



I DIED YESTERDAY

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

This page formatted 2004 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- ? [Chapter I](#)
- ? [Chapter II](#)
- ? [Chapter III](#)
- ? [Chapter IV](#)
- ? [Chapter V](#)
- ? [Chapter VI](#)
- ? [Chapter VII](#)
- ? [Chapter VIII](#)
- ? [Chapter IX](#)
- ? [Chapter X](#)
- ? [Chapter XI](#)

Originally published in *Doc Savage Magazine* February 1948

Chapter I

THE new client was a long-faced, sack-suited young man who came in wearing his lips drawn flat against his teeth. I remember having a first thought about him. . . . He needed the sun.

Miss Colfax came forward and bent her shining head at him, and he asked, “What is this place? A beauty shoppe? . . . Okay. I’ll take the works.”

I walked on. I was just passing anyway. Miss Colfax was an iceberg, and she was hired to preside at the door and throw out fat women who thought they could just walk in and become customers. It was part of the system. To become one of our customers was a shade more difficult than being presented to the court of St. James. That was part of the service they got for the prices we charged.

Miss Colfax could handle him. Miss Colfax could freeze a battleship, Admiral included, and send it rocking away with no steam left and full of respect. Miss Colfax was master of the most queenly snub yet invented. She was well-paid for it.

But she came into my office a few minutes later. “Miss Savage, I’m awfully sorry to trouble you,” she said.

“Yes?”

“I’ve got one I can’t handle,” Miss Colfax said.

“The young man who came in a while ago?”

“Yes.”

I thought about the young man for a moment. There had been something that was odd about his way. But then, what would you expect of a man who walked into an exclusively female establishment the way he had? Or even walked in.

“Intoxicated?”

“I think not,” Miss Colfax said. She didn't look upset, but then she never had, and probably never would.

“Exactly what seems to be the difficulty?”

“He just walked in and asked for the works. I gave him my best *no*. He walked past me. He walked until he came to an analysis room, and went in and sat down. He won't budge.”

“Is that all?”

Miss Colfax nodded. “Shall I call a cop?”

I left off frowning at the ceiling, and frowned at Miss Colfax. She wouldn't normally refer to a policeman as a cop. Not Miss Colfax; she would have more regal terminology for a cop. So she was flustered after all.

“What is he doing, Colfax? Chasing our girls around and around the furniture?”

Miss Colfax did not smile, and said, “Quite the contrary. I imagine some of them wouldn't be adverse. He's not bad looking.” Then she lowered her eyes to her hands and examined one of our best ten-dollar manicures. “I think they're looking forward to watching you throw him out,” she added.

“Who is?”

“The hired help.”

“Oh, they are, are they? And what is behind that kind of anticipation?”

Colfax lifted her head at my tone and said, “You've got me wrong. . . . It's just that they've heard about you.”

“What,” I asked, “have they heard about me?”

“Things. About excitement.”

“I see.”

“I'm afraid you haven't been living up to your reputation,” said Colfax quietly.

I told her that some others hadn't been living up to their reputation around here, one of them being Miss Colfax, who was supposed to brush off pests. I said I would brush off this pest personally, then we would go into the other matter, the one about maintaining reputations.

“Yes, Miss Savage,” Colfax said.

She wasn't very impressed, and I thought about that for a minute. Colfax was supposed to be awed by me, even if she wasn't spellbound by anyone else. Hitherto she had been. She wasn't now. She was even

giving me, her employer, a little of the sass that our prestige-minded customers paid money for. There was just one answer—Colfax was right, and I hadn't been keeping up my reputation as a hair-raising adventuress, and I was losing standing. That sort of thing was bad. It could trickle down to the customers, and business would get bad.

“Throwing one obnoxious young man out won't prove anything, Miss Colfax,” I said. “But I'll throw him out anyway. Where did you say he is?”

“In Analysis Room Three.”

Our analysis rooms were like the settings they made for ten-carat diamonds; they were intended to emphasize the richness of the merchandise. Number Three was done in blonde mahogany and pastels of azure and dove, and it was calculated to make a frustrated customer feel that she had stepped upon the threshold of symphonic harmony with nectarian living; it was a room ambrosial with the muscadine vibrations of the psyche aesthetic and the body sublime—that was the way the decorator had put it, or words almost like those, and he had achieved something that would be about like that if put into words. There was a more earthy way of putting it: the room was guaranteed to impress over-moneyed, over-jaded rich-witches who were accustomed to being impressed. It did the job, too. We charged them fifty dollars for just being in the room.

The young man I was going to throw out had certainly made himself at home. He was stretched out on the astral blue couch, the one that was like a psychoanalyst's consulting couch. His fingers were laced together, his eyes were closed.

He was, as Colfax had said, not bad-looking. His gaunt good looks were of the Lincoln and Eamon de Valera sort, and his sacky tweed suit indicated he wasn't unaware of his typing and not above enhancing it a little with an outdoorsy motif. But his paleness detracted from the effect considerably.

Opening his eyes wearily before I could speak, he said, “Where am I? Would you mind telling me that?”

“Why bother? You won't be here long enough to make it important,” I said.

“It's quite a fancy trap, whatever it is.” He closed his eyes then, and I noticed that his face looked weary, infinitely tired and spent. The weariness was almost an ugliness. “You're not such bad bait, either.”

“I'm glad we're not going to have any polite preliminaries. I was afraid we'd be delayed by them.” I told him.

“You're beautiful,” he said. “You're as lovely as the golden morning sun on a spring raincloud. I didn't see you very well. But I'm sure you are.”

“You think so? Wait until—”

“There's more shines from you than just startling loveliness,” he continued tiredly, his eyes still closed. “There's more, an electrical quality, a vibrating force. I think it's like a chemical reaction in a test-tube, like the mingling of strong acid with helpless fluid. You have a strong effect on everyone around you, don't you? Going out with you would be about as placid as carrying a lighted candle through a gasoline refinery, wouldn't it? Where did you get that combination of bronze hair and flake gold eyes?”

“Listen, I've had that kind of ammunition shot at me by experts,” I said. “You might as well save your breath.”

He turned his head away a little, with his eyes still shut. He wasn't concentrating on me, or on anything.

"It don't amount to one little thing how lovely you are." His voice was low now, thin and far, a weak thing that didn't reach the walls of the room. "I wish it did. I sure wish it did."

I began to think seriously of throwing him out the hard way. I'm supposed to be pretty good at judo.

"Would you like to go out head-first or feet-first?" I asked coldly. "We don't usually extend a choice, but you're beginning to seem like a special case."

"You effervesce," he said. His voice crawled further back into him. "That's it. You effervesce. You sizz. You're a Fourth-of-July sparkler. You're self-igniting, and you must be lovely to watch. . . . I can't see you. I wish I could."

"You might try opening your eyes."

"Why trouble? It wouldn't do any good. . . . No, I prefer to keep them closed, and that way I can compare you to Lucia. Lucia makes quite a contrast. Lucia isn't like you. Her misfortune. . . . And mine."

"So you've got woman-trouble?"

"Maybe I have. . . . I haven't thought it all the way out yet—but maybe I have. Could be."

"Name of Lucia?"

"Lucia. Yes."

"Doesn't Lucia appreciate a great big lanky hunk of man like you?"

A smile that was nothing but the spirit of a smile haunted his lips.

"Lucia is married to a helluva nice guy named Rich Thomas," he said.

"Oh, you've been jilted?"

"Lucia married Rich ten years ago," he said. I went a few steps closer, because his voice was now dying before it reached me. I listened to him add, "Lucia carries the world on her shoulders. That's her trouble."

"It looks to me," I told him, "as if Lucia isn't carrying you, but let you drop with a thud."

"Lucia should have been born God."

"Lucia sounds stuffy."

He didn't seem to be hearing me. "But it is the other way around," he continued. "Rich *was* born God. Rich is going to remake the world, and it won't take him any seven days, either."

"This seems to be rather divine company you've been keeping," I told him coolly. "Now let's get back to fundamentals. We can't use you around here. Even if you're an assistant Angel, which could be the impression you're trying to give, we still couldn't use you. How about taking a walk?"

He loosened a little more on the couch. There wasn't any animation in him anywhere. He might have been more pale, or it might only have seemed so. I had to lean forward to get the sound of his voice where it stopped, which was no more than six inches from his lips.

He said, "Would you run an errand for me?"

“Errand?”

“As far as the door,” he said. “Go see if they've come in yet to finish killing me.”

I went to work on him then. I could see that there wasn't any more time to lose, and that it was quite possible that too much had been lost already. What was wrong with him wasn't easy to find. He helped me a little; he had barely enough left in him to do that. He managed to get a hand around to his back and lay a finger on the spot.

I couldn't tell exactly what they had put into him, but it had a thin blade, and they had broken it off, snapped off the handle or whatever had been attached to the blade. There was just a small bead of bluish blood, and when I pressed on it with a finger, I could feel the sharp edge of steel underneath.

Chapter II

I WALKED to the door, threw it open, and told Colfax, “Get Farrar in here fast.”

Colfax stared with pale, detached wonder. She wasn't alone. All the other employees who could decently loiter there were present, waiting to see me in action. But they hadn't expected to see a young man possibly in the act of dying, and on their faces was the thin shrill silence of horror.

“Pat, is he—” Colfax made a wooden movement with her hands. “I'll get Farrar!” she cried, and whirled and ran.

Farrar was my plastic surgeon, and he was also, with the exception of one man, probably the best in the business. The exception, the one man better than Farrar, and better than any specialist was likely to be for a number of generations, was my cousin, Doc Savage. But Doc Savage didn't demean his skill by sculpturing the faces of vain women, and Doc didn't work for money anyway, and also he wasn't too long on approval about my beauty salon business; and so Farrar was the best available.

Farrar came in a hurry. He began doing what he could.

“Colfax,” I said. “You were at the door when he came in.”

“Yes.”

“You see anyone following him?”

“Who would—”

“Someone thrust a thin blade, ice-pick, or something of the sort, in his back, trying to kill him. He came in here to escape them.”

Colfax's head came back stiffly and fear stirred in her eyes, like pale smoke.

“I saw no one.” She said this with her lips only.

I said, “I’m going out and look around. Help Farrar. If he needs an ambulance, call one. Get him anything he needs.”

“You’re going out and— No! No—they may still be there!”

I went into my office, opened a cabinet, and took out a family heirloom, a little more than four pounds of old-fashioned single-action six-shooter. Hoglegs, those implements of mayhem were called in their day. I had inherited it from my father, who hadn’t exactly used it as a paperweight in his time. I could stick five matches in a crack in a fence post at thirty yards and light at least four of them with it, and that was my father’s doing too. He had shown me how.

Stowing the family treasure in a handbag a little smaller than a valise, I went out to look for murderers.

The hired help, who were never called by anything as vulgar as hired help, watched me depart with a collective expression of hair-on-end. My reputation was on the upswing, I gathered.

It wasn’t quite as devil-may-care as they seemed to think it was. I gave some thought to that, to the effect that excitement seems to have on me, while I was sauntering along the hallway looking for anything suspicious, and the result of my thought was a thankfulness that Doc Savage was not there watching. Excitement in any of the three forms it usually takes—danger, suspense or anticipation of violence—undeniably has a stimulating effect on me, and this trait, if it should be called a trait, must be a family inheritance just as much as the six-shooter in my handbag. Doc Savage once told me that it was a blemish that passed along in the Savage blood. He said this unhappily. He also said that he was going to cure me of it, and he said the same thing on other occasions, but never very confidently. Firmly, yes. Angrily, also. But never with much certainty.

My cousin Doc Savage has the same blemish himself, although he just looked erudite and poker-faced when I pointed this out. He was a victim of the same intoxication about excitement that I was, because nothing else would very well explain the odd profession he followed, a profession which was—and nobody should be fooled by the Galahadish sound of his work—righting wrongs and punishing evildoers who were out of reach of the usual law enforcement agencies.

Doc Savage, who had been literally lifted from the cradle by a rather odd-minded father and put in the hands of scientists and specialists for years of training, was a remarkable combination of scientific genius, muscular marvel and mental wizard. To say that about Doc sounds melodramatic and a little ridiculous, but the fact remains that he was a startling individual. He was primarily trained as a surgeon, and could easily have led that profession in practice. He was also an electrical engineer, chemist, and several other things, of startling ability.

But Doc followed none of these professions. He did research in them, sporadically, and contributed his discoveries, which were outstanding, to the general welfare. The rest of the time, he followed adventure, in the company of five specialists—Monk Mayfair, the chemist; Ham Brooks, the lawyer; Johnny Littlejohn, the archaeologist and geologist; Renny Renwick, the engineer, and Long Tom Roberts, the electrical wizard—men who had the same liking for adventure that Doc Savage had.

Doc Savage led a wonderful life. His name could make men shudder in the far corners of the earth—the sort of men who should shudder, that is. Someone tried to kill him at least once a month. It was always the very best talent that tried, because the idea of going up against Doc Savage would scare a second-rater green. Doc was appreciated, too. He could, by making the mildest sort of a request, get unbelievable cooperation from any governments of the right sort. He did things daily, as a matter of course, greater and more exciting than most people achieve in their lifetime. He really did. He was my

cousin, and members of a family usually underrate the accomplishments of the rest of the kinfolks. He was probably even better than I thought he was.

Doc Savage and I had our differences. Personally, I could use money, and I didn't mind chipping it off those who were heavily plated with it. Doc was independent of money. He had—and this was true, far-fetched or not—a lost tribe of Mayans in Central America who supplied him with fabulous quantities of gold, out of gratitude for a service he'd done them. That was the way Doc Savage was. A little unbelievable.

But the main difference, and point of dissension, between Doc Savage and myself was this first matter of liking excitement. Danger affected me in a way that was—well—a little abnormal, as I am sure it did Doc also. To me, excitement was a heady thing, irresistible, fascinating, drawing wildly at me. Not that I didn't have fear at the prescribed times. Whether it was a normal amount of fear, I don't know, because who can measure a thing like that in himself or herself? What do you use for a yardstick?

Oh, to sum it up, Doc Savage and I were bitterly at odds on one point—he wouldn't let me take part in the wonderfully exciting adventures he was always having. He called it keeping me out of trouble, because I was a girl. He was stubborn as a mule about this. He didn't even let me know when he was in New York part of the time, for fear I'd horn in on something.

Naturally, I jumped in whenever I could. Who was I to defy a family trait? It was too interesting not to defy it.

I nearly didn't find the killer, due to the fact that I almost overlooked a kindergarten item that every policeman knows: Murderers don't necessarily look like murderers.

He was a bobbing little fuss-duddy of a man. He should have chirped as he hopped along. He looked like a bird, a drab one, a sparrow.

He came out of an office and went into another one. He came out of that one, and entered still another, and I followed him into that one, not really suspecting him yet, but interested in him because I couldn't figure what business would take him into the office of an oil-well tool supply concern, a fashion magazine, an insurance agency.

He took off his hat, and his hair was the same coal smoke grey as his suit. He said to the receptionist in that office, "I was to meet Doctor Cleagle here."

"I'm afraid I don't know Doctor Cleagle," he was told.

"But I don't understand. . . . I was told the Doctor came—there had been an accident—a young man, something had happened to him."

"Sorry."

"Perhaps, if I described the young man who was—ah—injured . . ."

And so help me if the little sparrow didn't describe young Abraham Lincoln-De Valera who was lying in my establishment with the sliver of steel in him.

"No, sorry," said the receptionist, who then turned to me and asked, "What can I do for you, Miss?"

I leaned over the desk and told her that I would like to see Mr. Illminer—one of the names on the door—about some insurance. Not a bad idea to have insurance, either, I thought. I could see the little man from the corner of an eye. He was looking absently at me, not at my legs but at a spot on my back

that corresponded to the resting-place of the thin steel in the lanky young man, or so it seemed to me. It was quite a creepy sensation. Then he took out a handkerchief, a neat white one which he unfolded, and he blotted at his face. He turned and left while the receptionist was telling me that I would have a short wait to see Mr. Illminer, and I said sorry, I'd have to run along.

The business end of my big gun had a satisfyingly firm feeling when it came against his back. We were alone in the office-building hall. Just to make it better, I put the gun nose to the spot where the steel reposed in the other man.

"This is a gun," I told him. "And if you have any preconceived notions about women, don't be misled by them."

He twisted his head around sufficiently on a thin neck to see that it was a gun, and his eyes, brightly round and bird-like, came out a little.

"I understand," he said.

"Remember, don't be misled."

"I won't."

I pushed on the gun so that it gouged into the significant spot on his back, and asked, "Remind you of anything?"

He said, and it sounded surprisingly mild, "I'm afraid visions of my long and misspent life aren't going to flash before my eyes, as they are supposed to do. Really, young lady—"

"It was in him right at that spot."

"I don't believe I—"

"It was a small blade. It didn't make the commotion that this thing will if I let it go."

He stood as still then as the statue of General Grant on Riverside Drive, and he began to get a little of the General's marble coloring. His shoulders became concave, a trifle saucer-shaped, trying to get away from the hard iron touch of the gun. And he was thinking. His mind was chasing ideas like a fox after rabbits.

"You heard me asking about young Thayer," he said finally. "Yes, you followed me into that office and heard my inquiry. Well, I can explain that. You see—"

I said, "You've had time to think up a nice lie. I'll bet it's interesting. But let's save it a minute. . . . Do you think you could perform a simple act like raising your hands without provoking me into shooting you?"

"You wouldn't shoot me."

"You think so? Try me and see."

His shoulders squirmed a trifle more, and dropped a bit in discouragement, or I hoped it was discouragement, and he said, "I wish I had taken a closer look at you. You seemed to be a very lovely girl, the sort who would howl like anything at a mouse. Yet now you sound—there's something about you—I can't be sure—"

"And you're not a mouse. The hands up, do you mind?" He lifted his hands then, and I noticed that they didn't tremble, which was a bad sign, a warning to be careful with him. There are ways—they teach them to policemen and soldiers—of taking a gun from another person, and they work astonishingly well. I

watched those. He had a billfold. And a camera. Nothing else. Absolutely nothing else.

The billfold contained a hundred-dollar banknote, two tens three ones. No cards. No identification. But it was an old billfold and its shape showed that he customarily carried cards in it.

The camera was a tiny, expensive job. A 35-millimeter, with an F2 lens and shutter speed up to a thousandth of a second. It evidently contained film, and fourteen exposures had been taken.

“Mind giving me the camera back?” He was looking over his shoulder at me now, like an owl twisting its neck.

“It’ll be safe. I’ll turn it over to a policeman, if you like. He’ll take care of it for you.”

“Very funny.” His voice was a little guttural. “That camera cost me plenty. I don’t want it stolen from me.”

“It won’t be.”

“I’m going to argue with you about the camera,” he said sharply.

“All right. But let’s have a referee. Let’s go into my place, and perhaps call an attentive policeman—”

He was beginning to turn slowly, swinging his head around first, then his shoulders and the rest of his body following in a slow wheeling that was almost imperceptible, and his eyes were fixed on mine. That was the gimmick—he was holding my gaze, and gripping by intention by that slow wheeling, not turning fast enough to start anything, but still turning so that I noticed it and would give it attention. That was the whole purpose. To hold my attention. But he slipped a little, and his eyes left mine for an instant, crossed my shoulder, and there was a kind of wild appeal in them. It’s probably an old trick to tell someone with a gun there’s another person behind him; anyway it has been worked to death in books. But he wasn’t doing that. He was too subtle about it. *He had a friend behind me.*

It was a bad moment then. This fellow was no amateur; the moment he knew that I knew there was someone back of me, the instant that fact had all my interest, he’d take my gun. He probably knew how to do it. That pelted through my mind, and a lot of other things. . . . To move slow? Or move fast? Or stand there? Or was I wrong? . . . I decided to move in a hurry, but he understood that I knew them, and he did that whirling striking motion that the judo instructors teach the rookie policemen. He went for my gun. He didn’t get it. But then I didn’t have it either, for it was knocked from my hand and sailed through the air.

I was after the gun fast. I was after it while it was still in the air, before it hit the shiny parquet hallway floor—after it and praying it wouldn’t bang off a bullet in my direction when it hit the floor. It was an old gun built for simple business, and it had no foolishness like safeties.

The sparrow had a friend in the hall, a very young-looking boy with skim-milk skin and eyes that were large, calf-like, benign, and the color of ripe dewberries. He was a big boy, too, with football shoulders. But he had a single-track mind, and he was still looking foolishly at the spot where I had stood.

“Get her!” the sparrow gasped.

The broad-shouldered young one took this and thought about it. His jaw lowered, his brow furrowed. He had to take it, arrange it, understand it.

The old six-gun didn’t discharge when it struck the floor. But it did skid, and I kept after it.

The small man was completely unlike the other in his thinking. He must have been chain-lightning. He

evidently weighed everything, his chances of getting to the gun ahead of me, the likelihood of his being able to do himself good if we reached it simultaneously, and the unfortunate things that might happen to him if he over-guessed himself. He debated all this. For time, he used nothing flat. And he reached a sensible conclusion, and turned and ran.

“Get the camera!” he yelled at his slow-wilted young giant. “Take the camera. Quick! Get the camera, Abraham!”

He strung this out behind him as he left, mixed it with the frantic whetting of his feet on the floor, and by the time the last word fell, the large young man—Abraham, if that was his name, and there was no one else around to answer to it, so evidently it was—had stopped. Abraham halted ponderously, the way a truck halts at a puzzling crossroads. He didn't look after his fleeing companion; he didn't gaze at me particularly. Abraham had stopped to take a new idea.

The old gun was hard and heavy and good in my fingers now, and I turned, still crouching, ready to shoot the sparrow in a leg. But I didn't, and for a good reason—his angel of evil was riding with him, and an elevator door had opened. It was chance. The pure ugly luck that the devil hands out. The elevator doors had eased back with no more sound than flame on a match. The sparrow flicked inside, his coattails out straight as a board from speed.

That left Abraham, and I pointed the gun at him, let him look into the large round cavity where the noise could come out. I didn't tell him to stand still, nor raise his hands; it didn't seem necessary. He could see the bullets in the cylinder, and they should be looking as large as skulls to him.

Abraham was to be an odd one. How odd, I now got an inkling.

He asked blankly, “What do I do now?”

I didn't know he meant the question seriously, because I didn't know Abraham yet. He really wished to know what he should do.

“You can run,” I said sarcastically, “if you think you can dodge some lead.”

He accepted the first part, took it literally. Because that was the way Abraham was; he could accommodate one idea at a time, if it was a small idea in two or three words, and not handed to him crosswise. I had told him to run, and so he ran.

I was so astonished I didn't shoot him anywhere.

The elevator was waiting, and his friend heard him laying his large heavy feet on the corridor floor. It must have been a disturbing sound, and the view-mirror beside the elevator door must have given a picture of what was happening. Because the small drab man screamed, “Get the camera, Abraham!”

But Abraham steamed ahead for the elevator. Perhaps he hadn't noticed any camera.

The sparrow shrieked imprecations. Mostly what he screeched was incoherent, and it was mostly rage that made it incoherent. He tried to hurl the sliding doors closed. But Abraham was there now. He gripped the door, wrenched it open, his great shoulders bunching, with no more effort than opening an envelope. Abraham went into the elevator.

I was there by now, in front of the elevator doors, and I had pushed astonishment aside, and was ready to let the six-shooter take up the argument. But there were half a dozen innocent passengers crowded in the rear of the elevator, and nowhere to shoot without hitting one of them if the bullet went through its target, which it would.

“What do I do now?” Abraham asked the sparrow.

The little man was fit to be strait-jacketed. He emitted one more screech, while he was falling against the doors, and he got the doors sliding shut.

My right foot in the crack of the closing door was the best I could do. He kicked it out. The door shut. The elevator left with a thick whispering that backgrounded, but did not cancel out, the things he had to say about Abraham and Abraham's ancestors.

Chapter III

WITHIN five minutes I knew they had taken an express elevator—it would have made no difference; they wouldn't have let it stop enroute down anyway—and at least ten people had as many different descriptions of the sparrow and his single-witted companion. The ten were trying to tell it to anyone who would listen in the lobby. There were four different opinions of which way and by what method the pair had departed, but three of the opinions were by taxicab, so that was probably right.

Miss Colfax had a high shrill look in her eyes when I came back.

“I—I hear you tried to shoot a couple of men,” she said.

“News travels fast, and ties itself into knots getting there,” I told her. “What does Farrar say about young Thayer?”

“Thayer . . .?” Colfax looked at me blankly.

“The young fellow who dropped in here to do his dying, and I'll bet you that turns out to be his name,” I said.

“Doctor Farrar had him removed to his office,” Colfax explained.

I found Farrar dabbling his fingers in a large tray of fixing bath in which an X-ray negative reposed. The red darkroom light gave his face an unreal, satanic cast that enhanced the worry he was wearing, and presently he switched on the white light behind the viewing box, lifted the wet negative from the bath, washed it briefly, and slapped it against the illuminated glass.

“So you X-rayed Thayer already,” I said. “That's quick work.”

“Thayer?” Farrar was puzzled.

“I met a small drab man in the hall, and the resulting conversation led me to believe that might be your patient's name.”

Farrar nodded vaguely, not understanding but not particularly upset about his lack of comprehension, and used the tip of a pencil to indicate certain parts of the negative. He said, “A vertebraic perforation, and an incipient myelin rupture. I was afraid of something of the sort.” He did some more poking and peering. “That isn't good.” He straightened, and his face was sober. “It isn't good at all.”

I knew, of course, that the vertebrae are the backbone, but the word myelin was only doctor's abracadabra as far as I was concerned. I asked him to explain that, and anything else he could get across in plain English.

Farrar said, “The blade, which seems to be an ice-pick, actually passed through the backbone, breaking

off a small spear-shaped fragment of bone which, due to the position in which it is lodged is almost certain to be forced into the spinal cord when the blade is withdrawn. You can see how pressure of the blade in the position it occupies is holding the bone dagger forced away from the spinal cord.”

“Won't an operation do any good?”

He got out a handkerchief and wiped his face. “Not one chance in a thousand, unless we had a man capable of doing it.”

“Do you know a surgeon good at that sort of thing?”

Farrar shrugged. “The woods are full of specialists. . . . But this isn't an ordinary job. I'd say that—well—you can guess who comes to my mind. Doc Savage.”

“Could Doc do it?”

“If anyone can,” Farrar said, nodding.

“All right, if Doc is in the city, he's our man,” I said.

Farrar rubbed his jaw, and began dubiously, “Well, if you think he'll touch—” He stopped, looked uncomfortable, and finished. “Of course, Savage would be excellent.”

“What did you start to say?”

He glanced at me, looked away, pocketed his hands and complained, “Something I shouldn't have started to say. I've—uh—heard rumors that you and Doc Savage are not on—uh—shall we say, the best of terms.”

“You heard wrong. We're on the best terms. The very best. We have some of the most dignified fights you ever listened to.”

“Very well. If you think Savage will do this job.”

“He will when I get through outfoxing him.”

Reaching the door, another thought came to me, and I turned back to indicate the X-ray darkroom and ask, “Can you develop a camera film in there?”

“What kind?”

“A 35-millimeter film, one from a small candid camera.”

Farrar shook his head. “Not with X-ray developer. Too hot. Give you a grainy negative. . . . Better take it to a place where they do fine-grain work.”

It was not difficult to get Doc Savage's headquarters on the telephone, but getting through to him was a different matter. The first hurdle, a private detective agency which was hired to monitor and screen all calls on his listed phone, was easily circumvented—I knew Doc's unlisted number, which got me as far as Monk Mayfair.

Monk's small, squeaky, child-like voice had the same sort of distinction that a cricket has in a barrel. It didn't sound like Monk looked, nor did Monk act in keeping with Monk's reputation. Monk was an eminent chemist; it could be said without much exaggeration that he was world-renowned, but he had the manners and dignity of a fourteen-year-old hooligan from the wrong side of the tracks.

“I’m supposed to say no,” he said to my inquiry as to whether Doc Savage was in town.

“You mean no just to me?”

“That’s what I mean,” said Monk cheerfully. “You’re the kitten who drags the big, terrible rats into our parlor.”

“I’d like to talk to Doc.”

“No can do. We’re in the process of unofficially disowning you. . . . What have you got on your mind?”

The thing that would interest Doc Savage, and the only possible thing that would persuade him to let me come within a mile of him when I was even faintly tainted with excitement, would be an appeal to his Galahadish side. Doc would function as an angel of mercy, but he wouldn’t even listen to me if I came with a ready-made package of trouble. He would welcome the trouble separately, if it was interesting trouble, but he wouldn’t tolerate a package deal with me included.

So I told Monk that a young man had walked into my beauty shoppe with an ice-pick blade in his back, and was going to die if Doc didn’t do surgery and save him. I made it dramatic, coating the story with terror and tears—you could lay it on as heavy as you wished with Monk, because he was a sucker for any female. He would accept the most preposterous lie for gospel, if a woman told it to him.

“Holy smoke, I’ll get Doc on the wire for you,” Monk gasped before I had nearly all the stops out.

Then Doc Savage’s marvelously capable voice was addressing me with all the enthusiasm of a banker interviewing a client trying to float a loan on an honest face.

“It has been some time since you came skipping in on us with a little case of trouble that would scare a normal person green,” he said. “I knew it was too good to last.”

I gave him the same story I’d put to Monk, minus the trembling and tears. And minus some other points. I didn’t tell him I’d gone hunting the stabbers, had found them, had come out unfavorably in the encounter, and had a camera and some weakness in the knees to show for my efforts. He wasn’t fooled.

“That tale sounds three-legged to me,” he said.

“You’re unfair.”

“No, I’ve just had some experience with you,” Doc said. “You say Farrar examined the fellow? Put Farrar on.”

Farrar spoke to Doc Savage for a while, breathlessly as if he was being received by the Master. Mostly they talked big-worded medical nomenclature, things like anterior poliomyelitis and spastic paraplegia due to bilateral cerebral lesion. Farrar was earnest, apologetic, and in the end gasped with relief, “I’d like to observe you do the surgery!” Then he handed the phone to me, explaining, “The Doctor would like to speak to you again.”

“Pat,” Doc Savage asked, “did you invite the victim into your place of business?”

“Good Lord, no!”

“Why did he pick on you?”

“I don’t know. Accident, I suppose.”

“I think somebody took a round-about way of laying something in my lap,” Doc Savage said dryly. “What do you think?”

“But this fellow Thayer didn't even seem to know where he was—”

“That, toward the last, could have been the result of the injury to his spine. I imagine he knew very well where he was going when he walked in there.”

“That was a sad error he made, wasn't it? I mean—he mustn't have known I never participate in your adventures, mustn't he?”

“That's not very subtle sarcasm, Pat. And if he knew you never get me in trouble, he knew something that I don't.”

“Oh, then you're going to let me go along with you on this one—”

“Now you know better than that.”

“But what do I do now?”

“You may return to the practice of that refined piracy you call a beauty salon, young lady. . . . And just let me make one flat statement—you stay out of this, you understand?”

“Yes, I understand you clearly,” I said—a statement that was for the benefit of Farrar, who was standing there listening to my end of the conversation. I hung up then, and raked back over what Farrar had heard me say, concluding it might, with a little deft addition, be enough to fool him.

“Farrar, I'm going to work with Doc Savage on this mystery. We're going to find out why young Thayer was stabbed, and also what Thayer meant by saying that a woman named Lucia *should* have been born God, but that her husband Rich Thomas had been, because husband Rich was going to re-make the world, and not in any seven days either. I think Thayer was saying something important when he said that. It should be investigated.”

Farrar looked at me oddly. “You're going to work with Doc Savage?”

“Of course.”

He pocketed his hands, shifted his gaze uncomfortably to the floor, and advised, “It so happens that Doc instructed me specifically that you were not to be involved. . . . More exactly, you were not to know as much as what hospital Thayer was taken to for the operation.”

I tried something that I knew was not going to do any good. Tried to stare him down. “Farrar, you're not going to go along with such nonsense?”

“I'm afraid so, Miss Savage.”

There was some temptation to ask him if he recalled who was paying his salary, but fortunately I got that one stopped in time. Farrar would have replied, politely and stiffly, that beginning now, nobody was paying him a salary. That was exactly what he would do. And I'd have lost the best plastic surgeon who was available.

“Farrar, you seem to place Doc Savage very highly.”

“Very highly,” he agreed.

“You’re a good man, Farrar.”

There seemed to be no point in carrying it farther, but if they thought they had me boxed in, they were mistaken. I went into my office, called Colfax in and told her, “I want you to get me Thayer’s hat and coat. Bring them here.”

“How will I—”

“Just walk in and remark to Farrar that you’ll take care of Thayer’s coat and hat, then bring them here. And step on it, will you. Time is important here.”

She was back in hardly more than a minute with the tweedy coat and the hat. Both were distinctive garments. “Thanks, Colfax. Now, I want the mannequin—the male one—we used a few weeks ago in the lobby display. It’s in the storeroom. I want it—a wheeled stretcher—the rubber-tired one that is in the storeroom—and two blankets, a pillow, everything in the storeroom. Take the coat and hat in there too. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

Colfax nodded and went out, looking excited in her glassy way, and I took the big old six-shooter out of my purse and laid it on the desk. I frowned at the elderly cannon—knowing now, when it was a little too late, that I shouldn’t have depended on it. . . . I should have used some of Doc Savage’s gadgets.

Doc Savage, earlier in his career, had shown a flair for creating gadgets which he employed in his adventures. He no longer used them as much; I sometimes suspected that was a phase of his life that he was trying to live down. Doc had explained it a little differently: “A man who has a good tool is inclined to come to depend too much on that tool, and if it’s taken away from him, he’s helpless,” he told me once. “I used to think that applied particularly to a man with a gun, which is why I’ve never carried one. Now I’ve concluded it applies to any mechanical aid, and so I’m not depending as much on tricky gadgets. A quick wit and a sharp mind are better. You can’t be disarmed of those so readily.”

That was fine, if you could devote a lifetime to developing a quick wit and sharp mind, as he had. For the rest of us, who didn’t have a tribe of grateful Mayans to keep us in spending money, gadgets were not to be sneezed at.

Personally, I had been grieved that Doc no longer made as much use of gadgets. His astonishing scientific devices, which he pulled out of his hat at the most unexpected times, had given him a great deal of color and a weird touch that I liked. His contraptions, and some of them were stunning in their ingenuity, were symbolic of Doc’s wizardry. Yet he seemed determined to drop away from using them, and that spoiled a lot of Doc’s special flavor for me.

The fact was, I’d made a collection of his past gadgets. Sort of a museum of them. I had enlisted his aides—principally Monk Mayfair, but the others had helped too—to assist in assembling them. I had a couple of hundred of them—and I didn’t have near all of them, which gives an idea of Doc’s prolific ingenuity—and I knew how to use them. I’d rigged a special room, adjacent to my office, for their storage. Someday, when I’m a doddering old lady, the Smithsonian will probably be very grateful for them. In the meantime, I had them, had learned to use them—and I intended to make use of them now.

It required only a couple of minutes to collect the gadgets I would probably need. It was that simple because I had copied Doc’s system of carrying them. I changed shoes, put on a trim grey suit, a snappy dark hat, re-did my hair slightly, and carried a different handbag. I was wearing them now. Maybe it took more than a couple of minutes, but not much more.

Colfax was waiting in the storeroom. She had read my mind, and she had the male dummy wearing Thayer’s noticeable tweed coat and hat, and lying on the litter under a blanket.

“This what you wanted?” Colfax asked with a perfectly expressionless face.

“Fine. Colfax, you're a wonder. Phone the garage to have my station-wagon waiting out front—”

“I did that.”

“You *are* wonderful! . . . All right, we'll get this into the hall through a side door, and into an elevator. I don't want Farrar seeing me. He's fallen in with Doc's starry-eyed notions about woman's place being in the home.”

It went smoothly for us, with the station-wagon there and waiting, and the elevator starter and an operator helping us load the dummy as carefully as if they were handling a wounded man. Five dollars and a brief explanation accomplished the latter.

Colfax, a little pale now, asked, “Do you wish me to go along?”

“Want to?”

Colfax shook her head. “No, thank you—I'm already scared stiff. . . . Isn't this likely to be dangerous?”

“What possibly could be dangerous about hauling a dummy around the streets?”

“If they tried to kill him once, they'll want to finish the job,” Colfax said dryly.

“Could be.”

“Bait,” said Colfax, shaking her head again, “is something I don't crave to be. Not bait for murder.”

“Everyone to their taste, Colfax. That's what makes it such a diversified world.” I mixed a smile with that, so Colfax wouldn't get the notion her courage was in doubt. It wasn't, either, because Colfax had all anyone needs.

“How long,” asked Colfax, “before I send out a posse?”

“Oh, give me an hour. And after that, if I haven't turned up wearing the smile of the cat beside the empty canary cage, you'd better make it the cavalry, the U. S. Marines, the whole works.”

“Doc Savage?” she asked pointedly.

“That's what I meant.”

“I'm glad,” said Colfax, shuddering, “that I don't have the sort of malady that makes one crave danger.”

“Without the disease, you'll never have the wonderful fever that goes with it, Colfax,” I said, and slid behind the wheel and drove the station-wagon away.

I felt, then, a little foolish. Because this was a very long shot I was taking, no more than an arrow loosed generally into the darkness where there were wild animals. It might hit nothing. Nobody might try to finish off my supposed passenger. If that didn't happen, the arrow would be for nothing and I would feel very silly indeed.

And before long I understood why I had done a thing like this. It was because Doc Savage might have done something of the sort—but when Doc did them, they always seemed to pay off, and now I wasn't so sure I would have that luck. Doc had a way, a kind of magical perception. Sometimes I thought I had it too, but often I wasn't so sure.

The excitement began to wear off. Bank-fishing with a cane pole and getting no bites isn't my style. I stewed.

Impatience, presumably, is a sour taste that everyone has in varying degrees. Some bear it better than others. We Savages, I think, carry it poorly. I know my father was that way, and his father before him, our grandfather had been little inclined to sit in his log cabin waiting for the Indians to attack, but had gone out looking for them instead. A grand old guy. There were villages named for him all over the northwest.

It was a long drink of sour-silly tasting impatience that I had, but there was a tart olive at the bottom of it, and a violent one. It took the form of a truck. An enormous truck, full-bodied as a house, but drab-looking and not conspicuous as trucks go.

A fantastic thing, but I didn't have time to think of that. Not until it was gone. The truck had angled in front of me with that loutish air that trucks and many large things seem to have. A tragic light showed a green eye, and everything stopped, the truck ahead of me, and then the truck inched forward a little, a few feet. The whole back end of the truck fell down, flopped down like a hinge, making a sort of ramp. And then, with a stunning power—not a crash, just a shove, gentle and then hard and powerful—a car behind me gave the station-wagon a shove. My vehicle jumped forward. The car behind followed, pushed—my station wagon was boosted up the ramp and into the van body.

I turned the wheel hard now, but it was too late; the swerve of the station-wagon only jammed a fender against the inside of the van. The car behind, backing away, raced its motor noisily, and then there was a grinding of machinery followed by darkness.

There was a feeling of motion then. The truck was carrying me away.

Chapter IV

THE station-wagon engine idled gently with the rather startled sound of a big cat, and I thought of how swiftly the exhaust would pour poisonous carbon monoxide into the tight small room that was the inside of the truck. So I switched off the engine.

We were not moving fast enough to interest a traffic cop, and the street sounds, while audible, were surprisingly faint. The inside of the van was thoroughly sound-proofed with heavy quilted material. I waited until there was no motion—probably we had stopped for a traffic light—and put back my head and screamed for help. It seemed like a deafening effort, but possibly it wasn't much outside. And all it got me was radio music. I could hear in a moment, a car radio playing loudly in the cab. That took care of the screaming; it wasn't much use.

There wasn't a lot of appeal to the idea of crashing the station-wagon out through the back of the truck, but being hauled off somewhere helplessly was less appealing, so I started the engine again, meshed the gears in reverse, and stamped the throttle down hard. The station-wagon jumped back all of two feet, stopped with a jolt that snapped my head back. It hadn't even hit the rear of the van. I got out and looked, and found there was a steel bar contraption, or rather a series of steel bars, which had been released and dropped down to pen in the station-wagon.

“Tried everything, baby?” The voice—hoarse, guttural—had the obvious unnaturalness of being disguised.

“Can you hear me?” I asked.

“Like you had that pretty head on my shoulder, baby.” Now the voice could be located—it came from an ordinary public-address loudspeaker mounted overhead.

“This trap is something,” I said.

“Impress you, does it, tutz?”

“Fixing a truck up like this took a couple of weeks work, didn't it?”

“Think so?”

“That much at least. It has been less than an hour since I got involved in whatever I'm involved in, so it follows that the truck wasn't prepared just to catch me.”

“That's sure logical, ain't it, tutz,” the voice said cheerfully.

“Just how did you happen to be all set for me?”

“Honeychild, we always go loaded for bear.”

“I'm going to set this thing on fire.”

“It's fireproofed, baby.”

“There's plenty of gasoline in my station-wagon. I'll bet I make some smoke that attracts attention.”

“I'll bet you're hotter than a firecracker before any smoke shows.”

He had a point there. It would be foolish to start a gasoline fire in the van body, which I recalled as being made of sheet steel.

There was one more thing to try. “Mr. Thayer is very seriously wounded and needs an immediate operation,” I said earnestly. “He's going to die if you don't let me take him to a hospital. If that happens, I'm sure you will be charged with murder.”

“Yak, yak, yak,” the voice said. “I'm shaking in my boots, if I had boots.”

I climbed back into the station-wagon, and sat loosely there, deciding I was completely shaken by surprise. Actually, I was probably scared until all the threads were loose. But it was no time for a case of terror, and so I told myself it was just surprise—that it was incredible they could have been so well-prepared against the rare chance that I would move Thayer from my place in a car, and be all set to trap me in this bizarre fashion . . . Still, it wasn't too illogical, because they must have known how seriously Thayer was wounded, and surmise that he would be moved in an ambulance. With this truck contraption they could have caught an ambulance as easily as they had taken my station-wagon.

There was another chance, to which I tried to pin hopes—someone must have seen the station-wagon being bumped headlong into the truck. Anyone seeing it *should* give an alarm. But had they? Thinking it over, I decided they probably wouldn't, because the incident was fantastic, and New Yorkers have a way of regarding anything too unusual as being a publicity stunt or a zany gag. New Yorkers are afraid of making fools of themselves; they're exposed to the unusual so much that they become immune to it. Oh, the story of a big truck swallowing a station-wagon might seep out eventually, and the newspapers might even publish a squib about it—too late to do me any good.

The rest of the ride could be summed up as about an hour of acute dissatisfaction during which I lost at least two pounds. Came a jolting, a heaving around of the great truck as if it were crossing the disgruntled

body of a huge animal, really only a rough lane, no doubt, and stillness came. No motion. No sound at all.

“Hello?” My voice was thinner and higher than I liked. “Are we there? Have we arrived?”

“Baby,” said disguised-loudspeaker-voice. “Baby, do you like it in there?”

I hesitated, then suggested, “There might be worse places—and I’m not fooling.”

“There could be. There very well could be. . . . But it’s nice you like it in there. I’m glad to hear that. Because you’re going to stay there for a while.”

“Stay in this truck? For how long?”

“Oh, a week or two.”

“But Mr. Thayer—”

“He can keep you company, tutz. The lucky stiff—and I’m not just kidding. He wouldn’t be a stiff by now, by any chance?”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want too much interest aroused in Thayer, lest they—or one of them, if there was only one, and I had heard only a single voice so far—discover that Thayer was a beauty-shop show window mannequin.

Presently, in a disgruntled way, the voice said, “Oh well, if you’re off speaking terms, it’s okay by me, baby. . . . But now you listen to me: I’m going to open the side door—there is one, in case you hadn’t noticed it—and slip you some canned tomatoes. You probably won’t like canned tomatoes afterward, but they’ll do you for a diet.”

I got ready for him then. I hadn’t been entirely doping off during the ride, and I had the collection of Doc Savage gadgets I’d brought. The trinket I selected was one Doc Savage had used as much as any other, a little glass globule that contained a liquefied anaesthetic gas that would vaporize instantly, and nothing perceptible in the way of color or odor, and would knock a person senseless in what practically amounted to nothing flat. It was wonderful stuff, that gas; its potent agency was oxidized and nullified by the oxygen in normal air in approximately forty seconds. You could hold your breath—almost anyone can hold their breath fifty seconds or a minute in a pinch—while the stuff knocked out the other fellow, then be on with your business. The victims were usually out for about fifteen minutes, with not much more than a foolish feeling for after-effects.

A latch clucked on the side of the truck—or what sounded like a latch—and I watched the spot expectantly, the globule of anaesthetic gas poised. The minute my friend looked in, he was going to get it in the face.

The silence was like time stopped. Not another sound for twenty seconds, forty. . . . The door didn’t open in the side of the van; as a matter of fact. I couldn’t distinguish any sign of a door by the reflected light from the station wagon headlamps, which was the only illumination I had.

There was a sudden pell-mell of sound behind me—a door whiffed open, a heavy object thumped inside, the door whacked shut. I’d been foxed. The door was on the other side of the van!

“Yak, yak,” said my tormentor from the loudspeaker presently. “Fooled you, didn’t I? Sissy, if you’ll look at the box I dumped inside, you’ll find it’s a case of canned tomatoes, and—”

I went around to the other side, found the spot that was cut out in the padding for the door, and pried it loose near the bottom. Into this spot I inserted another Doc gadget, this one a grenade, too. But not gas. This one, not as large as a grape, was concentrated violence. I got into the station-wagon, rolled the windows down so there wouldn't be as much flying glass, got the blankets off the dummy and wrapped them around my head and hands.

The explosion was better than a bargain. It changed the shape of the side of the station-wagon, and changed my ideas about ever using one of them in such close confines again.

Dizzy, deafened, I found the hole in the side of the truck and tossed out one of the gas pellets. That came near being too hasty a move; holding my breath for the needed minute was enormously difficult.

The breath-holding, the latter part of it, was made pleasant by having heard a man, evidently of some bulk, falling to the floor.

I crawled out into what proved to be a large and unused barn to learn what my gadgeteering had bagged. He was a squarish bulk in a careless suit and he occupied an attitude of restful sleep on the floor. He had bumped his nose in falling, and it was leaking crimson very slightly. It wasn't a large nose, and it was no asset to a wide and remarkably homely face—I was tempted to kick it further out of shape.

I sat down and waited the fifteen minutes that it took him to get over his whiff of anaesthetic. By that time, I was full of words.

He sat up, felt of his nose, and said, "That was a dirty trick, Pat."

"You should know," I advised him. "Since you're an authority on dirty tricks."

He was Monk Mayfair. He ran to breadth and pleasantly homely baboon looks, and, as I mentioned, he was a great chemist when he took time out from chasing excitement to practice his profession, which was rarely. Since he was one of Doc Savage's five assistants, I had a fair idea of what had happened to me.

"You look kinda irritated," Monk ventured.

"You think so?" I asked.

"Now wait a minute! I don't like that expression in your eye! Just because I outfoxed you—"

"Outfoxed—me? Take a look at your ankles. Notice the nice rope tied around them? I could have tied your wrists too, but I believe in giving even a dog half a chance. Now, I've got a nice hypodermic needle here, filled with stuff that will make you sleep about a week. I'm going to use it for a little game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, with guess who for donkey."

"Pat!" he yelled in alarm. "My God, it was only a joke—"

"Oh sure, Monk, all a joke—"

"Wait! Be reasonable! It was Doc's idea—"

"I knew whose idea it was as soon as I saw your silly face," I told him. "All right, I'll listen. What is the story?"

"Why, Doc thought he would teach you to stop horning in on our little shindigs." Monk looked at me uneasily. "After you telephoned him, he hung up and looked at me and said, 'Monk, Pat sounded innocent, and that's a bad sign. I'm sure she's going to jump headlong into this mess, if she hasn't already."

So we're going to stop that right now. And then he told me what to do with the truck.”

“Who was driving the car that rammed me from behind?” I asked.

“Oh, him. The private detective who screens Doc's calls. You talked to him earlier in the evening before you got hold of me.”

“That's fine—run in strangers. What were the plans for me?”

He grinned uneasily, knowing he wasn't going to like the way I would react to what he had to say, and explained, “Well, Doc thought if we left you locked up in the truck a day or two, while we got to the bottom of the trouble you stirred up, it would give you a chance to meditate. Maybe mend your ways.”

“A fine cadaverous idea. . . . And I didn't stir it up. Thayer just walked in on me.”

“That's not too logical, Doc feels.”

“Logical or not, that's the way it was. . . . How did you know I didn't have Thayer in the station-wagon?”

“I phoned up to Farrar to make sure.”

I admitted grudgingly, “The whole thing was a nice piece of crystal-gazing on Doc's part—guessing I'd try to use a phony Thayer for bait. Or did Farrar get wise and tip Doc off?”

Monk snorted and said, “You must have forgotten there's a fellow named Doc Savage. You're underrating him.”

“I'll underrate him, all right. I'll make him into catmeat, if he doesn't watch out. What's the idea, pulling a thing like that on me?”

“This I'd like to see,” Monk said doubtfully. “Listen, you're not going to stick that needle in me, are you?”

“That's certainly my plan.”

“A fine way to treat a pal,” he complained, completely overlooking the part he'd had in Doc's shenanigan upon me. “A fine thing, is what I say. Don't you know who your friend in court is? Why, I even said to Doc: 'Why not let Pat jump into the thick of it for a change? Maybe she'd get her fill of excitement.’”

“And Doc said?”

“He wasn't impressed. He said who ever heard of a kitten getting too much cream?”

“Monk—I'll make you a deal.”

“Oh, oh!” he said suspiciously. “Here goes my shirt. I don't think I'm going to be interested—”

“All right, if you'd rather have this stuff shot into you and sleep for a week—”

“I'm listening,” he said hastily.

“You're going to be the little pal you say you are, Monk. You're going to cut me in on this case. You're going to do it by tipping me off to where the explosions are going to be, so I can be there. Either that, or so help me, I'll empty this hypo needle into you, and add another for good measure.”

Monk argued, cajoled, threatened, for about five minutes before he came around. “All right,” he grumbled. “But nobody is going to like this, including you.”

“No doublecrossing me!” I warned.

His homely face could show more injured dignity than a frog that had accidentally hopped into a cream pitcher. “My word is as good as gold.”

“That,” I said, “is one we could argue about, but won’t.” I untied his ankles and tossed the rope in the barn, to one side. “You don’t tell Doc about our little side arrangement. You understand?”

He rubbed his ankles to restore the circulation. “How much inside dope have you got, Pat? Do you know who stabbed this Thayer?”

I described sparrow and his thick-witted young friend, and gave Monk a rough idea of how I had met them, leaving out the parts that might lead him to think they’d made a fool of me, a construction that wouldn’t be too hard to attach to the episode.

“Of course, I didn’t actually see either one put the ice-pick into Thayer,” I finished. “But they knew about it, were hunting Thayer, and were rough boys.”

Monk nodded. “That almost votes them into office, don’t it. . . . Now, why are people sticking ice-picks into other people? Tell me that.”

“I don’t know.”

“Huh?” His jaw fell.

“Lucia, who carries the world on her shoulders, and should have been God,” I said. “And Rich Thomas, Lucia’s husband, who’s going to re-do the world.”

Monk said, “*Huh?*” more loudly, with his jaw farther down.

“Oh yes, and in less than seven days,” I added.

Monk scratched around in the reddish pig-bristles that be used for hair, and finally asked, “Is that supposed to mean something?”

“My guess would be yes,” I told him. “But don’t ask me to draw any pictures. Here, I’ll tell you how I picked up that little charade.” He listened intently to my explanation that Thayer had said these enigmatic facts, and said them seriously, and was already shaking his head when I ended on, “Now, what do you think?”

“We’ll have to shake more out of the bushes than that,” said Monk.

Inasmuch as the barn was on an isolated and uninhabited farm—I stepped outside and looked, and it certainly seemed isolated enough, the nearest house almost a mile distant—we concluded to drive the trick truck back to the city. The little grenade had blown the truck side-door open and it was jammed against the wall of the barn, we discovered. We looked about for something to pry it free, Monk suggesting a fence post. There were no loose fence posts, so we compromised on a rail that formed part of one of the stalls in the barn, and were yanking at that when our visitor arrived.

She came in with no more commotion than a fly walking in a sugar bowl, and said, “I hate terribly—believe me, I do hate terribly—doing this.”

Monk and I turned. We probably did it while we were two inches off the packed earth barn floor.

“Please!” she told us earnestly. “Please don’t provoke a disaster.”

She didn't explain what she meant by disaster, but the object she was holding in her hand described it fully. It was one of Mr. Colt's latest models.

Chapter V

THIS was Lucia. Somehow I knew this, although she wasn't bearing the world on her shoulders, which were a little too pointed for the job. Not that she was an ugly woman. She wasn't. She had a remarkably pure pale beauty, done in marble, that was striking in a sepulchral way. Ash-blond was her type, and she wore it clean-scrubbed and without cosmetics.

“Lady—lady—” Monk was paler than she was, had raised his hands, and was trying to point at her gun with one finger of one of his lifted hands. “Lady—that thing is cocked.”

She was younger than went with that ash-blondness. She should have been a stone angel standing in front of a tomb in some cemetery where no birds sang and the passers-by stepped silently.

She said, “I followed you here. We—we did, that is. You will—and please understand I won't be circumvented—raise your arms while I search you.”

We followed instructions, and she did an amateurish but earnest job of frisking us. Amateurish, because she didn't find a thing on me, and I was loaded with trinkets designed for coping with just such situations as this.

“Now, you will walk with me, but ahead of me,” she said.

I tried out my guess about her identity with, “What are you going to do with us, Lucia?”

A kind of angelic composure touched her face and scared me badly because it was the kind of a look that didn't exactly go with sanity. It didn't quite pass away, and kept Monk and myself meek and actively complying with her wishes. She herded us outside, and onward.

The afternoon sun was cresting western clouds with hot silver and putting brassy shadows among the trees and in the underbrush that edged a crooked, rutted, heat-cracked lane which we followed for a while, for about a hundred yards. No one said anything. I turned my head. She was floating along behind us, a pure-faced wraith attached to the big blue gun.

Her car—I knew it was her car because of its hearse-like character—stood silently in the lane, gleaming black among the green trees which almost buried it. And the squarish shape of a man stirred inside, then a very red, excited face looked out at us.

Her companion, whoever he was, was driving her car. But he wasn't a chauffeur, unless chauffeurs have taken up two-hundred-dollar tailoring and three-carat diamond rings. His name was Burroughs, she let us know.

“They know my name, Mr. Burroughs,” she said. “At least *she* knew it.”

He hadn't liked waiting there in the car, or anyway it showed clearly on his face that there was *something* he hadn't liked, and he wasn't much more pleased now. His hands lifted, the fingertips making little clutching movements—but whether seeking peace of mind or knowledge, it was hard to say.

“I've been very worried, Lucia,” he said. And then added, more wryly, “I'm quite distressed by it all.”

She said calmly, “We've discussed that, Mr. Burroughs. Please let's not again.”

Burroughs looked at her, and then away from her; he set his attention on infinity with extreme concentration. He was fifteen years older than she was, I guessed, which would make him past forty-five. Probably fifty. There might be a five-year swing in his age either way, because he was a man who kept himself groomed, manicured, and sun-lamped. His skin was good velvet and the tan it carried was reddish copper like an Indian's.

With gun, eyes and chin, Lucia told us to get into the back of the shining limousine.

"I must ask you to journey with us. It is not a far distance," she said.

I glanced at Monk, wondering what he thought about our Lucia, and he made question marks by waving his eyebrows. I nodded. That was the way Lucia affected me, too.

When we were settled—Lucia in front, half turned on the front seat like a little girl, but not looking like a little girl—and before he started the engine, Mr. Burroughs felt it necessary to introduce himself.

"My name is Preston Burroughs," he said.

Introductions didn't seem to fit the situation, but he had started it, and so I went along, pointing at Monk and saying, "Mr. Mayfair—Monk Mayfair—a Doc Savage associate," and at myself to add, "Patricia Savage, distantly related to Doc Savage and, I'm beginning to think, species of jackasses."

Lucia looked at me with the angelic firmness of a saint turning a sinner around and giving him a gentle push toward tophet.

"Lies have no place in this. Please don't," she said.

"You don't think we're connected with Doc Savage?" I asked.

"Please don't," Lucia said.

Monk nudged me, and his ugly face was waving a look of alarm from side to side when I glanced at it. Monk didn't understand Lucia, and he thought she might be something worth being afraid of. It could be.

Preston Burroughs drove, and he was a little too heavy and often with brake and accelerator, but otherwise did well. The sunlight broke lances of gold on the long black hood, and the big engine made no more noise than a good electric fan. No one spoke. No one seemed particularly happy.

We came to one of those crossroads places, two service stations, general store, antique shop, and Lucia told Burroughs to stop. He did.

"Telephone my husband," Lucia told him. "Instruct him to meet us at—well—a half mile down that road yonder." She pointed.

Burroughs squirmed. "Lucia, I don't approve—"

"Please!" Lucia's voice was clear and hurt, as if she'd been soiled by his beginning to object.

Burroughs went into the general store, came out and went into the antique place, and five minutes later he was back with, "Rich is coming. He seemed stunned. I don't blame him."

By now my fingers were itching to try another of Doc's gadgets, and I asked Monk, "You want to go through with this?"

"We haven't much choice," he said, heartily enough to show that he did want to go along. He added,

“Maybe a little drop of information will leak out of this somewhere eventually.”

We drove half a mile down the road Lucia had indicated and parked in the cool green-tinted shadows of a great sprawling tree. Lucia turned then, and gave us a lecture, one that sounded as if she had been rehearsing it.

“Do you understand predestination?” she opened.

Big words always flabbergasted Monk, and she had addressed both of us, so I let Monk take that one and fumble with it. He saw what I was doing, scowled, and told Lucia, “If you mean have I gotta follow a plan that was laid out for me before I was born, I think it's bunk.”

Lucia was shocked. She was as startled as an old-fashioned roll-on-the-floor evangelist who'd heard a sinner say there wasn't any hell. She didn't even try to convince Monk that people are born for the Purpose; she believed it herself so strongly that it didn't permit argument; this Belief shown in her calm deep eyes.

Lucia said, “All who achieved greatness in history were equipped for it. Whether their greatness was for evil, or benevolent, they came into life bearing their tools readymade. They were prepared. Their way was ready for them. Take any of them—Alexander, Genghis Khan, Edison, Napoleon, Hitler. . . . Choose any of them at random, and you will find you have a man with a god-given quality or more than one quality that fitted him for his ordained place in the human race.”

She stopped for breath, and I said, “Let's take one fresh in mind, that late—we hope—Adolf Hitler. What would you say his pre-equipment was?”

She looked at me from a cool distance and said, “He was a man ordained for evil, and he had the tools he needed, intensity and a hypnotic sway over men. That's a good example for you to choose. You see what I mean? Greatness is pre-arranged, ordained—the plan is all made and the individual tailored to fit it.”

“Oh, what pap!” I said.

Lucia stiffened, lifted her chin two degrees, and addressed me as a misguided child. “No doubt you haven't investigated the subject, and there is no time to enlighten you now, even if there was any reason to do so.”

“For my money, it's piffle.”

She ignored a skeptic pointedly, continued with, “Accidents can happen in all things. It happens in plant life, I understand, when a new plant of entirely different type, called a sport, appears. . . . Still, that hardly makes my point. What I'm trying to say is those shining knights who enter this world destined for greatness carry their armor and weapons with unmistakable splendor, for everyone to see.”

If this was leading up to a point, or had a point, she was keeping it a mystery, and I was getting mighty curious. I watched her lifted face, intent eyes, aesthetic expression. She had the air of someone who wished to see a vision, and perhaps thought she might.

“Rich can't be,” she blurted suddenly. “If he was destined, I should certainly know. . . . After all, I'm his wife.”

I got it now. She didn't think her husband was cut out to shake the world. She couldn't see that he was carrying the ordainment, whatever that would be. . . . This tied in with what Thayer had mumbled about Lucia should have been born God, but Rich Thomas, her husband, had been instead. It hooked together,

but it didn't make sense.

“Monk,” I said, “what do you think?”

He had a thought that was as good as any of mine. He said, “Maybe the boys with the butterfly nets missed her.”

Lucia stiffened at that. And Preston Burroughs reached over, patted Lucia's hand comfortingly, and murmured, “Never mind, Lucia. They don't understand.”

But her feelings were hurt, and we had silence in large chunks until her husband Rich Thomas arrived at sixty miles an hour in a palomino-colored roadster that was new and expensive.

“Lucia!” he yelled while his tires were still shrieking to a halt. “What in hell's going on here?” He vaulted out of the car and strode toward us.

Rich Thomas appeared to me to be a perfectly nice uninhibited guy who wouldn't know a pre-destination if he saw one. He was not too handsome, not too athletic, not too sober-looking, but neither was he particularly deficient in any of these things. About thirty-five, with no hat and a cropped bullet head of tan hair. The kind of haircut the young scientists have gone in for.

“Who are you people?” he shouted at us. He looked at Preston Burroughs—without marked liking—and roared, “Press, what is my wife into?” He saw the gun Lucia was holding. “My God! She's got my new revolver!” he said.

Preston Burroughs opened his mouth to answer, but Lucia made the words.

“Rich, listen to me,” she said, “Leo Thayer was stabbed this afternoon. About noon. These two people did it and—”

“Hold it, Lucia,” I said. “You've got the wrong stabbers.”

She threw me a coldly aloof look and brushed my statement away with, “You arranged it, I'm quite sure. Poor Thayer was headed straight for your place. Two men actually did the stabbing. They were trying to keep Thayer from reaching you, weren't they?”

“I wouldn't know,” I said.

“Lucia!” yelled her uninhibited husband. “Start with something that makes sense? Thayer stabbed! I don't believe it! Why?”

“Listen to me, Rich,” Lucia said with saintly calm. “Leo Thayer thought someone was trying to steal It. He was investigating his suspicions. Thayer told me he felt someone was after the Discovery. But he wouldn't tell me who he thought was after the Secret.”

She said it like that, her tone capitalizing the words It, Discovery and Secret.

But I was staring at her husband now. I think we were all staring at him. A drawn grey look had whipped across his face, and his lips were stiff and drawing as if being pulled invisibly at the corners.

“Shut up, Lucia!” he gasped.

“Rich, I'm telling you why young Thayer was—”

“No, Lucia,” he said in a thin high voice of anxiety. “Don't say more.”

“But Thayer was still stabbed,” said Lucia calmly.

“How do you know? Did you see it?”

“I saw it. I was following Thayer. Do you want to know why I was following him, Rich? . . . It was because I wished to know whom he suspected. He wouldn't tell me. I thought I might learn whom he visited, and draw some conclusions.”

Rich Thomas moved a hand vaguely across his face. He was sick. His wife, by saying It, Discovery and Secret—the way she had said them—had made him ill.

Thickly, from a dull throat, he took: “What happened then, Lucia?”

“Why, I was disturbed,” his wife explained. “And I felt the need of advice. So I telephoned Mr. Burroughs.”

Rich Thomas looked at Burroughs, and some of his former bounce flickered back, and he asked unpleasantly. “And what help did you think he would be?”

“Mr. Burroughs and I see human values similarly,” she told him.

“The hell you do!” he said thoughtfully.

His wife ignored his tone with the tranquillity her pure feelings gave her, and told him the rest of it. “This young woman left the building where Thayer had gone. She had Thayer on a stretcher. Mr. Burroughs and I followed in my car. We saw a rather unbelievable incident—this young lady's station-wagon was forced inside a large truck, which then hurried her away, a prisoner, to the country near here. Mr. Burroughs followed, and I took her and this man, the driver of the truck, prisoner. Then we called you.”

“Great God, did you go off and leave Thayer wounded—”

“It wasn't Thayer. It was a papier-mâché dummy.”

I liked the way Rich Thomas said, “Whoosh!” Now he dug out a large white handkerchief and blotted his face, which still wore the stiff paleness. “Throw some more firecrackers,” he invited.

“There are no more.”

“You mean,” he demanded. “That you don't know who stabbed Thayer?”

Patently, showing faint surprise at his density, speaking elaborately as she would to a child, Lucia described the sparrow and his dull-witted giant. “They did the act.” She inclined her head at me. “Hired by these people.”

Rich Thomas examined me, and decided, “Lucia, you picked a nifty-looking number for the mastermind, anyway.” Then he frowned, stroked his jaw again, rubbing the jaw hard with the heel of his right palm. He was thinking. His eyes brought Burroughs, then his wife, into whatever he was debating about. And abruptly he asked, “Lucia, why did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Well—follow Thayer, for the first thing.”

“I wished to know who—”

“Baby, I told you, when this thing first came out of a test tube, that you were to forget about it. Frankly, I didn't like the look that came into your eye. I told you to forget all about it, remember?”

“But Rich—”

“This isn't like you, Lucia. This concealment—you didn't tell me that young Thayer had suspicions. I can understand Thayer not telling me—he didn't want to worry me because it might interfere with the experiments. Thayer is excitable and imaginative, and I'd warned him before about grabbing at the tail of every wild idea that came along. Yes, I see why Thayer didn't tell me. . . . But you, Lucia, you've pulled a new one on me. What got into you?”

“I wished to learn—”

“All right, baby, you wanted to know who had designs on my brain-child. . . . But why? What were you going to do when you knew—I take it you weren't going to tell me, from the way you acted.”

She gave him a look of high glory. She was Madonna. She was the essence of all purity. She was garbed in the shining light of righteousness, and she was destiny's little helper.

Lucia said: “I was not going to interfere with destiny. If the one in quest of it seemed to wear the robes of ordination, I was going to see that he got It.”

Her husband thought about that for a minute.

“Baby, do I get this right? . . . You were going to help some stinker rob me of something I've worked all my life on?”

She was sweet and sad now, and inward and knowing, righteous and certain. “Rich, my dear—my dear, dear Rich, you have not the qualifications of destiny. You were an accident, Rich darling. You're a fine husband, but it was never intended that you should hold such greatness in your hands—the power to change mankind, the shape of history, the way of the world. You have it now, Rich, but it was given to you by accident—it had to be. Rich, don't you understand that?”

He showed how well he understood it by saying, “Well, I'll be a flop-eared duck!” And showed what he thought of it with: “A lot of fine wifely ideas you've picked up!”

She was ice on an altar. She said, “You're a fine earthly and lovable man, Rich. Great destiny does not fit you. It was an accident.”

Her husband had other notions about it, and he looked darkly at Burroughs, demanded, “Look, Burroughs, did you put these butterflies in her head?”

Burroughs stiffened, passed a dry pink tongue over his lips, and shook his head. “Old boy, I assure you I had nothing to do with it. I don't even understand what the scuffling is all about.”

Rich Thomas made his hands into fists and put the fists on his hips. “Let me give you some advice, Burroughs. Chop us off your acquaintance list. Do you think you could do that?”

“Really, old fellow, I shouldn't like—”

“Either that,” Rich Thomas said, “or I'm going to smear your nose all over your face. . . . I don't like you, Burroughs. I shouldn't have neglected telling you.”

Burroughs, embarrassed, face a fire-engine red now, was unhappily, and perhaps prudently, silent.

Rich Thomas then swung on Monk and myself, saying, “Lucia seems to be wrong about nearly everything. Is she wrong about you people?”

“She,” Monk said, “hasn't hit a right note.”

“Who the hell are you?”

Monk, who didn't include modesty in his vices, gave himself a buildup as world-renowned chemist and Doc Savage aide, and did almost as well by me as Doc's cousin and beauty salon operator. But he didn't quite sell Rich Thomas.

“I've heard of Doc Savage, of course,” Thomas said suspiciously. “I admire the man enormously, as who doesn't. I'd know him by sight.” He scowled at Monk, and said, “I've heard of you, too—if you're Mayfair. But I don't know you by sight.”

“That makes it tough,” Monk admitted. “But if you'll look in my pocket, you'll find a billfold with cards, a driver's license—”

“I wouldn't believe anything I found in your pockets,” said Rich Thomas calmly. “But in your head—that might be a different matter.”

“Huh?”

“ $\text{HC}_2\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$,” said Thomas. “That mean anything to you?”

Monk said, “That's the formula for acetic acid. What's it supposed to mean to me?”

“I guess you're a chemist anyway.” Thomas shook his head, scowling, and added, “But it doesn't prove much—there are chemists back of every bush. . . . And what if it did? I don't want any part of you.” He drew in a heavy breath, pocketed his hands, darkened his scowl, and said, “Yeah, I don't want any part of outsiders.”

Now he swung on his wife again, demanding, “Is the tow-rope still in the car?. . . Oh, never mind—if it's destined to be there, it will be.” And he went around and jerked open the sedan baggage trunk, to return presently carrying a Manila tow-rope. “Stand still,” he told Monk and me.

Monk, his patience worn thin, said, “Wait a minute, brother! What's the go?”

“I'm going to tie you up, telephone the police, and let them pick you up here,” Rich Thomas advised him.

“The heck you are!”

“You think not, eh?” Rich Thomas went over and took the big revolver from his wife's fingers, turned with it, and added, “We can argue about it all you want to.” He waved the gun. “This is my argument.”

I tried out another Doc Savage gadget. It seemed about time for one. And since I had started out with grenades, I stuck with them. It was simple stuff, perhaps a little childish, and I could have been a bit more complicated, ingenious, and spectacular, because I was equipped for it. But nothing outstanding seemed called for.

This one was a button. A row of buttons ran down the front of my suit coat, and were rather thick and elaborate—but not obvious because since when is a flossy button on a woman's suit anything unusual. It was the third button. I pulled it off, let it go quick.

The button didn't make a great deal of noise opening, but then it wasn't designed for noise. It was as

quiet as night coming, and blacker than the darkest midnight. It made, in the first twentieth of a second, a black object—smoke—about the size of a bear. This didn't change for about another four-fifths of a second, then it really spread. Suddenly I couldn't see a thing, and that was frightening; it was like being in the abysmal blackness that eternity may be.

I said wildly, “Monk—” But Monk had already moved. He was familiar with Doc Savage's trinkets, and he had gone in on Rich Thomas. I could hear his feet, hurried, frenzied sounds; I could hear his hands on Rich Thomas, Thomas' gasp of pain. And Thomas' gun gave a great blatt that spiked terror into the darkness.

Then a clash, steel into steel, and a whine that was the limousine starter urging the big engine. I had expected that, and I went forward, not for the limousine door because I thought more of my looks than to have a scratching match in that smoke with Lucia. I headed for the front of the limousine, the engine hood, and got to it; the slick black metal was under my hands. The engine had caught and was throbbing, and the big car began to move.

I had another button now. I ground it against the ventilating louvers at the side of the engine hood; I could feel the wetness of the stuff from the button, feel the biting cold as it evaporated. The car lunged, was gone past me, and I fell back, wondering wildly if the chemical was something that would disfigure my hand. I didn't know about that. I had never asked—I'd just turned the original material into an expert chemist, and engaged him to make up the stuff enclosed in a button that could be crushed if one really wanted to crush it.

The late afternoon breeze moved the smoke away—not smoke, really, but a chemical nigricant. And Monk was sitting there, sitting on Rich Thomas' chest.

“You all right, Pat?” Monk asked.

“I'm fine.”

Monk pointed down the road. “There she goes, riding on destiny,” he said.

“Destiny will soon get out of breath,” I said, and had barely said it when the limousine engine died and the car—it was going uphill—made no more than fifty feet farther, and stopped.

Monk told Rich Thomas, “Don't let this worry you—I've rapped many a skull in my time, and killed nobody yet,” and he whacked Thomas alongside the head with the revolver. Then Monk loped toward the stalled limousine, waving the gun, bellowing. He was a figure that would have frightened a tribe of Indians. He howled, “Don't start anything!” And Lucia and Burroughs didn't.

When we had assembled them, Monk looked at me thoughtfully.

“What stopped their car?”

It was a little trouble telling him, because I didn't know the exact chemical composition of the stuff, only that it was a vapor that would be sucked into the limousine engine through the air intake and, mixing with the gasoline vapor, form a mixture that was absolutely useless for locomotion purposes.

“Uh-huh, I know that stuff,” he said. “I helped Doc develop it.”

“Did you?”

He looked at me again, intently and speculatively. “You're loaded down with little things like that, aren't you? . . . Pretty good job of it, too. I hadn't noticed.”

“I’ll bet you,” I said, “that you can’t name half of them that I have left.”

He grinned faintly. “I thought, when you asked me a few months ago to collect some of those gadgets for you, that you wanted to start a private museum.”

“I did. I’m wearing part of it.”

He indicated our prisoners. “You going to proceed along your own lines? Or take them to Doc?”

“Why, I wouldn’t think of denying Doc a little excitement,” I said.

He was clearly relieved.

Chapter VI

THEY stood, a group of fifteen or so nurses and internes, in the little anteroom that was the professional entrance to the hospital. They were wide-eyed, subdued, expectant; there was not much conversation, and one interne was doing most of that—he’d seen the operation, and he was telling two other internes about it, his voice a song of breathless wonder. . . .

I thought: *I wish they’d wait with bated breath this way to see me pass by. I wish that I’d done one thing in my life, just one, to make me worthy of that.* And I turned and went back to the limousine which we’d parked in the sweeping driveway, and Monk asked, “Is Doc coming?”

“In a few minutes, they said.”

The amount of prestige that Doc Savage had—where it counted, with people with enough specialized skill themselves to understand Doc’s skills—always awed me profoundly. It wasn’t just a thing like being hero-worshipped; that sort of idolatry means little and tomorrow is gone. This was fundamental, sincere, and I don’t think any of the hospital people loitering there envied him as much as they sincerely admired his ability. I know that people have worked a lifetime for just a little of what he was receiving here.

Monk was watching me speculatively, and he asked, “What’s eating on you, Pat?”

“Something that always sort of gets me. They’re waiting in there, to see Doc walk past.”

Lucia and husband Rich and Burroughs stirred a little in the rear seat. Monk looked around, and they were quiet again. Rich Thomas was resting his fingertips gently against the bruise Monk had put on the side of his head, but he wasn’t injured much.

Presently Doc Savage came from the building and moved toward us, swinging out with a kind of power in his stride that was smooth and natural. Doc Savage was a big man—not fat, just big—but I don’t think anyone quite realized it until they stood close to him. Not what a giant he was, really.

Doc was, unlike many unusual men, distinctive in almost all ways. He did not cultivate it—quite the contrary; he practiced a considerable effort to appear inconspicuous. It was about as effective as trying to make the Empire State Building look like one of the buildings in St. Louis. Doc’s size, his metallic bronze from tropical suns, his flake gold eyes, the remarkable regularity his features achieved without being pretty, were a combination he couldn’t bury.

He grinned slightly at me and said, “What, you’re not spending the day in a truck?”

“Hello, Doc. That idea was a little pixyish for you, wasn’t it?”

"I'm slightly ashamed of it." He glanced into the rear seat. "These your collection?"

I introduced Lucia, her husband and Burroughs to him. Lucia had a look on her face that said you-see-what-I-mean; men-of-destiny-wear-it-on-them. She was as impressed as if a house had fallen on her. Burroughs was pale-faced, wet-lipped, and looked a trifle ill. Rich Thomas grunted agreeably. He said, "My signing name is Richard Welfred Thomas. I'd be rather flattered if you'd heard of me."

"Thomas on Lecoplasts and Chloroplasts in the Sexual Cells of plants," Doc said.

Rich Thomas leaned back. He was as pleased as a school kid who had found his name on the passing-grade list.

I asked, "Doc, how did the operation go?"

"Fair enough."

"Has Thayer talked yet?"

He pretended not to hear this—indicating I shouldn't have asked the question—and said instead, "We'll drop in at your place of business, Pat. Okay?"

I was rather pleased, which shows my head wasn't cut in, and said it would be fine. Doc flicked down the jump-seat and rode in the back with our three guests. He exchanged no word with them; instead, he said nothing at all, except to answer a question of mine.

I asked him, "What are Lecoplasts and Chloroplasts, Doc?"

"Portions of the protoplasm in plants," he replied. "Chloroplasts carry green color. They're quite a mystery to science."

I was satisfied. But I noticed that Rich Thomas wasn't—he had become rather pale, his lips were flat against his teeth, and his eyes looked worried. . . . Had what I said upset him? I didn't see why.

"Are you allergic to chloroplasts, Mr. Thomas?" I asked.

He said nothing. He looked a bit more ill.

My place of business was functioning as if nothing had happened. Miss Colfax bent her shining head at us, and her voice was only two points cooler as she asked, "The young man, Leo Thayer, is his condition satisfactory?" I said it was, and Doc told her that Farrar was still at the hospital. We went into my private office.

"I'll make a cool drink," I said.

"You needn't bother. We'll hardly be here long enough for that," Doc Savage said quietly.

"I'll make it anyway." I went into the room where I kept my collection of Doc Savage gadgets. I had Lucia's purse with me—naturally I wasn't letting her carry it, while she was a prisoner.

I put a trinket in the handbag. It was about two inches long, the size of a cigarette. I slit the lining in an inconspicuous place, and inserted it.

I carried another gadget, a little continuously-operating micro-wave radio transmitter—a wonderful thing for spotting with a direction-finder—with me through a side door. I found Colfax.

“Put this in the shining black limousine downstairs,” I told Colfax. I described the machine, and gave her the license number, which she wrote down. “Get it out of sight. Under a seat cushion might do. Be sure they won't spot it readily if they jerk up the cushion and look.”

Colfax went away with the radio. It was about two-by-four-by-one inch in size.

Returning to the office, I looked Doc in the eye. “What did you mean—you wouldn't be here long enough for a drink? I got to thinking about that.”

“We're not staying,” he said calmly.

“No? Where are *we* going?”

“You're not.”

I nodded. “I think I get it. You're tossing me back into the dull, drab, work-a-day world where there's no nice excitement. That it?”

He nodded also. “Where you're not likely to get killed,” he added.

“We've been over this trail before,” I said.

Doc shrugged, turned to the three prisoners, and apologized, “Pat shouldn't have been involved in the beginning, of course. I hope you'll overlook the harsh words she will probably have to say now. . . . You'll go somewhere else with me to give your stories.”

Rich Thomas was pale. “Stories?” He put out a jaw that was now made of colorless stone. “There'll be none.”

Doc Savage's bronze face was normally expressionless, but not from any innate woodenness. He had an excellent actor's ability to register emotion when he wished, and now he showed a profusion of injured surprise.

Doc said: “But your friend, Leo Thayer, has been the victim of an attempted murder. Surely you wish to help find and punish the—”

“That's your idea,” Rich Thomas said. “Do it without us.”

“Rich, dear,” his wife said sharply. “Rich dear, I think—”

He swung on her like a frightened cat. “Think—if you want to. But keep your mouth shut!” he snapped.

Lucia drew herself up. She shone her soul out at him. She wrapped herself in shining white righteousness, and she said, “Rich, how can you fly in the face of things so clearly pre-ordained and arranged? How can you?”

“That, again!” said her husband.

She was unaffected, and she said, “Destiny has taken you by the hand, Rich, and you're trying to jerk away. You mustn't!”

Rich Thomas looked tired, frightened, and everything but uncertain. “Shut up, Lucia,” he said.

She said: “Mr. Savage may be the man destined to wear the cloak of greatness that dropped by mistake on your shoulders. Rich, it could be. Oh, it could be. I think he is!”

He said, “Nuts!” wearily. And then, scowling, “Honey, you’re hell-bent on giving my little discovery away, aren’t you?”

“I’m afraid for you, Rich,” she wailed.

“I’m afraid, too,” he growled. “But not that afraid.”

I was looking at Lucia, and I saw that she *was* afraid. That cool shining stuff she had been wrapping around herself—it wasn’t goofy psychic stuff, but plain unadulterated frost-edged fear. Our Lucia was scared just a bit beyond being a normal woman.

“It’s too great for you, Rich,” Lucia whimpered. “Oh my dear, I so wish you would put it in other hands.”

Her husband was unimpressed, or too frightened himself to be impressed. He jutted his jaw toward the door, said, “Get going, Lucia. We’re leaving.”

Lucia was a pillar of ice. “Rich, I’m going to tell Mr. Savage—”

Now her husband went toward her, having a little trouble with his long legs because he didn’t seem aware what he was doing. And that was the way he slapped her, as if it wasn’t quite of his own volition. He slapped her, and then pushed her toward the door, turning his head as they went, saying to Doc Savage, “You might keep us here. You might manage it. But damned if it will get a word out of us—”

“Stop them, Doc!” I gasped. “They know why Thayer was stabbed! We can get it out of them, I’m sure.”

Doc swung on Monk, said, “Monk, stay here and keep Pat. Don’t let her follow me.” And then he was out of the door after Rich Thomas and his paper-faced wife.

Monk suddenly stood between me and the door. “Huh-uh,” he said. “We stay here.”

“You big clunk!” I told him. “Let’s not miss this!”

“Ixnay.”

“There’s going to be more excitement than a Yaqui war-party. Doc is going to try to get the wife loose and pump her, and the husband is going to raise Cain. . . . And what the woman says to Doc is going to be interesting. This world-shaking destiny stuff has me intrigued.”

But Monk was adamant. He explained sheepishly, “I loused up the job Doc gave me of keeping you out of this. I don’t think it would look good if I flopped again.”

“You’re no pal of mine!”

“That,” he said, “should save me some bruises.”

It dawned on me that Burroughs had followed the Thomas pair and Doc, that he had actually preceded them through the door. I said, “At least go out and collar that Burroughs, Monk. We can work on him. Doc won’t mind, and it’ll pass the time.”

Monk was tempted, but shook his head. “Nope. Doc wants you out of the whole thing, and he wouldn’t like you questioning Burroughs.”

“I was a sucker to bring the three of them to Doc. I knew better.”

“I thought it was pretty wise.”

“The man has no gratitude. . . . And don't you start preaching to me to keep out of trouble. I should have jabbed you with that hypodermic needle while I had the notion.”

Monk grinned, and I think his grin was what tore it. Monk had promised me, under duress it was true, that he'd cut me in on the excitement, and there was something about the grin that said he was welshing. And happily.

“Come back here!” he yelled.

But I was out now, through the door, and I slammed the door in his homely agitated face. The door had a spring lock, and by the time he found his way around through the back, he would have some looking to do. I wouldn't be there. I ran for the elevators, had good luck and caught an express, and kept my fingers crossed all the way down to the lobby.

The crossed fingers did it. Doc Savage was in the lobby with the Thomas couple and Burroughs. They were arguing, the Thomas pair with pale, emotion-ridden faces, and Doc intent, dominant, obdurate.

Burroughs seemed to be listening, flapping his hands, and scrubbing his face with the white handkerchief. Suddenly he showed spirit. He spoke—I didn't get the words, but it was violent—and then he wheeled and strode to the street. . . . Which was as far, I thought for a moment, as his little blaze of determination was going to take him.

Halting in front of the building, still plainly visible from the lobby, Burroughs displayed a dither. An actor couldn't have done better with indecision. He even did a little teetering dance on his toes. He blotted with the handkerchief again. He threw undecided glances back at Doc, Lucia and Rich Thomas. They were not, or seemed not to be, paying him the least attention.

Burroughs fooled me and didn't come back. He walked away. He was out of sight. Gone. *Doc is making a mistake*, I thought. *That fellow isn't just a friend of the be-destinized Lucia.*

Doc seemed to be winning over Rich and Lucia. He would. They didn't have a chance. Doc Savage in an argument was about as easy to cope with as an earthquake, although he didn't use an earthquake's tactics—very often. There was something mesmeric about Doc's deep-throated, flexible, controlled voice; when he really wanted to talk, he could make a spell, turn black to white with profound convincingness. He was hypnotic. Literally, I mean. As a part of his early training, he had worked under masters of the occult in India, and in Tibet, and although I wasn't inclined to feel the mystics in Tibet were any more mystic than the psychiatrists on Central Park West, Doc Savage had acquired a compelling power from somewhere.

So I kept in the background and watched Rich and Lucia lose the battle of wills. Lucia, actually, was on Doc's side all along, but he didn't need her aid. With words, that wonderful compelling force Doc owned, he laid indecision across Rich's face, then defeat, surrender. And Rich was nodding his head helplessly, just as Doc was also nodding—very much as if hypnotized, I thought. And it could be. I'd seen Doc do unbelievable things with hypnotic suggestion.

Now they turned and went toward the door, arm in arm, like pals. They pushed through the great slabs of glass that were the doors. Lucia had her handbag. She'd taken it from my office upstairs, or her husband had. I couldn't remember which, but anyway she had it, and my little gimmick would be inside. Probably I wouldn't need to use it now. Doc had talked them into telling him what earth-shaking thing destiny had handed to Rich Thomas.

Stepping out confidently now, I came up behind them and said, "I won't break the spell, will I?"

Doc, who normally didn't miss as much as the movement of a fly within fifty feet of him, jumped visibly, wheeled, gave me a look that would have corroded brass.

"I thought Monk—"

"So did he. But the schemes of mice and men gang aft—"

"Pat," he said wearily, "would you do me a favor?"

"Not this time, probably. Not if it's to go away and mind my own business—because, come to think of it, I consider this little mystery my business."

He swung to the Thomas pair, said, "Excuse me a moment, will you," and turned back to me frowning. He gripped my arm.

"Let go my arm, cousin! If you think—"

"No, no," he said impatiently. "Come over here a moment, and I'll tell you why I want you to take your oar out of it."

"Is it some good reason like a young woman should never partake of any excitement?"

"No, it's more to the point than that."

"Okay, then I'll listen."

Unhappily, his attention divided between my intrusiveness, and his imminent success with the Thomas couple, he led me to the curb and along it a few yards, intending to get out of earshot of Rich and Lucia Thomas. . . . And I noticed Mr. Burroughs. He hadn't gone away, not entirely away.

Mr. Burroughs stood about fifty feet distant, facing us, and about him was the air of a man who'd lost his nerve and was returning to have it out.

I pointed, said, "There's Burroughs, Doc. He didn't leave after all—"

I tried to scream. I tried and tried, and got my mouth open, and all the breath crammed against vocal cords that I could, and I would have screamed, only there wasn't time for it. There wasn't the fiftieth of a second that a scream took to get going.

He had come from between two parked cars. A big man, a great oak-fisted man I didn't know, didn't want to know, wished I had never seen. He had what they call a blackjack. A sap, a persuader, a skull-buster. It's against the law to carry them, although they're just a little leather sack containing buckshot.

He didn't hit Doc squarely. But enough. And Doc sank, turning sidewise slowly. Not out. Not kayoed. But not feeling good. The big man hit again, and Doc avoided that one. The man swung four times as if he was fighting bumblebees, and Doc evaded them all. But now there was another man behind Doc, and he didn't miss. He had a sap too. There were two more men. Three. They came from the air, the sidewalk, out of the sunlight.

Men I didn't know, had never seen. They beat Doc down. He didn't have a chance. Ten men wouldn't have had a chance. And I was in it, trying to help. I got an arm, and I think I broke it, because the man screamed that way.

Flame, unbelievable noise with it came against my face. I was being shot at. He was two feet away. Why he missed, no one can possibly know; it may have been because I was moving hard. And now I moved harder, around and through the men beating Doc—beating, stamping, kicking. I wanted behind them. I wanted the bullets to go into them first.

What was happening to Rich and Lucia Thomas? I got that too. They were receiving attention, and from a pair that were no strangers. From the sparrow, and his witless big shadow. They were being driven into a waiting car.

Mr. Burroughs too, I saw. He was drifting across the sidewalk, his feet traveling about twice as fast as he was, and skidding on the concrete. He was heading for the Thomas limousine, and he went into it, but without opening the door to do so. He went in through a window, headfirst.

This I saw in twisting awry confusion, like the scenes from a motion picture projector where the film had torn and was flipping through crosswise and everywise. Because I was running, twisting and lunging. I was doing a beautiful job of evasive running for the protection of the building lobby. I was doing it without knowing anything about it. Instinct purely. Terror stormed with me, and the street was full of gunsound. I didn't need to push open the fine great plate glass doors. They fell to pieces before me, dissolved into fragments. Bullets had done that. And I went through the brittle, jangling, cascading fangs of glass and dived to the right.

I was safe now. At least death wasn't roaring in my face. But I had for a while yet, seven or eight seconds it may have been, the weird detached feeling, unreal, far-apart, that was so unnatural. I got it—the feeling—off me; I forced it away from me, and the terror that got me then was worse than it had been. For I was certain I was shot. I was sure that was the only thing that would explain the way my physical part had moved without any instructions from my mental part.

But I seemed to be all right. All together. Two arms, two nice legs, all shaking like paint-mixers.

I looked back outside, at the street. It would have been easier to put my head in the mouth of a starving lion.

They were going with Doc Savage already. They had thrown Doc in a car, just heaved him in; I could see Doc's limp arm draped across a door.

They had a second car, and Rich and Lucia Thomas were in that one. The sparrow was with them, and his slow-fire lackey. And two other men who had been in the group who took Doc.

These two cars, one carrying Doc and men, the other Rich and Lucia Thomas and men, were actually in motion when I saw them. Hurried motion. They had poured bullets, noise and excitement into the street, and it was no place to tarry. The two cars were gone in an instant.

And now Burroughs left. He was in the Thomas limousine; a fat mouse in an iron hole was the way he looked with his fear-greyed face sticking barely high enough to see over the cowling. He fled in the long black car, clipping a fender of a parked machine, already traveling forty-five when he took the first corner.

The evening sun now fell in the street, and the air was still, the people in the street were still, and everything stayed quietly suspended until a piece of glass that had been hanging undecided now fell off one of the doors. But that didn't break the silence. It brought on more of it.

Follow them, I thought. Pat, get going, follow them, you quaking fool. You wanted excitement, you got it, and you can have some more. Just follow them. So I began telling my legs to take me out on

the street and into the first car and follow them. It was not likely I could catch them, less likely that I could trail them, and least probable of all that I could accomplish anything if I did succeed with either of the first two. Those had been rough boys. They were too much for my playhouse. . . .

But the point, the ridiculous point of it, was that my legs wouldn't do anything that I wanted. They had ideas of their own. They were too busy beating together and trying to let me down on the floor.

Then Monk Mayfair was there. Monk, his small eyes bigger than I had ever seen them, his face as if a witch had walked across it. He came galloping from the elevators. He was beside me. He said something that didn't make sense.

He said, "Pat! You're shot!"

I said, "They got Doc! A thing like that never happened before!"

I used a voice I didn't know. A stranger's voice. As calm and clear as a three-heart bid in bridge. It wasn't even related to the family of my terrors.

"You're shot!" Monk said.

"It was my fault!" I said, still in that wonderful voice. "If I hadn't bothered Doc, they wouldn't have taken him by surprise. I know they wouldn't have—so it's my fault. If they kill him, that will be my fault too."

The witch went over Monk's face again, this time with a frightened spell, and he gripped my arm, yelled, "Pat! Stop talking like that!"

"They took Doc away. Men did. They were terrible men. They took Rich and Lucia, and Burroughs ran away—"

"Pat! Oh my God, Pat!" He turned around and bellowed, "Somebody get a doctor, an ambulance!" His small voice was now big the way it was when he got excited. It was a circus calliope. "Get a doctor! This girl's shot and out of her head and—"

I became vaguely interested in a detached far-dreaming way, but there wasn't anything very personal about it. Some girl was injured—I was actually that far from it; I didn't seem much bothered about who the girl was. Just slightly interested, just barely enough to raise a hand and touch my face and notice how sticky it was, then bring the hand far enough from my eyes to focus on it.

The color red was on my hand, and if the color red can get into a scream, it was in mine.

Chapter VII

FARRAR finished with gauze, tape, and something from a bottle that burned like the devil's tears—a lot of paraphernalia and fuss for no more than they had found wrong with me.

"I'm all together again?"

Farrar said patiently, "On the average of twice a month I give myself a worse wound while shaving."

"You don't need to be sarcastic just because I thought I had been slaughtered."

"I'm not," he said. "I'm profoundly worried."

Monk Mayfair, voluntarily doing something he usually avoided if possible—taking the rap—said sheepishly, “I guess it was my fault. When I saw the blood on her face—after all that shooting—I thought she had been shot.” He looked at me. “You’re lucky it was only a small cut. But how did you get it?”

“I didn’t see any knives being thrown. I guess it was a piece of glass. There was plenty of that.”

Monk had been using the telephone, talking with the police, and he handed me the instrument. “They want your description of the outfit that pulled this.”

The inadequacy of what I could tell the police made me feel stupidly inadequate. Except for the sparrow and his dull shadow, I couldn’t even be sure how many. Seven or eight? Ten? I didn’t really know. There could have been ten, and certainly not less than six. The police seemed to think it was a pretty fair description of everyone, considering circumstances, but probably they were accustomed to the vague descriptions most spectators give.

I hung up and gave Monk a look that was undoubtedly as beaten as I felt.

“Monk, I can’t get over the feeling it was my fault. If I hadn’t bothered Doc—”

He shook his head gloomily. “Nobody bothers Doc enough to get him into trouble, Pat. . . . Are you sure he didn’t *let* them take him? He might have let that happen deliberately so he could get a line on them—”

“No, but I wish I could believe that,” I said.

And for a few moments I tried very hard to believe it, to think that Doc Savage had been manipulator rather than victim. But nothing solid would come from the hope. Even though I knew Doc’s fantastic way of maneuvering incident to his use—oh, Doc hadn’t staked this. He couldn’t have.

“Monk, we’ve got to get hold of Ham, Renny, Johnny and Long Tom,” I said grimly. These four were the other members of Doc’s group of aides, the men who normally worked with him. “We’re going to need help.”

Monk’s bleak look shocked me. “Renny, Johnny and Long Tom are in London. I cabled them. But they’re not going to be able to get here any faster than planes fly.”

“What about Ham Brooks?”

“I was coming to that. Ham is on a vacation. He’s doing something he never did before—going fishing. You know what a fashion plate and fop with clothes Ham is? You’d think a canoe trip in Quebec would be his idea of purgatory. But that’s what he’s doing. And God knows where he is. I phoned, sent telegrams, and I’ve got a Canadian radio station trying to locate him.”

“You did all that while Farrar was patching me up?”

“Yes, and damned ineffective it was.”

Monk was a wonderful guy. He was direct and primitive, in spite of the ability as a chemist that had made him known worldwide. You never had to guess what Monk was thinking or feeling. He was discouraged now, and angry at his helplessness. He demonstrated his state of mind by suddenly kicking over a chair.

“By God, if we only knew what to do next!” he yelled.

I went into my gadget museum and brought back a radio direction-finder for the ultra-high-frequencies. It was a good one with a new type of five-element beam antennae—it would spot the signal exactly, with

none of that old stuff of not knowing whether the transmitter being nulled upon lay in one of two directions. One direction only, it told you.

“What good will that contraption—”

“I put a continuous-note U.H.F. transmitter in the limousine, or had Colfax do it. Burroughs fled in the machine. . . . Monk, I have a considerable curiosity about that Burroughs. How did he ring to you?”

“He rang,” Monk said, “like a cracked bowl. By golly, give me that locator, and I’ll go fishing for the guy.”

“Be careful.”

“You know me,” Monk said, and bolted out with the U.H.F. locator.

I knew him. He was never careful. He was as discreet as a foghorn, and his fighting tactics were as well-controlled as a bull on ice. But I had a suspicion Monk’s kind of approach would work well with Mr. Burroughs. If Burroughs was a fox in sheep’s clothing, Monk was the fellow to shake the wool off him.

I called Miss Colfax.

“Colfax, you know that an armada of thugs have seized Doc Savage, Rich and Lucia Thomas, and they are probably in the worst kind of danger. . . . They were all seized because Rich Thomas has some world-shaking discovery that they’re after.”

Miss Colfax seemed unusually pale. “Yes. . . . But it is so terribly melodramatic—”

“The world-shaking discovery, you mean? I don’t care how it sounds to you, Colfax. I’m sure it’s terrific. A gang of men don’t shoot up New York streets for peanuts.”

“Oh, but I didn’t mean—I think I meant it is all so astounding I can hardly credit my senses.”

“When we find what the fuss is about, Colfax, I’ll bet it’s a humdinger. That’s why I want to know about Rich Thomas. I want everything that can be dug up on Rich Thomas.”

“Rich Thomas? But who is he and—”

“That’s the job I’m giving you, Colfax. Get on the telephone and start at it. Your working day is about over, but I’ll pay overtime—”

Colfax had been staring at the floor. She looked up rather oddly. “I wouldn’t accept overtime for a thing like that.”

“Well, you’ll get it anyway. This isn’t your affair, and I don’t expect you to do detective work for nothing.”

“You wish me to assemble information on Thomas?”

“Exactly. He’s a plant man—I mean plants that grow. A botanist, or whatever the word would be. You can start with that.”

“The word,” said Colfax, “might be phytotomist, phytobiologist, mycologist, dendrologist—” She stopped the big words, looked away fixedly.

“For heaven's sake, Colfax! Where did you pick up that terminology? . . . Never mind. Rich Thomas is probably well-known in his field. Doc knew him by reputation.”

Colfax nodded. “I'll do my best, Pat.”

“Thanks, I'm going to the hospital to see if there is any possibility of learning anything from the young fellow Thayer, who walked in here with an ice-pick in his back.”

Colfax turned her face toward me, and it was stiff, and her lips hardly moved as she said, “I could do that for you, Pat.”

“Go to the hospital to see Thayer? Why should you?”

“It may be dangerous for you to venture on the streets.” Colfax said rigidly.

“They won't catch me asleep again, Colfax. I'd almost welcome trouble. It would be an opening in this stone wall we're up against.”

Colfax turned away. She had always been a cold, withdrawn and ice-mannered woman, and I had never seen her this upset.

On the way out, I stopped to ask June Davis, the switchboard operator, if she would stay on overtime, and she said she would, gladly. I asked her to carefully list all calls, then brought her a wire recording device and showed her how to use it to get a record of any suspicious voice that might telephone. And I told her to make arrangements with the telephone company to have any call traced quickly, and if the phone people had any objections, to get the police to authorize the tracing.

Twenty minutes later, feeling a little shaky simply because nobody had bothered me enroute, I walked into the hospital. I got good service—not remarkable in itself, since it was funds supplied by Doc Savage which kept the hospital in existence.

But all the service in the world couldn't make young Leo Thayer talk. He was unconscious. There was no way known to surgery to rouse him, even for a few minutes. The coma was certain to last another twelve hours, probably longer. It was stupefying news, and the hospital officials were distraught about it. They'd heard, probably from the police, of Doc Savage's misfortune.

A Doctor Herman Pressman, a tall, tin-faced brain surgeon who was staff chief, stopped me as I turned disconsolately away. “Miss Savage—would you—uh—step into my office,” he asked uncertainly.

Sharply curious—the hospital head had something worrying him—I followed him into his glistening office with its antiseptic efficiency, and he closed the door.

He said, “Miss Savage—in view of what has happened to Doc—some information—I'm aware of Doc's disapproval of involving you in danger, but I believe you're the one to know.”

“What information is this?”

“The patient—Thayer—data on him which Doc Savage asked us to assemble.”

I was startled. Then hope bounded up in me until my face felt hot. “Oh, wonderful, Pressman! Maybe you've got something that will help.”

Pressman wasn't, he said—his uncertainty subsided as he talked—sure that it would be of much value, but it was this: Doc Savage had, from the laundry marks on Leo Thayer's clothing, enlisted the aid of the

police laundry bureau and located Thayer's home address.

Thayer lived in an apartment in Jackson Heights, a living-room-bedroom combination. He was unmarried, lived alone, was twenty-eight years old, paid his rent regularly, and didn't have to be called down for wild parties. He had a girl friend, a nice person about his age or a little older, dark-haired, pretty in an austere way, who dressed gorgeously. They were engaged, it was understood, but Pressman hadn't been able to learn the girl's name nor anything more about her.

Leo Thayer was a phytotomist. That was one of the words Colfax had used.

"What is that, Pressman?"

"That one got me too, and I looked it up," he said. "It wasn't easy to find, but it's a science dealing with the vegetative substance of plants. A branch of botany, I suppose you would call it. But specialized."

Then Pressman said that Leo Thayer worked for a Mr. Rich Thomas. He was employed by Thomas to work at his profession of phytotomist. I'd known that Thayer worked for Thomas, but not as phytotomist, or plant expert or whatever the word meant.

"What did you find out about Thomas?" I demanded.

Very little, Pressman said. They had tried to contact Thomas to tell him his employee had met with a misfortune, but had failed—naturally, because Thomas and his wife had been out making trouble for Monk and myself—and there was very little more on the book about Thomas, except that he was also a phytotomist.

"That's all," said Pressman. "Except that, really, someone should notify Thayer's employer, Thomas, that the young fellow is in the hospital. I have Thomas' address here—he lives up in Westchester."

"Pressman," I said, "Let's have the Thomas address. You certainly save your climaxes for the last."

Chapter VIII

SO I drove to Westchester, helped along at eighty miles an hour during the last part of the trip by a pair of cops in a patrol car. They were behind me for a while, but caught me, and we talked it over and they went ahead.

I hoped that the going-over I intended giving the Thomas establishment would help clear up the mystery, particularly as to why there should be so much skull-duggery over something a phytotomist had discovered. And it began to look promising even before I got to the Thomas place.

Stopping at a suburban drugstore, as the country became a winding network of lanes through estates of considerable size, I used the telephone to get my office. Monk surprised me by answering.

"Monk! You're back! Have you got Burroughs?"

"I lost the signal," he said bitterly.

"What! You mean somebody found the transmitter I had Colfax hide in the car?"

"No, I don't think so," Monk explained. "I got a good null on the signal, and a buildup that showed I was getting nearer the transmitter—how much nearer, of course, it's impossible to tell. The locator doesn't do that much for you. . . . But the point is, all of a sudden the signal went out."

“You mean it snapped off? As if the transmitter had been switched off, or smashed?”

“No, a slow die. Or a quick fade. There wasn't any change in the carrier, no click as if power had been cut.”

“You know how those U.H.F. tubes behave when the heater voltage fails. Was it like that?”

“No, it took seven or eight seconds to die. Were the batteries fresh?”

“The batteries were perfect.”

“I wish we had Long Tom Roberts here,” Monk complained. “He's the electrical expert of this gang.”

“Check with the police to learn whether the limousine was in a crash—”

“I already did. No dice.”

“All right, will you see what you can dig up on Burroughs? Let's know more about the man.”

“Will do.”

“Good. I'll see you later.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” Monk exclaimed. “Where are you? What are you doing? Don't you know there might be trouble floating around looking for you?”

“I have two fine big strong cops for company,” I said. “Handsome devils, both of them. I'll be all right.”

The policemen liked that, if Monk didn't, and I knew they were going to stick with me. I didn't mind. They weren't particularly handsome, but they seemed to think they were special gifts to the ladies, one of them more than the other.

I asked the druggist behind the prescription counter, figuring a prescription man would know more about the neighbors than the soda clerks, if he could tell me where to find the Rich Thomas home. He said take the left turn at the next corner and follow my pretty nose to an estate with a lot of greenhouses, and added, “Don't tell me you're another one going out there looking for a job?”

I didn't know whether or not to be flattered by his impression that I would be looking for work on a country place.

“Why, aren't the Thomas couple good people to work for?” I asked.

He hesitated, shrugged, said, “I shouldn't be talking about the neighbors, but that wife of his gives me a slight pain. A reformer, she is. Know what she did once? Bawled me out for letting kids spike their cokes here. Hell, we don't allow that.”

“I've met her,” I said. “I wondered if she would be pleasant to work for.”

“Oh, she's all right. Probably make you keep bell-hours, get in at nine every night. Husband seems all right, though. Congenial guy, that Rich Thomas. You know what he means from what he says.”

“Then they should be fair employers.”

He grinned. “Sure, if you bring your own food.”

“Bring my own food? What do you mean? Do they put everybody on a diet, or something?”

“That's it.”

“What is *it*?”

“Diet,” he said dryly. “They insist on feeding their employees out there.”

“What's bad about that, in these days of high food costs?”

“It's what they feed them.”

“What's that?”

“That's the odd part. Nobody knows—except Rich Thomas, of course. And for some reason or other he won't tell the help what they're being fed. It isn't ordinary stuff—like potatoes and lettuce and fruit. . . . Fellow named Gridley, gardener for them, was telling me about it. Stuff didn't taste bad, he said. Seemed to agree with him. But he wants to know what he's eating, and he's about to quit.” The druggist paused, chuckled, and added, “Seems rumor got around the food wasn't something the help would eat if they knew what it is. You know how quick something like that could play heck with an appetite.”

“I can imagine,” I said.

The two policemen had been listening, and seemed quite intrigued, whether with me as a woman, or with the mystery as a mystery, or with its connection with Doc Savage, I couldn't tell. But it wasn't important. They went along with me, and contacted headquarters over their radio while they were doing it, to learn that nothing had been heard from Doc Savage.

The Thomas estate, not a flamboyant place, was spread over three or four acres. It was mostly greenhouses which looked well-used, and enclosed in a stone wall to which had been added, quite recently, an extra six feet of steel-mesh factory fence topped by three vicious-looking barbed wires.

“Looks as if they didn't want unannounced visitors,” one of the cops remarked, and we went inside and asked for Gridley, the gardener who didn't like the food.

Greenhouses, the glasswork invariably daubed with whitewash to cut down the strength of the sunlight, always look shabby. But some of these were nearly dilapidated. The house, a white frame building, colonial, stood back in a swatch of lawn that was strictly functional.

Gardener Gridley, a flabby, rheumy-eyed man of fifty, was impressed by the policemen. Better still, he either led a blameless life, or had something to conceal by talking willingly—at any rate, he was a fountain of information.

Yes, said Gridley, the food was odd. It was—well, he didn't know how to describe it. You couldn't tell what it was. In appearance, it was—well, you know how custards taste? And cheeses of some types? And some cakes and candies? That was the general idea.

“You think maybe this Thomas was trying to poison you?” one of the policemen asked suspiciously.

“Oh, good Lord, no! No! Mr. Thomas. He's a nice man. And his wife wouldn't let him anyway—she's as straight-laced as a saint.”

“Was the stuff you ate highly seasoned?”

“Not specially.”

“Did it taste bad?”

“No, it didn't,” said Gridley uncomfortably. “It kinda had a good taste, most of it. But different like. . . . Me, I want to know what I'm getting for my grub.”

“And Rich Thomas wouldn't tell you?”

“That's right, he wouldn't. Made a big secret of it.”

“Big secret?”

“I mean, nobody could get it out of him what we had to eat, and why we had to eat it in the first place.”

“You *had* to eat this odd food?”

“Or quit our jobs,” said Gridley angrily. “Ain't that a hell of a note!”

I asked, “Anything else odd going on around here lately?”

Gridley shrugged. “Nope. Except the lab has been off limits for the help.”

“The lab?”

He pointed. “That brick building yonder. Mr. Thomas wouldn't even let Mrs. Thomas in there. I heard him telling her to stay out.”

We went to look at the laboratory, and there were two peculiar things that met the eye at once: The windows had been bricked up solid recently. The door had been steel-plated.

One of the policeman pointed at the padlock, said, “That wouldn't be an easy thing to open.”

“Oh, you couldn't go inside!” gasped Gridley excitedly. “Mr. Thomas has been very secretive about what is inside. He wouldn't like it.”

I said, “Suppose you gentlemen take a walk around to the back and see if there is a rear door that might be open.”

One of the cops caught on, or anyway took the chance to wink at me, and he and his companion and Gridley wandered around to the rear. Gridley was protesting the back door had been bricked up too.

I tore a flap off the breast-pocket of my jacket, wrapped it around the padlock, found a long twig, moistened the tip with my tongue, applied a bit of what could have passed as lint from another pocket, and touched the fabric on the lock. The result was heat, white and terrific, actually blinding me momentarily before I could turn my eyes away. When I looked again, the lock, all except the staple, was molten liquid dripping to the ground.

Brother, I thought, I'm not going to wear that stuff as a pocket flap again. Think what would happen if it got touched off accidentally!

The two officers and Gridley, having seen the flash light up the neighborhood, came running.

“The lock fell off,” I explained.

This got a puzzled grin from the one who had winked. He peered at the molten metal, still smoking, and sniffed the air. “Some variety of thermit, if you ask me,” he said.

He could go to the head of the class on that. The other officer shoved open the door, drew his

gun—probably to impress me, although I would have done the same thing—and stepped inside.

His, “The hell!” boomed out inside. It had an empty sound. He added, “Somebody done a job in here.”

He meant a job of destruction. Selective destruction. Certain equipment had been spared, but nothing that would indicate what the laboratory had been used for. There was a large electric furnace of the industrial type, and this had been used to systematically melt down metal and glass parts. There was no way of telling what else had been destroyed by heat.

“Rich Thomas did this,” I suggested.

“Could be,” said an officer. “Time, patience, and thoroughness went into this job.”

I said, “If Rich Thomas was this careful, we're not going to find anything on the place that will help us.”

They seemed to think so too.

“Gridley,” I said, “do you know a man named Burroughs?”

Gridley nodded eagerly. “Mr. Burroughs, the food products manufacturer,” he said. “Yes, Miss. He came here often.” He started to say something else, probably that Burroughs came most often to see Mrs. Thomas, and changed it to, “He was a friend of the family, Miss.”

“Food products manufacturer?” I asked. “Is that Burroughs' business?”

“Well, yes. Only I don't think he is active in it now. I understood he was retired.”

“Know anything else about Burroughs, Gridley?”

He didn't.

We poked around a bit more, accomplished nothing, and took a path that led back to our cars. One of the policeman, the winking one, emitted a grunt, snatched out his gun, and sprang into some bushes that edged the path. There was a scuffle, and the officer came out of the bush with Monk Mayfair.

“Monk!” I gasped. “How did you—I thought you—”

Monk jerked away from the policeman, told the latter who he was, then told me, “When you pulled that stuff about not telling me where you were, it scared me. I checked with the police, and found out where these two officers were escorting you.”

Both of the officers looked startled, and one said, “We didn't tell the station where we were going!” But Monk said, “You probably did, and forgot about it.” But I knew he was lying.

After he heard what we had found, Monk said, “Let's take a look at what grows in the greenhouses before we go.”

We did, and left knowing no more than before. Except that the greenhouses didn't grow any one thing—not flowers alone, nor vines alone. There was a little of almost everything including, carefully cultivated, a lot of common weeds.

Monk decided we should use his car for the trip back, picking up mine later. His reason was obvious, because he was driving one of Doc's cars, and it was armor-plated. The policemen made a way for us back to the city, faster than I really cared to ride.

“You dig up anything on Burroughs, Monk?”

“Some, before you got me excited. . . . He used to have a big job, vice-president, in a corporation that manufactured in the general food line. Got let out a couple of years ago. Retired, he calls it. Fired. His former employers wouldn't say why. Burroughs is unmarried, has a Park Avenue apartment, lives high, and has run through better than a hundred thousand dollars in the two years. He puts up a front. Pretends to be still wealthy, and looking for a new business venture in the foods line. He has less than ten thousand bucks left to his name.”

“That's quite a lot on Burroughs.”

“It doesn't do us any good,” Monk complained. “It doesn't find Doc. I'm getting hell-fired worried about Doc.”

“How did you find me at the Thomas place, Monk?”

“Huh? Why, I told you—”

“Try it again, in a way I'll believe.”

He grimaced angrily, not particularly out of irritation with me, but because he was bothered about Doc. “Oh, if you must know, Doc has had one of those radio U.H.F. transmitter gadgets spotted in your car for months. Just in case you got in a mess, and we had to hunt for you.”

“For months, you say? But the batteries on those things run down—”

“Not the new kind—not for about a month. The gadget draws only a few mils of current, and these new batteries hold out surprisingly.”

The patrol car left us at Grand Concourse, and after that we had to drive more sanely. I was feeling almost as worried about Doc as Monk looked by the time we reached my business place.

Chapter IX

“I THINK,” said Monk, as the elevator carried us up, “that we have the pieces of the puzzle in our hands. If we could only put them together!”

“The same thought is frightening me,” I admitted grimly.

We stopped at the phone switchboard to look over the list of calls June Davis had made. Nobody particularly suspicious had called, so she hadn't used the recorder.

Colfax was in the outer office, the client's reception room over which she presided. She was pale, austere, and her voice was as cool as icewater in a glass.

“How did you come out with Thayer, Colfax?”

She lifted her head rigidly and asked, “Is Leo Thayer all right at the hospital? You went there—”

“You were to gather information on Thayer, Colfax. Let's have it.”

Her head bent down; her voice was a cool mountain stream flowing over stone. She had everything the hospital had learned about Thayer—he was a plant expert—he worked for Rich Thomas—he lived in

Jackson Heights. Then she gave an astonishing, considering how hard it is to make a quick investigation of a man, flood of new data. The town in Iowa where Thayer had been born, his high school, his college—both in Iowa. Three previous jobs Thayer had held before joining Rich Thomas. His good record. Even personal details, where he bought his clothes, names of his friends—she had these latter listed, and handed me the list, but there was no one on it who meant anything, except Burroughs—and a lot of other stuff.

“That's wonderful, Colfax.”

“Thank you,” she said stiffly. “Is Mr. Savage—do you think he's safe?”

“He's certainly not safe, Colfax. We haven't found a trace of him.”

In a voice that she drew from some far unpleasant place, Colfax said, “That is quite terrible. . . . And no trace of the Thomas couple, or Burroughs? . . . You tried to trail Burroughs by the little radio transmitter I put in the Thomas limousine, didn't you?”

“We lost it,” Monk said. “Lost the signal. It died out.”

“Maybe,” said Colfax hopelessly, “it faded out. They do, don't they? My radio at home fades. And I've noticed in a car, when you go over a steel bridge, they die out. Couldn't the limousine have gone into a metal building or something? And if it was driven out, you'd hear it again, wouldn't you?”

“The way that radio went out, something happened to it,” Monk said.

“Well, I wouldn't know,” Colfax said quietly, in a voice she hardly seemed to bring forth.

When we were in my office, Monk remarked, “That Colfax is efficient, isn't she? Dug up everything on Thayer. Too bad none of it helps us much.”

Suddenly I was weak at the knees. I went to the desk, walking woodenly, I think, and dropped in a chair there. My face tingled sharply, as if electricity was on it, then it grew abruptly fever-hot. I put my hands on the desk and lying there on the desk they looked silly, inadequate, futile; stupid female hands that had thought they were clever, but really had no competence in them. Belonging, I had to think sickly, to an excitement-chasing girl who had best stick to the beauty business if she couldn't do any better than this.

“It did,” I said.

“Huh? Did what?” Monk had his eyes closed now, and he was probably beating at his brain in the hope of flushing an idea out of its usually adept cells.

“Colfax's information did mean something.”

Monk's face was erratic—hope, doubt, chased each other—and he demanded, “What do you mean, Pat?”

“Would water—a soaking—stop the thing from transmitting? It would, wouldn't it?”

“The radio in the limousine, you mean? I suppose it would. For a while, anyhow.”

“A while—wouldn't it go out permanently?”

“Why, I talked to Long Tom Roberts about that one time. He designed them, you know. He said that the contraption could be dried out if it got wet, and would be as good as new.”

“A bomb!”

“Huh?”

“Monk, they—Burroughs or somebody—took the radio out of the car and put it in water. That's what you do with a bomb, isn't it? They thought it was a bomb. That's what happened. The water soaked in slowly, and the little set gradually died out.”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Monk complained. “It's all right to make deductions. But you're jumping at conclusions too wildly.”

“Turn on your locator.”

“What?” He stared at me. “It won't bring in a thing, I tell you. I lost that transmitter once, and it was smashed or—”

“Want to bet?”

He frowned and scrubbed a hand against the side of his homely face. “You sound strained, as if . . .” Suddenly he growled, “It won't hurt to try it.” And he swung out of the office. I could hear him getting his radio-finder from where he had left it in an anteroom, then he was back. He switched the device into operation. It was fixed in frequency, crystal-controlled, and needed only warming up. . . . Presently a procession of thin high sounds, like a clock ticking, came from the apparatus.

Monk swung, stupefied, to stare at me. “Pat, how did you—”

“That's it, isn't it? The limousine transmitter?”

He was too stunned to nod. And now he suddenly scooped up the direction receiver, saying violently, “My God, maybe the thing has been back in working order for hours! Why didn't I keep the receiver turned on? What a dope I was!”

He was banging his large feet on the floor in the direction of the door, saying more under his breath that he didn't consider fit for my ears. My, “Monk! What do you think you're doing?” made him swing his head impatiently.

“I'm going to find that limousine. It's the only trail we've got.” He shook his head wonderingly. “Pat, that was some deductive job. The transmitter was soaked in water. And it dried out and began working again.”

“Wait.”

“Damn it, we've killed enough time—”

“Wait,” I said. “You're grabbing half of my theory and bolting off with it. Better hear the rest.”

Monk scowled. He hated indecision. He disliked being puzzled. He'd seen a way open for direct action which he did like, and he hated to abandon it. But he did frown, then say, “I don't see where anything that Colfax told you gave you the bomb-in-a-bucket-of-water idea.”

“I added some wild guesses.”

“Oh, then—”

“Want to see how far a couple more guesses will carry us? It won't take a minute.”

He said, impatience in the way he moved his shoulders, and in his voice, “Well—”

“Come on.”

Before we reached the room where Colfax would be, I gripped Monk's arm and stopped him. That earlier feeling was back in me now, the feverish futility, the misbehaving of nerves. I didn't like what I was doing, and it was something that I might not like for just a little while, but for a long time.

“Monk, let me handle it,” I said stiffly. “I—I've got to know—I'd hate to make a mistake here.”

He nodded, none of the puzzlement leaving him, and we went on then, and walked in on Colfax. She was sitting at her desk with an air of pale, brittle intensity.

“Colfax,” I said, and my voice wasn't as causal as I wanted by a great lot. “Colfax, you asked me about the condition of young Thayer, and I don't think I answered you. I was excited.”

Colfax turned her face to us and smiled, but it was the sort of a smile that is on skulls. She was pale. Colfax was always pale, with an austere china-doll quality, but this was different, and painful to see. She said, very carefully, “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have bothered you with my questions.”

“It was all right. He's going to live, Colfax. Barring unforeseen complications. Probably there will be no paralysis.”

“Thank you.” Again she had nothing but that voice that seemed to come from an infinite distance, from under a great weight.

“Colfax, that was a good idea you had about the radio. It's on again.”

She whitened. Not a little. Quite a lot. She didn't speak.

“We're going to hunt it now,” I said.

She had the answer ready. She'd fought it out before, knew what she was going to say. This time the words came freely, but unnaturally, sliding over glassy ice that was strain.

Colfax said, “I'd be careful, Pat. It may be—it could be, you know, a trap. They may not have thought of that at first, then thought of it later—using the little radio to decoy you.”

Monk grunted explosively. He hadn't taken time yet to think of that. He started to say something, stopped when I shook my head.

“Colfax,” I said. “You knew Thayer's first name.”

She wasn't quite as prepared for that. The answer fell out nervously. “But isn't it Leo—”

“Nobody told you—you hadn't heard Thayer's first name—yet you knew it.”

She had frozen silence. There was a bluish halo around her lips.

“Colfax,” I said. “The cat is crawling out of the bag. Why don't you open up for us?”

Colfax stood up then, and the standing seemed to have no other purpose behind it than a preparation for falling. She dropped. Not successfully, not gracefully. She loosened here and there at the joints, and it was shocking to see an austere, cold-mannered woman like Colfax faint on her feet.

Monk moved quickly and caught her before she was entirely down, and he stared over her shining head at me. “Pat! How did you figure out—”

“I’m not sure. Intuition, maybe. She did know Thayer’s first name. She was too concerned about him—but I almost missed that, because Colfax is an inward sort. . . . And I kept wondering why Thayer came here in the first place. That didn’t seem logical—for a stabbed man to take an elevator in an office building and find my place. Thayer came here because of Colfax, I imagine.”

“The hell! Then Colfax is in it!”

“I think she’ll talk when she regains consciousness, Monk.”

Chapter X

MONK MAYFAIR drove. Doing it, he was busier than a one-armed juggler—he had the direction-finder to contend with, traffic, the conversation I was holding with Colfax in the rear seat. And on top of that, the not unreasonable chance that we might be waylaid sooner than we expected.

Colfax talked loosely, without animation; the words, facts, were in her like loose marbles in a box that had been opened, and they were being taken out one at a time in a dull, shaken voice. She had not been conscious long.

She had been born in Iowa, the same town as Leo Thayer, she said. And that jolted me vaguely, because I knew what town Thayer had been born in, for it had been on her employment record, but I hadn’t noticed the connection.

Leo Thayer had looked her up more than a year ago, she explained, when he had been working for Rich Thomas a few weeks. Thayer fell for Colfax. But Colfax wasn’t marrying anyone; she had definite ideas about the desirability of single blessedness as versus blessed events, and the last thing she ever intended to acquire was a husband. . . . This part of her story was important, only emphasized a female trait—regardless of her protestations, Colfax was violently in love with young Thayer.

“Did Thayer give you the background of this?” I asked.

He had told her plenty.

I listened. Monk listened also, not giving as much attention as he should have to the green hills, tree-furred, through which we traveled. We had the radio transmitter pretty well located now, and were swinging well to the east through the Long Island countryside, hoping—and our necks might depend on how accurate the hope was—that nobody would expect us to come from this direction. But we hardly noticed the countryside because Colfax’s low words, painfully spoken, were more exciting than a string of firecrackers letting off in the car with us.

Leo Thayer had told her what Rich Thomas had discovered. . . . *He had found out how all green growing plants manufacture their organic food by means of the radiant energy absorbed from sunlight.*

Colfax said it like that, her voice underlining the words with a kind of gasping breathlessness. . . . But offhand it didn’t mean too much to me. Not something like inventing the electric light, or radio, or how to make flying machines. I glanced up at Monk—just in time to yell at him to straighten up the car and preserve a roadside tree for posterity. Monk was impressed. He was going to need help getting his eyes back in his head.

“Whew!” Monk said, as if someone had shown him eternity.

I debated about exposing my density, then tossed it out for them to see by asking, “Well, so somebody found out how plants grow. I had taken it for granted science knew about that, but given the fact that they didn't, what does it accomplish?”

I should have told them the world was flat. It would have made me seem brighter.

“Great Heavens, Pat!” Monk gasped. “The thing is one of those basic discoveries that can change the whole course of human life!”

“I don't see it.”

Colfax said wearily, “She doesn't have the chemical background to comprehend its magnitude, Mr. Mayfair. I wouldn't have either—didn't have, when Leo first told me about it. But—well—it begins to soak into you.”

I suggested they use a few facts to open up some cracks in my mind so it could soak into me.

Monk said, “What's the most fundamental human occupation?” He answered that himself. “Farming. . . . What disaster is the most irreparable of all? Crop disaster. . . . What makes a great nation, more fundamentally than anything else? A strong agricultural economy.”

I sat back with a funny feeling. I was beginning to see the light.

“But Rich Thomas would have had to discover how to duplicate the process—”

“He has,” said Colfax grimly. “He has—oh, it isn't perfect yet. It may take months or years of research to put it on a commercial scale.” She hesitated, staring off into space, then murmured, “On a laboratory scale, Rich Thomas has been creating food materials just as the plants create it.”

“That was the stuff he's been making the hired help eat?”

“Yes.”

“They didn't seem happy with the food.”

“That was because they were suspicious of it, and Thomas didn't dare tell them the truth. It was palatable. The results were healthy. Experiments were successful.”

Monk added his bit: “Pat, all the life on this globe depends on the photosynthetic power of green plants to manufacture food material for themselves. . . . I remember something that the encyclopedia says about it: Green plants are the alchemists which alone of living things have mastered the secret of converting the sun's rays into food material. . . . Or something like that.”

“The point is,” said Colfax, “that the most complex organic substances are created by growing plants. If man can do that, he achieves an independence of nature which will mean so much it's hard to comprehend, because—”

“Let's drop the scientific part for later,” I said. “We've got direct troubles ahead of us.”

Colfax shuddered. “That is the secret Leo Thayer found some one was trying to steal.”

“And Thayer was stabbed because he was investigating the matter?”

“Yes.”

“Thayer came to my place because of you, Colfax?”

She nodded, and said, “There is a short story behind that. I had suggested, when Thayer told me of his suspicions, that the thing had enough magnitude to interest Doc Savage. But Thayer said Rich Thomas wouldn't listen to that. Rich Thomas is an individualist. He would have fired Thayer. And Thayer—my poor Thayer—he wanted more than anything to be in on the creation of this great discovery.”

“He told you not to let on that you knew him?”

She nodded bitterly. “And I did.”

“Why?”

“Because—well—to save Thayer's career.”

“But Thayer had come to see me. Wouldn't that have gotten him in bad with Rich Thomas?”

In weariness and confusion, Colfax moved her head from side to side. “Oh, I'm so confused. . . . The secret was the main thing. Thayer wasn't going to tell that. And if Thayer died, you would know, and investigate. . . . It was Thayer's way of enlisting Doc Savage's aid.”

We crawled through hills now, following an unpaved dusty road. Monk had a road-map on his knees. The dust rose behind us, chalky and sifting over shrubbery that was already chalky from the few other vehicles that had passed before.

It was a lonely and frightening road, made no more soothing by the growing darkness. The sun, dropping into the west some time ago, was pulling dark animal-like shadows behind it. The spirit of terror was embodied in the shadows. That was the way I felt; I knew the others had the same creeping edginess. We might be waylaid. Chances were we would be.

“I wish I had a good aerial map of this country,” Monk complained. Later he groaned, “Dammit, I wish I dared radio the police. But that is the first thing those guys will do—tune a short-wave radio in on the police network to keep posted.”

“Colfax,” I said abruptly. “How did you get that idea about the little radio being on again?”

“I—I think they saw me put it in the limousine,” she said uneasily. “A man watched me. He answered the description of one of those who later seized Doc Savage and the Thomas couple.”

“Then you just guessed they might use it to trap us?”

“Yes.”

Like a steel spring, one tiny spring in the whole complicated tense works, relief loosened in me. I hadn't really realized it until then, but I had been wondering if Colfax hadn't dealt directly with the enemy. But she hadn't. She didn't need to tell me she hadn't. I believed her without that. Colfax was all right.

“The camera, Colfax,” I said. “What is on that film in the camera?”

She looked at me blankly, and Monk too. They didn't know about the camera, so I told them. “I gave the film to a shop for fine-grain development, and they promised to rush it. The shop in the building lobby. . . . Then I'm afraid I overlooked it in the excitement.”

They didn't know what was on the film. It didn't seem too important now.

I watched the dark frightening tangles of bushes move by, listened to the metallic murmuring of the engine. I stared until fear made my eyes ache, and although I saw literally everything, each insignificant detail of the country we passed through, yet I probably saw nothing at all. We could have turned into a submarine and gone underwater, and I might not have noticed. I was scared.

Even my surprise at finding what the trouble was all about—even that was nothing. I had expected a tangible treasure at stake, something you could take into your hands and spend, like gold or jewels, or a rare mineral. The secret of how plants manufacture food was far different. More valuable, I could see now, than almost anything of the other sort.

“Colfax,” I said. “Did Leo Thayer tell you who he suspected?”

Now my voice was also small, littler than Colfax's had been at any time.

Colfax explained, “Other than Leo Thayer and Rich Thomas and Mrs. Thomas, the only person who knows about the discovery is a food manufacturing specialist, whom Mr. Thomas let in on the secret. This man, because of his experience, was supposed to be serving as marketing consultant. Mr. Thomas isn't a business expert, so he hired this man—on a salary, not as a partner, or even a shareholder, to blueprint the marketing set-up for the discovery. I think that man, greedy, knowing he was an employee rather than a partner, planned to—”

“So Burroughs is it,” I said.

Colfax stared fixedly ahead.

“Burroughs,” she said.

Chapter XI

WE WERE going to creep up on the place. We were going to be as cautious as anything. It was a good idea, if it worked, and it didn't.

The place had a feature or two that were not surprising— remoteness, ramshackle looks, a naked dark loneliness—and some others that were not expected, such as the fact that there was no house in the little valley, just a great hulking building in a five-acre scattering of bleak poles. A drab huge buzzard sitting amid its scattered bones.

We pulled to the tip of the last hill, and saw it, and Monk said, “Tobacco-drying barn. Unused. The poles once supported the acres of cloth they grew the tobacco under.”

“Why haven't we been waylaid?” I asked thinly. “If it's a trap—”

“Maybe it's not. Maybe—”

Colfax's scream buried his voice as if a cricket had fallen into a hard-blown cornet, and she was pointing, indicating a man who had stepped from behind a tree with a rifle. He wanted room for careful aiming.

Monk said, in the shivering echoes of Colfax's screech, “My God, I hope this car is what it's cracked up to be!” He sounded unbelievably sincere. Not too confident, either.

“Get down!” I told Colfax. “I don't trust this bulletproof glass.” But she was already on the floor, not shrieking now, just white-faced. She asked, “Haven't you something—a weapon—I can use?” She was all right, Colfax was.

Now the bullet came, the bullet first, before the sound of the rifle. He had shot at Monk, who was driving. He had aimed carefully, and I hadn't been able to quite distinguish what kind of a rifle it was in the semi-darkness, but it was high-powered. A 30-06 caliber, probably, and they put out twenty-nine hundred foot-pounds of muzzle energy, if I recall rightly, and this one hit the glass almost squarely. Monk didn't like what the slug did to the glass, although it didn't come in. I heard his breath go out in a great displeased grunt, startled.

That was why we had come in so brazenly. This car was Doc Savage's, built back in his gadgeteering days when the fantastic was his specialty. It was over-powered, armor-plated, gas-tight, and every niche was crammed with some trinket to handle trouble. It wasn't an army tank, but I preferred it to one.

Monk grabbed at shift levers, jerked the wheel, and we left the road, careened up a slanting bank that would have given a mule pause—four-wheel drive did this—and headed for the rifleman. He shot twice more, then stopped wasting his time. He dodged behind the tree, made for a larger tree, where even this car couldn't follow him.

Monk, more pleased, said, “We've got something for that lad.” He jabbed at another button; a hissing joined the troubled sound of the engine.

I lifted up now, looking for the gas, but I couldn't see it. If it was there, it was colorless, and this troubled Monk too, because he swore violently, something he didn't normally do without provocation. . . .

But in a few moments, the dodging man—we hadn't seen him for a bit, because he was keeping out of sight in the brush—got the stuff. We knew that when he reeled blindly into view, running, pawing at his face with a hand, the other hand out in front of him. He went headlong into a tree, evidently breaking his shoulder from the way he began screaming. So it was tear-gas.

“One guard!” Monk yelled happily. “That's fine. Now we'll just drive into that crummy building and have a look.”

I said, “I thought Doc had stopped using gadgets?”

He grinned. “He keeps them around. They come in handy.”

We were, it developed, going to need everything that would come in handy. Because until now hell had just opened one eye. They were laying for us, and they hadn't expected us to come as sheep—we learned later that an outpost at my building in New York, and another one along the road, had telephoned ahead with the news of us.

They tried grenades now. Not regular fragmentation hand-grenades of the army sort, but ones they had made from dynamite. Dynamite wrapped with wire. Dynamite stuffed in gas pipes. These needed fuses. They threw them like great firecrackers. But, in the darkness, we could see the fuses, the matches flickering.

Monk drove the car hard now. They had expected him to follow the road, and were stationed for that. But he didn't; he cut to the right, in a wide sweep, and none of the grenades—they threw four—landed near enough to more than rock the car.

Monk yelled, “They were really loaded for us! . . . I'm gonna bust right into that building.”

Now we were in the thicket of poles and lattice-work that had once been the covered tobacco yard. The four-wheel drive labored; the car bucked and jumped, reminiscent of the pictures they used to publish when the jeep was first developed.

The men were behind us now. Their bullets weren't. How many ambushers there had been, I didn't know. Enough to let loose plenty of lead; its clanking on the car, like a blacksmith striking hard blows, was a terrifying thing.

Monk, without the proper respect for the poles that supported the lattice of the old tobacco yard, hit one square on. The result piled all of us into the front of the machine.

Colfax said angrily, "Of all the damn driving!" And I looked at her, and she wasn't the cold-mannered Colfax that she'd always been. She was wonderful.

Monk probably didn't hit the barn door more than half as hard as he had intended. A wide door made for trucks; it caved, became a cloud of splinters, if one could call twelve-inch planks splinters. It bothered our car not at all, and our headlights lighted the barn interior.

I think we stopped the car and sat there twenty seconds. It seemed twenty minutes.

Monk rolled down the window and put his head out. "Hey, hadn't you noticed a little noise?" he asked.

It would be hard to say what I had expected. Bodies. Doc Savage being tortured. Or already dead. The Thomas couple with cigarette burns on their eyes and no fingernails.

What we saw was Doc Savage, looking as disgusted as he would under the circumstances, which was about as disgusted as a fellow who had dropped his cigarette. Doc was not exactly unmarked. The bruises on his head were noticeable, even in that excitement, and they had evidently walked on his face.

Rich and Lucia Thomas were in better condition physically, worse mentally. Rich was pale, shaking, couldn't control his lips. His wife simply stood there flapping her hands in front of her, as if she were taking wrist-relaxing exercises. Her eyes could have been the eyes in a skull.

But what stunned us, they were all free-handed, on foot, and in triumphant possession of one prostrate senseless prisoner—the latter the man whom I thought of as the sparrow.

Monk, bewildered, said, "This is some rescue!"

"It'll pass for one," Doc Savage said. He waited for five or six bullets to come inside, and added, "If we put it off."

Rich Thomas came over, rattled his teeth at us, and said, "We were tied—a man on guard—Mr. Savage had something on his person—he put it on the ropes—they just dissolved." The dashes were put in by more tooth-chattering.

"Gadgets," I said to Doc. "I thought you were off them."

He said, "Don't rub it in." And to Rich Thomas, "Get your wife in the car. Quick!"

"We can't escape in the car!" Thomas wailed. "They'll riddle us!"

Monk assured him that, "Not in this car, they won't!" And he jumped out himself to seize Lucia Thomas himself and toss her into the big sedan. He had, then, a little experience with Lucia Thomas that would have been funny under other conditions. She was afraid of Monk. She had met him before, knew who he

was, but she screamed at him as a frightened child would scream at a too-big, too-friendly dog. She kept waving her hands, too, and was still flapping them when he tossed her into the armored machine.

We were loaded in. Doc drove now. We backed out of the old building, and turned around, and the prospects took a dark turn.

A man stepped out from behind a tree with a quart bottle, applied a match to the side of the bottle, to a gasoline-soaked rag wrapped around it, and threw. The bottle fell short, burst, and there was flame on the ground fifteen feet in diameter and twenty feet high.

Monk was among those who didn't like that. "One of those cocktails would finish us! I've seen them do a job on tanks!"

Doc stopped our suddenly dubious fortress. He got a small machine pistol from somewhere and handed it to Monk.

"Do a little shooting. It's loaded with mercy bullets, so try not to hit anybody in the head," Doc said. "What have you used on the car?"

"Just the tear gas," Monk said.

He rolled down a window a crack, picking a window that hadn't been jammed by the rifle bullets knocking against it, and tried out his machine pistol. It's bullfiddle roar deafened us all. I could see where Monk was aiming and I was sure he was, contrary to Doc's instructions, trying to knock a man's head off.

The little gun's big voice slowed the rush toward us from a run to an undecided walk.

"Get going!" Rich Thomas screamed. "We can shoot our way through!"

I thought so, too. It seemed a splendid idea, and the only feasible one. Not too feasible at that. But better than being roasted when they got behind the barn and tossed their flame cocktails at us.

Monk stopped shooting and peered at his weapon. He had completely missed the man he was shooting at.

Doc said, "Get out the trick goggles."

"Huh? Oh!" Monk seemed confused. He dragged out a rather complicated looking headset affair for the eyes.

"Not those," Doc told him. "The ones for use in the smoke."

Then Doc flipped one of the assortment of trinkets on the dash, with the result that the earth seemed to turn black under us, swell, bloat, rise up and cover us. It was smoke, oddly bluish in color, completely opaque, and spreading as from an oil-tank fire.

The fact that the special car was equipped with smoke wasn't new to me, but the part about the goggles was. Monk had the proper ones now. They weren't quite like the others, but not enough different to be remarkable.

Doc said, "Monk and I will go out now. The smoke will come in. Don't be alarmed. It's harmless." Except for using four very short sentences in a row, he was calm about it.

"Get a pair for me!" I cried.

“We might manage that—in a day or two, for your museum,” Doc said. “Come on, Monk. And remember they’re likely to do some wild shooting.”

Monk said he hoped to make them wilder, and I heard the sedan door open, slam shut.

“Shouldn’t we help?” Colfax asked.

“Yes, by sitting tight,” I said. “You’re now going to witness one of the great spectacles of our time, Doc Savage in action.”

“But I can’t see a thing,” Colfax complained.

The way she said that helped me. I didn’t want to sit there either, and the regret in Colfax’s voice, the sincere dissatisfaction, as if a fat man had stood up in front of her just as the contender knocked out the champion in a prize-fight, was quite soothing. I was able to sit and be amazed by Colfax.

We listened. There were long bites of silence. Then a commotion yonder. More stillness. Another brief tussle. Like Boy Scouts playing a game of capture-the-flag in the darkness, except that this was deadly.

The wind, I imagined, was carrying the smoke over the enemy. I wasn’t in any state of mind of the wind direction, or whether there had been any. But that must be what was happening. And Doc Savage and Monk, able to see in the trick smoke because of their goggles were stalking and striking. Now and then there was random shooting. I heard a gasoline cocktail take off. I could hear its roaring, and it was close enough to cool my blood.

And now Colfax, so help me Colfax began a cool-voiced dissertation on her theory of how the goggles worked. She said, “They’re effective on light of wavelengths outside the visible spectrum, ultra-violet or infra-red light or something like that. And the smoke is transparent to the light. You can see with goggles. . . . I remember reading that something of the sort was developed for vision—in darkness, not in smoke—during the last war.”

There I was sitting holding my teeth together so hard that my whole head ached. My fingernails biting into my palms. And Colfax was theorizing.

She added, presently, “But they would need a projector for light, wouldn’t they? Where are they getting the infra-red light? Did they take a lantern with them?”

I let her wonder. I felt like allowing my teeth join Rich Thomas in a duet.

It was like that until Doc Savage’s voice, touched with impatience, asked, “Well, are you all right in there?”

“How is it out there?”

“Come out and see.”

I thought that over. True, there hadn’t been any shots, screams, or sounds of cracking skulls for a few minutes. But I was doubtful. I wasn’t even sure I could recognize Doc’s voice, and this might be someone with an imitation.

“Thanks,” I said. “We’ll like it in here. Until we get a password.”

Doc laughed then, and I heard Monk’s voice—nobody could imitate Monk’s voice—say, “The car filled with smoke when we opened the door to leave. They don’t know the moon is shining.”

So we got out then, and the breeze had carried the smoke away—that which had been imprisoned in the car drifted away lazily, like a large black cow grazing—and the moon was shining.

The moon shone brightest, I thought, on the fat square porcine face of Mr. Burroughs. I judged, from the soundness with which Burroughs slept, and the new shape that his jaw and nose had both assumed, that Monk was the one who had overtaken Mr. Burroughs.

I went with a flashlight to look over the other victims, and recognized all of them. They were like old acquaintances, and I was a little proud of the descriptions of them that I had given the police.

Coming back, I was in time to hear Rich Thomas saying that he wished, would insist, that Doc Savage take over the administration—presumably he meant the distribution to the world—of the food-creating discovery. But, he reminded, it would need considerably more research. It sounded like something they had discussed previously during the time they were prisoners, and Thomas was sticking by his agreement.

Colfax was rubbing Lucia Thomas' hands. I joined her, and Colfax looked up with shining eyes.

“Wasn't it amazing?” Colfax exclaimed delightedly. “I can see now why you're so fascinated by Doc Savage's adventure!”

Fascinated, I thought. I decided I didn't know what she was talking about. I turned and walked away, wondering if the miracle that Doc had been working for had happened, and I was cured of my liking for adventure, or whether it was just that I was still scared. I didn't feel scared—which was what worried me.

It could be so destined, as Lucia would say.

THE END