



"Okay." I said. "You've got my wife. Who are you and what's the payoff?"

"Never mind who we are," the muffled voice told me. "The payoff will be the plans of your new Paxton-Leland radio remote-control for bombing planes. We know they're ready for Washington, and we want them. By midnight."

"Otherwise?" I asked quietly.

"You guess," the voice said. Then I heard Barbara again:

"They say they'll k-kill me, Nick!"

And the man's voice came back to add: "We mean it, Paxton. Think it over."

I didn't have to think it over. I already knew what my answer must inevitably be. Barbara came first, because I loved her. Barbara's safety came ahead of my friendship for Todd Leland, my partner; ahead of my loyalty to my country. I said:

"You win, whoever you are. Tell me what I'm to do."

The voice seemed pleased. "For one thing, you're not to contact the police. You understand that?"

"I understand that."

The voice said: "You are to bring the plans—both sets of them—to room Two-ten, the Norcross Hotel, Burbank. That is all."

"By midnight?"

"Not one minute later. Unless you want to be a widower."

I LOOKED desperately at my wrist-watch. "But it's eleven o'clock now," I argued swiftly. "An hour isn't much time."

"It's all the time you need, Paxton. It's all the time you've got." There came the grim finality of a disconnecting click.

I hung up. Cold sweat formed on my forehead and under my armpits as I walked across the apartment to a locked closet. I unlocked the door, and the sight of Barbara's dresses hanging there made my throat go tight with apprehension because I couldn't fight back. There were her street frocks, her negligees, her little slippers. Unless I obeyed orders, she might never wear them again. A faint fragrance drifted to my nostrils. Barbara's fragrance, clinging daintily to her dresses.

"God...!" I whispered.

I knew what I had to do. I pulled down a flat leather packet off the upper shelf and lifted a .32 automatic from my other suit. I crossed over to the bureau, took a handkerchief from the top drawer and scissored two eye-holes in it. I thrust the

handkerchief and the gun into my coat pocket, poked the flat leather packet under my shirt. Then I put on my hat and left the apartment, went down to my coupé parked at the curb.

I drove hell-for-leather toward Glendale Airport.

Distance and traffic signals cost me fifteen precious minutes. But I finally got there. I skirted the field to its far side, stopped a little way beyond the private hangar marked Heinrich Kunkel Aero Co. That was where Todd Leland and I had toiled elbow to elbow for six long, weary months. I peered through the gloom. The hangar was dark. It looked deserted.

Ten more minutes later, a light winked on inside the hangar office at the rear of the structure. I saw Todd Leland's profile silhouetted against the dirt-streaked window. That was what I had been waiting for.

I adjusted the handkerchief mask over my face, drew my automatic and stole forward.

My palm was clammy-cold against the gun's matching coldness. The night itself was no blacker than the shadows that were on my heart as I stealthily approached the building before me. For half a year, Todd Leland and I had worked to perfect that bombing-plane control device for the War Department, Todd laboring on the radio part of it while I did the mechanical aeronautics end. Now the job was finished—and I was turning Judas. I was going to doublecross my partner; I was going to sell my country down the river.

It wasn't nice to think about it. I tried not to think about it. I tried to keep my mind on Barbara, whose life was at stake.

The office looked bare and denuded as I softly opened the door. I missed my draughting tables littered with blueprints, the workbenches cluttered with Todd Leland's wires and condensers and experimental radio apparatus. Impotent anger welled through me when I thought of all the work we'd done, work that now would go to benefit some foreign power.

Todd didn't hear me come in. He was busy opening the office safe. His suitcase was on the floor nearby, packed; he was all set to catch the midnight sleeper plane for Washington. Over across the field, the sleek DC-4 airliner was already being tractored out onto the concrete runway.

ONE final quarter-turn of the dial, and Todd swung the door of the safe outward. He

reached in, brought forth a flat leather packet that duplicated the one inside my shirt. He straightened up.

I jammed my automatic against the base of his spine.

"I'll take that," I said and snatched the packet out of his grasp.

He turned around, slowly. "Damn you—" he started to yell.

"Quiet," I warned him. I disguised my voice as much as I could.

He glared at me, his eyes trying to probe through the mask I was wearing. Then, abruptly, his lips twisted in a sardonic grin.

"You're not so smart, mister," he growled.

I didn't answer him. I backed toward the door.

"Those plans won't do you any good," he said. "They aren't worth a damn without the other half. And the other half are where you'll never lay your lousy hands on them."

"What makes you think so?" I sparred, still backing away and keeping him covered.

"My partner has them," he snapped at me. "Do you think Nick Paxton and I would be saps enough to keep the specifications all in one place? Like hell! You damned foreign agents approached us too many times, offered us too many bribes. Nick and I made sure nothing like this would be pulled on us. Not successfully, I mean."

I said: "You talk too much," and reached around behind me for the doorknob.

Todd kept right on trying to sell me on the futility of the hold-up.

"I'm taking my half of the plans to Washington tonight. Nick Paxton is to follow me in a day or so with his half. We arranged it that way, so that in case either of us got hijacked, the hijackers would draw blank. Better hand back that packet, friend. It's worthless to your government without Nick Paxton's blueprints."

"So you think," I said, and stabbed my thumb at the light switch.

Todd did the unexpected. He hurled himself at me before I could jab the office dark. He came with both fists swinging. He was like a maniac.

I let him have it. I had to, even though I hated myself for doing it. I clipped him across the temple with the muzzle end of my automatic. Not too hard; I didn't want to hurt him. After all, he was my friend.

His eyes went glassy. He sagged. And as he went down, he clawed out with his left hand as if to support himself. His outstretched fingers raked

my face, caught in the mask. The mask was ripped away, Todd stared at me, stupidly.

"Nick! *Nick Paxton!*" he exclaimed.

Then he hit the floor, unconscious.

That was bad. Now I was in for it, I knew. I had hoped to pull the stick-up without Todd Leland recognizing me. Then he would never have known my part in the deal. But my luck was out. Once Todd regained consciousness he would go to the police, make a full report. A dragnet would be spread for me.

WELL, it couldn't be helped now. Maybe I could reach the Border, escape into Mexico before the law caught up with me. Barbara and I could start life all over again in one of the banana republics, perhaps. When I thought of Barbara, my nerves tightened. I had to find her, save her—and I had to do it before midnight. That gave me exactly thirty minutes. My wrist-watch showed half-past eleven as I snapped off the office light and scuttled out into the hangar proper.

Thirty minutes in which to reach that hotel over in Burbank! It would be touch-and-go. I cursed whatever foreign operatives had put me in this spot. Then I froze.

Somebody was coming into the hangar from the front.

I didn't have a chance to hide. The big overhead incandescents blazed into raw white life. I blinked, stared ahead. I saw Gus Kunkel and Kunkel's little swarthy-skinned chauffeur, Steve Wallack, coming toward me. I'd often wondered why, with so many Americans out of work, Kunkel didn't hire somebody without a European twist in his tongue to drive his big car. Wallack's face was bland, impassive; his narrow eyes expressionless. Kunkel looked surprised to see me.

Kunkel owned the hangar. He was the one who had put up the money to finance the Leland-Paxton experiments. He was a pudgy, Americanized European who liked to boast of his patriotism, his love of his adopted country.

"Nick Paxton!" he said. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"Seeing Todd Leland off," I lied.

"Has he gone?"

I nodded, fighting not to show my uneasiness. "He went over to the plane five or ten minutes ago," I said. If Kunkel went into the office and discovered Todd Leland lying senseless there, I was sunk. Why the hell was he staring at me so queerly?

"I wanted to tell him good-by and wish him luck," he said. "I think I'll walk across the field and catch him." He turned to Wallack. "You drive the car around and meet me at the administration building."

Wallack nodded and went out.

"Coming with me, Paxton?" Kunkel asked.

I was desperate to get away. "No, thanks," I said. "My car's outside. I've got some errands to do."

My heart drummed against my ribs as I watched Kunkel leave the hangar. Time was leaking away, time I couldn't afford to lose. My lips were dry as I heard the receding purr of Kunkel's limousine heading for the road that circled the field. I listened to the fading footfalls of Kunkel himself as he strode across the hard, oiled surface of the runway. Then I pelted into the night, hurled myself into my coupé. I kicked the starter, headed desperately for Burbank.

It was five minutes before twelve when I skidded to a halt in front of the third-rate Norcross Hotel. I ran into the lobby, crossed it without even a glance at the desk clerk and took the stairs two at a clip. I reached a door marked 210 and knocked.

THERE was a radio playing in the room, tuned in on a swing-band. My nerves were so taut that the sound of the switch being snapped off was like the report of a gun. Then a woman's voice seeped through the thin panel. It was throaty, softly guttural.

"Who is there?" it asked.

"Nick Paxton," I said.

The door opened. I stared into the cold blue eyes of the woman who had questioned me. Her hair was the color of wheat-straw, her complexion like cream and roses, her dress too tight on her curves. She had an automatic in her right hand. I got the impression that her slim fingers weren't strangers to the feel of a trigger.

"Come in, Mr. Paxton," she drawled.

I walked in. She closed the door. Then she searched me, lifted my gun. "A dangerous toy, Mr. Paxton," she purred.

"Where's Barbara?" I demanded. "Where's my wife?"

"Safe enough. Did you bring what you were told to bring?"

I tossed both leather envelope-cases on the table. They seemed of little importance now, yet the information they contained might sway the fate of nations. I wasn't interested in that. I wanted my

wife. I said so.

"Really, Mr. Paxton," the blond woman smiled. "Do you think we'd be so stupid as to have her *here*?"

When I stopped to think about it, I could see what she was driving at. She and her confederates weren't too sure I'd show up with the plans. I might have risked calling the police.

Her gun still menaced me. "I'll look at the plans to be certain. Then I'll telephone and arrange for your wife's release. The phone is in the next room. Meantime—" From a drawer of the small table which held the tiny portable radio, she took a pair of handcuffs. She wasn't taking any chances on me.

Warned by her automatic, I stood still while she snapped one of the cuffs on my left wrist and looped the other bracelet around a steam-pipe in the far corner. If it hadn't been for Barbara's danger, I'd have fought through hell for those plans. But I didn't dare fight, the way things stood.

The woman made a hasty examination of the specifications in the two packets. She seemed satisfied. She laid them on the table beside the radio, beyond my reach, and went into the next room.

A scheme popped into my head. I might not hear what was said over the phone, but if I could get hold of the little radio and turn it on, maybe I'd be able to count the dial-clicks and figure out the number being called. Then, if the blonde and her pals tried to doublecross me, I'd have something to go on.

I couldn't reach the table. So I slid the handcuff down the steam-pipe to the floor, stretched myself out on my back and fished my feet toward the table-leg. I made contact; rocked the table. It didn't quite tip over, but the radio slid off and I caught it between my ankles. I pulled it to me, flipped the switch.

The loud-speaker hummed into life just as the blonde woman began dialing in the room next door. I counted the dialing clicks. One, four, two, four, four, nine, one. From the other room I could hear the low blur of the woman's voice:

"This is Frieda. He brought them. Better tell—" She dropped her tone and I couldn't get what she said after that.

There was something damned familiar about the phone number she had dialed. I translated it in my mind. The first "one" would be "ABC." The second "four" represented "GHI"—and in that area, it could only mean the local exchange, which

was Citrus. Therefore, the number she was talking to was Citrus 2-4491.

I'd called it many a time, myself. It was Gus Kunkel's residence!

**R**AGE choked me. So Kunkel was the man behind the kidnaping of my wife! He had financed Todd Leland and me until we'd perfected our invention. Now he wanted to get it away from us without revealing his own identity in the matter—so he could make a fortune by peddling the device to his original fatherland! All his talk about American patriotism was so much bunk!

I was balancing the tiny radio in my hand as I heard the woman returning. I was squatting on my haunches now, my left hand still cuffed to the steam-pipe. If I could throw the little receiving-set straight enough—

I jerked its connecting cord out of the plug. And as the Frieda female came through the door, I let her have it. The radio weighed about five pounds, and it clipped her a glancing blow on the chin. She went to her knees. Then she toppled on her face. She was out, cold.

But my predicament was just as bad as ever. I had seen her drop the handcuff key inside the low-slashed vee of her dress, and when she fell, she was still on the other side of the room—a good six feet past my reach. There I was, cuffed to the pipe, the key in the woman's bosom, and the plans in plain sight—but as inaccessible to me as if they'd been fifty miles away.

I lived ten years in the next two minutes. Then I cursed my own stupidity for not seeing a way out. The woman was beginning to stir. In another moment or so she'd regain consciousness. If she happened to be sore enough to use her gun, I was washed up. I had to act fast.

There was a nine-by-twelve rug on the floor. If I just had strength enough in my one arm to grasp the rug's edge and slide it toward me with the weight of the woman's body, the weight of the furniture, perhaps.

I grabbed the rug and pulled it. Slowly the woman came toward me, head-first. If I could get that key, it meant freedom for me—and for Barbara. I'd be able to save the plans, too. And Gus Kunkel would never again have occasion to proclaim his allegiance to the United States. I loved the ground he was going to be planted in.

At last I tugged the rug enough to bring the woman close to me. I ripped her dress open all the way to the waist. It was no time for niceties. I

wanted that key. I got it.

A minute later I was loose, the precious plans were under my shirt and the blonde was handcuffed to the steam-pipe that had been my own hitching-post. I taped her mouth with some adhesive I found in the bathroom. Then I threw the key out the window.

**G**US KUNKEL lived in a big house on the top of a hill near where Glendale cuts into East Hollywood. How I got there without being arrested, I'll never know. I certainly broke all the traffic laws ever written. And I wasn't taking any more chances with the plans.

My coupé was an Oldie with a drip-pan under the motor. When I stopped in front of Kunkel's driveway, I took an oilproof slicker I had in the back of the car and ripped a square piece out of it. I wrapped the two leather packets in the oiled square of cloth, opened the hood and slid the little bundle under my engine.

While I was doing it, a taxicab came roaring up the hill. I crouched down behind some bushes as the cab skidded into the driveway and stopped. The corrugated grip of the automatic I'd got back from the blonde felt good to my palm. I watched.

I saw the taxi's door swing open under the porte-cochere of Kunkel's house. Kunkel himself tumbled out of the cab and tossed the hacker a bill. The cab pulled away as Kunkel made for his front door.

I raced across the lawn, my feet making no sound on the thick turf. The first warning Kunkel had of my presence was the pressure of my gun against his back.

"One bleat out of you and they'll send your ashes to the Fatherland in a vase," I told him.

He trembled. I could feel the shiver coursing through him. As he always did when excited, he lapsed into broken English.

"Dis iss a hold-up, *ja*? Mine money iss in der hip pocket. You take heem and—"

"I don't want your stinking dough," I snarled. "I want my wife."

With his hands high, he turned around. "Nick!" he gasped. If his surprise was feigned, the movies had lost another star when Kunkel went into the aviation business. "Nick Paxton—haff you gone grazy? Vot do I know about your wife?"

"You had her kidnaped to force me into turning the Paxton-Leland plans over to you. Don't stall. You're washed up, Kunkel. I *did* give the plans to your blond lady friend, so that she'd phone

you an okay to turn Barbara loose. But later I conked the blonde and got the specifications back—and I tracked you down at the same time. Now I'm calling the plays."

He seemed dazed. "I don't know vot you're talking about, Nick. I thought Todd Leland vent east vith his half of the plans at midnight. The plane took off joost as I got across the field. I vaited for Wallack to come vith mine limousine, but he didn't show up. I took a taxi and came home—"

"Wallack!" I whispered. "Maybe he's the one the dame Frieda telephoned, here at your house!" Not that I believe Kunkel to be in the clear. But it was possible that he and his chauffeur were working together. I said: "Come on, Kunkel. You and I are going to find Wallack. Keep your hands where I can see them. Walk ahead of me."

He seemed willing enough. Almost too willing. Once he and the chauffeur got together, the odds would be two to one against me. But that was a risk I'd have to accept. At least I had the advantage of surprise on my side.

**I** PRODDED Kunkel toward the garage, saw Kunkel's limousine there. So that much of my guess was correct; Wallack *had* come straight home—probably in order to accept the blond woman's call. There was a light in the living quarters above the garage; the chauffeur must be up there now, I figured. I forced Kunkel up the stairs ahead of me until we reached the door of Wallack's room. I knocked.

"Is that you, Frieda?" Wallack's voice asked.

I stiffened. Frieda was the blonde's name. I pitched my tone to a purring falsetto. "Yes. Let me in."

The door opened. I shoved Kunkel in front of me as a shield. I covered Wallack with my automatic and said: "Reach, rat."

Wallack went pasty. His mouth opened, but no words came out.

"Talk fast, Wallack!" I said. "Where's my wife?"

He seemed to read the determination in my eyes, must have realized I'd kill him unless he gave me straight answers. In his precise English with its foreign-flavored accent he said:

"I do not know where she is."

"You lie!" I blazed.

"The kidnaping of Mrs. Paxton was not a part of my plan," he insisted desperately. "When Frieda telephoned me and told me you had delivered the

specifications to her, I had no further interest in your wife. You cannot hold me responsible. I only agreed to buy the Paxton-Leland invention; I did not care how it was obtained."

"So you agreed to buy the invention!" I snarled. I knew that no such agreement had been made with me. "Was it Kunkel?"

"No. It was—"

From the doorway behind me a voice spoke.

"All right, Wallack. You needn't mention my name. I'm afraid it's already been guessed. Drop your gun, Nick. I'm sorry, but I've got you covered."

Todd Leland's voice!

I dropped my gun, half-turned to face him. He stood at the threshold with a .38 Colt in his steady fist and a bandage over his head where I'd clipped him, back at the hangar office. A wry grimace twisted his lips,

"I guess you think I'm a louse, Nick," he said. "Maybe I am. But I needed money badly—and quickly. My kid brother is in a jam at the bank where he works. A bad jam. And Wallack offered me a hundred thousand, spot cash—"

"But, Todd," I blurted, "this doesn't make sense! *I* stole the plans from *you!*"

"That's the way I juggled it, Nick. I realized you'd never go for a cash sell-out, and I knew my half of the plans were worthless without yours. So I had to figure some way of getting your half without you suspecting me; I wanted to make you think that you yourself were the guilty one."

"God!" I whispered.

"We may as well be truthful, now that you know this much," he went on. "I knew your most vulnerable spot would be Barbara. So I had my brother kidnap her and phone you. I knew you'd steal my half of the plans and then take both halves to Wallack's woman at the Norcross Hotel. That's why I allowed you to conk me. And by putting on that act of recognizing you when I tore your mask away, I had you in a spot where you'd never be able to bleat."

**D**UMBLY I just stared at him. He went on: "Just now, I came here for my pay-off. I heard enough to let me know you'd smeared the deal—"

"I smeared it plenty," I breathed, still hardly believing that my own partner had engineered the whole thing. Wallack and Kunkel stood beyond me, all of us covered by Todd's gun. It was like a nightmare.

Todd's eyes looked desperate. "You've got to understand, Nick," he said, "I don't like this any more than you do. But my brother needs that money and I'm in too deep to back out, now. After all, Wallack is acting for a friendly power. The invention will never be used against this country. I want those plans, Nick. I mean to have them. Where are they?"

"Where's Barbara?" I countered.

"She'll be released when I give the word. I won't give the word until I get those plans and turn them over to Wallack—for cash. You can't stop me now, Nick."

I don't know what made me say it. Certainly it wasn't because I feared for Barbara's safety, I knew Todd's brother wouldn't harm her, if it came right down to cases. Whatever happened, she would be okay. But when I saw the hysteria in Todd Leland's eyes, I spoke.

"The plans are in my car," I muttered. After all, half of the invention belonged to Todd. And maybe I could still talk him out of selling them. "They're in my car," I repeated, "but you don't want to—"

That was as far as I got. Todd should have known better. Keeping three men covered is no cinch. Wallack had been watching for his chance, and now he whipped a Luger from under his chauffeur's uniform-coat. He cut loose with it.

His first shot smashed Todd's gun out of his hand. "Now the plans are mine—without payment! You will all die, in the name of *Der Fuehrer!*" He fired again, and Todd doubled over, a bullet through his mid-riff.

I braced myself for the impact of a death slug. Gus Kunkel almost collapsed. Wallack triggered again, but nothing happened. The Luger had jammed.

He cursed gutturally and dived for the doorway. I tried to stop him. His fist caught me on the chin. I staggered. He got by me and went clattering down the steps. I could hear his heels hammering on the driveway as he raced to the street where my coupé was parked.

Todd Leland straightened up. Blood was spreading across the front of his shirt, and his right hand was bullet-creased. But with all that, he beat me to the door. "So Wallack was working for the Nazis!" he gasped. And he plunged down the stairs.

I went after him. But he was already behind the wheel of Gus Kunkel's big limousine. It roared away before I could leap for the running-board.

Out at the curb, I heard my own coupé surging into the night with Wallack driving it. Wallack was making his getaway with the plans—and Todd Leland, wounded, was pursuing him!

I heard Kunkel descending. "Have you got another car?" I yelled.

"My daughter's Ford. In the garage, Nick."

I FOUND it, piled in. Kunkel jammed himself alongside me as I gunned the V-eight backward to the driveway. I hit the street in second, and started after Todd. In a hundred yards I had the speedometer up to forty, then fifty.

Remembering the down-grade, I eased off for the turn at the foot of the hill. There wasn't too much speed in my coupé, which Wallack was driving; and Todd Leland, in the Kunkel limousine, was making knots. But the coupé was shorter and could make the turns faster. It was anybody's race. I was gaining on Todd, but he wasn't gaining on Wallack.

There was a hairpin turn at the foot of the hill. At the speed Todd was driving that big car, I didn't think he could make it. Then I caught my breath. He didn't even try to make the turn. There was a low embankment just this side of the spot where the road doubled back on itself. Todd deliberately wheeled the limousine over the edge. In a flash, I understood his plan. If the limousine held together, it would slam across the intervening space and come out on the lower section of the road, straight in Wallack's path as he came around the curve.

In the uncertain light I saw the big car go jouncing across the rough rocks, tires bursting with every turn of the wheels. It lurched across the flat place at the bottom of the embankment and landed squarely in Wallack's path. The Nazi agent tried to slow up, but the brakes on my coupé were none too good. With Wallack screaming at the wheel, my little jalopy whammed into the limousine's side. The crunching crash of metal could be heard for blocks. Wallack's shriek died suddenly as his head smashed forward into the windshield and shattered the glass. Razor-sharp shards sliced through his gullet....

I stood on the V-eight's brakes, scrambled out, with Kunkel scurrying after me. We stumbled down the embankment on foot.

"Todd!" I yelled as I saw him come weaving out of the big limousine. I caught the flicker of flame licking the two twisted wrecks. "The plans—under the motor of my coupé—" Then I cursed as a turning rock twisted my ankle and sent me

sprawling.

Below me, fire roared as it caught the spilled gasoline. Yellow tongues hissed skyward. I saw Todd Leland approaching the heart of the blaze. I knew what he was going to do. I could almost hear the frying of flesh as he reached into that flaming hell and raised my coupé's hood.

I couldn't have stopped him. Nobody could have stopped him. Flame cloaked his form for a moment, like a white-hot shroud. Gus Kunkel was whispering: "God! God in Heaven!" Then Todd Leland came staggering away from the wreckage. He had something in his arms. It was the square of slicker-wrapped plans.

He collapsed in the middle of the road as I reached him. His face was a blotch of scorched, blackened flesh. I beat at the smoking shreds of his clothing with my bare hands. I bent over him.

"WALLACK'S dead," he whispered through pain-twisted lips. "But here...are the...plans.... Listen, Nick...I wouldn't have...done it...if I'd known... Wallack was...a Nazi...."

"Take it easy, Todd," I said gently. "I'll get a

doctor. I'll—"

"No good," he moaned. "I'm... done for.... Tell my brother...to take his...medicine...like a man...."

"I'll tell him, Todd. Maybe I can help him. I'll try."

"Thanks, Nick...you'll find Barbara...at the kid's apartment... don't hang a...kidnap rap...on him...don't let...the world... know...I...almost sold...out ...my country...."

He grew quiet. Deathly quiet. I said a little prayer for his soul. He'd made a mistake, but had rectified it.

Gus Kunkel touched my arm. "Nobody need ever know the truth, Nick," he said softly. "We'll tell the police I was coming home in my limousine and there was a collision. And I'll put up the money to get Todd's brother out of trouble. Maybe you'd better go, now. Go find Barbara."

I went back up the hill to the V-eight. I found Barbara at Todd's brother's apartment

"Nick...oh, my dear!" she cried brokenly. I took her in my arms.