

MODELS FOR MURDER

By W. T. BALLARD

What grim motive was behind the terroristic frightening of those beautiful New York models, and behind the murder that accompanied it? I, Austin Gardner, had two dangerous reasons for wanting to find out



JIMMY WABASH said; "I'm telling you, Austin, this gal is something. You can take your million-buck models and throw them all together and you ain't got nothing that can touch her."

I regarded him with amusement. He was a funny little guy with red hair and the sharpest-pointed nose I've ever seen. A photographer, and a good one, he preferred to freelance rather than take a job, although he could have commanded an excellent salary.

"I like to take pictures of what I want, the way I want to take them," he told me once, and I believed him.

"Take it easy, Jimmy," I said, winking at Henry Graylord, my agency manager. "You'll

blow a fuse. To hear you tell it, this tomato is super-extra. I'd almost think you were gone on her if I didn't know that you regard women as strictly from hunger."

He grinned, the red climbing up his pinched cheeks until it reached his oversized ears and colored them. "I wouldn't know about that." He'd lowered his voice. "You see, the way I feel about this Mary . . . all I want to do is sit and look at her, like you would look at a statue or something."

"Bring her around," I said. "We could use something like that. Most of the girls nowadays have been walking around in moccasins so long that they shuffle like an Indian."

He grinned. Henry Graylord said in his worried voice, "Now, Austin, don't be hasty. This girl probably just fell out of that tree that grows in Brooklyn. If you have Jimmy bring her in, she'll get big ideas and—"

"She wouldn't come anyway," said Jimmy. "I don't get it. I told her I knew you—kind of building myself up, you know—and she acted sort of scared."

"Maybe," said Henry slowly, "she belongs to this model association. If so, we don't want any part of her."

I swung my chair around to look at him. "Model association? What's that? Do any of our girls belong?"

He shook his head. "It isn't that kind of an association. In fact, I think it's some kind of racket. The cheaper jobbers and ready-to-wear houses that have one and two girls are bothered. I was talking to a friend of mine in the trade the other day. It seems he has to hire the girls they tell him to—or something might happen to his business."

"Nuts."

Henry shrugged and looked appealingly toward Jimmy Wabash. "Austin's so used to being the head of the great Gardner Agency that he can't imagine anyone who isn't afraid of him."

"It isn't that," I said. "It's just that that kind of talk doesn't make sense. Sure, I know there are chisellers around town who would move into anything that looked like they could squeeze a dime out of, but those girls, modeling in the ready-to-wear trade, aren't making enough to attract any kind of a rat. Someone's been kidding you. Now, you both get out and let me work."

THEY went and I proceeded to forget all about Jimmy and this Mary Ingersoll. I probably would never have thought of the name again if Jimmy hadn't been waiting at the bus stop three nights later when I paused in the hope of picking up a cab.

His face lighted when he saw me and he pulled a big old-fashioned hunter-case watch from the pocket of his sagging vest.

"Hi, Austin. Where you headed?"

I said that I was going home. I was tired of arguing with girls. To those of you who see the photographs of my models on advertising or magazine covers, it may seem that it would be fun to argue with some of the models once in awhile, but when you put in eight hours, six days every week, coping with their temperament, satisfying their whims, temporizing with advertisers, photographers and the like, you get very tired of women.

"Look," he said in his small, eager voice. "It's early, not four-thirty yet. They're having a little show for some out-of-town buyer down at Ivor's Misses Ready-to-Wear and Stylish Stouts. That Mary Ingersoll that I was telling you about. She's working down there. You can get a look at her without her knowing."

I shook my head. "Ixnay."

"Please, Austin . . . tell you what I'll do. I'll handle those Radferm pictures you've been after me to take, if you'll come down. It won't take half an hour. . . . Hey, taxi!" His arm had gone up and signaled a passing cab which slid to a stop before us.

Jimmy had the door open, was shoving me inside and giving the driver a Twenty-second Street address. I shrugged and settled back in the seat. It was easier to go along than it was to argue.

The building before which the cab stopped was an old one, housing a succession of lofts and small show rooms. The one on the third floor into which Jimmy piloted me was no different from a hundred others scattered through New York's sprawling garment center.

Around the showroom were scattered a half-dozen buyers from little chains of ready-to-wear shops from all across the country. It was no different from crowds that you could see at one of these places any time a new line

was being shown, but the girl who came through the far door was decidedly different.

I didn't need the tug which Jimmy Wabash gave my coattail to know that this was the girl we'd come to see. I watched her instinctively, as a trainer might size up a horse. Models were my business, after all.

She was beautiful, but to me that was of secondary importance. It was the way she walked, the little extra touch that she gave to the clothes she wore.

A little difference is big in models.

THE outfit she was modeling was cheap and badly designed, but on her it looked as if it might have come from Sak's. She wore almost no make-up, yet her skin looked as smooth and soft as a peach.

"What did I tell you!" Jimmy whispered gleefully. "Some dish, what?" Before I could stop him, he'd stepped forward and caught the girl's arm as she was about to disappear through the door to the fitting room. He led her, protesting, toward where I stood and I felt every eye in the room turned in our direction.

As they reached me, Jimmy was saying, "Snap out of it, sugar. This is Austin Gardner. His agency is almost as large as the Powers outfit. You can't afford to miss a chance like this."

I could tell by her face that his words excited her, but under the excitement there was something else that seemed very like fear. "I . . . I'm not supposed to talk to anyone," she said.

I stepped to meet them. This girl intrigued me. Mostly I have to fight shy to keep from meeting them. Here was one who hesitated at meeting me.

"How do you do?" I said as Jimmy introduced us. "I wonder if you'd be interested in calling at my office in the morning. It's on—"

"Oh, but I couldn't."

I stared at her. "Well, in that case," I started to turn away.

But Jimmy caught my arm. "Wait a minute, Austin. Don't go."

I turned back and as I did so a squat man came through the fitting-room door. He was so broad that he seemed to be almost as wide as he was tall. His face was broad and flat, and his eyes protruded a little as if someone had squeezed his neck too tightly.

"Get out of here." He was talking to the girl, his voice so low that it barely reached my ears.

I took a step forward and he snarled at me, "Keep out of this, Bud," and putting out a thick hand, shoved against my chest.

I hit him without thinking about it. I have never liked being pushed around, and I certainly didn't like this squat man. I hit his jaw, and it was like hitting a piece of iron, sending pain back along my arm in knifelike waves. He put his head down and bore in. I sensed rather than saw the heavy arms, clutching out at me, and knew that if he ever folded me into their bearlike grip, he would smash my ribs and perhaps shatter my spine.

I danced away from him. I'd boxed in college but I'd not had on gloves since. I realized anyhow that this was more than a boxing match, much more. This squat man, charging toward me with his guttural half-animal noises, was a killer. I could see it in his popped, red-rimmed eyes.

I had to stop him, and it had to be with my fists. I concentrated on the man before me, forgetting the startled buyers, the girl and Jimmy Wabash. He kept rushing me, his big arms swinging, but it wasn't the blows I feared. I feared that he'd back me into a corner, and wrap those arms around me.

My fists thudded against his head and face, battering it into a red smear. An ordinary man would have fallen, but this grotesque creature kept coming. One of his eyes was closed and blood from a cut over the second eye ran down to blind him partly.

This helped. If he could have seen clearly I don't think I'd have ever escaped. As it was, I

can take no real credit for knocking him out. It was Jimmy Wabash who ended it, and the weapon he used was a bronze statuette of a model which sat in a little niche between the windows.

HOW long it was between the man's first charge and the cracking blow against the back of his head which put him down, I'll never know.

He fell forward onto his face, and I thought that he was dead. I wasn't certain that I wasn't either. My chest felt as if it were circled by a band of iron which would not allow me enough air in my tortured lungs. My arms were so weary that I could hardly hold up my puffed, broken hands.

Jimmy was excited. "Did he hurt you, Austin? Boy, did you hit him with everything in the book!"

"Everything but a statue," I said wryly. "It seems that's what it takes. Lucky you were around to swing it."

His mouth twisted. "I'm sorry, I couldn't seem to move, couldn't get going."

"You came through in the pinch," I said, feeling one cheek where one of the squat man's wild blows had nearly laid the bone bare. "That was like fighting an ox. We ought to buy his contract and put him in the Garden."

Someone seized my arm, and I thought for a moment that the ox had friends who wanted to carry on the fight. I swung around, ready. Instead I found myself facing a little guy in a gray pin-point stripe suit. His shirt and tie were lavender and matched. His hair was sleek and very black and he looked worried.

"What have you done? What have you done?" He was treating my arm as if he thought it were a pump handle.

I shook him loose. "Take it easy."

He was almost crying. "Bobo won't let me operate. 'He'll wreck the place, he'll—"

I judged that the man on the floor was Bobo.

"At the moment he won't wreck anything," I said. "We're lucky if he isn't dead."

"You can't kill him," the lavender-shirted one moaned. "Oh, that this should happen to me." He swung about and went tearing away into the cutting room.

I looked at Jimmy. "What is this, a den of lunatics? Is the guy dead?"

"He breathing."

"Then let's call an ambulance and get out of here. We don't want to be mixed up in a brawl in police court." I looked toward the girl, whom I'd forgotten, and found that she was staring down at the battered man on the floor.

"Look, sister, who is he?"

She raised her eyes. They were big and very dark and the most beautiful I'd ever seen. "He's . . . Bobo."

I lost my temper. After all, I'd taken something of a beating myself. Every muscle in my body ached. "Bobo! Bobo? What is this?"

"He runs the association."

I said, "So what? You act as if you were scared to death of him. My girls belong to a union and they—"

"This is different." She was whispering as if she were afraid that someone would hear her. "We . . . we can't quit. Something would happen, acid would be thrown. It happened to one girl. . . ."

I STARED at her, not believing my ears, but I had to believe the fear that was mirrored in her face. It was a real, a living thing that gave her a tragic quality hard to describe.

"Look," I said, and my voice was softer, for I found that I suddenly had the impulse to put an arm around her shoulder, to comfort her, to tell her not to be afraid. "This is utterly silly. If everything that you say is true, all we have to do is to call the police, to tell them what you know, and Mr. Bobo will go away for a long, long time where he won't throw

any acid or anything else.”

“No, no. I don’t dare. I can’t talk to the police.” She was crying openly now. “They’d get the other girls if I did.”

“Who would?”

“I don’t know. That’s the trouble. We’ve never seen them, never seen anyone but Bobo.”

I looked helplessly at Jimmy.

He said, “We can’t leave her here. That ape will kill her when he comes to.”

“If he ever does.”

“He will,” said Jimmy. “No bronze was ever cast that would crack that skull. I’ll take her home with me. I’ve got a sister up in the Bronx. In the morning, we’ll decide what to do. Will you give her a job?”

I nodded. “Why not? With some training, and—”

“See?” said Jimmy, putting his arm around Mary Ingersoll’s slender shoulders. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, baby. Six months with the Gardner Agency and you’ll be a big shot. You’ll laugh at muggs like that Bobo.”

She shuddered. “I can’t go. I—”

“You’re going,” he said, peeling off his own topcoat and throwing it around her shoulders. “You’re okay now, baby, nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.” He turned to me. “Coming?”

“Go ahead,” I said. “I’m going to find a phone and turn over my little beauty to the cops. We’ll see what happens then.”

CHAPTER II

No Chary Chase

HENRY GRAYLORD came into my office almost as soon as I arrived, and put a copy of the morning paper on my desk. “I thought you might be interested in this.” He pointed to a story in the right-hand column, headed: PHOTOGRAPHER FOUND MURDERED.

It still didn’t ring any bell until I read on down and found Jimmy Wabash’s name. Then I looked up with a start.

“When? How?”

Graylord said, “It’s all there.” He was a big man, soft and good-looking in an over-stuffed sort of way, and his face glistened a little now in the shaft of morning sun. “His sister heard an awful racket about one-thirty in Jimmy’s dark-room. She tried to get in, but the door was locked, and she called the police. When they arrived they broke down the door and found Wabash’s body. He’d been beaten to death.”

I started, and a picture of the squat Bobo leaped into my mind. “A girl,” I said. “Does it say anything about a girl?”

Graylord looked at me as if I had suddenly gone crazy. “Why, yes, it seems that Jimmy brought a girl home with him last night, according to his sister. They put her in the spare room, but when the police looked, she was gone.”

I swore under my breath and reached for the telephone, thought better of it and grabbed my hat.

Graylord said sharply: “You have appointments with—”

“Take care of them,” I flung back over my shoulder, for I was already halfway to the door. “You’ll have to run things. I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

CAPTAIN LUNDINE and Inspector Roff of the homicide squad said, “But of course you can see him. He’s over at the morgue.” They took me over to the morgue and showed me Jimmy Wabash, or what was left of him.

Lundine said, “Poor devil! Whoever did it must have hated him. Only a man crazed by hate would have beaten him up that way.”

“I know who did it,” I said, turning away. The sight of Jimmy’s broken body sickened me.

They both stared at me. Lundine was a little man, not much bigger than Jimmy had been, and they looked something alike. He screwed up his gray-green eyes and asked: "Who?"

"I don't know what his name is," I told them, "but I called the police about him last night. He and I had a fight in one of the garment lofts on Twenty-Second Street, and he was knocked out. The ambulance came and took him away, but he must have been released. His name is Bobo something or other."

The two men looked at each other, then at me; and Lundine shook his head. "Sorry Mr. Gardner, but that's out. The man you're talking about is Bobo Grimes. He's a small-time chiseler and former fighter. As soon as we heard about this missing model, we started checking up on him. Wabash had told his sister about the fight, but we're out of luck. Bobo couldn't have killed Wabash because Bobo was still at the hospital, being patched up, at the time of the murder."

I stared at them, not believing my ears. Then I turned and looked at the broken man on the wheeled table. It was so obviously Bobo's work. This was the way he would like to kill a man, breaking him to pieces until the flicker of life went out of his victim. I turned back. "Look, wouldn't it be possible that this Bobo could have slipped away from the hospital, killed Wabash and slipped back in, thus establishing an alibi? I've read of such things, and—"

"You'll find," the police captain told me, "that they happen much more often in movies than they do in real life. However, we checked very closely on this one, and we're certain that Bobo didn't leave the hospital; nor was he in such good shape to kill anyone. You gave him a very thorough beating, Mr. Gardner."

"Not as much as I'd have liked," I said, grimly. "Look, this model association, or whatever it is, that Bobo is connected with. I'm certain that they killed Wabash and

kidnapped the girl. Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

Inspector Roff spread his hands. "What can we do? We've been interviewing girls and manufacturers all morning and we can't get a straight answer out of any of them. They're lying, we know it, but they tell us with a straight face that they never heard of such a thing. Why, Clinton Ivor, the man who owns the loft where you had your fight yesterday, swore that he'd never seen Bobo before and that he had no idea who he was. Don't think we're giving up, but—"

"I'm not giving up," I said, sticking my jaw out and realizing even as I did so that this was silly. Here were two police officers. I knew they were honest and yet they admitted that this had them stumped.

But inside of me was a burning anger. I'd never felt quite like that before and I couldn't explain it even to myself. I'd liked Jimmy, but I knew a great many people whom I liked as well. Why then should I butt my head against something which was none of my affair? Could it be the girl? Was I worried about Mary Ingersoll? That didn't make sense. I'd seen her only once. She was beautiful, yes, but in my business, beautiful women are a dime a dozen. I'd go back to my office and forget the whole thing. Sooner or later the cops would find Jimmy Wabash's murderer. They always did.

I said goodbye to the two officers and headed uptown, but I didn't go to my office. I went on up to the Bronx.

JIMMY WABASH'S sister was a thin-faced, tired-looking woman in her late thirties. Her hair had the same gritty, sandy look that Jimmy's had had, and her nose was almost as pointed. It gave me a turn to look at her.

"I'm Austin Gardner," I said, as she showed me into the small, dark living-room. "I came out to see if there was anything I could do to help!"

That wasn't quite true. I'd come out to ask questions, but after one look at her, I couldn't bear to bring up the subject of the murder.

She brought it up herself. "Jimmy would have been proud to have you here," she said. "He thought you were a great man, one of the greatest."

This was embarrassing and I fumbled for words, not knowing quite what to say. She saved me the trouble. Words came out of her with a rush. I guess it was a relief to have someone to talk to.

"The girl killed him," she said. "Oh, I don't mean that she beat him herself, but it was on account of the girl. Ever since he saw her first he's been kind of screwy. I don't know whether he was in love with her. I don't think Jimmy was ever really in love the way most boys are; at least he never had any girl friends. He was always nuts about pictures, taking them, cutting them out of magazines, anything."

I said, weakly, "I know he was. A great guy."

"In his way." She nodded. "Kind of screwy, but good-hearted. I—" She broke off and I thought for a minute she was going to cry. "It was pretty terrible, seeing him, after . . . after it was over."

"I know, I saw him."

She seemed to derive a little comfort from that. "I don't know what it's all about," she went on. "Jimmy didn't tell me much. He brought this girl home. She wouldn't eat. She went right to her room."

"And that's the last you saw of her?"

The woman nodded. "After dinner Jimmy went into the darkroom." She indicated the pullman-like hall at one side. "It's on the end. I didn't think much about it. He spends most of his evenings in there. Around twelve I heard the apartment buzzer. I was in bed. I heard Jimmy go to the door, then the mutter of voices."

"How many?"

She shook her head tiredly. "I don't know.

I've been trying to remember. I even thought I heard your name mentioned."

I stared at her, startled. "My name?"

"Probably I didn't," she said. "We'd been talking about you at dinner, what you were going to do for the girl. Jimmy even said that he might work for you, part time anyhow, taking pictures of her."

"Poor devil." It came out without my meaning to speak, but the woman took no notice.

"Anyhow, I must have dozed off, for the next I knew I heard the sounds of this fight. First I thought it was in the alley out back, then I realized that it was in the dark-room. I got up, and ran to the door, calling to Jimmy, but it was locked and I couldn't get in. Finally I gave up and called the police."

"And the girl, you didn't see her?"

The woman shook her head. "Not a sign. Her bed had been slept in but it was empty when the police got here."

"And there's another way out of the dark-room? I mean the murderer didn't come back through the hall?"

She shook her head. "There's a fire-escape down to the alley. He'd have to drop only one story."

I thanked her and left the apartment. I meant to go back to the office. There were a million things that demanded my attention, but I found myself giving the cab driver the address of the Twenty-second Street loft.

CHAPTER III

Lady On the Lam

CLINTON IVOR was certainly not glad to see me. His face, when he realized who it was, turned the color of dirty cheese-cake and he took half a step backward as if to retreat to the cutting room.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I just want to talk to you."

"Haven't you caused enough trouble?" He

still wore the lavender shirt, or, judging from its freshly laundered appearance, another of the same shade. His hands fluttered up, long and graceful as a woman's. I eyed them, wondering if they were strong enough to have beaten a man to death. The back of the right one was discolored and there was a little piece of tape over a small cut.

"I haven't caused any trouble," I told him.

"No? What do you call trouble?" he demanded angrily, coming forward. "A fight when my best buyers are in the room, knocking down a man, beating him, and then sending the police this morning to question me as if I were a criminal!"

"Aren't you?"

He looked startled for an instant, then angry red drove the yellow whiteness from under his skin. "Get out. Get out before I have you thrown from the building."

"Who's going to do it?" I asked. "Have you got Bobo hiding in one of the back rooms?"

He stared at me, the red fading from his cheeks, leaving the lemon yellow as before. "Bobo? Who is this Bobo? I know no one by such an absurd name."

"You knew him last evening," I said, dangerously. "When he was decorating your floor and bleeding all over the pretty rug."

"Oh, you mean that one. Hah!" Ivor pretended to get excited. "That one I do not know. He comes with the girl. Every time he comes with the girl. Her brother or something, I think."

I knew he was lying. I knew that he didn't think anything of the kind, but at the moment I couldn't prove it and I couldn't see anything to be gained by saying so.

"Okay," I said. "What was the girl's address?"

"Address . . . address? I don't know. I—"

"Look," I said, losing patience. "You're really building yourself up a lot of trouble, my friend." I turned on my heel and walked out of the place, conscious that his black eyes were

boring into my back.

TWICE on the way back uptown I had the sensation of being followed, and I paused outside of Radio City to look back at the street crowd, but could see no one who seemed suspicious.

However the impression persisted all the way up in the crowded elevator, and it was not until I gained the shelter of my own office that I lost it.

Henry Graylord greeted me angrily. "Where in the devil have you been? Fifty things have come up that needed your attention." He proceeded to dump them onto my desk, and I worked like mad for a full hour. Finally my secretary came in hesitantly.

"I hate to bother you, but there's a girl here. She's been waiting for over three hours and she won't see anyone but you."

I waved my hand. "Not today. Make an appointment or—"

The secretary coughed. She'd been with me a dozen years and I'd never known her to take liberties before. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gardner, but . . . well. I think you should see this girl. There's something the matter. I don't know what it is, but she's tremendously worried. She says that you told her to call and that Jimmy—"

I had looked up in impatience. Suddenly I said. "What? What name?"

"Mary," said the secretary....She just asked me to tell you that Mary Ingersoll was here."

I jumped up from the desk so rapidly that I turned the swivel chair over. "Mary? Jimmy? Why didn't you say so before? Where is she? Bring her in here at once."

The secretary's mouth had fallen open. She was past fifty, steady and unexcitable, and I guess she'd never seen me act in this manner before. "Yes, sir," she gasped when she had recovered her breath. She turned and disappeared into her own office to reappear a minute later with Mary.

I came forward to meet her. Mary

Ingersoll was without coat or hat and was still wearing the suit she had been modeling on the preceding afternoon.

The secretary stood and stared at us until I raised my head and looked at her, then slowly she disappeared into her own office, closing the door softly behind her.

"Mary," I said. "Where have you been? I've been hunting all over New York for you. So have the police."

She shivered a little at the mention of the law officers, and I led her to a chair.

"You're all right," I said, "There's nothing to worry about. You're perfectly safe."

She started to cry then, not loudly, but silently, the big tears squeezing their way from under her lids and drawing little wet paths along the curves of her cheeks.

I put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against me, feeling her tremble. "Take it easy. You're all right. Just tell me what happened."

SHE told me in short, broken sentences. She had been awakened by the noise from the darkroom and had stolen out into the hall. Then she had heard Jimmy Wabash's sister phoning the police and had fled the apartment. She had seen no one.

"But where did you go—home? The police checked your address and—"

She shook her head. "I didn't dare," she said. "I rode the subway all night and this morning, until I thought you'd be at your office. I couldn't find your home phone in the book."

"It's unlisted," I told her. "Have you any idea who killed Jimmy? You know he's dead?"

She nodded. "I saw a paper in the subway. They killed him of course."

"They?" I stared at her.

"The men behind Bobo," she said. "They threw acid in Jane's face. They whipped Katie and they'll kill me—"

"Oh no they won't," I told her confidently.

"There's nothing to worry about, not one single little thing. With your testimony the police can put Bobo away and—"

She shrank before my eyes. "No, I can't talk to the police."

My voice roughened. "Look, Jimmy Wabash was a funny little guy, but he believed in you and he was killed trying to help you."

"I know." It was barely a whisper.

"You owe him something," I went on, "even if you don't owe anything to yourself."

"I owe the other girls something, too."

I stared at her. "What do you mean by that?"

She said, slowly: "If anyone of us were to talk, they'd take it out on the other girls."

"That's the second time you've mentioned this mysterious *they*. Who are they? What do you know about them?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

I lost what little patience I had left. "Do you mean that you took Bobo's word for it that there was someone else? He was probably bluffing you, probably working by himself."

"No he wasn't." Her voice gained strength. "I saw another man once. He spoke to us. He was masked."

The phone on my desk rang sharply and I reached over to pick it up. A man's voice, curiously muffled, said, "For your own good, Gardner, keep out of things that are not your concern."

There was a click at the other end of the line, and I hung up slowly. The girl, watching my face, seemed to sense that something was the matter. "Mr. Gardner . . . what is it?"

"Nothing," I told her, slowly, reaching across and pressing the buzzer which would summon Henry Graylord. "Just someone with the wrong number."

HENRY GRAYLORD came in. His eyes, when he saw the girl, widened a little, then narrowed critically. He was a good man and he knew as much about the business as I did. I sensed his excitement although he

maintained his poker-face, and I knew that I hadn't been wrong about Mary. It takes something to make a good model, more than looks and shape and the ability to walk right.

In actresses you'd call it personality, the ability to sell yourself, to sell the thing you're wearing or advertising. This girl had it. Even through her fear it reached out and gripped you.

"This is the girl Jimmy Wabash was talking about." I explained.

He looked at her with renewed interest. "The one the police are hunting?"

I nodded. "This is my manager, Henry Graylord. He runs the place when I'm not around. In fact he almost runs it when I am."

Graylord smiled. "He's too modest, Miss Ingersoll. Austin is the spark plug. Without him we merely limp along."

I said: "Let's skip the compliments. Miss Ingersoll doesn't want to go to the police. She's afraid that if she talks, the other girls will get into trouble. I don't know what to do with her."

Henry was silent, considering. "Why not send her out of town? It's certain that she won't be safe as long as she stays here. Whoever killed Jimmy isn't going to want her around."

I said, "That's okay, but I don't want to send her out of town. I want to keep her here. There's a place for her in this agency and—"

Graylord nodded. "I know what you mean." His eyes were still studying the girl thoughtfully. "But look at it this way, Austin. It wouldn't be fair to our other girls. Supposing these men, whoever they are, find out that she's working here. Don't you think they're going to start something with our other models?"

I stared at him. "They wouldn't dare."

He shrugged. "Still playing that Gardner Agency tune? Look, Austin. I've been with you two years. I think I've always worked for the best interests of the agency and I've never before hesitated to tell you the truth. I'm not

going to start now."

"I don't want you to. There's nothing in the world I hate as much as a yes-man."

He nodded. "Okay, in your own line, you're a big shot. You know important people, and they're your friends. But doesn't it occur to you that the men behind this little game aren't impressed by who you are or who you know? A gun is a great leveler, and a beating will kill any man."

"Well . . ."

"So you don't want the girls working out of this agency to be subjected to rough treatment just because you're trying to prove to a bunch of crooks that Austin Gardner isn't afraid of them."

He was right. I hadn't thought of it from that angle. I turned toward the girl. "All right, honey. You go out of town. The question is where to send you."

She just looked at me as if not being able to find words, and I went on. "Where do you come from?"

"Here. I was born in Long Island City."

"Send her to Hollywood," Henry suggested. "I've got a friend out there who has a small agency. He might take her on. There isn't much work on the coast but—"

"Okay," I said. "Give me this guy's name and address. Better call him on the phone, then see if you can get reservations for Chicago. There may be a cancellation."

"What are you going to do?"

"Take her down and get her things," I said. "I'm not going to leave her alone for a moment before she gets out of town. Come on, honey. What's your address?"

CHAPTER IV

Tough-Stuff Ivor

THE apartment was an old-fashioned walkup whose halls held smells of cooking, long forgotten. Mary Ingersoll said, "I don't know how to thank you for what

you're doing, but I can't go."

"Can't go?" I stared at her. We were standing in the small entry. To our right were the rows of brass-bound mail boxes with the apartment holders' names on them.

"Can't go," she repeated. "I can't leave Jane."

"Jane? Who's Jane?"

"The girl I live with. You know, I mentioned her. She used to be a model. She's the one that they threw acid at."

"Take her along," I said.

"But the money. It would cost—"

"Forget the cost," I said. "Look at it this way. If I hadn't gone down to Ivor's and started that fight with Bobo maybe none of this would have happened, maybe Jimmy wouldn't be dead, maybe—"

She said, quickly, "It isn't right for you to blame yourself. The thing has been going on for months. I was caught in it, the rest of the girls were caught. Jimmy Wabash got mixed up because he was trying to help me."

"Still," I said, "I'm going to get you out of town, and I'm going to break this thing up if I can. Come on." I turned and led the way up the stairs.

The girl who opened the door was surprisingly tall. I could see that she was perfectly proportioned and for a big girl would make an excellent model—but her face! . . . I found that I had to steel myself when I looked at it.

She had been beautiful once. Not as beautiful as Mary Ingersoll, but far above the average as looks went. She wasn't now. The acid had not only burned the skin, it had caused the muscles to contract, making her mouth draw up at one corner and making one eye squint.

I steadied myself and managed a smile as Mary introduced us. But the big girl showed no interest in me. She caught Mary by the shoulders, holding her away so that she could look her over carefully, then she pulled the smaller girl against her, clasping her tight, and

said in a husky voice:

"Baby, you all right? I was worried. You all right?"

"I'm all right," Mary told her. "This is Mr. Gardner. He helped me."

"Thanks," said the big girl, not even looking at me. "If there's anything. . ."

"You can get your clothes packed," I told her. "You and Mary are getting out of here,"

She looked at me, startled, then her twisted mouth hardened. "Oh no you don't. No one's running us out of this town. They tried it once with acid, but I'm too tough. I'll stay and I'll get even with them. . . ." Her voice trembled a little but it wasn't from fear. I don't think that this girl knew what fear was. She'd gone through enough to make the average woman quit, but there was no quitting in her.

"You don't understand," Mary told her hastily. "Mr. Gardner isn't running us out of town. He's sending us because he doesn't think it's safe for us to stay. He was a friend of Jimmy Wabash. You remember Wabash, the little man with the funny nose." She turned quickly to me. "This is Jane Walters," she said. "The girl I was telling you about. She wants to stay in New York. She wants to get even with the men who . . . who—"

Jane said without trace of emotion, "Who fixes my face this way. And I'll get even. I'll find out sometime who is behind Bobo and—"

She was interrupted by the sound of the buzzer, and both girls looked - at each other, startled. Mary said in a hushed tone, "They know I'm home. They . . ."

JANE turned without a word, walked across the room to the couch and drew a small pearl-handled gun from its hiding place among the tumbled pillows.

"I hope it is." Her mouth was a grim, crooked line. "I just hope it is. This is the break I've been waiting for, the—"

Both had forgotten me. I said, "Put that gun away. Let me handle this."

"No." Her voice was flat, final. "If it's

them, I'll handle it myself." She tucked the gun into the loose sleeve of the dressing-gown she wore. "Go into the bedroom and stay there unless you want to get shot too. This is my show and I aim to handle it alone.

I went into the bedroom. I knew how she felt, but I didn't mean to stay out of it, not if I were needed.

I hadn't long to wait, for I heard the outer door open and heard a voice I recognized. It was Clinton Ivor, the manufacturer for whom the girl had modeled.

He came in and his voice was angry. "What do you mean, Mary, not showing up this morning? What do you mean, getting mixed up in a murder and having the police come to question me?"

"Leave her alone," said Jane.

"And you keep out of it." I couldn't see him but I judged that the little lavender-shirted man had swung to face Jane. "You never did know enough to mind your own business. It got you in trouble once. Maybe you haven't had enough trouble."

Jane's laugh was not a nice thing to hear. "There's nothing that you or Bobo or anyone else can do to hurt me now. I've been hurt as much as it's in the power of any man to hurt me. Now, let her alone."

"I should fire you, Mary." Apparently Ivor had chosen to ignore Jane. "But I'm soft-hearted. I'll take you back if you get these silly notions out of your head."

"She isn't working for you," Jane told him.

"Oh, but she is. I'll see that she doesn't model for anyone else. I'll see Bobo. He'll take care of her. He's sore at her anyhow."

"She isn't working in New York," said Jane. "Now, get out of here before I throw you out."

"Why you—!" I heard the sound of a slap, then a scuffle, and I ripped open the door. Apparently Jane had tried to pull her gun and Ivor had knocked it from her hand. They were struggling close to the door and although the

girl was strong, the man was handling her with surprising ease. It flashed through my mind that I'd have to revise my ideas in regard to Ivor. He looked soft, but apparently he wasn't.

Mary was down on hands and knees, trying to get the gun which had slid under a chair. I jumped across the room, caught Jane's arm and, pulling her out of the way, swung for Ivor's jaw.

But he had seen me, wrenched free with a startled cry, turned and dived through the partly open door. I went after him and saw him go down the stairs in wild leaps which I could not equal without falling.

By the time I reached the building entrance he was gone.

Slowly I re climbed the stairs to find the girls waiting in the hall. Jane had regained her gun and was standing, ready.

"Did you catch the perfumed rat?"

I shook my head and she said under her breath: "Why didn't I shoot him!"

I said, "You think he's behind all this?"

The girls looked at each other, startled. Jane started to shake her head, then stopped.

"Why, I—it never occurred to me before. I always thought about him taking orders from Bobo, but, well, they were always pretty friendly. Some of the other manufacturers tried to put up a fight, but Ivor never did. I always thought it was because he lacked the guts, but now that you mention it . . ."

I glanced at my watch and was surprised to find that it was after five. "Listen, you girls get your stuff together. Stay in the apartment and don't open the door for anyone but me. If someone tries to break in, don't hesitate to use that gun of Jane's."

"Don't worry," the big girl told me.

Mary didn't say anything. She just stretched a hand to my arm, drew herself up on tiptoe and kissed me on the cheek. "You're about the nicest person I've ever met."

CHAPTER V

No Break for Bobo

IT WAS getting dark as I left the building and looked for a cab. There was none, and I started to walk across town toward the subway. I didn't see Bobo until he stepped out of the doorway and blocked my passage. There was a strip of tape along one cheek and his features had a battered, bluish look.

"Wait a minute, Mac."

I was startled, and I think afraid. I've never known much about fear, but I felt it tugging at me now. I looked up and down the street, quickly, in search of help. There were people on the street, but none close to us, and none paying any attention.

I faced Bobo then, knowing I was in for it. There was no question that the man could lick me. He was more brute than he was human, a throwback to the days when man was little better than an animal. I thought of Jimmy Wabash's shattered body and shuddered. Still, he wasn't going to get me without a fight.

But I got the surprise of my life. Maybe Bobo was stiff and sore from the beating he had taken on the preceding afternoon. Maybe he figured that now wasn't the place or time, for he said:

"Look, Mac. This is just a little warning, see. You're planning to send those dames out of town . . . oh, never mind how I know. Well, that's okay. They're troublemakers and I'd just as soon they weren't around, but get smart and take a powder yourself. This town ain't big enough." He swung on his heel and cut across the street, leaving me standing there, staring after him with my mouth open.

A sudden, unreasoning rage filled me. That the man should have the nerve, the utter gall to order me out of town! I went after him, calling as I came.

He paused, swinging around, his fists on his wide hips, his arms looking as heavy and thick as young trees.

"Listen, you ape," I said. "This is my town and if you think I'm going to run because a

cheap chiseler like you says the word, you'd better turn yourself in to the psychopathic ward at Bellevue."

He moved his big head slowly from side to side. "Don't think I didn't warn you." His small eyes glittered redly in the half light. "You're just like that mugg Jimmy Wabash. I tried to tell him to stay away from the dame, but he was always around, taking pictures, always taking pictures. And you ain't such a big shot, Gardner. Your agency will go on after you die, just like anything else." He swung on his heel again and walked away up the street, leaving me staring after him.

This time I did not follow.

Instead I turned and walked rapidly toward the subway, headed for my office.

THE switchboard girl and Henry Graylord were the only occupants when I arrived.

Henry glanced at his watch. "Where have you been? I was just about to pull out."

"What about those train reservations?" I asked him.

"Nothing for tonight. The best I could do was tomorrow afternoon. The girls will just have to wait."

I shrugged and, turning, led the way into my private office. He followed. "Have any trouble?"

"No real trouble," I said. "That guy Ivor showed up at the girls' apartment muttering threats. I started to throw him out but he got away before I could get my fingers on him. Then, as I was leaving, I ran into Bobo."

Henry's voice quickened with concern. "What happened?"

I shrugged. "Nothing much. He warned me to get out of town."

"The devil he did!"

I nodded. "He said he'd warned Wabash too, but the guy wouldn't listen. 'Always going around taking pictures,' Bobo said, 'taking pictures of everything.' Does that suggest anything to you?"

Henry looked blank. "What in the devil

are you talking about now?"

I shrugged. "Maybe nothing. It's just an idea. Jimmy Wabash was always taking pictures of everything. I never saw him without a camera, even if it were only a little one."

"That's true."

"And I'll bet anything that he had several cameras mounted around his dark-room. I'll bet you that some way, somehow, he managed to snap a picture of the man who killed him."

Henry was staring at me. "Why—but that's absurd. It was a dark room, the light wouldn't be good enough to get a picture, even a time exposure; and certainly the murderer, whoever he was, wouldn't stand still long enough to have his picture taken."

"Ever hear of infra-red film?" I asked.

I saw by his expression that he had.

"You don't need light to take pictures with that," I went on. "Don't you see? Jimmy was a camera nut if I ever knew one. He used to delight in snapping me when I knew nothing about it and then showing me the candid shots. I'm going to call his sister—no, she said she was going over to stay with a cousin in Jamaica tonight. I'll have to catch her in the morning."

"Aren't you going to call the police?"

I shrugged. "Look, I tried to get the police to do something for me today and they acted as if their hands were tied behind their backs. I'm going to handle this myself. Maybe the idea is screwy. Maybe there isn't any camera or any film, but if there is, I'll find it in the morning."

He nodded, "I can see your point."

"And that's not all," I told him thoughtfully. "Bobo is getting scared."

"Scared? Are you crazy? From what you've said about that guy he isn't the kind that would get scared at anything."

I shrugged. "Maybe not, but he's gone out of his way to warn me to get out of town. If he wasn't scared of something, why should he

bother? I think I know what's the matter with him."

"What?"

I said, "Let's look at it this way: Bobo got a break when Jimmy Wabash was killed. Bobo was in the hospital at the time, and he can prove it. I think what's worrying him now is that he fears that something will happen to me, that the cops know that he and I had trouble and that they'll try to pin my death on him. Maybe he wouldn't be so lucky this time. Maybe he wouldn't have an alibi."

Graylord nodded slowly. "I see your point. He knows that something's going to happen to you and he doesn't want to be blamed, so he's trying to get you out of town before this happens. Right?"

"It frames up that way."

"And who do you think is behind this?"

I shrugged. "Maybe Ivor. He seems to turn up at every opportunity."

"We'd better get you a bodyguard," Henry suggested. "We can't have anything happen to you."

"Then you don't think I should leave town for a while?"

He shrugged. "Suit yourself about that. If it were me, I'd go quick, but I'm not as knuckle-headed as you are. If I can help . . ."

"There's nothing you can do," I told him. "You might as well keep out of it. If anything should happen to me, you'll have to run the agency, but I've a notion that I can put the bite on Bobo and make him talk. The ape-man is beginning to get nerves. Funny as it sounds, I don't think he likes murder."

CHAPTER VI

Killer's Motive

COMING out of my own apartment an hour later, I stopped to light a cigarette. As I ducked my head above the match flame something struck the corner just above my

head, and a tiny chip of stone fell onto the sidewalk at my feet.

My reaction was purely instinctive as I jumped back into the doorway. I stood there in the shadow, staring out at the street.

It was quiet. A block over the Madison Avenue traffic made a steady hum, but there were only a few pedestrians and one cab within the block.

I looked at them searchingly, but none paid any attention to me. Then I reached around gingerly and felt the facing stone from which the chip had come.

There was a scar and I'd have taken my oath that it had come from a bullet, a bullet from a silenced gun. I started to shake. It wasn't from fear, but from reaction. This had gone far enough. It had to stop, or I wouldn't be around long.

I went back into the apartment, slipped through the side door and went hurriedly toward the corner of the avenue where I caught a cab, giving the driver the address of the girls' apartment.

It was Jane who let me in. She was dressed for the street with a little cocky hat perched on one side of her head and a veil shrouding her marred features. Not until that moment did I remember that I'd told them to be ready to leave.

"No reservations," I said. "I'm sorry, I should have let you know. Has anything happened since I was here?"

"Ivor came, and then Bobo."

I stared at her. "Did they get in?"

She shook her head. "I talked to them through the speaking tube. Ivor wanted to know if you'd gone to the cops. Bobo was slinging threats as usual. Funny thing, I got the idea he was scared."

I stared at her. This girl was smart. She didn't miss many bets and she had nerve. If she hadn't, she wouldn't have bucked in the first place and wouldn't have had the acid thrown in her face.

Trim, too, a good model, and with the veil no one could distinguish the acid burns. I found myself liking her more, respecting her more than anyone I'd met in a long time.

"Look," I said. "I got the same idea about Bobo that you did. I've got the idea that the heat is on him and that he doesn't like it. If I play it right, I may be able to make him talk. Do you happen to know where he lives?"

She didn't waste time asking questions. She said, "I don't know, but I know where I could find out. One of the girls followed him one night." She turned and, walking to the phone; dialed a number. She talked for a couple of minutes, then hung up, turned and gave me the address.

I nodded. "Thanks. Keep your door locked and I'll phone you as soon as I get through."

"Oh no you won't," she told me. "I'm going along. This I want to see."

"Now wait. Bobo's an ugly customer."

"You're telling me." She touched the veil. "Don't you think I've got a little right to see the rat squirm? There isn't much of anything he can do to me that hasn't already been done."

Her tone was bitter and I realized just how much those acid burns had meant to her, how it had wrecked her life.

"Come on, then."

Mary appeared from the bedroom. She also was dressed for the street and she said, "I'm going too." There was a little tremor in her voice but her tone was resolute.

I hesitated, but I figured they would be safer if there were two of them. "Come on," I said, and led the way down to the waiting cab.

IT WASN'T far to Bobo's apartment and it was the same type of building. I didn't press the button under his mail box, as I didn't want the man to have any warning of our coming. Instead I hunted up the janitor, told him that we were giving a surprise party for Bobo and that we wanted the pass key to his apartment.

The man eyed me, then the two girls. I guess he figured that if I'd been planning any funny stuff I wouldn't have brought a couple of women with me. He traded the key for a twenty-dollar bill and went on about his business.

We went up the stairs quietly and I eased the key into the lock. If Bobo was there I meant to walk in before he had any warning of our presence. If he wasn't, I meant to wait until he returned.

The door swung open and I stepped in. There was no light in the apartment and I said to Jane in a low voice, "I guess he's not home. Well, we told the janitor we wanted to surprise him and I think when he walks in, Mr. Bobo will be very, very surprised."

I went on ahead, switching up the living-room light—and then I stopped.

Bobo was home. He sat in a chair, facing the door; his round bullet head fallen forward so that I could see only a part of the small hole that marred his forehead. He was quite dead.

Mary gave a gasping little cry. Jane made no sound at all. She just stood there, staring down at the apelike man. The veil screened her face so that I had no idea of her expression.

She said, in a controlled voice: "It seems that someone had the same idea we did, that Bobo was scared and ready to talk. Someone made very certain that he wouldn't talk."

I nodded. "Look, you girls get back home and stay there. I've got an errand."

She looked at me and I had the sensation that this girl could read my mind. "What kind of errand?"

I shrugged. "One that I'd have taken care of sooner if I wasn't a fool."

"I'm going," she said, flatly.

"It's something that has to be done alone," I said. "If too many go, it will spoil it."

"We can wait in the cab," she said, and that was that. There was no use arguing with her. I relocked the door, praying that the janitor wouldn't see us. I didn't want to be

held up with explanations to the police. But we saw nothing of him and gained the cab without incident.

I told the driver to park a block down the street from Jimmy Wabash's, and traveled the remaining distance on foot, leaving the girls in the cab. I gave them strict orders not to move unless I failed to show up within half an hour, then they were to call the police.

As I neared the building, my heart started thumping faster, for there was a light burning in Jimmy's apartment. I tried to control myself. Maybe the sister hadn't gone away, after all. Maybe . . . but still, I'd get a chance to look at the dark-room.

SOFTLY I advanced toward the apartment door, pulling the gun from my pocket and letting off the safety. The door was unlocked. I eased the knob over and thrust it open softly, listening for any sound of movement from within. There was none. I stepped in and eased the door shut, moving forward on soundless feet, the gun ever ready.

If the sister was home, she was in for a bad scare, but I couldn't help that. I moved to the living-room door and peered in. It was empty. So were the bedrooms and kitchen. That left only the dark-room at the end of the hall, and I drew a deep breath as I grasped the knob and thrust the door open. It was black inside. I stepped sideways so that I wouldn't be outlined in the rectangle of light—and I waited, holding my breath, listening until I could hear the blood pounding in my ears, but I could hear nothing else.

Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. "I know you're in here, show yourself."

Nothing happened, only the heavy silence bore in upon me. My nerves snapped. I didn't care what happened. I had to have some light, even if it brought the shot that killed me. I reached over and clicked up the switch.

Aside from myself the room was empty.

My knees seemed to turn to water and there was cold sweat across my forehead. I

wiped it away with the back of a hand that trembled. I hadn't realized the strain I was under until that moment and I laughed aloud, laughed at myself. A touch of hysteria in the sound brought me to my senses. This wouldn't do. The murderer had evidently been here and gone, leaving the lights on—or the sister had forgotten to turn them off before leaving.

I looked around the dark-room. There were some twenty cameras in the place, some set up, others not. The thing to do was to remove all the films that the various cameras held, take them and have them developed. I set about it, shoving the gun into my pocket.

I must have been there ten minutes when a voice from the doorway said softly:

"Having fun?"

I swung around to see. Henry Graylord in the doorway, smiling at me, a gun held loosely in his big hand. "Surprised?"

"No," I told him, slowly. "Not since I found Bobo. I wasn't much surprised even then, although up to that moment it had seemed impossible."

"That's the trouble with you," he said. "You've sold yourself on the idea that you're the great Austin Gardner, that nothing can touch you."

I shook my head. "Wrong, Henry. Where I failed was in being able to believe that a man I trusted could want something so badly that he would be willing to kill to get it."

He laughed at me. "And you set this little trap, up in your office, didn't you? You expected to walk in and catch me?"

I shrugged.

He said: "You had it wrong. I'm not a complete fool. I could see what you were thinking, so I set a trap for you. I hurried out here, made certain there was no infra-red film in any of the cameras, then I left the lights on and went outside. I wanted to see if you'd bring the cops with you. I rather thought you wouldn't, knowing how certain of yourself you are. I waited and saw you come in alone. I made sure no cops were hanging around, then

I came in."

"To finish me?"

He nodded. "To finish you."

"Tell me," I said, and I was really curious, "have you always intended to kill me to get me out of the way so you could take over the agency?"

He shook his head. "I was trying to build one of my own. I had Bobo organize those girls. I meant at the right time to step in, offer to protect them from Bobo and start an agency. I had my eye on that Mary Ingersoll. She's got something. Wabash was right. I was so mad at him when I found him gumming my game that I came out here to fix things. Then, after he was dead, I realized that if you were dead, too, I'd have the whole works."

MY MOUTH felt dry. "Are you going to beat me to death, the way you did Jimmy?"

He shook his head. "A shot will be quicker. I tried it outside your apartment. If I'd connected then, this wouldn't have been necessary."

"Okay," I said, stiffly. "Go ahead, let's get it over with." There was no use stalling. I'd told the girls to call the police if I wasn't back at the cab, but I knew they'd never arrive in time.

He said: "I got no pleasure from killing Wabash. I was mad. I'm not now, but I'm going to enjoy this. I've hated your guts, Austin, ever since I've worked for you. I've hated your high-and-mighty attitude as if you were playing God. Count ten, my friend, count as fast or as slowly as you like, because when you reach ten, I'm going to squeeze this trigger."

"No," said a calm voice behind him. "Not unless you want a bullet between your shoulder blades. Drop the gun."

It was Jane, her veil pulled back to show the scars across her face, her little gun in her hand.

Graylord turned. He didn't drop his gun, and she fired. The light-caliber bullet struck him in the chest, but it didn't knock him down.

He said, savagely, "It's you, huh? Acid wasn't enough. Take this then."

I jumped against him from the rear, jiggling his gun arm so that the bullet went over Jane's head. He dropped his gun but he wasn't through. He swung back, his arms locking about me and I realized that I under the layer of soft fat were muscles that would put Bobo to shame.

I felt the breath being squeezed out of my lungs. I felt sick and dizzy. I tried to break the grip and failed. It seemed to draw only that much tighter. I beat at him with my fists, but I knew that my blows were getting weaker. The bullet from Jane's little gun seemed to have no effect; at least it hadn't sapped his strength.

But Jane wasn't through. She'd caught up the heavier gun and now she clubbed him with it. He turned away from me, like a bull, cornered, and tried to snatch the gun from her.

I measured him and put everything I had into the blow to the chin. It rocked him back on his heels and I struck again and again, beating him down before me, remembering Jimmy Wabash's broken body, remembering Jane's scarred face. Even after he slumped against the wall and slid down into a sitting position, I kept on hammering. I think I'd have beaten the life from him if Jane hadn't caught my arm and hauled me back.

"Austin, stop it, stop it!"

Her words came faintly through the red haze that seemed to surround me. I shook my head and some of the roaring went out of my ears. She held my shoulders, shaking me. "All right?"

"All right," I told her, thickly.

She held on for a moment longer, then she turned and, walking to the phone, called the police.

THE cops had come and taken Graylord away. I walked slowly to the cab with a girl on either side of me. "That's over," I said. "Are you going to report to my office tomorrow, Mary?"

Mary nodded.

Jane said, musingly, "It's strange that a man like Graylord—when did you suspect him first?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't really know it was him until we found Bobo, but little things all along the line point to him now that I know. First, he knew about this models' association of Bobo's although I'd never heard of it. Then, he knew that it was Jimmy Wabash that had interested me in Mary. No one else, not even Ivor, or Bobo could know that. Also, he knew Jimmy had taken Mary home. I was a fool to miss seeing it sooner, but he'd worked for me, been with me. . . . Let's forget him and think about you."

"Me?" said Jane. She sounded surprised. "There's nothing to think about me. Maybe Mary, now she's going to be a great model, will hire me as housekeeper or something."

"You're a model, too."

"Look, mister. Her voice was rough. "Stop kidding me, will you. I'm sorry. I can take most anything, but not that—not kidding about . . ."

I turned and caught her by the shoulders, swinging her around to face me. "Listen, you were a good model. You can still wear clothes. A plastic surgeon, and I know a good one, can do wonders with that face. . . ."

"Austin, no, please; you're just trying to be kind. I've given up. Don't start me dreaming about the impossible."

"You fool," I said. "You haven't given up. If you hadn't trailed me from that cab, I'd be dead. *You* never give up."

"I don't want your gratitude."

"It isn't gratitude," I said. "Why'd you trail me from that cab when I told you not to?"

She spoke without thinking.

“Because I didn’t want you hurt. I was afraid. . . .”

“All right,” I said. “You didn’t want me hurt, and I certainly don’t want to say anything to hurt you. You’re the smartest, dearest, best . . .”

She tried to stop me but I made her listen, and I finally made her believe that I meant it.

The surgeon was wonderful and I’m glad for her, but for my part, it wouldn’t have mattered. I don’t care what she looks like, I know what she is underneath, in her heart, and in her mind.

Beautiful women are my business, but I don’t want to take them home with me. I like to go home to my wife, and Jane is the best wife a man ever had.