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The Iron Rain by Donald Malcolm

CHAPTER 1

Looking back on it, you would think I should have known what was coming. I was, after all, a professional astronomer; I had been doing a long-term study of meteors and meteorites. But the Iron Rain caught me as much by surprise as it did everyone else: all my background accomplished was to allow me to understand the problem better once it occurred.

It began as I was clearing up my papers, preparatory to flying back to Manchester. I had just spent a busy two weeks as a guest lecturer at the University of Strathclyde. Even at this time there were foreshadowings of the nightmarish future. During my stay in Glasgow, reports had come in about fourteen large meteorites that had caused havoc, destruction and death at random parts of the globe; certainly others must have fallen undiscovered in the oceans, the deserts and the polar regions.

I must say I *was* worried. One destructive meteorite that size in an average lifetime would be headline news. The increased incidence made me feel extremely uncomfortable. Had I known how bad the situation was to become, I'd have been even more worried.

Trouble struck at about three o'clock that January Friday, just as I was getting ready to leave my university office for Glasgow's Abbotsinch Airport. I heard a distant, thunderous roar. As though ten thousand rampaging steam engines were approaching from the west, the building began to shake. From the street below came the screeching of brakes mingled with the sounds of breaking glass and screams. The window behind my desk shattered and a small object sizzled and flashed across the

room and embedded itself in a cupboard door.

When the shaking had subsided, I picked my way through the glass to the gaping hole where the window had been. The office was high up in the John Street block, and as far as I could see in either direction, the sky was fast being blotted out by flame and thick smoke.

I turned away and walked to the cupboard, scrunching on the shards of glass. I had no need to speculate on the cause of the noise and the fire. I prised a pea-sized object out of the door and let it roll about on my palm. The tiny meteorite, a fragment of the large one, was black, pitted and still quite hot. It had narrowly missed killing me.

I think I must have realized then that these meteorite falls were the forerunners of an entire shower. At least, I understood the advisability of mass evacuation from heavily populated areas. There were too many ways to die in a city if a meteorite hit—falling masonry, vehicles out of control, fire... the list was endless.

I picked up the telephone and dialed the number for the College of Astronomy, listened briefly to the thin screech coming through the wires, and replaced the receiver. Both the college and the observatory were at least twenty miles away; there was little I could do to help. Escape was the sensible solution, if escape were still possible.

I opened the door to the outer office. Miss Field, who'd been helping me with paperwork, lay slumped beside her desk. She groaned as I raised her head gently, revealing a livid bump on her forehead. I lifted her into a chair and went to get her some water.

People were running and pushing past me in the corridor, some talking, others silent. But every face wore the expression of fear I was to see often in the future.

When I returned to the girl, my foot nudged the radio, lying beside her chair. I switched it on, before feeding her sips of water. There was nothing coming through except static, but I left it on.

"How do you feel, now?" I asked.

She pushed a strand of hair away from her eyes, one of which was now puffy and discolored. "My head hurts. Was the noise made by a

meteorite?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. I tried to dive under the desk and didn't judge my distance very well."

There was still nothing on the radio.

"We've got to leave here at once," I said. "The building took a shaking; another shock like that could bring it down."

"I'd like to telephone my parents first."

"The phone doesn't work and we don't have time—"

"It won't take a minute." She dialed the number as she spoke. I fiddled with the radio to cover my impatience and succeeded in tuning in on a station.

"... are vague, but the meteorite has gouged a channel from the Clyde to the Forth and destroyed parts of Edinburgh. Fires have broken out in many places and authorities are trying to keep control. Keep listening for more news. You are urged not to panic."

"Well?" I didn't conceal my haste to be away.

"You're right, the line's dead." She winced as she stood up and we hurried out to the empty corridor. I had the radio. We reached the elevator, but it failed to come up when I pressed the button; someone had left the door open and the elevator wouldn't operate. We went down the stairs.

The place was deserted. The noise of our heels echoing eerily was drowned out by the roar of another meteorite rushing by somewhere to the south. Instinctively we clung together. The building shook again and a crack appeared in the wall.

We pulled apart and ran down the remaining stairs until, gasping for breath, we reached the street. Miss Field's face was drawn with pain. Everyone had headed for the open at the same time, so we were jostled and buffeted about. By now it was dark. Lights had been left blazing

everywhere, lending the scene a false festive atmosphere like Mardi Gras gone mad. High overhead, a long, brilliant streak scored the sky.

The crowds, spilling from the pavements onto the road, were pushing to no purpose. Cars were marooned in the living sea, and at the foot of John Street, where my own was parked, police cars were trying desperately to clear a way through to George Street for ambulances and fire engines. Two more meteors flashed by.

Taking Miss Field's elbow, I began to push toward my car. If we couldn't move it anywhere, we might at least be safe inside it for a time.

A voice from a police car blared, miraculously managing to make itself heard above the din. "Please keep off the road! Ambulances and fire engines are trying to get through to stricken areas. Please keep..." The officer was making little impression.

There was a gurgling cry just ahead as a woman tripped and disappeared under the feet of the crowd. No one picked her up. I pushed the radio at Miss Field and battled my way to the fallen woman. As soon as I had helped her, she disappeared into the crowds again, shoving as hard as ever. My companion was beside me again and gradually we forced our way to the car.

It was already occupied; the youth glanced up in fear as I grabbed his collar and pulled him out. The keys he'd been using dropped to the floor. With a twist, he was out of my grasp and away. I got into the car just after Miss Field. Suddenly the commotion was dwarfed by a horrible roar and a whoosh: a huge, intensely bright, yellow monster, cartwheeling parallel to George Street, came in from the west and exploded in the region of the telephone headquarters, about two hundred yards up the street.

Sparks showered the milling crowds, but the screams around me were nothing compared with the sounds from the point of impact. Following the dreadful crash of masonry, flame and smoke exploded into view.

The woman was quivering in the seat beside me; I could see she'd been crying and was wiping away the tears.

"How far is your house from here? Could we walk?"

"No. I live in Brookfield, about fifteen miles away."

I gave her the appropriate map to chart our route. "Go up to Cathedral Street and turn left," she said.

At least I knew where that was. As we moved off, the radio came to life again. Part of my attention was diverted by driving, but I gathered that damage and death were extensive. Robert Campbell, Scotland's Regional Director, was calling for everyone's cooperation with the authorities.

We passed Love Loan and turned into Cathedral Street. Although most of the traffic was going the other way, I still had to contend with the gleaming, sharded carpet of glass that lay ahead of us; and hundreds of pedestrians scurried about like rats in a maze. I kept my speed to around twenty-five miles an hour. Compared with the other cars, we hardly seemed to be moving.

We'd gone only a few hundred yards when an approaching van had a blow-out. The vehicle was doing about sixty and it spun across the road into the path of my car. The woman screamed. Realizing that braking would be useless, I wrenched the wheel to the right. The tires screeched as they grated through the glass. The van, which seemed about to go past, suddenly spun again and smashed the passenger side of the car with the force of a fighting galley ramming the enemy. Miss Field's second scream was abruptly cut short. As my head jerked forward and hit the steering wheel, I was vaguely aware of something hot spattering my face.

I regained partial, groggy consciousness, and floated up from the depths of emptiness. A weight crushed against my left side. I tried to push it away, but my hand encountered a hot stickiness. I glanced round and was shocked fully awake.

Miss Field slid against the dashboard like a discarded puppet. The van had plowed into the car at least two feet, demolishing the whole of the front and most of the side. Miss Field had her back to me. I froze in the act of easing myself away from her—an incoming meteorite seemed to shake the world with its passage, then was gone, exploding somewhere behind the university.

As I moved, the girl's body fell back and draped itself over the stubby gearshift. I looked at her face. It was covered with blood, gore and glass. Overcome with a painful retching, I averted my head quickly.

But I had to look again: she might still be alive, although I doubted it.

Clamping my mouth tightly shut, I took a handkerchief and tried to clean some of the mess away. It was enough to convince me she was dead.

I sat for a minute, becoming increasingly aware of a large bump on my forehead. I was lucky; nothing was broken. I crawled out of the car, none too steadily, and had to scramble out of the path of an oncoming truck that peppered my face with particles of glass as it raced past me. I'd instinctively closed my eyes, which saved them, but the rest of my face felt as if it had been exposed to a sandstorm.

I opened my eyes again and gazed around. I glanced over at the van; it was leaning against a storefront and there was no movement from inside. One or two pedestrians sprinted down the street, and plenty of cars picked their way down the road. The sky was a lurid yellow mixed with black, and some of the buildings were in flames. I huddled against the car again as I heard the already-familiar roar of an approaching meteorite. It rent the sky about two hundred feet overhead and incandescent fragments pattered onto the streets, like rain.

I was alone in a dying city, a dead woman for a companion. And no one was going to help me but myself. My instincts warned me to get away as quickly as possible. But there was the woman: still a human being, if dead. Before long, there would be packs of dogs and cats roaming the streets, searching for food. I didn't want that to happen to her.

A gray Alsatian, as large as a wolf, came loping along from the direction of the city and paused as it neared the car. That decided me. The animals wouldn't be hungry: yet. The dog circled me warily, snarling as it ran away. A light wind had risen, wafting the smoke along the street in whirling eddies, fanning the loudly crackling flames, and stirring up dust from the collapsed building, now in its death throes.

I could do one of two things with the girl. I could get some gasoline and set the car alight. Or I could drag her body into a shop and try and give her some protection against predatory animals. I didn't relish the thought of burning the body, so I decided on the second plan. There wouldn't be any trouble in getting in somewhere. There was unlikely to be a whole pane of glass in the area.

I didn't want to have to move the body too far. My stomach hadn't stopped churning and I knew that if I were sick again, I would never finish the task. I walked along the street and found a butcher's shop, about

twenty yards away from the scene of the wreck.

Returning to the car, I set about getting the body out. The force of the crash had tilted the car up and I had to get down on my knees. It was neither easy nor pleasant. I covered her head with my car duster and, putting my hands under her armpits, began to pull. In my awkward position, I couldn't exert much leverage and I was soon sweating. I kept hitting my head, which aggravated the bump already there. Finally, I had her out onto the road.

Cars and pedestrians still passed, but no one offered to help. Not that I expected any; people had their own problems. I lifted her body—she wasn't as heavy as she'd seemed when I pulled her out of the car—and carried her to the shop. I took her through to the rear, opened the door of the large refrigerator, and laid her on the floor inside. I stood, looking down. Nothing would get at her here. I left the cloth over her face.

I closed and secured the door before going outside again. A man and a woman, carrying suitcases, passed quickly and didn't give me as much as a glance. The flames had set up a roar of their own as they leapt from building to building, so I didn't hear the meteorite coming in until it was almost on top of me. It was a very small one, but I felt the heat of its passage as I jogged back to the car. My body jarred as I threw myself down onto the street, momentarily oblivious to the splinters driving into my hands.

The meteorite sizzled past and hit the street about fifty yards away in an eruption that scattered fierce white sparks and fragments in profusion. I was struggling to my feet when I smelled burning material. Quickly I whipped off my coat. The left tail flap was smoldering and a small flame quivered at the edge of the burn. I beat it out on the ground and put the coat on again.

I reached the car and, while I considered what I was going to do next, picked shards of glass out of my hands. Fortunately, I had no serious wounds. I was alone, a stranger in the city, with nowhere to go; and I had no transportation. During my stay in Glasgow, I'd received invitations to the homes of several of my colleagues. One lived in Milngavie, another in Airdrie, the third in Barrhead: all just places on a map.

I checked my watch: 4.45 p.m., almost two hours since the meteorites had started to fall in large numbers. And they were still coming; I could

detect the detonations above the crackle and roar of the flames.

This meteor stream might be called a rogue. Most streams are associated with the debris left in the wake of a comet and follow their own orbits around the sun. As such, the Earth crosses those orbits at fairly well-known specified times of the year. This stream was totally unpredictable. The only satisfactory explanation I had been able to come up with is that the sun, in its own journey through the Galaxy, was sweeping through a section of interstellar space that was peppered with debris of its own. If that were the case, there was no telling how long this shower could last; it depended on how thick the layer of interstellar junk was.

But if things were going this badly here, I knew they must be even worse on the other side of the globe. Because of the Earth's rotation, meteors hit harder and more frequently on the side where the hour is between midnight and noon. During the a.m. period, that side of the Earth is moving head-on toward the stream. In the afternoon and evening, the meteors have to "catch up" with us in order to hit. The western hemisphere and the Pacific Ocean would be taking the worst beating at the moment. In eight hours it would be our turn. But geography would hardly matter; if the big meteorites continued to fall at this rate for even the next few days, the surface of the Earth would soon resemble that of the Moon.

Speculation wasn't going to solve my present problem. The heat in the area was becoming unbearable, despite the January evening chill, and I had to move. There was no point to wandering about aimlessly—I'd get myself killed, sooner or later. I doubted any aircraft would be flying from Abbotsinch, or from any other airport, but it made a definite destination. And, I had noticed from the map, Miss Field's village was fairly near the airport. That gave me two possible destinations. The thought of the girl's home made me thankful my own parents were dead. I had no brothers or sisters and I wasn't married. I was both alone and lonely. I retrieved the map, now splattered with blood, from the car and started walking.

It was a dangerous business. If I tried to walk on the pavement, I ran the risk of getting buried under masonry. The road was little better: vehicles were being driven haphazardly, with no thought of keeping to the correct side. Picking my way through a maze of rubble, crashed cars and broken glass, I made slow progress. The intense heat and thick smoke

swirled around in the wind, making my eyes, nose and throat raw. Dante's little holocaust was minor compared to this. I gave up trying to keep a simultaneous lookout for falling buildings, speeding cars and meteorites with my name on them. I was miserable, footsore, tired and hungry.

I'd waved at one or two cars, but no one stopped to pick up passengers. The end of Cathedral Street seemed as far away as the sun. Long before I reached it I could hear the cacophony of motor horns, shouting and screaming. Five or six roads converged on the area and the traffic was jammed solid, like metal sardines waiting to be canned. People were scrambling over the cars, cursing and fighting. I kept well back. I could see no way through the packed mass and I didn't fancy risking life and limb trying to force a way. That traffic jam was likely to last until the vehicles rusted.

And I was running very hard just to stay in the same place. I couldn't make a detour. All the buildings were either wrecked or in flames. I'd have to abandon the plan of getting to the airport or to Miss Field's house. I turned to trudge back the way I'd come. As I did so, I saw a brilliant ball of fire expanding in the sky at a terrifying rate until it filled my vision like a hypnotist's gleaming charm. It seemed to be heading straight for me. I couldn't move and I couldn't scream. There was a stupendous roaring, like a dozen hurricanes raging at the one instant of time. I could see the tumbling of the component fragments of the meteorite as it streaked down the sky. Screams took on a note of hysterical fear. I willed myself to run, to hide—

The meteorite struck the ground and the world erupted in my face.

CHAPTER 2

Awakening was like a second birth. All was noise, beat and pain. Especially pain. There was a blossoming ache in my chest. I tried to move and couldn't. I was pinned down by something. When I explored it with my free right hand, it looked and felt like metal. It shifted a little when I pushed it, but I couldn't sustain the effort. Being knocked unconscious twice within a few hours had sapped my physical strength. I lay like a dead man.

Perhaps I was already as good as dead. I couldn't think clearly. Lucid moments, when I could assimilate the torment and agony, were followed

by what seemed like eons of woolly limbo. I was trying grimly to hold onto my life, which would inexorably slip away if I didn't do something. Paradoxically, I was shivering with cold amid the furnace of flames. Blood fouled my mouth.

I ran my hand over the metal object again, extending my arm as far as it would go. I was trapped by part of a car. I moved my legs experimentally and pushed my feet against the rubble. One of my shoes was off. Summoning up reserves of strength, I began slowly to wriggle my way out of my metal prison. I had to stop and draw hard breaths every few seconds. My head felt like an overripe fruit about to split. It must have struck the ground hard when I fell.

I discovered that I would move a little and then the metal would simply shift and clamp me down as firmly as ever. Despair and frustration confused my thinking. I forced my weary body to relax and the free-running gears of my mind to mesh again. I had to stop the metal from shifting with me; therefore I had to stop it with something. I screwed my head around to the right. There was plenty of rubble within my long reach and I started to gather it near me.

When I had all I could get, I recommenced the rescue operation. It was a tricky job. With one hand, I had to grip a bit of rubble and lever up the metal at the same time. Pushing with my feet, I managed to use extra purchase. As I raised the metal higher, I thrust rubble underneath it. Finally, it was precariously clear enough to let me hold it up with both hands. I drew my legs up, then straightened my body out. Once again, and I was free.

I crawled a yard or two and lay exhausted. The sweat produced by my exertions was already cooling and I was racked with long, uncontrolled shivers. Depression settled over me like a shroud. After all my efforts, I was going to die. I could lie here and soon it would be over. The warning bells set up a clangor in my numbed mind. I was drifting into delirium; it would be so easy to let it take over.

It took a supreme surge of will to make my body sit up. My head seemed to do a quick waltz and I shot out my hands to prevent myself from falling. Propping myself up, I sat, arms extended, for a few minutes. The meteorites were still making their kamikaze plunges to the ground, which shook with every impact. Apart from that, the area was strangely quiet. The fires didn't burn so fiercely, the smoke wasn't so thick, and the

occasional screams seemed more of resignation than of pain.

Then I realized that my hearing was impaired; the left ear was almost totally deaf, the right one was dull. I hoped it would clear up. My chest still ached painfully, but I was intact, no bones broken. Even so, I was a sorry specimen of humanity; my face was flecked with blood, my hands felt as if they'd been shredded, and my clothes were torn and dirty (to say nothing of the missing shoe). I stood up, taking my time, like someone getting out of bed for the first time after a long illness, went and found my shoe and put it on. That made me feel better. I had accomplished something.

I looked around me. I was marooned in a sea of stone and flame. Only luck had kept me alive. If that piece of flying metal had struck my face instead of my chest... The thought was unpleasant, so I concentrated on the immediate problem of leaving the place. I started to pick my way through the rubble, which kept shifting under my feet, threatening to pitch me headlong with every step. I was soon near exhaustion again from the effort. Somehow, I kept going.

The street junction was a horrifying tangle of bodies, metal and masonry. It was like the product of a mad sculptor's mind. Here and there, other people were moving about in a slow, stunned manner. A woman screamed as a meteorite roared to a ground-shaking finale. The noise was muffled for me.

I was about to stumble on when a hand gripped my arm. I jerked away with fright and retreated. "Come and help with the rescue work," the man said, turning away without waiting for an answer. In the flickering flames he looked like a wraith. I followed and joined a group of men and women who were using bits of wood, or their bare hands, to remove rubble from a crushed-up mess that had once been a car. I still couldn't hear very well, but I assumed that someone was alive, or we wouldn't be excavating. My mind was functioning sluggishly and I had to give myself plenty of time to think. The blow on the head must have been more serious than I'd thought.

We worked in silence. It was a relief to have something to take my mind off my own troubles. I could have been buried, as hundreds must be, with little hope of survival. Urgency, giving me new strength, made me work harder. I couldn't find a suitable lever, so I used my hands. I was beyond caring that they were a mesh of cuts and raw patches.

In a few minutes we had the car uncovered enough to see the girl sagging against her safety belt in the driver's seat. I couldn't hear, but she was probably moaning. Flames reflected in her eyes as she stared at me. The back of the car had jacked up and crumpled and she was trapped in a little cocoon of metal and upholstery. Getting her out wasn't going to be simple.

My right ear popped, as if I were at a high altitude, and I could hear again. "Easy, now, lass," the big man was crooning, "we'll soon have you out of there." She was sobbing in a quiet way that was more disturbing than a full-blooded scream. I hope she believed him. "You others: start getting someone else out." To me, he said, "Those hefty shoulders of yours should come in useful; you stay with me." I did as I was told. No one else seemed to question his authority. Times of stress, they say, always produce leaders. I certainly was in no fit state to be one, even if I'd wanted to.

We knelt beside the car and studied the problem. The door was buckled in and the passenger seat in the front had been ripped loose and jammed the woman against the door. The top of the car at the windshield had collapsed, so there was no chance of getting her out that way. It had to be the door. Both of us pulled, but it was firmly stuck and we succeeded only in hurting our hands. The cold was beginning to creep in again. Every so often, at irregular intervals, the roar of an incoming meteorite could be heard and the ground would shake, dislodging stones with the tremors. Others worked nearby, pulling and heaving at twisted metal.

The big man sat back on his haunches. "We need tools. Go see if you can find some tools, in a car or from a shop. I'll keep trying here."

By the glare of the dying flames I spotted a truck almost clear of rubble, and made for it. The cab was tilted at a crazy angle, while the body remained more or less upright. I was puffing by the time I reached it, my breath like steam in the chill air. The tools would probably be under the seat. The near side was tilted precariously toward the ground. Any strong vibration would shift the structure. I leaned into the cab, poking around under the seat. There was a heavy tool box. Sweating with exertion, I got both hands on the box and began to drag it out. The cab creaked ominously, like a windjammer in a storm.

An awful roar filled the sky. The meteorite was going to be a big one and was shaking the area even before it hit the ground. The clammy sweat of fear enveloped my body: this was it! The cab was grating against the

rubble when the heavy box slid and pinned my right hand. Whimpering, I tried ineffectually to free myself. The thundering climaxed and the meteorite exploded somewhere behind me. The blast and heat propelled me forward easily as if I'd been a feather. The cab was falling away and I went with it, still half in and half out. Luckily, another vehicle, lying on its back, prevented the cab from tumbling over on its side. I kept moving and ended up inside the cab, with my feet sticking out of the window.

I lay limply, marveling at my escape. I was conscious and apparently undamaged. Pulling my feet in, I lifted the box and threw it to the ground, then got down after it. New fires had sprung up everywhere. Judging by the rising column of flame and smoke, the meteorite had struck about half a mile away. I hefted the tool box back to the trapped girl. The leader was standing, hands on hips, staring down. He glanced at the tool box as I put it on a rock.

"We won't need it for this one, now. Let's see how the others are." Seven of them, three women and four men, were standing in a group, looking toward the fountain of smoke and flame. No one was speaking. The shell of a building began to crash down over to our left, sending up a blanket of dust.

We went over to them. "Anyone hurt?" our self-appointed leader asked.

A short, stout man said, "I wrenched my shoulder when I hit the ground. But it isn't too bad."

No one else had been injured. The subject reminded me of my complaints. My right ear was still clear, but the left one was out of action. And my chest was painful again. I said nothing.

After the recent activities, I could feel the cold beginning to penetrate my bruised body. As if reading my mind, the leader said, "We'll have to get under cover before we freeze to death. There's little more we can do for anyone here."

The desolation around us hadn't much to offer by way of shelter.

"But there will still be people alive under the debris," one of the women protested. "We can't go away without trying to rescue some of them."

"I know that," he replied, answering the first part of her statement.

"Everything has shifted since that last explosion. We'd have to start searching all over again. We don't have the resources or the strength and we'd be killing ourselves. Brutally put, it's us or them and I don't think the possible sacrifice is any longer worth trying to get out people who are probably beyond medical help, anyway."

He paused and then went on in a gentler tone: "They'll be mercifully dead by morning. The weather—" He left the sentence dangling. "I think we should find someplace for the night."

There were two far-off roars, one right after the other, and the ground shook slightly. The tortured landscape groaned and scraped and creaked, stirring up more dust. The shells of buildings thrust up, like wrecks in a ships' graveyard. Some were burning. It began to snow; small flakes floated down and persisted where they lay. We would have to find shelter soon or we would be no better off than the victims under the rubble.

We trooped westward after the leader. The first building we came to was little more than a pile of debris and two standing walls about seven feet high. These looked as if a strong breeze would knock them over. The blanket of snow was beginning to thicken.

We tried three more places before we found one that seemed more reliable. It stood between two taller buildings and was relatively unscathed. It had been a shop with houses above—one, perhaps two storeys; it was impossible to tell, the place was so ruined.

Books were littered everywhere among bits of partially collapsed ceiling, but at least we were in out of the snow. Two of the men went to explore the shop, while the rest of us started to clear spaces so we could lie down. There was plenty of wood about from smashed furniture and one of the women helped me to gather it. The others had piled books just inside the door; we heaped the wood on and soon had a fire going.

The men came back. The leader said, "There's a kitchen at the rear of the shop. There's water and some provisions, so we can have something to eat and drink." He warmed his hands at the blaze as he spoke. "A stairway leads to the room above, but it's partially blocked and could be dangerous." He was silent as we heard the snow-muffled noise of a meteorite coming in. It must have been quite far away, for the impact explosion wasn't very loud. I could see tense expressions imprinted on the dirt-streaked faces of my companions.

"Since we're thrown together in adversity," the leader went on, "we'd better get to know each other. My name's Westlake. I'm a lawyer."

I happened to be sitting first to his right and his glance invited my contribution to the identification parade. "Harry Blackman. Astronomer." That raised some eyebrows, as if I were personally to blame for the catastrophe.

Next to me was the woman who'd helped me with the wood. I judged her to be about thirty and possibly attractive, though the grime made a perfect disguise.

She was pleasantly plump. Tossing her long, mouse-colored hair, she said in a weary voice: "Margery Queen. I was a secretary." She laid heavy emphasis on the word "was." I liked her.

The short, stout gentleman with the wrenched shoulder spoke up, in a rather prissy tone, laced with self-importance. "I'm Lawrence Yaffe, Managing Director of my own firm." Everyone refrained from standing up and clapping. *Clothes shops?* I wondered; *money lender, warehouseman?* It made for interesting speculation.

Huddled next to him was a little woman who looked about fifty, thin and taut as a piano wire, and perhaps as tough. The fire reflected in her very bright eyes. "Maisie McKay, housewife." As I watched her, she brushed her right eye with a furtive hand. She hadn't looked at anyone as she spoke.

The third woman in the group was about twenty-five, with short, curly fair hair, an extremely dirty face, even in the present circumstances, and an expensive, green, sheepskin coat. She wore the huge collar turned up all the way around. Her voice was concise, with a trace of accent I couldn't quite place, and she made my hackles rise. She was a lady scientist—worse, an anthropologist. My relations with colleagues of the opposite sex had never been good and I reflected on whether I would break the cycle with Susan Marks.

Three men were left. Andy Gardner was a chemist, balding, middle-aged, unobtrusive. John Allingham was young and darkly attractive, with an athlete's build. He was an engineer. Lastly, there was Bob Peyton, a technical representative for a chemicals combine. Even in his disheveled state, he contrived to look neat. His trim mustache and

black, wavy hair gave him a rakish appearance, which his voice, seemingly always on the edge of humor, belied.

Nine people, from varying stations and walks of life, thrown together by natural calamity. The names and occupations helped me to consider them as people, not merely as pawns in the human chess game. We looked like fugitives from the Stone Age.

Westlake took charge again. Only Yaffe seemed to resent it. He sniffed loudly. Evidently he thought that a managing director should take precedence over a lawyer. I saw one or two of the others smiling. "I'm going to see if I can make some tea. Any volunteers to help?"

His manner was disarming. If he were a prosecuting attorney, I was willing to bet he could persuade a defendant to contradict himself ten times a minute. Even though he must have been at least sixty there was a spry, lively quality about him that belied his age.

Maisie McKay stood up. "Let's get on with it, Mr. Westlake."

"Don't you think you should have a rest, Maisie?" he said, concerned.

Her eyes flashed. "I've been through a depression and a world war, and I'm not going to give way to this. Come on."

"Good for you, Maisie," Bob said, laughing. "The old Dunkirk spirit." He wasn't being sarcastic.

"Fine," Westlake said; then to no one in particular, "Keep the fire going."

As I threw on some more wood and secondhand books, John Allingham suggested, "Perhaps I'd better have a look at the stove. It might be dangerous."

"That's sensible," Westlake agreed, preceding the other two through to the kitchen. I heard Allingham asking whether it was gas or electric.

Westlake had been a kind of nuclear glue holding the parts of the group together, and even his temporary departure created a conversational vacuum. Again, if the others felt as I did, they wouldn't be inclined to talk. One or two were lying back, as if falling asleep.

Tension suddenly filled the air again as a roar that even the still-falling snow couldn't muffle beat against our eardrums. The ground began to shake. Debris fell onto the floor of the room above. I could see Yaffe beginning to rise. He wanted to run. The fear emanating from him was contagious. If the meteorite struck anywhere near, the building we were in would probably collapse. The ground was trembling as the roaring increased. While incandescent fragments hit the snow, the sizzling could be heard plainly. More debris rattled onto the floor above; everything seemed to be vibrating. The meteorite could have been only a few hundred feet up as it whooshed overhead. The pitch of the noise began to drop and about a minute later we heard and felt the impact.

"That was close," Bob Peyton breathed. There wasn't a ghost of a laugh in his voice.

I realized that my nails had been digging into the palms of my hands during the meteorite's passage and now they stung. "It was a really big one," I remarked, shivering despite the heat of the fire. Outside, a building toppled over, making me jump.

"You'd know about that, of course." I recognized Gardner's quiet voice.

I muttered "Yes," and would have left it at that, but the chemist persisted: "Could you tell us something about the phenomenon? I'm sure we'd all like to know." I couldn't tell if he was genuinely interested, or just killing time.

The tea makers came back, with an assortment of cups, mugs and jam jars on a tray. "Cups for the ladies," Westlake said, carrying the tea around. "Help yourselves to sugar from the bag. No milk, I'm afraid."

I waited for him to add that the milkman hadn't left any. But he was an astute man; he knew just how far to jolly people along without overdoing it. Maisie sat down beside me and I told her the tea was very good. I'd misjudged her age badly. Even with a close scrutiny I wouldn't have said she was much over fifty. But, from her remarks, she must have been born some time before 1930.

I thought I was going to wriggle out of giving my lecture, but Margery Queen reminded me with an exaggerated brightness. I spoke briefly, realizing that we had much more important things to discuss. Westlake appreciated my brevity. With his natural charm, he adroitly stifled

discussion (which I didn't want, anyway) by saying, "So Earth is like a town where it rains all the time and occasionally suffers a severe storm of"—he sought a phrase—"iron rain." He had an ear for the harmony of words. "Stone" rain would have been a more accurate description, since about ninety percent of meteorites hitting the planet were formed of stony materials.

Our tumbledown haven began to shake again as a large meteorite roared in somewhere toward the south and exploded with a cracking noise that reverberated for minutes afterward. More debris fell from above. A few more near misses like that and the building wouldn't last the night. It was still snowing thickly and we were stuck till daylight. I wiped away a mixture of sweat and dust from my forehead. My heart was thudding. I was annoyed at my fear, which I considered irrational; I knew what was causing it, but could do nothing to influence the cause. The residue of primitive race memory in me had more sense than my sophisticated mind and was justifiably afraid.

Westlake said: "I suggest we try and get some rest tonight—I know it won't be easy, but we can do nothing constructive until morning. If any authority still exists, we'll have to get in touch with them. Whatever happens, times are going to be difficult, and I think we should keep together. First thing we'll have to get is food. It's going to be scarce."

"What you mean is that we'd better get to the food before others do, and that there's going to be safety in numbers?"

He took my direct challenge. "Yes. This isn't like a war, when everyone cooperates to defeat the enemy. If what has happened around here is repeated everywhere, the destruction is going to mean the almost total breakdown of our civilization."

"Surely, then," Allingham countered, "that's all the more reason for cooperation?"

There were murmurs of support.

"Agreed. We must be open to cooperation where and when it is genuinely offered. But it is only common sense to be prepared for trouble if it occurs."

"It seems a jaundiced, if perceptive, view of the situation," Susan Marks

commented. "He's right, though. A person's basic instinct is to think of the safety of family and self first during a crisis, then of others only if that safety is not endangered. This is our family. You get my vote, Mr. Westlake."

He thanked her. "You are all, of course, free to do what you want. I still think my precautions are wise ones. You can decide in the morning."

He piled wood and books on the fire, then lay back. I had worked my body into a fairly comfortable position and I spent some time staring out at the snow. If I slept at all, it would be through exhaustion. My chest was painful again, a nagging ache that would intensify, then fade. Between them, Westlake and Susan Marks had given me (and the others) plenty to think about. Although I had forced Westlake to stop hedging like a lawyer, I agreed with him. I didn't think there was going to be much authority left and I was sure that many people would ignore direction and restriction. It wasn't going to be a pleasant time.

A dog howled.

CHAPTER 3

By morning, I was cold, stiff and aching. I had passed the night in a series of shallow catnaps, frequently interrupted by the roar and crack of incoming meteorites, which were even more frightening when one was in the vague limbo between sleeping and waking. A fine patina of dust had settled over me and when I sat up, bits of plaster fell out of my hair. I peered through the cracked glass of my watch: 6.30. The fire was still going. Most of us, at some stage or other of the night, had kept it fueled. It was low, though, so I piled on books and a few pieces of wood, then started to jump up and down, trying to get warm.

"You don't strike me as the early-morning athletic type." Susan Marks looked surprisingly attractive in the firelight. Others were beginning to stir.

"I'm not, but I've got to generate heat somehow." The exercise was hurting my chest, but I kept on.

"Come and help me make some tea," she said. "I'm perished."

Glad of the excuse to stop, I followed her through to the kitchen. There wasn't much room to move, due to debris. She organized things efficiently, boiling the water in a battered kettle on a gas ring, while I cleaned the assortment of cups, mugs and jars. The smell of gas was very strong and I didn't think the supply would last much longer.

The rest of the group were huddled around the fire when Susan and I brought in the tea. Westlake wasn't one to waste time. As we took the first sips at the scalding tea, he said: "Have you made up your minds what you intend to do?"

Susan answered first. "I'm in favor of staying with the group. It's the sensible thing to do."

My "Count me in" was followed by a chorus of assent.

"Good," Westlake said, obviously pleased. "The food supply is the most important thing, so I suggest that Bob Peyton, Harry Blackman and myself go shopping after we've finished our tea."

"That's a good idea," Maisie McKay said, "but shouldn't you have a woman along? You men aren't practical, to say the least."

We laughed and Westlake said, "You can come along and see that we don't take too many tins of caviar." There was no sarcasm in the words, rather an acceptance of her qualifications.

Since I had awakened, meteorites had been falling regularly, but there was no point in diving for cover every time. The one that came close enough to matter would be the last one we would know about. But I still felt my muscles tensing whenever I heard the roaring whistle of an incoming fireball and a brief glance at any of the others revealed their tensions. We were like troops under shellfire, waiting, wondering...

A large one began its descent as we were about to go out. The noise was deafening and my body was uncomfortable with the force of the reverberations of the pressure wave. Everything was shaking; it was evident that our temporary home wouldn't last much longer. Bits of it were falling, stirring up dust, and there was a continual ominous creaking.

I peered out, seeing, at first, nothing but snow. Then I spotted the steadily expanding pinkish glow as the meteorite thundered down. My

nails were furrowing my palms, but the pain of the lacerations lent me a terrible clarity of mind as the immense cauldron of fire rushed toward the ground. I sensed that this might be the fatal one.

"Outside!" I shouted, pushing those nearest to me into the open. "Out! Out!" I was aware of people scrambling by me, infected by the panic of my warning. I was still standing, petrified by the cosmic Gorgon. Hands were pulling me, then thrusting me to the snow. The ground shook against my face. The area was bathed in a fierce light, and great fiery fragments of the meteorite went cartwheeling off the main body, sending up clouds of hissing steam when they struck the snow. The building we had just left tumbled down like a jerry-builder's nightmare, and we were showered with a mixture of dust and snow.

The heat of the passing meteorite seared me and then it was gone. There seemed to be a split second of silence before the terrifying crack of the meteorite pulverized a considerable bit of the city. The impact point must have been at least a mile away, probably more, otherwise we wouldn't have been alive. As we lay pressed hard to the ground, the iron rain pattered around us. I drew my breath in with pain as a small piece landed on my left hand and started to fry the skin. Quickly I brushed it off, wincing as the cold pounced on the raw wound.

I raised my head a little. Susan was lying close to my right side, her head tucked in like that of a sleeping bird. Some tiny fragments were smoldering on her back; I flicked them away and heard them spit angrily as they died in the snow. Yaffe was rolling about on his back, rubbing it frantically. Steam and smoke squeezed out from his sides and I smiled at the sight he made. Susan looked up, saw him, and started laughing, too. After a second, I stopped, feeling weak from the strain of the last few minutes. My blood was setting up a circulatory sprint record and I breathed deeply to calm myself, before getting up and helping Susan to her feet.

Yaffe had managed to extinguish his personal fire and, like the rest of us, looked miserable. Already the dampness was seeping through my clothes and into my bones. I beat my arms, but not too strenuously. My chest had taken another thumping when Susan had yanked me out of the building. No one mentioned the warning I had given. I think we all realized that we'd been too near death to indulge in banalities.

"We'd better find shelter," Westlake said quietly.

But where? The snow had distorted the contours of the ground, so that the limited landscape around us was totally unfamiliar. And from where we huddled, there wasn't another building in sight. Westlake, his hands a protecting bridge above his slitted eyes, glanced this way and that, as if he might clear a tunnel through the silent flakes by the force of personality alone. He pointed a finger and said, "The nearest buildings I can remember, in relation to here, were that way. Let's go."

No one argued. No one spoke. We followed him, keeping close together. It would be all too easy to get separated and lost in the white murk. We didn't so much walk as stumble, slither, and occasionally, fall. We moved in our own little continuum and I was glad of the meager heat generated by the exercise. But I was getting colder and my spirits were dropping with my temperature. Almost, I envied Susan her coat.

My watch had stopped, I had no idea of the time and I was too tired to ask someone. Then, off to our left, some buildings loomed up, like the skeletal remains of some stranded sea monster. The world was beginning to shake again and we paused until, somewhere ahead of us, the violent mating took place between planet and meteorite, showering the area with the expected iron rain.

The first two buildings were inaccessible, completely blocked up by rubble that had caved in from higher floors. The third looked more promising. It seemed to be free of serious damage and we were soon inside, in a furniture showroom. The beds, chairs and settees were like visions of the Elysian Fields. In minutes, the scene resembled the aftermath of a Roman orgy, with bodies draped everywhere in exhausted poses.

Outside, the snow was slackening off. The first weak rays of the sun probed cautiously at the ravaged planet. A tidal wave of sleep engulfed me. I forgot pain and cold and fear: I slept. Through my sleep the Earth shook, as if giants walked there.

I was awakened by a sound I couldn't identify. Coming from outside, it was a hard, chattering noise, moving toward the buildings. The others were rousing themselves from sleep. I glanced at Susan. "It's a helicopter," she said, obviously noting my puzzled look, and stood up.

My mind had been running in a logical channel. Nothing should be flying in the present conditions. Although I had subconsciously recognized

the sound made by a helicopter, my mind had rejected the correct solution and sought another. I began to hold a minute respect for lady scientists—or at least for one lady scientist. She grinned at me, as if she could read my thoughts. The helicopter started hovering, about thirty yards away.

We were crowded around the doorway and the window, when a voice, magnified and distorted by a megaphone, shouted out: "Survivors please show yourselves. We are organizing shelter, food and clothes. This is a police message."

The helicopter came on again, like a flying pneumatic drill. The message was repeated. When the machine was abreast of the door, Westlake stepped out into the snow and waved to the occupants. I could see the head of a man peering down from the helicopter. He put out an arm and indicated that he was going to land.

The pilot eased the helicopter forward a few yards, then brought it down amid swirling snow. As it settled, its engine noise was dwarfed by the roar of an incoming meteorite. We scattered back from the doorway as the iron rain began to fall and sizzle in the snow. I could hear fragments striking the helicopter. The meteorite whooshed past, shaking the ground and the buildings, and exploded. The subdued *crack* indicated that it had met its end about two miles away.

Everyone seemed to begin talking at once as we jostled back to see what was happening outside. The helicopter had cut its engine. The machine was a sleek blue and silver Rotorcraft *Getaway* (such a crass name, I'd always thought), the latest model for people who liked their one-upmanship airborne. And things weren't going to stop at two cars and one helicopter. I'd seen recent advertisements demanding: ARE YOU A TWO-HELICOPTER FAMILY?

The helicopter belonged to Glasgow (Abbotsinch) Airport Heli-Service. I'd flown in on one to the Queen Street Heli-Port. The man climbing out wore a police uniform. There were two other men in the cockpit, but I couldn't see them clearly. He walked over to Westlake, who was standing at the door. He saluted and said, "Constable McLean, sir. We're trying to contact any survivors. There aren't many in the center of the city." His gray eyes scrutinized us as he spoke. He looked strained and tired, but that was only natural. He glanced over his shoulder at the men in the helicopter as Westlake asked, "Where are the survivors being taken,

Constable?"

"Initially to the airport, sir." He seemed to be picking his words very carefully and he kept watching the men in the helicopter. "Robert Campbell has declared martial law. Police and troops are acting under his orders."

"The two with you," Westlake said abruptly, "are they soldiers?"

The policeman's mouth tightened and I thought for a moment that he wasn't going to answer. Then he said, "No, sir. They're two of Campbell's workers."

I could see that Westlake didn't like the sound of that. Nor did I.

"What have they to do with martial law?" Westlake could be disconcertingly blunt.

"I don't know, sir. They've been seconded to help us out during the emergency. I'm following orders."

Which, I bet to myself, you don't approve of.

One of the men shouted from the helicopter, avoiding the policeman's title. "McLean—what's the trouble?"

"No trouble. I'm explaining the situation to them," he called back.

"What happens now?" Westlake asked.

The man who'd shouted left the helicopter and came across to us. He wore a leather-backed blue jerkin, dark trousers and heavy boots. He was brawny, with thick black hair. Small lettering on the left breast pocket said: The Campbell Group. There was a mailed fist underneath. I disliked him on sight.

The policeman didn't like him, either. That much was evident. "If you wait here, sir, you'll be picked up." He was staring hard at Westlake, as if trying to convey a message—or a warning.

"Very well, Constable, we'll do that. I don't want to detain you. I'm sure you have plenty to do."

McLean thanked him and turned away. But the other man stayed, a malicious smile on his hard features. I resented the way he silently looked Susan and Margery up and down. When the helicopter lifted off, the man pushed by Westlake and dropped solidly into a robust armchair that creaked with his weight.

"Anyone got a cigarette?" The accent was definitely Irish.

No one else had sat down and we stood gazing at him as we might study a monkey at the zoo. No one offered him a cigarette.

He became aggressive, the accent broader and uglier. "You know, a fag, a gasper." He stared malevolently at the company in general, before favoring me with his attention. I was bigger than he, which was something. "I don't smoke," I said, implying by my tone that I wouldn't have given him a cigarette if I did.

He was half out of the chair when Peyton and Allingham moved in to stand at either side of me. His belligerence subsided and he slumped back, his eyes narrowed and watchful, his expression unpleasant. "Never mind. I'll take one of my own." He produced a gold case and a gold lighter and lit himself a cigarette.

"We'll have to get something to eat," Maisie announced, once more occupied by the practical things of life.

"Looting forbidden," the Irishman said shortly.

Maisie gave him a fierce look. "And where did you get your fancy lighter and your fancy case?" she retorted.

The remark drew a muttered "Mind your own business" and the man lapsed into a sullen silence.

I'd moved away and Westlake said quietly, "Constable McLean seemed afraid of something, or someone. He wasn't acting naturally." He inclined his head toward the Irishman. "The more I consider him, the more I'm convinced he was trying to warn us of something. If we only knew what, it might help us to be on our guard."

"There's one way to find out and that's to allow ourselves to be taken to the airport. I suppose Campbell's assumption of the powers of martial law

is legal?"

"He was the government's nominee for Governor-General when Scotland elected a Scottish Nationalist Federal Parliament at the last General Election. The title of Regional Director was a most unfortunate choice, and it was going to be changed. I would say he has the power.

"Anyway, in case we need a hideout, my house is in Kilbarchan, up the left fork off the Bridge-of-Weir road, after you go through Brookfield—"

"That's where my Miss Field stayed."

"Good. You know the area, then. The house stands on its own grounds and is called *Trincomalee*. Pass the word around to everyone."

We circulated with the information. A few minutes later, we drifted together again. "Everyone agreed?" I nodded. "Let's get some food, then," Westlake went on, only to be interrupted by the glowering Irishman who demanded: "What are you two whispering about?" He was on his feet, his right hand in his pocket.

"We are talking about getting some food—"

"No one is leaving till the helicopter arrives."

"Are you going to stop the nine of us?" Westlake inquired in a disbelieving tone.

"Yes. With this." He didn't handle the gun very well and it could have been more dangerous in his hand than in that of a weapons expert.

For a brief second, no one moved. But the Irishman couldn't cover everyone. I saw Maisie scooping up a vase and heaving it, all in one action. As it hit the man's arm, causing him to drop the gun, Peyton and Allingham were on him, with fists pummeling. He recovered quickly from his surprise and proved himself a tough fighter. As he thudded a heavy fist into Peyton's chin, I became aware of the thundering of an incoming meteorite. In the excitement, I hadn't heard it.

The floor of the shop was trembling and then the walls took up the vibration. The roaring got louder and diverted everyone's attention, although Allingham and Westlake were sufficiently alert to take

advantage. The engineer swung a championship punch which sent the Irishman tumbling over a chair and onto the floor, where he lay, still. Westlake grabbed the gun, then saw that he had no immediate use for it.

I realized that the meteorite was going to fall close by, and signaled my companions to get down. It was impossible to make myself heard above the increasing din, which reminded me of the frightening noise made by a concentrated artillery barrage. The iron rain was falling thickly, many fragments striking parts of the shop and starting to smolder. A mirror tumbled from the wall with a crash.

The roar of the fast-approaching meteorite seemed to drown out my very thoughts. My head felt as if it were going to disintegrate; my body was running with cold sweat; I knew nothing but fear.

Suddenly there was a terrible heat in the air. I was almost at the heart of an exploding cosmic bomb. The floor tilted away from me and I was sliding, unable to stop myself, in a kaleidoscope of chairs, tables, couches, carpets, whirling, spinning, falling, falling, falling...

Still conscious, I came to a halt somewhere. There was a veil of dust obscuring my view. I peered around, but could see nothing except a vague patch of light above my head. Testing my arms and legs gingerly proved I was still in one piece, probably black and blue. I couldn't hear very well, either, so my ears were again useless, temporarily, I hoped. I had a natural dread of deafness, of being cut off, adrift in a world of silence.

The dust began to settle and I could see a bit better. We'd fallen into the basement. People were struggling to untangle themselves from the furniture. I spotted Westlake, then Maisie, rising like ghosts. "Come and give a hand," a voice blasted in my ear. I turned. It was Susan. I could see by the look on her face that she'd been talking to me several times. I pointed to my ears and shrugged my shoulders as best I could in a folded-up position.

She smiled ghoulishly through a white mask of dust. More debris slid into the basement from above. It was imperative that we get out quickly. That thought jerked me out of my semistupor. My right ear popped, letting in a flood of noise. A number of the others were talking, but Westlake's voice rose above the din, telling someone to be gentle. Susan and I picked our way toward the group. We passed a heavy wardrobe, raised off the ground by something. Then I saw the leg and recognized the

boot. I didn't feel any regret. And I wasn't shocked by my lack of concern for a dead human being.

"We must get out before the place collapses and buries us," I said to Westlake. I suppressed a note of hysteria.

He didn't look up. "As soon as we bind up Yaffe's broken arm," he replied evenly. "I suggest you start getting the women out."

"I know this store," Maisie said. "The stairs are over at the right-hand corner, at the back." She scrambled her way in that direction, with some of us tagging behind.

It took us ten minutes to clear a way to the stairs. All the time the tremors were subsiding, sending clouds of dust everywhere. My eyes, nose and throat were raw and irritated. I sent the three women up the stairs with Gardner, then went back to see if I could help with Yaffe. There was a new hazard, now: fire. Part of the shop above was ablaze. If we didn't hurry we would be trapped.

Bob and John were supporting Yaffe, who was groaning continually. By the time I led them to the stairs, the fire had a strong hold. Smoke was billowing about, making us cough and splutter. We groped our way up the stairs, the heat searing us as we reached the top. The whole place was aflame.

"Link hands!" Susan shouted, grasping mine. She took us out to the snow. For once I was glad to feel the sharp caress of the cold. I sucked in the air, although every breath I drew was agony. We were too weak to stand up and we had no place to sit down. The smoke from the burning building blotted out the sky. Wearily, we trudged along the street, seeking someplace in which to rest.

A black cat ran across our path. "That's supposed to be unlucky," Susan said in a dull voice. The gods must have been annoyed by her harmless remark, for the snow started to drift down again, adding to our misery.

The area we were moving through was a mass of rubble. What buildings there were afforded no shelter. Susan stopped, her head down. "Listen." It was the helicopter, coming nearer. I'd forgotten about it.

We looked at Westlake. No one knew what kind of situation we might

be letting ourselves in for. In the present circumstances there didn't appear to be much choice. He was silent, watching the sky. We waited.

The helicopter came clattering along, fairly high up, a few minutes later. It was a thirty-seater Westland craft, used in passenger ferrying. We were spotted and the machine landed a short distance away.

Two men came to meet us. One was McLean, the policeman. When they reached us, I was jolted to notice that his mouth was cut and swollen and that he had a black eye.

We were subdued as we boarded the helicopter.

CHAPTER 4

There were about ten other people already seated in the helicopter, all looking dirty, miserable and cold. No one spoke. Two of Campbell's men watched us file past to our seats. McLean came in after me and took his place next to the pilot, while the man who'd accompanied the policeman outside was the last to get aboard. He glanced at McLean, who stared back, his expression a mixture of fear and resentment. I was beginning to wish we'd escaped.

The man closed the door, then said to Westlake, who was the nearest of the group, "Where's McCaffrey?" His voice was surprisingly soft for such a muscular-looking man.

"I assume you mean the man who was left to guard us?"

"Yes."

"He's dead." One of the others cursed.

"What happened?"

"He was killed when the floor of the building we were in collapsed into the basement. A very large meteorite fell close by. You might have seen it as you flew this way."

The man smoothed his bright red hair. "I see. But no one else was killed?"

"One man was injured, that was all."

"Strange, don't you think, that McCaffrey was the only one killed?"

Westlake matched the man's steady stare. "You'll agree that many strange things have happened in the past hours. Civilians carrying weapons, for instance."

If the thrust hit the target, the redhead didn't show it. "Take us up," he said to the pilot, who switched on the twin turbine engines. The cabin was effectively soundproofed and only the vibration betrayed that the rotors were turning, building up the power. The lift-off was smooth, evidence of a skilled pilot. I judged our altitude to be less than a hundred feet when the machine began to move forward. The speed increased and the snow-muffled landscape fled beneath us. Looking out across the city, I could see numerous fires burning, sending up black smoke to taint the whiteness of the falling snow.

The helicopter was now following the Clyde. Ruin and destruction lay everywhere below. As the machine rose higher, the scene became a remote chiaroscuro of smoke and snow. The flight would take only a few minutes and we hadn't long to wait to find out what was going to happen to us. The redhead was watching us the way a warden supervises his especially difficult prisoners.

The airport lay ahead, on the left. Several small craters had been blasted around the perimeter. The M8 motorway that passed a few hundred yards to the east of the airport was badly damaged, but the main reception building, the hotel and most of the offices and cargo sheds appeared to be unscathed. Four or five aircraft were dotted about behind the reception area.

The helicopter swooped to a landing at the front entrance. We got out and stood huddled in the snow. Some men, in the now-familiar dark clothes, were stamping about in what I would have called strategic positions, at the front and sides of the terminal. There was no traffic moving anywhere. The carpark opposite the terminal was half-full; one or two cars stood in the free, limited-time area, alongside the oblong ponds, near the helicopter landing pad.

We forgot about the cold and gazed apprehensively into the sky to the west, searching for the source of a rapidly deafening roar. The first

instinct was to run for cover, but we were safer in the open. Margery was first to pinpoint the brilliant, yellowish-pink fireball as it slashed the thin veil of snow about half a mile to the south, trailing a billowing tail of smoke and flame. Some incandescent fragments spluttered in the snow nearby. The noise wasn't as bad here as it would have been in the city, but the rolling thunder was frightening. The meteorite exploded with a nerve-scratching *crack* that left the inside of my skull feeling like an echo chamber.

A large window pane shattered and fell inward. Others displayed sudden hair-line patterns, but remained intact. Redhead marshaled us and we entered the building. He led us to the left and we passed the row of check-in booths for the various airlines and went up the stairs to the spacious first floor. To the right was a book shop and a bar and a restaurant; on the left was a bank and a clothes shop. There were plenty of seats. But I placed hunger before weariness, and there were good smells wafting over from the buffet part of the restaurant.

More Campbell men were lounging about, not looking particularly alert.

I said to Westlake, "This is a peculiar kind of martial law. Where are the soldiers?"

"You'll notice that there are no police about, either. We'll have to be careful what we do and say, until we find out more."

Redhead, who'd disappeared into the bank, came out and announced: "You're to go for a wash, then come back here for food."

He didn't need to add that no one was to leave (I'm sure they would have been stopped), for who would want to try when the prospect of food was imminent? We went to the cloakroom. It took a few soapings to get the dirt off. After drying myself, I found I still had my comb and managed to make myself presentable.

The comb was passed around to those who wanted it, then we headed for the buffet. Redhead was there, organizing the allocation of soup and meat sandwiches. Susan, Maisie and Margery joined us, all looking as if soap and water had raised their morale. Mine certainly went up a few notches.

We collected our food and grouped ourselves around a magazine table. The next few minutes were occupied with eating. I noticed Redhead going into the bank. Once the plates were returned to the buffet—some other survivors had served up the meal and they would probably wash the dishes—we rested and waited. No one seemed inclined to wander about; we'd all had enough of that. The other people who had come with us in the helicopter were dispersed around the reception area.

Outside, the meteorites were still falling sporadically, but none had come dangerously near the airport. The iron rain had been falling now for about twenty-four hours and I wondered if that part of the stream containing the large meteorites was beginning to thin out as the Earth passed through it. The incidence of falls per hour seemed to have dropped, but with a rogue stream, anything could happen.

Yaffe had made no complaint about his arm since we had hauled him out of the basement. Gardner had helped him with his meal and Maisie was now sitting beside him, making sympathetic noises. The arm would obviously be causing him pain and I felt guilty. I should have asked about possible medical help, although there was no sign of any of the airport staff. Most of them would have tried to get home when the catastrophe began, but I was puzzled by the total absence of people other than survivors and Campbell's people.

I said to Westlake, "Yaffe needs a doctor to look at that arm."

"I asked the redheaded man when I was getting my food. He said there was no one here who could help. When I said that there was medical staff attached to the airport, he didn't reply. I didn't like the look he gave me. It's an odd situation."

Darkness was snapping hard at the heels of day with the setting of the sun. Cloud, hinting at more snow to come, heightened the feeling of gloom. There were no lights on anywhere and there probably wouldn't be any. Even if the generating stations had escaped direct damage, the power lines would be down in many places. When night came, there would be light only from the fires and from the meteorites. The prospect was bleak, though it was comforting to be under cover, with food in my stomach. I didn't care to speculate too much on what tomorrow might bring. I was content to live for the present. At least there was relative safety here from the meteorites.

To my surprise, the lights flickered on. They were slightly dimmer than normal. I should have remembered that there would be back-up generators at an airport. Some of the group had drifted into a half-slumber and they awakened, rubbing their eyes and blinking at the unexpected brightness.

"What's going to happen?" Margery Queen asked fretfully. "Are we supposed to sit here all night."

"I'd rather be here than out there," Maisie said tartly. "And you don't have a broken arm to worry about."

Yaffe looked like a spaniel that had had its head patted.

Margery bridled. "No need to get nasty. I merely asked a question." She pouted huffily.

"Ladies, ladies, this is no time for argument. None of us knows what is going to happen. We are, for the time being, safe, and I think that's all that should concern us." Westlake was firmly smoothing out the trouble. "Try and get some sleep and you'll feel refreshed."

"I'm cold." Margery was being defiant.

"I'm sure we all are. Maybe there will be some blankets somewhere."

Westlake rose. At that moment, Redhead emerged from the door of the bank and strode across to us. "Come with me," he said to Westlake.

"I'll find out about the blankets," he said to Margery, then went to the bank.

I sensed that he was worried. Martial law, but no military, no police, no airport staff. It did not add up to anything very pleasant. I'd have given anything to be able to listen to a radio, to find out what was going on in the rest of the country. If there was any country left. Destruction and loss of life in such a closely packed island were going to be almost total. The future security of the survivors would be ensured only by the fullest cooperation. But I didn't think it would happen that way.

We whiled away the fifteen minutes of Westlake's interview in desultory conversation between silences. There was little to talk about, until we had

seen whoever was in the bank. I heard eight meteorites come in, none of them close to us.

The bank door opened. Westlake came out, preceded by a Campbell man and followed by Redhead. The lawyer wasn't going to rejoin us. I caught his warning glance before he and his escort went downstairs. Redhead beckoned to me. Squeezing Susan's hand, I obeyed his signal. We went into an office behind the counter.

The man sitting behind the desk said quietly, "Close the door, Martin." Redhead hastened to comply. To me he said: "My name is Hillary. I'm in charge of this area."

His eyes, bright, splintery, like steel shavings, went over me with the efficiency of a fine rake, missing nothing. I'd never before seen anyone whose eyes were so close together. Only a thin bridge of nose intervened to prevent them merging into one sinister eye. Otherwise, he was quite handsome, with a firm mouth and chin and coarse black hair flecked with gray, like spindrift on a dark sea.

His hands were, perhaps, the most ominous thing about him. They lay before him on the desk and I visualized them having a life of their own. The backs of the hands were completely covered with wiry hair and, with the thick fingers, they were like a pair of waiting spiders. I hated spiders.

"Your name?" A pencil waited to make a note on a pad.

"Harry Blackman."

"What do you work at, Mr. Blackman?"

"I'm an astronomer."

The eyes glittered, with a kind of malevolent humor. "The present disaster must have its interesting aspect for you." The irony was sharp as a stiletto thrust. Then: "Aren't you a bit far from home? Where *is* home, by the way?"

"Manchester."

I intended him to work for his information. In view of Westlake's silent warning, maybe it wasn't a sensible course of action. Hillary continued to

look at me. There was about him an uncanny stillness. He had no mannerisms or facial twitches. I didn't like him.

"Very few people do."

His words were so quiet that I almost missed them. I drew away from the desk, startled. I liked mind readers even less. There was no obvious indication, such as any normal person might have shown, but I knew I'd just made myself an enemy. It might prove an expensive and painful commodity. Tacitly, we assumed that nothing had passed between us.

He said no more. He didn't move. Even a meteorite roaring low over the airport and exploding close enough to shake the room brought no reaction. Martin fidgeted behind me. He was made of more mortal stuff. After five minutes, I tired of the waiting. (Had he tried the same technique on Westlake?)

"Look," I blurted out angrily, "I've given you all the necessary details of identification, Hillary. What more do you want? I'm a civilian—"

"Under martial law." His voice was quiet and controlled—the qualities of a deadly snake, as I was to discover.

"So you say! But where are all the soldiers and the police? You're only a civilian yourself, so how can you enforce martial law?"

I was leaning on the desk as I answered. There was a greenness in the depths of his eyes and I felt myself being drawn in. I straightened up.

"You're not a stupid man; you, perhaps better than any of us, realize just how destructive the meteorites are and how extensive the damage is. Thousands of people were killed by every one that fell at the beginning. How many soldiers, or policemen, do you think are left alive? And those still living are anxious to remain that way."

"That sounded like a threat to me."

"You may interpret it that way, if you wish. But you'll find that I am the law here."

"We're being detained, then, is that it?"

"For the time being." He followed up quickly, taking the initiative away from me. "You're a stranger here. Did you have anyplace in particular to go?"

Almost, I fell into the trap. "Of course not. But I like to think that I am retaining my freedom of action."

"That privilege must be subordinated to the good of all. We have many things to organize and I'm sure you'll agree that we'll have a better chance of success if half the surviving population isn't wandering about creating trouble."

He spread the spiderlike hands and I repressed a shudder. He saw the reaction. Again there was the touch of malice in his eyes.

"You mean looting, for food and such things?"

"You're very perceptive, Mr.—or is it Dr.?—Blackman."

"Yes; Dr. Blackman."

The man was playing with me. Whoever controlled the food supplies could command the survivors. We both knew that. If circumstances had been different, we—the group—would have had our own food supply and kept clear of authority. I kept thinking about McLean. His attitude, the injuries, the abrupt disappearance after we'd arrived at the airport: all were enigmatic. And enigmas could be frightening.

"That will be all for now, Dr. Blackman. Thank you for being so cooperative." The stiletto again. A devious, cunning, weapon.

I turned to leave the room.

"One more thing, Doctor. How did McCaffrey die?"

My contemptuous glance didn't affect him visibly. "No doubt you asked Westlake the same question. It happened the way we told it to Martin, here. No one will tell you a different story, because that one happens to be the truth. He was sitting near the middle of the floor when it caved in. Most of the furniture slid in on top of him. Good quality furniture is heavy."

"Your turn to be ironic, I see." He nodded to Martin, who led me out and passed me to the care of one of his men. I wasn't rejoining the group, either. I waved my hand, in what I hoped was a confident manner, to Susan in particular and to the group in general.

Suddenly there was shouting and commotion from downstairs. The sound of ascending footsteps was followed by the appearance of an incredibly tall man—he looked about six-feet-eight-inches—who was crying in a raucous voice, reminding me of a seagull, "Repent, repent, all ye sinners, while there is yet time!"

Martin stopped at the door of the bank and Hillary came out to see what the disturbance was about.

The tall man halted, like a switched-off robot, and the two men trying to catch up cannonaded into him. He consulted a bible held in a spadelike hand. " 'And he doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men.' " His right hand was raised like an avenging sword. Hillary was watching him, no hint of curiosity in his expression.

The newcomer's black, shiny suit looked as if it had been thrown onto his gangling frame in separate pieces. He was like a seabird that had been buffeted about in a force ten gale and was amazed at being alive. He strode toward the bank door, his white hair flopping about like an untended thicket. The men stayed where they were. He stopped again, a few feet away from us, thrusting out a long finger, as if probing for our souls with a lance. His countenance was dark and his deep-set eyes had a shifty glint in them. His mouth, very small and neatly formed for such a big man, was overhung with a precipice of a nose. It twitched as he talked.

"I am the Prophet of the Lord," he ranted, waving the bible about. "Repent! The vials of the wrath of God have been poured upon the earth and all men have blasphemed Him. Did He not promise thunder and lightning and earthquake and stones from heaven?"

As if approval from on high were being granted, a great rumbling took the building in a giant grip, shaking out half the remaining windows. A roar and a whoosh accompanied a flaring brilliance in the darkness and there was a mighty intermingled flash and explosion that sent tremors through everything for miles.

"See!" the man screeched in a paroxysm of delight. "The Lord has sent me a sign!" Two women over at the buffet were screaming. His face and eyes working with some inner turmoil, he spun around. It had the effect of stopping them. "Silence, you miserable sinners; how dare you raise your lamentations in the sight of the Lord! If you want to be saved, get down on your knees and pray."

No one seemed in a hurry to comply. I'd been watching his eyes, whenever I could see them. If the light in them was religious fervor, I was a Martian. The shifty glint persisted. That one had both feet on the ground. Was he drunk, but controlling it very well? Or was there a deeper, more sinister reason for his extravagant histrionics?

My interrogator's voice was penetrating without being loud or aggressive. "Have you finished your bible-thumping, my friend?" His words carried a note of amused irony, but I sensed a threatening undercurrent.

The big seabird of a man wheeled on him. "You blasphemer! The spirit of the Devil comes out of your mouth!" Then he replied, "I am the Preacher. I carry His words to the multitudes of sinners." He moved toward us like a scrawny vulture. The flesh of his neck was very loose and enhanced the resemblance. My earlier simile of the seabird was entirely too innocuous; the shifty glint in his eyes was more evident than ever. I wondered what age he was. "Are *you* a sinner? Or *you*!" I sidestepped a bit. He had foul breath and there was also a faint whiff of methylated spirits detectable.

He was about to go on when Hillary showed the iron hand in the iron glove. "That's enough! I know what *you* are. Willie McBean, a man as laughable as his name. Work-shy. Lecher. Wino. Deviationist. Lucifer's very skin."

McBean recoiled a little with each word as it plunged home like a poisoned barb. His face had gone rigid and a few shades paler and his eyes were murderous. For a moment, I feared that he was going to start crying.

Instead, he vented a shriek that chilled my blood, and slung the bible at Hillary. His aim was bad and it struck Martin on the head, preventing him from tackling McBean as the latter unleashed his lean body at Hillary, his hands curved like scimitar blades. I unashamedly scrambled out of the way. I'd no wish to be scarred for life for someone else's cruel goading.

Hillary didn't flinch. As McBean closed with him, he sidestepped and rammed a fist into the man's abdomen, with a thud that made me ill. His following blow to the jaw felled the man in full flight. McBean spun away and hit the floor where he lay still.

Hillary didn't even look ruffled. To Martin, who was nursing his head, he grunted, "Get rid of him. Anywhere." He went into the bank, leaving the door open. Martin whistled two men over. They each took an end. He must have been heavy, for they puffed as they raised him. A bottle slid out from under his jacket and smashed on the floor, spreading its mauve-colored contents in a wide pool.

Martin said to me, "You, too." He came with me to the bottom of the stairs and said to another man, "Put him in with the other one."

The air hit me like a wall of cold water as I left the building. The men were struggling with their burden. My escort and I jogged to try and work up some heat, and we soon left the others behind. Once or twice they cursed loudly.

I was alone with the man. What, I asked myself, is to stop me from running? He didn't seem to be armed.

But he might be. I recalled how the late unlamented Mr. McCaffrey had produced a gun. Fear of being shot wasn't the reason. I'd known the members of the group for only a brief time. But I knew that our only chance lay in keeping together, if we could. Also, I wanted to be near Susan, and I don't think I would have relished her contempt for someone who had skipped out.

We crossed over to a fence on our left, which marked off the actual airport property from the public domain, walked along the road for a few yards, then turned left again. We continued in silence for about a quarter of a mile, past the offices on the right, in the direction of the main gate. The first of the airline cargo sheds blurred up out of the darkness and the man said, "In there." He unlocked a door and pushed it shut against my back as I went inside.

It was like being blindfolded, halfway up a chimney. I'd often read about people getting accustomed to the dark and being able to see. But there was no light in the shed, anywhere. It was built for maximum security and windows were superfluous. My hackles rose, like those of a

cat being stalked by a giant rat.

When someone asked, "Have you any matches?" I thought my heart was going to lodge in my throat and choke me. Then I recognized Westlake's voice, slightly distorted. "I'm a nonsmoker," he added, apologetically. I couldn't tell where he was.

I fumbled in my pockets and located a damp box of matches. I slung them away. "Stay where you are, Harry. I took a fix, I think the air force lads call it, on the door as you came in." I followed his progress via a series of thumps and minor crashes, until, about a minute after I'd entered the shed, I felt his hand touch my arm. It was reassuring.

"There are some boxes just inside the door to the left—that's to our right, slightly, now—so I suggest we have a seat."

We groped our way there and sat down.

"You were a long time in coming," he went on, "I was getting worried. What happened?"

I related the episode with McBean, concluding, "They've probably dumped him outside somewhere. He'll freeze to death. And what about you? The interrogation took long enough."

"Hillary is not an uncultured man," he began obliquely, only to be interrupted by the muted thunder of an incoming meteorite. The shed began to shake, so it was going to be close. Things kept falling down at various points in the shed, with a variety of noises, made fascinating by the anonymity of the blackness. The sound of the meteorite's passage increased in volume. Hannibal's war elephants must have sounded like that when in full gallop. The iron rain straddled the shed with loud *thwacks* and I was thankful that the construction was metal and not wood.

The violent consummation of meteorite and planet occurred nearby, dislodging more mysterious objects from their places. I took up the conversation as the tide of noise receded.

"You were talking about Hillary. If you'd seen the cold, efficient way he beat up McBean, you would have had a different opinion!"

"Don't misunderstand me," he chided, "I was referring to his technique of interrogation: the little stabs of irony—"

"I noticed that. He wasn't any the less firm despite it, was he? I was scared of him. Those hands—!"

"They weren't pleasant. Peculiar weapons of terror."

I didn't like to think about the women's reactions to Hillary's hands.

The next interruption was of a more welcome nature. Susan and Allingham were put into the shed.

"We're just a little way from the door, at your left," I said quickly, to alleviate fright on Susan's part. I should have known better.

"Fine," she answered, her voice brisk and not in the least afraid. "Hasn't anyone got any matches?"

"No," Westlake said, identifying himself.

There was a rattling, followed by a scratching, followed by a flaring. In the sudden brightness, we resembled a coven of warlocks and a witch.

"Well, don't just stand there," Susan said impatiently, "Let's find something to light. Have you got many matches, John?"

"A full box."

"Don't drop them, then." (I was having second thoughts about female scientists, especially ones that showed themselves to possess a wide practical streak.) "There must be paper of some kind here. When we find it, we can have a fire. Strike another match, John,"

He did so, and we searched the immediate surroundings. There was nothing immediately inflammable. Three matches later, Susan found a sheaf of papers, which she twisted into tapers. Some light crates provided wood and soon we had a small fire going.

"Better not make it too big," Westlake cautioned. "We don't want to be smoked out."

For a few minutes, we huddled around it, getting warm and talking

about our plight. We realized we must get away from Hillary but were anxious for the others to arrive. It was only then could we concoct an escape plan.

John lifted a stick and lighted it. "I'm going exploring. Anyone coming?" He had no takers. "Out into the unknown, then." He flitted off like a firefly, stopping here and there to examine crates. I was throwing sticks on the fire when he called me. Taking a light, I joined him. He was standing beside a crate that had fallen, with others, from a stack, and split open. He held his light down toward the floor.

In the flickering flame, I saw McLean.

Dead.

CHAPTER 5

The staring eyes sent out a plea for help that could never be answered. I knelt and slid the lids closed.

"Accident, do you think?" John whispered, doubt lacing his query.

Without moving the body, I'd been exploring it for more obvious signs of violence. When I removed my hand from under the left shoulder blade, it was sticky with blood.

Westlake called from the fire: "What have you two found, there? A crate of whiskey?"

I heard him rising. I stood up. I didn't want them all down to see what had happened. We rejoined the group.

"It was McLean. Murdered."

There were sharp intakes of breath.

"He must have been killed because he disagreed with Hillary's authority," I continued. "The same thing could happen to any or all of us. I don't think he particularly liked me."

"My impression was that Hillary wouldn't like anyone," Susan commented.

Westlake brought us back to a practical course. "McLean's death alters everything. We can't wait until the others come—they might not even be put in beside us—the escape plan must be ready."

"If only one man acts as escort, it shouldn't be too hard to overpower him—"

Allingham shook his head at me. "There were two men with Susan and I. Both were armed. You might get one of them, but the other one would certainly kill some of us and spoil any chance of escape. We have to get out when there are none of Campbell's men around."

The door rattled again. This time, three people were pushed inside the shed: Maisie, Margery and Yaffe. Yaffe looked half-dead as John helped him to a seat.

"We were beginning to wonder if you were coming," Westlake said. "What about Peyton and Gardner?"

"Bob was going in as we came away," Maisie said, holding her hands out to the glowing embers. "Andy Gardner was still waiting."

Westlake told the newcomers about McLean. Then he said, "I think what John says is sensible, so the only way out is by the door."

"How are we going to manage that, if it's locked from the outside?" Susan asked reasonably.

"We'll have to force it," Westlake answered.

"You're forgetting that this is a top security shed," John Allingham pointed out. "It's not going to be easy."

That stumped us all for a minute.

"There's more than one door into the shed," Maisie said. "We all came in through a side door."

"Of course!" Westlake exclaimed. "There must be a large door to admit loads."

"It's at the rear of the shed," I grunted, as I stooped to light a stick to the fire. "I remember when I was leaving the airport a fortnight ago,

seeing large vehicles on a road behind the sheds. There they don't interfere with traffic in and out of the airport."

I led the way for Westlake and Allingham as we picked our way around fallen crates. The door was an electrically operated, roll-up type. More in hope than expectation, John punched the button. Nothing happened. He took the light from me and bent down and started running his fingers along the floor. He finished his examination and got up. "Quite a few gaps. The floors of places like this are seldom level. And the door isn't as mechanically strong as an ordinary metal-hinged door would be. Given time, it could be levered up sufficiently to let us slide underneath."

"Time is the one thing we might not have," Westlake reminded him glumly. "If they killed McLean, they could also kill us."

"Let's look for some suitable levers," Allingham said.

A tremor along the floor gave advance notice of a large meteorite coming in. The sound grew rapidly, but we were shielded from the full force and the meteorite rushed past. The explosion, when it came, was muffled. When we returned to the others to explain the situation and to get more sticks, we found Bob and Andy there.

"We were just getting to the door as the meteorite went over," Bob said. "One of the fragments damn near set me alight. What's been happening here?"

"We're going to try and force the roll-up door. Come and help us to search for tools," Allingham said.

"Well need more than a spanner for that," Bob quipped, only to be topped by Allingham's remark that they'd be lucky to find even that. We dispersed to get on with the task.

The first boxes I found were small and easily opened, but they contained only machine parts whose purpose I couldn't even guess at. There was no marking on the outside of the boxes, except code numbers and letters. Still, there might be other, more useful, metal parts in the shed. I didn't know whether or not each shed had specific kinds of goods stored in it, such as paper, or perishable foodstuffs. I could hear the others trying to break into crates and boxes.

A large packing case defied my efforts to open it, so I left it. My light was burning low and would soon have to be replaced. I was about to pass the next crate—it obviously couldn't be opened without tools—when I banged my left shin. The pain made me drop the light and sparks flew as it struck the floor.

"Careful," John called. "You'll set the place on fire."

He came toward me. I'd slumped against the crate, to take the weight off the injured leg. "What's up?"

"Must've hit my leg on the side of the crate."

"Let's have a look." He put his light nearer, then exclaimed, "Well I'll be—!" Excitedly, he walked away from me, around the side of the crate, then came back. "Good for you, Harry. You've found a fork lift. We should be able to do something with that."

"I wish the discovery had been a little less painful," I groaned.

"Sorry," John apologized, "I'm not being very sympathetic. Put your arm around my shoulder. I'll help you back to the fire."

Feeling that I'd carried martyrdom too far, I said, "It's not as bad as all that—"

"Maybe not. But if you keep walking about on that leg, you'll only aggravate it. When we get out of here, you're going to need two good legs."

We reached the fire. "Harry's given his leg a knock," John explained, as Susan rose hurriedly. "He found an electric fork lift. If there's still sufficient power in the batteries, we just might be able to use it to get us out of here."

I sat down and Susan had a look at the injury, while John went off, calling for the other men. I winced as her fingers skimmed over the dent made by one of the forks.

"It's beginning to swell, now," she said, sitting beside me on the box.

"Nothing much we can do for it here," Maisie observed. "Keep your weight off it, though."

She threw some bits of wood on the fire, which was low and looked as if it might go out. Margery was sitting, with her elbows on her knees and her face squashed up between her hands, staring at the disturbed embers. She didn't speak. Yaffe, propped up against a crate, seemed to be asleep.

From somewhere in the shed came the whine of an electric motor and I heard the fork lift being driven to the rear of the shed. I was determined not to be a bystander at this stage. I stood up and almost bit off the tip of my tongue at the sharp stab of pain.

"You'll make it worse," Susan protested. "Sit and rest."

"I want to see what's happening. I'll be all right."

"Don't argue with him, Susan," Maisie said. "You'd better help him in case he falls over."

"I still don't think it's sensible—"

"Maybe not!" I snapped, "but tell me anything that's sane these past hours. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Of course." She took my arm and we hobbled toward the scene of activity.

I muttered an embarrassed apology.

"I probably would have done the same in the circumstances. You're forgiven. How's the leg?"

"Bad enough, but I'll live. I'm anxious to see how John is going to use the truck to force the door. The forks can't go underneath."

Andy Gardner passed us, going for more sticks. John was seated on the truck and he was driving it against the door, reversing, and repeating the action. Susan and I sat down to watch. Andy returned with sticks and started a small blaze. John kept pounding away with the truck. There was nothing we could do except wait. The forks were denting the door. But how long would they take to penetrate? Hillary's men could come at any time. I didn't want to think about that and concentrated on willing the forks to break through the metal.

I looked at my watch. Just after nine. We'd been at the airport for about five hours. The air in the shed was getting stale. We wouldn't be able to keep fires going much longer, or we'd use up too much oxygen. The truck continued to pound at the door. The blows did not seem to be so powerful as they had been at first. Probably the batteries were running down.

Bob called from the door. "John! The metal at the left side is damaged. I can feel a crack. Keep going."

Another few minutes passed, then the door was examined again.

"The forks are through on both sides!" Peyton exclaimed.

John drove the truck hard, until both forks were firmly jammed in the holes. Then he began to try and raise the forks, and the door with them. The noise was deafening and we were sure it would attract attention.

"Get everyone ready," Westlake said to Andy. He rounded up Maisie, Margery and Yaffe and brought them to the door, which was still resisting the efforts to move it. Peculiar sounds were coming from the engine of the truck. Still the door held. I knew that if it didn't give in the next minute or two, there wouldn't be sufficient power left in the truck's batteries.

Suddenly I felt a cold draft rushing past my ankles. John's exclamation of triumph was superfluous. The grinding of metal was music in my ears. Inch by inch the door was forced up until it had been raised about seven or eight inches.

Abruptly, the engine whined, then stopped.

"We'll have to try and squeeze underneath the door," I said, as John jumped down from the truck. "There's no chance of releasing the truck. It's stuck fast."

I lay on my back and started to wriggle my way out of the shed. It was difficult, but I managed it. Maisie was next out, and soon only John and Yaffe remained inside. After ten minutes of gentle pulling and pushing, the injured man was out. He was weakened by the effort and had to be supported by Bob and Andy. John came out.

Deprived of the warmth and protection from the wind afforded by the

shed, we huddled together. Escape didn't seem quite such an important thing. The wind honed itself upon us. The sky was pregnant with snow and a chilly mist hugged the ground, stealing its warmth. The terminal building, dimly lit, seemed to float like a derelict spaceship in the desolate darkness between galaxies.

Westlake was talking. I hadn't caught his first words. "... for Kilbarchan. We'll need two cars—"

"Where are we going to get keys for them?" Margery interrupted.

"Who needs keys," John answered. "I could start a car without a key when I was ten years old."

"We'll ignore the criminal implications of that statement," Westlake went on, then added, "I also know that trick. I'll take one car. Who knows the area?"

Bob said, "I do."

"You'll drive the second car, then. If we get separated, or... don't make it... you know where the house is. Good luck."

He set off toward the office blocks. Susan's hand found mine and held it tightly. I was glad to be moving again. The group kept close together as we skirted the end building and went on to the road. It was miserable, trudging through the slushy, aging snow. Meteorites were still falling, but nothing big had come down in the vicinity for over an hour. The pain in my left leg had subsided to a dull, constant throb.

We had almost reached the last building when a black shape seemed to rise out of the ground before us. I could feel Susan tensing. The figure came forward a few paces, then stumbled. "Do not pass by on the other side. Help me."

Willie McBean. The Preacher. He was on his knees in the gray snow, attempting to get up. I recalled Hillary's cruel description of him and wished that he'd left us alone.

Westlake was helping him up.

"He's dangerous!" I blurted. "Leave him. Let's get away."

"Pharisee!" McBean snarled at me. I shuddered and it wasn't because of the cold. There was an aura of menace about the man.

"We're wasting time," John said. "I say leave him."

Murmurs of assent tailed off as McBean said, "One shout, and Hillary's men would be here in a minute. He might not like it, you trying to escape."

"Come if you want," Westlake said curtly. "Just don't make trouble."

McBean tagged along as we crossed the road and entered the car park. I could see men walking about the terminal, but there was no urgency in their actions. John was looking for cars near the entrance, about fifty yards from the roundabout, that would take us to Greenock Road, our immediate objective. If we were to gain the advantage of surprise, there wouldn't be time for fancy maneuvering. Hillary's men would be alerted by the noise of the engines.

John selected two cars. One was unlocked. He broke the fly window on the other. Susan and I took the commodious front seat beside the driver, while Bob helped Yaffe into the back and tried to make him comfortable, before taking his own place behind the wheel. Everything was set. Bob signaled to John that he was ready.

John was fiddling under the bonnet of the car when the dreaded tremors began again. A roaring, like the noise of a tidal bore, began to fill the air. The area brightened steadily with a yellow glow. The meteorite was going to fall close to us. I felt trapped in the car. If a fragment hit the car, we wouldn't have a chance. Susan and I clung together in clammy fear. The iron rain was playing a mad drumroll on the roof. I didn't realize that the engine had started until John hauled himself into the back seat, as Bob reversed the car, then drove it forward, fighting to hold it as it skidded through the snow. Another car pulled out ahead of us and Bob followed it.

There was a stupendous explosion, accompanied by a *crack* that set my head ringing. The back of the car whipped around and we were moving sideways. Yaffe cried out as John was thrown against him. Bob plied the wheel desperately, trying to get control. The car spun again and almost turned over. It came down with a thump that sent everyone bumping off the roof. The roundabout loomed up ahead. Bob tooled the wheel like a racing driver on a twisting circuit. Skillfully, he straightened the car and

got it going in the right direction. He drove slowly.

Sweat was pouring down Bob's face as we sorted ourselves out. Despite that, he looked exhilarated, as if he had enjoyed the danger. There was no sign of the other car. He didn't have to use headlights, yet: the glow from the sky behind us was sufficient. From the position of the pall of smoke and the flames, I judged that we had escaped just in time.

Suddenly, Susan said, "There!"

We were approaching the overpass, when we spotted Westlake's car lying on its back, like an upturned beetle, a few yards ahead, on the left. The wheels were still spinning lazily. Bob braked the car and we rushed to the accident, leaving Susan to attend to Yaffe. He had made no more sound after the meteorite had exploded; I suspected he might have fainted.

The doors of the crashed car were still closed and we struggled to open them. The front passenger door came easily, but the driver's door was jammed. We were relieved to hear groans. First out was Maisie, then Margery, who had blood all over her face.

"It's my nose," she said weakly, as we helped the two women to the other car.

"I'm all right," Maisie said, "I'll look after her."

McBean was standing by the upturned car when we returned. There was a rapidly swelling bump on his forehead. He didn't speak and no one troubled to ask him if he was hurt otherwise. We were too anxious to see to our own people. Westlake was unconscious, but Andy Gardner was trying, with scant agility, to get out. We helped him first, then concentrated on rescuing Westlake.

Only one person could get near him and John elected himself for the job. The rest of us stood about in the frigid air, attempting to keep warm. John was having difficulty moving Westlake's bulk from behind the steering wheel. I wondered what was happening at the terminal. Every minute we spent here could mean recapture and I didn't relish that prospect. But the meteorite might yet give us the time we needed. The damage and confusion it would cause would occupy Hillary for a while.

At last, John had Westlake free and Bob and I carried him to the other car (which now resembled a casualty-clearing station) and left him in the care of the women.

"Let's get the car on its wheels," John directed. "You, too, McBean." The big man glowered at him, but did as he was told. We arranged ourselves and, when John gave the word, heaved. Bob slipped and almost went under the car as it toppled back onto its roof.

"Again," John said. We got it over on the second attempt. "While I get the engine started, rearrange the bodies, Harry."

Both Westlake and Yaffe were conscious again. Margery's face was cleaned up and her nose wasn't broken, as I'd feared. I left the two men in the back seat and Susan and Margery in the front. The other car was ready to go and John came over.

"I'll drive this one," he said, "and Bob can take the Ford. Show us the way and I'll follow. Westlake won't feel like giving directions."

"It's an ambulance we need," I said, as he got in behind the wheel.

The Ford's rear doors had been forced open and McBean and Andy were sitting in the back. Maisie was in front.

"What's happening?" Bob asked.

"You're in charge of the expedition now, so don't get us lost."

We got into the car, Bob gave John the thumbs-up sign and we moved off. There was a sound of glass being punctured. Andy grunted slightly and his body slumped forward. As I twisted round in my seat to see what was wrong, McBean said in a sonorous voice: "He has gone to meet his Maker."

CHAPTER 6

"Get us away from here, quickly!" I shouted at Bob, as I stared at the spreading patch of blood at the side of Gardner's neck. "Andy's been shot!"

Bob put his foot down and the car sputtered through the snow toward the Greenock Road. "Is he dead?"

"I think so. Hillary's men must've discovered our escape." To McBean, I said, "Put him back against the seat. Cover his face." Blood welled out of the wound as McBean shifted the body and propped it up in the corner. He took a handkerchief from a pocket and hid the mess.

Maisie looked straight ahead the whole time.

We were now on the main road, going back in the direction we had come, with the terminal now on our right. John's car was following. Another shot gouged its way across the hood of the car, but I think it was more lucky than accurate. We crossed a narrow river and continued along the road for a few hundred yards. Bob turned the car off at the first road on the left.

"We'll take a chance on getting through Linwood. It's the most direct route."

There was now a new hazard: fog. What had been a ground mist when we escaped from the shed was now a thickening, dirty, mixture. Visibility was still fair, but lessening rapidly. After a couple of miles, the engine started to miss. I scanned the gauge. It read almost full. Bob dropped his speed and for a minute, the engine seemed to pick up.

Bob said: "It's the electrical system that's going. The headlights are fading." As he spoke, the instrument panel light went out. The engine spluttered once or twice, then died. The car rolled to a stop.

He got out and opened the hood, then came back to the window. "A stray bullet has made scrap iron of the battery and the generator."

John's car drew up. Bob told him what had happened. Then he gave him the really bad news, about Andy. I'd joined them at the car.

"What do we do, now?" I asked. "We'll never get another four people in there, especially with the injured to think about."

"We walk," said Bob, philosophically. "Can you take Maisie aboard, John? The rest of us can look after ourselves. The house isn't all that far from here."

"But in this weather—" Susan began, gazing worriedly at me.

"There's no other solution," John cut her off kindly, but crisply. "You might still be able to pick up another car somewhere. Anyway, Westlake's explained the route to me, so, if you keep on it, I'll come back and get you."

"If this fog gets any worse, it'll be the only sensible thing to do," Bob agreed. "Normally, we could have cut across country and saved too long a walk. What about Andy?"

"There's nothing we can do about him. We can't take him with us, and I think the ground will be too hard, so you won't be able to bury him. I'm sorry. Will you get Maisie, now?"

Bob nodded and fetched her; she slid into the back seat with Westlake and Yaffe.

"Remember," John said, as the car pulled away, "keep to the road."

Bob, McBean and I were left there, like three warlocks who had forgotten to go home after Halloween. We laid Andy out along the back seat of the car, then closed the doors.

"Let's get started," Bob said brusquely.

In silence we went off along the minor road that led to Linwood. The fog was closing in quickly and we could see for only forty yards, or so, ahead and on either side. As the chilly tendrils of fog wisped against my face, I tucked my head in and stuck my hands deep into my pockets. The only noise was the slushing of our shoes through the snow.

We were passing a small farm, when Bob halted. "Listen."

My hearing was still affected, but I listened anyway, then said, "I can't hear anything. Let's move. It's freezing."

"Quiet!"

"It sounds like a car, or a truck," McBean said. I was surprised to hear him talking like an ordinary mortal and less like a prophet.

Bob said: "That's what I thought. But which direction is it coming from? It's difficult to guess in this damned fog."

Even I could hear it now. "It's coming from Linwood," I said positively, "we'd better get off the road if we don't want to get run down."

"I thought you were the one who couldn't hear anything," Bob replied. "You're right, though. Friend or foe, in this fog they'd hit us first and see us afterward."

Once off the road, we waited. Visibility was now about thirty yards. The cold seemed to be eating its way into my bones. Inwardly, I started to curse that stray bullet, then I remembered Andy and the thought sobered me. The vehicle—it sounded heavier than a car—was getting nearer. Its speed was necessarily low. Then it stopped. The fog was closing in fast.

"Must be too bad for them to drive," Bob said into my ear.

Noises came from ahead, like the slamming of doors. Then heavy footsteps, coming toward us. A man said: "It might just be local. The weather was clear half a mile back."

"Do you think we should risk driving on?" a second voice asked.

Let's see if it is a patch, or widespread. As long as we keep to the road we'll be all right."

We kept our heads down as the men approached our hiding place. Somewhere above the fog, I heard the muted roar of a meteorite. When the men had passed us, Bob tugged my sleeve and the three of us sneaked onto the road and made for the vehicle. It was a contractor's truck. We climbed in, not fully closing the doors, and Bob took the wheel.

"I know where we are," he said. "We're near a small bridge. A cart track runs across the road on the other side, so I'm going to reverse there. Hold on. Here we go."

As soon as he started the engine, McBean slammed his door. Bob, his head twisted out of the window, raced the truck over the bridge and swung it into the cart track, on his right. He changed gear quickly and expertly, gave the accelerator a jab and we were away. There were shouts behind us. The fog was almost solid here and Bob could not afford to increase the speed too much. There was no point in ending up in a ditch. He was driving with his head out of the window, straining to see where he was going.

I wondered if the two men we'd stolen the truck from were still running. If they didn't give up, they could probably move faster than the truck. We weren't out of danger yet. Bob was having trouble keeping the vehicle on the road, even though he had recent tracks to guide him. He took advantage of a thinning in the fog to accelerate, but the blankness closed in again after twenty or thirty yards.

The speed dropped again. He drew his head in and rolled up the window. Suddenly, his door was wrenched open as a man seemed to appear from the roof of the cab. The truck slued dangerously as the man grappled with Bob, who was fighting to keep the truck under control. He slammed on the brake, sending the truck into a skid and his assailant fell off, dragging him out of the cab. Instinct made me grab the wheel and, somehow, I managed to keep the vehicle on the road.

McBean was already out and running back; I jumped out and followed him. Bob and the man were rolling about in the slush, each trying to land a punch, without much success. The man's companion came panting along and McBean tackled him as I went to Bob's aid. As I dragged the man off him, Bob scrambled up and gave him a right hook to the chin and a left under the ribs. The man crumpled against me.

We turned our attention to McBean's sparring partner. The big man wasn't so much fighting as trying to squeeze his opponent to death. But he was weakening as the man repeatedly short-jabbed him in the stomach. Bob and I hauled him off. The other one was picking himself up groggily from the ground and we took them back to the truck.

"What do we do with them, now?" McBean asked, his breath coming out in a white mist.

"Some questions," Bob said. "You." He indicated the young, tough-looking man who had attacked him in the cab. "Where have you come from?"

"Get knotted, you bastard!" The escape attempt was as unoriginal as the remark. He tried to lunge past Bob, who lowered a shoulder and thumped him against the side of the truck.

"Well?"

Winded, but still sullen, the man answered, "Kilbarchan."

"Where were you going?"

"Just getting away." Evasive.

"In this fog? Away where?"

Bob switched the questions to the older man. "Is the truck yours? It looks almost new. No name on it."

I was getting colder by the minute and I wished we were in the truck and driving to the safety of *Trincomalee*. A thought niggled at me. The truck must have passed the car with the rest of the group. If these two were Hillary's men—

The question switched again. "Did you have any trouble getting this far?"

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?" Cocky, now.

I was itching to ask about the car. And Bob wasn't getting any answers.

"It looks as if we'll have to turn this pair over to Hillary," Bob said.

"Now, look, mister," the older man said, half-pleading, half-defiant, "I don't know who this Hillary is, and I don't want to know. You keep the truck and we'll get on our way. Just let us go. We didn't do anything wrong."

"They're not Hillary's men, Bob," I said through chattering teeth. "Let's get out of here."

The young man spoke. "A roadblock was being set up a ways back. Someone shouted at us to stop, but we kept going."

"Martial law has been declared. Didn't you know?"

They traded uneasy glances.

"You don't want to come with us, then," Bob said, interpreting the exchange. "What's in the back of the truck?"

"Just TVs, things like that." The older man sounded anxious to be away.

Bob climbed up on the cab step and glanced into the back of the truck, then came down again.

"You two have been busy, haven't you? Looters. Right. I don't care at this particular time what you've done, or why. Get the truck cleared."

Reluctantly, they did as they were told. Ten minutes later, as we drove away, we left them standing amid a pile of their spoils. The fog was thinning again.

"You heard about the roadblock," I said worriedly. "Perhaps John's car would be stopped."

"Maybe not." Bob was concentrating on his driving. The speedometer gauge hovered around the twenty-five mark. "There was probably some confusion when this truck drove through, and John might have dodged through. The snag is, the block would have to be a double one, if it's where I think it is, at an intersection. The road to the left leads to Paisley, the one straight on would lead you eventually to the Bridge-of-Weir road."

"We're not going to know what's happened to them, so we can't make any plans."

"Assuming that Hillary was speaking the truth when he said that martial law has been declared, it means that, if there are soldiers, or police, at the roadblock, then we'll have to stop. It would be legal for them to force us to halt."

"And if there are neither soldiers nor police...?"

"This is a big truck."

The power of the engine was reassuring.

We turned a sharp right-hand bend. Visibility was about a hundred yards. Ahead, to the left, I could see the glow of a large fire, lending a pearly brightness to the fog.

"Anytime, now," Bob muttered, gripping the wheel tightly. "Get ready to keep your heads down. If I see anything that looks like real authority, I'll stop."

We were traveling at over forty miles an hour. The headlights picked out the figure of a man at the side of the road, swinging a red lantern. Behind him was a bar-type roadblock.

"Civilian," Bob said. "Heads down. I'm going through!"

McBean and I ducked below the level of the windshield. The engine roared its power as Bob accelerated. There was a brief shout and a splintering of wood and I heard the windshield fracturing. Seconds later, we crashed through a second barrier.

Bob had smashed his fist against the windshield, knocking a hole in it, and the wind was blasting into the cab. The truck raced along the road. We took a sharp turn on what seemed like two wheels, both of them on one side. Up a hill. Down into the dip. Then a long incline. Another curve ahead. There didn't appear to be any roadblocks.

On the left, a town was alight. The truck had all four wheels on the road as it rounded the curve, then went straight on. A great thundering gradually drowned out the engine noise. There was a brief straddling of iron rain as the meteorite streaked high overhead. Then came the impact.

"That's Johnstone we passed," Bob said. "Sounds to me as if that meteorite must have exploded somewhere near it."

We were driving through a small village. "Brookfield," Bob said. Some of the houses, all on the right side of the road, were burning.

"Miss Field—she lived here. Her parents might still be alive."

"We can't do anything just now. We're almost at the house."

A bend brought us to a fork in the road, and Bob turned the truck up the hill to the left. About three hundred yards on, he went right into what must have been a private road, which curved away to the right, among trees and shrubs.

"Bob! Stop the truck a minute."

"What now?" He sounded annoyed. He braked, coming to a full halt.

"That's what." I pointed out at the driveway ahead of us. "Tire tracks—"

"So that means that John and the others made it," he interrupted impatiently and reached out a hand to shift the gears again.

I caught his arm. "Probably. But there are also quite a few footprints—the tire marks are running over them and they look recent."

Bob was leaning over the wheel, peering at the ground. "You think there might be other people at the house?"

"It seems like it. And they are almost certain to be hostile."

"They might simply be people seeking shelter. Up from Brookfield, maybe," Bob argued.

"We can't take chances. I suggest we get out and approach the house carefully."

McBean had remained silent during the exchange.

"They probably heard the engine." Bob was being stubborn.

"Not necessarily. Come on, McBean. Let me out."

McBean drew his long legs in and I scrambled across him and jumped out of the cab and walked around the front of the truck as Bob climbed down. He said over his shoulder: "What's keeping you, McBean?"

"If you don't mind, I'd prefer to stay here."

"Out," Bob ordered brusquely. "We don't want you driving off with the truck somewhere."

McBean joined us.

"Before we rush headlong into something," Bob said, "shouldn't we discuss a little strategy first? There could be a lookout. We don't know how far away the house is, remember."

"I doubt it, especially if they're those law-abiding citizens you spoke about. No one in his right mind is going to be hanging about outside in weather like this. What could he see, anyway?"

"It's evident you've never had any service training, Harry. It's surprising

just how much a man can see at night, or in conditions like this, even an untrained one. If we walk along that driveway, we'll be spotted very easily—assuming that there is someone watching. You were the one talking about not taking chances."

"I defer to your superior knowledge." I was none too gracious. "Lead on."

We went onto the grass on the right-hand side and headed for the house. About two hundred yards on, the driveway did a snake twist to the left and we could not yet see the house. The car tracks and the footprints stretched on to the edge of visibility, now, I guessed, about a hundred and twenty yards. Fog. Trees and bushes, like wraiths. Silence. The scene made me feel colder than I was. We moved on trying to screen ourselves from the hypothetical watcher in the dark.

A farther five hundred yards and another change of direction, this time to the right, and the outlines of the house gradually solidified out of the mists.

I noted that the footprints veered off the driveway, to the left, while the car tracks continued on toward the house, and I tugged at Bob's sleeve. He'd noticed; he paused by a large rhododendron bush.

"That alters things a bit," he whispered. "The people who made those footprints might not yet be in the house. They could be circling in from the other side. We've no way of knowing."

"Perhaps whoever made the footprints ran away when the car came," McBean said. "You can see that the place where they go off the driveway is scuffed and that the distances between footprints lengthen—as they would do, if people started running."

"Very sensible," Bob remarked, and I couldn't decide whether he was being complimentary or ironic. "We'll never find the answers standing here catching pneumonia; let's get on."

The house was a stone-built mansion with, probably, about ten rooms. It faced south. There did not appear to be any lights showing, although the fog might have been obscuring them. Or John and the others could be in a room at the rear of the house. If they were having something to eat, that was likely. The tire tracks went around the east side of the house.

Keeping in among the shrubbery, we walked cautiously until we could see the back of the house. The car was nosed up against a double-door garage, which sat at right angles to the house, on the west side.

We edged to within a few yards of the building, then stopped again. I said, "The only footprints in sight seem to be the ones leading from the car to the house. Where did the people who made the other ones get to?"

"As McBean said, they ran away when they heard the car," Bob said. "Let's get into the house."

He started forward as a hard voice said behind us: "That's a very good idea. We'll go with you. There's a shotgun pointed at your backs. Start walking. When you reach the kitchen door, you"—I was prodded briefly in the small of my back—"knock and call for your friends. I'll be there with the gun. If you try to give a warning, I'll shoot the person who opens the door. Then I'll shoot you."

CHAPTER 7

My mind raced furiously as I began to walk to the house. I didn't want anyone there to be harmed. It might be better to start something now and let us take our chances. The others would be warned. But I didn't know how many were in the gang or what weapons they had. None of us had dared turn around. As if the man with the shotgun had divined my thoughts, a metallic coldness nuzzled my neck, a kiss of potential death.

I felt like a condemned man taking the final walk. For all I knew, that might be true. I had no way of knowing his intentions. I didn't waste time speculating; I would have to be alert for any carelessness on the part of our captors. I wondered if there was a way I might warn those in the house. The door was there, waiting. My hand hesitated. Again the insistent prod in the back.

The noise of my knuckles on the wood was loud, seeming to echo inside the house. There was no activity. After thirty seconds, the man with the gun said:

"Knock harder. Call out."

I complied. Footsteps. Cautious, measured. The tension in my chest

almost stopped me from breathing.

"Who is it? Identify yourselves." Westlake. Cagey. The door remained closed.

"Harry, Bob and McBean—"

The shotgun dissuaded me from saying any more.

"Just a minute. The lock seems to be stiff."

That alerted me. It was Westlake's house and, from casual appearances, well-maintained. Westlake continued to fumble with the lock and I risked a glance at Bob, on my right. His expression told me that we'd both reached the same conclusion: the people in the house knew that there was something wrong.

The door began to open. Westlake shouted: "Down!"

Bob and I hit the slush together, but McBean was a bit slow. John's voice came from our left. "Drop the shotgun. We have you covered from both sides."

"Run!"

I twisted around to see what was happening. The man with the shotgun was backing away, pulling McBean with him and using the big man as a shield. Two other men—the three of them looked young, perhaps in their twenties—were sprinting for the shrubbery.

"Don't shoot, or try to follow."

We watched until McBean and his captor had disappeared among the trees. Bob and I got up as John and Susan joined us, both carrying .22 sporting rifles.

"Inside, quickly," Westlake said and we bundled out of the cold.

The kitchen was large and there was a big coal fire, to which Westlake set a light.

"Do you think they'll come back?" Susan asked.

Westlake shook his head. "I don't think so. Although the one with the shotgun, Lee, is cunning."

"You know him, then?" Bob said, starting to take off his wet clothes. I began to do the same. The fire was beginning to flare up merrily.

"He used to do odd jobs for me. I met him through my work in the Prisoners' Aid Society. He gave every sign of wanting to reform, so I offered to help him. But he didn't prove reliable, so I told him he'd have to go his own way." To John, he said, "Could you get those oil lamps from the garage, now? We could do with some light."

"One of them was a girl," Susan said, handing me a towel.

"They all looked like men to me," Westlake said.

"It takes one to know one."

John returned with two lamps and soon had them lit. A warm glow spread throughout the kitchen, lending everything a certain charm.

"What about McBean—?" John left the question unfinished.

Susan made a face.

"They'll probably let him go," Westlake said, stirring the fire up and sending sparks shooting up the chimney. "I don't think Lee will harm him—his violent streak takes other forms—and they won't want him with them; another mouth to feed."

"Then he'll come back here." Susan sounded dismayed.

"Somehow, I doubt it," I said. "We made it rather plain that he wasn't wanted. Anyway, we're better off without him. He gave me cold shivers up my spine."

There was a general chorus of assent.

"I'll get you two some clothes," Westlake said, ever practical, "while Susan, I'm sure, will be pleased to make us some tea. There's no electricity, of course, but there's one of those camp stoves in that cupboard, by the sink. John will show you how it works."

"I've used them before," Susan said tartly, bringing a smile to Westlake's face.

"Clever girl," he said, and nipped out of the kitchen.

"Where are Maisie and Yaffe?" I asked. Bob and I were basking in the heat of the flames. "And Margery. Mustn't forget her."

"Upstairs, out of harm's way," John said, rigging up the two-ring stove, while Susan made an inventory of the food cupboards and the refrigerator. "Yaffe's not feeling so good. His broken arm's giving him trouble. Maisie gave him some aspirins. There's nothing else we can do until we find a doctor and by then, it might be too late."

Although I didn't particularly like the little man, I was sympathetic. It was terrible to be injured during times like these.

Westlake and Maisie came back together.

"Good to see you safe. Yaffe's sleeping. He needs a doctor."

No one spoke. Bob and I put on the shirts and sweaters given to us by Westlake, who then went to see how Susan was doing with the cooking. I realized that I was very hungry and my nostrils twitched at the smell of bacon.

"How did you know we were in trouble?" Bob asked Maisie.

She warmed her hands at the fire. "John spotted the footprints when we entered the driveway and we took precautions. There's a good view all around from the upstairs rooms and we could see the gang circling around the house and coming in behind you. So it was just a matter of waiting for the right moment to free you."

"I'm relieved that Lee decided to run, instead of blasting off with the shotgun," I said.

"Amen to that," Bob endorsed.

Margery wandered in, yawning, and her face lit up when she saw us. She greeted us, then went to help Susan.

Maisie began to prepare the table for the meal. Bob and I went to wash

our hands at the sink and were surprised to find that the water was hot.

"Oil heating," Westlake explained, "with hot water on tap. The coal fire was left in here, for it was somewhere cosy to come and sit. We used to stir up the embers and make a mountain of toast, which we drowned with an ocean of butter. Then we'd relax and listen to the radio. I never did like central heating."

No one asked him about his wife. Probably he didn't want to talk about her.

"Have you a radio handy, by the way?" I asked. "We might be able to find out what's happening elsewhere."

"I never even thought about that. We've had so many cares of our own. There's a transistor in my study. I'll get it."

"Don't be long," Susan said, her voice gentle and affectionate, "The meal's ready. Come on, lads, sit down." After we'd settled ourselves, Susan dished up bacon, scrambled eggs and beans, with fried bread, while Maisie poured tea into large mugs.

Westlake came back with the radio and handed it to me. I selected what I hoped were the right wavelength and station and put the radio on the floor at my side. There was nothing except a loud hissing noise.

"Eat, drink and be merry," Bob said, "for tomorrow the larder's empty." Everyone laughed.

There was a muffled rumbling away to the south. It was another reminder of our situation.

"Food is going to be our main problem," Westlake said. "I don't know offhand how much food is in the house, but it won't go far among eight people, even with rationing. And things such as milk, cheese, bread, we won't be able to get. After the meal, we'll find out just how much we do have."

The radio gave vent to a sudden squawk, followed by a brief burst of speech in some Oriental language.

"How the devil could that happen?" Maisie said. "We can't pick up

Chinese broadcasts here."

"I think it was Japanese, actually," I said, "and it can happen. The meteorites coming in will be leaving ionized trails behind them, which would act as radio wave relays, giving freak reception from distant parts of the world. Radio communications could be in a chaotic state for a long time to come, especially if the ionosphere is badly disturbed."

"What about all those satellites, then," Maisie countered, "surely we can receive Japanese broadcasts via them?"

"You're right; but the satellites would be used only to relay special programs, mostly television, and primarily in English. I think we picked up a Japanese local station. And there can't be many stations broadcasting, anywhere in the world, except for emergency transmitters working on behalf of governments. They're going to be giving out only what is absolutely necessary to the maintenance of law and order—what there is left of it."

"So, if anyone's broadcasting from Britain, they might be getting it in Timbuctoo!" Maisie grinned and caused a laugh.

"Local broadcasts are still much more likely to be heard in the countries of origin than in some other country."

"That's enough, Professor," Susan chided. "The lovely meal I cooked is getting cold."

I accepted my rebuke meekly, neglecting to say that I had been eating steadily, whether I had been talking or not.

The radio began to lay another Marconi-type egg, and it was soon evident that this one had been hatched much nearer home.

"Here is a message from Regional Director, Robert Campbell."

There was a short pause.

"In order to facilitate the working of martial law, which I have introduced for the duration of the emergency, all radios and televisions will be handed over to men of the Campbell Group, who will collect them, house-to-house. You are urged to cooperate. News will be purveyed from

central loud-speaker systems.

"Once again, may I remind you that no food must be hoarded. Anyone found contravening this order, or caught looting, will be shot.

"All directives concerning registration for medical aid, food, clothing and shelter will be broadcast from this transmitter. Stay tuned, and be prepared to surrender your radios and televisions when requested." The announcer was like a parrot.

"For 'Director,' substitute 'Dictator'," John said grimly.

"If what Hillary said is true, Campbell has the authority to take whatever measures he thinks fit to maintain law and order."

John gave Westlake a long, searching look, as if he were trying to uncover his thought processes.

"Authority he might have. But I don't like the way he's using it." There were grunts of agreement. "Haven't we seen the erosion of personal liberty in our own country since 1964? Life has gradually become a series of political hoops, which we all jump through whenever the politicians crack the whip."

"That may be. Don't forget that we elect the politicians, so we got what we voted for. In any case, until we know all the facts, we can't judge Campbell's actions objectively—"

John thumped the table, making the oil lamp wobble dangerously. "Objective, nothing! Campbell's out to isolate individuals as much as possible. It's an old and tried technique. And it makes me think that he doesn't have as much authority as you credit him with." His face looked almost satanic in the mellow light from the lamp. "He wants people to have to rely on him for everything. He wants to suppress news from outside, from, probably, legal government. Tell me this: are you prepared to walk back into Campbell's web, after having had a taste of spiderman Hillary?"

"No... no, I suppose not. Common sense must override my predilection for legal proofs. We'll have to fend for ourselves. Campbell's edict makes it unlikely that we'll be able to stay here for long. Foraging parties will be out, searching for food, radios, weapons."

I said, "We'll have to contend with more than Hillary's men. There will be gangs, roaming the towns and the countryside, looking for food and guns. We're somewhere in the middle." I'd been trying the radio, without success, during the debate. "What weapons do we have?"

Westlake answered: "Nothing except the pair of .22 rifles. I don't know how much ammunition there is."

"At least it's something," Bob said.

Ever practical, Susan suggested, "If everyone leaves the table, we'll get it cleared. After the dishes are washed, maybe we'll be able to find out just how much food and ammunition we *do* have and what we're going to do."

The note of asperity in her voice was almost solid. It started a flurry of action and some dishes were broken.

"Right!" Susan said loudly, "you men go away until this chaos subsides." She pushed us out of the kitchen and firmly closed the door, leaving us in darkness.

Westlake looked into the kitchen again. "May we have one of the lamps, please?"

"Can't call anything your own these days," Maisie said, handing him one.

Bob said immediately, "Where's the bathroom?"

"I'll show you. I'd like to take advantage of a Prince of Wales' advice—always avail oneself of the facilities when the opportunity presents itself."

We followed him along a short, thickly carpeted corridor and turned right.

As we reached the bathroom door, Westlake said, "Whether that advice was the result of profound philosophical meditation, or merely the possession of a weak bladder, makes for interesting speculation!"

Amid the laughter, he added, "We'll hold our council of war in my study. It's comfortable, with plenty of chairs."

The radio, which I'd left on, despite the drain on the batteries, suddenly had an electrical fit. We stopped to listen as the tail end of a word came through: "... ton."

There was silence.

"Blasted, tantalizing thing!" Bob said feelingly, voicing everyone's thought. He started running the hot water again.

"Attention, attention. This is a message from the Government Emergency Transmitter, Southampton. All reports so far received indicate that much of Britain has been devastated by the meteorites, which are continuing to fall in great numbers. Loss of life has been very high in the concentrated industrial areas, such as London and Birmingham. Fire, flood, fog and snow have hampered rescue attempts.

"No reports have been received from Scotland and it is feared that the site of the Regional Seat of Government there has been destroyed, preventing communication.

"Instructions for the gathering and issue of food, clothing and medical supplies and the provision of shelter have been issued to local radio stations throughout Britain and you are asked to stay tuned to either Southampton or to your local station.

"World news. Most countries appear to have suffered damage similar to that in Britain, although Canada, Australia and New Zealand seem to have escaped serious or widespread destruction and loss of life.

"Relief fleets from Australia and Canada are being organized."

There was a brief pause, then the announcer concluded: "The next bulletin will be at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Good night."

"Things aren't quite as bad as we thought," Bob said.

"They are here," I replied, drying my hands.

Westlake lifted the lamp. "The ladies should be finished now. Let's go into the study."

We went left, right and right again and availed ourselves of deep,

enveloping chairs. Susan and Maisie entered shortly after.

Westlake drew the curtains across the French windows and settled himself at his desk. In the nostalgic glow of the lamp, we seemed like people from a gentler age and time.

Westlake immediately took charge of the proceedings. "We have all had a trying day," he began, with exquisitely understated irony, "so I suggest that we get to bed as soon as we can."

There was unanimous agreement on that point and Bob emphasized it with a loud yawn.

"What I am going to say is based on the assumption that, for the time being at least, we are going to keep together as a group. Circumstances might force us to break up in the future. We have here all the basic comforts we need, except a guaranteed supply of food. Campbell has made it clear that he is going to control the supplies and distribute them from central depots, the location of which will be announced. Once we know where the nearest depot is, we can plan to raid it—"

"Us, and thousands of others," John interjected gloomily. "We'll be falling over each other."

"That might be so. But, in the next days and weeks, most of the raids on food depots will be the result of desperation and the men will be caught. Ours will be minutely planned and we will not be caught."

I wondered if he felt as confident as he sounded. Then a second thought escaped like a cork to the surface of my mind: Westlake wouldn't be going on any romantic food raids; he was a bit past that, although I had to admit, he'd shown admirable stamina so far. I was being unfair to him.

"I doubt if there will be any further broadcasts tonight, Harry," Westlake said, rather pointedly, but with a trace of a smile in his voice, and I switched off the radio. I found it hard to take offense at Westlake.

He went on, "I think we'll have enough food to keep us going for a few days. By that time, we'll know where the depot is and can plan accordingly."

He stood up, his features benignly indistinct in the lampglow. "The

ladies can have the three bedrooms to the back, upstairs. There are two more upstairs, mine being the one to the right, at the front. Yaffe is in the other front bedroom. It has two beds, so I suggest that one of you move in beside him, in case he needs help during the night. There are two small guest rooms off the same corridor as is the downstairs bathroom. You can help yourselves."

"I'll go upstairs with Yaffe," Bob volunteered, unexpectedly, adding, "I used to do a bit of first aid work."

He moved toward the door.

It opened and Margery came in. Even in the vague light, I could see that something was wrong.

Before anyone could speak, a voice said mockingly from the corridor: "You should have remembered that I know this house as well as you do, Mr. Westlake, perhaps better."

Lee.

CHAPTER 8

The snout of a shotgun nosed into the study, like a pilot fish preceding a shark. The glint of cold metal dominated the room.

Margery stepped forward to join us, but Lee stopped her. "You. Stay where you are." The shotgun was leveled alongside her right hip.

"What do you want, Lee?" Westlake asked, and at the calmness in his tone, everyone seemed to relax a little; one or two of us, including Westlake, moved a bit. He stepped away from the desk.

" 'What do you want, Lee?' " the intruder mimicked savagely, hitting Margery's hip with the shotgun. "Mr. Lee, to you, Westlake. Let me hear you say it."

"Certainly. Mr. Lee." The sarcasm was as jagged as the edge of a broken bottle.

Before Lee could retort, someone else came into the light and elevated the dialogue out of the B-film class.

"Lee." The one word silenced him. Susan had been right. One of the intruders was a woman. I strained my eyes to try and see her clearly, but the many diffused shadows in the study made that impossible.

"It's simple, Mr. Westlake. We want food and shelter. And we'll take it, if we have to." Her voice was pleasant, with an exciting husky flavor, but the implied threat was feral.

"I hardly think that will be necessary. You're welcome to stay and share what we have. But it won't last for long."

"Kind of you, Mr. Westlake. We wouldn't have been welcome without the shotgun, would we? Hypocrisy doesn't suit you."

"And cynicism doesn't suit you. However, we can't stand here all night, exchanging insults. If you want to join us, forget about guns and threats and be prepared to work for the common good—"

"How much longer do we have to listen to him, Jackie?" Lee exploded, thrusting Margery aside. "We have all the guns. Let's dump this lot outside and keep all the food to ourselves."

It was careless, leaving both .22s in the kitchen, I thought gloomily. I supposed we were lucky that Lee wanted merely to throw us outside, instead of shooting us. I wondered if Jackie was his sister.

"I think not." I sensed the imperceptible, but definite, change in Westlake's tone.

"I wouldn't push Lee too far, Mr. Westlake. All those loud bangs we've been having outside have made him very nervous. His finger might slip on the trigger."

The silence was thick inside the room.

"I could shoot him before he has a chance to blink his eyes again."

Jackie laughed. "With what? We have all the...."

Her voice tailed off as Westlake raised his right arm and extended it straight out. The revolver in his hand pointed at a spot directly between Lee's eyes.

Where had the weapon come from? Then I remembered: Westlake had lifted McCaffrey's revolver during the scuffle in the store.

"You wouldn't use it." The remark was suspended between a defiant statement and an uncertain question.

The gun didn't waver.

"I would, to preserve my people. During my youth I did liaison work with the French Resistance at the end of the Second World War. I am not squeamish about killing. I was doing it before any of the three of you were born. Make your choice."

I wanted to wipe the sweat off my face but dared not move. Even supposing Westlake shot Lee, an involuntary squeeze of that shotgun trigger would mean death for some of us in the confined space. I prayed that they were convinced of Westlake's intention.

Far beyond the house, a meteorite thundered to fragmentary ruin. The noise seemed to break the tension.

"Put the shotgun down, Lee. You too, Jeffrey."

Lee snarled, but did as he was told. His companion followed suit. I could feel their resentment smoldering across the room.

Westlake kept the revolver leveled at Lee. "Harry— get the sporting rifles." I gave Susan a brief smile as I passed her, then brushed between Jackie and Lee and took charge of the rifles from Jeffrey, the third intruder—a youth of seventeen or eighteen, as far as I could judge in the poor light. He seemed glad to surrender the rifles.

"I have them."

"Good. Everyone into the day room. It's through the door on the right. John, would you get the other lamp from the kitchen, please?"

As we started to move, Jeffrey made a sudden dash in the direction of the front door. I doubt if either of us knew exactly where he was going, but I stuck a rifle between his legs and he went down in a tangle, cracking his head off the wall. John returned with the other lamp and we bent over the youth. He was unconscious. We hauled him into the day room and

deposited him in a chair.

The incident seemed to knock the last of the fight out of Lee and Jackie. Neither of them looked so cocky. They kept glancing from Jeffrey to Westlake's revolver, and back again.

"You're fortunate, in a way," Westlake addressed them. "But for your companion's mishap and present condition, I would have put you outside tonight. You forfeited any consideration by your actions. There's a large storage room upstairs. You'll be locked in there for the night. It will be inconvenient and uncomfortable, but I think you would prefer that to the outside?"

Jackie and Lee exchanged sullen, miserable glances and said nothing.

"Are you going to put her in with them?" Margery asked, the shocked tone of her voice revealing an unexpected prudish streak in a young woman.

"In the circumstances, there is no alternative, and I don't think it will matter, anyway. You must be the sister Lee spoke of occasionally, Jackie."

She muttered confirmation. By the combined light of the two lamps, I could see that she was a lovely girl, with dark hair coiled in a tight bun. The subtleties of eye and skin coloring were not lost under lamplight conditions. It lent the girl a provocative air.

"You'll get something to eat, your ablutions will be supervised, then you will be put into the room. There are plenty of blankets, so you won't be cold."

Westlake was speaking as a kindly father might to erring children who had to be punished for their own good. For a moment, Lee looked as if he was going to retort, but Jackie silenced him with a glance.

"John, Bob, will you carry the boy upstairs, please? Harry, Susan, see that these two eat and get washed, then escort them to the room. Margery, will you wash up the few dishes and make sure the kitchen's tidy? Thank you."

Margery opened her mouth and shut it again; Susan and I traded smiles as we herded our charges to the kitchen. We heard Westlake

chasing Maisie off to her bed.

"He certainly has things organized!" Susan remarked, filling the kettle, while Margery lit the stove. Holding one of the rifles, I lounged by the door, keeping watch on Jackie and Lee, who were seated disconsolately at the table. I yawned and longed to sleep.

"It comes of having a logical mind," Margery said and I thought I detected a trace of sarcasm. "I worked for a firm of lawyers, once. Talk about fussy— If it had been confined to their work, I wouldn't have minded, but they were meticulous in everything they did. 'Everything in its place; a place for everything,' one of them used to say to me, at least twenty times a day, while his brother nodded sagely at me like the Wise Old Owl."

"We're very lucky to have Westlake as our leader," I reproved, then, to soften the note of censure, added: "Does anyone know his Christian name, by the way?"

"Stephen," said Susan, who was making French toast that smelled delicious. But I knew better than to ask for a bit. Our survival in the future depended on everyone exercising individual and corporate discipline, especially about food.

The three of us watched Jackie and Lee finish the meal quickly. When they had pushed their plates aside, Susan and I left Margery to wash up and we escorted our charges to the bathroom and then to the upstairs storage room.

Jeffrey had come to and was lying down, covered with blankets.

"What about food for him?" I asked Susan.

"He might not feel like eating. I'll ask him."

He shook his head slowly, saying that he'd like tea.

Leaving the rifle with John, I went to get the tea. I must have moved silently, for when I entered the kitchen, I found Margery, a look of bliss on her face, licking her fingers. She stopped when she saw me. One finger was still in her mouth and her eyes popped. I should have remonstrated with her. Instead, I laughed and she removed her finger from her mouth and

joined me.

"Sssh! It's our secret," I said, pouring tea into a mug. I put in one spoonful of sugar and no milk.

"Before you bring the lamp, Margery, there's still a sheen of grease all around your mouth."

I left her furiously rubbing it off.

All the others were outside the storage room when I got back with the tea. I was in time to hear Westlake asking what had happened to McBean. Jackie explained that he'd run away. I passed the tea inside, then West-lake closed and locked the door. I noticed that someone had thoughtfully supplied a large chamber pot.

"I'm glad McBean didn't come back here," Susan said, as I paused before going downstairs.

"I'm not surprised that he didn't. But I wonder where he went." I squeezed her hand confidently. "Anyway, he won't worry us again, so forget him and have a good night's sleep."

I awoke just after seven the next morning feeling, if anything, worse than I did the previous night. The bed had been comfortable; yet I ached all over. I peered out the window. It was dark outside and snowing heavily, so I crawled back under the warm blankets and tried to get back to sleep. After twenty minutes, I abandoned the attempt and rose. As I pulled on my trousers, I could hear other noises in the house, indicating that others in the house were up and about. There was no noise from John's room, next to mine, so I supposed he was still sleeping.

I washed and dressed in my torn, grimy clothes and went to the kitchen. Westlake was there, looking spruce. He took in my appearance at a glance. "Good morning, Harry. I've left a pile of underwear, socks, shirts and trousers in the day room, so you can help yourself after breakfast. There are razors, both battery-operated and safety, upstairs, if you want to shave."

I thanked him, although shaving was about the last thing I wanted to do. Still only half awake, I was grumpy.

The women came in, followed by Bob.

"How's Yaffe?" Westlake asked.

"He had a restless night. He needs a doctor badly."

"I know two who stay at Brookfield. I'll see what I can do after breakfast."

The women were bustling about, filling the kettle, laying the table, preparing food. There couldn't be much food left and breakfast was likely to be our last substantial meal, until we augmented the supplies. And we couldn't begin to do that until we knew where the supplies were going to be kept.

"Will he be able to take some breakfast?" Susan said, effectively making toast by sticking bread on a fork and holding it above the flame of the picnic stove.

"I think so," Bob replied. "If you dish up what he's to get, I'll take it up and help him with it."

"You sit down, Bob, and I'll take Mr. Yaffe's meal to him," Maisie said.

John came in, evidently awakened by the aroma of scrambled eggs and toast. He was greeted with ironic cheers, which he answered with a flourish and a bow.

"What about the people upstairs?"

"I think they can wait until we've had ours," Westlake told me.

It was a reasonable reply and I didn't comment. Maisie went out with Yaffe's meal and the rest of us sat at the table. There was very little talk, and that was mostly about fatigue and the weather. I think everyone was killing time until the next Government broadcast at ten. I hadn't put on the radio, yet, to try and catch Campbell's station.

When we had finished our meal, Westlake asked John and me to bring the prisoners down. He handed me the key and we each took a rifle. Neither of us expected any trouble, and we didn't get any.

The only thing that assaulted us when we opened the door was a

nauseous smell of stale air and urine, and our guests were in no condition to do anything but gasp for fresh air. Momentarily, I felt sorry for them, then I remembered their cocky, threatening attitude of the previous night, and my sympathy dissolved. We took them along the corridor to the bathroom, beyond Yaffe's room, and asked Maisie to supervise Jackie's toilet, while we guarded Lee and Jeffrey outside.

When the three of them were washed up, we took them downstairs. Only Susan was in the kitchen; the others had presumably gone to deal with tasks of their own. I told the intruders to sit at the table and Susan gave them their egg, toast and tea. No one said thank-you. Susan turned down the corners of her mouth and started to sort out some tins in a cupboard.

"Talkative lot, aren't they?" John said to no one in particular. "And they had so much to say last night."

Lee stopped eating and gave him a look that was nasty enough to make me wave my rifle warningly.

"You'd be inclined to be quiet, too, John, if you'd spent the night cooped up, as they were."

"Whose side are you on? You're making a lot of sympathetic noises all of a sudden."

"And *you* are getting very belligerent, for no apparent reason," Susan interrupted firmly. "Stop arguing. We can't afford personal quarrels, especially ill-founded ones."

John calmed down as quickly as he had flared up. "Shot down in flames," he said, making a comic gesture with his hands.

I wondered whether he was as unconcerned about the minor incident as he appeared. We were all strangers, brought together by circumstance, and there was bound to be friction from time to time, although Westlake had ensured that our minds were occupied with more important problems.

When the three were finished, we took them to the day room. Susan came along. The others were already there. In daylight, the room was beautiful. The deep carpet was somewhere between Prussian blue and

indigo in color, with white rugs strategically placed around to give the best effect. The walls were white and the high ceiling was pale gray, with the cornices and picture rail picked out in gilt.

A graceful fireplace at one end was flanked by two comfortable heavy chairs in warm gray; facing it was a couch. There was a roll-top desk at the window, with two straight-backed chairs on either side.

There were Turner originals on either side of the window, their ethereal, dream-like colors infusing a strange fire into the coldness of the room. Above the fireplace hung a large oil portrait of a gentle, dark-haired woman in an oyster-colored satin gown. A series of pen and inks drawings of old Japanese bridges was strung along the third wall. I'd seen many of the real bridges during a visit to Japan, with exotic names such as the Dancing Dragon Bridge, and the drawings did them full justice.

Everyone was staring around, as if he were touring a stately home and wanted full value for his entrance money. Perhaps for us, the beautiful objects in the room helped to rekindle the cooling embers of the soul, or whatever one chose to call that kernel that is the essence of a human being. At least, it was a momentary escape from an all too proximate reality.

Westlake was standing with his back to the fireplace, his face reflecting the pleasure he could see in the expressions of the others in the room. The woman in the portrait seemed to smile down upon him. No one was sitting. Like me, each was waiting for something to happen. It was just after 9.30 and almost time for the government broadcast from Southampton. There might also be a broadcast from Campbell's people, soon. I switched the radio on, so that I could hear it without the others being disturbed.

Sporadic meteorites had been falling since I had awakened, but none had been too close to the house. Probably the Earth had passed through the worst of the stream, although stragglers, many of them big enough to cause considerable damage, would continue to fall until our planet passed completely out of the stream.

"Would everyone please come and sit down," Westlake invited. John, Bob and I pulled the four-seater couch back and moved the other chairs in to form a semicircle around him. Four superb paperweights lay on another low antique table I hadn't been able to see because of the couch.

They all had floral motifs. One in particular drew my attention: it had a simple dahlia design. My hand reached out tentatively to touch it. If it was an original, it was very rare.

Westlake smiled. "It's a genuine Clichy weight. I bought it in a junk shop in Paisley. Pick it up and you'll see the date, 1843, and the initials "CL" on the base. Some have the name in full. These two are St. Louis and the other one is Baccarat, all picked up in little shops."

I sat nursing the Clichy paperweight as he addressed the group, now settled down during our little discourse. He remained standing. Jackie was sitting in the big chair to his right, with her companions on two hard-backed chairs beside her. Our three women occupied the couch, while I and the other two men completed the company.

"The first thing we have to decide," Westlake began, "is the fate of our young friends." They gave him sullen looks as he went on: "In my view, they have forfeited the chance to stay with us. Although this is my home, normal circumstances don't apply at present. As this concerns you all, I want you to vote by putting up your hand if you think they should be turned out." Westlake put his up as a lead to the rest of us. Bob, John, Susan and Margery were quick to follow.

That left Maisie and me. She was sitting very still, looking at Jeffrey and I could only guess at what was passing through her mind. Although by some mutual, unspoken agreement, we had never mentioned our families, perhaps he reminded her of a son, and that was preventing her from making a quick decision. But what was keeping me back? I should have been one of the first to vote to throw out our unwelcome guests. The reason might be sitting opposite me.

Jackie's face had lost its cold, frightened expression. She sat forward in the chair, hope kindling in her eyes. Her teeth worried at her lower lip. I averted my eyes quickly, my glance nickering around the group. Susan was frowning.

"Harry? Maisie? It's almost time for the broadcast and we should get this matter settled." Westlake's reminder was as strong as a command.

"Vote and let's get rid of them," John said curtly. "We can't feed them and we can't trust them."

Before either Westlake or I could say anything, Maisie said obstinately: "No. They're young, with nowhere to go and I think we should keep them with the group."

"Stop thinking with your heart and use your head," John sneered. "That one, Lee, would kill any of us for a slice of bread." A cunning tone crept into his voice. "And I don't think Susan or Margery would feel safe with him around."

The blatant play upon the women's fears made them reinforce their support for John's views and a verbal free-for-all began, with Westlake shouting for silence.

Suddenly, Lee shot out of his chair as if he'd been rocket-propelled and threw himself in John's direction, his face taut with hate.

Jackie cried out. Margery screamed.

The antique table overturned and the paperweights were scattered. I found myself abruptly pushed out of the way, and I landed on the carpet.

Lee had misjudged his leap. John's eyes were cruel as he caught the stumbling Lee with one hand and raised the other like a butcher wielding a meat cleaver.

I realized that he'd deliberately provoked Lee into attacking him and that he intended to kill Lee. Desperately, I lunged and grabbed John's left ankle, and pulled.

The two men toppled on me heavily, sending the breath whistling out of my lungs. They continued to struggle and I tried to extricate myself. I heard two dull thuds and the fight stopped. Lee and John were dragged off. Susan came to my side as I got up, sucking in air. Jackie was cradling Lee's head in her lap. There was an ugly lump on his brow. John, in similar condition, was being tended by Maisie, solicitous but disapproving.

"That," observed Westlake, rubbing a thumb over the Baccarat paperweight, "rather alters the situation."

In the momentary silence that followed, the sound of the radio came faintly into the room.

CHAPTER 9

Bob turned up the volume of the set and the casualty station activities were suspended while we listened.

"This is the Government Emergency Transmitter, Southampton. The number, size and frequency of meteorites falling on Britain has slackened since our last transmission. Sir William Barry, an astronomer at the Royal Observatory, has said that the Earth appears to have passed through the part of the stream with the highest concentration of large meteorites. However, because the stream is previously unknown, there may still be more large meteorites to come.

"Relief operations are well under way throughout the country. Food, clothing, and medical supplies have been distributed from special centers; still-existing accommodations are also being used. Army units, supervised by the Royal Engineers, are erecting temporary buildings and attempting to restore power lines.

"There is still no news from Scotland. All attempts to communicate with the Regional Seat of Government have failed and no messages have been received at Southampton. Units of the—"

There was a loud sizzling noise, like that made by sausages frying, then the radio faded out.

We looked at each other in dismay and disappointment. "What caused that?" Maisie asked, examining John's head.

I answered automatically. "A large meteorite probably came in somewhere, leaving an ionized trail behind it that deflected the radio signal elsewhere. We're lucky we heard anything at all."

"And that's why Southampton hasn't picked up Campbell's broadcasts, I suppose?"

I nodded. Westlake, still fingering the paperweight, went on, "As I said, the situation is now altered. Jackie, you and your friends may stay. But be warned: I will not tolerate trouble from any of you. When your brother regains consciousness, ensure that he understands. John will be told the same. I am going down to Brookfield to see if I can get a doctor. Bob,

Harry, keep watch and don't let the weapons or the prisoners out of your sight."

He left the room. Minutes later, from the window, I saw him walking toward the road.

"I'm going to see Yaffe again," Maisie said, and went out.

"Fine old mess this turned out to be," Bob commented, but he wasn't really grumbling. I caught his sideways glance at Jackie, who was too preoccupied to notice. And I was aware of Susan looking at me. I ignored it and sighted along the rifle, at nothing in particular.

"Hey!" Bob exclaimed. "Stop waving that thing about." He knocked up the barrel.

"Sorry," I said tritely, pleased with my little diversion, "it was stupid of me."

Bob smiled mysteriously. Then he said, not unkindly, "Having this lot on our hands makes a food raid imperative, now."

"Only, we don't happen to know where the food depots are."

"As soon as we hear Campbell's next broadcast we shall."

"True. You know the area. Have you any ideas where they might be?"

John groaned. He tried to raise his head, his eyes flickered, and he fell back.

Margery said, "Shouldn't we do something?"

"We should," Bob replied, "but what? Anyway, he deserved all he got, stirring up trouble and giving us three extra people to feed." He didn't look at Jackie this time.

"I've a feeling that Westlake will make them work their passage," I said. "But it won't be easy. Especially now, we should be able to trust everyone in the group, instead of having to guard some of them all the time."

Jackie spoke. "Lee—or any of us—won't cause any more trouble. I guarantee that." She sounded very submissive.

"You must have a strong influence on your brother," Susan said.

"Yes."

"Then it must have been you who put Lee up to breaking in here and threatening to kill us all."

Jackie stared at Susan. "That's right. Now I've decided that there won't be any trouble."

"Very kind of you," Susan retorted scathingly. "And how do we know that you won't change your mind again, if it suits you?"

Bob and I exchanged I'm-glad-it-isn't-me looks.

"You don't. All I said was that we'll behave ourselves. I didn't say for how long."

"We have a tigress by the tail," Bob remarked; there was no levity in the words.

Jackie gave him a look that would have seared paint off a wall.

"I think I'll go upstairs and keep an eye on the grounds," Bob said hurriedly, although I could sense that he was strongly attracted to the girl. She disturbed me a bit, too.

John groaned again and sat up as if his bones were made of sugar icing. He put out one hand to prevent himself from falling over and put the other one gingerly to his head. Lee also began to stir.

"Christ!" John grunted as he explored his new bump, "what hit me."

"The classic question. A very valuable paperweight," I said.

"That's supposed to make me feel better," he replied sourly and started, groggily, to get to his feet.

I didn't try to help him. I had the rifle and I didn't know what he might do if I went near him. I knew that Westlake would want him watched. And I had to safeguard myself. What did I know about any of them? Nothing. Most of the group had already betrayed unpleasant facets of their characters—only to be expected—but it was the ones still to be uncovered

that worried me.

The next days and weeks would almost certainly see all of us peeled like onions until our raw, inner selves were revealed. I smiled grimly to myself; I was the one who, only a short time ago, was talking about trust. Now I was suspicious of everyone. That emotion could be catching. If we did stop trusting each other, we were lost. I forced my mind off the negative track and onto a positive one.

"Take it easy," I counseled John, as he teetered. "You'd better sit down. That was quite a thump you got." I guided him to a chair.

"Don't I know it." He sounded more rueful than angry.

Lee was propped up in another chair and the two combatants sat holding their heads and glaring at one another.

In their present state, they were incapable of resuming hostilities, but I said, "I hope I'm not going to have to do anything you'd both be sorry for. Just behave yourselves and I'll see if something can be found to ease your headaches. Margery—there should be brandy or whiskey in the house. Would you go and get it and bring it here, please? There's probably some in the study."

I felt a faint, insistent tremor vibrating through the soles of my shoes. The sensation grew steadily and fear rose in every face. No one moved or spoke. The rumbling intensified with the passage of the meteorites. Somewhere a window shattered. The roaring filled our ears and then the danger was past. Then came a series of muffled explosions as the meteorites struck the ground and the tremors ceased.

Everyone wilted visibly. I wasn't a drinking man, but I could have done with something strong just then. It was rather a strange insight on the workings of the human mind that I'd almost forgotten about the meteorites, the cause of all the trouble.

No one seemed disposed to talk. I strolled across to the window, making sure that I could still watch the others. Margery went out. Snow was beginning to idle again through the gray sky, in no hurry to reach the earth. Westlake had gone about twenty minutes ago and I estimated that it would take him at least that time to reach the village, longer if the road was damaged. On that reckoning, he wouldn't be back for another thirty

minutes, or more.

Margery returned with a partially full bottle of whiskey and two tumblers. She held them up in my direction and I said, smiling, "Don't give them too much, or they might start singing, and that could be worse than a fight."

No one smiled. John looked positively venomous. Margery gave the two men the glasses and poured conservative measures. Both downed the whiskey in a gulp.

"Better give them some more," I said acidly, "they didn't have time to taste the first drink."

Susan shot me a quick glance. John half rose out of the chair. Fortunately we were interrupted by a voice, in mid-sentence, from the radio.

"... not being fully obeyed. As a result... people... shot.

"Eight people found guilty of looting have also been executed.

"A strict curfew is now in force. Anyone found on the streets after 8.30 p.m. will be shot on sight.

"Depots for the supply of food, clothing and medical supplies have been set up at the following places."

There followed a list of names, none of which meant much to me, together with instructions for collection. That was followed by another warning.

"The depots will be strongly guarded. People making unauthorized entry will be executed.

"This transmitter is now closing down for good. Listen to your nearest loud-speaker system for news."

"The crafty bastards," John said savagely. "They don't want their broadcasts to be picked up." To Margery he grunted, "What about that drink?" He took a mouthful, then went on, "And look at that piece of bait they dangled, giving exact details about the food depots. They're inviting

people to try and break in."

I signaled Margery to take the bottle away. John watched her go, but said nothing. His expression gave nothing away.

"Talking of depots, is there one anywhere near here?"

"Kilbarchan," Susan answered.

I glanced toward her and realized I had made a mistake. Or worse, two mistakes; one was to give John the drinks; the second was to take my eyes off him.

I started to swing the gun around, but he moved very quickly, as I'd already noticed. His eyes were wild, his teeth clenched in unleashed anger. With a powerful twist, he took the rifle and thumped me in the chest with the butt. The blow made me stagger, and catching my legs on the edge of a chair, I fell heavily.

The next moments were pure nightmare. Cursing steadily, he turned on Lee with the rifle. Jackie's brother must have, as I had, realized that there was danger. He had pushed Jackie away and was on his feet, preparing to attack John. A shot exploded. Jackie screamed. Lee spun around abruptly and crashed against the fireplace.

I struggled to get up. John brought the rifle down in an arc. I managed to avert my head and the rifle struck me on the left shoulder with numbing force.

"Bloody fools!" I heard him shouting. "I'm getting out!"

He ran toward the door and opened it. I twisted around.

Bob was there, about to come in. John cannonaded into him, but retained his balance and lunged on, while Bob fell on his back. The front door opened, and John was gone. Susan helped me up. I didn't know what part of me to hold first. Bob came in, trailing his rifle.

"What happened?" he asked, looking over his shoulder at the doorway, as if half-expecting John to charge through it again.

Then he saw Lee, sprawled in the fireplace and Jackie kneeling by him,

calling his name over and over with dull desperation.

"John shot him?" He went over. "Susan—get Jackie away. I'll need to see how bad the wound is."

He started opening Lee's shirt. Margery appeared and asked breathlessly what had been going on. Bob almost snarled at her to get hot water, towels, bandages, anything. Looking quite put out, she went away. Poor Margery, I thought, everyone's dogsbody!

I joined Bob. There was a lot of blood around Lee's left shoulder and upper chest. His face was an unpleasant gray-green hue and he was having difficulty in breathing. Speaking softly so that Jackie wouldn't hear, I muttered:

"He isn't going to die, is he? Doesn't look too good."

"Neither would you, with a bullet in your body!" Bob snapped with acerbity, laying bare the wounded man's chest.

I flushed.

Bob said, "Sorry, Harry. You've had a hard time, too."

"We all have. I'll go and see if I can help Margery."

"Better still, why don't you go and find Westlake and that doctor? Otherwise, we're going to have a couple of corpses on our hands. And watch out for John. He might still be lurking about in the grounds and wanting to take a potshot at you."

"That's all I need to cheer me up. But I think I'll be safe. It was Lee he was after. I wonder why he didn't stay behind to make sure he'd done the job right? Anyway, I'll leave the rifle with you, just in case anything happens."

Margery came back, laden with all the things Bob had sent her to get.

"Give me those," Jackie said, a bit shortly. "He's my brother, I'll look after him."

"I could help," Margery offered, reluctant to shed the limelight. "I went to first aid classes—"

"Bully for you."

Jackie's roughness shocked Margery and she was about to retort when Susan intervened smoothly, "I'm sure Jackie would like you to help." She, at least, knew what Jackie was suffering.

"Good luck," I said loudly to Bob, handing him the rifle. "I'll be glad to get out of this roomful of cats."

I nipped out, leaving Bob to soothe their ruffled hackles.

Protecting myself as well as I could from the weather, I left the house. The snow was heavier now, but I could see faintly John's tracks leading away down the path. Trying to cram one of Westlake's hats a bit tighter on my head, I started walking toward the road. The trees and shrubs on either side of the path were only half-seen in the snow-slashed gray light. As I trudged on, I felt like a man marooned on another world, doomed always to travel and never to arrive.

I didn't fancy myself as a Flying Dutchman, earth-bound or cosmic. I was very cold and I reproached myself for taking on the task. Then I consoled myself with the thought that I was doing something to help others. The transitory glow of nobility did nothing to combat the chill creeping into me. A brisk jog seemed to be called for, so I tried that. I arrived at the gate quicker, if anything colder, and with my shoes full of snow.

Visibility was very poor, now, and the snow was flailing in my face, stinging the skin. I kept my head down and ploughed on, using the ditch on my left as a guide. There was no sound, except that made by my scuffling feet. I moved on, like a disturbance in a cocoon of silence.

I tried jogging again, but soon stopped. The past few days had taken their toll. How long had it been since the meteorites had begun to fall? Try as I might, I couldn't remember. My mind was refusing to function on that particular point. I'd visited a confectionery factory when I was young, and I recollected watching with fascination thousands of pandrops tumbling over and over in a huge stainless steel vat. Recent events agitated around my mind in the same way. I shivered and pressed on.

At last, I reached the main road. To the left was, I think, Bridge-of-Weir; to the right lay Brookfield. I failed to recall the twists and

turns of the road, so I moved over to the right and carried on. I didn't expect to meet any traffic in the present conditions, but it was more likely here than on the quieter road, so it was wise to be on the correct side.

I'd gone only a few yards when I heard a noise. I halted, the cold and the snow abruptly forgotten. I listened. Nothing. My mind must be playing tricks on me, I thought, and was about to walk on. There it was again! A heavy, rasping sound. Where was it coming from? It seemed to come, now from the front, now from the back. And what was it? I was going to be attacked. What should I do? Run? Stand still? My mouth suddenly went dry.

Suddenly a shape loomed out of the snow and I was down, kicking and struggling with a wet, hairy mass, and unable to free myself. A wild dog, obviously, perhaps driven mad with hunger and injury. I'd been a fool not to arm myself with a stick. Just as I thought I was going to be smothered, I heard a voice ordering curtly, "Off, Sheba, off! Let's see what we have here."

Hands lifted me up.

I shook the snow out of my eyes.

"My heaven!" Westlake exclaimed. "Harry!"

I could do nothing, but splutter with relief.

"I'm very sorry," another voice apologized, "she gets excited at times. I hope you're all right?"

"Apart from being scared out of my wits, yes."

We started walking back toward the house.

"This is Doctor Mathieson," Westlake said. "Ronnie, Doctor Harry Blackman. Telescope, not stethoscope, by the way."

We exchanged greetings, then I said, "You're needed more than ever, now, Doctor Mathieson."

Westlake was alert. "What's wrong?"

The story of the shooting was quickly related.

"Stephen's told me about Mr. Yaffe, of course. The man, Lee—was he seriously injured, do you think?"

"Impossible to say. There was so much blood about. But Bob—that's another of the group—didn't seem worried."

We were walking briskly, and I could feel a little warmth stealing into my system. Sheba was cavorting in the snow and I didn't mind her frequent bumps off my legs.

"We'll see soon enough, then," the doctor said. "Wounds from close-range shots can often be surprisingly minor. Lots of blood and little else."

I had the impression that she was whistling to keep my courage up, maybe to atone for the behavior of the unladylike Sheba.

"I'm worried about John, wandering about in this weather," Westlake said, leading the way through the gate. "Perhaps I should have handled things differently."

"In the short time I've known you," I said, "that's the first time I've heard you express doubts about your own ability to control the situation. As for John, I'm concerned about him with a rifle. He could be waiting somewhere to snipe at us."

"Life is full of surprises," the doctor commented laconically.

I didn't consider it in quite that way. I'd seen what a .22 bullet had done to Lee and I didn't want it to happen to me.

The snow slackened as we reached the house. Susan let us in, squeezing my arm as I passed. She looked as if she'd been crying. Westlake had taken the doctor into the room.

She came into my arms and buried her face against me, oblivious to my snow-sodden clothes, and began to sob deeply.

"Susan, Susan, what's wrong?"

She pulled away long enough to mutter something. I could barely catch her words.

But I heard enough to know that Yaffe was dead.

CHAPTER 10

We joined the others in the room. Lee had been put on the couch and Dr. Mathieson was examining him. Jackie. was standing by anxiously. Everyone else was hanging about, waiting for something to happen. Westlake was talking to Maisie in low tones. Leaving Susan with Margery, I went over to the window to find out what had happened to Yaffe.

"Maisie says he died about thirty minutes ago. She'd gone out of the bedroom for a minute. When she returned, he was dead."

She took up the story. "I found him half out of the bed, as if he'd been trying to get up. I should have been there. He died alone." Her eyes sparkled with tears.

"You did all you could," Westlake comforted her. "If anyone's to blame, I am. I should have fetched the doctor sooner."

Dr. Mathieson came over. "He'll need an operation; the bullet's still in his body. And he shouldn't have been moved. He's lost a lot of blood. Anyway, don't let's waste time. Stephen, I want a table brought in here, a substantial one. There's no anesthetic, so I'll need whiskey or brandy." She ticked off other necessary items on her fingers. "Two sharp knives, towels, hot water, bandages, if you have any. I'm going upstairs to examine the dead man. Organize those things for me quickly."

She was gone before we had to say anything.

Westlake said, "Bob, Harry, there's a suitable table in the kitchen. Would you bring it up here, please? Margery, Susan, I think you'll make very good assistants to Dr. Mathieson. You know what's wanted. There are some overalls in the kitchen, by the way. I'm sure they'll be needed. Harry—take Jeffrey with you. He looks as if he could stand some hard work."

The third member of the gang came unwillingly, his mouth sullen.

As we filed toward the kitchen, Bob said callously, "Just our luck to get lumbered with this lot: a tricky, strong-willed girl, a wounded man, and a

layabout. We're going to have problems. I'm beginning to think that John—wherever he is—had the right idea."

"That sounds more like Hillary's philosophy; it wouldn't solve anything."

"Maybe not. But it would have meant three less mouths to feed. We're going to have to get food quickly and it's not going to be easy."

We reached the kitchen and started to wrestle with the table. It was large and heavy and it took all our strength to carry it back to the room. The conversation was suspended while we maneuvered it out of the kitchen. We managed after five breathless minutes, and paused to rest.

"That thing must have been built in the kitchen," Bob wheezed, mopping his brow.

"Let's get on with it," I said.

With much bumping and banging, we arrived at the door just as the doctor came from upstairs. She held the door open to allow us to get the table through.

"Please put it lengthways by the window," she directed.

"What about Yaffe?" Westlake asked.

"Heart attack. Nothing could have saved him. I'd say he'd had at least two others fairly recently, within the last year. His days were numbered. That's fine, thanks."

Puffing, we flopped into chairs, while the doctor prepared for the emergency operation. Maisie spread a sheet over the table and waited with a second one over her arm. When Dr. Mathieson had things to her satisfaction, she asked Bob and me to wheel the couch over beside the table.

"Now—this is the delicate bit. I want you to lift the patient onto the table. One take the head, the other the feet. That's it. Support him firmly but gently."

Trying to make everything sound normal, she was keeping us from

getting flustered.

Lee was light and it wasn't difficult to lift him onto the table. There was no sound in the room except the rasping of his breath. We positioned him and Maisie put the other sheet over him. His eyes were open, but dulled with pain. His skin was gray, with vivid blotches of red on his cheeks. His mouth worked soundlessly.

Stephen had moved all the men back out of the way. Mathieson asked him to raise Lee's head.

"Nod if you understand me. I'm going to have to take the bullet out."

Nod.

"I'll be as quick and as gentle as I can."

Nod.

"I want you to drink this."

Dr. Mathieson had poured whiskey into a cup. She put it to Lee's lips. After a few minutes, the doctor said, "He's over."

The operation began.

Westlake called Bob and me over by the fireplace. He had chairs grouped around the antique table, fortunately undamaged in the fight. On it was spread a map, held down at the corners by the priceless paperweights.

"We are here," he said, poking a finger at a point on the map. "The nearest food and supplies depot is there, at Kilbarchan, in the paper mill. It won't be too difficult to reach the mill, but it will be hard to get into it from the rear." He started to draw on a piece of paper. "As you'd expect, the mill is near water. A deep, but not too wide, stream runs at the back of the mill and that would have to be crossed. There is a mesh fence on the opposite bank, which is high and steep. The buildings practically overlook the stream. From left to right, there is a large storage shed, built a few years ago, with offices above; it adjoins the original offices. Then there is the actual factory itself. There is another storage shed between the offices and the main road."

We listened and watched as he spoke softly, sketching with deft strokes. He drew the position of the mill relative to the road. About a hundred yards to the right of the main gate was a road junction. "An ideal place for a checkpoint," Westlake said.

I glanced at Mathieson. She was working quietly, surrounded by the women in the group.

"Because of that, it will be impossible to enter from the front. In fact, the layout of the roads around the village makes it impossible to get anywhere near the mill without being seen. But once we're in the vicinity of the mill, there are a number of likely entrances."

"But surely the rear will be heavily guarded, if entry from the front is as difficult as you say?" I objected.

"And we don't know where the food and supplies will be kept. A lot of valuable time could be lost searching."

"Chances will have to be taken if we are to survive. The only alternative is to surrender ourselves to Hillary in order to get food. I've marked on the drawing where I think the likeliest spots will be. They'll have to dump paper and waste to make space for the amount of supplies they'll have."

"Supposing all this is successful," Bob said, "how do we get the stuff away?"

"There are plenty of suitcases, bags, haversacks, in the house. We'll use those."

"Strewth," Bob exhaled noisily, raising his eyebrows.

Westlake was undaunted. "Now—how to get there. I want you to learn the route by heart, in case we get separated."

Or captured, or shot, I added to myself. The adventure sounded highly dangerous and the chances of survival seemed slight. I wished I could share a little of Westlake's enthusiasm. He was reliving the episodes with the Resistance during the last war. I had no such experiences to draw on.

I paid special attention to what he was saying and to the route.

"It's a bit up hill and down dale. If we keep together, it will be easier. Six of us will go. We three, Jeffrey, and Susan and Margery."

"Wouldn't the girls be safer here?"

"They would," he answered me. "But we need to get as much food in this raid as we can and the two women will help to carry it. Maisie will stay here, so will Jackie."

"I'm not happy about that," Bob said. "Maisie wouldn't be safe. We'd be better to take Jackie with us."

"I don't think she'd want to leave her brother and how would it profit her to make trouble during our absence? No, I think my arrangement is best."

Mathieson came over, drying her hands on a towel. There were some spots of blood on her blouse.

"It's done. He'll be weak for a few days. If he can rest, he'll be all right. Leave him on the table until he wakes up—it could be some hours, yet—then have a bed made up for him in here. Don't let him move or try to get up. And he must be kept warm. I'll come back up tomorrow to see how he is."

"You'll have something to eat before you go. The ladies are preparing a meal now. It'll be the last good one we'll have unless we succeed in stocking up soon."

"You're not going to do anything rash, are you, such as raiding a food store?"

"I never do anything rash. The answer to your question is, nevertheless, in the affirmative. I have some experience in such matters."

"That was a long time ago, Stephen." The doctor's reminder was pointed, although said kindly.

Westlake was unruffled. "The problems remain basically the same. I simply have to find the right solution for this particular situation. There's no alternate action available. I should amend that. We could start eating each other, or sit here and starve, or even give ourselves up to Hillary."

Mathieson looked glum and said nothing. Westlake was irrefutable in the most pleasant manner, as all of us knew, and I couldn't imagine anyone taking offence at him.

"I think I should get back—" the doctor began, when Margery came in to ask Westlake if there were any other tables available.

"You'll find card tables in the closet upstairs," Westlake said.

"Thanks. We're almost ready."

"I'll help you with the tables," Bob offered, going out.

Mathieson and Westlake were at the window, watching the driving snow and talking. I joined them.

"Have you decided what to do about Yaffe, yet? I don't suppose he can be left upstairs indefinitely."

"We were discussing that," Westlake said. "He'll have to be buried. There's a piece of overgrown ground at the bottom of the garden, by the ditch separating it from the fields. Some trees about; it would be a good spot."

"I'll make out a death certificate. It'll keep everything legal, against the time when law and order is restored."

"You talk, doctor, as if this were a brief interruption in the normal scheme of things. Life is going to be very different in the next few years, and probably a lot of permanent changes will have to be made. The geography and, possibly, the climate, of the world will never be the same again and those changes will have effects on our lives and our social habits."

"You're probably right. But there's a certain comfort and strength in being able to follow a well-worn routine. Thumbing one's nose at fate, as it were."

"It'll take more than a few meteorites and some uniformed thugs to alter our ways," Westlake laughed.

Susan called that the meal was ready.

"Right, Jackie and Jeffrey, come on."

"I'd rather stay here with Lee," Jackie said.

"He'll be all right, lass. You heard what the doctor said. Now come and get something to eat and you'll feel better," Westlake said.

I marveled at his magnanimity and his capacity for persuasion. He was a lawyer, obviously a highly successful one, and such qualities would be a basic part of his armory. I hadn't known him long, but I guessed that they were fundamental ingredients of his personality as a man. They would manifest themselves, no matter what job he did.

Jackie smiled despite herself and did as she was told.

Going down the hall, Westlake said, "We'll need a coffin of sorts for Yaffe. Are you any good with hammer and nails? You'll find plenty of wood in the garage. He won't need a big one. No doubt Bob will help you. Fine, that's arranged. My, I am hungry. Let's enjoy the ladies' cooking."

What could I say? What *was* there to say?

We sat at the tables. Someone had found covers. There were nine of us and it was amazing how far a few eggs and some beans could be made to go. And there was tea, with milk and sugar, if required, and even a thin smear of butter on the bread. We each had our own portions.

After the meal, Bob and I started our appointed task. There was a workbench in the garage. Bob had taken the precaution of measuring Yaffe, and between us we hammered together a serviceable box. Next we dug a grave at the bottom of the garden, under the shade of an oak tree, which helped to keep some of the snow off us as we worked. Visibility was only a few yards.

"As long as this keeps up, we'll never get on the food raid."

"Don't you believe it, Bob. If Westlake makes up his mind, he could persuade anyone to do anything."

"I'd noticed that trait." He piled up some more earth. "That should do it, I think." He leaned on the spade and stared down into the hole. "What a way to go."

We trudged back to the garage and took the box into the house. Margery, Maisie and Susan were still in the kitchen, sitting at one of the tables, talking. Jeffrey was washing the dishes and looking thoroughly sour about it.

The talking stopped abruptly when we carried the box in. The primitive fear of dying rose in every face. The youth dropped a plate, which helped to shatter the mood.

"We'll need a sheet," Bob said to Maisie.

"Yes. I'll ask Stephen."

"We'd better carry him downstairs," I suggested as we took the box along the passage. "It would be too awkward and heavy to do it the other way."

"A bit public, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," I said wearily.

Maisie appeared with a sheet and started to go upstairs.

"We thought we'd bring him down here—"

"Oh." All her disapproval was concentrated in that single word.

"Upstairs," I said to Bob.

Soon the job was done and the lid nailed down. It was a struggle on the stairs, but finally we managed. Westlake, carrying a bible, led the solemn little procession out of the house and into the snow.

The ceremony was short and dignified. When it was finished, Bob and I waited while Jeffrey filled in the grave. Bob made him clean the spades when he completed the job. He was getting more surly by the minute.

"We'll have to watch that one," I warned Bob, as we went back to the house. "I don't think he's quite so innocuous as he looks."

CHAPTER 11

The snow continued to fall heavily. Beyond the window was a swirling, unseen world, like something from a half-remembered dream. We spent most of the late afternoon and early evening resting, sleeping, lounging. Bob and I took turns at staying awake. Neither of us trusted Jeffrey, although we couldn't see any sense in his causing trouble, at least not now.

About six o'clock, Susan and I made tea. The milk was finished, but there was still sugar for those who wanted it. The meal was meager: bread, butter, cheese and jam, all in small lots.

Westlake was bleak as Susan told him that there was no food left. "We've no option, now, but to stage a raid."

"Look at the weather," Bob protested. "We'd be lost in no time."

"Not if we keep together. Also, there is the element of surprise. The people we will be dealing with don't like the snow any more than we do. They'll be too busy trying to keep warm and won't be so vigilant. They won't expect anyone to go near the mill until the weather clears a bit. You heard what Susan said: we have no food. The snow might not go off for days. Meanwhile, you want us to sit here and starve."

"As long as we have water, we could stick it out."

"Fine. But we don't know how long the pipes will remain undamaged and there's a limit to how much we can store. We have plenty of tea to drink. If we try to exist on nothing but that, we'd soon be too weak to undertake a raid. And remember, too, that we could be discovered here at any time, by Hillary's men or by a roving gang searching for food and guns. I say we go. What do the rest of you have to say?"

I asked, "How far away is the mill cross-country?"

"Just over a mile."

"It doesn't sound much."

He gauged the undercurrent of doubt in my words.

"I didn't say that it would be easy. Some of us could get killed."

"We could sit here and argue until we drop from exhaustion. I'll go."

He scrutinized me openly, approvingly.

"Bob?"

There was no hesitation now. "Count me in."

Westlake turned to Susan and Margery. "I've explained that we'll have to get as much food as we can in this one raid. It would help if you two came along, to carry some of the loot away. The weather is rather bad, so if you wish to stay behind, it won't matter."

"I'll go. I'm as much part of the group as any of the men," Susan said, giving me a small smile.

Margery nodded agreement.

"Good. We'll leave at two a.m. If there should be a break in the weather, we'll go sooner. I suggest you get as much rest as you can."

"Wait a minute," Jeffrey said, "I don't want to go on this crazy raid of yours—"

"What you want, or don't want, is unimportant. You came to my house uninvited. Only because Lee was wounded were you allowed to stay. You've enjoyed my food and my hospitality. You'll come with us and do what you're told, or you get out of here now. Make up your mind."

"If he has one," Bob taunted.

"That's enough, Bob." The reproof was amiable, but firm. "Well, boy?"

"All right, all right, spare me the sermon. I'm convinced." He was sullen and there was a rebellious edge in his voice. He stood up and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Bob asked.

"To the washroom, if it's all the same to you. I suppose I am allowed to go?"

Bob ignored the sarcasm. "Of course. I'll go with you."

"I think he can manage on his own, Bob. He's not going to do anything

silly."

"But I need to go—" The plea was so anguished, we couldn't help laughing.

"Just wait till he comes back, then."

"This wisdom of Solomon bit is going too far!" Bob said, grinning. But both Westlake and I noticed that his eyes were hard and unsmiling. Westlake's shrewd brain would be assessing the situation constantly, watching for any hint of trouble.

The next hours were spent in getting everything organized. We had to improvise with the clothes we had, although Westlake was able to provide extra items that would help to keep us drier and warmer. The suitcases and haversacks were lined up. Wire-cutters were brought from the garage. Westlake treated it like one of his Resistance operations. By eleven, all was ready. The waiting was one of the frustrating parts.

The snow was beginning to slacken. Tea was made again and we sat around, silently drinking. Just after midnight, it stopped snowing and Westlake said it was time to go.

Well muffled, we set out from the house. The sky had cleared and the stars scintillated in the black January skies. An east wind honed itself on us as we walked to the gate, the snow compressing beneath our feet with that peculiar creaking sound. High overhead, a trio of bright flashes slashed brilliantly across the heavens and were gone.

We reached the road and Westlake struck off at an angle to the other side. He took us through a break in the ditch, and we were into the fields. The ground was rutted beneath the snow. Westlake set a slow pace, but all of us had fallen at least once. The crisp snow brushed off easily. We were now walking alongside a wire fence. On the left lay a quarry.

The field sloped upward gradually and we made good use of the fence to stop ourselves from sliding. The wind scoured across the gaping wound of the quarry. I felt as if I had no clothes on; the coldness cut right through everything. Finally we climbed to the top of the hill and Westlake called a welcome halt among some trees. No one spoke; we were too glad of the respite. Our breaths billowed into the frosty air. From my viewpoint, the whiteness rolled away for miles until the far mountains beyond the valley

came up against the night. Here and there great fires burned. I could have been a spy looking down fearfully upon the encampment of Ghengis Khan.

Westlake broke my Walter Mitty reverie and we were off down the other side of the rise, slithering and stumbling. Partially sheltered from the wind, I was even beginning to feel slightly warm. At the foot of the incline, the going was flat for about three hundred yards before giving way to a series of ups and downs that were more tiring than the previous climb. Slips and tumbles became frequent.

Our objective was on the other side of the next rise, Westlake told us. At the top, we stopped by thick bushes. The mill wasn't as well lit as I'd anticipated. There were many enticing pools of darkness. The place was probably still on emergency lighting.

The ground before us, dotted with bushes, led to the stream, some four hundred yards away. The buildings backed practically onto the far bank. There wasn't much space between them and the fence.

I recalled what Westlake had told us about the stream: it was narrow, about eight feet wide, and deep with steep banks. There was a fairly easy way down this side, but not up the other side, at the fence. In some places, the slope was almost vertical. The snow helped by revealing depressions that might afford a foothold, however precarious.

We moved to within about fifty yards of the stream, left the women in a sheltered spot, then the four men moved on. I'd been chosen to go over first and cut a hole in the fence. Height has its drawbacks. The three others settled themselves by a bush at the edge of the stream.

The wire-cutters were in my pocket. I checked to see that the string I'd tied around them and looped about my middle was secure. I went down the bank. At this point, the opposite bank was eight or nine feet high. To have any chance of gripping the top of the bank, I'd have to launch myself outward and upward from a standing jump. Otherwise I'd end up in the water, probably attracting attention in the process.

Pressing myself against the bank, I was about to attempt the leap, when I heard voices. Two men, coming toward me. I stopped myself from falling, but one foot shot from under me and into the water. The men were coming nearer. I had to stay as I was, the freezing water fast numbing my foot and ankle and my trouser soaking up the dampness. I'd been keyed up

to jump and my heart was thudding. Already, the strain of the unnatural position was telling, threatening to topple me over.

The men reached the fence, slightly to my right. If they looked in this direction... My breathing rasped as loudly as a buzz saw and I put my head down to try and muffle the noise. I knew I wouldn't be able to hold the position any longer; I could feel myself beginning to slip. The limb in the water seemed to be dead below the knee. Frantically I tried to stop myself from falling. The men must hear me!

Then someone called to them from the factory and they turned away from the fence.

I was sliding into the water. The precarious foothold I had on the bank crumbled. A hand grabbed my shoulder and pulled me against the bank. "This is no time for a swim!" Bob grunted from above me and I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Thanks. Let me rest for a minute and then I'll be fine." I wouldn't be, of course. I leaned against the bank, panting like a marathon runner who'd misjudged his pace, and tried to massage some life into my numb leg. Bob held on to my shoulder.

"I'm ready now. Here goes."

I braced myself and pushed off with my dry foot.

My hands clawed at the fence and I managed to grab it with one hand while my feet scrabbled for a hold. Just when I thought I was going to let go, my left foot found a projecting stone and I was safe. My breath was burning in my chest and throat and I wanted to sleep, nothing more. But that would have to wait.

Making sure that I had a firm grip of the fence, I set to work with the wire-cutters. They weren't meant to be used with one hand, which made the job much harder.

Finally, I cut a hole big enough to allow us to wriggle through. I pulled myself up the bank and went through the fence. I waved to the others. It had been agreed previously, against his will, that Westlake would not cross the stream. Bob had been at his most tactful when talking about age and weight, and the lawyer had been persuaded. Bob helped the women across,

leaving Jeffrey to make his own way. I hauled them up from my side.

Bob whispered, "Everyone ready? Keep together. Let's go." We had moved only a few yards, when I noticed that the boy was hanging back. I started to order him to stay with us.

Suddenly, he began to yell at the pitch of his voice, at the same time making a dive for the gap in the fence. Instinctively I stuck out a foot and it caught him and he fell.

"Get back across the stream!" I shouted to the others. The boy scrambled to his feet and tried to get through the wire. A shot echoed spitefully and he jerked upright, his hands trying to touch the wound in his back, then he slumped against the fence.

There was shouting from the factory. I shoved the body aside roughly. Bob slithered down the bank and almost threw Margery to the other side, where Westlake took over. Susan was halfway through the wire when another shot rang out. She gasped and I could see the stain spreading rapidly on her left shoulder. Men were running toward us.

"Bob!" I hissed, "get away! We've had it!"

He was still pulling at Susan, not understanding what had happened.

"She's been shot! Get away!"

He jumped the stream. But, if I didn't create a diversion, he'd get shot. I knew that, by moving, I was inviting a bullet in the back. However, I would be killed sooner or later and I might be able to save some of my friends. To distract the men, I ran toward them, shouting and waving my arms. They halted, unsure of what to do. One of them had no doubts. As my momentum carried me on, he swung his rifle at my head. The pain was intense. My last thought was of Susan.

CHAPTER 12

The first thing I saw when I regained partial consciousness was a thick hand, covered with wiry hair. I shuddered involuntarily, abruptly wide awake and afraid. Hillary's bright, splintery eyes were as barren as the surface of the moon and twice as inhospitable. They were inches from my

face. I tried to draw back. He smiled at my reaction. At that moment, the Iron Maiden would have been more welcome.

I closed my eyes briefly, hating myself for showing my cowardice so openly. When I looked again, he had moved away, his face in shadow. A piercingly bright light shone behind his head, giving him a devilish halo. I blinked, unable to see. Someone behind me coughed and struck me hard as I turned my head.

I wondered where Susan was. Perhaps she had escaped. The more rational part of my mind discounted that. They had her, too. I tried to peer into the gloom, without success.

"My pleasure again, Dr. Blackman," Hillary said, the irony delicate, probing, "one I have been... anticipating? Yes, I think that's the word I want."

I was shaking perceptibly, all over, with a terror that couldn't be described. There was menace in the room; evil, rottenness, something almost tangible in its silence. From far away came a muffled thundering and I wished myself at the point of impending impact, awaiting a quick, fiery death.

The silence poured slowly into the room, welling up in my mind, threatening to drown me in soundless horror. I clenched my teeth until my gums ached, determined not to say anything until Hillary spoke again.

His hands slid forward and lay, as if severed, in a platter of light. The fingers moved fussily, picking at surprisingly clean, well-kept nails. I fought down the picture of two spiders, preparing for a feast. His quiet laughter echoed like pebbles being rattled around in a skull.

I was alternately hot and cold and the waiting was beginning to break me, as it had done during the airport interview.

"Are your friends keeping well, Dr. Blackman?" The tone was light, conversational. The hands were still, now.

I took a chance. "I've been on my own since I left the airport. I don't know where the others are. Miles away by now, I should think."

"And where have you been keeping yourself?" Still the casual, unhurried

approach.

"Here and there. I've been moving around, looking for food."

"In this weather?" Then: "Those aren't the clothes you were wearing when I saw you last."

"I picked them up—"

"At a friend's house, perhaps?"

"I told you, I've been moving around, on my own."

"So you did. Quite the professional housebreaker."

He raised a hand. The man behind me puffed as he lifted something heavy and dragged it forward into the light.

A hand grasped a fistful of my hair and jerked my head to the left and down.

Cold eyes in a bloodied face stared back at me, full of the remoteness of death.

John Allingham.

I found strength from somewhere and prevented myself from being sick. The man let the body fall to the floor.

"A very stubborn man, with great physical and mental stamina. He didn't tell us anything." His eyes, set so close together, were tiny slivers of fire. In effect, he was telling me that I lacked those qualities that had doubtless prolonged John's painful death.

"You don't have any conscience, any feeling for humanity—"

"Then I'm paying it back in kind, Dr. Blackman. It's easy to moralize from one viewpoint." He sounded neither angry nor perturbed. "However, that's something we might debate another time. Meanwhile, I think I can get the information I want from someone else." He snapped his fingers and an overhead light was switched on.

It was a few moments before I could see clearly. Then I cried out and

started to get out of the chair. Two hands clamped my shoulders and neck and thrust me back into it.

By the door of the wood-paneled room, to my right, stood Susan, an arm twisted behind her, a gun jammed deep under her jaw. She sagged against the man holding her.

"Let her sit down, Hillary. Can't you see she's injured?"

"It's a very minor wound. But it could become serious, shall I say, under certain circumstances."

My look was venomous, but I could think of nothing to say that would express the intense loathing I had for him.

A quick flurry of shouting and the sounds of a struggle outside the room curtailed the interrogation. Someone knocked on the door and entered.

It was Martin, Hillary's redheaded assistant, followed by the gaunt towering figure of McBean and two men who were having difficulty in restraining him.

"Get these Philistines off me!" he demanded haughtily, tossing his thatch of white hair, which seemed even longer and dirtier than it had at the airport.

Hillary ignored the outburst. "Where did you find him?" he asked Martin, a trace of exasperation in the question.

Martin realized that he had made a mistake in disturbing Hillary and he rushed into his explanation. "Actually in the food store. After the disturbance at the fence, we checked the entire factory area."

"How did he get in?"

Martin swallowed. "I don't know."

Hillary switched his flinty gaze to McBean. "Did you ever work here?"

McBean's precipice of a nose twitched. He nodded. "I decided my labor would be better appreciated elsewhere, so I left."

"What you mean is that you were fired, probably for drinking, or fondling the little factory girls, or both."

There was a brief flare of savage hatred in McBean's deep-set eyes, then he started to bluster: "You dare say that to a man of God—"

Hillary seemed to take an age to rise from his chair opposite me, but the blow that felled McBean was swift and brutal.

"Get him out of here, Martin. And I don't want to see him, ever again."

McBean sensed the full import of the remark and he started to whine, his arrogance gone, his eyes shifty with cunning. He got to his knees and stayed there, wiping blood from his small, prim mouth. "I could give you information."

"About what?"

McBean's eyes sparkled with malice. "About them." He pointed, first to me, then at Susan.

Hillary sat down and let his hands dangle between his knees. His eyes were almost on a level with McBean's. "Go on."

"They're all at the big house off the Kilbarchan Road, across from the quarry. *Trincomalee*, I think it's called. That lawyer, Westlake, owns it. They've been there since they escaped from the airport."

"So you're one of them, raiding for food?"

"No, no," McBean denied hastily, "I was taken hostage by some young people who tried to break into the house, then they let me go."

"It seems no one wants you for very long, do they, McBean?"

McBean revealed his hate again for an instant and then it was gone.

"Thank you very much for the information, Mr. McBean," Hillary said with mock courtesy. "You saved me from having to be unpleasant to this young lady. Martin, now you can take him out and get rid of him."

McBean clutched at Hillary's legs. "You promised! Have mercy! You promised—"

They hauled him away, still whimpering and pleading.

My mind was numbed by the callousness of Hillary. I had heard that men like him existed during the Second World War, exterminating human beings without pity, but I never thought I would meet one personally.

Hillary turned to me. "That leaves us with you. And your friends." He looked as if he would like to kill me there and then, with his own hands. The moment passed and he said to the man behind me: "Take them into the village. We'll catch the others and make an example of them all together."

He indicated the corpse. "Strip him and hang him up by the heels from the main gate. Not too low—we don't want the animal packs to get him too soon."

Susan was almost fainting as I put my arm around her. They pushed us out of the front door of the mill office and into a land rover. Two men climbed into the back beside us. The vehicle moved up an incline, passed the gatehouse on the left, and turned right.

We traveled about a hundred yards and passed through a T-junction checkpoint, went over a small bridge and entered the village, where every house exterior seemed to be painted a different, more violent hue, than its neighbor. The driver parked the vehicle beside several others drawn up outside an inn that had obviously seen better days. The black and white paint was pitted and scarred, windows were broken, the door was hanging by the top hinge. From inside came the mixed noises of loud laughter and even louder singing. I held Susan close to me as we were pushed into the building.

The air was poisonous with the fumes of smoke, sweat and beer, and there were too many people in the confined space. The racket was deafening. There were two or three sullen-looking girls present, being pawed by men in the dark uniform and the mailed fist emblem of the Campbell Group.

Martin was forcing his way to the bar, with Susan and me following and another man behind us. Four men, with their arms around each other's shoulders, were singing in a brogue a yard thick about some colleen who fell into a bog in Ireland, but the words, when they could be

heard, were too crude to be the original verses.

"Come on, lads," Martin shouted above the din, "let us pass!"

The revelers took no notice. If they heard Martin, they ignored him, and carried on with the song. Martin tried to elbow aside the man with his back to us. The man turned, and saw Susan. He let out a wild whoop, which had the effect of stopping, momentarily, all conversation, and everyone stared at us as if we were creatures from another world.

"Now isn't she a beauty?" the man said, rubbing his large, dirty hands together. "Better than this frigid lot of virgins!"

He was a six-footer, with a patch over his left eye, and he had the ugliest-looking face I'd ever seen. "Where did you get her, Martin? Bring her along for us to play with, did you? Isn't that good, boys?" His companions roared their approval and they moved toward us. Susan pressed herself against me and she was quivering with terror.

"That's enough!" Martin snapped, stepping in front of us. "They're special prisoners of Hillary's. If anything happens to them, you'll answer to him."

The people in the crowded room were silent now, eager to see the outcome of the clash, but not wanting to get too close in case they became physically involved.

"Did you hear that, boys?" the man appealed to his friends. "I'll answer to Hillary." He snatched a pint glass from a table and drained the contents in a continuous gulp, then smashed the glass on the table's edge. Light flashed off the splintered, razor-sharp edges. The man's single eye glittered.

"Hillary! The bastard with ice for a heart." He made a two-fingered gesture, stumbled, and regained his balance. "*That* for Hillary. And you, too, Crawler Martin. I'm having the girl, so let's... let's she... see you stop me."

After his session with Hillary, and now this, Martin seemed to be goaded beyond endurance. Instead of letting the ugly giant fall over, as his slurred speech and stumbling indicated he would at almost any moment, Martin made the mistake of insulting him.

Martin's hand was on his gun butt as he flared: "You stupid son of a stupid Irish pig—"

The man lunged the short distance separating them, and the terrible glass was thrust forward into Martin's face. Blood spurted everywhere. He screamed and kept on screaming until that sound seemed the only one in the universe. The Irishman's charge carried him on and he collided with Martin. There were two shots in quick succession and the Irishman was thrown back against his companions. His mouth was wide open, showing yellowed teeth, but he couldn't scream for the blood welling into his throat and spilling down his clothes. Slowly he toppled over, like a felled tree, and crashed face down on the floor. His legs jerked once or twice, then he was still.

Susan had fainted and I slumped her into a chair. Several people were being noisily sick. They were all trying to get out of the bar at the same time, causing a jam. There was shouting from outside, as if men were attempting to get in. Village patrol, most likely. Martin was on his knees, his hands over his face, blood oozing between his clenched fingers. He was moaning softly. His revolver lay close to him. I bent down quickly in the confusion, lifted the gun and slipped it into my pocket.

The patrol finally cleared the place and Martin and the body were taken away. After finding out what had happened, the patrol leader went behind the bar and I could hear him talking rapidly on the telephone.

He put the telephone down, lifted the divider and said, "You—through here."

As I started to pick up Susan, I felt the heavy revolver beginning to slide out of my pocket and I hesitated, not daring to do anything that would draw attention to the weapon.

"Hurry up! What's keeping you?" The man's nerves were shredding.

I leaned on the chair and put the other hand to my brow. "Feeling dizzy," I muttered. The revolver was still sliding. "All this... the smoke and the heat."

"I don't blame you." I think the sympathy was more for himself than for me. "Give him a lift with the girl, Jim." The man who'd been talking with a friend by the door came over. My hand dove into the pocket where the

gun was and brought out my handkerchief. The gun wouldn't fall out, now.

I blew my nose loudly, then, between us, we carried Susan behind the bar and into a room beyond. Jim went out and locked the heavy door. We'd laid Susan out on a rickety table, the only piece of furniture in the place. There was nothing else except stacks of empty beer crates and crisp cartons. The light bulb was weak, filthy and naked and it threw bleak shadows. The room was cold.

But, be it ever so uncomfortable, it was home, for the present, anyway. The weight of the revolver in my pocket was reassuring. I had something to fight back with, when the time and the opportunity came.

CHAPTER 13

Susan groaned and sat up, like a zombie rising from its coffin. She tried to push stray hair off her face and didn't succeed. I could see that she wasn't fully aware of her surroundings. She might become hysterical when she remembered what had happened in the bar, so I would have to keep her occupied. I went to her and put my arm around her shoulder.

She clung to me, almost pulling me off balance, and I held her close for a minute, crooning sweet nothings against her hair, before I said: "I want to look at that wound of yours. Hillary said it was only minor, but I'm not so sure."

As I spoke, I eased her outer garments off, being as gentle as I could. Several times she grimaced, but said nothing. The heavy sweater was more difficult to remove. By the time it was off, she was swaying and would have fallen had I not prevented her. I wasn't going to be able to work with her this way, so, still holding her, I pushed the end of the table against the wall, then propped her up. Fatigue, hunger, the wound: all were having their effect on her and she fainted again.

Her once-white blouse was soaked in blood on the left side, from the shoulder to the waist. So much for Hillary's minor wound. My fury rose again, but I calmed myself. I was going to need a calm mind and steady hands.

Gingerly, I undid the buttons of the blouse. It wouldn't come off. A lot of blood had dried and made it stick to her skin. What was I going to do?

Susan needed help badly, preferably from a doctor. There seemed little prospect of getting one, but it was worth a try. I crossed to the door and began to batter it with my fist. All my shouting and explanations brought nothing except a threat from an irate man, who told me I'd better shut up, or he'd come in and do it for me.

This wasn't the time to make use of the gun and advantage of surprise that it would give me, so I was silent. I glanced at Susan again. Maybe the wound looked worse than it actually was; a lot of blood could flow from a minor injury. My mind was in a web of indecision. I walked to the table and scrutinized the area where I thought the bullet had hit. The blouse was torn on the slope of the shoulder and I managed to part the material enough to see a deep gouge in her flesh. I leaned against the wall, relieved. The bullet hadn't entered her body. She'd been very lucky.

But that wasn't the end of the problem. The wound had not been tended and dirt and cold would probably have aggravated it. Fine; what was I going to clean it with? I cast around for inspiration and my gaze rested on a beer crate. Of course!

Susan was stirring again and I made sure that she was as secure as possible before I began what must have been the biggest bottle-emptying episode in history. There were three crates of discarded whiskey bottles as well as some odd empty bottles. I put them aside and started work. After about thirty minutes, I had a bottle with at least an inch and a quarter of whiskey in it.

That was for medicinal purposes and I took it to Susan. She looked pitiful. Her hair was matted and dirty; her face was streaked with mud and splattered with some of Martin's blood. I was glad she didn't have a mirror.

"Harry—I feel ill. Where are we? My shoulder hurts."

"Take this and you'll feel better."

I put the bottle to her lips and she tried to push it away.

"Come on," I said firmly, "it's whiskey and it'll help to revive you, put heat into those cold bones of yours."

Reluctantly, she took the whiskey and I made her finish it. I'd put her

jacket around her shoulders and she huddled into that.

"Better?"

She nodded. "You didn't tell where we are."

I went back to the bottles, working with the gin and the vodka. My system was simple and efficient, if a bit precarious. I lined up a number of bottles on the floor, then upended an equal number, put them neck to neck and leaned the upper bottles against the wall. One or two fell down, but the rest sat tilted at the crazy angle. Soon there was hardly room to move in the place for pairs of bottles, clasped in glassy embraces, accompanied by a monotonous *drip, drip*.

"We're in a storage room somewhere in the back of the building," I told her, putting some really empty empties into a crate, "and I think we'd better get out of it as quickly as we can."

"How are we going to do that?"

I showed her the gun.

"Martin's!"

"Yes. I picked it up during the donnybrook in the bar." I was still a bit surprised that I could talk so calmly about the recent brutal event. Martin would probably lose his sight. And the Irishman had lost his life.

Susan was watching, fascinated, at my performance with the bottles. "How's the shoulder?" I asked.

"Stiff and sore."

"It will be for a while. You were lucky—the bullet merely gouged you. An inch or two lower and the wound would have been serious. I'll have to clean the wound. That's what the beer's for. In the absence of water, it will soften the caked blood and let me... see what I'm doing," I said, euphemistically, then added, "I wonder if beer has any antiseptic properties?"

She started to giggle, then shut up abruptly as the ground began to shake. The sensation, transmitted through the soles of my shoes, was

almost soporific. This one could be fatal. My carefully balanced bottles were falling all over the place, providing a weird dissonance to the sound of the approaching meteorite, which was a big one, heading somewhere in our direction. There probably weren't many more large bodies left in the stream—the Earth would be in the tail end of it by now—but one, if it came anywhere near, would be enough to wipe out the village.

I scrambled to salvage what bottles I could. The sound was increasing in pitch, setting my teeth on edge. Crates tumbled, smashing their contents. The roar was like that made by one of those lunar rocket ferries. The noise was still increasing as it passed over and exploded with a muffled *crack* some miles away.

But our relief was short-lived. As my hearing returned, other sounds became audible: creakings and groanings, rendings and tearings. Unless I was mistaken, our prison was about to collapse, with us inside it. Dust and pieces of whitewash began to drift down from the ceiling, gently at first, then thick and fast.

I pulled Susan beside me against the wall, and took out the revolver and fired two shots into the door lock. I thudded against the door with my shoulder: it wouldn't budge! Somewhere in the building, a heavy object fell. The flakes of whitewash were falling like snow and the inn's death agonies were hideous to hear, especially as they might also be our own. I cursed the men outside for not opening the door.

I fired another round and attacked the door again. After three efforts, it gave and Susan and I staggered out of the room, coughing and spluttering as the dust got into our throats and eyes. I saw why the man, Jim, who'd put us into the room, hadn't opened the door. He was sprawled a yard away, a beam lying across his head. The key was in an outstretched hand.

I hustled Susan out of the building. Several fires had started and the flames revealed knots of people, most of them in their night clothes, rushing about aimlessly, not knowing where to go or what to do.

The land rover was among the vehicles standing outside the inn. Three of Hillary's men were there, making no attempt to help anyone. They didn't seem to realize that the inn would fall down anytime.

We edged toward the vehicles. The first was a private car. I tried the nearside door. Locked. Signaling to Susan to stay put, I crept around the

back of the car. The driver's door was unlocked. I began to open it, when part of the inn roof caved in.

"The inn's going!" one of the men shouted.

"We'd better get those prisoners of Hillary's out, or he'll skin us alive," another cried, running forward. I ducked and hoped that Susan had the sense to do the same.

"Don't be stupid! The place won't stand up another minute!"

As he spoke, the front wall bulged and the building began to collapse with a roar of splitting timber and falling stonework. Clouds of dust erupted into the air and immediately started to settle again.

Something bounced off the roof of the car and hit the ground behind me. A gasp told me that Susan was there, luckily unhurt by the debris.

"Let's move the transport, then!"

A man came around the front of the land rover and saw us crouched beside the car. He shouted and his hand dropped to a gun. I already had mine out. I fired point-blank and the bullet hit him in the neck and spun him off his feet. One of his companions bundled into him as he struck the front of the land rover. I rose quickly. The third man, in the act of climbing into a three-tonner parked with its tail to the road, saw my gun, came back down and stood with his hands raised.

"Come over here!" I ordered, indicating where his friends were. "Throw your guns into the land rover; no tricks." They did so. "Now the keys to the rover." One of them pitched the keys at my feet. Susan reached down and lifted them. "I want the keys of the other vehicles." Soon, Susan had a handful.

"Start walking toward the mill. Take him with you, and don't give me any reason to shoot again. Susan, get into the rover."

The two men lifted their companion—I didn't know whether he was alive or dead—and carried him away. I got into the driver's seat, started the engine and swung the vehicle onto the road to the left. A light rain was falling on top of a thin crust of thawing snow, not exactly the best driving conditions.

"Can we get back to Westlake's house this way?" I asked, maneuvering around debris and potholes.

"Yes. Keep going in this direction, past the war memorial and up the hill. The road's narrow at the top and bends sharp left."

This part of the village seemed to have escaped serious damage. Men and women were running toward the lower village and no one paid any attention to us.

"We want to go right almost immediately. Drive slowly, or you'll miss the turning."

"I am driving slowly." We were halfway up the hill. "A thought has just occurred to me: checkpoints. We'll probably run into one any minute. You know the area. Where are they likely to be?"

"You'd better pull in till I think about it."

"Make it quick, Susan," I said, stopping the rover. "That lot I shot up won't be far from the mill by now and they'll raise the alarm. They know we're headed this way and they might be able to telephone to a checkpoint. That's why I want to be ready."

I examined the three guns we'd captured. Two were automatics, the other was a service revolver, similar to the one I had taken from Martin. I wondered if the automatics might have a weaker recoil than that of the service revolver. When I'd used Martin's, the kick had almost made the weapon jump out of my hand. Even at short range, I'd been lucky to hit the man at all. All three guns were fully loaded. Mine had only one round left, so I took an automatic, gave the other to Susan, and kept the revolver handy by the side of my seat.

Susan was sketching on the back of an envelope.

"The road takes that sharp left turn I told you about at Habbie Simpson's tower. You can just see it ahead, on the right. Three roads converge past there, but I think it's too wide to establish a checkpoint there. The road leading off to the left is unimportant. The main road goes to Bridge-of-Weir. A few hundred yards up it, a road branches off left, going over the moors to Port Glasgow and Greenock and that's a likely place for a checkpoint."

I was following her sketch as she talked.

"The road we want leads straight to Westlake's house and goes on to join the road from Johnstone and Brookfield to Bridge-of-Weir."

"That's the one we came along."

"Right. Hillary's sure to have gone to the house. The birds might, or might not, have flown. I think there might be checkpoints at both ends, at least until Hillary gets what he wants."

"Either way, we could be going into a trap. Still, we've nowhere else to go and we must find out, if we can, what has happened to the others."

I hesitated before moving off. "There might be more shooting. And killing. If anything goes wrong, I want you to know that I'm glad I met you, Susan."

A smile lit up her grimy face. "So am I, Harry. Let's go."

CHAPTER 14

A heavy drizzle was falling now, and the headlights glinted on the treacherous road. Although we were crawling up the hill, the rover kept skidding, as if it had a life of its own, and in my fatigued state, the struggle to hold it straight was beginning to tire me. However, checkpoint guards might not be so alert during such weather, and at this time of the morning that could work to our advantage.

We passed the tower, reached the top of the hill, then went by a square and some shops before entering the wide space where the roads met. We turned right at the gutted shells of houses. Debris littered the road. The rover had been a fortunate choice. A car would have been grounded by the jolting and jarring that lasted for about a hundred yards before the road was clear again.

I was beginning to hope that there might not be a checkpoint when the headlights picked it out through the drizzle. A wood rail barred the road, near what looked like a school. I considered crashing the barrier, but doubted if I could get sufficient speed up on the slippery road. I ran the rover right up to the barricade and kept the engine running.

"Let me do all the talking, Susan, even if the guard speaks to you. And keep your gun ready."

One of the guards was inside the hut, on the left side of the road, huddled over a cherry-red stove, and looking over the shoulder of the man who came out to the door. I saw no telephone and began to breathe easier. The man inside, who'd lifted his rifle, laid it down again when he recognized the rover, and continued brewing a can of tea. From his position, he could not see who was in the vehicle.

The other guard came to the side of the rover and stared at Susan, who had bent her head so that her hair shadowed her face. She didn't look at him.

His shrewd eyes slid past her to rest their gaze on me, and narrowed. His hand flexed significantly in his coat pocket, but he did not produce the gun I knew must be there.

"Who are you?" The suspicion in his voice, which was flat and sinister, like a cobra's head, would translate swiftly into violent action if I failed to bluff my way through the next few minutes. Susan continued to cower in her seat and I suspected that she wasn't entirely playing a part.

"Manson," I said, "Bill Manson; what's yours?"

"Haswell," he answered slowly. His eyes were probing everywhere.

I thrust out my right hand. "Pleased to meet you."

He hesitated, perhaps reluctant to relinquish hold of his gun. But few men are rude enough to ignore an outstretched hand and he took mine, briefly. I could have killed him then, while I had the advantage.

"I haven't seen you before." The suspicion was back.

"I haven't seen you before, either, so that makes us even. Look, Haswell, Hillary's expecting me at a house along the road, so how about lifting the bar?"

He was staring at Susan again. She was breathing heavily, conscious of the dangerous game I was playing.

"Who's she?" He was a persistent one, this, rain or no rain.

"A prisoner," I explained patiently, giving the impression that Hillary wouldn't be pleased to be kept waiting. "It's just a matter of a few routine questions, and then we'll be coming back this way. If you like we could... stay a while?"

My wink drew a relaxed leer from the man.

"You don't want to keep the old adrenalin pumping too long, do you? Open the bar and we'll be on our way."

Haswell grinned and went and raised the bar. He was still standing in the roadway, when there was a shout from the school. A man was running toward us. Haswell moved back to the heat of the hut. Then, understanding the message, he turned, his gun almost clear of his pocket.

I killed him with the last round from Martin's gun. The impact of the bullet threw him backward into the hut, knocking over the other guard, who had half risen.

I slammed into gear with a grind and raced the rover through the barrier. The vehicle's back end kicked under the sudden spurt of acceleration, and I had to fight to prevent it from skidding into the school wall. The guard had scrambled clear of the hut, which had caught fire in the scuffle, and he was shooting at us. The man coming from the school was also shooting, for a bullet zipped across the windshield, leaving a fine trail of cracks in its wake. Six inches nearer to us and Susan or I might have been dead.

I yelled at her to get down, but, sensible girl, she had already done so. I doused the lights, so that the men wouldn't have two red targets to shoot at, and dropped the speed. I had no wish to run off the road and into the large park on our right, or the houses on the left.

"I think you can come up for air, now, Susan."

She sat upright, blowing some hair away from her mouth. "I thought we were finished, there."

"Don't sigh with relief too soon." I stopped the rover and went oh, "You realize that we're almost certainly in a trap? I still want to find out what

has happened to Westlake and the others, so I suggest we take the rover a bit nearer the house, run it off the road, and continue on foot. Do you feel able to do that?"

"I'll manage," she said, trying to hide a grimace.

"Is the shoulder bad?"

"Yes. More stiff than sore. But I'll be all right. If I could get something to eat and drink, I'd feel much better!"

We moved off and soon reached the vicinity of the house. I ran the rover off the road, then we struck off across a field that would bring us to the grounds of Westlake's house. The rain was now a downpour and we trudged wearily over the rough soil, slipping and sliding, and generally getting more miserable by the minute. I wondered what lay ahead of us, at the house. We might have to fight, or we might have to run. And we were in no condition to do either.

At last we came to the high hedge that barred the way into the grounds. There was a row of trees behind the dense hedge. It took me a few minutes to find a gap barely wide enough to admit us. I fetched Susan, who was having a brief respite, and helped her through the hedge. Above the roar of the wind and the slashing patter of the rain, I thought I heard a sound, half growl, half whine. But I couldn't be sure.

The hedge acted as a partial windbreak and we took advantage of the shelter to have a rest. Susan was breathing loudly and unevenly; by the way she hung heavily against me, I guessed that she was almost exhausted. We had plenty of problems, to which there was only one immediate solution: we had to get to the house. No matter what awaited us there.

I put my arm around her and we started to rise from our uncomfortable crouch, when I froze. It wasn't my imagination this time. I heard the sound again. Somewhere to the left, quite near. It had stopped. I strained to hear. Susan was moaning softly against my neck. Nothing. Perhaps the effect of the recent events was overtaking me and my mind was wandering. But I *had* heard something.

Then I saw a shape, standing in the lane between the hedge and the trees. And I heard the sound again. A low, insistent growl that was

changing to a snarl. The dog would be like us in some respects: wet, cold, exhausted, afraid. It would also be savage with hunger.

The animal began to inch toward us. My hand closed over the automatic in my pocket. I paused. If I fired a shot, it would be heard in the house. The dog was coming closer. I took out the gun. If the dog attacked us, there might not be much of us left for anyone to find. I held Susan close to me and raised the weapon, my finger tight on the trigger. My eyes were accustomed to the darkness and I was certain that I would be able to hit the dog.

When it halted, I wondered why. I kept the gun pointed at it. Then I became aware of snarling, in front, and to the right of us. My hand was wavering and I lowered the gun. More dogs. They must be hunting in a pack. There might be a dozen of them. They didn't come any closer, but waited, ringing us with their snarls and their menace. I wondered about that, too. Why didn't they attack?

While I was speculating, I was also acting. I had to move gingerly, in order not to provoke the dogs, or hurt Susan. I eased her against the hedge and placed myself in front of her. Still the dogs remained where they were, snarling. A seemingly pointless waiting game ensued. After a few minutes, there was a sharp whistling sound from the direction of the house.

Shortly after, a voice called, "Come out nice and quietly, and the dogs won't attack. Try anything funny and they'll tear you to pieces."

"As you say." I thought about the three guns we had. Would they expect us to be armed? Whether they did, or not, they would search us. I let Susan keep her automatic, while I thrust mine into my waistband, at my back. The revolver I kept in my pocket. I might just get away with it, when they found the obvious weapons. Almost carrying Susan, I walked toward the house.

A man closed in from either side, keeping at the rear. The dogs ran on ahead, waiting now and again for us to catch up. The house loomed up out of the rain. The door was open; we went inside. The dogs milled about, bumping against our legs. There was no light in the hall itself.

But enough filtered through from the day room to reveal a dark-clothed body huddled and unmoving against the foot of the stairs.

CHAPTER 15

The day room, lit by the oil lamps, seemed to be crowded with people and dogs. There was a distinct odor of unwashed bodies, both human and canine. All the beautiful furniture had been carelessly bundled away from the center of the floor and stacked against the walls. In the vacated space, several people of indeterminate sex were gyrating, presumably to music inside their heads. By the scattered light of the lamps, their faces looked like those of the long dead.

Among the furniture, by the wall on my right, where the pen and ink drawings of the old Japanese bridges now hung askew, were Maisie, Jackie, Lee—and *Hillary*. Beside him lay two men in the grotesque poses of death. Maisie half rose, but a long-haired person—I could not tell the sex—pushed her roughly to the floor. I started toward her, still holding Susan.

A voice came from the end of the room, at the fireplace, and the dancers moved aside, as if at a signal, to give a view of the speaker.

"Your friends are all right, my dears, so far. Don't cause any trouble. Come and join the party."

The voice sounded masculine. But the figure, silhouetted by firelight and lamplight, was feminine. The hair stood out from the head, as if the owner had received a fright. The fringes glowed golden in the flickering light of the fire. The speaker wore what might have been a dress—I could see through the material— and trousers.

I stood still, not knowing what to make of the situation. The intruders seemed a weird lot; but how dangerous were they? I'd seen groups like this before. The mixture of dress was one of their ways of being "original," although it wasn't. Some of them still managed to get drugs, despite the stringent regulations. And, if newspaper exposes were to be believed, their sexual habits could hardly be described as normal.

Unless Maisie and the others had killed the men, which was unlikely, the evidence of the three bodies made them very dangerous indeed. I would have to be very careful in word and deed. We didn't move. No one moved. We were like figures in a tableau.

"Have you searched them, yet?" There was a mumble I knew was

negative. "Do it, then, fools!" The voice was higher pitched.

The two youths who had captured us started to search me, while two girls did the same to Susan. The hands were looking for more than weapons, and remembering my resolve, I steeled myself not to strike the searchers. Susan was struggling beside me, but I did nothing. Finally, they took our guns and left us alone. Their preoccupation with other matters was a break for me. They didn't find the gun tucked in my waistband. One of the dogs—they were all whippets, or greyhounds—nosed around me. I had to vent my anger and humiliation on something, so, pretending to stumble, I stood hard on one of its paws. It yelped as if it had been skewered.

I left Susan with Maisie and Jackie as the speaker by the fire commanded, "You. Come here."

I put my hands in my pockets and took my time about obeying. From a few feet away, I could see that my captor was a youth, even though he was obviously wearing garish lipstick. And his hair looked stiff with lacquer. We were about the same height and we stared at each other evenly. He kept hitting the palm of his left hand with a thin cane.

"Who are you?" he said, the voice definitely masculine, now.

"Harry Blackman. The woman's Susan Marks."

"You know the others?"

"Yes."

The cane continued to swish.

"Where are the remainder of the people who went on the food raid with you?"

He was well informed, anyway.

"I don't know. But probably dead. There was a lot of shooting."

"And how did you manage to escape?" I was watching the cane. "We were caught, but got away when a meteorite landing nearby caused the building to collapse."

He thought about that for a minute. There was no other noise in the room. I wondered where Westlake and Margery and Bob might be. Had they returned to the house and perhaps found the gang already here? Or maybe this painted dolly was deliberately trying to trap me. Westlake and the others might be prisoners in another part of the house. If not, where were they? Then I remembered Dr. Mathieson, down at Brookfield. They could be with her. The more I considered that explanation, the more I liked it, probably because it was the one that held out most hope.

"You hurt one of my little darlings, didn't you. I didn't like that."

The cane whipped out and slashed across my left cheek like fire. I'll never know how I managed to contain my temper amid the red haze of pain and fury.

He lifted the cane again, then lowered it, and laughed. "You have very strong control over your emotions, Mr. Blackman. I was going to give you and your companions easy deaths, after we'd finished with you—we can't feed you, of course—but you will have to pay for what you did to my little darling. They're very gentle... most of the time. I shall give you to them. Poetic justice, wouldn't you say?"

"When daylight comes, you'll be put outside the house. Then I'll send the dogs after you. They've been very hungry for some time, now. No comment, Blackman?"

I had a gun and I could afford to hold my peace. If possible, I had to wait for the best possible advantage before doing anything. Unless I were forced to.

"Take them all to the cellar. I am tired of them." The imperious tone would have been laughable in other circumstances.

There was an outburst of protest from some of the people in the room. "Let's have some more fun with them, first, especially the new ones," one shouted and the cry was taken up. "Leave Jackie with us, again," a girl demanded and there was a babble of voices.

Suddenly, the hair on the back of my neck began to stiffen. The eyes of the weird youth took on a strange expression, mainly of fear, with something indefinable thrown in. His cockiness and arrogance evaporated.

I turned slowly.

Standing in the doorway was the Preacher.

"You are being a little hasty, James. By all means let them keep the prisoners a while longer."

McBean appeared not to notice me, as I stared at him in shock and disbelief. He should be dead! I'd heard Hillary give Martin the order. At least, the inference had been plain. And McBean had thought he was going to be killed. Martin had probably delegated the execution to some of his men. But somehow, McBean had escaped, or had persuaded them to let him go.

"Anything you say, Preacher," James replied, nervously tapping the cane off his knuckles.

It was doubtful that McBean heard him, or even that it mattered, as the youths and girls crowded around him, clutching, pleading. At first, I couldn't understand what anyone was saying. Then one phrase came through clearly: "... have you got the fix..."

Drugs. Perhaps that explained a lot of things. McBean obviously had access to drugs. And that would give him power and influence over many people, especially ones such as those in the room. It might even explain how he'd managed to cheat death at the hands of Hillary's men.

"Yes, I have what you want, my children—"

At his words, there was a frantic scramble that almost knocked him over. He kept his balance and, towering above them, held his hands aloft. In one, a syringe glinted; cigarettes seemed to sprout from the other.

"If you do not behave," his voice penetrated the din, "you might not get any."

I realized that I had to take a chance now, with the gun, while everyone's attention was diverted. I dove my hand behind me and pulled the weapon out of my waistband and leveled it at McBean. There was an agonizing stab of pain across my wrist and the automatic spun out of my grasp. I'd forgotten about the painted dolly behind me.

McBean affected to see me for the first time. "That was very rash of you, Mr. Blackman." His gaze went over my shoulder to James. "He was searched?"

"Yes." His voice was a barely audible croak.

"Who?"

"Terence and John."

"Incapable, no doubt, of keeping their hands to themselves and doing the job right."

He gestured with a flick of a hand and the two offenders unwillingly detached themselves from the group.

"For your carelessness, you will miss your next two fixes, and you will not be allowed to join in any activities until I give permission."

Behind me, James let his pent-up breath out. Terence and John shot me venomous glances, as if I were to blame. I was glad that they were being denied their little pleasures, which would have been at my expense.

"And you, James, will get no fix this time, for failing to supervise the search, as you should have done."

I received a painful jab in the kidneys from the painted dolly's sharp cane. I swung my heel back and had the satisfaction of feeling it crunch into a shin bone and of hearing the resulting snarl of pain. I moved quickly away from him and joined my own people.

As I did so, I felt the floor beginning to tremble, very slightly. No one else seemed to notice. Perhaps they were too busy with their own fears and desires. Or maybe my perception was more acute. I sat down beside Susan: although her eyes were open, she didn't seem aware of her surroundings, or of what was happening, which was just as well.

I looked at Maisie and her attempt at a smile was pitiful. Jackie, her head down, her face obscured by her hair, cradled Lee against her. I didn't know whether he was alive or dead. The tremor changed to a rumble. A girl screamed. I caught Hillary's glance. He did not look afraid, but merely angry. In his predicament, that was a sign of either courage or stupidity.

And Hillary wasn't a stupid man.

The room was shaking with a terrifying vibration. Somewhere in the house, a heavy object fell. Two or three of the group rushed out to the hall, perhaps thinking that they would be safer there. Others followed them. Chairs, tables, pictures, fabrics—everything in the room took on a life of its own, sliding, creaking, banging, colliding. The whole building would be swaying by now. The meteorites in the incoming shower were big ones. Some would have fallen already. As if by verification, I heard a series of fairly loud explosions.

The abrupt increase in vibration caused a lamp to fall over. Flames shot up as the oil splattered onto the carpet, which began to smolder. As I dove across the floor to smother the incipient fire, one of the windows was smashed in with a rending of wood and a screeching of glass that set my teeth on edge. A great glowing ball cartwheeled into the room, flew over me, and crashed into the wall. Sparks and fragments ricocheted everywhere, starting small fires. The room was beginning to fill with smoke and heat. I yelped like one of the dogs as an incandescent sliver from space hit my neck and stuck there, searing the flesh. I flicked it off.

Pervading everything was the most terrible sound I had ever heard. It seemed compounded of thundering express trains, racing tidal bores, erupting volcanoes, artillery barrages. People were fighting to get out of the room, Hillary among them. I shouted to him. He ignored me. Jackie was struggling with Lee's weight, and Maisie was trying to help Susan. I rushed at Hillary and caught his shoulder. He tried to shrug me off.

"Help me, you fool! Your chances lie with us!" I yelled, dragging him back into the room. He said nothing. There was no sign of fear in his face. Almost contemptuously, he stooped and lifted Lee. I pushed Maisie after him and, with Susan in my arms, jogged out of the house.

The sky was in its death agony. Impossible purples, yellows and crimsons brought a quality of nightmare to swirling clouds of steam. The heat almost broiled exposed flesh. I felt as if no air was getting to my lungs. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a tall chimney beginning to topple toward us. It seemed to float down like something in a dream, soundless, taking forever to fall.

I ran, but my legs refused to carry me more than a few strides. I stumbled and Susan and I went down in a heap. Perhaps that saved us.

The meteorite pounded the ground somewhere near the quarry, I judged, with the impact of a cosmic piledriver. The blast and a numbing shriek of wind came. I was lying on my back. As I opened my eyes a body, crucified on a cross of violent air, swept past me. It was the painted dolly, his mouth a chasm of mute appeal. The steam writhed again and he was gone from view.

The commotion gave way to an eerie silence and the ground gradually ceased to shudder. Susan lay prone, but she was still breathing. The steam had all but dissipated and the rain had stopped. I gazed around me. The place was like a battlefield; people were stirring slowly, relieved and a little surprised to be alive. Others, not so lucky, were sprawled in death.

The house was in ruins. Part of the roof and west wall were down. The windows were eyeless sockets. Smoke drifted out of the doorway. Mashed against a pock-marked wall was the painted dolly, like a child's garish sticker. My heart leaped as the remaining chimney-pot collapsed. I wondered where Westlake, Bob and Margery were. If, as I surmised, they were in Brookfield, then they might be dead. The force of the explosion had strewn rock for miles around.

I decided to try and get Susan to the village. She had to have shelter and rest. The house was too dangerous. There might be help for us in Brookfield, if Dr. Mathieson was still alive. As I helped Susan to her feet, I heard a familiar sound. A helicopter! Perhaps it was a Government machine—it was flying in our direction, from the east. Susan and I huddled together with the rest of the survivors. All our people were there, also Hillary and McBean.

The helicopter came into view, circled the grounds once, then landed. No one moved or spoke as the rotors idled to a halt and the door in the side opened. The emerging figure wore dark clothes. I could see the clenched fist emblem clearly.

CHAPTER 16

The expression on Hillary's face remained unchanged as he watched the man coming from the helicopter. But there was a faint glint of triumph in his cold eyes.

"You took your time in coming!" he snapped at the man. "I could have

been killed!"

"Sorry; we've had troubles of our own, Mr. Hillary. The Kilbarchan base and the food store have been flattened, everyone's dead. And there are Government troops in the area, somewhere. Paras or Commandos, I think."

He looked at us briefly, without interest. "What about this lot? We'll be leaving them, I suppose?"

Hillary didn't answer immediately.

"Come on, Mr. Hillary," the man prompted impatiently, glancing around him. "We must get away. If those troops have seen or heard the chopper, they'll be after us. And I don't fancy serving life for high treason."

"Him," Hillary said, pointing, "I definitely want him."

I didn't like the way he said it, nor did McBean, who came forward fearfully and walked to the helicopter.

"And him." The ringer was pointing at me. "Bring the girl."

"Leave her, Hillary. She needs a doctor. There might be one in Brookfield," I protested.

"Give me your gun," Hillary ordered the man.

He leveled it at Susan. "Are you coming, or do I shoot both of you here? Her first, of course."

"It's not an attractive alternative. We'll come. But if Susan dies—"

"You'll not be in a position to do anything about it, so shut up, and move."

The gun waved menacingly.

I said goodbye to Maisie and Jackie and advised them to try and reach the village to get help for Lee— he looked as if he was dying on his feet. I knew that it was useless appealing to Hillary to take them there.

As we went to the helicopter, the two women started to walk to the

road, supporting the wounded man between them. The survivors of the painted dolly's gang slunk away, leaving their dead companions behind, only too glad to be allowed to go.

The man from the helicopter helped me lift Susan into the machine. We settled thankfully in the seats. It was good to be out of the wind. Guiltily, I thought of Maisie and the others. But it was a fruitless emotion and didn't alter anything. Hillary closed the door and the craft took off. He sat beside the man in front of us, facing McBean, who had crammed his bony frame into a seat backing the pilot's.

"How did you get caught?" the man asked, then added, a hint of a sneer in his tone, "You said it would be easy to catch the people in the house."

"Don't get clever with me, Gordon. I'm not in the mood for it. You can blame McBean for the foul-up. I don't know how he got away from Martin—I'll find out—but he had his pretty little perverts and those dogs at the house. My three men were killed and they took me prisoner."

He went on viciously, "I should have killed you when I had you at the airport, McBean. This time, I'll see to it personally."

He went forward and spoke to the pilot, then returned to his seat. I'd been listening drowsily and thought nothing about it. I was enjoying the rest.

"Martin's dead," Gordon said.

Hillary granted.

"He got his face ground up by a broken beer mug. The shock must have killed him, I suppose. Poor bastard."

"He's better off that way."

The remark was flat and unemotional, but I fancied I detected a note of weariness in it. Perhaps even Hillary tired of violence. I couldn't have been more wrong. I was never to forget the next few minutes.

"Are we there, yet?" Hillary barked irritably at the pilot.

"Just passing over it now."

"What height?"

"Five hundred feet."

Hillary had Gordon's gun. "McBean. Come with me."

McBean pushed himself back into the seat, his mouth working soundlessly. His face was gray with terror.

Hillary fired the gun and the bullet struck the cabin wall and lodged in the armrest of McBean's seat.

The helicopter lurched. "Are you mad, firing that gun in here?" the pilot shouted at Hillary. "You'll kill us all!"

"Shut up and keep the helicopter circling. I know what I'm doing. Are you ready to come now, McBean, or do I have to place the next shot closer?"

The Preacher stood up unsteadily, his body crouched because of the low ceiling.

"What are you going to do? Are you going to... kill me?"

"Walk forward to the hatch."

"You can't do it!" Gordon was on his feet, fear and determination in his face. "It would be murder!"

My eyes widened in surprise. This was the first attack of conscience I had seen from any of Campbell's men. Perhaps Gordon was soured by the nearness of the killing.

Hillary turned on him savagely and I thought he would shoot Gordon.

"What he and his filthy little perverts did to me was much worse than mere depraved, physical torment. You can't imagine what it was like, being handled by them. It kills you, in here and in here."

He touched his heart and his head. His voice was almost pleading for understanding.

"You can't kill him in cold blood!"

"Don't you see, Gordon, he *has* to die. Now."

Gordon was going to argue, but Hillary stopped him.

"I'll kill you, too, if I have to, Gordon."

For the first time, I saw expressions of emotion on Hillary's features. Had the pilot hit on the truth when he had called Hillary mad—I was beginning to think so. Then we were in acute danger of being killed sooner than I thought. Hillary might not keep us as hostages, which obviously had been his initial intention.

While Hillary's attention was diverted by the argument with Gordon, McBean made a desperate lunge for the gun. But Hillary's reactions were too quick. He clubbed the big man, who fell against Gordon, and they went down in a heap.

"Get to the hatch, McBean!"

We looked on in horror as the Preacher dragged himself toward the hatch. Hillary had positioned himself so that he could cover us all with the gun.

"Open it."

McBean did so and stood in the opening, the wind tugging at his clothes and hair. There was a transformation in him. The terror had left his face. Instead, there was acceptance and dignity.

Hillary was needled. He sneered, "No groveling this time, McBean? No pleas for mercy? Why aren't you calling on your Maker, now?"

I remembered the way McBean had debased himself, when Hillary had ordered his removal before. I couldn't understand the change. Nor could Hillary.

"I have led a very bad life, Mr. Hillary. I rejoiced in every vice. But I truly believe that He will redeem my sins. That is something you cannot touch, or take away."

"Kneel and ask me for mercy, McBean, and I won't kill you—"

McBean smiled. He let go the sides of the hatch. For a second, his gaunt

frame defied the wind. Then, suddenly, he was gone.

Susan screamed. Hillary cried incoherently and fired several shots. I hoped that his aim was accurate. I sat down leadenly, my arm around Susan, who sobbed against me. I felt sick. There was no sound in the cabin, except that of the engine. I glanced at Hillary, who was still standing by the open hatch, the wind whipping at him. He had the look of a cheated man. I wanted to taunt Hillary, but I didn't have McBean's strange brand of courage. Hillary closed the hatch and walked past us, his knuckles yellow where he gripped the gun. Fury was etched in every line of his face.

"Can we head back to the airport, now?" the pilot called.

"We're not going to the airport. Head down river. Follow it. I'll tell you where to land."

Still keeping a hand on the controls, the pilot twisted around in his seat. There was a gun in the other hand, aiming at Hillary's stomach.

"We're going back to the airport. Where you go from there is your business, Hillary. I did you a favor by picking you up from the house. Now I'm looking after my own neck. Anyway, I don't want you running berserk in here again. You might kill us all. Slide the gun along the floor. A bit farther. Don't try anything."

I saw Hillary's shoulders tensing and I could sense his hate and frustration. But he did nothing as the pilot drew the weapon toward him with a foot.

"Hillary, Gordon, sit at the starboard side."

They did so.

"Whose side are you on, McCudden?" Gordon protested.

"*My* side, so both of you sit there and shut up. I've enough to do, flying this crate and watching you."

The pilot was obviously uncomfortable in his twisted position and he kept easing his body this way and that. I wondered how long he would be able to endure it. Long enough, I hoped, to get us safely to the airport,

which could only be a few minutes' flying time away.

Hillary spoke. "Why do you want to go back to the airport, McCudden? You heard what Gordon said about the troops. They'll certainly make for the airport as soon as they can. Remember, you're in this as much as we are. I think they still hang traitors, which is what they'll brand us. Think about it."

"Shut up!" The helicopter sideslipped a little and the pilot corrected it skilfully. "The authorities will have a difficult time proving anything, beyond my connection with the Campbell Group. All I've done is fly the helicopter."

The pilot was doing exactly what Hillary wanted him to do. McCudden was arguing, trying to justify himself. He would lose his concentration and might be caught off his guard. Hillary was desperate enough to attempt to grapple with the pilot, even if it meant the helicopter spinning out of control, and carrying us all to our deaths.

Hillary ignored the pilot's instruction, and went on smoothly, "The authorities could be made to think differently, McCudden—"

"You always were plausible, Hillary, I'll grant you that. But, if I'm caught, and that's a fifty-fifty chance, I'll have a few things to say about you. We're still going back to the airport."

"I have a little cabin cruiser at Gourock," Hillary persisted. "It's fast, well-provisioned. We could be in Eire in no time at all."

"It sounds wonderful, Hillary. And when we were in the middle of the Irish Sea, you'd have me over the side at the first opportunity."

"So you'd have to look after yourself, watch me all the time. I think that the possibility of a long swim is better than the probability of a hanging. Also, you have two guns. I have none. Surely you can't want more odds than that?"

"Even if you let me trail you all the way at the end of a hundred-foot line, I still wouldn't trust you. We're over the airport now. No sign of any unusual activity that I can see. I'm not landing near the terminal. I'll put down on the perimeter, near the road leading to the bridge. I live in Inchinnan, so I won't have far to walk. The rest of you are on your own."

Here we go."

Susan was slumped against me, her face flushed, her breathing labored and uneven. Soon I would be able to get some sort of medical attention for her. And she would need a lot of rest and care.

I looked at Hillary. How glad I would be to escape from his evil influence and intentions. He sat erect in his seat, apparently unconcerned as the helicopter dipped toward the ground, perhaps taking him to an ignominious death. His sinister spidery hands lay one upon the other on his right thigh. I could not rid myself of the feeling that they were merely waiting for action. I relaxed a little. He wouldn't attempt anything now. When the helicopter had landed, he might have a chance of getting clear.

Despite the handicap he was flying under, McCudden was making a smooth and expert job of landing the helicopter. He was gritting his teeth under the strain and his face was sweat-streaked.

Just as the wheels touched the ground, Hillary flicked something bright at McCudden. A small knife. The pilot dropped the gun as the blade point stuck into his hand and blood spurted. He cried out sharply. The helicopter lurched, and ran off the end of the runway, onto the grass. Hillary had launched himself after the knife. He was taken off balance, but he managed to grab the gun.

He took the seat beside the pilot's. He thrust the gun close to McCudden's pain-wracked face.

"Fly this machine to Gourock, McCudden. If I think you're doing anything suspicious, I'll kill you. I know enough about flying a helicopter to land it if I have to. So you're very dispensable."

"My hand—"

"Start flying! We'll bandage it later!"

McCudden started the take-off procedure.

I stood up and Hillary swung the gun in my direction.

"Let the girl go, Hillary. She's wounded. She needs a doctor, food, warmth, rest. You don't need her. Let Gordon take her to the terminal."

"Gordon knows where we're going, so I can't let him go. Get airborne," Hillary snarled at McCudden. To Gordon, he said: "I'm not taking any risks."

The helicopter rose slowly at first. As it turned in the direction of Gourock, I looked out the window at the receding terminal. We had been so near to safety.

"Blackman—come up here and do something with McCudden's hand."

I did as he ordered, conscious that he might kill us at any moment.

CHAPTER 17

McCudden's hand was covered in blood. When I'd cleaned it off, I saw that the wound wasn't as deep or as serious as it had appeared. I bandaged the hand with a dirty handkerchief.

Hillary, who was watching us closely, mocked, "Isn't this where the heroine tears up her slip—"

The hate and loathing in my eyes cut short the remark.

"That's the best I can do," I told McCudden.

He granted his thanks and concentrated on flying the helicopter. I returned to my seat. Susan was slumped in the corner, against the small window, her head lolling with the motion of the helicopter. I made her more comfortable.

I moved to a window seat. McCudden was following the course of the river, as instructed. Our height was about a thousand feet. Watery sunlight filtered through the clouds, but did nothing to lessen the impact of the desolation below. We were passing over the recently-opened Erskine Bridge. The center span across the river was still standing, although the south approach roads had taken several direct hits. The scene looked like the result of saturation bombing.

After we left the bridge behind, there was nothing to see from my side of the cabin, except a scarred, pockmarked land that resembled the surface of the Moon.

"Look at that!" Gordon exclaimed.

I crossed to his side. Hillary said nothing, but the gun was alert and ready.

"What is it?" I asked, peering down at the ruins of a small town, virtually flattened.

"Dumbarton Rock," Gordon answered impatiently, pointing.

I looked. There was a gigantic crater, at least half a mile in diameter, at what had once been the river bank. The river itself was dammed almost the whole way across, with rocks and debris, and the water was rushing through the narrow gap and flooding into craters near the river.

Gordon saw by my expression that I didn't understand what he meant.

"The Rock—it's gone!"

The helicopter swung away, toward the south, as I asked, "How big was it?"

Gordon waved his hands about. "Big, very big," he said vaguely, "and about two hundred feet high."

I returned to my own seat. The helicopter was following the railway lines, as the pioneer aviators used to do. Within minutes, we neared a town built mostly on a steep hillside. Great gashes had been raked among the houses, while the shipyards and industries along the waterfront were desolated and flooded. Gordon had joined me. "Port Glasgow," he informed me. "Greenock's next, then Gourock"

"Hillary must be crazy if he thinks his boat has survived that damage." I kept my voice low.

"He's crazy enough for anything. I don't give much for our chances of escape."

"I have to look after Susan, so I can't attempt anything rash."

Gordon glanced at her. "Don't waste time with her, Blackman. Watch out for yourself, that's what I advise."

"We'll make it together!" I snarled. He just shrugged.

We passed over the dry dock. A ship was stranded there like a prehistoric monster come home to die. Water had crashed through the broken lock gates and lifted the liner's bow out of the dock and rammed it into the remains of workshops and offices.

The helicopter began to dip. I turned away from the unrelieved scene of destruction and death and sat beside Susan's limp body.

We were flying low over a residential area. Many of the houses were still standing and damage looked minor. Water had swirled across the road and submerged the gardens. Hillary was looking ahead, watching for his boathouse. He didn't seem to be paying attention to the rest of us. I saw Gordon tensing himself for a leap. Hillary turned as Gordon moved. The gun roared twice and the bullets shattered the man's face. Momentum carried him on. He was dead when Hillary caught him and pushed the corpse to the deck.

I retched twice, violently, as the gory head struck my foot. Steeling myself, I leaned over and pulled the man's coat up to cover the hideous sight. Hillary's eyes clashed with mine. He was willing me to attack him. When he saw that I would do nothing, he sneered and directed McCudden, "There—land by the first slip, this side of the lighthouse."

As the helicopter swayed in the rising wind, I glimpsed trees, the road and some boathouses. White-capped waves were tumbling up the beach, onto the road.

"It's suicide—"

"Take it down!"

McCudden shrugged and jockeyed the machine skillfully, countering the sudden buffets of wind. With one good hand, that wasn't easy. A squall of rain began to hang a veil ahead, reducing visibility.

Finally, he landed the helicopter. Immediately, the turbulent water began to move it, this way and that.

Hillary said, "The cruiser's in the second boathouse. You'll put the woman aboard, Blackman, while it's still in the shed, then you and

McCudden will push the boat down the slip. I'll be watching, so don't try anything. Right, out."

He opened the hatch. The turbulent roar of wind and sea beat into the cabin. McCudden brushed past me and climbed down to the beach.

"Blackman." Hillary gestured with the gun. "Come on. There's no time to waste."

"Have you no sense, Hillary? I can't take Susan out there—"

"Don't ask stupid questions. Bring her."

Wrapping her against the wind and the rain, as best I could, I lifted Susan. McCudden helped us out of the lurching helicopter. The tossing water clutched at me, sometimes reaching my knees. I could feel the numbness creeping up my legs.

We slogged our way to Hillary's boathouse, fighting the elements. Hillary opened the doors and we hastened inside the shed, thankful to be under shelter.

The cabin cruiser was rakish and gleaming white. Her name was *Lucifer*. Very appropriate, I thought.

The prospect of putting to sea in such weather in a small boat scared me out of my wits. Whenever I sailed—which wasn't often—even in good conditions, my imagination was overactive. The specter of drowning was never far away from my mind. It used to amuse my friends when I said that I'd much rather die out in space by choice, where I could at least see what was happening.

"Get her aboard, Blackman."

My expression must have given me away, for Hillary added, surprisingly not in a mocking tone: "Scared?"

I nodded.

"*Lucifer* is perfectly seaworthy."

"But in this weather... all the way across the Irish Sea—"

"We'll make it. Get aboard."

Between us, McCudden and I got Susan bedded down in one of the bunks. Hillary wouldn't allow me to remove her sodden clothes, or to tend her wound.

"You can do that later. Help McCudden launch the boat."

He gave us concise instructions. The work warmed me up.

"Remove the chocks! Push!"

The boat resisted at first, then it began to slide down the slip. We followed. Outside, there seemed to be nothing but sea, wind and rain: a fury of noise and movement. Hillary started the engine and brought *Lucifer's*, bow into the wind, and she bobbed up and down with the swell. I wondered how Susan was. Hillary waved to us to-hurry.

I grasped McCudden's sleeve. "Listen! I can hear something!"

"It's the wind—"

Hillary was getting impatient.

"No! It sounds like a helicopter!"

McCudden exclaimed: "You're right!"

He scanned the storm-riven clouds, then pointed toward the east. The helicopter, flying at about a hundred feet, was coming our way.

McCudden began to wave. Abruptly, he pitched forward into the water. I bent to lift him. Something slapped the shed door, in line with where my chest had been seconds before. Hillary was shooting. I dropped McCudden. He was probably dead anyway. If he wasn't, then the people in the helicopter would rescue him.

I ran to the boat. Hillary had the gun leveled at me. The helicopter swooped and banked overhead. It distracted Hillary's attention and he fired at it. I wondered how many rounds he had left.

Each breath I gulped was like fire. I seemed to be no nearer the boat. Then I saw why. Hillary was at the controls. It was pulling away!

Susan...

The helicopter came around in a tight circle and zoomed across the cruiser's bow. She heeled to port. A big wave caught her and began to drive her back toward the beach. I kept running. Hillary spotted me and swung the gun in my direction. The bullet never came. He threw the gun away.

He managed to bring the boat's bow around again, but seemed unable to make headway. In desperation, I plunged in the water and swam to the boat. She was tossing badly in the heavy sea, but I grabbed the stern rail and hauled myself aboard.

Hillary was too busy trying to sail the craft and watch the helicopter at the same time. He didn't see me. I threw myself into the cockpit, knocking him against the controls. As we struggled, the boat was being forced back toward the slip.

He had immense strength in his hands. And they were now locked around my throat. I clawed at him ineffectually. A bright crimson haze fogged my mind. The roaring in my head had nothing to do with the sea or the wind. Distorted images rolled slowly before me. My terror of drowning returned. That must have given me strength. I prised one hand loose. But the other one was still like a vice. There was a dull scraping sound. The pressure on my windpipe ceased.

Dimly, I saw Hillary climbing out of the cockpit and disappearing from view. Dizzily, I pulled myself up until I could see what was happening. The cruiser was grounded, although the swell threatened to float her again.

Hillary was running for McCudden's helicopter, which was still upright. The other helicopter circled above. He reached the machine and scrambled inside, not troubling to close the hatch. Unsteadily, the helicopter rose, its rotors churning up the surface of the water. The second machine continued to circle.

As I lay exhausted against the rail, I became aware of massive rumbling and tremors. Hillary's helicopter wobbled higher into the sky until it was about a hundred feet up. Then it flew erratically eastward.

The accumulated vibration was terrifying. Amid a bright eastern sky, the helicopter was gradually drifting seaward. Diffused yellows, blues and

reds cast a weird light. The second helicopter landed by the boathouses.

The incoming meteorites made a peculiar shrieking sound. I felt as if my sinews were being shredded. The helicopter flew on drunkenly. The meteorites struck the sea to the north-east, about a mile away from the boat. Huge hissing eruptions marked their watery graves.

Seconds later, I saw the machine suddenly turn end over end. Something—I couldn't be sure what—detached itself and began falling. Then it was obscured by warm, lashing spray.

If the plummeting object was Hillary, then his death had been poetic justice.

Before I went below to get Susan, I saw Westlake waving to me.

EPILOGUE

The world—much changed—still spins in its orbit around the sun. But the greatest change was in mankind. Those who survived the Iron Rain had matured at last, after a million years of existence.

People of all races realized that their continued survival depended on cooperation, not confrontation.

The Iron Rain fell long ago.

It might have been a dream, except that I now have Susan beside me, sharing my life—and we never would have met but for that catastrophe that shook the planet.

Often, on chill winter nights, I see a brief slash of light in the sky and feel a momentary surge of panic. At times like those, Susan slips her hand in mine and I take comfort in the world we've helped build together.