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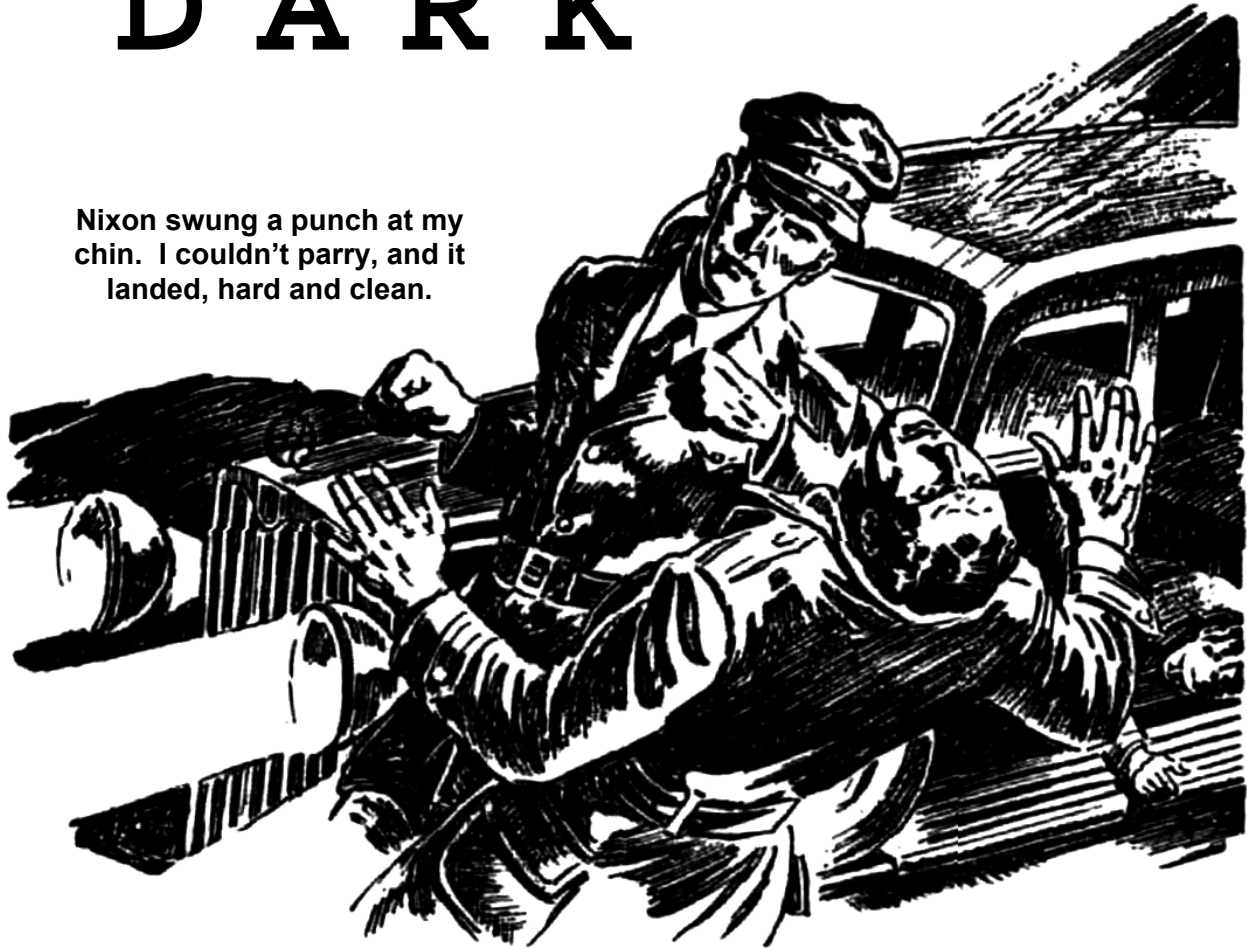
# KNIFE in the DARK

by  
ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

# KNIFE in the DARK



Nixon swung a punch at my chin. I couldn't parry, and it landed, hard and clean.



## CHAPTER I

### *Dead Passenger*

**T**HE PILOT knew his trade. I scarcely felt the big airliner's wheels touch the ground. There was no shock, no bounce, no sense of transition from airborne to earthbound. The night was as dark as a pocket in perdition and the storm that had threatened us all the way south from San Francisco was a steady drench now that

we had landed in L.A. But at least we had landed, rain or no rain, and presently I would be finding out why the agency had sent me down here in such a hurry to see ex-Senator Cartwain's nephew.

I waited until the plane had made its taxi run to the passenger apron. Then, as soon as they had rolled the portable steps into place and opened the door, I checked out past the stewardess and made my break for the canopied runway to the depot building. Even with my hat brim turned down and



a novelette by  
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my topcoat collar up, I got thoroughly soaked before I reached shelter.

Southern California never does anything by halves. Rain in Los Angeles isn't just rain; it's a feature production. The movie influence, probably.

In the station, a loud-speaker cleared its metallic throat and began telling the arriving travelers where to wait for their luggage. I had none to wait for. The only clothes I had with me were the wet ones I was wearing, so I wasn't interested in baggage announcements. I came alert, though, when I heard my name crackling out

of the horn.

"Passenger Palmer just in from San Francisco on Flight Eleven. Passenger Palmer just in from San Francisco on Flight Eleven. Attention Passenger Palmer. Will you please call at the Coastal Airways ticket desk on the east side of the rotunda? Thank you."

When you've been a private detective as long as I have, watchfulness and caution become second nature. I headed for the rotunda's west side, away from where I was wanted, then carefully circled the waiting room. I loitered along casually, as if waiting for an outbound flight.

Passing the newsstand, I dropped a nickel and took a late edition of the *Herald-Express*, held it up before me and pretended to scan the headlines. Under its cover I delved beneath my left armpit, unholstered my stubby .32 automatic, unobtrusively transferred it to the right side pocket of my topcoat and kept my hand on it.

Then I peered over the newspaper toward Coastal's ticket desk.

**A**TALL, thin man in chauffeur's livery stood there talking to the clerk. In turn, the clerk picked up a phone and spoke into it. Right after that, the loudspeaker repeated its plea. "Would passenger Palmer, just arrived from San Francisco on Flight Eleven, contact Coastal Airways at once? Thank you." Click.

So it was the chauffeur who was having me paged. I decided he looked harmless and I relaxed, moved forward. Then he turned, so that I could see his face, and suddenly there was no more relaxation in me. Tension took its place, a taut, twanging premonition of danger.

I knew the man. Nixon was his name, Edgar Nixon, and he hated my insides. A year ago he had threatened to kill me.

He hadn't been a chauffeur in those days. He had been an obscure lawyer representing an equipment manufacturer under Congressional investigation for war contract irregularities. And I had been the special agent for the Cartwain Committee who had dug up most of the evidence that finally got Nixon's client indicted. It was my last G-job in Washington before I quit and came back to private work out here on the West Coast.

As an unexpected afterpiece to this war contract probe, Nixon himself had been disbarred, fined, and jailed for alleged subornation of perjury. That was a charge with which I'd had nothing to do, and of which I didn't particularly approve. Somehow it seemed to me that he had been made a scapegoat, a whipping boy, merely because he had dared to defend a profiteer. While he might have been misguided in accepting such a tawdry case, I had considered him guilty of nothing worse than unwise judgment.

The Cartwain Committee and the courts, however, thought otherwise. And when Nixon was sentenced he had blamed me for it, had shouted that he would shoot me dead as soon as

he was free.

So now he was free.

I waited until his back was to me. Then I walked up behind him, let him feel the prod of the gun in my pocket

"Looking for me, Nixon?"

Red came up his neck, spread to his ears. "My name isn't Nixon," he said, without turning. A twitching muscle made his shoulder jump under the formfitting brown whipcord tunic.

"But mine is Palmer," I said. "Don Palmer, from San Francisco. Just in on Flight Eleven."

Slowly, then, he faced me. He was having trouble with his breathing, and his muddy eyes were protuberant.

"So you're the Palmer I was to meet!" he choked.

I let that ride. I also let him see it was a gun I had in my pocket.

"You're caught off base, Nixon. Don't try anything you'll regret."

"I—I don't—I wasn't—I didn't intend—"

The airline ticket clerk was looking at us with too much speculation. I walked Nixon across the rotunda to a spot where we had more privacy.

When did you get out?" I asked.

"Out—?"

"Of prison. Don't spar with me."

"Two—months ago."

"Escape?"

"Parole," he said quickly. "I can prove that. I have papers. I can show you."

"Later," I said. "Right now I'm more interested in why you were having me paged."

"I told you. I was sent to meet a Mr. Palmer coming in on the plane from up north."

"Who sent you?"

"The people I work for. Listen," he added desperately. "They don't know I'm Edgar Nixon. They don't know I'm a jailbird." Droplets of sweat popped out on his forehead. "I took this job under an alias, and—and—"

**I**STUDIED him, beginning to understand the crazy implausibility of the situation. My agency had despatched me south to see the nephew of former Senator Marcus Cartwain. Therefore, if Nixon had been sent to pick me up, there was only one possible conclusion I could draw.

"Do you mean to say you're chauffeuring for the Cartwains?" I demanded. "Ex-Senator Cartwain, who headed the Cartwain Committee that wrecked you?"

"Y-yes." He spread his hands. "Give me a break, Palmer! Don't tell them who I am. If you do, they'll fire me. All I want is a chance."

"Once you threatened to kill me," I interrupted him. "Now you beg me for favors."

"I didn't m-mean those threats." The nervous tic twitched his shoulder again. "It was just that I saw my reputation, my career, my whole life going down in ruins. I blamed you, then. But later I realized you had nothing to do with it."

"Nice of you."

"It was my own fault, for trying to defend that profiteer. By tying up with a fellow like that I left myself wide open for trouble. Marcus Cartwain was running for reelection and he made political capital out of smearing me. Not that it did his campaign any good when it came to count the votes."

"So all right," I said. "So he was licked, and he left his home state and retired to California. So now you're one of his servants, and that makes no sense whatever. He must realize you hate him for what he did to you. Then why would he hire you, alias or no alias? Don't tell me he didn't recognize you. I did. You haven't changed that much in a year."

"He hasn't recognized me," Nixon said, "because he's blind."

I felt my own eyes widening. "What?"

"It's true. He lost his sight a few months ago. He hasn't let the newspapers know it. Pride, I guess. But I found it out, and I applied for the job when his former chauffeur quit, and—well, he hired me."

"Why?"

"Why did he hire me? I'm a good driver. Maybe a better driver than I was lawyer. More careful, anyway."

"No. Why did you go after the job? What's your game? Revenge? Waiting for a chance to get even?"

"I'd be silly to admit that, even if it were true. You'd warn Cartwain. You'd tell him who I am."

"I would indeed."

"But it's not true. Maybe I had some such

idea at first. I've had some pretty bitter moments. But not any more. I'm playing it straight, and if you'll just give me a break I'll keep on playing it straight. I give you my oath."

The oath of a paroled convict isn't often a thing of too great substance. Yet somehow, as I looked at Nixon, I felt that he meant what he said. He seemed sincere, and as a rule I'm not easily fooled.

I gripped his forearm, squeezed it hard for emphasis.

"I make no promises," I said. "I want time to think it over. But for the time being, I won't give you away—and never mind the gratitude." Then I said: "Now tell me why the Cartwains wanted me sent down to see them."

"That I wouldn't know. Young Gerry—I mean Mr. Gerald—is waiting for you out in the car. The Senator's nephew, you know." Nixon's lips curved downward at the corners. "He didn't like getting wet, so he sent me in after you."

"Let's go," I said, and made for the exit.

The rain was still a production number. I was dripping when I reached the limousine; so was Nixon.

He opened the tonneau door for me.

"Mr. Gerald, sir, this is Don Palmer of San Francisco."

Inside the car, Gerald sat in the far corner—dapper, expensively tailored, his expression a little sardonic. Faint lines of dissipation were beginning to etch themselves into his face, and even without the dome light I could see he needed some sun-tan to relieve his unhealthy pallor.

Behind the chauffeur's back, I put a quick finger to my lips. Whatever young Cartwain had to tell me, I didn't want it discussed where Nixon could overhear. That seemed only a reasonable precaution under the circumstances.

**P**OKER-FACED, Gerald neither greeted me nor acknowledged my impulsive gesture. That was all right, though. It indicated that he had caught the signal and knew how to obey orders. I was pleased by this, because it helped modify the original impression of him that I'd had back in Washington a year before.

Then he had struck me as a hard-drinking, hard-spending playboy with more money than brains. Now, I reflected, he was beginning to

show signs of sense. He was growing up.

I got in beside him, sitting in the opposite corner so my wet topcoat wouldn't soak his suit the way the coat was soaking the mohair upholstery. Up front, Nixon slid under his wheel, got his engine and twin windshield wipers going. The long, luxurious car whispered into forward motion.

I whispered, too, after first making sure the glass partition was closed between tonneau and front compartment.

"Easy with the conversation until later. That is, if what you want to tell me is confidential."

Gerald nodded absently. The limousine cleared an uneven place in the paving, then flowed like poured oil through Burbank and out toward the Valley. Our tires hissed steadily against the rain-slick asphalt and the side windows began to steam up, so that the occasional service station neon signs we passed glowed like ghostfire, vague and intangible.

Then we made an abrupt turn—and young Cartwain toppled out of his corner to sag limply against me, like a rag doll.

Startled, I shoved him off.

"What's the matter with you?" I said sharply. "Are you drunk?"

He didn't answer.

I propped him by pressing my hand against his side. Something wet and sticky met my fingers, something that might be blood. It was blood, from a stab wound. I touched his neck, found no pulsation where the artery ran.

Gerald Cartwain was dead. I had been riding with a corpse.

## CHAPTER II

### *Disappearing Corpse*



IN RAPID sequence, I reviewed everything I could remember since getting into the car. I recalled the way young Cartwain had sat in his corner, unmoving, not speaking. I had thought his silence was because of the warning signal I had given him, but now I knew better. I knew he had never seen that signal. And his faintly supercilious smile, I realized, had been

something else entirely—the beginning of *risus sardonius*, the death grin.

Nor had his pallor been from dissipation. He had lost color as his blood drained out of that knife wound in his side. Even his head nodding could be logically explained. That had happened when the limousine had jounced on a rough place in the paving.

In brief, he had been dead from the start. He had been murdered before I climbed in beside him.

I wedged him back in his corner of the seat, then got out the automatic from my topcoat pocket. Leaning forward, I slid the glass partition open behind Edgar Nixon's head. Then I pressed my gun muzzle to the nape of his neck.

"Pull over," I said.

He winced at the feel of steel on him. Maybe the tone of my voice had something to do with it, too.

"Wh-what—"

"Pull over and stop."

"But—but—"

"You heard me, killer. I'm not fooling."

He slapped down hard on his brake pedal and the limousine edged over to the right, sliding a little on the wet street. The sudden deceleration sent Gerald Cartwain's body lurching forward. His dead face hit the partition with a sickening sound. Then, grotesquely, he landed in a crumpled heap on the floor.

The car stopped.

I opened the left-hand door and stepped out fast, so that the merest shifting of my gun kept its sights lined on Nixon. At the moment, there was no traffic in either direction. There was only the incessant rain and the sound of its steady drumming.

We were in an undeveloped section of the Valley, a few acres not yet subdivided or cluttered with little stucco houses. The vacant lots stretched off to either side like drowned fields, brown and weedy and smelling the sour smell of earth too long wet.

"Come out," I said to the chauffeur.

"I—I don't understand."

"Come out. With your hands in front of you and empty."

He scrambled from under the wheel. "All right. I'm out. What now?"

"That," I said, and inclined my head toward what was sprawled inside the car's tonneau.

He turned and looked in. Under the soaked cling of his livery you could see his thin body going stiff with shock. He backed away from the limousine's open door and slowly faced me. His eyes were more protuberant than usual, and the muscles of his throat moved visibly.

"Holy Pete!" he said. "It's Gerald. Is—is he—"

"Dead, yes. Murdered."

"You—killed him? But why? Why?"

"Let's have none of that, Nixon. Accusing me isn't even clever. You can't get out of it that easily."

He breathed noisily. "What do you mean, I can't get out of it? Surely you don't think, you're not saying—"

"I'm saying you stabbed him."

"Oh, no! No!"

"You stabbed him before you went into the airport depot to get me."

"No," he repeated harshly. "No, you're wrong."

"The chances are he had recognized you. He knew you were the Edgar Nixon his uncle had helped send to prison. Maybe that was why he wanted me down here. He could have hired plenty of private detectives in Los Angeles, but they wouldn't do. He wanted me especially, because I could confirm your identification. I'd been the Cartwain Committee's special investigator in Washington and I was one man who would know you on sight."

He kept saying, "No, no," over and over, mechanically, like a phonograph record with a broken groove.

"You were afraid it was something like that, but you couldn't be sure. And so, to make sure, you murdered him before I could get together with him."

"No. No, you're wrong."

I PUT my face close to his.

"You should have killed me, too," I said. "You might have got away with it, then. You overlooked a bet there. Or did you lose your nerve? Maybe one murder was all you could stomach. Is that how it was, Nixon?"

"No. He was alive when I left him in the car.

He sent me into the station to get you. He gave me your name. He was alive, I tell you. How could he talk to me if he wasn't alive?"

"You're lying."

"No I'm not. If *you* didn't kill him, then it must have happened while you and I were talking in the airport waiting room. Look, Palmer, you've got to believe me—"

"But I don't," I said, and reached for the handcuffs I always carry in my back pocket. "Maybe you can convince the police, but I don't believe a word of it."

"You—you're going to turn me in?"

"Definitely."

His knees buckled under him and he went down, his back sliding along the side of the car. It was a smart trick. It threw me off guard. I thought he had fainted. Instead, he suddenly doubled forward and launched himself at me. He butted me in the stomach.

I didn't expect that and I wasn't prepared for it. Pain went through me like a sword and I dropped the handcuffs. I staggered and tried to keep from collapsing. My leg muscles cramped. Nixon came up and swung a punch at my chin. I couldn't parry it, couldn't get out of the way. His fist landed, hard and clean . . .

Rain, beating against the nape of my neck, brought me back to consciousness. I was lying prone in the gutter behind the limousine, where Nixon had apparently dragged me after he had knocked me out. My stomach hurt like fury from being butted, and my jaw ached with a steady, constant throb like the pounding of drums. Feebly I pushed myself up on all fours, then sat for a moment on the low curb. It slowly dawned on me that I wasn't wearing my topcoat. It had been stripped off me.

My gun was gone, too. And so was Nixon.

Well, he would have needed the topcoat to cover his brown livery and make him less conspicuous for a getaway. As for the automatic, there was no telling what he might need that for. I could guess, though.

When I gathered enough strength I stood up. Swaying drunkenly, I moved to the car and peered inside. What I saw swept the last of the cobwebs out of my mind. Because what I saw was—nothing.

Gerald Cartwain's corpse had disappeared.

I pulled my pencil flashlight, sprayed its concentrated white glow all around me. Raindrops resembling falling gray bullets cut slantwise across the lightbeam, but there was no trace of the murdered man.

Swearing, I searched the weedy vacant lots beyond the sidewalk, trudged through soft spongy mud until I had covered the entire area.

I didn't find young Cartwain.

And I didn't find Edgar Nixon.

Back at the limousine, I discovered the ignition key still in the lock. I jammed myself under the wheel, pressed the starter. A smooth, surging flow of power answered my foot on the throttle paddle and I headed forward, making plans.

At a red and white Chevron station a mile farther on, I pulled in and took a quick look at the address on the cat's registration certificate. Then I asked the station attendant how to find that address. He got out a city map, put me straight.

Ten minutes later I gained my destination—a big neo-Colonial mansion perched on a knoll, surrounded by rolling lawn and reached by a graceful private driveway. I went up the driveway in second, my rear tires spitting gravel at the night.

Then I was vigorously thumbing the mansion's front doorbell.

My strap watch showed nine-thirty—not late enough for people to be in bed. But nobody answered my ring. Again I jabbed at the button and this time, after a long wait, the door opened.

"Yes, sir?" the girl who answered my ring asked.

SHE was a brunette in the black taffeta of a housemaid. Her skin was tawny, creamy; her face young but wise. The taffeta was tight over curves that were ample, though not lush. She looked at me with dark, impersonal eyes that gave you the impression of seeing more than they pretended to see.

"Is this Senator Cartwain's house?" I said.

"Yes, sir. Former Senator Cartwain," she added, as if to correct any mistaken notions I might have about his political status. "But he has retired for the night, sir."

"That's all right," I said, and pushed past her. "He'll be getting up again, soon enough. Right

now, where's your phone?"

"Really, sir, I can't have this," the maid protested.

I had already noticed what I wanted, on the other side of the oak-paneled reception hall. I made for the telephone, picked it up, dialed 0 for operator and asked for Police Headquarters. Then I asked for Homicide, while the maid stared at me in growing bewilderment. "Homicide?" I said a moment later. "This is Don Palmer of the Schindemann Detective Agency, San Francisco. I'm calling from the residence of ex-Senator Cartwain near Van Nuys. That's right, Cartwain." I gave the address. "I want to report a murder. Cartwain's nephew and ward, Gerald. Stabbed. And his body stolen. I suggest you put out a radio reader for the Cartwain chauffeur—real name Edgar Nixon, but using an alias. About six-two, prominent eyes, thin build, wearing brown whipcord livery and a light tan topcoat which he took from me after knocking me unconscious. Yes, I'll be waiting here for your crew. Right."

I hung up.

Behind me there was a muffled thudding noise. I pivoted, saw that the taffeta-clad maid had crumpled to the floor. It was a genuine faint, I discovered when I loped over to her and stooped down. Her breathing was shallow and her dark eyes walled back so that only the whites showed.

There was a formal staircase to the left, and footfalls sounded on the upper steps. Then they reversed themselves swiftly and faded off. I kept trying to shake the maid awake, and the pattering click of high heels sounded again on the staircase. This time they came almost all the way down.

"Bring some water," I said, without glancing toward the stairs. "Or better still, brandy."

Then I looked up and saw a blonde girl standing on the fourth step from the bottom.

The long barreled .22 target automatic in her hands was pointed straight at my head.



## CHAPTER III

*A Muffled Scream*

THE footfalls I had heard had been the blonde's, of course. They had started downstairs, had seen me leaning over the maid, had assumed I was a prowler and had gone back to get her gun.

"Whoever you are, put up your hands," she said now.

There was something vaguely familiar about her, some trick of expression or conformation of features I thought I ought to recognize, although I knew I had never seen her before. She wore a light blue negligee and matching satin mules, and her hair was the shining yellow of new gold, done in a braided cornet around her head.

She looked to be in her early twenties, or younger, and her mouth was compressed to a firm line—the only sign of emotion she allowed to show. Her eyes were bluer than the negligee, and as unwavering as the target pistol she aimed at me.

"Take it easy," I said. "This isn't what it seems to be."

"I told you to put your hands up. What have you done to Lora? If you've hurt her—"

Lora, then, was the maid's name. I lowered her, stepped back.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "I haven't done anything to her. She fainted when I phoned the police and accused your chauffeur of murder."

"Our chauffeur? You mean Judley?"

"If that's what he's been calling himself. He's really Edgar Nixon."

That didn't seem to mean anything. She frowned over it briefly and let it go.

"What's this you're saying about a murder?" she demanded.

"I think I'd sooner tell it to Senator Cartwain. Get him for me. Tell him Palmer wants to see him—Don Palmer of the Schindemann Detective Agency, San Francisco."

"He's asleep. Whatever you have to say, you can say it to me. I'm his niece."

I looked at her and suddenly knew why her face had seemed so puzzlingly familiar. It was a family resemblance.

"So you're Gerald Cartwain's sister."

"Yes. I'm Sylvia Cartwain."

"Put down that gun," I said gently as I could. "I've got bad news for you. Your brother is dead. He's the man your chauffeur murdered."

Her cheeks went pale and she leaned against the stair rail.

"You—you're joking."

"I wish I were."

She came down the last four steps, walked toward me.

"I don't believe you," she said tightly. "This is some monstrous lie." Then, when I shrugged, she said: "Where is his—where is the body?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

I told her the whole story then, bluntly and quickly, and sparing her none of the details. I explained how Gerald had been knifed in the limousine, how Nixon had subsequently slugged me and escaped, somehow taking the corpse along with him.

"And now I'd better talk to your uncle," I finished.

Dully she indicated the staircase. "His room is the first one to the right on the second floor. I'll stay here and take care of Lora until the police come." She looked at the still unconscious maid. "Poor Lora. No wonder she fainted when she heard you accusing Judley."

"Nixon. Edgar Nixon. The Judley was an alias."

"It doesn't matter. Whoever he was, he and Lora were engaged to be married."

In itself, this was a piece of information that interested me, because it clashed with the pattern I had formed in my mind. It was a wrong note, jarring, having no place in the picture.

But beyond all that, I thought of Sylvia Cartwain herself as she told it to me. There was something fine and selfless about this blue-eyed girl, a quality of character as shining as her golden hair. Grief-stricken and stunned by the murder of her brother, she could find strength to subordinate that grief in her sympathy for a servant. In my work you don't often encounter people like that.

I suppressed an impulse to reach out, touch her hand. Instead I turned and went upstairs, found my way to the first door on the right in the upper hallway. I knocked, softly.

From the inside came what sounded like a low groan.

**I**RAPPED louder and the groan was repeated, distinctly. There was no question about it this time. I was hearing a man in trouble, in pain. I tried the knob, found the latch unfastened and gave the door a quick shove. The bedroom before me was dark, and once again came that deep-chested groan.

Fumbling at the wall just inside the door, I located a light switch. Flipping it gave me illumination from an overhead fixture. I stared toward a big four-poster bed across the room—and at the elderly man on it. A man bleeding from a stab wound.

He was former Senator Cartwain.

Shaggy and leonine in flannel pajamas, he lay massively on a crumpled pillow; a giant of a man with an unruly mop of cotton-white hair and a heavy-jarred face gone flabby in the jowls. Over his right eye socket there was a black patch. The left eye looked milky and rheumily opaque, leaving no doubt as to its blindness.

His pajama jacket was drawn up away from the shallow gash across his ribs, and the bed covers were stained bright crimson. He rolled and tried to sit up, turning his head and cocking his ear as I went toward him.

“You son of a witch,” he said faintly. “So you’ve come back to finish me.” He made a groping gesture. “Old and blind and weak as I am, if I could get my hands on you I’d—”

“Hold on a minute, Senator,” I said, keeping out of his reach. “I’m not the one who stabbed you.”

He strained his sightless face toward me. “I know that voice. You—you—”

“Don Palmer. I worked for your committee in the Senate. Investigator. Never mind that. Who knifed you?”

“Palmer,” he said, ignoring my question. “Palmer. Yes. Yes, of course. Now I remember.” His tone grew a little fuller, more resonant, with a hint of the oratorical quality he had put to such good use in his Washington days before his defeat for reelection. “Don Palmer. That profiteer case—and Nixon. Nixon, that sneaking, sniveling, cowardly—” The resonance faded, and Cartwain sagged against the pillow. “My side . . . ah-h-h—”

“Who did it?” I almost shouted at him. “Who stabbed you?”

“Bathroom,” he mumbled, and flapped a hand in its direction. “Bandages—iodine. Do something—stop bleeding.”

I raced from the room, raced back to the bed, and rolled the elderly man over on his side so I could get to the knife slash. One look told me it was painful but not serious. The blade had cut an ugly furrow but not a deep one.

I used a wet cloth to sponge away the blood, then poured iodine liberally. Cartwain winced, moaned. I slapped a pad of gauze against him, fastened it with strips of adhesive tape.

“Now will you tell me who knifed you?” I growled at him. “For heaven’s sake, Senator, talk!”

“He came in—the window over there—must have climbed—up the portico.”

“Who? Who was he?”

“I tried to—fight him off—but he cut me—and went back—out the window. Nixon—Edgar Nixon, lawyer—Washington trial. He called himself Judley, chauffeur, but I recognized him—when it was too late.”

I sprang to the open window Cartwain kept mentioning. Rain was blowing over the sill in little gusts, and the carpet beneath was damp. Outside in the night there was a flat rectangle of roof with an ornamental balustrade around it. It was the roof of the portico below.

Nobody was on this roof, though, and if there had been footprints they had long since been washed off by the downpour.

It wouldn’t be too difficult for a man to shinny up one of the portico’s pillars, climb over the balustrade, come in the window and later get away by the same route; not too easy—but not too hard for a criminal with vengeance on his mind and murder in his heart.

“When was it?” I went back to the bed. “How long ago?”

“Five minutes—ten—I don’t know. I tried to call out. I—wasn’t able to make anybody hear.” He broke in on himself, “*What was that?*”

I’d heard it, too—a muffled scream, then a thud.

It came from downstairs.

Then a door slammed.

I started out of the bedroom, fast.

"Stay where you are, Senator," I said over my shoulder, and I sped to the staircase, hurled myself downward three steps at a time.

**A** WHILE ago, I had left the maid, Lora, unconscious on the floor of the reception hall with Sylvia Cartwain looking after her. Now the taffeta-clad brunette was gone and Sylvia lay sprawled in her place, an ugly bruise on her temple.

"Judley!" She managed to whisper as I ran to her. She still thought of the chauffeur by that name rather than Nixon. "He came in, took Lora away. I tried to stop him—I tripped, fell."

Outside, a car motor roared alive and wheels spun on wet gravel, seeking traction.

Then the treads caught hold and the machine thundered off, gone before I could get to the front door.

I went sprinting out into the storm, trying to reconcile this new development with the things I had already learned. The driveway stretched in a graceful curving slant ahead of me from house down to street, but the limousine I had left parked there was no longer in view. I cursed myself for leaving the key in the ignition, then I realized that Nixon would probably have had a duplicate in any event.

A crazy urge took hold of me, an urge to dash in pursuit of the vanished car. In the grip of this blind, unreasoning impulse I lowered my head to the pelting rain and ran toward the rear of the grounds where there was a garage building with the servants' quarters above, like an old-fashioned plantation coach-house.

Surely, I reasoned, a family as well off as the Cartwains would own more than one automobile. After all, Marcus Cartwain was said to have retired from politics with a comfortable bank balance. Moreover, I recalled that young Gerald Cartwain and his sister had inherited a fair-sized fortune which was under their uncle's trusteeship, a fortune which likely would be entirely Sylvia's now that Gerald was dead.

**I** WAS right about the extra cars. I found two in the garage—a convertible and a station wagon, the latter spattered with rain-drops as if recently driven. Its instrument panel heat indicator needle, too, was up above the pin. But there was no key.

And none in the convertible, either.

By that time I had come to the realization that it didn't matter anyhow. Nixon had too big a start on me. There wasn't the remotest chance of overtaking him.

Dripping wet again, I went back into the mansion—and in a night full of surprises, I found still another surprise awaiting me there. A sort of combination den-library was located just off the reception hall on the left, and Sylvia Cartwain had recovered sufficient strength to totter in there, and to throw herself onto a leather upholstered davenport.

That wasn't what startled me, though. It was the sight of blind, hulking Marcus Cartwain bending over her, solicitously groping, trying awkwardly to comfort her.

## CHAPTER IV

### *House of Menace*



**M**ARCUS Cartwain's vitality was enormous. He had put on a robe over his bloodstained flannel pajamas, and in spite of the weakening effects of the stab wound in his side he had fumbled his way downstairs to be with his niece when she needed him most. His heavy face was gray, almost to the whiteness of his unruly hair, and he turned his head as I came into the room.

"Who's that?" he asked sharply.

"Don Palmer."

I went over to the davenport, looked down into the blonde girl's misty blue eyes.

"Are you all right, Sylvia?" I said. It didn't even occur to me that I should have called her Miss Cartwain.

"I—think so. I was j-just telling Uncle Marcus about—Gerald."

Cartwain's massive hands bailed into fists, impotently. "That swine Nixon!" Then, more calmly: "How did it happen?"

"Gerald came to meet me at the airport and sent Nixon in to get me. When he took me to the car, Gerald was already dead."

I repeated what I had previously explained to Sylvia—how the chauffeur had later knocked me

senseless, and how he and his victim's body had been gone when I came to.

Cartwain's lips moved, almost soundlessly as they formed the question. "You've notified the police?"

"Yes."

"Then why aren't they here? Why don't they come?"

I glanced at my wrist-watch. "It was only ten or fifteen minutes ago that I phoned," I said. "They wouldn't despatch a radio car here. They probably short-waved every cruiser in the neighborhood to keep moving, keep on the lookout for Nixon. What they'll do is send us a squad from downtown Homicide, experts to ask questions, lift fingerprints, things like that."

"I don't like it," he said, peevishly querulous. "That Nixon must be a madman! First killing Gerald, then attacking me and coming down here, knocking Sylvia unconscious—"

She patted his arm. "I tripped, Uncle Marcus. He didn't knock me unconscious. He just grabbed Lora and said the police were after him, and they'd have to find a place to hide, start life all over again. I ran at him and stumbled. He never even touched me."

"He might have killed you. He must have planned to wipe out the whole family! And here we sit without police protection—me blind, not knowing when he may come sneaking in again to knife us in the back!"

"But Mr. Palmer is here, Uncle Marcus," Sylvia said. She smiled at me wanly.

I wondered if there might be a little irony in that. Thus far I had done little protecting of the Cartwains. I had arrived too late to save Gerald from death, the Senator from a wicked gash across the ribs, and Sylvia from a bump on the head. I seemed constantly to be one step behind these attacks, and I had a feeling that danger still hung over the big Colonial house, menacing, ominous and gathering force to strike again.

As long as this feeling persisted, I didn't intend to let the blonde girl out of my sight until her brother's murderer was under lock and key. Meanwhile, there was something I wanted to know.

"Senator Cartwain," I asked, "why did Gerald have my agency send me down here from San Francisco to see him? What was it he wanted

me to investigate?"

His heavy face twisted bitterly. "It was something that I considered a lot of arrant nonsense. You see, I had received several threats—"

"Uncle Marcus!" Sylvia said. "You never told me!"

"No. Gerald didn't want to worry you, and as for me, I thought the whole thing was poppycock. A couple of anonymous phone calls, an unsigned letter—why, that sort of thing is commonplace to any man in public life. I've been threatened more times than I could count, and nothing ever came of them. How was I to know it was my own chauffeur getting ready for a spree of killing?"

"So Gerald wanted me to look into the threats, is that it?" I asked.

"Yes. And I suppose Nixon decided it was time to act, before you could trace the messages to him. So he stabbed Gerald, knifed me—"

"That's a lie!" a low, vibrant voice said from the doorway of the little den-library.

I whirled, stared. Then, slowly, I put my hands in the air.

I WAS getting pretty tired of looking at guns being pointed at me by attractive young females, but I raised my hands anyhow. The girl in the doorway was Lora, and she had an expression in her unwavering dark eyes that warned me she would shoot if she was forced to.

On the davenport, Sylvia gasped and pressed against her uncle as if trying to shield him. I stood motionless, studying the brunette maid, and studying the stubby .32 automatic in her hand. It was my own Colt, the one Edgar Nixon had stolen from me when he had knocked me senseless on the way from the airport. Nixon must have given it to Lora.

But why was she back here in the house? What insane errand had brought her?

"You got away once," I said. "You should have stayed away."

Her body shivered under her rain-soaked, clinging black taffeta uniform.

"Stayed away on what? It takes money. I have some coming to me. I want it. I want my wages. They're past due."

"And Nixon's?"

"His, too."

"Was he afraid to come in himself?"

"You ought to know." She glared at me. "You're the one who accused him, framed him for something he didn't do. But don't think you'll make it stick. You won't even catch him. We ditched the limousine. And before I came back in here, we made sure the police hadn't arrived yet."

"They're here now," I said. "Right behind you."

Old as the trick was, she believed my lie and pivoted in panic. It was what I had hoped she would do.

The instant she moved, I launched myself at her. I didn't have to worry about the gun now. While it was pointed at me, I didn't stand a chance, but as soon as she started to turn it made the gamble worth trying. Springing, I got my hands on her shoulders. My weight bore her to the carpet, and I pinioned her there.

"Nice bait," I said.

She writhed, squirmed. "Let me g-go!" Then: "Bait?"

"I'm going to hold you," I said. "Maybe Nixon will get tired waiting. Maybe he'll start to worry. Maybe he'll come in to find out what happened to you. Then I'll have him."

Abruptly she stopped struggling. "No," she said in a curiously quiet voice. "Don't do that. You won't have to. He didn't kill Gerald."

"Didn't he?"

"No." She sighed wearily. "I did."

"Lora!" Sylvia Cartwain cried out sharply in a shocked voice.

Her uncle made a blind, groping gesture, his face registering disbelief; or perhaps it was disillusionment.

I had no illusions to lose. I got up, hauled the maid over to a chair, installed her and stood over her.

"So you murdered Gerald. Why? What was your motive?"

"He promised to marry me. He reneged."

"Wait," I said. "You and Nixon were engaged."

"Nixon can worry," she said cynically. Too cynically. "It was Gerald I wanted. It was Gerald I thought I had. At least he had me. The heel. He could twist a woman around his finger. He made me believe he loved me. Me, a servant, a maid. And him rich, high society, a Senator's nephew.

Or anyhow a former Senator's. I guess it flattered me. Anyhow I fell for his line."

"And Nixon?"

"I was just stringing him along for kicks." She was hard about it. She overdid the hardness.

"So when it came time for wedding bells, Gerald backed out," I said. "Is that the way of it?"

"That was how it was. And when he went to the airport tonight to meet you, I followed him: I waited until he was alone, sitting so high and mighty in the limousine. I killed him."

"You say you followed him. How?"

"I drove."

"In one of the other family cars?"

"Yes. You think I've got a car of my own on my wages? Wages two months overdue?"

"Which car did you drive?" I said.

"The—" She hesitated. "The convertible."

I picked up my gun from the floor where she had dropped it. I beckoned Sylvia Cartwain, and when the blonde got up from the couch I handed her the weapon.

"I'm going to phone the police and see what's delaying them. Keep Lora covered with this."

"You don't have to keep me covered," Lora said. "I'll take my medicine, just so you keep Nixon out of it. He's innocent."

AS IT developed, I didn't have to phone Headquarters, either. Just as I went toward the reception hall phone, the doorbell rang. I answered it and admitted three plainclothes detectives out of Homicide. They had a fourth man with them, a thin man in a wet, badly fitting topcoat—my topcoat, covering a brown, soggy whipcord livery.

The law had caught up with Edgar Nixon.

One of the detectives was a man I had known in my earlier days on the Coast, before the war—a sinewy little lieutenant named Otto Kleinstadt. He had a face as narrow and sharp as an ax, eyes like gimlets.

"Hello, Palmer," he said. Then he indicated his prisoner. "Know him?"

"Yes. Nixon."

"Thought so. We caught him sulking around the grounds and he matched the description you phoned in. Looks like a nice quick clean-up, eh? No chase, no trouble at all. Funny, nabbing him

here at the house. From what you told us, I figured he'd be long gone and far away."

Nixon's shoulder twitched with nervous tic he had. "Now listen," he said. "I was railroaded once. It's not going to happen again."

"So you were railroaded," I said. "By the Cartwain Committee. Actually by Marcus Cartwain. That's why you hated him, hated his whole family. You got this job as his chauffeur for one reason only—revenge. A chance to get even. You knew he wouldn't recognize you because he was blind. You were waiting for an opportunity to start a family massacre."

"It's a lie. I told you I'd put all that out of my mind. When I met Lora I changed. All I wanted was to marry, settle down, forget the past."

"Lora?" Otto Kleinstadt said. "Who's Lora?"

"The maid here," I told him.

"I'm no killer," Nixon said. "I didn't murder Gerald Cartwain. I didn't do it."

"But you knocked me unconscious," I said.

"I admit that."

"And stole my coat and my gun."

"You think I wanted to stick around while you framed me?"

"And you disposed of Gerald's body somehow," I said.

"Down a storm drain. It will turn up at the outfall, or Ballona Creek. I was a little bit crazy to do that, I guess. But I wasn't thinking straight. I was cornered. Anyhow I know I didn't murder him."

"I believe you," I said.

With that, he blinked at me as if doubting his ears. Lieutenant Kleinstadt blinked, too.

"What the devil, Palmer!" he exploded. "You said he was guilty!"

"That was before Lora confessed."

Nixon stiffened. "What?"

"You made a mistake letting her back here for her wages." I smiled him. "She walked into trouble she couldn't cope with."

Then I took him into the den-library with Kleinstadt and the other two headquarters men trooping along behind.

## CHAPTER V

### *A Good Trick—That Didn't Work*

FORMER Senator Cartwain was sitting on the davenport with his head to one side the way a blind man always does, using his ears for eyes. Sylvia stood against a wall, leaning tiredly, but keeping my little automatic trained on the maid who was still in the chair where I had left her.

Nixon took in the scene.

"Lora," he said harshly, "Palmer says you confessed you killed Gerald."

"Yes." She was calm. "Yes, I confessed."

"But why—why do a thing like that!"

"To save you from the lethal chamber, of course," I said. "What other reason would she have for lying like that? She loves you. A woman will make any sacrifice for a man she loves."

Lora's dark eyes met mine reluctantly. "I didn't lie. I murdered Gerald Cartwain."

"Stop being noble," I told her. "Your story was full of holes. You overacted it. The main discrepancy was, you said you followed the limousine to the airport by driving in the Cartwain convertible. I happen to know the convertible is as dry as a bone. It hasn't been out in the rain at all. You should have said the station wagon. I might have believed you then, because it's wet and its motor is still warm. You guessed the wrong car."

Nixon went toward her. "Lora! You mean you were actually willing to let them convict you of murder—for me?"

"I wouldn't have gone all the way through with it," she answered him moodily. "I just wanted to give you a chance to get away." Her lower lip trembled. "I was playing for time. I couldn't stand the thought of them strapping you in a chair and—and starting the gas."

Suddenly her reserve broke. She wept, quietly and with big racking sobs. He touched her shoulder.

"You thought they'd convict me, Lora? Because I wanted to run away, you thought I was guilty?"

"Yes."

"I'm innocent, Lora. I didn't kill Gerald."

I took my gun out of Sylvia's hand and backed toward the doorway.

"He's telling the truth, Lora," I said. "He did a lot of foolish things, such as hitting me, getting rid of the corpse, coming here and taking you away, then letting you come back for your wages. He doesn't stack high for brains, but he didn't kill Gerald."

Everybody was staring at me except Marcus Cartwain, who couldn't see.

"Somebody else followed Gerald and Nixon in the limousine," I said. "Somebody who used the station wagon and waited until Nixon left Gerald alone and then knifed him. I'm aiming at the killer," I added, and pointed my .32 at blonde Sylvia Cartwain.

I had all the puzzle's pieces neatly put together, in my mind at least, so that the pattern was clear and plain. But much of it still needed proving, which wouldn't be easy.

Sylvia stood speechless as my gun menaced her. Nixon and Lora breathed audible gasps. Otto Kleinstadt, flanked by his two plainclothes colleagues, started moving toward the golden-haired girl, and over on the davenport her uncle dabbed at his milkily opaque left eye with a mussed linen handkerchief while adjusting and tugging at the black patch over the right one. He dislodged the patch briefly, snapped it hastily back in place.

"Much obliged, Senator," I said. "Eh? What? What?"

I shifted my automatic to cover him. "Thanks for the confession. Thanks for helping me prove you murdered your nephew."

"I murdered my nephew? Are you insane? How could I have killed him? I'm blind."

"Blind only in the left eye," I said. "Your right eye has perfect vision, barring that patch you wear over it. That's why I used a little trick just now, to make you give yourself away. I announced that I was aiming at the killer, but I mentioned no names. It caught you off guard. In your own conscience, you knew you were guilty. You wondered if you were the one I was accusing."

"With the patch on your good eye, you couldn't see where I was pointing my automatic. Maybe at you, maybe at someone else in the room. You had to know, you had to find out. So you dabbed at your blind eye with a handkerchief and managed to move the patch from the other one, just for an instant. Just long enough to see

that Sylvia was the person under my gun.

"Then you let the patch drop back into position. I was watching you, waiting for you to make that move. I expected you to. And you did."

"You're out of your head!"

I STEPPED close to him.

"Am I?" Then I yanked away the patch, and his perfectly sound right eye glared at me maniacally. "Look at me, Senator," I said. "Take a good look and tell me now if I'm crazy."

"Curse you—curse you!"

"Uncle Marcus!" Sylvia wailed, and the others in the room involuntarily stirred and muttered like a shocked audience at some corrupt melodrama. Cartwain cursed me again, thickly.

"I think it must have been a long-range plan," I said to him. "Something you plotted months ago, when your left eye went blind. With a patch on the right eye you could pretend complete blindness. That was the start of your murder plan."

"Curse you, curse you, curse you!" he repeated.

"Next came Edgar Nixon," I said. "Either accidentally or by design, you'd learned he was out of prison and in Los Angeles, jobless. You got rid of your former chauffeur, then, and somehow managed to get the news to Nixon that the position was open. You also made sure he heard that you were blind, so that he'd feel safe from recognition if he applied for the job. Clever psychology, Senator. You counted on him applying. As a political expedient you'd ruined him in Washington and he had good cause to hate you, to be vengeful. That's why you wanted him in your household. It made him a logical fall guy for the murder you were planning."

He swore at me again, over and over.

"I first suspected you when I found you stabbed in your bed," I told him. "You accused Nixon, said you had recognized him. How could a blind man recognize anybody? That was a minor slip of the tongue, a lie told blunderingly, a false note that started me thinking. And your wound was shallow, as it might be if self-inflicted, whereas Gerald had been stabbed once and deeply enough to cause death. If the murderer could kill Gerald with one stroke of knife, how could he possibly do such an incomplete job on you, a

helpless blind man? It wasn't in character for a killer, but it was characteristic of stage-dressing. Of fakery."

He seemed to shrink against the davenport's leather upholstery. He looked a thousand years old.

"And if you'd been really blind," said, "how could you know a man came in your window? How could you tell? There was something else, too. You claimed you had been attacked five or ten minutes before. But the carpet under the window was barely damp. The way the rain was coming in, the carpet would have been soaking wet in five or ten minutes. That meant you had opened the window a mere moment before I knocked on your door. You lied. Everything you'd told me was a lie, including that wild yarn about receiving anonymous threats. I don't believe there ever were any threats. That was a story you cooked up to keep me from guessing Gerald's real reason for asking my agency to send me down here."

"His real reason?"

I nodded. "I'm theorizing now. Something Lora said tipped me to it. You were supposed to be well-fixed if not wealthy. Gerald and Sylvia had a fair-sized fortune, and you were trustee of their estate. But the maid's wages were past due. So were Nixon's. Where was all the money you were supposed to have? What had happened to Gerald's and Sylvia's inheritance? Maybe you had been embezzling, gambling, dissipating everything. Maybe Gerald's suspicions were aroused. Maybe he demanded an accounting that you didn't dare give him. Maybe that was why you planned to kill him. He was on to you."

"Curse you," Cartwain said monstrously. "Curse you to perdition."

"So finally he decided to send for me, hire me to investigate your finances. That brought it to a head. You're the one who drove the station wagon tonight, followed the limousine, waited until your nephew was alone and then stabbed

him. Perhaps you intended to kill Sylvia, too. I caught you groping over her, pretending to comfort her. Were you going to break her neck and pin that on Nixon, too? Then you wouldn't have had to give an estate accounting to anybody."

CARTWAIN put a hand down between two of the leather cushions.

"Come with me to Hades, Palmer," he said, and brought up the long-barreled .22 target gun that I had last seen in Sylvia's hand.

She must have left it on the davenport when she rested there, earlier. And Cartwain had it now. He snapped a shot at me.

He got me in the right arm. Then, behind me, Otto Kleinstadt fired his service .38 and destroyed the only good eye Marcus Cartwain had. Where the eye had been, there was now a bright red hole.

"Save the State the cost of a trial," Kleinstadt said, almost apologetically. Then, to Sylvia, "Sorry, Miss Cartwain. I guess I didn't realize I was such a good marksman. But you'd have been out an uncle in the long run, anyhow."

She didn't seem to hear him, didn't even look at the former Senator's corpse. She came running to me.

"Mr. Palmer, your arm—your poor arm! It's bleeding!"

It was nice to know she cared. It was an incongruous time for such notions, but I kept thinking she was probably poor, now. Her estate had been squandered if my theories were correct. And then I thought that a private detective makes pretty fair money. Maybe I would never afford a chauffeur and maid like Nixon and Lora, but I could take care of a wife. I could take very good care of a wife with hair the color of new gold.

I stopped daydreaming. That was looking too far into the future.

"It's all right, Sylvia," I said. "Don't worry about my arm. One of these days I'll get in touch with you. I'll be as good as new."

