



The Black Mountain

A Nero Wolfe Mystery

Rex Stout

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BENEATH THE SHADOW OF THE BLACK MOUNTAIN

Suddenly, Danilo stood up and left Wolfe and me sitting at the table.

In five minutes he was back with a wad of crumpled paper that he threw down next to his coffee cup. Wolfe asked him something in a polite tone.

Danilo picked up the paper, unfolded it, and showed us the contents.

It was a human finger.

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A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY

**THE BLACK
MOUNTAIN**

REX STOUT



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NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.

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About the Author

WARNING

In a way this is a phony. A lot of the talk I report was in languages I am not on speaking terms with, so even with the training I've had there is no use pretending that here it is, word for word. But this is what happened, and since I had to know what was going on to earn my keep, Nero Wolfe put it in English for me every chance he got. For the times when it had to be on the fly, and pretty sketchy, I have filled it in as well as I could. Maybe I shouldn't have tried to tell it at all, but I hated to skip it.

ARCHIE GOODWIN

That was the one and only time Nero Wolfe had ever seen the inside of the morgue.

That Thursday evening in March I barely caught the phone call. With a ticket for a basketball game at the Garden in my pocket, I had dined in the kitchen, because I would have to leave the house at ten to eight, and Wolfe refuses to sit at table with one who has to pack it in and run. And that time I couldn't eat early because Fritz was braising a wild turkey and I had to convey it to the dining room on a platter for Wolfe to see whole before wielding the carving knife. Sometimes when I have a date for a game or a show I get things from the refrigerator around six-thirty and take my time, but I wanted some of that hot turkey, not to mention Fritz's celery sauce and corn fritters.

I was six minutes behind schedule when, as I pushed my chair back and got erect, the phone rang. After asking Fritz to get it on the kitchen extension and proceeding to the hall, I had got my topcoat from the rack and was putting it on when Fritz called to me, "Archibald, Sergeant Stebbins wants you!"

I muttered something appropriate for muttering but not for printing, made it to the office and across to my desk, lifted the receiver, and told it, "Shoot. You may have eight seconds."

It took more like eight times eighty, not because Purley Stebbins insisted on it, but I did after he had given me the main fact. When I had hung up I stood a while, frowning at Wolfe's desk. Many times through the years I have had the job of reporting something to Wolfe that I knew he wouldn't enjoy hearing, but this was different. This was tough. I even found myself wishing I had got away two minutes sooner, and then, realizing that that would have been tougher—for him, at least—I went to the hall, crossed it to the dining room, entered and spoke.

"That was Purley Stebbins. Half an hour ago a man came out of a house on East Fifth and fourth Street and was shot and killed by a man waiting there in a parked car. Papers found—"

Wolfe cut me off. "Must I remind you that business shall not intrude on meals?"

"You don't need to. This isn't business. Papers found on the body indicate that it was Marko Vukcic. Purley says there's no doubt about it, two of the dicks knew him by sight, but he wants me to come down and give positive identification. If you have no objection I'm going. It won't be as pleasant a way to spend an evening as going to a ball game, but I'm sure he would have done as much ..."

I would have preferred to go on talking, but had to stop to clear my throat. Wolfe had put down his knife and fork, quietly and properly, on his plate. His eyes were leveled at me, but he wasn't scowling. A corner of his mouth twitched, and after a moment twitched again. To stop it he compressed his lips.

He nodded at me. "Go. Phone."

"Have you any—"

"No. Phone."

I whirled and went.

After going a block south on Tenth Avenue and flagging a taxi on Thirty-fourth Street, I didn't take long to roll cross-town to the city mortuary on East Twenty-ninth; and, since I was not a stranger there and was expected, I was passed through the railing and on in with n

questions asked. I have never cared for the smell of that place. An assistant medical examiner named Faber tried once to sell me the idea that it smells just like a hospital, but I have a good nose and I didn't buy. He claimed that there are rarely more than one or two cadavers on the premises not in the coolers, and I said in that case someone must spray the joint with something to make it smell like a morgue.

The Homicide dick who escorted me down the corridor was one I knew only well enough to nod to, and the assistant ME in the room we entered was one I hadn't run across before. He was working on an object that was stretched out on a long table under a strong light, with a helper standing by. The dick and I stood and watched a minute. A detailed description of the performance would help only if you expect to be faced with the job of probing a corpse for a bullet that entered at an angle between the fifth and sixth ribs, so I won't go into it.

"Well?" the dick demanded.

"Yes," I told him. "I identify it as the body of Marko Vukcic, owner of Rusterman Restaurant. If you want that signed, get it ready while I go use the phone."

I went out and down the corridor to the phone booth and dialed a number. Ordinarily when I am out of the house and phone in Fritz will answer after two or three signals or Wolfe will answer after five or six, but that time Wolfe's voice came before the first whirr was done.

"Yes?"

"Archie. It's Marko. Shot twice in the chest and once in the belly. I suppose Stebbins is up at Fifty-fourth Street, at the scene, and maybe Cramer too. Shall I go up there?"

"No. Stay where you are. I'm coming to look at him. Where is it?"

He had been making a living as a private detective in Manhattan for more than twenty years, and majoring in murder, and he didn't know where the morgue was. I told him; and thinking that a little *esprit de corps* wouldn't be out of place in the circumstances, and knowing how he hated moving vehicles, I was going to suggest that I go get the sedan from the garage and drive him myself, but he hung up. I went out front to the sergeant at the desk whose name was Donovan, and told him I had identified the body but Mr. Wolfe was coming to take a look and I would stick around.

Donovan shook his head. "I only got orders about you."

"Nuts. You don't need orders. Any citizen and taxpayer can enter here to look for the remains of a relative or friend or enemy. Mr. Wolfe is a citizen and taxpayer. I make out his tax returns."

"I thought you was a private eye."

"I don't like the way you say it, but I am. Also I am an accountant, an amanuensis, and a cocklebur. Eight to five you never heard the word amanuensis and you never saw a cocklebur."

He didn't rile. "Yeah, I know, you're an educated wit. For Nero Wolfe I need orders. I know too much about him. Maybe he can get away with his tricks with Homicide and the D.A. but not with me or none of my guests."

I didn't feel like arguing. Besides, I knew Donovan had a lot to put up with. When the door opened to admit a customer it might be anything from a pair of hoodlums wanting to collect data for a fake identification, to a hysterical female wanting to find out if she was a widow. That must have got on his nerves. So I merely explained it to him. I told him a few things

about Marko Vukcic. That he was one of the only ten men I knew of that Nero Wolfe called by their first names. That for years he had dined once a month at Wolfe's table, and Wolfe and I had dined once a month at his restaurant. That he and Wolfe had been boys together in Montenegro, which was now a part of Yugoslavia. Donovan seemed to be listening, but he wasn't impressed. When I thought I had made the situation perfectly plain and stopped for a breath, he turned to his phone, called Homicide, told them Wolfe was coming, and asked for instructions.

He hung up. "They'll call back," he informed me.

No bones got broken. His instructions came a minute before the door opened to admit Wolfe. I went and opened the gate in the railing, and Wolfe stepped through. "This way," he said and steered him to the corridor and along to the room.

The doctor had got the slug that had entered between the fifth and sixth ribs, and was going for the one lower down. I saw that from three paces off, where I stopped. Wolfe went on until the part of him that is farthest front, his middle, was touching the edge of the table. The doctor recognized him and spoke.

"I understand he was a friend of yours, Mr. Wolfe."

"He was," Wolfe said a little louder than necessary. He moved sidewise, reached a hand, put fingertips under Marko's chin, and pushed the jaw up so that the mouth closed; but when he took his hand away the lips parted again. He turned his head to frown at the doctor.

"That'll be arranged," the doctor assured him.

Wolfe nodded. He put fingers and a thumb into his vest pocket, withdrew them, and showed the doctor two small coins. "These are old dinars. I would like to fulfill a pledge made many years ago." The scientist said sure, go ahead, and Wolfe reached to Marko's face again, this time to place the coins on the eyes. The head was twisted a little, and he had to level it so the coins would stay put.

He turned away. "That's all. I have no further commitment to the clay. Come, Archie."

I followed him out and along the corridor to the front. The dick who had been my escort there chinning with the sergeant, told me I didn't need to sign a statement and asked Wolfe if he verified the identification. Wolfe said he did and added, "Where's Mr. Cramer?"

"Sorry, I couldn't tell you."

Wolfe turned to me. "I told the driver to wait. You said East Fifty-fourth Street. Marko's address?"

"Right."

"We'll go there." He went, and I followed.

That taxi ride uptown broke a precedent. Wolfe's distrust of machinery is such that he is never in a condition to talk when he is being conveyed in something on wheels, even when he is driving, but that time he mastered it. He asked me questions about Marko Vukcic. He reminded me that he had known Marko a lot longer and better than I had, but he said there were some subjects which Marko had never discussed with him but might have with me—for example, his relations with women. I agreed that was logical, but said that as far as I knew Marko hadn't wasted time discussing his relations with women; he just went ahead and enjoyed them. I gave an instance. When, a couple of years previously, I had taken one named Sue Dondero to Rusterman's for dinner, Marko had cast an eye on her and contributed a bottle of one of his best clarets, and the next day had phoned to ask if I would care to give

him her address and phone number, and I had done so and crossed her off. Wolfe asked why I said to give her a break. Marko, sole owner of Rusterman's, was a wealthy man and a widower, and Sue might hook him. But she hadn't, Wolfe said. No, I agreed, as far as I knew there had been something wrong with the ignition.

"What the hell," the hackie grumbled, braking.

Having turned off Park Avenue into Fifty-fourth Street, he had made to cross Lexington and a cop had waved him down. The cab stopped with a jerk that justified Wolfe's attitude toward machinery, and the hackie stuck his head out and objected.

"My fare's number is in that block, officer."

"Can't help it. Closed. Up or down."

He yanked the wheel, and we swung to the curb. I paid him, got out, and held the door and Wolfe emerged. He stood a moment to take a deep breath, and we headed east. Ten paces along there was another cop, and a little farther on still another. Ahead, in the middle of the block, was a convention: police cars, spotlights, men working, and a gathering of citizens on the sidewalk across the street. On our side a stretch of the sidewalk was included in a roped-off area. As we approached it a cop got in the way and commanded, "Cross over and keep moving."

"I came here to look at this," Wolfe told him.

"I know. You and ten thousand more. Cross over."

"I am a friend of the man who was killed. My name is Nero Wolfe."

"Yeah, and mine's General MacArthur. Keep moving."

It might have developed into an interesting conversation if I hadn't caught sight, in one of the spotlights, of a familiar face and figure. I sang out, "Rowcliff!"

He turned and peered, stepped out of the glare and peered some more, and then he approached. "Well?" he demanded.

Among all the array of Homicide personnel that Wolfe and I have had dealings with, high and low, Lieutenant Rowcliff is the only one of whom I am dead sure that our feelings are absolutely reciprocal. He would like to see me exactly where I would like to see him. So, having summoned him, I left it to Wolfe, who spoke.

"Good evening, Mr. Rowcliff. Is Mr. Cramer here?"

"No."

"Mr. Stebbins?"

"No."

"I want to see the spot where Mr. Vukcic died."

"You'll be in the way. We're working."

"So am I."

Rowcliff considered. He would have loved to order a couple of the help to take us to the river and dump us in, but the timing would have been bad. Since it was unheard of for Wolfe to leave his house to work as a matter of routine, he knew this was something extraordinary and there was no telling how his superiors might react if he let his personal inclinations take charge. Of course he also knew that Wolfe and Vukcic had been close friends.

He hated to do it, but he said, "Come this way," and led us along to the front of the house and to the curb. "This is open to correction," he said, "but we think we've got it about right." Vukcic left the building alone. He passed between two parked cars to look west for a taxi.

car that was double-parked about twenty yards to the west—not a hack, a black or dark blue Ford sedan—started and came forward, and when it was about even with him an occupant of the car started shooting. It's not settled whether it was the driver or someone with him. We haven't found anyone that got a good look. He fell right there." Rowcliff pointed. "Archie stayed there. As you see, we're still at it here. Nothing from inside so far. Vukcic lived alone on the top floor, and there was no one there with him when he left. Of course he ate at his restaurant. Anything else?"

"No, thank you."

"Don't step off the curb. We're going over the pavement again in daylight." He left us.

Wolfe stood a moment, looking down at the spot on the pavement where Marko had dropped, then lifted his head to glance around. A moving spotlight hit his face and he blinked. Since that was the first time to my knowledge that he had ever started investigating a murder by a personal visit to the scene of the crime—not counting the occasions when he had been jerked loose by some other impulse, such as saving my life—I was curious to see how he would proceed. It was a chance he had seldom had.

He hopped on it by turning to me and asking, "Which way to the restaurant?"

I nodded west. "Up Lexington four blocks and around the corner. We can get a taxi—"

"No. We'll walk." He was off.

I went along, more and more impressed. The death of his oldest and closest friend had certainly hit him hard. He would have to cross five street intersections, with wheeling monsters waiting for him at every corner, ready to spring, but he strode on regardless, as if these were a perfectly natural and normal procedure.

Things were not natural and normal at Rusterman's. The six-foot, square-jawed doorman opened for us and let us pass through, and then blurted to Wolfe's broad back, "Is it true, Mr. Wolfe?" Wolfe ignored it and went on, but I turned and gave him a nod. Wolfe marched on past the cloakroom, so I did likewise. In the big front room, which you crossed on your way to the dining room, and which Marko had called the lounge but which I called the bar because it had one at its far side, there were only a few customers scattered around at the tables, since it was nearly nine-thirty and by that hour the clientele were inside, busy with *perdrix en casserole* or *tournedos Beauharnais*. The tone of the place, subdued but not stiff, had of course been set by Marko, with the able assistance of Felix, Leo, and Joe, and I had never seen one of them break training by so much as a flicker of an eyelash until that evening. As we entered, Leo, standing at the entrance to the dining room, caught sight of us and started toward us, then wheeled and went back and shouted into the dining room, "Joe!"

There were murmurs from the few scattered customers in the bar. Leo wheeled again, clapped his hand to his mouth, crossed to us, and stood staring at Wolfe. I saw sweat on his brow, another misdemeanor. In restaurants that sell squabs for five bucks or more apiece, captains and headwaiters are not allowed to sweat.

"It's true," Leo hissed, his hand still covering his mouth. He seemed to be shrinking in front of our eyes, and he was none too big anyway—not a shorty, but quite narrow up to his shoulders, where he spread out some. He let the hand fall, but kept his voice down. "Good God, Mr. Wolfe, is it true? It must—"

A hand gripped his shoulder from behind. Joe was there, and Joe was built for gripping. His years with Marko had polished him so that he no longer looked like a professional wrestler, but he had the size and lines.

"Get hold of yourself, damn it," he muttered at Leo. "Did you want a table, Mr. Wolfe? Marko's not here."

"I know he's not. He's dead. I don't—"

"Please not so loud. Please. Then you know he's dead?"

"Yes. I saw him. I don't want a table. Where's Felix?"

"Felix is up in the office with two men. They came and said Marko had been shot and killed. He left the dinner to Leo and me and took them upstairs. No one has been told except Vincent at the door because Felix said Marko would not want the dinner to be spoiled. It makes me want to vomit to see them eating and drinking and laughing, but it may be that Felix is right—and the face he had, it was no time to argue. Do you think he is right? I would myself want to put everybody out and lock the door."

Wolfe shook his head. "No. Felix is right. Let them eat. I'm going upstairs. Archie?" He headed for the elevator.

The third floor of the building had been remodeled a year or so previously to provide an office in front and three private dining rooms to the rear. Wolfe opened the door to the office, without knocking, and entered, and I followed. The three men in chairs over by the table turned to us. Felix Martin, a wiry, compact little guy with quick black eyes and graying hair—in his uniform, of course—got up and started toward us. The other two stayed put.

They rated uniforms too, one an inspector's and the other a sergeant's, but didn't wear them to work.

"Mr. Wolfe," Felix said. You didn't expect a voice so deep from one that size, even after you were acquainted with it. "The worst thing on earth! The worst thing! Everything was going so fine!"

Wolf gave him a nod and went on by to Inspector Cramer. "What have you got?" he demanded.

Cramer controlled himself. His big round face was always a little redder, and his cold gray eyes a little colder, when he was exercising restraint. "I know," he conceded, "that you're interested in this one personally. Sergeant Stebbins was saying to me that we would have to make allowances, and I agreed. Also this is one time when I'll gladly take all the help you can give, so let's all take it easy. Bring chairs, Goodwin."

For Wolfe I went and got the one at Marko's desk because it was nearer the size desired than any of the others. For myself I wasn't so particular. As I was joining the party Wolfe was demanding, not taking it easy at all, "Have you got anything?"

Cramer tolerated it. "Anything hot, no. The murder was committed just two hours ago."

"I know." Wolfe tried to shift to a more acceptable position in the chair. "Of course you have asked Felix if he can name the murderer." His eyes moved. "Can you, Felix?"

"No, sir. I can't believe it."

"You have no suggestions?"

"No, sir."

"Where have you been since seven o'clock?"

"Me?" The black eyes were steady at Wolfe. "I've been right here."

"All the time?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where has Joe been?"

"Right here too."

"All the time?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where has Leo been?"

"Here too, all the time. Where else would we be at dinnertime? And when Marko didn't come—"

"If you don't mind," Cramer cut in, "I've already got this. I don't need—"

"I do," Wolfe told him. "I have a double responsibility, Mr. Cramer. If you assume that I intend to see that the murderer of my friend is caught and brought to account with the least possible delay, you are correct. But another onus is on me. Under my friend's will, as you will soon learn officially, I am executor of his estate and trustee ad interim. I am not a legate. This restaurant is the only substantial asset, and it was left to six of the men who work here, with the biggest shares going to the three men I have just inquired about. They were told of the terms of the will when it was altered a year ago. Mr. Vukcic had no close relatives, and none at all in this country."

Cramer was eying Felix. "What's this place worth?"

Felix shrugged. "I don't know."

"Did you know that if Vukcic died you would be part owner of it?"

"Certainly. You heard what Mr. Wolfe said."

"You hadn't mentioned it."

"Good God!" Felix was out of his chair, on his feet, quivering. He stood a moment, got the quivering stopped, sat down again, and leaned forward at Cramer. "It takes time to mention things, officer. There is nothing about Marko and me, about him and us here, that I will not be glad to mention. He was hard about the work, hard and sometimes rough, and he could roar, but he was a great man. Listen, and I'll tell you how I feel about him. Here I am. He is at my side is Marko." Felix tapped his elbow with a finger. "A man appears and points a gun at him and is going to shoot. I jump to put myself in front of Marko. Because I am a big hero. No. I am no hero at all. Only because that's how I feel about Marko. Ask Mr. Wolfe."

Cramer grunted. "He was just asking you where you've been since seven o'clock. What about Leo and Joe? How do they feel about Marko?"

Felix straightened up. "They will tell you."

"How do you think they feel?"

"Not like me because they are not of my temperament. But to suppose it possible they would try to hurt him—never. Joe would not jump in front of Marko to stop the bullet. He would jump for the man with the gun. Leo—I don't know, but it is my opinion he would yell for help, for the police. I don't sneer at that; it would take more than a coward to yell for help."

"It's too bad one of you wasn't there when it happened," Cramer observed. It seemed to me uncalled-for. Obviously he didn't like Felix. "And you say you have no knowledge whatever of anyone who might have wanted Vukcic dead?"

"No, sir, I haven't." Felix hesitated. "Of course there is one thing—or I should say, more than one. There is women. Marko was a gallant man. Only one thing could ever take him away from his work here: a woman. I will not say that to him a woman was more important than a sauce—he could not be accused of ever neglecting a sauce—but he had a warm eye for women. After all, it was not essential for him to be in the kitchen when everything was planned and ready, and Joe and Leo and I are competent for the tables and service, so Marko chose to enjoy dinner at his own table with a guest there was no feeling about among us. But it might have caused feeling among others. I have no personal knowledge. Myself, I am married with four children and have no time, but everybody knows that women can arouse strong feelings."

"So he was a chaser," Sergeant Stebbins growled.

"Pfui!" Wolfe growled back at him. "Gallantry is not always a lackey for lust."

Which was a fine sentiment with company present, but the fact remained that Wolfe had himself asked me about Marko's relations with women. For the next three hours, there in Marko's office, that subject came close to monopolizing the conversation. Felix was dismissed and told to send Joe up. Other Homicide dicks arrived, and an assistant district attorney, and waiters and cooks were brought up for sessions in the private dining rooms; and with each one, after a few personal questions, the emphasis was on the female guests who had eaten at Marko's own table in the past year or so. By the time Wolfe was willing to call it a day and got himself erect and stretched, it was well after midnight and a respectable bulk of data had

been collected, including the names of seven women, none of them notorious.

Cramer rasped at Wolfe, "You said you intend to see that the murderer is caught and brought to account with the least possible delay. I don't want to butt in, but I'll just mention that the Police Department will be glad to help."

Wolfe ignored the sarcasm, thanked him politely, and headed for the door.

On the way downtown in the cab I remarked that I had been pleased to note that no one had pronounced the name of Sue Dondero. Wolfe, on the edge of the seat, gripping the straps, set to jump for his life, made no reply.

"Though I must say," I added, "there were enough of them without her. They're not going to like it much. By noon tomorrow there'll be thirty-five dicks, five to a candidate, working on that list. I mention it merely for your consideration, in case you are thinking of telling me to have all seven of them in the office at eleven in the morning."

"Shut up," he muttered.

Usually I react to that command vocally, but that time I thought it just as well to obey. When we rolled to the curb in front of the old brownstone on West Thirty-fifth Street I paid the driver, got out and held the door for Wolfe, mounted the seven steps to the stoop, and opened the door with my key. After Wolfe had crossed the threshold I closed the door and put the chain bolt on, and when I turned Fritz was there and was telling Wolfe, "There's a lady to see you, sir."

It popped into my mind that it would save me a lot of trouble if they were going to drop her without being invited, but Fritz was adding, "It's your daughter, Mrs. Britton."

There was a faint suggestion of reproach in Fritz's tone. For years he had disapproved of Wolfe's attitude toward his adopted daughter. A dark-haired Balkan girl with an accent, she had appeared out of the blue one day long ago and proceeded to get Wolfe involved in a bank operation that had been no help to the bank account. When it was all over she had announced that she didn't intend to return to her native land, but neither did she intend to take any advantage of the fact that she had in her possession a paper, dated in Zagreb years before establishing her as the adopted daughter of Nero Wolfe. She had made good on both intentions, having got a job with a Fifth Avenue travel agency, and having, within a year, married its owner, one William R. Britton. No friction had developed between Mr. and Mrs. Britton and Mr. Wolfe, because for friction you must have contact, and there had been none. Twice a year, on her birthday and on New Year's Day, Wolfe sent her a bushel of orchids from his choicest plants, but that was all, except that he had gone to the funeral when Britton died of a heart attack in 1950.

That was what Fritz disapproved of. He thought any man, even Nero Wolfe, should invite his daughter, even an adopted one, to dinner once in a while. When he expressed that opinion to me, as he did occasionally, I told him that he knew damn well that Carla found Wolfe as irritating as he found her, so what was the use?

I followed Wolfe into the office. Carla was in the red leather chair. As we entered she got up to face us and said indignantly, "I've been waiting here over two hours!"

Wolfe went and took her hand and bowed over it. "At least you had a comfortable chair," he said courteously, and went to the one behind his desk, the only one in the world he had thoroughly approved of, and sat. Carla offered me a hand with her mind elsewhere, and I took it without bowing.

“Fritz didn’t know where you were,” she told Wolfe.

“No,” he agreed.

“But he said you knew about Marko.”

“Yes.”

“I heard it on the radio. I was going to go to the restaurant to see Leo, then I thought I would go to the police, and then I decided to come here. I suppose you were surprised, but I wasn’t.”

She sounded bitter. She looked bitter too, but I had to admit it didn’t make her any less attractive. With her dark eyes flashing, she might still have been the young Balkan damsels who had bounded in on me years before.

Wolfe’s eyes had narrowed at her. “If you are saying that you came here and waited two hours for me on account of Marko’s death, I must ask why. Were you attached to him?”

“Yes.”

Wolfe shut his eyes.

“If I know,” she said, “what that word means—attached. If you mean attached as a woman to a man, no, of course not. Not like that.”

Wolfe opened his eyes. “Then how?”

“We were attached in our devotion to a great and noble cause! The freedom of our people and your people! And there you sit making faces! Marko has told me—he has asked you to help us with your brains and your money, and you refused!”

“He didn’t tell me you were in it. He didn’t mention you.”

“I suppose not.” She was scornful. “He knew that would make you sneer even more. Here you are, rich and fat and happy with your fine home and fine food and your glass rooms on the roof with ten thousand orchids for you to smirk at, and with this Archie Goodwin for your slave to do all the work and take all the danger! What do you care if the people of the land you came from are groaning under the heel of the oppressor, with the light of their liberties smothered and the fruits of their labor snatched from them and their children at the point of the sword? *Stop making faces!*”

Wolfe leaned back and sighed deeply. “Apparently,” he said dryly, “I must give you a lecture. I grimaced neither at your impudence nor at your sentiment, but at your diction and style. I condemn clichés, especially those that have been corrupted by fascists and communists. Such phrases as ‘great and noble cause’ and ‘fruits of their labor’ have been given an ineradicable stink by Hitler and Stalin and all their vermin brood. Besides, in this century of the overwhelming triumph of science, the appeal of the cause of human freedom is no longer that it is great and noble; it is more or less than that; it is essential. It is no greater or nobler than the cause of edible food or the cause of effective shelter. Man must have freedom or he will cease to exist as man. The despot, whether fascist or communist, is no longer restricted to such puny tools as the heel or the sword or even the machine gun; science has provided weapons that can give him the planet; and only men who are willing to die for freedom have any chance of living for it.”

“Like you?” She was disdainful. “No. Like Marko. He died.”

Wolfe flapped a hand. “I’ll get to Marko. As for me, no one has ordained you as my monitor. I make my contributions to the cause of freedom—they are mostly financial—through those channels and agencies that seem to me most efficient. I shall not submit a li-

of them for your inspection and judgment. I refused to contribute to Marko's project because I distrusted it. Marko was himself headstrong, gullible, oversanguine, and naïve. He had—"

"For shame! He's dead, and you insult—"

"That will do!" he roared. It stopped her. He went down a few decibels. "You share the common fallacy, but I don't. I do not insult Marko. I pay him the tribute of speaking of him and feeling about him precisely as I did when he lived; the insult would be to smear his corpse with the honey excreted by my fear of death. He had no understanding of the forces he was trying to direct from a great distance, no control of them, and no effective check on their honor or fidelity. For all he knew, some of them may be agents of Tito, or even of Moscow—"

"That isn't true! He knew all about them—anyway, the leaders. He wasn't an idiot, and neither am I. We do check on them, all the time, and I—Where are you going?"

Wolfe had shoved his chair back and was on his feet. "You may not be an idiot," he told her, "but I am. I was letting this become a pointless brawl when I should have known better. I'm hungry. I was in the middle of dinner when the news came of Marko's death. It took my appetite. I tried to finish anyway, but I couldn't swallow. With an empty stomach, I'm a dunce, and I'm going to the kitchen and eat something." He glanced up at the wall clock. "It's nearly two o'clock. Will you join me?"

She shook her head. "I had dinner. I couldn't eat."

"Archie?"

I said I could use a glass of milk and followed him out. In the kitchen Fritz greeted us by putting down his magazine, leaving his chair, telling Wolfe, "Starving the live will not profit the dead," and going to open the refrigerator door.

"The turkey," Wolfe said, "and the cheese and pineapple. I've never heard that before. Montaigne?"

"No, sir." Fritz put the turkey on the table, uncovered it, and got the slicer and handed it to Wolfe. "I made it up. I knew you would have to send for me, or come, and I wished to have an appropriate remark ready for you."

"I congratulate you." Wolfe was wielding the knife. "To be taken for Montaigne is a peak few men can reach."

I had only had milk in mind, but Fritz's personal version of cottage cheese with fresh pineapple soaked in white wine is something that even a Vishinsky wouldn't veto. Also Wolfe offered me a wing and a drumstick, and it would have been unsociable to refuse. Fritz fixed a tasty tray and took it in to Carla, but when Wolfe and I rejoined her, some twenty minutes later, it was still untouched on the table at her elbow. I admit it could have been that she was too upset to eat, but I suspected her. She knew damn well that it irritated Wolfe to see good food turned down.

Back at his desk, he frowned at her. "Let's see if we can avoid contention. You said earlier that you supposed I was surprised, but that you weren't. Surprised at what?"

She was returning the frown. "I don't—oh, of course. Surprised that Marko was murdered."

"And you weren't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because of what he was doing. Do you know what he was doing?"

“Circumstantially, no. Tell me.”

“Well, in the past three years he has put nearly sixty thousand dollars of his own money into the cause, and he has collected more than half a million. He has gone seven times to Italy to confer with leaders of the movement who crossed the Adriatic to meet him. He has sent twelve men and two women over from this country to help—three Montenegrins, three Slovenians, two Croats, and six Serbs. He has had things printed and arranged for them to go to the peasants. He has sent over many tons of supplies, many different things—”

“Weapons? Guns?”

She gave it a thought. “I don’t know. Of course, that would be against the law—American law. Marko had a high regard for American law.”

Wolfe nodded. “Not unmerited. I didn’t know he was in so deep. So you are assuming that he was murdered because of these activities. That either Belgrade or Moscow regarded him as a menace, or at least an intolerable nuisance, and arranged for his removal. Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Belgrade or Moscow?”

Carla hesitated. “I don’t know. Of course there are those who secretly work with the Russians all over Yugoslavia, but more in Montenegro than other parts, because it is next to Albania, and Albania is ruled by the puppets of the Russians.”

“So are Hungary and Rumania and Bulgaria.”

“Yes, but you know the border between Montenegro and Albania. You know those mountains.”

“I do indeed. Or I did.” From the look on Wolfe’s face, the emotions aroused by the memory were mixed. “I was nine years old the first time I climbed the Black Mountain.” He shrugged it off. “Whether Belgrade or Moscow, you think they had an agent in New York, or sent one, to deal with Marko. Do you?”

“Of course!”

“Not of course if it is merely a surmise. Can you validate it? Have you any facts?”

“I have the fact that they hated him and he was a danger to them.”

Wolfe shook his head. “Not that kind. Something specific—a name, an act, a thing said.”

“No.”

“Very well. I accept your surmise as worthy of inquiry. How many persons are there in or around New York, other than contributors of money, who have been associated with Marko in this?”

“Why, altogether, about two hundred.”

“I mean closely associated. In his confidence.”

She had to think. “Four or five. Six, counting me.”

“Give me their names and addresses and phone numbers. Archie, take them down.”

I got my notebook and pen and was ready, but nothing came. I looked at her. She was sitting with her dark Montenegrin eyes focused on Wolfe, her chin up and her lips pressed together.

“Well?” he demanded.

“I don’t trust you,” she said.

Naturally he would have liked to tell me to bounce her, and I must say I couldn’t have blamed him, but she wasn’t just a prospective client with a checkbook. She had or might have

something he needed for paying a personal debt. So he merely barked at her. "Then why the devil did you come here?"

They glared at each other. It was not a sight to impel me to hurry up and get married and have a daughter, especially not an adopted one.

She broke the tableau. "I came because I had to do something. I knew if I went to the police they would want me to tell everything about us, and I couldn't do that because some of the things some of us do—well, you asked about sending weapons." She fluttered a hand. "But Marko was your good friend, and he thought you were his, and you have a famous reputation for catching murderers, and after all I still have that paper that says I am your daughter, so I came without really thinking. Now I don't know. You refused to give money for the cause. When I speak of freedom and the oppressor you make a face. It is true you have Montenegrin blood, you are of the race that fought back the savage Turks for five hundred years, but so are others, still in those mountains, who are licking the bloody feet of the tyrant. Have I looked into your heart? How do I know who you serve? How do I know if you too get your orders from Belgrade or Moscow?"

"You don't," Wolfe said bluntly.

She stared at him.

"You are not a fool," he assured her. "On the contrary, you would be a fool if you took my probity for granted, as little as you know of me. As far as you know it's quite possible that I'm a blackguard. But you haven't thought it through. To test your surmise about the death of Marko I need some facts from you, but what are they? Names and addresses and dates—things that are already known to the enemy. I have no means of convincing you that I am not verminous, so I offer a suggestion. I will ask you questions. You will assume that I am a Communist, owing allegiance either to Belgrade or Moscow, no matter which. You will also assume—my vanity insists on it—that I am not far from the top in the councils of depravity. So. Each question I put, ask yourself if it isn't extremely likely either that I already know the answer or that it is readily available to me. If yes, tell me. If no, don't. The way I act on the information will show you whether you should trust me, but that's unimportant."

She was concentrating on it. "It's a trick."

He nodded. "And rather ingenious. For the record, I say that your misgiving about me is groundless; but assuming that I am of the enemy, I'll certainly try to pry something out of you that I don't already have, so you must keep your wit sharp. Shall we start and see how it goes?"

She didn't like it "You might tell the police. We are not criminals, but we have a right to our secrets, and the police could make it very difficult."

"Bosh. You can't have everything. You can't have me both a Communist agent and a police informer; I'm not a chameleon. You're making it a travesty, and you might as well go. I can manage without you."

She studied him. "All right. Ask me."

"Eat something first. That food is still palatable."

"No, thank you."

"Beer, then? A glass of wine? Whisky?"

"No, thank you. Nothing."

"I'm thirsty. Archie? Beer, please. Two bottles."

I went to the kitchen for it.

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