

MURDER MOST STRANGE

Dell Shannon

WILLIAM MORROW AND COMPANY, INC.

New York

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ONE

The elevator door slid back silently on the long hospital corridor. Just opposite was the L-shaped desk in a bay of a nurses' station, and a tall blond young fellow in white smock and pants was lounging there casually talking to half a dozen nurses; apparently he'd just gotten to the punch line of a joke, and they were all laughing as Mendoza and Hackett came up.

"Dr. O'Laughlin," said Hackett, "called to say-"

"Me." He surveyed them; he looked too young to be anything but an intern. "You'll be the fuzz."

"Lieutenant Mendoza, Sergeant Hackett."

"Yep," said O'Laughlin. "Down this way. She was damned lucky, he just missed the heart with one blow, and she'd lost a hell of a lot of blood. Yeah, she's been conscious since about four A.M., but you can only see her for ten minutes or so—she's still weak, so take it easy." He looked at them interestedly, Mendoza as usual dapper in silver-gray herringbone, Hackett looming bulkily over him. Halfway down the hall he stopped at a door. This was the Intensive Care section of the huge sprawling pile of Cedars—Sinai Medical Center: beyond the window to their left was a rather spectacular view, from five storeys up, out over Hollywood.

In the two-bed room, the second bed had curtains drawn around it,

the occupant invisible; in the bed nearest the door, Cindy Hamilton was half propped up against pillows, an I.V. tube in one arm. Her dark hair was brushed lankly back from her pale face, and she looked disappointed to see the three men; her mouth drooped.

"I thought-Mother'd be back."

"Later," said O'Laughlin easily. "You're off the critical list now, darling, and visitors' hours haven't begun yet. It's the police with some questions, Cindy—we do want to catch the fellow who did this, don't we?"

"Oh," she said. "Oh, yes." She looked at Mendoza and Hackett with faint interest. "Only I haven't the least idea who he was, you know."

"Can you give us a description of him?" asked Hackett, getting out his notebook.

"Oh, my God," said Cindy Hamilton, and shut her eyes briefly. They knew quite a bit about her now, and she was a nice girl. She was twenty-five, and she had a job as a legal secretary, one of three girls in the office of Daniel Frome on Beverly Boulevard; she lived alone in an apartment on Hoover. Her original home was Fallbrook, where she still had family; her parents were here now. Three days ago, last Monday, she hadn't showed up at work, and eventually one of the other girls had gone to the apartment, as they couldn't raise her on the phone, and discovered the door open and Cindy unconscious and bloody on the living-room floor. She'd been beaten, stabbed and raped.

"My God," she said again now. "Yes, I can do that all right." She was obviously still weak, but she tried to pull herself up straighter in the bed and raised a hand to smooth her hair. "Gah. I feel like death warmed over. Mother and Dad at me to come home to Fallbrook, the big city so dangerous. You know, I'm sort of thinking about it now. And you'll think I'm a fool—but you just don't know—how—how damned plausible he was! It—he—" She shook her head. "It was just like Jekyll and Hyde."

"How do you mean, Miss Hamilton?" asked Hackett.

"Funny isn't the right word. Naturally I'm not idiot enough to let a strange man in—you know, the ordinary way. I've lived in L.A. for three years, I know about the crime rate, for heaven's sake. But he was so nice—so polite. He was—well, a gentleman, you know?" She drew a long breath. "I'll tell you—all I can, if it'll help to catch him. It was about four o'clock on Sunday afternoon, the doorbell rang and there he was.

Never saw him before, but he looked—" She thought, and decided on, "Nice. Nobody to be afraid of. He was about twenty-five or thirty, tall, around six feet, dark hair, clean shaven, sort of thin—and dressed real sharp, a gray suit, not just sports clothes, a whole suit, white shirt and tie. I mean, he looked—oh, like a professional man of some kind, certainly not a bum or a dopey—and he was so polite." She swallowed. "That was why. Why I was such a fool to let him in. Because—it sounded—he made it sound so plausible."

"What, Miss Hamilton?" asked Hackett.

Her eyes moved over the three of them listening, closed again. "Such a fool," she said. "He said—he was looking for his sister. He thought she lived there, at my apartment, I mean—he'd had a letter and they were supposed to have moved there last week, his sister and her husband—he took out a letter from his pocket to check the address. He said a name—something like Wayne or Raynes, I don't remember. And he'd just gotten to L.A. from someplace back East, he couldn't understand why they weren't here. He sounded—he looked so really upset and worried. And I said I didn't know anything about it, of course, and he thanked me—he seemed just terribly worried, and he apologized—and then he said he'd sent his taxi away because he'd expected to find his sister there, and he supposed he'd have to go to their old address and see if they were there, and did I mind if he called another taxi—"

"Ca," said Mendoza interestedly.

"And like an absolute fool I let him in. Like Jekyll and Hyde," said Cindy Hamilton weakly. "As soon as—the door was shut—he whipped out his knife, and he was on me—didn't give me time to scream—all of a sudden, he looked just like a fiend, this awful fixed grin, and he—and he—"

"Can you tell us anything more about his appearance? Color of eyes? Any scars or tattoos?"

She shook her head. "It was all sort of fast, after that. Feel like such

a fool. But he was so plausible—" Her eyes shut again.

"That'll do for now," said O'Laughlin. In the corridor, he was disposed to ask curious questions, but Hackett was curt and he shrugged and took himself off.

"And that's something a little different, isn't it?" said Hackett. "She

might be able to make a mug shot."

Mendoza was teetering back and forth, heel to toe, ruminatively. "It rings a small bell in my head," he said.

"What? An offbeat sort of thing—"

"Mmh. Come on, Arturo, let's go back to base and chase it up."

They had driven over in Hackett's garish Monte Carlo: it was early afternoon and the traffic light. In twenty minutes they were back at Parker Center downtown, and came into the Robbery-Homicide office to find Landers and Palliser just leaving on a new call. "Probably not much," said Sergeant Lake pithily. "Body over on Miramar, Patrolman

said looked like a typical old wino."

Mendoza swept off the inevitable black Homburg and started for his office. "Get me Hollywood, Jimmy-Sergeant Barth if he's in." He sat down at his desk and swiveled around to stare out at the view toward the Hollywood hills over the urban complex sprawl of downtown L.A. It was a clear view, this last day of March; the winter months had been wet, and as yet there hadn't been anything like a heat wave or high smog. So far it was a pleasant, cool spring, and Robbery-Homicide was perking along with enough to do, but not as heavy a caseload as they sometimes had to work. They had, of course, the usual heist jobs, and three of those over the last couple of weeks had apparently been pulled by the same pair; they had a shapeless sort of homicide, a derelict wino stabbed to death over on Skid Row, which would probably end up in Pending. There was a still unidentified body which had turned up three days ago in a cheap hotel room: an O.D. on heroin, the autopsy said, and it wouldn't make much difference if they never found out who he'd been. As the year advanced and the inevitable heat wave arrived, business would pick up; at the moment they were out hunting heisters, and cleaning up a rather messy but obvious homicide involving an addict and his supplier-but more business was always coming along.

The phone shrilled on Mendoza's desk and he picked it up. "What do you want?" asked Sergeant Barth of the Hollywood precinct. "I'm

busy."

"Just before Christmas," said Mendoza, "I ran into you down in R. and I. with a witness to look at mug shots, and you were telling me something about a gentlemanly rapist. Who talked his way into victims' apartments all very polite and then pulled a knife."

"Dapper Dan," said Barth instantly. "Yeah. Don't tell me you've got something on that one? As far as we know, he pulled seven rapes up here in the last six months, and one turned into a homicide. What's

vour interest?"

"It's possible we've got another victim in our territory. I'd like to

hear what you turned up on it. Didn't you say he had some plausible story about thinking his sister lived at this address, and did the lady mind if he called a cab—"

"That's him," said Barth. "For God's sake. The last we heard of him was in January."

"Come to Papa, please," said Mendoza gently, "with everything you collected. It looks as if he's branched out into new terrain."

"Damn it, I've got a couple of witnesses in to make statements. I'll get down as soon as I can. And hell, Bosworth worked that homicide mostly and it's his day off—I'll be down, I'll be down," said Barth resignedly.

"An offbeat one, all right," said Hackett. "Just chance, you running into Barth like that." But of course, as they went on to work it, NCIC would have pinned down the M.O. and sent them to Hollywood precinct eventually.

Mendoza sat back, lit a cigarette and yawned. "I think I'm coming down with spring fever. Offbeat—I don't know, Art, nothing a rapist does should surprise us, "como no?"

There wasn't anyone else in the office. They were short one man on day watch now; it was apparent that the brass wasn't about to assign any new men to the bureau, and instead had transferred Rich Conway to beef up the night watch. They were about to lose Nick Galeano, if temporarily. After more than a year of pussyfooting around his very proper and respectable young German widow, Marta Fleming, he had finally screwed up the courage to propose to her, and the formal wedding was scheduled for next Monday afternoon. Galeano had six days of unused sick leave as well as his vacation coming, and it was just to be hoped that the case load at Robbery-Homicide didn't start to get hot and heavy before he got back to them.

"I've got that report to finish," said Hackett, and reluctantly went back to his desk in the communal office. Most of the heists were, as usual, entirely anonymous with few leads to offer, and he felt rather like coming down with spring fever himself.

Before Barth showed up John Palliser and Tom Landers came back, with the new one to start a report on.

"That old wino, Leo Marvin," said Palliser, absently stroking his handsome straight nose. "About ten days ago—in an alley over on Alameda. Stabbed. It looked a little funny, because he didn't have much on him for anybody to steal, and for a couple of days he'd been

too broke even to buy the cheapest stuff—panhandling up on Broadway, said a couple of his pals, and no luck. Why the hell should anybody knife one like that?"

"Annoyed because he didn't have much on him," said Hackett.

"What about him?"

"Well, this new body looks sort of like a replay," said Palliser. "It's funny."

Landers tendered a quarter and tossed it. "Heads." Palliser said "Tails" uninterestedly and they looked at it. "Hell," said Landers, and took the cover off his typewriter.

"What do you mean, a replay?" asked Hackett. Mendoza had come wandering out of his office and perched a hip on the corner of Higgins'

desk.

"Well, in a way, just such another one," said Palliser. "Except that he wasn't a wino. One Joseph Kelly, retired railroad man, lived on a little pension and Social Security, an old apartment on Miramar. Harmless old widower, no family, evidently not many friends. The man who lives across the hall found him a couple of hours ago, in the hall right outside his apartment door. Stabbed to death, it looks like. And not very long before, he was still warm. And he had about nine bucks on him, so he wasn't robbed either."

"The city jungle," said Mendoza, and yawned again.

"Yes, but—it just struck me as funny," said Palliser. Landers had rolled the triplicate forms into the typewriter and was starting the re-

port.

George Higgins came in towing a weedy, very black young Negro and said, "Good, somebody's here. I finally caught up with Willy." Three witnesses had fingered Willy Lamb for the knifing of another unsavory character who had been supplying him with heroin. "Who'd like to sit in and talk to him?" Higgins looked tired; he'd been out all day following up the few elusive leads to Willy, and probably hadn't had any lunch.

"Oh, stash him away and take a breather," said Mendoza. "You look

a little beat, boy."

"I could use a sandwich and coffee, but we ought to get to him while he's still surprised he got tabbed for it." Higgins shepherded his capture out toward one of the interrogation rooms, and Palliser swore and followed him. Quite a lot of the time this was a very boring, dull and sordid job. Landers had finished the report, and it was getting on for four o'clock, when Sergeant Barth of the Hollywood precinct came in. Higgins and Palliser were still closeted with Willy Lamb. Hackett went down the hall to the coffee machine and brought back three cups to Mendoza's office, remembering that Barth liked sugar.

"Thanks very much," said Barth, looking slightly less sour. "My God, what a day—we're in a hell of a mess up on my beat, four homicides this week—four, I ask you—I can remember when Hollywood was the cream-puff beat, and now all these goddamned hookers and pimps cluttering the streets, not to mention the nest of fags— Augh!" He took a swallow of coffee and sighed. He had a year to go to retirement; he'd put in thirty-five years at the job, and today looked his age and more, a middle-sized nondescript fellow with a comfortable little paunch and a nearly bald head. He had laid a fat manila folder on Mendoza's desk, and nodded at it. "There's all we've got on Dapper Dan. You think he's pulled one down here?"

"It sounds suggestive," said Mendoza. "Tell us the highlights."

Barth shrugged. "Seven cases, roughly last September to February. He must have eased the girls at least desultorily, to know they were living alone. But of course they all had their names in the slots in the apartment doors. He gave them all the same story, and they all—that is, except the one who turned up dead-said the same thing. He was so polite, such a gentleman, they didn't hesitate to let him in when he asked. And none of them was the kind who'd admit a strange man in the ordinary way, so he must be damned plausible. The same little tale, and it was just simple enough to sound plausible, I suppose. He'd just landed here from somewhere back East, and this was the new address he had from his sister and her husband, and he was all mystified at finding they weren't there. He padded it out, and every one of the girls believed him—all so apologetic, so sorry to bother them. And they gave us a good description. Five ten to six feet, thin, dark hair, probably dark eyes, clean shaven and very well dressed. Which seems to have been one of the things that reassured them, you see? The natty suit, the white shirt and tie."

"Mmh, yes," said Mendoza. "Not a bum or an addict. What about the homicide?"

"Well, it's very probable it was him," said Barth. "It looked like a carbon copy. In all the other cases, as soon as he got into the apartment he pulled the knife and seemed to go berserk—"

"Jekyll and Hyde," said Hackett.

"Yeah, one of them said that. He only went for the straight rape, nothing kinky, but he was rough—all of them were beaten up and stabbed, two of them seriously. The homicide—well," said Barth, "a hell of a lot of suggestive evidence ties it up to him. Girl named Gay Spencer, lived in an apartment on Fountain. She was a salesclerk at Magnin's. Girl friend of hers worked there too, so when she didn't turn up for work one Monday the girl friend went to see why, found the door unlocked and Spencer dead on the living-room floor. She'd been stabbed twenty-three times, died of shock and blood loss. The autopsy said about twenty-four hours before. That linked it up right there—the knife, and the day—all the jobs were pulled on Sunday afternoons. So we asked around, and two women had seen a man coming up the hall, from the direction of Spencer's apartment, about four o'clock the afternoon before. Same description, if not quite as much of it."

"Yes," said Mendoza. "All on Sundays? That's a queer one."

"Day when a lot of single young girls would be home," said Barth. "Washing their hair or stockings or something, or doing their nails, getting ready for the week's work. Anyway, you can see it linked up. There's all the statements and so on in there, and I wish you luck. He does tie up to your victim?"

"Oh, definitely, I'd say." Mendoza gave him a brief rundown on

Cindy Hamilton. "You didn't turn anything at all?"

"Not a thing," said Barth. "We went the usual route. All of 'em said they'd very definitely recognize him, but none of them picked out any mug shots. We wasted a hell of a lot of time dusting all those places for latents and weeding out prints of all their friends who might have left any around, and didn't get one damn thing. He wasn't wearing gloves, so he's just careful—or lucky. NCIC didn't have a thing on the M.O. or the description, and he didn't show in our records where we looked first. So now you can go look in all the same places and come up empty."

"Hell," said Hackett unemphatically. "What a bastard to work. He damn near killed this one too. She only came to this morning—concussion and about twenty knife wounds. It looked as if he'd knocked her against the stereo cabinet. She put up quite a fight, by the look of the

place."

"Yeah." Barth nodded. "So did all of ours—and the Spencer girl—but he's big and tough, and he doesn't care how much damage he does.

Do have fun chasing him, boys." He got up. "I'm going home. Thank God it's my day off tomorrow. Let me know if you catch up with him,

but I won't hold my breath."

As he went out, Mendoza eyed the fat folder idly, making no move to pick it up. "Inventive character," he said. "And a waste of time to speculate what the head doctors would say about him. I think I'll go home too, Arturo. We haven't had a lab report on the Hamilton girl's apartment. I suppose this time he could have left some prints, but if they're not in anybody's records—"

"How do we know?" asked Hackett. "The nothing they got from NCIC doesn't say a damned thing." It didn't, of course, because the National Crime Information Center's computers only numbered current crimes unsolved; when a case was cleared it was removed from the computers' memory. "Or have you got a hunch he's first time out?"

"No hunch—it could be, it doesn't have to be. The only thing I will say is that if we don't land on him, sooner or later he'll end up killing another girl. I wonder," said Mendoza, "why he's switched beats."

"We don't know that he has," said Hackett dampeningly. "He may just have spotted the Hamilton girl somewhere and it was chance she lives where she does."

"¿Como?" Mendoza pulled the folder onto the desk blotter and opened it, began to leaf through the reports. Five minutes later he said, "I don't think so, Art. Look at what a tight little circle it is—extraño—Fountain Avenue, Berendo, Kenmore, Harvard, Delongpre—and the homicide on Fountain again. All the addresses above Santa Monica, in old Hollywood—between Vermont and Western." After twenty-six years on this force, Mendoza knew his city by heart. "And now all of a sudden he's come all the way down here."

"If you feel like deducing from A to B," said Hackett, "I'll point out that an area like that—old uptown Hollywood—is the kind of place a lot of young women might live who're working for fairly small salaries. Cheaper rents, more convenient to public transportation if they don't drive. You aren't suggesting he picks victims by their addresses, are you?"

"I don't know, damn it. I just say it's a little odd." Mendoza shut the folder, leaned back and shut his eyes. "Wait for the lab report. Somebody had better type up a statement for the Hamilton girl to sign."

"Meaning me," said Hackett. "But right now I'm going home." Mendoza picked up his hat and followed him out. In the corridor Higgins was talking to Sergeant Lake at the switchboard. He said to Mendoza, "Well, Willy finally came apart and gave us a statement. Just one more of the younger generation who doesn't believe in free-enterprise capitalism."

"Oh?" said Hackett. "Which way?"

"The supplier expected to get paid for the H—he was interested in profits all right. Willy was mad because he wouldn't extend credit."

"Go home," said Mendoza. "You're not supposed to be here at all."

"I know, I know." Thursday was normally Higgins' day off. "But the damn painters are at the house, and one of them keeps a transistor radio going. I hope to God they'll be finished tomorrow." He stretched and resettled his tie, which was under one ear as usual. "John took Willy down to book him." He drifted out.

In the communal office, their policewoman Wanda Larsen was arguing about something with a sleepy-looking Henry Glasser. There hadn't been any sign of Jason Grace since late this morning; he was probably out hunting possible heisters; but Galeano had come back from somewhere and was just sitting at his desk staring into space. Hackett went over and prodded him.

"Hey, paisano, it's end of shift." Galeano jumped and looked up. Hackett grinned at him. "Bridegroom daydreaming. Only three more

days, Nick."

Galeano laughed. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I was wondering if we're so smart to go to Yosemite for a honeymoon, after those couple of earthquakes up there last month."

"I've always said marriage is dangerous," said Glasser deadpan. Wanda made a grimace at him and got up, rummaging in her bag for

keys.

By the time Higgins got home to the big old house in Eagle Rock, the painters had mercifully left for the day; they only had the back wall to finish and should complete the job tomorrow. Mary said she'd spent most of the day at the public library or she'd have gone mad. The house was quiet enough now, with Laura Dwyer busy over homework and Steve, expectably, in the new darkroom built onto the garage a couple of months ago. The little Scotty Brucie bounced underfoot.

Strangely enough, these days Higgins felt a little like a bridegroom himself, even if he and Mary had been married over three years. It wasn't that he had felt like an interloper in the house on Silver Lake

Boulevard, but it was the house that Bert Dwyer had bought sixteen years back when he and Mary were expecting their first baby, and there were memories of Bert in it—Bert who had died on the marble floor of the bank with the heister's slugs in him.

These days, the Higginses were even more a solid family. It just slid vaguely through Higgins' mind as he bent to pick up their own baby, solid little Margaret Emily who was unbelievably two years old now, and just as pretty and smart as her mother.

Hackett was getting used to the longer drive these four months since they'd moved to the new house high in Altadena; on the freeway it didn't take that much longer, unless there was a jam. But they weren't on daylight saving yet, and it was dark when he got home.

He kissed Angel; the children were for once playing quietly, Mark with a coloring book and Sheila with her beloved stuffed cats. It was good to be home, after a boring day. He sat down to look at the *Herald* before dinner, and he wasn't thinking at all about the offbeat rapist or the other things they were working on.

As Mendoza approached the tall iron gates, high on the hill above Burbank—the wrought-iron gates leading to Alison's new country estate—he squinted up at them in the last rays of the dying sun and reflected that his red-haired Scots-Irish girl had been right again. These days she had one resigned phrase for any new problems arising: it all went to show, she said, how one thing led to another.

Certainly her love affair with the ancient Spanish hacienda had led her to spend a lot of money on updating it; and the chain-link fence enclosing four and a half acres had only been the beginning. There had been the construction of an apartment in what had been the old winery for Ken and Kate Kearney, the latest additions to the household. Kearney, a retired rancher, would of course know all about the ponies for the twins, she had said, and so of course he did; and plump little Kate Kearney would be such a help to Mairí in the house. The ponies had materialized; that had meant creating a stable out of one of the outbuildings. The ponies, a Welsh pair of dark bays named Star and Diamond for their white face markings, were a great success with the twins, but they had further necessitated the construction of a riding ring and corral alongside the stable. And it was too dark to spot them now, but

somewhere on the hill would be the Five Graces, the sheep recommended by Kearney to keep the wild undergrowth eaten down.

Mendoza climbed out of the Ferrari, opened the gates, drove through and got out to close them. The gates bore the name of the house in intricate letters at the top: La Casa de la Gente Feliz, the house of happy

people.

There were some California live oaks on the four and a half acres, but Alison had said leave most of it wild, just some landscaping around the house. In the last couple of months she had been spending quite a lot more money, and the landscaping had gone in—fairly mature Italian cypress trees, hibiscus bushes against the house, modest sweeps of lawn at front and sides, a few avocado and orange trees on either side of the curving driveway, more hibiscus flanking the triple garage. At the moment she had decided that the Kearneys' car deserved a garage too, and that was half built as an addition to the apartment, with a hundred yards of new drive to be added later.

And what was passing through Mendoza's mind now was—one thing leading to another—that it was damned inconvenient to have to stop and open and shut those gates, going and coming. There would probably be some way to install an automatic opener, something on the prin-

ciple of those garage-door openers, he thought.

In fact, only one of the potential problems attendant on the move had astonishingly resolved itself. Everybody had been nervous about the juxtaposition of the redoubtable half-Siamese El Señor and the Kearneys' large black cat Nicodemus. But it appeared that territorial rights established a truce. The Kearneys had moved into their apartment a month before the Mendozas and Mairí MacTaggart had moved into the house; and by the time the four Mendoza cats had gone out exploring their new domain, Nicodemus had occupied by right the entire area around the old winery, the stable, corral and riding ring, and the grove of live oaks on that side of the hill. After a few bristly encounters with a good deal of hissing and spitting, El Señor—who only pretended to be a great warrior in any case—had tacitly reserved for his own domain the other half of the property, and a peaceable truce was in effect.

The other potential problem had been solved by the discovery of an excellent parochial school only a mile away down the hill. It even boasted a small kindergarten; but time sliding by as alarmingly as it did, next September the twins, Johnny and Teresa, would be starting first

grade.

However, that gate . . . It was nearly full dark when he slid the Ferrari into the garage beside Alison's Facel-Vega and pulled down the door. There were lights in the house, welcoming. As if to add further welcome, from somewhere out there in the dark a couple of the Five Graces uttered loud bass baas.

Halfway up the new cement path from garage to back door, he was pounced on playfully by the Old English sheepdog Cedric, and being taken unawares and off balance, fell flat on his face. "¡Vaya por Díos! Down—bastante! No, I don't want to play—down, damn it!" Fuming, he marched in the back door.

Alison and Mairí were both in the big kitchen beyond the generous service-porch-pantry, Alison making a salad at the sink and pink-cheeked silver-haired Mairí peering into the oven. "Now I will tell you," began Mendoza, "that damned dog—"

"Oh, you're home, darling, I didn't hear the car." The twins, how-

ever, had, and came running.

"Daddy, Daddy, we been ridin' all afternoon—an' Uncle Ken let us gallop a lot—Johnny was almost afraid—"

"I wasn't neither, an' Diamond galloped faster than Star—Uncle Ken says I'm better 'n Terry because my legs are longer—but, Daddy—"

"Yes, yes, niños. You're both very good indeed. I will tell you, querida," said Mendoza, "we've got to put a light on that path from the garage. This damned dog you saddled us with—I might have broken my neck. And another thing—" Sheba landed on his shoulder from behind without warning. "Cats!" he said. "Dogs! And I'll tell you something else—"

"Now calm down, chico," said Alison.

"The man needs a dram or two before dinner," said Mairí.

"We galloped *lots* and Star can gallop just as fast as Diamond, an' I only had to hang on a little bit—"

"Uncle Ken says we both gonna be good riders—only it'd be more fun outside the fence. Daddy, can't we ride outside the fence?"

As if by magic, hearing a reference to strong drink, El Señor arrived, floated up to the counter under the cupboard where the liquor was kept, and uttered a raucous demand.

"¡Santa Maria! How did I ever get into all this?" demanded Men-

doza violently.

"Now, now," said Mairí. "Take the man away and settle him down

before dinner, achara. It will be half an hour and a bit. He's doubtless

had a bothersome day. I'll see to the salad."

Alison poured El Señor his half ounce of rye, put a shot glass, the bottle of rye and a glass of sherry on a tray and shepherded Mendoza down to the huge square living room, Cedric bouncily preceding them and the twins in hot pursuit. The other two cats, Bast and Nefertite, were sound asleep on the oversize couch at right angles to the fieldstone hearth. The new one was slumbering peacefully on a blanket in the middle of the floor; the new one, Luisa Mary, not so new now at nearly eight months old, was astonishingly mobile when awake and by now had a full head of hair as outrageously red as Alison's. She was also definitely, as Mairí had predicted, going to be left-handed.

"Now sit down and relax," said Alison.

He swallowed rye and began to feel slightly better. "A post or something with a floodlight," he said. "Or a floodlight on that side of the garage. And another thought I had—that gate—it is one big damned nuisance, having to open and shut it. If there was an electric eye or something—"

"Yes, I know," said Alison, sipping sherry. "I'd had the same

thought, but we've spent so much money already—"

"Damn it, might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb," said Mendoza.

"Yes. Well—that's another thing," said Alison. "Those sheep. They ought to be sheared, Ken says. They were a year old in February, and sheep ought to be sheared once a year."

"I suppose he can locate somebody to do it."

"I hope so. About the gate, I'll look in the yellow pages and get an estimate on the electric eye. You know, Luis, it is very funny, isn't it, how one thing keeps leading to another."

"Daddy, you didn't listen about the galloping-"

"And about ridin' outside the fence. Please, Daddy-"

The new one woke up and began to bellow. Alison swooped to pick her up.

Mendoza resignedly poured himself another shot of rye.

Friday was Nick Galeano's day off, but he wouldn't be getting together with his bride-to-be; according to what they'd heard she was a very proper convent-bred girl, and quite thick with Galeano's mother. It