

"No scoop, Charley. The poor bastard just came to the National Press Building to die, like the elephants do in their African graveyards."

Charley's eyes sparkled. "Say, that's an angle, Tony, a damned good story line."

"Don't mention it," Baylor said wearily.

TWELVE

A metronome ticked back and forth hypnotically in the CIA office. The Man Behind the Desk watched its arm swing, his big hands folded before him on the desk. Tiny thought lines creased the skin between his eyes.

"Who is it for?" Ernie Sessena asked from the sofa.

"Linda. The kid is becoming quite a musician."

"How old is she?"

"Thirteen tomorrow. It's her birthday."

The metronome ticked on. Finally, the Man Behind the Desk cleared his throat and stopped the swing of the arm. He looked at Sessena. "Of course, you realize that everything has changed," he said into the silence. "This is a new ball game. Was it murder?"

Sessena nodded. "No doubt about it. Poison. We'll know what kind within the hour."

"We have to bring the FBI into this now."

"Yes."

"Bennington was a good man."

Sessena lit a cigarette. "Not so good that he didn't catch it."

The Man Behind the Desk grunted. "You're a cold-blooded bastard."

"That's part of the job description."

"Who are you going to talk with at the FBI?"

"Ed Hanson."

"Don't mention your suspicions of Probar. Keep that between us girls."

"O.K."

"What about Baylor?"

Sessena shrugged. "He's on his own. His pal is stone cold. There's no more money. He'll probably chicken out."

"And if he doesn't? What if he gets in the way?"

"Then we'll have to take him out temporarily. Armateurs' night is over on this one. We've lost one of our boys."

The face of the Man Behind the Desk wore a wintry grin. "I seem to detect just a faint suggestion of human emotion."

Sessena got to his feet. "Go to hell," he said gruffly, looking out of the window. Then he ground out his cigarette and left the room.

The Man Behind the Desk looked after him for a moment with a worried expression. Then he set the metronome ticking again. The sound was strangely soothing. He might buy one for the office.

Ed Hanson picked up Ernie Sessena at the corner of Thirteenth and F Streets and pulled his grey sedan back into traffic. "I don't see why we couldn't discuss this at my office, Ernie," he said plaintively. "I sometimes think you cloak-and-dagger boys overdo it."

"Your office may be bugged. In fact, it probably is," Sessena answered dourly.

Hanson laughed shortly. "See what I mean?"

"We think someone is selling out to the Chinks, Ed. We've already lost one of our men, right here in Washington," Sessena said brutally. "You want to stop kidding and hear the facts?"

Hanson glanced at Sessena briefly and then looked back to the traffic before him. "Let's hear the facts. All drill remarks are withdrawn and apologized for."

"Drive out toward Mount Vernon. We can pull off on one of the overlooks by the river and talk this thing out."

"Right."

They sat silently in the parked car after Sessena had finished talking.

"When did Bennington get it?" Hanson asked.

"Last night. They found the body in Baylor's office this morning."

"Maybe Baylor did it."

"No chance. No motive. The guy is a pigeon. We checked him out thoroughly before Bennington contacted him."

"Bennington learned too much and was killed by the spy ring. Is that your theory?"

"Yes."

Hanson squeezed his lower lip between a thumb and forefinger and gazed sidewise at the saturnine visage of the man beside him. "You played this pretty cute, Ernie. Would you have let us in on this if one of your operatives hadn't been killed?"

"Eventually. This thing involves Washington, maybe bigtime Washington, Ed. We had to be damn certain something was wrong, very wrong, before we could bring in the FBI. Since the police told me that Bennington was murdered by cyanide, our suspicions are confirmed and we're bringing you in on it."

"Many thanks," Hanson said dryly. He shrugged. "Could be espionage. But what does one murder prove, more or less? Maybe Bennington was catting around, or had some deals on the side. It wouldn't be the first time."

Sessena spoke with exasperation. "God damn it, Ed, he was clean. He was our man."

Hanson shook his head. "A CIA agent is murdered. Too bad. We don't like that. No siree. We accept your assurance that all CIA agents are brave and clean. But that

doesn't mean he was murdered by an international spy ring. No siree, it don't. No indeedy. We FBI boys are just homebred, homespun domestic types, and we don't have much truck with all them exotic foreigners. Our minds run to simple things like jealous women, greedy partners in crime, or cuckolded husbands."

Sessena stared straight ahead through the windshield and out over the darkening river. "Christ! And you wonder why we didn't bring you guys in on this at the beginning." He brought his hands together. "Stay out of it, then, if you are so damn afraid of the political overtones. Stay out of it! But, by God, when the CIA has this case cracked open and the press and the public ask why the FBI was sitting on their bureaucratic asses, looking even more stupid than usual, one Ernie Sessena will tell them!"

Hanson cleared his throat. "We aren't going to stay out of it, Ernest. Bennington is dead. That's a fact. We'll notify the Metropolitan Police that there's a Federal angle, and we'll put it under wraps with the press until we know some of the answers. You may be right—maybe bigtime Washington is in this up to their necks. Time will tell. But to Ed Hanson, this is a policeman's job involving homicide, nothing more."

Sessena put a cigarette between his lips and stared gloomily out over the river. "O.K. Check out the homicide. I'll keep working on the rest of it."

"Has the Pentagon reported any data missing?" Hanson asked.

"No. And we haven't asked them."

"Wouldn't it be interesting to know if your spy ring is spying?" Hanson asked dryly.

"Yes, it would." Sessena bit off the words. "And now that we're getting the brilliant minds and facile tongues of the FBI into this, I have no further inhibitions about discussing it with anybody including the Pentagon. I know we'll soon find out that Bennington merely choked to death on the olive in his martini, and that every other aspect of

the case flows from a Spanish-American's overwrought mind."

Hanson started the automobile. "You fellows out at McLean must have interesting days. It's good to know that you're there. Our first line of defense against invaders from outer space."

Sessena hunched down in his coat and remained silent during the drive back to Washington. "Drop me at Fifteenth and Penn," he said curtly as they entered the city. He turned to Hanson as he got out of the car. "This conversation was an official notification to the FBI, Ed, of a matter which in the opinion of the CIA is of grave importance. We aren't going to reduce it to writing, and I don't give a good God damn if you treat it like a routine homicide or, for that matter, if you act on it or not. Just stay out of my way because I'm going to blast anyone involved in this right out of the water!"

Hanson winced as the door slammed.

Major Brun of Army Intelligence had a thin, aquiline face with high cheekbones. Under a receding hairline and bushy brows, his eyes were sharply alert. He was in civilian clothes and seated across from Sessena at a table in a small Italian restaurant on Eighteenth Street. They were drinking chianti from a bottle wrapped in straw placed in the center of the table. A basket held several slices of sourdough bread. It was four-thirty in the afternoon, and the restaurant was empty except for a sleepy-eyed waiter who was standing at some distance gazing out on the street through a window smeared and dulled by a winter of cooking and artificial heat. Brun turned his wine glass in his hand and looked intensely across the table at Sessena.

"You called this one, Mr. Sessena," he said in a quick staccato which was muted by his effort to keep his voice low. "How did you get on to it?"

"I'm not at liberty to give you all of the details, but we had reason to believe that there was a leak from your R and D section to the Chinese Reds."

Brun nodded. "A leak there is. Funny damn thing. Our boys in Saigon have been checking it out at that end for over a month. Never thought to alert us here, at the font, so to speak."

"What is the leak?"

"Bacteriological warfare secrets. BW we call it. We have some very advanced research going on up at Fort Detrick near Fredrick, Maryland. We also have programs at Pine Bluff, Arkansas, Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland, at Rocky Mountain Arsenal in Denver and elsewhere. But the leak seems to be out of Detrick, data on a nerve gas, 'incaps,' that is, incapacitating chemicals such as BZ, disease germs, and the delivery systems or agents. Russia is pretty advanced in this field, but the Chinese are nowhere. It makes sense that they would go all out to steal our BW data."

"Did you follow my suggestion and compare the information leaked with the subject matter of secret testimony on the Hill before the House Armed Services Committee?"

Brun shifted uneasily. "Yes. The information reaching the Chinese is all information we have touched on one way or another in testimony before that Committee."

"Any correlation in timing?"

"A direct correlation."

"How do you think it is done?"

"I've given the thing some thought, and I've particularly considered the time element. The Chinese get the information within a week or ten days after testimony on the Hill, but never before the testimony."

"Never before?"

"Never."

"What do they get?"

"Saigon says it's data, even copies of blueprints and experiments." Brun looked bleak.

"Could they get this from the Congressional Committee?"

"No. Our testimony is general in nature—not tech-

nical. The Committee would not have this detailed information in its possession."

"So, it has to come from the R and D files at the Pentagon or at Fort Detrick?"

"There's no other way."

"But there is the correlation with testimony?"

"Definitely."

"What does that suggest to you?" Sessena asked.

"It suggests that someone on the committee or its staff alerts someone at the Pentagon about what to look for and the confederate in the Pentagon then extracts the files and photographs them. The information is then relayed to the Chinese, probably through Saigon and Hong Kong." Sessena sat back in his chair. "That's exactly what I think."

Brun sipped his wine. "There is one thing more. The flow of information stopped last week. Information testified on at a committee hearing two weeks ago has not been transmitted. It's hot stuff too. Necessary to make some of the earlier information useful."

"I'm not surprised," Sessena said. "They've had their wind up recently." He lit a cigarette. "Tell me, no clue as to how the information has been passed?"

Brun shrugged. "There are scores of ways, as you know. Microdots, radio transmissions, through concealment in imported goods, couriers, diplomatic pouches. Transmission is no problem, especially when there are ports like Saigon, Macao, Hong Kong, even Singapore. All it takes is money and an organization."

"Who do you think is the contact in the R and D section?"

"We have no idea. None at all. You see the damn thing stopped before we in Washington even knew it was going on. Everybody with any access to classified data is under suspicion. Unfortunately, that's a small army. You can't have research without some element of trust in the research personnel. That's why we have clearances for secret and top secret information. It's a calculated risk."

Sessena nodded. "So the fox has gone to ground?"
"I would say so. Yes." Brun replied.
"I'll see what I can do about flushing it," Sessena said. "We'll keep in touch, Major."

Ed Hanson sat beside Ernie Sessena at the end of an otherwise empty row of counter stools and wolfed his hamburger. "I sure do like these exotic places you like to get together in, Ernest."

Sessena put some sugar in his black coffee. "If you've done even the plodding police work of which you are capable, you may have guessed why I'm being careful."

"Yes indeedy. A very sticky business indeed it becomes."

"What have you got?"

"We've put a tail on this fellow Williams you mentioned."

"And?"

"Williams seems rather a precious type but nothing wrong there that we can see."

"What about Baylor? Does he attract attention?"
Hanson wiped his mouth on a paper napkin and swallowed a mouthful of coffee. "It turns out we've run across him a time or two before this."

"How?"

"We keep a routine surveillance on a thin, sleepy-eyed Chink, name of Wong. He works for the South China Sea Trading Company of New York. It's a Chinese Communist front that has interested us for a long time. We haven't closed it down because they provide us such a wonderful opportunity for travel and sightseeing."

"Go on."

"Wong picked up Baylor nearly a week ago and tailed him for a few days. Two days ago Wong switched to Bennington and dropped Baylor."

Sessena shot an intent look at Hanson. "Do you still think this is a routine homicide?"

The FBI man laughed. "No indeedy, especially since

I've learned from our detail assigned to cover Wong that he was right on top of Bennington the night he was murdered."

"Any more on that?"

"It looks like Bennington was knocked slightly silly by a judo chop and a capsule of cyanide forced down his throat. The body was then deposited in Baylor's office to scare him off."

"Did Wong do it?"

"Probably, but I am truly embarrassed to say, Ernest, that we don't know. Our man lost Wong and Bennington at the crucial moment."

"I hope you have a better man on Wong now. This is now a hell of a lot more than routine surveillance."

"We do, Ernest. He won't shake us again."

A counterman drifted down to them and filled their coffee cups. "We're filling up, fellows. I'll have to open this end of the counter soon."

"Thanks, Joe. We're nearly finished," Sessena said. He turned to Hanson. "The Pentagon has lost vital information, Ed. Bacteriological warfare secrets to the Chinese Reds. There's a probable tie-in to the Hill."

"Williams?"

"Army Intelligence hasn't zeroed in on anyone yet and I'm not prompting them. I don't extend to them the childlike trust I give to you."

Ed grinned. "You still think it's Williams?"

"Absolutely. This whole thing has developed from our original suspicions of Williams. The big problem is, who else is involved? How high up do we go?"

"What's going on now?"

"Nothing, damn it."

"That doesn't make it easy, does it?"

"This is one of the nasty ones, Ed. I've felt that from the beginning. I'm floundering on this one and I've lost a man."

"I'm sorry about that, Ernest."

"Yeah, well," Sessena rubbed his chin and stared at the counter. "It's got me a little on edge, Ed, you know?"

"Sure, Ernest. Hell, I read you like a book. Why do you think I put up with your lousy taste in food?"
Sessena grinned. "You get what I can pay for, and that runs to hamburgers and beans."

"Oh, you're paying for this?"

"Yeah. But I'm not going to make it a habit."
"Thank God for that."

THIRTEEN

BAYLOR sat slumped in a chair in his apartment. His telephone was off the hook and he had a splitting headache. He had returned home from his office as soon as he had been released by the police and could shake off Charley Diggs. His high state of excitement on arrival, which had set him pacing aimlessly up and down his single room, had now in midafternoon left him, supplanted by a sense of deep depression, apathy, and growing apprehension. What in God's name had he gotten into? What did he do now? With Bennington gone, he suddenly realized that he was in over his depth. He was no big time newspaperman. Why pretend that he was? Was the Pulitzer prize worth being murdered for? It won't do you any good posthumously, and you won't write the story posthumously either. He felt an almost hysterical urge to laugh. He went into his bathroom and took two aspirins. Bennington was dead. What had the poor bastard done to deserve that? He had tried to dig up the dirt on the Congress, that's what. A

surge of warming anger flowed through Baylor. And the body had been delivered to him as a warning to lay off. A final warning, maybe. They had tried to buy him off; they had roughed him up; now they had murdered Bennington. If murder was meant to frighten him, it was succeeding. He was scared to death.

But he was fighting mad, too. Who in the hell do they think they are? He ran a tongue over his dry lips. What in hell do they think I am? He lit a fresh cigarette from the one in his hand and extinguished the old butt in an overflowing ashtray.

A light tap came on the door. He ignored it. It came again, heavier and more insistent. He looked through a small one-way viewer in the center of the door. It was Jiggs. He unlocked the door and opened it. She had a basket over one arm and an afternoon newspaper tucked under it. She hurried in, a worried frown on her pert face. As Baylor shut the door, she put the basket and newspaper down and embraced him.

"Tony, darling. Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure. Considering everything."

"But why was this dead man in your office? It's all over the afternoon papers."

"We were working on something together."

She held him at arms length and looked earnestly into his eyes. "What is this all about, Tony? They break into your apartment and slug me. They kill the man you're working with. It must be frightfully important."

He reached for the newspaper. "Newsman Murdered In Press Building" the headline screamed over the by-line of Charley Diggs. Well, Charley got his scoop, Baylor thought wryly. "Like the elephant returning by instinct to his ancient burial ground, Frank Bennington, veteran newspaperman, came back to the National Press Building to die," the story read. "Apparently murdered, Bennington was found. . . ." Baylor threw the newspaper on the floor. "I even gave Diggs the story-line," he said in a tired voice. He turned to the little red-head beside him and kissed her on the lips.

"Thanks for rallying around, Jiggs. What's in the basket?"

"Supper, aspirin, an ice pack, a bottle of Scotch, and a 22-calibre pistol. If we're going to have a siege, I'm ready."

Baylor laughed for the first time in hours and felt better. "You wonderful, wonderful gal. Let's break out the bottle."

He fixed them Scotch and sodas. She curled up beside him in the chair. After a time she said, "Want to tell me about it?"

"I don't know. I don't want to get you involved."

"I am involved, and if I'm going to get hopped from time to time, I think I deserve to know why."

He squeezed her. She almost spilled her drink. "Bennington and I were working on an exposé of a Congressional committee on the Hill. Since we began it, they've attacked me on the street, torn up my office, broken into my apartment, roughed up my girl friend, and murdered my partner. I guess they don't like us nosing around."

"Exposé of what?"

"That's the maddening part. I don't know what I'm trying to expose. Bennington had some idea, but he didn't tell me. But it is worth killing for to keep covered up. That's a big story in anybody's book. The other day, Bennington gave me a lead at the Pentagon. A chap I met at the Pentagon who works with the Committee staff on Pentagon matters acted like the classic case of the guilty conscience. The staff of the Committee is scared to death. I know there's a great story, if I can only break it!"

"It may break you, like it did Bennington."

"There's that, of course," Baylor nodded soberly.

"Why don't you chuck it, Tony?" Jiggs asked. "It isn't worth getting killed over. I don't want a dead hero on my hands."

"I'm no hero. I'm scared to death. I never thought it would turn out like this."

"You don't even know what it's all about, darling. That's why you are alive. Bennington must have known

more and they killed him. Stay ignorant, stay alive." Baylor finished his drink and lifted himself out of the chair. "Let's have supper."

"Are you angry?"

"Nope. Just hungry. Somehow, I feel better. I don't know whether it's the Scotch or your wholesome, vibrant sex."

"Supper is pastrami."

"Wonderful."

"And potato salad."

"Great."

"And coleslaw."

"Good."

"And beer—imported, even."

"You are a dear."

They ate on a table by the fire and finished with cafe espresso.

"It is good to be alive," Baylor said into the fire. "My day ended better than Frank Bennington's."

"I wouldn't think about it," Jiggs said.

"I have to think about it. When I walk through that door again and get into the Morgan, I have to know whether I'm going through it as a lion or as a lamb."

Jiggs looked at him solemnly over the rim of her coffee cup. "You know something, Tony?"

"What?"

"You're going through that door like a lion. It's written all over you."

"You know, you're right," he said after a moment. "Why? Why is it worth it?"

He looked at her as he framed his answer. "I've been trying to sort that out. I guess it's because they think I'm so small, so unimportant, so insignificant, that they can buy me off or kick me around, or frighten me away. 'Get lost' they say. 'Disappear, small timer.' Well, I'm not quite that small. I'm going to hold on and we'll see who comes out on top." His voice quavered slightly and his hand shook as he lit a cigarette. "Besides, Frank Bennington looked me

up for this job. He believed in me. And they've killed Frank Bennington."

As he emerged from the elevator on his floor of the National Press Building at nine the next morning and walked down the green hallway to his office, the drab sameness of his surroundings depressed him. A murder that was on the front pages of all the city's newspapers had left this sunless corridor callously untouched. He felt reduced in size, merely an expendable and replaceable tenant of one of the cubicles opening off the passageway to his right and to his left. His passing would be even less of an event than Frank Bennington's. The National Press Building would remove the slightly yellowed lettering of his name from the tenants' register in the lobby and in due time replace it with another name in new white letters. A few minor bookkeeping entries, and he would be disposed of for good and some other poor bastard with delusions of his own importance would walk this way.

His office smelled stale with a faint suggestion of Sergeant O'Brien's cigars still present in the air. He flung open a window and stared out over the nearby roof-tops. The roof of the parking garage next door was cracking and peeling. Well, what in hell wasn't?

He telephoned the police morgue to find out where Bennington's funeral would be. After being relayed from extension to extension, he finally reached someone with an answer. They didn't know. The family had claimed the body after the autopsy, and that was that.

His rented typewriter sat accusingly on its stand. There was still a living to be made and issues of *Baylor's Bit* to be composed. Luckily he made a practice of holding back some items which weren't perishable as filler for vacation periods. He could put out one or two creditable issues before the subscribers realized that he wasn't really there. Sitting down at the typewriter, he stared at its dull, black keys, then he wrote as his lead sentence, "What is someone on the House Armed Services Committee so worried about

these days, and who are the friends that are trying to protect him?" Lighting a cigarette, he gazed through the smoke curling up from its tip at the sentence. This was Bennington's last suggestion on tactics. It would at least let Probar and his goons know that they hadn't frightened off Tony Baylor. He was still in the game. They had no way of knowing that his mouth was dry and that his knees had a tendency to shake.

Dialing the exchange of the Pentagon, he asked for an extension number and waited to hear the familiar, almost childish voice. "Janice?"

"Yes?"

"This is Tony."

She giggled happily. "I thought it was, but I didn't want to ask."

"A lot has happened since the night before last."

"Oh?"

"You don't read the newspapers?"

"What's in the newspapers?"

"Nothing. Forget it. You're better off that way."

"O.K."

"How about some more dancing tonight?"

"That would be dreamy."

"I'll pick you up about eight-thirty."

"Come by at seven and I'll give you something to eat."

"I'm afraid of girls who cook."

"Oh, I'm not a very good cook, Tony," she assured him anxiously. "It would be, like, a TV dinner."

"I'll be by at eight-thirty after dinner," he said firmly.

"O.K."

"Stay sweet."

She giggled and he hung up.

He was finishing the last article for *Baylor's Bit* when Charley Diggs opened the door and looked in. "I figured you would at least have the door locked."

"What good would that do? It was locked before Bennington's body was dumped in here."

Charley dropped into the extra chair and let the door fall shut behind him. "You said that before, Tony. Wouldn't it be safer at least to admit to the possibility that you left the door unlocked?"

Baylor shrugged. "Anybody can get into these offices. I can't see that it makes much difference."

Charley yawned and slumped down in his chair, regarding Baylor through half-closed eyes. "I'm running my ass off on this story. I'm worn out."

"My sympathy."

Charley looked up at a corner of the ceiling. "You said you were working on a news story?"

"Yes."

"Can't you give me a slant on that?"

"You know better than to ask that, Charley. You'll read all about it in the newspapers when I have the story."

Charley looked only mildly discomfited. "Does this murder tie in with the news story you were working on?"

"I have no idea. Probably not."

"It's a funny thing, Tony. In its way, this is a big story, a big break for me, by-line and all of that, but the story has a peculiar way of receding. The police are playing it very cool—no information available, no family color or background on Bennington. The story is dying after one day. Even my editor has chopped up my copy, and moved it off the front page. What's going on?"

"Possibly nothing. What's another murder nowadays, more or less? You and I aren't experienced crime reporters. It looks like a bigger story to us than it does to an editor. He has a rich lode of crime to work every twenty-four hours in Washington."

"I'd hate to think that someone is sitting on this story and that you know why."

Baylor addressed a heavy manila envelope to his printer and put his copy for *Baylor's Bit* into it. He looked at Charley Diggs as he licked the glue on the envelope flap.

"Beat it."

"Tell me I'm wrong."

"Look, Charley. Write your story, follow your lead, but leave me out of it. I feel like a short tempered son-of-a-bitch these days and I don't want to act like one. You've been a friend, of sorts."

"Throw me out. That would make good copy."

Baylor got up, slipped on his coat, and flipped the light switch. He opened the door and turned to Charley. "I'm leaving. Are you coming or should I look you in?" Charley moved through the door. "I'm sorry to needle you, Tony, but I can't leave you out of it. The body was found in your office."

"I'm just an innocent bystander."

"That's just banal enough to be quotable."

"Go ahead."

Baylor sat down with Janice at their tiny table in the rock-and-roll joint. "I'm beat!" he said, grinning and wiping his brow with a handkerchief.

Janice took out a small compact and touched her nose and cheeks lightly with a powder puff. "You're really with it, Tony. Boy, am I glad you came into the Pentagon. We're livin' it up."

"Let's have a drink."

"Sure."

They drank the soft drinks thirstily. "I don't think you're too old for me," Janice said, cocking her head at him.

"Too old for what?"

"You know, too old."

"You don't like my dancing?"

"Oh, no. I love it. You're groovy."

"Let's leave it at that."

"Rightee-o," she said happily.

"Any dope on Bart Williams?"

Janice grimaced. "He's one of these squares. Good-looking, but square, you know?"

"I've met him."

"Yeah. I forgot. Well, I haven't got much, but here

it is. She opened her small purse and pushed a card with some notes on it toward him.

Baylor glanced over it. "He sounds like a boringly upright citizen."

"Turn over the card."

Baylor smiled. "He goes to watch the exotics at the

Red Onion?"

"That's the gossip."

"Does he have a girl friend there?"

"Nope. He just watches. He's that kind, I guess.

Square. You know."

Baylor slipped the card into his pocket. "Thanks,

Janice."

"Don't mention it." She sprang to her feet and motioned to him, her arms beginning to pump in time to the music. "Come on. There goes that beat!"

The following night Baylor sat in the Morgan outside the Red Onion. He had parked the Morgan earlier in the evening one door away so that he could observe the entrance to the night club when he was ready through the windshield. It was cold and wet. Gusts of rain shook the small car and caused water to drip down from the several places where the top was not weather tight. Baylor was chilled to the bone when Williams walked up the street and entered the Red Onion. It was eleven o'clock. After a short interval, Baylor got out of the car stiffly, and followed his quarry inside.

A wave of welcoming warmth enveloped him, compounded of human sweat, tobacco smoke, and alcohol. He left his coat with a scantily clad, big-bosomed, hatcheck girl and turned to a heavy-set, double-chinned man in a soiled and wrinkled dinner jacket two sizes too small for him. "A table in the rear, please."

The man shrugged and led him to the rear of the room where he gestured toward an empty table. Baylor sat down.

"We got better tables up front," the man said gruffly. "No cover and the drinks are one price." The worn material of his jacket reflected the colored lights from the stage as he bent over Baylor.

"This will do fine."

"O.K. Mac, just didn't want you to feel abused." Baylor ordered a Scotch and soda from a shoe-eyed waitress and studied his surroundings. He recognized Williams alone at a table near the stage, vigorously applauding one of the dancers as she finished her act. She gave a good-natured wiggle in his direction, winked at the orchestra leader, and sat down at Williams' table. Baylor's drink arrived and he sipped it slowly, watching Williams. His face was animated and he seemed in an exuberant mood. A funny guy. It was as if he were on guard everywhere except in this dump. The girl, a rather good-looking blonde, seemed to hang on his every word. They were like a couple of sweethearts. He tried to identify his emotions. They put him off. Why? Because it was phony, that was it. It was phony. Someone was play acting. Was it the man or the woman? Or both?

The hovering waitress moved in. "You want another drink, honey?"

"Yes, bring it along."

"That was Scotch and soda?"

"It was meant to be."

"You want a friend, honey? You don't have to sit alone, you know. The dancers will come over and join you for a drink."

"I'm fine. Tell me, who is the girl that just finished her dance, the one sitting at the table with the good-looking young guy?"

"That's Rosie Dawn."

"She's good."

"One of the best, hon."

"How about getting her over here?"

"No chance while she's with another customer. Besides, he's a big spender." She looked disparagingly at Baylor's single glass.