

WILD TALENT

By

WILSON TUCKER

Rinehart & Co., Inc. New York Toronto Published simultaneously in Canada by Clarke, Irwin & Company, Ltd., Toronto Copyright, 1954, by Wilson Tucker Printed in the United States of America All Rights Reserved For Paul Breen, wherever he may be hiding

One: 1953

The microphones were dead, had been disconnected for many days. No one cared any more. No one bothered to keep up the pretense. She had angrily broken all the connections, but no punishment had come. The hard decision had been made downstairs, and there was no turning back from that decision – so there would be no retaliation no matter what she did. The sham had been abandoned.

She spoke aloud, keenly enjoying the novelty of being able to speak without fear of the listening microphones. They couldn't listen any more; she had smashed the things. She asked a question aloud but didn't really expect an answer.

"They intend to kill you? Now? Today – tomorrow?"

She was a pale, tensed woman who stood beside the window and stared down at the immaculate green lawn three stories below. Figures moved about down there, manlike figures who carefully avoided looking up at the third-floor windows. Strolling puppets, and the other puppets who spied on the puppets. The unnatural whiteness of the young woman's face, the nervously playing fingers clasped behind her back – these were the only outward indications of her anxiety. She stood erect, tautly waiting and watching at the window, waiting for anything at all to happen.

"Paul...?" He hadn't heard, wasn't listening. He was reading again.

Her resentful gaze followed the puppets on the lawn, judging them, measuring them. An occasional figure in trim military uniform strolled across the well-kept lawn and across her line of vision; sometimes the military figures were accompanied by still other men in civilian clothes. She knew those other men. She knew which of them were security agents and which were staff members of the house, although they strove to intermingle and thus hide their numbers and their identities. She knew who were the clerks who carried on the routine things and who were the government agents watching over the clerks; she knew the cable and wireless operators, the decoding experts, the maids and butlers and cooks and houseboys, the bodyguards. She knew the men who had only recently given up their earphones when she disconnected the listening ears. All of them, all the puppets were like an open book—once the cover was turned they could not hide their secret identities from her. Nor from him, from Paul.

Without turning from the window she spoke again, raising her voice to carry through his absorbed attention.

"Paul—this decision to kill. Is it definite?"

"Yes." The man answered absently, his thoughts away. He was immersed in a heavy book.

"Which one? Who is to do it?" Her quick gaze darted over the strolling men. "Do you know which one?"

"I'm not sure," he said slowly. "I think it may be that new one, they call him Colonel Johns. But I'm not sure."

The woman lifted her eyes from the tended lawn and the trim uniforms to seek the horizon, to seek the high stone wall and the heavy growth of timber that was their enforced horizon. The timber was old and tall and beautiful against the blue Maryland sky, but the wall was new and rough, its top strewn with broken glass and alarm wires. She could see the late afternoon rim of the low-lying sun above the graceful trees, the roseate clouds formed in gentle ridges above the sun and flapping birds blackly silhouetted against the clouds, but her concentrated stare could not penetrate the stone wall. Something else was needed. The wall was new and had been built only a few years before, a disgrace in its picturesque setting. Her eyes could see nothing beyond the wall, nothing in or among the trees although she *knew* what moved there.

She knew men were there, just over that wall and scattered among the trees, men who watched and guarded those inside without ever knowing whom they guarded. The snipers crouched in concealing branches, stiff in their long-unmoving positions while below them the machine gunners patrolled the ground in pairs. Wild life was unwelcome, the small game and birds had fled with the coming of the soldiers. Their abrupt, ringed horizon was scarcely a mile from the big house.

"Colonel Johns," she mused, her voice now low and emotionless. "He is army, I think. And the others?"

"A friend of Slater, a hand-picked friend for this job. He's army—yes." Paul moved slightly in the chair, the better to catch the light on the book he held. "The rest of them are keeping hands off. Somewhat afraid, I suppose, and not sure it's the right thing to do. Outwardly they agree with my sentence, but they personally refuse to carry it out."

"Colonel Johns came in from Washington a few hours ago."

Paul nodded. "Slater was with him."

"Here? He's here in the house now? That is unusual."

He nodded over the book. "They brought the decision. I'm sure of that."

"From Washington?" she questioned. "From how high up?"

"No higher than Slater. He made it." Paul glanced up from the page. "Not what you are thinking – not the top. Top man will be told that I met with an accident, a very common but believable accident. Everyone will express keen regret at my unfortunate demise, crying the tremendous loss to the nation." He smiled briefly and dryly. "Top man is not an unduly suspicious man. He believes in those he trusts and he's had no reason to distrust Slater." His eyes were locked with hers, calm and warm, revealing his affection for her.

"Paul!" She quickly left the window and crossed the room to him, pushing the book from his hands. Softly and tenderly she raked his cheek with the diamond in her engagement ring. "How can you read...?"

Paul retrieved the book from where it had fallen, awkwardly open. He closed it and put it down on the table beside his chair, to reach out and pull her into his lap.

"I hadn't read Robinson before," he told her, tapping the volume with a finger. "I wanted to finish it."

She relaxed in his lap and laid her head on his shoulder, burying her lips on the soft skin just above his collar. "Paul, what if...?"

"Don't," he cautioned, and glanced by habit at the corners of the ceiling. "Let's not discuss that."

Her answer was muffled against him. "All right." The lips moved on his neck. "But how can you read!" She put her arm around his head, drawing him closer.

"Too bad old Robinson isn't here to witness the answer," he told her and wrapped his arms about her waist. "He would have enjoyed it, in a way. Someone decided to solve his *Situation Thirty*."

She moved her head. "I don't know that."

"Robinson was a classroom strategist of the military school. He posed problems and the students had to solve them. Among those problems was a classic, one seemingly without an answer, and then he pointed to a solution if anyone dared take it. The student was expected to solve the solution as part of the problem, I gather.

"Robinson's problem was a simple one. It consisted of two fighting ships, enemies, who chanced upon one another suddenly in the darkness and then uneasily stood off, watching each other. Neither could attack the other with hope of victory because they were absolute equals; neither could turn and run for port, for such a move would reveal the direction and perhaps the location of that port. All that apparently could be done was to stand and watch until eternity, always waiting for the other to move first.

"Robinson then advanced to the next step. The men of one ship, in plain view of the other, threw overboard a mysterious hollow sphere which in time drifted across to the second vessel. It was not a mine, obviously, so the second ship took it aboard. The war

of nerves then set in, which was the real intention behind the launching of the sphere. The commander of the second ship was afraid to open the sphere for fear such tampering might cause an explosion. Similarly, he was afraid *not* to open it, for the thing might prove to be a time bomb. And finally, he could not afford to simply throw it back into the water, for it occurred to him that a second contact with the sea might be just the trigger to set it off – if it was a mine. The explosion would take place against the side of his ship. The problem devolves upon man's imagination and fear of the unknown. The ship's commander would eventually destroy himself with his own uncertainty, and that collapse might bring about the bloodless victory the first ship awaited."

"So he must retaliate," she offered.

"He must; he sends back a sphere of his own, and the stalemate is as before. Robinson pointed to the only solution. One commander *must* set a blowtorch to the sphere and open it, prove it harmless. Either it explodes and sinks him, or it doesn't and he is free to plan something else. The question is – what else?" Paul hugged her to him. "Downstairs, or in Washington, they've at last decided to solve Robinson's problem. Colonel Johns has probably been chosen as the blowtorch."

"How will he do it?" she asked quietly.

"They don't know – yet."

"When?"

"Tonight, I think. But before sunrise tomorrow, surely."

She jerked up. "So quick? So soon?"

Paul echoed her words. "So quick, so soon. While they still have the nerve up."

Despite her rigid self-control she found herself shivering. "I can't help it, Paul. I'm frightened, inside."

"Don't be, angel, don't be." He drew her back to him for warmth, to stop her quivering, and pulled her head down on his shoulder. Beyond her the afternoon light was fading from the window.

As though knowing he was looking out, she said, "It's a lovely Maryland sunset."

"I've seen Maryland sunsets. Many of them."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Of them? Or what they will do? No. I only regret it, all of it."

"Paul, Paul, how did you ever get into all this, *why* did you ever get mixed up in it?" His gaze remained on the sky beyond the window, on the tips of the trees moving slowly against the sky. "A little boy got me into it, a young fellow on the streets of Chicago named Paul Breen. A little boy who knew too much, but not enough to keep his mouth shut, and who wanted to play G-man."

"And finished here," she said bitterly.

He nodded silent agreement. "And finished here."

A little boy who grew up, and finished here in a large old Maryland mansion which resembled nothing so much as an army staff headquarters perpetually on the eve of a major campaign. The uniformed officers constantly parading the well-kept lawn,

entering or leaving the house on mysterious errands of their own, or strolling with no apparent purpose. While in and out among them wove a formless pattern of civilians, a clerk, a butler, a radioman or a secret service agent, pretending to be something else. And none of those with knowledge would glance directly at the third-floor windows.

Beyond the beautiful lawns, beyond the ugly wall were the far woods and more men paraded there, watching the wall and that part of the house that could be seen above the wall; watching the fields in the opposite direction. Nothing moved through the woods in either direction, nothing passed the lines of picketing soldiers. Nothing alive, or lacking a pass. The Maryland mansion represented the tightest security stronghold since the days of the old Manhattan District, more than a decade before. More guarded than Fort Knox, than Oak Ridge or Hanford, than the White House.

All because a young boy named Paul Breen discovered a wild talent and knew too much and too little.

Paul broke the silence between them. "I once had a very good friend who guessed this might come. He called me a name and called himself another."

"Slater stopped that," she responded bitterly.

"Slater stopped them all, one way or another. One by one he robbed me of my friends and – removed them. I owe him something for that."

The distant sun sank behind the trees, trees thick with men and guns, giving warning of the coming twilight. The house was fairly quiet with only the subdued talk of many men gathering for a meal, coming in from the outside. Paul spanked the girl lightly, fondly.

"Dinner should be ready. See about it, will you?"

She hugged him the tighter, refusing to move. "Oh, Paul!"

"Now stop that!" he warned. "Don't lose your head, don't be panicky. You aren't included in the decision, so you will have to take care of yourself. Watch for the breaks and use them."

"I wish they *had* included me!"

"No you don't." He touched the ring on her finger. "You aren't dangerous to them; they know very little of you. They know nothing important. And they used that to keep you here, to keep you quiet." He moved the ring with the tip of his finger. "Take advantage of it. This will be awfully rough, so take care of yourself."

"I don't care if it is rough. I can take that. I can stand it. I'm not afraid of them."

His hand closed around hers, encompassing the ring. "The important thing to remember is that you don't know *anything*. The less you know, the longer you will live. You aren't supposed to know anything about me, about what I've been doing here; you know nothing of what is to happen. You've never heard of Colonel Johns and what he's going to do to me. Remember that!"

"All right, Paul." She kissed him tenderly. "I'll remember. And afterward...?"

"Afterward, do just as you planned to do. Watch for a break. When it comes, run for it and don't stop running. If they catch you...well."

"They'll never catch me, Paul. I promise you that."

He moved forward in his chair and pushed the girl toward the edge of his lap. "I'm hungry. Please see what's holding up dinner."

She struggled to retain her seat, tried to kiss him once more but he stood up, laughing. "Move! I'm starving."

She gained her footing, winked a secret thought to him and crossed over to the apartment door. Her outstretched hand hesitated on the knob and she looked over her shoulder for a quick, fond glance. "I'm glad you love me, Paul."

And opened the door.

She remained there for long frozen seconds with the door half open, staring into the corridor outside, staring at someone beyond his line of vision. Her hand flew to her mouth to shut off a scream and when she turned to him her face was flushed and frightened.

"*Be careful!*" he shot at her. "*Know nothing!*"

"Paul..."

"Yes?"

"It has been very lovely knowing you, darling," she whispered. "Good-bye."

And she was gone from the doorway, roughly shoved aside by a tall, ponderous man who seemed every inch the suave man of distinction. The newcomer was not in uniform, but he could not discard his military bearing. He stepped quickly into the room and shut the door behind him with a forceful, positive action.

Paul did not move from the chair. "Colonel Johns?"

"Since you know my name already – yes."

"Please come in."

"I am in." Briskly.

"Thank you. I've sent down for dinner. Will you join us?"

"No. And it will not come."

"Oh?" Paul relaxed in the chair with one hand resting lightly on the volume of Robinson. "Now...?"

"Now," the colonel echoed bluntly. He remained at the door, braced against it. "And I shall dispense with the formalities." He pulled a service automatic from under his coat. "There will be none of this nonsense with last meals and last words. If you know my name, you also must know I have the same regard for you as I do for a snake. I hate snakes." He raised the gun to eye level, taking careful sight on Paul.

Paul Breen still did not move from the chair. "There is nothing I can say?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing. It is decided." The finger tightened on the trigger.

"Then I am sorry for you. Good-bye, Colonel Johns."

The barrel of the gun flipped in a quick arc and exploded into flame. The walls were soundproofed. Not even the deadened microphones carried the sound of the booming shot.

Paul Breen was thirteen years old, he had seven dollars and fifty cents tightly wrapped in a handkerchief stuffed down in his pocket, and he was going to the Fair. No wealthier, happier human existed on the planet. Chicago was a hundred and thirty miles away and the bus fare was quoted at more than two dollars. That was too much. Paul waited in the railroad yards for the freight train that passed through every morning just before noon.

People had talked about the Fair all the previous summer, igniting in him the magic spark of desire, the compelling urge to see it, but in 1933 he had been but twelve years old and his aunt had firmly forbidden him the journey. Happily, unexpectedly, Chicago was repeating the wondrous exposition for a second time the following summer, and that summer he was no longer a child but a young man in his teens. The very first of the teens, but that was brushed aside as unimportant. His aunt still said *no*, meanwhile silently cursing those who were responsible for the repetition, those who would bleed a good thing for the last dollar – hadn't the papers reported the Fair a tremendous financial success? Paul persisted, knowing that this second summer would be his final chance, and at last the badgered woman gave her reluctant permission but with a condition attached. The condition was her out, her excuse, her method of shifting the blame from herself to someone or something else. She thought she saw in the condition an opportunity of directing the boy's coming disappointment another way. He could go – if he had the money to take care of himself. That was only sensible, and it relieved her of a decision, of a blame.

Paul surprised her two months later, in August. And in response to her curious, annoyed questioning he told in detail with the accumulation of each cent, each dollar, together with the names of men and places and dates and jobs. Seven dollars and fifty cents. That was more, much more, than some men owned in the summer of 1934.

Paul went to see the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago.

He sensed the approach of the railroad detective before he saw the man, guessed the man's identity before the questions revealed it.

"Hey there, buster. What you doing here?"

"Waiting for the train," Paul told him.

"What train? The train stops down there at the station." The man towered over him like an ogre.

"Waiting for the train," Paul repeated inanely.

The detective studied him. "How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"Your folks know about this?"

"I live with my aunt. She *said* I could go. If I had enough money." The boy was faintly defiant, feeling the need to bolster his sagging nerve, but still hoping the belligerence wouldn't be noticed by the detective. "I got enough."

"How much?"

Paul brought out the knotted handkerchief to show it briefly and then thrust it back into his pocket again. "Seven dollars and fifty cents."

"Seven dollars and fifty cents," the detective repeated. "So you're going up to the Fair?"

Now how had he known that? "Yes, sir."

"Ever been to Chicago before?"

"No, sir."

"Well, let me tell you something, buster. That freight doesn't stop here and it'll be rolling too damned fast for you to catch it. Now you go on up the line to the crossing; there'll be a red light set against the freight and it'll have to stop there. But don't you climb on until it stops rolling, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" The darkness was chased away and the man wasn't going to prevent his trip to the Fair. "Up at the crossing."

"And let me tell you something else: don't ride into the Chicago yards. They'll pick you up for sure and throw you in jail. You don't want to go to jail, do you?"

"No, sir!"

"All right then—when that drag slows down at the edge of the yards, you get off. And watch yourself." His hand suddenly came out of his pocket. "Here."

A half dollar. And now he had eight dollars.

Despite the warmness of the August day, the moving freight was chilly, and he was thankful for the jacket his aunt had insisted he take along. He put it on and stayed near the open door of the boxcar, half determined to jump if the drunken man riding at the opposite end of the car approached him. The drunk mumbled something at him, but kept his place, toppling over to sleep after a while. When the freight slowed at the outer edge of the Chicago yards he did jump out, stumbled and fell on the cinderbed, but got to his feet immediately and ran across the tracks to the street. His hands were dirty and scratched from the fall on the cinders, while his face felt grimy from the locomotive smoke.

He had never before entered a saloon, but he knew there were washrooms in them. Paul turned in at the door of the first one he came to—an easy thing in Chicago in 1934—but was just as promptly chased out again. For the second attempt he waited until he found one crowded with men and slipped in because the bartender was too busy to see him. He was seen as he emerged from the washroom and again ordered into the street, but he had accomplished his objective. A woman told him which streetcar would deliver him to the Loop. From there, special buses ran to the Fairgrounds. And he was in Chicago with a few cents less than eight dollars in his pocket.

With a single purposeness of mind he went directly to the Fair, bought his admission from a dazzling young woman in the box office, and in the next minute stood lost in rapturous wonder gazing down the beautiful Avenue of Flags.

Late at night, long after darkness had come and caused the modernistic buildings to

be bathed in riotous electric colors, Paul left the exposition grounds to ride another bus back to the Loop. The street names there meant nothing to him and he didn't bother to memorize them; the place where he would catch the bus again in the morning was fixed in his mind, and that was all that mattered. He knew he was in the Loop as long as he stayed within the shadow or sound of the elevated trains and so he wandered around. Supper was taken at a restaurant bearing a price sign on the window; one of the dark and noisy streets beneath the elevated structure had many such eating places. Full meal, 35¢. Complete dinner, 29¢. All you can eat, 24¢. Three-course dinner, 22¢. And the same street seemed to be crowded with hotels for men, in hot competition with one another; they bore their fees on the door. Rooms for the night, 50¢. Clean rooms, 35¢. Rooms with breakfast, 40¢. He decided on that one; not now, not just yet — it was too early to go to bed, but he would come back to that one. Breakfast thrown in for free was too tempting a bargain.

The street was a fascinating place.

There was a man standing in a dimly lighted store entrance, selling little paper clowns that seemed to dance unsupported in the air. The man would pick a clown from the cardboard box under his arm, reach down as though to set the clown on its feet, and the paper doll would madly dance on the dirty sidewalk. Paul looked at the black thread on which the clown had been fastened and followed the thread to a second man who stood eight or ten feet away. This other man stood with his hands behind him, jiggling the end of the thread in his fingers. Both peddlers, Paul noted, kept constant watch for a policeman.

There were drunken or sleeping men in all the darkened doorways, some of them lying flat on their backs or stomachs on the sidewalk, and no one stopped to look after them. There was a ragged man sitting on the curbstone with his shoes off, resting his feet in a pool of filthy water. There were men who looked at him, watched him walk by and were still looking as he passed down the block. And again there was a policeman who stopped him, questioned him, and he repeated the story of his aunt and the trip to the Fair.

There was a theater that remained open all night and the admission price was only a dime. He went in and watched the picture through twice, Marie Dressier in *Tugboat Annie*. He also found amusement in watching the usher making his rounds; every half hour the man walked up and down the aisles, searching out the sleepers, to awaken and eject them. Paul was dozing near the end of the second showing, but sensed the usher's approach and turned wide-open eyes on the man when he paused near by. He left the theater shortly afterward.

Many of the lights were out and the street was considerably darker, considerably lonelier. The roaring, clattering din of passing elevated trains was heard less frequently. He walked aimlessly along the streets, turning corners at random, unsure of his directions and disoriented after the long stay in the theater. Another corner that seemed familiar, and he turned eagerly into the new street — but it was not the one with the restaurants and hotels. He was about to reverse himself and continue along in his original direction when he saw the man.

At first he thought the man was drunk, but in the next instant Paul realized it was something else. The man was on his knees at the mouth of an alley, just hidden from the street. He seemed to be hurt — shot. The man was shot. Unthinkingly, Paul walked

closer. The man in the alley heard him coming and twisted around to stare over his shoulder.

Paul stopped at the alley. "You've been shot."

"Get out of here, kid. Get going!"

Paul stood his ground, frightened but fascinated. The fear in his mind urged him to run, to run as fast as his legs would carry him, but the man down on his knees was a policeman who had been shot. "You've got to get them! They can't shoot a cop and get away with it."

"Get the hell out of here *now*, you little fool!" The wounded man clutched his side, staring foggily at the boy. The short image seemed to waver and dance.

Paul hesitated an instant longer, suddenly knowing many things, suddenly aware of the terrible pain the man was experiencing. The man wasn't an ordinary policeman, he was a G-man. From Washington. He wasn't carrying a gun. And he had been shot in the side, high—near the shoulder, and it hurt like sin. The images of the street and the boy (himself) were foggy, wavering. The man's name was Bixby.

"Mr. Bixby, I'll go get help. They can't shoot you and get away with it!"

Bixby turned startled, groggy eyes on the boy's face. "How did you know...?" and he toppled over, the sentence unfinished.

Paul Breen stared down at the body with growing terror. He knew it was *body*, knew the government agent was dead. A black horror seemed to dance and settle on the man's upturned face, an undefinable blackness that suggested fading ... fading ... fading. Paul turned and ran, ran until the breath choked up in his throat and the tears streaked his cheeks, ran until his legs ached and the long exertion pained his chest. He fell suddenly, stumbled and all but collapsed on the unswept sidewalk, brought down by the desperate shortness of breath and the strained leg muscles. He sat down then, sat on the sidewalk and held his hands to his face, fighting back the tears, gulping in the needed air, trying to calm himself. He was still there, not fully recovered and not yet free of the horror, when a man stopped beside him with the usual questions. This once he hadn't sensed the stranger's approach.

To evade the exact truth, Paul said that he had lost his street and hotel, had been wandering about for an hour trying to find them again. In response to the questions, he described the street as best he remembered it and told of the many restaurants and hotels with the cheap prices pasted over their doors and windows. The stranger pulled him to his feet, to walk him less than four blocks and put him on the desired street; he stayed with the boy until *Rooms with breakfast, 40¢* loomed up in the night ahead of them. Paul remembered to thank him, and climbed the stairs to the second-floor lobby.

The old, old man rocking contentedly in the lobby regarded him rather oddly when he came in, when he asked for a room, but the old one took his forty cents and locked it away in a cashbox, took up a flashlight and began climbing the stairs to the third floor. Paul sucked in his breath with disappointment and stared at the rooms.

There were many rows of cubicles, long rows of them and they appeared to be constructed of nothing more than heavy paper. Each had a door that could be closed, each was covered at the top with chicken-wire netting. A strong smell hung in the air. A single light bulb burned at the head of the stairs as they entered, while another red one

could dimly be seen in the far dark reaches of the room. The old man flicked on the flashlight and led him down the aisle to an empty cell, pointed at it with the flashlight's beam and then turned on his heel without a spoken word. Paul stood in the aisle and watched the oldster vanish down the stairs.

He went inside and closed the door.

By peering closely in the dim light he could make out the message stenciled on the back of the panel. *Lock the door.* Paul moved the bolt that locked it, and sat down on the cot. There was one blanket, folded over to form a pillow. He unfolded it, lay down on the cot without removing his clothes and spread the blanket over him. After a while the pattern of the chicken wire overhead was visible in the near darkness. There were many men sleeping in the large room, in many of the cubicles, and most of them were noisy in their sleep. Over all was the odor of strong disinfectant. Paul drifted off to sleep.

He awoke sometime in the night, awoke suddenly and without reason to stare wildly around him, uncomprehending. Slowly the shapeless forms took substance in the poor light and he saw the walls of the cubicle, the stenciled message on the door and finally the wire overhead. And then he realized where he was. Chicago – at last, Chicago! The World's Fair. The continued dream of two summers come true. He was in Chicago and that afternoon he had seen the Fair and tomorrow morning he was going back again. And what else?

Mr. Bixby.

Mr. Bixby was a government agent, a real G-man, and he had been shot down, sinking to his knees in that nameless alley. The G-man didn't have a gun, but those two men had shot him.

What two men?

Why, those two men who were hiding in that upstairs window, across the street from the alley. Had he seen the men? Well ... no, he hadn't actually seen them but he *knew* they were there, *knew* they had fired the shots. How did he know that? Well, now.... He didn't know how he knew it. But he did *know!*

He had been walking along the street and had found Mr. Bixby in the alley, wounded. Two men concealed in a second-floor window across the street had done the shooting. Those two men still crouched there, watching, as he walked along the street, as he stopped to talk to Mr. Bixby, as the agent died, and finally as he fled in terror from the unknown black thing on the body. They had stayed behind the window curtain and seen it all. He had been fully aware of their presence at the time, but hadn't given it any thought, being much too concerned with the wounded agent. Still, he knew all about them.

How had he known Mr. Bixby's name, and that he was a G-man? That was puzzling. Had he seen the man before – in the movies maybe? No. Had he been told? No. Mr. Bixby was trying to ask that same question when he died. How then did he know all about the dying officer?

No answer. He just knew.

As soon as he stopped to talk to him, he knew. He became aware of who the man was, what he was, what had happened to him and who was responsible for it. And in the next moment he was aware of the two men crouching behind the curtains in the upper window. Mr. Bixby hadn't told him anything; he just *knew*. And he knew he was right.

It was as puzzling as those other things, the things that had happened to him before.

Like that railroad detective back home, and the cop out on the street that afternoon, like the usher in the theater who walked up and down the aisles waking everybody up. He had sensed the approach of each of them even though he hadn't been looking their way, had known who each of them was and what they were going to do or say before they actually spoke. But the puzzle wasn't confined to them. It had been that way with his aunt, too. For a long time now he had always known the nature of the questions she was going to ask before she actually asked them. Some of the time he had guessed the questions so far in advance that he had time to formulate an answer before the question came. Even the seven dollars and fifty cents, earned to insure his trip to the Fair. In his search about the town for odd jobs, he had only approached those men actually wanting jobs done. He had talked to no one who would turn him down.

But that's the way things were.

Paul dozed off a second time.

Breakfast was the hotel's second disappointment. The old man was still dutifully rocking in his chair as Paul descended the stairs and paused in the lobby, waiting. The aged one arose from the chair with a grunt and crossed the room to an oilcloth-covered table, flipping back a soiled towel to reveal a cold slab of beef. He cut off two thin slices, rummaged in a bread sack for bread, and made the beef slices into a dry sandwich. And then he returned to the rocker and sat down.

Paul ate the sandwich, staring at the oldster.

"Have you got any writing paper?"

"No. Try the drugstore."

"Where's that?"

"Down on the corner there."

He swallowed the last of the sandwich and glanced around for water. There was none. "Is that all I get for breakfast?"

"How much do you want for nothing?"

Paul left the lobby and went down to the street. He turned in at the first restaurant door and had a second breakfast for twenty-two cents. Afterwards he stopped at the drugstore and bought a stamp, but at the last moment decided not to purchase a paper and pencil because he remembered a place at the Fair where they gave the articles away free. And then he was running for the corner where the special bus stopped.

The Fair was the same wondrous, magical place it had been the previous day; he bought another ticket and entered, strode down the Avenue of Flags, passed the various buildings and exhibits until he found the railroad booth where stationery was available.

There was even a special post office in the booth and letters mailed there would be stamped *Century of Progress Exposition, Chicago, Illinois*. On a letterhead bearing the name of a great Western railroad, Paul Breen wrote a note.

I know who shot Mr. Bixby. It was a man named Tony Bloch. There was another man he called Bob and they hid in the window across the street, upstairs.

Paul could think of nothing more to add, and was on the point of signing his name when he thought the better of it. He scratched out the initial P that he had already written, and hesitated. How should it be signed? How did Mr. Bixby sign the letters and telegrams he sent to Washington?

Bixby-twelve.

That sounded as though it were a code name, but if Bixby used it, it must serve. He signed the note, Bixby-twelve. And folded it, inserted it in the envelope the railroad happily provided, affixed the stamp he had bought and hesitated again. Who should he send it to? Who would Bixby have sent it to?

There was no answer.

Paul wrote: The President White House Washington, D.C.

And dropped it in the mailbox, liberally covered with his fingerprints.

He stayed two more full days at the Fair before his eight dollars were spent.

Three: 1941

Paul Breen was twenty years old, had a satisfactory and comparatively easy job and was earning thirty-seven dollars a week when he made a shocking discovery about himself. The discovery came about as something of an accident and proved to be only the forerunner of what was to come. It helped to explain many things, once it was firmly grasped and understood. Paul found that he possessed a special faculty which other people apparently did not have.

The dictionary termed it telepathy, but the brief paragraph in the dictionary did little to explain it.

At fifteen he had found his first steady job in a movie house, ushering during the after school hours and on weekends. The memory of the Chicago theater usher did occur to him, but his duties did not call for similar work. In the small town where he lived patrons rarely fell asleep in the theater; if they did, they were gently awakened and sent home when the last show was over for the night. Not many weeks on the job had passed before Paul was convinced that he was working in the wrong end of the theater – the projectionist in the film booth had a much better job.

He promptly put in his application, filed a duplicate application with the union when he found that to be necessary, and just before his sixteenth birthday he was admitted as an apprentice. For the first few weeks all he was allowed to do was to listen and watch; Illinois had a law prohibiting minors under sixteen from operating machinery. At the end of those weeks his knowledge of the projection apparatus was astonishing. Paul felt the questions coming. The projectionist questioned him about the knowledge, wanting

to know if he had operated machines elsewhere. He said that he had watched the school instructors handling the smaller machines there and had obtained the rest from the projectionist himself, listening and watching. This literal truth, coming as unintended flattery, was accepted as satisfactory. The apprentice was marked as *bright*.

The apprenticeship was ended after two years and his first salaried job was in the same theater; his teacher quit the projection booth to take a managing position. Paul was the projectionist, the envy of scores of local youths of the same age, and was earning thirty-seven dollars a week. He promptly bought a used car.

The uncanny sense of *knowing* things continued.

The accident leading to his discovery of himself came in his twentieth year, in the projection booth, during the showing of what was billed as a horror movie. Nineteen hundred and forty-one was a year in which the second-rate horror movie vogue was in full swing. Bela Lugosi made horror movies, Lon Chaney, Jr., made horror movies, Lionel Atwill made horror movies, Boris Karloff made horror movies, and a host of lesser satellites made horror movies. Paul's theater, fondly referred to as "The Bat Roost" by the local citizenry, played them all. The occasion of awakening was a special midnight show on Halloween (two dollars extra in overtime pay for the projectionist), and the picture portrayed Boris Karloff playing merry hell with the police authorities, meanwhile luring pretty maidens from the safety of their homes by sheer mindpower. Also in the cast was a know-it-all college professor who claimed Karloff was using mental telepathy, a claim which was scorned by the police until near the end of the last reel.

Paul was fascinated.

Karloff lurked in the hedge beside the road, reading the minds of those sent out to catch him and thus thwarting their plans. Karloff crouched in the shrubbery outside the bedrooms of beautiful girls, listening with his mind while the maid said good night and left the room, left the damsel alone to his sinister purposes. Karloff hid in an adjoining office in the city hall, mentally knowing the traps set for him by the police in a near-by room. Karloff did everything by mental telepathy – by reading minds. He was finally captured when the hero donned a metal helmet which cut off all thought – choked off any telltale emanations which he might vibrate – and approached the villain from behind, quietly and mentally silent.

Paul Breen rejected that last as fantastic, but the remainder of the novel idea stayed with him. He lay awake that night thinking about it, weighing it, and scrap by scrap the various unexplainable occurrences in his own life made themselves known to him.

He had got along very well with his aunt, during those years he had stayed with her, because he always seemed to know in advance what she would and wouldn't like; he always seemed to know her next question and had a proper and satisfactory answer ready when she spoke. He had known a full week before her death that something was wrong with her, that something about her facial image seemed to be fading. And the teachers at school – school was a breeze because in both the oral and written examinations he was ready with more information than could be found in the textbooks. Additionally, school was sometimes embarrassing in a mysterious fashion when his answers were too advanced for his grade or his age – although the teacher knew what he was talking about. The expression on the teacher's face would indicate that the very

same information was on the tip of his or her tongue, but would remain there unsaid. The girl across the street – she would have little to do with him after the first few evening dates, despite his magical connection with the theater and free passes for herself. He anticipated the girl's wishes a little too quickly for her serenity and comfort, saw through her subterfuges and evasions. Mental telepathy.

He had picked up a working knowledge of projection equipment in a remarkably short time, by listening carefully to the projectionist's explanations, by grasping at things implied but not said, by following the man's swift fingers as he worked with film and machinery, and by knowing just what should be done next – and then having the satisfaction of seeing the man do it.

There had been a national election the previous year; a presidential candidate was running for a third term in office, something that had never successfully been done before and something that the townspeople said would not be done successfully this time. Paul had accurately predicted to himself the outcome of that third term attempt.

But even before all that, much before...

The eager, teen-age desire to visit Chicago's Fair and the raising of the needed money in money-tight times. Each and every man he had approached on the subject of work needed something done. There had been occasions when the possibility of a job might be there for the asking, but for some reason he hadn't investigated, hadn't asked if a job existed. There had been no turndowns; he avoided all possibilities of a turndown and unerringly picked those who had odd jobs to offer. Two months, seven dollars and fifty cents, and the trip to the Fair. A railroad detective had approached him as he waited for a freight in the yards; Paul had known he was a detective although he couldn't recall seeing one before, had known the general tenor of the questioning ... although *that* could have been easily guessed by the dialogue heard in many gangster movies. He had quickly found the black thread on which the paper clown danced, quickly found the confederate who was jiggling the thread. And he had quickly guessed the two of them were constantly alert, constantly fearful of the police. He had known the Chicago patrolman would stop and question him when he first glimpsed the officer almost a block away.

It had been amusing to watch that other usher making his slow rounds, waking the sleepers; amusing to fool the man by turning to stare at him while he was looking to see if Paul was asleep. But there had come a moment shortly afterward when the strange sense of knowing deserted him. He had lost his way after emerging from the theater.

Abruptly there flashed in his memory the glaring picture of a man sagging to his knees in an alleyway.

Mr. Bixby.

Bixby had never told him his name, had not spoken to him at all except for those quick, urgent warnings to get away – to run from the danger as fast as possible. But he had tarried a few moments because Bixby was a G-man and his childhood ambition, long nursed and cherished, was to become just that – a government secret agent. Bixby suddenly represented a bond-brother, and he paused to help him. In that pausing, seeing and sensing the man's agony, he had learned without spoken words the entire momentary drama being played in the alley. Learned more – learned a fragment of Bixby's background, learned the code name Bixby habitually signed to his

communications with his superiors, learned the names and the upstairs location of the men who had trapped and shot him. And then suddenly there was something else, two parts of the same pattern fitting together to form a whole. ...

A blackness had seemed to settle over Bixby's face as he died, a blackness that suggested something was fading from view. A blackness that terrorized the boy. The same faint blackness that had been present about his aunt's face, the same unexplainable *fading* when she died.

Mental telepathy.

Paul was still awake when his bedroom window revealed the coming dawn in the eastern sky.

"You sick or something?"

"No," Paul said. "Why?"

"I heard you tossing and turning up there all night." The landlady sat across the breakfast table from him, watching him eat. "I thought maybe you was sick."

"Nothing wrong. Maybe it was too much coffee."

"You shouldn't drink coffee that late, going to bed on a coffee stomach is bad for you. You should drink milk. Now you keep that in mind."

"I will, thanks." He hesitated, unsure of himself. "What is mental telepathy?"

The landlady moved her glasses higher on the bridge of her nose and stirred sugar into her third or fourth morning cup of coffee.

"What is what?"

"Mental telepathy."

"What's that?"

"I don't know. It was in the picture last night. I thought maybe you'd know."

"Pfff – pictures! Sickness, maybe."

"No, I don't think so. It has something to do with mind-power, controlling other people."

"Well I don't know and that's for sure. Still sounds like sickness to me; you know, sickness words. Why don't you go down to the library and see?"

"That's an idea!" He wondered why he hadn't thought of that himself. "They must have it."

The public library was an old-fashioned, two-story brick building, encrusted with much useless ornamentation, pigeon droppings, and a large gray cornerstone bearing the names of every city official even remotely connected with the erection of the building: the mayor of that bygone day, the various members of the city council, the man who had donated the plot of ground, his wife in whose name it had been donated, the superintendent of parks, the superintendent of streets, the architect, the construction firm, and just incidentally the chairman of the library board.

Inside, Paul still hesitated to broach the subject; he disliked the idea of making a fool of himself if mental telepathy proved to be a fiction, a device concocted for the motion pictures. The sight of a large dictionary on a table by the librarian's desk solved his dilemma. He opened it.

TELEPATHY (noun). The supposed communication of one mind with another at a distance by other than normal sensory means; thought transference.

(Word coined about 1886 from the Greek to express power of mental communication.)

Thus armed, Paul put his question to the librarian. She seemed not in the least startled nor even slightly moved by the request, but instead asked him to wait and disappeared among the shelves behind her. Several minutes later she reappeared with three dusty books in her hands and handed them over to Paul. Curiously, he turned them about to read the titles on the spines. Two were by Joseph Banks Rhine, *Extra-Sensory Perception* and *New Frontiers of the Mind*. The last was by a Dr. William Roy, *Studies in Psychokinesis*.

The librarian regarded him for a moment and thought to add, "I believe we have some fiction dealing with the subject. Would you like some of those?"

Paul glanced down at the volumes in his hands. "How many can I take out at once?"

"Four." She had followed his glance. "You may keep those for two weeks, and then renew them for another two if you wish. There is a two-week limit on fiction, however.

"Just one, then," Paul decided. "I'd like these three and one of fiction." He suggested, "A new one."

He read the novel first, slowly and carefully and searching for implications concealed between the lines, read it first because it had to be returned the soonest and because it was obviously lighter reading, an easier approach to a strange and puzzling phenomenon. *The Time Masters* was a romantic thriller in which a man and woman practiced mental telepathy by physical contact; holding hands, a kiss, a warm embrace. When the couple were in such intimate physical contact they were able to read one another's thoughts at will, able to plumb the depths of the other's mind. When the contact was broken the thought transference ended.

But Paul had not touched Bixby, had seldom touched his aunt. When he was smaller of course he usually kissed her good night; as he grew older those kisses were reserved to those perfunctory occasions when either of them left home for a time. He could recall no thought transferences occurring between them. So the novel did not provide the answer he sought; nevertheless, still groping for what may have been hinted at but not said, he wrote a note to the author addressed in care of the publisher. The note briefly and politely asked for the author's views on the subject and did the author know of any such occurrence? He wisely said nothing about himself.

Paul next turned to the two volumes by Rhine and made the shocking discovery of himself.

Mental telepathy existed.

Several forms of the phenomenon existed, had been mathematically proven to exist in spite of the fact that it apparently violated many natural laws of science. Rhine, a parapsychologist at Duke University, through several years of experimentation had developed a system which reduced vague and haphazard results to a mathematical process based on the laws of statistics. Employing a deck of cards bearing five symbols, Rhine – with the co-operation of selected subjects – demonstrated that the degree of success in naming the correct sequence of cards was so high as to be outside the bounds of pure chance, so high as to be improbable. He came to the conclusion that the subjects were able to perceive the symbols on the cards without seeing those symbols – and then proved his conclusion. From there, the experiments advanced beyond playing cards.

Persons seated in another room were able to know the thoughts or conversations of the experimenters; some could copy on paper a message being written by another student in a separate room, others could reproduce a symbol or rough picture by similar concentration. But in all of Rhine's experiments under the best of laboratory conditions it was evident that a high degree of co-operation was necessary between the subjects, that one must concentrate while the others attempted to perceive the object under consideration.

Paul, unwittingly, had found it much easier than that. The willing concentration and co-operation on the part of the second party had never been necessary; he apparently knew their thoughts and moods without their being the wiser, apparently sensed their questions as they formulated them. More, he had known of the existence of things without direct mental contact – how else explain the jobs he easily found, as a boy of thirteen seeking funds?

Another technical term opened still wider speculations: extra-sensory perception, abbreviated to ESP. ESP embraced not only telepathy but other undreamed powers of the human mind: clairvoyance, precognition, telekinesis, and teleportation. The volumes of Rhine and Roy explained them all, after another quick trip to the dictionary at the library. Clairvoyance was the ability to see or know things not readily visible to the normal eye or necessarily known to the normal mind – his locating the men with work to be done, the quick absorption of projection techniques. Precognition was to know in advance of something about to occur – his realization that the Chicago usher was standing at his shoulder ready to shake him awake, the advance knowledge that the presidential candidate would win a third term. Telekinesis was the incredible power to move an inanimate object without touching it – Roy suggested that a paperweight might be pushed from the desk and caused to fall to the floor, merely by *willing* it to do so. Teleportation was a most startling form of transportation, moving one's self over a great distance by will power.

When the four weeks had expired, Paul returned the books to the library and attempted to purchase the volume by Roy; it was by far the most valuable to him of the three, suggesting the most astonishing theories and concepts. The librarian would have none of it, but did offer to look up the price and help him order it. She found the book to be still in print, and Paul dispatched the order. It cost him seven dollars, but he thought the sum well spent.

Thereafter the evenings in the projection booth saw more attention devoted to the book than the film. He summoned the nerve to attempt practice of what he learned and

would stand for long minutes at the tiny porthole overlooking the auditorium, staring at the backs of people's heads. Nothing happened so far as he could discern. He could not perceive their thoughts, could not guess what they might do next. In mild despair he turned back to the book.

He was deeply engrossed in it one evening, reading through it for the second time, when the film broke in the projector with a snapping, tearing sound. Paul flung the book onto the workbench and leaped for the machine to slam shut the dowsers, aware of the ever-present threat of fire. He flicked off the motor switch and applied the brake, was already pulling the damaged film from the projector when he heard – or sensed – the manager rapidly climbing the stairway behind him. The man burst into the booth with the nervous, staccato manner of distraught managers everywhere when a breakdown has occurred.

"What's the matter – what happened? Did the film break? Hurry up, will you – they're getting impatient. How did it happen? Can you fix it? What..."

Paul said nothing, working rapidly, but in his annoyance with the man bit off a savage thought: Damn it, get out of here and let me alone!

He ran the film down past the break, inserted it into the machine and slipped the jagged end onto an empty reel. With one effortless motion he released the brake, started the motor and lifted the dowsers to put the picture back onto the screen. Only then did he turn around. The manager was gone.

Months later he performed another act of supposed usefulness which he was later to regret, an act which for the second time in seven years was to cause considerable consternation in official Washington circles. An impossible kind of lightning struck them twice.

Paul had since learned of the separate existences of two security bodies in the nation's capital, two separate spheres of police duties. The Secret Service, operating out of the Treasury Department, guarded the chief executive and performed other functions identified with counterfeiting, federal tax stamps, customs inspection and the like. On the other hand, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was a part of the Department of Justice and concerned itself with national criminal activities. Paul was vaguely aware of the lines of jurisdiction between the two agencies. He realized he had made a mistake in sending his Bixby letter to the White House; the Secret Service people would have opened it. It should have been addressed to the F.B.I. because Bixby had been a member of that body.

And so with startling naiveté, he wrote a second letter – this one addressed to the Bureau pointing out that his first had been misaddressed. He suggested that possibly they could recover that first letter of seven years before if such incoming mail was saved and filed at the White House. That first letter had contained information on the murder of one of their agents and would be of value to them.

Paul *could* be credited with a minute grain of caution: again, he didn't sign his name to the note nor give his address. As before, he wrote Bixby-twelve. The letter was written on Y.M.C.A. stationery which did not bear the name of any town or city; Paul had

previously taken a supply of the letterheads for his own use. He mailed the note later on that week in Peoria, where he had gone with a couple of friends seeking a good time. And as before, the letter was well sprinkled with fingerprints. His new-found powers of clairvoyance and precognition were conspicuous by their absence.

In Washington, a Bureau official named Ray Palmer drove himself into a rage.

The receipt of the first letter seven years earlier, finding its way to him through the channels, had been enough of a jolt. Handwriting and fingerprinting systems had readily revealed the letter to be written by a child. The information supplied in the body of the letter led other agents to the upstairs room and eventually to the two gunmen who had murdered Bixby. But in spite of it all, nothing led the Bureau to a child who had used the dead man's signature and who put the finger on his killers. Millions of people had passed through the gates of the Century of Progress Exposition; tens of thousands had availed themselves of the free stationery distributed by the railroad.

Who remembered one child, out of thousands, asking for a letterhead and an envelope?

The receipt of the second letter after seven years was as great a jolt. It provided only one additional clue: the boy – now a young man – apparently lived in or near Peoria, Illinois. An angry Palmer flew to Peoria to take charge of the investigation.

Paul Breen was not drafted into the army until the spring of 1945, ending a five-year term of apprehension. With countless others he had registered on a cold, blustery October day in 1940, sitting rather stiffly and self-consciously in a chair before one of his former schoolteachers, watching the woman note down the information he supplied. And then the following five years had been a bewildering shuffle through many changes of classification, until at last he found himself ticketed I-A. In the spring of 1945, someone apparently found his file for the first time and noted that he had not yet seen service.

He was twenty-four years old and somewhat beyond the usual induction age. His services were allotted to the army. And as a matter of routine procedure he was fingerprinted.

Ray Palmer had been impatiently awaiting just that. The odds were greatly in his favor that the induction machinery would eventually uncover the young man he wanted.

Four: 1945

"Hey-Breen!"

Paul was resting on his back and staring dreamily at the barracks ceiling, his hands locked beneath his head. Now he lazily moved his head to stare across the row of cots to the door. The top sergeant stood there, breathing heavily as though he had been moving too fast for his bulk. The sergeant stood in the opened screen door, searching the room. Behind Paul, toward the rear of the barracks room a man was making a terrific, unmusical noise on a banjo and several off-key voices were attempting to follow the

banjo with bellowing song. Like the man on the cot next to his, Paul had successfully ignored the noise; that other soldier was sleeping soundly and snoring loudly.

"Breen!"

"Here," Paul said, raising up on the bed. "Now what?" Behind him the sound had died away. "Roll your tail offa there and come on!"

"This is Sunday," Paul protested.

"I don't give a damn what day it is – get up and trot!"

"Go on, Breen," somebody called out from behind him. "Maybe the general wants to give ya' another merit badge."

"Naw," a second voice objected. "This is important this time. G-2's found a Japanese map and nobody can read it except the Emperor and Breen."

"Knock it off!" the sergeant roared.

Paul sat up to stare at the man in the doorway. He closed his eyes for a moment, as if fighting away sleep or a sudden pain, and then began to put his shoes on. The topkick seemed in a devil of a hurry and had come on orders of the captain. The captain had been emphatic. Paul bit his lower lip with the sudden awareness that something unpleasant was coming. He put his tie around his neck and tied it. The sergeant was leaning against the doorframe, waiting with obvious impatience.

They went out into the company street, and the noise again welled up behind them.

"What's up?" Breen asked.

The noncom looked at him curiously. "Don't you know?"

Paul shook his head. "I haven't put in for anything." He realized that the sergeant didn't know the reason for the summons either.

"Just between you and me, soldier, the Old Man's been keeping his eye on you anyway. Maybe because you didn't put in."

By the spring of 1945, Paul knew enough about himself to keep his mouth shut and his faculties concealed. He was aware, through the books of Rhine and Roy and by studying those around him, that talents such as his were not given to other men, were only now budding in the blind and groping minds of those experimenters in the parapsychology laboratories. Upon his induction into the army, he had discovered himself building up extraordinarily high scores in the intelligence and aptitude tests – not because he was of superior intelligence, but because he was absently picking the minds of those about him, unthinkingly ferreting out the proper answers to the tests.

Paul saw what he was doing, saw that the officer in charge was talking about his scoring, and slacked off. He had no wish to call attention to himself.

In camp he struggled not to repeat the earlier episode in the projection booth – that of knowing too much too early, of knowing before he could be normally expected to learn. Despite his precautions, the training sergeant had picked him out one day.

"You been in the army before, buster?"

Paul told him he had not and realized that the man didn't fully believe him. After that

he redoubled his guard, but it was difficult not to do what the sergeant *thought* he should be doing. At first it had been awkward and arduous to distinguish the unspoken thought from the spoken word, to determine which was the mental propellant behind a barked order and the oral order itself. Later he learned the fine distinction between thought and word, thought and deed by careful observation and analysis. The mental thought always preceded the word, the propellant always stimulated the vocalization, regardless of the time lapse between the two. It was very much like hearing the same things said twice for his benefit alone; he had only to remember *not* to act the first time it was relayed to him. Always to wait for the second and slower command.

With some of the trainers that had proven easy; their thought patterns were sluggish and lazy in stimulating the vocal cords, but in combat veterans freshly back from the war theaters the reverse was true. The double commands were snapped with hairline triggering, the shouted word following the shouted thought by no more than a millisecond, the two almost blending into one. Under them, Paul had made less mistakes because there was so little need to distinguish the mental from the spoken command, and because they on their part thought and acted so quickly they did not notice Paul sometimes obeying the thought rather than the word. But with the other kind of man found in the army, the unhurried thinker, he learned to watch his movements.

The top sergeant pushed open the door and walked into the orderly room, Paul following. The room was empty. Paul waited while the sergeant knocked on the inner door, and the double thought-voice of the captain was heard.

"Come in, come in."

The sergeant opened the door. "Private Breen, sir." He moved aside to let Paul in and then closed the door.

Paul looked first to the company commander, Captain Evans, and learned next to nothing; the man was highly curious at this new turn of affairs and was eagerly looking forward to the interview, but as yet knew little. Eagerly looking forward to the interview! Paul switched his glance to the two civilians sitting in the office and in the following second received a double shock – the most startling of his life because they bordered on shocks of fear. The two in civilian clothes were calmly staring at him.

Ray Palmer of the F.B.I., and Peter Conklin of the C.I.C.

Captain Evans leaned forward, indicating a chair. "Sit down, Breen. These gentlemen want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir."

Paul sat down, struggling to control his growing nervousness and struggling to prevent that emotion from showing. He waited stiffly in the chair, knowing what was coming, knowing that two letters and eleven years had finally caught up with him. He realized, too, what had trapped him. The fingerprints on the letters and those taken at the induction center. As he waited, trying not to squirm under their scrutiny, he saw one thing more. They were not aware of *him*, of what he was. They were still wondering how he did it.

Palmer spoke first, a slow, almost drawling speech that suggested a patient, kindly man with all the time in the world. Only the agility of his mind betrayed the camouflage.

"Breen, we've been interested in you."

"Yes, sir."

"Interested in your army record, really. A most remarkable record, wouldn't you say?"

"In what way, sir?"

"Well now, let's consider those intelligence and aptitude tests first of all." Palmer was slow, unhurried. "You should be proud of your scoring."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, aren't you?"

"I don't think they were particularly high, sir."

"But they *could* have been," Palmer pointed out. Paul said nothing to that.

"I think they could have been much higher, don't you?" He paused to see if Paul might agree. "A pity that they fell off, just as they did."

"I didn't know anything about newspaper procedure, sir. Mats, logos and hellboxes – things like that."

"You went along very well on the remainder."

"I've done a lot of reading, sir. And I've worked on projection machinery and an old car I had."

"Get around a lot in that car? Did you go out and have a good time on Saturday nights?" Yes, sir.

"Ever been to Peoria?"

"Yes, sir, several times."

"And Chicago?"

"A few times. Not many."

"Did you go up to see the Fair?"

"Yes, sir." It was coming closer. "Enjoy it?"

"Very much, yes, sir. I stayed two or three days."

"I was there too," Palmer said. "Let's see, you must have been about twelve or thirteen then."

"Thirteen." Any moment now.

"With your folks? Your aunt perhaps?"

"No, sir. I went alone. I saved up the money."

"All alone in Chicago? And only thirteen?"

"I wasn't frightened, if that's what you mean."

Palmer nodded. "No, I don't imagine you frighten easily." He pursed his lips, giving the impression that he didn't know what to say next, that he was groping around. That too was false. "Gangsters didn't frighten you, did they?"

Paul blinked at him. "Yes, sir, they did."

"Oh? Did they threaten you?"

"No, sir. But I was scared, all the same."

Palmer studied him. "What did you do?"

"I ran away. Back to the hotel."

"Why?"

"Because I was scared...and..."

"And?" he invited.

"And because Mr. Bixby told me to run."

Palmer nodded to himself. "Bixby told you to run. Well now, that's sensible. What else did he tell you?"

That was it. From this point onward he could move in one of two directions. He could tell them the truth and ride it wherever it might carry him — or he could lie, and hope with further lies to find a way out of explaining the entire situation. Already he saw a vague picture of where the truth might take him, saw a solidified kind of future looming up on the periphery of his mind. He saw too that he had already hesitated in answering the question, and the hesitation had been noticed. Paul decided to tell them the truth and let the consequences come as they may.

"Nothing," he said in answer to the last question.

Palmer looked through him. "Bixby told you nothing else? Only to run away?"

"That's all, sir."

There was a long moment's silence. Captain Evans was frankly eager for the conversation to continue; he was enjoying it and he fancied he was learning great things. Not every day did the F.B.I. *and* the C.I.C. descend upon your office to quiz one of your men. He always thought there was something queer about Private Breen!

Paul flicked him a quick glance, hiding a smile.

He looked back to find both civilians studying him. He was becoming used to Palmer, to his quick mind and his slow speech, but the silent Conklin tended to make him nervous. As yet there was no way to know how Conklin's mind and tongue co-operated in action. His thinking was sharp, razor sharp, and he had already formulated a working theory — Paul sucked in his breath, astonished at the near accuracy of the theory! He stared at Conklin, conscious of the man's potentiality; he had best watch the C.I.C. agent.

Paul realized that Palmer had briefed Conklin in advance, had filled in his background; he knew that the two of them had gone over his army record together and arrived at the same general conclusions together. But he saw now that Conklin was far ahead of Palmer in theorizing; where the F.B.I. man still didn't know the Chicago answers, Conklin was already making shrewd guesses. Paul considered that difference for a moment, and then did something he had very rarely done in his life. He gently probed into Conklin's mind to see *why* he was theorizing.

Conklin knew about the book!

He knew about the battered copy of Roy's *Studies in Psychokinesis* which he still had, tucked away in his foot-locker. The C.I.C. agent then had been peering around, had come prepared to this Sunday afternoon meeting. And so — he was theorizing. He didn't *believe* yet, he refused to allow his orderly mind to admit the possibility that Paul Breen

was a telepath. But that old book certainly suggested it.

Paul found one other thing. Conklin had no intention of telling Palmer of the book or his theories. Whether much or little came of it, it would remain C.I.C. property alone.

That's what he thought! Paul was suddenly glad he'd decided to tell them the truth. Both of them.

Ray Palmer cleared his throat and continued talking in his easy, unhurried drawl. "I'd like to hear about Chicago, about Bixby and those gangsters."

Paul gave him a frank glance. "I've already told you most of it." He found no visible reaction to that, but the man's thoughts leaped — This soldier knew who he was!

"Tell me again," Palmer suggested.

"I was wandering around the streets pretty late at night — lost. I couldn't find my way back to the hotel. I turned a corner and saw Mr. Bixby in the alley; he was on his knees, and had been shot by two men who were hiding in an upstairs window across the street. I stopped to help him, and he told me to run. I waited a minute longer and did run. Somebody showed me the way back to the hotel. And the next day at the Fair I sent the letter to tell you about it." He paused and almost smiled at the memory. "Only I didn't know *where* to send it."

"Jehoshaphat!" the captain burst out. "All that at thirteen?"

The C.I.C. agent silenced him with a glance. "I'm surprised," Palmer said mildly.

"Sir?"

"That you didn't know where to send the letter. Apparently you knew everything else: Bixby's name and code he used as a signature, the names of the men who shot him, where they were hiding. I'm surprised you didn't know where to send that letter."

"Mr. Bixby didn't tell me that, sir."

Palmer's eyes were quickly bright, stabbing into his. "You said that Bixby didn't tell you any of this."

"No, sir, he didn't."

Palmer made a gesture of impatience. "Then how in the world did you find out?"

Paul glanced cautiously at the three of them, at the captain hanging on his every word, at the puzzled and now angry Palmer, at the silent C.I.C. agent whose mind was on the brink of a dazzling leap.

"I read his thoughts, Mr. Palmer."

Stillness. No physical movement, but ... Paul sensed a change in the room, a subtle change on the part of one man. Conklin was regarding him stolidly, unblinking. Palmer was of the same mind and attitude as before, except for an increase in his anger. Evans decided the man was lying.

The F.B.I. agent said carefully, slowly, "No one has been introduced to you, Breen. How did you know my name?"

Paul answered him but he was looking at Conklin as he spoke. "I read yours, too."

None of those four ever forgot the tableau in the captain's office; not the captain, not even when he was eventually shifted to a godforsaken outpost on Kwajalein to get rid of him, not Palmer, not to the day he peacefully died in bed with his shoes off, not Conklin, not to that very moment a sentry's bullet cut him down somewhere in the heart of Russia. Paul Breen never forgot it as he sat a prisoner on the third floor of the Maryland mansion, watching a succession of sunsets. His candid admission was the turning point in their four lives.

Evans snapped, "Now see here, Breen — "

Peter Conklin silenced the man a second time.

Palmer was on his feet, peering at him. "Are you trying to be funny, son?"

"No, sir."

"Why do you say a thing like that?"

"Because it's true."

"I'm disappointed in you, Breen."

Paul looked up into his face and said quietly, "Shall I tell you what you're thinking, Mr. Palmer?"

"I think you're making a fool of yourself."

"Yes, sir, you do, and you also think I'm lying, but you can't understand why I should be lying. At first you believed that I might be related in some way to the two gunmen and turned them in to collect a reward, but later evidence caused you to discard that belief. Then you thought that perhaps Bixby had told me the situation and given me instructions, only to discard that too when you realized Bixby couldn't or wouldn't do it. Finally you admitted that you simply didn't understand it at all and asked your superior officer to be relieved. He refused and assigned you to the case for as long as it remained in the open file.

"Sir, you have a wife forty-six years old, who scolds you because you don't change your socks often enough to please her; you have twin daughters who are twenty, and one of them is married to a man who continually pesters you to find him a job with the Bureau. Your private opinion of the man is that he couldn't fill a job digging ditches.

You suffer from arthritis in the left knee and also have a large permanent blister on that heel; on bad days your limp is most pronounced and very annoying to you. You fear that the Bureau may retire you before the time — "

Palmer shouted at him. "*Stop!*"

"Yes, sir."

Palmer backed away from him and sat down, eying Paul as he would an untamed beast caught in a rickety cage. He said nothing, sitting straight and strained in the stiff-backed office chair, breathing heavily.

Captain Evans was staring at the two of them, desperately attempting to believe what his eyes and ears had just reported, shoving away for the moment the nagging doubt in his mind that such a thing couldn't be true.

"Breen," he said, and looked around quickly to see if the C.I.C. agent intended to silence him a third time, "Breen, is that true? Can you really do that?"

Paul turned to the captain.

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid I can."

"Now see here, you aren't attempting a leg-pull to get yourself out of a bad fix?"

"Sir, shall I tell you about the fifteen tons of coal that were diverted to a relative's house? Or what Lieutenant Miller's wife said to you the night she found you in her kitchen? The WAC detachment posted a —"

"That will be all, Breen," the captain said evenly. His face was an emotionless mask.

"Yes, sir."

The silence descended on them again. Paul glanced around, quite uncomfortable to be the target of their eyes, and found each of the three studying him, weighing him and not liking what they saw. He found speculation, anger and open hatred. His gaze finally settled on Peter Conklin who was watching him with speculation — and nothing else.

Like the two others, Conklin didn't approve of the revelation, but there was no anger or hatred in his mind. The C.I.C. agent still sat in the position he had maintained throughout the interview, the tips of his fingers placed together and coming to a point beneath his chin. He had seldom moved and had not spoken a word since Breen entered the door. Paul returned his stare.

Conklin spoke suddenly. There was neither friendliness nor hostility in his voice. "You need not prove yourself to me, Mr. Breen. I require no personal demonstration, and I do not care to have my mental privacies paraded for view. Instead, let me say that until I find evidence to the contrary, I shall believe you."

Paul smiled at him. "Yes, sir."

"How long has this been going on?" There were no particular tonal qualities to Conklin's voice; like the man himself and his mode of dress, there was nothing to cause him to stand out in a crowd.

"All my life I suppose, sir. I wasn't aware of it until I was thirteen — that night in Chicago."

"Who else knows of it?"

"No one, sir. I didn't want to talk about it."

"I commend you. Do you realize what it will mean?"

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Never mind; I see that you haven't. We have something of a problem here."

Paul said nothing. Palmer turned in his chair to speak to Conklin and there was a new note in *his* voice.

"What are you getting at?"

"Mr. Breen's peculiar talent must not continue to be wasted here."

Palmer stared at the agent. "Mr. Breen?"

Conklin nodded. "Are you not yet aware of a change in relative values? Of a bizarre

shift of command in view of that particular talent?"

"Well..." Palmer hesitated. "I guess he can't stay here on the post."

Conklin allowed himself only the briefest of glances at the captain. "Obviously."

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Washington."

"Washington?" Palmer considered that. "Your outfit or mine?"

"Mine."

"Well now, I don't know. He's been *our* problem for the last eleven years."

"He is in uniform now." Conklin inspected the summer tans Paul was wearing. "Our jurisdiction."

Palmer shook his head. "That won't set so well, I'm thinking. The office will raise hell."

"Let them take it to the top. I'm going to claim jurisdiction until he's taken away from me." He turned quickly to Paul. "With your permission, Mr. Breen."

"*Permission!*" Captain Evans displayed the shock. "He's an enlisted man."

Conklin tapped the tips of his fingers on his chin, the briefest trace of a mocking smile on his lips. "I'm afraid you aren't an overly imaginative man, Captain. Whether we approve or not, a change in status occurred a few moments ago." He was still looking at Paul. "There remains in my mind some doubt as to who is the actual master here."

"Are you serious, sir?"

"I am. I believe our present situation to be analogous to that of the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnon. I am trying to avoid a similar mistake." He turned back to Paul. "Mr. Breen, I would like you to return to Washington with me. I want to present you to my superior officers." Paul said, "Yes, sir."

Captain Evans cut in. "See here, I can put through orders transferring him to Washington. I can arrange the transportation and ..." He stopped talking, taken aback at the expression on Conklin's face.

"You will be kind enough to arrange the transportation, Captain. On tonight's train, if it can be managed. Secure a double bedroom or a drawing room. Will you look after it now?"

Evans was on his feet and moving toward the door. "At once, sir."

"And, Captain..."

"Yes, sir?"

"Not one word of what has transpired here is to pass your lips. You are not to mention the subject even to your wife." Again the agent's grim expression underlined his words.

Evans said quietly, "Yes, sir," and went out. After a moment the outer door opened and closed.

The old stillness settled over the room. Paul found the two agents continually watching him, continually studying, probing, guessing, and to be the object of their

steady scrutiny was vastly uncomfortable. Doubly uncomfortable, for behind their piercing eyes their minds were repeating the examination of him; their thoughts clearly said what their eyes could not and their lips would not. In varying degrees they accepted him for what he was, and yet they had not time to learn that *all* their thoughts were open to him. They would not or could not say what they were thinking, still not fully realizing that they may as well say it.

Paul saw something in Conklin's mind and was on the verge of speaking, when caution gripped him. If he had used caution he wouldn't now be in this position – and although it might be a late time to start, still it was a beginning. So he held his silence, saying nothing, confident that Conklin would voice that thought sooner or later. It came almost at once.

"Mr. Breen, I can't help feeling sorry for you."

Paul knew why, but for the sake of pretense and to spare the man's feelings, he asked, "Why, sir?"

"Because your captain inadvertently gave you a taste of what is to come. Because in the eyes of those who will know you, you are going to be the most hated man in the world. I'm sorry for you, Mr. Breen. It is an unenviable position."

Five

The train moved eastward through the cloudy night, stopping seldom, whistling often, and intermittently throwing long streamers of fiery soot and smoke back along the cars and the right-of-way. Paul sat with his chin in his hand and his forehead pressed against the window, watching the dark and back-rushing country. Little towns rocketed by, no more than minute clusters of dull light around a station or an express office, and sometimes there were other thin strings of lights reaching away into the blackness. When the train sped across a highway there would be flashing red warnings that momentarily lit up the interior of the bedroom, turning his face a dull crimson. Occasionally a pair of headlights, yellow-white by comparison, would be waiting on the highway and their flaring cones would illuminate the room, streak across the face against the window.

Ray Palmer slept soundly in the topmost Pullman bed on the other side of the room, enjoying his dreams. Below him, Peter Conklin reclined on the lower bed, but he was not asleep. The degree of mental activity exuding from the two agents was marked; it revealed the difference between a state of sleep and one of wakeful awareness. Conklin was worried, fascinated and repelled by turns; he was in a feverish state of mind – speculating, calculating, planning. Belatedly he was becoming aware of the fabulous treasure he had uncovered, of the full and invaluable richness of it.

With Breen at his side he could walk through the streets of Washington or New York, searching out those aliens now in this country bent on sabotage. He could go through the workshops and laboratories of hundreds of factories and secret experimenting centers, fingering the traitors, the malingerers, the enemies. He could stand in the customs sheds, catching them as they left their ships; he could wait at the airports, arresting them as they disembarked. With Breen he could move among the crowds still

attending the gala Washington social events, picking out the foreigners and the pseudo friends intent on harming the nation, discovering the embassy personnel who were actually undercover agents. And if they'd only let him take Breen to London...!

The car wheels rumbled hollowly across a bridge.

Conklin rolled over on his side and found Paul's brooding silhouette against the window.

"Can't sleep?"

"No, sir."

"Neither can I. Upset by all this?"

"Some – yes, sir. I keep thinking."

"I believe I know what you mean." Conklin peered through the window. "Where are we, do you know?"

"Indiana, I think. We're going too fast to read the signs. I saw Vincennes a long way back there."

The three of them had left the military post in an uncomfortable silence, late that afternoon. Captain Evans had provided a staff car and the driver; he wasn't sorry to see them go. After several hours of almost unbroken silence (of silence to all but Paul), the driver had delivered them to the Union Station in Saint Louis, and they sat down to await the opening of the train. Departure time was near midnight. They boarded the train and Palmer asked the porter to make up three of the beds; he was in the upper bed and falling asleep before they pulled out of the station. After a while Conklin locked the door, partially undressed and stretched out on the lower. Paul seated himself on the foot of his bed, watching their train snake its way through the cluttered yards and along the riverbank to the open country. He was still there hours later, face to the glass.

There had been some relief when Palmer fell asleep; at least the agent stopped thinking about him, dissecting him. But he was sorely puzzled by some of the strange things the man in the lower bed was mulling – why, for instance, should Conklin wish he had been found some months earlier? What difference did it make when he was discovered – in April or early May before Germany's surrender, or now in the middle of July? Paul could discern no good reason for the concern.

"Will you tell me something?" he asked suddenly, Conklin seemed startled, wondering why he should *ask*. "Certainly. If I can."

"I didn't understand your remark about Neanderthals. Will you explain that?"

"I'd be glad to. Are you at all familiar with the subject?"

Paul nodded hesitantly. "I seem to remember reading something about it – or them, in school, but it's rather hazy now. Ape men, I think."

"*Homo neanderthalensis*," Conklin supplied. "They were a race of almost-men, prehistoric cave dwellers who lived in Europe tens of thousands of years ago. Commonly agreed upon as our Paleolithic ancestors. They came just before modern man, gave way *to* modern man." (Paul caught a sudden, unhappy thought-picture.) "The Cro-Magnon was the beginning of today's modern man; they were a tall and straight race of people where the Neanderthal was bent or stooped. There is a school of thought

which holds that the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnon cultures overlapped briefly, violently. One must spring from the other of course, but this particular school believes the overlapping and the subsequent cleaving were violent. Extremely violent. In short, that the two fought each other and the newer Cro-Magnon killed off the Neanderthal."

Paul sat still, saying nothing, learning much more than Conklin put into words.

"If this theory is true, it may well be understood. The Neanderthal would be envious, jealous of the better man living alongside him. And that other man would likely be contemptuous of the clumsy beast who shared his world. Envy and jealousy readily become hate. The Neanderthal would find himself outwitted in every contest and perhaps actually going hungry because of the other's superior hunting skill. He had brute strength, but that is poor match for wits, skill and knowledge. He lost. The Cro-Magnon replaced him on earth and he vanished – utterly.

"I regard that replacement as natural, for had it not occurred perhaps we wouldn't be here today and something else would be in our place. I believe that natural scientific laws govern the universe and all within it, and that evolution is inevitable. What we understand, we label. What we half understand or do not understand at all, we call 'Mother Nature' and try to accept it. Mother Nature arranged for the superior Cro-Magnon to replace the stumbling Neanderthal, and so we evolved, the human race today. I'm sure you follow me."

"Yes, sir. That's why Captain Evans disliked me."

"Hated you would be more correct. I doubt that I could explain to him what I have just explained to you, but the parallel is obvious. Will you forgive me a frankness...?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. Unless you are an accidental freak, I suspect your appearance here is but a hint of things to come. I am afraid the earth is about to witness still another struggle between the old and the new, between common man and advanced man. It isn't a happy prospect."

"But, Mr. Conklin, I don't intend –"

"No, perhaps not," Conklin agreed. "Not now, not yet. But do we know what ten or twenty years will bring? Do we know that you are the *only* one?"

Paul had never considered that. The possibility that there might be others like him was stunning.

"I only wish you were more mature," the C.I.C. agent went on. "I am aware that you consider twenty-four to be a ripe old age; I thought the same when I was twenty-four. But I fear that you lack the maturity to grasp all this, that you lack the reasoning ability to see where it may lead. Still with frankness, I believe that an older man in your place would never have permitted his discovery."

"But I'd like to help," Paul declared.

"Help what?" Conklin asked flatly.

Paul gestured, then wisely said nothing.

Ragged strings of weak light sprang up about them, and poor houses that habitually haunt the outskirts of any city along the railroad right-of-way. The scene gave way to

rainswept streets and a greater concentration of light, and then the cloudy sky reflected the neon glow of the city. The train slowed and at brilliantly illuminated street crossings Paul could see the rain falling, could see the madly swinging windshield wipers on the waiting automobiles. The red lights flashed in his face. His window was on the lee side of the car and dry. Far away he caught a glimpse of another river and then the train was picking its careful way through the railyards, through a maze of freight cars and chugging switch engines and men with lanterns.

Up ahead the station revealed itself through the curtain of rain, high up. The locomotive slid into a murky tunnel beneath it and the cars came to a squeaking halt alongside a trainshed which captured the sound of the rain on a tin roof. Conklin raised up to peer out the window.

"Cincinnati," he said. He reached for the porter's bell, touched it. After a few moments that man knocked on the bedroom door and Conklin got up to unlock it, open it. "Get me a late paper if you can, please?"

Paul saw the porter come down the steps of their car and move along the platform. Without taking his eyes from the outside scene, he asked, "Do you think I'm going to have trouble?"

"Yes, frankly I do."

"But why?" Why should anyone make trouble for him?

"Mr. Breen ...let us suppose there was but one known Cro-Magnon in all the world. Let us further suppose the Neanderthal leaders discovered that man, captured him, tied him with a rope and put his wits and skills to work for them. Nothing but trouble can come from such a situation."

"I suppose so, but I don't want to make trouble."

"Not now, not yet," Conklin repeated. "You will find Washington full of men like Captain Evans; big men, little men, many of them with intolerance and hate in their minds. Those few who will come to know you, will use you – and using you, hate you. That, too, disturbs me."

Paul turned from the window to stare curiously at the agent lying on the bed. He had discovered something about the man, something not shared with the F.B.I. operative now asleep in the upper bed. They regarded each other for long moments, oblivious of the outside sounds seeping into the room. In the semidarkness Paul smiled "You don't hate me."

"I do not," Conklin replied instantly. "At this moment I neither like nor dislike you; I am neutral. I hope that I will not see fit to change my mind in the future. I cannot like you because you are alien to me." Unexpectedly he returned the smile. "But no ... I do not hate you." And then he added, "I hope that I never will."

The agent was frightened of him, Paul realized. It was no more than a small fright at the moment because the fantastic situation was new and unplumbed, had only taken root that afternoon in the captain's office. To Paul's unhappiness, he saw the fright growing with each passing hour. The longer Conklin discussed him and his special problem in his mind, the more frightening the predicament appeared. As yet, he saw Paul only as an invincible, invisible finger man – someone who might walk the streets with him, pointing out the enemies of the department and the nation, someone who

could unerringly ferret out those who did not belong. But in the man's subconscious there was another and greater fear which had not yet forced its way to the surface: Paul could know the minds of friends as well as enemies. If he could stand in a ballroom and expose the undercover activities of an embassy hireling, he could also walk through the offices of the War Department and know the most cherished secrets of a wartime world. That was lurking in Conklin's subconsciousness and would make itself known before long. And the fear would grow.

The train began to move.

Paul looked to the door. "Your paper's coming."

Conklin only glanced at him and waited for the knock. He lay back on the bed with the paper, after again locking the door, and turned on the small reading light.

"Another one of those conferences," he said after a glance at the headline. "Truman, Churchill and Stalin. At Potsdam this time. Let's hope something good comes of it. This war has been going on much too long!"

Paul favored him with a curious, sidelong scrutiny. He parted his lips to speak and then stopped himself. Conklin's feelings toward him at the present time were neutral; he said so, and he believed so. There was little point in causing that neutrality to develop into an active dislike or open hatred, through mistakes on his part. To speak his mind now would be a mistake. To speak either of their minds! The information in the paper wasn't news to Conklin; he had known before leaving Washington that the president was away on another mission, had known most of the advance details. The headline only served to remind him of the facts he already knew. Paul seized that knowledge from him while he was reading the headline and the subheads above the body of the story. And, he noted now, Conklin didn't bother to follow down the page, didn't read the news story itself.

Instead, he asked, "Can I have the sports?"

Conklin pulled the section from the paper and flipped it across the room to him. Paul snapped on a second light and fingered through the pages. With an effort, he prevented himself from looking up at the F.B.I. agent.

"All right, dammit," Palmer said, leaning over the edge of the bed, "if we're going to stay awake all night I might as well join you." He snapped his fingers at Conklin. "Give me the comics."

Conklin seemed surprised to find him awake.

They went to the dining car for breakfast together. Paul had been the first to awaken, pulled from his sleep by the now-absent reveille which continued to dominate his habits. He tarried a moment on the edge of the bed, studying the two sleeping agents, and then he felt through his bag for the shaving equipment. The sound of running water awoke Conklin. Paul did not turn from the mirror or speak; he knew the man was lying on the bed watching him, speculating anew, and to greet him without first turning to see him awake would be another mistake. He wanted to avoid mistakes with Conklin at all costs; Conklin at least was a neutral friend, while the older Palmer was not. He had already lost Palmer, lost him yesterday afternoon in the office.

Stinging lesson: *keep silent.*

Conklin rolled out of bed and said good morning, and then he reached up to wake

Palmer. Paul glanced listlessly through last night's paper while they shaved and dressed. And the three of them went to breakfast.

"What would you like?" Conklin asked him. "Hungry? Order anything you want, anything at all."

"I don't have much money on me."

"You don't need it. I'm paying the bills." He humorously nudged Palmer in the ribs. "Even yours."

"You can afford it," Palmer returned sourly. "You've got the prize."

Paul saw no more than the sharp, warning look Conklin gave the other agent, but he caught the wince in Palmer's mind as Conklin kicked him under the table. He ignored both of them and ordered a meal.

As he was eating he found himself absently listening, listening to both the words and thoughts of those about him in the car. That too was a habit, one that had caused him some faint shame when he discovered himself first doing it, because he felt as though he were prying into places where he didn't belong. The shame wore away when he realized that he could no more shut out those stray wisps of thought than he could block off the spoken sounds reaching his ears. Sound *could* be closed out if he put his fingers to his ears, but the thoughts could not. And so it had become a detached thing; a mixture of thought and voice picked up from nowhere as he was working, drilling, loafing, reading. He would come out of some introspection to find the man next to him speaking or thinking, he would hear a few words or sentences or trains of thought, and then the pattern would be broken off as he moved on to something else.

Now, at the breakfast table, Palmer was poking a fork among the eggs on his plate and wondering aloud if they were fresh. To himself, he was saying that no one could fry eggs the way his wife did, and the prices on dining cars were terrible. Conklin was absently eating and looking out of the window. His thoughts were a continuation of the feverish planning of the night before, but his only words were a remark on the coming heat of the day and a superfluous reminder that Washington in July was intolerable.

Paul let his gaze drift about the diner.

A very pretty young woman caught his attention, a woman smartly dressed and made up, and he saw that most of the other men in the car were likewise enjoying her beauty. An older man sat beside her, a man he at first supposed to be her father until he caught the random, casual thoughts of both. Both in their way were thinking of the night just past. He was not her father. Paul hesitated only a moment longer, staring at the girl with surprise until she happened to glance up and catch his eye. In her mind she instantly replaced the older man with Paul, and Paul let his gaze slide past her. He was facing the greater length of the car with only a few of the corner tables at his back. A man and his wife were going to Washington to see ... to see what? The president. They were going to see the president because their oldest son was in a prisoner-of-war camp and now their youngest son had received his draft notice. (But didn't they know he was now in Potsdam?) Two salesmen were comparing routes and goods; one sold books, the other a line of meats. Books was complaining that the other had it lucky — people always ate. Line of meats countered that *he* had to pay three dollars to read a snappy one, whereas the other got to read them all free. Books closed that subject by declaring he had never read a book in his life, he only sold them. But his mind admitted it was a boastful

lie—he did read them whenever he stopped overnight in a town lacking a decent picture or a burlesque theater. A heavy-set and scowling man sat alone at a far table, dividing his attention between the pretty girl and the trio at Paul's table. The unpleasant fellow seemed vaguely reminiscent of one or two overbearing army sergeants Paul had known, and he stared at Paul and at his uniform with some distaste. In the next moment Paul discovered why. The man had been a sergeant, had only recently doffed his uniform and the mere sight of another caused a welling resentment in his mind. Paul could easily understand that and even sympathize with the view; he had yet to meet a man in the ranks who liked it, who wasn't eagerly looking forward to his own day of separation. The former noncom let his eyes and wishes roam over the figure of the girl, and then he turned once more to Paul and the two cops.

Cops! With a start, Paul stared at Conklin.

Conklin asked, "What's the matter?"

"He knows you're policemen; both of you."

Conklin frowned across the table, searching Paul's face, but he did not turn to inspect the car. Palmer began a turning motion in his chair, but stopped himself before the movement could be noticed. "Who does?" he demanded.

"That fellow sitting down there—looks like he's mad at the world." Paul inclined his head toward the other end of the diner. "He's an ex-sergeant; just got out, I think."

Conklin was watching Paul closely and with growing fascination. "How does he know?"

Paul didn't answer for several seconds, and then, "I don't know—really. He just seemed to recognize the two of you by looking at you. Not *you*, but what you are. He's been around you before—he's familiar with security agents. He recognized you from past association with others." Paul stopped again, then smiled. "He thinks you've arrested me."

"Why does he think that?"

"Just suspicion—suspicion of the two of you. He doesn't know why I'm 'arrested'; he just thinks that."

Conklin nodded with an inner satisfaction that wasn't lost on Paul. "Describe him, please."

Paul did so, taking care not to let the ex-sergeant catch him staring. Palmer then asked which table he occupied and Paul told him.

"Is he looking this way now?"

"No, sir."

Palmer casually turned and called the waiter. After a moment he said, "I don't know him." The waiter stopped by their table and received a request for more coffee. As he left, Conklin looked after him.

"Nor I," he said a moment later. He faced Paul. "What's he doing now?"

"Ogling that good-looking girl across the aisle."

"No change in his suspicions?"

"No, sir."

Conklin returned to his meal. "Odd."

"He's probably been working around you fellows," Palmer suggested. "You've been in his hair."

"I suppose so."

The elderly couple on their way to Washington got up from the table and left the car. Paul silently wished them luck, knowing all the time how futile their trip was. The two salesmen argued on and on while their waiter stood by patiently, waiting to clear the table. The girl and the man who was not her father were getting off at Harpers Ferry, where he had a hunting lodge up in the mountains. She had only two weeks vacation, but was expecting to stretch that into three or four. Occasionally her eye would light on one or another of the various men in the car, and briefly she would wish *that* man were going to the lodge with her. Four government clerks entered the diner all talking at once, and the former sergeant fell to watching them.

Paul said, "What's — " and then stopped himself.

Conklin turned from the window. "Yes?"

"Not now, sir. Too many people around."

"All right. I'm finished. Shall we go back?"

"Yes, sir." He pushed back his chair and stood up, conscious that several eyes were on his uniform and that the heavy-set man at the far end of the car was studying them again. He walked out without looking back.

In their bedroom, he sat down and watched Conklin lock the door. That had become a ritual.

Palmer took off his coat and hung it up, revealing a shoulder holster which he now shifted to a more comfortable position. Paul glanced at the holster and said nothing. Last night Palmer had slept with his gun under his pillow, while Conklin had hung his over a hanger with his coat. Conklin said, "Want anything?"

"No, sir." He inspected the passing scenery and then turned back to the C.I.C. agent. "Well — yes, sir. Do you suppose I can have my civvies when we get to Washington?"

"I can't promise that, but I see no reason why not. I'll request them."

"I'd appreciate that. I don't suppose I'm out of the army?"

"I doubt it. But perhaps you would be more comfortable without the uniform."

"Thanks."

"You started to ask something in the diner," Conklin reminded him. "Something you didn't want to mention in a crowd."

Paul nodded. "What's an atomic bomb?"

He had his answer instantly, if it was an answer, but he waited for Conklin to speak. Conklin hesitated, turning the phrase over in his mind.

"I don't honestly know. Where did you pick that up?"

"The sergeant back there."

"An atomic bomb. ... I've never heard of it. But the name itself certainly suggests a frightful train of thought. I rather imagine it to be some new weapon the laboratory people have produced. But an *atomic* bomb!" Conklin reverted to his old pose of the tipped fingers beneath his chin. "And that man was thinking about it? Did he know what it was?"

"No, sir. Not what it was, but he knew about it." Paul glanced absently at the closed door as someone passed by outside. "I thought you might know; that's why I asked."

"I don't," Conklin shook his head in puzzlement. "But I should like to. My imagination is worrying me."

"I told you!" Palmer broke in. "The sergeant has been working around you fellows somewhere."

The train paused briefly at Harpers Ferry, and Conklin gave the porter a telegram to file for him. Far down the platform Paul could see the young lady and her gentleman friend among the small crowd of people leaving the train.

A car was waiting for them at Washington's Union Station. Paul twisted around in the seat to stare at the Capitol building. The first view of it coming out of the station doorway had been a breathtaking surprise.

Six

Conklin had understated the facts when he said that Washington, in July, was insufferable. Paul Breen surveyed Washington – as much of it as could be seen from the high office window – with all the delight of the first-time visitor. He compared the restricted view to those newsreel shots he had often seen in which the camera stared straight ahead, recording some politician mouthing meaningless words while all around and behind him Washington lived and breathed. By putting his cheek to the glass and straining his eyes, he could make out the nearer surroundings, but for the moment he had to be content with what could be seen before the window. He had not given much heed to the heat on the street. Two rooms away from the office where he waited, the temperature was much higher.

A stranger waited in the office with him, casually smoking a cigarette and saying nothing at all while he stood at the window. The stranger knew nothing about him; Paul found in one swift sweep that the man had only been sent in to keep him company while Conklin reported to his superiors. The report was in progress two rooms away, and the heat there was intense.

"Where's the Mall?" Paul asked the newcomer, "and the Needle?"

"Around on the other side; this window faces the wrong way." The man talked around his cigarette and looked at Paul curiously, wondering what the score might be.

"Is there an elevator or do you have to walk?"

"The Needle? An elevator."

"Does it really sway in the wind?"

"I've heard that it does."

Paul turned. "Haven't you been up in it?"

"No – why?"

"Well, people come thousands of miles to see that – you live here."

"I was born and raised in New York," the stranger told him. "I haven't seen the Statue of Liberty, either."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" He finally removed the cigarette from his mouth. "I don't have time."

Paul went back to the scene outside the window.

Two rooms away, Conklin was having a difficult time. Paul gave a part of his attention to that room and to Conklin as he inspected the small slice of Washington. With some amusement he listened to Conklin making his report, listened to the highly vocal, highly doubtful reception the report was getting, amid hints that perhaps Conklin was in need of a psychiatrist. The agent stood by his story and, disregarding the veiled suggestions concerning his mental stability, told how he had been contacted in Saint Louis by Ray Palmer, of the F.B.I., and had been acquainted with the Breen case which had sorely puzzled that other Bureau for almost twelve years. Inasmuch as Breen had been located on an army post and was therefore within C.I.C. jurisdiction, the two of them had gone out to the post to interview Breen. The result was astonishing. Conklin sketched in the background and general details of the case, carefully repeating the conversations that had taken place in Captain Evans's office – and including the three men's reactions.

Paul remained at the window. There was no sound in the office other than the minute noises made by the man waiting behind him, obviously bored. Nothing of the heated conversation in that other room was audible, but Paul still listened to it, wondering how Conklin would convince the two men who were his superiors – how he could convince them short of parading them in and asking Paul for a stage performance.

Conklin unknowingly found a way.

He launched next into a recital of events on the train coming from Saint Louis, ending his report by stating that Breen in the dining car had discovered a former army sergeant thinking about something called an atomic bomb.

The temperature in that other room dropped alarmingly.

"An atomic bomb?" one man questioned.

"Yes, sir."

"What about an atomic bomb?"

"I don't know, sir. Breen only reported to me that another man in the dining car recognized Palmer and myself as plain-clothes policemen. This man was somehow familiar with what we represented and supposed that we had Breen under arrest. Upon further questioning, it developed that the man was a former army sergeant and had

recently been in contact with something called an atomic bomb."

One of the men sitting in that far room turned to his companion with, "What the hell?"

The companion demanded, "Get Breen in here!"

Paul did not move away from the window or turn to face the door as Conklin left his superiors and approached the smaller office where he waited. Instead, he let Conklin find him still inspecting the Washington scenery. An empty, nothing-to-report shrug passed between the agents behind him, and Paul turned as Conklin called to him. Back again in that other room down the hall, Conklin attempted to put Paul at ease by introductions. "Mr. Breen," he said quietly, "this is Mr. Slater and Mr. Carnell."

Neither of the two left their chairs or made any sign of acknowledgment. Instead, Slater favored Conklin with a probing stare, and in his mind there was the question, *What the hell? Mr. Breen?* Both of them studied Paul, and he waited patiently for someone to speak. Slater was the older of the two and the greater authority; he was heavier in body and his white shirt, turned up at the sleeves, showed the distress of the heat. Carnell was thin, wore a small mustache and horn-rimmed glasses. He seemed to be the deeper, more introspective man, given to fast but sure judgments. Paul liked him on sight, liked what he saw of the man's mind; Slater was the type he would never know or care to.

Slater said, "Well, Breen, this is quite a story."

Paul waited, not answering. They did not invite him to sit down.

"So Captain Evans was diverting coal for private use, eh? Are you expecting a reward for telling that?"

"No, sir."

"Everybody on the post knew it, I suppose?"

"I don't believe so. I never heard it mentioned."

"No? How did you find out?"

"Captain Evans asked for proof of what was in his mind, sir." Paul glanced at Carnell and then back to Slater. "I told him."

"Yes, so it seems. And you told Palmer what was in his mind. Did you also tell Conklin?"

"No, sir. He asked me not to."

"But you knew, nevertheless?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I suppose you're standing there reading mine?"

Paul nodded, knowing what was to be next.

"Well, well-tell me."

Paul started, "Your wife—"

"No!" Conklin burst out.

Slater jerked his eyes around, glaring at Conklin. "You have an objection, *Mister* Conklin?" He eyed the agent with reprimand.

"No, sir. I only thought to warn you that it is a shocking experience, the first time."

"I can stand it," Slater retorted. "Very well, Breen, what about my wife?"

Paul had caught the warning. "Your wife phoned you about an hour ago," he substituted lamely. "She wanted to know if you would be late again tonight."

Slater turned to Conklin. "That's shocking?"

"Ask more."

"All right, Breen. Let's hear more."

Paul considered for a moment. "You sent eighty men to Potsdam with the president, including several from the Baltimore office although they could hardly be spared there. The Baltimore office is having trouble with the theft of large amounts of military goods on the docks; several supply ships have sailed with useless cargo because tools or parts were missing. You have made arrangements for other shipments to replace the stolen material and hope that the original shipments and the replacement parts reach France at about the same time. You know that dock workers have been organized by criminals to loot the supplies, but still you are unable to stop it. You are considering the abandoning of those docks, as was done some years ago when a similar situation arose in Brooklyn." He paused. "Enough?"

Slater's eyes bored into his. "Let's hear more."

Paul regarded him curiously for a moment longer wondering why he kept trying to hide a man's name, wondering why Slater continually fought not to think about someone named Willis. The name itself was easily grasped, but the reason for hiding it was not. "You already knew about Captain Evans," he said. "You knew that the fifteen tons of coal was only a small part of an over-all picture of thievery, and you've drawn up a report on it all." Then Paul went on to list in exact detail the names, places, dates and materials on the report as he visualized it in Slater's mind. He repeated the list of missing articles and the amounts: coal, gasoline, oil, lumber, clothing, foodstuffs, PX supplies, miscellaneous items; he told the geographical location where each had been stolen and the date when each had or had not been reported; he named the men in charge of those locations and the names of the men suspected of the thefts. As he talked, he found Slater interpolating false entries into the list. In an effort to trap him, Slater would casually insert a name or a place not on the list and then wait to see if Paul repeated that deception. Paul ignored the traps, somewhat surprised at the man. If Slater admitted that he was actually reading his thoughts, he should also realize Paul had the sense and the ability to determine the false from the true—to know his *whole* mind and not just those parts Slater chose to feed him. He formed a strong dislike for Slater.

When he had ceased talking, Carnell spoke. "Tell us about the man in the dining car, the former sergeant."

Paul turned his attention to Carnell and smiled. He was almost the exact opposite of Slater, was more like Conklin in his manner and patterns of thought. He could be a friend if the matter were handled carefully. Paul said, "Yes, sir," and repeated the incident at the breakfast table.

"No more than that?" Carnell asked. "Didn't you get a more detailed picture of the man or his background? Did he get on the train at Saint Louis? Where was he from?"

"I don't know, sir." Paul closed his eyes, dwelling on the scene in the diner and what

he remembered of the man at the far table. "It seems to me there was something about a desert—I'm not sure. He thought about the bomb and the desert, but I'm not sure the two were connected."

"Did this man see the bomb?"

"On the ground, do you mean? Or in an ammunition dump? No, sir, I don't think so. But he saw a bright flash that hurt his eyes; the bomb was exploded, I guess."

"Did you get any clear picture of his separation from the army? Why he was no longer in uniform?"

"No, sir, only an impression when he looked at me. He was glad he wasn't wearing his any longer."

"Do you know where he got off the train?"

"He didn't. He was going to New York."

"New York! How do you know that?"

Paul hesitated and then shrugged. "I just do."

Carnell said to Conklin, "Go into the next office and phone New York; use my authority. Give them the description of the sergeant and tell them to take him off the train at all costs. Bring him back here."

After Conklin had left, Carnell and Slater held their silence, again studying Paul. Paul waited, still standing for lack of an invitation to sit, and found that he could follow Conklin's telephone conversation with ease. That was a recent accomplishment; once he had met and talked to a person, once he had become aware of a person's mental habits and patterns, he could if he chose follow that man forever afterward regardless of the distance between them. It was like a familiar voice being heard over a long-distance wire, a wire that could not be broken no matter how far or how fast the voice moved. The trick would not work with those who were still strangers to him, with those whom he had not yet met. He was conscious of several people working in the many adjoining offices, but he knew nothing of them and would not until he had seen them face to face and glimpsed what was in their minds. After that meeting, however brief, he would always know them and where they were and what they were doing or thinking. Paul believed that he knew Conklin so well, he could keep in constant mental contact with the man if he were sent to the other side of the world. At this moment, for instance, Captain Evans was wondering about the outcome of the interview in his office, was wondering when an official reprimand would come for the theft of the coal. He was cursing Breen, wishing his tongue were cut out.

Paul absently licked his lips, tasting his tongue. His especial gift was a strange and perplexing one, and he often wished there was someone he could talk to about it, someone who might have some knowledge of the endowment and who could advise him, teach him the many uses of it. Those few books he had managed to locate were enchanting introductions to a wonder world; they had guided him and actively helped him to understand a part of his problem, but still they were no more than introductions written by men who theorized and experimented with a force they thought to exist. What he desperately needed was an experienced teacher.

He had blindly groped his way thus far, discovering and learning to use the mental tools by trial and error, by accident. Beginning with those faintly understood wishes of

his aunt, he had grown up finding new worlds on every side and making mistakes in some of them because there was no one – parent, mentor, or skilled friend to serve as counselor. Teaching yourself the proper use of a new tool or technique was difficult in the extreme. He realized he was lucky to come off with as few errors as he did.

Carnell broke the silence. "Well, Breen, what are we going to do with you?"

"I suppose I can go back to the post, sir."

Carnell permitted himself a fleeting smile. "No, I'm afraid you can't. For a number of reasons. We would be very foolish to send you back there."

"Mr. Conklin thought I might help out here, sir."

"Help out? In what way?"

"In finding people you want found."

Carnell nodded. "Yes, I daresay you'd be quite useful. And invaluable in that respect." He favored Paul with a frank stare. "Tell me, how do you feel about all this? What is your reaction?"

Paul weighed his answer carefully, searching first to determine if the question were an honest one and if Carnell expected an honest reply. He did. There was no guile in the man's mind, nothing but genuine curiosity.

"Well, sir, I don't like some parts of it. I didn't like being drafted and I didn't like the army, but I was determined to go through with it and get it over with. And I told Mr. Conklin I was willing to help, if he wanted it." Paul faltered, glancing at the hostile Slater. "But I don't like being regarded as a freak. I'm not a freak to myself and I resent being treated as one." Paul hesitated again to look down at the uniform he still wore. "Can I speak my mind?"

Carnell said, "Certainly."

"I don't like being pushed around. I expected it in the army because it is part of the army. I don't expect it if I stay here."

Carnell pursed his lips and said nothing. The trace of a cruel smile appeared on Slater's face.

"You're still in that uniform, Breen," he said. "Yes, sir."

"And still subject to orders from proper authority."

Paul said, "Yes," and deliberately omitted the *sir*.

"So...?" Slater held the vague threat in his mind.

"I know the extent of army regulations. I know what's expected of me physically and morally, but the army is notorious for discouraging thinking." Paul waited a long moment to drive the hint home and then leaned forward to frown at the officer. "Do you have a headache, Mr. Slater?"

Slater gaped at him with pained surprise and then abruptly rose up and stalked out of the room. The door had no sooner slammed behind him than it was opened again, and Conklin re-entered with a puzzled expression on his face.

"What's the matter with him?" he queried.

Paul said, "Mr. Slater has a splitting headache."

"Yes..." Carnell nodded quickly, peering up at Paul with bright and speculative eyes. "I think he has just that."

Dressed in new clothing paid for by Conklin, Paul toured Washington like any other summer visitor. He chose a thin and cool appearing summer suit of blue-checked pattern, a sport shirt and white shoes; he had felt an unquiet moment when he learned the amount of the bill, but Conklin brushed that aside as nothing. Both the clothes and the trip about the city had been early requests and were quickly granted. Neither of them mentioned the addition of two bodyguards who now accompanied them wherever they went.

The party of four rode the slow and creaking elevator to the top of the Washington Monument where Paul spent a long and delightful hour gazing out across the Mall, asking Conklin to identify the various government buildings and city landmarks. And afterwards the party of four visited the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials – where at least two of their number displayed unmistakable signs of becoming tired of it all; they spent nearly half a day wandering through the vast halls of the Smithsonian Institution and later the Botanical Gardens. It was during the course of this last that the attitudes of the bodyguards shifted to boredom. Conklin inwardly laughed and kept going. Because it was midsummer and Congress was not in session, Conklin found someone in the office of the Senate's sergeant-at-arms who took them down onto the floor of the Senate chamber and later into the private waiting rooms behind it. Paul stood beside the desks, looking up and around the room he had seen so often in the news-reels and in that picture Jimmy Stewart had made, looking now at the empty room and easily imagining it packed with men giving their undivided attention to another man standing on the rostrum. Still later they visited the Bureau of Engraving and Printing where Paul had hoped to see money being printed, but there was no activity that day. As they drove past the imposing structure housing the Library of Congress, he was struck by an idea and resolved to make further requests very soon. He was already discovering that Conklin's official connections – or more properly, Conklin's and Slater's and Carnell's official connections – could get him almost anything he wanted within reason. After a moment's reflection he added, And some things not within reason. He was beginning to understand the fantastic value they were placing on him.

They were strolling through Potomac Park with the two bodyguards a short distance behind, weary and hoping that the rubberneck tour would end soon.

"Mr. Conklin, do you remember the subject we talked about on the train? The one I didn't mention in the diner?"

Conklin said, "What? Oh yes, the –"

"Yes, that new thing." Paul hesitated. "Well, I know what it is now."

"Do you?"

"Yes, sir. Do you want me to tell you?"

They walked a short distance in silence, Conklin thinking furiously of the weapon called an atomic bomb. Did he want to know of it or not? He had known several sleepless hours worrying about that term, worrying about what it could mean. He had

not had scientific training, but he was reasonably well versed in scientific matters; the knowledge was sometimes necessary to the job, and the spectre conjured up by those two words was frightening.

"No," he told Paul slowly, "I don't think I want you to tell me."

"All right. I don't know for certain, but I think you'll read about it in the papers in a month or so."

Conklin closed his eyes with pain. "The practical way; I was afraid of that."

"Yes, sir." They continued walking, each involved with his thoughts. "That sergeant who was going to New York," Paul said suddenly as though they had been discussing the man, "he didn't. Your New York office didn't find him."

"*That* will certainly make things more difficult."

Paul nodded and then glanced away as a pair of attractive girls approached. He watched them as they came abreast and then cast a quick glance over his shoulder as they passed. Conklin noticed it.

"Interested?" he asked.

Paul stared at him, knowing his mind. "Mr. Conklin, I appreciate everything you've done for me – I honestly do. But I'll get my own girl when I want one."

"I'm sorry. Forgive me."

"Yes, sir."

"And please stop using *sir* with me. It isn't at all necessary."

"Habit," Paul smiled. "I'll try not to."

"I should imagine you will find great variety," the agent said, harking back to the previous subject. "Washington is overcrowded with women of all ages." He looked eyes with Paul and grinned. "I do very well."

Paul returned the grin. "I've got my eyes open. I hope you don't spoil things."

Conklin sighed and the grin faded. "I hope not. As usual I will have to inquire, but I certainly hope I won't be standing in your way." They reached the waiting car and climbed into the rear seat, while behind them the two shadows stepped briskly forward to sink contentedly onto the seat cushions.

"Back to the hotel?" the agent inquired. One of his two superior officers had made a quick phone call and a suite at the Mayflower Hotel magically appeared for Paul and his retinue of three. It was only a temporary stopping place while another and more tightly shielded retreat was being prepared for them.

Paul nodded. "All that walking tired me out."

Concerted sighs of relief came from the front seat and the car moved out into traffic.

"There's a girl in your building," Paul suggested almost bashfully. "Working the switchboard. Do you know her?"

"Which shift?"

"She was there this morning when we left."

"Oh, yes. Martha Merrill."

"Martha..." Paul seemed satisfied with the name. "Is she married?"

"You don't know?" Conklin asked with mild surprise. "Of course not. I didn't--"

"I must ask you to forgive me once again. I leap to conclusions. No, she isn't married."

"Going steady with anybody?"

"I don't know." Conklin considered that a moment and leaned forward to tap the shoulder of one of the men in the front seat. "Is she?"

"No," the bodyguard replied. "She dates first one guy and then another." He looked around at Paul and then at Conklin. "I couldn't get to first base with her."

"No personality appeal," Conklin laughed.

"No something," the other man agreed. "I wish you luck."

"I have a suggestion," Conklin continued. "When we return to the hotel I will make a phone call. The usual inquiry, you know. If the answer is in the affirmative, I rather think something can be arranged for this evening if you like. Surely there is someone in Washington who will drink with us!"

"Swell," Paul agreed. "I'm willing."

Paul unpacked the remainder of the clothes that had arrived while they were out and hung them away. He bathed, shaved again although it really wasn't necessary, and put on still another suit that had been paid for with Conklin's never-ending supply of money. Conklin had made one thing quite clear to Paul when the clothing was being selected, when the bills silently began climbing. He guessed what was in Paul's mind and sought to alleviate it.

"An expense account has been placed at your disposal," he explained. "You need only to name it and you can probably have it. I feel quite certain in my own mind that you will not make fantastic demands, but" – and he faced Paul squarely – "*should* you make them, I believe they would be met. Now, stop worrying about the clothing bills."

And so Paul had picked out three suits and a dozen shirts; a few minutes later and a few blocks down the street he discovered a bookstore and asked for five or six titles which appealed to him on sight and inspection, having everything sent to the hotel. He bought a jar of pipe tobacco of Conklin's brand and gave it to him and then cigarettes for the two bodyguards when he found them eying the tobacco. Gently then he inquired into Conklin's mind and found that the extent of his purchases were far below the figure that had been expected. Satisfied, he stopped buying and they had continued their tour of Washington.

Conklin returned as he was standing before a mirror, tying his tie.

"Well, Paul, good news and bad. The answer is yes, we may have visitors within reason. But as for Miss Merrill, no. She flew home on emergency leave this afternoon. Someone ill, I understand."

Paul's disappointment was on his face.

"Shall we go on with it anyway?" Conklin asked. "I can find two charming young ladies who are willing to drink our liquor. And by the way – what do you drink?"

"Bourbon and beer," Paul told him, feeling regret at the missed opportunity of meeting the girl. "Sure, go ahead. See if you can get me a blonde."

"Bourbon and beer!" Conklin repeated. "Together?"

"Yes – why?"

"Nothing at all, nothing at all," the agent assured him. "But you have just risen a notch in my estimation. Very well, a blonde it will be." He made as if to leave.

Paul stopped him, not turning but watching him in the mirror. "Mr. Conklin, do you know anyone named Willis?"

"Willis?" A studious pause. "No, I don't believe I do. Shall I inquire?"

"No, let it go."

Still Conklin waited. "Paul. Is this another atomic bomb?"

Paul laughed and turned from the mirror. "No, I was just being nosy."

"Sorry I couldn't help. I'm going to order dinner, and then we will investigate the ladies."

Seven

She was a blonde, natural blonde of a rather dark shade and not at all the glossy canescence that is so painfully artificial; she wore a magnificent bronzed tan which complemented the coloring of her hair and eyes, a tan that made her the instant target of admiring male and critical feminine eyes. She said her name was Karen and that she did not mind in the least his awkward dancing or frequent missteps. Paul liked that much of her.

Paul learned more of Karen very early in the evening as she was teaching him some of the simpler, introductory dance steps; his bashfulness and his inability to dance had kept him from suggesting the entertainment, so she had asked him, holding out long beautiful arms to him. Someone, some lost girl in bygone years had once attempted to teach him to dance and they had progressed only as far as the box step when the impatient girl gave him up as hopeless. It had not been a happy experience for either of them. Paul stammered an embarrassed explanation of this to Karen, but she only laughed and pulled him away from the chair.

He took her in his arms with reluctance.

After the first few moments Paul admitted to himself that it was fun; holding a beautiful girl so close to him, the sensation of her hair against his cheek and her perfume in his nostrils could hardly be otherwise, but still there remained the awkward quandary of listening to her careful instructions, of being led, and then of making mistakes that were painful to them both. Karen did not once display the least distress when he trod on her toes or moved in the wrong direction, unexpectedly separating them; instead, with a patient and smiling manner she pointed out the error and then directed him to the proper movement. After some time Paul had the brilliant idea of anticipating her, realizing that in her mind Karen was going through the mental motions of teaching him and he had only to look to see what was expected of him next – a formula not far removed from those early training sergeants who barked their orders.

Slowly, as though he were opening the door into a dark room, he inquired into her thoughts, seeking only to find the directions expected of him.

He fumbled, nearly stepped on her feet again, and stopped.

"I'm sorry – I really am. Are you sure you want to go on?"

Karen lifted her face. "I'm not complaining. Now let's try that last one again. Use the pressure of your hand on my back to guide me. Ready?"

Karen was an agent and had been planted on him.

Her orders had been briefly noted on an interoffice memo and were signed only with a pair of initials that were foreign to him. She had been asked to attend the party, to be as friendly as possible and to determine if he could keep his mouth shut. No more than that was written out in words, but the implications would have filled several pages of the memo, and she had been expected to understand all that was implied. In that one brief sweep of her mind he saw too that she had known such work before; she had been used to bait military officers and government employees for similar information and purposes.

Paul continued moving, watching the surface of her mind and gradually improving his dancing by careful prognostication. But aside and to himself he speculated on her presence in the hotel suite. Slater had sent her – there was nothing overt to indicate that, but he was certain of it. Slater had probably passed the verbal order on to someone else, someone who owned the pair of initials at the bottom of the memo sheet, and that anonymous someone had issued the actual order. But Slater had originated the idea, and, remembering the false entries he once attempted to slip into the list of stolen war materials, had arranged matters so that the order could not be traced back to him. Or so he had supposed. Carnell would be as anxious as anyone to know if he could hold his silence, but Carnell's mentality would devise some other method for a test, if he felt a test was needed.

No, Slater was the chap who would turn loose a dazzling woman on him, a woman experienced in such matters.

As yet, Karen had done or said nothing to invite confidences, to draw him out. He supposed that she would be careful about it, would take her time until the place and the moment suggested it. Briefly Paul wondered just how much was implied in that part of the order asking her to be "as friendly as possible." And just as briefly he held a notion to tempt her.

They danced, she drank highballs while he chased bourbon with beer, they stopped beside the windows to look at the lights of Washington, they talked with Peter and the other girl who had been introduced as Emily. No one seemed to possess family names.

"Where do you come from, Paul?"

"Illinois."

"Really? I have an aunt in East Saint Louis. Have you ever been there?"

"Not in that direction, no. I mean, I never stopped there. Went through it on the train."

"What do you do?"

"I was a movie projectionist."

"Oh, I should imagine that would be fun. Do you like pictures?" They paused beside a tray of food. "Some of them; there are an awful lot of stinkers."

"How I agree with that! Were you in the army?"

"I put in a hitch."

"Did you like it?" And then she answered her own question. "No, I don't suppose you did – few people do." Karen had made a small sandwich and handed it to him. "What did you do in the army?"

"Do?"

"You know – what kind of service?"

"Infantry."

She started a sandwich for herself. "I don't suppose you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Not even your war experiences? Were you ever in great danger?"

"A corporal once threatened to bloody my nose."

Karen laughed delightedly. "I guess I don't understand men. Some of them never seem to stop talking about how they are winning the war and others won't speak a word."

"The same with women," Paul told her, biting into the sandwich. "Some think much but say little."

"Do you prefer that kind?"

"I don't like women who chatter all the time. The quiet ones are more comfortable."

She arched her brows. "Is that a hint?"

"Too early to tell; the evening is young."

"But I like to talk to new men; they are fascinating." Karen led the way to chairs and sat down. "Tell me all about yourself."

"Nope."

"No? But why not?"

"I don't trust that opening."

"Ah!" She assumed an all-wise expression. "You've been bitten before."

"My grandfather said that was pulled on him, ninety years ago."

"Your grandfather was a wise old man! Just between you and me, that has been used for nine hundred years. What kind of a man was he?"

"Grandfather? A hell-raiser, I guess." Paul put his tongue in his cheek and began the manufacture of a story. "When he was young he lived in the Ohio Valley, trapping game, rustling a few head of cattle, anything to make a living. But he got mad one day when a new family moved in about twenty miles away – he claimed the neighborhood was getting too blamed crowded. And besides, a girl in that family fell into the habit of coming over to visit him every Sunday and he swore no female was going to tie him to apron strings, so he pulled out. Went West."

"That *is* fascinating! What else?"

"Oh, he knocked around out West for quite a while; always getting into one scrape after another. Rustling cattle on a big scale, cheating at cards, selling liquor to the Indians – things like that. Some dance-hall woman made a play for him once and he shot the high heels off her shoes; he didn't trust women. Later on he teamed up with a man named Bowie from New Orleans and I understand they made quite a fortune. No one ever found it though; he and Bowie both died at the Alamo."

"Why, Paul, that's...that's..."

"That's what?" he asked innocently.

"That's rather hard to believe. What a magnificent old man. Where did he meet your grandmother?"

"He didn't. I told you he had no use for the women. He never did get married."

"Now, Paul!"

"Want another drink?" Paul asked her.

He closed his eyes, relaxing, but a part of him would not rest. His mind wandered.

Captain Evans was sitting on a bed removing his shoes; Evans had evidently forgotten him for the moment, for now he was only looking forward to an hour's pleasure. The bedroom was an ordinary one with the usual lotions and combs on the dresser, a bit of discarded clothing cast over a chair and a pair of pink mules waiting beside the bathroom door. Evans dropped the second shoe to the floor and glanced again at the dresser. Through the man's eyes Paul followed the glance and saw the backside of a picture frame which had been turned to the wall; through his ears he heard the sound of the distant shower being shut off and then Evans turned to the bathroom door. A woman emerged. Paul thought he recognized her as someone he had seen on the post and withdrew his attention.

There was a moment of aimlessness and then a mental picture of himself captured his attention. Palmer, the F.B.I. man. Palmer lay abed nursing a painful knee and idly thinking of Breen. Palmer thought of many things as he alternately rubbed and cursed the arthritis in his knee: his obnoxious son-in-law, his wife's chiding because he had not worn clean socks that day, the possibility that one of the girls was pregnant again, the skepticism and

then the rough going-over he had received on his report of the loss of Breen to the C.I.C, the lack of a new assignment in the past few days, the reminder to lay in next winter's coal supply now while summer prices were in effect, the coming rain that the knee never failed to prophesy, a mild wonder if Breen could predict the weather. ... Paul pulled away.

A young woman in a mountain cabin. She was quite drunk, as was her companion. Paul watched her for only a long second, staring in utter fascination at what she was doing, and then twisted his percipience elsewhere.

The former sergeant who had sat in the dining car now sat in a nondescript window above the street, looking down on moving traffic and walking people, on the neon lights blinking to either side of him. An opened bottle of beer was near at hand, but the man was thirsty for more than what the bottle offered, craved more than could be had from

the dark room in which he sat and the window from which he peered. He wanted freedom, he wanted to go down on the street and mix with the people he saw there, wanted to run into the nearest bar and have one hell of a good time! He wanted women, lots of women and all the rye whiskey his money would buy – he had plenty of money. Alex and Dave had taken good care of him, had made good their promises. But now Alex and Dave wouldn't let him go out on the street. Too risky. What the hell! He didn't intend to spend the rest of his life cooped up in this damned room. If Alex didn't like it, he could shove it! The former sergeant reached for the bottle of beer and took another swallow.

Paul sat at attention, straining his senses to find where the man was located. There was no clue. He did not think of the city's name nor see anything with his eyes that might give a scrap of identification. Only the moving cars and people and blinking signs.

"Are you sleeping?" Karen demanded.

"No." Paul opened his eyes and looked at her.

"I thought that bourbon and beer might have taken toll. Are you tired?"

He nodded. "Some. I'm still not much of a dancer. We've been walking a lot today."

"Then let's just sit here and enjoy ourselves. Where did you walk to? What did you see?"

He laughed, remembering the discomfiture of the two bodyguards. "All over town!" He told her about some of the points of interest they had visited, some of the famous buildings he had seen in pictures many times but not in the stone until yesterday, or today.

"Then you like Washington?"

"Very much so." He nodded.

"What do you do here?" Karen watched him with gay, laughing eyes. "Nothing."

The brows went up again. "Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"The idle rich?" Her tone was bantering. "Well, idle anyway."

"That is quite fascinating. I've always wanted to meet a man who could afford to do nothing." She laughed, and set a fresh drink before him. "I should warn you I'm husband hunting."

"Have fun."

"You're supposed to pick me up on that." Paul sampled the bourbon. "Someday I might. I like blonde hair."

"But someday won't do. I'm getting old." He studied her. "Twenty-six."

Her eyes widened, but her lips disclaimed. "That's unkind, really. Twenty-three."

"Twenty-six," he said with finality.

"I think you're mean." When he said nothing more, she nibbled on a sandwich and pretended to sip at the drink. "Emily and Peter are getting on very well – but then, they always do. Are you a good friend of Peter's?"

"You might call it that."

"Have you known him long?"

"Not very long."

She dropped her voice to a secretive whisper. "He's in government — high up in government."

"Oh, not so high," Paul contradicted. "Not nearly as high as Slater."

"Who is Slater?"

"The man above Peter."

"Paul Breen, I think you talk in riddles!"

He said casually, "Who told you my last name?"

Karen stared at him. "Well, we *were* introduced."

"As Paul, and Peter, and Karen, and Emily, yes. I don't believe I heard any other names mentioned."

"Someone must have mentioned it," Karen recovered nicely. "Or I wouldn't have known it."

"I guess that's right. How's your drink?"

She said her drink was warm, and he offered to make another, but she declined. She left him for a moment to mix the new drink herself and to recover her inward composure. She had slipped up. Five years with the department, the last two of them employed on confidential matters, and she had made her first slip. His name had been written on the memo pad, confound it! And she *was* twenty-six. How had he guessed that with such smug accuracy? But damn his good-looking eyes, he wouldn't talk; only those two sentences in which he mentioned Slater's name could be construed as loose talk — and that was next to nothing. If the remainder of the evening was to be no more than this, she could turn in a complimentary report on him. Nice guy. Seemed to be a bit younger than she, but then that did not matter.

Karen carried the drink back to where they had been sitting, only to find him gone. She looked around. Emily, also alone, pointed a finger toward the bathroom and drifted over to where Karen waited.

"Beautiful party!" She glanced at her watch. "I can't stay too late. How's your Joe?"

"Quiet," Karen said. "The strong, silent type."

Paul leaned against the wall and watched Conklin combing his hair, peering closely into the bathroom mirror. "Having fun?" Conklin wanted to know.

Paul nodded. "She's nice. Talks too much, but nice."

Conklin glanced sidewise in the mirror and caught Paul's reflected image. He seemed to be asking a question.

"Yeah," the image replied. "I know."

"I'm sorry, Paul. I truly am."

"Not your fault."

"No, it isn't, but I might have guessed it in advance. I spoke with Carnell on the telephone, but still I might have guessed what was coming. I didn't *know* until Karen entered the door; she was expecting to find me here, and of course I recognized her instantly." He paused. "Slater?"

"The initials on her message were *R.B.*"

Conklin nodded unhappily. "Rose Busch. I know her. Slater."

"That's what I figured."

"Well – what do you want to do?"

Paul grinned at him. "Let's get on with it. I'm having fun, are you?"

"Emily is always fun."

"Too bad about the two shadows outside. No girls for them."

"To the victor..." Conklin quoted. The victors rejoined the ladies.

One of the two victors awoke the next morning with a head and a mouth which betrayed the beginnings of a hangover. Conklin groaned and lay very still on the pillow, pressing his fists into his closed eyes.

Paul, long awake, sat up in the opposite bed to stare across at him. "You must be rusty."

"I didn't drink that much," Conklin protested indignantly. "I swear it! That vixen poisoned me."

"The vixen is too much in love with you to know which day is Tuesday." He swung his feet to the floor and started for the bathroom. "I'll get an aspirin."

"They never help," Conklin told him. "And there aren't any; we didn't buy aspirin. I'd like to crawl under a rock."

Paul continued on to the bathroom and soaked a washcloth with cold water, which he folded and placed over Conklin's eyes and forehead. He stood there for a moment, pressing his fingers lightly on the covered eyelids. "Go back to sleep, Peter. You'll feel better when you wake up." He looked down at the partly concealed face and the tiny drops of water streaming from the cloth. Conklin relaxed. When his breathing changed to a sleepful state, Paul removed his fingers from the eyes. "And forget all this," he said with finality.

Paul shaved and dressed, then put his head into the other room where the bodyguards slept. They were up.

"How about breakfast?"

"Any time you're ready, we are! The boss awake?"

"Not yet. He had a hard night."

"Hard night – *hah!*" Lips and eyes suggested just how terrible the evening must have been.

"Knock it off," the second fellow advised. He said to Paul, "Any of that bourbon left?"

Paul nodded and pointed to the far room. "Help yourself. I'm going to phone down and order." As he spoke into the phone he could hear one of the shadows mumbling behind him, a long rambling dissertation having to do with soft lights, sweet music, beautiful women and a never-ending supply of liquor. He grinned and finished ordering.

They breakfasted while Conklin slept on.

Paul fell to considering the problem of the army sergeant who now inhabited a couple of anonymous rooms in some unknown city. He could see the man clearly whenever he chose to look, could see his near surroundings, his thoughts and his wishes. Right at the moment the ex-sergeant was sleeping off a beer-bust that had been in progress the night before; and at that moment Paul could see nothing outside the man's mind because his eyes were closed in sleep. But once he awoke, Paul would be able to follow his every move with ease, to see the surroundings the sergeant was seeing, to know everything that crossed the sergeant's line of vision and train of thought. The trouble was, Paul reflected wryly, the object of the desperate search wasn't thinking *enough*. During that short interval in the dining car Paul hadn't bothered to inquire too deeply into the noncom's mind and so he did not know too much of his background; the scanning had covered the surface thoughts and no more. The result now was that the man was like a stranger to him. He could follow only those random thoughts the man chose to contemplate, could see only what the other was seeing.

There was someone named Alex and another someone called David involved, plus a considerable sum of money and a fanatical interest in secrecy. There was also that horrible new weapon called the atomic bomb which had recently been tested in the Western desert. (*That* had come from Slater; all unknowingly Slater had passed on to Paul the fiery scene witnessed in New Mexico.) And of course there was now the feverish anxiety to find the missing sergeant. Alex and Dave were somehow aware of that, or had anticipated it, and had impressed on the man's reluctant mind the necessity of remaining under cover. Paul easily guessed that the Alex and Dave had purchased information from the sergeant, but no one seemed to know the precise nature or extent of the information—and the sergeant never dwelt on it. And that was the fine point where he personally was disappointed. He simply didn't know the hiding man well enough to discover anything worth while.

(He *must* develop his talent further in that respect. He must carefully cultivate the ability to follow anyone he had once met, however briefly. He must train his mind to locate and observe them at any time—to observe all of them and not merely what they chose to consider. Conklin, Palmer, and now Slater and Carnell—he knew them well enough to track their movements with ease, and after last night he could trace Karen. A clever man like Slater could still keep secrets from him by sheer determination; but because he was angry with Slater he resolved to discover the identity of Willis. As for those others who had not fallen under his close scrutiny—the sergeant, Emily, the two bodyguards—why, he knew no more about them or the girl on the switchboard than what had been told him.

And he wanted very much to know more of Martha Merrill. All *that* was a part of his still developing faculty which he must encourage. If he were able. Was there a finite limit to his powers?)

Paul experienced a sudden thought, and it frightened him momentarily.

Suppose he could *force* that hiding man to reveal his whereabouts? Well...? There were two recent precedents which gave rise to faint hope. That other day in the office of Slater and Carnell he had caused Slater to develop a bad headache. Not actually caused it – no; the headache had been there in the beginning, but in an angry moment Paul had reached into his mind and magnified it, had made Slater acutely aware of it. And only a few minutes ago he had sent Conklin back to sleep with the gentlest of hypnotic pressure, suggesting to him that the hangover would have vanished when he again awoke. As well as all memory of the incident. If that worked – and Paul never doubted that it would – then why could not he force the sergeant out of the room and into the open? Had he the ability to do that over the distance?

Paul closed his eyes and tried, tried harshly.

He thrust his will power across the space separating them and attempted to seize the mind of the sleeping man, to jerk him into wakefulness. The sergeant growled in his sleep and only turned over to bury his face in the pillow. There was no more.

"What's the matter? Too hot in here?"

Paul opened his eyes on the breakfast table. "What?"

"You're dripping sweat. Something the matter?"

"No, I'm all right. Last night's bourbon, I guess." That had failed; he couldn't do it. Was it necessary to be in contact with a person, be in the same room? He continued eating.

Late in July an army bomber crashed into the fog-enshrouded top of the Empire State Building and Paul read the headlines of a New York paper through the eyes of the still-hiding sergeant in that distant, dirty room. He never ceased his periodic watch over the man, and, although he did not mention the subject to Conklin, he learned from Slater and Carnell that the search was going on. The fugitive stayed where he was, and occasionally the one called Alex visited him, attempted to cheer him and repeated ever and again the need to remain out of sight. Paul could discover next to nothing about Alex because the sergeant knew him as only a contact and there were no telltale thoughts. So day by day he looked in, always seeking some new clue. The New York paper had been a day old and so meant little; Alex brought it on a visit along with a varied stack of magazines, but the age of the paper only suggested the hide-out was somewhere near New York. Alex had arranged for periodic shipments of beer and food. The man did his own cooking, and was always there when the deliveries were made. Paul bided his time.

Almost without mental debate he decided to say nothing to anyone of this ability to watch the fugitive over a distance. It would do little to improve his situation and might even cause further personal distress in the strained relations with Slater. Slater and Carnell knew only so much concerning him, and even Conklin who was now his closest friend knew little more; all of them had assumed it was necessary for Paul to be in the same room with a given person to know that person's mind, and they had used him accordingly. None of them had cause to suspect there was a broader scope to his talent, and so he did not enlighten them.

Whatever may have been believed about Slater's sudden headache, no one supposed

Paul had created it with some mysterious, devilish mental magic; and the morning after the party Conklin had sprung from the bed fresh for a day's work, holding no memory of a previous awakening. But they used Paul to the extent of their knowledge of him.

He sat in on interviews which were conducted in one office or another, always the silent second or third party in the room who listened politely to the conversations and then afterward reported the visitor's mental reservations. It was a thrilling experience to meet some of the people in those interviews. He sat silent, watching, weighing, prying, as Congressmen, State Department personnel, military officers of all branches, job seekers, industrialists, planners and engineers, espionage agents, security people, governmental assistants, diplomats, pests, all trooped into the room and had their say or listened to what was said and trooped out again. Palmer and his superiors at the F.B.I. appeared, argued and were shown out. Captain Evans was called in from his post, sworn to silence and sent away. And after each interview, Paul would report to Carnell or Slater what had been freely spoken, what had been thought, what had been held back.

When the long-absent presidential party returned from Potsdam there had been one hell of a row between Slater and Carnell in a locked office. Paul and Peter Conklin waited in another room, Conklin hearing none of it but Paul listening attentively. Slater was quite certain that events had transpired in Potsdam which were not duly reported to proper agencies – meaning himself; Carnell argued that a presidential party was above their jurisdiction and they had no right to force the intrusion of this particular privacy. In the end, Slater and Carnell, Conklin and Paul all visited the White House, where Paul was off-handedly presented to a president who had never before seen or heard of him. Slater did not make Paul's talent known, and afterward pumped him of everything observed during the visit.

In early August, Paul discovered the answers to some questions he had been mildly curious about. Slater was definitely withholding knowledge of him from high government figures, was confining the knowledge to a small knot of people. Apparently only seven people knew a telepathic agent existed in Washington: Palmer and two of his superiors of the F.B.I., Evans, Conklin, Carnell and Slater himself. Only those seven. The president had not been told, nor of course Karen, Emily, the bodyguards or those other persons in contact with Breen.

Only seven.

Still mildly curious, Paul wondered why. Barely a week later he suddenly interrupted a cocktail at the hotel to seize Conklin's arm. "Peter – send down for a paper."

"A paper? Can't it wait until we finish?"

"No, please. Get a paper now."

One of the bodyguards left his unfinished drink and took an elevator to the lobby. He was back in a hurry, breathless.

"Hey!" he yelled from the doorway, "look what we did to those Japs! We got a new bomb and they don't have a town called Hiroshima any more."

The routine continued, with but two exceptions before the end of the year. The party of four moved from the hotel into new quarters and were increased in numerical strength "for greater security purposes," and Paul located the undercover fugitive. That event happened first.

Paul had never given up his watch over the dingy rooms despite occasional misgivings that it would come to nought. He had tried once again to force the man to move, to obey his will from a distance, and failed as before. And then one late November night, via the waiting man's senses, he saw and heard Alex enter the room for the last time, listened to the careful plans of escape and flight which were outlined to the former sergeant. Places were named, timetables read, tickets exchanged and certain persons mentioned. The two of them would leave shortly after dawn from the Newark airport.

Paul sat upright in bed – and then hesitated. How to give this information to Conklin without revealing all? He sat there for long minutes, fuming at his own delay, and then thought of a passable scheme. It was weak, but the only subterfuge he was capable of concocting at the moment. Its only strength lay in the knowledge that all people have mirages that come in the nighttime. He got out of bed and crossed over to Conklin, shaking him. "Peter-Peter!"

The agent was instantly awake, jerking upward. "What's the matter?"

"Remember the sergeant, the one we met on the train?"

"How can I ever forget him!"

"Then listen: he and a man named Alex are leaving the Newark airport on a flight at six-fifteen in the morning. They are flying to Miami and will change planes there for New Orleans. In New Orleans they will take another plane for Mexico City. In Mexico, they will drive to Vera Cruz and then ship out for Portugal." He paused. "I don't know what happens after that."

Conklin peered at him through the darkness. "What's all this?"

"Straight stuff. Honest."

"I am probably asking a silly question, but how do you know?"

Paul turned and pointed to his rumpled bed. "It just came to me. Peter, you'd better hurry."

Without another word Conklin leaped for the telephone, but still someone didn't move fast enough. The two hunted men left the Newark airport on schedule and were not caught until they landed in Miami.

Afterward they quizzed him, the three of them by turns, but the sessions with Slater were more properly grillings than quizzes. He stayed with his original explanation: the entire line of flight had suddenly come to him in his sleep, and they were able to gain no more. To their questions as to why that should have happened, he said that he had constantly kept the sergeant in mind since the meeting in the dining car – which was truth. He left it to them to place interpretations as they pleased, quite sure they would assign to him the passive role.

Occasionally in later weeks, Conklin would arise in the mornings with a standard

question.

And Paul would say, "Nope, nothing last night."

The move from the hotel suite occurred just before Christmas, with Paul, Peter Conklin and the two ever-present shadows being driven to a brick house far out on the Columbia Pike, well beyond the Naval Office building. It was a two-story affair and had evidently been in preparation for them for some time. A telephone switchboard was installed in the first room beyond the entrance, and Paul looked quickly to see who was manning the board. Disappointed, he continued the first inspection of the house.

The rooms on the lower floors had been arranged to provide informal offices and lounging rooms, a large dining room and a kitchen. Upstairs were four bedrooms; Paul found that he and Conklin each had one to themselves, with a connecting door between. He noted with approval that bookcases had been installed in his for the small library he was slowly gathering. (He still clung to the worn copy of Roy's *Studies in Psychokinesis*.) The bodyguards shared a third bedroom while the fourth and last was occupied by two new men assigned to the same job "for greater security purposes." All of the basement rooms except those used for heating and storage equipment had been given over to recreation facilities.

"Home." Conklin nodded approval.

"Maybe they put a swimming pool in the attic," Paul suggested.

Conklin looked to see if he was truly joking.

A cook and housekeeper appeared daily, went home nights. Three relays of switchboard operators turned their eight-hour shifts and disappeared until the following day. Paul was on hand when each shift changed the first time, but the three girls were strangers to him. Emily occasionally appeared when someone came out from Washington, and the following interview needed the services of a stenographer. The parade of people trooping in and out waxed and waned, with Carnell holding court.

Conklin arranged a Christmas party for the household and Emily brought Karen to the new place.

"Well!" Karen greeted him warmly. "And how is your darling old grandfather?"

Paul shook his head in mock seriousness. "Barely escaped a noose just the other day. Horse stealing. He convinced them the horse followed him because he had sugar in his pocket."

"The old one must have a silver tongue. And how is your dancing?"

"The same as before — I haven't done a thing since that evening."

"Do you have a radio? Oh, yes — I see it. Shall we go on from where we left off?"

"Can you stand it?"

Karen laughed. "Try me." She held out her arms, and Paul found her still as blonde, still as warm. "Nice," he said into her ear. "Thank you."

The Christmas party brought something Paul had not expected. Their visitors stayed all night, Karen in his room and Emily in Conklin's. No one objected afterward except

the two familiar, grumbling bodyguards.

In mid-November, 1948, the house on Columbia Pike was shaken by a storm that was really an aftermath of another storm two weeks earlier. Paul wormed it out of Conklin a little at a time. Slater had not seen fit to enlarge the circle of seven people who were aware of Paul, and the sudden entry of two more was not to his liking—although there was nothing he could do about it. Slater had particularly omitted informing the White House because he felt, with many others, that the coming election would effect a change; there was a reasonable security risk involved in having too many people know about the first and only telepath. Slater was but one of the many who were rudely surprised on the morning after election, and as quickly as possible he hurried over to admit his dereliction. And so, in mid-November, 1948, a squall enveloped the house on the Pike and two new members joined the exclusive circle of Breen-watchers.

The second new man was a personal representative of the other, a major with suspicious eyes who stared at Paul as he would at a two-headed calf, and who visited the White House several times daily.

Nine men now knew a telepath lived in Washington.

Actually, Paul realized, there were eleven. He held his silence and waited, meanwhile containing his resentment as to his status there. He was, he knew, half guest and half prisoner.

Nine: 1949

The long routine abruptly changed in early 1949.

The change began with a perfunctory knock on Paul's bedroom door. He did not get up from the bed but merely raised his eyes above the book he was holding, to study the closed door. Carnell waited on the other side, a mentally agitated Carnell. He was alone. Paul called out, "Come in."

The panel opened immediately and a visibly agitated Carnell stood there looking at him. "I'd like to talk to you, Paul. It's very important."

Paul laid down the book and sat up. "Come on in. Or would you rather talk downstairs?"

Carnell entered the bedroom and carefully closed the door behind him. "This will do nicely. Paul, I'm afraid we're in for a hell of a lot of trouble— all of us." He walked over beside the bed, turned a chair about and sat down.

Paul said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

Carnell lit a cigarette just to be doing something with his hands. "Do you remember the two men we nabbed three years ago in connection with the bomb information?"

Paul nodded. "I went to see them."

"Yes, and couldn't find a really worthwhile fact! One was a courier who received information, paid for it, and then handed it over to still another person. He also arranged flights from the country when that became necessary. Acting on orders from some other

unknown person, our courier purchased atomic bomb information from the sergeant, hid him, and then attempted to help him escape. Well, those two are in jail and I'll never understand why they didn't swing. But we still know nothing of the people higher up! Do you also remember the escape route the sergeant was to follow?"

"Miami, New Orleans, Mexico, Portugal – yes."

"Yes. Well, shortly after we nabbed those two men we sent one of our own operatives down that trail. We supplied him with all the information known to the courier and the sergeant and shipped him down the route. He did everything in proper order, everything you found in the courier's mind; he transshipped at Miami, at New Orleans, he drove from Mexico City to Vera Cruz and waited for the steamer fitting the description you furnished. He sailed for Portugal." Carnell stubbed out the cigarette with a savage motion. "In Portugal he was shot dead."

Paul watched him emotionlessly, already knowing the full story on his mind, but waiting for the man to tell it.

"We covered him all the way; we had men in each city, at each stop, shadows who followed him and watched him go through the right motions at the right time. He performed those movements letter perfect, according to the directions gleaned from the courier. When he sailed from Vera Cruz, we put men in Portugal to cover his landing; we wanted to see who contacted him there and where he would be sent next. We were fully prepared to follow him all the way to Siberia – if that was his unknown destination."

"But he was murdered."

"Murdered," Carnell repeated. "His unknown destination was Lisbon, a few hours after he landed. The instrument of death was a gutter Spaniard who would – and did – commit murder for fifty American dollars. The Spaniard was unable to describe the man who hired him, but he had been furnished with a pencil sketch of the agent and the name of the ship on which the agent was arriving. It was very simple. The Spaniard did not live very long; I regret that, for you might have been able to obtain more information – but then, our boys in Lisbon know nothing of you, and so the man died."

Paul questioned, "A pencil sketch?"

"An excellent likeness. Drawn by someone who waited at Miami, or New Orleans, or Mexico City, and then airtailed the picture to Portugal. Well, we didn't try that again. But neither did anyone else. The particular route was closed down and never used again." He paused, looking beyond Paul. "A few months ago a new one was opened – or rather, we discovered a new one. We don't know how long it has been used."

"Mexico, again." Paul nodded.

"Mexico is a favorite jumping-off-place. Even during the war they didn't fully patrol their coastlines."

Paul closed his eyes, knowing what else must be said before Carnell left the room and feeling sorry for Carnell for having to say it. Slater had handed him the assignment and he was not happy about the matter; Carnell and Breen had got along very well together in the past years. But still, it must come out. What was it Conklin had said that long ago day on the train? "I believe that an older man in your place would never have permitted his discovery." And, "Let us suppose the Neanderthal leaders discovered that man,

captured him, tied him with a rope and put his wits and skills to work for them. Nothing but trouble can come ..." Now some of it was coming. Paul let Carnell take his time.

Carnell lit another cigarette. "We have reason to believe that fugitives and information are flowing along this new route – and perhaps others still undiscovered. That in itself isn't so alarming; there will always be escape routes and lines of information into and out of every country in the world. We have ours, of course. But one phase of it has become alarming. Since July of 1945 we've had a brand-new kind of headache to contend with, and the remedies we're prescribing are desperate ones. Paul, the United States is *supposed* to be the only nation in the world with nuclear weapons."

Paul nodded knowingly. "Supposed to be."

"But we aren't. We have reason to believe Great Britain has them or almost has them. If not at this date, they will very shortly. We also have reason to believe that Russia will have the bomb much sooner than the five years predicted by our scientists. The sergeant who sold us out – and people like him – will see to that. You can appreciate our problem."

Paul nodded, waiting for that other matter.

"We must stop these information leaks, we must find and stop the people responsible for them, and we must search out the men higher up – the men in this country directing the espionage. We've about reached the limit of our natural resources. There remains only you." He fell silent.

Paul blinked at him and, seeking to ease him out of an embarrassing situation, suggested, "Mr. Carnell, I know what's on your mind; it isn't necessary to say it unless you want to."

"I want to!" Carnell burst out. "I want to spell the entire thing out in words so that each of us may know where we stand."

"All right."

Carnell hesitated, looked at the smoldering cigarette he had not smoked and mashed it out. He discovered himself absently reaching for the pack and stuffed it back into his pocket. "This isn't easy, Paul."

"No, sir."

"It began shortly after the 'dream' you had – that one in which you saw the sergeant's exact escape route."

Paul nodded. Each motion of assistance involved him in still larger problems.

"To be precise," Carnell corrected himself, "a part of it began before that particular night. Ever since the day you were discovered, since the day you first walked into my office downtown, we have carried on an unceasing search for others like you. It hasn't been easy and it has taken much time; the number of men and women who have been processed into the armed services since 1940 is really astonishing. But one by one we have examined every single record, every rating and every intelligence test." He shook his head. "With negative results. But still, we aren't stopping. *Now* we're examining the record of every man, woman and child who has at any time applied for government service."

"That's going to take some doing!" Paul declared.

"A tremendous task," Carnell agreed. "But if we find just one more like *you* it will be well worth it."

"Let me answer one question in your mind," Paul interrupted, "and be quite honest at the same time. No, I don't know of anyone else."

"Thank you. It had occurred to us that you would be the first person to discover another telepathic, but we wondered if you'd reveal that information. So, thank you."

Again he reached for his cigarettes and again stopped himself. "Well, to get on with it..."

"After that night when you so clearly saw the escape route, we began wondering about you and we did something we should have done much sooner. To be brief, we set a team of scientific analysts on you. Those men were given every assistance possible, every faculty at our command. And that is not meager, if you'll permit a boast. Geneticists were sent to your home and the place of your birth, where they succeeded in tracing your ancestors back five generations. Their findings were given to the analysts. Psychologists were given your intelligence and aptitude tests, your army records as far as you progressed, and their reports were turned over to the analysts. And finally a dossier was compiled. A written record covering every hour of your life from the moment Conklin found you in that office on the post; the things you said, the movements you made, the expressions you displayed; the emotions you seemed to have. Into that dossier went the memories and impressions of many people who had observed you: Conklin, Palmer, Slater, Karen, Emily, the two men in the other room, myself—everyone. Your every spoken word that we could remember, your every mood." He stopped for a moment, quite embarrassed. "Forgive me, Paul. The way you danced and the manner in which you made love. Everything."

Paul's eyes slid toward an old book on the shelf. "Roy," he said aloud.

Carnell nodded. "Dr. Roy, and a fellow scientist he recommended, Dr. Grennell. You see, the book you carried everywhere with you finally opened our eyes, and we contacted Dr. Roy." Carnell grinned absently. "He was beside himself with joy. It nearly broke his heart when we refused to let you two meet. You would have guessed everything."

"I'd like to meet him now," Paul said wistfully.

"I suppose you may now. I'll check with Slater. Well, the dossier was complete and we turned it over to the analysts, Roy and Grennell. They were the only two outsiders who had to be told of you. And then we sat back to await the results." Carnell took out the cigarettes again and finally lit one. He said suddenly, "Karen isn't coming back."

"No," Paul responded bitterly. "I realize that."

"She's a wonderful woman!" He gestured with his two fingers. "Now if we only had polygamy in this country. ... Karen never knew *what* you were of course, but in time she guessed you were aware of her prying activities; it depressed her. Feminine intuition, I suppose. She felt quite badly about it because she had grown fond of you. When she was ordered to include in the dossier the details of the night she spent here with you, we had a battle on our hands. She did it, but she requested never to be sent here again. She couldn't face you."

"How did you like my technique?" Paul asked coldly.

"Please, Paul. This is more embarrassing to me than it is to you. And please remember that I'm only following orders. I'm second in command."

"He hasn't been around lately either."

"He thinks it best to stay away; he realizes you dislike him."

"And vice versa."

"Yes, that's true. You don't have many friends."

"I seem to be losing them all the time." Paul was still hurt over the incidents leading up to Karen's forced entry in the dossier, even though it had happened many weeks ago and he had known of it for as long. At a distance of many miles he had watched her prepare the report, had known the turmoil in her mind as she wrote it out, had known when it was finished that she would never again come back to the house on the Pike.

"The analysts," Carnell continued after a silence, "turned in their report."

"And Dr. Roy danced with glee?"

"Danced with glee. He said it was like seeing his own book come true; a Nobel Award couldn't please him as much. But – we got what we were looking for." Carnell turned his eyes away, seeking the sunlight at the window. "Paul, you haven't been entirely co-operative."

"I've done everything you've asked."

"Yes, you have, but still ..." His eyes remained at the window. "The findings of Roy and Grennell indicate that your particular talents are *much* greater than we have believed. Much greater than the two manifestations thus far disclosed. The analysts have taken all the studies into consideration and, based upon their beliefs, have made a conservative estimate of the extent of your talents, wild talents, Roy terms them. In brief, Paul, they told us that you should be able to do *more* than merely scan the minds of persons in the same room with you, more than discover the route an escaping man is about to take – and that on but a single occasion." He stopped and turned his eyes back to the man on the bed.

"They are quite right," Paul replied woodenly.

Carnell peered at him. "They are?"

"They are."

"What... what more can you do?"

"Didn't Roy's report tell you?" he mocked.

"All right, if you want it that way." Carnell was obviously unhappy with the situation. "The report suggested that you need not be in the same room with a person, that it was entirely possible to scan minds at a distance."

"That's correct – to a degree."

"To a degree?"

"I must first meet the person and get to know him. I can mentally follow you, or Conklin, or Karen, wherever you go and whatever you do. At any time of the day or night. Whether you like it or not." Paul glanced at the man's face and saw the pressure there. "But I can do very little with those people I don't know as well – Slater, for

instance. And I can do nothing with people I've never met."

"But the sergeant, and the courier —"

"I kept watch on the sergeant from the day you first questioned me about him. I knew it was something important and stayed with him. I saw his surroundings through his eyes, heard his conversations through his ears. But I could do nothing at all with the courier at the time because I had never met him, I saw him only when the sergeant saw him. It's a different situation now since I visited them in jail and deliberately probed their minds. They can never hide from me until they die. Nor can you, or Conklin, or Karen."

"Slater?" Carnell noted the omission.

Paul frowned at him. "Slater is a slightly different proposition, and I'm not sure I can explain it to you. Slater has the most disciplined mind I've ever known. Please don't take offense at the comparison, but you believe you have an iron-willed mind. Slater's is impermeable steel compared to yours; I can *know* his mind and yet I can't. In the same room with him I am able to follow most of his thinking with ease, but yet if he desires to keep something hidden from me he can do so by rigidly avoiding all thought of the matter. I can see what he is doing, but I cannot see behind that barrier. I can perceive the erection of the barrier, the reasons for it, the strain to maintain it, but I cannot discover what the barrier is concealing.

And that is why he has stayed away from here of late. He senses the limitations of my powers and believes that I can read him only if he's in the house."

"What about that last?" Carnell wanted to know.

Paul studied him, knowing that *the* conversation would be reported to Slater. "Yes and no — I can't give a clear answer. There are times when I follow him about Washington as easily as I follow you; there are other times when he is lost to me. If I concentrate deeply, I can see him in his office and see what he is doing. But I can't always discern what he is thinking in that office. I simply haven't been able to know him as well as I know you. So he stays away from here."

"I think I understand. Very well; Roy and Grennell are correct in that instance. You are able to scan some minds at a distance. That would seem to explain the knowledge of the escape route."

"It does. I listened to the courier read it off."

Carnell's gaze drifted back to the window. "Roy next suggested powers of clairvoyance and precognition; he believed that knowledge of the escape route was explainable by those terms. But they weren't..." He paused, waiting.

"Roy is again correct. And again the power is limited. I am aware that you — or Slater — are intending to separate Conklin and myself; I've realized for some time that Conklin is to be reassigned somewhere else." He stopped talking as a train of thought flashed into Carnell's mind. "Now," he said, "I know why and where. Until this moment I didn't know why or where, I only realized he was leaving."

Carnell brushed his hands across his face. "Our analysts seem to have done a complete job. I'm still embarrassed by all this, Paul." His mind skipped down a list committed to memory. "Dr. Roy's report indicates some sort of mental phenomenon he termed parabolic receptivity. He likened it to radar. The report states that you should

have the ability to be constantly aware of persons and things about you, even though you have not seen or touched those objects. Is that true?"

"Yes."

Carnell waited.

Paul said, "I can describe to you the people in the house at this moment and what each of them is doing. The man who drove you out here today is sitting down in the hall flirting with the telephone operator. I don't know him, can't scan his mind. But I'm aware that he is there. Our cook is out in the yard and the potatoes she left on the stove are beginning to burn."

Carnell started from his chair. "Well, hadn't we better warn her —"

"No," Paul grinned at him. "Someone downstairs will smell them in about thirty seconds and yell at her."

They sat in silence, Carnell straining his ears and absently glancing at his wrist watch. Paul continued to watch the agent's face, grinning in high humor. A sudden yell sounded through the closed door. Carnell's eyes darted to his watch.

"Twenty-six seconds," he announced.

"I missed by four," Paul said laconically.

"Paul..." Carnell turned to him. "All this makes me feel better, immeasurably better. You know the trouble we're having downtown." Paul nodded but said nothing. Carnell said, "They pass the most impossible laws to maintain the most impossible secrecy and then give us hell when we can't fully comply. I thank God Russia doesn't have you."

Paul asked quietly, "How do you know they haven't?" Carnell's jaw dropped. "Paul! You wouldn't —"

"Don't be silly. I'm not talking about myself."

The suggestion so unnerved the C.I.C. officer that it was many minutes before he could force himself back into the chair, many minutes before the purpose of his visit returned to mind and he could once again objectively consider the analyst's report. Carnell paced the floor, his fist smacking into his open palm with monotonous regularity. The suggestion upset him, not only because if true the consequences could be unbelievable, but because they hadn't thought of *that* before. They had searched their own military records seeking another possible telepath and now they were searching other government records. Even if it were possible, no one had suggested examining the files of foreign countries. No one had imagined that any other country but the United States could possess a telepath! What idiotic blindness!

Carnell whirled around. "Paul...?"

"I've already answered that one. There are no others to my knowledge."

"But you would *know* if another should appear?"

"I don't know. Maybe — maybe not. What would I look for? What indications? I've never met another person like myself. How would I recognize them?"

"But you could read their minds!"

"If they wanted their minds read," Paul reminded him.

"Do you mean they could forbid it—conceal it?"

"*I don't know*, Mr. Carnell. I have nothing to guide me! How can I cope with something I've never experienced before, something of that nature? I would actually have to meet one and try."

Carnell had to be satisfied with that although he didn't like it. It was difficult for him to understand, because he was not a telepath and did not know the mental processes involved, did not know the problems and shortcomings present in theoretical cases. Another such telepath might or might not readily be apparent to the first one; there would be no real way of knowing until such a meeting occurred. In time, Carnell returned to the matter under discussion, the report on Breen handed in by the analysts.

"Ah, Paul ... about this matter of teleportation. Dr. Roy indicates that—"

"Dr. Roy missed fire completely on that one," Paul cut in. "I can't. I've tried, and I can't move myself an inch unless my legs carry me."

"You-tried?"

"Certainly. I wanted to find out."

"But it failed?"

"It failed. If it had worked, I would be tempted to move myself away from here at the first opportunity. I'd jump into the next state or the next country, or to the very limit of my powers. I've even had some ideas about a writ of *habeas corpus* to get me out of here, but I know Slater would quash it because I'm still army. So—I can promise you this—*if* I can make teleportation work in actual practice, I'll go so far and so fast your department will never find me."

Carnell dropped his gaze to the rug and after some moments replied, "I didn't realize you felt that way."

"I got into this with my eyes closed, Mr. Carnell. I was full of patriotism, I was green, and I was eager to help people whether they wanted it or not. Peter Conklin warned me of what might come, but I was too naive to understand his warning. A long time ago I said that I didn't want to be pushed around; I didn't like being pushed around, after I had volunteered for a job. But I was pushed, all the same. You understand what I mean. You have never knowingly pushed me, but it has happened. Karen knowingly did it at first, but she was acting under orders and balked when her conscience hurt. Slater has knowingly and deliberately pushed at all times."

"I'm sorry. I truly am."

"I know that; I know you honestly are." Paul gestured with his hand. "Let's get on with it."

"The report," Carnell continued unhappily, "states that some degree of telekinesis should be present among your talents. The analysts were not too sure just what degree might be expected, what particular direction the faculty might take. They said only that their studies led them to the conclusion that telekinesis is present, in whatever degree of effectiveness." He looked up. "Can you enlighten me?"

"May I ask a question first? A rather personal and alarming question?"

They both noticed the minute hesitation before Carnell answered, "Well – certainly." He was instantly on guard before some unimaginable thing.

"*Must* you report everything said here back to Slater?" Paul wanted to know. "Or can you keep your mouth shut on certain parts of it?"

Carnell was gaping at him, taken aback. "Are you suggesting that I withhold –"

"I'm asking if it is possible to tell you something that will *not* be repeated to Slater?"

Carnell reached again for the package of cigarettes, found it empty and hurled the crumpled paper across the room. He glanced at Paul in anxious uncertainty, looked away, made up his mind and came back again.

"I'm sorry, no," he answered finally.

"I'm sorry too," Paul told him softly. He moved off the bed and stood up. "I guess this has gone about as far as it can go."

"But the telekinesis--"

"I'd like to tell you about telekinesis, Mr. Carnell. Believe me, I really would. I like you and trust you. There are some matters I'd like to discuss with you in strict privacy, but they aren't for Slater's ears. I'm sorry, but you'll have to ask Dr. Roy about telekinesis."

Carnell said hesitantly, "Paul, you should know my position. It's more than a matter of personal loyalty; it's a national loyalty as well. I have sworn to do my duty, to uphold my office. In a manner of speaking, Slater and myself *are* the department, and he is my commanding officer. I can't withhold information from him."

"He keeps it from you."

Carnell was caught by surprise, staring at Paul with some incredulity. "That's his privilege," he said stiffly. He wandered about the room for a moment waiting for Paul to say more. When nothing more was forthcoming he asked, "Is this all?"

Paul said, "Until I can talk to you alone – yes."

Carnell walked out without another word.

There was a light tap at the door. Without turning from the window and his casual watching of the cook pattering about the yard, he called, "Come in, Peter."

"How did you guess it was me?" Conklin asked with a wide grin. He pushed the door shut behind him and stood surveying the room, studying Paul's back, knowing the signs. "Carnell went by me in a dream – is it raining or snowing? Somebody handed him a big one."

Paul turned around and leaned against the window sill. "I'm going to hand you another, just as big."

"Fire away."

"Would you be able to do something for me, or discuss a matter with me, and not report it to your superiors?"

Conklin blinked and his eyes grew round. "No wonder Carnell was asleep; you knocked him out. Paul, this might be a serious matter."

"Could you?" Paul persisted.

"I don't know..." Conklin shook his head, puzzled. "Let me think about this. If it is an official matter involving the department, absolutely no. If it were a private matter-Well, let me think about it a moment."

Paul crossed over to a closet and opened it, getting a bottle of bourbon and two glasses from a rack inside the door. Conklin watched his movements in silence. Paul said, "I will guarantee you, Peter, that what I ask will not harm you in any way. There are two things I would like to have done without knowledge of them going beyond us. I want to make a purchase, and I want some information found. The first will be easy, but the second may prove difficult. When you can make up your mind, I will tell you about it."

"Let me think," Conklin repeated.

Paul poured two drinks of bourbon and handed one to Conklin. "Take your time," he suggested. "But I'd like to know your answer in the next few days."

"Is there a reason for hurry?" He stared at the drink and at Paul.

"Yes. You're leaving."

"The hell I am?"

"I'm afraid you are."

"Why?"

"Two reasons why. Slater has decided that you and I are too friendly to suit him; he's breaking us up. He also may believe that in time a part of your loyalty will switch to me, and he doesn't want that. Do you know about Roy and Grennell?"

"I've heard something about the matter," Conklin replied cautiously. "Have you read their report?"

"No."

"That's the second reason you're leaving. The report reveals to Slater there's more to the iceberg than appears on the surface. He's going to take advantage of that and the advantage involves you."

"And I'm leaving here?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"In less than a week, I should judge."

"Where am I going?"

"Russia."

"*Russia!* Ye gods – why there?"

"Bomb hunting."

Conklin rubbed his eyes, dazed by the sudden turn of events. "Russia! Oh, hell. When will I see you again?"

"You won't."

Ten

Peter Conklin was struck dumb.

He gulped down the bourbon without really tasting it and held himself still, enveloped with shock, his hand enfolding the empty glass. A thinner glass would have been crushed under the brutal pressure. While his eyes seemed to be staring at Paul, they weren't seeing him, weren't seeing the room; instead they were looking at something else far away and beyond immediate comprehension. Something halfway around the world.

In all the years Paul had known Conklin, this was the first time he has seen the agent lose his mental equilibrium, had witnessed a fall from character. Since that initial meeting in the captain's office nearly four years before, Conklin had always been the cool and self-possessed operative who cloaked his identity and his profession behind a poker face. Of late, the face was tempered with laughter and friendliness, with camaraderie and amity, but it remained constantly in original character. Until now.

"I – won't?" he asked uselessly.

Paul shook his head, mute.

"Oh, hell!" Conklin said again. He struggled to express his emotions, and managed, "I feel sort of pushed in."

"I'm not happy about it," Paul offered.

Conklin looked down at the glass in his hand and swished the tiny amount of liquor remaining in the bottom. The few drops raced around the glass. "I guess the honeymoon is over; I have to go back to work. It's been nice."

"Honeymoon," Paul repeated with a humorless grin. "Those are almost the words Slater used when he read Dr. Roy's report on me. Carnell didn't have the nerve to repeat them, but he was told to tell me, 'Tell that son of a bitch the honeymoon is over. He goes to work for us – or else.'"

"Carnell is delicate about such matters." Conklin looked up at Paul. "*Or else?*"

"Slater didn't elaborate. Maybe he meant the salt mines."

"Go easy, Paul. Watch your step. He can make it tough for you."

"Not half as tough as I can make it for him," Paul retorted flatly. "Not *half*. Carnell was partially upset because I wouldn't confirm a part of Roy's report. Roy had made some brilliant deductions in the field of telekinesis, and they wanted to know if the doctor was right or wrong. I gave them no satisfaction."

"They'll keep prying."

"Slater will make me mad someday and find out the sudden way. I owe him a lot of nastiness."

Conklin walked over to the window, sat down and put his heels up on the window

sill. Paul moved another chair beside him and set the liquor bottle between them. The winter sky was dark with leaden clouds, threatening rain or snow. After a reflective silence, Conklin spoke.

"So I won't be seeing you again?"

"Not after you leave here – no."

"Well! We've come a long way together. And I think I've enjoyed every minute of it, despite some rather stiff jolts back there at the beginning. Is there" – he hesitated – "no chance?"

"None. Slater does not intend to let us see each other again."

Conklin moved his head away from the window to lock glances with him, a direct question in his eyes. He repeated the question aloud. "And *you* see no later meeting?"

"None at all."

"Then I suppose I must accept it." He refilled the glass in his hand and stared through the liquid. "Cheers."

"And good luck."

"I'll need that, too! Russia, by hell! I wish you'd tell me about it; what happened this time?"

"Boiled down, you're going bomb hunting. Enough information to cause alarm has slipped through the security net and been smuggled abroad; some plans and actual drawings have gone over. Top brass thinks that Russia will have the atomic bomb pretty soon, much sooner than the original estimate based on research calculations. They underestimated Russia's potential and never dreamed outside information would be channeled over to them. The calculations had to be discarded when it was discovered that White Sands and Chalk River leaked secrets. So – they have no hope of preventing or even circumventing a foreign atomic program now. All they can do is watch and wait, pry and peer, keep abreast of development to learn *how soon* and *how much*."

"And I'm the eyes and ears?"

"One set, yes. Others are already over there and still more will follow you, but you won't be allowed to contact any of them. You'll be briefed and then shipped over to find out for yourself. What you discover you'll report to me. You see, you're supposed to be something different than all those others."

"Why? Because I know about you?"

"Because you pass your thinking along to me. You do the mental broadcasting and I do the receiving. No couriers, no cables, no in-between contacts. No other man ever approaches you to expose your activities."

"I just *think* about it? At that distance?" Conklin moved in his chair, the better to study him.

"Can do, yes. They will either give you Dr. Roy's report to read or they'll tell you all about it. They found out that I'm able to follow you wherever you go, see what you see, hear what you hear, know every thought that passes through your head. I can do it any time, all the time. The distance involved is no barrier at all – not as well as I know you. So they're setting us up as a relay team."

"Paul ... this new thing, this extended faculty, is it a recent development?"

"My being able to read you at a distance? No. I've done it for some time; wherever you go in the world, I can follow you." He chuckled. "One of the reasons Slater is unhappy. He thinks it has been going on for years."

"Has it?"

"Some of the years, yes. Not all of them."

Conklin considered that for a moment, dwelling on the many personal episodes firmly lodged in his heart and memory. And suddenly he whistled.

"No," Paul cut short the dawning trend of thought. "I've never done that, Peter. Not to you. I've looked in at odd moments without your knowledge, seeking the answer to some particular question; and I've unconsciously sopped up the residue which spills from you like water, but I've never done what you must be thinking now. And I'm not peeking now – I'm looking at the expression on your face." Paul had to grin. "Sometimes I find myself an involuntary Peeping Tom, but I get the hell out of there in a hurry!"

"Thanks, pal!" Conklin's answering grin was weak. "You worried me for a moment. And Emily wouldn't have liked it, if she knew."

"Slater forced Karen to tell him about ours."

"The devil he did!"

"Yes. And she won't come back to see me again. That's another thing I'm saving up. One by one I'm losing my friends: Karen, you, and I suspect Carnell will be moved after a while. I suspect Slater's long-range intention is to surround me with strangers."

"Why?"

"Because he hates my guts, and he knows I hate his. How's your memory?"

"It stretches back four years," Conklin replied. "That's the answer."

Conklin drummed fingernails on the whiskey glass. "How does it feel to be a Cro-Magnon?"

"I wish I were a Neanderthal." He put out his hand to touch the other's arm. "I'd change places with you right now – Russia and all."

"Sorry. I wouldn't change with you."

They sat for a while without talking, and now and then someone would refill the glasses. Conklin placed a cold pipe in his mouth and stared at a colder sky, wondering if the same forbidding overcast would be seen on the other side of the world. *That* was certainly ruining a lot of things! A suddenly heating romance must now be postponed and the many plans they had foolishly made would have to be filed away or abandoned altogether. He had already made a down payment on an engagement ring and started inquiries into the possibility of an apartment; finding one in Washington still was not easy, and he expected the search to last many months. He had not taken time to figure out how he would make the move away from the house on the Pike – or even considered the possibility that his superiors would disapprove. But Emily certainly couldn't live there in the house with them; he had supposed some arrangements for living out and working in could be made. Well – so much for that.

No marriage, no apartment, no heaven with Emily. It would be no more than a rosy

dream, something that would have to await his return. And how long might that be? There was no knowing; Paul himself couldn't foresee the reunion. And Paul could see...

What *could* Paul see and know? That analysts' report must have been astonishing, to judge by what occurred between Paul and Carnell an hour ago. He fervently hoped his superiors would allow him to read the report before he went overseas. It would be rewarding – if frightening – to discover some of his own theories had borne fruit. Since that long ago day four years ago he constantly speculated on Paul, forming new impressions and revising old ones almost from day to day. And now, he had been told, his innermost thoughts could be traced and read, halfway around the world. A reading of that report would certainly be a treat!

"What now?" he asked suddenly. "When do we start?"

"You start in a few weeks – I don't know just when. You're going to Europe as a tourist; some of the airlines are offering off-season rates until warm weather, and you're a bargain-hunting tourist. New York to Shannon, Shannon to London, London to Paris. From Paris you'll probably take a sightseeing bus to the Low Countries – and then you vanish. In a casual manner. No search, no hue and cry. Have fun, Peter." He considered a moment. "And, Peter, watch your step. Pretend you're in enemy territory the moment you reach Shannon. Do you know what happened in Portugal?"

Conklin said grimly, "I know."

"All right then. It could happen to you before you ever see Paris. Use your head."

"Meanwhile, what?"

"Meanwhile, you are going to teach me to play spy. This afternoon, or maybe this evening or tomorrow morning at the latest, we're going into town." Paul scratched his chin, ruminating. "We're going down to haunt an embassy."

"Oh? Someone there?"

"I gather that someone will be there soon; he's in New York now, he just got off the ship and checked into a New York hotel. I gather that he's chock-full of information and instructions from home. When he leaves New York for Washington, we go down and hang around the embassy to await his arrival. I'm supposed to find out what he knows."

"Jolly," Conklin commented, "real jolly. Why don't you simply inquire now?"

"I can't do that. I don't know the man, I've never seen him in my life; he's a total stranger. If I knew him, I could reach him now. I could find out what Carnell wants to know." Paul shrugged. "But a stranger remains a stranger as long as he is a stranger. If that makes sense to you."

"In a vague way."

"So we're going down to the embassy and wait for him. Carnell is hoping he has inside information on a very hot subject."

"Those bombs?"

"Those bombs." Paul nodded solemnly. "See here. Doesn't the fact that he speaks a different language make any difference?"

"No. You speak French and Spanish, don't you?"

"Both, yes."

"All right, try this. Think of something in either of those languages or both of them. Try not to form English word pictures; try to *think* in French or Spanish."

Conklin closed his eyes, frowning with effort.

"*Esprit fort*," Paul quoted from his mind, "I am a freethinker — I am a strong-minded man."

"Well, I am!" Conklin laughed ruefully.

"No doubt about it. You used to scare me. Let's go downstairs and see if the cook has burned up all the lunch." He pushed back the chair.

The afternoon light was fading early, even for January, and a cold, drizzling rain dampened visibility. A black Packard sedan waited in the drive a few steps away. Paul Breen pulled the collar of his overcoat higher and tighter about his neck, then ducked his head to ward off the slanting rain. He moved down the steps toward the car and then suddenly stopped as somebody opened a rear door for him. Paul stared at the man, recognized him as having been around before, raked the Packard with a quick glance and recognized it, and finally climbed inside the car.

Inside, the sense of depression gripped him.

Peter Conklin moved in beside him. One of the two bodyguards ran around to the opposite side of the car and entered, placing Paul in the middle. The second bodyguard climbed into the front seat with the driver. The Packard began moving along the drive.

"Peter..."

"Yes?"

Instead of answering, Paul reached forward to tap the driver's shoulder. "Stop."

The Packard slammed to a halt, jolting those who had not time to brace themselves.

"What is it, Paul?"

"Something's wrong."

Conklin made a sound deep in his throat and his hand slid toward a shoulder holster. The bodyguard sitting on the opposite side already had a gun in his hand, searching the surrounding lawn and shrubbery.

"What's wrong? Can you tell me what it is?"

"No, I don't know what it is."

"You're sure?" Conklin knew it to be a foolish question.

"As wrong as hell, but I can't see what it is!"

The man in the front seat twisted around. "I'll take a look at the street." He slipped out of the car and trotted along the drive, one hand in a coat pocket. Behind them, the hesitation and the subsequent activity had been noted in the house. The front door was flung open and two men ran down the steps toward the car, coatless, but armed.

"There's nothing in the street," Paul protested.

"Let him look anyway." The men from the house ran up and peered into the windows.

Conklin shook his head, but they waited beside the car, looking over the grounds.

The street was clear. The bodyguard standing at the entrance of the drive waved them on.

"Okay?" the driver asked.

"Go ahead," Paul answered. The Packard moved slowly along the drive. At the street it paused, and the bodyguard got in.

"All clear," he said uselessly. The car continued out onto the Pike and nosed toward Washington.

Conklin was sweating. He wanted to ask where the trouble might be, where it might be located, but he couldn't ask such a direct question in front of the car's passengers for fear of getting a direct answer. The bodyguards knew only whom they were guarding, not what they were guarding. And then he cursed his own stupidity. He didn't have to ask and be overheard. Briefly, he touched Paul's arm and then ran his hand across his forehead.

"*Paul, is something wrong with the car? Tires?*" Because he was not used to it, he enunciated each word clearly and slowly in his mind. His lips said nothing.

Paul closed his eyes as though he were examining the automobile. At last he shook his head.

"*The men in it? Any of them?*"

The same negative reply.

"*Along the street?*" was the next thought.

Paul frowned, hesitated before answering and then shrugged.

"*But it's a possibility – is that what you mean?*" A nod.

"*Something ahead of us then. It must be that.*" He ceased to direct his thoughts at Paul, to review mentally the route ahead of them. Abruptly he tapped the driver's shoulder. "Do you know where we are going?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then take a different route. Twist around and come in by some other direction."

The Packard slowed and left the Pike at the next intersection, turning north to make a wide swing around behind Arlington Cemetery. "This is silly," Conklin hurled the thought at Paul. "*We've never gone to the embassy before; there is no set route.*"

Paul nodded, gazing ahead through the windshield. The grim sense of imminent depression clung to him. Slowly, he looked at the faces of each man in the car or as much of their faces as he could see without attracting attention. He found no rewarding sign. But something was ahead of them, something was to happen – of that he was certain. The car sped toward the intersection with Lee Boulevard, and Paul suddenly gripped Conklin's arm.

"Slow!" Conklin commanded, catching the suggestion. "Watch the traffic coming in on either side."

They moved onto Lee and then across it, without incident. A prowling car swung from Lee and followed them for a moment, until the driver caught their license plate. The

prowler fell back and was lost in traffic.

"Any ideas?" Conklin shot at Paul.

"Do you have hunches?" Paul asked aloud.

"Sometimes."

"I don't want to upset you – I'm not just making this up. But – well, it feels funny. You know what I mean."

Conklin nodded, staring at the backs of the men in the front seat. "I know what you mean."

"When I was a kid, sometimes I'd wake up in the morning with hunches, good or bad ones. If it was a happy hunch something nice would happen before the day was out; if it wasn't..."

Conklin's only answer was a whisper under his breath. He understood the idea Paul was trying to communicate to him, and he saw with some satisfaction that his own unease was spreading among the car's passengers. Damn Carnell and his harebrained ideas! He wished he had Breen back at the house, safe and sound inside four walls. Anywhere but here on a Washington street outside an unfriendly embassy. But still – *this* was Breen's purpose, his job.

The Packard worked its way north and east past the island, sped over the Key Bridge and turned on M Street. "Not much choice now," the driver said.

"Take the shortest way; let's get this over."

The long sedan was parked innocently at the curb a block distant from the embassy. Five men remained seated inside, studying the street, the embassy building and the iron-grillwork gate swung shut across its entrance drive.

"Listen carefully," Conklin said swiftly, "this is the schedule. We can't drive down there and park without arousing suspicion; after all, they know their man is coming home, too. We'll get perhaps a minute's warning that he's on the way. A tail is waiting at the station for him now; that tail will get here a jump ahead of him and give us the sign." Conklin turned to the man sitting on the other side of Paul.

"Gordon, you and I and Breen will stroll along the walk, talking; we'll time our arrival at the gate so that we'll have to stop and let the car pass."

Gordon nodded, judging the distance.

"Their chauffeur drives like a madman and he swings off the street and through that gate like a kid with a hotrod. So we'll stop, to keep from being run over. If we've mistimed our arrival and have gone past the gate, Breen turns around for a curious look. Only Breen." He tapped Paul's arm in emphasis. "Paul, your man will be in the rear seat and probably sitting on the right side. He's sixty, has a small mustache, wears rimless glasses and a hat such as Gordon is wearing. If the hat is off – fine white hair. Look fast, Paul. You won't have more than a second."

"Do my best." He was aware of the curiously subtle glances of the bodyguards, wondering what was going on.

"Hell and Maria!" Conklin snapped petulantly. "I don't see why we couldn't have planted you in one of those windows across the street. Perfect cover."

"That's no good. I have to see the man close up. I need a good look at him and as long as possible."

"Well, we can hope for the best. I can't imagine them trying to pull something in the middle of Washington. All right. ... Forrie, you'll drive on to the next corner and wait for us. Gates will follow us by fifty feet. And if anything goes wrong, close in fast!"

Conklin pursed his lips, watching Paul. "Still got it?"

Paul nodded. "Hard." He fingered the back of his neck. "Here."

"Want to back out?"

"Will Slater let us?"

"No."

"That's my answer, too."

"All right," Conklin repeated tautly. "If anything goes wrong, you jump! And jump fast. Pick your spot and don't think about us – if we can't get out of the way it's our tough luck. Maybe that damned fool chauffeur will go over the curb at us, maybe anything. ... You be ready to move, one way or the other. I'll be in front of you, Gordon stays behind you." He turned cold eyes on the bodyguard. "And I mean *close* behind. If something is to happen, you or I get it first. Understand?"

"I'll breathe down the back of his neck."

A noisy car appeared out of the darkness on the street ahead, headlights dim with age. Behind the wheel, Forrie said quickly, "Here's the tip."

"Positive?"

Forrie nodded. "I know that car." He peered through the darkness. "Two people in the front seat."

The old car rattled toward them. Paul watched it, knew that Karen was driving, knew that she had picked up her companion on the run at the station. As they neared, Karen rolled down the window on her side and reached for the glowing cigarette between her lips. Her eyes slanted toward the Packard, searching out the occupants. When the two cars were abreast, she flicked the cigarette out the window. It sailed in a fiery arc across the short space and hit the Packard broadside, to tumble to the street. Gordon had his door open, already moving. Paul flung a quick look at the old car, but it was past them and Karen kept her attention on the street ahead. She was striving furiously not to think of him.

"Move," Conklin urged, pushing at him.

Paul slid out of the car and crossed to the walk. As he left the protection of the car's bulk he stopped short and flung up a sudden hand to clasp the back of his neck. "Oh, damn, Peter! We're hexed."

"Move!" Conklin snapped again. "Keep moving. It's a matter of seconds now." He took a position on one side of Paul. Gordon moved up on the opposite side. "Neck hurt?"

"They're behind us."

"Who's behind us?" Conklin jerked his head around, saw only Gates leaving the Packard. "Use your head, Paul! What is it?"

"*I don't know.* It's too ... dark, I can't see anything. Something's behind us."

"Get behind, Gordon." Conklin turned and motioned for Gates to close in. Gordon obediently stepped close behind Paul, almost walking on his heels. Gates came up, narrowing the fifty-foot gap between them. There was a soft mesh of gears and the Packard slid by them in the night, toward the rendezvous at the farther corner. Beyond the Packard the bright headlights of another car rushed to meet it, traveling fast.

"Embassy car," Conklin said tersely. "Step up the pace." They moved faster, watching the grillwork gate to gauge the ground and their speed. A horn sounded in the near distance and the great gate started to swing open, moved by an embassy guard. "Faster," Conklin whispered. "We're going to make it."

Paul walked with his head high, eyes closed and holding on to Conklin's arm for guidance. He was searching the street behind them, desperately seeking the danger he knew was there. The thing in the back of his head was like an ice pick biting into his skull. Something like a —

The embassy car slowed almost imperceptibly, abreast of the gate, and snapped around in a fast arc into the drive.

—a gun. "Gun!" Paul shouted aloud. "Down!" He brought up a knee in lightning action, jolting Conklin's spine and sending him staggering. In the same instant he whipped out his arm, grabbed Gordon around the neck and tried to drag him to the ground with him.

There was a soft, faraway bark. The embassy car shot forward through the open gate, faces peering out at the tumbling figures. Paul hit the sidewalk hard, bruising his face and smashing a gash over one eye. Just ahead of him, Conklin was whirling on his belly, gun out, searching the night behind them.

"Paul? Were you hit?"

"I'm all right."

"Where'd it come from?"

"I don't know. Some window I think." He caught a new movement. "*Look out!*" He flinched.

The thing barked again and a streak of pure white fire raced across the back of his neck. He dropped his head limply. Conklin fired blindly across the street, seeking the hidden marksman.

Beside Paul, Gordon spouted a fountain of blood.

In an apartment nearly three miles away, a girl screamed. She stared with horror at the scene on the sidewalk.

Eleven

He opened his eyes to find himself in his own bed, in his own room, and saw Karen.

"Well, hi..." he said weakly, happily.

She sat beside the bed, looking into his face.

"Glad you changed your mind."

She wore a quizzical expression.

"About coming back," he explained.

Karen smiled slightly. "The old order changeth."

Paul grinned at her. "They missed me."

"Sure they did." There was an edge to her voice. "They missed the spinal column by a good half inch. No need to worry at all."

"They missed," he reminded her. "What more could I want?"

She didn't answer, only sat there staring at him. The room was quiet. He moved his head slowly and saw they were alone. A near-by table held a glass and a pitcher of water, a tray, and some bottles. Behind the tray he saw the end loops of a pair of surgical scissors and bandage dressing. A tall vase held a half-dozen yellow roses.

"Never bothered much about flowers." He rolled his head back to her and experienced an ache in his neck. "But I like the yellow ones better than the red ones."

She smiled her thanks.

He rested, lying on his back with his face turned to hers, content to lie there and watch her. After a while his thoughts returned to the street scene and what had happened there.

"Gordon?" he asked.

"Gordon is being buried this afternoon."

"But..." The surprise was evident on his face.

"You were shot the night before last." The edgy tone had returned to her voice. "You've been out of circulation, mister."

Paul considered that. "Peter? And the others?"

"All okay. Only you and Gordon."

"Did they find anybody?"

She shook her head. "You'll have to ask Peter or Mr. Carnell about the details. I know very little, and I don't talk about what I do know."

Paul studied her. After some moments he said, "Something's happened to you, Karen. There's a change."

"I came back," she said quietly.

"And that took guts," he added.

She searched his face for information. "I suspect you know more than I had believed. About... things."

Paul tried to nod and found the taped neck forbade it. "I've picked up a bit here and there. Carnell added a few things. I'm awfully glad you came back."

"Perhaps I should apologize, but I'd rather not talk about it."

"No apologies needed; I know it was forced, and we won't talk about it. Nice day isn't it?" He couldn't see the window from his position on the bed and so she grinned crookedly at him.

"It's raining."

"I say it's nice. You're here."

"Thank you, sir." Karen dipped her head.

"You *can* tell me something. Did you know what happened there on the street? How far away were you?"

"Several blocks. We heard the shooting— guessed it was your party. I turned around and drove back as quickly as I could. Forrie and Peter were putting you in the car."

"Several blocks?" he questioned. Then suddenly, "Did you scream?"

"Scream?"

"Yes, did you? When the shots were fired, or when you arrived?"

"No. I didn't scream."

"Someone did. A woman. I heard her."

"Probably a neighbor across the street."

"Maybe. I'll ask Peter."

Karen stood up. "I'd better call him, and the doctor. They're downstairs eating a late lunch. I was supposed to call them instantly if you awoke." She paused as she was crossing the room and turned to look back over her shoulder. "I wanted a few moments with you alone. Don't give me away."

For answer, he put an imaginary kiss on the tip of his finger and flicked it at her. She pretended to catch it and place it on her lips, then continued on to the door. He watched her blonde hair as it disappeared from sight and then listened to the sounds of her shoes descending the stairway.

Paul relaxed and lay staring, at the ceiling. The full vivid picture of the street ambush came back to him, and he considered the gun that had been planted on the back of his head. That gun had been waiting for him for a long time — from the moment the party left the house on the Pike. From before that moment actually, because he had realized danger as soon as he emerged from the house and entered the Packard; the danger had been unrecognized, he didn't know then that it was a gun, but he knew something was lurking there. At first he had made the same mistake as Conklin in supposing that the danger would come from the embassy car, or perhaps the embassy itself. But instead it had come from some other place along the block or across the street, and it had been waiting for him. Waiting for him to arrive at that precise spot. First time out of the house in two or three years, and the gun was waiting for him.

So the gun really must have been waiting for a very long time. In the literal sense. It had been waiting for all of those two or three years he lived in the house; until now he had never ventured beyond the grounds. That gun *might* have been waiting for him since the day he first arrived in Washington, in 1945 – or any time thereafter. The fact that there had been no early attempt suggested it had been waiting only the last few years, since his taking up residence at the house on the Pike. It also very obviously suggested that the man behind the gun knew where he was going and when he would be there. Unless the people in the embassy had his twin, his counterpart hidden within their walls, they knew nothing of his coming. And were out of it.

Eleven men in Washington knew what he was, where he was, and what he was doing. Which of the eleven was the man behind the gun? Or had placed a marksman there?

Were there more than eleven? Had someone talked?

The door opened suddenly and Paul looked up in surprise. Conklin came in, followed by a second man who must be the doctor.

"Hello!" Conklin called out. "Glad to see you up and around – " He caught the expression on Paul's face. "What's the matter?"

"I didn't hear you coming," Paul said.

"The door was closed. And I'm not an elephant." Suddenly he stopped in midstride as a new thought twisted across his mind, registering on his face as alarm. "Paul! You -didn't?"

"No."

"*Try*, Paul. Now. Try me!" Conklin waited, forcing rapid thoughts at the man lying on the bed.

Paul shook his head. "No," he repeated. "I'm sorry, Peter. Nothing. It's like... like a radio suddenly turned off."

Conklin asked desperately, "Everything blank?" He turned and ran from the room.

The doctor stood beside the bed, mystified. "Now what was that all about?" He reached for the pulse. "How do you feel, young man?" He took out his watch and began counting to himself.

Paul listened to the count echoing in the doctor's mind and held back a smile.

Carnell reached the house in less than a half hour. He was panting from the exertion of running up the stairs, and the growing alarm on his face went far beyond that exhibited by Conklin. The two of them sat beside the bed, pumping him, seeking to encourage him.

"I don't know when it started – I mean stopped," Paul protested again. "It never occurred to me to read Karen. When I woke up and found her here, I just said a few words and she answered me, then went to call the doctor. I didn't try to look into her mind. Everything seemed all right until Peter opened the door. I hadn't heard him, hadn't realized he was standing on the other side of the door. First time it ever failed."

"What about now?" Carnell anxiously pressed him. "What about Peter and myself?"

Aren't you getting anything?"

"Nothing."

"Jehoshaphat!" Carnell smacked his fist into the bed. "Is this the end of it all?"

"Will you keep trying, Paul? Try hard?" Conklin turned to Carnell. "Where's Slater? He should know about this."

"He's in San Francisco; something urgent came up. I've wired him. He's coming back as soon as possible."

"I'm curious about a couple of things," Paul said after a short silence. "That street shooting. Did you find anything?"

"Some," Conklin told him glumly. "We located the house, the room and the window the gunman was hiding in. For all the good it did us. The people owning the house have been gone for months—since Labor Day. Wintering in Arizona. The gunman forced a basement window in the rear and entered the house that way. But he didn't so much as leave an empty shell or a cigarette butt."

"Sounds like a smart operator."

"Damned smart! We know he went in, we know he fired two shots at you, we know he left. We know nothing else."

"Nothing more than that?" Paul asked sharply.

They stared at him curiously. "What do you mean?"

"Eleven men know about me. Only eleven."

"We thought of that, too," Carnell informed him. "Our first thought, almost. And we checked on the location of every one of those eleven. All accounted for."

"The gunman knew I was coming," Paul reminded them.

"I realize that; it's been giving us trouble. And we can't account for it. All we can do is watch the eleven; there is the bare possibility that one of them has talked. We're checking into that." He spread his hands. "Of course, there are one or two men we *can't* grill, but we can ask discreet questions and then weigh the answers."

"Paul," Conklin said then, "if only this new thing hadn't happened to you, if this blankness hadn't occurred, *you* could check the eleven fast enough."

"I know. I've thought of that."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"Nothing much to do," Paul responded, "except sit and wait. Let's see what happens next. Maybe Roy, or that doctor can explain it."

"I'll ask Roy immediately, but not the doctor. I object to a twelfth person joining the club!" Carnell jumped up from his chair to pace the floor. "Damn it all, Peter, this is a disaster."

Conklin nodded dully. "I'm afraid so."

"How in the world could it ever happen?" Carnell demanded savagely of no one.

Paul said, "He must have used a rifle. And had good eyesight."

"He probably had a sniper scope on it," Conklin put in. "It was rather dark along that

street and he picked you out too neatly, considering the distance. Did you notice the absence of loud noises? The rifle was equipped with a muffler or baffle of some sort. I wish I could lay my hands on him!" He grinned weakly. "Next time I'll trust your hunches, boy. You said he was behind us."

"There won't be a next time," Carnell contradicted flatly. "Paul isn't going out of this house until... until... well, until whatever." He paused in his frantic pacing to frown with new thought. "You know, there has been talk downtown of building a new place, a really big establishment. Somewhere over on the Chesapeake shore. We have some property over there which was used as a training center during the war. What happened night before last will probably cinch it." He stopped again and looked at Paul. "If —"

"If I'm any use to anyone after this," Paul finished for him.

Carnell said absently, "Yeah."

Paul turned his attention back to Conklin. "Peter, when it happened, were there any women around?"

"Not to my knowledge. Oh, Karen was there, but she didn't arrive until after it was over. Why?"

"I wondered who screamed."

Conklin closed his eyes, going over the scene. "I didn't hear a woman scream."

"Someone did, though. I heard it. Just after the second shot."

"I didn't."

Carnell stopped beside him. "Could there be anything in it?"

"We found no evidence of a woman in the house. Not in recent months, that is. But I'll check with Gates and our driver." Conklin was looking at Paul. "Can you tell me anything about the scream?"

"No ... I don't think so. It was just a scream. I don't know where it came from."

"*How* did you hear it?" Conklin asked suddenly.

"How?"

"With your ears, or otherwise?"

Paul stopped to consider that, quite surprised with the suggestion. "Well," he said finally, "I don't know. I was seeking that gun. I had the impression of a window and the muzzle of the thing, and I thought I saw a finger moving on the trigger. That's when I warned you a second shot was coming. He got me then — it burned like sin. I thought that if I dropped my head and played dead, the gunman would quit. That's when I heard the scream, but I don't know *how* I heard it. And then I passed out, I guess."

"It must have been a silent scream," Conklin mused.

"Now hold up a minute; let's follow this thing through," Carnell persisted. "Let's assume for the moment that a woman *was* hiding somewhere along that street. Or had been strolling along and ran into hiding when the trouble started. She would have to be a witness to the shooting to scream at the proper moment, wouldn't she? Yes. Now let's assume that it was what you call a silent scream, one which was emitted by the mind instead of the lips. So — Paul, it would be easy for you to hear that, wouldn't it? We

never had to speak to you unless we wished, eh?"

"That's true. But I'd have to know the woman, the same as the people I've met here. At least, I would have had to meet her once or twice and take some interest in her. I couldn't work on strangers – that's why we were going to see the embassy man."

"Precisely! If you heard a woman scream mentally, it follows that you had previously met her. And if you did hear a woman scream at that place and at that time, she must have seen you shot. Do you see my line of supposition?"

"Yep. Finish it."

Conklin interrupted. "It would suggest some female of Paul's acquaintance was there on the spot."

"That's my point," Carnell snapped. "Who?"

"He knows two. Emily and Karen." Conklin turned to the patient. "Who else?"

Watching him, Paul said slowly, "My landlady and some old girl friends back home. The telephone girls downstairs. And there is the slight possibility that I can read some of the women who worked in the hotel downtown – I didn't see much of them, but I remember a few faces."

"That," Carnell said emphatically, turning to Conklin, "is our next line of research."

"I was afraid of that."

"Why?" Carnell asked sharply. "Are you worried about Emily and Karen?"

"No – not really. I'm sure of Emily. And Karen was driving the tip-off car; we know where she was." He looked up. "But you can't be sure of Emily, as I am. You don't know where she was. And so she's under suspicion."

"Don't worry about it," Carnell said in a kinder tone. "We'll do it gently. I'll put Karen on it." He resumed pacing the floor. "Hell, I'm not worried about her. I know her like my own daughter. Well, almost. But what about these other women? The three downstairs? I'll start a routine check back in Illinois, but I imagine we can rule out the landlady and the old flames. See where that leaves us?"

"Downstairs or the hotel."

"Yeah."

Paul broke in, "All this is only a supposition."

"But a damned good one!" Carnell declared. "And what else can we do? We're turning the city upside down now to find that rifleman. We've already started checking the eleven people who are wise to you – and let me tell you one thing! It'll be rough on the man who can't account for his whereabouts the evening before last."

"Where were you?" Paul asked with a grin.

"In my office. Waiting for Peter's report on what happened at the embassy."

"I never did get to see the man coming in," Paul said ruefully.

"But he saw you," Carnell retorted. "The whole lot of you. Somebody down at State had to soothe his ruffled feelings. Had to convince him that gangsters and capitalists weren't shooting it out on his front doorstep." Carnell suddenly grinned. "I wonder what kind of report he sent home?"

"You don't know?" Paul asked.

Carnell gave him a curious stare and did not answer.

"You know what I'd like to do?" Paul asked.

"What?"

"I'd like to meet the man who cracked the Japanese code during the war. I read about that. I'd like to know that man."

"Why?"

"I'm curious about him. I've read some books on codes and ciphers, but I still don't understand how it is done. I'd like to know how to do it. If I get my – my talent back again, I'd like to see some of those people."

Carnell considered it. "We'll see."

The week wound on to its end, closed, and a new one began. The officious doctor continued to pop in and out twice a day, removing bandages, peering and probing, humming to himself just above the level of audibility, finally replacing the bandages and departing. Paul remained in bed; the cook brought in his meals; each of the telephone girls looked in briefly with a word as her shift ended. Conklin spent the greater part of each day in Paul's room, chatting with him or sometimes reading aloud, or at other times doing nothing more than sitting at the window staring into space. There were six fresh yellow roses daily. Karen dropped in a few times, but didn't stay long, pleading that she was extremely busy. Once she exchanged glances with Conklin, and he was miserable for hours. The strange new thing that seemed to have happened to her after the shooting episode was still there, carefully hidden in her voice and manner, but there nevertheless. After several days Conklin caught it and glanced at Paul to see if he was aware. Paul winked at him, but said nothing. Carnell came in once or twice, quite glum.

Conklin reported the progress (or lack of it) they were making on the various lines of inquiry. The reports weren't really necessary; Paul had already followed each of them to its ultimate end and knew that none of the women under suspicion was actually involved, but he continued to play his game and let Conklin make the verbal reports. Those women living in Washington were not on the street that night, and Carnell would eventually discover that to his complete satisfaction. So far as he could discern, the women back in Illinois had never left the state. But one question remained unanswered in his prying mind: Who had screamed?

The shooting had awakened him to the peril.

If some one of those eleven men hated him that much, hated him to a degree he was willing to murder him, it was far past time to take protective steps. The nearness to death, the awful closeness of that bullet to his brain seemed adequate cover for this deception. He would continue the spell of blankness for the moment, to allow his peculiar talent slowly to "return." This first time, rooted as it was in genuine-seeming circumstances, would set the pattern for future relapses. And perhaps in time he could convince them it was gone altogether. What would they do then?

Lying abed, he had sought the eleven too and found nothing rewarding. Conklin had been at his side and knew absolutely nothing of the gunman. Captain Evans had long ago been transferred to an outpost in the Pacific. Carnell *had* been downtown waiting in his office, and Slater *had* been in San Francisco in charge of a detail of men. The F.B.I. agent, Palmer, was out of town; his two superiors who knew of Paul continued their grumbling over losing him, but knew nothing of the shooting until late at night, when someone at State routed them out of their beds. The White House had temporarily been moved to Key West during a short vacation; while the unctuous major who ran liaison had been somewhere en route between Washington and Florida. Of the eleven, only Doctors Roy and Grennell remained, and they were the uncomfortable targets at the moment. Paul knew, if Carnell did not, that they too were innocent. That would be established shortly. Who screamed?

And who set the rifleman on him?

Eleven men knew him and eleven men had been accounted for. Eleven minds hadn't been read, but their actions and locations had been accounted for. In time, in good time, he expected to pry deeply into every remaining one of those eleven minds not already scanned. That would come, and he was content to wait.

But who screamed?

Carnell announced one day, after Slater returned from the coast, that renovation plans for the Maryland place were being dusted off. They were waiting only to see if Paul recovered his abilities. Carnell was quite pleased with the plans. It was a magnificent old place, he said, a big Maryland mansion surrounded with acres of lawn and woods. A wonderful growth of timber – beautiful trees, setting off a beautiful estate. It had come down from Colonial times. The building was a three-story affair with tall, graceful columns, and was completely modernized. They had used it during the war. The house would be done over for them, with bulletproof glass in the windows and a high stone wall around the estate. Complete privacy. The new plans called for a cable and wireless room so they would have their own direct connections with all the world; there would be a movie theater, a swimming pool, a gymnasium. It would be as much fun as a picnic. If Paul recovered.

He did not say the ants would be missing. The estate would first be swept clean with a security broom, and the ants would be eliminated.

They had large plans, Slater and he. Once again the place would become a training center, of a kind of training the world had never before known. Conklin was to be only the first of many men and women who would be sent out over the world, reporting back to Paul all that they saw and heard. The new agents would come to the Maryland center and spend weeks there, undergoing rigorous training. They would be taught a new code and instructed to report by cable or wireless direct to the estate. Meanwhile, Paul would study each of them, get to know them, and thus follow them wherever they went. The new code and the cable connections were really a cover; Paul would always know in advance the information they had unearthed, and their actual filing of messages would be a blind, designed to keep the truth from them and others. They were not to learn Paul's secret, but continue to believe that the coded messages were getting the

information back. Dozens, scores of agents could be trained and dispatched. The ultimate number depended only on Paul's ability to handle them. If he recovered.

Paul instantly saw the opportunity of a second relapse. Take on, say, a dozen men, two dozen, and the overload would bring him down again. And with about the third collapse — *finis*. Get out of this mess.

Paul was out of bed and sitting in a chair reading Roy's *Studies* when Karen came in. He had been getting up for short periods of time over the past few days, and now he felt strong enough to spend an afternoon in the chair.

"Hi," he called. "Why stop to knock?"

"I try to be polite always." She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at him. "How are you, chick? You seem healthy."

"I am healthy. Want proof?"

"Not right now, thank you. Ask again later on."

Paul grinned. "Don't think I won't."

"I know you will." She matched his grin. "I can remember your grandfather. Now there was a wild one!"

"Grandpappy hasn't been doing much lately. They caught him teaching the Indians how to brew their own rot-gut and put him away for a while."

"Oh, that's too bad. He was such a nice, harmless old man."

"He's probably broken out by this time. I haven't heard from him for months — mail's a bit slow, you know."

"Yes." Karen leaned back on the bed, laughing at him. "You've recovered. May as well pay the doctor bill and send him packing." She displayed a slim and inviting appearance.

"What's with you?" he wanted to know.

"Work," she answered, "work, work, work. Mr. Slater and Mr. Carnell are slave drivers. Lucky you, lolling around in bed." Paul rubbed the back of his neck and said, "Sure." He gazed at her ankles and then lifted his eyes to her face. "I know a little bit about Emily. Peter was quite worried. Did it come out all right?" Karen frowned. "I — I'm not supposed to talk about such things. Even to people I know as well as you."

"All right. Do you remember the day you were here and he had the miseries? Give me your opinion on something. Do you think his miseries are over?"

She burst into laughter. "Yes, you persistent man. I think his miseries were quite groundless."

"Glad to hear it. I like Peter and Emily, like them very much. Now he'll be fit to live with again." He had a new thought. "Say, are you staying awhile this time?"

She moved her head. "Perhaps an hour or so."

"Fine! Open that closet door." He pointed behind him. Karen obediently arose from

the bed and went to the closet, opened it to reveal the liquor rack.

"Oh, now," she exclaimed, "does the doctor allow this?"

"If he doesn't, he should. He's been helping himself for the past two weeks. Trot it out."

"Well, maybe just a little one..."

She stayed well over an hour, and once expressed the wish that his room were equipped with a radio and that he were on his feet again. He promised both the next time she should visit him. Karen said she thought she would be free the coming weekend, and Paul snapped her up on it. He even offered to sing, now, if she would dance for him.

"Can you sing?" she asked.

"Well..."

"Never mind. That's answer enough. Forget it." And humming aloud, she did a few steps about the floor. He applauded and asked for more. She declined, saying she preferred to wait until he could join her. And thus they passed the hour, and more.

When at last she had to go, she bent down quickly and kissed his lips. "That's for the other day," she said.

"I wish I had thrown you a handful," he complained, reaching for her. Karen moved back out of the way.

"Silly! I really must go now." She paused in the doorway and smiled at him. "Do you want anything?"

Paul winked at her. "But I can't have it. So just ask Peter to come up, will you?"

"See you this weekend. 'Bye." And she was gone.

Conklin came through the open door a few moments later. "A cloud," he said, pointing downward. "A pink, fluffy cloud, and she was floating along in the middle of it. What's on your mind, Don Juan?"

"Karen's in love with me."

"I've known that for days. Did she just get around to telling you?"

"No, she didn't tell me. Not out loud. But she told me."

"You were blind not to see it before. Hey – wait a minute!" He stared at Paul. "You read it?"

"Yep."

Conklin turned and jumped down the stairs for the telephone.

Twelve

The first real touch of spring had come and the windows were open, not yet covered by screens. The cook's carefully tended plants were budding in the yard, and early birds had been making noises for weeks, impatiently awaiting the warmer weather. Peter Conklin stood in the middle of Paul's room, looking around at all the small familiar

objects, picking out his favorite chair. His darting eyes finally came to rest on Paul.

"Well, so long." He held out his hand, displaying an awkwardness that was new to him. "I don't know what to say, except that it has been fun."

Paul grasped the hand and squeezed it. "Take care, Peter. And be careful of all the Spaniards in all the streets. You know...?"

"I know and I will. Very careful." He hesitated, searching the other's face. "I don't suppose you've changed your mind? About our meeting again?"

"No, I'm sorry. Slater hasn't changed his mind, and I see nothing whatever. It just isn't there."

"That's what I thought. And all along I've been hoping you were wrong. Damn — what a lousy place to go! That's the trouble with this job. Emily threw a scene."

"Tough on her, all right." Paul nodded, and suddenly smiled at him. "If it's any comfort to you, just remember that you can talk to me all the time. Any time, day or night, I don't care. I can't answer, but don't let that stop you. And Peter — don't move your lips. People will think you're touched."

"Won't they, though! I'm glad I was in on the beginning of this. Of you. Else I would suspect I was touched." He made a last careful survey of the room. "Well, the car's waiting for me. I'm going directly to the station and taking a train for Newark. It looks like this is the end of four years." He hesitated once again, glancing at Paul, and it was obvious what was on his mind. Paul waited for it to be spoken.

"Do you remember what you asked me several weeks ago, Paul? About doing a favor without mentioning it downtown?"

"I remember."

"Well — I'm going directly to the train. I'm not going back to the office."

Paul let his gaze drift across the room, examining the wallpaper. Then he snapped back to the waiting man. "I was hoping you'd do it, Peter. It won't involve you in any trouble if you're careful. When your plane touches down at Shannon, I'd like for you to make a few inquiries for me. Nose around below the surface and see what you can find out about a man. I think he's in Ireland somewhere."

Conklin laughed in relief. "Is that all? What's the man's name?"

"Walter Willis."

"Willis?" The agent frowned at that. "You mentioned him before; a long time ago, I believe."

"Yep. And be careful about it, Peter. The man might not like the idea of your poking into his business."

"All right, if that's all." He laughed again. "And I had supposed you wanted somebody killed. Who is this Willis?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. I'm hoping you'll turn up something." He shrugged as if to dismiss it. "I picked up the name years ago when we were living in the hotel. It's been on my mind."

"Well, I should think so. Four years. All right, I'll see what I can do, but it won't be

much. It's only a four or five hour wait between planes."

"Not much of a chance, I realize that. I thought maybe you could find a quick contact somewhere around."

"I'll try." The awkwardness had returned. "Well, the car's waiting and I've got to make that train." He shook hands again. "May as well cut it short." He turned and walked away.

Paul waited, watching him.

Conklin paused for a moment in the doorway and looked back. "So long, Cro-Magnon."

Paul waved. "Good-bye, Neanderthal."

Conklin vanished from the doorway and strode rapidly down the stairs. Someone in the lower hallway said a few words and then closed the door after him. Through the open window of the room came the sounds of the car shifting gears and then rolling down the drive. Paul had turned about and was staring down at the lawn below. That was the last he would see of Peter Conklin.

Within a few days Carnell moved into the adjoining bedroom and began picking up the reins.

Paul reported to him each thing the absent agent saw and did, reported the progress he was making in reaching his destination, and Carnell was delighted with the smoothness of the arrangements. It pleased him that the ever-increasing distance between the two men raised no barrier and that Paul was able to follow his every move.

This in turn activated other plans. Slater ordered work started on the Maryland training center and began choosing the first few men who would report there.

"A real picnic!" Carnell repeated.

"But you aren't going to the picnic, are you?"

Carnell dropped a pencil, staring at Paul. "What do you mean?"

"You won't be going to the Maryland place."

Carnell seemed uneasy. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I think that." Paul's manner was casual and straightforward. He had never been as friendly with the man as he had been with Conklin, though they got along well enough. "Your anxiety has been showing these past few days, and I've picked up the impression you're packing your bags."

"Well, there *has* been some discussion about a flying visit to Tokyo. Slater broached the subject. We're in for trouble over there. Have you been reading the papers lately?"

"China? Yes."

"It's more than just China, I'm afraid." He rubbed his face nervously. "The Chinese Reds took Nanking last week — and there are no indications they're stopping there. But our men have found out other things; we have been receiving reports from farther north. Frankly, Paul, we expect a hell of a lot of trouble somewhere soon. Slater believes I

should fly over for an inspection."

"A dollar says you won't come back."

"*What?*"

"Hold on—I didn't mean that the way it sounded." Paul hitched his chair around to face Carnell. "I'll tell you what I told Peter, and he didn't find it so hard to believe. One by one, Slater is removing the people I know here and associate with. Those who've become my friends. Peter was sent off first; one of these days you'll be sent to Tokyo or some remote place. And then Karen will go, on one pretext or another. And perhaps Emily." Paul picked up the fallen pencil and tapped the chair with emphasis. His expression gave little hint of his cold anger. "When I'm moved out there to the Maryland place and spliced to a maze of cables, these bodyguards and the switchboard girls will be left behind. There will be new personnel—none but strangers there. And Slater, alone."

"You're crazy!" Carnell declared.

"I might be at that," Paul agreed. "But let's wait and see, huh?"

"What would be the purpose to all that?"

"I thought I was making myself clear. But ask Slater, the mastermind. His purpose is to remove or eliminate that which he can't fully control, and my sudden appearance was a factor he couldn't adequately control to his liking. In Peter's case it was the growing fear of our friendship and the possibility that his loyalty might be transferred to me. Peter was free with his opinions, and his thoughts on the matter failed to coincide with those of Slater. Slater specializes in cold, efficient service. He rules out the emotions. Therefore he doesn't care to have me surrounded with friendly people; he would much prefer those with attitudes similar to his. Do you recall that first day in his office? How bitter he was?"

"Of course."

"Slater hasn't changed—not an iota. He doesn't want anything changed. So Peter was sent away, and you will be sent away."

"You're crazy," the agent said without conviction. "I'll put up a dollar cash."

One day in June, Conklin unexpectedly slipped across a distant border. It was night on the other side of the world, and he made the passage safely under cover of darkness. A hard, stinging rain washed away his tracks, and the border guards with their watchdogs missed him. Paul walked into the basement gymnasium and found Carnell exercising there, to tell him the news.

He watched Conklin more closely thereafter, carefully observing his every move and peering into every face Conklin saw. Because the distant man traveled more freely at night, Paul adopted the habit of retiring to his room about noon each day and relaxing on the bed. Usually from about noon until nine or ten in the evening he would lie quietly, shutting out the noises of the house and the outside world, to watch and listen to the roving Conklin. But as dawn rose over there and the espionage agent went into hiding, Paul relaxed vigilance and kept watch with but half a mind. Sometimes, before falling off to sleep, Conklin would send back a purely personal message to him or Emily

and at the same time wonder if he was being heard. Those messages were always heard, but could never be passed on to the girl.

Paul lay full length on the bed, asking the ceiling, *Who screamed?*

The rifleman had never been found, nor had there appeared a telltale mental trace of the man responsible for placing him there. Over a period of time Paul had had the opportunity to examine at near or far range every man but two, and none of those nine had any prior knowledge of the ambush. The two remaining men had not yet been reached and read. Slater remained the elusive mind, as always; and Paul had not been back to the White House. Speculating, he was more than inclined to eliminate one of the remaining pair of questions marks, leaving only Slater. Slater held that much hate for him.

Who was the woman who had screamed?

For no other reason than to exercise his mind, he cast about in time and space for those persons he had previously known, however short a while. His former captain of course – no losing him. Evans was sweating it out on a sunbaked island and cursing the day he was born. He was also cursing the fact the island contained no women. And Palmer – there he was, in Chicago. Palmer was going over bookkeeping records of some nature, squinting at them and nursing his bad knee. Next were the two men of years ago: the former sergeant and the man to whom he had sold his information. Both in jail. The sergeant was – what? Oh, he was mulling a plan for an escape. Paul looked closer and saw that it was the hundredth plan for the hundredth escape. Wishful thinking. Now there had been a man and woman on the train ... Something about a vacation in a mountain cabin. Where were they? ??? They weren't. He sat up in bed, startled. They couldn't be found, either of them. Had his grasp of them been so tenuous? He had read them easily enough on the train and again a few days later when they occupied the cabin. Since then there had been no occasion to look in on them. And now they were gone from his reach. *That was a lesson.* The vague ones slipped away with time; it was necessary to know someone fairly well or fairly long to be able to hold on to him. Paul lay back on the bed, considering that.

Surely *she* hadn't been the one who screamed in the night? It wasn't likely that he had scanned her then, but was totally unable to locate her now. It didn't follow. And too, she had not exhibited a deeper interest in him other than as a mirage companion to her pleasures. Perhaps she had never again thought of him after leaving the train.

Who else did he know?

There was Karen, driving a car; and, briefly, Emily. The oily major was somewhere playing billiards, while his boss posed for pictures on a wide lawn, surrounded by Girl Scouts. Carnell was in the next room. Slater was – where? Well now, *that* must be the Maryland mansion. Huge place. And the swimming pool was going in over there. Paul turned his attention away. A large library, and the Doctors Roy and Grennell were pursuing their new-found work to its ultimate end. Paul grinned at the sight of them. They were now engaged in running paper tests on the limit of his theoretical powers. Slater wanted to know and Slater had demanded answers. Could he move a block of wood, a pencil, a paper clip, Roy demanded of Grennell? Grennell spread his hands and wore an expression. Telekinesis.

Paul moved his head on the pillow and looked across the room. Roy's volume stood

in its place in the bookcase, and atop the case was a dust rag left behind by the housekeeper. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the cloth. After a moment he opened them again to look for the rag. It had fallen to the floor. In that distant library, Grennell pointed out there was no limit of power – on paper.

In August, the prowling Conklin relayed a startling piece of news which electrified Carnell and Slater and ultimately several other men in high positions. He had almost literally stumbled over a hidden mountain laboratory producing – they hoped – low-order atomic bombs and had barely escaped detection himself. There was no opportunity whatever to get nearer or to estimate the number of such bombs on hand; he had to be content with his distant, precarious observation point. Conklin also flashed back the general location of the laboratory, but Paul deleted that from his report.

"Where is he?" an irate Carnell demanded. "He was carefully instructed to send his location at all times I We want to know where he is."

Paul eyed him, knowing what was meant by *we*, and fervently desiring to protect Conklin. "I'm sorry, but I can't tell him anything. This is a one-way affair."

"Slater won't like it! How can we pinpoint a factory in that wilderness?"

"Maybe they took the signposts down," Paul replied laconically.

"You keep watching. Find out where he is."

Paul kept careful watch.

Doctors Roy and Grennell continued to try, in vain, to see again their "patient." Carnell's recommendation that they be allowed to visit the house had resulted in one very brief visit, and since then the two men had been nearly frantic, dreaming up excuse after excuse to see him again. They were kept away. They knew nearly everything there was to know about Paul, those two, on paper, but they had no further opportunity to see him in person. They continued to speculate, to set up tests and patterns, to prove and disprove their own theories, but not even once more were they permitted to do the one thing they wanted most. Their usefulness was over, but they hadn't realized it. Only the security fetish held them in Washington; how long they would be kept there not even Slater knew.

"I am asking you to look!" Roy shrilled one day into the empty air over his head. Grennell peered at him, at first startled, and then realized what he was doing. Or attempting to do. "Look at me," Roy repeated to the four walls of their room. "I know you can see me and I am asking you to look – you there, Mr. Paul Breen!"

Grennell clasped his hands, eagerly awaiting some sign.

Roy shook a fistful of papers. "Do you see this? Do you know what I know? I know everything about you – everything! And yet I cannot come to you. So you must come to me. To us. Come here, to this room. Do something, Paul Breen, to tell us you have come here."

He waited, impatiently. Paul did nothing. He realized that if he did anything at all, it would instantly be reported to Slater. Dr. Roy picked up a yellow pencil and slammed it down violently onto his work table. "See that, Paul Breen? Move it – *move it*, I dare you!"

From afar, Paul glanced at the pencil and did nothing. He wanted to do something, wanted very much to reward their labors in however small a way because he owed Roy a debt he could never repay. It was Roy and his book which had opened a vast new world to him and made him fully aware of himself; Roy was, in a sense, his father as well as his mentor, and the doctor deserved a reward. But he knew he couldn't afford to touch that pencil or any other object the researchers set out for him. If he caused the pencil to roll off the table or hurtle across the distant room, the eager men would quickly tell Slater what had happened. And Slater would know the answer to the final question he was seeking.

"Roll it!" the furious doctor shouted. Grennell attempted to placate him but was shaken off. Roy picked up a handful of papers and flung them at the wall. "Fraud! You're a fraud, a fake!"

Paul turned away.

In late August, Peter Conklin reported further news. He was on the move again, warily following several bulky objects which were being transported to a broad, uninhabited mountain valley. There was a growing excitement within him that was hard to suppress and it colored his thinking.

He knew what he was following, knew its purpose, and he prayed that it would fad.

In early September, unprotected by dark glasses, he witnessed a sight which nearly blinded him. And though he had supposed himself at a safe distance, the shock wave hurled him to the ground and tore the wind from his body.

Within days the Alaskan monitoring stations verified the startling event.

The President waited nearly three weeks and then made a fourteen-word announcement: "We have evidence that within recent weeks an atomic explosion occurred in the U.S.S.R."

It had happened some three years before the best technical minds expected it. They had erroneously assumed their own timetables would be followed.

The presidential liaison officer, a suddenly not-so-casual major, appeared and pinned a decoration on the lapel of Paul's uniform which had been donned for the occasion. He made a pretty little speech about service and duty and valor, a speech which had been memorized because it had been said many times to many men for many reasons. He gave Paul an enigmatic smile and departed. Paul removed the uniform and put it away in the closet.

"Paul, you've done it!" A wildly jubilant Carnell danced about the room, discarding for once his reserved behavior. "You've proved out. This is wonderful!" He clapped Paul's shoulder and playfully thumped his chest. "You're wonderful! We're rushing work on the Maryland thing – we can't get moving fast enough now. What a lucky find you were. And believe me, Paul, you're worth ten times over every dollar we've spent for you."

"The hell I am." Paul was unmoved.

"You certainly are. Do you know what Slater is doing this minute? He's up there on the Hill, getting a secret appropriation rammed through for you – and he has some powerful backing!" Carnell was beaming, excited. "Until now the expenses have come out of one fund or another, borrowed from here and there, but you're big time now, boy. An expense fund all your own, like the old Manhattan District. Give us one year and we'll blanket the world! Who can possibly stop us?"

"Swell. How much do I get?"

Carnell stopped the capering. "What?"

"How much of this wonderful money do I get?"

Carnell blinked at him, suddenly disturbed. "Well, I don't know, I just couldn't say offhand. Money? But haven't we given you everything you've asked for?"

"How much?" Paul insisted.

"Isn't your salary enough, Paul? We can raise it. Double it! Is there anything we can get for you? More books, perhaps? We'll fill a room with books – anything you ask for. New clothes? How would you like a new suit?" He peered anxiously at the other, had a new thought and winked. "Oh – girls, Paul? You can have all the pretty girls you want. I'll move out of my room and bunk across the hall. We'll bring down models from New York. Just name it, man."

"How much money is Slater asking for?"

"Ah ... five million, I believe." Carnell frowned at him, obviously worried. "For this year."

"Fine," Paul replied. "I'll take one."

"One – what?"

"Million. For this year."

The following morning Slater sent back the answer to that. Carnell lacked the nerve to relay the answer.

A bright, cold moon shone through the window.

Paul slipped out of bed and felt for his slippers in the dimly illuminated darkness. The most agonizing headache he had ever known held him in its grip, a headache and a mood that reflected the very depths of despair. He wrapped a robe about him and moved slowly across the room toward the connecting door and the adjoining bedroom. He stopped after a few steps and turned away. Carnell wasn't in his room. Painfully, Paul mentally searched the house seeking him. He finally located the man down in the kitchen eating a snack. Paul left his room and walked quietly down the stairs, startling the girl at the switchboard by his unexpected appearance.

"Well, good morning, Mr. Breen."

He turned and moved toward the kitchen without answering her. Carnell had overheard her surprised words and came to the kitchen door. "Hello, what's the matter?"

Paul pushed him back into the kitchen and closed the door, staring at the other man

with aching eyes.

"Paul, what's the matter?" Carnell repeated in alarm.

"Peter Conklin is dead," Paul said dully.

"He's *what*? How do you know?"

"A sniper got him, just a few minutes ago."

"Paul, this can't be!"

"It is."

"But how did that happen? How did they catch him? Peter is a careful man."

"Peter *was* a careful man. They came looking for him. They knew where he was and routed him out."

Thirteen: 1950

She was a blonde, natural blonde of a rather dark shade and not at all the glossy canescence that is so painfully artificial. He liked that and held his lips close to her hair. She still wore the bronzed tan which complemented so well the coloring of her hair and eyes but now the tan was faded from the long winter. She rested her head on his shoulder in a dispirited manner, no longer the sparkling, animated woman he had first known so many years before. Karen was deeply troubled. They sat alone in the basement gymnasium, she in his arms.

Her gaze moved slowly about the huge room, seeking this object or that, seeking the pleasant memories that had been.

"Remember when we batted that silly ball around, Paul? The four of us?"

"Peter batted it too hard. He knocked Emily down."

"One by one they have all gone, haven't they? The friends we loved so well."

He nodded against her head without speaking.

"Poor Peter – I shall never forget that first night I met you. He opened the door and saw me standing there. He was very surprised and almost made a rude remark. I think he would have, too, if Emily hadn't been with me."

Paul tightened his arms about her. "You were the last woman on earth he was expecting that night. It probably cured him of blind dates."

"We lost Peter first and in such a horrible way." He felt the tremor in her body. "Did you know that the shock sent Emily to the hospital? Mr. Carnell kept her there for more than a week. It was dreadful news. They were planning to be married."

"I knew that, yes."

"And then she left us. She wrote to me at first, but her letters became more and more infrequent and at last stopped altogether. She was in Chicago for a while and then Salt Lake City. I haven't had a word from her since Christmas; just a note, really, asking me to remember all the other Christmases we spent together. That one was from San

Francisco. And since then—nothing."

The big room was warm and still. From upstairs came the occasional sound of a footfall, a scraping chair, but no more. When he and Karen had descended to the gymnasium, Paul had pulled shut the door behind them, serving notice to the rest of the household that they wanted to be alone.

Karen said, "And then Mr. Carnell."

Paul nodded again. "Third man out."

"I was very fond of him; he was quite warm and human, really, and not at all the cold mechanical man you would expect in such a position. He did everything he could for Emily after ... He offered her a transfer to any part of the country she might wish, offered to do everything possible to help her. But no one can help in a situation like that, can one? I drove him to the airport the night he took off for Tokyo." Her voice was melancholy.

"And his plane plunged into the Pacific," Paul finished almost brutally. "Engine failure."

"They were all good friends, Paul, close friends. Perhaps the best we would ever have. And one by one..." She stirred in his arms and turned her lips to be kissed.

Then he said, "What you're trying to tell me, Karen, is that your turn has come. I've known that for several days." He kissed her again.

"Of course." Her voice betrayed no surprise at his knowledge. "I'm being sent to London. One day soon now."

"Next Monday," he told her.

"Monday," she mused. "So we have but four days." She turned again to look up into his face. "Paul, I am going to tell you something."

"I already know it."

"But I am going to tell you anyway. I know all about you." She stared into his eyes. "All about you."

"If you value your safety, your life," he said slowly, "you won't repeat that statement to anyone. Not anyone! You especially won't mention it to anyone here in Washington."

"I'll keep silent," she promised. "Do you want to know how I found out about you?"

"I do know."

"Hush. I want to tell it my way." There was a pale smile on her lips, a mocking. "Someone slipped rather badly in trying to hide the secret of you. They kept you locked away, but they permitted you to have the books you wanted and they permitted visitors to your room. Do you remember the day you woke up and found me waiting there? After you had been shot? I had been waiting there a long time, thinking. Just thinking about you."

"Thank you," he said.

"I had been thinking about you ever since that first night I knew you. At first it was no more than a routine check to determine if you could hold your silence. But as time went on and I saw the very odd precautions taken over you, the almost insane concern for

your safety, the manner in which you were shielded from the outside world as well as the world being kept away from you, I began thinking. When you were moved out here on the Pike and installed in kingly grace, my thoughts moved from mere thoughts to active speculation. I inspected your bookshelves quite early; it is a part of my way of becoming better acquainted with a man. And in that early inspection I noted two or three particular titles, titles and subject matters which aroused a mild curiosity in you. Am I saying *mild*?

"Later, when Dr. Roy and that other scientist came on the scene, I vividly recalled those books because Roy had been the author of one. It was too much to pass off as coincidence. All that, taken in consideration with your presence here and a rather unprecedented security cover led me to a conclusion. Oh, I thought it a wild and crazy conclusion! But as I waited in the room upstairs for you to recover consciousness, after the shooting, I read Roy's *Studies*. And so I like to believe I know all about you. I suppose my expression gave me away when you awoke." Karen whirled around to him, looking up. "Paul, can you do all that?"

"Not all of it, by any means," he said truthfully. "Roy was unable to clearly separate theory from fancy and a part of his work is pure nonsense – or so I believe. But he was four fifths correct. That much I can do."

"I don't think I would like that – to be in your place, I mean. I don't think I would care for it at all." Her hair moved against his lips as she shook her head. "And I'm not going to ask what it is like. I don't want to know."

What was it like?

It was like one grown man in a world of children, it was one set of vocal cords in a deaf-mute society, it was a broadcasting station in a civilization lacking radios, a knowledge of writing in a world where no one knew how to read. What was it like? It was like a grown man, himself, making love to a naive, teen-age youngster. He had only to plant a suggestion and she would comply, only to insert a thought or a notion into her mind and she would act on it as if it were her own thought. She could not discern a difference.

"Someone," she repeated impishly, "would be awfully angry if they knew the mistake they made. They permitted the three of us in a room together: you, me, and a book."

"That someone would be more than angry," he warned again. "So you must be careful never to repeat this."

"I said I'd be careful, Paul. I will. I know why." She thought a moment. "For what reason am I being sent to London?"

"To separate us, as Peter and Carnell were separated. And Emily, too, if she hadn't moved away of her own free will. You're my last close friend here, so you have to go."

"I'm more than that," Karen reminded him softly. She put out a hand into the air, flipping her fingers, knocking down tenpins or houses of cards in her imagination. "Peter, gone; Emily, gone; Mr. Carnell, gone." A final, fourth flip. "Karen, going."

"You're only making things tougher for yourself, Karen. Let's enjoy what remains. We have four days."

"No," she contradicted. "We have forever."

He had no wish to discourage her and kept silent. Peter Conklin had been thoroughly shocked to learn he would not see Paul again, and his had been a more stable mind with tighter discipline. There was no guessing Karen's probable reaction to such news.

"Paul," she said suddenly, "come here ..." She tugged at him, causing him to fall forward toward her.

Instinctively he spread his hands on the floor to stop his fall and brace himself. "Now, Karen," he laughed at her, "gymnasiums have hardwood floors."

"I'm not complaining, Paul. Come here."

Fourteen

A spring rain had turned the gravel road to a slippery, sloshing roadway and the black Packard sedan traveled cautiously over it, the tires sending up occasional sprays of dirty water when they hit a puddle. On either side of the road the Maryland countryside was blossoming with the new season and already the short grass was a live green, while the hardier trees had long since shot their buds. The Packard moved on at a steady, unslowing clip with Washington far behind.

After a while it navigated a wide curve in the road and a fence appeared ahead, a gate swung shut across the road. A sentry box stood to one side of the gate and beyond that were a few tents pegged out in a precise line. Men stood guard behind the gate, and two waited before it. The Packard drew up and stopped.

An M.P. strode up to either side of the car and peered in the windows.

"Your passes and identification, please?"

Paul handed his to the soldier nearest him. Beside him, the car's driver was offering his through the opposite window. Two men sitting in the rear seat held theirs ready, waiting their turn. The M.P. stared at his pass and the small photograph affixed to it as if he were memorizing it and then gave Paul a close, careful scrutiny. He passed on to the remaining identification, to swing back to Paul's face for a final look. After a moment he returned the cards.

"Thank you, sir." The M.P. moved to the men in the rear seat and the procedure was repeated. Afterward, one of the soldiers dropped to the ground to peer under the car while the other requested the keys to look into the trunk. Satisfied, he handed the keys back to the driver.

"Thank you, sir. You may proceed." He signaled, and the wide gate swung open. The Packard passed through.

Scarcely a mile along the twisting gravel road they arrived at a high stone wall and a second gate. More guards waited there, and the ritual was repeated all over again. When they were passed through, Paul turned to look back.

He said, "They must be hiding something in here. A rocket ship, maybe?"

The driver grunted, but gave no other answer. He and the two silent men occupying the rear seat were strangers, operatives Paul had not seen before. They were military

men, Paul knew, but were habitually dressed in civvies. Behind him in the old house on the Pike, he had left the bodyguards and the switchboard girls and the cook, left them all. The past was cut off, and no one from the past remained. Slater had deliberately turned a new page onto a new world and had ripped out and thrown away all the old pages of the familiar book. He briefly recalled Karen knocking down the imaginary figures with her fingers, one, two, three, four. Paul had one savage thought and then turned his mind from the girl. Slater was going to pay dearly for *one* and *four*.

The Packard rolled on through a thick woods and the road was improved, black topping replacing the crunching gravel. Abruptly they were out of the woods and into the open sunshine, with spacious green lawns spreading away in every direction. It was still a respectable distance to the house. Paul stared at it through the windshield, looking at every feature he had often seen in someone else's mind. It was as old and as beautiful as people had said, or thought, with gleaming white trim and tall columns setting it off amidst the lush green background. Paul peered around. "Where's the rocket ship?"

The driver only glanced at him and pulled the car up before the entranceway. A butler came running out and opened the doors of the car. Paul climbed out, stretched, and stepped back. The two men who had ridden in the rear seat stood beside him; doors slammed, and the car moved away.

"Good afternoon, sir," the butler greeted him. "May I show you to your apartment?"

"Yes. Where is it?"

"The third floor, sir. In that wing." The butler pointed to a row of windows. "Did my trunks come?"

"Yes, sir. I have put everything away." He turned and led the way.

"Where's the rocket ship?" Paul wanted to know.

The man didn't hesitate in his stride. "We have no rocket ship, sir. Not to my knowledge."

They went through the great front door and into a reception hall, where still another man waited. He glanced up as they entered, nodded briefly to Paul, flicked a glance at the two others bringing up the rear and looked away. Paul was inwardly amused. Another sentry. And undoubtedly the back door contained still another. The butler continued on through the hall into a large and brilliantly lighted room, turned left, and finally stopped before a door.

"The elevator, sir." He opened the door. The four of them crowded in. Paul's last glimpse of the big room was of a magnificent chandelier hanging in the center of an oval ceiling. The doors closed and the elevator lifted smoothly and silently. It stopped automatically at the third floor and they got out. The two men stayed beside the elevator, while the butler and Paul turned away and moved along a short, wide corridor. This particular end of the corridor contained but three widely separated doors. The butler stopped at the third and last one. He glanced up and saw Paul's questioning gaze on the other two doors.

"The nearest one is a linen closet, sir," he said without being asked. "That first one is another apartment, connecting with yours. It is to be used by your visitors, sir, if you desire." He opened Paul's door and stood aside.

Paul found he had three rooms and a bath. Bookcases had been built into the walls of one, forming a library and study. All of his books had been installed on the shelves, leaving much room for future acquisitions. He looked for Roy's volume and found it in the same corner of the same shelf it had occupied in the old house. The second room was a living room, the one which opened onto the hallway, and the bedroom and bath made up the rest. All but the bedroom and the attending bath overlooked the front of the house and the winding drive which led to the distant gates. The bedroom, around on the side, overlooked a new swimming pool. He sat down.

"If you need anything, sir, ring. The bell push is there by the door. My name is Singer."

"Glad to meet you," Paul said. "I'm Breen."

"Thank you, sir." And he left.

Paul relaxed on the soft chair, looking about the room. From some ancient, forgotten picture he remembered a few words of a song a girl had sung, and hummed the words. "Good-bye, little yellow bird ..." He stopped abruptly.

There had been an unexpected reaction to that, strangely like an echo.

He twisted in the chair and glanced around the room, puzzling over the thing. There had been an echo in his mind. But that didn't make sense — he didn't hear echoes, he heard only words spoken to him, or about him, or distant thoughts directed on him. Exploring the train of thought, Paul tried again. "Good-bye, little yellow bird, I must..."

The repetition came again, the queer sense of hearing his own words relayed through ... through someone else. He got out of the chair and walked rapidly about the apartment, searching each room. He was alone. Next he cast about for the minds of those men he had only recently met. The driver of the Packard; the man was in the garage back of the house, tinkering with the car. He was conversing with still another chauffeur, and neither of them was discussing Paul. The butler, then. But Singer had gone to his own quarters at the far end of the wing and was doing nothing more than loafing about, waiting for Paul to ring. He was thinking of Paul, but only in a distant, impersonal manner. That left the two bodyguards who had ridden silently in the rear seat and who had stayed beside the elevator. Paul sent a mental feeler toward the elevator. They were gone.

But he found them almost at once. They too were in another room of the opposite wing. One sat and read and smoked. The other sat and listened with a pair of earphones on his head. Paul stared at what he read in the man's mind and then swung about for a hasty search of his room. They were carefully hidden and he was a long time in finding them. Microphones, two of them, cunningly buried in the molding which decorated the four sides of the room where walls and ceiling met. They were tiny, nearly invisible things. Quickly then he strode into the library and found another and finally found them in his bedroom and adjoining bath. Even in the bathroom!

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said aloud.

He heard his own surprised words repeated in the earphones fastened over the listener's ears, heard the words repeated again as they registered in the man's mind. His original sentence and the two quick repetitions were instantaneous, Paul mentally

picking them out and separating them only by the vague tonal colorations of first the electrical reproduction and then the bodyguard's mental patterns. It was like listening to a record of your voice, played back in the same instant you spoke.

And the other apartment?

Following the thought, Paul went to the connecting door and stepped through, to search the rooms. There were but two and the bath. Each contained a tiny microphone. He waited there a moment before going back to his own rooms, frowning. There had been an odd something about the bedroom. Retracing his steps, he again crossed to the bedroom and poked about. And then he had it. Flinging open a closet door, he found an array of feminine clothing. A chest of drawers contained still more things, and a vanity table likewise revealed occupied drawers.

A "visitor" was already in residence.

Paul sauntered back to his library and sat down in a deep, red plastic-covered chair. There was a matching footstool and he lifted the hinged top to discover a concealed liquor cabinet. Closing the lid after examining the labels on the bottles, he cried "Skoal!" to the microphones. In the distant room he heard the earphones repeat the toast. Paul propped his feet up on the footstool, clasped his hands about his knees and gazed at the sky beyond the window.

Some young woman had already moved into the adjoining apartment.

He had not the slightest doubt that she would be young and attractive and compliant with his wishes. She would be ever ready to dance with him, drink with him, make love with him. Slater would have thoughtfully arranged that, just as he had arranged to eavesdrop on every future minute of his life. Their lives. Both apartments, both bedrooms. Slater didn't particularly care if Paul was happy or not, but he saw to it that his comforts were taken care of. There had never been a complaint about food or drink, about the few articles of clothing requested, about the numerous books and other things Paul had purchased from time to time. A large paycheck was delivered every month — a check that Paul had signed and given to Conklin or Carnell to deposit in the bank. His bankbook now reflected a considerable balance. And since that initial meeting in the hotel five years ago, Karen had been more or less a constant companion, absenting herself as she chose or as the occasional demand of outside duty required. In truth, his comforts were well supplied. But a new world demanded a new population.

Paul wondered if this new woman in the adjoining apartment would be a plant, as Karen had been, or would she be an outsider imported for a single purpose? She could be either. Slater might be relying on the microphones to tell him all he wished to know, in which case the girl would be hired only to cater to him. Or Slater might be playing it doubly safe and ringing in another operative on him. Whatever the case, Slater knew he would instantly know which and apparently that didn't bother the department chief. The woman was there and Paul could suit himself. Slater — the good provider.

He sank lower in the chair and closed his eyes, letting his mind roam over the house. The entire structure formed a vague pattern on his consciousness and with a little effort he divided off the rooms into their proper perspective. Some of the rooms were

peopled, but as he had not met those persons yet he was only aware they were there, no more. Room after room opened to his gaze and in half an hour he had the house committed to memory. It was a deceptively large place, capable of housing many more people than would be supposed from an exterior examination. He found the cable and radio rooms and found operators already there on duty; discovered a switchboard set away at the back of the house and the vague image of a girl seated before it. A man lounged at the back door, and another sauntered about the yard. There was a very large dining room in one wing of the house, and another and smaller one in the opposite wing. Several people were lounging in the kitchen. The second floor seemed to be arranged in several units that suggested classrooms. Oh, yes – there the new agents would be trained.

They would come in from all over the country or the world to study the latest code, to participate in refresher courses, and Paul was to mingle with them, pretend to be one of them, meanwhile closely studying each individual and prying deeply into his or her mind. And in the end, Paul would be permanently attached to them in a certain mental sense, and they would be sent out again to various places in the world to look and to listen. Spynet supreme. No visible lines of communication, beyond the perfunctory filing of cables which every government watched as a matter of routine. And should an agent suddenly find himself in a position where he was unable to transmit physical messages, they would continue to be received anyway.

That was the work intended for Paul in the years to come.

He brought his attention back to the room in which he sat, and found himself contemplating the buried microphone. Idly, he wondered if he could damp it, destroy its sensitive parts so that it would not transmit – and then he rejected that idea. They would only replace it. It would be better to blanket the device temporarily, cause it to cease functioning for only as long as he wished. If he used reasonable caution they would suspect nothing, yet his privacy would be assured.

Paul put forth a slow and careful finger of probing mental perception, scanning the construction of the tin ear and its component parts. His mind reached a solder joint and with minor effort opened it. The microphone ceased transmitting. Quickly he swung back to those men in the far room who were listening, but there was no change in their attitudes; they were unaware of the change. Getting up from the chair, he quietly closed the library door, shutting off sound to the other rooms, and then spoke aloud. With satisfaction, he noted that his words had not been heard in the earphones. With that, he laughed aloud. And Dr. Roy had called him a fake and a fraud because he had not used telekinesis to roll a pencil across a table.

Paul released his grip on the device and allowed the solder joint to close again. Whistling, he left the library and walked to the entrance door of the apartment. As he stepped out into the corridor one of the bodyguards appeared from the opposite wing.

"Hi," Paul greeted him. "I'd like to look over the house."

"Yes, sir." The man punched the elevator button.

At dusk, he took the elevator back to the third floor and his room. The house had

been pretty much as he had visualized it earlier, but now he had the added advantage of having met most of the people currently occupying it. The bodyguard and he had taken a turn about the grounds, pausing beside the pool to wish for warmer weather. Paul flipped a farewell salute to the accompanying man and opened his apartment door.

He heard water running in the bathroom of the connecting apartment. *She* was in.

Almost before he could close his door, there came a light tap, and the butler stood there. "Pardon me, sir. Dinner will be at seven. Would you care to join the gentlemen downstairs, or would you prefer to dine here?"

"Here, tonight, I think," Paul told him after a moment's consideration.

"Yes, sir. For one or two, sir?"

Paul glanced at him with some surprise and then turned to study the closed door of the other apartment. The sound of running water came through very clearly. "Make it two," he said.

"Yes, sir." Singer closed the door and departed.

Paul shaved and changed clothes. When he emerged from the bedroom the noise of the water had ceased, and now there were only tiny sounds indicating movement in the other apartment. He idled about the room, wondering what he would say to her. How did one invite a total stranger to dinner – and in the privacy of his rooms? The incongruity of that struck him at once and he laughed. But still, how should he go about it? He had never done it before and lacked a precedent. He couldn't just walk up and bang on her door and shout, "Soup's on – come and get it or we throw it to the hogs!"

Similarly, consider the superfluity of introducing himself as a means of starting the conversation. She would already know his name. Then why not play it the direct way? Rap on her door. Invite her to dinner. Here. At seven. She would reply yes or no. As easy as that.

Paul walked across the room. He rapped on her door. The small noises from the other side stopped.

"Yes?" Her voice was soft. He liked it.

"I'm having dinner sent up for two. Join me?"

"Why, yes, thank you. I'll be there in just a moment." There seemed to be a smile in her voice.

There! See how simple it was? He waited. She moved about behind the door. He put his hands in his pockets and tried not to be nervous. She neared the door, paused with one hand on the knob. Paul saw the knob turn and jerked his hands from his pockets. The door opened and the girl stepped through, smiling prettily. Paul stared at her.

He exclaimed, "Jehoshaphat!" A borrowed word.

Martha Merrill said, "Hello, Paul. You evidently remember me."

"I saw you – saw you in that building downtown, about five years ago."

"Of course. I was breaking in on the switchboard. I heard you had asked about me." She advanced across the room and held out her hands to him. "I've come up in the world, as you can see."

She realized at once she shouldn't have said that, or at least phrased it quite that way. Paul was frowning at her and, despite himself, flicked a quick glance over her shoulder at the open doorway. Martha stopped, studying him, and before she could control it the shadow of an inward storm raced across her face.

"I don't like what you're thinking, Paul."

"I'm sorry. I apologize. You caught me by surprise."

She tarried a few seconds longer. "All right," she agreed then. "I'll forgive you." She put out her hand and Paul took it. "Fix me a drink?"

"Delighted. Come and see where the bar is hidden." He led her to the library and carefully closed the door behind them. Once inside, he put a finger to his lips to indicate silence and then stood a moment with his eyes closed. The solder joint in the microphone snapped open, destroying contact. Paul whirled around quickly and grasped the girl's arms.

"You screamed," he said with excitement.

Martha nodded. "Yes, Paul. I screamed."

"You – weren't there on the street?"

"No, I was quite some distance away. At home."

"But you were watching me?" His excitement grew.

Martha reached up and gently pried loose the tight grip he held on her arms. "I've been watching you and listening to you for five years, Paul. Since the day you arrived in Washington and walked past my switchboard."

"Martha," he whispered, "what are you?"

She smiled at him happily. "The same as you, Paul. Or very near the same." One hand raised and a finger pointed toward the ceiling. "I didn't know about those microphones. I can't break the connection as you just did."

"Are you reading me *now*? Have you been?"

"Of course, all the time. Forgive me again, Paul, but I was very amused at your hesitancy outside my door." She moved back from him. "And now, Paul, you had better replace the connection and make sounds of opening bottles. Someone will become suspicious."

"But I want to –"

"Not now," she cut him off. "We must keep up the pretense. Bottle noises, please."

Reluctantly his mind reached out and restored the solder joint. Hardly taking his eyes from her face, he reached into the footstool for the liquors. She gave the appropriate exclamation of surprise at discovering the cabinet and then told him how much to pour into her glass.

"No ice," he said then. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all. You have a beautiful place here." Martha clinked glasses with him and then surprised him a second time. "*It isn't necessary to use spoken words, you oaf! Use your head.*" No sound had passed her lips as she deftly inserted the suggestion into his consciousness, via telepathy.

Paul stared open-mouthed, taken aback. "Why, I ... *Why, I never thought of that! What's the matter with me?*"

"*You aren't used to it, as I am. You've had no opportunity to practice, you don't know what it means to converse in this manner.*"

"*Practice? And you have? How?*"

"*I have two brothers, Paul. Like myself. All telepaths. And now you make four.*"

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said aloud.

"Oh," she covered for him, "did you spill it? Try to be more careful." Martha winked and indicated the hidden ears.

"*Where are they?*" he demanded.

"*At home right now. In the islands.*" She took his hand and led him to the sofa. "*Don't ask so many questions, Paul. Look in and see. My mind is open to you.*" She pushed him down and then sat beside him, holding his arm. "*Look...*" she urged.

Paul closed his eyes without thinking, knowing that it was unnecessary, and peered ever so cautiously into her conscious mind. She tightened her hold on his arm, urging him forward. Paul looked.

There were five of them in the family; Martha, her two brothers, her father and mother. The children were telepathic, the parents were not. Her father was that rare breed of man, a man who calmly and wholeheartedly accepted the strange gift possessed by his children and actively encouraged it. He aided them in their plans, did what he could to maintain the cloak of secrecy over them and acted as the fiercely proud father was supposed to act.

Their real home was in the West Indies, tucked away on a tiny island of the Grenadine archipelago, far off the trade and tourist routes and reachable only by native schooners working out of Grenada or St. Vincent's Island. Her parents were British subjects, her father a retired civil servant, and the whole of the West Indies were filled with retired civil servants of the Crown. He was but one among many, unnoticed, unobtrusive. Their home, back from a long white-sand beach, was visited only by the trade winds and a few native fishermen or boatmen from the neighboring islands. Her brothers were there now. One had just come back from London; the other was preparing for a trip to South Africa.

Her supposed residence was in Savannah, Georgia. A carefully if fraudulently documented background existed there for any who cared to investigate. And of course she had been investigated before obtaining her present employment many years ago. The Savannah camouflage had withstood the test. Her purpose in Washington was the same purpose as those of her brothers in London, or Capetown, or wherever they chose to go: hunting for others like themselves, like Paul. To date, he had been the only find. Her particular choice of sentry duty, that of the Counter-intelligence Corps, was a favorable one in that if other telepaths existed it was likely they would turn up there eventually, or be turned up by the agents of the C.I.C. As Paul had demonstrated.

It hardly seemed necessary to furnish reasons for wanting to locate other telepaths — her father referred to them as *Telemen*. He entertained dreams, as they sometimes permitted themselves to do, of an island, or a country, or the entire world populated by telemen. But meanwhile there were but four of them, and they should be

together. There was one other reason. Martha was most emphatic on the point. She could not marry one of her brothers; she had no desire to marry a man who did not share her faculty. And so she had hunted with doubled vigor. And Paul arrived.

But why hadn't she spoken out sooner? Why had she waited for five years?

Because her brothers had cautioned against any rash act. They were free agents, Paul was not. He was most securely wrapped in the arms of the C.I.C. and it was wisest for the time being to let him remain there. If and when the future brought about a natural means of releasing him from their jurisdiction, well and fine. If there were indications that freedom was never coming, steps would then be taken. Paul's initial mistake was to call attention to himself too early, to become embroiled in a government security agency. If that hadn't happened and he had remained a free man, mutual discovery might have been a long time in coming, but eventually they would have found him, or he them. It would have been quite different. But as it was, she had followed her brothers' advice and kept silent, watching and waiting for the opportunity. That opportunity had come when she learned of plans to renovate the Maryland place for his residence, learned of Slater's intentions to provide him with feminine company.

Because Slater was unaware of her, he was not on guard against her. Probably to his own mild surprise he changed his mind one day about the woman he was going to send to Maryland. He called Martha Merrill into his office, explained to her the desirability and necessity of placing a confidential agent in the adjoining apartment, outlined what her duties might consist of, and asked if her religion or morals forbade it. After a suitable delay, she accepted. They were both satisfied. Paul was here, she was here, they were at last together. The future would determine the next steps.

She hoped he didn't think her too bold? "I should say not!" Paul exclaimed and then looked around guiltily. Martha laughed at him. "*What of your brothers?*" he sent.

Dave, the elder, was a roving correspondent for the *Times* of London. One couldn't wish for more adequate protective coloration, couldn't hope for a better excuse to roam the world. Marty, the younger, conducted guided tours to all parts of the globe for the American Express Agency. Herding tourists was an onerous chore, but it served the purpose. She had chosen this particular agency in the United States because of what it and the nation was. If Brazil had been the world's leading power, she would be working in the Brazilian foreign office, if that were at all possible. Her parents remained on the island, keeping the sanctuary against the day it might be needed.

Did he remember the early day when he had asked after her, asked about the possibilities of a date and Conklin had said she flew home on emergency leave?

Yes.

She had gone to the island by a circuitous route to inform her parents of her discovery. Had she not left so quickly she would have probably met him that night or the next. She later regretted missing him, but it was not to be helped. The shock and the thrill of the discovery as he walked past the switchboard had upset her, had sent her packing with the news.

Paul rubbed his eyes and opened his mouth to say something, when a tap sounded at the door.

Singer had brought their dinner.

He constantly watched the girl across the dinner table.

"You're pretty," he had informed her bluntly. "I thought so five years ago and I think so now."

"Thank you, Paul. Now eat your dinner."

He permitted his thoughts to roam over her, around her and at her aimlessly and undisciplined, while he ate. (I like your hair; I've always liked long hair, I think. I like the way it curls inward against your neck and shoulders. There's a name for that, isn't there?) She nodded, went on eating and listening to his random mentation. (Brown eyes, too. Snappy. Brown eyes and brown hair make a perfect combination – well, I think so. I would judge you at about five foot three or four. Aren't you? Pretty package, gal. Your skin is rather pale; maybe you need more sun. Not that I'm the complaining kind, you understand. I think you have magnificent...) He stopped, swallowed, and the color ran high in his cheeks.

"All right," she laughed at him lightly, "I forgive you this one time."

(You scan me too easily. Not fair! I can't do that to you.) Paul stopped eating to stare hard. "*Say! Why wasn't I aware of you waiting on the other side of the door?*" He almost hurled the puzzled thought across the table at her. "*You said you saw me standing there, fumbling.*"

She made a face at him: "*Because I have something you do not, Paul, just as you have certain talents I don't possess. I said there were small differences between us.*"

"What?" he demanded.

"*I have no ability whatever with telekinesis; I can't disconnect the microphones as you did. And I lack the parabolic receptivity that you seem to possess. I didn't discover the microphones and the men listening.*" And then she thought to add, "*I'm unable to scan the separate rooms in the house, but I can follow your percipience as you do.*"

"But what do you have that I don't?"

"A mental barrier, a kind of shield to prevent your looking in on me."

"You can do that?" he asked with astonishment. Martha nodded. "*Try me – now.*"

Paul tried. Peer and pry as he did, searching over the surface of her mind for a crack or crevice however small that a thought might slip through, he found nothing.

Her cerebration was opaque. She was wrapped in complete silence. Little wonder that he had been unable to locate a woman who had screamed in the night!

He said aloud in wonder, "How do you do that?"

"I'll be happy to teach you, in return for what you can teach me." She put out a hand. "A bargain?"

He reached for the waiting hand. "A bargain!"

The gentleman patiently listening at the earphones must have wondered what was going on, catching as he did only the spoken parts of the conversation.

The initial group of intelligence agents arrived, and Paul began the training work assigned to him. The big house which had held comparatively few people when he first moved in now seemed full to overflowing, but he quickly discovered that not all the arriving strangers were field men sent in for training. There was a sprinkling of internal security agents, watching the students; and of course there were additional staff members to feed and house the influx. The wheels within wheels were everywhere; Paul found a cook and a chauffeur who were intelligence men, and an upstairs maid who not only checked on Martha but the other domestics in the household. One of the girls in the stenographer's pool kept a wary eye on the female clerical help and on the switchboard women. And with each of them it was the same baffling paradox: they were to watch for they knew not what, but they were to watch for it.

It reminded him of an anecdote that made the rounds after the war. The censors attached to Los Alamos and the other units of the Manhattan District kept strict watch on the scientists under them, watching for a leak by word or letter. They didn't know what kind of leak to watch for, and had not the slightest idea what was in the making, but like patient dogs they kept watch. And finally caught a man. In a note to a friend, the man had described a method of prolonging the life of a flashlight battery.

In time, Paul found himself securely attached to and constantly aware of a group of a half dozen men; he came to know them internally and externally as well as he had known Palmer of the F.B.I., as well as Carnell. He could follow them with ease day or night, awake or sleeping, and when they were sent to Washington and on to Miami for unwitting distance tests he was there beside them mentally. All unknowing, they passed the tests and were ready. Paul notified the man in charge of the Maryland center, a Lieutenant General Boggs, and the six agents were dispatched. Training immediately began with a new group.

Lieutenant General Boggs became the twelfth man to be made aware of Paul's secret – at least as far as Slater was concerned. Slater knew nothing of Karen's knowledge, of Martha Merrill and her family of four. Paul privately admitted that the affair was beginning to take on the aspect of a circus. But Boggs found himself the official twelfth and he didn't like it; he regarded Paul with nothing but suspicion and distrust. Although he maintained the duty desired of him, he kept a barrier between himself and that freak, Paul Breen.

With the dispatch of those first agents overseas, the training program began to pay small dividends. Sooner than information would have trickled back through normal channels, Paul learned a few of the things going on in East Germany – and Washington promptly lodged a protest demanding the dissolution of the East German police militia created by Russia, claiming it to be really the nucleus of a German Army. The White House and the State Department were informed well in advance of the outcome of certain elections and the return from exile of King Leopold III of Belgium. In late July came the news of Russia's intention of returning their representative to the U.N. Security Council, and so of course his actual return caused no surprise.

More men were trained and then sent away. Not all were assigned to overseas posts. Slater had ideas.

A former government official suddenly admitted he had been a Communist and named three others like himself. The mayor of a large city resigned almost unexpectedly and was given a foreign post. A new friendliness developed toward Spain and several concessions were made to that nation. In October, the President flew to Wake Island to confer with General MacArthur on Far East Policy – and a Breen-Slater agent went along as a member of the plane crew.

"How goes it?" Martha asked.

"Like eating pie. Do you see what he's up to?"

"Slater? Yes. He's spinning a web all his own."

"Is your brother in London? Dace?"

"Not at the moment, but he will be soon."

"Ask him to go to Ireland, when he can. Look up a man named Willis, Walter Willis. I'm convinced he is someone we should know."

"Willis? I know that name."

"You do! How?"

"It has come up at the office. That is, in the mind, not in conversation. Willis is one of Slater's agents. He receives information from him and sends to him."

"Sends to him? You're sure?"

"Yes, Paul."

"Is that all you know of Willis?"

"That's all. He's one name in a hundred or more that I've chanced across a time or two. Why, Paul? Is he connected with this web of Slater's?"

"I think so. I've been watching for something ever since I caught Slater attempting to hide the name from me." He reflected a moment. "I suppose that's why you haven't learned the answer before this. Slater didn't suspect you and so hid nothing from you. Having nothing to hide from you, he had no betraying thoughts of Willis around you. So you accepted the casual references as just another agent."

"I'm sorry, Paul. I should have peered more closely."

"No fault of yours. There was nothing there to arouse your suspicions as there was in my case. Perhaps your brother can find something in Ireland. And caution him – Willis is dangerous."

"I'll tell him. Be good, Paul. And come home as soon as you can. I haven't seen you all day."

He flashed a grin. "If the elevator isn't running I'll climb the stairs. What's for dinner?"

"What would you like?"

"I'll start with a kiss. Be at the door."

"Now, Mr. Breen," the instructor said, "suppose you key a word and the class will build a cipher."

The number of men who reported to the training center surprised Paul. It was quite apparent that Slater had quickly enlarged upon his original idea, once the initial successes became known. The trainees continued to come in, in small but continual streams until by the year's end, Paul had lost count of their actual number. He estimated it at near fifty. He suspected that Slater was actively recruiting new men all the time, sending them directly to the old mansion or using them as domestic replacements for the more experienced agents already in service. They would appear in batches of six, but as soon as each half dozen were sent to some distant city for a final telepathic test, they were shipped overseas and new trainees took their places. He managed to keep in contact with them all, but now it was no longer a constant, uninterrupted contact as it had been with Peter Conklin; instead he found himself handling so many men by the year's end that he was forced into an intermittent union with each – grazing first one and then the other, pausing for a close inspection only at those times when the agent seemed to have something important under observation.

Paul called a temporary halt to the proceedings by faking a relapse, a second period of illness in which nothing was heard or reported. The doctor was rushed in to examine the old scar on the back of his neck, but nothing could be learned from that. Paul complained to General Boggs that the work was too much and too heavy, he had been losing contact with some of the men for days before the illness struck. The intermission of silence, lasting for over a week, frightened Boggs and, by association, Slater. For more than a week they lived in daily fear of their beautifully constructed espionage net crumbling beneath their fingers. Slater, nearly frantic, consulted Dr. Roy to learn no more from him than had been learned from the doctor who continued to stop in twice daily to inspect the pulse and the old scar. With spiteful vengeance, Roy pointed out that he knew less of Paul Breen than any of them, thanks to the policy of keeping them apart. So why ask him for advice now?

Paul and Martha enjoyed the furor.

On New Year's Eve, an agent died in Vladivostok. The man had been one of a group trained at the center the previous summer and Paul's perception of him had not been continuous, but his death seemed to signal a mass movement. On New Year's Day, the Chinese Communists opened a terrific drive in Korea and barreled down the peninsula. Almost at the same time Canada started work on still another atomic pile. Paul reported both developments before the newspapers or governmental reports. A conference of British Commonwealth Prime Ministers opened in London, and for some reason Slater evinced an interest in that. He left Washington in late January to witness the latest bomb tests in Nevada, but behind him the various events were watched and recorded.

General MacArthur decided, in the opening days of February, that the Chinese entry into the new war upset all the preconceived ideas of quick victory; in Maryland, General Boggs notified interested parties of the decision and smugly predicted that a public announcement would be forthcoming soon. He was proven right two weeks later. And another French cabinet fell, almost on schedule.

An agent in Iran discovered and reported rumors of a plot to assassinate a premier who opposed the nationalization of oil; a secret warning was flashed to the official from Washington, but it did not prevent the assassination. General Eisenhower assumed the effective command of all Atlantic Treaty forces in Europe, and one of Slater's men

stalked about his headquarters with eyes and ears opened wide. Only a few miles away, the president decided to relieve MacArthur of his Far East command, and Slater told his few close friends of the development several days before the public announcement was made.

"Paul?"

"Yes?"

"*Dave is in Ireland again. He is inclined to agree with you about that man. Some sort of undercover agent.*"

"*Yes, Conklin found out that much. A few have heard of him, but nobody wants to talk about him.*"

"*You think he is in with Slater?*"

"*That seems to be the connection; Slater exhibited a definite guilt when hiding his name from me. And have you noticed something? None of these men shipped out of here have been assigned to Ireland. Every place in the world but Ireland.*"

Summer came again, and Martha and Paul spent as much time out of doors as possible; they dawdled for an hour or two each day in the swimming pool – alone. By some curious and unwritten law, no other member of the household cared to use the pool while they were in it, although there was always a maid lurking somewhere near by who would rush out with towels as they climbed from the water. Or they went for long, slow walks around the farthest reaches of the walled-in estate, again alone, but only after Paul had bluntly invited a bodyguard *not* to accompany them.

"I seem to detect a measure of distrust," Martha said after they were out of earshot. She laughed.

"And doubt," Paul added. "He's wondering if he should tag along anyway. Our slightest wish is their command, except where our wishes conflict with their wishes."

"This is like a prison, even to the wall. I wonder what is on the other side of the wall?"

"I don't want to point, but a pair of sentries are standing over there in the woods about opposite us. They heard you laughing a moment ago – and exchanged sneers."

"I can't ..." She hesitated, groping for the men, and then found them. "Oh, yes, I see them now. Please notice my improvement, teacher. And do you know what I did last night? I disconnected the microphone in my bathroom."

"Be careful," Paul was quick to warn her. "Don't ever let them suspect you are what you are. That would be fatal."

"But, Paul, my bathroom! And I will be careful." She reflected for a moment. "Those sentries – I can't read them very well. You said they were sneering?"

"Their grapevine has been working overtime, mostly in the wrong direction. A good-sized body of men are encamped out there and you'd be surprised at some of their notions; they don't actually know who or what is inside the wall, but they've seen men and Women coming in. Rumor has made an evil woman of you, Martha."

She laughed again, but without sound. "Then they aren't sneering, Paul. They are envious."

He nodded. "That too." As they walked on he found a man perched in a distant tree.

"See him?" he asked.

She stared hard, looking for the particular tree etched in his mind. "No. Where?"

"I'll make him move. Watch for a movement."

The concealed marksman fumbled, nearly dropped his rifle and shot out a quick hand to recapture it.

"Yes! I saw that. And there are more of them."

"Yes; all around us. They can see you and the other women and start the rumors. Word of mouth does the rest." Paul grinned suddenly. "Our boy is looking at your legs right now. But for that matter, so are a half dozen others back at the house." She was wearing shorts.

"Everyone does," she protested, "except you. I never see you looking at them."

He responded with a laugh and then carefully selected one image from a storehouse of recent memories. He held the image at the front of his mind until she blushed.

"Stop it, Paul! That isn't fair."

"But I've made my point."

They walked on, moving down the hill as the land fell away from the woods and dipped toward the distant buildings. The sun was hot overhead and after a while Paul removed his shirt.

"Were you listening to that navy report the other day?" he asked her. "The one that said a Douglas Skyrocket had flown higher and faster than any other plane?"

"I seem to remember something about it. Why?"

"The navy's holding back. That particular flight was made several weeks ago; there've been one or two more since then. Do you know what they're preparing to do?"

"No." Martha looked up at him. "But I can guess you are wishing *you* were doing it."

"They're planning a round-the-world flight in that ship.

With a minimum number of stops. Right now they're setting up refueling bases and they hope to send that ship completely around the world pretty soon – the ultimate goal is nonstop around the world, either jet or rocket. Maybe a combination of the two. I think they'll make it."

She nodded, following his reasoning. "Fast."

"Very fast. A matter of hours." He thought to add, "And watch that new business at White Sands. I can't get too much information there, but I suspect they're building a moon rocket and expect to fill it with test animals. The army is far ahead of the navy in rocket programs."

"A lot of people will be terribly surprised if it *is* green cheese," she suggested.

Paul agreed. "But think what might happen if that first rocket carries rats and mice. What will lovers and songwriters do then?" In a suddenly serious mood he added, "You're right though about my wishing for that round-the-world flight. I want to be almost anyplace but here." He reached out to seize her hand possessively. "What's your island like – your home?"

"Absolutely beautiful! My mind is open. Look."

A blue, a very blue lagoon lifted bodily from a Technicolored picture book and set down in an already blue Caribbean Sea forty miles from anywhere; beyond that a silvery beach of sand so white and fine it hurt the eyes to gaze at it under the noonday sun, and still beyond *that* was the nearest approach to paradise on earth a retired servant of the Crown might ever hope to see. A small island among other similar dots in the region – no more than a few square miles and therefore worthless from a commercial or tourist standpoint; the island was far to the south of the hurricane belt, but squarely in the path of the trade winds, and its climate was perpetual summer. Their home stood back from the beach in a storied setting of palms; there was a large garden, some cattle and sheep. The island did not have a single paved road, no building more than a story high, no gas mains, no running water other than a well with a pump, and no electricity except that generated by each family for their own use. The only other inhabitants of the island were descendants of slaves, Africans who were fishermen, sailors or boatbuilders.

St. George's, Grenada, was forty miles away by native schooner; the city had everything you might expect of any small city except that the goods tended to be British or domestic products rather than American. They went to the city perhaps once or twice a month for supplies, but other than that the family lived gratefully alone in a semi-wild Eden of their own choosing. "*Does all this sound too primitive?*"

"So *primitive*," he responded instantly, "*that I'd trade everything I have for it!*" He glanced at her and a qualifying thought occurred to him. "*Well, almost everything.*"

Late July, and one of Slater's roving agents caught up with and hastily reported on a high official of the British Foreign Office, who had been missing from his home since May. This man, along with one other, had vanished quite unexpectedly and mysteriously for no apparent reason and had succeeded in remaining under cover for months. General Boggs and his superior received the news, considered it, and then did nothing. Boggs because he wasn't expected to, Slater because he did not care to. Within a few days the Briton again slipped from view.

Meanwhile there had been still another assassination, another cabinet fall, a banking crisis, and a king who had only recently returned from exile packed his bags to give up his throne a second time. His son succeeded him. His son had a very warm friendship with that personable young American from the embassy.

During the closing week of September, Russia tested a second atomic bomb. Encouraged by the authenticity of the first report, the White House reported it on the third day of October and almost immediately the far-flung monitoring stations looked to their screens for evidence. It came. Still another test, the third, followed shortly thereafter, but it was a strangely familiar activity in an entirely unexpected place which caught and held Slater's astonished attention that autumn. Great Britain began showing the first outward, unmistakable signs of possessing such a bomb – or at least the manufacture of one. The signs were not easily read by the unpracticed eye, but Slater detected them. He assigned three special agents to widely separated British points, waiting and watching.

Paul also watched those three. He was unable to watch Slater directly, but by now he

could calculate Slater's intentions by studying his reactions to any given stimulus. Upon the receipt of confidential news, via Paul and Boggs, Slater would either act or not act according to some deeper purpose of his own; by watching what he did with the information received and the subsequent shifting of men to distant places, it was often possible to guess those intentions. Sometimes nothing more was ever heard of the matter; at other times a later news dispatch or radio broadcast would touch upon a foreign event which could only be an outgrowth of Paul's receptivity and Slater's meddling.

American efforts to mediate the oil dispute between Iran and Great Britain ended in complete failure; Paul was suspicious of that failure because Slater had followed the entire matter with close interest. And what possible concern could he have with a military coup in Damascus which ended with the overthrow and arrest of a premier and his ministers?

Christmas brought a halt to nearly all the activity. Paul held seventy men, and he bluntly warned General Boggs there could be no more. He underlined his warning by sketchy reports and frequent headaches; many days would go by while he reported nothing at all on some agents although the cabled reports from those observers continued to be received at the center. Again, in the midst of a briefing or reporting session, he would suddenly stop talking and complain of a headache. Boggs was fearful of a recurrence of the previous year's illness and slacked off. Christmas leaves were granted to most of the center's personnel and to Martha after she requested it. But because of her closeness to Paul, she was warned again of security rules before departing, and a man was assigned to shadow her after she passed through the gates.

"*Watch your step,*" Paul cautioned her. "*Whatever you do will be talked about.*" He stood at a third-floor window, watching her car moving along the black-top drive.

Martha had settled back in the seat and was chatting with a young officer en route home for the holidays. The officer was surprised and delighted to find her alone.

She smiled at the officer and flashed to Paul, "*I will, darling. I want to spend a few days in Savannah for appearance's sake. Be back soon – see you Christmas Day. And look what this goon is working up to!*"

The officer made his opening bid, a brief attempt to convince her she should go home with him. "The folks will love you!"

"*Beware the wages of sin,*" Paul declared after her. "*Somebody besides the folks will be loving you. Make him squirm – give him ants in the pants.*"

"*Oh, Paul, no!*"

"*I'm the jealous type,*" Paul said. "*If he drops that hand on your knee, he gets the works.*"

As the car neared Washington the young officer gave a startled yelp of pain and surprise. He clutched his posterior and reddened. The chauffeur turned around.

"What's the matter?"

"A bee bit me!"

"Bees? In December? You're crazy."

Paul remained at the third-floor window, whistling.

Christmas Day was quiet and cold with a stillness to the air that seemed to promise eternal peace. The trees beyond the far wall were blackly naked, holding their limbs against an overcast sky, and the soldiers beneath them shivered and cursed. Not until noon did a weak sun appear, but it did nothing to dispel the cold.

Paul had a late breakfast and wandered through the great house, marveling at its emptiness. It had not been so vacant since the spring day he had moved in, nearly two years before. He prowled around, exchanging "Good Mornings" and "Merry Christmases" with those who had to stay behind, and finally located the one man he was searching for. He knew the man was one of Slater's inner agents, set to watch Paul and the others inhabiting the house, and so he had deliberately selected him for the errand to make it easier for the information to reach the chief.

"Did you get it?" Paul asked the officer. "Right here." He held out the small package. "And good luck to you."

"Thanks, thanks for both."

The delivery of the package implied that Slater had given his approval. It could have been stopped easily enough. Paul opened the package to display the engagement ring. "Think she'll like it?"

"I would, in her shoes," the officer declared. And then he laughed. "We paid plenty for it!"

Martha returned in the early afternoon. Paul had been watching for her for hours and located the automobile while it was still distant from the Maryland place. She was greatly excited.

"Paul. My brother was in Savannah!"

"You didn't contact him – "

"No, of course not. He put up at the hotel and I had lunch in the dining room. Paul, he located Willis."

"Tell me!"

"Look in, Paul. You will get it faster that way. I've memorized it all." She put aside her barrier shield and her thoughts lay naked to him.

The silence between them was long and contemplative. The automobile left the highway and turned in at the road leading to the gates protecting the estate. It had reached the second gate before Paul spoke again.

"So that's Willis!"

"Nasty, isn't it? And Slater preaching patriotism!" She was bitter and bewildered. *"Paul, what are we going to do?"*

"I don't know. Yet. Nothing at all until we can find a way to bring him down."

The car moved through the second gate and entered the drive leading to the house. After a minute Martha had a new thought, tinged with growing curiosity.

"Paul, what are you hiding?"

"Hiding? Me?"

"Don't pretend to innocence! I can sense an evasion about something. What has happened?"

"Nothing's happened, the way you mean."

"Then what are you hiding from me?" She felt his warm laughter. *"Come home and find out!"* He held the ring box in his hand, carefully concealing it from her prying mind.

Sixteen: 1953

"They'll never catch me, Paul. I promise you that."

He moved forward in the chair and pushed the girl to the edge of his lap. "I'm hungry. Please see what's holding up dinner."

She struggled to retain her seat on his lap, tried to kiss him once more, but he stood up, laughing. "Move! I'm starving."

Martha gained her footing, winked a secret thought to him and crossed over to the apartment door. Her outstretched hand hesitated on the knob and she looked over her shoulder for a quick, fond glance. "I'm glad you love me, Paul."

And opened the door.

She remained there for long frozen seconds with the door half open, staring into the corridor outside, staring at someone beyond his line of vision. Her hand flew to her mouth to shut off a scream and when she turned to him her face was flushed and frightened.

"Be careful!" he shot at her. *"Know nothing!"*

"Paul..."

"Yes?"

"It has been very lovely knowing you, darling," she whispered. "Good-bye."

And she was gone from the doorway, roughly shoved aside by a tall, ponderous man who seemed every inch the suave man of distinction. The newcomer was not in uniform, but he could not discard his military bearing. He stepped quickly into the room and shut the door behind him with a forceful positive action.

Paul did not move from his chair. "Colonel Johns?"

"Since you know my name already – yes."

"Please come in."

"I am in." Briskly.

"Thank you. I've sent down for dinner. Will you join us?"

"No. And it will not come."

"Oh?" Paul relaxed in the chair with one hand resting lightly on a volume of Robinson. "Now...?"

"Now," the colonel echoed bluntly. He remained at the door, braced against it. "And I shall dispense with the formalities." He pulled a service automatic from under his coat. "There will be none of this nonsense with last meals and last words. If you know my

name, you also must know I have the same regard for you as I do for a snake. I hate snakes." He raised the gun to eye level, taking careful sight on Paul.

Paul Breen still did not move from the chair. "There is nothing I can say?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing. It is decided." The finger tightened on the trigger.

"Then I am sorry for you. Good-bye, Colonel Johns."

The barrel of the gun flipped around in a quick and complete arc and exploded into flame. The walls were soundproofed, and not even the deadened microphones carried the sound of the booming shot.

The colonel's stiff, military body collapsed on the floor, its face and most of its head blown away. The gun clattered noisily from his useless fingers, came to rest on the hardwood floor. The weapon had betrayed its owner in a most hideous manner, and the surprise in the man's mind would now remain there for eternity. Paul left his chair and stood looking down at the body for no more than an instant, turned and walked softly toward the connecting door to Martha's apartment. He touched the knob and quickly yanked the door open. A man's startled face peered out at him. "Come in, Slater. Join the party."

Slater hesitated in the doorway, incredulously staring from Paul's living body to the dead one across the room. "He's dead," Paul assured him. "Close range."

"What happened to him?" Slater demanded. "He shot himself."

"You're lying!" Slater advanced a few steps into the room, an expression growing on his face. "Look for yourself."

Slater did. He crossed the room and slipped down to one knee, studying the fallen body. Carefully avoiding the widening pool of blood, he peered this way and that, making up his mind slowly and desperately.

"How did you do this?"

Paul smiled down at him, a cold, mocking gesture. "You should know. You questioned Roy and Grennell about telekinesis. You sent Carnell to question me. Take a long hard look, Slater." He motioned to the body. "Telekinesis."

"You made him shoot himself?"

"I caused the gun to turn. You're next."

"*What!*" Slater jumped hastily to his feet, backing away. "You can't make me kill myself. You can't."

Paul said nothing. There was a brief movement glimpsed in the corner of the eye and Slater jerked his head around, glaring at the movement. The colonel's fallen automatic was moving slowly across the floor, sliding its slow way toward Slater's feet. He watched it in stunned disbelief, the sweat suddenly appearing on his face and neck. The gun inched up to the tips of his shoes, touched one and stopped. Slater leaped backward.

Paul told him harshly, "Telekinesis."

"I'll see you in hell first!" Slater made a sudden grab for his shoulder holster and when his hand reappeared it contained a twin to the automatic on the floor. He raised for aim,

hesitated, and his face assumed a new pallor. Veins stood out on his neck and there was a wildness in his eyes. As he watched in mounting horror his hand turned on him, the barrel of the automatic swinging around to align with his eyes. It stopped, held steady.

He found himself staring into the deadly barrel, unable to move his hand, his body, his head. Only his lips would move and now they were begging in a hoarse whisper. "Take it away! *Take it away!*"

"Not yet – not until you hear what I have to say."

"I'll listen to anything. Take it away!"

"No." Paul sank back in the chair, watching the man with a fixed, cold stare. "I don't care for dramatics, Slater, and I don't care for intrigue – especially your kind. I'm going to say what I have to say as quickly as I can, and then we'll end this."

"I'll listen," the chief pleaded desperately.

"You damned well can't help yourself! I made one mistake years ago, Slater, and since then you've made all the rest of them. I allowed myself to be discovered for what I am, a freak in your world. Since that day I've been told many times that I shouldn't have let it happen; if I had been older, wiser, it wouldn't have happened. But it did, and I came to Washington, frankly eager to help you in any way I could. You knew that, and you were quick to take advantage of me. And you began making some mistakes that I'll never forgive.

"You planted the sniper outside the embassy that night – you wanted me killed, but you had to get me away from the house to do it. Because you found out I was tracing a man named Willis, and because I would not knuckle down under your orders. I had refused to co-operate with Carnell. So you planted the sniper and hoped to eliminate me. You failed." Paul leaned forward, tense. "You also planted Karen on me earlier, that night of the party in the hotel room. And afterward, years afterward when we had become close friends, you forced her to make a written report on our personal activities. You know what that did to her. That's two I owe you, Slater.

"And then you robbed me of the few friends I did have. You were jealous or afraid of our friendship. You sent Peter Conklin to Russia – and then saw to it that a patrol found him, when he proved a better spy than you had expected. You hadn't intended for him to get so close to their bombs, had you? You never liked the firm bond between us, did you? So Conklin was hunted down and shot, indirectly by your hand. Willis took care of that matter. Next, you ordered Carnell to Tokyo by plane, and an unexpected engine failure threw that plane into the Pacific. You were not willing to share the knowledge of me with a man of Carnell's caliber. Two more gone, and that's four I owe you.

"Conklin's friend, Emily, had already disappeared, leaving only Karen. You packed Karen off to England, and she is still over there, slowly driving herself insane wondering when she can come back. Two more marks on the score. I owe you a lot, Slater, and the time has come to pay off!"

Slater whispered, "Take this away!"

"It stays there until I'm ready. I'm not finished. The next matter is this training center and the agents you've carefully spread over the world. A master spynet, efficiently directed and beautifully operated, the kind of spy-net the world has never known before. A wonderful and patriotic idea, Slater, if only *this* country could have had full

advantage of it. Unfortunately, they did not. Because you've consistently short-stopped information for your own purposes; that which you thought safe to pass along to Washington, Washington used, but that which you did not consider fit for them was given only to Willis. And Willis used it. Seventy good, intelligent men covering the world, seventy men reporting back to you and Willis the things that are hard to know.

"And so we come to your last mistake. Is the gun getting heavy? It won't take so long now. You realized, finally, that I knew about Willis, knew your connection to him. Investigations came to light that could only have originated with me. Belatedly, you traced Conklin's movements between planes at Shannon and found that he had done some prying; you've also watched Karen's activities to see if she is spying for me. And now Willis has told you definitely that someone is after him, has been investigating him for several months. He found clear evidence of it. So the two of you decided it was far past time to kill me. And you sent Colonel Johns in here." Paul stared at him with disgust. "Johns wasn't supposed to live after shooting me. You had to silence his tongue, so you were waiting there in Martha's room for him to finish the job."

Paul arose from the chair and went to a closet to get his jacket. He checked the inner pocket to see if his wallet and credentials were there and came back to Slater.

"You're sweating, Slater. I like that. Conklin didn't have time to sweat – his happened too quickly. But Carnell did, as his plane went down. He had to sit there and watch himself fall. And Karen is now, sweating out a return ticket. Sweat just a little more, Slater, and we'll go." He stood before the man, cold and angry.

"There's just one more thing to tell you, to make the rest of your short life miserable. You're not alone in this – you aren't the only one looking down the barrel of a gun tonight. Willis is sweating, too."

The man's eyes moved dully away from the automatic, glaring up at Paul. "Another ... freak?" he whispered.

Paul nodded, liking the appellation. "Another freak. Like myself. And Slater – that isn't all. There are *more*. I'm glad that hurts you, Slater."

"Freak," he tried to shout and failed.

"Sure," Paul agreed without humor. "And Willis is meeting his – now. Another freak has been on his tail for months, another freak aroused his suspicions and turned you on me. That freak is doing to Willis what I'm doing to you now. Willis was your master, Slater, and you wanted to ape him. Willis has been in business for a long, long time and a lot of men had wanted to ape him. Willis worked for Germany in 1914, and offered his services to the world after that war. He worked for that country again in 1939, and turned to Russia when the second German attempt collapsed. But on the side he has sold his goods and services to the highest bidder, to all the highest bidders, at all times. Willis stayed in Ireland and spied on all the world, for all the world. People like you were his puppets. He owned you body and soul.

"Willis was the master of them all, and men like you danced as he pulled the strings." Paul put on his jacket. "Willis comes to a full stop tonight. As you will. Put the gun away."

Slowly, stiffly, struggling against his will, the hand returned the automatic to its holster and then smoothed down the coat over it.

"Now listen very carefully and don't make a mistake. If you *do* make a mistake, or attempt to signal, or cry out, your tongue will stick in your throat and strangle you. We will walk downstairs. You will order a car to the door. You will tell the chauffeur to stay behind. You will drive. We will go through the gates and show our passes as we've always done. We will drive to the Washington airport. When we get there, you will buy tickets for that old escape route, remember? Washington to Miami to New Orleans to Mexico City. And then we will board the plane."

The hoarse whisper, "What happens...?"

"Why," Paul told him in mock surprise, "you'll never reach Mexico City, of course. Something will happen to *you* along the way."

"I won't!" Slater defied him, his voice a mixture of fear and rage. "I won't go!"

"You will," Paul contradicted. "Like this."

The room held a moment of silent tension and suddenly Slater screamed, clutching his stomach in agony.

"You will," Paul repeated with false pleasantness. He flashed a searching thought for Martha, somewhere about the grounds. "*Did you hear this?*"

"*I heard you, Paul.*" He could sense her trembling.

"*Where are you? Are you clear?*"

"*Clear and safe. I'm taking a stroll about the yard. One man with me.*"

"*Get rid of him. Walk slowly toward the drive or the gate. If we have any luck we can pick you up in the car.*"

"*Bring my gate pass. Bureau drawer, top.*"

"*Will do. Watch us. Try.*"

He turned to Slater. "More? Or can you walk now?"

They moved slowly toward the elevator through Martha's room.

A clouded moon rode high over the Gulf of Mexico, allowing only intermittent shafts of pale light to strike the warm lazy waters of the Gulf below. The night was quiet, almost deserted, although a few miles away the glare of neon lights reflected against the cloudy sky, and now and again came the wild throbbing sound of a jukebox turned up too high. On some distant highway an occasional automobile darted along on singing tires, making for the lights of the town. It was a nameless Florida town, small and nondescript and resting somewhere above St. Petersburg on the gentle crescent of the Gulf shore.

Martha hugged the beach cautiously, watching the far lights of the town and the nearer stretches of sand. Behind her in the darkness was a violent thrashing, an angry mutter of words. Paul's voice and thought came to her, but she stayed where she was, alert to intercept any wanderer coming their way.

"Walk!" Paul demanded in a low, stinging tone.

"*No, damn you – damn you!*"

Slater stood ankle-deep in the warm lapping waters of the Gulf, his face turned stiffly away from the shore. An unguessable distance away the dim lights of a solitary freighter seemed to move along the surface of the sea.

"Walk," Paul whispered.

Slater jerked one foot through the turgid water, fumbled for a place to put it down and then moved the other. "No!" His feet continued a slow, unwilling movement of their own. "NO!" He tried to turn his head and look back, but he could not. "Stop it!"

"I'm not stopping," Paul declared savagely. "This is for Conklin, and Carnell, and Karen and Emily. Keep going, Slater."

The man continued walking into the sea, woodenly controlled as if he were a puppet. Martha heard a minute sound. "Paul?"

"Yes, angel."

"Is he...?"

"He's gone."

She was trembling again. "I'm not sorry."

Paul moved up beside her on the sand. "Stop thinking about him," he whispered. "Where's your brother? Where's that boat he promised?"

Martha pointed to the darkened sea. "Out there, Paul. Can't you see it?"

He strained his eyes and when they would not reward him, fell back on his receptivity, exerting his mental reaches to the utmost. "No. I can't."

She laughed softly in the night and reached for his hand. "I'm in for more teaching, I can see that." She pointed once more and he attempted to follow her finger. "He's there, about three hours out. He will pick us up before dawn. Now *you* stop worrying."

"I'm not worried," he assured the girl. "Only concerned. I don't want some drunk to stumble along here and find us." And then he caught the laughter in her mind.

"But, Paul, we can be pink elephants to him."

He moved nearer until their bodies were touching. "I want only two things right now, and neither of them is drunks or elephants." When she did not answer, he added silently, "*The island is the second thing.*"

Martha had her arms around him. "*You lovely freak.*"