

WHIT. That's the point.

JESS. It's just canvas. I could swear it was a wall. And that ceiling. I suppose it's for acoustics.

WHIT. Probably. (Calls.) Helloooooo! See. No echo. (From off L. we hear an answering "Helloooooo!" from MILDRED.) My voice is changing!

JESS. (Calls off.) Over here. Follow the gleam.

MILDRED. (Off.) Be right with you. This is a gloomy vault, isn't it?

JESS. Wait until you get where we are.

WHIT. (To JESS.) It's a woman.

JESS. (Takes her glass from above table.) Must be Mildred Maxwell.

MILDRED. (Enters through arch. MILDRED Z. MAXWELL is a large woman, folksy in a way, but very determined and opinionated. She often has a sharp way of speaking although she is a friendly soul. She is in her late fifties or early sixties, wears a two-piece silk dress and a small hat. She carries a large bag with her which contains her handiwork.) I made it. (Shields her eyes from the lights.) Oh, those lights are bright, aren't they?

JESS. Stand in the right color and it'll take ten years off you.

MILDRED. Nothing could do that short of a visit to Lourdes. (Crosses to JESS with hand outstretched.) How do you do. I am Mildred Z. Maxwell.

JESS. We've read everything you've ever written.

MILDRED. Why, thank you, dear. A few million more like you and I wouldn't have to be here now. (Moves below and descends on WHIT who rises.) You must be Mr. Summers.

WHIT. Wrong.

MILDRED. I hate to be wrong.

WHIT. Whitney Olive, and this is my wife, Jessica.

MILDRED. (They shake hands. JESS moves above the desk and sits on the desk chair.) Of course, I should have known. The martinis.

WHIT. Would you like one?

MILDRED. Never drink on a job, dear. Coagulates the mind. And let me say, I have read everything you've ever written.

WHIT. Now we're even.

MILDRED. But I had no idea you were so like your books.

JESS. In what way?

MILDRED. I mean, every one of your murders started out with a charming couple sipping a martini and then things happened. It was like a trademark.

JESS. We have to maintain the image.

WHIT. Besides, we happen to enjoy martinis.

MILDRED. (Settles down on the sofa L. and takes her crocheting out of her bag and starts working on it.) So do I, but, unfortunately, I never made a career out of it. Well, where are the others?

JESS. (As WHIT sits on the sofa again.) No one else has come yet.

MILDRED. Honestly, now, what do you think of this whole thing?

WHIT. Should be delightful fun if we don't all end up fighting.

MILDRED. Every bee to his own bonnet, as I always say.

JESS. I wondered what you always said.

MILDRED. (Laughs.) You are like your books. Marvellous. I wish I were. I try to be, but it never comes off somehow.

JESS. How do you mean?

MILDRED. My characters are so thoroughly organized and my plots so spectacularly logical, but in reality I have trouble balancing my checkbook. Never think it from my stories, would you?

WHIT. Certainly not. Those murders are brilliantly plotted. They're something like a geometry problem. Many's the time I've said to Jess that we could use more of your ingenuity.

MILDRED. And many's the time I've wished for your comic flair for the urbane.

JESS. (*Gets the thermos and refills WHIT'S drink, then returns to the desk and refills her own.*) Whitney, this collaboration is going to be perfect. We're getting along like a house afire already.

MILDRED. Mutual respect, that's what all authors should have.

WHIT. Especially mystery authors who are dated.

MILDRED. Nonsense, we're not dated. Your stories are still as alive and thrilling as ever.

JESS. (*Puts thermos back in bag and sits on desk.*) But we only hinted at sex and we avoided violence whenever possible.

MILDRED. But mine are timeless. The unusual murder, the interfering detective and then call everyone into a room and give them the answer. That's the basis of all murder books.

WHIT. Not any more, I'm afraid. Take our characters, for instance—rich, sophisticated, always from the Four Hundred. What do you read about today? Pick up any murder mystery and every girl has bosoms like watermelons and rich, creamy thighs. I never wrote any girl like that.

JESS. He may have thought it, but he never wrote it.

MILDRED. We'll come back, my dears, just hang onto your typewriters. The pendulum is swinging. Even the sexy CIA agent with all his super weapons is out. I bet Brad Benedict hasn't sold a thousand copies of his latest.

(BRAD BENEDICT enters through the arch from U. L. He is much younger than the others and, consequently, more mod in his dress but by no means "hippie." Actually, BRAD is a very shy and retiring person as we shall soon see. He has a quiet sense of humor that manifests itself in a small grin when he has been amusing, but usually he takes a back seat and admires the others. He comes in and moves to the L. end of the settee.)

BRAD. I get my royalty statement next month but I think you may be right.

MILDRED. There I go again, putting my foot in it right up to the knee.

BRAD. It's O.K. It's true.

WHIT. (*Rises.*) How do you do. I'm—

BRAD. I know who you are, both of you. (*Shakes hands with both of them.*) You're the Olives. I always loved that name. It goes so well with martinis. And Miss Maxwell. A pleasure.

JESS. And you're Brad Benedict, the author who brought the transistor radio to the pencil and the camera to the cigarette lighter. (*Toasts him and sips.*)

BRAD. It was good while it lasted.

JESS. We were all complimenting each other on our murders. Would you care to join in?

BRAD. Am I expected to compliment my idols?

JESS. (*Delighted.*) Oh, I like that.

BRAD. Without you stalwarts of the murder mystery, I never would have had my short-lived career. I learned everything from you.

MILDRED. Now, that's a nice speech, dear. Sit down and join us.

WHIT. And have a martini. (*Sits.*)

BRAD. My pleasure. (*Sees no glass. Holds out his hand.*) Just a handful, please.

WHIT. Don't underestimate my wife. Jess, a glass.

(JESS crosses below BRAD to her bag.)

JESS. I always carry a spare for guests. (*Takes extra glass from bag, hands it to BRAD and pours.*)

BRAD. Jason Summers isn't here yet?

MILDRED. No, just the three of us. One thing we've already decided. (*JESS puts thermos back in bag.*) They may expect it but we're not going to fight. We'll collaborate peacefully and make a fortune.

BRAD. (*Sits on bench by desk.*) I'm all for that.

MILDRED. Just to clear the air, dear, I must say there's something about you I hate. It's not the modern