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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWELVE TIMES ZERO ***



TWELVE *times* ZERO

By Howard Browne

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Police grilled him mercilessly, while eyes from a hundred worlds looked on.

Chapter I

They brought him into one of the basement rooms. He moved slowly and with a kind of painful dignity, as a man moves on his way to the firing squad. A rumpled shock of black hair pointed up the extreme pallor of a gaunt face, empty at the moment of all expression. Harsh light from an overhead fixture winked back from tiny beads of perspiration dotting the waxen skin of his forehead.

It was a love-triangle murder that made today's headlines but the answer lay hundreds of thousands of light years away!

The three men with him watched him out of faces as expressionless as his own. They were ordinary men who wore ordinary clothing in an ordinary way, yet in the way they moved and in the way they stood you knew they were hard men who were in a hard and largely unpleasant business.

One of them motioned casually toward a straight-backed chair almost exactly in the center of the room. "Sit there, Cordell," he said.

A quiet voice, not especially deep, yet it seemed to bounce off the painted concrete walls.

Wordless, the young man obeyed. Sitting, he seemed as stiff and uncompromising as before. The man who had spoken made a vague gesture and the overhead light went out, replaced simultaneously by strong rays from a spotlight aimed full at the eyes of the seated figure. Involuntarily the young man's head turned aside to avoid the searing brilliance, but a hand came out of the wall of darkness and jerked it back again.

"Just to remind you," the quiet voice continued conversationally, "I'm Detective Lieutenant Kirk, Homicide Bureau." A pair of hands thrust a second chair toward the circle of light. Kirk swung it around and dropped onto the seat, resting his arms along the back, facing the man across a distance of hardly more than inches.

In the pitiless glare of the spotlight Cordell's cheekbones stood out sharply, and under his deepset eyes were dark smudges of exhaustion. His rigid posture, his blank expression, his silence—these seemed not so much indications of defiance as they did the result of some terrible and deep-seated shock.

"Let's go over it again, Cordell," Kirk said.

The young man swallowed audibly against the silence. One of his hands twitched, came up almost to his face as though to shield his eyes, then dropped limply back, "That light—" he mumbled.

"—stays on," Kirk said briskly. "The quicker you tell us the answers, the quicker we all relax. Okay?"

Cordell shook his head numbly, not so much in negation as an effort to clear the fog from his tortured mind. "I told you," he cried hoarsely. "What more do you want? Yesterday I told you the whole thing." His voice began to border on hysteria. "What good's my trying to tell you if you won't listen? How's a guy supposed—"

"Then try telling it straight!" Kirk snapped. "You think you're fooling around with half-wits? Sure; you told us. A crazy pack of goof-ball dreams about a blonde babe clubbing two grown people to death, then disappearing in a ball of blue light! You figure on copping a plea on insanity?"

"It's the truth!" Cordell shouted. "As God hears me, it's true!" Suddenly he buried his face in his hands and long tearing sobs shook his slender frame.

One of the other men reached out as though to drag the young man's face back into the withering rays of the spotlight, but Kirk motioned him away. Without haste the Lieutenant fished a cigar from the breast pocket of his coat and began almost leisurely to strip away its cellophane wrapper. A kitchen match burst into flame under the flick of a thumb nail and a cloud of blue tobacco smoke writhed into the cone of hot light.

"Cordell," Kirk said mildly.

Slowly the young man's shoulders stopped their shaking, and after a long moment his wan, tear-stained face came back into the light. "I—I'm sorry," he mumbled.

Kirk waved away the layer of smoke hanging between them. He said wearily, "Let's try it once more. Step by step. Maybe this time...." He let the sentence trail off, but the inference was clear.

An expression of hopeless resignation settled over Cordell's features. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Take it from five o'clock the afternoon it happened."

The tortured man wet his lips. "Five o'clock was when my shift went off at the plant. The plant, in case you've forgotten, is the Ames Chemical Company, and I'm a foreman in the Dry Packaging department."

"Save your sarcasm," Kirk said equably.

"Yeah. I changed clothes and punched out around five-fifteen. Juanita had called me about four and said to pick her up at Professor Gilmore's laboratory."

"At what time?"

"No special time. Just when I could get out there. We were going to have dinner and take in a movie. No particular picture; she said we'd pick one out of the paper at dinner."

"Go on."

"Well, it must've been about quarter to six when I got out to the University. I parked in front of the laboratory wing and went in at the main entrance. I walked down the corridor to the Professor's office. His typist was knocking out some letters and there were a couple of students hanging around waiting for him to show up. How about a smoke, Lieutenant?"

Kirk nodded to one of the men behind him and a package of cigarettes was extended to the man under the light. A match was proffered and the young man ignited the white tube, his hands shaking badly.

The Lieutenant crossed his legs the other way, "Let's hear the rest of it, friend."

"What for?" Bitterness tinged Cordell's voice. "You don't believe a word I'm saying."

"Up to now I do."

"Well, I said something or other to Alma—she's the Prof's secretary—and went on through the door to the hall that leads to the private lab. When I got—"

Kirk held up a hand. "Wait a minute. Your busting right in on the Professor like that doesn't sound right. Why not wait in the office for your wife?"

"What for?" Cordell squinted at him in surprise. "He and I get ... got along fine. When Juanita first went to work for him he said to drop in at the lab any time, not to wait in the outer office like a freshman or something."

"Go ahead."

"Well..." The young man hesitated. "We're back to the part you *don't* believe, Officer. I can't hardly believe it myself; but so help me, it's gospel. I *saw* it!"

"I'm waiting."

Cordell said doggedly: "The lab door was open a crack. I heard a woman's voice in there, and it wasn't my wife's. It was a voice like—like cracked ice. You know: cold and kind of ... well ... brittle and—and deadly. That's the only way I can describe it.

"Anyway, I sort of hesitated there, outside the door. I didn't want to go bulling in on something that wasn't none of my business ... but on the other hand I figured my wife was in there, else Alma would've said so."

"You hear anything besides this collection of ice cubes?"

The young man's jaw hardened. "I'm giving it the way it happened. You want the rest, or you want to trade wise cracks?"

One of the men behind Kirk lunged forward, "Why, you cheap punk—"

Kirk stopped him with an arm. "I'll handle this, Miller." To Cordell: "I asked you a question. Answer it."

"I heard Professor Gilmore. Only a couple words, then two quick flashes of light lit up the frosted glass door panel. That's when I heard these two thumps like when somebody falls down. I shoved open the door fast ... and right then I saw *her!*"

Kirk nodded for no apparent reason and was careful about knocking a quarter inch of ash off his cigar. "Tell me about her."

The young man's hands were shaking again. He sucked at his cigarette and let the smoke come out with his words: "She was clear over on the other side of the lab ... standing a good two feet off the floor in the middle of a big blue ball of some kind of—of soft fire. *Blue* fire that sort of *pulsed*—you know. Anyway, there she was: this hell of a good-looking blonde; looking right smack at me, and there was this funny kind of gun in her hand. She aimed it and I ducked just as this dim flash of light came out of it. Something hit me on the side of the head and I ... well, I guess I blanked out."



She was standing a good two feet off the floor in the middle of a glowing bubble that pulsed and wavered around her.

"Then what?"

"Well, like I said yesterday, I suppose I just naturally came out of it. I'm all spread out on the floor with the damndest headache you ever saw. Over by the window is the Prof and—" he wet his lips—"and Juanita. They're dead, Lieutenant; just kind of all piled up over there ... dead, their heads busted in and the—the—the—"

He sat there, his mouth working but no sound coming out, his eyes staring straight into the blazing light, the cigarette smouldering, forgotten, between the first two fingers of his left hand.

Almost gently Kirk said: "Let's go back to where you were standing outside the door. You heard this woman talking. What did she say?"

Cordell looked sightlessly down at his hands. "Nothing that made sense. Sounded, near as I can remember, like: 'Twelve times zero'—then some words, or more numbers maybe—I'm not sure—then she said, 'Chained to a two hundred thousand years'—and the Professor said something about his colleges having no idea and he'd warn them—and the blonde said, 'Three in the past

five months'—and then something about taking in washing—"

The detective named Miller gave a derisive grunt. "Of all the goddam stories! Kirk, you gonna listen to any—"

Kirk silenced him with a gesture. "Go on, Cordell."

The young man slowly lifted the cigarette to his mouth, dragged heavily on it, then let it fall to the floor. "That's all. That's when the lights started flashing in there and I tried to be a hero."

"Sure you've left nothing out?"

"You've got it all. The truth, like you wanted."

Kirk said patiently, "Give it up, Cordell. You're as sane as the next guy. Give that story to a jury and they'll figure you're trying to make saps out of them—and when a jury gets sore at a defendant, he gets the limit. And in case you didn't know: in this State, the limit for murder is the hot seat!"

The prisoner stared at him woodenly. "You know I didn't kill my wife—or Professor Gilmore. I had no reason to—no motive. There's *got* to be a motive."

The police officer rubbed his chin reflectively. "Uh-hunh. Motive. How long you married, Cordell?"

"Six years."

"Children?"

"No."

"Ames Chemical pay you a good salary?"

"Enough."

"Enough for two to live on?"

"Sure."

"How long did your wife work for Professor Gilmore?"

"Four years next month."

"What was her job?"

"His assistant."

"Pretty big job for a woman, wasn't it?"

"Juanita held two degrees in nuclear physics."

"You mean this atom bomb stuff?"

"That was part of it."

"Gilmore's a big name in that field, I understand," Kirk said.

"Maybe the biggest."

"Kind of young to rate that high, wouldn't you say? He couldn't have been much past forty."

Cordell shrugged. "He was thirty-eight—and a genius. Genius has nothing to do with age, I hear."

"Not married, I understand."

"That's right." A slow frown was forming on Cordell's face.

"How old was your wife?" Kirk asked.

The frown deepened but the young man answered promptly enough. "Juanita was my age. Twenty-nine."

Martin Kirk eyed his cigar casually. "Why," he said, "did you want her to walk out on her job; to give up her career?"

Cordell stiffened. "Who says I did?" he snapped.

"Are you denying it?"

"You're damn well right I'm denying it! What *is* this?"

Kirk was slowly shaking his head almost pityingly. "On at least two occasions friends of you and your wife have heard you say you wished she'd stay home where she belonged and cut out this 'playing around with a mess of test tubes.' Those are your own words, Cordell."

"Every guy," the young man retorted, "who's got a working wife says something like that now and then. It's only natural."

Kirk's jaw hardened. "But every guy's wife doesn't get murdered."

The other looked at him unbelievably. "Good God," he burst out, "are you saying I killed Juanita because I wanted her to stop working? Of all the—"

"There's, more!" snapped the Homicide man. "When you passed Professor Gilmore's secretary in his outer office yesterday, what did you say to her?"

"Say to her?" the prisoner echoed in a dazed way. "I don't know that I ... Some kidding remark, I guess. How do you expect me to remember a thing like that?"

"I'll tell you what you said," Kirk said coldly. "It goes like this: 'Hi, Alma. You think the Prof's through making love to my wife?'"

Cordell's head snapped back and his jaw dropped in utter amazement. "*What!* Of all—! You *nuts?* I never said anything like that in my *life!* Who says I said that?"

Without haste Kirk slid a hand into the inner pocket of his coat and brought out two folded sheets of paper which he opened and spread out on his knee.

"Listen to this, friend," he said softly. "'My name is Miss Alma Dakin. I reside at 1142 Monroe Street, and am employed as secretary to Professor Gregory Gilmore. At approximately 5:50 on the afternoon of October 19, Paul Cordell, husband of Mrs. Juanita Cordell, laboratory assistant to Professor Gilmore, passed my desk on his way into the laboratory. I made no effort to stop him, since my employer had previously instructed me to allow Mr. Cordell to go directly to the laboratory at any time without being announced.'" Kirk looked up at the man in the chair opposite him. "Okay so far?"

Paul Cordell nodded numbly.

"At the time stated above," Kirk continued, reading from the paper, "'Mr. Cordell stopped briefly in front of my desk. He seemed very angry about something. He said, 'Hi, Alma. You think the Prof's through making love to my wife?' Before I could say anything, he turned away and walked into the corridor leading to the laboratory. I continued my work until about five minutes later when Mr. Cordell came running back into the office and told me to call the police, that Professor Gilmore and Mrs. Cordell had been murdered.

"Since there is an automatic closer on the corridor door, I did not see Mr. Cordell enter the laboratory itself. I do know, however, that Professor Gilmore and Mrs. Cordell were alone in the laboratory less than ten minutes before Mr. Cordell arrived, as I had just left them alone there after taking some dictation from my employer. Since I went directly to my desk, and since there is no entrance to the laboratory other than through my office, I can state with certainty that Mr. Cordell was the only person to enter the laboratory between 5:00 that afternoon and 5:55 when Mr. Cordell came out of the laboratory and told me of the murders.

"I hereby depose that this is a true and honest statement, to the best of my knowledge, that it was given freely on my part, and that I have read it before affixing my signature to its pages. Signed: Alma K. Dakin."

There was an almost ominous crackle to the document as Lieutenant Kirk folded it and returned it to his pocket. Paul Cordell appeared utterly stunned by what he had heard and his once stiffly squared shoulders were slumped like those of an old man.

"I don't have to tell you," Kirk said, "that the only window in that laboratory is both permanently sealed and heavily barred. No one but you could have murdered those two people. You say you saw them killed by some kind of a gun. Yet a qualified physician states both deaths were caused by a terrific blow from a blunt instrument. We found a lot of things around the lab you could have used to do the job—but nothing at all of anything like a projectile fired from a gun."

The prisoner obviously wasn't listening. "B—but she—she lied!" he stammered wildly, "All I said to Alma Dakin was a couple of words—three or four at the most—about not working too hard. Why should she put me on a spot like that? I just—don't—get—it! Why should she go out of her way to make trouble...." Dawning suspicion replaced his bewilderment, "I get it! You cops put her up to this; that's it! You need a fall guy and I'm elec—"

"Listen to me, Cordell," Kirk cut in impatiently. "You knew, or thought you knew, your wife was having an affair with Professor Gilmore. You tried to break it up, to get her to leave her job. She wasn't having any of that; and the more she refused, the sorer you got. Yesterday you walked in on them unannounced, found them in each other's arms, and knocked them both off in a jealous rage. When you cooled down enough to see what you'd done, you invented this wild yarn about a blonde in a ball of fire, hoping to get off on an insanity plea."

"I want a lawyer!" Cordell shouted.

Kirk ignored the demand. "You're going back to your cell for a couple hours, buster. Think this

over. When you're ready to tell it right, I want it in the form of a witnessed statement, on paper. If you do that, if you co-operate with the authorities, you can probably get off with a fairly light sentence, maybe even an outright acquittal, on the old 'unwritten law' plea. I don't make any promises. Gilmore was a prominent man and a valuable one; that might influence a jury against you. But it's the only chance you've got—and I'm telling you, by God, to take it!"

Cordell was standing now, his face working. "Sure; I get it! All you're after is a confession. What do you care if it's a flock of lies? My wife wouldn't even *look* at another man, and not you or anybody else is going to make me say different. That blonde killed them, I tell you—and I'll tell a jury the same thing! They'll believe me; they're not a bunch of lousy framing cops! You'll find out who's—"

Lieutenant Martin Kirk wearily ground out his cigar against the chair rung. "All right, boys. Take him back upstairs."

Chapter II

It was a gray chill day late in November, and by 4:30 that afternoon the ceiling lights were on. Chenowich, the young plain-clothes man recently transferred to Homicide from Robbery Detail, stopped at Martin Kirk's cubbyhole and slid an evening paper across the battered brown linoleum top of the Lieutenant's desk.

"This oughta interest you," he said, jabbing a chewed thumbnail at an item under a two-column head half-way down the left side of page one.

CORDELL DRAWS DEATH NOD

Killer of Wife and Atom Wizard To Face Chair in January

Paul Cordell, 29, was today doomed by Criminal Court Justice Edwin P. Reed to death by electrocution the morning of January 11, for the murders of his wife, Juanita, 29, and her employer, world-famous nuclear scientist Gregory Gilmore.

A jury last week found Cordell guilty of the brutal slayings despite his testimony that it was a mysterious blonde woman, floating in a "ball of blue fire," who had blasted the victims with a "ray gun" on that October afternoon.

Ignoring the "girl from Mars" angle, alienists for the prosecution pronounced the handsome defendant sane, and his attorneys were powerless to offset the damage.

The final blow to Cordell's hopes for acquittal, however, was administered by the State's key witness, Alma Dakin, Gilmore's former secretary. For more than three hours she underwent one of the most grilling cross-examinations in local courtroom....

Kirk shoved the paper aside, "What could he expect when he wouldn't even listen to his own lawyers? They'll appeal—they have to—but it'll be a waste of time."

He leaned back in the creaking swivel chair and began to unwrap the cellophane from a cigar. "In a way," he said thoughtfully, "I hate to see that kid end up in the fireless cooker. In this business you get so you can recognize an act when you see one, and I'd swear Cordell wasn't lying about that blonde and her blue fire. At least he thought he wasn't."

Chenowich yawned. "I say he was nuts then and he's nuts now. What do them bug doctors know? I never seen one yet could count his own fingers."

The telephone on Martin Kirk's desk rang while he was lighting his cigar. He tossed the match on the floor to join a dozen others, and picked up the receiver. "Homicide; Lieutenant Kirk speaking."

It was the patrolman in the outer office. "Woman out here wants to see you, Lieutenant. Asked for you personally."

"What about?"

"She won't say. All I get is it's important and she talks to you or nobody."

"What's her name?"

"No, sir. Not even that. Want me to get rid of her?"

Kirk eyed the mound of paper work on his desk and sighed. "Probably a taxpayer. All right; send her back here."

A moment later the patrolman loomed up outside the cubbyhole door, the woman in tow. Lieutenant Kirk remained seated, nodded briskly toward the empty chair alongside his desk. "Please sit down, madam. You wanted to see me?"

"You are Mr. Kirk?" A warm voice, almost on the husky side.

"Lieutenant Kirk."

"Of course. I *am* sorry."

While she was being graceful about getting into the chair, Kirk stared at her openly. She was worth staring at. She was tall for a woman and missed being voluptuous by exactly the right margin. Her face was more lovely than beautiful, chiefly because of large eyes so blue they were almost purple. Her skin was flawless, her blonde hair worn in a medium bob fluffed out, and her smooth fitting tobacco brown suit must have been bought by appointment. She looked to be in her mid-twenties and was probably thirty.

Her expression was solemn and her smile fleeting, as was becoming to anyone calling on a Homicide Bureau. She placed on a corner of Kirk's desk an alligator bag that matched her shoes and tucked pale yellow gloves the color of her blouse under the bag's strap. Her slim fingers, ringless, moved competently and without haste.

"I am Naia North, Lieutenant Kirk."

"What's on your mind, Miss North?"

She regarded him gravely, seeing gray-blue eyes that never quite lost their chill, a thin nose bent slightly to the left from an encounter with a drunken longshoreman years before, the lean lines of a solid jaw, the dark hair that was beginning to thin out above the temples after thirty-five years. Even those who love him, she thought, must fear this man a little.

Martin Kirk felt his cheeks flush under the frank appraisal of those purple eyes. "You asked for me by name, Miss North. Why?"

"Aren't you the officer who arrested the young man who today was sentenced to die?"

Only years of practise at letting nothing openly surprise him kept Kirk's jaw from dropping. "... You mean Cordell?"

"Yes."

"I'm the one. What about it? What've you got to do with Paul Cordell?"

Naia North said quietly, "A great deal, I'm afraid. You see, I'm the woman who doesn't exist; the one the newspapers call 'the girl from Mars.'"

It was what he had expected from her first question about the case. Any murder hitting the headlines brought at least one psycho out of the woodwork, driven by some deep-seated sense of guilt into making a phony confession. Those who were harmless were eased aside; the violent got detained for observation.

But Naia North showed none of the signs of the twisted mind. She was coherent, attractive and obviously there was money somewhere in her vicinity. While the last two items could have been true of a raving maniac, Kirk was human enough to be swayed by them.

"I'm afraid," he said, "you've come to the wrong man about this, Miss North." His smile was frank and winning enough to startle her. "The case is out of my hands; has been since the District Attorney's office took over. Why don't you take it up with them?"

Her short laugh was openly cynical. "I tried to, the day the trial ended. I got as far as a fourth assistant, who told me the case was closed, that new and conclusive evidence would be necessary to reopen it, and would I excuse him as he had a golf date. When I said I could give him new evidence, he looked at his watch and wanted me to write a letter. So I wrote one and his secretary promised to hand it to him personally. I'm still waiting for an answer."

"These things take time, Miss North. If I were you I'd—"

"I even tried to see Judge Reed. I got as far as his bailiff. If I'd state my business in writing.... I did; that's the last I've heard from Judge Reed *or* bailiff."

Kirk picked up his cigar from the edge of the desk and tapped the ash onto the floor. "Shall I," he said, his lips quirked, "ask you to write *me* a letter?"

Naia North failed to respond to the light touch. "I'm through filling wastebaskets," she said flatly. "Either you do something about this or the newspapers get the entire story. Not that I'll enjoy being a public spectacle, but at least they'll give me some action."

"What do you want done?"

She put both elbows on the desk top and bent toward him. He caught the faint odor of bath salts rising from under the rounded neckline of her blouse. "That man must go free, Lieutenant. He

didn't kill his wife—or Gregory Gilmore."

"Who did?"

She looked straight into his eyes. "I did."

"Why?"

Slowly she straightened and leaned back in the chair, her gaze shifting to a point beyond his left shoulder. "Nothing you haven't heard before," she said tonelessly.

"We met several months ago and fell in love. I let him make the rules ... and after a while he got tired of playing. I didn't—and I wanted him back. For weeks he avoided me."

"So you decided to kill him."

She seemed genuinely astonished at the remark. "Certainly not! But when I saw him take this woman—this assistant of his, or whatever she was—into his arms ... I suppose I went a little crazy."

"Now," Kirk said, "we're getting down to cases. You know the evidence given at the trial—particularly that given by Gilmore's secretary?"

"Of course."

"Then you know this Dakin woman was in the laboratory until a few minutes before Cordell showed up. You know that nobody could have gone into that laboratory without her seeing them. You know that Alma Dakin testified that there were only two people in there: Gilmore and Juanita Cordell. So, Miss North, how did you get in there after Alma Dakin left and before Paul Cordell arrived?"

"But I didn't."

The Lieutenant's air of triumph sagged under a sudden frown. "What do you mean you didn't?"

"I didn't enter the laboratory after Greg's secretary left it. *I was there all along.*"

Kirk's head came up sharply. "You *what?*"

"I was there all the time," the girl repeated. "Since noon, to be exact. I planned it that way. I knew everybody would be out to lunch between twelve and one, so I went to the laboratory with the intention of facing Greg there on his return. When I heard him and Mrs. Cordell coming along the corridor, I sort of lost my nerve and hid in a coat closet."

Martin Kirk had completely dropped his air of good-humored patience by this time, "You telling me you were hiding in there for almost five hours without them knowing it?"

Naia North shrugged her shoulders. "They had no reason to look in the closet. I'll admit I hadn't intended to—to spy on Greg. But I kept waiting for him to say or do something that would prove or disprove he was in love with Juanita Cordell, and not until his secretary left and he was alone with her did I discover what was between them. I must have come out of that dark hole like a tiger, Lieutenant. They jumped apart and two people never looked guiltier. He said something particularly nasty to me and I grabbed up a short length of shiny metal from the workbench and hit him across the side of the head before he knew what was happening. He fell down and the Cordell woman opened her mouth to scream and—and I hit her too."

She paused as though to permit Kirk to comment. "Go on," he said hoarsely.

"There's not much left," the girl said. "I was standing there still holding that piece of metal when the door crashed open and the dead woman's husband ran in. He started to lunge across the room at me and I threw the thing I was holding at him. It struck him and he fell down. My only thought was to hide, for I realized I couldn't go out through the outer office, and the only window was barred. So I hid in that closet again."

"It was only a few minutes before Paul Cordell regained consciousness. He staggered out of the room and down the hall and I could hear a lot of excited talk and Greg's secretary calling the police. Then I didn't hear anything at all for a moment, so I came out of the closet and looked down the hall. The office door was closed, but it seemed so quiet in there that I tiptoed quickly to the inner door, opened it a crack and peered through. The office was deserted; evidently Cordell and Miss Dakin had gone out to direct the police when they showed up."

"When I saw there was no one in the main hall of the building itself, I simply walked out and left by another exit. No one I passed even noticed me."

For a long time after Naia North had finished speaking, Martin Kirk sat as though carved from stone, staring blindly into space. She knew he was thinking furiously, weighing the plausibility of what he had heard, trying to arrive at some method of corroborating it in a way that would stand

up in a court of law.

"Miss North."

She came out of a reverie with a start, to find the Lieutenant's eyes boring into hers. "This shiny hunk of metal you used: where is it now?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know. Probably some place in the laboratory, unless somebody took it away. I do seem to remember picking it up and tossing it back with several others like it on the bench."

"Then it's still there," he said slowly. "Judge Reed ordered the room sealed up until after the trial. And then there's the closet.... Were you wearing gloves that afternoon, Miss North?"

She said, "No. You're thinking of fingerprints?"

"If you're telling the truth," he said, "there's almost certain to be some of your prints on the inside of that closet door—maybe even on that length of metal, if we can find it."

She said almost carelessly: "That's all you'd need to clear Paul Cordell, isn't it?"

"It would certainly help." He swung around in the chair, scooped up the telephone and gave a series of rapid-fire orders, then dropped the instrument on its cradle and turned back to where she sat watching him curiously.

He said, "A few things I still don't get. Like this business of your standing two feet off the floor in a ball of blue light. And the flashes of light just before Cordell heard his wife and Gilmore fall to the floor. Even the snatches of conversation he caught while still in the hall. He couldn't have dreamed all that stuff up—at least not without *some* basis."

She had opened her bag and taken out a cigarette. Kirk ignited one of his kitchen matches and she bent her head for a light. He could see the flawless curve of one cheek and the smooth cap of blonde hair, and he resisted the urge to pass a hand lightly across both. Something was stirring inside the Lieutenant—something that had long been absent. And, he reflected wryly, all because of a girl who had just finished confessing to two particularly unpleasant murders.

Naia North raised her head and their eyes met—met and held. Her lips parted slightly as she caught the unmistakable message in those gray-blue depths....

The moment passed, the spell was broken and she leaned back in the chair and laughed a little shakily. "I read about those statements of his in the papers, Lieutenant. I think perhaps I can at least partially explain them. As I remember it, there were several Bunsen burners lighted on the laboratory bench near that window. They give off a blue flame, you know, and I must have been standing near them when Paul Cordell came charging in. In his confused frame of mind, he may have pictured me as being in a ball of flame."

"Sounds possible," the man admitted, frowning. "What about those flashes of light?"

"You've got me there. Unless they were reflections of sunlight through the window—from the windshield of a passing car, perhaps."

"And the things he heard you and Gilmore saying?"

She shook her head regretfully.

"There I'm simply in the dark, I don't see how he could have twisted what little we said into the utterly fantastic nonsense he claims to have heard."

Kirk rubbed a hand slowly along the side of his neck, still frowning. "He *could* have confused that length of metal in your hand as a gun.... Well—" his shoulders lifted in the ghost of a shrug—"it all seems to add up. Except one thing: Cordell had been tried and convicted, leaving you in the clear. Why come down here voluntarily and stick your lovely head in a noose?"

The girl smiled faintly. "'Lovely head', Lieutenant?"

Kirk flushed to the eyebrows. "That slipped out.... Why the confession?"

She said soberly: "I was so sure they'd let him off. When you *know* someone's innocent you can't realize that others won't know it too, I suppose. But when I learned he'd been found guilty and actually condemned to die ... well, I know it sounds noble and all that but I couldn't let him go to his death for something I'd done. Surely such a thing has happened before in your experience, Lieutenant."

He watched as she drew smoke from the cigarette deeply into her lungs and let it flow out in twin streamers from her nostrils. Only rich men, he thought, could afford a woman like this, and somehow it made him resentful. What right did she have to walk in here and flaunt a body like that in his face? She went with mink stoles and cabin cruisers and cocktails at the Sherry-Netherland, and her shoe bill would exceed his yearly salary. She would be competent and more than a little cynical and not too concerned with morals or the lack of them. That kind of woman could kill—and would kill, on the spur of the moment and if the provocation was strong enough.

"Well, Lieutenant?" She said it lightly, almost with disinterest.

Then Kirk was all right again, and he was looking at a woman who had just confessed to murder.

"You heard the phone call I made a moment ago, Miss North. Two men from the Crime Lab are already on their way to the University. If they find your fingerprints inside that closet, if they can turn up *anything* to prove you've been in Gregory Gilmore's laboratory, then you and that evidence and your confession get turned over to the D. A. and Paul Cordell will be on his way to freedom."

"And if those men don't find anything?"

"Then," he told her rudely, "you're just another crackpot and I'm tossing you *and* your phony confession out of here."

They found the fingerprints: several perfect ones on the inner door of the laboratory coat closet. But even more conclusive was their discovery of a short length of polished metal pipe among the dismantled parts of a Clayton centrifuge. At one end of the pipe were the imprints of four fingertips—at the other a microscopic trace of human blood.

"We had no business missing it the first time, Lieutenant," the Crime Laboratory technician told Kirk ruefully. "I'd a sworn we pulled that place apart last month. But this time we got the murder weapon and we got the prints—and those prints match the ones we took off that blonde. Hey, how about that, Lieutenant? I thought this Cordell guy did that job?"

Slowly Kirk replaced the receiver and eyed Naia North across the desk from him. "Looks like you're elected," he said somberly. "I'm telling you straight: the D. A. isn't going to like this at all—not even any part of it."

Her brow wrinkled. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Doesn't he want murder cases solved?"

Kirk smiled crookedly. "You're forgetting this case *was* solved—over a month ago. You any idea what it can mean to a politician to have to admit publicly that he's made a mistake? Especially a mistake that's going to get all the publicity this one's bound to? 'District attorney railroads innocent man!' 'Tragic miscarriage of justice averted only by chance!' Stuffy editorials in the opposition press about incompetence in high offices and how the voters must keep out anybody who goes around executing the innocent and helpless. Looks like Arthur Kahler Troy is going to be a mighty unpopular man around these parts—and election less than five months away!"

He glanced up at the office clock. It was nearly nine o'clock in the evening, and both of them were showing signs of wear. Kirk left his chair and went over to the water cooler, drank two cupfuls and brought one back to the girl. She thanked him with a wan smile and gulped down the contents.

He took the empty paper container and crumpled it slowly. "Might as well get hold of him," he muttered. "It's going to be mighty damned rough, sister. You sure you want to go through with it?"

She lifted an eyebrow at him. "That's a peculiar question for a homicide officer to ask, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." His eyes shifted to the phone on his desk, stayed there for a long moment. Then he shrugged hugely and picked up the receiver....

It was well after two in the morning before Martin Kirk reached his apartment. He showered and got into a fresh pair of pajamas and went into the small, sparsely furnished living room. He moved slowly and with no spring in his step, and the set of his features was harsh and strained in the soft light from the floor lamp.

Troy had been even more difficult than he'd feared. What had begun as plain irritability at being disturbed, had passed by successive stages to amused disbelief, open anger and finally reluctant conviction that Paul Cordell was innocent of the crimes for which he had been sentenced to die.

A male stenographer from his staff was called in and Naia North dictated a complete statement which she signed. Troy questioned her for nearly two hours, getting in every possible angle of her private life as well as minute details of her actions on the day of the murders. Kirk had not been present during that part of the night, but he figured it wouldn't be much different from what he'd heard many times before.

He mixed himself a drink, and was surprised to discover that his hands were shaking noticeably. Well, why not? A day like the one he'd just been through would put the shakes in Grant's Tomb. Even as he made the excuse, he knew it wasn't the real reason. There had been cases that had kept him on his feet for as much as forty-eight hours—cases where men had pointed guns at him and pulled the triggers—and the shakes never came.

No, it was the girl. Naia North. Naia—a strange name. But no stranger than the girl herself. Now how about that? Why should he think her strange? Because she'd taken a life or two? Hell, lots of

people did that and no one called them strange. Criminal or unmoral or greedy or angry, yes. But not strange. She looked like other women—only a lot better. She dressed like them, walked like them, talked like them. So why strange?

Because she *was* strange. Nothing you could put your finger on made her that way, but that's the way she was.

He threw his cigar savagely into the fireplace. He went over and made another drink and poured it down fast and another one after it, right on its heels. Then he went to bed. Tomorrow—today, rather—was a work day and work days were tough days and he needed his rest.

He didn't get much of it, though. The phone woke him a few minutes after seven o'clock. It was Arthur Kahler Troy at the other end and the D. A. was too angry to be coherent.

It seemed Naia North had disappeared from her locked cell during the night.

Chapter III

"I don't give a triple-distilled damn *what* you say!" Troy snarled. "Nobody's got enough money to make that kind of payoff. Five men, Lieutenant—five men and five locked doors stood between that girl and the street. And you sit there and try to tell me somebody bought all *five* of 'em off!"

"Then," Kirk said heatedly, "what's *your* explanation?"

It had been going on this way for over an hour. The morning sun came in weakly at the window behind Troy's huge polished mahogany desk, picking up random reflections from the collection of expensive gadgets littering the glass top.

Troy began to wear another path in the moss-colored broadloom carpeting. He was big and broad and getting puffy around the middle, like a one-time halfback going to seed. His round, heavy-featured face was even more florid than usual, and his heavy growth of reddish-blond hair needed a comb.

Martin Kirk pushed himself deeper into the depths of a brown leather chair and watched the D. A. through brooding eyes. He wanted a cigar but it was too early in the morning for that kind of indulgence. You needed a good breakfast and a couple cups of coffee before—

"I don't explain it," Troy said in quieter tones. He was standing by the window now, staring down into the boulevard passing that side of the Criminal Courts Building. "It's one of those things that make me think my sainted mother wasn't so wrong when she used to tell about elves and gnomes and leprechauns and fairies and—"

Kirk made a sound deep in his throat, "Naia North was a hell of a long way from being a leprechaun. Somebody wanted her out of here for some reason—and they got her out. I want to know who took her out, why she was taken, and where she is now. And I'm going to find out the answers to all three if I have to turn this town on its ear."

"Go ahead," Troy said. "Hop right to it and I wish you luck. Only leave me and my people out of it."

"Seems to me you're mighty damned anxious *to* be left out."

Arthur Kahler Troy turned on his heel and strode toward the Lieutenant until he was towering over him. "Just what," he said between his teeth, "do you mean by *that* crack?"

"Figure it out for yourself," Kirk snapped. "And I'm sure you can."

Troy reared back as though the police officer had pulled a gun on him. "Why—why you—I'll have you busted for making a dirty insinu—"

"You couldn't bust a daisy chain at the police department," Kirk growled. "The Commissioner hates your guts and you know that as well as I do. Now let's cut out all this hokey-pokey and pick up a few loose ends, The first thing: what about Paul Cordell?"

All the wide-eyed fury seemed to go out of Troy's face like water down the bathtub drain. He turned away and walked slowly back to his desk chair and sat down.

He said, "What about Cordell," in a soft voice.

"The morning paper," Kirk said, "reports he was taken up to Hillcrest last night. The warden out there's probably got him in Death Row already."

"Uh-hunh."

"Well, let's get him out of there. With the evidence we've got, plus Naia North's sworn statement, Judge Reed will have to bring him back down here and release him—at least on bail until we can find the girl. The man's innocent, Mr. D. A.; have you forgotten?"

"Yes."

"Yes'? Yes, what?"

"I've forgotten he's innocent," Troy said quietly. "Matter of fact, he's guilty as hell."

The Lieutenant half rose from his chair. "Now wait a minute! You heard that girl's story and you've got the evidence I turned over to you right here in this office last night. What more—"

"I'll tell you what more," Troy snapped. "That girl was a fraud, her story was a downright lie and that evidence was faked. Let me tell you something else, Mister: within five minutes after the guard downstairs reported your girl friend missing, I had five squads of my men out running down the personal information she gave me a few hours before. And you know what they found out? *Every bit of what she told me was false!* Hear that? False! It took my men about one hour to prove as much, for the simple reason that not one lead panned out. Not one! And you know what I think?"

Martin Kirk opened his mouth but nothing came out but a strangled croak.

"I think you and this dame worked out the whole thing between the two of you to save Cordell's neck. Who could do a better job of faking evidence than a crooked cop? What's more, you might have gotten away with it, too—only it suddenly dawned on the girl that she was getting in too deep."

"And so," Kirk cut in hotly, "she calmly walked through five locked sets of iron bars and went back to Mars!"

He stood up and crossed to the desk and leaned down with his palms in the center of the brown blotter. "You won't get away with it, Troy. You didn't want any part of this new development from the minute I called you on the phone last night. You knew it could show you and your whole organization up as a bunch of bunglers and incompetents. So you got rid of the girl, thinking that without her the truth of those murders would never get out to the voters.

"Well, it won't work, Fatso! The evidence I dug up is strong enough to reopen the case *without* Naia North. All I have to do is put that evidence in front of Judge Reed, and—"

Troy was smiling wolfishly. "*What* evidence, Lieutenant?"

Kirk stiffened. "You know damned well what evidence. It's in your files right now: Naia North's statement, the strips of paneling from that coat closet, the murder weapon. I turned the whole works over to you."

The D. A. was shaking his head. "We don't keep worthless junk around here, my boy. The Cordell case is closed; the guilty man is awaiting execution. Sure, you run along and tell the Judge all about it. Tell the newspapers, tell Cordell's defense attorneys, tell the world for all I care. See who'll touch it without something more concrete than your highly imaginative day dreams. For all you can prove, the girl might have confessed the whole thing was a hoax and we tossed her out of here last night...."

"I'm a busy man, Lieutenant. Good morning—good luck—and kindly close the door on your way out."

Chapter IV

Lieutenant Martin Kirk shoved the pile of mimeographed pages aside. Three hours spent in going through the complete transcript of the Cordell trial and nothing to show for it but stiff muscles and an aching head.

Give it up, a small voice in the back of his mind urged. You haven't got a leg to stand on as far as getting any action out of the authorities. Troy and his gang put the fear of God in that purple-eyed dame and shipped her out of the State. You lose, brother—and so does that poor devil up in Death's Row.

He drummed his fingers over and over on the arm of his chair and listened to the every-day sounds of a normal day at the Homicide Bureau. A new day, a new set of problems, and why knock yourself out over something that doesn't concern you? Thing to do was go down to the corner tavern and have a couple of fast ones and watch an old movie on television. Yes sir, that's exactly what he'd do!

He went back to the mimeographed pages.

For the fourth time he read through Cordell's testimony of what had happened that October afternoon. And it was there that he came across the first possible break in the stone wall.

Once more Martin Kirk went over the few lines, although by this time he could have come close to reciting them from memory. It was an excerpt from Arthur Kahler Troy's cross-examination of the defendant after Cordell's counsel, in a last desperate effort to swing the tide of a losing

battle, had placed him on the stand.

Q: (by Troy): Now, Mr. Cordell, I direct your attention to the point in your testimony at which first entered Professor Gilmore's outer office. At what time was this?

A: At about 5:45 p.m.

Q: Who was in the office at that time?

A: Alma Dakin, the Professor's secretary. And a couple of students—although they were at the other end of the room and I didn't pay much attention to them.

Q: But you did pay attention, as you call it, to Miss Dakin?

A: Well, I spoke to her, if that's what you mean.

Q: That's exactly what I mean, Mr. Cordell. And what was it you said to her?

A: Something about it was too late in the day to be working so hard.

Q: That was all?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: Remember, Mr. Cordell, you're under oath. Now I ask you again: Was that all you said to her at that time?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: It isn't possible you've forgotten some additional remark? Think carefully, please.

A: No, sir. That's all I said. I swear it.

Q: Very well. Now how well do you know Miss Dakin?

A: Just to speak to.

Q: Have you ever seen her outside Professor Gilmore's office?

A: No, sir.

Q: Ever ask her for a date?

A: No, sir.

Q: Did you ever have an argument with her? A discussion of any kind that may have become a bit heated?

A: No, sir.

Q: Then to your knowledge she'd have no reason to dislike you?

A: No, sir.

Q: Very good. Now, Mr. Cordell, I want to read to you an excerpt from the testimony given by Miss Dakin in this court. "Mr. Cordell was looking very angry when he came in. He came up to me and bent down over the desk and said so low I could hardly hear him: 'Hi, Alma. You think the Prof's through making love to my wife?'" I now ask you, Paul Cordell, isn't that what you said to Alma Dakin? Not that she was working too hard, or whatever it was you claimed to have said.

A: No, sir. I didn't say anything like she said I did. I wouldn't insult my wife by saying such a thing to a third—

Q: Just answer the questions, Mr. Cordell. Then you contend that Miss Dakin deliberately lied in her testimony.

A: She was mistaken.

Q: Oh, come now! Miss Dakin is an intelligent girl; she couldn't misunderstand or twist your words to that extent. Now could she?

A: Then she lied. I never said anything like that.

Q: What reason would she have for lying, Mr. Cordell? By your own statement she hardly knew you, always greeted you pleasantly on the times you came to the office, never got into any arguments with you, and never saw you outside the office. She had worked for Professor Gilmore for five or six months, has excellent references, and is well liked by her friends. Yet you're asking us to believe that she coldly and deliberately lied to get you into trouble. Is that true?

A: All I know is she lied.

The break was there all right, Kirk thought grimly. For if Cordell was innocent, then he had told

the truth during the trial. And if he had told the truth about his remark to Alma Dakin, then, automatically, Alma Dakin's testimony was untrue.

Kirk ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture of bafflement. What possible reason could Gilmore's secretary have for going out of her way to lie about Cordell's remark? Was it because she was so certain he had killed her employer that she wanted to make sure he would be punished?

Or was it because she wanted to shield the real killer? Maybe she was a friend of Naia North's and had known the blonde girl was in Gilmore's laboratory all along. She might even have deliberately steered everyone out of her office after Cordell discovered the bodies, making it possible for Naia to slip out unseen.

It was a slender lead, but the only one large enough to get even a fingernail grip on. He drew the phone over in front of him and began a series of calls designated to give him more information about Alma Dakin.

A call to the University took him through a couple of secretaries before he reached the right person. Her name was Miss Slife, personnel director of all non-teaching employees. Miss Dakin? Why, of course! A lovely girl and very dependable. She had come to the University in search of a position only a day or two before Miss Collins, Professor Gilmore's previous secretary, had resigned. Since Miss Dakin's references showed that she had worked for a short time as secretary to Dr. Karney, one of the co-discoverers of the atom bomb (according to Miss Slife), she had been engaged to take Miss Collins' place. Professor Gilmore, poor man, had been very pleased with the change and everybody was happy: Miss Collins at inheriting a vary large sum of money from a relative she'd never even heard of, Miss Dakin at being able to get such a nice position, and *dear* Professor Gilmore at finding such a satisfactory replacement.

When Miss Slife had run down, Kirk said, "This Dr. Karney. Why did Miss Dakin leave him?"

The woman at the other end of the wire seemed astonished by Kirk's ignorance. "Why, I assumed *everybody* knew about Dr. Karney. He died of a heart attack about eight months ago."

"What!"

"Goodness, there's no need to shout, Mr. Kirk. He was connected with Clement University, out in California, and suffered a stroke of some kind while at work."

Kirk thanked her dazedly and broke the connection. This, he told himself, is too much a coincidence to *be* a coincidence! Two prominent nuclear scientists dying suddenly within seven months of each other at opposite ends of the country—and both of them with the same secretary at the time of their deaths!

A sudden thought sent him leafing rapidly through the trial transcript to the place where Paul Cordell had told of the disjointed phrases he claimed to have heard before he pushed into Professor Gilmore's laboratory. The words he sought seemed to stand out in letters of fire: "... three in the past five months...."

Again he caught up the telephone receiver, aware that his heart was pounding with excitement, and dialed a number.... "*Bulletin?* Hello; let me talk to Jerry Furness.... Jerry, this is Martin Kirk at Homicide. Look, do something for me. I want to find out how many top nuclear fission boys have died in the past four or five months.... No, no; nothing like that. Some of the boys down here were having an argument about.... Sure; I'll hold on."

He propped the receiver between his ear and shoulder and groped for a cigar. In the office beyond the partition of his cubbyhole a woman was sobbing. Chenowich went past his open door whistling a radio commercial.

The receiver against his ear began to vibrate. "Yeah, Jerry.... Four of 'em, hey? Let's have their names." He picked up a pencil and took down the information. "*Uh-hunh!* Three heart attacks and one murder. Check.... You mean *all* of them? Tough life, I guess.... Yeah, sure. Anytime. So long."

He replaced the receiver with slow care and leaned back to study the list of names. Not counting the last name—Gilmore's—three world-renowned men in the field of nuclear physics had dropped dead from heart failure within the designated span of months.

Coincidence? Maybe. But he was in no mood for coincidences. If the deaths of these four scientists was the result of some sinister plan, who was responsible? Some foreign power, concerned about this country's growing mastery of nuclear fission? Was it his duty to notify the FBI of his findings and let them take over from here?

He shook his head. Too early for anything like that. He needed more evidence—evidence not to be explained away as coincidence.

Once more Lieutenant Martin Kirk went back to analyzing the broken phrases Cordell had picked up while eavesdropping that October afternoon. *Twelve times zero* made no sense at all ... unless it could be the combination of a safe...? Hardly possible; no combination he'd ever heard of would read that way. The next one, then ... *chained to two hundred thousand years*.... Another blank;

could mean anything or nothing. Next: A: ... *sounded like the Professor said something like his colleges had no idea and he'd see they were warned right away.*

Kirk bit thoughtfully down on a corner of his lip. Gilmore didn't own any colleges and how do you go about warning one? Maybe the word was *college*, meaning the one where he had his laboratory. But actually it wasn't a college at all; it was a university. Not much difference to the man in the street, but to the Professor.... Wait a minute! Not *colleges*! *Colleagues*! It was his colleagues Gilmore had promised to warn. And the word meant men and women in the same line of work as the Professor—nuclear physics. Things, Kirk told himself with elation, were looking up!

The business about "three in the past five months" was next, but he felt sure of what that had meant. But the last of the quotations went nowhere at all.

"Something about *taking in washing*—" Under less tragic circumstances, a nonsense line. But Cordell hadn't actually heard the words clearly enough to quote them with authority. That could mean he had heard words that sounded *like* "taking in washing."

Taking, baking, making, slaking, raking—the list seemed endless. "Washing" could have been the first two syllables of Washington—and Washington would be the place where the Atomic Energy Commission hung out.

Still too hazy. He leaned back and put his feet up and attacked the three mysterious words from every conceivable angle. No dice.

Sight of the ambling figure of Patrolman Chenowich passing the office door caught his eye, reminding him that two heads were often better than one. "Hey, Frank."

Chenowich came in. "Yeah, Lieutenant. Somethin' doin'?"

"I'm trying to figure out a little problem," Kirk explained carelessly. "Let's say you hear a guy talking in the next room. You can't really make out the words he's saying, but right in the middle of his mumbling you hear what sounds like 'taking in washing.' Now you know that can't be right, so you try to think out what he actually *did* say...."

It was obvious Chenowich had fallen off on the first curve, so completely off that Kirk didn't bother finishing what was much too involved to begin with. The patrolman was staring at him in monstrous perplexity.

"Jeez, Lieutenant. I don't get it. 'Less the guy's goin' to open up one of these here laundries. That way he'd be takin' in washin'. But I don't know what else—"

Kirk's feet hit the floor with a solid thump and he grabbed Chenowich's wrist with fingers that bit in like steel. "Say that again!" he shouted. "Say it just that way!"

The patrolman recoiled in alarm. "What's got into you, Lieutenant? Say *what*?"

"Taking in washing!"

"Takin' in washin'? What for?"

Kirk's grin threatened to split his face, "The same words," he said, "but you say them different. Only your way's the right way! Thanks, pal. Now get out of here!"

Chenowich went. His mouth was still open and his expression still troubled, but he went.

The last of the killer's cryptic remarks was now clear. For Kirk realized that "takin'" rhymed with words you'd never associate with "taking." "Bacon", for instance—or "Dakin"! Alma Dakin, former secretary to two widely separated, and now dead, nuclear scientists. Her name had been mentioned by the slayer of Professor Gilmore only seconds before she had clubbed the savant to death.

But now that "taking" had come out "Dakin"—what did the rest of the phrase mean? *Dakin in washing* made no sense. What sounded like *washing*? Washing; washing ... *watching*? It was close; in fact nothing he could think of came closer.

All right. *Dakin in watching*; no. *Dakin is watching*—that made sense. But Alma Dakin hadn't been watching anything at the time of the killing; she, according to Cordell, was at her desk in the outer office. That would leave *Dakin was watching* as the right combination. Watching for the right opportunity for murder!

What did it mean? Well, assuming from her past record that Alma Dakin was mixed up in the deaths of two prominent men of science, it argued that she and Naia North were accomplices in a scheme to rid America of her nuclear fission experts. The nice smooth story of killing Gilmore because of unrequited love was probably as much a lie as the personal information Naia North had given Arthur Kahler Troy.

The North girl had confessed to murdering Gilmore and Juanita Cordell. As a confessed killer she must be taken into custody and booked on suspicion of homicide. Taking her was Martin Kirk's

job—and it seemed he had a contact that would lead him to her. Namely Alma Dakin.

Lieutenant Kirk grabbed his hat and went out the door.

Chapter V

The address for Alma Dakin turned out to be a small three-story walk-up apartment building on a quiet residential street near the outskirts of town. At two in the afternoon hardly anyone was visible on the sidewalks and only an occasional automobile passed.

Kirk parked his car half a block further on down and got out into the chill November air. He entered the building foyer and looked at the name plates above the twin rows of buttons. The one for Alma Dakin told him the number of her apartment was 3C.

He pushed the button several times but without response. The foyer was very quiet at this time of day, and he could hear the faint rasp of her bell through the speaking tube.

Kirk was on the point of shifting his thumb to the button marked SUPERINTENDENT when a sudden thought stayed his hand. It was not the kind of thought a conscientious, rule-abiding police officer would harbor for a moment. The lieutenant, however, was fully aware he had no business working on a closed case to begin with—and when you're breaking one set of rules, you might as well break them all.

He rang four of the other bells before the lock on the inner door began to click. Pushing it open, he waited until a female voice floated down the stairs. "Who is it?"

"Police Department, ma'am. You folks own that green Buick parked out in front?" There was no Buick, green or otherwise, along the street curbing, but Kirk figured she wouldn't know that.

"Why, no. Officer. I can't imagine—"

"Okay. Sorry we bothered you, lady," Kirk let the door swing into place hard enough to be heard upstairs. But this time he was on the right side of it.

There was a moment of silence, then he caught the sound of retreating feet and a door closed. Without waiting further, the Lieutenant mounted the stairs to the third floor, his feet soundless on the carpeted treads.

The entrance to 3C was secured by a tumbler-type lock. From an inner pocket Kirk took out a small flat leather case and a thin-edged tool from that. Working with the smooth efficiency of the expert, he loosened the door moulding near the lock and inserted the tool blade until it found the bolt. This he eased back, turned the door handle and, a moment later, was standing in a small living room tastefully furnished in modern woods.

His first action was to enter the tiny kitchen and unbolt the door leading to the rear porch. In case Alma Dakin arrived at an inopportune moment, he could be half way down the outer steps while she was still engaged with the front door lock. Since he had pressed the moulding back into place, there would be nothing to indicate his presence.

Within ten minutes Kirk had ransacked every inch of the living room in search of something, anything, that would point to Alma Dakin as being more than a nine-to-five secretary. And while he found nothing, no one, not even the girl who lived here, could tell that an intruder had been at work.

The bedroom seemed even less promising at first. Dresser drawers gave up only the pleasantly personal articles of the average young woman. Miss Dakin, it turned out, was almost indecently fond of frothy undergarments and black transparent nightgowns—interesting but not at all important to the over-all problem.

Kirk, his search completed, sat down on the edge of the bed's footboard and totaled up what he had learned. It didn't take long, for he knew absolutely no more about Alma Dakin than he had before entering her apartment. No personal papers, no letters from a yearning boy friend in the old home town, no savings or checking-account passbook. Not even a scrawled line of birthday or Christmas greetings on the fly leaves of the apartment's seven books.

To Kirk's trained mind, the very lack of such things, the fact that Alma Dakin lived in a vacuum, was highly significant. It smacked of her having something to hide—and his already strong suspicion of her was solidified into certainty of her guilt. But certainty was a long way from rock-ribbed evidence—and that was something he must have to proceed further.

He was ready to leave when it dawned on him that he had not yet looked under the bed. Kneeling, he pushed up the hanging edge of the green batik spread and peered into the narrow space. Nothing, not even a decent accumulation of dust. The light from the window was too faint, however, to reach a section of the floor near the footboard. Kirk climbed to his feet and attempted to shove that end to one side.

The bed failed to move. He blinked in mild surprise and tried again. It was only by exerting almost his entire strength that he was able to shift the thing at all, and then no more than a few inches.

He felt his pulse stir with the thrill of incipient discovery. Once he made sure nothing was anchoring the bed to the floor, he began to tap lightly against the wood in an effort to detect a possible false panel.

Within two minutes he located an almost microscopic crack in the headboard cleverly concealed by a decorative design running along the base. He ran his fingers lightly along the carvings until they encountered a small projection which gave slightly under pressure.

Kirk pressed down harder on the knob. A tiny *click* sounded against the silence and a section of wood some three feet square swung out. Lifting it aside, the detective found himself staring at an instrument board of some kind with a series of buttons and dials countersunk into it. The board itself formed a part of what was obviously a machine of some sort which evidently contained its own power, for there seemed to be no lead-in cord for plugging into a wall socket.

It could, Kirk thought, be a short wave radio transmitter. If it was, it looked like none he had ever come across before. On the other hand it could be some sort of infernal machine, ready to blow half the city to bits at the turn of a dial.

Even as his mind was weighing the advisability of tampering with the thing, his fingers were reaching for the various controls. Gingerly he moved one or two of the dials but nothing happened. A little more boldly now, he began to depress the buttons. As the third sank in, a low humming sound began to fill the room. Before Kirk could find a cut-off switch of some kind, the faint light of day streaming through the room's one window winked out, plunging him into a blackness so infinitely deep that it was like being buried alive.

Nothing can plunge a man into the sheerest panic like the absence of light. Even a man like Martin Kirk, who had walked almost daily with danger for the past fifteen years. And since the form panic takes varies with the individual, the Lieutenant's reaction was an utter inability to move so much as a finger.

Abruptly the low humming note ceased entirely, replaced immediately by the sound of a human voice. "Mythox. Contact established. Proceed."

Almost as though the words had tripped a lever in his brain, Kirk's paralysis ended. Both his hands seemed to swoop of their own volition to the invisible control panel and their fingers danced across the dials and buttons.

"Mythox," said the voice again. It seemed to swell and recede, like a direct radio newscast from half around the world. "Contact estab—"

The word ended as though it had run into a wall. The humming note came back, then ceased—and without warning daylight from the window washed over the bewildered and thoroughly frightened police officer.

Not until five minutes had passed was Martin Kirk sufficiently in control of his nervous system to even attempt replacing the loose panel in the headboard. When at last he managed to do so, he returned the bed to its original position, closed and bolted the kitchen door, took one last look around to make sure nothing was out of place, then slunk out of the apartment.

By the time he was back behind the wheel of his car and had burned up half a cigar, Kirk's brain was ready to function with something like its normal ability. He sat limp as Satan's collar, trying to piece together the significance of the last half hour's events.

There was no longer any doubt that Alma Dakin was in this mess up to her bangs. Linked as she was to the murders (and Kirk was convinced heart disease had nothing to do with it) of those scientists, he would have sworn she was a foreign agent bent on weakening America's defenses. Except for one thing. That machine. The kind of mind that could design and put together a mechanism like that was not of this planet. No longer did Paul Cordell's story of a girl who floated in a ball of blue fire sound like the ravings of a deranged brain. And the seeming miracle of Naia North's escape from a cell block now passed from fantasy to the factual.

What to do about it? Martin Kirk, at this moment undoubtedly the most bewildered man alive, put his head in his hands and tried to reach a decision. Take his story to the Police Commissioner? It would mean a padded cell—and without even bothering to see if Alma Dakin possessed a machine more complicated than an electric iron. Some government agency? By the time the red tape was unsnarled the former secretary could have reached Pakistan on foot.

Slowly from the depths of his terror of the Unknown, Martin Kirk's training in police procedure began to make itself felt. A plan started to form—hazy at first, then in a sharp and orderly pattern.

He left the car and returned to the apartment building. A glimpse of his badge and a few incisive orders masked as requests reduced the superintendent to a state of almost obsequious cooperation. Nor was the tenant of apartment 3D, a middle-aged spinster, any less anxious to assist the law. It seemed she had an older sister living on the other side of town who would be happy to put her up for a few days. She departed within the hour, a traveling bag in one fist.

Before that hour was gone, Chenowich, in response to a sizzling phone call, skidded a department car to a stop at the curb a block from the building. He delivered a dictograph to his superior, listened to a grim warning to keep his mouth shut about this at Headquarters, asked a couple of questions that drew no answers, and departed as swiftly as he had come.

The next step was the dangerous one. The superintendent admitted Kirk to the Dakin apartment and went down to the foyer to ring the bell in case the girl arrived at the wrong time. He soothed the Lieutenant's anxiety somewhat by explaining that she seldom returned to the place before seven o'clock, over three hours from now, but Kirk was taking no chances.

By five o'clock he had Alma Kirk's bedroom bugged and the instrument in working order and thoroughly tested. He was painstaking about removing all traces of plaster and sawdust and bits of wires before pushing the dresser back into place to cover the dictograph's receiver.

He found the superintendent stiffly on guard in the foyer and gave him his final instructions. The man listened respectfully, repeated them back to Kirk to convince him there would be no slip-up, and the Lieutenant went back upstairs to 3D to take up his vigil.

He was in the spinster's bedroom, working out a crossword puzzle, earphones in place, when he heard the sound of the bedroom door closing in the next apartment.

The time was 7:18.

Chapter VI

It was like being in her room with his eyes shut. The soft scraping of drawers opening and closing, the creak of a chair being sat in, the cushioned thump of shoes dropped to the carpeted floor, even the rustle of a nylon slip as she drew it over her head.

It seemed much too early for her to turn in for the night. Was he going to be forced to sit there and listen to twelve of fourteen hours of feminine snoring? It would be damned unlikely in view of what was a cinch to be running through her mind.

Minutes later he heard her leave the bedroom, followed at once by the muted roar of a running shower. After that had lasted a normal length of time, the sound ceased and naked feet were audible on the bedroom rug. There was more opening and closing of drawers, the whisper of clothing being donned, and an irregular clicking sound like tapping glass against glass which he finally interpreted as part of the ritual of alternately combing and brushing hair while in front of the glass-topped vanity.

If there was anything of a panicky nature in her movements it would take better ears than his to detect it. But for Alma Dakin to get away with her kind of job required the nerves of lion trainer no matter what pressures she was subjected to.

Kirk stretched his legs, dug a cigar from the breast pocket of his coat and got it burning, then went back to the crossword puzzle with half his attention, keeping alert for any significant sound from the other apartment. His years as a minion of the law had adequately conditioned him to the utter boredom that went with the ordinary stake-out.

Several times the subject left the bedroom, but he was able to pick up sounds familiar enough to trace as emanating from the living room or kitchen. But nothing she did was worthy of notice in the home-town paper or even on the margin of a police blotter.

At 9:24 Alma Dakin again entered the bedroom. A hunch, or a sixth sense, or whatever years of experience in a single field gives a man, told Kirk that this time something would pop. He put aside the newspaper, placed a sheet of blank paper on the cover of a historical romance lifted from the spinster's nightstand, and got out a pencil.

A motor whined unexpectedly from the opposite side of the apartment wall and he could hear a heavy object roll with well-oiled smoothness a short distance across the carpet. He decided it was the bed being moved out from the wall by mechanical means rather than muscle, and it was clear to him now how she was able to get at that hidden radio, or whatever it was.

For the second time that day Kirk heard that eerie humming—a sound, he realized, that ordinarily would have been completely inaudible beyond the girl's bedroom walls. Suddenly the hum was chopped off and a familiar voice spoke familiar words.

"Mythox. Contact established. Proceed."

"A message for Orin. Alma Dakin."

A series of almost undetectable clicking sounds; then:

"Alma?" Despite the fact that the voice was coming through an amplifier, there was no distortion. "Anything wrong?"

It was a man's voice, clear, vibrant, young, and with no trace of an alien accent. Kirk's theory of an interplanetary menace lost some of its strength.

"I—I'm not sure, Orin," the girl said hesitantly. "There was a policeman at my apartment today—the same one Naia went to: The building superintendent told me."

"That's odd. There's no way *you* can be tied in with her. Or is there?"

"Not that I know of, Orin. Unless they've decided to check back on me just for the sake of something to do. If that's what's happened and they've learned I was working for Dr. Karney at the time of *his* death, they may get an idea the three deaths are related. And once a police officer gets suspicious, he can hound you unmercifully. That's what worries me, Orin. You know I'm not really an accomplished liar!"

"Shall we bring you here? At least long enough to build you a new identity?"

A pause. Then the girl's voice again: "Something else puzzles me, too. There's no mention of Naia's confession in the newspapers."

"*What?* You mean they haven't released Cordell? What will Tamu say?"

"If they have, nobody knows about it. I told you Naia should have remained in their hands until the young man was set free. You don't know my people as I do, Orin—none of you do."

"But the evidence? Nobody, not even the most stupid of Earthmen, could have ignored that evidence! Tamu won't like this."

"I can't help it, Orin. I keep telling you, Orin: you must use a new set of standards for this world. If its people thought as yours do, none of these unpleasant things would have to happen."

Another pause before the man's voice came over Kirk's earphones. "We didn't dare leave Naia in their hands. That's why we brought her back here. Look at the chance we took by permitting them to hold her even briefly. If only she hadn't blundered in the first place...."

His voice trailed off, then came back suddenly brisk. "Well, too late for regrets. We won't risk letting them question you. Field Seven in, say, three hours. Time enough?"

"More than enough!" Her relief was unmistakable. "It'll be wonderful visiting Mythox again, Orin. I hope Methu will allow me to stay for a long time."

"I hope so too, darling. But our work comes first; none of us dares let down for even a moment.... See you soon. And don't neglect to eliminate the contrabeam."

"It will be gone seconds after we break contact. Field Seven at—let's see—12:30."

"I'll be there. Farewell, Alma."

The dim humming came back again, followed briefly by no sound at all. Then there was the noise of drawers being opened and closed with a kind of brisk and cheerful haste. Alma Dakin was preparing to take it on the lam!

Martin Kirk knew he had only a limited time to plan his own course of action. One way was to walk into the adjoining apartment, place Alma Dakin under arrest and force the whole story from her. A moment's reflection, however, caused him to abandon the idea. Any such move would end his chances of getting his hands on Naia North. More than anything else he wanted her, and he closed his mind to the broader aspects of what had taken—and was still taking—place.

No, his job was to follow Alma Dakin to her rendezvous with this man Orin and in some way force the two of them into turning Naia North over to him. This time she'd stick around long enough to stand trial—even if he had to handcuff her to the bars of her cell!

From beyond the wall he caught the sounds of suitcases being snapped shut, followed by the fading echo of footsteps. He jerked the earphones from his head and went quickly to the hall door in time to catch a glimpse of Alma Dakin on her way to the building stairs, a bulging suitcase in each hand.

Kirk raced for the kitchen of 3D, flung open the door and went down the rear steps with astonishing agility. He was opening the door of his car by the time the girl came out of the front entrance. He watched her place the bags in the trunk of a small sand-colored coupe, then slip in behind its wheel and start the motor.

The coupe passed his parked car, turned the corner and disappeared. Before it had reached the next intersection, Kirk was rolling smoothly half a block to her rear.

Two hours later both cars were moving along a winding country road miles from civilization. Kirk was driving without lights, bad enough under favorable circumstances but sheer folly considering the sky was completely overcast, so that he was denied even the faint radiance of the stars. Fortunately there was no other traffic in this desolate section at eleven o'clock at night, so that his only danger was in failing to remain on the twisting road.

Finally, near the crest of a particularly steep hill, two flaring red lights warned him his quarry was applying the brakes of her car. He cut his engine long enough to hear the coupe's motor die, then he swung his wheel to the right and coasted to a halt on the soft shoulder of the road.

Under cover of bushes and trees, naked of foliage at this time of the year, Kirk worked his way silently ahead until he could make out the dim figure of the girl as she dragged the pair of bags from the boot. Without a backward glance, she turned away from the road and an instant later was lost to sight among the trees.

There was nothing of the frontiersman in Lieutenant Martin Kirk, but fortunately the same was true of Alma Dakin. Where anyone accustomed to moving across natural terrain could have lost the officer with ease, in her case he need only pause briefly from time to time and use his ears.

At last the seemingly interminable forest ended and the girl sank wearily down on an upended suitcase. Kirk, perspiring freely under the folds of his topcoat, halted in the shelter of a tree bole, and waited.

Beyond where the girl sat was a large natural clearing covered with a fringe of winter grass. The silence was close to being absolute; only the faint keening of a chill wind and the restless creak of barren branches kept it from becoming unbearable.

Gradually his eyes became more and more accustomed to the absence of light worthy of the name, and he began to identify objects as something more than formless shadows. Alma Dakin appeared to be much closer to him than he had realized. He eyed her slim back malevolently, and when she lighted a cigarette, the wind bringing the odor of tobacco to his nostrils, he could cheerfully have strangled her for adding to his torture.

Time crawled by. An hour by reckoning was ten minutes by the illuminated dial of his wristwatch. His leg muscles began to twitch under the strain of holding the same position. Twice he managed to hold at bay explosive sneezes; he worried at being able to do so again.

The last five minutes before 12:30 was like being broken on the rack. He caught himself straining his ears for the sound of a motor, of a faint humming—of anything to indicate Orin was arriving. Nothing—and at 12:30 still nothing.

Martin Kirk had had all he could take. He was through standing out on a windy hill like some goddam—

Something seemed to flicker in the night air above the clearing—and he was staring slackjawed at a circular structure the size of a small house standing in the center of the clearing as though it had been there for years.

Before the Lieutenant could get his jaw off his necktie, Alma Dakin had uttered a cry of relief and was racing toward the nearest edge of the gleaming vessel. A panel in its side slid noiselessly back and the tall figure of a man was outlined in the opening.

"Alma!" he shouted and sprang to the ground to meet her.

They came together almost violently midway between the clearing's edge and the ship. She clung to him as he bent his head to meet her lips.

Kirk glanced past them at the open portal. Dim light from within cast a soft glow against the night. Nothing moved in the narrow segment of the interior visible from where he was standing.

And Kirk had a moment of what was as close to fear as he was able to know. A little time of bewilderment when his guard slipped just a trifle. What in the hell *was* all this? Into his solid world had come strange and unreasonable things. Crazy ships, and people who didn't play according to the rules he had learned over thankless drudging years as an honest cop. A few tiny beads of sweat formed on his upper lip.



Into his solid world had come strange and unreasonable things.

Then his stubborn, inherent fatalism came to his aid. He grinned without humor. The hell with it. Whatever came up—a screwball flying saucer or a berserk psycho waving a gun. You played it the same; according to your own rules. This thing, whatever it was, bridged the gap to a killer. And when you found such a bridge, you crossed it.

Martin Kirk, his gun clutched tightly, moved like a casual shadow, eased his way along the hull of ship and slipped inside.

He had never seen anything like this. The lighting for one thing. It came from nowhere and somehow the stuff had a mood. It seemed alive—an intelligent force watching him, mocking him, sneering at him. And so potent was the mood of the whole setup, so sharp his need of release that he muttered, "The hell with you," and softly followed a circular corridor which curved off the hull.

They were coming toward the ship, Orin and Alma—coming while he still hunted a hole. He kept on going. If he met anybody they were going to go down. But he didn't. He found a steel stairway and a pocket at its base to hold his body. It wasn't a dark pocket. Light was everywhere. But the stairway hid him and the pair passed by and went on down the corridor.

He realized his right hand was aching and relaxed his grip on the gun butt he clutched. He straightened up and the tense little mirthless grin played on his lips.

Okay. Now where was she and how did it work? Could he find her and haul her off silly tilt-a-whirl? He thought not. Either his eyes were bad or this thing had appeared from nowhere. Something inside snapped: Quit thinking that way! Whatever it looked like—*think right*. Follow the rules. Look for the dame. His grin deepened.

Sure.

He started walking. Around the eerie corridor in the direction opposite that taken by Orin and Alma Dakin. He walked a long time and there were no doors or anything else so the only thing to do was keep walking. He thought: When I come to that stairway I'll be back where I started but where's that? What good is a hall you keep going around and around in?

The ship lurched and threw him to the floor. It was going somewhere.

But it didn't go anywhere. Of that he was sure. Maybe he'd been fooled but it seemed the ship settled back after that single lurch and lay there like a choice segment out of someone's pet nightmare. Kirk got to his feet and rubbed the place his leg had violently met the floor.

He walked on and there was the steel stairway again and it was all very damned silly because he knew he'd circled the ship at least three times.

But lucky because the footsteps sounded again and as he dived toward the pocket, the wall of the ship opened to form a doorway. They forgot something, he thought. What kind of supermen are these? They can build a ship that has a stairway every third trip around and still they go away and forget things.

The grin was tighter than ever. Whistle in the dark, boy, but admit it—you're scared. Sure, but what's that got to do with it?

Orin and Alma left the ship. Martin Kirk pushed his head around the staircase. He crouched for sometime, staring through the open segment of the hull at the outside world. And his poor stupid orthodox mind asked a pitifully logical question:

How could it get light, with the sun at high noon, in fifteen minutes?

After a long, motionless time, the silence became such a roaring thing in Kirk's ears he could stand it no longer. He got up and walked to the doorway.

Something had gone somewhere; either the ship or the world he'd known, because out there was a different world and he knew damn well he'd never seen it before.

Chapter VII

Martin Kirk stepped out into a circle of lush vegetation. And in doing so, he learned something. He learned that the human mind is a far more adaptable mechanism than most people imagine; that they can pelt you with goof balls and you get sweat on your lip and have to talk to yourself to keep from sliding off your rocker, but after a while when your mind seems half-way over the edge, it straightens up suddenly and starts going along. A defense mechanism against insanity? He didn't know.

He only knew that when the tiger roared, he whirled around with his gun leveled, saw the six-inch teeth, got wholesomely and sanely scared, and then everything was all right. He knew he was all right when he got the right reaction from sight of the almost naked girl holding the tiger.

For a long moment it was a frozen-action tableau. The huge orange and black beast. The wide-eyed young brunette nudist, and the tropical forest with the great big fat sun overhead. The girl's voice nailed it all down. "Don't be afraid. Rondo won't hurt you."

Kirk's resentment flared warmly and, had resentment been a tangible thing, he would have kissed it. "You're tootin' right he won't, sister. This isn't a toy I'm holding."

"Rondo is very gentle."

Kirk eyed the girl. "Why don't you put some clothes on?"

Her teeth were as bright and even as little white knives but her smile took the edge off them. "Only people in the city wear clothes. I wear them when I'm in the city. When I come out here I —"

"—you don't wear any clothes. Tell me—where am I?"

"Don't you know?"

"Let's not play games. If I knew I wouldn't ask you."

"Did you come on the ship?"

"You saw me get out of it didn't you? Now answer my question." And he realized how certain he was of what her answer would be.

"On Mythox."

"Well fancy that. Now tell me something else. Do you know what language you're speaking?"

"Of course. English."

"And why should you speak English on Mythox? Haven't you got a language of your own?"

"Certainly. But you're obviously from Earth. I thought you were a Watcher. I tried English. If you hadn't responded I'd have spoken to you in the other Earth languages."

"How many do you know?"

"Eleven hundred and seventeen. With various dialects, four thousand and—"

"There aren't that many."

She looked puzzled. Then her face cleared. "Oh you mean Earth languages. I was referring to those of the Five Galaxies."

I'm not going to be surprised at anything, he told himself doggedly. Not at anything. "Do you know anyone named Naia North?"

There was a childlike seriousness in her manner. It tended to deny the maturity of her body. Or was it the other way around? Martin Kirk wasn't sure, and grimly assured himself that he didn't give a damn.

The girl said, "I don't know anyone by that name. But I could find her for you."

"How would you go about it?"

"I'd go to the city and check the video-directory, naturally."

"Naturally. And you'd put your clothes on before you went?"

"Of course I would. We go without clothing only out here in the playground."

Kirk realized he'd been holding the gun rigidly in front of him. The tiger had dropped to the ground and lay outstretched like a lazy, good-natured dog. Kirk lowered the gun, setting his eyes again on the girl. "A minute ago you said you thought I was a Watcher. What did you mean?"

He would have framed his questions with more guile, but something told him it wasn't necessary. This child of nature was utterly without guile. She said, "An Earth Watcher. What did you think I meant?"

"I didn't know or I wouldn't have asked."

It clarified. *Dakin is watching*. Sure. What the hell else would a Watcher do but watch? But why, and for what? Kirk was mystified. But it didn't matter, he asserted inwardly, and turned his mind back to the straight line. The cop's line. "Will you put on your clothes and go into the city and locate Naia North for me?"

"If it will help you."

"It will. Where can I wait for you?"

"If you want to see Naia North why don't you come with me?"

Kirk shrugged. Why not? So long as the score was completely unknown to him, why not follow the path of least resistance? "Get your clothes on," he said.

The girl turned and started leading the tiger back toward a grove of trees. After a few steps she turned back, a look of sober thought on her face. "Are all Earthlings so assertive?" she asked. Kirk grinned. As long as it works, this one is, baby. But what if it stops working? His reply was not audible and the girl turned finally to disappear into the bushes.

Kirk then experienced a strange feeling of unreality which persisted until the girl returned.

"My name is Raima," the girl said solemnly. She wore tight-fitting trousers, a loose blouse and had a silver colored air car with room in back for the tiger.

Kirk knew it was an air car when the craft lifted from the ground from no apparent means of acceleration and skimmed along just above the trees. He sat beside Raima and asked, "About that ship I came here in? How fast does it travel and how far is it from Mythox to Earth?"

"The distance is around two hundred thousand light years but the ship doesn't really travel at all."

"Maybe you could go into a little more detail," Kirk said wearily.

"It's very simple. Distance, as you Earthlings regard it, is not distance at all. Space bends to a greater or lesser degree depending upon its immediate function in whatever time-space equation you are using."

"Thank you very much," Kirk replied and silently added: Keep to the line. Hold to your own values. On Earth, wherever it is, a man is waiting to go to the chair for a murder he didn't commit. Use whatever equation you want to—that still adds up the same. These people may be a lot smarter than you are, but they can't twist that one and make you believe it comes out any different.

A strange city of graceful flying spirals was coming over the horizon. It moved closer and the air car arced in to a halt on a huge cement landing area punctuated with small circles of a different material.

Raima jumped from the cockpit and Kirk followed to hear the soft thud of the cat's four paws landing beside him. The cat went over and sat down on one of the circles. Raima followed, stood beside the animal and called, "Don't you want to go down to street level?"

"Of course. How stupid of me not to know how."

The circle dropped silently beneath them in a bright metal tube in which a door soon appeared to let them out into a broad street filled with casually moving pedestrians. Kirk noted that none of them seemed in any hurry; that here and there was an individual dressed like himself. Watchers on furlough or vacation, he thought a trifle bitterly. This picture was far from complete but enough of it added up to furnish a name for them. Quizling was a good one. Perhaps traitor was better.

All in all, he found one satisfaction. He could travel about as he pleased.

A short walk brought them to a huge four or five story wall, the like of which Kirk had never seen. It was symmetrically covered with small, opaque, glass windows, beside each of which was a dial not unlike the ones on Earth telephones. Catwalks of some bright metal covered the wall. On these catwalks, numerous people were busy with a strange business Kirk could not follow.

"This is the video-directory," Raima said. She gave no further explanation, but while Rondo lazily rubbed noses with a bear cub sitting on its haunches waiting for its master, she spun the dial with practiced efficiency. "Now, if Naia North is in the city and wishes to see you, her image will

appear in the mirror."

As Kirk watched and the bear slapped the grinning tiger with a playful paw, the opaque glass cleared and the tall, willowy figure of Naia North appeared in miniature.

"You may speak in here," Raima said, solemnly indicating a small screened opening beside the mirror. "My! She's pretty, isn't she?"

Naia North was entirely composed. She wore a pale blue gown and from the background in the mirror, Kirk gathered that she was at home. "Aren't you surprised?" Kirk asked.

Now a slight frown creased the lovely Naia's brow. "A little perhaps. How did you get to Mythox? And why did you come?"

"A slight matter of murder. A murder you confessed to, or has it slipped your mind?"

"Aren't you being rather absurd? That's all done with."

"Not so far as Paul Cordell is concerned. He's going to the chair—only he isn't. We're going back and straighten a few things out."

Genuine surprise was reflected now. And possibly a certain contempt. "My opinion of you lessens. I hadn't rated you as a complete fool. How did you get here?"

"The same way you did I suppose, is there more than one way?"

Naia's frown deepened. "Do you mean you were *brought*—?"

"Not intentionally, I stowed away on that funny round ship that doesn't go anywhere and travels far."

The beautiful brow immediately cleared. "Oh, I see," Naia observed with amusement. "And you know exactly how you'll get me back to Earth I suppose? Thousands of light years. It's a long walk."

"I'll take one thing at a time and worry about them in order of appearance. The main thing for you to remember, is this: You may be as smart as all get out but you broke an American law on American soil by your own confession and by God you're going back and answer for it!"

"Idiot! I can have you—"

Kirk's mood changed to the quizzical. "It's entirely beside the point, but still I don't get you, baby. Why the switcheroo? You walked in and confessed. Then you took a powder. Now you sneer in my teeth. What do you use for a rudder, sweetheart?"

"I followed orders," Naia flared with a mixture of anger and sullenness. "I am now free of the assignment."

Kirk pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You wouldn't be sort of a hatchet-woman for this high-blown outfit, would you? I can think offhand of a few other names. Karney, Blatz, Kennedy. What gives with knocking off nuclear physicists, baby?"

Naia did not answer. When she started to turn away from the mirror, Kirk glanced at the silent Raima standing with her hand on the tiger's head. "Is there any way I can call on the lady in the mirror personally?"

"Not if she doesn't want to receive you," Raimu said. She was studying Kirk, with wistful dark eyes.

Naia turned back quickly. "I'll be glad to receive you. It's time I taught you a lesson."

"Fine. What's your address?"

But Naia was gone. The little mirror turned opaque. Kirk shot a questioning glance at Raimu. "Does yes mean no on this cockeyed planet?"

"Her car will come." Raima murmured. But the petite dark beauty seemed interested in other things. "You didn't tell me your name."

"Sorry. Rude of me. It's Martin Kirk. You've been pretty nice to me. I wish there was some way I could show my appreciation."

"You're going to see Naia North?"

"Yes. She's a murderess. I'm taking her back to my planet."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be possible."

"You too, honey?" Kirk reached out and flicked one of the raven curls. "If things were different you and I might be able to have fun."

"I spend a lot of time—where you found me. Maybe—"

"I doubt if I can make it. But keep your clothes on after this—as a personal favor to me."

She was the very soul of solemnity. "I don't understand you. I really don't understand you at all."

At that moment, an air car—much smaller than Raima's, dropped gently into the street beside Kirk. "Good lord! Did this thing smell me out?"

"It came to the mirror on Naia's private wave-length. Get in. It will take you to her."

Kirk crawled into the car. The last thing he saw before it lifted into the air, were Raima's dazzling black eyes. The last words he heard were, "Goodbye, Martin Kirk. I will visualize you."

The car swung up above the graceful, spidery buttresses and moved across the city. Kirk filled in the time by trying to figure out what made the thing go. He hadn't gotten to first base when the car lost altitude and came to rest on a balcony hung with seeming perilousness on a sheer white wall. Kirk stepped out. A large glass panel had been pushed back and Naia stood waiting in the opening.

"Nice of you to receive me," Kirk said. "Have you got your bags packed for a trip stateside?"

"Please come this way."

Naia turned and moved through the room just off the balcony. On the far side another door gave exit. She passed through it and turned as though waiting for Kirk. He took one step, two, three, four.

Then something came from somewhere and almost tore his jaw off. He went out in an explosion of black light.

Chapter VIII

Kirk came to with the feeling that his period of unconsciousness had been momentary. Naia was standing as she had stood before, just beyond the inner doorway. The mocking smile was still on her face. "Did you trip?"

Kirk got groggily to his feet. "No, angel. That's the way I always cross a room." As he came upright his hand reached toward the bulge made by his shoulder holster. But it didn't get that far.

He had not seen from whence the first blow came but that was not true with the second. From a tiny opening in the door jamb, a pinpoint of light appeared. It hung there for a moment. Then it brightened, expanded, and shot forth as a slim beam. It contained a silvery radiance and the kick of a Missouri mule. It slammed against Kirk's jaw, but not quite so hard this time; only hard enough to send him down again amidst a cloud of shooting stars.

He shook his head and got to his hands and knees. "Wha's 'at? A trained flashlight?" He began coming up. As soon as he didn't need his right hand for rising he reached for his gun. The light beam seemed to resent this. It hit him in the solar plexus this time; a sickening blow that fed nausea down through his legs. He tightened his stomach against the agony and began getting up again.

"You see how useless it is?" Naia asked. "Beside us, you Earthlings are children. Will you stop being foolish, or must I kill you?"

Kirk squinted craftily at the pinpoint of light with one closed eye. Clever little devil. What the hell! Nude innocents. Tigers on leashes. Light beams that knocked your teeth out. Paul Cordell with a shaved spot on his head.

"You got your bag packed for a little trip, baby?"

For a brief moment, genuine fear flamed in Naia's eyes. And in Kirk's mind: Dumb babe. What's she got to be scared of? They hit you with nothing and make it stick. Kirk croaked, "Grab your bag, baby. We'll go find that flying biscuit. We got a date with Arthur Kahler Troy."

He was really cagey this time. When the light beam shot out, he hurled himself to the side. But he could have saved the effort. A beam came from the other door jamb and he stepped right into it. That one really tore his head off.

Somebody was talking. It was a man and he had a deep resonant voice: a voice full of authority—and censure. "I'm surprised at you Naia. I never suspected you of having a sadistic streak."

Naia's sullen reply. "Do you think anyone can do the work I do and remain unmarked?"

"I suppose not. But as I remember it, you asked to serve."

"As a benefit to humanity."

"We won't go into it."

But Naia pressed the point. "I have always followed orders. I placed myself in possible jeopardy on Earth by clearing Paul Cordell."

"But Paul Cordell was not cleared."

"Not through any fault of mine."

"But why this? What end does torturing this poor unfortunate serve?"

Martin Kirk cautiously opened one eye. It brought to his brain the image of a large blue globe. A man of fine and commanding appearance stood within the globe, suspended about a foot from the floor. The globe and the man gave every indication of having just come through the opaque glass wall of the room, and as Kirk watched, the man was lowered slowly to the floor and the globe became a blue mist that spiralled lazily and was gone.

Kirk opened both eyes now, stirred, and climbed dizzily to his feet. "You bump into the damndest things around here," he said, "But let's get down to the important business. My name is Martin Kirk. I'm an American police officer. One of your subjects committed a murder on American soil. I hope you aren't going to be difficult about extradition."

The other could not hide his surprise. Nor did he try to. "Amazing," he murmured. Then, "I am Tamu, the overlord of the galaxy. I wonder if Naia's cruelty hasn't affected your mind?"

"If you mean I'm nuts, I think maybe you're right. But it wasn't little Playful here who did it. I've gone through a lot and I don't speak with any sense of bragging. I've seen more funny things happen than any one man should see in so short a time. So maybe I am off my rocker. So I'd like your permission to take my prisoner back to Earth so I can give all my time to regaining my sanity."

Tamu regarded Kirk with thoughtful eyes. "I think we should have a talk."

"I would like a talk. I would like nothing better than to chew the fat with you for hours on end if my jaw didn't hurt so damned much. So I'll just take my prisoner and go. Do I have to sign a paper or something?"

The overlord's surprise was fast becoming a kind of fascinated awe. "Kirk, you said?" He pointed to the door leading to the inner room. "Please go in, sir. There's no use of our standing out here while we discuss your problem."

The Lieutenant eyed the door frame warily, "I tried getting through there before but the light got in my eyes!"

"You can trust me."

The police officer stepped cautiously through the opening and on into a luxuriously furnished room. Tamu, dressed much the same as one of Earth's better bankers, followed him in and suggested he sit down.

"Why?" Kirk demanded bluntly. "Let's stop kitten-and-micing around, Mr. Tamu. I'm not comfortable here and I want to leave. With her." He tilted his head toward the watching, sullen-faced Naia North. "And now."

Tamu said, "Believe me, it will be as easy for you to return to Earth an hour from now. You seem weary to the point of exhaustion. I ask you again: sit down and get back some of your strength. Naia will find you something to eat."

Kirk's stubborn determination to force an immediate showdown wavered. It had been born largely of fear to begin with, and the thought of relief for his burning throat was impossible to resist.

"I could use a drink," he admitted.

Tamu gestured and Naia North turned to leave the room. But Kirk leaped forward to block her off. "Nothing doing! I don't take my eyes off you, baby. I'll just pass up that drink."

The girl glanced at the overlord and shrugged helplessly. Tamu said, "Have a girl bring in something. While we're waiting I suggest all three of us get comfortable."

While Naia was speaking into a tiny screen set into one of the silk-covered walls, Tamu and the man from Earth sat down across from each other on a pair of fragile-legged chairs. The overlord leaned back and sighed. "You've asked my leave to return to Earth and to take Naia back with you to stand trial for murder. Have you considered that I may refuse that permission?"

"I don't think I have to consider it," Kirk said promptly.

"You don't?" Tamu was mystified again. "Why not?"

"You tell me you're the overlord. I take that to mean you're in charge. That means you have laws to govern your people and *that* means you believe in laws. One of your subjects has broken the

law of my country. You can't refuse to let her take the consequences any more than if the situation was reversed."

Tamu was shaking his head and smiling slightly. "I'm afraid you're not taking into consideration one fact, Mr. Kirk. Naia North broke your law, as you call it, on express and definite instructions from me."

Martin Kirk made a show of astonishment. "Let me get this straight. You *ordered* Professor Gilmore and Juanita Cordell murdered? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Exactly the reason I suggested we have a talk. To make you see why they—and others in the same classification—could not be allowed to live."

"Men like Karney? Kennedy? Blatz?"

Tamu blinked. "My respect for you increases, Martin Kirk."

"Don't let it throw you. I'm a police officer, and police officers are trained to do the job right."

The overlord crossed his legs and settled deeper into the chair. "Mythox needs men like you, Martin Kirk. That is why I'm going to give you a chance for life. For this you must understand: if I wanted it, you would be dead within seconds."

A chill slid along the stubborn back of the Lieutenant but nothing showed in his impassive expression and he did not speak.

"But because we do need you, I am going to tell you things no Earthman knows. I believe that once you understand why Mythox has undertaken to meddle in the affairs of another world—and I tell you frankly that our doing so is as abhorrent to us as anything you can imagine—once you understand our reasons, you will cheerfully, even eagerly, join us."

"And if I don't?"

"You know the answer to that, I'm sure."

A slim fair-haired girl in a pale green toga-like dress entered the room carrying a tray holding tall glasses of some sparkling blue beverage. She offered it first to Kirk, then the others. The Lieutenant removed one of the glasses, waited until Tamu and Naia had done the same, but not until they had drunk some of the liquid did he tilt his own glass. The cold tangy liquid hit him like a bombshell—a bombshell on the pleasant side. He could almost literally feel his strength flow back, his senses sharpen and the poisons of fatigue and mental strain disappear.

"I'm listening," he said.

Tamu set his glass on the edge of a nearby table and bent forward, his manner earnest. "It won't take long, Martin Kirk. Hear me. We of Mythox are far in advance of the peoples of Earth—both spiritually and scientifically. Life on our planet materialized in much the same manner as on your own world, but countless ages before. Almost the same process of evolution took place; but somewhere along the line humanity on Mythox managed to reach full development without the flaws of character found among so many of Earth's inhabitants. When I tell you that we find it almost impossible to voice an untruth, that taking a human life willfully for any reason is equally difficult, that crime of any nature is almost unknown here—then you will see the difference between the two planets.

"For ages our scientists have observed the events taking place on Earth. By perfecting a method for changing matter from terrene to contraterrene, we have managed to bridge the million light years of space separating our worlds as we saw fit. Thousands of years ago we could have gained control of your ball of clay and turned mankind into any pattern we might choose.

"That is not our way, Martin Kirk. Free will is our heritage too—and we respect it in ourselves, and for that reason must respect it in others. So long as Earth's peoples confined their more destructive tendencies to themselves we kept our hands off—even while we failed to understand such senseless conduct.

"And then one day we witnessed an explosion on Earth's surface—an explosion different from any of the countless ones before it. That explosion was the first man-made release of atomic energy—a process we had known how to bring about for ages, but one we would never use. For we have learned the secret of limitless power without the transformation of mass into energy. Your way is the way of destruction, Martin Kirk; ours is exactly the opposite.

"For the first time, the leaders of Mythox knew the meaning of fear—fear that, once Earth's scientists had found the secret of nuclear fission they would go on to the one extreme forbidden throughout the Universe itself.

"And so we acted. Not in the way your people would have acted were the situations reversed. For

we were still determined that there would be no intervention on our part in Earth's affairs—and that is still our way, just as it must always be. But there must be one exception to this rule: no one on Earth must be allowed to blunder into the extreme I mentioned a moment ago."

Tamu, overlord of Mythox, paused to drink from his glass and to cast a speculative glance at the stolid face of Martin Kirk. He might as well have studied the contours of a brick wall.

"The road to that blunder had been opened the day your learned men first split the atom. If they persisted down that path, it was bound to follow that they would attempt the thing we feared: the splitting of hydrogen atoms—the hydrogen bomb, as you call it.

"We know what that would mean: a chain reaction that would wipe out an entire galaxy in one blinding flash. *Our galaxy*, Martin Kirk—yours and mine! Do you have any thought at all on what that means?"

The question was rhetorical; even before Kirk could shake his head, the overlord pressed on.

"Mythox and Earth are two grains of dust on opposite sides of a galaxy—a spiral formation of stars and planets 200,000 light years wide and 20,000 thick. Between us lie countless other worlds, a vast number of them supporting life—not always, or even often, life as we know it, but life nonetheless.

"There is not one of those worlds, Martin Kirk, we do not know as thoroughly as we do our own. Fortunately for our purpose only a relative few have progressed along a line which can lead to danger for the rest. Yours is one of those which has—and that is why we of Mythox have taken a well-masked place in your affairs *so far as they relate to nuclear physics*.

"Every scientist of your world, male or female, is constantly under the eye of a Watcher. These Watchers are members of your own races—people we have enlisted in the fight to save not just their world or mine—but millions of worlds.

"When a Watcher learns a physicist is close to the one key to success in his effort to make a hydrogen bomb—an equation that begins: 'Twelve times zero point seven nine'—we are notified and a killer from our own people is sent to execute that scientist. Yes, Martin Kirk, we have those among us—a very few—who are capable of killing on orders and for cause. Naia, here, is one of them. She was sent to take the lives of Gregory Gilmore and Juanita Cordell; but she bungled and instead of their deaths resembling heart failure, they were obviously murdered.

"Alma Dakin tried to cover up the truth by making it appear both scientists had died at the hands of a jealous husband. She succeeded, both because of her perjured testimony and the fact that Paul Cordell insisted on telling the truth. But when we of Mythox learned what had happened, Naia was sent back to confess the crime. She entered the laboratory only a few hours before she came to your office; while she was in the laboratory the second time, the clues you found were put there.

"Our mistake was in thinking that, once proof was offered clearing Cordell, the innocent man would be freed. For once more we credited Earthlings with the same code of ethics we of Mythox adhere to.

"You succeeded in following Naia here. Only a man composed of equal parts of Earth bulldog and genius could have done so. Martin Kirk, I offer you a place among us and a lifetime devoted to making sure the galaxy of which we both are a part does not perish. What say you?"

Several minutes dragged by. The eyes of both Tamu and Naia North were glued to the grim visage of Homicide Lieutenant Kirk. It was impossible for either of them to know what thoughts were churning behind that stone face.

Abruptly he stood up. "I'm a cop. I leave your kind of problem to the people who are good at it. My people, Tamu. You see, I belong to my world, not to yours.

"But you've got a solid argument—one I'd be a fool not to consider. Let me sleep on it. Tomorrow morning we'll talk about it some more; then I'll give you my answer. Right now I'm too worn out to think in a straight line."

"Of course." The overlord rose to his feet. "Find Martin Kirk comfortable quarters, Naia, and leave orders he is not to be disturbed until he is ready to join us."

On his way down a corridor behind the same slip of a girl who had brought him his drink, Martin Kirk was thinking: They didn't even frisk me for a gun!

Martin Kirk went into his apartment and lay for a while looking at the ceiling. After a time, he got up and went out again.

Chapter IX

The soft silvery radiance which this planet seemed to feature, bathed the metal hallway as Kirk marched stolidly toward the slim arcing stairway that led toward Naia's floor. This was certainly a strange building, he thought. The architects of Mythox knew how to use curves. They utilized them for utility and beauty to a point where a straight line was something to be surprised at. Pretty smart people, the Mythoxians—in more ways than one.

And Kirk, for no apparent reason, thought of a phrase common among children during his own childhood, "Who died and left you boss?"

He counted the markings over one door. He had seen those markings before. Naia North lived here.

And Naia North was in. Kirk walked softly across the large foyer room and quietly pushed open a door to the left. Naia, clad as always, in beauty, lay sleeping on a bed that stood out from the wall on two narrow rods of metal and needed no other support.

As Kirk opened his mouth, Naia awakened, so she was looking calmly at him as he spoke. "Up, baby. You've got a date with a hot electrode a lot of light years from here. It's a hike, so rise and shine."

Naia sat up very slowly, very gracefully. She was what men dream of finding in bed beside them. What they marry to keep in bed beside them.

"You must be mad."

"As a hatter, baby. Into your duds." He saw her glance at the door jamb of the bedroom entrance, saw the shadow of disappointment in her lovely eyes. "You didn't put those Joe Louis light rays in your bedroom, did you?"

Naia set her feet on the floor and drew herself to her full height. She wore light blue, a gown that hung as had that of Guinevere, as that of the Maid of Shalot.

But Naia was contempt. She was contempt clothed in cold blue, then contempt naked as she allowed the gown to fall to the floor. A few minutes later, she was contempt clothed for the street in tight britches and a loose blouse.

"You go first," Kirk said. "And do as you're told. You may be a Mythoxian, but this .45 doesn't know that. It puts big holes in anybody."

As Mala walked serenely toward the hall door, there was only a touch of sullenness at the corners of her mouth. She turned her head to speak over her shoulder. "Hiding behind a woman, brave Earthman?"

"Yes and no. I'm hiding behind a woman from those damn straight-left rays; and I'm not a brave Earthman. I spend most of my time scared to death. That's why all of us are getting back to Earth quick, so I can draw an easy breath."

"All of us?"

"Oh yes. Didn't I tell you? You're taking me to the places I can find Alma Dakin and Orin. We're going to have witnesses and testimony. And the party who gets burned isn't going to be Paul Cordell."

"I won't—"

"Hold it, honey."

Kirk had picked up two items upon leaving Naia's apartment. A pair of filmy silk stockings and a white scarf. He jerked Naia's hands behind her back in somewhat of a surprise move. Before she recovered, her wrists were tightly bound. She gasped, "You—madman," just before he deftly pulled the scarf across her mouth and twisted it into an effective gag. He stepped back to admire his handywork.

"Now we're all ready. Orin and Alma."

Naia shook her head in a slow negative, Kirk pushed her gently into the hall and rounded to face her. "Yes, baby," he said. "You ought to know now I won't be stopped. I need Orin to fly that space buggy. If I don't get him we can't go. Then there'd be nothing left for me to do but even the score for Paul Cordell. He'll have to go but you'll keep him company."

Naia stood like a statue, apparently considering. Then she moved slowly down the corridor in the opposite direction from which Kirk had come. Down three curving flights and stopping finally in front of a door identical to her own. Kirk stepped forward and leaned firmly on the knob. The door opened. He knew where the bedroom was in these apartments now. He pushed Naia ahead of him, into the bedroom and saw Alma lying with her eyes closed.

Kirk whirled, just in time to level his gun and bring Orin to a dead stop. "Over by the bed, high-born." As Orin complied, Kirk leered at Naia. "That was clever, but I had it doped. I spotted them for husband and wife or the Mythox equivalent quite some time back. A good chance shot to hell."

"What do you want here?" Orin demanded.

"A chauffeur. We're heading Earthward on the first ship. That's the one out in the jungle."

"But you talked to Tamu. I thought—"

"I'd been suckered? No, no my friend! On the force they called me the boy with the one-track mind."

"I can see what they meant," Orin sighed.

"I thought you would. Tell your wife to get dressed. We're getting an air-sled."

"You might have the decency to—"

"I won't turn my back. You can stand between us. That's the best I can do."

Alma dressed swiftly in a costume similar to Naia's. When they were ready to leave, Kirk said, "Now let's get it straight once and for all. I'll stand for no fast moves. It's Earth, or some quick slugs. Do you follow me?"

They did not speak but they evidently believed Kirk because, fifteen minutes later, the party of four stood beside the ugly ship while thick trees and grasses whispered around them.

"Inside."

In the corridor, Orin stopped and turned as though having thought of a convincing argument he was bent upon trying. Kirk poked him sharply in the ribs with the barrel of the .45 and he moved on after the women toward the ladder and thence to the motor room.

Once inside, Orin turned and spoke sharply. "Won't you reconsider?"

"Push the levers, Jack. The right ones."

"Tamu is a reasonable man. We could talk to him again. He would make even a more generous offer."

"I'm waiting."

"Certainly you did not refute the logic of his argument? We are in the right. Our case is just. The galaxies must be protected from—"

"The right levers, Jack."

"—from those who through ignorance, stupidity, or ferocity would destroy it."

"One more minute of this and there'll be dead people aboard this ship."

"You're helpless, really. You can't fly this ship without me. Therefore my life is safe. I merely refuse to launch it."

"Would you like a dead wife?"

Orin whitened perceptibly.

"She may be a wife to you, but to me she's just a doll who helped lie a man into the chair."

"You wouldn't do it! You haven't got the nerve to shoot down a man or a woman in cold blood."

Kirk looked steadily into Orin's eyes. "You don't believe that do you, bud?"

Orin held the gaze for a long time. Then he dropped his eyes. "No. I don't believe it."

"Then get to work."

"One last offer. Won't you reconsider. Join us?"

"No!"

"Very well."

And Orin, a fixed, taut look on his face, reached forth his hand and touched a button on the panel board. It was a very special button.

A button for use only when all hope was gone.

The exploding space-time ship lighted the countryside to blinding brilliance.

A.P. Jan 21st—Shortly after midnight today, Paul Cordell, convicted killer in the famous "woman from Mars" case, was put to death in the electric chair at the state penitentiary.

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