

CRIME

PROLOGUE BOOKS *presents*

He met a gutter
angel on the
roadway to hell

77
Rue
Paradís

Gil Brewer

77 RUE PARADIS

by

Gil Brewer

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Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

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Chapter One

THE SENSUOUS SCARLET GLOW from the floor lamp in the cheaply furnished room seeped under the partially closed lids of Baron's eyes, and he lay rigidly on the bed, thinking it all through one more time with a kind of fevered relentlessness. He tried to shut his mind against the harsh sounds of Elene's quick movements as she crossed and recrossed the room. He heard her hesitate before the dresser and her skirt lifted, a garter snapped against flesh, the skin was lowered, smoothed. She cleared her throat, recommenced the nervous stalking from the wall to the scantily curtained windows overlooking the Rue Paradis and that strange, hazy, lingering yellow twilight of late afternoon in Marseilles. Back and forth she stalked, to and fro, and Baron actually held his breath as he drove deep again into tight remembering. He recalled the chronologically ordered moments of the past two and a half years, perspiring and slowly thinking his way straight to this empty-handed present — to this cheap room with the cheap cocotte who somehow still possessed her soul. And to what was left of himself, Francis Baron. Even seeing it clearly, he would never admit defeat. There was too much hate for that — too much of everything.

You don't trace and seek a man for endless months, across continents, through endless cities, beyond mountains and plains, and then suddenly drop it. The insane part of it was that he really searched for a man's existence. Because he had never seen the man. A human being that existed. Somewhere....

Yes, he thought. He destroyed me. He destroyed my life. Somewhere I'll find him — someday.

Like bright black moments on a stark white screen, the tragic elements of the remembering sprang tauntingly awake, and he experienced the usual torture. Those frenzied weeks before the trials. The waiting and the cruelly patient days during which he lost his wife and his daughter, Bette. Losing Patricia, knowing she had left him, he could stand that — but Bette was something else again. The headlines, screaming, "Traitor!" The closed factories he had once been so proud of, and the closed bank accounts, too. All gone. Finished, like so much sand washed along a smooth curb into the sewer. Because all the time there had been inside him this howling cry, yelling at them that they were wrong. None heard. Not even the day on the witness stand, when the cry burst past his lips.

Ruined, destroyed, shattered by a lie.

It had taken more than one hand to accomplish everything, he knew. But he also knew that a single mind had conceived the major plan. With meagerly rationed money from

single secret bank account that his understanding lawyer had arranged for him, he began the search without a clue. He had only his oath, sworn passionately to himself, of vengeance. He did not like the word itself, because it somehow cheapened the quest. But cheap or not, that was what it was. So from the environs of the closed airplane factories, from the Midwest cities, he pursued a nebulous trail of talk. And very gradually he discovered the faint, elusive, but telltale aura of a *modus operandi*. A careful rationalization of this alone led him from New York to Chicago to San Francisco, then to Mexico City and Panama and Tokyo and down through Brazil and back to New Orleans and Kansas City, tracing the dim trail of that mind's existence. Questioning everywhere. To Capetown, to Italy, then back home. To Rome and Paris and home again, with the money dwindling fast now. But with the trail sometimes brightening, almost as if that mind paused to laugh, just around the corner, allowing Baron to hear the laughter. But faintly. Then, suddenly bright, it had led him to Paris — and not to Marseilles. The money was all gone now, everything he owned pawned or sold, and the trail was absolutely ended.

There was nothing left to go on. It was like carrying a pail brimming with precious water for miles, only to discover suddenly that the pail had no bottom. That there had never been any water.

There had never been a name. Only a method.

Baron twisted on the bed, keeping his eyes closed and fiercely closing his mind to remembering. He did not want to remember now, only to rush skimming along the surface of things. To remember the details of each interim clearly was to go on through torture that would leave him spent, exhausted.

“Chéri?”

Elene. He had forgotten her. She meant a great deal to him and he wondered momentarily what would eventually happen to them. And as he wondered, the memories slipped away, and he began to be himself again, slowly. He relaxed, with only the ghost haunting him. The newspapers had followed his journey quite well, but they termed it a debauch. Frank Baron's death fling. Well, let them think it. To hell with everything but *him*.

“Frank, *mon cher*,” she said.

“Yes?” He looked at her and she smiled at him with that quick motion of the head and shoulders that helped to reveal the self-conscious boldness he admired.

“I am hungry,” she said.

He said nothing, watching her. He knew she didn't like being watched. It made her move her head and shoulders still more and he liked seeing this. Scarlet touched her cheeks and his dark eyes sparkled and he wished they could go someplace far beyond far mountains. He knew he would never find a better companion, a more understanding lover. Since they had

met that night in the café, she refused to leave him. She liked his nose. *She* refused to speak of any other reason for remaining with him. "It is your nose," she told him. "It is a great defiant nose. A strong block of a nose. A nose with character. Many persons have noses that are entertaining," she told him. "But none is so interesting as your nose, *chéri*. Let it go that, then. I am in love with your nose."

For his own part, he had never imagined a prostitute could be anything like Elene. He had heard the stories, but he had never met one. Not like Elene. For many days now he had refused to admit to himself that she had any calling other than their own life together. He couldn't understand why she stayed with him. He knew he was boresome. They had not eaten regularly. They were behind in their rent. Looking at her now, he wished they could always be together. If peace might ever be found, then surely Elene had helped to show him a way.

"Well?" she said. She was wearing a soft dark blue skirt and it was tight, sheathing her fine hips. A loose white blouse fresh from her private iron lay smoothly beneath the golden brown flush of hair that coiled and clung to her shoulders. Her breasts moved vigorously against the blouse and Elene was very much alive. But hungry, he thought. Yes.

"You wish to be free of me?" he said.

Her scowl was dark, her gaze threatening. "No."

"What will we do?"

"I will work."

He grinned at her. About everything she was coldly frank. Her life had taught her that was the easier way. Now she pouted slightly.

"But I am hungry."

"You know I've got that money."

She nodded. "You went out to the Château d'If this morning."

They looked at each other for a time and he thought about the five hundred francs in his pocket. It was the most money he'd had at one time in weeks. He had helped a Frenchman take a boatload of tourists out to the Château d'If. He had rowed one boat and the Frenchman the other. They had insisted on going out in rowboats. There were all kinds of excursion boats that left the *Vieux Port* on regular runs to the island Dumas had made famous with his adventurous Count of Monte Cristo.

Elene came over to the bed and sat beside him. She touched his forehead, whispering silently. "Fever," she said.

He clawed into his pants pocket, brought out the single paper bill, quickly thrust it in the open flaring throat of her blouse, down between the warm breasts.

"I won't be long," she said. "We will eat, *chéri*."

"No appetite, Elene."

She smiled, leaned and kissed him, and he felt the vague stirrings of desire as her damp lips pressed his. For a moment she leaned hard against him, her body and her hands moving with that same frank, bold approach he had enjoyed during all their days together. Abruptly she moved away and smiled at him once again. She waved a warning finger.

“Later,” she said. “We must eat first.” She paused and he wished she would go away. He needed her much too much. “Frank,” she said, “I’m going to buy cognac, too. You need the brandy.” She paused, turned away, and slow agitation showed in the stiffening of her shoulders. “For three hours,” she said. “For three hours you have not spoken. I will return quickly, and we will talk.”

“We owe money here,” he said.

“Pooh!”

“All right. See that you don’t open the brandy before you get here. See you don’t forget to come home.”

She grinned wickedly and winked. “When I get back, you’ll tell me everything,” she said. “I love your nose, but I think a nose is not enough. You are holding it inside you, *chéri*. This is bad. If I thought it could be a woman, I would laugh. It would be to laugh at. But it is not a woman. It is something else and you must tell me.”

“You think I’d be all right then?”

“*Certainement!*”

She went away and he heard her heels clicking on the stairs. The street door slammed and again he heard her heels down there on Paradis, clicking on the pavement. Then nothing and he lay there wondering how he could ever explain it to her. She knew nothing and up to now she had not questioned him. He began to know he had to leave her. Yet the very thought of being away from her frightened him, because for this first time he understood what it would be like to be alone.

He sat up on the bed, swung his feet to the floor, and stared across the room through the scarlet lamp glow.

Elene had come from Normandy. As a very young girl she had sold herself to the Boche during World War II, when her home had been destroyed. She nursed her father through sickness this way. They lived in a ruined cellar and she fed him, buying food with money earned in the only manner possible. When he died, she walked and flirted her way to Paris on the Red Ball Highway, then eventually came to Marseilles. She was frantically alone when he found her that night in the café. She was sorry for nothing, refused to discuss it after the first explanation. She was one of many.

He sat on the bed and realized that he was straining to hear her returning footsteps. She didn’t have far to go, only to the corner and back, and he waited. Time slipped by and the

was no sound from the street. The yellow twilight progressed into further yellow twilight darkening faintly, but not yet dusk.

He blanked out his mind. He thought of the brandy. They would forget for this one night and tomorrow he would start fresh. He would begin again, because there had to be a renewal of the trail.

Only she did not come. He refused to think she might have slipped away with the money for a night of her own. Yet he could not keep the thought from his mind. She was human, and too human. And he was anything but fun for her.

He began to pace the room. He looked down on the street. It was solemnly empty and the room with its scarlet lamp glowing was suddenly a torture. He knew he had to stop thinking this way. He knew it was not alone Elene's going with the money that bothered him. It was everything. He needed that brandy and a moment later he was on the street himself.

He would tell her how foolish he had acted. She would meet him on the sidewalk.

But she did not. Elene wasn't in the café where they bought their wine. The bakery was closed. He moved down Paradis to the Cannebière and headed toward the harbor. If she had decided to make it a night of her own, that was the direction she would take. It was where he had found her and it was where she would be....

Then finally the twilight had become a yellow dusk. He hurried now up from the *Vieux Port* along the Cannebière, heading for the next tourist café. He had tried the ones along the harbor; she hadn't been there. Understanding and anxiety had given way to anger now. If he could get his hands on her and at least some small remaining part of his five hundred francs he would be happy. Also lucky.

He decided to warm her bottom. Yet how could he expect her to act differently?

Then somehow he knew she was gone. There were a few more spots he might try, but he felt it, a washing away of faith. Because he had so little faith in anything. He tried to tell himself that Elene was not the type to run off. Wasn't she? He laughed to himself, walking swiftly now.

The small gray German Opel sedan stopped directly before him as he stepped down from the curb into the street. The rear door came open and he saw the gun.

"Get in," a man said.

There was nothing else to do. It was that simple. He had no time to think and it was like a revelation of the ending he had been coming to. The door, in opening, brushed his sleeve. One step and he was in the car. A man in the front seat beside the driver put a hat on his sleekly combed head. "*Alors.*"

The Opel sped up the street. The door slammed, and Baron waited with a kind of empty patience.

Chapter Two

THEY HAD WORKED VERY FAST and with professional skill. A slow tension began to build inside Baron as he realized this. Somehow, the dreamlike way the car had appeared, and the way he found himself here on the rear seat, became a truth among a life of hazy lies.

The man in the front seat partially turned his head.

“Monsieur Baron? Frank Baron?”

“Yes.”

“Please, monsieur. Say nothing. No one will speak to you. *Voilà*. It would be a waste.”

Baron sat stiffly now on the edge of the small rear seat. He saw the man up there tap the driver on the shoulder, point to the left.

They came onto the Rue Vacon and turned right on Paradis, and by the time they passed the building where he had his room — or where Elene had hers — they were doing an easy sixty. On Paradis this was an interesting speed. They lurched on the old tracks, narrowly missed taking a wheel off a horse-driven cart, swung back into the right lane, bumping across the worn bricks.

He had seen none of them before. The driver was young, he wore a cap, and though it was dusk now and rapidly darkening, Baron made out a very red face. The man beside him was in command.

He glanced across at his neighbor in the rear seat. The heavy gun barrel clunked just once, sharply, across his kneecap.

“Look,” he said. “This is foolish. What the hell is this?”

The Opel’s engine was in good shape. He could feel that much. It sounded as if it were winding up, like a spring-wound toy car just before it exhausts itself. Only this engine was not tired.

They turned left again, passed the prefecture, came on along until they struck the broad tree-lined Prado. Now the driver really opened it up. It was plain they weren’t going to stop for a while.

He stopped himself from looking once more toward the man beside him. The kneecap pained badly. For another moment or two he remained on the edge of the seat. He no longer thought about being hungry. He had forgotten Elene and the five hundred francs. He had absolutely no idea of what it was all about. He sat there, frightened. Then gradually the fright went away. There was nothing to hinge it on. No reason to be afraid.

“You’ve made a mistake,” he said. “I have no money, not a franc. I’m completely broke.”

Nobody spoke.

They knew him. The hell with it. He had been trying to say the hell with it in Marseille for three months now. He could afford to go on saying it. He got a smile out of that and relaxed in the seat. There was nothing else to say. For three months he had been at standstill. It didn't matter what was happening, so long as it was something. His life no longer mattered. It traveled a course, that was all. He had to recover volition and one way was as good as another.

They drove for some time. He quit trying to place where they were going. It was much too dark now, and they traveled too fast. Besides, it was tiresome. Whatever it was they wanted, he would soon find out.

He kept himself somehow in this frame of mind until the car turned abruptly into a narrow alley and stopped. All he knew was that they were somewhere north of St. Charles' Station. They had wound in and out all over Marseilles.

"Get out."

The man from the front seat held the door open for him. His friend in the rear prodded him tightly with the gun barrel. He got out and looked at the man from the front seat.

"All right," the driver said. He had unlocked a door in the brick wall of the alley. The light went into darkness.

He began not to like it again. The fright began to work up into him again. He tried to push it away, to retain the feeling he had manufactured in the car. He could not do it. He remembered Elene and suddenly felt that those few moments before she left the room had been moments of peace. Because now his personal tortures were sinking into a background of memory only. He found he did not like this at all.

They went along a damp, musty-smelling stone hallway. Their heels chunked hollowly on the big stone flags. The young driver lit a flashlight and Baron had an impression of brick walls, well worn. They turned down a corridor to the right and went through a curlicued wrought-iron gate into the usual garden. As they crossed the garden on more flags under a starry, freckled sky, Baron saw that it was not the usual garden. Flowers bloomed in the night and buds swung from an enormous vine, like giant teardrops. There was the heavy, suffocating odor of night-blooming jasmine. A miniature fountain sprayed weakly from a plump, doll-like stone nymph's head into a circular cement dish in the center of the garden. They went past some twisted trees that looked like weary old ladies flapping lace shawls over their heads. They entered another door by way of another wrought-iron gate and went down another narrow corridor.

The flashlight in the driver's hand stopped, played on a door and latch. He knocked. He turned, grunted at the man with the hat.

“Again,” the man with the hat said. “*Encore.*”

The driver knocked again.

“Yes. Enter,” a woman said.

The flashlight went out. But not before Baron saw the driver smile brightly at the man with the hat. The gun poked. The door opened.

Inside it was warmer, but the smell was still present. It was an odor he had often met with in Marseilles; a presence of damp stone and gray, tired centuries.

“Yes, Lili?”

The woman was seated at a table across the room, with her back to them. She rose. She turned and glanced at the man in the hat without looking at anybody else. It was quite a feat, Baron decided. She wore a red artist’s smock and held a long slim paintbrush in one hand. She had been painting designs on pottery and china plates. Some of the plates, showing careful intricate work, were racked against the wall above the table where she worked. She was quite tall and slim. The smock somehow managed to reveal the slimness and at the same time give promise of a fine young body beneath it. Her legs were straight, her shoes black, high-heeled, dainty. Her hair was raven black, not too long, and there was something sly about her. Right away Baron liked the slyness.

“Yes,” she said. “One moment.”

She disappeared behind an immense Chinese screen with a scene of red and green dragons and a white pagoda by a turquoise lake painted on the black cloth.

A man’s voice reached them, but the words were unintelligible. Baron heard the door open behind him then, He glanced around and the driver and the man with the gun were just leaving.

“Quietly,” the man in the hat said. He had the gun now, holding it in a hand sheathed in a gray cloth glove.

They waited.

The room was very quiet, as though they were deep underground. Baron could smell linseed oil now, and turpentine and paint.

The girl spoke softly from the other room and again the man’s voice reached them.

Baron looked at the man in the hat. He did not like what he saw. Everything fitted too well. The man looked quite human, no different from anyone else. He was a man of medium build in a gray suit, wearing a gray topcoat of thin smooth material and a gray Homburg. His shoes were shiny, but not too shiny. His eyes looked quite honest, unsuspecting. He wore an inconspicuous blue tie and his shirt collar was clean. It was too perfect. There was nothing particular about the face. Two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. But the gloves. Baron was immediately suspicious of any man who wore one glove with the back turned down and

carried the other in his bare hand.

Too, there was the gun.

“Come,” the girl said.

She waited by the corner of the screen and looked at the floor as they walked past her. Baron got a whiff of good perfume, very faint, elusive. The jasmine out there in the garden should give up, he thought. It wouldn't stand a chance.

He kept trying to bolster his courage in this way. He frankly admitted to himself now that he was scared.

“He is here,” the man in the hat said.

A huge bull of a man stood looking at them from behind a desk as big as a barn door. His drummed fingers like miniature baseball bats on the desk top.

“Lili,” he said, “close and lock both doors. Thanks.”

He looked at Baron and sighed.

Chapter Three

BARON WAITED. On top of what was happening, he realized he had a bad toothache. He wondered that he had not felt it before. Recently the filling had come out of a large cavity and now the tooth really ached.

“Arnold,” the big man behind the desk said, “will you sit over there by the door. Thanks.”

Baron decided Arnold was a good name for the man in the gray hat. Damn the tooth! He watched as Arnold found a straight-backed chair, pulled it over beside the door, and sat. He still held the gun. He took his hat off now and laid it carefully on his lap. His hair was something out of an old-fashioned pomade advertisement, parted exactly in the middle.

“Frank Baron,” the big man said.

Baron said nothing. He stood about four paces from the enormous desk and watched the enormous man and cursed his tooth.

“I am Hugo Gorssmann.”

Baron nodded. He began to feel uncomfortable, standing there. This Gorssmann watched him with a pair of very small eyes that were like lively black bugs waiting to pounce on something good.

Gorssmann sighed again. It was a sigh that took place somewhere behind the buttoned cream-colored vest. Truly, Gorssmann was the largest man Baron had ever seen outside of a circus. He was not fat. It was meat. He wore dark-blue trousers, pleated and without a wrinkle, the cream-colored vest, a French-cuffed blue-and-white striped shirt, a dull maroon tie. The shirt sleeves were partially rolled back over hairless, freckled arms that looked like heavily inflated tire tubes. His mouth was lipless, like a clamp; a straight slash above the jaw which went down without a neck to the knot in the maroon tie. He was bald, his skin knobby and liver-blotched, with a fringe of disconcerting kinky red hair above each ear. Gorssmann was quite a picture.

“I shall speak to you in English, Monsieur Baron,” Gorssmann said. “You prefer this?” When he spoke it seemed that no part of his face moved. The lips separated somewhat and the words came out. That was all. With each word Gorssmann hissed faintly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Baron said.

“Correct,” Gorssmann said. “It doesn’t matter in the least. You speak French, German, Italian, and halfway decent Spanish. But you cannot write Spanish, can you? And when you write Italian, it is truly a mess.”

Baron blinked at him.

“Was there any trouble, Arnold?” Gorssmann said.

“No trouble.”

“You may put the gun away, Arnold.”

“You think — ”

Gorssmann nodded. He raised his eyebrows slightly at Baron, sighed again, and sank into an overlarge chair behind the desk. The chair vanished.

“Sit, of course, Baron. There.” Gorssmann moved one finger toward an armchair beside the desk.

Baron decided to hell with it again. He went over and sat down. He was conscious that he looked quite ratty. His suit, a brown sharkskin, was filthy. There was a three-cornered tear in the left trouser leg. He wore no tie, no coat. He had sold his hat for twenty-five francs in a café weeks ago. He was badly in need of a haircut. The tooth ached worse all the time. He touched the cavity with his tongue, and winced.

The only thing Baron knew so far was that Gorssmann spoke French with a fine Parisian accent.

“I don’t know exactly how to approach the subject,” Gorssmann said. He drummed on the desk with his baseball bats, glanced carefully at his fingertips, looked once again at Baron.

“It’s simple,” Baron said. “You’ve made a mistake. Somewhere you’ve got your wires crossed. It’s obvious to me. I haven’t got a cent.”

“Precisely.” Gorssmann turned his head a scant inch and said to Arnold, “He hasn’t got a cent.”

“Then what do you want?” For the first time a touch of real anger took hold of him.

Gorssmann clucked his tongue, shook his head. He could not turn his head well because of the amount of meat that stood in the way.

“I have a proposition,” Gorssmann said.

“Oh, great.”

“Your attitude is not good, Baron. Not good at all.”

“Have you got a cigarette?”

“That’s better. Believe me, I was sure of you from the start. You aren’t the kind — Here.” Gorssmann leaned like a derrick and handed Baron a mahogany box of English Oval. There was a lighter in the box beside the cigarettes. Baron put the box back on the desk, stood up, waited some more.

“You did not find the girl, did you, Baron?”

“What girl?” Something bad touched him lightly and went away.

“Elene Cordon. You were looking for her, were you not?”

Baron watched him. This was just fine.

Gorssmann moved his shoulders. Possibly he shrugged someplace, but it was only bare movement by the time it reached the outside. “We have the girl, Baron. You would never have found her.”

“But why?”

“Ah. Now we begin to get someplace. Your attitude changes, Baron.” He turned slightly toward the man in the chair. “Arnold. Did he talk coming here?”

“No.”

“No excitement? Fright? Fear?”

Arnold shook his head, ran a palm carefully across the hair at the back of his head, looked at his palm, sniffed it. “No,” he said. “Nothing.”

“Bold, then.”

“I would say yes,” Arnold said. “Bold, unworried. I would say he did not care.” He paused, then said, “Of course, this could be an act.”

Gorssmann nodded, looked again at Baron.

“You *will* care, Baron. Seriously.”

“If you’re trying to worry me,” Baron said, “you’re succeeding. Is that what you’re trying to do?”

“A peculiar man,” Gorssmann said. He stared at the top of the desk. He seemed to be debating about something. He frowned and the meat humped into a small mountain on his forehead.

Baron was just a little bit more scared now than before. His life had never, from the first, been channeled in this direction, and he kept realizing the fact more and more as time went by. He would be distinctly more at home in an American back yard, cultivating shrubbery and a fine lawn. For the first time he allowed doubt to enter his mind, or perhaps doubt simply won itself through the wall, and he wondered how he had survived all this time, running up and down the world, chasing someone he didn’t even know. He swallowed and recognized embarrassment. Then the embarrassment changed into something else and he recognized this, too. It was fear. Plain, simple, direct fear.

“What did you bring me here for?” Baron said.

“I’m getting to that. As I say, I don’t know just how to approach it. You’re much the man I expected, of course. But there are certain facets.” He stopped, stared again at the desk.

“What about Elene?”

“The girl. I had forgotten. Neither here nor there.” Gorssmann paused on a long inward breath, scratched his throat meatily. “You’ve come a long way, Baron. Both up and down.”

How would you like to go up again?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

Gorssmann leaned to the right, opened the bottom drawer on the desk, withdrew a polished brown leather brief case. He held his breath, found a key in a pocket of his vest, unlocked the brief case, put the key back. He lifted the brief case upside down over the desk and a sheaf of papers tumbled out. "You, Baron," he said, pointing to the sheaf of papers with his other hand.

Baron said nothing. He remembered the cigarette, took a last drag, dropped it on the floor, and ground it out with his foot. There was a good rug on the floor, deep nap, green. Gorssmann watched distastefully as he did the job on the cigarette.

"Suppose you tell me about yourself, Baron," Gorssmann said. He clasped his hands across his front, like stacked fence posts, and stared glumly at the papers on the desk.

"I'm not going to tell you anything."

"Why?"

"Because I'm damn well thoroughly mad and I see no reason to tell you anything. That's why."

"I see. Would seeing the girl help?"

Baron stood. He made a move toward the desk. Gorssmann sat back a little and Arnold stood up, holding the hat in both hands. Gorssmann chuckled, lifted the brief case from the desk, and slammed it against his legs.

Baron sat down again.

"Haven't you grown tired of this life?" Gorssmann said. "Aren't you rather ill from doing the things you have been doing all this while?"

"All what while?"

"Please, Baron. Let us be honest with each other. I mean since the beginning of the end. You are a broken man, Baron. You must know that. Does this please you? The memory of what you were, the knowledge of what you are? Living with a common street girl, allowing her to perhaps even work for — "

He came up fast, took one step, slammed his hand down on the desk in front of Gorssmann. "Just don't say that," he said. His voice was tight and he looked into the bug-like black eyes, seeing nothing. "Don't ever say that."

"Ah-ha," Gorssmann said. "Sit down, Baron. You mean there are still ideals?" He turned with a light flick of his head toward Arnold. "Perhaps we have swooped down too soon. Perhaps we should have waited a little longer. Could it be, Arnold, that we have mistaken the proper time to strike?"

Arnold did not answer. Baron looked at the man and watched him sitting there. He was

Carefully cleaning a steel comb with a matchstick, digging fine particles of pomade and li
and dirt from between the teeth and wiping them on the rung of his chair.

“No,” Gorssmann said. “If we had waited any longer, you might have come to something else. Perhaps even done away with yourself. Because you are hurt, deeply hurt, aren’t you Baron? Confess.” He leaned toward Baron, hissing quietly. “This horrible business in your country. It has affected you deeply, is not so?”

Baron looked down at him.

“Please, sit. Thanks.”

Baron sat down again. He crossed his legs and looked at Gorssmann, beginning, to feel tight all over and giddy in the head. He wanted to swallow, but when he tried, his throat was perfectly dry.

“Yes,” the big man said. “You are deeply affected.” He straightened in the chair, flapping the brief case back up on the desk. “But we know these things.”

“What do you propose to do?”

He watched as Gorssmann shrugged and wondered how he was able to sit here like that, waiting the way he did. The only word for it was ominous. Gorssmann was obviously sadistically inclined, and whatever was going to happen would be revealed slowly. Possibly painfully. He could sense this. He felt that every question was richly baited, like a secret trap.

Baron heard the words stumbling from his lips. They sounded all right. He wished he had more control, but he realized now that he had never prepared himself for any finality. For a long time he had pursued; his every waking hour — and a good share of his dreamtime — had been spent in a melodramatic portrayal of *The Chase*. He had not counted on anything like this.

“Say what you have to say,” he told Gorssmann. “Get it over with. I want to leave. If you have the girl, let her go. There’s no reason to hold her for anything. Whatever this is, there’s no reason. She doesn’t even know who I am.”

“She does now, Baron.”

“It changes nothing.”

“All right,” Gorssmann said. “We have bantered enough. We have wasted words and energy. I had to do this, though. Now we begin.”

Baron watched him and he did not feel at all well. He felt worse than ever before in his life. It seemed that he was suddenly being allowed certain revelations, a kind of insight, or hindsight, into his living and himself that had been withheld. He did not belong here. He was out of place. It was disconcerting and fear seemed to weep on the walls, tenderly anxious in the shadows. He belonged back home, in the States. At the same time, he knew he had

brave it out, whatever it was. Only don't be too brave, he thought. Because then it can turn into something else. And you need some of that bravery yet a while. Because remember, he thought, you have to go on until you find *him*.

And thinking this he stared at Gorssmann. He knew what he had felt all along, but he refused to admit. These were the type of people. My God, could it be that Gorssmann was the very man he was after? This was, he had to admit, almost the way he had imagined it would be. Though he had always pictured the final scene with himself in Gorssmann's place. Suppose ...

And it snickered in his brain, like that. The thrill of it went bright white along his shoulders and up the back of his neck.

Gorssmann continued to watch him, his face immobile.

The chance that this was the end of his trail was anything but pleasant. There was plenty wrong about it and he wanted to get up and run.

"You are ill?" Gorssmann said.

Baron shook his head. He would have to wait and see. Gorssmann continued to observe him, the black eyes snapping and crawling like bugs. They revolved in the sockets and Baron closed his mind again, frightened now of the remembering and of the present both. He knew now that he was quite ordinary, that he did not belong here, that he was, as Elene would say, "to laugh at."

"Three years ago," Gorssmann said quietly, "you were a big man in the United States, Baron. Before the war in Korea you were left a large automobile factory by your father. It was a new car in your country — new as compared with other familiar makes, such as Buick, Chrysler, Ford, Willys...." He waved his hand, like a Zeppelin straining at its mooring tower.

Baron waited. He tried to fight off the waves of sickness that rushed upon him. The uncertainty was being revealed.

"The make was taking hold, was it not? Yes, it was. It sold. It was a going thing, as they say. It was a good car. I know, I have owned one. Here nor there." He waved his arm again. "Your father died and you were left with the business. You were a smart young man." He shook his head and looked sorrowful.

"Meaning what?" Baron said. He knew he was speaking only to keep up his courage. These things Gorssmann was telling him could have been culled from newspapers.

"You don't feel so well?" Gorssmann said. He shrugged. "It is regretful. To continue then. You were a very smart young man. Clean-cut. Intelligent, almost. I say almost, because at that time it was true. I am not yet certain of the present, even though intelligence is inherent. Here nor there." He flagged his arm again. "Yes. You wanted to do right by your father's memory. It was hard, at first, because you were, by your country's standards, rather

average. It would take effort. You had never really thought of entering your father's business. It was overlarge for your thinking. But, anyway, you took over and you were soon making money. Lots of money. You were married. You had two homes. One in Florida, one back by the factories — your business. Now it was the business you loved and you had begun to learn it. Everything was good, smiling. And then the war. The Korean war."

Baron listened, his memories pulsing in time with the throbbing ache of his tooth.

"Was she pretty? Baron?"

"Who?"

"The wife. Remember?"

"Who are you?"

"Not now, Baron. Was she beautiful? Patricia?"

Baron was tense in the chair. He leaned forward. "Who are you?" he said again.

"Not now. After, Baron — after. Answer me. Was your wife, Patricia, beautiful?"

Baron looked at him and Gorssmann's eyes did not blink. Gorssmann turned away, fished momentarily among the papers on the desk, came up with a large photograph. He held it by one corner, waving it in front of Baron.

He felt the knot twist a little inside him, twist and wrench and then go away. He recognized the picture. It was a snapshot, blown up. A picture of Patricia that summer in Maine when she had worn the Bikini for the first and last time, wearing it that once out there on the rocks, while they swam. She had large breasts. She had been unable to control them. Yes, just for him. He had taken the picture and there had been only the one. He had not been able to remember where it was himself. How could these people have that picture?

It was blown up as far as it would go without distortion.

"I will answer for you. She was a beautiful woman. And your daughter, Bette, is a beautiful young girl, too, Baron."

Gorssmann looked at him and waited.

Baron did nothing, thought nothing. This was becoming evil.

"You're thirty-eight now," Gorssmann resumed. "You married early — at twenty, to be exact. Your first and only child, Bette, was born in the first year. That would make her seventeen? Close enough. Ah — well, so. Of course, Bette is with her mother?"

"Yes." The single word came from his lips inadvertently.

"Of course. Just now Patricia is in Bermuda. With a Spaniard. She admires the dark texture of his skin and he thinks the very world and all of the white texture of hers. You recall, of course, she did not believe in sunbathing for its own sake? Consequently, she remained natural. She is no longer quite so natural. A bit worn around the edges, Baron. But — he shrugged, waved his hand — "aren't we all? Aren't you, Baron?"

Gorssmann laid the picture back on top of the sheaf of papers. Baron sat there staring at the light glinting across the photograph, an oblong of reflected light, nothing more.

“You love your daughter, very much, don’t you?”

He did not look toward Gorssmann. He stared at the floor.

“A year — over a year — since you have seen Bette?”

Something cold and cruel began to cut him up inside. He closed his eyes against it. What was Gorssmann trying to do? It *had* been a little over a year since he’d seen Bette. She was a wonderful kid. It had hurt him plenty to leave her with Patricia, but that was the way of things.

“Ach, so. The war. You did the right thing then, too.”

“About my daughter. What are you trying to say about my daughter?” There was a touch of anxiousness in his voice now; it only seemed to make things slightly worse.

“Later, Baron — perhaps.”

“Damn you!”

Gorssmann raised his eyebrows slightly. “You contracted to build airplanes for the war Bombers. You did well there, too. Your father had done well during World War Two. I imagine you recalled your father often. Perhaps summoning up his ghost now and again, to sit in judgment on one thing and another. Am I correct?”

Baron sat there, floating in misery now.

“Yes, eh? Deeply affected, troubled waters, Arnold. We were right from the very start, of course. So! You went along that way, Baron, working for the war — building airplanes. You learned much. You were a student. You met people; people from all over the world. Your contacts are enviable, believe me. You went to Washington. You sat in on conferences. In other words, you became *somebody*, so to speak. You were happy. You imagined your wife too was happy. You did not know that she dreamed of dark Latins with gold earrings, did you? Here nor there.” He leaned back in the chair and the chair creaked, the sound driving into the very foundation of the building.

Arnold coughed three times, into his hat.

Gorssmann came forward again. He held his black gaze on Baron, picked up the leather brief case. “And then, Baron — what?”

Baron didn’t speak. He felt like the cobra watching the little tinkling silver bells.

“Then *calamity!*”

Gorssmann swung the shiny brief case up and down hard. He smashed it into the sheaf of papers on the desk. Papers flew wildly into the air, fluttered around the desk to the floor. Gorssmann brutally flung the brief case at the desk. It skidded across the top and slipped to the floor.

Gorssmann was breathing hard. “As I said before,” he went on, “those papers are yo
Baron. *You!*” He straightened, glanced over at Arnold by the door.

“Arnold,” he said, “pick those papers up and arrange them in their proper order. *Merci.*”

Chapter Four

ARNOLD PICKED UP THE PAPERS, arranged them, thumbed through them. He stacked them neatly on the desk in front of Gorssmann. He retrieved the brief case, lined it up with the papers and returned to his chair.

“Thinking?” Hugo Gorssmann said.

He could not speak, could not bring himself to say the words.

“Not now, Baron. I know well enough what you are thinking.”

Baron reached nervously for the cigarette box. He noted the way his hand trembled, tried to still it, failed. He lit another cigarette, sat back in the chair, waited. He wondered foggily where Elene was. He hoped she was all right. He wanted to avoid thinking in circles. He knew he might as well face it. These boys were playing a game and it was not cards or even marbles.

Bette. Just now he did not even want the thought of her in his head. It was a worry sharp and clear. Patricia did not matter. It had been a wrong marriage from the start, he had stayed together only for the child's sake. It had taken the sharp jar of financial jeopardy and scandal to take Patricia away — when he needed her most, for the first time in his life.

He looked over at Arnold. Arnold returned the look without smiling, or even blinking.

“Am I permitted to leave here?” he asked Gorssmann.

“Baron, dear Baron — have I underestimated you?”

“Then I'll leave.”

Gorssmann changed his face slightly. This was a smile.

The big man said, “Calamity. Very bad, a shame, indeed, awful. Considering what I know of you, I can understand the shock. It must have been a tragic moment when you learned that the planes over in Korea were beginning to fall apart. It must have been much worse when you learned that only the planes coming from your plants fell apart. This was a bad thing.”

Arnold coughed. “The light,” he said. “All right if I turn off that light and you light the desk lamp?”

Gorssmann nodded. Arnold touched a wall switch and the overhead light went out. The desk lamp came on and Gorssmann's features were tinged with watered blue. The desk lamp poured a broad lake of the watered blue light all around the desk. Baron sat there bathing his feet in the light.

“In my eyes,” Arnold said. He coughed again.

“Some even fell apart before they got there,” Hugo Gorssmann said. “There was gre

confusion after a time. It took time, too. Committees had to be formed. There was voting and more confusion, inspections, discussions — red tape. Clerks worked overtime with second endorsements, and third and fourth endorsements. Delegates were appointed. And all the time the planes continued to fall apart. A pity. Because” — he blinked — “when the planes were inspected they looked all right. Just like any other planes. Then, after many deaths and a great deal of confused running hither and thither, it was discovered that you were to blame, Baron.”

He sat there with the remembered echo of the verdict rising anew in his ears, suffering from the sharp pain in his chest, the confusion once again a part of him.

“Inferior grades of material and so forth. Here nor there. But you knew it was not your fault. You purchased the very best of materials. Everything underwent rigid inspections. The *what?* Sabotage, Monsieur Baron. Sabotage.”

The cigarette burned between his fingers. He looked at Gorssmann.

“Go ahead, on the floor. It’s good we picked this time, instead of waiting any longer. Your manners are disintegrating. The rug must be cleaned anyway.”

He ground it into the rug with his foot. He did not know what move to make. All he knew was that he should make some move.

“You knew you were not at fault,” Gorssmann said. “But they found you at fault and you lost everything you had. Your wife, your homes, your money, your business. You very nearly lost your life. They ripped you apart. They destroyed you. You screamed sabotage. Certain people high up believed that to be true, that you knew nothing. But they were high up in the wrong way. They could not help you. You managed to stay out of prison, but you had little left. At the first hint, your wife left you. To many you are a murderer of valiant men who went to war in planes that fell apart.” Gorssmann chuckled. “They said you were careless. You were money-mad, living on blood. Ah, politics!”

Baron did not move now. He could not. It stunned him. He felt certain of what he was faced with. He did not know what to do.

“So we come to the interesting part now — don’t we, Baron?”

Baron looked at Gorssmann. The big man was grinning. It was a kind of all-knowing, hateful grin that embraced the world, and it was heartless.

“You see,” Gorssmann said, “I know what you’re thinking. Shall we wait? All right, the newspapers, then. They say you have gone to hell. You did have a small bit of money that nobody knew of. A year ago you saw your daughter for the last time, and of late you’ve been in Europe, finishing your debauch. So the papers say. But the money ran out.”

Gorssmann took a series of long breaths. He fished a blue silk handkerchief from his side-trouser pocket and blew his nose with a kind of fiendish gusto.

“Of course, Baron,” he said through the handkerchief, “it was sabotage. You know it, know it.” He blew harshly. He shrugged. He wiped his nose carefully, stuffed the handkerchief away. “Instead of working toward the right end, opening their minds to sabotage, sifting it out, they went crazy. They would rather pick on a businessman with a great deal of money, a success, and wring him dry, destroy him. Yes, even during the war when they needed you, Baron. You know the business, you have studied, you are smart enough. You have a good mind. But you were vulnerable because you were rich, you seek scandal. People love scandal. They thrive on it. Would eat it instead of thick steak or chicken three times a day. Gossip. The same thing. They would not listen. They finished you off. Almost.” Gorssmann chuckled.

“Are you through?”

Gorssmann clucked his tongue. “Baron, Baron,” he said.

“What is it you want?”

“They destroyed you, Baron, remember that. No more planes came from your factories afterward. They were turned into other hands, but nothing was accomplished. They cut their own throats painstakingly, because your plants supplied plenty of planes. It could have continued, if they had listened to you.”

“And you?” Baron spoke softly.

“All right. You think I am the one, don’t you?”

Baron heard the words, and he was prepared for them. It was a shock, just the same.

“For months,” Gorssmann said without changing his expression, “you have continued to make a fool of yourself.” His voice rose slightly. “You think we are all idiots? No, Baron, I’m not the man you’re after. You are not even close, Baron. Listen.” He leaned forward, the chair creaking. “For nearly a year we have led you around by the nose, while we readied matters. Just sit quietly and listen. Don’t strain so! We knew what you were doing when you began your silly questioning, your quest.” Gorssmann wiped his nose with the back of his hand and belched faintly. “You’ve been sitting here, thinking more and more that I am the man you’ve been trailing all this time. Baron, you are in many ways a king among fools. We let you spend your money. We sent a man out to leave a trail for you to follow. A trail that would end in Marseilles — *here!*” Gorssmann paused, seemed to hesitate in his thoughts. “All right. I will tell you this: The man you seek lives. But he is so big you could never touch him. Baron. All you have done is to aid him toward the largest enterprise of his career. Gorssmann went sober. “And of mine, too, I might add.”

Baron listened and felt the walls of panic grow around him. He had read of how they worked. Now he was experiencing it. Using all his will, he controlled himself, fought down the wildness that seethed inside him. For a brief time he thought he would go mad. He

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