

MANHUNT

A woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a dark jacket with red trim, is holding a handgun and looking forward. She is standing in a wooded area with green foliage and trees in the background.

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

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TALMAGE POWELL

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EVERY STORY NEW!

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Precious Pigeon

*She was worth a good deal of money.
To Constantine she was worth much
more dead than alive.*

BY

TALMADGE POWELL

THE MOTEL was an old one, located on a once-busy highway that had been by-passed by the new city expressway.

The number of cars in the parking area indicated occupancy of about half the units. I slid my car to stop beside a four-year-old Chevy.

It was a hot, humid autumn evening, the last growl of summer. In the drab unit at the far end a baby was crying fretfully.

My own reaction to the surroundings was one of sharp distaste. I knew how Constantine must be chaffing, anxious to get on the final phase of the task we had planned. Constantine was living, I knew, only on the hope of escaping this and similar places forever.

I assumed he had been watching

for me through a crack in the blind. The door of his room opened even as I approached.

I stepped inside and he closed the door quickly. He looked me up and down with envy and impatience in the dark eyes beneath the shaggy brows.

"Anyone see you, Cary?"

I shook my head. "We are total strangers, totally disconnected."

"Good." He turned toward the bureau, a great mass of man, swarthy, oiled with sweat. Something about Constantine always made me think of steam. Steam in the close confines of a dark room.

"Drink?" he asked.

"No, thanks."

He helped himself to a drink from the bottle of dark rum atop the bureau. He always drank such liquids, heavy and dark, sweet brandies, wines, thick liquers.

His glossy, moist eyes were hooded by their heavy lids. "How was the honeymoon?"

I shrugged.

"Now she dies," he said.

He saw a reaction in my face. He laughed, a sound heavy and thick. "Still the man of tender feeling."

I didn't let him ruffle me. "From the beginning," I reminded him, "this job has consisted of two distinct phases."

"Quite so, Cary. I am perfectly willing to complete the second division of labor, sparing you the details. By the way, how much is she actually worth?"

"Slightly more than two million dollars."

A delicious shiver ran the length of his massive frame. "Two million . . . divided equally . . . we are millionaires, Cary."

"Not quite. Not yet."

"But soon—as soon as the precious pigeon dies." He was growing more excited. He breathed as if he were smothering. "A million dollars . . . Ah, the thought of it! All my life I've waited and watched for this one, Cary. The big one at last . . ." Then a horrendous thought struck him. "There are no other heirs named in a will?"

"She is very young to think of making a will, Constantine."

He trembled. "Don't tell me . . ."

"No, no," I said. "There is a will—now. She suggested it herself, insisted on it."

"Ah, you are clever, Cary!"

"I am named sole heir."

"You—and me." Laughter shook him. He slapped his hands against his sides. "How little she dreams that her will covers both of us."

"She has no idea."

The laughter subsided to a smile that wreathed his face, pushing the flesh so that his eyes were almost buried. "Incidentally, Cary, I suppose you've thought of cutting me out?"

"Why do you say such a thing?"

"You are human, subject to all the vagaries of the human mind

and emotions. It's natural for the thought to occur to you. Do you deny it?"

"No, I can't truthfully say that I do."

"Good." He slapped me on the shoulder. "I'm glad you didn't try to pretend, Cary. It would be impossible to cut me out, you know."

"I recognize facts and limitations when I see them," I said.

"Excellent. You will not forget them, either. It was I who spotted the lonely, plain, precious pigeon after her parents died. My mind evolved the idea. My money financed you, Cary, so that you could meet her, woo her, win her."

"I know."

"While you were squiring her about, I lived in flea traps and ate gruel."

"Must you . . ."

"I must remind you, yes," he said. "I must impress one thing on you, Cary. My life has been the story of near-misses, of petty crime that didn't quite pay, of deals that failed by a hair to jell. Of rotten prisons. Of waiting in cheap places like this one," his hand made a gesture that despised the room, "until you returned with her. Until the moment when she dies and we become rich."

"So I warn you, Cary. I impress the truth of myself upon you. I gamble everything on this one. I am old now, and tired. Nothing will be left if I fail. Do you understand? We are inexorably bound to-

gether, Cary. We shall be accessories before, during, and after the fact. Think for one moment of cheating me, and I will destroy you."

"Even if it means destroying yourself as well?"

"Even so," he said calmly. "For I welcome destruction, if I am to have nothing. I fear destruction far less than you, Cary—and therein lies all the insurance I need. Are we clear on this point?"

"Quite."

"Good. Would you care for a rum now?"

"Yes, I think I need it."

We drank.

He burped softly. "Have you a plan?"

"That's not my phase, is it?"

"Touche." He smiled. "You've met important people through her, I'm sure."

"A few. She hadn't many friends."

"I suppose not. A plain girl slipping beyond the age of marriage, saddled with sick parents . . . But we need important people for your alibi, Cary."

"I've joined a club or two," I said.

"Does she mind? Does she keep a close rein on you?"

"Not at all. She's very understanding. She insists on my having an evening out occasionally."

"Then we shall make it soon, provided she remains home when you have these evenings out."

"She usually reads."

He nodded ponderously. "And

this Thursday evening—as she reads—a prowler will enter your home at ten o'clock. He will kill her and make off with a few items of value. These items I shall drop safely to the bottom of the river. After it is all over, you will take your grief to New York. There, in a few days we shall meet—total strangers. Nothing to tie her death to either of us. Nothing to link us to a scheme that required two phases.

"The casual meeting of the two strangers in New York will develop gradually into a firm friendship. Only we will know the friendship to be irrevocably cemented by our mutual past and the gradual division of two million dollars. I think we shall use foreign banks and a dummy corporation to affect the transfer. Do you agree?"

"You have it pretty well airtight, I think, Constantine."

He rolled a swallow of rum lovingly down his throat. "Now—as to details. How about the servants?"

"Two. An old couple. They have quarters over the garages and usually retire early."

"Excellent. Does she have friends who might visit her that evening?"

"I doubt it. I can't guarantee that part of it, Constantine, but the odds are very much against it."

"If the odds show against us, we'll simply postpone it a few nights. And that leaves only one thing—a way to enter the house."

I felt my face go even paler. He noticed, and his eyes despised me briefly. "You need not risk the apparent loss of a key or anything you'll have to explain, Cary. I must be able to get in, get to her before she can raise an alarm. Before I leave, I can make it look as if entry was forced."

"A window . . ." I mumbled.

He nodded. "Simply leave one unlocked."

"Dining room," I said. "Dining room is away from the garages . . . on the sheltered side of the house . . . fourth window down the west side of the house . . ."

I moved toward the door.

He caught my arm. "Don't you want to know how I shall do it, Cary? Whether she'll be strangled or struck over the head?"

"Not my phase, Constantine . . ."

I pulled away from him, ran, and collapsed in the car.

She cooked dinner herself Thursday night. She said she enjoyed cooking and did so often. I wished, however, she had made a less intimate gesture that evening.

She seemed to savor the feeling of our being alone together in the house. She really didn't like servants. She was, I thought, too basically kind to order other people around.

"Cary . . ."

She looked almost unreal as I faced her across the candlelight.

"Yes?"

"Do you know what?" she

laughed with delight. "I was a stranger today."

"Stranger?"

"I went unrecognized. At least—almost. I ran into Jean Carraway at The Hub while I was shopping. She hardly knew me. Honest and truly. Said marriage had worked wonders for me. Have I really bloomed, Cary?"

"Oh, I don't know. You always had the basic stuff, the bone structure, the figure under those plain dresses you used to wear."

She reached across the table and touched my hand. "It goes deeper than that, Cary. If I have changed—bloomed, as Jean said—it was because of you. Cary . . . even if . . . if I should die tomorrow, I have lived. At last, I have lived . . ."

What gave her the powers to have such a premonition?

I had to get out of the house quickly. My part was almost over. It remained now only for me to make sure that I was in the company of unimpeachable witnesses at ten o'clock, when phase two would take place . . .

A large cloud obscured the moon when I returned. Except for a single light upstairs in her bedroom, the house was dark.

I let myself silently in the front door. Passed like a shadow through the foyer.

Near the walnut-panelled staircase, I heard a slight sound. The massive bulk of Constantine loomed before me.

He realized I was there. He turned. From the hall table, I had picked up the heavy, antique marble figurine.

I struck him twice on the head before he knew what was happening. He fell across the table, smashing it. I bent over him quickly, striking my lighter. He was dead. The bone in his head was crushed.

Light spilled into the upper hall, and her voice, quick with anxiety, came to me.

"Cary . . . is that you?"

"Don't come down here, darling!"

I ran quickly up the stairs; she was tall, slender and strangely and exotically beautiful in her negligee, the book she had been reading still in her hand.

"A prowler, darling . . ." I gasped. "A total stranger . . . Surprised him . . . scuffled . . . grabbed the first thing that came to hand . . ."

She touched me tenderly. "My poor Cary!"

"It's okay . . . all okay now . . . think I killed him . . . call the police, will you?"

As she called, I was filled with the enjoyment of looking at her. If I had given meaning to her life, she had returned the gift fully.

And that was the thing I never could have explained, a thing Constantine never would have understood.

That I would fall in love with her.



“DEAR EDIE”

BY PAT MACMILLAN

DEAR Edie:
I never thought I would be writing a letter to anyone asking for advice, but I am a constant reader of your column and think you might be able to help me.

My problem is my wife. I am at my wit's end. My wife is an intelligent, well-educated woman—in fact, that's part of my problem. She's too well-educated, better than I am, and never lets me forget it.

She makes twice as much money as I do, which would be just fine if she didn't always throw this fact in my face. She's made me dependent on her, Edie, and no man likes to feel that way.

She is neglecting her home and children. We have two children who have grown up knowing the baby sitters better than their own mother. She can't be bothered with them. She expects me to take them to the doctor, shopping, visit their teachers, and all the things that a normal mother would do. Her “career” takes up all her time.

Not only that, but she nags me in public all the time. Last night we were out to dinner with friends and she kept telling me I was using the wrong fork, or spoon; she always makes me feel ridiculous in front of others.

And she's always correcting my

English in front of people. I haven't been to college, Edie, but I talk pretty well, and try to watch my grammar; I wouldn't mind if she did this in private since I'm willing to learn, but why does she have to humiliate me in front of people?

We just haven't anything in common anymore; not even the children, since she doesn't take any interest in them.

My wife won't give me a divorce. She says how would it look for her career?

Please, please help me solve my problem, since I can't take it much longer. If she just reads this letter, she may see my side.

Disillusioned

Dear "Disillusioned":

I've studied your letter very carefully and have come to the conclusion that the situation isn't as hopeless as you've made it appear.

Your wife is obviously a highly intelligent woman since she is doing so well in her career, and you've indicated that she is exceptionally well-paid. Therefore, she must be a woman who can be reasoned with.

Her neglect of the children is, of course, serious, if it is as bad as you say. However, the other faults listed seem to me to be rather minor. Perhaps you are too sensitive, due to the fact that she is better educated and that her career has been so lucrative. This gives you a feeling of inferiority and you feel you are losing your time-honored position as head of the

household. You might do well to re-examine your own motives and perhaps listen to her criticism, which is probably well-meant.

I suggest a heart-to-heart talk with her. Try to see her point of view. I am sure that if you both make concessions, your marriage can be salvaged. Good luck!

Edie

Dear Edie:

I just finished reading your answer to my letter in the paper. What kind of an idiot do you think I am? I've already tried "heart-to-heart" talks with my wife, but she doesn't have a heart. She just laughs and brushes me off, saying she has work to do, or can't be bothered. She doesn't even take me seriously, Edie, and I see you don't!

I'm not exaggerating about the children! Last week she even forgot her 12 year old's birthday! No present, no cake, no Happy Birthday! I made the kid a cake myself, and do you know what she did, Edie? She laughed! She said what kind of a man goes around in an apron! She didn't even feel bad about forgetting. It isn't that she is deliberately cruel; she forgets these remarks as soon as she's made them. I don't forget—neither do the kids.

They don't have any respect for me, because she doesn't! It hurts a man to have his own boy and girl contemptuous of him, but how else can they feel toward a man who is trying to be a mother?

You say my other objections are minor! Is it right for a woman to put her career ahead of her home? Sure, I resent her making more money than I make, but if we needed it, I wouldn't say a word. We don't, Edie. I make a good salary, although she acts as if she carries the burden of the whole family on her shoulders.

Her corrections in public are getting worse and worse since she has become infatuated with another man—and don't tell me it's my imagination! Everywhere we go we bump into him! They laugh and talk shop—he's in the same business—and ignore me, except when my wife can find an opportunity to belittle me in front of him!

Do you see what I mean, Edie? I try to talk to her, but she just won't listen! Help me!

Disillusioned

Dear Disillusioned:

Sorry, the space in my column is limited. I am glad to answer any letters personally, if they are accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Edie

Dear Edie:

I am enclosing the envelope you requested. I will pick your answering letter up at General Delivery, since I don't want my wife and children to find it.

Things are getting worse and worse. My wife and her new boy

friend are becoming more and more careless about their affair. I know all of our friends know, and are laughing at me! She doesn't even care enough about me to try and be a little discreet! What do you think of a woman like that, Edie?

Last week, my 14 year old son walked in unexpectedly and found his mother and this man kissing! He ran away, Edie and the police had to find him! She's forgotten this already, too, laughing it off as a childish prank!

How can an intelligent woman act this way? Please answer right away, as I can't take much more!

Disillusioned

Dear "Disillusioned":

I see now that you do have a serious problem, but I'm sure it is not insoluble. If your wife is as intelligent as you say, why not ask her to visit a marriage counselor with you? It would do you both good. Reading between the lines, I can't help but feel that you are not taking your full share of the blame for your unsuccessful marriage. These things are never one-sided.

Cultivate new interests compatible with hers! Take an interest in her career, since she is obviously not going to give it up—you may find out why she is so fascinated! Try and adjust your way of thinking to hers! Find common recreations you can enjoy! Remember, the family that plays together, stays together!

Edie

Dear Edie:

It's no use! I've tried everything! I suggested the marriage counselor and she laughed in my face. She said what possible good could a marriage counselor do her, since she'd had all those courses in college herself!

She likes her life the way it is, Edie, and doesn't want me intruding in it. She refuses to admit we're unhappy and says all couples have their little differences.

Last night I asked her for a divorce again, since she obviously didn't want to share her life with me and she said it was absolutely out of the question—she would never agree to it since it would ruin her career!

I can't go on any longer, Edie. My manhood has suffered beyond endurance and my heart aches for my neglected, motherless children!

I'm taking the only way out. She works late at her office every night. Tomorrow night, after everyone has left, I'm going to go up there and shoot her! She doesn't deserve to live and make everyone miserable!

If she had only listened! I tried to reason with her and when she wouldn't listen, I even wrote letters to her, but they didn't do any good!

Don't try and talk me out of it because by the time you receive this, it will be too late for a reply to reach me!!

Disillusioned

Dear Disillusioned:

I am writing in the desperate hope that my letter will reach you before you take action. Don't do it!!! It isn't hopeless! I realize now that—

Dear Readers:

The Edie Lane column will no longer appear in this paper for obvious reasons. This paper deeply regrets the loss of a woman whose great humanitarianism and deep insight was the guiding light for thousands of troubled souls. It would be impossible to estimate the countless number of marriages that owe their survival to this gifted and brilliant woman.

This paper will not rest until the perpetrator of this heinous crime, committed even as she was working on a letter to help a poor unfortunate, is apprehended.

For details of the shooting, which took place in her office late at night even while she was pouring over humanity's myriad dilemmas, please see page 1.



THE PRICE



OF LUST

A Novelette

BY JOE GORES

The notebook must have been valuable . . . it cost five lives.

HE WAS a nervous little guy with quick hands and sad eyes and a bald pate fringed with grey. The billowing steam muted his high-pitched voice but his hands conveyed a perpetual excitement, like the paws of a squirrel eating a nut.

"You got the build, oughtta be with the 49ers," he yapped, gesturing at my towel-wrapped body through the clouds. He wiped sweat from his face with a quick hand. "Me an' my partner take nightclub photos, I'm up all night; this turkish bath saves my life."

As I was knotting my tie after my shower he popped up again, a manic gadfly before analysis.

"Cuppa coffee?"

"Why not?" I had been steaming out the kinks of an all-night drive

from Eureka, and my reports would take me the whole morning anyway.

We went up carpeted stairs and through aluminum and glass doors. San Francisco looked deserted. Down on Market an early streetcar rumbled by; across Golden Gate Avenue a black Fleetwood lisped carbon monoxide into the dawn-fresh air. Yellow light spilled from a coffee shop half a block away.

"They're open."

"Okay."

We turned left, toward the corner. The Caddy came alive. I yelled: its lone occupant had a black handkerchief knotted across his face just below his eyes and his hairless head shone under the

dome light like a peeled egg at an Easter social.

Something black and deadly and silenced puffed at us from the open window; a slug splattered on the imitation marble steps of the apartment house next to the turkish bath and a second jerked urgently at my topcoat sleeve. My companion grunted, grabbed my lapels; we hit the gutter. My mouth was cottony with fear: I reeked of it. The Cad-dy slid into Taylor Street before I got the license number.

He clung to me like a rejected paramour, his lips drawn back and his shocked eyes pleading for understanding.

"I . . . I didn't . . . the book . . ."
His hands relaxed and his head hit the curb. Fluid drooled from his slack mouth. Two men came out of the all-night billiards parlor across the street and turned uphill, toward Jones, without noticing us. I was all alone with the little guy, and he was dead. The turkish bath hadn't saved his life after all.

2.

Violent death, like a night with a virgin, leaves too many regrets. Climbing the stairs to my office Wednesday morning—after spending enough of Tuesday with the police to convince them the gunman hadn't been after me—I was an old man with spiders in his eyes and a cigarette made from a wrestler's sweat sock. I'd gone to bed

with a bottle and the dead man's face.

The door with *Bartholemew Drew, Investigations* in one corner of the frosted glass stood open enough for me to see a woman reading a newspaper in the outer office. Her rolled umbrella was slim enough for duelling and her purse could have garaged a Renault.

"Hello, Bart. It's been a long time."

"How are you, Edie?" I unlocked the private office and opened a window to stir up the musty smell that came with the lease. There was a dead fly on the window sill. Belatedly I added: "Too long."

She'd cried on my shoulder after her husband's death in an accident, until she'd become engaged to a man named Frank LaMonea. I hadn't seen her in four years but I'd heard that the marriage hadn't worked out. She'd changed enough so she swiped a glove across the chair and showed too much leg sitting down. The leg was still good. Her spike heels could have skewered *shish kabab*.

"You're older, Bart."

"I saw a man die yesterday."

She nodded. Her newspaper was headed GUNS ON GOLDEN GATE AVENUE over a picture of the blanket-covered dead man, with another of Otard from Homicide sleuthing the gutter for clues. I'd managed to keep my own mug out of it.

"It must have been terrible, Bart. But when I saw your name it suddenly seemed you might be able to help *me* with my . . . problem. Were you working?"

"I'd just met him in a turkish bath. Name was Hymie Bergen, developed pictures for a photo girl, Gloria Gann, at some roadhouse down the coast. Two shots from a silenced .38—and from a moving car that's shooting. The car was stolen." I sat down behind my desk. "You mentioned trouble."

She brought up one of those hesitant women's smiles that no man can ever duplicate. Her wide-set grey eyes were ageless and her well-boned face would retain its beauty for another ten years.

"You probably heard that Frank and I . . ." I nodded. "A year ago I went to a Reno dude ranch to establish residence. You know the sort of place: lonely women sharpening their claws on one another and hating the man they couldn't hold. A man named Vernon Segale was staying there and—"

"And six weeks is too long to be alone. What dude ranch?"

"The *Bucking Horse*. Not that it matters. Segale said he could get me a night-club job when I came back to San Francisco. I believed him. His last night there we had a party in his room and I got terribly drunk. I . . . I remember dancing for him by moonlight."

She shuddered and ground out her cigarette savagely.

"So after my divorce I looked him up. He was the lousy *parking attendant* at a crummy roadhouse in Pacifica—and since then he's been fired! Some job *he* could have gotten me! I haven't seen him since then, and haven't talked to him when he's called, but . . . this morning . . ."

It was a plain white envelope with her name and address—a new apartment house on Nob Hill—in executive type, the kind that looks like printing. It had been mailed from Sausalito, a small town across the Golden Gate from the city, the night before.

Inside were four photos, wallet-size. In two of them Edie was doing a wild interpretive dance, her face very serious. Part of a blonde-wood side table was visible, with a whiskey bottle, two glasses, and an ash tray full of butts. By the third one she had gotten nude and was sitting on the bed, head back, laughing, beside a young blond guy with a build like Steve Reeves'. The bottle was empty in the fourth, and the bottom half of a print by some modern artist showed on the wall. Edie and the blond guy were still on the bed. They weren't sleeping. The pictures had a nightmarish quality, like illustrations for *Tropic of Cancer* without Miller's vitriolic humor to save them from pornography.

"Don't leer so, you damned goat!" Edie was blushing furiously.

"Taken with infra-red flash; we

use a lot of it in our business." I said it just to be saying something. My palms felt clammy. "Any note?"

Her eyes had become tight and furious. "Did there have to be?"

"No note. No way to prove Segale sent them. You don't need me, Edie; go to the police."

She squeezed her eyes shut as if scanning the lids for guidance. Wan sunlight struck rich fluid highlights from her dark hair. Disturbing shadows when she leaned toward me, lips slightly parted, contradicted her defenselessness. Her perfume was *l'Or* at sixty bucks an ounce.

"If any stranger ever saw these I'd . . . well, I'll never go to the police. And I don't have any money to pay Segale. I . . . I thought if you'd . . . I mean, we were good friends once; when all this is over . . ."

"Okay, Edie," I growled, "You don't have to offer me your fair white body. I'll talk to him and see what I can do."

I refused a retainer, wrote down Segale's Sausalito address, and watched the door close behind her tight revealing skirt with a sigh like lost innocence. Her perfume, like her Nob Hill address, was a good trick for a girl without any money. The years had made her one of those women who depend on a glimpse of her stocking tops to get her out of trouble, but that's the way it usually is with my cli-

ents. They're seldom innocent, or moral, or nice, or even honest. Just in trouble.

Most investigations are routine: park your fanny on a chair and run up a phone bill. I learned from the Hall of Justice that Segale's car-park permit had been rescinded when he'd left the Pacifica roadhouse, the *Rumrunner*, but they had the same address Edie had given me; Sasualito information confirmed it. There was no felony want on him, the rackets detail had never heard of him, and none of the house men at the big downtown hotels made him. I cremated a cigarette and got interested.

A toll-call to the *Rumrunner* got me a secretary who confirmed that Segale had been terminated, reason unspecified, and an appointment with the owner, Dwight Benjamin, for ten-thirty the next morning. The secretary had never heard of Edith LaMonea.

I leaned back and put another Pall Mall to the torch. The *Rumrunner* nagged me. Segale nagged me. He was too pure to be a professional, but damned few amateurs work with infra-red flash. Then I got it. I rooted around in the story on Hymie Bergen in the newspaper Edie had left. There it was. Bergen had worked at the *Rumrunner* developing night club photos; Segale had worked at the *Rumrunner* as a parking boy; Edie had come to see me about one of

them the day after I'd shared a gutter with the other. Coincidences really occur, but not that kind.

I got an operative busy in Reno, then found out from a rental agency what apartments cost in Edie's building. Finally I tried some headwaiters whose business was remembering people. They remembered her: always with the high-rollers from out-of-state. Always with the singles. The tricks women have. A pattern was emerging and I didn't like it. I called the answering service and told them I'd be out.

3.

A few years ago Sausalito was a sleepy little bayside village with retired oldsters dangling lines off the piers. Then the weekend beats and the limp wrists and the yachting set discovered it: now Ferraris chase you down the sidewalks and supermarkets shoulder aside the olde shoppes, and rentals read like executives' salaries.

Segale lived on Columbine Drive, a narrow tortuous lane high in the hills flanked by expensive houses buried in oaks and eucalyptus trees, in a modern pile of stone, redwood, and glass designed to look as if someone had dumped it beside the road with a truck. In the carport was a blue and cream 1956 Olds registered to a Doreen Britten in the 2400 block of Washington in San Francisco, and a black Mercedes sedan registered to Segale.

The bell beside the front door was a small brass figurine of a nude woman with the button in her navel. When I tickled her, Segale opened the door; his personality matched the bell. His face, clothes, and manners were Hollywood, his ego a yard wide. He was in his mid-twenties, almost as big as I was and built like a charter member of Vic Tanny's Gyms. Sunglasses peeped from the pocket of his one-button roll—the button was a copper knob the size of my thumb—and the creases in his grey slacks would have sliced steak.

"Something?"

I didn't like him any better than taxes. I flashed my buzzer and dropped my dime.

"My client is being threatened with some scatological photos of herself and a man. She thinks you're doing it, which is a felony in this state."

"Indeed?" His nicely-modulated voice went with his nicely-modulated hair and his eyes held lazy amusement. His tone said that I bothered him as much as a very small hangnail. "The lady has a name?"

"Not yet; but maybe you can recognize her." I shoved one of the photos under his nose. One that he was in.

His hair didn't turn grey but he didn't like it. Then he remembered his pose and started a nasty gurgling sound like blood coming from the throat of a slaughtered

hog. It was supposed to be a chuckle.

"Nice work. Artistic. I suppose you're selling prints, cheapie, but—"

I remembered the Olds in the carport. "Maybe Doreen would like to see them. She could come out and—"

It almost pulled his plug. He came through the door and jerked it shut behind him, his face opened up as if I'd kicked him in the stomach. He was breathing like a man trying to be quiet in a dark room.

"How did you . . . listen, cheapie, drag Doreen into this and you . . . you'll wake up kissing the gutter."

"George Raft, 1936. Any time, son; any game you want to play."

Late sun had turned the water below the Golden Gate into a vast crinkled vat of golden champagne. I fought rush-hour traffic to Washington Street and found the run-down apartment house a few doors off Fillmore. The landlady had a face like a hatchet wound and a nose that twitched to the scent of scandal like a rabbit smelling lettuce. Doreen, she said, lived with her father, Homer Britten, and probaby spent her whole paycheck—she was a nightclub singer—to keep the old man in booze. Segale was a frequent visitor. The name of the nightclub where Doreen sang was no surprise.

From a pay phone on the corner I had my answering service read me the wire that had come in from

Reno. Segale had never been at the *Bucking Horse*; Edie had. I headed for the sea like the last lemming trying to overtake the others; I should have known I'd be too late. It's only on television that you're always in time.

4.

Dwight's Rumrunner, in red, came up out of the fog under a white neon arrow like the pointing hand of a luminous skeleton in a house of horrors. I braked, turned right on a narrow dirt road. San Francisco was twenty miles and two hundred years behind. After a fresh-faced punk in a white coat—Segale's successor—had talked me out of my car, I went to the edge of the low bluff to smell sea, fog, kelp, feel moisture and the vibration of the unchanging thud of the surf. Below was the broad pale beach of low tide and lines of grey breakers rolling out of darkness. I turned away with a shudder; it was a long way to Hawaii.

The bar ran the length of the building with windows overlooking the ocean. Through a net-draped archway a diminutive flame-haired girl with surprising curves under a plain white sheath dress was singing of love and sorrow and faithlessness in a voice that made you believe her. She belonged there like Leontyne Price in a high school chorus.

I found a place at the bar be-

tween a short sad white-haired man and a pair of college types who argued shrilly and waved their arms at one another like drowning men. When the bartender came over I drifted a dollar down on top of my change. His apron string creased his round belly and he had a face like the tailgate of a truck.

"They ought to give that singer half the gross. She earns it."

"Yeah. Dorry Britten, three shows a night, nine, eleven, and one. Tell your friends. That's a big tip for a sixty-cent beer."

"Information. Not much. Is Gloria Gann around tonight?"

After a moment's cogitation he nodded slowly.

"Fine. I'll be at a table."

He nodded again and the dollar disappeared. The white-haired man raised his face from his drink to frown at me as if people didn't do that in the *Rumrunner*. Maybe they didn't. I patted his shoulder as I went by.

Doreen Britten was gone from the dining room dais, replaced by a lean horsy-faced man who tickled *Stardust* from the piano with just enough energy to keep his card in the musician's union. At the cashier's desk by the stairs to the second floor was a frozen-faced peroxide dish who looked like she'd handled more passes than R. C. Owens.

I spotted Gloria Gann by her camera, an underfed blonde wear-

ing a white blouse over thrusting latexed breasts and a black skirt tight enough to give a girdle complexes. Her face was closed as a fist, her eyes full of dollar signs. I laid a five on the table as she came over.

"I'd like some answers about Edith LaMonea."

She shrugged, set her camera on the table. "Never heard of her."

"How about Vern Segale? I need answers on him, too."

She stared at the bill, poised between greed and caution; the money won, as it always does with her sort of girl.

"I could tell you some things. Why should I want to?"

I mated the five with a ten and leaned forward casually.

"I was with Hymie last night. He talked before he went. To me."

Her knees almost buckled and she fell into the chair I pushed out. She mouthed words as carefully as if they were glass splinters.

"Did . . . didja say anything to the bartender about Hymie? How do I know you ain't just stringing me?"

"Tell me about the book."

"The *book*?" Her shocked eyes probed the room for danger; her swift chipmunk movements were those of her late partner's, as if she had inherited them. My question had put so much real fear in her eyes that I knew she was through talking. I wrote my home phone number on one of my business

cards and dropped it on top of the money.

"When it gets too heavy to carry around, Gloria, call me."

She stared at me, bright-eyed, then shot out a quick tiny hand and speared the bills and card and was gone. There was one more cookie in the jar. Segale's name on the back of another card worked.

Glaring down at me ten minutes later, Doreen Britten looked cool as a monk's desires in a navy-blue suit that matched her eyes. Segale had good taste. Her hair was the color of burnished copper, cut short and rising in soft waves from the nape of her neck, and her voice was too soft for her strident tough-girl act.

"Why should a name I don't know written across the back of your card buy you any of my time, shamus?"

"You should have said 'the name of a man who used to work here'; even girls with great lost eyes don't have memories that are that poor. And if you're ashamed of him, don't park your car in his driveway."

"I know your kind!" she shrilled in sudden little-girl fury. "You manufacture evidence in divorces and commit perjury and frame innocent—"

"Very old and very tired. There are unethical PI's just as there are society doctors who push the hard stuff to rich neurotic women, and hundred-grand lawyers who sub-

orn juries to get racketeers acquitted; but they wear better clothes than I do and drive Continentals instead of Falcons. I'm hired to ask questions and trained to get answers. Don't think I can't bother you, Miss Britten, because a private eye with a client can bother anyone."

She wrinkled her button nose and sat down, suddenly meek.

"All right, I was at Vern's house this afternoon. I often am. He's my fiancé, there's nothing wrong with that."

I wondered what she would say to the pictures in my pocket.

"Why was he fired from his job here?"

"He wasn't. He quit, because he was asked to do things he . . . he felt were immoral."

"You're not a good liar, Miss Britten. A man who would quit a job for that reason wouldn't have let you stay on. Not when you could do . . ."

"Is there some trouble here, Dorry?"

It was the short frayed man who had frowned at me in the bar. He had a marvelous head of fine white hair, black eyebrows, diffident blue eyes, and the sad gentle voice of a preacher who's just caught the organist with a hand in the collection box. Next to Dorry he was easy.

"I'm a private investigator trying to get information about Vernon Segale from your daughter, Mr. Britten."

Doreen was suddenly sore at me again; her temperament was as volatile as organic peroxide.

"Why don't you bribe him with a drink, peeper?"

I remembered her landlady. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Britten?"

Doreen tossed a trio of words at me like she was skidding a plate of stew over a skid-row counter to a drunk, and stalked away with swishing hips. Homer Britten's eyes were full of pain.

"Have you ever been married, sir?"

"Once. It didn't take."

He nodded as if he'd made his point. "Her mother left me when Dorry was a child and I've had to raise her alone. It hasn't been easy."

"Do you approve of Segale's relationship with her?"

"Would it matter if I didn't?" His mouth twitched. "She supports me, sir. Totally. This drink is on her tab; she even pays our rent."

I let it go by. One person feeling sorry for him was enough.

"Do you know a woman named Edith LaMonea? She'd be coming in here with a series of different men and would be close to the photo girl."

"To Gloria?" He looked vague. "I—I'm sorry, Mr. Drew. I don't recall . . ."

I bought him a drink and got away from there; probing him for meaning was like trying to get a policy statement from a dish of

jello. On the way out I swerved over to the hostess' desk by the stairs and let her see a twenty and a jaded leer.

"How much for a room for the night?" She looked at me like a floater fished from the bay, but I plowed on: "She's out in the car. She's of age but my wife—"

"Cops," she spat disgustedly. "Don't you creeps ever quit trying?"

There were other ways. I slid a pair of aces into the car park boy's ready palm and tried it on him. He tipped me a wink.

"Not here, man; not this week. This place is from hotsville. There been more fuzz around today than at the police academy. Our photogger got wasted last night and . . ." He stopped abruptly and his face closed up like a safe door. "Like who sounded about balling out here?"

"Edith LaMonea. I knew her before she got on the Mary Magdalene lay."

"I'm hip, dad; there's a *chick*. Like she'll trip you and beat you to the floor. The floor upstairs."

I left him laughing at his own wit and headed north, my thoughts as murky as an hour of stag movies. A little after one a.m. I parked on Lake and went through the landlord's house to let myself into my cottage.

Fists exploded out of darkness. I snapped a left with the power of an old lady with a coronary and my

knuckles crumpled against an abdomen cast from pig iron. A knee found my groin. Varnished oak flooring came up to kiss my jaw; reality slipped away like a roll of dimes in Reno.

A bell was tolling the news of my stupidity. I crawled through the connecting door to the bedroom, fumbled at the phone, mumbled "Minute," into it, and got to the bathroom in time to vomit into the toilet. I splashed my mouth with cold water. Back at the phone a low harried female voice tumbled words at me.

"You said to call when it got too heavy. It's too heavy. I can tell you everything but I'll need money, tonight, to get away from here."

My hand whitened around the phone as my mind began functioning.

"Where are you, Gloria? I'll come right—"

"Oh! I've been—I'd hoped . . ." Her voice was tight and panicked. "I've got to trust you now. Wait for me."

The line was dead. I hung up slowly, as if I had a glass arm. Her voice had held terror but I had nothing to give the cops. If she had a phone it wasn't listed; the *Rumrunner's* bartender said she'd left two hours before, alone, and convinced me he didn't know her home address. I put on *Music 'til Dawn* and a pot of tea strong enough to melt the spoon. It was a rough four hours. I ached all over

and the pictures Edie had given me were missing. It wasn't tough to guess who had them.

A six a.m. newscast carried the bulletin. Police had found her by a phone booth on the other side of the Park wearing two .38-calibre slugs in her skull. Her purse had been found two blocks away. Apparently the mail box on the corner had been the only witness and Gloria had been too dead to give descriptions.

I put myself to sleep with bourbon again, but my dreams made me wish I hadn't wasted the whiskey.

5.

Cold late-morning light made the *Rumrunner* look like a building at a nuclear test site just before the blast. In the bar was a harsh-faced man whose hands smelled as if he'd been setting oyster pots.

"Ain't open 'til noon, mister."

"Dwight Benjamin. I'm expected."

He jerked a broad scarred fisherman's thumb at the curtained doorway behind the performer's dais. The dingy hall was rank with memories of small-timers on the downhill trek to oblivion, but Benjamin's office had planters, soft lights, and good modern prints. A busty blonde who thought she was Jayne Mansfield was pecking an I.B.M. typewriter as if it were yesterday's cat food. Her voice was

like a scream from a chasm but matched her violent purple eye shadow. She concentrated over my card like a chimp with an Einstein equation, buzzed the intercom, and dropped me from what she called her mind like a stone going over a cliff. She would be incapable of more than three letters a day but was probably adequate for night work.

In the private office the carpet was as deep as a buffalo wallow and the boomerang-shaped desk covered enough area to trot a pony. The walls were soundproofed. So was Benjamin. He was a tall hard lean cookie with swarthy skin, dark hair brushed straight back, and the hooded eyes they all have, little windows of the soul opening on a blank wall. His moustache was neat and nasty as the death penaty. I had caught up with the description that had come in from Reno the day before, which made it easier. We shook hands, I sat down in the pale gold chair across from his, fished for a cigarette, and got chatty.

"I'm investigating an ex-employee of yours, named Vernon Segale. Also a woman named Edith LaMonea."

"Never heard of the woman." He said it much too promptly. "You know how it is in this business. Segale, let me think." He frowned to show the complexities of his thought processes.

"Funny you'd forget LaMonea.

She's a hooker who's been steering marks out here for the past year."

"Out *here*?" He started glaring at me as if he had just remembered he was supposed to be tough. "Listen, peeper, I eat up your kind raw. Try that old shake on me and I'll—"

"What? Call the cops and chat with them about extortion?"

Time went by on tiptoe like a teen-ager sneaking in after a late date. I stretched out my legs and blew smoke through my nose. Benjamin's voice came from far away, as if he were recovering from a tracheotomy.

"I . . . don't know what you're talking about, peeper. If you—"

"Or maybe you'd rather talk about the book." It was a random shot but his face got old and his eyes were those of a kicked hound. I stood up. "Well, I'll be around, Dwight. Maybe we can do business."

Benjamin was still sitting on his hands: no applause. But there didn't have to be. I would have vowed 'em in Cincinnati. In the outer office the secretary was doing her face; she probably spent more time with it than Kennedy does with the budget. In the dining room I ducked between chair-laden tables to go up the stairs to the second floor.

I was in luck. An old lady with streaked peroxide hair and varicose veins was just backing a maid's cart from the room at the

head of the stairs; I told her I'd left a pair of cufflinks in there the night before and went in.

The wall heater probably got a workout that close to the ocean, the double bed had a stained spread, the scuffed tan rug was thinner than the ham in a drug-store sandwich, and the shower stall was just about large enough to wash a cat. It was a room in which only a drunk or a conventioneer could feel erotic. The ornately-framed mirror set in the wall opposite the bed was the jarring note I'd been seeking. I snooped the frame and found what I'd expected.

"Is the room next door the darkroom where the nightclub photos are developed?"

"Yes. And that'll be five bucks." Her voice was scared but firm.

"Let's see your aces, mother; I think you're bluffing."

Behind her, over the bed, one of Modigliani's models leered reproachfully at me from a framed print, one eye slightly smaller than the other as if she had a bad hangover. The model's hands and the cigarette-scarred blondewood side-table looked familiar.

"You didn't leave no cufflinks in here, mister; none of these rooms was used at all last night. I just checked 'em."

"Well I'll be damned." I started to grin. "Is the room on the far side also arranged so the mirror is on the wall adjoining the darkroom?"

She had to think that one over, which made me like her. When she finally nodded I gave her the fin. She'd earned it. Going back to town I knew that her thanks were the only ones I'd get.

6.

Eddie came to the door wearing a red silk lounging outfit that made all her lush curves obvious, but they moved me like the curves of a store window dummy. I crossed the broad living room to the built-in bar by the picture windows. The view was exclusive and apparently corrupting. Eddie had returned to the couch to languidly show too much leg again like a summer re-run of an old television show.

"Too early for bourbon, Bart?"

"Too late."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Her voice and eyebrows had climbed half an octave. I gestured around at the plush tasteless layout.

"California modern. Ersatz materials arranged in the latest sub-phallic mode by this month's pansy decorator. It has a nice appearance but it isn't real. Like Disneyland. Like you, Eddie: made up to look like a woman but running on stainless steel guts. You use an old friend and don't even realize there's anything wrong with it; you see a man in a run-down office wearing last year's suit and decide because he's honest he must necessarily be dumb."

"You sound dumb; or foolish. When I hired you I didn't think I—"

"You didn't think at all. You remembered me from the days when I was opening my own office after Army CID and Pinkerton's. You actually assumed that I wouldn't check out Reno or Segale's back-ground and come up with the *Rumrunner* and Dwight Benjamin."

"Why should I listen to this trash?" she demanded petulantly. But her hand shook as she stubbed out her cigarette.

"Because Benjamin, not Segale, was the man you met in Reno. He had been using one of the old bedrooms on the second floor of the *Rumrunner* for a darkroom, and the others to accommodate steady customers who occasionally ended up with girls who didn't care if they went home or not. Then he got an idea. He could knock a hole in the walls of the adjoining rooms, install one-way glass that would look like a common mirror unless you were in the darkroom, and conceal an aperture in the fancy frame through which he could take undetected infra-red photos."

"You'd better leave now." Her tone was icy.

"Not quite yet, Edie. Benjamin was afraid to try blackmailing any local people because they might squawk to the local law: he needed a girl with real class who would pick up well-heeled tourists in the

big hotels, take them to the *Rumrunner* to catch the show—his vocalist is a hell of a lot better than she should be—and while there succumb to their manly charms and go upstairs with them. But a week or a month later they'd find out they'd have to buy some pictures to keep the little woman from seeing them. Benjamin went shopping in Reno for the woman he needed. He found you."

"I suppose I made up those pictures I gave you yesterday."

"Oh no. But they were taken at the *Rumrunner* by Gloria Gann. You mailed them to yourself from Sausalito, after typing your own name and address on the envelope with the I.B.M. Executive in Benjamin's outer office, and you guessed—correctly—that when Segale saw them he wouldn't spill anything to me for fear his fiancé, Dorry Britten, would see them. He even mugged me last night to get them away from me."

She still wasn't softened up. She sneered: "How do you think you're going to prove any of this?"

"I don't have to. First, I'm only concerned with the extortion racket in relation to the murders. Your racket's dead anyway, now."

"What do you mean, murders? Hymie's the only one who—"

"Guess again. They found Gloria Gann out near Golden Gate Park at dawn, but she wasn't watching the sun rise. Two in the head from the same .38 that killed

Bergen. She's wearing a sheet and a DOA tag and—"

"Bart! *Don't!*" She was off the couch, backing away as if I had carried bubonic plague into the apartment. Fear of death was pulling her face apart, aging her as I watched. "First Hymie and then Gloria and now I . . . I may be next. You're—Bart, you have to protect me!"

"Quick and fast, Edie, or I walk out of here."

"I knew I wasn't going to get much of a settlement from Frank so when Benjamin offered me clothes and money and this apartment I . . . I took it. I always picked marks who were married, and from out-of-state; upstairs at the *Rumrunner*, while Gloria was getting her pics, I'd micky his drink with a light sedative so I could get his name and address from his wallet. I'd give them to Dwight."

"How did he make contact?"

"A person-to-person phone call a month later. He'd tell the mark that something was coming in the mail that the little woman shouldn't see, and hang up. After the prints went out, he'd mail a regular statement of payments to make over a six-month period, requesting cashier's checks made out to cash; mailed to a drop. From there they were automatically remailed. No written threats, nothing that would stand up in court as evidence of extortion. No one's squawked yet."

Talking had steadied her; her

grey eyes were calculating again and her fingers had started toying with the buttons of her kimona.

"Hymie mentioned a book before he died. What is it?"

"Dwight keeps the photo negatives, numbered, in his safe. He also has a little notebook with a complete list of the marks, the numbers identifying their photos, their addresses, how much they're paying, and to what drop they send the payments. Without the book the photographs are worthless. The day before Hymie was killed, Dwight told me that it had been stolen. He had fired Segale over some argument a few weeks ago and thought he might be responsible. He'd had me take Segale upstairs months ago so Gloria could get some pictures, and he gave me the prints you know about and told me to use them to force Segale to return the book."

"So you decided to use me for your dirty work since you'd seen in the papers that I'd been with Hymie Bergen when he died. I suppose you thought there was a chance I had been hired to investigate the *Rumrunner* by a—former client—and that you could seduce me into telling you anything I might know."

"I'm so ashamed, Bart. I shouldn't have tried to use you."

She spoke with her face averted, but there was no flush on her cheeks and as if by accident the top buttons of her kimona were open.

All she was to me now was something from the script of a bad B movie; I had to get her back on the defensive before she could start lying.

"Why do you think that you might be next?"

Remembered fear made her eyes limpid, momentarily honest.

"Hymie wasn't in the set-up. A few days ago Gloria told me that he had found out about it somehow and was threatening to go to the police. I told her to go to Benjamin. Then Hymie was killed; Benjamin must have had it done. Then Gloria. Can't you see, everyone who knows about the notebook."

"Maybe Gloria took the notebook, not Segale, and she was killed by someone who wanted it."

"That would still mean Benjamin." Her face lit up with a new thought. "You aren't afraid of him, Bart. Instead of just protecting me, you could get the book away from him. We'd be on easy street then. You could have anything you wanted from me . . . darling."

"You're a real sweetheart, Edie."

I started for the door. She tried to catch my arm, her eyes shocked and outraged.

"Where are you going? Bart! I need your help! You can't just—"

"Try Mexico, Edie. The police probably wouldn't bother to extradite you and Benjamin will be too busy ducking the law to come after you."

I went out the door with her

curses striking my back like small diseased fists; she would be on her way to the airport in half an hour. When the trouble comes the hookers always are.

7.

Light was fading from the dirty faces of the buildings across Powell Street and the memory of Edith lay in mind like dirty linen. According to her I knew the murderer: Dwight Benjamin. So why wasn't I on my way to the police? He was an extortionist, perfect for a quick railroading. Why shouldn't I be smart, go to the cops?

I put out the lights and turned things over to the mice. I had to have proof before I pointed the finger. My face, reflected palely in the door as I went out, looked broad and harsh and angular, but more human than it had an hour before.

Doreen Britten's apartment was on the second floor rear. The stairs creaked and the dim halls were of a more gracious age, high-ceilinged and broad enough for a drag race. She answered the door wearing red pedal pushers and a lime blouse; her face, freshly-scrubbed and glowing, was the face of a twelve-year-old, but her smoky eyes weren't a child's. She had a lot of hidden fire.

"I'm glad you've come, Mr. Drew. It gives me a chance to apologize for last night."

"Your father probably needs it

more than I do."

The apartment had the ill-assorted furniture of a woman who is paying her own rent. Across the living room from the ancient couch was a new tv set; the bunny ears on top were flanked by a photo of Vern Segale, all teeth and tan and blond waves, flashing his life-guard's grin, and another of Homer Britten, his face younger and his upright shock of receding hair still black, peering timidly at life.

"I got the set for Dad; I'm not always as cruel as I was last night. It's just that he's so . . . so pliable. When he got here six months ago he didn't even have a suitcase, just the clothes on his back. He'd been with a carnival in the midwest and had hitch-hiked out."

"I thought he raised you after your mother left him."

"That's his favorite . . . fiction." Her voice was sharp and rising. "The nuns raised me, here in the city; I hadn't seen Dad for years. I pretend to believe he sent the sisters money because it gives him a chance to feel he's . . . that he had a right to be respected."

I sat down in the stuffed chair beside the tv and turned my hat over in my hands. I needed a new one. I said:

"Last night I told you that a private eye with a client can bother anyone. Tonight I don't have a client. I'm holding out on the cops in two murders. I'm asking your help because your fiancé is mixed

up in the extortion setup that's been instrumental in these murders. I still need an answer: why was he fired from the *Rumrunner*?"

Her troubled blue-violet eyes had stolen to Segale's grinning image on the tv set. Her fingers, locked in her lap, writhed like a snake run over on the highway.

"I act like I've been around, Mr. Drew, but the *Rumrunner* is my first professional engagement. I . . . you probably won't believe this, but I've never . . . I mean, Vern and I don't . . ."

"I believe you, Doreen."

Some of the invisible but somehow tangible tension left her.

"Thank you. You make it easier. Before Dad was here to drive me to and from work on bad nights, I used to stay over at the *Rumrunner*—there are a couple of bedrooms upstairs—when the fog was too thick. A few weeks ago I got a really wonderful offer from a big supper club here in the city; I gave Dwight notice. Then he . . . he showed me some photos." Her voice had faded and her cheeks had gotten scarlet. "They were horrible, pictures of me undressing and coming out of the shower nude. I . . . first I asked Hymie Bergen why he had done that to me, but he said he didn't know anything about them. Then I—I told Vern about them, because by then we were in love. He said he was going to beat the negatives out of Dwight."

"Did he?"

She shook her head. "All that happened was that Dwight fired him. Vern—Vern told me there was nothing we could do just then."

"Hymie *didn't* know anything about the pictures of you, Doreen," I said gently. Apparently she still didn't know about the pictures of Segale and Edith. "Gloria took them. Hymie was killed because he was a threat to the extortion setup."

"You must be wrong. Gloria . . . Gloria was my friend. She wouldn't—"

"Gloria would do almost anything for money." I told her most of the story Edith had told me, and finished up: "Now you can understand why I've come to you. I have to know if Vern took the notebook or knows who did. I have to know the motive behind Gloria's murder."

"Vern would never steal anything, Mr. Drew." She had drawn herself up proudly. "And he would certainly never want to blackmail anyone. Besides, doesn't everything point to Benjamin as the killer?"

"Too much so. Problems." I held up a hand to mark them off. "A blackmailer seldom kills. Extortion is Benjamin's business and the two murderers have ruined that business. He could have just let the notebook go and built up a new list of marks; he could have bought Hymie off or had him given a professional beating, the sort that will break almost any man. I can't see

him being either desperate enough or dumb enough to hire a killer and leave *himself* open for a future shakedown."

She nodded. "Then why don't you see Vern and ask—"

"Vern wouldn't let me get near him. After . . . you see, we had a misunderstanding yesterday. I need you to run interference."

She saw cheap vicious shallow Vernon Segale as a knight in shining armor; if I told her about the mugging she wouldn't believe me anyway. Segale would disillusion her quick enough by himself. I didn't know that my decision to not tell her about the photos would save my life.

"If . . . If I help, can you keep Vern from being involved publicly in anything—anything unsavory?"

"It may be too late for that, Doreen. But if I had a client—say you hired me to get the pictures with which Dwight Benjamin is blackmailing you—I'd have a legal reason for withholding anything not bearing directly on the murders unless they hauled me up to the grand jury."

She bought it. Ten minutes later I had a one-dollar retainer and her promise to arrange a meeting with Segale. When I got back to the office the phone was ringing; it was her old man.

"Doreen has told me that she hired you, Mr. Drew and I—for what it's worth, I approve. She's already left for work, but she said

that Vernon will be expecting you at his house at ten o'clock." His voice became wistful. "I don't know what it's all about but I'll be home watching television all evening. If you need any help, anything at all, I . . . I mean, I'd welcome a chance . . ."

His daughter's feelings must have been contagious; I found myself telling him I was glad to know he'd be standing by. Going down to Moar's Cafeteria for an early dinner I had no idea how glad I would be.

8.

I parked ten yards beyond Segale's house and walked back: across the road the eucalyptus trees sighed and gave off their wet mongrel smell. Arced below were the lights of Sausalito; beyond a black arm of bay the faint penumbra of San Francisco was being blotted out by mist.

Segale's Mercedes was in the carport, engine cold, but the house was dark. The front door was ajar; my Luger was in my hand before I even knew I'd moved. I stepped inside breathing shallowly. Nothing. Just the reek of whiskey. I worked my pencil flash.

Liquor from the overturned bar puddled the floor. Upholstery was ripped, mattresses gutted, gobs of excelsior thrown about like cotton candy. Feathers had snow-stormed the house. The toilet top was in

pieces, writhing snakes of toothpaste decorated the bathroom sink, the suits in the closets had been slit. Slices of bread littered the kitchen like grotesque confetti. Sugar, coffee, and flour had been dumped in the sink and the electric wall clock eviscerated of its mechanical intestines. There were no bodies.

I walked back to Falcon trying to figure out what had happened, and slid in behind the wheel. An automatic was jammed against my neck. My hands jumped on the wheel like a spastic's; my mouth was dry as a Scotsman's wit. A gaudily-clad arm came across my chest to remove the Luger and point out that I should have checked the back seat.

"You're going to drive back to the city now, cheapie. If you try anything I'll kill you, I really will."

I believed him: as he came over the back of the seat, Segale was shaking with excitement like a wet cat. We climbed momentarily above the mist; the engine caught its breath while the wipers clapped with measured metronome applause. I tried to hide the tremor in my voice.

"What do you think you're doing, Segale? Doreen told me—"

He jerked the 45 so the sight numbed my cheek. I felt a warm trickle down my jaw.

"Did you really think you'd conned her, cheapie? She knew that you're still working for Edith, and I know you were here earlier

trying to find the pictures I took away from you last night."

"Sure. That's why I came back now with my hands in my pockets. Pardon me while I have a good laugh. Edith left town this afternoon—you can check on that."

My jaw muscles still ached with the tension of controlling my rage, but my fingers were slowly unclenching themselves from the wheel. Beyond the tunnel on U.S. 101 a break in the fog showed us the illuminated orange cables of Golden Gate Bridge, rising from the scudding mist in strangely delicate festoons like something in a Japanese print. As we started out across it, Segale waved his automatic.

"Get in the right lane. We're going to your house and we'll use the Lincoln Boulevard to get there."

At the toll plaza he slipped the Colt under his thigh and looked scared while I tossed a quarter into the automatic hopper and took the underpass to the Presidio; he had Mr. America muscles and a cleft chin but he was pure mush inside. In the view area below the bridge a lone sedan was pointed out into the fog. Bad weather never bothers neckers.

"When were those pictures of you and Edith taken?"

"Last year—before I even met Doreen." My question had put him automatically on the defensive and made him querulous. "Edie all but asked me to go upstairs with her

and what the hell . . . I mean, I made it with lots of chicks before I met Doreen."

"Really? I thought you were a virgin. Ever make it with Gloria?"

"Yes. No. Listen you, shut up. I'm not taking any more riding."

But sweat beaded his forehead and upper lip as if he had a fever; it was probably the first time in his life he had ever held a gun on anyone.

We had passed Fort Scott; the tall eucalyptus trees were thinning and we were at the crest. Fog flowed up across the highway from the blackness like smoke from dry ice. The wipers swished monotonously. Except for a pair of headlights in the rearview mirror, our world was bounded by low bent scrubby cypresses to the left and the white wooden guard rail to the right. Returning to my house was senseless, unless . . .

Unless I'd been forgetting something: that headpieces have more uses than just to disguise baldness. A man's overcoat, bulked around a slim slight figure . . .

"Who are we meeting at my house?"

He jerked up the .45, startled by my sudden barking tone.

"Dor . . . What makes you think we're meeting anyone?"

"Yesterday I showed you some photos. Your reaction was immediate and physical: beat me up and take them away from me. You didn't even search my house for the

negatives. A few weeks ago Do-reen told you that Benjamin was using photos to blackmail her into staying on at the *Rumrunner*. Your first thought was of senseless violence. But tonight you patiently waited in the back of your Mercedes, and then hid in the Falcon so you could bring me back to my own house at gunpoint. It's too devious for you, Segale. Someone had to spell it all out for you."

"Go to hell, cheapie."

"Sure. Only have you thought of this? I didn't search your house: *someone* did. Someone who's already killed twice and wanted us both together at my house—it'll be easy to arrange it as if we fought over the pictures of you and Edie and killed one another—is waiting to kill again. I'll bet you were told to have those prints with you and have them in your pocket right now."

"You're crazy, cheapie!" But I knew from the sick look on his face that I was right. "Do—"

Too late: the killer had been smart enough to wait in case we did take the shortcut. The car that had been behind us was beside us now, the dome light reflecting grotesquely from the bald head of the dumpy driver. A black handkerchief obscured the lower part of the face. Jolt: metal scream: skid: the wheel was alive under my hands, the car bucked against the rail like a maddened stallion. Segale's shriek was lost in the splintering

of wood, my door was open, black-top was coming at me. I tucked, tried to roll, the weight of the universe slammed my skull.

9.

My head outweighed Friendship Seven and was already in orbit. Salty blood filled my mouth; I spit out a tooth. My left arm was broken. A red glow in the fog showed where Segale had found the answer to the big question on the rocks below. The cutter moored off China Beach coughed coldly and poked a long white finger of light at the burning car.

When my shambling foot kicked the mail under the slot and scattered it across the living-room floor thirty minutes later, I yelped: shock was wearing off and my left arm had touched the door frame. I found a bottle, took what was in it, and sat down on the bed to tear a shirt into strips with my teeth while the liquor moved around in my belly. Getting my arm into the sling brought sweat to my face.

I should have recognized the car sooner, back at the view area under the bridge. That should have clinched it, but the time element was screwy. How long had I been out when Gloria had called? Five minutes? That made it impossible, unless . . .

Gloria Gann.

I was staring stupidly at the mail I had kicked across the floor. On

one envelope my name had been hurriedly pencilled in over her typed name and address. Flap stuck with scotch tape; local post mark; four cents due because it was too bulky for its single stamp; Gloria had been found a few feet from a mail box.

The car crawling by, circling the block. Just time to scrawl my name over her's, slap on her single stamp, drop it in the box. A poor scared little girl all alone, with death rounding the corner. *I've got to trust you now.* Her trust had been too late. The time element fell into place.

The room wavered and receded as if I were under water. Doc Soto in Daly City would set my arm without asking questions, he had gone through high school with my father in Modesto. But no time for him now. If Benjamin heard about Segale before I got to him, it would be too late. Dialing the phone my hand shook: pain was bursting inside me like mortar fire. Benjamin's voice was a wierd pleasure. I said:

"It's the size of a pocket address book, blue imitation leather cover, number notations in pen and ink that look like a simple book code. An expert could identify the handwriting. You've got an hour."

My voice hung in the miles of fragile wire connecting us. I was holding my breath. When he spoke my sigh was like dead leaves blowing down an autumn street. He

hadn't heard about Segale. I hoped I was right: I *had* to be right: but pain was making my thinking fuzzy.

"What are your terms?"

Cash was his only currency, greed the only motive he would credit.

"Ten grand tonight—cash—and the negatives and prints of the photos you've been using to blackmail Doreen Britten. In the future, twenty-five percent of the take."

"Why the pictures?" His voice was thin, sharp, suspicious.

"A man can never get too much money, can he, Benjamin?"

I hung up, shook my head like a fighter who's just been tagged with a hard right. I hadn't even had to have him check the parking lot to see if her car was there, or ask him if he'd found a replacement.

Her father finally answered the phone, his voice thick and surprised when I spoke my name, as if he had just run up a flight of steps or been wakened from a sound sleep. The surprise sharpened when I asked for Doreen.

"She's not here." He tried to shake grogginess from his voice. "What time is it? I fell asleep watching tv." He made the sounds a man makes looking at his watch with a phone in his hand. "After one. Isn't she still at the *Rumrunner*?"

Reality wavered, blurred, darkened, I aged a year bringing it back into focus again.

"No. Did she take the car tonight?"

"Yes. I usually drive her, Mr. Drew, but tonight she said she wanted the car. If she isn't at work, where—"

"An hour ago I was run off the road. Segale was with me, which may or may not have been planned. Segale is dead."

"Vern? Dead?" My call had brought realities a weak man should never have to face. "You can't believe that Doreen would . . . would . . ."

"I said it may not have been planned. This afternoon you offered help; now I need it. If Doreen gets there before I do, tell her Gloria mailed the book last night, to me, and I'm bringing it over. Tell her anything, but *keep her there*. Can you do it?"

"Yes, but . . . but Vern! This is monstrous. How can I tell her that Vern . . ."

"You're her father," I said. "I'll get her pictures from Benjamin and be right over."

I rested a moment, tasting my pain as a spear-struck fish will rest on the bottom adjusting to the strange metal thing in its body. I felt no compunction about what I was asking Britten to do; I could only hope that he could carry out instructions. I straightened up, slid the deadly notebook into my inside jacket pocket and stuck my spare Policeman's Special into my waistband. I'd talked too much but it

was too late to change anything now. One more call to make.

Al Persico, a sharp tough operative I sometimes used, was home and agreed to lend me his car and back my story. Doc Soto could wait: the killer couldn't.

10.

The tide was coming in. Each wave passed a clammy hand of spray over my face like the caress of death. Ten minutes earlier I had called Benjamin from the pay phone outside the *Rumrunner* and had told him to come down the path to the beach, alone, and keep walking until he was stopped.

His cautious shape loomed up darkly in the mist. I thumbed the button of the four-cell hand lantern I'd set on top of a granite out-cropping, and leaped clumsily aside, yanking out my Policeman's Special. The stark light pinned Benjamin to the sand as an entomologist pins a beetle to the board, and his right hand jerked up a .32 belly gun.

"Throw it away!" I yelled.

He did. It struck at the edge of the circle of light. His bold features, cast in sharp relief like the face of a carved gargoil on a French cathedral, were emptied of defiance. I stepped into the light with the .38 on his middle. Fog swirled around us in a slow smoky dance.

"Don't be hasty, Drew!" Like a lot of the hard boys he wasn't really

hard, just mean and lucky; when the luck went so did they. His voice was almost lost in the thunder of the waves on the short steep beach below us. "I was afraid of a trap. The money is at the *Rumrunner*, like you told me to have it, and the pictures are in my suitcoat pocket. Tomorrow—"

"No tomorrows, Benjamin. Vern Segale is dead; this time the cops will really land on you. You're too well-covered to fall on an extortion rap, but your operation is dead now and Doreen—"

A slight diffident cough behind me made a black hole, like a speck of flung mud, appear in the center of his forehead. He went down without a sound, a corpse before his knees hit the sand.

"Do not move at all, Mr. Drew. You know I am an excellent shot and could easily kill you with the second shot this silencer allows."

The confrontation: but not as I had planned it. I would throw myself sideways, roll, come up firing at the sound of his voice. But my knees buckled and I sat down in the sand like a toddler learning to walk. The book was burning in my pocket. I threw away the useless gun.

He stepped into the light, the .38, grotesquely lengthened by its silencer, too big for his fine-boned almost delicate hand. His bulky overcoat made him seem a heavier, bigger man, but his voice was low, and sad and unchanged. By the

harsh light his silver wig finally was unreal.

Homer Britten. Murderer.

"I might have believed you were deluded into thinking Doreen was the killer if you had not told me you were coming down here to get her photos from Benjamin. I'll take the book now."

I stared up at him, cursing tiredly. The agony in my arm had seduced my judgement while I had been talking on the phone, and I had said too much. I took out the notebook, held it carefully as a foaming wave tugged at my trousers. Defiance was my last poor dignity.

"Even if you shoot me it goes into the water, Britten. The ink will run and even if you can find it, it will be useless."

"In a moment you will gladly hand me the book, Mr. Drew."

"In exchange for a quick death? Think again. I'm tougher than that."

"We've had ample proof of that. No, because driving in carnival dare-devil shows and managing shooting galleries at county fairs has given me more than proficiency with autos and side arms. It has made me an amateur psychologist. It has given me the insight to know that you are a romantic. That you walk mean streets but are not yourself mean."

"Has it given you the insight to know that you're a sick gutless nothing whose hatred of his own

weakness has made him a mental defective?"

For a moment the mask slipped. His face turned to wax and I tensed myself to throw the book into the sea. But then the glassy look left his eyes and his skin became skin once more as his lips came back down over his teeth.

"I hope you do not provoke me into rashness, Mr. Drew. If I fire and you throw away the book, then to amuse myself I will use the nude photos of Doreen which are in Benjamin's pocket to drive her either to madness or to suicide. Her ridiculous moral rectitude, inbred by the good sisters who raised her, would make it quite simple."

The wind sighed in the misted dark as if sharing my revulsion. He would do it; and he was right. He knew I would meekly hand over the book if it would keep him from destroying his daughter.

Except for two things.

Except that I didn't think the sob we'd heard had been the wind. Except that the rim of light behind him no longer showed me Benjamin's .32 in the sand. The return of hope stung like blood in frost-bitten fingers. If I could last, if I could keep him talking. If.

"Why is the book so important to you, Britten?"

"You can ask?" His footlight was a dimming hand torch but he loved the stage, he was supremely self-centered. "All my life I've had nothing, been nobody, been cheated

by life. The book will give me cars and clothes and women and . . . and *respect*." His eyes were bright and inturned. He stepped closer as a wave splashed me again. "After I learned of the extortion ring through mere observation, I knew that if I could tempt Gloria, poor venal Gloria, into stealing the book—by promising her half the take—I would be able to be *someone*."

"Did you have to kill to be someone?"

"What else could I do?" The egomaniac peeped from his eyes. "Doreen made Bergen aware of the extortion photos and he was threatening exposure for Gloria. She would have talked before I could have gotten away with the notebook."

"So you killed him, wearing an oversize coat, a mask to hide your face, and with your wig removed so the police would search for a baldheaded killer. Your hair is *receding* in the photo Doreen has of you, but it didn't register with me in time."

He smiled proudly.

"She had no idea I was actually bald." His face darkened as if a cat's paw of wind had passed over a placid lake. "I made a grave error in allowing Gloria to keep the book; Hymie's death upset her too deeply. Even before you asked for her at the *Rumrunner* I knew she had to die. I missed her at her apartment, but saw her in the phone booth down the street, circled the block and did . . . what I did."

For a second he looked almost sorrowful. "Until you told me tonight, I didn't know that she had already mailed the book to you in the few moments I lost sight of her. I had spent the day searching everywhere for it."

"Even Segale's place. You told Doreen you needed the car so Segale would take her to work—that's why she was already gone when you called me at six o'clock—and once he was out of the way you searched his house. And then you convinced him I had done it, and arranged for me to take the short-cut through the Presidio so I could have an 'accident'."

Pain was snapping at me like a shark at a drowning man. He bent over Benjamin's corpse and pulled the envelope with Doreen's photos in it from the jacket pocket. He glanced at them briefly, then looked at me.

"We are out of time, Mr. Drew. I do not enjoy killing and you are the last. Toss the notebook at my feet and I will let you destroy these photos before . . . while you are still able."

He was grotesque, his soul was twisted and stunted and blackened like a lightning-riven tree. Fog swirled around us, muffling the Pacific's shouts. I struggled to my feet; acquiescence had made me also grotesque; if I were wrong I wanted to take death standing up. I tossed the book.

"I have a final question, Britten.

Were you jealous of poor egotistical stupid Vernon Segale? Couldn't you stand having only Doreen's pity and affection while he had her love? He knew nothing of any of this; why did you murder *him*, Britten?"

We both heard her gasp: then she was in the light with Benjamin's .32 steady in her gloved right hand. Her eyes were the hardest I've ever seen, and filled with the deepest horror.

"You killed *Vernon*?"

"He's lying, daughter. Of course, I didn't—"

"Look at his face, Doreen. You heard him admit running me off the road with your Olds. He arranged it so Vern was with me, and was killed."

She didn't say anything. She just shot him four times in the stomach. In the fog the reports were like hand-claps. His body jerked and his wig fell off and landed at his feet like a small dead albino animal. He fell sideways, writhed briefly, and was still, staring up at us with sandy eyeballs. She dropped the gun beside him as if she were discarding a candy wrapper.

"My own father," she said dreamily. "I was waiting after the bar closed for him to pick me up, and saw you call Dwight from the outside pay phone. When Dad got there I told him you were both down here on the beach, and he said you were the murderer and he was going after you. He said he

would be a man for once and wouldn't let me call the police. I wasn't supposed to follow but I did—I was afraid for *him*. I . . . I heard everything and I picked up Dwight's gun and then he . . . he said he had killed . . . I . . . Vern . . .

Her forehead pressed my chest, agony nearly swept me away. She smelled of *Emeraude*. Her small even teeth began worrying my lapel and she made raw sounds in her throat like a knife scraping bone. I stepped back and brought up my open right hand, hard. When I slapped her again the madness faded from her clouded violet eyes. She went right on as if she hadn't even stopped.

" . . . and so I killed him. I'm not even sorry. Does . . . does that make me some sort of unnatural person?"

A wave flopped Benjamin's arm. In a few minutes the tide would be at full flood, and it was still a long way to Hawaii.

"I made you shoot him. I'm not proud of it but I wanted to live and there was no other way. He deserved to die."

But her eyes were becoming a little girl's. I seized her shoulder and shook her roughly, barking harshly to hold her attention.

"At first I thought *you* were the killer, Doreen; but when Gloria was killed you were doing your one a.m. show. But your father was short and slim, like you, and a

bulky overcoat would make him look dumpy as well as you, and the bald head, instead of being a bald wig covering your hair, could be him removing a wig that he always secretly wore. There were other things. In the bar last night he got interested in me only when I asked for Gloria, not when I mentioned you; and later he slipped and called me by name when he didn't know me and no pictures of me had been in the papers."

It worked; her eyes meeting mine were rational again.

"Why . . . why did you tell him you were coming to see Benjamin?"

"I wasn't thinking straight, and it slipped out. And I really did have to get the pictures of you from Benjamin. I knew as soon as he heard that Segale had also been killed he would clear out, and in a few years he would have used them to blackmail you."

"Now they'll execute me." Her voice held a first hint of bitterness.

"Only if you want them to. I'm like a doctor, Doreen, except crime is the disease I treat." I picked up the envelope with her pictures in it, and handed it to her. "Let me handle this. Go home. In time you'll forget, even Vern."

"I'll never forget."

There was an infinite sadness in her voice; seeing her ravaged face in the dim light I could almost believe her: almost but not quite.

"You're dramatizing, Doreen.

You'll forget. The young always do."

She stared at me, unmoving; then something that might have been hope flickered far down in her eyes. She put out a hand and touched my cheek, wonderingly, like a child touching a kitten. Then she turned away and walked out of the light without looking back, her high heels sinking into the sand and the water foaming around her ankles. The fog and the night took her.

Pain was a cudgel. Benjamin's eyes glittered with momentary false life as the tide hissed around him.

Homer Britten was a bundle of discarded clothes, waiting for the cleansing Pacific with the patience only the dead can attain. Icy water sucked at my calves and dragged both men closer to the sea. I had to wade to my flashlight. Doc Soto. I had to get to him. He would tell the police I had been under his care since Al Persico had brought me in, dazed and injured after a car accident. If I could just get to him. Only I couldn't. It was much too far. I'd never make it.

But as I started up the path to the *Rumrunner's* parking lot, I knew that somehow I would.



STATEMENT

REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, JULY 2, 1946 and JUNE 11, 1960 (14 Stat. 208) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION OF MANHUNT, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1962.

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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: 178,145.

MICHAEL ST. JOHN
Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28th day of September, 1962.

[SEAL] DAVID A. FERDINAND,
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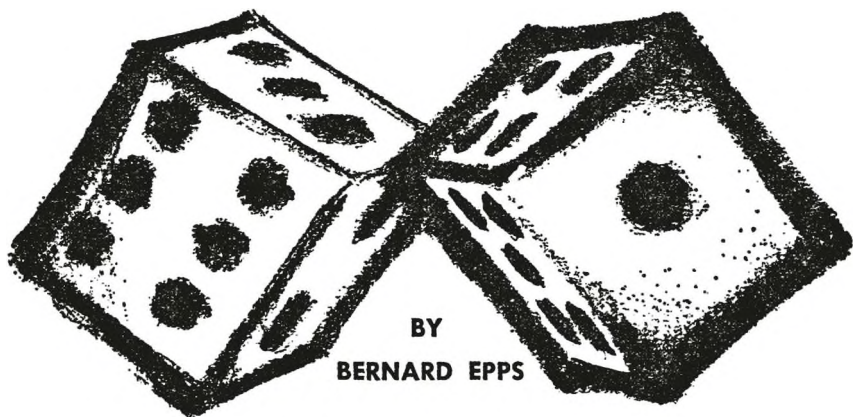
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CONNED



BY
BERNARD EPPS

*You just couldn't beat Jerry, the Pup, in a crap game.
That's why he's doing a dime store in the state pen.*

NOPE!" said the bartender, flicking his rag along the empty bar. "I ain't seen Jerry, the Pup, in quite some time and I ain't likely to neither, since he's up in the Big House. He's doin' a dime store, I hear, five to ten years. Let me get you another beer and I'll tell you how it happened.

"Well—you know Jerry, how he's always lookin' for the smart buck, how he figures he's sharp enough to con the Queen out of her crown jewels, or something—well, he's in here one night, see, sittin' on that stool right next to you there and it's a slow night like tonight. Mon-

day, I guess it was. Monday's are always slow. Anyway he's sittin' there and poundin' my ear about how good he is as a soft-con artist and, to hear him tell it, there ain't a broad or a sucker in the whole United States of America can stand up to him when he gets in the groove. I mean, he figures he's another Yellow Kid or something.

"Well, pretty soon, two customers wander in. There's been guys wanderin' in and out while we been chewin' the rag, of course, but these two come in and you can see right away they been celebratin' somethin' big. The guy is red in the face

and his tongue's falling all over his lip the way guys do when they've had one too many. And the twist is kind of a skinny, washed out blond but she's had her fill of the booze too, see.

"Well Jerry, the Pup, looks 'em over and moves in.

"You got to admire that guy. He turns on the charm and has you eatin' out of his hand even though you know he's connin' you! *You* know how it is with Jerry, the Pup!

"Anyhow, pretty soon he's the best of friends with these customers, see, and they're buying drinks back and forth, and they're talkin' horses and it comes out that this guy made quite some killin' at the track that day and that's what they're celebratin'!

"In my business, you know, you kind of learn to keep your eyes and ears open. You got to learn to spot trouble before it starts, see, and you'd be surprised the things I hear when no one knows I'm listenin'. Well, I'm serving drinks and keepin' a close eye on Jerry's technique, see, and I can see he's turnin' over in his head how to work this fish loose from his scratch. And, somehow—I don't know how it happened and probably the fish don't know either—the talk turns to crap games and Jerry the Pup says he knows where there's a floatin' game that night and he's goin'. Well, the fish falls for it! He figures it's his lucky day and all, winning all that bread at the track, and he wants in.

"'Okay,' says Jerry, 'I'll just make a quick 'phone call,' he says, 'to find out if the game's still on,' he says, 'And I'll be right back.'

"The fish says, okay, and Jerry gets change from me and makes a call from the booth in back. Now, I figure, Jerry don't know where there's a floating game. There's not a regular crap game in town will let him within two blocks of the dice!

"You ever see his loads? There's one corner shaved just a leetle bit and just a leetle bit more paint on one side than the others. I mean, they're not changed enough so you can *see* anything, but enough to give Jerry the viggarish—that extra edge—he thinks he needs! Jerry couldn't run an honest game if he was paid to!

"So he makes his call and I figure he's callin' some buddies of his to set up a game someplace, just for the fish, see.

"Hold on a minute and I'll fetch you another beer. Hey, I got some of this new German stuff the boss started keepin'. You want to try one? Comin' up! Now, let's see. Where was I?

"O, yeah. I heard the rest of the story from Mabel down at the Hotel Carmoty. I don't know if you know her but her and me's been keepin' company the last few years and she tells me everything that goes on down there. She says that Jerry and a few of his sharp friends come in the club just about one, see, and they

all seem pretty happy, Mabel says. She says they was laughin' about how the sucker kept stuffin' his winnings in his pocket everytime, like he didn't trust anybody, see, and everytime he fades a bet he has to pull the money out again! She says, they figured here was a real, all-American pigeon!

"Anyway, the fish gets about five hundred ahead and then Jerry switches in his loads and the fish is pullin' dough out, pullin' it out, until he was down more than seven hundred and there wasn't any more! So Jerry takes him back to his hotel, tells him how sorry he is about his losing the scratch, meets his boys around the corner and takes them to the Carmoty to celebrate!

"But, when it comes time to pay the tab, Mabel notices something funny about the twenty they give her. She shows it to the head-

waiter and the head-waiter calls the fuzz.

"You should have seen their faces, Mabel says, when the cops put the arm on them for passing queer! Here was Jerry, the Pup, figured he'd pulled the cleanest con of his life and instead he'd lost some five C's and wound up holdin' a fistfull of worthless queer!

"He tries to tell them he won it in a crap game but you think they believe Jerry, the Pup? They're happy enough to get their hands on him! 'Crap games is against the Law,' they says, 'and for passing counterfeit you do a five and dime!'

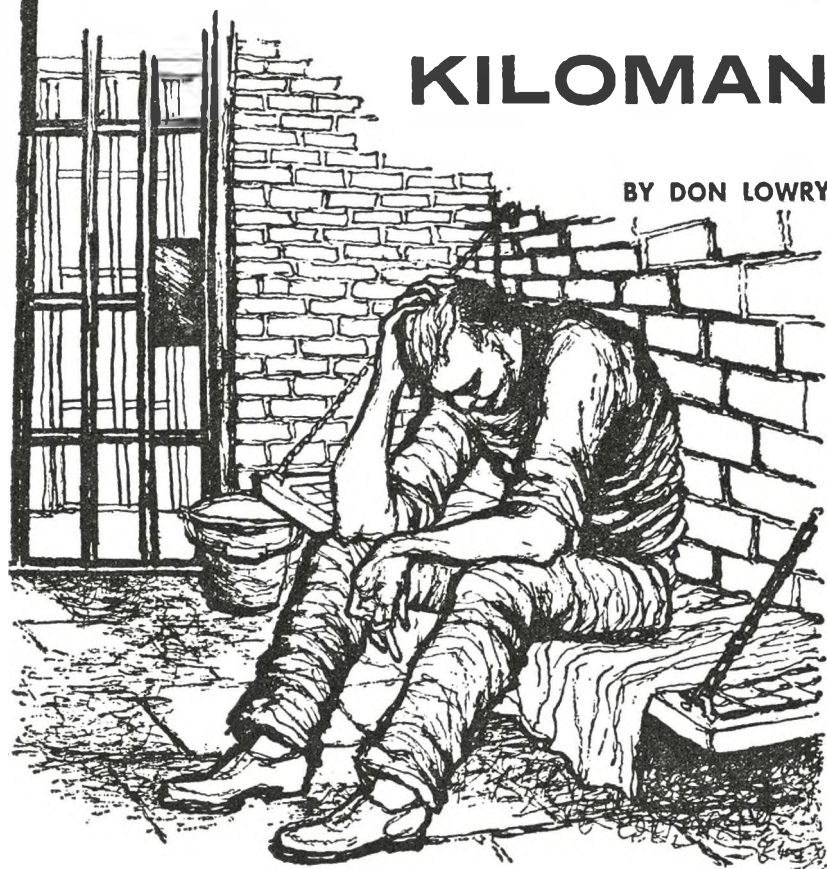
"That's pretty good beer, ain't it? Those Germans really know how to make good beer. I used to know a German. Willy, the German, they called him and he made his living by crashing parties, see, and, one time . . ."



"Marty, can't you cut Eddie in? After all, he is my brother and he's solid. Give him a break. He'll make a good pusher . . ."

KILOMAN

BY DON LOWRY



EDDIE TORRIO spelled it out for me. He was the number one front man for Mr. "B", the wheel who bankrolled the junk racket; who never touched the stuff and for all I knew never saw it; and whose lieutenants never handled less than a kilogram of H at a time. I was a small-time pusher with big-

time ambitions and a three-grain habit on horse. I finally made connections with Torrio and got over to him my pitch that I had enough on the ball to be more than a local pusher.

"I'll think about you the next time we have an opening," was his non-committal reply.

Nothing happened and the next time I made my connection for stuff I asked the courier if he had any news for me from Eddie.

"I don't know any Eddie and I don't know what you mean. And five minutes from now I won't even remember you, Marty. Why don't you get smart and stay cool with your customers—you've all the girls and hogs on the island buying horse from you and you get your own horse at cost. Be wise and stay in Galveston."

"You talk like my mouthpiece, Mannie and you're set like he is—nice car nice home and all the rest that goes with it. Maybe you guys don't want competition.

Manuel Del Rio moved away without a comment. He'd said more in that one piece of advice than I'd ever heard him say before. Torrio's connections were all the same—like clams and they never hung around. But they all had class and that I wanted—bad.

I picked up Marcia at the bar and drove back to Galveston. At least I got sympathy from her and she kept telling me that I had the makings of more than a pusher. And she wasn't on the make. Some weeks she brought home more than I did and who paid the rent depended on who was in the pad when the landlord came around. No questions asked. The kind of love she had for me wasn't the kind she put out for sharpies looking for a fifty-an-hour call girl.

I had to make a meet when I got back and dropped Marcia at the Buccaneer. Things stayed the same—for a week—and then I got a phone call:

"Don't bring that broad with you when you come down tomorrow."

That was all. I knew the voice but not the caller—and I didn't take Marcia with me to Brownsville where I connected for my stuff.

I saw Mannie coming out of the hotel and he made no sign that he had any stuff for me.

"Go over to the bar at the Ritz in Matamoras," was his only comment as he kept on walking.

I nursed a beer and heard Mannie again behind me.

"Come on outside."

I followed him into a green Ford and watched the boulevard as we drove out to the San Antonio.

"Torrio wants to see you. He's in Room 14."

A brunette opened the door into a second floor room of the San Antonio and I forced myself to look away from her to Torrio with his back to me looking out the window. He didn't even turn around.

"Think I'd forgotten you Marty?"

"No, but I wondered . . ."

"Well stop wondering. I think we can find a place for you. These things take time and we make sure we know what we're doing before we do it. You come from New Mexico. Albuquerque."

It wasn't a question—more like a flat statement. Like he was thinking.

"When I was a kid. I fell for possession and did a bit at La Tuna. Never went back."

"How long has it been since the local law around there was familiar with you?"

"Ten—fifteen—years ago. They've all changed by now."

"You still on horse?"

"Yes."

"How much you use?"

"Three—four—grains a day."

"You're going over to El Paso this afternoon. We've a plane leaving from Corpus around two. Abilio Guerra is our man there and he knows you're coming. The plane's a red and white Beechcraft and the pilot'll be on the lookout for you. We're going to keep Guerra south of the border and let you take over his territory. He'll spell it out for you."

"What's my end?"

Torrio ignored my question.

"Get one thing straight, Marty. You fell as a user and got a short federal rap. If you fill the bill at El Paso you're more than a user. There's an Act of Congress—Section 107 of the Narcotics Control Act to be exact—which makes you a target for Giordano and the rest of the bastards at the Bureau of Narcotics—a special target. Take a fall for selling and transporting and you can wind up with a life bit or a death sentence. You're not

just a user or a pusher; you're what the bureau spends its time trying to nail—a transporter and a distributor. You know the score and I don't have to paint a picture of your problems. See Abilio in El Paso and take it from there. He'll run it down for you."

"Can I use your 'phone, Eddie?"

"For what?"

"I want to call Marcia in Galveston and tell her I won't be back to-night."

"You forget your Marcia—and everybody else that you knew in Galveston. She knows all your business now and that's too much."

I'll call her from El Paso, I thought as I went out. The brunette didn't even smile as she opened the door. Torrio could have his window dressing around. I couldn't even 'phone mine.

To hell with Torrio, I thought, and called Marcia from Corpus Christi.

"Pick up my car at the Seaside Motel parking lot, honey. I'll contact you later and let you know the score" was my only reply to her dozen questions. I went along that far with Torrio in not talking.

The pilot was like a clam. He didn't even grunt and, other than some gibberish with control towers at Corpus and El Paso might have been a dummie as far as I knew. Guerra walked me from the plane to his car and we drove over to Juarez, through the town and out to a motel on the outskirts. He

ran his end down for me and I recognized a few names among his pushers in El Paso and Albuquerque. His take was good—half a buck on every cap—and from my experience with Mannie I knew he increased the number of caps with powder sugar.

He said he'd pick me up that night on his run to Albuquerque and I checked into the motel; cooked up and just moped until he came back. I forgot to call Marcia.

I didn't pay too much attention to the road. Guerra drove and I was still a little high. The first thing I knew we were stopped some place on 85 between El Paso and Las Cruces. I was clean but I didn't know what Guerra had—and I didn't have any time to ask.

"Get your hands on top of the car; back your feet and spread them—fast."

Expert hands frisked us and we were cuffed and in the other car without any questions being asked or answered. Only the flasher disturbed the night as the law car sped away with us. We were booked in some small town police station and right then I became suspicious.

"What's this pinch for?"

"Transporting narcotics."

"Who are you—feds? Treasury?"

"You'll find out in the morning."

"I want to make a phone call."

The reply to that question was a

slap in the mouth and a strong-arming into a cell. Guerra was still in the office when they hustled me down the hall. I knew it wouldn't be long before I needed a fix and the thought of what I was facing brought beads of sweat to my hands and face. They let me sweat it out for what seemed like a couple hours when a tall guy in plain clothes opened the cell door; shut it behind him; threw the keys to his partner and looked at me like I was so much dirt.

"That powder in the car belong to you?"

"What powder?"

"Inside the spare tire. I'm not saying what it is but I'll lay 15 to 1 the lab says it's heroin in the morning. Want to take the bet?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Your driver thinks you do. He says he was hired to drive for you and that he never saw the car before he got into it tonight; claims he's an El Paso truck driver and he has papers to prove it. He doesn't have any record and you're a junker from a way back. That help your memory about the H in the spare?"

The thought ran through my mind that this was a set up and that I was being put out of the way with a neat frame.

"You can go to hell. I want to make a 'phone call."

I saw a million stars as he smashed my face in with a black-

jack and kicked me in the guts at the same time. He picked me up and knocked me down, throwing me up against the steel plate wall of the cell like a battered hunk of meat. When I came to he'd gone.

I threw up. Shook. It was cold. I felt my nose and face and just the touch of my fingers was like a toothache. Between spasms and stomach cramps I tried to think—and couldn't. These jackals couldn't be federal people—they didn't work that way. Couldn't be local law on the highway. Couldn't be state law—no uniforms and they didn't use the "beat 'em break 'em technique". I couldn't stop shaking and got sick again when the door banged open like a box car shunting into another. There were two of them this time and the tall one was accompanied by a black-haired sunuvabitch only one generation removed from whatever species gorillas claim.

"Use a fix, Marty?"

I knew this approach and the futility of asking.

"Get lost, you sadist."

This time I was ready for them. I braced myself at the back of the bunk with my feet against the steel slats. At least I'd kick him in his face if the tall one made another pass at me.

"Why try wearing us down, Marty? We've got the stuff. You've got the record and you're caught in the car with a driver who is clean. What kind of a story can you lay

on a judge or jury in the face of that evidence? Play it smart. Give us a statement; get a fix; and get looked after by a doctor."

I got sick again—all over the gorilla's shoes and pants.

"Pig," was his only crack as he threw himself at me and he didn't have to use a blackjack or feet. His hands were like fifteen-pound hams.

No cop alive would do this to even a narcotics trafficker, were my orbiting thoughts as I lost consciousness again.

They came again—twice, I think—before daylight and the last time I was so damn sick I didn't care.

I rolled over on the bunk and saw Abilio Guerra standing beside me. He was getting a fix ready and I thought I was dreaming. It was for me.

"How'd you like the treatment?"

"Treatment? You kidding? These bastards tried to kill me. Hurry up with that. How'd you score it? What happened? How'd they make us?"

I shuddered and sighed when the mainliner began to hit me. I went to lie back down again when I noticed the cell door was open and the sight of Eddie Torrio walking in—with no screws around—brought me up with a jerk that registered in every aching bone and muscle in my body.

"You spring us, Eddie?"

"Get him up and let's get out of here so a doctor can patch him

up," was Torrio's casual reply. He ignored me.

We walked out of that police station without anyone even giving us a second glance. A bull at the desk handed me my wallet and property.

"Have a pleasant night?" he quipped.

I rounded to swing at him and Guerra grabbed me.

"Wise guys like you can get hurt," he shot at the cop.

"Come on Marty, you can take care of him later."

We stopped at a house before we reached Socorro and a doctor patched me up.

"Another automobile accident, Mr. Smith?" the doctor asked Torrio.

"Just fix him up, Doc. No questions," replied Torrio.

"Feel better, Marty?"

I mumbled through bandages and we walked back to the car. On the way to Albuquerque, Torrio ran down to me the pseudo third degree and its necessity.

He had to *know* and Mr. Big insisted on his knowing how insiders in the racket would stand up under pressure.

In a town near the Texas-New Mexico border, I still don't know where it is today and it could even be south of the line, through a fix with the local law a prospective employee of the kiloman-crew is "arrested", locked in a cell, questioned and beaten by "officers". If

he talks he winds up under Dona, Ana sands or Sierra Madres rocks—he had the makings of a stool pigeon anyway. If he stands up under the staged but brutally realistic, "Third degree", he is "in" the ring. It's the most effective way discovered by kilomen to prevent infiltration by stool pigeons and Bureau of Narcotics Agents into their ranks.

It's a hell of a way to get into any racket. Pure hell.

The next day, at a ranch house owned by Torrio, they laid it out for me in detail and one by one Guerra's pushers and runners showed up. I knew two or three but they didn't remember me and the bandages and sun glasses didn't help anyone who might have.

Eddie and Abilio left that night and I was in business. As soon as their car pulled out of the yard, I thought of Marcia. I drove into Albuquerque and stopped at the first pay 'phone. No answer. I drove around for a while and called again. Still no answer. I phoned her girl friend.

"Marcia? You don't know, Marty? Where've you been?"

"Never mind the questions, Marie give it to me fast and straight."

Marcia was the victim of a hit-run driver who was not yet found by police. In the middle of a driving, Gulf coast rain storm she had been run down and killed on a side street. ,

"Like hell!" I concluded.

Marcia wouldn't go out in a rain storm for anything or anybody—well—maybe for a fix, but she had enough horse on hand to last her for a month when I left the pad. And I knew she wouldn't part with so much as a cap.

Marcia wouldn't be found—alive or dead—on a side street. Our pad was on a main street and she had a well-worn route—by cab or car—to the gulf coast hotels when she got a call. Side street, hell.

I was learning slowly how thorough Torrio and his Mr. Big really were. As far as they were concerned, Marcia was just another dame who knew too much. As far as I was concerned it was only a hunch. But from what I knew of Marcia—and we lived together two years—the “hit-and-run” story was as phoney as my “third degree”.

Right then there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it and I got back to business—the business Marcia had prompted me into.

“I'll be over the bridge at three tomorrow.”—a long distance call from Ciudad Juarez to a pre-arranged pay 'phone booth in Albuquerque—no names or places, vaguely indefinite but sufficiently clear for me to fall in line along the route which heroin travels from south of the border into this country.

This brief statement triggered the smuggling and transportation of a kilogram of pure heroin, part of an operation moving across in-

ternational borders from hidden laboratories to pushers and addicts. Mr. “B” was behind it; Eddie Torrio his front man and now I was one of the lieutenants. The cost for my end—so far—Marcia's life; a beating; and five years as a pusher. Those behind the operation made only one allowance for error: death for the one who erred.

The 'phone call announced—to me—the departure of a commonplace truck from Mexico. It bore plates and licenses required for legal interstate transportation. Its cargo and bill of lading appeared as respectable as that of any highway hauler. Its driver's credentials were letter-perfect. All state and federal laws were meticulously observed and obeyed—except the Narcotics Control Act—and the truck was watched every inch of the way. Even the watchers were watched. An innocent-appearing truck concealed a weekly shipment of pure heroin on its way to any one of the fifty states.

Mr. “B” paid \$4,000 for the kilo in France, Italy or the Near East. Couriers got \$500 for transporting it. As soon as it hit this continent its kiloman importer, Mr. “B”, made three pounds out of every two by adulteration with milk sugar. Originally 80 per cent pure, heroin is only 6 per cent pure by the time I get it to my pushers. Profit is fifty times that of the original cost. That's why even the watchers were watched.

My first move was to spot the truck as it headed north from Socorro to Belen in southern New Mexico. As it came north along the Rio Grande I drove leisurely south. I spotted it just before it crossed the Valencia County line. We made no sign of recognition no horn or headlight signal; not even a nod of a head as we passed on the road. Jose Herrera, the truck driver, recognized me and I recognized him and we both anticipated the meeting in that area. He continued north at the same speed. I drove south to Socorro; casually gassed up at a service station; and inconspicuously headed north to overtake the truck.

I passed it in Belen, parked innocently while Jose lunched with other drivers. He didn't have to see me or my car to know I was passing. That and every other move to be made was well known ahead of time by both of us—and others. As I crossed the Bernadillo County line Jose overtook and passed me. I let the truck stay ahead and watched as he pulled into a motel south of Albuquerque. I didn't even slow down and drove into town. If there'd been a tail on either of us we were not connected. Jose was just another truck driver pulling up for the night. My trip was neither unusual nor illegal. The heroin remained on the truck. Only Jose knew where. He would move it that night.

I sat in a bar of Albuquerque's

Old Town, sipping a drink and waiting for Jose. He knew I was there and I knew he would make the "meet" with me. Then and only then would I learn where to locate the *drop* he made. Again, both of us were *clean*. If either of us had been tailed the law would find nothing on us. All he had to deliver to me was information. He went to another table; lit a smoke; and ordered. He was just another customer on the town. After others at the bar had time to accept him as part of the scenery Jose followed me into the men's room.

"Pick it up at the south side of the fifth highway marker just over the Sandoval County line—it's in the sand," was Jose's only comment.

We returned to our tables and left separately.

I picked up where Guerra left off and, having been a pusher myself, was hep to their tricks before they tried to pull them on me. Weekly shipment after weekly shipment came in with only a few needed variations in the routine. My bankroll grew fat and I was reaching the "class" I'd admired in my Galveston mouthpiece and in Mannie Del Rio. I rarely saw Torrio and when I did meetings were so short and business-like I never had a chance to feel him out on Marcia's death.

There was soon another "Marcia" and nights with Jean compensated for run-of-the-mill troubles with pushers who wanted credit and

hopheads who brought heat on the racket. Every rape, crime of violence and screwball caper in the southwest was laid to actions of drug addicts and from time to time we had to lay off. These panics among the junkers only made business better when we turned the horse loose again on the streets. I could have told people that violent crimes and sex crimes were from the psychos and not from the junkies. The average junker steals—petty larceny, shoplifting and prowling—for one reason: to get the price of a fix. But who the hell was I to get quoted as the local expert for the defense? I soon had troubles of my own. Jean had a brother—

"Marty, can't you cut Eddie in? After all, he is my brother and he's solid. Give him a break. He'll make a good pusher . . ."

I asked around and nobody had anything bad to say about the kid. He'd done a couple bits—car theft and B&E—and had a good reputation both in the joint and on the street.

"Besides," I rationalized, "he's a hophead and Jean's keeping him on my bankroll. Might as well put him to work."

I stayed out of the picture and told one of the regular pushers to give him a piece of the neighborhood and keep my name out of it. And I warned Jean to keep her mouth shut about my doing the kid a favor.

The phone rang a few minutes after midnight. It was the pusher who I told to break Eddie in.

"The kid's pinched."

"I don't want to hear about it or any of your other goddam troubles. Call a mouthpiece. You know better than to call me and you know damn well I don't want any part of anybody's pinch. That's your baby." I was hot and he knew it.

"Well, I thought, like him being Jean's brother . . ."

"You thought. I'll do my own thinking, you . . ."

I hung up and did some fast thinking. I had to get Jean out of town and out fast. She was nuts about her kid brother and I didn't want a wacky dame on my hands crying for me to spring her brother.

"Jean, Jean, come on inside."

She walked in from the sunporch where she liked to sleep when I was busy at night and what I saw almost made me change my mind about sending her away—that night anyway.

"I've got an envelope that I want to put in my safety deposit box in L.A. and I want it there in the morning. Be a good girl and make the trip for me."

She didn't bat an eyelash. I'd started to bank in Los Angeles when things got good and she'd made occasional trips there for me. As far as she knew it was just another payoff I'd received and it

was a chance for her to run wild in Wilshire Blvd. shops."

It was a good thing I got her out of town. The punk panicked; tried to make a break from the law and was shot. Papers made a big deal out of the kid being a hophead *and* a pusher and the resulting heat was felt all the way to the poppy fields where the horse comes from.

I 'phoned Torrio.

"One of my pusher's got bumped by the law and all hell's broken loose out here."

The cool bastard reacted like a machine.

"Hang on for a minute while I put a stop on the next shipment—it shouldn't be on the road yet."

During that minute I made up my mind to lam to L.A. and pick up Jean there. Torrio came on the 'phone again.

"Turn it off for a few days and get out of the state for a while yourself. Get in touch with me the next week. And put that broad out of circulation—permanently. When she hears about the kid she'll run amuck. The law will be looking for her and they'll tie her to you. Are you with me, Marty?"

I wasn't "with him" one inch of the way but I said I was. This time he wanted me to be the hatchet man. I wondered who he sent to do the job on Marcia.

"I'll handle things, Torrio." I hung up.

I packed a couple bags; threw them in the back of the sedan; and

took off after Jean. I had to get to her in L.A. before she saw the morning papers.

"To hell with the house and everything in it," I thought. The minute the law finds that kid's sister has been shacking up with me, they'll be out here in carload lots. I'll be dead if they nail me—without a trial."

There was little traffic and I did some thinking on the road.

"I'll cop out to being a rotten sonuvabich in a rotten racket but I won't be a *murdering* rotten sonuvabich for Torrio and all the Mr. "B"'s in the world."

I wasn't sure where I would head—if I could talk Jean into coming along—and I wasn't sure just what sort of a dame she would be when she blew her top over her kid brother.

I found her at the Commodore and she was just getting to sleep when I knocked at the door. She looked like a tousled-haired kid when she opened it in reply to my voice.

"Marty. How come you're here? What's the matter? How'd you get here? Is there something wrong?"

I couldn't see any point in stalling and I gave it to her straight. She was a junker herself and knew the score. But she was also the kid's sister. Jean didn't bawl, scream, cry or rave. She just sat and stared. Then she started to talk.

"Who can I hate, Marty? The

bulls who shot him when he took off? The pusher who was supposed to keep him in line? You? Or myself?"

"Take it easy, baby. Hate won't bring Eddie back and it won't replace love. I went through that once myself and it didn't work."

Jean looked at me as if I were a complete stranger and walked over to lie on the bed. She buried her head in the pillow and just lay there. No sobs. No words. Hardly breathing.

I wanted to ask her about tomorrow and the need to move while I had a chance but one look at her still body told me this wasn't the time to talk.

"I'll see you in the morning, baby. I got things to do."

"Don't go out, Marty. I don't want to be alone."

We talked until the sun rays came through venetian blinds—or I let her talk. Jean told me of her childhood with Eddie their slum home—broken up when they were youngsters; and their need to live on their wits to survive.

When she dropped off to sleep I left a short note and slipped out.

I cleaned out my box at the bank, closed out two bank accounts and spent an hour waiting for the L.A. bank to close out my Albuquerque account and pay me off. It was one o'clock before I closed a deal with a dealer for the two cars and when I got back to the Commodore Jean was pacing the floor.

"I called my cousin in Albuquerque and she says the police are asking for me—and for you; they're staked out at the house. And somebody's been phoning here every few minutes for you. Who knows we stay here when we're in L.A.?"

I could see the picture in Albuquerque and I didn't answer the last question. This room was paid for the year around by Torrio. I should have thought of that last night but was so used to coming to the Commodore that I didn't give it a thought. I needed a fix—bad.

"Get packed, baby, we're getting out—but quick."

"Where . . . ?"

The 'phone rang before Jean could finish. I answered it.

"Marty?"

"Yeah."

"This is Abilio. Mr. Torrio wants to know if that problem is out of the way yet."

"I'm working on it."

"Marty, don't try to be a wise guy. Stick with the script. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, yeah. I got things to do now. Want me to call back?"

"You know better. We'll call you—wherever you are; and we'll know where that is."

All that I knew. I had a fifty-fifty chance to get away from the law. Nobody in Albuquerque knew who I really was and I'd never been mugged or printed since I took over from Abilio Guerra. But get-

ting away and staying away from Mr. "B" was like escaping from an octopus in an aquarium tank with no outlet. For all I knew his L.A. people had me covered like a blanket and if I didn't do something with Jean they would.

"Baby, I think you already get the picture without me painting it for you. We've got to get out of here—so far from this part of the country that it will cost a buck to mail a five-cent letter to us. I'd like it to be the two of us but that you will have to decide. How about it?"

Her look and her arms did the real answering.

"Count me in, Marty. You shouldn't even have to ask."

"O.K., baby and I hope it'll always be this way. Now listen closely. All the bags stay here. Dump that trunk-size purse you carry and we'll put in it what's in my brief case—it's a cool half million in case you wonder how we'll manage to buy new luggage. We're going down and walk out the lobby door to a cab like we're making a normal trip. Play it cool and quiet.

We may have to shake a tail but we'll play it by ear and see what happens."

"Come on, Marty, let's get out of here."

What I thought was a pleasant doll to give class and beauty to the surroundings was turning out to be a real partner.

I passed the cab that pulled up and we walked to the back of

the stand for one that was pulling in,

"Drive out Wilshire 'til we make up our minds, driver. If you got a tail there's a C note for you if you drop it."

It was enough to make the cabbie blast off into space. He pulled up to lights just before they changed to red and then beat them. He knew more private driveways and lanes than map-makers in the city engineering department.

"If you want to make sure, boss, I know some canyons that will make a tail look like a tired hound dog on asphalt."

He had the right idea—a residential area and that would give me time to think of our next move.

"OK, go ahead. And here's your C note with a bonus."

The site of the canyon with its beautiful homes and landscaping gave me an idea.

"Know a quiet resort in the county, driver—quiet and respectable?"

"Sure, the Apple Valley Inn; not far from Victorville. Used to work there. Wanna look at it?"

"As long as there's no tail on the way."

"There won't be."

On the way, I ran it down to Jean. She didn't like it but she bought it.

"I'm going to leave you at the Inn. I've got some unfinished business in L.A. that may take over-night to finish. Keep this cab hired

at the Inn even if I'm gone a week. As long as the cabbie's out here nobody in L.A. can strong-arm him into telling where he brought us. I'll get another cab and double back to town."

As long as the C notes lasted the driver was happy to remain on tap for a year if necessary. It was OK with him. We checked in; got a receipt from the manager for the bulk of the bankroll; and had supper together. I left everything with Jean except a C note and my automatic. I didn't tell her what my "unfinished business" was all about but I had a hunch it would come to me without a lot of looking on my part.

"Come back quick, Marty, please."

"In the morning, baby."

I stopped in the manager's office and made out an order to deliver the bankroll to Jean if I were not back in seven days. I wasn't too confident I would make it back. The business could get rough.

I changed cabs five times between Victorville and the Commodore in L.A. to make sure there would be no back-tracking to Jean. The "business" was waiting when I opened the door to our room in the hotel. It was Torrio and the gorilla-like bastard that posed as a bull and beat my head in at the staged third degree grilling.

"Hello, Marty. Get the job done?"

"This afternoon."

"Any trouble?"

"You taught me to be thorough, Eddie. When I do a job I don't have trouble. Incidentally, I'd like to do the same kind of a job on that bastard sitting there."

"Anytime, ya . . ."

Torrio interrupted before the gorilla and I could carry out our mutual invitations to mayhem.

"If you didn't have any trouble, why did you work so hard to shake the tail when you left the hotel?"

I played it straight.

"Who wants a tail when you're on your way to dump a broad?"

"Good question, Marty."

"And how did I know it was your tail?"

"You got the right answers—and I hope they turn out to stay right."

"They will." (I hoped.)

"I suppose you wonder why I'm here?"

"With that ape it could be only for one reason. To get the job done—on the broad and me—if I didn't come through."

He had the cruelty to laugh.

"That was only part of it. If you did have it done, Mr. "B" wanted to see you. If you didn't—well, he never wanted to see you again—alive that is."

"Mr. Big sees the likes of me for two reasons—a promotion or an execution. Spell it out, Eddie."

"You know, Marty, it's funny how a little dough makes a small-town pusher into a joker. One of these days your sense of humor

will fall flat and I'll throw you to Willie here—for keeps rather than for bruising. Mr. "B" will do his own talking and you and I will like what he says—whether we do or not."

A cold sweat broke out under my armpits when I realized the route Willie was taking. It was the route back towards Apple Valley. I kept up a time-passing conversation with Eddie Torrio, running down the Albuquerque fiasco to him. And I kept my hand on the automatic. If Willie turned in at the Inn, I'd dump both him and Torrio before any questions were asked.

I saw the lights of the Inn in the distance and its nearby airport and knew my own moment of truth might come in a few minutes—and that of Eddie and Willie would come more surely.

When the gorilla turned off at the airport, I felt only a little relieved. After all, Jean was only a short distance away—I hoped.

Then I saw the red and white Beechcraft at the far side of the airport and the muscle man swung the heavy sedan towards it. He could wheel a car like he threw his fists. Sure and fast.

Torrio didn't even get out of the car.

"In the plane, Marty. I got the boss's signal and he's waiting for you. When he talks he talks to one person alone and it's you he wants to see."

I got out and walked through the glare of spotlights to the plane. The same no-talking pilot pointed to the cabin steps and I went up them. The panel door slid open and a voice that sounded like a tape-recording cut the air:

"Come in, Bello."

I looked around the leather-upholstered cabin and found myself alone, but the voice went on:

"I'm in the cockpit, Mr. Bello and I can see you. It isn't necessary that you see me. Sit down and make yourself at home. There's liquor in the cabinet and smokes in the drawer. Help yourself. Or if you want a fix go right ahead and cook up. That, I understand, is your department."

The voice was cultured with an overtone of condescension and sarcasm. I listened and he talked.

"I'm afraid your value to us in the southwest has fallen off, Mr. Bello, but we always have room elsewhere for enterprising and experienced talent. Your conversation in Torrio's car came in to me on our own wave length and it filled in the picture for me with the information I already had on hand. So we can dispense with any further explanations or rationalizations on your part about Albuquerque—or Los Angeles. You do speak Spanish do you not?"

"Fluently."

"Fine, because you'll need it. I'm building up a new—ah—enterprise based on an island in the Caribbean

and I need someone with your talents there. No Russian by any chance?"

"Not a word of it."

"Your brevity almost reaches the point of rudeness."

"I just listen and do what I'm told."

"I suppose that's an admirable trait, Mr. Bello. At least's it isn't common anymore."

I let that one pass over and said nothing.

"This—ah—enterprise evolves around the purchasing and buying of cocaine. I'll let Torrio run it down to you and work out the details. You'll answer to him from the Caribbean and a word of advice—you have an unfortunate habit of becoming involved with the opposite sex—always a complicating factor in our business. Try to avoid it in the Caribbean. That's all. Nice talking with you, Mr. Bello. Goodnight. Ah, by the way, all this, I assume, meets with your complete agreement.

"Of course," I quipped. "Goodnight."

As Willie pulled away from the plane, I could hear its engines rev up.

"Goodnight." I thought.

"What about it, Marty?"

"About what?"

"The deal the boss offered."

"I'll buy it," I quipped, stalling for time. "He said to work out details with you."

"I know that. He's bringing Fer-

nandez back from the Caribbean to handle the southwest and I'll fill you in on the island deal."

"I hear you talking."

"You don't hear me talking 'til you show Willie and me where you dumped that broad this afternoon. I stand good for you and I never take anybody's word for anything. Never."

Right at that moment we were driving by the Inn and I thought, "Don't come walking across the lawn, baby."

"No sweat, Eddie. Tell your ape driver to keep driving and head right up the road to Big Bear. I'll show you the spot and the results."

The isolated country was right up my alley and half way up the hill, just past the Permanente Cement Plant, I told Willie to slow down so I could get my bearings.

"Pull off at that clearing by the curve."

I got out first and made like I was looking in the rocks.

"Come on, Eddie. Here it is."

He came and Willie came with gruesome anticipation behind him.

I'll give Torrio credit, his only crack was jocular when I filled his guts with lead—on behalf of Marcia.

"A hophead with an automatic. Can't believe it."

Willie showed his true colors.

"Don't, Marty. Please don't."

I didn't give him the satisfaction of a slug. He was at the edge of the rocks and I kicked him over. His

screaming stopped 1500 feet below.

I drove the sedan back down the hill and parked it outside the airport. After wiping off finger prints, I walked the half-mile or so to the Inn. Jean was sleeping—high or tired, it didn't matter. I wanted some sleep and knew we had to be back on the road in the morning. I walked out to the parking lot and found the L.A. cabbie. He was asleep at the wheel and punched at the starter the minute he woke up.

"Where to, boss?"

Funny the loyalty a C note will bring.

"You can pull out now. We're through travelling around here."

"Many thanks. You've got some change coming."

"Keep it and this—with our thanks." I gave him another C note.

"If this keeps on boss, I'll give you a title to this hack. 'Night."

His goodnight had the only ring of sincerity I'd heard so far that night. I yawned and headed for the Inn again.

This time Jean heard me come in. She tumbled out of the bed and came drowsily to me and just clung to me for a minute before saying anything.

"Oh, Marty, I was afraid you wouldn't get back."

"Don't worry, baby, I'm back for keeps."

"You look awful. Where've you been?"

"As I said, looking after some unfinished business. Let's get some

sleep. We're getting out of here in the morning."

Jean's slow and rhythmic breathing, with her head cuddled on my shoulder told me she was dead to the world in which we were both so involved. Tired as I was, I thought instead of slept.

I had the worst kind of heat on me from the law—the Bureau of Narcotics and the FBI. Albuquerque wanted to see me. By tomorrow afternoon the sheriff's department here in San Bernardino County would be more than interested in the bodies of Torrio and Willie up the hill towards Big Bear. Be all that as it may, it seemed trivial to the kind of heat Mr. "B" would turn on us when news of Torrio's murder got to him.

I could think of lots of places I had a fifty-fifty chance to stay away from the American authorities, but right then there didn't seem a hole isolated enough to crawl into where "B" wouldn't turn us out—or bury us. I dozed off on the horns of this dual lamster's dilemma.

It must have been noon before I woke up and my arm and shoulder were cramped from the light weight of Jean's using it as a pillow. I looked down at her and my first thought was one of panic—we had to get the hell out of here—fast—or we'd never get out alive or without handcuffs.

"Mmmmm. You feel good, Marty," she murmured.

"We'll both feel better when we get far from here, baby. It's time to get on the road again. Still feel the same about coming along?"

"Stop asking, Marty. I *am* along."

"OK, baby, but before you keep coming 'along', let me clue you up on what it will mean—we'll be on the run from now on with one eye ahead and the other over the shoulder, doubting the future and dreading what's coming behind. The law and Mr. "B" will be both waiting around any curve ahead and always, always creeping up from behind. There won't be any ties with the past except memories—not even a postcard. There won't be any new friends because every stranger will be a possible bull or a paid torpedo from Mr. "B". How do you like that picture?"

"Marty, you're my past—and my future. I don't want to hear any more about grimness of life on the lam. It's been grim most of the time already."

It's been "grim" but even living a day at a time in an isolated Central American village has been better for me than the fate which would have been mine. And it's a better fate for Jean than that of Mar-

cia. We don't even see a newspaper from the states and, as I ran down for Jean, the past is only a memory—brought to life occasionally through a newscast on the radio. When boredom of the tropics becomes other than a routine part of life our mutual escape is the needle. We're its slaves in our own prison—a temporary escape from a haunting fear of apprehension which I know will come some day. Even a passing plane or rare incoming boat brings thoughts of how long and searching are the arms that still reach out for us.

One newscast brought word of another lamster—made that way legally through deportation to a European country—the great Mr. "B" eventually fell and Uncle Whiskers finally exiled him to his native country.

His threat—to a degree—to American life and welfare was removed. But to me, and to Jean, it remains. Jean's only consolation—from her own inborn philosophy—may perhaps sum up what's left, "que sera, sera."

As she still says, "We have each other—even if just for today, tomorrow may never come."



MANHUNT'S

Gun Rack



Colt Woodsman

The COLT WOODSMAN .22 caliber automatic pistol is one of the finest sporting and target pistols. The Woodsman's magazine holds ten .22 long rifle cartridges . . . regular or high speed. Ruggedly built, and dependable as a side-arm on hunting and fishing trips, the Woodsman possesses as well the balance, smooth action and accuracy necessary for high scores on the target range.

HE WAS waiting when Marty Valentine hit the bricks, sitting in a government car across the street from the Ad building, smiling and waiting. Marty looked over at him, grinning leanly. Eleven years and it was still Stevens. And the Mounties liked to brag.

Stevens waved out the window of the car at him. "Ride?"

Stevens started the Chevy, easing out into the traffic. "Any place special?"

"Downtown," Marty said. "I've got to find a room—a cheap one."

"Twenty-five dollars and a card-board suit, hmm?"

Marty nodded. "And I'll have to find a job. Know anyone who wants a good ex-accountant? I was

A Patient Man

It was Stevens who'd sent him up. And it was still Stevens who met him when he got out . . . eleven years later.

BY DAVE HILL

Marty shrugged, "Taxpayers money." He walked over to the opened door and eased into the car.

"You're looking good," Stevens said dryly. "Cigarette?"

"Must be the quiet life." Stevens was still Stevens. Dry, tenacious, unswerving. "Sticky" they called him. Marty grinned a little at that—it fit. Eleven years and Stevens was still on the job, grayer, heavier, but still patient, waiting.

good you know."

"Why work? You've got a lot of money."

"Have I?"

"One million dollars, according to the books." He whistled. "That's what the record says—exactly one million and fifty-one dollars. Too bad you got caught—that was a sweet job of embezzling."

"Eleven years worth."

Stevens turned professional in a minute. "Look, Valentine," he said,

"You're forty-two, you've done eleven years in the joint. You can't make over eighty bucks a week again. Why don't you use your head?"

"Such as?"

"Such as getting off that money. We know you've got it stashed someplace. In a hole, or a bank, or buried, or something. You can't spend it—you know that as well as I do. We've got every number on the bills. The first one you break, you'll be nailed. And that'll be the end of your parole."

"Meaning back to the joint, hmm?"

"You did eleven on a thirty," Stevens said. "You hardnose us and we could see you did the other nineteen." He shrugged. "On the other hand, our department could be helpful—if you want to be helpful. We could make a . . . well, a . . ."

"A fair exchange?"

Stevens nodded. "We could set you up in a good job, get you off paper. Maybe even kick in with a little reward."

Marty threw his cigarette out the window. "What's a fair exchange for eleven years?" He grinned. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Stevens."

Stevens drove on in tight silence until they came to town. "Front Street good enough?"

Marty nodded. "Just right. I always liked the hotels here you know—so economical."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

Stevens pulled up to the curb by a park full of old men with dirty beards and foul smells to them. He reached in his pocket, pulled out some bills, and slipped them to Marty.

"A hundred bucks," Marty said softly. "You don't want that money too bad, do you?"

"It's the top my expense sheet will take," Stevens said bluntly. "But we'll get that money back—I'm a patient man."

"Me too," Marty said. "I've had practice."

At least the money let him get a room that was clean. A nice room in a boarding house run by a sweet old lady type. And a job came easily too—at a magnificent sixty-five dollars a week. But, anyone could run a drill press.

The room lasted three days. When he got home from work the third day, the little old lady was on the stoop. "I'm sorry Mr. Valentine, but a Mister Stevens was here and . . ." She let her hands flutter. "I try to run . . ."

"I know. A respectable house." Marty went up to pack. So he wanted to play rough, did he?

And, when Marty walked into work the next morning, he could see it coming in the boss's cool eyes. "A mister Stevens called on me and . . ."

"Save it," Marty said. "There's more jobs."

When he walked out the door

with a three-day check a few minutes later, Marty wasn't even surprised to find Stevens waiting. He got in the car without even saying hello.

"Hows tricks?" Stevens asked.

"You play dirty, don't you?"

"We're willing to deal," Stevens said.

"How much?"

"Twenty thousand."

Marty opened the car door. "See you around."

Stevens grinned. "You bet you will. I'm a—"

"I know, you're a patient man."

Seven rooms and nine jobs later, Marty realized just how patient Stevens was. Very patient—too patient for his own good. He called the regional office with change from the latest of his one-day checks. Five minutes later, Stevens met him in a quiet bar.

"Still want to deal?" Marty asked.

"Always."

"Fifty grand," Marty said. "Or I'll get it and burn every goddamn bill."

"You wouldn't do that," Stevens said.

"Wouldn't I?"

"You might."

"Deal?"

"I'll have to talk to the chief," Stevens said. "I can't guarantee anything but . . ."

"But you think so, is that it?"

"That's it."

"And my parole?"

Stevens backed away. "Wait a minute now. I don't—"

"Fifty grand for me, no parole, and a waiver against any further action."

"You drive a hard bargain," Stevens said.

"For a million that's cheap."

"All right," Stevens said. "When?"

"Your office—at two o'clock. I'll have it all but my fifty grand. You better have the release papers and the waiver ready."

"They will be."

Marty grinned, walking out of the bar. Fair exchange? It just might be at that. He ran over the next couple hours mentally. Cable to Switzerland, travel bureau, airport, all checked.

Stevens was waiting at two, papers on his desk. Marty sat down, laid the bank draft on the desk. "I couldn't get cash."

"I didn't think you could." Stevens slid a government check over to him. "We keep our word. Sit tight now while I have that check verified. I hope it's for real."

It was. "I figured you'd have it over there," Stevens said. "I didn't think you'd be fool enough to keep registered bills. But you still couldn't have spent it. We could have kept you on parole for nineteen years yet, you know. By then, you'd be too old to enjoy it."

Marty nodded. "Yeah, I guess

you're right. It'd be pretty hard to suddenly start dropping hundred dollar bills around on parole, wouldn't it?"

Stevens slid over the other papers on the desk. "Here's your discharge and the waiver—you earned it."

"I guess I did," Marty said. "Eleven years, huh?"

"You guys never learn," Stevens said, leaning back in his chair. "You think fifty grand is worth eleven years? I'm a patient man, but I couldn't—"

Marty stood up suddenly and looked at his watch. "Sorry—I've got to go." He turned for the door,

then stopped with a grin. "Did you say that fifty grand wasn't a fair exchange for eleven years?"

"Is it?"

"Hell no," Marty said.

"You guys never learn though," Stevens repeated.

"I guess you're right," Marty said. He started out the door, then turned again. "By the way, did you know that the interest on a million comes to over five-hundred and fifty bucks a *week*? You figure that out for eleven years of fifty-two weeks each, huh? You're a patient man." He winked. "I've got to catch a plane to Acapulco."



Gambler's CROSS

BY ROBERT MCKAY

He made the choice . . . the choice between the bookie business and his girl friend. He went legit and got himself a lot of trouble.

WHEN my girl told me I'd have to choose between her and the bookie business, that was one thing. But when I made the choice and then got fired from the first legitimate job I'd ever held in my life, that was something else. I didn't blame my boss; he had no choice. We were working on government contracts and I should have known it would be only a matter of time until a routine security check uncovered my record.

I packed my drafting tools, avoiding the glances of the men I had

been working with, telling myself I didn't care what they knew or what they thought. But I was remembering how the world had looked an hour ago, and wondering how things could go from great to lousy in sixty minutes.

I thought about Kathy and the way she looked the day I met her—in the public library where I was hunting for a biography of a painter. And if that sounds out of character for a bookie, perhaps it was. But I had been a reader all my life and I got interested in art while in prison.

When I asked her about the painter she looked up from her desk in the art room. "I'm not a librarian," she said, smiling, her eyes deep and brown and unafraid and soft. I fell into those eyes and disappeared without a trace.

She said something else but I couldn't hear her. Then she looked down at the papers on her desk and I fought my way slowly back to the surface. I floundered around for a while, not knowing where I'd been, just knowing I wanted to go there again. She looked up. I dove for those sweet brown pools, but this time they were covered with a thin sheet of ice.

I don't remember how I cleared those first big hurdles—telling her I was Jack Bailey, finding out that she was Kathy Clayton, that she was twenty-two, that she had worked as a clerk in the library since graduating from high school. Finally asking her for a date and having her say No, asking her again—No; and again and that time she said Yes.

I realized I'd be a dead pigeon if she knew I worked for a gambler. So I told her I was a roofing salesman, hoping she didn't know any more about roofs than I did.

And I damned sure didn't tell her that I had once done a stretch for burglary. Ex-cons had no place in Kathy's world. Anyway, the burglary bit was over and done with. Except for Sam Morrison, nobody in the city knew I'd been in prison.

I was only a kid when I got sent

up. I'm not making excuses, understand; but considering the home and the neighborhood I came out of, it's not too surprising that I landed in prison. My mother was the lush in our family. She drank herself to death when I was ten years old. My old man was just a good natured slob who was never able to do anything right.

At eighteen I graduated from the streets to the South Side Social Club. There I met Benny Massio and began to learn the burglary trade. Benny was an expert safe man—he could take a couple of special jimmys and a lead mallet and a cold chisel and rip the average burglar-proof safe in an hour.

I worked hard at burglary and—believe it or not—I never thought of what I was doing as "wrong." I knew I'd go to jail if I got caught, but what I mean is that my conscience never bothered me. In our neighborhood there seemed to be two choices for us kids: We could go to work and live the rest of our lives the way our fathers lived theirs, or we could join the Smart Money. The smart-money boys were the gamblers, ward politicians, loan sharks, and the big time pimps. Since it took patience and connections to get anywhere in those rackets, some of us who were in a hurry tried to cut a corner. We became burglars and stickup men.

When Benny and I got caught ripping the Standard Bakery safe the judge handed Benny ten years. I got

off with a five-spot because it was my first felony. Good behavior cut my fin to thirty-nine months. And in those thirty-nine months I learned a lot. Part of it I learned in the prison school by taking courses in drafting and engineering. The rest I learned from Dan Loftus, a bald headed forger with a face as honest as Eisenhower's. "You're a smart boy, Jack," he said. "You don't want to spend the rest of your life in the can, and that's what you'll do if you try to beat the cops. Why don't you hook up with the gambling syndicate?"

It sounded all right except that I had no connections, and you don't go to work for the Syndicate by filling out an employment application. But when my release date rolled around, Dan Loftus solved my problem. He was nuts about painting and art and he had taken a liking to me because I was maybe the only guy in the joint who would listen to his theories on art. He gave me Sam Morrison's name and sent word through the grapevine that I was on my way.

Sam Morrison was a Syndicate captain who handled all the action on the north side of the city Dan Loftus had sent me to. He started me out delivering punchboards and pick-and-win tickets. I'd been with him a year when I met Kathy. By then I was a collection man for the parley cards. My salary was two bills a week.

The trouble was I got hooked so deep on Kathy I began to feel guilty

about lying to her. In a moment of over-confidence I told her a little bit about the parley cards. Kathy went off like a skyrocket. In her scale of values bookies evidently ranked somewhere between child-molesters and dope peddlers. This made no sense at all to me and the windup was that we both said things that would be hard to unsay.

For two weeks I fought with myself trying to decide what I wanted: the big money and the easy life—or Kathy? I couldn't have both. So I argued and fought and sneered and laughed and got drunk, and was right back where I started. I knew what I wanted and I also found out what I had to have.

I waited outside the library one day for Kathy. She frowned when she saw me, then shrugged and said, "Hello, Jack."

She looked just as she always did: porcelain fragile, nylon strong, glass cool, brandy warm. I let the wonder of her soak into me as though my eyes were sponges. I swallowed and said, "Let me drive you home."

She wouldn't look at me and her voice was uncertain. "Why are you doing this, Jack?"

I grinned, relaxed now, teasing her—feeling very good inside and knowing it was all right to tease her. "Come on! Don't be such a prude."

"I'm *not* a prude."

"How come you won't ride with an ex-bookie then?"

She shook her head and smiled, her lips quivering, her eyes filmed

with tears. "Are you sure, Jack? I mean are you sure that's what you want?"

I leaned forward and kissed her. Slowly the sounds of traffic filtered through the roaring in my ears. I lifted my head and met the interested gaze of an old lady in a velvet choker. She smiled encouragingly. I took Kathy's arm and hurried up the street to where I had parked my car.

When we stopped in front of the little house in the suburbs where she lived with her parents, I was reminded again of a minor puzzle that had bothered me from the beginning. The Clayton's house might have been called a cute bungalow thirty years ago; now it looked merely cramped and shabby. Kathy's father had his own business, a fair-sized camera store in the city, and he certainly should have been able to afford a better house than that for his family.

I had met him several times and liked him all right, except that he always seemed to be thinking of something else whenever he talked to me. He was about forty-five, a thin, bald man with tight lines around his mouth. I liked Mrs. Clayton better. She was cheerful and warm and had the same huge brown eyes and complete sincerity that had first attracted me to Kathy.

I used an old gambling connection to get a job as a junior draftsman and immediately learned that getting out of the rackets was a hell of

a lot easier than getting the rackets out of me. I tried to open myself up, to be warmer, to act the way the other square-johns acted. But a dark part of myself kept sneering at honesty, sneering at generosity, sneering at softness. I was changing, perhaps—but I had to work at it.

Three months later I asked Kathy to marry me and she said yes and then gave me the devil for spending too much on the diamond. Her mother kissed me and made me feel fine. Her old man controlled his enthusiasm. I didn't blame him for not being overjoyed; if I'd had a daughter like Kathy I'd have wanted something better than a junior draftsman for her too.

We set the date for February first. On December twentieth I came to work feeling great. And at 9:30 I was packing my tools and cursing my own stupidity for thinking I could cover up a prison record.

After taking my tools to my room I went out and walked around in the slush for a while. I ate lunch without tasting it and walked back to my room. Kathy's old man was there waiting for me.

I wasn't in the mood for any more surprises. I unlocked the door and went in the room and we hadn't even said hello.

"Jack," he said, "I've come to you because I'm in trouble. They sounded kind of funny at the plant about your being off today. You aren't in any trouble, are you?"

"We all got troubles," I said.

"What's your particular brand?"

"It's a long story and a messy one, but it all comes down to the fact that I need a thousand dollars before tomorrow noon. If I can't get it I'm going to have a bad-check charge against me."

I snorted. That camera business of his was worth maybe thirty-four thousand dollars. A guy like Mr. Clayton should have been able to borrow a thousand bucks over the phone from any bank in the country.

"I know it sounds crazy, Jack. But my business is mortgaged for every dime it's worth. My house is mortgaged. My car isn't paid for. I'll have to clean out the cash register tonight to meet my payroll and unless we have a big day I won't make it."

"If my life depended on it, which is not impossible," he said with a tired smile; "if my life depended on it I couldn't raise a thousand dollars in the next twenty-four hours."

"Well, I can let you have the dough," I said. The breath went out of him in a long sigh. He told me his story, and in the end it didn't surprise me as much as it might have.

Mr. Clayton was a gambler. One of the suckers. In the early days, when he was netting four thousand a year from his store, he blew a thousand on the ponies. When the store brought him eight thousand he lost three thousand. The past year the store had earned twelve thousand and Mr. Clayton had thrown half of it to the bookies. "You've no

idea what the gambling fever can do to a man, Jack. It's worse than alcohol. It's a kind of insanity."

I let that pass. The only thing that surprised me was that he and I had never run into each other in a horse room. But it was a big city, and he probably did most of his betting over the phone. "How come you need it by tomorrow noon?" I asked. I was afraid that a thousand dollars wouldn't help him any more than would one bucket of water if his house was burning down.

"I gave a bookie a post-dated check for that amount. I've owed him the money for a week but today he got nasty about it."

"You know you can stop payment on that check, don't you? Gambling debts aren't legal in this state."

"I know—and I'm afraid to try it. This is a violent and dangerous man I'm up against."

I frowned. The Syndicate was not usually in a hurry to kill the geese that laid the eggs with the hundred-dollar bills inside.

"Who is this guy?"

"You wouldn't know him, Jack. His name is Izzy Kline."

I knew him well and I understood now why Mr. Clayton was worried. Izzy Kline was a very bad actor who had recently been put in charge of the downtown horse rooms. He was a throwback to the old on-the-muscle gangster of thirty years ago. Touchy and impulsive as a grizzly bear. Mr. Clayton had a right to be scared.

"There's one more thing," he said

sheepishly. "Could I ask you not to tell Kathy? She has known about the gambling for a long time, but I'd hate to have her know that I borrowed money from you."

After he left I couldn't sit still. Why did things always seem to work out this way? The nice guys were weak and they got hurt. Bastards like Izzy Kline and Sam Morrison got rich. I had given up the rackets and now I was out of a job and tomorrow I'd be close to broke.

I thought of Sam Morrison chuckling over the rows of figures that came out of his adding machine. Many an evening I had sat in his office watching him count the thick wads of bills his collectors brought in. Most of the money went into a canvas sack that Morrison himself would later deliver to the main office downtown. Some of it went into a green cash-box.

In my mind's eye I saw Morrison stacking bills in the cash-box, swiveling in his chair to open the ancient safe, putting the box in the safe, slamming the door and twirling the combination. And in my mind's eye I saw myself peeling that safe like a can of sardines.

I'd get Mr. Clayton's thousand bucks for him, and I'd get some satisfaction for myself. But I'd have to hurry. There were tools I needed and preparations to make and it was already close to three o'clock.

Two hours later I was spreading my purchases on my bed. My biggest

problem would be the wrecking bar. It was three feet long and heavy. I also had another bar which was shorter and lighter, a ten-pound lead mallet, a cold chisel, a punch, and the best small hatchet that money could buy. And I had a flashlight, extra batteries, three leather belts, and several rolls of adhesive tape.

It took me an hour and a half to make a crude harness out of the belts and tape. The harness hung from my shoulders with loops under the arms to support the wrecking bars and a loop in front for the hatchet. The screwdriver and the mallet I shoved into the waistband of my pants and tightened my belt on them.

The street doors of Morrison's office building closed at nine o'clock. I made it out there by eight-thirty, parked a couple of blocks away and walked slowly toward the building. If any of the boys saw me now it was forget about the safe and just keep walking.

I took the elevator to the floor above Morrison's office and hid in a broom closet until ten o'clock. Then I hurried down the stairs and went straight to the door of the optometrist who had an office adjoining Morrison's. The door lock snapped instantly under pressure from the small bar. I couldn't go through Morrison's door because Morrison's door was bugged.

In less than half an hour I had a hole cut in the wall big enough for me to wriggle through into the

gambler's office. And then I discovered that ripping that safe without Benny Massio to point out the weak spots was a brutal, backbreaking job. At eleven-thirty when I pulled the last bolt my hands were cut and bleeding, my muscles ached from putting pressure on the big bar, and I was covered with sweat and powdered concrete.

My fingers trembled with exhaustion as I took off my gloves and counted the thin sheaf of bills in the green cash-box. Jesus! I wanted to split Morrison's smug face with the crowbar. His expenses must have run high this week. The money in the cash-box added up to less than four hundred dollars. I had gambled ten years of my life against three hundred and seventy stinking bucks.

Bending wearily to pick up my tools, I glanced into the safe and saw the canvas bag.

It shouldn't have been there. In all the time I worked for Morrison I had never known him to leave the bag in the office over night. Maybe he'd be back to pick it up!

Frantically I tore open the knotted mouth of the plump canvas sack and dipped into it for the six hundred and thirty bucks I needed. I pulled out a bundle of bills. They were fifties. I leafed off thirteen of them. The bundle looked as thick as ever. In the dying rays of the flashlight the money glowed more and more brightly green. I tried to drop it back into the bag but my fingers wouldn't let go of it.

I stuffed the fifties in my pocket, picked up the money bag and the tools, and wriggled back through the hole into the optometrist's office. It was quarter to twelve.

Down the back stairs I went in a soft rush, and out into the cold sweetness of the night. I didn't meet a soul on the way to the car. In my room I stripped, standing on newspapers to catch the cement dust. After a shower I counted the money. The bag held \$23,000 including the fifties I had pocketed. I started to feel very jumpy.

By two o'clock I was twenty miles out in the country, burying the money and tools near a deserted picnic ground Kathy and I visited that fall. The earth was frozen so hard I had to chop a hole in it with the hatchet and crowbar. I burned my clothes in one of the stone barbecue pits. With more time I could have found a better place to stash the money, but the big thing was to get rid of all the evidence in a hurry. It would take an eye witness to convict me now, and I sure wasn't going to squeal on myself.

The next day Mr. Clayton accepted the thousand dollars with a kind of dignity and quiet determination that surprised me into thinking he might still have a chance to kick his habit after all.

I went to the Clayton's for dinner that night, and since Mr. Clayton was working late there were just the three of us. I was lifting my last forkful of dutch apple pie when the

front door opened and Mr. Clayton lurched into the dining room, his face white as snow and sweat running down his cheeks as though the snow was melting.

At first I thought he was sick drunk. He couldn't talk—just made wheezing grunts. When we got him into the bedroom and out of his sweat-soaked clothes and I saw the way his stomach looked, I knew what had happened to him as surely as if I had seen every punch. The big red and purple bruises scared Kathy and her mother. But when they wanted to call the doctor, Mr. Clayton grabbed his wife's wrist and shook his head. "No!" he grunted. "No doctor. Be . . . all . . . right."

After his tortured muscles relaxed he told us a story of being strong-armed by a gang of hoodlums and robbed of his wallet. It wasn't much of a story, but I guess it was the best he could come up with and he stuck to it.

"I want to talk to Jack," he said finally. The women looked at each other and then Kathy looked at me with a look that said she suddenly realized I might be mixed up in what had happened to her father.

"Where did you get those fifty-dollar bills, Jack?" asked Mr. Clayton as soon as we were alone.

"From a friend of mine. Why?"

Wincing, Mr. Clayton hitched himself up on the pillows. "Well, Izzy Kline came back this evening and told me that they had been stolen from a Syndicate safe. He

took me to a hotel room and two of his men half killed me because I wouldn't tell them where I got the money." Behind the pain and the questions in Mr. Clayton's eye there was an amused and glittering spark. My opinion of Kathy's dad zoomed. But his loyalty was all wasted effort. Kline and Morrison would check everybody associated with the Claytons, and when they came to Jack Bailey they would stop.

"What made him think those bills came from a burglary?"

"I don't know, but they must have been marked in some way. He seemed very positive." Mr. Clayton shook his head grimly. "These are bad men, boy. Maybe you'd better leave town for a while."

"How come you didn't call the cops?" I asked.

"They threatened my wife and daughter, Jack. That's why."

"And that's why I can't leave town, Mr. Clayton. The whole deal's a mistake and I know how to straighten it out." I grinned and stood up. "OK?"

He looked worried now, and anxious. "I don't know, son. These are evil men. Be careful . . ."

I went out of the room feeling good that he called me son, and feeling bad about the beating he had taken for me. Kathy and her mother jumped up when I came into the living room.

"Did he tell you what really happened?" asked Kathy.

"No."

"Did he tell you about the gambling?" This from Mrs. Clayton.

"A little," I said cautiously.

And then they took their hair down and told me all about their problem child. They laid it on the line—warning me that I was coming into a family that included an irresponsible lunatic.

I listened with half my mind, pretending it was all news, trying desperately to figure my next step. There was no question that I would have to give the money back. My problem now was how to do it without ending up dead.

It was snowing when I came out. Big soft flakes dropping straight down. I couldn't figure any smart plays on the drive home, but then everything was taken out of my hands when I started up the stairs to my rooming house. Two men came quickly across the street. Sam Morrison said, "We want to talk to you, Jack." The other man was Izzy Kline.

They walked me across the street to Morrison's black Cadillac. Morrison got behind the wheel and Izzy pushed me into the back seat and climbed in after me. It was warm in the car and light enough so I could see the hard gash of Morrison's mouth and the shine of his slick black hair as he turned to face me. Izzy's face was a pale round blob under his gangster-style fedora.

"I want that twenty-three G's, Jack," said Morrison in a conversational tone. I didn't answer, and Izzy

swung his right fist in a short awkward punch that caught me high on the forehead and jarred me.

"Cut it out, Izzy!" said Morrison sharply. "I told you we were going to handle this one my way."

"A-a-ah! There's only one way to handle a smart punk," said Izzy in his hoarse, slurring voice. "And you're a smart punk, aren't you, Bailey? A smart, safecrackin' punk!"

"I want my money, Jack," said Morrison, still speaking softly. "And that's all I want. Can you pick it up in five minutes?"

I shook my head.

"Well, bring it to my office before ten in the morning. I've got a late date that can't wait." He grinned like a shark.

"Listen, Sam—we've got this smart punk now. Let's get the money now. How the hell do we know where he'll be by ten o'clock tomorrow." Izzy was disgusted and in a boiling rage.

"He'll be there." Again I saw the quick glint of Morrison's teeth. "You'll be there, won't you, Jack?"

I nodded.

"We don't even have to make any threats, do we, Jack?"

I shook my head. No he didn't have to make any threats. And I knew I was very lucky to be getting off like this. Morrison wasn't doing it out of the kindness of his heart; I decided I was getting a break solely because Morrison wanted to make Izzy toe the line.

"You almost got Clayton killed.

You know that?" said Morrison.

I nodded again. He didn't have to go on with this.

"That's a very pretty girl, Jack. You're a good picker. You want to be sure you take care of that girl, Jack."

"Now look, Sam—!"

"Take it easy, Jack," said Morrison, still smiling. "Nothing's going to happen to the girl. We don't even know the girl." He reached over and opened the door for me. "See you tomorrow, Jack."

In my room I sat in a straight chair for a long time, full of murderous and helpless anger. I hated and feared and despised Sam Morrison and Izzy Kline. Their arrogance, their naked cruelty—they took the guts out of a man and left him weak and ashamed.

And I had been one of them. I realized that in truth I had been one of them until tonight. Izzy was close to the mark when he called me a smart punk. The burglary had been absolutely inexcusable and I felt sick now at how easily I could have been caught and the price I'd have had to pay. As it turned out I wasn't paying anything. Mr. Clayton had payed. And Kathy and her mother had payed.

Sitting there in my room with it all in my mind—all bright and sharp where I could take a good look at it—I watched the lure of the smart money dissolve. I understood for the first time and for all time that going for the smart money meant going

along with Sam Morrison and Izzy Kline. It meant *being* a Sam Morrison or Izzy Kline.

I stood up and put my coat back on. I was feeling pretty good, not worried now and I grinned to myself, admitting it, not afraid anymore. I didn't know why I was suddenly not afraid, but I knew I wasn't.

The snow had stopped and the night was colder now, and very still and clear. There was no moon, but the stars were winking icy clear and the night was filled with pale light that came up out of the new snow. My car door creaked as I opened it. And as I put the key in the switch, the door opened again and Izzy Kline with a gun in his hand came in and sat down beside me.

"We'll go get the money now, smart punk."

I looked at him—the pale blob of face under the wide hat brim, the short barreled revolver in his hand. "Don't try nothin'" he said. "I'd get almost twenty-three G's worth of kicks out of killing you."

On the way out of the city I considered wrecking the car. But Izzy would pull the trigger and he was too close to miss. I figured I was safe until Izzy actually had the money in his hands. Then he would kill me, of course; and dump me in the woods. And in the morning Izzy would have the money and Morrison would think I had skipped town and God have mercy on Kathy and her mother and dad.

When we turned under the trees

onto the rutted dirt road that led to the picnic area it was like driving in a tunnel. The star shine didn't get down through the bare branches of the trees and at the edge of the headlights was nothing but blackness.

I stopped the car and snapped off the lights. Izzy said, "Hey!" in a hoarse, startled voice. "Sit still!" he yelled. Then the light from the snow began to seep dimly into the car and he said, "Ain't you got a flashlight?"

"No," I said hoping he wouldn't open the glove compartment where the flashlight was.

"Give me the keys," he said. I handed them to him. "Well, let's get the dough," he said, opening his door. I got out on my side and we stood looking at each other over the hood of the car in the faint, ghostly light. It was cold in the woods—no wind, but cold enough to bite through my coat immediately. Izzy shivered and jabbed the gun at me. He wasn't wearing gloves and he had his other hand deep in the pocket of his black cashmere coat. "Come on, he snarled, confident again. "What the hell we standin' here for?"

"I got nothing to dig with," I said.

"A-a-ah, you just dug the hole last night. What's to dig."

"I buried it deep," I said. "And the ground froze today. I need some kind of a tool." He stared at me, his face a dim expressionless blob. "I'll get the jack handle," I said, moving to the rear of the car. He came around on the other side and

watched me fish the hinged jack handle out of the black cave of the trunk.

I walked away from the car into the woods toward the place I had buried the money. Izzy followed closely. The ground looked different with the new snow on it and at first I wasn't sure myself where the hole was. Then I saw the big oak tree I had used for a marker. I walked past it about fifty feet and stopped and looked around. "This snow has changed everything," I said.

"Why, you smart punk!" Izzy's voice was loud and ragged.

"I'm not kidding you, Izzy," I said moving on. "I thought I knew right where—" He kicked me, hard, in the back of the thigh. Falling, I twisted quickly and looked up at Izzy. He stood with legs planted wide, squat and shadowed and threatening, the gun a black smudge in his hand.

"Get up," he said in his hoarse, slurring voice. "If you don't find that hole, you smart sonofabitch, I'm going to shoot you in both knees and leave you here to freeze to death."

I got up and limped in a circle, studying the ground. For half an hour I worked back and forth, stopping occasionally to probe a mound of snow. Izzy switched the gun from his right hand to his left, blowing on his free hand, opening his coat and putting his hand under his arm to warm it.

"Dammit, Bailey. I can't take

much more of this." The words came out stiffly, as though his lips were frozen in a straight line. I could hear his teeth chattering. And I knew it was now or never. It wasn't a question of getting away from him. I could have dived into the trees with little possibility of being hit by a bullet from his gun. But he had the car keys and he would get back to the city and to Morrison long before I would.

Turning to my left, I worked toward the small clearing around the oak tree. "Hey! This is it!" I said, poking at the snow.

"You sure?" His voice was petulant. The cold and the lonely darkness of the woods were getting to Izzy. Now if I could just keep him on the hook a little longer . . .

I started digging furiously with the jack handle. By wasting most of my energy on the iron-hard ground at the edge of the hole and gouging out only an occasional frozen clod from the real hole, I managed to work myself into a sweat without deepening the hole more than a few inches. Izzy stood perhaps fifteen feet from me, shuffling his feet clumsily, shifting the gun from hand to hand, breath steaming as the cold bit deeper into his bones. I was loose and warm now.

The next time he shifted the gun to his left hand I did the same with my jack handle—and with my right hand I flipped out the loose clods of dirt in the hole. My gloved fingers closed on what I was looking for.

I glanced up, looking off to the side of Izzy, and shouted, "*Don't shoot, Sam!*" The oldest trick in the book; but Izzy, in his frozen reverie, automatically jerked his head around. I ripped the hatchet out of the dirt and threw it at him. And in the same motion I dove for him, swinging the jack handle. The hatchet hit him first. His revolver blasted once, lancing flame at the sky.

Then he was falling away from me, silently, the gun flying from his hand as he fell backward full length in the snow. Holding the jack handle like a club, I circled him and grabbed the gun.

"All right — get up!" He didn't move. Like a lumpy sack he lay dark against the snow. The wide-brimmed hat had fallen off and his head looked too big. As I watched, his head grew bigger. When I went close to him I was glad the light was bad. The hammer head of the hatchet was sticking out of his face where his left eye should have been. The hatchet handle curled tight against his neck. Blood made a widening black splotch in the snow.

In the dim, pearly light under the trees everything was black and white and impersonal. Then I saw the steam rising from the black pool of his blood and the earth seemed to tilt under my feet.

I turned away from him and got the canvas money bag and the rest of the tools out of the hole. Then I went back to Izzy, knowing I had

to have the hatchet, wishing I could just leave it there. As I walked toward him I felt a gust of wind. The clearing darkened as though someone had dropped a huge blanket over it.

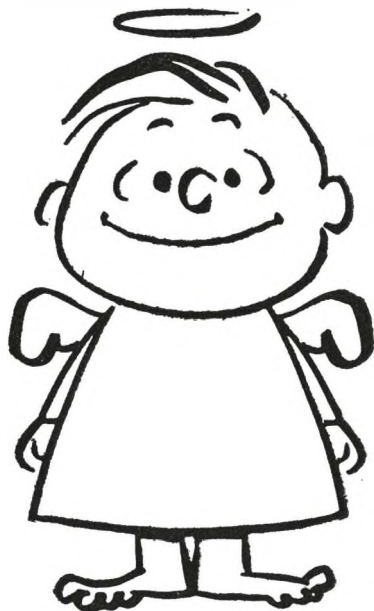
With the wind came snow-thick driving snow that laid a film on Izzy's body even as I bent and wrenched the hatchet free. I

scrubbed the hatchet in the snow as well as I could, and picked up the bag and the tools and headed for the car.

At the edge of the little clearing I looked back. Izzy was a vague mound in the driving whiteness. I was sorry for a lot of things; but I hoped it would be a long, cold, snowy winter.



EVERY GOOD GUY

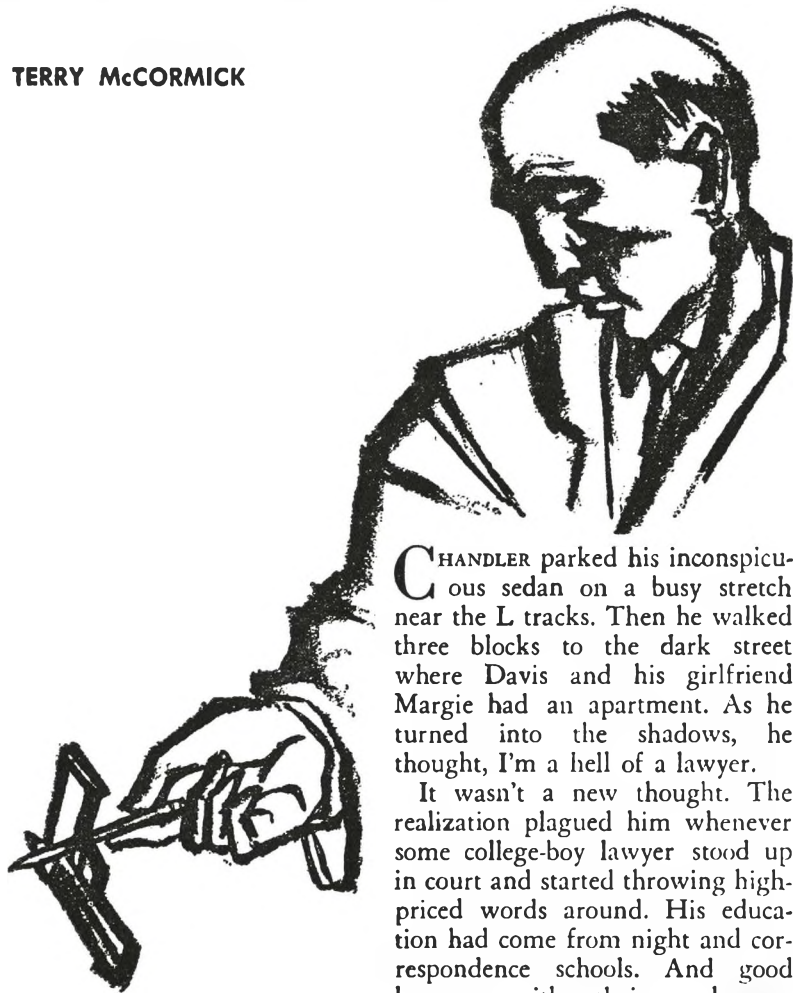


**GIVES THE
UNITED WAY**

FOR THE DEFENSE

Chandler's client was guilty. Chandler knew it and so did everyone else. But Chandler knew he would win this one.

BY TERRY McCORMICK



CHANDLER parked his inconspicuous sedan on a busy stretch near the L tracks. Then he walked three blocks to the dark street where Davis and his girlfriend Margie had an apartment. As he turned into the shadows, he thought, I'm a hell of a lawyer.

It wasn't a new thought. The realization plagued him whenever some college-boy lawyer stood up in court and started throwing high-priced words around. His education had come from night and correspondence schools. And good lawyers, with their mahogany desks and big soundproof offices,

weren't forever being appointed to defend some guilty bastard. They got paid for it.

Joey Davis, was guilty all right. One night two months ago he'd gotten fed up wrestling warehouse freight, had himself half a dozen beers and a couple of shots, and plugged old man Filcher while trying to rob the cash drawer in his grocery.

"The gun went off in my hand," Davis had pleaded during their first meeting at the jail. "Honest, I didn't think it was loa—"

"Save it for the barber who shaves your head!" Chandler growled and saw the watery blue eyes opposite him close sickishly for an instant. "Where'd you get the gun in the first place and where is it now?"

"Look, Mr. Chandler—"

"No, you look!" Chandler growled again. "I'm *your* lawyer, appointed by the court, but never theless. . . . I don't owe the D. A.'s office a damn thing, 'cept maybe a kick in the collective ass. They've beat me three times running, but this case I'm gonna win."

The gun, a foreign-made .25, belonged to a friend, a friend who fortunately had his own troubles. He wasn't about to admit supplying an excon with the right time. Davis had tossed the gun into a lot on North Clark.

"A distinctive weapon," Chandler thought aloud, "a cinch to identify. Let's hope the police don't get hold of it before I do."

"You'll get rid of it for me?" The words came wrapped in a tight, uncertain whisper.

Chandler rose to leave and smiled. "Anything for a client, Joey. That's my motto. Kid, chin up."

He found the tiny automatic—one cartridge left in its magazine—half hidden in a welter of weeds and blindly discarded beer cans. But things weren't meant to be that simple! The district attorney's office, with only a circumstantial case, had begun leaking publicity. A prospective juror couldn't read through his favorite paper without being reminded that Joey Davis was a two time loser. While in prison, for armed robbery, he had displayed vicious tendencies.

They can afford to be surreptitious as hell, but, the lawyer decided, I can't.

* * *

Only a handful of reporters showed up for Chandler's hastily called news conference. Smelling of sweat and fresh gin, they crowded the loft office and stood around, talking impatiently among themselves. Chandler unwrapped, lit and inhaled a thin cigar. As he exhaled, he began:

"My client's a very unfortunate young man. The kind who makes enemies easily." He perched on the splintery edge of the old desk that had come with the office. "It's our

contention that one of these enemies is framing him, attempting legal murder.

One reporter coughed, but said nothing.

"Our killer overlooked something, though—one thing!" Chandler paused, let his words mix with the cloud of blue smoke trying to escape out the skylight. "Davis has an alibi. On the night in question, he was at home."

"With Margie what's-er-name?"

Chandler shot back, "That's right. And she'll swear to it in court."

"Sure, Counselor." It was the same reporter. "With her playmate on his way to the chair, what else could anybody expect?"



What else? Chandler's mind repeated now as he knocked at the apartment door. The apartment was at the end of a narrow, green-lit hall like the halls in a hundred other furnished buildings. He had entered and would leave again by the fire stairs.

The girl who opened the door was like a hundred others, too. Not as young, not as pretty as she seemed at first glance.

"Can I come in, Margie?"

She nodded, puzzled. And when the door was closed again, she said, "I wasn't expecting anybody. You said—Mr. Chandler, you said you'd see me tomorrow in court."

"I know. But I can't have you coming down with witness stand jitters over night."

"I'll be okay." Her gaze refused to meet his. "There's some coffee on the stove."

"Sounds good," he admitted, his words persuading her into the kitchenette. "Remember Mr. Appleton?"

She considered. "He's bald, with a nice smile?"

"That's the bucko," Chandler said to the girl's back. "Tomorrow, Margie, after I finish, he'll have the right to question you."

There was no expression in the voice that asked, "Will he do it?"

"Yes—"

The coffee maker clattered metallicly against the stove top.

"—probably he will."

A wind-like rush of courage swept through her words. "Then I'll have to tell him! That Joey and me were right here together for that whole night."

Chandler didn't answer. He picked up the evening paper, already folded open to the story. Fact, claim, counter claim. It was all there. Complete down to a smeared photo of Margie and her home address. There for the eyes of the jurors and a million other people scattered across the city.

"They all know that you love Joey," he said at last. "They even know just about what you'd say on the stand. And everyone expects it to be a lie."

She tried to say something, but no words came.

"A jury would never believe you."

"But," she began, "That means

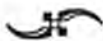
"No," he assured her, "I've found another way. Margie, don't you see? A way of convincing the law that someone *is* out to get Joey. Someone who wants to see him die."

And then the lawyer was sudden-

ly silent. Because he sensed that the girl was about to turn and face him, and because he'd already taken the foreign-made automatic from his pocket.

The distinctive little gun still loaded with a single tiny bullet. A bullet police experts would match to the ones Davis had actually fired.

Now Chandler picked up a sofa pillow, muffling the shot that would save his client's life.



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the outfit

*The Outfit was after Parker. But Parker was an old pro.
He knew how to hit the syndicate where it hurt the most.*

A Novelette

BY RICHARD STARK

WHEN the woman screamed, Parker awoke and rolled off the bed. He heard the *plop* of a silencer behind him as he rolled, and the bullet punched the pillow where his head had been.

He landed face down on the floor. A stubby pregnant .32 was clipped to the springs under the bed, like a huge black fly standing upside down, and Parker's hand was reaching out for it before he hit the floor. He spun away a half-turn from the bed, raising the .32 so the other one would know he had it, but he didn't fire. This was a hotel room, and the .32 wasn't silenced.

A half-turn, and he reversed his spin and rolled under the bed, hearing the second bullet thud into the floor just behind him. His arms were tucked in close to his body and he rolled all the way across and came up on the other side, seeing the other one just stooping to fire under the bed. Sitting there, Parker threw the .32. The grip hit the other's forehead, just above the nose. He grunted, and dropped out of sight. Parker bent and looked through under the bed. He was lying over there on his face.

After the first scream, the woman had been silent. Now she stared

slack-faced as Parker got to his feet and went around the bed. He was tall and lean, with corded veins and hard tanned flesh. His torso was creased by old scars, and his legs had a bony angularity to them, the muscles etched against the bone. His hands were big, thick, knotted with veins; they were made for gripping an axe, or a rock. When he picked up the .32 again, his hand made it look like a toy.

The killer lay on his face, arms and legs splayed out, as though he'd been dropped from a height. His gun was still in his right hand. Parker stepped on the wrist, then bent and got the gun. It was a .25 calibre target pistol, useless for almost any serious work. Except to come up close and kill a sleeping man. The silencer had been made for a gun with a larger barrel, and a jury-rigged clamp arrangement had been fashioned to fit it to the small barrel of the .25.

Parker stuck his foot under the killer's chest, pushed, and rolled him over. He flopped over like a fish, his right arm swinging over and thumping the floor like a sack. He had a narrow pale face, skimpy eyebrows, small nose and thin lips, prominent cheekbones and temples. He wore a short-sleeved white shirt with button-down collar, red and green striped tie, sharply-creased tan trousers with no cuffs, and highly-polished brown shoes with zippers instead of laces and floppy leather fringes to hide the zippers.

There was a purpling bruise on the point of his right temple, and a small cut in the middle of it gleamed carmine. Parker had never seen him before in his life.

The woman found voice again at last, and half-whispered, "Shouldn't we call the police?"

"Shut up a minute. Let me think."

It was a mess. She knew him as Charles Willis, absentee businessman with an income from a few parking lots and rental properties and gas stations here and there around the country. How could he square Charles Willis with a silent killer in the middle of the night? He had to give her a story, and she had to be convinced by it, and it had to give her a reason to keep her mouth shut. The law, too, would want to know why a professional killer had been aimed at Charles Willis.

The truth might do it, but he didn't know her very well, or how far he could trust her.

Her name was Elizabeth Ruth Harrow Conway. She was a good-looking woman, twenty-nine years old, with honey hair and golden flesh and the tall lush well-proportioned body of a voluptuous athlete. She lived on a combination of alimony from her ex-husband and atonement gifts from her parents. She'd always been rich, had always lived in places where only the servants worked, and she'd never had a problem that wasn't fashionable.

That much Parker knew about her. Also that she was fine in bed, and that she sometimes had a panther craving for brutality. He knew little more than that, and thought there was probably little more to know.

The killer made a small sound in his throat, and his head thrashed lightly on the floor. His blond hair was dry and limp. Sweat had broken out on his face, though the room was air-conditioned. He'd be waking up soon, and Parker had to have the woman squared away by then.

He saw her watching him, and was surprised at her expression. He'd expected fear and astonishment, but she looked—breathless. Pleased and excited, and curious. The way she always looked when they bedded together. Expectant. So; the truth. As little of it as possible.

There was a wooden chair with padded seat and back over by the blind window, the one with the air-conditioner in it. He went over and got it and brought it back and sat down on it. "Charles Willis isn't my name," he said. "I have another name. I use it in my work. You don't want to know about my work."

"What?" She frowned at him, and glanced down at the killer lying on the floor between them. "I don't under— You aren't Chuck Willis?"

"I am now, and here. When I'm not working, I'm Charles Willis. Here in Miami, or is Nevada."

"And when you are working?" She'd absorbed it faster than he'd expected.

He shook his head. "You don't want to know about that."

"But he—" she pointed at the killer "—he's from that other part of your life."

"That's right."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. I never saw him before."

"Oh. You mean he was just hired."

"That's right."

"And you don't want to turn him over to the police."

"Right again."

"I see." She reached out for the cigarettes on the night-table. She was nude, and when she leaned to reach for the cigarettes her breasts hung heavy for a hand. Sitting back again, they were firm again. She was a good animal.

She lit her cigarette and said, "I *don't* see. You aren't what you seem to be, but you don't want me to know what you really are. Whatever you really are, someone somewhere hired this man to kill you. Whatever you really are, it keeps you from wanting to be involved with the police. You want me to help you by being quiet, but you don't want to tell me what's going on."

He was silent. She studied him, frowning, but he had nothing to say. He sat and waited. While he waited, he watched the killer,

whose head had moved again but whose eyes hadn't opened yet. The bruise had stopped swelling, and was an unhealthy color. The carmine outline of the small cut had started to dull toward maroon as the blood clotted.

After a minute, he got to his feet. He had the .32 in his right hand, the silenced .25 in his left. He went over and put the .32 on the dresser, then went back and sat down and watched the killer again.

"All right," she said. "For now."
"Good."

She put her cigarette out, and nodded at the killer. "What about him?"

"We'll talk to him." He kicked the killer in the ribs. "You're awake," he said.

The killer opened his eyes. They were pale gray, gleaming faintly in the light from the table lamp on the nightstand. His face was blank, as though he had no attitude about what had happened to him. He said, his voice as blank as his face, "You can't turn me over to the law. You can't kill me, because you can't get rid of the body and you can't trust the dame. And you can't kill her because that would bring the law on you. You got to let me go."

"You can trust me, Chuck," she said. Her voice was low. She was half-smiling, and looking down at the pallid face of the killer.

Parker ignored her. He said to the killer, "Name of your contact. The guy who fingered me."

The killer shook his head, rolling it back and forth on the floor, doing it carefully, as though he were part of a balancing act. His face was still blank. "No," he said.

"And the name of your contact in New York. You work out of New York, don't you?"

"Forget it," said the killer.

"You can't go to the law either," Parker told him. He looked past the killer, over at the woman. "I've got to force the names out of him," he told her. "I don't like that kind of job. You want to try it? I'll tie him. And gag his mouth so he can't holler."

She smiled again, and leaned far over the edge of the bed, and looked down at the killer. "Yes," she said. "I've never done anything like that. I'd like to try." Her tongue peeked out past her lips. She moistened her lips, and looked down at the killer, and smiled.

Parker was pleased. He'd figured her right, every step of the way. He hadn't figured the unloading yet, but that would come when it was needed. When it was time to get rid of her, split with her, he'd find the way. Not kill her, just unload her.

He looked down to see if he'd figured the killer right, too. He had. The killer was staring up at the smiling face of the woman, balloon-like in the air over him. His pale eyes seemed larger, and the sweat had started on his face again. His fingers were clenching and unclenching out at the ends of his

arms, and his cheeks seemed hol-
lower, thinner.

Parker said, "What's your name?"

"Go to hell," said the killer. But his voice was higher and thinner, and not completely under control.

Parker got to his feet. "We'll use two of my ties," he said. "You. Get into the chair."

The killer didn't move.

Parker stepped on his ankle. The killer gasped, and Parker stepped off the ankle again and said, "Get in the chair."

The woman said, "Tell him to take his pants off."

The killer closed his eyes. His whole face seemed sunken now, and more pallid. He said, "Clint Stern. That's my name, Clint Stern."

Parker saw the woman pouting. She moved back against the pillow again and lit a new cigarette. She wouldn't meet Parker's eye.

Parker said, "Who fingered me?"

"Joe Menner."

"Who is he?"

"A collector. He collects from the books around the hotels."

"All right. Who gives you the assignments?"

"Jim St. Clair."

"In New York?"

"Yes."

"Where do I get in touch with him?"

Stern's eyes flickered, and his brow creased with worry lines. "You're making me dead, man," he said.

Parker said to the woman, "Maybe you'll get a chance at him after all."

Stern said, "I'll be dead anyway. What's the difference?" He sounded bitter, as though an injustice had been done him.

"I'm not talking about dead," Parker told him. "She won't let you die. Will you, Bett?"

She shrugged. She no longer seemed very interested. She knew Stern was going to give in without her doing anything. So did Parker. So did Stern. He said, "He runs a club in Brooklyn. On Kings Highway, near Utica Avenue."

"What's it called?"

"The Three Kings." Stern closed his eyes again. Every time he closed them, he looked like a corpse. He said, "You're killing me, man." He sounded tired, that was all.

"This guy Menner," said Parker. "You were supposed to call him when the job was done. Right?"

"Yes," said Stern.

Parker pointed. "There's the phone. Call him."

Stern sat up. Then he winced and put his hand to his bruised temple. He winced again, away from the hand, and looked bleakly at the spot of blood that had come off on his palm. "Maybe I got a concussion," he said.

"Move faster," said Parker.

Stern got to his feet, climbing up the chair. He moved as though he were dizzy. He stumbled when he moved away from the chair, and

almost fell down. He made it to the writing desk where the phone was, and leaned against the wall. He picked up the receiver as though it was heavy, and started to dial. Then he looked over at Parker and said, "What do I say?"

"Parker's dead."

Stern finished dialing, and lifted the receiver to his ear. He waited, looking dull-eyed, and from the middle of the room Parker heard the click and the metallic chatter when the phone was answered at the other end. Stern said, "This is Stern. Let me talk to Menner." There was brief metallic chatter again, and then silence. Stern leaned against the wall. Perspiration was streaming down his face, and his eyes looked heavier and heavier.

Finally, the phone chattered again, rousing him. He said, "Menner?" His eyes got brighter, feverish looking. He licked his lips. A kind of sick nervousness seemed to be pumping through him.

Parker watched him, and knew he was getting ready to tell Menner the truth. He whispered, "Remember the woman, Stern."

Stern slumped. He said, "It's done. He's dead." Questioning sounds. "No. No trouble." His voice was as flat and lifeless as his eyes. "Yes. All right, goodbye."

But he remained leaning against the wall, head bowed, phone to his ear. Parker went over and took the phone away from him and hung it

up. He said, "Where was that you just called?"

"Floral Court. Rampon Boulevard."

"What number?"

"Twelve. Twelve Floral Court."

"How many others there?"

"Five or six. It's a poker game."

"All right. You got any money? Stern! You got any money?"

"Not on me."

"Where you can get it?"

"Yes." He was acting now as though he'd been doped.

"You better get it and take off. South, out of the country."

"Yes."

"It won't do any good to try again. It won't work. And it wouldn't mean anything to the Outfit anyway. They're going to know you missed the first time, so they'll know they can't count on you."

"Yes."

"Take off," Parker told him.

Stern stepped away from the wall, and stopped. His eyes swiveled up in their sockets and he fell over on his face, falling loose and limp.

Parker shook his head, irritated. He said to Bett, "Wait here." He pulled a pair of pants on, grabbed Stern under the shoulders, and dragged him to the door. He pulled the door open and looked outside. It was quarter to four in the morning, and the hall was empty. Parker dragged Stern down to the end of the hall and opened the door to the interior fire stairs. He pulled Stern through and shut the door again.

A dim bulb faintly illuminated each metal landing up and down the stairwell.

Parker propped Stern up in the corner and checked his pulse. He was still alive, but not by much. When he'd fallen, he'd hit the same place on his head. It was bleeding a little bit again.

"Die someplace else," Parker told him. He pinched him and jabbed him in the ribs and snapped his finger against the underpart of Stern's nose. Stern came groggily out of it. His eyes were unfocused, and if Parker had asked him his name he wouldn't have known the answer. Or what the date was, or where he lived, or where he'd been born. But he could understand simple orders, and he could make his body move.

Keeping his voice low, Parker said, "Get on your feet."

Stern tried, but he couldn't do it alone. Parker helped him get upright. When he was up, he could stay up, one hand pressed against the wall. His head was down, chin sunk in his chest, but his eyes were still half-open. He could still hear.

Parker said, "When I go out this door, go down those steps there. Do you hear me? When I go out this door, go down those steps there."

Stern nodded minutely.

Satisfied, Parker stepped back and opened the door. He stood in the doorway and watched Stern take the first step toward the des-

cending metal stairs. He turned away, closed the door behind him, and walked back down the hall. Behind him, he could hear the muffled thumping as Stern fell.

He went back to the room and told her, "I'll be back later. I've got to go get this straightened out."

"Let it wait a few minutes," she said. She was sitting nude on the bed, her feet curled under her. She was smiling at him.

He didn't really have the time. He looked at her, and knew it would be a while before he had another chance; he'd be busy for the next week or two. "It can wait," he said, and went over to the bed.

Half an hour later he was ready to leave. "I'll be back in a couple weeks," he told her.

"I'll be waiting," she said.

2

In the center of the U was a dry concrete fountain, littered with papers. The three sides of the U were Floral Court, with latticework supporting tired vines across the open end, separating the court from Rampon Boulevard. By day, Floral Court was pink stucco, with green morning it was black, with one square of yellow light spilling out from one window, framing the dry fountain.

No air conditioners here. The windows were open, and breathing sounds of sleepers mingled in the middle of the U, punctuated

by the flat clatter of chips from the yellow window at the back.

Parker came silently through the opening in the latticework and stopped to take the awkward .25 from under his coat. The .32 would have been better, but he wanted to return the .25. He moved again, close to the stucco wall, passing the open windows and the sounds of breathing.

The door marked 12 was just to the left of the lit window. Parker passed it and crouched to peer over the windowsill. Inside was a tiny box of a living room, with a wide archway to an equally tiny box of a dining room. The dining room was dominated by a long table, around which sat six men, playing seven card stud. A chandelier over the table threw glaring light on the players and the cards.

Any one of the six could have been Menner. All were stocky, fortyish, sour-looking, with the pale complexions of permanent Florida residents. They spoke only to announce their bets, not calling one another by name.

Parker considered. He had to get inside. The window was no good; too much light spilled to it, and two of the players sat facing it. He straightened, moved to the side, and cautiously tried the door. As he'd expected, it was locked. So he'd have to take a chance on the back. He moved away, retracing his steps around the U to the latticework, and on out to the sidewalk.

Rampon Boulevard was deserted. This part of it was lined on both sides with stucco U's, all of them like Floral Court. Parker turned left and walked down to the corner, counting courts. Floral Court was fourth from the corner. Parker went down the sidestreet and turned at the driveway that ran behind the courts, separated from the courts by rows of garages. The darkness back there was almost complete, with only a sliver of moon in the sky.

He went between two garages and came to the rear of Floral Court. Here, by day, the pink stucco was crumbling and faded, the rear doors were grimed with age, the little patch of ground between court and garage was weed-pocked dirt. By night, it was a black emptiness.

No light from number twelve leaked out to the back. Parker had to go by sound, hearing the faint noise of the chips. He found the rear door and the rear window, and both were locked. But the wood of the doorframe was rotten; Parker leaned his weight against the door and felt it give. If he didn't have to worry about noise, he could go through this door in two seconds.

He had a pocket knife. He took it out, opened it, and forced the blade between door and frame till he found the lock. Then he pulled on the knob, pulling the door back away from the frame, gouging the

knife into the soft wood around the lock bolt. The wood made small cracking sounds, but it gave, and then the bolt was free, the blade under it. Parker pushed gently, and the door opened. He stepped through and pushed the door to behind him.

He was in the miniature kitchen. An open door on the right led to a bedroom, which he could barely see. Ahead, a yellow crack outlined the swing door that led to a short hallway. The hallway was flanked by the bathroom on one side, the second bedroom on the other. The dining room was straight ahead.

Parker pushed the swing door open slowly, till he could peer through at the dining room. Only one of the players was in sight, at the head of the table. He was concentrating his full attention on the cards. Parker slipped through the doorway, getting the .25 into his hand again, and strode quickly to the dining room. He stood in the entrance and said, "Freeze."

Six faces spun to gape at him. He let them see the gun, and said, "Face front. Look at your cards. Quick!"

They did as they were told. One of them, looking down at his cards, said, "You're making a mistake, fella. You don't want to knock over this game."

Parker said, "Menner, collect the wallets."

One of the six looked up. So that one was Menner. He stared at Par-

ker, and suddenly recognition struck him and left him ashen-faced. He sat gaping.

"Fast, Menner," Parker told him.

One of the others muttered, "How come he knows you, Jake?"

"Shut up. I'm waiting, Menner."

Menner held his hands out in front of his face and shook them, as though clearing away cobwebs. "Stern," he said. "Stern."

"You'll see him in a few minutes. Collect the wallets. The rest of you, keep your hands on the table, your eyes on the cards. Menner, you reach into the pockets for the wallets. You don't want to bring out anything but wallets."

The one who'd spoken before now said, "Do like he says, Jake. We'll take care of him later. We don't want any trouble here."

Menner obediently got to his feet. He went around the table, reaching into the other players' pockets, bringing out the wallets. Parker told him, "Put them in your coat pockets. Your own wallet, too. And the bills from the table."

"Listen," said Menner. His voice was shaky. "Listen, you don't under—"

"Shut up."

Menner had all the wallets in his coat pockets. He looked baggier than before, and forlorn, like a half-deflated balloon. He stood waiting for Parker to tell him what to do next.

Parker said, "Tell them why I'm here."

"Listen, honest to Christ, it ain't the way—"

"Tell them why I'm here."

The player that did all the talking said, "Do what he says, Jake. I'd like to hear it myself."

"They—they sent down this gun from New York, for this guy here, this Parker. They said I was to—I was to finger the job. That's all it was, I swear to Christ."

"The rest of it," said Parker.

"That's all! What else, for Christ's sake?"

"You fingered me in the first place. That's why the gun came down."

The player said, "That's between you and Jake, buddy. Don't take it out on us."

"It's all the same Outfit. Give me your coat, Menner."

"For Christ's sake, Parker, I—"

"Give me your coat."

Stuttering, Menner took the coat off. Parker reached out for it, waiting for Menner to try flipping it in his face, but Menner was cowed. He handed it over with no trouble, and stepped back to take his medicine.

Because it was such a light untrustworthy gun, Parker pulled the trigger three times. He turned and went out the back way, clearing the back door before Menner hit the carpet or the other five got out of their chairs.

It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the blackness, then he was gone. No one followed.

Parker sat at the writing desk with pen and paper, frowning. He wasn't used to writing letters:

"Frank,

The Outfit thinks it has a grievance on me. It doesn't. But it keeps sending its punks around to make trouble. I told their head man I'd give them money trouble if they didn't quit, and they didn't quit. You told me one time about a lay you worked out for that gambling place outside Boston, and you'd do me a favor if you knocked it off in the next couple weeks. I'm writing some of the other boys, too, so you can be sure they'll be too busy to go looking for you special. I don't want a cut and I can't come in on the job because I'll be busy making trouble myself. You can always get in touch with me care of Joe Sheer out in Omaha. Maybe we'll work together again some day.

Parker"

It took three drafts to get the finished letter. He read the final version through, decided it was all right, and nodded to himself. Then he went on to the other letters. They were easier, because he just copied the first one word for word, except for the particular job he wanted each man to do.

He did six letters, and then looked out the window and saw it was daytime, the dry fountain

looking like a remnant from a lost civilization. It was not quite seven o'clock, and he was back in number 12 Floral Court again. If those other poker players were anxious to get their money and wallets back, they might be able to check back through Menner's friends or other people in the Outfit and find out where Parker was supposed to be staying, so it would be a good idea to stay away from the hotel for a while. But nobody would be in any hurry to come back to Floral Court. There was a body in the bedroom closet.

Parker had run as far as the back yard, and then down to the left a distance of three courts. Behind him, he'd heard the poker players emerge. One of them had a flashlight, and all of them boiled on out past the garage. He waited, between two courts, and after a while they came back and went into the apartment. He kept waiting, until he heard three cars start up out front on Rampon Boulevard. Then he went back in. The lights were off, the place was empty, and Menner was in the bedroom closet. The poker players would be running around establishing alibis.

In the sideboard in the dining room he found the stationery and envelopes. He pulled the shade down in the living room, sat at the dining room table, and started writing letters.

This had all started a year ago. Parker had been in on a robbery

with four other guys, including one named Mal Resnick. Resnick was due for a fifth of the pot, but he needed it all, to pay off a debt he owed the syndicate, so he killed all his partners and took off. But Parker wasn't as dead as Resnick had thought; he followed Resnick to New York and evened the score. Resnick had already turned the money over to the syndicate, the Outfit, and Parker went to the Outfit to get it back. They didn't want to give it to him, so he used pressure, disrupting the New York organization, which was run by two men, Carter and Fairfax. Parker killed Carter, but still the Outfit wouldn't pay off. So he went to Fairfax and told him:

"I've worked my particular line for eighteen years. In that time, I've worked with about a hundred different men. There's you people with your organization, and there's us. We don't have any organization, but we're professionals. We know each other. We stick together. And we don't hit the syndicate. You're sitting there wide open, you can't squeal to the law, but we don't hit you. If you don't give me my money, I write to those hundred men. I tell them, the syndicate hit me for forty-five G. Do me a favor and hit them back once, when you've got the chance. Maybe half of them will say the hell with it, but the other half will do me any favor they can make a profit out of."

They weren't sure whether it was bluff or not, but they agreed to pay. With Parker standing over him, Fairfax telephoned Bronson, head of the national organization, and Bronson came to terms. He put the forty-five thousand in a trap, and Parker walked through the trap and came out on the other side with the money. Knowing the Outfit would now try to hunt him down and kill him, he went to a plastic surgeon who worked outside the law, and came out with a new face.

But now the Outfit knew about the new face. And knew also about the cover name, Willis. And had sent Stern. So Parker was writing his letters.

He did six of them now, then went over to the window, pulled the shade away, looked out at the decaying fountain, and decided he'd waited long enough. He tucked the letters into his coat pocket, got the .25, stripped the silencer off it, and went to the bedroom closet. He pulled Menner out onto the bedroom floor, wiped his own prints from the gun, and closed Menner's hand around it. It might not hold up as suicide—the angle was probably wrong, and Menner had two too many bullets in him—but it should help to slow the law down. And the gun, if it could be traced at all, couldn't be traced past Stern to Parker.

Out back, he threw the silencer into a garbage can. Then he

walked around to Rampon Boulevard and caught a cab. "Hotel Maharajah."

There was no one he recognized in the lobby. He went on up to his room, and it was empty. As far as he could tell, no one had been in it. He packed his suitcase, stuffing the six wallets into it, and went downstairs to check out. This time he was going to settle things with the Outfit once and for all. This time he was going straight to Bronson.

4

The woman with orange hair sat on the porch and watched Parker come walking down the rutted road toward the house. A barn stood back of the house to one side, and a long garage was on the other side. Rusting automobile parts were scattered on the baked clay between house and garage. A lone dead tree stood gray and naked in front of the house, with a rusty pulley arrangement fixed to a thick lower branch. Except for the woman with orange hair, the place looked deserted.

It was November, but the land was dry and the air was hot. After three miles, the suitcase was heavy. The rutted road made walking difficult. It would have been easier if he'd left the suitcase in Cordele, but he didn't want to go through there again.

As he walked past the dead tree

with the pulley on it, a lean mongrel hound rose up on the porch next to the chair the woman was sitting in. He stretched and yawned, then looked up at the woman and looked out at Parker. He watched Parker and waited, not barking or moving or doing anything.

Parker stopped where he was, and dropped the suitcase onto the ground. He said, "Chemy around?"

The woman said, "Who wants him?"

"Parker."

"Parker, you say?"

"Parker."

She lifted her head and called, "Elly!"

A boy of about fourteen, as lean and silent as the dog, came out of the house and stood there. The woman said to him, "Go on over to the garage, see if Chemy ain't there. Fella name of Parker lookin' for him."

Parker said, "Tell him I got a new face."

The boy turned his head and gazed at him, the same way the dog gazed. The woman frowned and said, "What the hell kind of talk is that?" She was very fat, forty or forty-five, with a fat white face under the orange hair. She was wearing a dark blue dress with a pink flower print.

"Plastic surgery," Parker told her. "He'll have to recognize me by voice and build and what I know."

The woman shook her head. "Go on, Elly," she said. To Parker she said, "You can wait right there."

The boy came down off the porch and walked around the garage. He was wearing dungarees and nothing else. He was tanned as dark as an Indian, and his sun-faded blonde hair was shaggy and long. He opened a door in the side of the garage and went inside, closing the door after him. The door squealed loudly in the silence, and seemed to affect light oddly. Instead of a shaft of sunlight angling through the opening and lighting the interior, it was as though a shaft of darkness pooled on the ground outside the door when it was opened.

Parker said, "You want a cigarette?"

"Thank you, no," said the woman.

"I think I'll have one," he said. He wanted her to know what he was reaching for. She nodded, and he slowly took cigarettes and matches from his pocket. Then he stood smoking in the hot dry air. The dog watched him, unwinking.

The squealing door opened again, and the boy stood in the pool of darkness, gazing at him. Then he turned and said something to somebody inside. Parker waited.

The boy came out to the sunlight again, and a short skinny man in overalls came out after him. The man had dry black hair and a narrow face. His bare shoulders were

pale and covered with freckles. He came walking over and stood studying Parker for a minute, and then he said, "Well I'll be darned. Got yourself a new face, eh?"

"It's your brother I wanted," Parker told him.

The skinny man frowned. "What's that you say?"

"I asked for your brother."

"The hell," said the skinny man.

"You asked for Chemy."

"And you're Kent."

"What makes you think so?"

"Go tell your brother I want to buy a car. Like the Ford with the bullet holes in the trunk."

The skinny man scratched his head. "You sound like Parker," he said. "You sure as hell act like Parker. And you know the right stuff to be Parker. But you don't look like Parker."

"Plastic surgery. I told your wife."

"Lemme see if Chemy's here."

"I'll come along. It's hot out in the sun."

The skinny man frowned and said, "You got all Parker's brass, I'll give you that much. What would you do if that dog there took to leap at you?"

Parker glanced at the dog. "Break its neck," he said.

"Yuh. And what if I was to whip out a pistol and start shooting down on you?"

"I'd take it away like Handy McKay did that time."

The skinny man flushed, and on

the porch the woman started to laugh. She had a high Betty Boop sort of giggle, completely different from her speaking voice. The skinny man turned to her and said, "Shut your face!" and she stopped immediately. He spun back to Parker. "I think you're a phony, Mister," he said. "I think you better get off this property."

Parker shook his head. Over the skinny man's head, he called to the woman, "You want to keep that dog right there next to you." Then he started walking toward the garage. The skinny man hollered and made as if to come after him, but then he stopped. The woman rested her hand on the dog's head, and watched Parker cross the yard.

The side door of the garage opened again, and a man came out with a shotgun cradled on his arm. He was short and skinny, like the other one, with the same kind of narrow face and dead hair, and was similarly dressed in faded blue bibbed overalls. They were obviously brothers, but what was petulance in Kent's face was strength in Chemy's. He came out and closed the door after himself, and said, "Stop right there, friend."

Parker stopped. "Hello, Chemy," he said.

Chemy looked past him at Kent. "Well? Is he Parker or ain't he Parker?"

Kent didn't answer at first. Parker half-turned and looked back at him. "Am I, Kent?"

"Yuh," said Kent. He said it reluctantly, and glared at the woman, as though daring her to laugh again. But she was silent, her face carefully blank as she watched them, her fingers scratching the top of the dog's head, between its ears.

To his brother, Chemy said, "Get us a drink. Come on in, Parker." He led the way back into the garage, and set the shotgun against the wall beside the door.

The garage was big enough to hold four cars. At the moment, there was a fifteen year old red Ford pickup truck parked down by the far wall, and an orange Volkswagen next to it on this side. The Volkswagen rear lid was open and the engine had been removed and was lying on two-by-fours behind the car. The back seat had been taken out, too, and leaned against the side of the pickup truck. All along the back wall was a workbench, littered with tools and small parts and lengths of wire and pieces of metal. Automobile body parts were stacked here and there in much of the clear space, and two engines hung by pulley and chain from the roof beams. A small plastic radio on the workbench was blaring country and western music; a girl singer with a twang as bad as a harelip was singing about unrequited love.

"Well, now," said Chemy. "You sure changed your face around. But you're still mean as ever."

"That brother of yours needs a talking to."

Chemy shrugged, and grinned faintly. "If you were Parker, you'd do what you done. If you weren't, you'd let him chase you off the place."

Parker shrugged. It didn't matter one way or the other. He was just hot from the walk.

Chemy said, "Take a look down here at this VW. What do you think of this? A 57 Ford straight six engine in there in back, and redid Chevvy brakes. Think she'll move?"

Parker frowned at the Volkswagen. "No," he said.

"No? Why in hell not?"

"Where's your cooling system?"

"Right where the back seat used to be, with scoops down through the floor. 51 Plymouth radiator assembly, that fits real nice."

Parker knew he was supposed to think of every objection he could, so Chemy could show him how smart he was. He said, "Not enough weight for the power. She'll go like a motorboat, with her nose up in the air. You'd have to take corners at ten miles an hour."

"No, sir. I've weighted down that front end, so your center of gravity is right *here*." He touched a spot low on the side, just behind the door.

"That's pretty far back."

"Oh, she'll jounce, I know she will. But the weight is just far enough up so you can take corners

just about any damn speed you like."

Parker shook his head. "She'll jounce apart," he said. "She won't last a year."

"I know damn well she won't. But she'll last a month, and that's all she's wanted for. A car that looks slow but it goes like a bat out of hell. That's what this girl is. A special order."

"So everything's worked out, then."

"No, it isn't." Chemy frowned at the car. "One damn thing," he said. "You know what that is?"

"What?"

"I can't make her *sound* like a VW. I've tried all sorts of mufflers, I've run pipe back and forth underneath there till she looked like a plate of spaghetti, but she never does sound like a VW. You know that little cough-cough sound the VW's got? Your VW fires slow, is what it is, and I be damned if I can get the effect." He glared at the car again, shaking his head. "I'll get it," he said.

"Sure." Parker knew he would. Chemy made cars do whatever he wanted them to do.

"Sure," agreed Chemy. He turned away from the Volkswagen. "So what do you want? A car? anything special?"

"Just a car. With clean papers."

"How clean? To sell?"

"No. To show if I'm stopped for speeding."

"Takin' her out of the state?"

"Up north."

"All right, then."

The garage door opened and Kent came in, carrying three glasses and a bottle of liquid as colorless as water. He glanced sullenly at his brother and Parker, then went over to the workbench, set the glasses down, and poured three drinks.

Chemy and Parker went over and they all drank. It was good liquor, with a harsh woodsmoke taste on the tongue and a bright burning in the back of the throat.

Chemy set his glass down and cleared his throat. "How new?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter. But I'll be going maybe a couple thousand miles in it, so I don't want one ready to fall apart."

Chemy nodded. "When?"

"Now."

"Always in a hurry." Chemy grinned at his brother. "This Parker," he said. "Always in a hurry, huh?"

"Huh," said Kent. He was being surly, staring into his empty glass.

Chemy winked at Parker, finished his own drink, and said, "I got two in the barn right now, but not what you got to have. Both hot, both no good. I got to take a ride. How much you want to pay?"

"I'll go a thousand if I have to."

"Well, maybe not. You go set on the porch a while. Come on, Kent."

They went outside and Parker strolled over to the house while the two brothers went around behind

the garage. Parker went up on the porch and sat on the other chair. The woman grinned at him, showing spaces where she'd lost teeth, and said, "I guess I must of heard about you."

"Maybe," said Parker.

A six year old Pontiac station wagon with Chemy at the wheel and his brother beside him came around from behind the garage and drove off down the rutted road. Parker sat and smoked, waiting. The woman tried to start a conversation with him once or twice, but he didn't encourage her and she quit. The dog got up again after a while and went down off the porch and loped away around the house. A while later Parker got to his feet and went into the house and walked through rooms of sagging furniture to the kitchen, where he got himself a drink of water. He didn't see the boy. The woman followed him in, and stood in the kitchen doorway, smiling hesitantly at him, but not saying anything. When he started out of the kitchen, she murmured, "We got time."

He shook his head, and went back out on the porch. She stayed inside the house.

He waited three hours, and the sun was turning red way off near the western horizon when Chemy and Kent came back. Kent was driving the Pontiac this time, and Chemy was following him in a four year old blue Oldsmobile with

Alabama plates. Kent took the Pontiac around behind the garage, and Chemy stopped the Oldsmobile in front of the house. He got out and patted the hood and said, "Well? What do you think?"

"What do *you* think?"

Chemy grinned, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't know yet. I figure maybe. The car's hot in Florida and the plates are hot in Alabama, but the plates are off a LaSalle, so you got nothing to worry about."

"LaSalle? There's still some of them around?"

"Give me three days around here, Parker, I'll find you a Harmon."

"I don't want a Harmon."

"Sure not. I'll check this out for you. She run good coming in."

Kent had come around from behind the garage, and was now opening one set of doors in front. Chemy got back into the Oldsmobile and drove it into the garage, next to the Volkswagen. Parker walked over after him, went inside, and Kent followed, closing the doors.

The two brothers spent half an hour checking the car, mostly in silence. Every once in a while, Kent would say, "Look at this," and Chemy would bend close and peer, and then say, "It's okay." A few times, it wasn't okay, and the two would work to make it okay.

Finally Chemy said, "She's better than I thought. A southern car all the way, Parker, got none of your northern corrosion."

"I thought it was from Florida. What about salt corrosion?"

"*Stolen* from Florida. She used to have Tennessee plates on her."

"What about papers?"

"Right here. Just fill in whatever name you like."

Parker had a driver's license in his wallet, from the state of New Jersey, with the name Joe Flynn on it, from his last job, and so he wrote the same name on the registration. Then he said, "Wait a minute," and went out to the suitcase, still lying on the ground out in front of the house. He picked it up and carried it back to the garage. The woman with orange hair was on the porch again, standing there, watching Parker with no expression on her face.

Parker went into the garage and opened the suitcase on the workbench. There was an envelope in the side pocket of the suitcase, and he took it out and slid seven hundred dollar bills from it and put them on the bench. Then he put the envelope back in the pocket and closed the suitcase.

Chemy watched the whole operation, and nodded. "Good enough," he said. "Kent, open them doors."

Kent opened the doors, and the woman with orange hair was standing there. Her face was flushed now, and she looked upset. She said, "Kent, that bastard raped me."

Kent just stared at her. Chemy said, "Don't be foolish."

"God damn it, I say he raped me!"

Kent turned, looking shaken. "Parker? What the hell is this?"

Parker shrugged.

Chemy said to the woman, "Come off it, will you?"

Kent shook his head, looking goggle-eyed at his brother. "Why would she say it, Chemy? If he didn't do nothing, why would she say it?"

"Ask Parker if you want. Don't ask me."

Parker said, "She made the offer and I turned her down."

Kent looked ashen. "You're a lying son of a bitch," he said. He reached out and a wrench came into his hand, and he started across the garage toward Parker.

The woman turned her head and shouted, "Judge! Here, you, Judge!" And whistled shrilly through the gaps between her teeth.

"Leave that dog out of this!" shouted Chemy.

"Don't do anything stupid, Kent," said Parker.

"I'll break your head open, you son of a bitch." Kent was as white as the inside of a potato, and he shuffled slowly forward, the wrench held out from his body in his right hand.

Parker turned his head, saying, "Chemy, you want me to kill your brother?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Then call him off."

"I couldn't do that, Parker. I'm sorry, but I couldn't do that."

Parker frowned. "Chemy, do you believe that bag?"

"That isn't for me to say, Parker, I ain't the husband. I'm just the brother-in-law."

"Then you'll keep out, won't you?"

"Unless my brother gets hurt."

Kent said, "I won't be the one gets hurt." He dashed in suddenly, face contorted, arm looping up and over with the wrench.

Parker ran inside the descending curve, butting Kent in the face with the top of his head, kneeing him, chopping upward with the rigid side of his hand against the soft underpart of Kent's upper arm. Kent cried out and his arm went dead, and the wrench fell to the floor. Parker stepped back and hit him twice, and Kent went down after the wrench and didn't move.

The woman was screaming for the dog again. Chemy wasn't saying anything at all now, but was leaning against the side of the Oldsmobile and looking on with an expression of regret on his face.

Parker turned and strode swiftly to the side door. He grabbed up the shotgun and turned with it as the dog, lean and fast and silent, came loping on a long curve from outside into the garage. The woman was screaming at him to sic 'im, and Chemy was shouting for the dog to come back. But the woman's voice was louder and the dog

kept coming and leaped. Parker had the shotgun by the barrels and he swung it like a baseball bat. The dog leaped into the swing, and the wooden stock cracked against the side of his head and sent him tumbling away to the side, to crash into a pile of junk and lay still.

Parker turned the shotgun around and said, "My best move is finish the three of you."

"I'm neutral, Parker," said Chemy.

"No, you're not. That bag wants to see your brother get killed, Chemy. She sent him after me hoping I'd do it."

The woman shouted, "Chemy, I swear to God—"

"Shut up," said Chemy. "Parker never touched you."

The woman stared at him, open-mouthed.

Parker said, "Can you convince your brother?"

"Sure I can. Why should I?"

"I don't leave loose ends behind me."

Chemy thought it over, gazing down at his brother, unconscious on the floor. Finally, he said, "I guess I see what you mean. All right, I'll convince him."

"How?"

Chemy grinned bleakly. "She offered it to me, too, once or twice."

"Lies!"

They both ignored her. Parker said, "I'll wake him up."

"No. You take off. It'd be better if we was alone when I told him.

He'd be able to take it better."

"You are going to tell him."

"I swear it, Parker."

"All right." Parker put the shotgun back where it had come from.

Chemmy said, "You want to give this bitch a ride into town? I figure she ought to be outa here before Kent gets the word."

"She can walk."

"I guess she can at that." He turned and looked at the woman. "Get started," he said. "If Kent wants to kill you, I won't do nothing to stop him."

"You *took* the offer, you bastard!" she screamed at him.

Chemmy turned his back on her, saying to Parker, "You might's well take off now. Sorry we had all this fuss."

"I'll be seeing you."

Parker stowed his suitcase on the back seat of the car. The woman, after hesitating a minute, had gone away from the garage, headed for the house. Parker backed the Oldsmobile out into the late sunlight, turned it around, saw the flash of orange hair in the living room window, and drove away down the rutted road, driving slowly and carefully across the bumps and potholes. When he got to the blacktop road, he headed north. The Olds responded well. The upholstery was in rotten shape, the floor mats were chewed to pieces, and the paint job was all scratched up, but the engine purred nicely and the Olds leaped forward when he

pressed the accelerator. He lit a cigarette, shifted position till he was comfortable, and headed north out of Georgia.

5

There was a large poster frame beside the entrance. In it, a faggot with black wavy hair smiled over his bow tie. His eyes were made up like Theda Bara. Under the bow tie, it said, *RONNIE RANDALL & his PIANO—Every NITE!* Over the entrance, small spots shone on huge silver letters against a black background: **THE THREE KINGS**. Pasted to the glass of the entrance doors were posters saying, *No cover, no minimum, except weekends*, and *SALLY & the SWINGERS, Every Fri Sat Sun*. The building behind all this information was low and squat, concrete block painted a pale blue. Parker drove by twice, slowly, and then parked half a block away, in the darkness of a side street.

This part of Brooklyn was a tight gridwork of two-story row houses, with Kings Highway gouging a broad blacktop diagonal down through it, flanking itself with diners and bars and small warehouses and used car lots. At the corner holding The Three Kings, two right-angled grid streets intersected, with Kings Highway cutting through the intersection at a forty-five degree angle, leaving a big open space of blacktop in the cen-

ter, fed from six directions and capped by a swaying traffic light. The streetlights were all too far away to light the middle, which was open, bare, and black.

Eleven o'clock, Tuesday night. Darkness surrounded the intersection everywhere but at the pool of light in front of The Three Kings. Up and down Kings Highway were far glimpses of other cases of neon, but the grid streets were all shut up and dark, lined by trees.

Parker left the Olds in a slot with plenty of room in front, so he could take off without backing and filling, and walked to the intersection. November was ending, and it was cold, the wet bronchial cold of a harbor city. Parker's breath misted around him as he walked. He had a topcoat on, but no hat, and he walked with his hands jammed deep in his pockets. In his suitcoat pocket was the gun he'd picked up the day before in Wilmington, a short-barreled S&W .38 Special.

He was now ten days from Florida. Forty-seven letters had been written, twelve men had been talked to personally. Four of the twelve had said they'd been looking for an excuse like this for years. Five more had said they'd think it over, and three had copped out for one reason or another. Say a third would move, out of fifty-nine, twenty jobs. All within a month or less the Outfit would be hit twenty times, maybe more, all over the country.

Starting tonight.

Light washed down on Parker as he pushed open the door and went into the club. Inside, amber light feebly silhouetted the furnishings and customers. Two bartenders were blobs of white shirt behind the dark wood bar, but tonight one of them was unnecessary. Four women and three men were spaced along the bar, and the booths on the other side were all empty. In back, twenty or so tables were arranged in a semi-circle around a small platform, and on the platform Ronnie Randall, twenty years older than his picture and very tired, noodled at the piano. Three of the tables back there were occupied, served by one sour waitress in black dress and white apron.

Two of the women at the bar turned to look at Parker, but he ignored them and walked farther down to where a batch of stools were empty. He didn't sit down, but stood leaning against the bar. One of the bartenders came down and asked him what he'd have and he said, "Menner of Miami Beach sent me up to see Jim."

"Who?"

"Jim St. Clair."

"No, no, the other one."

"Menner."

The bartender shook his head. He was a burly man gone to fat. He said, "I don't know the name."

Parker shrugged.

The bartender studied him a minute and then said, "I'll see."

What'll you have?"

"Budweiser."

"Check." He turned and called to the other one, "Bud here. I'll be right back." He walked away, down to the end of the bar, raised the flap, went through, and turned right, through the door next to the door marked *Pointers*. Farther back, there was a door marked *Setters*.

The other bartender brought the beer and took Parker's money. After a while the first bartender came back and said, "Okay. Right through there where I went."

"Good."

Parker walked back, pushed open the door, and found himself in a short bright hallway with plaster walls painted green. At the end, where the hall made an L to the left, there was a door marked *Office*. He walked over there, looked to the left, and saw a gleaming kitchen, with an undershirted Negro sweating at the clipper. Parker pushed open the office door and went in.

It was a small cramped room with gray walls. A desk was shoved against one wall, a filing cabinet against the other, and there was a water cooler in the corner, all leaving a small circle of black linoleum floor space in the middle of the room. A short fat redfaced man looked up from the desk, where he had ledgers open, and said, "Well? Hah?" He waved his hands, both of them ink stained.

"Menner sent me to see you," Parker told him. He started to close the door, but the bartender had come along behind him and was standing there.

The redfaced man was saying, "Menner? Hah? Menner? Menner's dead."

Parker nodded. "I know. But Cresetti said you didn't know him, so I should use Menner's name." Cresetti was another of the poker players.

"Cresetti? Hah? Who?"

"He took over from Menner."

"And he sent you up here? Why? What the hell do I do with this Cresetti? What's this Cresetti to me?"

"You sent Menner that guy Stern," Parker reminded him. The bartender was just standing there behind him, leaning against the doorframe.

"Sure, Stern," said the redfaced man. "Sure I sent him. He screwed up, huh? That bastard killed him, how do you like that?"

Parker shrugged. "He killed Menner, too." He wasn't really paying attention, he was trying to decide what to do about the bartender.

"Sure he killed Menner. They tell me maybe he'll come here." The redfaced man squinted at him. "You think so? Nah, I don't think so. What's he got against me? Menner fingered him, yeah, Stern tried to knock him off, yeah, but what did I do to the bastard? Nothing.

I'm told, send a gun to this Menner in Florida, I do it. I don't know what this gun is supposed to do, I don't have nothing to do with nothing. So I figured this bastard won't bother me. He'll ignore me, right?"

"Maybe," said Parker.

"Maybe you're him," said the red-faced man. "Hah! That's a hot one, huh? Maybe you're him! Maybe I oughta have Johnny he oughta frisk you."

"I've got a gun on me."

The red-faced man grinned and ducked his head, multiplying his chins. He was full of fun. "Heeled?"

"Stern's gun," Parker told him. "I'm bringing it back. .25. with a silencer. Johnny can reach in my righthand coat pocket and he'll find it there." Parker waited for Johnny to come up behind him, close enough.

But the red-faced man waved his hands. "Nah, why? We enemies? We animals in a jungle? Just take off the coat, that's all. It's hot in here, who needs a coat? Gimme, I'll hang it up."

Parker shrugged. He took off the coat, handed it toward St. Clair, and dropped it on the floor just before St. Clair got it. Grunting, St. Clair automatically stooped for it, Parker kicked him in the face. His hand went inside his suitcoat as he turned, and when it came out it had the stubby .38 in it. Johnny was one step into the room, but he stopped when he saw the gun.

"Back to the door, Johnny," Parker told him. "Lean against the wall like before. Fold your arms. That's a good boy, Johnny."

Johnny stood there the way he was told. His face was expressionless. St. Clair was lying on the floor. Parker tugged on a drawer of the filing cabinet and found it locked. He'd been a little worried when he'd seen no safe in the room, but now he felt better. St. Clair kept his cash in a locked filing cabinet. He felt real sure of himself, St. Clair.

Parker went down on one knee, watching Johnny, and went through St. Clair's pockets till he found a key ring. Then, lefthanded, he unlocked the filing cabinet and went through the drawers. In the bottom drawer was a green metal box. It was heavy. Parker lifted it out, put it on the desk, and found the key that opened it. It was full of bills in stacks, with rolls of coins lined in the top tray. Parker removed the tray and put it on the desk; he had no use for coins. Then he removed St. Clair's wallet from his jacket pocket and dropped it in the box. He looked at Johnny again. "Yours, too."

Johnny moved very slowly, reaching around under the apron to his hip pocket and coming up with a worn brown leather wallet. Parker said, "Toss it on the desk."

"I got a lot of papers in there," Johnny told him. "Driver's license and stuff."

"Good," said Parker. It would go with the papers from the poker players in Miami. Legitimate papers were always useful. He dropped the wallet in the box and closed the top. Then he switched the gun to his left hand, picked up the box in his right, and swung it against St. Clair's head. It made a dull echoing sound. When St. Clair woke up, he'd be in a hospital.

Parker put the box down, got into his topcoat, and picked the box up again. "Now," he said, "we're going outside. We'll go through the kitchen and out the back way, and you won't say anything to that boy working back there, not even hello. You got me?"

"Not yet, but I will."

"Don't be brave, Johnny, you just work here. Let's go."

Johnny led the way and Parker followed, cradling the metal box. They went through the kitchen with no trouble and on outside. Parker closed the door and then it was pitchblack. It took Parker a few seconds to adjust his eyes, and then he saw and heard Johnny making a run for it to the left. He smiled thinly and followed. They both went around the building, Johnny crashing and blundering ahead, Parker moving silent in his wake, and then Johnny burst out to the brightly-lit sidewalk and ducked to the left around the corner of the building, toward the entrance. Parker made it to the side-

walk and walked the other way. In three steps he was in darkness, and then he was around the corner. He got into the Olds, put the metal box on the seat beside him, and drove away from there.

6

In spidery Gothic script, the nameplate on the ivory door read: *Justin Fairfax*. Parker touched his finger to the bell-button beside the door, then looked at the name. He hadn't moved. That was stupid, it really was. He should have moved.

Parker had been here once before, while trying to get his money back from the syndicate. Fairfax was the man in control of the New York area of the Outfit's operations, and it was in this apartment that Parker had spoken on the phone to Bronson, the man in charge of the national organization, the one who was now trying to have Parker killed. Parker wanted to get his hands on Bronson, which meant he would have to go through Fairfax.

The door opened. A heavysset distrustful man stood there, his right hand near his suitcoat lapel. He said. "What is it?"

Beyond him, Parker could see two twin brothers of the heavysset man lounging in the elegant living room, looking like burglars resting in the middle of a job. He said, "I've got a message for Mr. Fairfax. From Jim St. Clair."

"What's the message?"

"I'm supposed to deliver it to him personally."

"Tough. What's the message?"

Parker shrugged. "I'll go tell Mr. St. Clair you wouldn't let me in," he said. He turned away and headed for the elevator.

"Hold on."

Parker looked back.

"All right. You wait there, I'll see what Mr. Fairfax has to say."

"I'll wait inside. I don't want to hang around the hallway."

The heavyset man made an angry face. "All right," he said, "get in here."

Parker went in, and the heavyset man closed the door after him. They stepped down into the living room, and the heavyset man said to his twin brothers, "Watch this bird." Then he went on through the room and deeper into the apartment.

The twin brothers watched him. Parker stood with his hands in his pockets, his right hand holding the .38. His topcoat was unbuttoned, so he could aim the gun anywhere from within the pocket.

The heavyset man came back, followed by Fairfax. Fairfax was a tall and stately man, graying at the temples, with a clipped pepper-and-salt moustache. He was about fifty-five, and spent a lot of time in gymnasiums. He was wearing a silk robe from Japan and wicker sandals. He looked at Parker and frowned. "Do I know you?"

The new face came in handy sometimes. Parker said, "I work for Mr. St. Clair. You might of seen me around with him."

"Mmmm." Fairfax reached up and touched his moustache with the tips of his fingers. It was a habit he had, meaningless but a little irritating. "Well, what's the message?"

Parker glanced meaningfully at the bodyguards. "Mr. St. Clair said I should keep it private," he said.

"You can speak in front of these men."

"Well—It has to do with Parker."

Fairfax smiled thinly. "Parker is the reason these men are here," he said. "What about him?"

"He knocked over The Three Kings tonight."

"He what?"

"He beat up Mr. St. Clair and walked off with thirty-four hundred dollars."

"So he's in New York." Fairfax mused, stroking his moustache with the tips of his fingers.

"He told Mr. St. Clair he was coming to see you next."

"He did, eh?" Fairfax glanced around at his three bodyguards. He smiled again, with scornful amusement. "I think we're ready for him if he does come," he said. "Don't you?"

"No."

Parker fired through his pocket, and the heavyset man staggered back one step and fell over a table, knocking magazines to the floor.

The twin brothers jumped to their feet, but Parker pulled the gun from his pocket and they stopped, frozen in mid-gesture. Fairfax backed up till his shoulders brushed the far wall; his face was pale and thin-looking, and his fingers now completely covered his moustache.

Parker said to the brothers, "Pick him up. Fairfax, lead the way. Same bedroom as last time." The last time he was here there'd been bodyguards, too. They'd been locked in a bedroom while Parker said what he had to say.

The twin brothers went over to the man on the floor. One of them looked up, saying, "He isn't dead."

"I know. I caught him in the shoulder. You can call a doctor after I leave here."

Fairfax, looking stunned, led the way. The brothers followed, carrying the wounded man, and Parker came last. They went into the bedroom and the brothers put the wounded man down on the bed. Fairfax pursed his lips at that, but didn't say anything.

Parker said, "Guns on the floor. Move very slow and easy, and one at a time. You first."

They did as they were told. Then Parker had them stand leaning against the wall, hands stretched out to the wall, bodies off-balance, and frisked them, finding nothing more on them. He relieved the wounded man of his gun, picked up the three guns in

his left hand by their trigger guards, and motioned for Fairfax to precede him out of the bedroom. Parker locked the bedroom door, and he and Fairfax went back to the living room.

Fairfax had regained some of his composure. "I don't know what you hope to gain," he said. "You'll keep annoying us, and we'll keep hunting you. The end is inevitable."

"Wrong. You aren't hunting me, I'm hunting you. Right now, I'm hunting Bronson."

"You won't get at him as readily as you got at me."

"Let me worry about that. This is the second time I've met up with you, Fairfax, and you can live through it this time too, if you co-operate."

"Whatever you want, it's beyond my power to give it to you."

"No, it isn't. I want two things. I want to know where Bronson is now and where he'll be for the next week or two. And I want to know who in the Outfit is slated to take over if anything happens to Bronson."

Fairfax's smile was shaky. "It would be worth my life to tell you either of those things," he said.

"You don't have any life left if you don't. I got your bodyguards out of the way so you could tell me without anybody knowing. I'm making it easy on you."

"I'm sorry. This time you'll just have to kill me." His voice had a

quaver in it, but he met Parker's eyes and he kept his hand down from his moustache.

Parker considered. Then he said, "All right, we'll make it easier than that. You know who's next in line after Bronson. I want to get in touch with him."

"Why?"

"You listen, and you'll find out. What's his name?"

Fairfax thought it over. His hand came stealthily up and lingered at his moustache. He said finally, as though to himself, "You want to make a deal. All right, there's no harm in that. It's Walter Karns, from California."

"Can you call him now?"

"I imagine he's at his place in Los Angeles."

"Phone him."

Fairfax got on the phone. Karns wasn't at the first two places he tried. Fairfax finally got in touch with him in Seattle, and said, "Hold on a second." He hadn't identified himself.

Parker took the phone. "Karns?"

"Yes?" It was a rich voice, a brandy and cigars voice. "Who is it?"

"I'm Parker. Ever hear of me?"

"Parker? The Parker who's been causing all that trouble in the east?"

"That's the one."

"Well, well, well. To what do I owe the honor?"

"If anything happens to Bronson, you're in, right?"

"What? Well, now, you're going a little fast there, aren't you?"

"I'm going after Bronson. Maybe I can make a deal with him, so we'll both be satisfied."

"I really doubt that, you know."

"Maybe I can, maybe I can't. If I don't, you're next in line. What I want to know, should I spend any time talking to Bronson?"

"Well, well! So that's it!"

"Do I try to make a deal with Bronson?"

"He'll never do it, you know."

"You got any other reasons why I shouldn't try?"

"Hold on. Let me think about this."

Parker held on. After a minute, Karns said, "I think we could probably work something out, Parker."

"You people go your way, I go mine. You don't annoy me, I don't annoy you."

"That certainly sounds reasonable."

"There's more. I'll get Bronson. I got Carter one time, you remember him?"

"From New York? Yes, I remember that clearly."

"And I had my hands on Fairfax once. And now I'll get Bronson. That means, if I have to, I can find you too."

"You seem to have found me already. Who was that on the phone before you?"

"That's not part of the deal. I just want you to know the situation."

"I think I understand, Parker. Believe me, if you succeed in ending the career of Arthur Bronson, you will have my undying respect and admiration. I would no more cross you thereafter than I would shake hands with a scorpion."

Parker motioned for Fairfax to come close. Into the phone he said, "Say it plain and simple. If I get Bronson, what?"

He held the phone out toward Fairfax. They both heard the tiny voice say, "If you get Arthur Bronson, Mr. Parker, the organization will never bother you again."

Parker brought the phone back and said, "That's good. Goodbye, Mr. Karns."

"Goodbye, Mr. Parker, and good hunting."

Parker hung up. He turned to Fairfax. "Well?"

Fairfax stroked his moustache. "I've always admired Karns," he said. "And I never have liked Bronson. You'll find him in Buffalo. He's staying at his wife's house till you're found. Seven ninety-eight Delaware, facing the park."

"All right. Fairfax, listen. What happens if you warn Bronson?"

"I won't, you can rely on that."

"But what happens if you do? You have to let him know you told me where to find him. He wouldn't take any excuse at all for that."

"I'm not going to warn him."

"What about those bodyguards of yours? Can you keep them quiet about tonight?"

"They work for me, not for Bronson."

"All right." Parker went to the hall door and opened it. "Goodbye, Fairfax."

"Goodbye."

Parker boarded the elevator and rode down to Fifth Avenue. The park was in front of him, the Olds was illegally parked around the corner. He plucked the green ticket from under the windshield wiper, ripped it in half, and dropped the halves in the gutter. Then he got behind the wheel and drove around the park to the west side, where there were phone booths. He got into one and made a long-distance call.

The phone was answered on the fourth ring by a male voice. Parker said, "I'm looking for Arnie LaPointe."

"Speaking."

"This is Parker. I want you to give Handy McKay a message from me."

"I'm not sure I'll see him."

"If you do."

"Sure, if I do."

"If he's got nothing on, I'd like to meet him at Madge's in Scranton next Thursday."

"Who should he ask for?"

"Mr. Parker."

"What time Thursday?"

"Nine o'clock."

"If I see him, I'll tell him."

"Thanks."

He hung up and went back out to the Olds. He had two days to

get to Scranton and meet Handy, if Handy felt like sitting in, and then on to Buffalo, and Bronson.

7

Parker sat in his darkened room in the Green Glen Motel just north of Scranton, and looked out the window at route 6. It was 8:30 Thursday night; Handy was due soon.

He heard footsteps coming along the cement walk, and then a rapping at his door, and a voice called, "Parker, it's me. Madge." He shook his head and got to his feet. He'd have to talk to her.

Madge ran the Green Glen Motel. She was in her sixties now, one of the rare hookers who'd retired with money in the bank. Running this motel earned her a living and gave her something to do and indirectly kept her connected with her original profession; most of the units here were rented by the hour.

Parker opened the door and she came in carrying a bottle and two glasses. "Turn the light on, Parker. What the hell are you, a mole?"

Parker shut the door and switched on the ceiling light. "Sit down," he said, because he knew she would anyway.

Madge was bone-thin, with coarse white hair cut very short in Italian style. She wore black wool slacks with shadow-sharp creases, and a white blouse with large black buttons down the front. She put the

glasses down on the bureau and held up the bottle for Parker to see. Haig & Haig. "Just off the boat," she said, and laughed. She had gleaming white false teeth. Inside the young clothes was an old body, but inside the old body was a young woman. Madge wouldn't let herself be old. It was 1920, she was as young as the century, the Great War was over, Prohibition was on, money was everywhere; it was a grand thing at the very beginning of the Jazz Age to be alive and young and a high-priced whore. It would be 1920 around Madge till the day she died.

"You want ice?" she asked him. "I can go get some ice if you want."

"Never mind," said Parker. She couldn't stay long. Handy was due soon.

She splashed liquor into both glasses, handed him one, and said, "Happy times."

He grunted. The liquor, when he tasted it, was warm and sour-sharp. He should have had her go for the ice.

She went over and sat on the bed. "What a sourpuss," she said. "I just can't get used to that new face, Parker. You know, I think it's even worse than the old one."

"Thanks." He went over and looked out the window again. When Handy got here, he'd have an excuse to throw Madge out.

"Did I tell you Marty Kabell was here last summer? He had some blonde with him, Christy or some-

thing. He had a moustache, too . . .”

She talked away, talking at his back as he stood looking out the window. She told him who she'd seen in the last year, who she'd heard about, where this one was now, what happened to that one. She was full of information. Some of the names she mentioned were people Parker didn't know; Madge thought all the people she knew also knew one another. One big happy family. It was part of her still being twenty years old.

A car turned in from the highway and he interrupted her, saying, "You got a customer."

"Ethel's minding the store." Ethel was a cow of a girl, about twenty-five, somewhat retarded. She lived at the motel and worked for Madge, cleaning the units when they were vacated, sometimes taking over in the office. Where she'd come from and what connection she had with Madge Parker neither knew nor cared. Some people thought she was Madge's daughter.

Madge kept talking. Every once in a while she'd pause or ask a question, and Parker would have to rouse himself and say something. Madge liked to talk too much, but she was valuable and it was worth while to put up with her talking. Hers was the safest place in eastern Pennsylvania.

Ethel passed by the window, carrying a key, followed by a teenage

couple with their arms around each other's waist. The girl looked frightened, the boy looked intense. After a minute, Ethel came back alone, headed for the office. Behind Parker, Madge still talked. She was asking questions now, trying to store up more information on comings and goings to pass on to the next friend who stopped by. Parker answered in monosyllables: "In jail." "Out in California someplace." "Dead."

At last another car pulled in from the highway. Parker finished the warm liquor and said no to a second drink. He listened half to Madge, and for the other half listened for footsteps coming down the walk. He heard them coming, and waited, and then there was a knock at the door.

Handy. But just in case, he said to Madge, "Answer it for me, will you?"

"Sure. You in trouble, Parker?"

"No."

Madge shrugged, still in good humor, and went over and opened the door. "Hello, Handy! Come on in."

"What say, Madge?" Handy was tall and lean as a one by twelve, with knobby wrists and a bony face and stiff dark hair graying over the ears. He had a cigarette dangling from his mouth, and when he took it out it was badly lipped, brown tobacco showing through wet gray paper for half an inch.

"It's real good to see you,

Handy," said Madge. "Hold on, I'll get another glass."

Parker said, "Later on, Madge."

"Business," Madge told him. "It's always business with you, Parker." She put a hand on Handy's arm. "Come on over the office later, we'll get drunk."

"Sure thing, Madge." Handy grinned at her, and held the door open for her. She went through and he closed the door and turned to Parker. "She's a good old girl."

"She talks too much. How've you been?"

"So-so. Never any static on that armored car job. You read the papers on it?"

Parker shook his head. That was three months ago, he and Handy and two others had taken an armored car in New Jersey. If it wasn't for this Outfit thing, he'd still be in Florida, living on the take from that job. He and Handy had split it down the middle, because the other two had tried a cross and it hadn't worked.

"They never even got a beginning," Handy said. He went over to the bureau and crushed his cigarette in the ashtray. It sizzled. Then he pulled a box of small-size wooden matches from his pocket, got one match, and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. Between cigarettes, he always sucked on a wooden match. He turned back to Parker and said, "You remember what I told you after that job, I told you it was my last one. I'm retiring."

Parker nodded. Handy quit after every job, he'd been doing it for ten years or more.

"I mean it this time," Handy told him, as though he knew what Parker was thinking. "I been up in Presque Isle, Maine. They got them an Air Force base up there, and I'm buying in on a diner, right across the road from the main gate. Open all night. I short order a good egg when I put my mind to it, so I'll work the nights myself."

"Good luck."

"Damn right." Handy moved over and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I been in this business too long," he said. "I'm a lucky man, Parker. You, too. Both of us, too damn lucky. But there's no string goes on forever, and I figure mine's down in Presque Isle, Maine and short order a few eggs and let the rest of the world go by." He grinned. "In the meantime, what's the job you called me in for?"

"It isn't a job. Not the regular kind, anyway."

"What kind?"

Parker filled him in on what had happened in the last week, the killer who'd missed, and the letters to the other men in the business, and taking care of Menner, and knocking over The Three Kings. When he was done, Handy said, "I been thinking. Out of the people I know, there's at least eight'll be real happy to get that letter of yours. They'll go right out and do that job they've been thinking

about all these years." He grinned and nodded. "This Bronson and his friends, I bet they're hurting right now."

"They'll hurt more." Parker lit a cigarette. "Anyway, I know where Bronson is. I'm going there."

"What else?"

"I could use a man beside me. I'm not in this one for the dough, so I'll give you the take from the poker game and The Three Kings. Forty-two hundred. Plus whatever we pick up in Bronson's house."

"I wasn't in on those other two. Why give me the dough from them?"

"Make it worth your while. Bronson may not have much on him."

Handy shrugged. "Keep the dough, Parker. We known each other for years. We'll split the take from Bronson, and call the rest for old time's sake."

Parker frowned. He didn't like it that way. He said, "A split all the way, then. Twenty-one hundred for each of us, plus Bronson."

"Why? Why you want to give money away all of a sudden?"

"I'm not giving it away. I'm making it worth your while. You don't want to do a job for nothing."

Handy watched himself light a new cigarette. He leaned over to drop the match into an ashtray and then shrugged. "All right," he said, not looking at Parker. "A split all the way." He lipped the cigarette,

then grinned and looked over at Parker. "I could use the money, anyway."

"For the diner."

"Sure, for the diner." Handy settled back on the bed, relaxing. "When you want to go after this Bronson?"

"Early next week. By then, the Outfit'll have been hit a few times. I want to be sure this guy Karns won't be in any hurry to cause trouble when he takes over."

"When do you want to go to Buffalo?"

"Tomorrow. We can use the time getting set up. How's your car? Hot?"

"Not a bit. Paid cash for it in Bangor. Absolutely legitimate."

"Same name as with the diner?"

"Sure. My own."

"We'll use mine then. To be on the safe side. It can't be traced back to me."

"It's a mace?"

"Yeah. I got it off Chemy, in Georgia. You know, the little guy with the brother?"

"Sure. It should be okay, then."

"It is."

"All right." Handy got to his feet. "I'm gonna stop in with Madge for a while. Come along?"

"Not tonight."

"See you in the morning, then."

Handy went out, and Parker switched off the light again. He sat by the window, smoking and looking out at the highway. Handy was troubling him. Buying a car,

buying it legitimate. Buying into a diner, and planning to work in it. And being willing to come into a job for nothing, out of sentimentality.

It was a bad sign when a man like Handy started owning things, and started thinking he could afford friendships. Possessions tie a man down, and friendships blind him. Parker owned nothing, the men he knew—who were just that, the men he knew, not his friends—owned nothing. Sure, under the Charles Willis name he had pieces of a few businesses here and there, but that was for tax reasons. He stayed away from those places, had nothing to do with them, didn't try to get a nickel out of them. What Handy was doing was something else again; buying things to have them. And working with a man not for a profit but because he *liked* him.

When a man like Handy started craving possessions and friendships, it meant he was losing the leanness. It was a bad sign.

8

Handy pointed. "That one," he said. "Next to the gray house."

Parker looked at the house where Bronson lived, and nodded. He pulled the Olds over to the curb and stopped, then gazed across at the mass of stone where he'd find Bronson.

It was Saturday night. They'd

taken their time coming up from Scranton to Buffalo, stopping off in Syracuse Friday night while Handy got himself a gun. He now had under his coat an Iver Johnson snub 38 revolver.

Parker shut off the engine. "Let's go for a walk."

"Right."

The park was beside them. They walked along next to it, not crossing till they came opposite the next cross-street. They went down that street and turned right, toward the rear of Bronson's house, walking casually, two big men in hunting jackets and caps, their hands in their pockets.

Handy murmured, "There's his garage."

"Driveway there."

They strolled along, looking in all the parked cars they passed, studying the driveway as they went by, and then continued on down to the corner and turned back toward the park again.

Handy said, "It's open. Does that figure?"

"They'll be watching inside the house. Maybe Bronson's got a front around here. So it would look funny for him to have guards at the driveways."

"I guess so."

"He'll have them in there with him, though."

Parker thought about it as they walked along. This was Bronson's front, Bronson's cover. He probably had his life here completely depart-

ed from his life in the Outfit—like Handy with his diner in Presque Isle, Maine, or Parker when he was being Charles Willis—and maybe he was here now because of Parker. Maybe he figured this Buffalo cover would hide him, the way Parker always used the Charles Willis cover.

So this should tie the score. Bronson breaks into Charles Willis, Parker breaks into Buffalo.

They turned right, and walked past the front of Bronson's place, and on down to the end of the block. Then they crossed over by the park again, walked back to the car, climbed in, and Parker drove away.

So that was Bronson's hideout. A big pile of stones, set back from the street, the grounds surrounded by high hedges. Neighbors far away on both sides. On the left a school for the blind, on the right some sort of clubhouse or something with neon; both sides empty at night, anyway. And the park across the street. And nothing but his own garage in back. He was isolated in there, a sitting duck. You could set off dynamite, and no one would hear a thing.

Handy said, "You want days or nights?"

"I'll take nights. I slept this afternoon on the way in."

"Okay."

They headed north, through Kenmore and Tonawanda, and found a motel near the Thruway.

The woman in the office talked all the time, reminding Parker of Madge, except she was fat. She finally showed them their unit and gave them the key and went away. Parker and Handy carried their luggage inside and then Handy looked at his watch and said, "Ten o'clock. I'll see you at ten in the morning."

"Right."

Parker went back to the car and drove south again into Buffalo and over to Bronson's house. He parked across the street again and down the block a ways, so he was facing the house. His watch told him it was ten-twenty. He got pencil and notebook out of the glove compartment and made a rough sketch of the front of the house, numbering the windows from one to eleven. Five of them showed light. He wrote: 10:20—1-2-3-6-7. He had passed the rear of the house coming in, and there had been no lights on back there at all.

The notes finished, he put the pencil and notebook down on the seat beside him, lit a cigarette, and settled down to wait.

At eleven-forty a prowler car went by, headed east. Parker jotted it down in the notebook.

At eleven-fifty-five, window 3 went out. At eleven-fifty-seven, window 9 came on. He wrote it down. At twelve-ten, window 9 went out. He wrote that down.

At twelve-twenty, windows 6 and 7 went off. Parker waited, but

no other lights went on in their place. He started the car and drove around the block, but there still weren't any lights on in back. He returned to his parking space and wrote it down.

At one-fifteen, the prowler car went by again, once more headed east. So it was a belt, and not a back-and-forth deal. And the belt took about an hour and a half. Parker wrote it down.

After the prowler car disappeared from his rearview mirror, he got out of the car and crossed the street. The streetlights were widely spaced here, and all on the park side. He was only a shadow when he slipped through the opening in the hedge and moved at an angle across the lawn toward the lighted windows. He peered over the edge at the room inside.

An oval oak table, and a chandelier above, and poker again. Five men this time. Parker looked at them and picked out Bronson right away. He had the rich, irritated, overfed look. The other four had the stolid truculence of club fighters, strike breakers and bodyguards. In this case, bodyguards.

Parker moved around the house, keeping close to the wall. There was an apartment over the garage, which he hadn't noticed before. There was a light on there, and record player music—MJQ—came softly from the open window. As Parker watched, a Negro in an un-

dershirt passed the window. The chauffeur, then. Parker continued on around the house.

There were no other lights on. Someone had gone to bed in the room behind window 9. The chauffeur was in his apartment over the garage. Bronson and four bodyguards were playing poker downstairs. The one who had gone to bed—Bronson's wife? Probably. So there were six in the house, plus the chauffeur. Parker went back to the car and wrote it all down in the notebook.

Two-fifty, the prowler car again.

Three-ten, window 3 went on. A minute later it went off again, and then an upstairs pair of windows, 6 and 7, went on. They stayed on.

Who would have left the game? Bronson. Window 3 would have shown the light he'd turned on to go upstairs. Windows 6 and 7 were probably his bedroom. Windows 1 and 2, where the game was, stayed on.

Three forty-five, windows 6 and 7 went off. Then window 8 came on, stayed on for five minutes, and went off. So was 8 Bronson's bedroom? Maybe he had a den or something upstairs, and he'd spent some time there before going to bed. Parker wrote it down with a question mark, then drove around the block again. The chauffeur's light was out, and there were still no lights on in the back of the house.

The bodyguards didn't even cover the back of the house! They were still in front, playing poker!

Parker didn't believe it. He parked around front again, left the car, and went over to the house to check. And they were there, all four of them, still playing poker at the oval oak table.

Parker went back to the car. He wrote it down, and put an exclamation point after it.

When window 3 went on at four fifty, and then windows 1 and 2 went off, he knew they were all going to bed. None of them would stay up all night, to be sure. They would all go to bed. Window 3 went off, and Parker started the Olds and drove around back and saw the row of lights on up on the third floor. He waited and saw them go off, one by one, and now the entire house was in darkness. Now there was no one awake to give the alarm. Parker went back to his parking space in front and settled down to wait for morning. He noted the prowler car's infrequent passage, and also noted the fact that the two cops in the prowler car never gave him a second glance. He'd been sitting here all night, but they hadn't bothered about him.

At seven-thirty, he put pencil and notebook in his pocket, left the Olds, and walked into the park. There was a blacktop path a little way off, and some benches along it. He sat on one, bundled up in the

hunting jacket, and chain-smoked while he watched the house and waited for ten o'clock.

At five past nine, a black Cadillac came out through the opening in the hedge, and turned right. Squinting, Parker could see the Negro chauffeur at the wheel, and one man in back. That would be Bronson. Another black Cadillac came down from the cross-street to the left, turned, and fell in behind the first one. There were four men in this one. The two Cadillacs drove away. So now there would be no one in the house but Bronson's wife.

At nine-thirty a cab stopped in front of the house, and a Negro woman got out, carrying a brown paper bag. She went on into the house. Cook or maid or some such thing, carrying her work clothes in the bag.

At five minutes to ten, another cab came along and stopped, this one pulling to the curb behind the Olds. Handy got out and paid the driver. Parker got to his feet and strolled along the path, looking over at Handy. Handy checked in the Olds first, then looked around and spied Parker and came walking across the grass. Parker sat down on the nearest bench and Handy came over and sat down next to him, saying, "How'd it go?"

Parker got out the notebook and read off what had happened in the last twelve hours, with his own commentary and explanations.

Handy listened to it, nodding, and then said, "He's making it easy for us."

"It doesn't figure."

"Sure it does. He thinks he's safe here. The bodyguards are for just in case, but he doesn't really think he'll need them."

"We'll go in Thursday. That'll give us five days to double-check."

"Okay."

Parker got to his feet. "See you tonight."

"Right."

Parker looked over at the Olds. "Maybe we ought to move the car for a while."

"I won't need it till after dark."

"I'll be right back."

Parker went over and got into the car and drove it away from there. He took it halfway around the park, locked it, and walked back through the park to Handy. "It's over there. You follow the path straight through."

"Okay."

Parker gave him the keys, then walked out of the park, found a cab, and took it back to the motel.

9

Thursday night:

They came in through the back way, keeping out of sight of the chauffeur's windows. It was quarter to eleven. By the lights, they knew Bronson was up in his office or den, his wife was in bed, the bodyguards were at the poker

game again. They played poker all the time. Every once in a while Bronson sat in with them, but not as though he enjoyed it. It was as though he was dying of boredom in there, and had to do something to occupy his mind. He was here because he was sure Parker would be looking for him at the resorts where he usually hung out, there wasn't any question of that any more.

They came at the rear door. Handy had three small slender tools wrapped in flannel and tucked inside his topcoat. He took them out now and unwrapped them. It was pitch black against the rear of the house, but Handy could see with his hands. His tools made muted metallic sounds against the lock on the back door, and then the door came open as though the lock had been made of butter. Handy wrapped his tools up again, tucked them back inside his coat, and took his .38 back out of his pocket.

Parker went in first. He had his gun in his right hand, a pencil flash in his left. There was electric tape over the flash, leaving only a small opening for the light to peep through.

They had entered a stairwell. Concrete stairs led down to the basement, wooden stairs led to the upper floors. Straight ahead was another door, unlocked. Parker opened it cautiously, to find more darkness. He aimed the light into

the darkness and saw a big square kitchen. He crossed it, Handy behind him, and on the other side there were three doors. One led to a small dining room on the right, one to a deep pantry, and one to a hallway. At the far end of the hallway there was light. Parker started down the hallway, and all over the house clocks began striking eleven.

They waited through it, unmoving, and when it ended Handy whispered, "Jesus!"

Parker started forward again, and another chime sounded. He thought at first it was another clock, running slow, but then he realized it must be the front doorbell. "Hold it," he whispered.

Ahead, at the far end of the hallway, one of the bodyguards went by, carrying his cards with him. They waited, heard the front door open, heard conversation, and then the bodyguard went back. A door closed.

Parker moved again. The two of them hurried silently down the hallway to where it opened onto the main front hall. Someone was going upstairs. They heard, "Hello, Mr. Bronson. A real mess, that Cockatoo situation."

Another voice muttered something unintelligible.

The first voice said, "Very nice house, Mr. Bronson. Really very nice."

The second voice said, "You said that last time." That would be Bronson. He sounded bitter.

"I must mean it, then."

"Yeah. Come on into the office."

There was silence, and then a door closed upstairs.

Parker whispered, "Watch the stairs."

Handy nodded.

Parker moved away to the right, at an angle, and came to the doorway where the bodyguards were playing poker. He glanced in and saw them sitting there, concentrating on the game. They would be there another three or four hours. They could be ignored.

Parker hadn't expected this visitor. Bronson had had only one visitor in the five days they'd been watching his house, and that had been a youngish man with a briefcase who'd showed up in a chauffeur-driven limousine Sunday night. He'd looked like an insurance adjustor, except for the limousine. He'd stayed half an hour, and then had gone away again. Following the lights behind the windows, Parker'd been able to tell the visitor had spent all his time in Bronson's office on the second floor.

He wondered if this was the same one, back again. Whether it was or not, he'd delay them.

Parker went back to Handy and whispered, "They're at the cards again. We can forget them."

"Right."

Mrs. Bronson was already in bed. They'd seen the light go on and off in her bedroom an hour ago. So, except for the visitor, ev-

everything was set up the way they'd planned.

Parker led the way up the stairs. They were thickly carpeted, as was the hall on the second floor, so they moved without sound.

The third door on the right should be Bronson's office. Bronson's bedroom was beyond that, and his wife's bedroom further down, at the end. The hall was lit dimly by wall fixtures in the shape of candelabra. Light gleamed under the door of Bronson's office.

Parker moved up silently to the door and pressed his ear against it. He heard the stranger's voice, talking in a monotone. After a minute, he figured out what the stranger was talking about. There'd been a robbery at a place called Club Cockatoo, and he was describing the robbery to Bronson.

Parker smiled to himself. He'd been right. He wondered which of his letters had set off the robbery of the Club Cockatoo. He moved away from the door, back down the hall to where Handy was waiting at the head of the stairs. Handy was keeping an eye on the staircase, just in case anyone decided to come up.

Parker whispered, "They're talking about a robbery."

Handy grinned. "Just one?"

"I don't know."

Parker went back and listened some more. The stranger's name was Quill, and Bronson didn't like him very much. Quill was explain-

ing how come the people who worked at the Club Cockatoo had let the robbers get away with it. Parker listened, as impatient as Bronson, and at last heard Quill say, "Well, I think we may have learned from this."

Bronson's voice said, bitterly, "And the others."

"I'd heard there'd been some more."

"Eleven more."

Parker moved away, back to Handy, smiling again. "Twelve," he whispered. "They been knocked over twelve times."

"That's a lot of money," said Handy.

"Karns'll go along. Twelve times! Karns'll pay us to stop."

Handy looked over the rail at the stairs and the hallway down below. Dimly, the poker players could still be heard. Handy said, "What do you want to do? Tackle him with that guy there?"

"No. He's maybe due someplace else after he leaves here. We don't want to keep him."

"What, then?"

"We'll wait. In Bronson's bedroom."

"Right."

They went down the hall together, past the office door, through which they could faintly hear the murmuring sounds of Quill and Bronson, and opened the next door along. Parker went in first, shining the pencil flash around, reassuring himself the room was emp-

ty. Handy came in after him, Parker shut the flashlight off, and they settled down to wait. They could hear Bronson and Quill talking next door, but couldn't quite make out the words. They left the hall door partway open, just in case one of the bodyguards should come up, or another guest should arrive, or Mrs. Bronson should decide to get out of bed. Handy sat on the edge of the bed and Parker stood by the door. They'd taken their hats off and tossed them on the bed, but kept the coats on. They both had their guns in their hands.

They waited about fifteen minutes, and then they heard the office door open and Quill say, "Good night, Mr. Bronson." Bronson muttered something from inside the office, and then Quill shut the office door and walked away toward the stairs.

Parker whispered, "Take the stairs. I'm going in after Bronson now."

"Right."

As soon as Quill started down the stairs and out of sight, Handy moved out of the bedroom. He went silently down the hall and stood against the wall by the head of the stairs, watching.

Parker waited a minute, then went down the hall and opened the door to Bronson's office. Bronson was standing at the window looking out, his back to the door. Parker studied his back, wondering if there was any reason to spend time

talking to Bronson first, and had just about decided there wasn't any reason when Bronson turned around.

Bronson saw him, and gave a start, but recovered quickly. A bitter smile creased his lips and he said, "So you're Parker."

"That's right." Parker raised the .38.

But there was sudden motion to his right. He turned his head and saw Handy coming on the run. He stepped into the office and Handy barreled in after him, saying hoarsely, "They're coming back up!"

Parker turned to Bronson. "Why?" "What? Quill's staying the night."

"All right. Keep your mouth shut."

Bronson shook his head. "No. I've been wondering if those bodyguards were any damn good. Now I'll find out." He raised his head and shouted, "Help!"

Parker fired in irritation and ducked back out to the hall. Behind him, Bronson sagged onto the desk.

Quill and one of the bodyguards were at the head of the stairs. They gaped at Parker and Handy, and then turned to run back down again. Parker and Handy both fired, but they'd both aimed at the bodyguard, so Quill got away safe, stumbling over the bodyguard as he dropped and fell down the stairs.

"The wife!" said Parker. "Shut her up."

"Right."

Handy hurried away down the hall and Parker went back into Bronson's office. Bronson was lying on his face behind the desk. Parker checked him, but he wouldn't need a booster. He straightened and took the phone off the hook, hoping there was only one phone line in the house. If all the extensions were on the same line, there wouldn't be any calls made while this phone was off the hook.

Parker hurried back to the hall. Handy hadn't come back yet. Parker ran down to the end of the hall, by the stairs, in time to see the three bodyguards starting up. He fired, not hitting anybody, and they ducked back into the room where they'd been playing poker. Parker knelt behind the railing and waited for Handy.

This was a good spot, for right now. Looking over the railing he could see straight down to the foot of the stairs, and out across the main hall to the front door and off to the right to the room where the bodyguards and Quill were holed up. He could keep them in there, unless they tried going out the window.

Somebody took a shot at him from the doorway down there. He ducked back, waited a beat, and leaned forward in time to see one of them making a dash across the hall for the room on the opposite

side, hoping to get back there so they could have Parker and Handy in a crossfire. Parker slid the .38 over the top of the railing, dropped the running man, and ducked back out of sight again. They were firing from the room on the right again, the bullets gouging the wall over Parker's head.

Handy showed up, running forward at a crouch, ducking down to kneel beside Parker. "Tied and gagged," he said. "What now?"

"Three left. Two bodyguards and Quill."

"What about the back stairs?"

"I don't want a chase. We finish them off in here. It's private in here. No neighbors, no questions."

"Okay."

Parker said, "Besides, we want time to go through the place. You don't want to do this for nothing."

"Yeah, that's right."

"You stay here. Take a shot at them every once in a while. I'll go down and go around outside to the window."

"Right."

Parker slid away, in a crouch, and straightened when he was a ways down the hall. He hurried down to the far end, where he found the stairs that led to the back door. He started down them, and a sound made him stop. Somebody was coming in through the back door.

Parker waited. Whoever it was, he was being slow and cautious. Small occasional sounds told Par-

ker where he was and what he was doing. He came in the back door, shut it carefully behind himself, and then started up the stairs. Parker had shut the second-floor door behind himself, so it was inky black in the stairwell. He sat on the top step, the .38 in his right hand and the pencil flash in his left hand, waiting. Both were aimed down at the landing.

The other one came slowly up the stairs, and finally got to the landing. He made the turn and started up the other half flight toward Parker. Parker switched on the pencil flash. It was one of the bodyguards, staring up at him, blinded by the light. Parker fired, and the face fell away from him. He switched off the light and heard the bodyguard go crashing back down the stairs.

Parker followed him, hurrying. He'd been delayed too long. Handy would be wondering where the hell he was.

He went out the back door and around the outside of the house to the front. He saw the open window where the bodyguard had crawled through, trying Parker's tactic in reverse. He moved up to the window, peered over the edge, and saw the two of them in there. The bodyguard was crouched by the doorway, peering out around the corner, an automatic in his hand. Quill was at the far end of the room, sitting in a leather chair, the briefcase on his lap, with the blank

expression of somebody in a waiting room.

Parker called to the bodyguard, "Drop the gun. Don't turn around."

But the bodyguard wouldn't quit. He spun around, firing wildly, and Parker dropped him with one shot. Then he turned and showed the gun to Quill, resting it on the windowsill. "Don't move," he said. "Don't make any move at all."

"I'm just sitting here," Quill told him. He didn't act particularly worried.

Parker called, "Handy! Come on down."

They waited, and after a minute Handy came in, grinning. He looked around and said, "One more. There's one missing."

"I met him on the way around. Watch Quill."

"Right."

Parker left the window and went around to the back of the house again. He let himself in and walked through the house to where Handy and Quill were waiting. He went over to Quill and said, "You know Karns?"

"Not personally. I've heard of him."

"I hear he'll be taking over."

"Bronson's dead?"

"I want you to give Karns a message from me."

"I take it you're Parker."

"That's right."

"And since you want me to de-

liver a message, that means you'll let me live."

"Why not?"

Quill smiled. "Exactly. Why not?"

"You heeled, Quill?"

"A gun? I never carry one."

"I didn't think so. All right, the message. Tell Karns I'll start getting in touch with my friends, telling them to forget the Outfit again. But it'll take a while. There'll probably be a few more robberies before I get in touch with everybody. This thing'll be tougher to stop than it was to start. But that was Bronson's doing, getting it started in the first place. I'll stop it as soon as I can. You tell Karns that."

"There may be some more robberies, but you'll stop them as soon as you can."

"That's it."

"I'll tell him."

"Good," Parker turned to Handy. "I'll keep an eye on this bird while you go through the house."

"Right." Handy pocketed his gun and left the room.

Quill said, "Have you been mas-termining these robberies?"

"No. My friends have been doing it on their own."

"They've been very professional."

"My friends are very professional."

"Yes, of course."

They were silent then.

About ten minutes later, Handy

was back. "I found a safe," he said. He turned to Quill. "You know anything about it? What he might have in there?"

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't know Mr. Bronson that well."

Handy shrugged. "I'd hate to take the trouble to go in there and not find anything but a lot of papers. I'll take the chance." He went out again.

This time he was gone longer. Parker sat at the table where the bodyguards had played poker, and Quill remained in the leather chair, his hands on the briefcase resting on his lap.

Handy was back in half an hour, grinning. "Jackpot," he said. "Bronson must of been holding out on the income tax people. Twenty-four grand in the safe. Plus about three hundred I picked up here and there, and some jewelry. We'll maybe get five or six on the jewelry."

Parker got to his feet. It was over. He could relax. Karns would be more sensible than Bronson. He said, "So long, Quill. Be sure to give Karns the message."

"Yes, I will. Goodbye, Mr. Parker."

10

Parker sat at the writing desk in the motel room, writing letters. It was the Green Glen Motel, outside Scranton, and Handy was off having a drink and some reminis-

cence with Madge. Parker was copying from the first letter he'd done this afternoon, and had so far done eight of them:

"Frank,

If you haven't done anything about that first letter I sent you, never mind. I got everything straightened out now, so we can leave the Outfit alone again. I got in touch with the guy who ran the Outfit, and the one who's taking over now has more sense. I talked with him, and we got everything squared away. If you already got the job set up go ahead and do it, but you don't have to on my account any more. You can always get in touch with me through Joe Sheer in Omaha. Maybe we'll work together again some time.

Parker"

He was just starting on the ninth when the door opened. He looked up, expecting Handy or Madge or both, but it was Ethel, Madge's girl, carrying sheets over her arm. She said, "I'm supposed to change the linen now."

"Go ahead."

She went over to the bed, and he got back to work on the letters. He did two more and then she said, "Okay, it's all changed now."

"That's good."

"Looks nice," she said.

He turned to look at her. She was a hefty girl, with big mounds of breasts and hips, and rumpled blonde hair framing a face that

would have been good-looking if it wasn't so vapid. He said, "Yeah, very nice. That's good." He wondered if she was waiting around for a tip.

She said, "You want anything else before I go?"

"No," he said. "That's okay."

She licked her lips and smiled, looking almost animated. "You sure?"

Then he caught on. And seriously considered it for a second or two, because the job was over, and he was due for a celebration, and it would be a nice break from the letter-writing to toss this one once, a soft quickie on the clean sheets. But the blank cow-face stopped him, because he knew there was a blank cow mind behind it.

He could wait till tomorrow night. He'd be back in Miami tomorrow night, and he'd look up Bett Harrow again. He could save it till then. The first one after a job ought to be a good one, on a clean piece like Bett, not on a cow from Scranton. He said, "I'm sure. Forget it."

"If you say so," she said. The smile faded, and she looked vague and sullen. She went out and closed the door after her.

Parker wrote letters a while longer, and then Handy came in. "Madge'll take care of fencing the jewels for us," he said. "She'll hold onto the dough till the next time we come through."

"Good."

"Where you headed next, Parker?"

"Miami."

Handy sat down on the bed. "It's colder than hell in Presque Isle this time of year," he said.

"Warm in Miami."

"Maybe I'll come along."

"What about your diner in Presque Isle, Maine?"

Handy shrugged, grinning sheepishly. "The hell with my diner in Presque Isle, Maine," he said.

"Come on along, then," Parker told him.





273586544
10 Greenwich Ave.
New York, N. Y.

Dear Joey the Jerk,

Whaddaya mean, how come I'm in the Women's House of Detention? That "square John with the big roll" you fixed me up with was a district judge.

Lily tells me you're planning on fixing the tennis matches. How you gonna do that . . . plant crab-grass in the center court at Forest Hills? You're nuts!

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*Forever yours,
Polly the Pigeon*

P.S.

See inside back cover.

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