

STANDING in the men's room on the twentieth floor of the Moon Oil Building trying to scrub a spot of blood off the front of his white shirt with a paper towel while he thought over the eventful lunch and Beatrice, McCall became suddenly aware of the blue presence of two Cleveland Policemen.

"You John McCall?" asked one.

Balling up the paper towel and tossing it through the hole in the counter top, McCall waited for the initial surge of adrenaline to pass. "I am," he admitted, now reasonably sure they did not come to arrest him.

The same cop reached through the hole in the counter and into the wastebasket to retrieve the paper napkin. "Detectives Johnson and Regal want to see you," he said, looking at the napkin. He scrutinized McCall's stained shirt and looked him up and down, noting the dirty knees of his pants. "Now!"

"All right if we stop by my office so I can get my jacket and inform my secretary?" said McCall, not really asking permission but merely out of politeness.

"What is it about 'now' that you don't understand?" came the institutionalized arrogance of the Cleveland Police.

Neither the policemen nor McCall spoke to one another again, not when they left the twentieth floor, not when they walked out past the guard's desk, not when they entered the police cruiser waiting in front of the building, not when they turned left on Ontario in the direction opposite that of the Justice Center, not when they pulled up in front of the Ritz Carlton Hotel, and not when they made their way through a gauntlet of police and reporters on their way to room eight thirty-two.

Waiting in front of it, McCall knew the room, the corner overlooking the pool through the skylight. The view was to the south and west of the city, quite nice at night with just enough city light coming through the sheer curtains to allow two lovers to see one another. He remembered the Sunday he and his wife had spent there, a cherished memory about to be destroyed. Long before his police escorts reemerged and the cop guarding access to room eight thirty-two stepped aside, John McCall knew a dead body waited inside.

"Stay right there, McCall," called Detective Johnson after the door closed behind him. "We'll be right with you."

By now, not easily shocked, McCall was horrified. Everywhere he looked, he saw blood. The sheer curtains were splattered with blood, and blood was on the wallpaper and the mirrors, the furniture and the carpeting. The white linen tablecloth had been used to wipe blood and was anchored to the intimate table for two with a bloody dagger. The horror of the sadistic exclamation point replaced the romance of the champagne, strawberries, and cream that lay where they had landed on the bloodstained carpet. At intervals all across the room, technicians systematically removed and cataloged blood evidence. As his eyes took in the scene and moved closer and closer to the bed, the concentration of blood became more and more sickening. He feared there must be more than one body, and when his eyes finally went to the bed, he could not judge what might lie beneath the bloody sheets.

Regal made his way to him, stepping carefully on protective pieces of plastic. "Sorry to have to do this to you, John," he said in an uncharacteristically sympathetic tone that continued. "Someone should identify the body, and we don't want to bring in his wife. Someone will need to describe this to the big shots over at Moon, and they don't want to hear it from us. You're involved in the investigation . . ."

"Yeah, sure," said McCall harshly, stopping the stream of justification, knowing Regal was sincere, dreading the sight, glad it would not be a woman. "Do your job detective."

Regal took him by the upper arm and directed him across the plastic to the edge of the bed. "Hard thing to look at, John. I'll try to describe . . ."

"Stop calling me John." Out of fear and dread, McCall went to the role of the hard guy. "Get to it."

Relieved to adjust to a tone of business and efficiency, Regal nodded. "I'll try to describe everything I'm about to show you quickly and in advance. In the table? That's a dagger. Probably the murder weapon. Used by pros, bladesman, they're called. Dagger because it's double edged. Knife's designed to cut. Dagger's designed to stab. To kill. Suggests premeditation. That's a riding crop next to it. About the only thing in the room with no blood on it." He pulled the top sheet down to reveal the dead man's hands,

wrists, and arms. "He's tied, spread eagle, to all four legs of the bed with leather straps. Slashes in both arms placed to bleed him. Without another wound, he'd weaken gradually and die within two hours. We can estimate the length of time between those cuts and death by the amount of blood in the bed around them. Okay. Be ready. Face has slashes, too. Punishment cuts. Deep, but not fatal." He pulled the sheet to expose the dead man's head and stayed to business. "Would you identify him out loud for us?"

"Stephen Wright, Moon Oil's Senior Vice President of Manufacturing and Supply." Detective Johnson watched McCall intently from the opposite side of the bed and noted he did not flinch.

Regal went on, eyes fixed on the corpse, a hint of admiration in his tone. "Good bladesman could administer those cuts with that blade in less than two seconds. By now, Mr. Wright knew he was about to be murdered. Murderer was likely explaining the reasons. With his cheek slashed through that way and that rag stuffed in his mouth, he'd scream and spray blood through his cheek. Pattern of blood splatters suggests he did a lot of that." He motioned with one hand to describe the blood-sprayed area. "Lack of blood splatters on his stomach and further down the bed between his legs suggests the murderer sat on his chest. We'll discuss the implications of that. I'll pull the sheet down further to show you the shoulders. These wounds are not consistent with a skilled bladesman. If you saw the movie, *Basic Instinct*, that's the type of thrusts that caused these wounds. Gory, but not meant to kill. More like recreational thrusts. Play-acting. Dramatic. Sexual. We'll talk later about these." He pulled the sheet. McCall did not react. "When I pull the first sheet the rest of the way off, you'll see some more slashes. Again, punishment slashes. Their shallowness demonstrates a very high skill level. Their location has some implications. Amount of blood in the area suggests they were administered while Mr. Wright still had considerable strength." He pulled the sheet off and passed it to a technician. "Now, when I lower the second sheet, you'll see the fatal wound. This one would cause death in five seconds. Person receiving a wound like this one would know instantly he was about to die, in theory. Administered by itself, this is probably the most humane way to kill with a blade. If I had to be murdered, this would be my choice. It, too, has meaning." He lowered the sheet to reveal a puncture under the rib cage. It had bled but not profusely. By this time, McCall had quit thinking about

Stephen Wright's wounds. "Couple slashes on his legs, meant to draw blood, but his genitals weren't cut. Again, tells us something, but there's no reason to look at that. Last series of wounds I'll show you are on his stomach. Made maybe two hours after death. Not administered with the dagger." He pulled the sheet quickly down, and heard McCall gasp. On Stephen Wright's stomach, carved like initials into the trunk of a tree, were the letters ISP.