

A black and white photograph from the movie 'Boys n the Hood'. On the left, Burt Lancaster is shown in profile, wearing a dark suit and a patterned bow tie, holding a telephone receiver to his ear with a serious expression. On the right, Dorothy Dandridge stands in a doorway, wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved dress and a dark shawl, looking towards the camera with a concerned expression.

Dorothy B. Hughes In a Lonely Place

'Hughes is the master
we keep turning to'

Sara Paretsky

M O D E R N C L A S S I C S



In a Lonely Place

Dorothy B. Hughes (1904–1993) was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and lived most of her life in New Mexico. A journalist and a poet (a book of her verse was published in the Yale Younger Poets Series), she began publishing mystery novels in 1940. To more than a dozen books she eventually published are written in the hard-boiled style, and three were made into successful films: *The Fallen Sparrow* (1943), *Ride the Pink Horse* (1947), and *In a Lonely Place* (1950, directed by Nicholas Ray, starring Humphrey Bogart and Gloria Grahame). In 1950 Hughes won a coveted Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America (MWA). Then, at the height of her career, she stopped writing in order to take care of an ailing mother and several grandchildren. In her later years she reviewed mysteries for the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and other papers. She won a second Edgar Award in 1978 for her biography *Erle Stanley Gardner: The Case of the Real Perry Mason* and was named a Grand Master by the MWA.

DOROTHY B. HUGHES

In a Lonely Place



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For Charlotte It's in a lonesome place you do have to be talking with someone, and looking for someone, in the evening of the day. _____

– J. M. Synge

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Chapter 1

It was good standing there on the promontory overlooking the evening sea, the fog lifting itself like gauzy veils to touch his face. There was something in it akin to flying; the sense of being lifted high above crawling earth, of being a part of the wildness of air. Something too of being closed within an unknown and strange world of mist and cloud and wind. He'd liked flying at night; he'd missed it after the war had crashed to a finish and dribbled to an end. It wasn't the same flying a little private plane. He'd tried it; it was like returning to the stone and after precision tools. He had found nothing yet to take the place of flying wild.

It wasn't often he could capture any part of that feeling of power and exhilaration and freedom that came with loneliness in the sky. There was a touch of it here, looking down at the ocean rolling endlessly in from the horizon; here high above the beach road with its crawling traffic, its dotting of lights. The outline of beach houses zigzagged against the sky but did not obscure the pale waste of sand, the dark restless waters beyond.

He didn't know why he hadn't come out here before. It wasn't far. He didn't even know why he'd come tonight. When he got on the bus, he had no destination. Just the restlessness. And the bus brought him here.

He put out his hand to the mossy fog as if he would capture it, but his hand went through the gauze and he smiled. That too was good, his hand was a plane passing through a cloud. The sea air was good to smell, the darkness was soft closed around him. He swooped his hand again through the restless fog.

He did not like it when on the street behind him a sudden bus spattered his peace with its ugly sound and smell and light. He was sharply angry at the intrusion. His head darted around to vent his scowl. As if the lumbering box had life as well as motion and would shrink from his displeasure. But as his head turned, he saw the girl. She was just stepping off the bus. She couldn't see him because he was no more than a figure in the fog and dark; she couldn't know he was drawing her on his mind as on a piece of paper.

She was small, dark haired, with a rounded face. She was more than pretty, she was nice looking, a nice girl. Sketched in browns, the brown hair, brown suit, brown pumps and bag, even a small brown felt hat. He started thinking about her as she was stepping off the bus; she wasn't coming home from shopping, no parcels; she wasn't going to a party, the tailored suit, sensible shoes. She must be coming from work; that meant she descended from the Brentwood bus at this lonely corner every night at – he glanced to the luminous dial of his watch – seven-twenty. Possibly she had worked late tonight but that could be checked easily. More probably she was employed at a studio, close at six, an hour to get home.

While he was thinking of her, the bus had bumbled away and she was crossing the slant intersection, coming directly towards him. Not to him; she didn't know he was there in the high foggy dark. He saw her face again as she passed under the yellow fog light, saw that she didn't like the darkness and fog and loneliness. She started down the California Incline; he could hear her heels striking hard on the warped pavement as if the sound brought her some reassurance.

He didn't follow her at once. Actually he didn't intend to follow her. It was entirely without volition that he found himself moving down the slant, winding walk. He didn't walk hard, as she did, nor did he walk fast. Yet she heard him coming behind her. He knew she heard him for her heel struck an extra beat, as if she had half stumbled, and her steps went faster. He didn't walk faster, he continued to saunter but he lengthened his stride, smiling slightly. She was afraid.

He could have caught up to her with ease but he didn't. It was too soon. Better to hold back until he had passed the humped midsection of the walk, then to close in. She'd give a little scream, perhaps only a gasp, when he came up beside her. And he would say softly, 'Hello.' Only 'Hello,' but she would be more afraid.

She had just passed over the mid hump, she was on the final stretch of down grade. Walking fast. But as he reached that section, a car turned at the corner below, throwing its blatant light up on her, on him. Again anger plucked at his face; his steps slowed. The car speeded up the Incline, passed him, but the damage was done, the darkness had broken. As if it were a parade, the stream of cars followed the first car, scratching their light over the path and the road and the high earthen Palisades across. The girl was safe; he could feel the relaxation in her footsteps. Anger beat him like a drum.

When he reached the corner, she was already crossing the street, a brown figure under the yellow fog light marking the intersection. He watched her cross, reach the opposite pavement and disappear behind the dark gate of one of the three houses huddled together there. He could have followed but the houses were lighted, someone was waiting for her in the home light. He would have no excuse to follow to her door.

As he stood there, a pale blue bus slid up to the corner; a middle-aged woman got out. He boarded it. He didn't care where it was going; it would carry him away from the fog light. There were only a few passengers, all women, drab women. The driver was an angular, farm-looking man; he spun his change box with a ratcheting noise and looked into the night. The fare was a nickel.

Within the lighted box they slid past the dark cliffs. Across the width of the road were the massive beach houses and clubs, shutting away the sea. Fog stalked silently past the window. The bus made no stops until it reached the end of that particular section of road where it turned an abrupt corner. He got out when it stopped. Obviously it was leaving the sea now, turning up into the dark canyon. He stepped out and he walked the short block to a little business section. He didn't know why until he reached that corner, looked up the street. There were several eating places, hamburger stands; there was a small drugstore and there was a bar. He wanted a drink.

It was a nice bar, from the ship's prow that jutted upon the sidewalk to the dim ship's interior. It was a man's bar, although there was a dark-haired, squawk-voiced woman in it. She was with two men and they were noisy. He didn't like them. But he liked the old man with the white chin whiskers behind the bar. The man had the quiet competent air of a sea captain.

He ordered straight rye but when the old man set it in front of him, he didn't want it. He drank it neat but he didn't want it. He hadn't needed a drink; he'd relaxed on the bus. He wasn't angry with anyone any more. Not even with the three noisy sons of bitches up front at the bar.

The ship's bells behind the bar rang out the hour, eight bells. Eight o'clock. There was no place he wanted to go, nothing he wanted to do. He didn't care about the little brown girl any more. He ordered another straight rye. He didn't drink it when it came, he left it there in front of him, not even wanting to drink it.

He could go across to the beach, sit in the sand, and smell the fog and sea. It would be quiet and dark there. The sea had appeared again just before the bus turned; there was open beach across. But he didn't move. He was comfortable where he was. He lit a cigarette and idly turned the jigger of rye upon the polished wood of the bar. Turned it without spilling a drop.

It was his ear caught the word spoken by the harsh-voiced woman. He wasn't listening to her but the word spun and he thought the word was 'Brub.' He remembered then that Brub lived out this way. He hadn't seen Brub for almost two years; he'd spoken to him only once, months ago when he arrived on the coast. He'd promised to let Brub know when he was settled but he hadn't.

Brub lived in Santa Monica Canyon. He left his drink on the bar and went quickly to the phone booth in the corner. The book was tattered but it was a Santa Monica book and there was the name, Brub Nicolai. He found a nickel and clanged it in the slot, asked the number.

A woman answered; he held on while she called Brub. Then Brub's voice, a little curious, 'Hello.'

He was excited just hearing the voice. There wasn't anyone like Brub, those years in England wouldn't have been real without Brub. He was gay as a boy, calling, 'Hello there, Brub,' wanting Brub to guess or to sense who it was. But Brub didn't know. He was puzzled; he asked, 'Who's calling?'

Excitement titivated him. 'Who do you think's calling?' he demanded. And he cried, 'It's Dix. Dix Steele.'

It was a good moment. It was the way he'd known it would be, Brub taking a gulp, then shouting, 'Dix! Where you been hiding out? Thought you'd gone back East.'

'No,' he said. He was warm and comfortable in Brub's pleasure. 'I've been sort of busy. You know how it is. Always something here. Something there.'

'Yeah, I know.' Brub asked, 'Where are you now? What are you doing?'

'I'm sitting in a bar,' he said and heard Brub's answering crow. They'd spent most of their free time sitting in bars; they'd needed it in those days. Brub didn't know Dix no longer depended on liquor; he had a lot of things to tell Brub. Big brother Brub. 'It's down by the ocean, has a ship's prow by the door -'

Brub had cut in. 'You're practically here! We only live on Mesa Road, couple of blocks from there. Can you come up?'

'I'm practically there.' He hung up, checked the street number in the phone book, returned to the bar and swallowed the rye. This time it tasted good.

He was out on the street before he realized that he didn't have his car. He'd been walking up the street this afternoon and he'd climbed on a Wilshire-Santa Monica bus and he was in Santa Monica. He hadn't thought of Brub for months and a scarecrow dame in a bar said who sounded like 'Brub.' She hadn't said it at all; she'd been calling the scarecrow guy with her 'Bud,' but he'd thought of Brub. Now he was going to see him.

Because it was meant to be, a taxi was held just then by the red light. At first he didn't

recognize it as a cab; it was a dark, battered car with a young guy, hatless, driving it. It was empty. He read the lettering on it, 'Santa Monica Cab Co.,' even as the lights turned, and he ran out into the lonely street calling, 'Hey, Taxi.'

Because it was meant to be, the driver stopped, waited for him. 'Do you know where Mesa Road is?' His hand was on the door.

'You want to go there?'

'I sure do.' He climbed in, still in his happiness. 'Five-twenty.'

The driver turned and drove back the way he'd come, a few blocks up the hill, a left turn and a steeper hill. The fog lay a deep and dirty white in the canyon, the windshield wiper pushed away the moisture. 'This is Nicolai's,' the driver said.

He was pleasantly surprised that the driver knew where he was going. It was a good omen; it meant Brub wouldn't have changed. Brub still knew everyone, everyone knew him. He watched the driver's fog lights circle, turn, and head down the hill. It was unconscious, the waiting and watching; in his thoughts was only the look of the amber swinging across the pillow of fog.

There was a gate to open; and the mailbox was white beside it. Lettered in black was B. Nicolai, 520 Mesa Road. He embraced the name. The house was high above the flowered terrace, but there was a light of welcome, amber as a fog light, in the front window. He climbed the winding flagstone steps to the door. He waited a second before he touched the brass knocker, again without consciousness, only a savoring of the moment before the event. He had no sooner touched it than the door was flung wide and Brub was there.

Brub hadn't changed. The same short-cut, dark, curly hair, the same square face with the grin on the mouth and in the shining black eyes. The same square shoulders and the look of the sea on him; he rolled like a sailor when he walked. Or like a fighter. A good fighter. That was Brub.

He was looking up at Dix and his hand was a warm grip on Dix's hand. 'Hello, you old son of a sea cook,' he said. 'What do you mean by not calling us before now? Let me see you.'

He knew exactly what Brub saw, as if Brub were a mirror he was standing before. A young fellow, just an average young fellow. Tanned, medium light hair with a little curl, medium tall and enough weight for height. Eyes, hazel; nose and mouth right for the face, a good-looking face but nothing to remember, nothing to set it apart from the usual. Good gabardine suit, he'd paid plenty to have it made, open-necked tan sports shirt. Maybe the face was sharpened at the moment by excitement and happiness, the excitement and happiness of seeing an old and favored friend. Ordinarily it wasn't one to remember.

'Let me look at you,' he echoed. Brub was half a head shorter and he looked down at Brub as Brub looked up at him. They made the survey silently, both satisfied with what they saw, both breaking silence together. 'You haven't changed a bit.'

'Come on in.' Brub took his arm and ushered him out of the dim, pleasant hallway into the lighted living room. He broke step as they crossed the comfortable lamp-lighted room. Things weren't the same. There was a girl there, a girl who had a right to be there.

He saw her as he would always see her, a slender girl in a simple beige dress, curled in a large wing chair by the white fireplace. The chair was a gaudy piece patterned in greens and purples, like tropical flowers, with a scrawl of cerise breaking the pattern. Her hair was the color of palest gold, a silvery gold, and she wore it pulled away from her face into a curl at

the back of her neck. She had a fine face, nothing pretty-pretty about it, a strong face with high cheek bones and a straight nose. Her eyes were beautiful, sea blue, slanted like wings; and her mouth was a beautiful curve. Yet she wasn't beautiful; you wouldn't look at her in a room of pretty women, in a bar or night spot. You wouldn't notice her; she'd be too quiet; she was a lady and she wouldn't want to be noticed.

She was at home here; she was mistress of the house and she was beautiful in her content. Before either spoke, he knew she was Brub's wife. The way she was smiling as the two of them entered, the way her smile strengthened as Brub spoke. 'This is Dix, Sylvia. Dickson Steele.'

She put out her hand and finished the sentence, '- of whom I've heard you speak constantly. Hello, Dix.'

Dix stepped forward to match her smile, to take her hand. Except for that first moment, he hadn't shown anything. Even that wouldn't have been noticed. 'Hello, Sylvia,' he said. She was tall standing, as tall as Brub. He held her hand while he turned to Brub, a prideful, smiling Brub. 'Why didn't you tell me you were married?' he demanded. 'Why hide this beautiful creature under the blanket of your indifference?'

Sylvia withdrew her hand and Brub laughed. 'You sound just like the Dix I've heard about,' she retorted. She had a nice voice, shining as her pale hair. 'Beer with us or whiskey as a stubborn individualist?'

He said, 'Much to Brub's surprise, I'll take beer.'

It was so comfortable. The room was a good one, only the chair was gaudy, the couch was like green grass and another couch the yellow of sunlight. There was pale matting on the polished floor; there was a big green chair and heavy white drapes across the Venetian blind. Good prints, O'Keeffe and Rivera. The bar was of light wood - convenient and unobtrusive in the corner. There must have been an ice chest, the beer was damp with cold.

Sylvia uncapped his bottle, poured half into a tall frosted glass and put it on an end table beside him. She brought Brub a bottle, poured a glass for herself. Her hands were lovely, slim and quiet and accurate; she moved quietly and with the same accuracy. She was probably a wonderful woman to bed with; no waste motion, quietness.

When he knew what he was thinking, he repeated, 'Why didn't you tell me you were married?'

'Tell you!' Brub roared. 'You called me up seven months ago, last February, the eighth to be exact, told me you'd just got in and would let me know soon as you were located. That's the last I've heard of you. You checked out of the Ambassador three days later and you didn't leave a forwarding address. How could I tell you anything?'

He smiled, his eyes lowered to his beer. 'Keeping tabs on me, Brub?'

'Trying to locate you, you crazy lug,' Brub said happily.

'Like the old days,' Dix said. 'Brub took care of me like a big brother, Sylvia.'

'You needed a caretaker.'

He switched back. 'How long have you been married?'

'Two years this spring,' Sylvia told him.

'One week and three days after I got home,' Brub said. 'It took her that long to get a beauty-shop appointment.'

'Which she didn't need,' Dix smiled.

Sylvia smiled to him. 'It took him that long to raise the money for a license. Talk of drunken sailors! He spent every cent on flowers and presents and forgot all about the price of a wedding.'

Comfortable room and talk and beer. Two men. And a lovely woman.

Brub said, 'Why do you think I fought the war? To get back to Sylvia.'

'And why did you fight the war, Mr. Steele?' Sylvia's smile wasn't demure; she made it that way.

'For weekend passes to London,' Brub suggested.

He stepped on Brub's words answering her thoughtfully. He wanted to make an impression on her. 'I've wondered about it frequently, Sylvia. Why did I or anyone else fight the war? Because we had to isn't good enough. I didn't have to when I enlisted. I think it was because it was the thing to do. And the Air Corps was the thing to do. All of us in college were nuts about flying. I was a sophomore at Princeton when things were starting. I didn't want to be left out of any excitement.'

'Brub was at Berkeley,' she remembered. 'You're right, it was the thing to do.'

They were steered to safe channels, to serious discussion. Brub opened another beer for the men.

Brub said, 'It was the thing to do or that was the rationalization. We're a casual generation. Dix, we don't want anyone to know we bleed if we're pricked. But self defense is one of the few prime instincts left. Despite the cover-up, it was self defense. And we knew it.'

Dix agreed, lazily. You could agree or disagree in this house. No one got his back up whatever was said. There was no anger here, no cause for anger. Even with a woman. Perhaps because of the woman. She was gentle.

He heard Sylvia's amused voice as from afar, as through a film of gray mist. 'Brub's always looking for the hidden motive power. That's because he's a policeman.'

He came sharply into focus. The word had been a cold spear deliberately thrust into his brain. He heard his voice speak the cold, hard word. 'Policeman?' But they didn't notice anything. They thought him surprised, as he was, more than surprised, startled and shocked. They were accustomed to that reaction. For they weren't jesting; they were speaking the truth. Brub with an apologetic grin; his wife with pride under her laughter.

'He really is,' she was saying.

And Brub was saying, 'Not a policeman now, darling, a detective.'

They'd played the scene often; it was in their ease. He was the one who needed prompting, needed cue for the next speech. He repeated, 'Policeman,' with disbelief, but the first numbing shock had passed. He was prepared to be correctly amused.

Brub said, 'Detective. I don't know why. Everyone wants to know why and I don't know.'

'He hasn't found the underlying motive yet,' Sylvia said.

Brub shrugged. 'I know that one well enough. Anything to keep from working. That's the motto of the Nicolais. Graven on their crest.'

'A big healthy man reclining,' Sylvia added.

They were like a radio team, exchanging patter with seemingly effortless ease.

'My old man was a land baron, never did a lick of work. But land baroneering is outmoded so I couldn't do that. The girls all married money.' He fixed Sylvia with his eye. 'I don't know why I didn't think of that. Raoul, my oldest brother, is an investment broker. That's what it

says on his gold-lettered office door. Investment broker.'

'Brub,' Sylvia warned but she smiled.

'Up and to the office by ten,' Brub proclaimed. 'Maybe a bit after. Open the mail. To the club for two quick games of squash. Shower, shave, trim, and lunch. Leisurely, of course. A quiet nap after, a bit of bridge – and the day's over. Very wearing.'

Brub took a swallow of beer. 'Then there's Tom – he plays golf. A lawyer on the side. He only takes cases dealing with the ravages of pterodactyls to the tidelands. The pterodactyls having little time for ravaging the tidelands, he has plenty of time for golf.' He drank again. 'I'm a detective.'

Dix had listened with his face, a half smile, but he kept his eyes on his beer glass. His mouth was sharp with questions, they were like tacks pricking his tongue. Brub had finished and was waiting for him to speak. He said easily, 'So you took the easy job. No investments or law for you. Sherlock Nicolai. And were you right?'

'No, damn it,' Brub wailed. 'I work.'

'You know Brub,' Sylvia sighed. 'Whatever he does, he does with both heads. He's full fathoms deep in detecting.'

Dix laughed, setting down his beer glass. It was time to go. Time to put space between himself and the Nicolais. 'Brub should have taken up my racket.' To their questioning eyebrows, he elucidated, 'Like ninety-three and one-half per cent of the ex-armed forces, I'm writing a book.'

'Another author,' Sylvia mused.

'Unlike ninety-two and one-half per cent I'm not writing a book on the war. Or even my autobiography. Just trying to do a novel.' A wonderful racket; neither of them knew what a smart choice he'd made. Not haphazardly, no. Coldly, with sane reasoning. He stretched like a dog, preliminary to rising. 'That's why you haven't seen me before. When you're trying to write, there isn't time to run around. I stick pretty close to the old machine.' He smiled frankly at Brub. 'My uncle is giving me a year to see what I can do. So I work.' He was on his feet. He had meant to ask the use of the phone, to call a cab. But Brub wouldn't allow it; he insisted on taking him to the busline; he'd want to know where Dix was living. Dix didn't mind a walk. He'd find his own way to town.

He said, 'And I'd better be getting back on the job.'

They demurred but they didn't mind. They were young and they were one, and Brub had to get up in the morning. He slipped the question in sideways. 'After all Brub has to have his rest to detect for the glory of Santa Monica, doesn't he?'

'Santa Monica! I'm on the L.A. force,' Brub boasted mildly.

He'd wanted to know; he knew. The L.A. force.

'Then you do need sleep. Plenty of work in L.A., no?'

Brub's face lost its humor, became a little tired. 'Plenty,' he agreed.

Dix smiled, a small smile. Brub wouldn't know why; Brub had been his big brother but he hadn't known everything there was to know. Some things a man kept secret. It was amusing to keep some things secret.

'I'll be seeing you,' he said easily. His hand opened the door. But he didn't get away.

'Wait,' Brub said. 'We don't have your number.'

He had to give it. He did without seeming reluctance. Brub would have noticed reluctance

Brub or the clear-eyed woman behind him, watching him quietly. He gave his telephone number and he repeated his goodnight. Then he was alone, feeling his way off the porch and down the path into the darkness and the moist opaque fog.

2

He walked into the night not knowing the way, not caring. He'd moved more than once during his seven months in California. He could move again. It wasn't easy to find quarters, the right ones for him. He liked the place he had now; he'd been lucky about it. A fellow he'd known years ago, in college. Years, aeons ago. He hadn't cared for Mel Terriss then; he'd cared even less for him on running into him that night last July. Terriss was going to pouche under his chin and eyes, in his belly. He had alcoholic eyes and they were smearing the blonde with Dix. He didn't get an introduction. But he blatted waiting for it and Dix had found the flat he'd been waiting for. He was sick and tired of the second-rate hotel off Westlake Park. It smelled. Terriss was telling everyone about being off to Rio for a year, a fat job to go with his fat head.

He could move again but he was damned if he would. He liked Beverly Hills; a pleasant neighborhood. A safe neighborhood. It was possible he could change his phone number, Terriss' number. Get an unlisted one. He'd considered that before now. But Terriss' number was as good as being unlisted. There was no Dix Steele in the book.

Automatically he walked out of the small canyon, down to the beach road. He crossed to the oceanside; he could hear the crash of waves beyond the dark sands. He considered walking back along the waterfront but sand walking was difficult and he was all at once tired. He turned in the direction of the Incline. There was no bus, no taxi, and no car stopped for him. He walked on, in the street most of the way because there was no sidewalk, keeping close to the buildings because in the fog he was no more than a moving blur. He was damned if he'd move or even bother to change his number. He didn't have to see Brub and his woman again. He'd proffered his excuse before it was needed. He was writing a book; he had no time for evenings like this, gab and beer.

He walked on, quiet as the fog. It had been pleasant. It was the first pleasant evening he'd had in so long. So terribly long. He tried to remember how long. Those early days in England when he and Brub knew each other so well.

He hardened his jaw and he trudged on towards the yellow ring of fog light on the pavement ahead. He watched the light, watched it come closer as he moved silently towards it. He shut out thought, clamping it between his set teeth. It wasn't until he reached the light that he saw the Incline looming slantly across. And realized that the house into which the brown girl had disappeared lay just beyond. He stopped there, in the shadow of the clubhouse. The club's parking lot, wire fenced, empty of cars, lay between him and the huddle of houses. The pounding of the sea recurred in changeless rhythm and he could smell the salt far beyond the wire fence.

He had to walk up to the three houses; that was where the white lanes of the crosswalk lay on the highway. He smiled a little as he started forward. He was halfway past the fenced lot when the hideous noise of an oil truck, ignoring the stop sign, thundered past. A second one speeded after the first, and a third, blasting the quietness with thumping wheels, clanging

chains. Spewing greasy smoke into the fog. He stood there trembling in anger until they passed. He was still trembling when he reached the huddle of houses, and when he saw what he saw his anger mounted. There was no way to know beyond which brown gate the brown girl had vanished. The gates of the first and second houses stood side by side. Abruptly he crossed the street and started up the Incline. He had been so certain she had entered the center house. And now he didn't know. He'd have to watch again.

He was to the midsection, to the hump of the walk, before he was calmed again. He stopped there and looked out over the stone railing. There was a small replica of the Palisades on this other side of the railing. And here, just over the rail, was a broken place in the wild shrubbery, even the pressure of a footpath down the cliff. A place where a man could wait at night. He smiled and was easy again.

He walked on up the Incline, undisturbed when a car heading downwards splashed light on him. He wouldn't move from Terriss' flat. He was satisfied there. There was something amusing about Brub Nicolai being able to lay hands on him whenever he wished. Amusing and more exciting than anything that had happened in a long time. The hunter and the hunted arm in arm. The hunt sweetened by danger. At the top of the Incline he looked back down at the houses and the sand and the sea. But they were all helpless now, lost in the fog.

He went on, not knowing how he would get back to Beverly, not caring. He was surprised crossing to Wilshire to see the lights of a bus approaching. He waited for it. It was the Wilshire-L.A. bus. After he boarded it, he saw by his watch that it was still early, a little past eleven o'clock. There were only two passengers, working men in working clothes. Dix sat in the front seat, his face turned to the window. Away from the dull lights of the interior. Others boarded the bus as it rumbled along Wilshire through Santa Monica, into Westwood. He didn't turn his head to look at the others but he could see their reflections in the window pane. There was no one worth looking at.

The fog thinned as the bus left Westwood and hurried through the dark lane framed by the woodland golf course. At Beverly you could see street corners again, as through a gray mesh. You could see the shop windows and the people on the streets. Only there were no people, the little city was as deserted as a small town. Dix kept his face pressed to the window.

At Camden Drive he saw her. A girl, an unknown girl, standing alone, waiting alone there, by the bench which meant a crosstown bus would eventually come along. At night buses didn't run often. Dix pulled the buzzer cord but he was too late for Camden. He got off at the next stop, two blocks away. He didn't mind much. He crossed the boulevard and he was smiling with his lips as he started back. His stride was long; his steps were quiet.

The phone was a jangle tearing sleep from a man's face. It was the scream of bus brakes, the clanging chain of an ugly oil truck on a beach road, the whine of a spiraling bomb. Dix opened his cramped eyes. He didn't know how long the phone had been ringing. It stopped when his eyes opened but as soon as he'd closed them again the fretful noise began anew. This time he didn't open his eyes. With his outstretched hand he knocked the phone from its cradle, ending the sound. He buried his head in the pillow, grasped at waning sleep. He didn't want to talk to anyone this early. He didn't care who was on the other end of the phone. No

one important. No one important had his number.

His eyes reopened. He'd forgotten Brub Nicolai. He'd given Brub his phone number last night. For a solitary moment the coldness of fear gripped his entrails. As quickly the moment passed. He was without fear. But sleep had gone. He turned his head to look at the bedside clock. It wasn't so early. Eleven thirty-five. He'd had almost eight hours' sleep.

He needed eight hours more. God knows he needed it. He'd fallen into bed in complete exhaustion. It took more than eight hours to refuel a body exhausted. But his curiosity could not let him return to sleep now. He shoved away the covers, and pulled on his bathrobe. He didn't bother with his slippers. He walked barefoot through the living room to the front door, opened it and brought in the morning *Times* from his doorstep. His hands were eager but he closed the door before opening the paper.

There was nothing unusual on the front page. The ways of civilization, international and national strife, wars and strikes, political propagandizing. Nothing he was expecting on the second page. That meant there'd be nothing. He thrust the paper under his arm. There'd been no reason to leave his bed. But now that he was up, he wanted coffee. He padded to the kitchen. Terriss had good stuff; he plugged in the electric percolator and opened the kitchen door to bring in the cream. The apartment was a corner one, easy for a man to keep to himself and to hold his affairs his own. No snoopy neighbors here. Most of them were connected with the studios; Terriss had told him that, told him with Terriss' fathead pride. They kept themselves private too.

While he was waiting for the coffee he began to read the paper. He drank three cups, finishing his reading. He left the spread paper and the coffee cup on the kitchen table. There was maid service; he made it a point to be out during that period. The maid was a shapeless sack with heavy feet. She came to this apartment between two and three in the afternoon. He didn't know the maid's name; he wouldn't have recognized her on the street.

He returned to the bedroom. There wouldn't be time for good sleep before she came plodding in. If he were asleep, she wouldn't do the bedroom and he didn't like an unmade bed. He sat down on the edge of it, noticed the phone and replaced it in the cradle. He just sat there for minutes, not thinking, not seeing. Then he got up and went into the bathroom. His face in the mirror was the usual face, drawn from sleep, his hair ruffled. He'd feel better after a shower and a shave. He was taking his razor from the case when the phone rang.

He wasn't going to answer it and then the quickening of curiosity stirred him. He took his time returning to it. Again he sat down on the ruffled bed. His hesitation before lifting the phone was so minute, his hand didn't realize it. He said, 'Hello.'

'Dix?'

It was a woman's voice, a woman querying, 'Dix?'

He took a breath. Only one woman could be calling. Sylvia Nicolai. He forced life into his voice. 'Speaking. Sylvia?' He'd surprised her.

'How did you know?'

'Recognized your voice,' he said amusedly. She would believe him.

'Where have you been? I've been trying all morning to reach you.'

He didn't like having to account. Nor did she care; it was conversational gambit. Because he didn't like it, he lied. 'I've been right here. Working. Phone didn't ring.'

She said, 'Phones,' then went on in her cool, lovely voice, 'Brub and I wondered if you'd like to join us for dinner at the club tonight?'

He didn't know what to say. He didn't know whether he wanted to be with them or not tonight. He was tired, too tired for decision. It was always easy to lie, so easy. He asked, 'Could I ring you back, Sylvia? I've a tiresome date tonight, business. If I can get free of it, I much rather join you.' The charm was in his voice, he turned it on. But she didn't match it. She was businesslike, as if she were Brub's secretary, not his wife. As if she preferred his refusal. 'Yes, do call back. If you can't make it, we'll try it another time.'

He echoed her goodbye and set back the phone. She didn't want him along tonight. It was Brub's idea and she'd said, 'If you want him, Brub,' because she was in love with Brub, the new hadn't been rubbed off their marriage. He wouldn't go. He wouldn't intrude on their oneness. They had happiness and happiness was so rare in this day of the present. More rare than precious things, jewels and myrrh. Once he'd had happiness but for so brief a time; happiness was made of quicksilver, it ran out of your hand like quicksilver. There was the heat of tears suddenly in his eyes and he shook his head angrily. He would not think about it he would never think of that again. It was long ago, in an ancient past. To hell with happiness. More important was excitement and power and the hot stir of lust. Those made you forget. They made happiness a pink marshmallow.

He stood up again, rubbing his untidy hair. He wouldn't go out with the Nicolais to their lace-panty club. He'd go out alone. The lone wolf. There was a savage delight in being a lone wolf. It wasn't happiness. It was the reverse of the coin, as hate was the reverse of love. On a thin press of metal between the sides of a coin. He was a lone wolf; he didn't have to account to anyone nor did he intend to. Sylvia Nicolai wanting to know where he was this morning. It was none of her damn business. This morning she didn't care, but get mixed up with the Nicolais and she would care. Women were snoopy. He hated women. Brub would be snoopy too; he was a detective.

Yet the game would be heightened if he teamed up with a detective. Dix went into the bathroom. plugged in the razor and began to shave. Hating the noise, the grinding buzz of noise. He could have used a safety razor but there were mornings when his hands had the shakes. He didn't know when those mornings would occur. Better the buzz than to have people noticing the cuts on your cheeks and chin. His hands were steady as iron this morning.

He finished shaving as quickly as possible, scrubbed his teeth and sloshed mouth wash. He was feeling better. Under the shower he felt considerably better. It might be definitely amusing to be with the Nicolais tonight. It might be that Sylvia was the one who wanted him along, that her play of indifference was a cover-up. He was clinically aware of his appeal to women. He'd seen their eyes sharpen as they looked at him. Sylvia's hadn't, true, but she was smart. She wouldn't let it happen with Brub there. He'd like to see Sylvia again.

He thought of her as he stood scrubbing himself with the towel. The long lines of her, the silvery look and sound of her. He'd like to know a woman of her caliber. Brub was lucky. He flung the towel on the floor. Brub was born lucky. For an instant he stiffened, as if a cold hand had touched his spine.

His laugh shot from his throat. He was lucky too; he was more than lucky, he was smart. He strode out of the bathroom. It was close to two; he'd have to hump it to get out before the ugly beldame of the brooms showed up.

He put on a blue sports shirt, blue slacks, comfortable loafers. No jacket. From the open windows he knew the day was a sultry one, September was summer in California. He transferred his wallet and keys and other stuff from the crumpled gabardines he'd worn last night. He rolled the gabardines, opened his closet and gathered up the other suits and odd trousers needing a cleaner's attention. He'd beaten the maid; he was ready to leave. The phone started to ring as he reached the front door. He ignored it and left the apartment.

The garages were in back of the court. His was almost a half block away. Just another of the advantages of Terriss' quarters. No insomniacs sitting up in bed checking you in and out. The garages fronted on an alley; a vacant lot across. He unlocked the one housing Terriss' car. A nice car Terriss had left for his use. He'd have preferred something flashier, a convertible or open brougham, but there was advantage in a black coupe. All black coupes looked alike at night. He drove away.

He dropped the bundle of clothes at the cleaner's on Olympic, then drove leisurely up Beverly Drive, parking near the delicatessen. He was hungry. He bought an early edition of the *News* at the corner and he read it while he ate two smoked turkey sandwiches and drank a bottle of beer. The delicatessen was fairly crowded even this late. It was a popular place and a pleasant one. Noise was a blur here, like in a club.

There was nothing in the paper. After checking the headlines, he read the comics, the café columnists and Kirby, Weinstock, and Pearson, loitering with his beer. He looked over the movie ads, sometimes he went to a movie in the afternoons. It was too late today. He had to phone Sylvia Nicolai.

He walked down to the Owl after eating and bought a carton of Philip Morris. It was after three then. The beldame would be out of his apartment, he could return, call Sylvia, and catch a nap before joining the Nicolais at their club. The afternoon heat and the beer had made him sleepy again. Or he could get the letter written to Uncle Fergus. Damned old fool expected a letter once a week. It had been two weeks since Dix had written him. He wouldn't put it past Uncle Fergus to stop sending checks if he didn't get his damn letter from Dix pretty soon. He'd say he'd been sick. Maybe he could jack up the income for medical expenses. Something needing treatment, something acquired overseas. A back or a kidney. Not anything that would jerk the strings, drag him back East.

He got in his car, backed out, and drove a little too fast around the block. Uncle Fergus didn't have to be so dirty cheap; he didn't have another living relative. Two hundred and fifty a month was pennies. Medical treatment was a good idea, he should have thought of it before. He could get three hundred for sure, maybe three fifty. He'd write a whale of a letter. He was the boy could do it. He knew Uncle Fergus like the palm of his hand. He felt all hopped up returning to the apartment.

He flung the Philip Morris on the divan, got out the portable and opened it on the desk. He rolled in the paper and started, 'Dear Uncle Fergus,' before he remembered the phone call to Sylvia. He left the desk and went to the bedroom. Before dialing – Terriss had extended service of course, Terriss had everything easy – he lit a cigarette.

Sylvia answered the phone. Her hello was natural. When he said, 'Sylvia? It's Dix,' her voice became a bit more formal. She was conscious of him all right. She was fighting that consciousness. He'd played the game so often of breaking down that withdrawal but never with this variation, the wife of his best friend. It stimulated him.

He asked, 'Do you still want me tonight?'

She was conscious of his phrasing because there was a minute hesitancy before she counted. She asked, 'You mean you can join us for dinner?'

'If I'm still invited.'

'Yes, indeed.' She acted pleased. 'Can you make it about seven? That will give us time for a drink before we go to the club.'

'I'll be there.'

He was pleased that he had decided to go. He lay back on the bed to finish his cigarette. He was still leisurely there when the phone sounded. He was surprised, more so when it was Sylvia again. Her voice wasn't standoffish now. 'Dix? I forgot to say, don't dress. We're informal at the beach.'

'Thanks,' he said. 'You eased my mind. My dinner coat is out at the seams. It shrank while I was away flying.'

'Brub's too. They fed you gentlemen altogether too well,' she laughed.

They had some easy conversation before ringing off. He didn't want to return to the damn typewriter. He was comfortable here on his spine; he wasn't sleepy now, just restful. It was just such delaying tactics that had let two weeks go by without writing the old skinflint. He pushed himself up and returned to the machine. Today there was incentive. He needed money for medical treatments.

Inspiration returned to him at the typewriter. He wrote a peach of a letter; it was just right, not too much nor too little. He didn't ask for money. He was certain his back would be all right without the treatments the doctor ordered. Stuff like that. He reread the letter twice before putting it in the envelope. He decided to go and mail it now. It was a little after five. Before sealing the envelope, he drew the letter out and read it again. Yes, it was right. He sealed it quickly, put on an airmail stamp, and left the apartment.

He was walking fast. That was why he didn't see the girl until he almost collided with her at the arched street entrance of the patio. It shocked him that he hadn't noticed her, that he hadn't been aware. He stepped back quickly. 'I beg your pardon,' he said. It wasn't a formality as he said it; shock made each word apology for a grave error.

The girl didn't move for a moment. She stood in his way and looked him over slowly, from crown to toe. The way a man looked over a woman, not the reverse. Her eyes were slant, her lashes curved long and golden dark. She had red-gold hair, flaming hair, flung back from her amber face, falling to her shoulders. Her mouth was too heavy with lipstick, a copper-red mouth, a sultry mouth painted to call attention to its promise. She was dressed severely, a rigid, tailored suit, but it accentuated the lift of her breasts, the curl of her hips. She wasn't beautiful, her face was too narrow for beauty, but she was dynamite. He stood like a dolt, gawking at her.

After she'd finished looking him over, she gave him a small insolent smile. As if he were a dolt, not Dix Steele. 'Granted,' she said and she walked past him into the patio.

He didn't move. He stood and watched her, his mouth still open. She walked like a model, swaying her small buttocks. She had exquisite legs. She knew he was watching her and she didn't care. She expected it. She took her time, skirting the small sky-blue oblong of the pool which lay in the center of the patio. She started up the stairway to the balcony of the second floor apartments.

He swung out the archway fast. He wouldn't let her reach the balcony, look over the balustrade and see him standing there. He'd find out about her some other way, if she lived here, or whom she visited. He'd left his car down the block a bit, by the curb. Although he'd intended driving to the Beverly post office to mail the letter, he didn't. He half ran across the street to the corner mail box, clanged in the letter and ran back to the court. He was too late. She was already out of sight.

He went back into his own apartment, sauntered in as if he weren't damning luck. If he'd bumped into her on his return from the box, he could have bungled at his doorway for the key, discovered which apartment she entered. He walked inside, slamming the door after him. It had been years since he'd seen a girl who could set him jumping. The redhead was it. He went out to the kitchen and although he didn't want a drink, he poured a double jigger of rye and drank it neat. The slug calmed him but he wandered back into the front room, wanting an excuse to slip out into the patio, to look up at the second-floor balcony.

The excuse came as he wished for it. He heard, just short of the doorstep, the thud of the flung newspaper. He moved quick as a cat. But as soon as he picked up the paper, unfolding it, he forgot why he'd hurried outdoors. He saw only the headline: *Strangler Strikes Again.*

Chapter 2

It was quarter past seven when Dix pulled up in front of Nicolai's gate. There was no woolly fog tonight, only a thin mistiness lay in the canyon. It was like gauze across the windshield. He could see the flagstoned steps clearly, even the geranium border framing them. The windows of the house were golden with light; the porch light was also on to welcome him.

He was again pleased that he had decided to come. He had dressed for deliberate effect, an eastern friend of the Nicolais, well off, the right background, even to ex-Air Corps. Gray flannel suit; an expensive tie, patterned in navy, maroon, and white; a white shirt; well-polished brown shoes, English shoes. He settled his tie before climbing to the porch. He didn't hesitate before ringing the bell and there was no hesitation in the opening door.

Sylvia was standing in the doorway. She had on her coat, a soft blue coat, and her bag, a white envelope, was under her arm. 'Hello, Dix,' she said. 'I'll be right with you.'

She didn't ask him in; the screen door was between them and she didn't push it open. She left him standing there on the lighted porch while she turned back into the hall and switched off some overhead lights. There was dim light still glowing in the hall and living room when she came outside.

'We're meeting Brub at the club,' she said in her high, clear voice as she started down the steps. 'He called and asked me to bring you there for drinks. He couldn't make it home.'

He followed her. He had to raise his voice to speak to her, she was that far ahead of him. She was accustomed to the steps; he must watch them. 'Brub pretty busy?'

'Yes,' she said but she didn't continue on that. 'Do you want to take your car or mine? It isn't far, only a few blocks.'

She wasn't talking particularly fast yet there was a breathlessness to it, as if she didn't want any silence between them, as if she were too conscious of him. She stood there by his car, tall and cool and lovely, but not quiet as she was last night.

He smiled at her; he put no intimacy into the smile. 'We might as well take mine, it's here. You can direct me.'

'All right,' she agreed.

He helped her in and went around, took his place at the wheel. She'd rolled the window down on her side, and she rested her arm on the frame. She remained there in the far corner as she gave directions. 'Just down to the beach road, turn left, the club's on the ocean side.'

It didn't take five minutes to get there, no time for the furthering of acquaintance. She talked of club friends, names he didn't know. There was no silence on the short ride. On direction, he drove through the pillared gateway into the parking court. She let herself out of the car, not waiting for him to help her.

The clubhouse wasn't large. There was a young feel to it, like an officers' club, the couples in the entrance hall, in the lounge beyond, were the kind you'd expect the Nicolais to know. A pattern you found all over the country, decent, attractive young people. The norm. They didn't look dull to Dix tonight. He was warmed by their safeness.

Sylvia said, 'I'll drop my coat.' She smiled at him, an open, friendly smile. 'Be right back,

Dix.'

She wasn't long. She looked lovely, her dress was cream color, an expensively simple dress. He had pride entering the lounge with her.

'Brub doesn't seem to have shown up yet. Unless he's beaten us to the bar.' She nodded to several couples as they crossed the room. There were more couples in the nautical bar but Brub wasn't there. 'I'll substitute for Brub and buy you a drink while we wait,' she said.

'I approve the substitution. But I'll buy the drink,' he told her.

She moved away from him to a table. 'You can't. Not at the club. This is Brub's party.'

She introduced him to all who stopped by their table. The question of the passers-by was inevitably the same, 'Where's Brub?' It didn't occur to any of them that she had any interest in Dix.

Her answer was always the same. 'He'll be along soon.' And her introduction never varied '... Dix Steele. Brub's best friend in England.' Only once did she show any disturbance. She said it quietly, 'I wonder what's keeping him.'

At eight the bar was emptied of all but those whose goal was alcoholism. Her nervousness lay near the surface now. She pushed away from the table. 'We might as well go to dinner. I'm sure he'll be here any moment.'

He deliberately broke through the commonplaces then. 'Don't apologize, Sylvia. I'm not missing Brub.' His voice smiled at her. 'I'm enjoying you – quite as much as I would Brub.'

She laughed. And she said with a small moue, 'I'm missing him. I haven't seen him since morning.'

He mock sighed. 'Still on your honeymoon.'

'Definitely.'

But he'd broken through, only a wedge perhaps, yet enough for a starter.

He waited until they were at the dinner table before he asked the question casually. 'Is he on a big case?'

She looked at him. Her eyes were anxious. Then she looked away. 'I don't know,' she admitted. 'He didn't say. Only he'd been delayed.'

She hadn't seen the evening paper. He could have told her but he didn't. Let Brub tell her. What she feared.

He saw Brub at that moment crossing the room. Brub looked worn, he put on a smile in answer to greetings as he passed the various tables, but it was a thin smile, it slipped away as quickly as it came.

Sylvia saw him almost as soon as Dix did. Anxiety sharpened her face. They were tacitly silent until Brub reached the table. He bent and kissed Sylvia. 'Sorry I'm so late, darling.' He didn't smile at them; he didn't need to pretend with his wife and best friend. He put out his hand to Dix, 'Glad you could join us,' then he sat down, dog tiredness in every muscle. His suit was dog tired too and his linen showed the wilt of the day. His dark hair was crumpled. 'I didn't have time to change.' He smiled at Sylvia. 'You can pretend I'm your chauffeur.'

The waiter, a young colored man, whiter of skin than the beach-brown guests, was unobtrusive at the table.

Brub looked up. 'Hello, Malcolm. Do you suppose you could get me a double Scotch from the bar before you start my dinner? I've just come from work and I need it.'

'I'm sure I can, Mr. Nicolai,' Malcolm smiled. He went away.

Sylvia's hand covered Brub's on the table. 'Hard day, darling?' She'd started casual but she couldn't keep it up. Something about the set of Brub's mouth released her fear in a little gust. 'It wasn't another -'

Brub's mouth was tight; his voice deliberately matter of fact. 'Yes, another one.'

'Brub!' She whispered it.

He began to light a cigarette, the flame wavered slightly. Dix watched the two with the proper attentiveness, and the proper curiosity. When neither spoke, he let his curiosity become audible. 'What's it all about?'

'Another woman killed ... The same way.'

Sylvia's hands were clenched.

Malcolm brought the drink.

'Thanks,' Brub said and saw Dix. 'I'm sorry, chum. How about you?'

'The same,' he grinned. He didn't want it for himself; an extra for Brub. To relax Brub. He began on his shrimp cocktail. 'Are you assigned to the case?'

'Everyone in the department is on it,' Brub said. He drank again and he grimaced. 'No, it's not my case, Dix. They don't put juniors on big stuff.' He turned to Sylvia. 'The commissioner called in the whole department. We've been with him since five, since I called you. Even hizzoner the mayor sat in.' His mouth tightened. 'We've got to stop it.'

'Yes,' Sylvia said. Her eyes were frightened, the color under her tan was gone. It was as if she had personal fright, as if the horror were close to her.

Dix said, 'Someone important who was killed?' Malcolm set down the highball. 'Thanks.'

'No.' Brub was halfway through his drink. 'It's never anyone important.' Again he realized he was talking to someone, not thinking aloud. 'I forgot. You wouldn't know about it. Being a visitor.' He could speak about it calmly; it seemed to relax him as much as a highball would. 'The first one was about six months ago. March to be exact.'

'March sixteenth,' Sylvia said. 'The night before the St. Patrick's party.'

'We didn't know it was only the first then. It was a girl down on Skid Row. She was a nice enough kid for the life she lived, I guess. Danced in a bump-and-grind house down there. We found her in an alley. Strangled.' He picked up his glass, emptied it. 'No clues. Nothing. We wrote that one off as the neighborhood even though we didn't get any leads. You usually can't get on Skid Row. The next one was in April.' His hand reached for his empty glass.

Dix shoved his across. 'Take mine. The shrimp are too good to dilute. Try them, Sylvia.'

'Yes, don't wait for me,' Brub said.

Sylvia picked up her fork but she didn't do anything with it. Just held it loosely, her eyes on Brub's face.

He took a drink before continuing. 'In April. We found her in Westlake Park. There wasn't any reason for it. She was a nice normal girl, young, attractive. She'd been to a movie with a couple of girl friends. She lived in the Wilshire district, blocks from the park. No clues. She'd been killed the same way.' He looked at Dix angrily. 'There wasn't any reason for her to be killed. There's been no reason for any of them.' Again he drank.

'There've been others?'

'Last night was the sixth,' Brub said heavily. 'One a month. Since March.'

'Except last month,' Sylvia said quickly. 'There was none in August.'

Brub continued, 'No motive. No connection between any of them. Never the same

neighborhood.'

'Last night's –' Sylvia's voice was hushed, as if she dreaded the question.

Brub said, 'A new neighborhood. Beverly Glen Canyon – up where it's country. She wasn't found until late this morning. She was lying in the brush at the side of the road.' Anger clanged in his voice again. 'It's like hunting a needle in a haystack. Los Angeles is too big – too sprawling. You can't patrol every street every night, all night. He's safe. A maniac walking the streets, looking just as normal as you or me, more normal probably.'

'You'll get him,' Sylvia said, pushing conviction into her wish.

'We'll get him.' Brub believed it. 'But how many women will be murdered first?' He tipped up the glass.

'You'd better eat, dear,' Sylvia said. She forced herself to start eating.

'Yeah.' Brub began spearing the shrimp, eating hurriedly, not tasting the food. 'Take this girl last night. A nice girl like the others – except perhaps the first was a different cut. This one was a stenographer. Worked downtown. Lived in Hollywood. She'd been playing bridge with friends in Beverly. On South Camden. Just four girls. They played once a week, rotating the meeting place. They always quit early. None of them wanted to be out late, alone that way. Last night they stopped around eleven. The three left together, walked up to Wilshire together. The other two lived downtown farther. They took the Wilshire bus. Mildred was taking the Hollywoodland bus. Her name was Mildred Atkinson. She was still waiting when the girls' bus came along. She waved goodbye to them. No one saw her after that.'

Sylvia had stopped eating. 'It's horrible,' she said.

'Yes, it's horrible,' Brub agreed. 'There's no reason for the pattern. If we could just get at what's behind it.'

Dix put on a thoughtful frown. 'Have you no leads at all?'

'Not much,' Brub said. 'There are no clues, there never are; no fingerprints or footprints, God, how we'd like just one fingerprint!' He returned to monotone. 'We've double checked all the known sex offenders.'

'It's a sex crime?' Dix interrupted.

Brub nodded. 'That's a part of it.'

Sylvia's shiver was slight.

He continued, 'We know one thing, of course. He works from a car.'

Malcolm brought the chowder.

'How do you know that?' Dix asked.

'He has to. Take last night, for instance. The place is inaccessible without a car.'

Dix scowled. 'Can't you check tire prints?'

'We can't check every car in L.A.,' Brub said helplessly. 'It's the same as footprints. We can't check every pair of shoes in L.A.'

'I understand that,' Dix nodded. 'Excellent chowder.' But they'd have the tire tracks in plaster. If you could get them off concrete.

'We have an excellent chef at the club,' Sylvia said. She had no appetite. Her soup was barely tasted when Malcolm brought the abalone steaks.

Dix began on his with relish. 'What you know then is that there is a man and he has a car.'

'Yes. In the fourth case, he was seen.'

Dix's eyebrows lifted. He held his fork in mid-air. 'You mean you have a description?'

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