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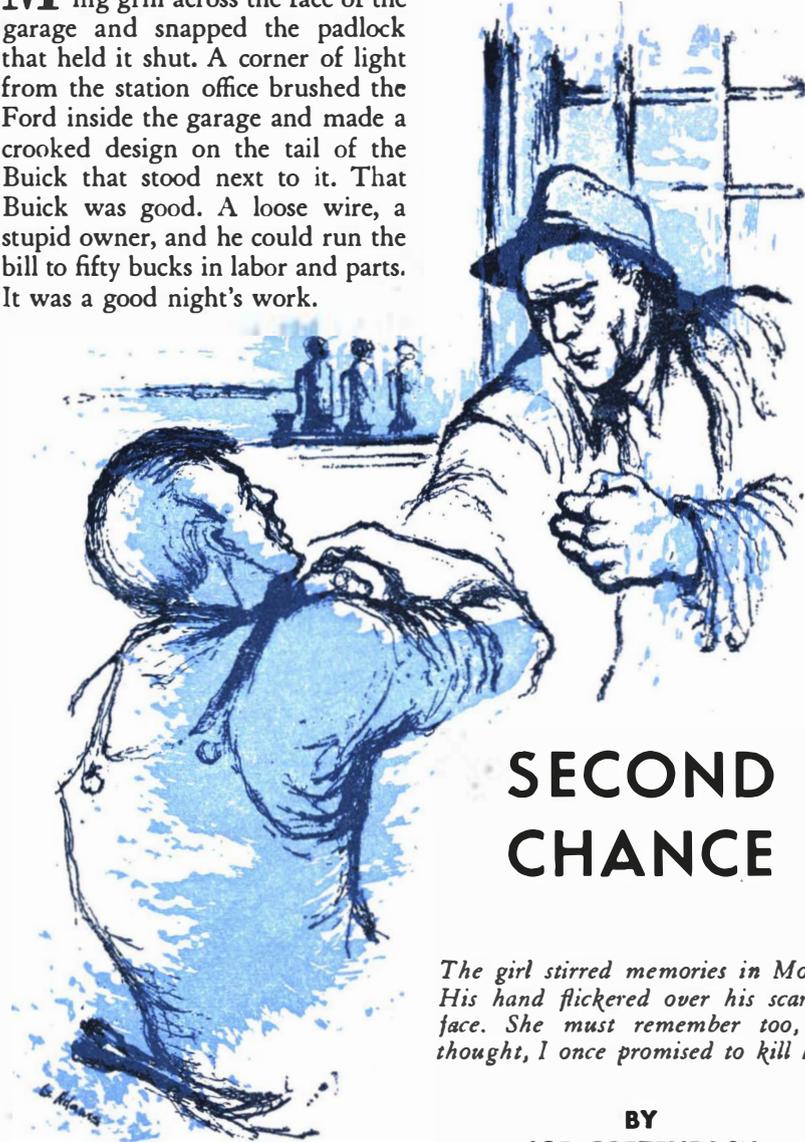
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MONK HOLLY muscled the folding grill across the face of the garage and snapped the padlock that held it shut. A corner of light from the station office brushed the Ford inside the garage and made a crooked design on the tail of the Buick that stood next to it. That Buick was good. A loose wire, a stupid owner, and he could run the bill to fifty bucks in labor and parts. It was a good night's work.



SECOND CHANCE

The girl stirred memories in Monk. His hand flickered over his scarred face. She must remember too, he thought, I once promised to kill her.

BY
JOE GREZENBACK

He turned towards the office, looking past it to the high hill that rose abruptly beyond the highway. Here and there on the upper slope, a patch of light cut the darkness, marking a house that was still awake—big houses, mostly, with two and three cars and stupid owners. A good mechanic could do all right at the foot of the hill; a smart one could do even better. And Monk Holly was both.

He went on to the office. It was long after midnight, time to quit. The hill was bedded down, and the traffic along the highway had disappeared an hour before—or almost. He stopped in the office doorway, listening.

The engine splutter sounded again from beyond the near curve. In a moment, he saw the headlights. He moved out to the line of pumps and waited for the slight downgrade to bring the car to him: a yellow Lincoln, slightly green under the neon. It came softly, its engine dead, and crept to a stop beside him.

"Trouble, Mr. Tabscott?"

The man in the car snorted. His face was thin, lumpy around the eyes, and a small mustache emphasized his short upper lip. The artificial light gave a yellow tinge to the pallor of his skin.

And that was from living at night, thought Monk, from owning a nightclub or something.

"Gas," muttered Tabscott. "Lucky you're open."

"Lucky," said Monk. He smiled a little, looking at the woman. She was curled in the shadow at the far side of the car: a young woman and blonde—which meant she was not Tabscott's wife. "You want it full?"

"And hurry it up!"

"Sure..."

He filled the tank slowly, watching the blonde through the rear window. He whistled softly to himself, thinking about the bankroll Tabscott had married and the touchy old woman who went with it. The blonde could be worth something. He hung up the hose and picked the squeeze bottle off the rack, moving up on the woman's side of the car.

"What're you doing?" said Tabscott.

"I'll get the windshield."

He closed his ears to Tabscott's protest and sprayed a mist across the glass. He wiped it clean, and the woman's face was directly before him. For an instant, his hand froze against the windshield. A quick surprise burned in his chest, and a kind of numbness settled in his legs.

Marcia!

A spark of panic showed in her eyes, and he knew it was no mistake. She turned her head sharply and spoke to Tabscott; and then she was out of the car, walking away towards the rest rooms.

It was Marcia, all right. She was thinner, now, and her hair was

blonde, but the eyes were the same—the eyes and the nose and the full, mocking lips. And the way she walked....

"You approve?" Tabscott was outside the car, watching him over the width of the hood. A stiff grin was tight on his face, and his eyes were ugly.

"Some blonde," said Monk. He moved to the driver's side of the car, newly aware of the man who stood there. The first surprise had melted away, and a stir of memory, a live curiosity took its place. He finished the windshield and shuffled around the car to put the squeeze bottle back in its place. When he turned, Tabscott was beside him.

"A friend," said Tabscott. "A neighbor. I'm giving her a lift."

Monk nodded.

"I'd just as soon you forgot it."

"Me?" Monk made his face blank, and his eyes drifted away in the direction of the garage. He said, "I got your wife's Ford over there. Be ready tomorrow." He brought his eyes back and squinted at the knot of Tabscott's tie. "You could tell her," he suggested softly. "Or maybe I could."

"About the car?"

"What else?"

Quiet laughter stuttered in Tabscott's throat. He said "Just so you understand." He held out his hand, and a folded bill jutted up from between his fingers.

Monk took it, stretching it tight

between his hands. It was a twenty.

"That cover it?"

"I guess," said Monk. "Only what about the gas?"

The shadows moved in Tabscott's face. "You shouldn't be greedy." His hand went into his pocket and reappeared with another bill. He opened his fingers deliberately and let the bill flutter to the ground between them.

Monk smiled a little. "You want a receipt?"

"I'll remember," snapped Tabscott. "So will you." He climbed back into the car and sat motionless, scowling at the windshield, until Marcia returned from the rest room. She got in quickly, avoiding Monk's watchful eyes.

The big car roared away, burning rubber on the asphalt. Monk watched while the tail-lights grew small, flickered and disappeared. He heard the dim sound of shifting gears as the car hit the grade of the access road. They were going up the hill.

He grunted. If Marcia lived on the hill, she had come a long way. A very long way. He bent over and picked up the bill that Tabscott had dropped. A ten. He shoved it into his pocket and walked slowly back to the office.

Marcia, he thought.

He stood for a moment, gazing blankly at the rows of new tires that lined the rear wall of the office, thinking back to the last time he

had seen her. Until tonight, he had almost forgotten.

But that was a lie.

An old burning ached in his chest—a hunger, a hatred, whatever it was. His hand went slowly to his face and he fingered the patchwork of scars that puckered his forehead. There were some things you never forgot.

He grinned without humor. She ought to remember that last time; she ought to be thinking about it now...

He had promised to kill her.

He slept badly. It had been a long time since the nightmare had kept him awake: the hot iron coming towards him, the guttural echo of Manny's laughter... and Marcia, pale and wide-eyed, watching them do it to him...

He had been so close. The money had been in the car, the suitcases packed, everything ready. But Marcia had stalled. He hadn't thought it was stalling at the time; but later, when Manny had locked the door...when the goons had closed in...!

He lay trembling. The ancient fear was a cold dampness over his skin. He shook it off impatiently, telling himself that it was all over. Manny was dead, now, and so were the goons. A police cordon had squeezed them to death more than a year ago. And the big money, the fifty grand he had almost succeeded in getting away with, that was gone, too. It hadn't done anyone

any good, not even Manny. The police had found it beside the corpse.

So it was over. Monk was small-time, now, hitting Tabscott for thirty bucks, the Buick for fifty. All that was left of the old days were the scars on his forehead.

And now, Marcia. He thought about the blonde hair, about Tabscott; and his mind drifted back to the good days, to the softness and warmth and the way it had been before the chance at fifty grand had tangled it up...

Marcia was back.

He sat up slowly in the darkness, frowning. It was over, yes. But he knew that it was not yet finished.

He got to the station a little before eight, and the tag end of early traffic sprinkled the highway, pushing east towards the city. The cars were lined double beside the pumps, and Curly Adams moved methodically between them, filling the tanks. Curly was a good helper.

Monk watched him from the mouth of the garage, thinking what might have been if Curly had been there the night before instead of himself. No Marcia, then. No petty blackmail...

He looked appraisingly at Mrs. Tabscott's Ford. In a way, it was like its owner, what little he knew of her: old but in good repair, without any frills. He smiled a little, remembering Tabscott's rigid grin and the twenty-dollar bill jutting from his fingers. What the

Ford needed was a brake-adjustment; but while he was at it, he would overhaul the master cylinder. The season on Tabscotts was just beginning. He put the Ford on the jack and went underneath.

When he emerged, Curly was in from the pumps. He was young, too tall for his weight, and the tangled mop of his hair matched the freckles across his nose. He leaned loosely against the bench, grinning from habit. "It's my day early," he said. "How come you're here so soon?"

"Eager," said Monk. He sat up, balancing the brake cylinder across the flat of his hand.

"Brakes gone?"

"Going."

Curly nodded perfunctorily. He waited while Monk drained the cylinder. "You know you forgot to lock up the johns last night?"

"Did I?"

"The lights were still on." Curly frowned a little and reached in his pocket. "Something else," he said. "I found this in the ladies', propped up on the basin."

It was a paper towel, folded twice. Monk's name was scrawled on the outside. Inside, a street name and number were printed large in an orange-tinted shade of lipstick. The letter "M" was written below.

"What about it?" said Curly.

Monk frowned at the message, curious, remembering the panic he had seen in Marcia's eyes. He folded the towel and tucked it into

his shirt pocket under his coveralls.

"What is it?" said Curly.

"Old friend." Monk grinned faintly and jerked a thumb towards the Buick. "You want to run that up the hill?"

A big question showed in Curly's face. He fought it down unwillingly and shrugged.

"Get the tricycle," said Monk.

He backed the Buick out of the garage and helped hook the service-cycle to the rear bumper. When Curly was gone, he took the towel out of his pocket, examined it carefully and then put it back again. The address was on the hill, a short mile below the Tabscott place. She was making it easy.

He went back to the workbench and gave his attention to the brake cylinder. He worked slowly, enjoying the feel of the fluid-wet metal and the easy skill of his own thick fingers. He pried off the snapping at the front of the cylinder, removed the outlet fitting and pushed a drift-punch into the hole. The inside parts spilled onto the bench. They were all good, as he had known they would be.

A series of cars pulled in at the pumps, coming and going at irregular intervals. In between, he reassembled the cylinder. He was ready to put it back on the Ford when he discovered Tabscott watching him from the doorway. He was not surprised to see him there, and that alone was a mild surprise.

"How's it coming?" said Tabscott.

Monk looked blankly at the puffy eyes and weighed the brake cylinder in his hand. "Bad cup," he lied. "I had to replace it."

He went to the Ford and crawled underneath. He heard Tabscott move, and then it was quiet except for the sound of the socket turning down the bolts. He finished the hook-up and came once more into the light. Tabscott was standing close to his feet. Monk went past him to the bench and found a piece of small gage wire.

Tabscott frowned, following with his eyes as Monk returned to the Ford, opened the front door and removed the filler cap under the floormat. He probed gently with the wire, seeking the ports in the cylinder below.

"What're you doing?" said Tabscott.

"Checking the adjustment."

"With a wire?"

"There's two little holes," said Monk. "They have to be clear of the piston."

Tabscott came closer, looking down at the thin wire in Monk's hand. "They must be small."

"They were bigger, you wouldn't get any pressure and the brakes wouldn't work." He replaced the filler cap and smiled a little. "Only you didn't come down here to talk about brakes."

"No."

"About blondes?"

A crooked grin twisted Tabscott's mouth. He walked aimlessly to the bench and stood with his back turned, staring down at the scatter of tools. He said, "You're a clever man, Holly. You add two and two, and you get thirty...."

"You want the ten back?"

Tabscott turned around and showed his teeth. "I want to be sure it was well spent."

"Sure."

As Monk half-turned, going back to his work, Tabscott stepped forward. "I'm not finished!" he said, and his fingers closed on Monk's arm. Monk twisted sharply. He reached with his free hand and caught Tabscott's wrist, grating the flesh. Surprise and pain burned in Tabscott's eyes.

"Keep your hands to yourself," said Monk.

Behind him, a high-pitched, nasal voice said, "Good advice."

The voice was misleading. Its owner stood at the mouth of the garage, big head and big hands, squinting at Monk through little pig's eyes. One hand was spread on the man's chest, pointing the way to the shoulder holster that bulged his coat. He came towards them slowly.

Monk released his grip, watching the newcomer's hand.

"It's all right, Benny." Tabscott rubbed his wrist gingerly and scowled. "I'll draw you a picture, Holly. There was no blonde. Stay away from me and away from my

wife, or you'll live to regret it!"

"Or maybe not," piped Benny. He focussed the pig's eyes on Monk's forehead. "We could take them scars and spread 'em around some. It might be fun."

Tabscott smiled. "You get the idea?"

"No blonde," said Monk. He felt the prod of Benny's eyes, and a warmth of anger rose within him. He had seen them up close and at first hand, and he hadn't liked them even then. It had been a guy like Benny who had held the iron to his face.

A trembling got into his hands, and he wiped them slowly on the front of his coveralls. He could feel the pad of paper towel bulging his shirt pocket. "I'll remember," he said.

"Do." Tabscott looked at Benny and jerked his head towards the Ford. "Wait for the car." He turned abruptly and went outside.

"Get with it," said Benny.

"Sure."

Monk went back to the Ford. He worked steadily, methodically; and after a while, the anger was a soft thing, purring in his stomach. He jockeyed the Ford out of the garage, circled the pumps and made the run to the highway and back, starting and stopping to test the brakes. When he was satisfied, he pointed the car towards the highway and climbed down, letting the engine run.

Benny came out from the shadow

of the garage and stopped beside him. "All done?"

Monk nodded. "Who gets the bill?" he said. "Tabscott or the old lady?"

"Neither," said Benny. "You got nothing more to do with the Tabscotts."

Monk smiled a little. "You going to pay me yourself?"

"I'm going to owe you." He showed his teeth, and his small eyes narrowed. "I want you should try to collect."

"Maybe I will."

Benny laughed. The laughter was like his voice: shrill and piping, almost girlish. "Sure," he said. His hand lashed out, stiff and straight like the blade of a knife.

Monk moved too late. The hard edge of skin and bone cut into his neck, and a flashing pain shot upwards, clouding his eyes. He staggered away, choking, struggling to stay on his feet. A second blow crashed down on his shoulder, and he sprawled on the asphalt. Somewhere above him, Benny was laughing again.

"Down-payment," said Benny. "Call it a sample!"

Monk lay still, straining for air. His lungs filled slowly. There was a roaring in his ears, and after a moment he knew it was engine noise. He lifted his head in time to see the Ford turn into the highway.

He got up. He touched his neck painerly, and a throbbing pain

swelled beneath his fingers. It died slowly, muffled by thought and a quickening rage. His hand crept to his shirt pocket and touched the lump of paper towel.

He grunted. On the way to the garage, he unbuttoned his coveralls. He hung them on the peg at the end of the workbench and shrugged into his jacket. When he came outside again, Curly was just dismounting from the service-cycle.

"Home again," said Curly. "That Buick—" he stopped uncertainly and flexed his eyebrows. "What happened to your neck?"

"Keep an eye on things," Monk said hoarsely.

"You going somewhere? I mean, what is it? What's up?"

"Good question," said Monk. He went around to the side of the garage and climbed into his ancient Chevy.

The road up the hill made a sharply curved S, climbing abruptly to join the macadamed O that clung like a bald man's fringe to the brow of the hill. The houses were inside the circle, scattered along a network of smaller roads that twisted and turned and went nowhere.

At the top of the access road, Monk turned right onto the macadam and then quickly left into Woods End Lane. The number on the paper towel belonged to the third house he came to—a rambling, one-story affair that followed the curve of the rising ground be-

hind it. By hill standards, the house was small. A cluster of trees kept it in shade, deepening the color of green-painted walls and lending a richness to the ornamental redwood shutters. At the side of the building, a grey Ford rested in the carport.

He parked beyond the house and walked back, feeling a tension in his legs and a kind of mocking anticipation. It was Tabscott that had made him come, and yet Tabscott was incidental. He was going to see Marcia. It was like walking backwards into a dream—and he couldn't be sure what made it important: the fact that he had loved her, or the fact that he had wanted her dead. He was even less sure when she opened the door.

"I saw you," she said. "I saw you drive up, and I saw you stop, and I saw it was you." She peered at him and the whites of her eyes were shot with red. The smell of stale whiskey hung about her like a strong perfume. "It's you, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"You know something?" She cocked her head abruptly, and a tangle of blonde hair made a curtain over her shoulder. "I'm not as scared as I thought I'd be. I been drinking up my nerve."

"Do I come in?"

For answer, she stepped backwards, pivoting with the door, leaning hard on the inside doorknob. Her blue robe fell open down the

front, and she made no effort to close it. She followed his eyes to her own white skin. "Sex," she said. Her mouth jerked into a quavering grin. "I was going to sex you. Only now I'm too drunk."

She wheeled abruptly and moved away into the room behind her. "Drunk," she repeated. He thought she was going to cry.

He closed the door softly and followed her into the room. There was an empty bottle beside the couch. Except for that, the room was impersonal—panelled in birch and furnished to look like the magazine pictures of gracious living.

She half fell onto the couch, making an effort to hold herself erect. Her head moved slowly from side to side as if it were too heavy to balance, and a sudden moisture glistened in her eyes. "You're going to kill me," she said solemnly.

"Am I?"

"Only it wasn't like you think," she said dimly. She tried to lean forward and almost fell. "You can't hurt me for something I couldn't help. You've got to listen how it was. . . ." The words trailed off, and he saw she was slipping forward.

"Got to listen," she said thickly.

Her mouth continued to move, but there were no more words. She slid forward and came to rest gently on the carpet, her legs sprawling. The skirt of the blue robe made an awkward pillow behind her.

He stood without moving, looking down at her long, slender legs,

the narrow waist and ample hips; the full, heavy breasts that had always looked better inside a brassiere. He waited for something to happen—for anger or lust or simple revulsion. He felt nothing.

This was Marcia.

He tried to remember the wide-staring eyes, the haunting mask that had burned in his mind through a hundred nightmares; but all he could see was the white, puffy face that lay against the couch. He laughed quietly aloud.

He leaned over and slapped her experimentally. Her head rolled with the blow, and a whimpering mumble moved her lips. He tried it again and gave it up. There was no pleasure in hitting her, and no profit. He picked her up and followed the path of open doors till he found the bedroom. He dumped her on the bed and left her there.

The telephone was in the hallway. He used it to tell Curly he wouldn't be back for a while; and then he found the kitchen and rummaged through the refrigerator. He killed an hour over lunch.

When he was through, he made a pot of strong coffee and carried it with him back to the bedroom. She had turned on her side, tangling her legs in the bedclothes. He put the coffee-pot on the bedside table along with the cup he had brought from the kitchen. He reached over and shook her roughly.

"Marcia . . ."

He shook her again, digging his fingers into her shoulder. Her whimpering moan was muffled by the pillow.

"Up," he said.

There was no response. He grunted impatiently and pushed her onto her face. Beyond the bed, an open door showed him the bathroom. Methodically, he shucked the blue robe from her limp, flopping arms, dropped it on the bed and took off his jacket.

It didn't take long. The first burst of water brought her suddenly to life. She scrambled to her knees clawing at the tile floor of the shower stall, and the noise that she made was a scream cut in sections. She waggled her head, and the wet blonde hair slapped across her face.

"Not yet," he said. He put his foot on the top of her head and shoved her back into the full stream of falling spray. She gasped, fighting weakly to find her way out.

He grinned. In a way, it was better than killing her. He let it go on for a while more, and then he reached in and turned off the water. She sat up slowly, bracing herself against the tile. Her hands moved uncertainly. She found her face and pushed at her cheeks with rubbery fingers. He went back to the bedroom and got the coffee.

"Drink," he told her.

She looked up, and her eyes were dim, searching, trying to find him. She stiffened abruptly. Recognition widened her eyes, and he knew for sure that she was awake. The fear made a noise in her throat, a grating sound that formed itself awkwardly into words: "How—how did you get here?"

"Drink," he repeated.

She stared at the cup and finally took it. Her hand trembled violently. He reached down to help her, guiding the cup to her mouth.

She choked it down, and he filled the cup again. The third time, she pushed the cup away and pressed her face between her hands. "I'm going to be sick. . . ."

"Sure." He pulled a towel from one of the racks and threw it into the stall on top of her. He took the cup and the coffee-pot and went back into the bedroom.

When he thought it was time, he got the blue robe from the bed and chucked it through the open doorway into the bathroom. Her arm reached out to pick it up, and a few minutes later she came slowly into the room. The towel was wrapped loosely around her hair, and the robe was belted in at the waist.

Monk said, "Better?"

She nodded uncertainly. Her face was the color of dirty plaster, but her legs were steady and the dimness was gone from her eyes. She walked past him and sat down

limply on the edge of the bed. "How long you been here?"

"A while."

"Did I let you in?"

He nodded. "I got your message."

She tried to smile, but there was no smile in her. She said, "You knew who I was, didn't you? Last night? I—I saw it in your face."

"It was a big surprise," he said softly. "I guess for both of us."

A slight tremor moved across her shoulders. "I want to get it over with, Monk. When I saw you—well, that's why I left the address. I've got to know where we stand."

"Scared?"

She wet her lips.

"It's nice you even remember," he said.

Her eyes crept slowly, self-consciously to his forehead. He could barely hear what she said: "You don't forget something like that."

"Not if you're me," he admitted. "I wasn't just sure how you felt about it."

"I couldn't help it," she said huskily. "He already knew about the money, about us..."

"Manny?"

"I didn't tell him all that. Just—just where you were."

"Just that," he said drily.

She shook her head violently, pleading. "He would've killed me! Don't you see, Monk? I was just a kid..." Her voice was weak, and the words bumped over beginning tears. "You can't hate me for wanting to live...I didn't know it

would be like it was, what they did..." She looked up, and a swelling moisture blurred her eyes. "I tried to find you, Monk. Afterwards, the next day, I wanted to find you."

"Why?"

She smiled dimly. When she spoke, the words barely reached him: "I loved you, Monk. I—I wanted a second chance."

She stared at her blankly.

"Believe me, Monk..."

He nodded slowly—not because he believed her, but because he remembered the softness, the warmth and the way it had been a long time ago. And besides, there was Tabscott. Whether he believed her or not was something he could decide later on. He said "Why not?"

Her eyes widened, and there was a faint trembling at her lips. "You mean it?" She got to her feet. She stood for a moment searching his eyes, swaying gently towards him. "Do you, Monk?"

"Depends," he said bluntly. "I'm here about Tabscott."

The name pushed her away, and she sat down abruptly. Relief and uncertainty, surprise and disbelief struggled briefly in her face. She said, "What about him?"

"You know him pretty well?"

"He owns half the place where I work." A faint smile flickered at the corners of her mouth. "I found out I can sing," she said. "I do two shows a night at the Black Angel, and in between, I work the game room upstairs."

"And one of the bosses," said Monk. "What makes him so nervous?"

"Why ask me?"

He grinned a little. "I figure you owe me a favor."

She frowned and her eyes dropped away. "He's crazy in debt, I guess. He's been using money out of the club."

"With his partner's permission?"

"Not quite."

"What happens when the partner finds out?"

She laughed nervously. "Tabby hopes he can make it up before that happens. He figures he can get it out of his wife."

Monk grunted. "Only not if she's sore," he reasoned aloud. "He's scared she'll find out about you?"

"At least thirty bucks worth."

"He told you?"

"He was mad as hell." A hesitant curiosity brightened her eyes. "You can't blame him," she said slowly. "If he doesn't pull it off in the next day or two, he's all through. Maybe dead."

"That's nice," said Monk.

"Nice?"

Monk grinned, touching his neck where Benny had sliced him. It was still sore. "Let's say I owe him something. Him and one of his little friends."

Her eyes widened a little and the brightness grew. "Only not that way, Monk. If you tell her, you're crazy."

"Am I?"

"Be smart, darling. If he does get to the old lady, he'll be good for a lot, maybe. Enough for—for both of us."

The afternoon sun had slipped away from the windows, and grey shadows stretched in the room. Her face was pale, soft in the dim light. He said, "Meaning?"

"At least twenty thousand, Monk. He'll have to get it back to the club, and—well, what if he stopped on the way? What if we set it up?"

"We?"

"I could help," she said.

"He'd have protection," Monk said slowly. "One of the boys..."

She came and stood close to him, searching his eyes. "Or maybe just me," she said.

He thought about it, staring down at her. "How often do you see him?"

"Every night. I'll know when he has the money. I can phone you at the garage."

He nodded slowly.

"Trust me," she said. She stared at him for a long minute, and faint shadows moved in her face. Then he felt her hands creeping upwards over his back, and the length of her body pressed suddenly against him. "Partners, Monk?"

He laughed softly, savagely, feeling the warmth and a quick excitement; thinking about Tabscott. He was suddenly alive in a way he had almost forgotten. "You wanted a second chance," he said huskily. "Maybe you'll get it."

"Us," she whispered. "Both of us."

Her fingers dug into his back, and her mouth was hot and alive under his own. It was like old times.

But different, he thought. And even as he kissed her, he remembered her drunk and the way she had looked in the shower—the way the fear had fluttered her eyelids.

Well, this time she knew where she stood.

She phoned early on the second day. He had just opened the garage, and when he stepped inside, his foot rolled on a length of metal. He came down hard on the concrete floor. He sat there, scowling at the drift-punch that had tripped him up, swearing at Curly for leaving it out. And then he heard the telephone ringing in the office.

A shrewd anticipation, a kind of relief swept through him. Even before he heard her voice, he knew it was Marcia.

"He's got it," she said. "He told me last night."

"From his wife?"

A soft excitement colored her laughter. "She was asleep, I guess. He went home about midnight and busted her safe."

"What about the money?"

"Tonight," she said. "He'll have it with him."

"And?"

"We're having dinner on the way to the club. You know the Charlotte House? We'll be there at

eight. You'll find his car in the parking lot."

Monk grunted. "No protection?"

She laughed again. "Why should he worry when I'm the only one that knows? He acts like he just won a raffle." She stopped abruptly, and a note of uncertainty crept into her voice. "Monk?"

"What's wrong?"

"He said he'd pick me up here. At the house."

"So?"

"Well—it's just that he's never done that before, too close to home. He sends one of the boys and meets me somewhere off the hill."

Monk frowned. "Did he give a reason?"

"Just that it didn't matter. He was like that all evening—like everything was going his way, you know? Even the old lady."

"Maybe he figures she's busy," said Monk. "She's got a fake robbery to worry about."

"I guess."

"So now we'll fix him up with a real one."

"And then?"

"We'll see where we are."

"Mexico," she said, and her voice was suddenly soft, promising, reaching out to him. "Like we used to talk about. I won't let you down, darling. Not this time. I—"

"Save it."

She was silent. Then she spoke faintly, almost plaintively. "Eight o'clock?"

"I'll be there."

He hung up angrily. He could feel the blood moving at his temples—a sudden warmth, a wanting, a whisper of how it had been in the still afternoon the day before. The feeling annoyed him. He touched his forehead uncertainly, tracing the scars, pushing the warmth and the memory away. Until he was sure, the past was all he would trust.

Behind him, Curly said, “Morning.”

He turned quickly, startled, and the early morning grin wavered on Curly’s face. “It’s just me,” said Curly. “How come you’re not at the pumps?”

“Why?”

“Lost a customer, is all. Drove away as I turned in.”

“So?”

Curly blinked. “You sore about something?”

“Tools,” said Monk. “Why don’t you pick up the tools?” He went to the desk in the corner of the office and searched the drawer for a cigarette. He found an empty pack and crumpled it in his fist. “Gimme a smoke,” he said.

Curly fumbled obediently at his shirt pocket. “What’re you talking about tools? You mean last night?” He waited while Monk took a cigarette. “What’re you talking about?” he repeated.

“Nothing,” said Monk. “I got things on my mind.”

“Sure, that’s all right. But—?”

“Match...”

“Oh, sure!” His hand moved again towards his shirt pocket.

Outside, a squeal of tires knifed through the sounds of early traffic. A green Hudson swerved at the entrance drive and turned in sharply towards the pumps. It turned again, rocking on its springs, and raced towards them.

Monk swore. He jumped for the doorway, pushing Curly ahead of him. The Hudson skidded to a stop a few feet away, and a skinny adolescent tumbled out from behind the wheel. “Call an ambulance!” he yelled. “My god, it’s awful!”

Monk grabbed the kid’s arm and jerked him close. “You buzz in here again like that, you’ll need more than an ambulance!”

“No, look—!” The boy twisted away, shaking his head frantically. “It ain’t me, mister, it’s up there!” His arm flopped vaguely towards the highway, and his adam’s apple jumped in his neck. “They told me I should phone!”

“About what?”

“The wreck, the wreck! Ain’t I telling you? I never saw anything so bad! Right off the hill, looks like. And that woman inside—!” He shook violently. “Look, mister, ain’t you got a phone?”

A pulse started slowly in Monk’s chest. He said, “Call the cops, Curly. Tell ’em they want an ambulance.” He frowned at the kid. “What kind of car?”

“Ford, maybe. It’s—it’s hard to tell.”

The fear grew abruptly: a kind of terror he could not explain. It was crazy, but all he could think of was the grey Ford he had seen in Marcia's carport. "Stay here," he said. "When the cops come, tell 'em where it is!"

He spun away and ran for his car.

The wreck lay close to the access road. High overhead, a great white finger of shattered guardrail pointed the way the car had taken. A trail of torn and crumpled brush ended abruptly halfway down the steepening slope. From there, the car had fallen free, plunging through space. It had landed on its nose, and the kid had been right: it was hard to tell it had been a Ford.

A cluster of people had left their cars at the edge of highway, and now they stood awkwardly in twos and threes, circling the wreckage. Monk walked past them. The fear was gone, and a petulant self-annoyance had taken its place. It was not Marcia's car; there had been no reason to think it might be. And yet he had been afraid....

He stopped abruptly and stared at the mass of twisted metal, seeing it whole, suddenly remembering what it had looked like. Recognition stiffened his back, and his blood moved faster. He stepped forward and squatted on his heels to peer through the crumpled remains of a front window.

There was no surprise, now.

There was only the mild shock of knowing she was dead, a shrewd realization, a quickening wonder. The woman's head was towards him, the face half gone. What was left was bloody and out of shape.

"Know her?"

The state patrolman was just behind him, a little to the right. Monk stood up slowly. "Mrs. Tabscott," he said. "She lives on the hill."

"Lived," said the officer. He took a notebook from his pocket and scratched at an open page with the stub of a pencil. "Your name?"

"Holly. I run a garage up the road."

"Oh?" He bobbed his head towards the mangled Ford. "Ever work on this one?"

"Now and then."

"Recently?"

Monk smiled a little. "You mean the brakes, I checked them out a couple of days ago."

"That right?" The officer pushed back his cap and squinted up at the dangling guardrail high above them. "She should've used 'em." He grinned faintly and slapped the notebook against his thigh. "They might want to talk to you later on. You'll be at the garage?"

"All day." Monk watched the officer move away, and a hard laughter worked in his chest, an angry frustration. He looked again at the tangled metal.

Accident, he thought. Tabscott had busted the old lady's safe, and

now the old lady was dead. That was good luck for Tabscott, wasn't it? It was too good. Only how did you prove it was anything else?

He went back to the garage. A little after one o'clock, a man came out from the sheriff's office: a balding, sunburned man with a cigar in his mouth and his coat too big for his sloping shoulders. He stood in the office doorway leaning against the frame, and he asked about the brakes.

"You were supposed to fix 'em," he said.

"Supposed to?"

The man took the cigar from his mouth and smiled bleakly. "I'm quoting the lady's husband. You can see how he'd feel—I mean, if it was the brakes. He was kind of worked up."

"Sure."

"Can I see the work order?"

"I didn't write one," said Monk. "I didn't charge her."

"Why not?"

Monk smiled stiffly, remembering. The thought of Benny tightened his jaw. "She's a good customer—was," he said slowly. "All I did was a minor adjustment."

"And you're sure the brakes were all right?"

"Aren't you?"

The man shrugged. "They were fine, judging from what's left."

"So why ask me?"

"Routine, is all." He put the cigar back into his mouth and pushed the words out around it.

"We couldn't find any skid marks, so we're checking it out."

Monk frowned. "How do you figure it?"

"Who knows? You rule out mechanical failure, you're stuck with the driver."

"You think she did it on purpose?"

"That's not what I said." The sloping shoulders moved abruptly, shoving away from the doorframe. "She was upset, near as we can piece it together. Found out there'd been a prowler in the house and wanted to get to the police. Seems this prowler wrecked the telephone. So she takes off down the hill maybe a little too fast."

Monk said, "Where was her husband?"

"Home, I guess. He's the one scared off the prowler. Nothing missing, but his wife insisted she ought to get to the police. That's what he says. I guess he's pretty well shook."

"I guess," said Monk.

"Attempted robbery last night, and his wife dead this morning. That's piling it on, huh?" He took the cigar out of his mouth again and spat on the asphalt outside the door. "Well, I guess you got work to do."

"Some."

"Me too." The man grinned and waved the cigar. "I guess we won't bother you again. It looks pretty straight."

"Sure." Monk stood in the door-

way and watched the man climb into his car. As the car pulled away, Curly came over from the garage.

"What was that?" said Curly. "Mrs. Tabscott?"

Monk nodded.

"How do they figure it?"

"Wrong," said Monk. He went back into the office. He sat down at the desk and stared at his hands.

No skid marks. . .

He clung to the thought, trying to imagine how it might have been done—wondering what Tabscott would know how to do. And it had to be something clever, something that even the sharp eyes of traffic investigation had failed to notice.

From the doorway, Curly said, "You sore at me again?" Then, "If it's that drift-punch, I didn't even do it."

Monk looked at him. "Do what?"

"Leave it out," said Curly, "like you said this morning. It was out, all right, but it ain't even ours."

"What're you talking about?"

Curly shrugged. "See for yourself," he said. "I put it there in the desk. We never did have a cheap punch like that."

Monk frowned. He opened the drawer automatically, still thinking about Tabscott. His eyes found the punch, and he stared at it blankly. It was a long one, practically new. The tip was broken off as if someone had tried to use it as a chisel.

"It wasn't there when I closed,"

said Curly. "Somebody must've dumped it on us. Threw it in there or something."

"Shut up," said Monk. A sudden excitement cracked his voice. He stared at the punch, and he had a picture of Tabscott standing at the workbench two days before: Tabscott and the Ford and a scatter of tools. . . .

"What is it?" said Curly.

Monk laughed. The feeling grew, and he threw back his head and roared triumphantly: "I'll give you a raise! Maybe I'll give you the whole damn place!"

"Me?"

"Get out of here, kid."

"Sure, only—?"

"Go do something!"

Curly nodded uncertainly. He backed away and turned towards the garage, shaking his head in wonder.

Monk went to the phone. It rang sharply just as he touched it. He jerked the receiver down impatiently and barked his name into the mouthpiece.

"Monk, there's something happened—!"

He cut her off sharply. "I was just going to phone—"

"Will you listen?" Her voice was pitched high, charged with excitement. "The old lady's dead, Monk! Tabby just called. She—!"

"Never mind," he told her. "I know all about it."

"What?"

"You still got a date?"

"Bigger than ever. But—?"

"Good! Only take your own car, hear? The way it is, I want him alone."

"The way it is, it's nothing!" she said. "He took the money in this morning!"

"It won't matter."

"What?"

"We got something better."

"What are you talking about?"

"Murder," he said.

There was sudden silence. Then her voice came low to his ear, full of breath and a new kind of excitement: "You can't be sure, Monk. He said she drove over the cliff. How do we know it was murder?"

"Easy," he said, and he laughed harshly. "I'm the guy that told him how to do it!"

The Charlotte House stood on a knoll, separated from the highway by thirty yards of terraced lawn. Monk pulled off the pavement as soon as he sighted the flickering *DINNER AND DANCING* sign that marked the mouth of the entrance drive. He left the Chevy and walked softly through the darkness, angling across the fields to the row of densely planted poplars that edged the parking lot. Beyond the trees, hanging yellow lights put a dusty glow on the lines of parked cars.

He grunted softly, satisfied. Tab-scott's Lincoln was next to the trees; Marcia's Ford was a few cars away. At the end of the row, a single attendant lounged against a

convenient fender. A car sounded in the drive, and the attendant moved away.

Monk waited until he was out of sight. He slipped away from the trees, opened the door of the Lincoln and crawled inside. He curled down behind the seat and looked at the luminous hands of his watch.

Eight twenty....

The time passed slowly. He could hear the dim sound of music; the occasional crescendo of motor noise as a car swept by on the highway. Around him, the attendant parked and unparked a hundred automobiles. The narrow space put a cramp in his legs, and a growing impatience worked at his nerves. How long could it take them to eat? He swore softly and squinted once more at his watch.

Nine-fifteen....

The sound of footsteps made him freeze. The door of the Lincoln came open abruptly, and he felt the shift of weight as the attendant climbed in and settled himself behind the wheel. The roar of the engine echoed the sudden pounding of his heart.

The car shot forward. The sudden movement jerked him away from the sheltering angle of the seat back. Pale light flickered above him, and he clung desperately to the floor, trying to minimize his bulk. The car stopped. The opening door admitted a shaft of yellow light, and he could feel it pointing at his face. His muscles grew tight,

waiting for the shout of discovery.

Instead, he heard the mumble of thank-you-sirs; the muted stutter of Tabscott's laughter. The door came shut on the finger of light, and the car moved again. He felt himself relax. As they turned into the highway, he could hear Tabscott whistling.

He raised himself slowly. The road stretched away between empty fields, headed for the city. Tabscott's head made a dark blot above the back of the seat. Monk braced his legs, reached forward and slipped an arm lightly around Tabscott's neck.

The whistling stopped abruptly.

"Pull over," said Monk.

"What—?"

"Watch what you're doing!"

The Lincoln serpentine, straightened itself and swayed to a stop at the edge of the pavement.

"That's better." Monk reached with his free hand, crowding Tabscott forward. He turned off the lights, the ignition, and dropped the keys on the floor.

"Hold still!" he ordered. He ran his hand under Tabscott's coat, reaching down across his chest. A tiny revolver was neatly holstered low on the left side. Monk grunted. He palmed the revolver and climbed into the front seat.

Tabscott leaned away. Recognition rumbled in his throat, and he straightened himself slowly. His

voice was edged with panic. "What the hell is this?"

"I just want to talk."

"Talk?"

"About your wife," said Monk. "In case you've forgotten."

There was a momentary silence. Tabscott cleared his throat, and the words came hard, limping from his mouth: "I—I don't see—"

"Don't you?"

There was no answer. A car swept past them, and the beam of its headlights flashed across Tabscott's face. A mist of sweat glistened on his forehead, and Monk could see the muscles working in his jaw.

"You learn quick," Monk said softly. "Just once I told you about the cylinder, how it works. Two little holes, remember? You make 'em bigger, and there go your brakes."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"A drift-punch," said Monk, "like the one you saw on my workbench. You drop it down through the filler hole, give it a wallop, and who knows the difference?"

"Insane," said Tabscott. The word almost choked him.

"Only you made a mistake. You bought a cheap punch, and the tip busted off inside. You know that? Anybody tears down that cylinder, he'll find a piece of drift-punch big enough to match. They'll be looking for the rest of it."

He let it sink in. Tabscott

reached slowly, uncertainly, and wiped his forehead. "Sweat," said Monk. "You got a lot to sweat about. And nobody's going to find that punch in my tool-box, either. I put it in a special place. They get it, they'll also get a big idea where it came from. Guess they could even nose out the place it was bought if they had to...and who bought it."

Tabscott took a long breath. He let it out in a shuddering sigh, and his shoulders moved convulsively. "What—what is it you want?"

"Fifty grand?"

Tabscott swore.

"Make it seventy-five."

"Impossible!"

"Is it?"

"I don't have it, damn you! You wouldn't get it if I did!"

"Shut up!" Monk reached abruptly and twisted his hand in Tabscott's shirt, jerking him sideways. "I'm telling you how it is," he growled. "Get brave and you'll end in the death house!"

"Look, I—I don't have it!"

"Then get it!" Monk shoved him away.

Tabscott sat stiffly, pawing at his shirt front. "I'd have to borrow against the estate," he whimpered. "It might take time..."

"You got till tomorrow night."

"But—!"

"Eight o'clock," said Monk. "A big bundle of old bills. You dump it out by the pumps, and you keep going."

Tabscott was silent. Monk watched him, trying to guess what was in his mind, suddenly aware of his own lack of armor. He grunted softly. "It's all written down," he lied. "You make a bad move, and the sheriff gets a letter—whether I'm here or not."

Tabscott frowned. "When do I get the punch?"

"You'll get it."

"And the letter?"

"That too."

"You're taking a chance," said Tabscott. "If you're in this alone—"

Monk laughed. "You think I'm bluffing, just try me." He nodded abruptly towards the floor. "Pick up the keys," he said. He opened the door and slid out of the car.

"What about my gun?" said Tabscott.

"After the pay-off, you get it all." He closed the door gently and patted the frame of the open window. "If you figure to get it sooner than that, do me a favor," he growled. "Send Benny."

Monk watched the Lincoln out of sight. His mind raced ahead, figuring the moves that were left to be made: stop by the garage and send Curly home; get the punch and go to Marcia's. If he stayed out of sight till collection time, there was little that Tabscott could do—and Tabscott would want to do something. The pay-off would come as a last resort.

He squinted at his watch and started back towards the Charlotte

House. It would take twenty minutes for Tabscott to reach the Black Angel; half of that to reach a phone. By the time a strong-arm drove out to the garage, it would be after eleven. By then, he'd be safe at Marcia's.

Trust me, she had told him.

He smiled cynically and lengthened his stride. There would be no last minute surprise this time. Even Marcia would wonder where he was until she came home and found him there. And after that, he would see how he felt...how they both felt.

Another ten minutes brought him to where he had left the Chevy. By ten-thirty, he was back at the station. He left the car beside the office and went inside to shake Curly out of a noisy sleep.

"On your feet, kid!"

"Huh?" Curly came out of the chair, fighting to open his eyes. "Right with you, sir!"

"Nuts," said Monk.

"Oh!" A sheepish grin tugged at Curly's mouth, and he blinked uncertainly. "Sorry, Monk. I—I must've—"

"Never mind, kid..."

The loud jangle of the telephone cut him off. He jerked his head towards the box on the wall, and it rang again.

Curly said, "I'll get it."

"Let it ring!"

"What?"

"Leave it alone," said Monk.

They waited for the ringing to stop.

"What is it?" said Curly. "What's going on?"

"A man wants to know if I'm here," Monk told him. "There's nobody here. You go on home."

"You mean now?"

"And take tomorrow off. I don't want you near the place."

Curly's eyes widened slowly. "You're drunk," he decided.

"Look, kid, just do what I say. Later on I'll explain it, only right now I want you home. Okay?"

"Sure." Curly shrugged and moved hesitantly towards the door.

"You mean that about tomorrow?"

"Just get out of here!"

Monk waited until he was gone. He locked the rest rooms, the garage, and then he went back to the station office. He turned off the lights.

The rows of tires made a solid black mass along the rear wall. He moved slowly, letting his eyes adjust to the sudden darkness, feeling for the tire he wanted. He pulled it half out of the rack and felt inside for the drift-punch. *Cold metal, cold cash.* He grinned a little and let the tire bump gently back into place.

A whisper of sound spun him around. He had a glimpse of a man's silhouette framed in the doorway; and then the beam of a flashlight leaped at him, jabbing at his eyes.

The lights went out.

A cold dampness rose abruptly on his forehead, and he felt a quavering tension in his legs. He shifted his weight, hunching down as the man lunged. Hard metal crashed against his shoulder. He staggered away, jabbing upwards and out with the drift-punch. The punch jolted in his hand as it struck a pad of cloth-covered flesh. A high-pitched gasp of pain and anger ripped the whispering dark—and then the metal came down again.

Monk felt his legs slipping away, and the darkness was filled with colored lights. He heard the crash of a falling body; and it was only vaguely, with a kind of wonder, that he realized it was his own....

His face was damp, and a slow trickle of moisture moved across his cheek. He touched his jaw, and the dampness stuck to his fingers. It felt like blood.

"Monk?"

Her voice was soft, anxious, close beside him. He lifted his head, and a jabbing pain shot through the side of his neck.

"Monk, get up!"

He could see her, then, a shadowy outline in the dimness above him. He said, "Marcia? ..."

"We've got to get out of here, darling! Can you walk?"

"Who was it?"

"Please, Monk, try to get up!"

"Sure. . . ."

He came slowly to his feet, lean-

ing against her, trying to shake the fuzziness out of his brain. His head felt larger than usual, as if pain had bloated it. He groped his way to the black lump of the desk and braced himself against it.

"We shouldn't stay here, Monk."

"In a minute," he said. Her dim silhouette seemed to swell and waver, drifting away from him. He closed his eyes hard, opened them, and she came slowly into focus. "How did you get here?"

"I was scared," she said. "I phoned, but nobody answered. I came out as soon as I could."

"Tabscott?"

"He left before I did. He stormed into the club and made a phone call, and then he stormed out again. I think he went home."

"What about the phone call?"

"He called his own number," she said. "He didn't mention your name, but—well, it was clear what he wanted." She shuddered a little. "We ought to go, Monk. . . ."

"Did you see who it was?"

"No. He ran when I turned off the highway."

Monk grunted. The pain in his head had dulled. There was a digging soreness in his neck, and he remembered the high-pitched yelp he had jabbed loose with the drift-punch. He knew who the man was, who it must have been, and a boiling anger warmed him. "Let's go," he said.

"I'll help you, darling."

He felt her arm along his back,

the pressure of her body. A softness pushed through the anger inside him, taking her in, making a bond between them. He reached awkwardly and pulled her closer. "You already did," he said roughly. "You just made up for a lot of things."

She laughed quietly, nervously, squeezing his arm. "I'm glad, Monk."

"So am I."

He let her guide him through the doorway. There was no need to look for the drift-punch: he knew it was gone. More than that, it seemed unimportant. He put his hand into his pocket, fumbled for Tabscott's tiny revolver. It was still there. And the gun was all he would need.

He got into the Ford, waited while Marcia climbed in behind the wheel. She put the car in gear.

"Your place," he said.

"Mine?" The word was thin, uncertain. "We have to be careful, Monk. Tabby won't quit. They'll be looking for you."

"At your place?"

"No, I—I guess you're right." She let the car roll forward, swinging it wide towards the highway. "Where are we, Monk?"

"Where?"

"What happens now?"

He smiled grimly. "How long will it take him to raise seventy-five grand?"

"What?"

"How much time?" he said.

They were nearing the access

road. She let the Ford slow down and shifted into second on the turn. As they started up the winding grade, she said, "Is that what you asked for?"

"How long should it take?"

She laughed softly, cynically. "There was over a hundred in the old lady's safe. Cash and coupon bonds."

"You're sure?"

"He told me at dinner. He was making sure I'd hang around."

Monk swore. No wonder Benny had been so close—sitting at Tabscott's, keeping an eye on a busted safe. And knowing it, Tabscott had stalled. The air whistled through the open windwing, recalling the sound of Tabscott's plaintive whine. Monk jerked the windwing shut, and a new flood of anger clogged his lungs. He said, "How quick can you pack?"

"Pack?"

"Mexico," he said. "Those places we used to talk about."

She kept her eyes on the road. "Without money?"

"With," he said. "What the hell do you think?"

There was no more talk. He slipped his hand into his pocket and closed his fingers around the butt of the small revolver. A raging impatience filled him up; and he sat stiffly, staring into the rushing darkness beyond the window.

When they reached the house, he leaned across her and opened the

door. "Out," he said. "I'll be back in twenty minutes."

"Monk—?"

"Just do what I say. You got a pencil?" He waited impatiently while she fumbled in her purse. "Gimme the lipstick," he said. He scrawled a number on the back of her hand. "Ask for Curly," he told her. "Tell him to go to my place and pack my clothes, then bring them out to the station. When he gets there, he's to call us back. And tell him to hurry."

She brought her face close, and her eyes were wide, searching. A tiny quiver of excitement moved her shoulders. "Can you do it, Monk?"

He laughed harshly. He felt the anger inside him, an eagerness, a kind of savage exaltation. He kissed her roughly and pushed her away. "Out," he said.

"I'll be waiting, darling. . . ."

"For me or the money?"

"For both," she said. "Mostly for you."

This time he believed her.

It was a short ride. The engine noise made a humming in his head, a soft pulsing of pumping blood. The taste of Marcia was still on his lips. He was sure of her, now, sure of himself, and he was almost glad that Benny had jumped him. It was better this way—better and quicker.

A sheltering curve hid him from Tabscot's house. He switched off the headlights and turned the car

around, pointing it back the way he had come. He could walk the rest of the way. Walk in and walk out. Walk deadly. . . .

He rounded the curve, and the house was just before him—a big place, built in levels to follow the slope of the rising ground. Tabscot's Lincoln made a light-colored blot on the asphalt crescent of the entrance drive. A black business coupe was parked behind it.

Yellow for Tabscot; black for Benny.

He grinned a little, easing his way towards the near corner of the house. The humming was still in his head, a quiet throbbing. He could feel the eagerness building up, a crazy excitement, a sense of action. The windows were dark, lined with a ribbon of uncertain amber where the light inside had crept past the edge of heavy draperies. He climbed the end of the wide front porch and slid along the wall to the door.

He took the small revolver out of his pocket and held it like a weight in his hand. He pressed the doorbutton and flattened himself beside the door, listening to the sound of his own breathing.

The seconds dragged. A tightness knotted his stomach, and he could feel the sweat starting up on his forehead—and still there was nothing.

He reached again for the doorbell.

A faint footfall stopped his hand.

The door opened a scant two inches, and Benny's piping voice said, "Yeah?"

Monk pressed himself hard against the wall.

Benny swore softly, and the door came open farther. The light from inside spread abruptly on the porch, making a frame for Benny's thick shadow. The shadow moved.

Monk swung hard with his weighted fist. The side of the revolver slapped into Benny's face, wiping away the fleeting look of startled wonder. Monk stepped in, raising his knee sharply. He felt the pliancy of soft flesh, heard the whimpering scream as Benny doubled up. He swung the revolver again, and Benny splashed forward onto the porch. The hulking body jerked convulsively.

Monk laughed. It felt loud, but the sound was inside him: a wild cry of blood-lust and rage. He swung his foot viciously. He did it again, and Benny lay still.

A guy like him!...

A jumble of pictures flashed through his mind: torn remnants of half-forgotten nightmares. A pounding got into his head, and the rasp of his breathing crowded the silence. He shook violently.

And then he was calm. He fumbled at his forehead, touching the scars uncertainly. He stared at Benny, and the past slipped away. The old days were gone, everything changed. This time it was all right. This time Marcia was waiting....

He wet his lips and turned to the open doorway.

There was no sound, no movement. He settled the small revolver in his hand and stepped cautiously into the house. A lighted room opened to his right. He moved slowly, deliberately, straining his ears against the silence.

The room was empty. Beyond it, a short flight of stairs led upwards into a darkened hallway. At the end of darkness, a crack of light showed him a closed door.

He heard the muffled splutter of anxious words, the worried rhythm of Tabscott's voice. The sound stopped as he touched the door-knob. He raised the revolver and pushed the door open.

Tabscott's hand was still on the telephone. He swiveled towards the door, and his mouth opened on a half-formed word: "Ben—?" The rest of it stuck in his throat. His eyes widened abruptly, and a quick panic moved in his face.

Monk grinned. He could feel the stiffness of dried blood pulling at his cheeks. "You need a new boy," he said softly.

He stepped forward, holding the revolver where Tabscott could see it. The room was a small office, a woman's office, half business and half boudoir. Monk's eyes made a quick inventory of the furniture. "Where did she keep the safe?"

Tabscott shook his head meaninglessly. His hands gripped the arms of the swivel chair, and the

fragile, finely-turned wood made his fingers seem large and out of proportion.

"We've had enough games," said Monk. "Where's the money?"

"I—I told you. I don't have it."

"In the safe," Monk suggested. "Over a hundred grand, less what you took to the club. Now, get it!"

"How—?" The unspoken words bulged Tabscott's throat. Surprise gave way to a flickering rage. Then he swallowed hard, and the lines of his face sagged abruptly.

"The safe?"

"In the closet." Tabscott tipped his head towards a corner of the room, watching Monk's face.

"After you," said Monk.

Tabscott shrugged. He dragged himself from the chair and led the way to the closet door. Inside, the door of the safe stood partly open, showing its broken lock.

Monk grunted.

A faint tremor moved across Tabscott's shoulders. He stood with his back to the room, facing into the open closet. His breathing quickened. "We made a deal," he said weakly. "I—I've got the punch, you've got the money. So—what about the letter?"

"What about it?" Monk swung the revolver hard. The quick breathing stopped in a shuddering sigh as Tabscott lurched against the doorframe. He fell slowly, bumping a shoulder against the wall.

Monk dropped the revolver into his pocket. He moved quickly to

the safe and pulled the door wide. It was all there: bearer bonds and cash, plenty of both. A hard satisfaction swelled in his chest, a feeling of triumph. A trembling excitement got into his arms, and he reached with both hands....

It was done. The money and bonds were under the front seat of the car, carefully sorted into the large envelopes he had found in Tabscott's desk. He backed the Ford into Marcia's carport, left the keys in the ignition, and went around to the back door. The door was unlocked.

He let himself into the kitchen and turned on the light. His own reflection drew him to the sink, and he studied his face in the sliver of mirror that was mounted there. His eyes were dark, burning, framed with smeared dirt and crusted blood. A rust-colored matting bristled at his right temple, and there was an ugly rawness over his eye. Now that it was over, he could feel the weariness seeping into his muscles.

"Monk...?"

She was standing in the doorway, half-dressed, smoothing her slip with nervous hands. Her eyes flickered towards the door. "Is it all right?"

"It's fine."

"Tabscott?"

"Resting," he said. "The money's in the car."

"Oh darling...!" She came suddenly across the room, reaching out

to him. A brightness was in her eyes, and her voice was soft, choked: "Darling, darling...!"

"Easy, kid." He took her shoulders and held her gently away from him, grinning down at her. "Let me wash first."

"Let me," she said.

She found a towel and wet the end of it under the faucet. She dabbed gently at his face, smiling, talking rapidly in whispers: "It's going to be wonderful, Monk!... All the plans, all the things we used to dream about... And—"

She stopped, suddenly self-conscious.

"And what?"

She reached softly and touched his forehead. "Memories?"

He smiled a little. "We start fresh," he told her. "We already have."

She kissed him hard, rubbing against him. The towel slipped out of her hand, and he could feel her fingers clawing at his back. It went on for a long time.

"Monk?" Her breath was warm, heavy, close to his ear.

"We ought to be moving."

"Not yet, darling..."

The scent of her hair filled his lungs, and it was difficult to talk. "Curly," he said. "He'll be at the station..."

"He hasn't called back yet. We've lost of time, Monk..."

"No, look—"

She clung to him, moaning softly

"... They'll never look for you here..."

He felt his reason crumble, smashed by a surging hunger—the softness, the warmth, the sound of her breathing. He crushed her mouth under his own, and the warmth was a fire. He picked her up and carried her into the hallway.

A coldness swept through him, a jolting awareness of time and space. He put her down slowly, awkwardly, staring at the telephone.

"Tell him to wait, Monk!"

"Sure..."

She kissed him again and slipped away into the darkness of the bedroom.

He picked up the telephone.

"Mr. Holly?..." It was a man's voice, young, whispering, touched with fear.

"Who is this?"

"Friend of Curly's. He— he said I should call you. He gimme the number, see? I— I don't know what else to do!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"They were waiting up there in the room. I got him away, only—"

"Only what? Where's Curly?"

"He—he's dead, see? I left him in the alley..."

"Dead?" A numbness gathered in the pit of his stomach. He stared at the phone, half-hearing the rush of fear-driven words.

"I— I'm scared, Mr. Holly. I just went along for laughs, y'know? He

didn't say what it was, just an errand. He just said whyn't I come along, that's all, and—!"

Monk broke the connection. His hand was trembling, and he wiped it angrily across his mouth. He should have known about the room—first the garage, then the room. Tabscott had covered them both. And there was more to come. He should have killed Tabscott instead of just knocking him out.

"Marcia!"

Her voice came softly, unintelligibly. He went to the bedroom door and searched the dimness until he found her. She raised her head slowly and looked at him from the bed.

"Get your clothes on!" he snapped.

She sat up abruptly.

"Curly's dead. Some damn fool kid is running around with your telephone number! Where's your suitcase?"

"Two in the living room," she stammered. "One in here..."

"Bring it with you!"

He left her there and went to the living room. He carried the bags outside to the Ford. He was half bending, putting them down, when he saw the movement beyond the car. He dropped to one knee, grabbing for the gun in his pocket.

Nothing happened. He raised his head cautiously, and he could see the man running, half-hidden by the trees. He swore softly, leaping forward into the darkness. The

lumpy shadow of a big car loomed in the roadway, and he heard the click of a closing door. He sprinted towards it, crouching, angling in towards the right front fender. The starter whined; and Tabscott's milky face showed at the windshield. Monk reached the door before the engine caught.

"Save it!" he rasped. He jerked the door open and thrust the revolver at Tabscott's face. "You wake up quick," he said.

"No, look—!"

"Shut up!" He chopped with the revolver, and the short barrel thumped against Tabscott's temple. He pushed the muzzle hard at the same spot and pulled the trigger.

There was very little sound: a quiet *pop*; a softer noise as Tabscott's head struck the window frame. Monk stared at him, only partly aware of what he had done. A cold moisture crawled beneath his clothes, making him shiver.

The slut! The damn double-crossing slut! . . .

And he could feel her rubbing against him, feel the warmth and the moist, moving lips. He could hear the sound of passionate breath and the way she had said, *Not yet, darling . . .*

It was history repeating itself.

He backed out of the car and walked slowly towards the house. The coldness crept through him, and an icy shrewdness clutched at his brain. He tightened his grip on the small revolver.

She opened the door before he reached it. She has put on a skirt and sweater, a short jacket that matched the skirt. She carried an overnight case.

"Turn off the light," he said softly.

She reached back obediently, and the doorway was plunged into darkness. She closed the door and came towards him.

"Come on," he said. "This way."

Marcia glanced uncertainly towards the Ford. "We're not going to walk, are we?"

"Not far." He walked away, listening to her footsteps behind him.

"Monk?"

"Take a look," he said.

She hesitated, peering through the darkness at the grey-yellow bulk of the parked Lincoln. She caught her breath and stepped quickly past him. "My God!"

"Surprised?"

"Where did he come from?" she whispered. "What did you do?"

"He's dead. He's inside."

A violent shudder moved her shoulders. "We've got to get out of here, Monk!"

"And leave him like that?" He smiled grimly. "Get in," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"In!"

She saw the revolver, and her face froze. He opened the door and pushed her into the car.

"Monk, you're out of your mind!"

"Am I?" He grinned at her,

watching the panic grow in her eyes. "He came straight here," he said. "Why do you think he did that?"

"Monk, listen—!"

"How did he know where I was, kid? You want to tell me?"

She was no longer listening. Her eyes were fixed on the gun, and a choking sound rattled in her throat. "Darling . . . !"

He laughed hoarsely. "That's twice, kid. Once for Manny, once for him." He raised the revolver slowly. "What was he going to do, marry you?"

She opened her mouth. He pressed the trigger, and a smaller hole opened in her forehead. Her head snapped back, and she fell sideways along the seat.

The sudden silence screamed in his head. He went back to the carport walking stiffly, feeling nothing. He got her suitcases, carried them to the Lincoln and pushed them in behind the seat. He set the overnight beside them. Then he leaned past her, found Tabscott's hand, and pressed the revolver into the dead fingers. He closed the door and went back to the Ford.

He touched the ignition key, hesitated, and took his hand away. The second shot had been loud enough to hear—and he remembered the houses farther down the road. It would be best if no one remembered a car driving off just after the sound of a shot. He could leave the Ford at the garage. A work

order dated the day before would be all the explanation it would need—and if he kept his head, he could stick around. It might be better if he did.

He sat for a moment thinking it through. Curly dead in an alley, and nothing to tie him into that but a scared kid with a telephone number—and even the telephone number was easily explained. She was a customer, wasn't she?

And Benny—they wouldn't worry too much about Benny. A known hood, most likely. And maybe Tabscott's "proowler" had tried again. Why not? Marcia and Tabscott would pass as murder and suicide. The only thing left was to get off the hill without being seen.

He opened the car door and put one foot on the ground, pushing forward. It was all he needed. The Ford rocked onto the sloping drive and rolled slowly towards the road. He made the turn silently, coasting down past the houses, past the macadam, gathering speed as he hit the top of the access road.

Marcia . . .

The name whispered in his mind.

He turned on the lights. The sweeping curve of the guardrail flashed in the headlight beams. The road plunged downward, winding way. He hit the starter switch, pressing lightly on the brake.

The engine coughed, sputtered and died. He threw the car in gear, reaching for the overdrive lock-out. The clatter of unmeshed gears

rattled the silence like a burst of metallic laughter. He was going too fast.

He grinned, tightening his grip on the wheel. *Too fast for Marcia, too fast for Tabscott. Eighty-five thousand under the seat . . .*

He pushed harder on the brake.

Unexpectedly, he heard the dim whisper of his own remembered voice saying, *Over a hundred grand, less what you took to the club. He remembered the anger, the quick surprise in Tabscott's eyes—and Marcia, laughing softly on the phone: Why should he worry when I'm the only one who knows?*

The grin faded, and a cold dampness spread across his face. It hadn't been Marcia who had told Tabscott; it had been himself! And Tabscott had come alone, come softly, come only as far as the carport . . .

A blind terror clogged his throat. He stiffened his leg against the brake, fighting the road and the rushing darkness. The brake pedal slid to the floor as if it rested on soft mud.

Marcia! . . .

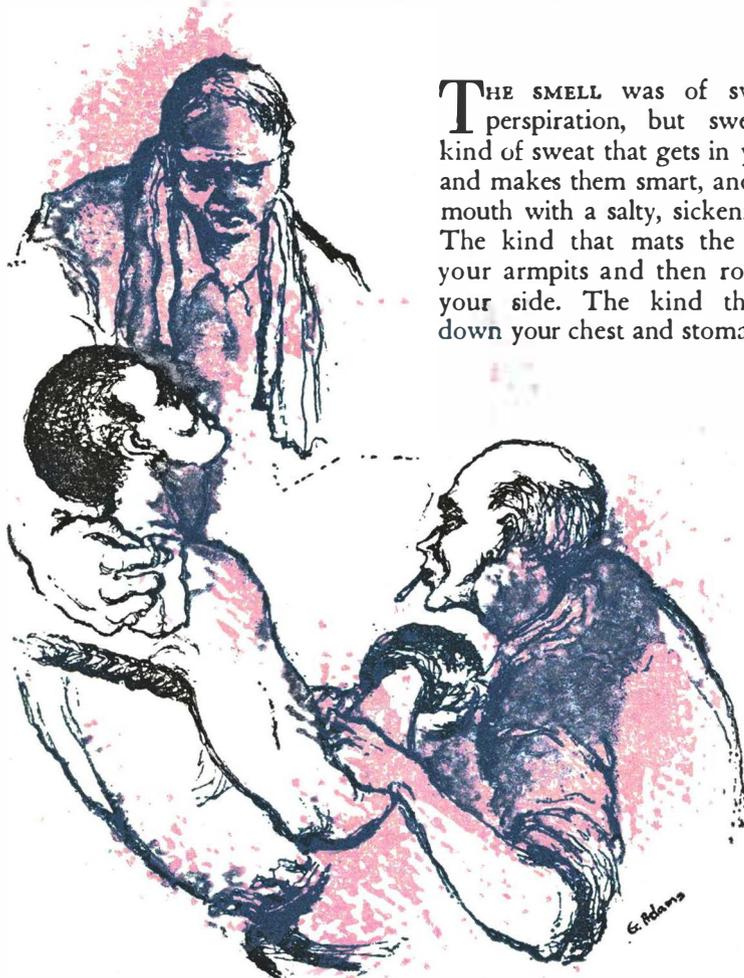
The black claw of panic ripped at his brain, and he clung helplessly to the wheel. The guardrail loomed in the headlights. The car crashed against it, nosing forward abruptly, plunging on into darkness.

On the floor of the car, the drift-punch Tabscott had left there rolled unseen in a crazy arc, charting the course they had just begun.

KILLER IN THE RING

BY PAUL H. JOHNSON, JR.

THE SMELL was of sweat—not perspiration, but sweat. The kind of sweat that gets in your eyes and makes them smart, and in your mouth with a salty, sickening taste. The kind that mats the hairs in your armpits and then rolls down your side. The kind that drips down your chest and stomach, soak-



It's not hard to kill in the ring if you play it right, and that's exactly what Caine was trying to do.

ing your shorts and jock. Sweat that stinks, and I was getting so I hated both of them — the sweat and the stink. But the smell wasn't half as bad now as it would be when the guys started staggering in from the prelims.

Simmy slapped me hard between the shoulder blades and told me to get down off the training table. Rolling over I swung my legs over the side, and then sat there for a moment, my thoughts still everywhere but at the Sports Arena and on things other than the fight.

"Ge' down, I say. You go sleep if I give you anymore rubdown. Do one roun' shadow-box, like Lou tell you."

Simmy's Greek accent crashed through the vacuum of my mind and I lowered myself from the table. His tone irritated me but I couldn't look at him, couldn't return his puzzled and annoyed frown. For the past three weeks everyone looked at and watched me with the same expression, an expression saying, "Johnny Michaels on the championship trail again? Who you trying to kid!"

I flexed my shoulders and started throwing some jabs at thin air. To hell with them. To hell with them and everybody in the fight racket—the managers, trainers, fixers, promoters, refs, and the jerks who fought! And especially, to hell with Johnny Michaels!

The write-up in one of the morning papers had read, "For both

boys this is a very important battle. Michaels, after losing a very close decision in his championship bid eighteen months ago has come back in the past ten months with four tough wins—three via the KO route. Ranked third now among the welters, a win tonight would definitely mean another shot at the title sometime this winter. For 'Killer' Caine, whose record, while shorter than Michaels' by some forty fights, is impressive with only two defeats in thirty-seven bouts, a win tonight could mean the same thing. A favorite with television fans, Caine might by-pass second-ranking Bartelli, and get a crack at the Champ."

That decision eighteen months ago had been real close; but tonight I was an eleven to five underdog. The oddsmakers had been reasonably unimpressed with my training.

As I dug my taped hands at imaginary bodies, I could remember that night after the championship bout. I had been sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a cup of coffee when Vi walked in, well after midnight. She had said, "You're the biggest flop I've ever known." She told me just like that; that I was rotten and she was sick of me and that I'd just goofed the only chance we'd have for the bigtime. After the shock had worn off and she had stormed off to her room, I had cried and I could recall the tears running down into the

stitched cut on my left cheekbone and making it burn like fire.

"Don't wear yourself out, kid," Lou said sarcastically. At the sound of his voice I looked around. He was standing just inside the dressing room door, and standing beside him was a big Negro, heavy with blood dripping from his nose. One of the prelims. Lou motioned him toward the showers saying, "Good fight, Henry. At least I'll have one winner tonight."

Lou just stood there staring at me until I turned and started throwing some more feints and jabs, only with a little more emphasis.

"Can the crap, Johnny, and put on your robe," he said quietly as he walked across the room to stand next to Simmy. I shrugged, slipped into my robe and sat down on a bench.

Lou Goeltz, my manager, was a big man in every way—size, mind, plans and heart. He had picked me while I was still a lightweight and then he and Simmy Kerhoulas had taught me patiently, trained me rigidly, given me bouts only when they knew I was ready for them. The first week I worked for Lou and Simmy they tied my right arm down to my side, making me work out and spar with only my left. Then Lou offered some of the guys at the gym two dollars for everytime one of them knocked me down, using both hands against my one. He must have paid out a hun-

dred bucks in a week's time; but my left became a sledge-hammer.

Lou had picked the spots where I was to add the ten pounds I needed for welterweight. "Here's a list of the welters," he had said one day in the gym. "There are seventeen guys between you and the title, but you may have to fight some of them a couple times. I figure it ought to take you about three years." He'd been just a little wrong, because I'd had to fight twenty-three guys thirty times before I got my title shot.

Lou continued to stare at me and it made me mad because I knew just exactly what was going through his head. "All right, all right, Lou; for God's sake get off my back," I said. "So there's no steam left. So I'm not the champ you thought I was going to be. I thought we had all this out this afternoon at the weigh-in."

He began speaking softly, calmly, his deep voice edged with what sounded like disappointment, and resignation. "I'm giving you back your contract after tonight, Johnny. If you fight anymore, it won't be for me." I'd known that was coming—the final blow and one I did deserve. "What I told you at the Commissioner's office this afternoon was about your fighting, what's gone wrong with it lately. And I never said I didn't think you could be champ, because I still think you could be. No; there's only one person who's ever whipped you,

only one person who's got you buffaloed. And we both know who that person is."

I was half way to my feet, my fists clenched. Lou went on, still calmly, "Don't look at me like that, Johnny Michaels. You're going to listen to this and then I don't give a damn if Caine puts you out in the fourth row. And don't get any ideas about coming at me because I'll knock that thick head of yours right through those lockers."

I sat down.

"The only one who's got you through the ropes is that nice little gal from next door—sweet, true-blue Vivian. You wouldn't listen to Simmy and me; no, you had to go ahead and marry her while you were still coming up. And what's it gotten you in two years—nothing but hell. Sit down and shut up! You know it and I know it, and I guess Simmy knows it too."

That's the way he went on, telling me things I knew already and things I wasn't consciously aware of and wouldn't admit. Telling me that Vi married me two years ago because she realized I was going places; but then ditched me when I didn't go fast enough to keep her in expensive clothes and at all the night spots. Everything he said hurt, either opening old wounds or making new ones. It was all about Vi and the way she twisted me around her little finger. He was right and I guess that's the reason I just sat there and let him say those things,

things that I never would have let anyone else say—things I hadn't even let myself think. Vi had stuck with me right up to the title fight, pretending to love me and making over me particularly when I would win one and get a little closer to the top. But losing the fight to the Champ had ended the little game. She wouldn't even wait for me to get another chance at it.

I was down in the dumps after that fight and lost my next three. But then Lou had gotten hold of me and kept me away from Vi long enough to get my mind back on boxing. I got so I felt good again, felt like going back after that title.

It was during the last six months, while I was getting back into the top ranks that Vi started really running around on me. I knew it from the few times I'd get home and from the rumors around the gym and camp. Then when I went into training for this fight the rumors got thicker. Vi was going to a lot of parties with the fight crowd—sports-writers, socialites, bums, some of the fighters, including this "Killer" Caine. Three weeks ago Vi had asked me for a divorce, just when I was primed for this fight, believing I could win it and get my second chance at the title. She had laughed when I told her that I was going to beat Caine, then in another six months I'd be Champ and things would be different.

"You're not going to whip

'Killer' or anybody," had been her cutting reply. "You'll lose to him and then be on the skids again. You know why? Because you don't know what the bigtime really is. You don't know what it is to own a big car and have a wife all dressed up and maybe go on a tour to Europe or South America. But that's what guys like Caine think about, and that's what they end up doing. They win so they can do those things. I'm finished with you, Johnny, and I want a divorce."

I told her to go to hell and she'd said maybe Caine would knock me around so much she wouldn't need a divorce.

The dressing room door opened again and a featherweight named Perkins was led in by his seconds. He was groggy and sort of whimpering as they guided him over to the table. Glancing up I saw that Lou had left and Simmy was now walking over to me with my gloves. "You on next, Johnny," he said. He was helping me on with the mitts when Vic Marcy, Caine's manager, strode in, smoking the big cigar that together with his loud mouth, was a trade-mark. He tried to give me a hard time, but I was too absorbed in my own thoughts to be bothered. Guys like him never cause me much worry anyway.

I don't remember much of those next few minutes except walking down the aisle and hearing a few cheers and words of encouragement from the crowd. Then we were in

the ring and as soon as Simmy stuck the stool under me I sat down. Simmy was massaging the back of my neck, while Spud Lochran, my other second, checked the mouthpiece and gloves. I glanced across the ring as "Killer" Caine stepped through the ropes then danced around in his corner, getting rosin on his shoes. He was a sharp cookie, in his white robe, a good boxer and plenty strong. The fans loved him because he could dish out punishment and make a real show of it.

The routine announcements were over and we were out in the center of the ring for the inevitable instructions and a chance for Mike Melchior, the ref, to speak his little piece. Caine and I touched gloves and went back to our corners.

It was just as I sat down on the stool that Simmy slapped me—hard right across the mouth. It was a short, stinging slap but I guess no one saw it on TV, and as I gasped with surprise, Spud shoved the rubber mouthpiece in. Before I could say anything Simmy was leaning over me, smiling and talking fast. "You need someone make you mad. Remember wha' we tell you, Johnny; stan' still and don't move too much. Let him come to you. Keep you eye on his lef' and when he start to hook and raise his right guard, hit him twice, hard in the rib. Then step back and watch him fall." He winked at me as the

buzzer sounded and I silently blessed him for bringing me out of the daze. Simmy was all I had needed because now I was back at the fight with everything else forgotten. In the ten seconds before the bell I again thought about all the points I was to keep in mind, all the moves and openings I was to watch for.

As the bell sounded I went out a little too fast, Caine coming out more slowly and with deliberation. He seemed to have a smirk on his face, the handsome face with its clean-cut features that none of his opponents had been able to mar. He immediately began dancing around, feinted with his right and then threw two fast jabs at my face. I backed off a step and kept my left out in front of me, crouching just slightly. He danced away and then came in fast and caught me on the temple with a couple more jabs. I hooked a left and he went under it catching me with a good one-two on the stomach. I lost a little breath and thought, hey, that's my play. I back-pedaled and moved to the left. Caine moved with me and swatted me on the ear with another hook, but gave an opening and I got him with a light uppercut to the chin and then a grazing hard right uppercut. He backed off and as I followed him, he caught me with a straight right to the nose that brought tears to my eyes.

It went like that for the first two

minutes of the round—Caine feinting, dancing, jabbing; me following him, waiting for an opening and scoring a couple times to the body. We were in a clinch when I heard him hiss through his mouthpiece, "Hello, flop!" Mike separated us and I was standing there like a big baboon while it sank in, when Caine blasted me. It was a left hook square on the cheekbone, and then a right cross. I saw purple spots and flashes of light for a second before slamming against the ropes, with the crowd yelling at my back. I was all covered up, trying to protect myself from the anticipated flurry, but Caine was standing back, not following through. He stood off from me until I started to move to my right along the ropes, and then he caught me with another left hook before I had a chance to duck. I crouched over and he waited until I straightened up again, throwing a series of fast lefts and rights to my head. As I started to weave, he swung a left uppercut; but this one I saw coming, getting under it and giving him the left-right to the ribs. He winced and stepped back as the bell rang.

Spud had the mouthpiece out and Simmy was looking at my face for cuts and bruises as I sat down in the corner.

"You got to stop going in, Johnny," Simmy was saying. "He's been waiting for you every time. Make him come to you." My head

was clearing and I rinsed out my mouth, trying to concentrate on Simmy's instructions. Go into more of a crouch but keep my head up. Watch Caine's left hand. If he continued to follow me this round, try feinting a step back and give him a right hook. He was dropping his guard as he came in after me so watch for an opening there. I wanted to ask Simmy if he had seen Lou, but he kept up a constant jabber so I didn't have a chance. The buzzer sounded as they slipped in the mouthpiece. I pushed it into place and then stood up.

I went out slowly for round two, and again Caine and I circled and jabbed at each other, feinting and watching for openings. He still had that cocky smirk on his face. About halfway through the round, Caine threw a left hook and I ducked under it and faked a step back. My right caught him hard over his left eye and knocked him back three steps. Again I never should have gone after him because he nailed me with a straight right, just as in the first round, as I was coming in, and in the instant I blinked he caught me with two more hooks and I was back against the ropes. I was trying for a clinch, but every-time I'd reach for him he'd step back and paste me.

They were strange kind of punches—almost like he was pulling them. No follow-through, just jarring jolts, mostly to my head. I kept trying to figure them out

while Caine kept on throwing them and connecting. The blows twisted my head back and forth so I tightened my neck muscles to hold my head still, but that made it worse. I finally tied him up in a clinch, and when Mike separated us we moved back to the center of the ring. The blows hadn't seemed hard, but I realized as I stood there waiting for him to come in that I was getting dizzy.

Caine circled some more, trying to maneuver me against the ropes. He trapped me in my own corner and as I rushed him to get out, the right uppercut landed on the point of my chin and the left hook sent me reeling down the ropes. I was going down and I wanted to go down to give my head a chance to clear up. Caine caught me as I was falling and, actually holding me up, forced us into a clinch. When Mike pulled us apart this time he gave me a quick once-over.

Caine let me get back to the center of the ring before pounding some more to my head. I got a solid left into his heart and followed with a hard right to the ribs. But he swarmed over me, and the round was over.

Simmy was talking to me again, talking rapidly, telling me to try crowding Caine. I tried shaking some of the fog out of my head and it helped when Spud threw cold water on my face. They checked my face but there were still no cuts or bruises so Simmy applied

just a touch of grease. That's one of the things I couldn't figure. Caine was a butcher; he'd won a lot of his fights on TKO's after ripping his opponent's face with razor-like jabs. But he wasn't cutting me, just using those hooks to the head.

Round three was more of the same, and even though I scored points in the first part of the round with some good shots to the body and then the head, during the last minute I was back on the ropes with Caine battering away at my head. My eyes were beginning to glaze up by the end of the round and Simmy didn't do much talking. He kept asking me if I was all right and I kept lying, mumbling yes. He and Spud were worried and we all knew that Caine was hurting me. I kept thinking the kind of blows he was throwing could really do serious damage—the kind that jar the brains loose from their linings and pop little blood vessels in the head.

I was thinking about that as I moved to the center of the ring for round four. This time I crowded Caine, trying to stay inside those hooks. We must have clinched three times in the first minute, but then Caine had me back on the ropes, punching away at my head. Things were going around in circles and I dropped my hands to my sides, not caring what happened. I wanted to go down, go down and feel the cool canvas on my face. But again Caine stood off

at the last moment, and when my eyes cleared for a second I could see he still had that look on his face, only it was getting meaner and nastier.

As I moved straight at him, wobbling at the knees, he threw the left hook again and it sent me staggering around the center of the ring. Then another, and another and I was going down for sure. Just as my knees buckled I saw the right—caught a glimpse of the savage gleam in Caine's eyes and the right fist already headed for my chin, aimed to catch it as I fell. I twisted my shoulders and Caine's right hand whistled in front of my face fanning it with a rush of cool air that felt wonderful.

I lay on my side hearing Mike count, "One... Two... Three..."

Mike had reached five when it started coming to me, and it came all at once. Sure those were the kind of blows that loosened a guy's brains, because that's what Caine intended. That's why he'd kept me on the ropes so many times, not letting me go down because he didn't want me to go down—not just then. He wanted me to stay up so he could jar loose a little more gray matter, and maybe rupture a blood vessel or two. Then when I was practically out on my feet, he maneuvered me to the center where I was helpless and where he could pick the time and spot to clout me with all the strength he had, and then stand

there and hope I'd crack my head on the mat when I fell.

Suddenly I knew what Vi had meant when she said maybe she wouldn't have to bother with a divorce after this fight. "Killer" Caine was the fair-haired bigtime boy in her life now, and he was out to make certain that this was not only my last fight, but my last night to live. It's not too hard to kill a man in the squared-circle if you play it right, and that's what Caine was trying to do. He wasn't fighting just to win—he could have knocked me out in the second round. No; he was fighting to kill me!

I got up on the eight-count and as Mike rubbed my gloves he asked me if I was all right. I nodded and when he moved out of the way, I stood there looking at Caine's face. The smirk was no longer there, but instead a look of dissatisfaction at having missed with the lethal right. He moved in confidently while the crowd screamed. My sight was still a bit foggy but I saw the left hook coming and ducked. My right buried itself to the wrist in the center of his stomach right on the belt line, and I saw the mouthpiece pop halfway out of his lips as the bell rang and the crowd booded.

I headed for the wrong corner before getting my bearings straight. Simmy and Spud had my stool ready for me and I saw Lou coming through the ropes and the ring door climbing up on the apron.

The first thing Simmy did was to slap a cold, wet towel over my face so the doc wouldn't get a quick look at my glazed eyes. Then Lou jerked the towel off and was looking at me with concern and saying, "I'm going to tell Mike to stop it, Johnny. You're getting hurt."

"You do and you'll end up in the same place I'd like to put Caine and sweet little Vi," I said, managing a smile at his big, ugly face. He looked startled, and then understanding what I meant, he started smiling back. Lou said in my ear, "Stand up straight and go into him with your left." Then he stepped through the ropes to head off the doctor, assuring him I was able to go on. The doc didn't push it, but caught Mike Melchior's eye enough to get it across that Mike was to watch me closely the next round. Spud was shoving the salts under my nose for about the tenth time when the warning buzzer sounded.

As the bell rang, Caine came hurriedly out of his corner, eager to get back to his task of trying to murder me so he and dear Vi could do the town. As I walked slowly toward him in the center of the ring, I said to myself, "Okay, pretty boy Caine; you can have that little bitch. But when I get done with that nice, handsome face of yours I don't think she's going to want much of you."

Caine danced around me for a few seconds, like the cat with the

mouse, giving the television viewers their show, then shot out two quick left jabs, followed by a right uppercut and the left hook. My eyes were clearing now, catching every motion he made, every give-away tightening of the muscles that told me what was coming next. I rolled with the hook and backed into the ropes. Caine's eyes lighted up and I saw him tense for the series of left and right hooks. One right grazed the top of my head as I ducked, grabbed Caine and threw him around into the ropes—the first time he'd been there all evening.

I kept my right flat against my side, just like it was tied there, and jabbed four times, hard with my left before Caine could blink an eye. I stepped back and watched the area around his right eyebrow turn red and start puffing up, and when he made a move, I gave the spot a short right overhand. Caine got to my body with a couple of hard ones and we fell into a clinch.

After breaking, we moved back to the center and Caine danced around some more, a little puzzled over the turn of events. He moved in with some left jabs and this time I didn't wait for the follow-up hook. I crouched and then came up with a right that caught him flush on the mouth, snapping his head back so that I could belt him hard with a sidearm left to the kidneys. The pain showed on his face and I stepped back. We'd play it

his way—cat and mouse. The crowd didn't like it because they wanted blood—especially my blood.

I moved in too close and we clinched in the corner. Mike separated us and I forced Caine back into the ropes with a grazing left hook. We went into close fighting, Caine shoving me back and landing two left jabs and a right cross when the bell sounded.

Lou was waiting in the corner with Simmy and Spud when I sat down. "You've got him, Johnny," he said. "You've got him now. Keep your left in his face and stay back from him. Your jabs will keep him off balance and he'll drop his gloves when he comes in to hook."

While Simmy sponged my face and the back of my neck, I asked Lou, "Did you know about Caine and Vi?"

"No," he replied, "I didn't know about them till just a little while ago. After I left the dressing room I ran into that newspaper guy Ferguson, and he gave me the low-down." He paused and said, "I'm sorry about that part of it; even I didn't think Vi was that rotten."

I started to say it was okay but the sound of the buzzer shut me up. The stool was taken out from under me and I was standing in the corner, impatient for the bell. The bell rang and as I walked cautiously toward Caine, I could see grease applied heavily on the swollen area over his right eye.

Caine came in close and tried

some body punches that I blocked with my elbows. We stood together in-fighting, but neither of us scoring very well. I stepped back and Caine got my nose with a left jab. I backpedaled a few more steps, wanting Caine to come in, and when he did, I threw a left-right combination to his body. When he dropped his guard I let loose with a smashing right that caught him on the nose, and I could almost feel the cartilage snap in his once nicely shaped beak. The tears welled up in his eyes and before he could clear them I sent two left jabs against his nose, followed by a right cross that smeared the flowing blood all over his face.

I had never felt like this before in a fight—I suppose because I had never before fought my wife's lover and a guy who wanted me out of the way. I felt now that I could end it at any time and Mike Melchior was already watching Caine closely for too much bleeding. But I didn't want a TKO, at least not until I'd put some more scar tissue on him.

For the rest of the fifth, I contented myself in jabbing at his face, but trying to keep away from the right eye. A small cut was opened high on his left cheek by the end of the round.

His seconds worked a lot on Caine between rounds but the doctor didn't come in to look at him.

At the start of the sixth, Caine's guard was up and as I threw a side-

arm right at his body to bring the guard down, he caught me with two sharp left hooks. As we clinched I realized that the fight wasn't over and perhaps Caine didn't understand that I had guessed the whole story. Before Mike could separate us, Caine spun me around into the ropes and hit me again with the left. A right followed, catching me right on the button and I was worried for a moment that I wasn't going to have any more chance to work on Caine. But he clinched me and I knew his tactics were the same; his plan was still to try for an "accidental" ring death. Mike got us apart and warned Caine for the wrestling.

I shook my head to clear it and then backed away as Caine started in after me. I took two dancing steps backwards and as he stepped into me I threw a left and right to his head, both hard and both connecting. His knees wobbled and he tried to fall against me, but I backed again and hit him six times in the face with short, chopping punches. As I skipped away leaving Caine hanging on the ropes, I saw the inch and a half split in his right eyebrow. There was little blood coming from it but the blood was flowing freely from the gash under his left eye. I knew what else the right eye needed and after hammering his body we clinched and I butted the eyebrow with my head. Mike didn't see it but I could hear some boos from the crowd.

We broke and it was evident that Caine was in serious trouble.

His eyes were dull and a look of pain was on his face, showing through the crimson stain that covered him from hairline to chin. The entire area above his right eye was open raw flesh, and the eye was closing fast. His nose, while not bleeding anymore, was a drab red, cocked slightly to the right. Blood from the gash under his left eye was still streaming down his cheek and his chest and trunks were polka-dotted red. I didn't think they would let him come out for another round and I would have tried for a knockout right then, but I had lost track of the time and the bell rang.

The doctor followed Caine's seconds into the ring and I kept watching them, not paying any attention to Lou and Simmy telling me the fight was over. There was a heated discussion between the doctor and Vic Marcy in the oppo-

site corner and then the doc walked over to Mike and spoke briefly to him. They were going to let Caine try another round.

I didn't want to get back in there with him because I figured I'd gotten my revenge, but the bell rang and there we were. As a matter of fact, the seventh round lasted only thirty-four seconds – long enough for me to hit Caine in the stomach, and then follow with a left hook and right cross. Mike had stopped the fight even before Caine hit the canvas and I didn't even watch him fall, but turned and walked back to my corner.

And that's it, Lieutenant. Nobody told me about him cracking his head when he fell. After the announcement of the time I saw them leading him out of the ring and since he was walking, I figured he must be okay. Oh, I knew he was hurt, but I thought it was just from the cuts. I never thought he would die.



"One Hour Late" by WILLIAM O'FARRELL

"Road to Samarra" by JANE ROTH

"The Double Take" by EDWARD WELLEN

—*in the April* MANHUNT

So, here I am; just a few hours out of jail and already burying my first cop.

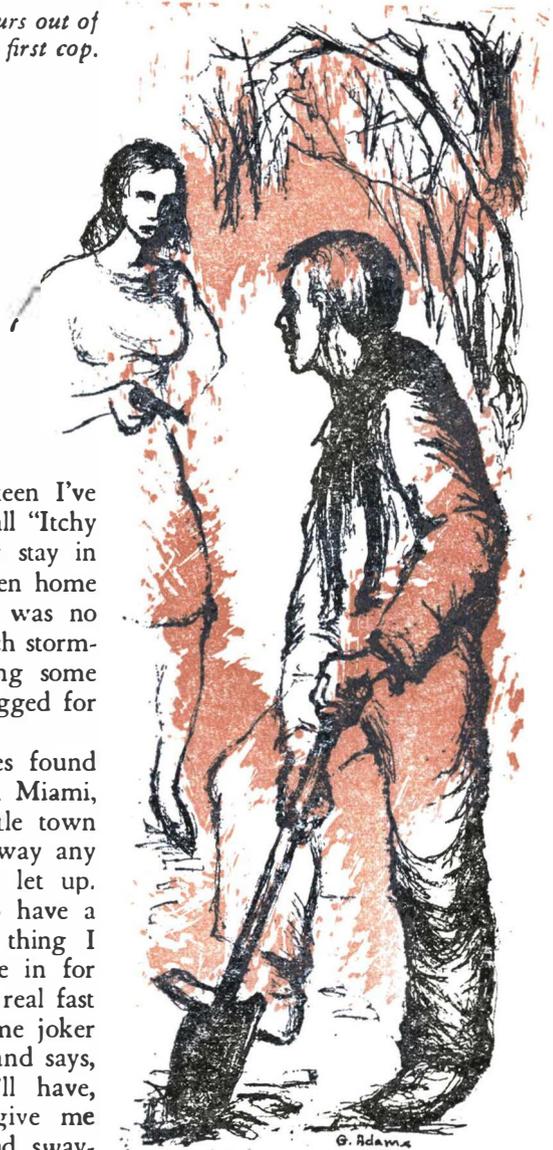
LOVERS

BY

R. J. HOCHKINS

EVER SINCE I was eighteen I've had what my folks call "Itchy feet." It's because I never stay in one place too long. I'd been home for seven months and it was no shock to them, when March stormed into Manhattan wailing some cold wet blues and I shagged for the sunny South.

Six days thumbing rides found me a hundred miles from Miami, stranded in a nothing little town that was going to float away any minute if the rain didn't let up. I relaxed long enough to have a few beers and the next thing I know this badge runs me in for vagrancy. There are some real fast legal proceedings then some joker hands me a big hammer and says, "Think of the tan you'll have, son." Big laugh. They give me thirty days of sunshine and swaying palms on the county road gang.



This morning they returned my clothes and stuff but the only thing the mildew hadn't ruined was my old club jacket. I've had it since high school and you can make out *Tigers A. C.* on the back where I tore the lettering off a long time ago. It looked too much like kid stuff for bummin' around the country, but anyhow I'm glad it didn't rot 'cause it's like an old friend. The rest of my things I had to buy new.

After a shave, haircut and meal the Sheriff says, "Make tracks Tiger," and man that's what I did. It felt real fine to be loose again and I didn't so much as turn my head for a last look at that town.

North for a ways then maybe cut over to New Orleans is what I figured. Miami had lost its charm for me. I made a good eight miles before deciding it was safe to bum a ride. It's Wednesday and not many cars out. The ones I did show the thumb must have noticed I'm big and not dressed too well. Anyhow, they don't stop.

With the sun resting on the palmetto tops here comes another car, way off. I look it over to make sure it's not cops then stick up the thumb. This sharp blonde kind of looks through me and blasts on by. I'm thinking to myself, things like that don't happen, when, lo and behold, she swings a turn far up the road and comes halfway back.

She sits there on the other side

of the pavement and I can feel her watching me. I'm saying urgent little prayers for a ride 'cause I'm tired and the sun is a hot weight.

She's got Florida tags and coming alongside the car I flash my best smile across the road and yell, "How about a lift?"

All the time she's watching me very calm and thoughtful and when I speak she jumps, then smiles, but not to me, to herself.

She roars into another turn, stops in front of me and says, "Get in."

The back of the seat feels cool and nice through my T shirt and as we start to roll I give her a smile and say, "Thanks."

She smiles a your-welcome back at me and I see she's a dream, with a golden tan that lightens to a delicate olive at the swell of her breasts and a low cut pink cotton dress that whispers of firm, smooth, fullness its whole length. I start thinking how long it's been, and have to look away.

"Have you walked very far?" she asks.

"About eleven miles." Then I think it's not a very smart answer because she can add my cheap new clothes, deep tan and haircut to the fact the county jail is in that town eleven miles back.

If she's wise she doesn't let on, but pulls a pack of cigarettes down from the sun visor and offers me one.

I hold the dash lighter out to

her. "Do you live around here?" I say.

"More or less but I wouldn't call it living." She exhales slowly with no trace of humor.

"I'm from New York myself," and, as an after thought, "My name's Pete."

She has a nice laugh. "Mine is Lily."

After that we hit it off pretty well and the conversation is steady although we talk of nothing things like how hot it is.

We've only come about ten miles when she says, "I'm getting a bit tired driving Pete, do you mind if I pull off the road for a few minutes?"

I could offer to drive but my mind is racing with all kinds of pleasant thoughts and I just say, "No I'm not in any hurry."

We slow down, cut off onto this dirt road. About three hundred yards with the brush, and moss hung trees tall on both sides, then there's a clearing. Low in the center are the fire gutted timbers of a house and barn. She backs off the road twenty feet from what looks like a small chicken coop. It's not damaged from the fire and there's a padlock on the door.

I'm going half nuts thinking how nice it would be to kiss the side of her neck and wondering if her skin would feel warm or cool and maybe it shows 'cause she turns her head and gives me an icy ray with both eyes.

She pulls the cigarettes down, lights one and slides the pack to me across the seat. Then she takes her bulky purse and stands in front of the car smoking with a blank face. I kick myself for being such a dreamer.

As the sun starts down she gets back in.

My thoughts are under control now and I'm enjoying the evening. The shadows are long in the clearing and there's a breeze with little cool pockets. Its come a long way, and I'm breathing deep.

Facing me she does the same, then says softly, "Mmm nice."

"You can smell the sea, Lily," I guess I'm grinning cause I love the sea.

She looks at me so sad for awhile, like she's sorry for me about something. Then she slides closer to me and says, "It gets cramped sitting behind the wheel."

I'm trying to keep from dreaming again but her perfume sneaks inside and grabs me and next thing I have her warm and close, her lips under mine. Then I get panicky thoughts of her screaming and me back on the road gang and I turn her loose quick.

She looks surprised then whispers, "It's okay, Pete, I've done time myself."

This rocks me back for a minute but her fingers are working down the side of her dress where the buttons are and in the fading light her eyes are saying love me, Pete.

Then I'm holding her again and she's all soft curves. Her skin is some places warm, and some places cool and all over like velvet and it's the way you always think it's going to be but hardly ever is.

It's dark after awhile. She is sitting at the wheel and we hold hands across the seat with no talk.

Bending down to see the luminous clock on the dash, she takes her hand away, opens her purse and is searching in it when a light starts up the road.

I have my shirt and jacket on but a chill works up my back and I feel like something's wrong.

She turns. "Sit still and keep quiet." Her words are tight and low.

My stomach flips into a knot as a motorcycle cop roars into the clearing. He pulls up in front of the car and cuts his machine.

Everything is dark again as he starts over to the chicken shack without looking at us. He's big with an animal gait. There's a flashlight under his arm and he turns it on to unlock the door. It swings open, there's a cot and some blankets inside. He leans against the doorjamb and looks over at us like he's waiting.

He spots me after awhile. Jerking up straight he puts the light on me then on Lily and starts walking toward us. He moves slow like a fat bear. There's sweat and meanness on his pudgy face.

My legs are weak and I'm try-

ing to figure what kind of a soup I'm in.

He comes up on the other side. "What you tryin' to pull, Lily?" He talks thick like he's been drinking.

She's tense and breathing hard. "My parole was up yesterday."

There's some great problem working in his mind, then he must notice something in her eyes because he starts clawing at his holster.

She brings this great black cannon up from her purse and as it roars the whole side of his head tears away. The recoil catches her alongside the jaw and she doesn't even feel it. She jumps out real desperate like and blasts him three more times. He just lays there very still. I know he's dead.

My heart is slamming all around inside and my brain won't tell me what to do.

She's draped across the engine with coughing sobs. When it passes she straightens up. Her eyes are red and swollen and the whole time she still holds the gun. Moving behind the car she opens the trunk and comes back with a shovel. "I need your help." Her voice is matter of fact and the gun seems forgotten at her side but I do what she says.

She wants him buried under the chicken coop, motorcycle and all. I push the coop over on its side and start digging. The hard work

calms me down and while I'm working she tells the story.

They caught her pushing some stuff in Miami and she got sent up. She does most of it, then gets paroled and is staying with her folks about forty miles from where we are now. With five months parole time left, she goes out on a bat one night alone. She's high as a kite and speeding when the fat cop pulls her over. She tells him about being on parole and asks for a break. He offers her the shack where he found some bum living. She doesn't want to be sent back to prison and goes along. He says to meet him there every Wednesday, and she gives in again. She hates his guts and starts making plans for when her parole runs out and she can leave.

The story is over and I'm still digging. It takes all of three hours before I think it's deep enough and stop.

She says, "Deeper Pete."

When I look at her face an icy hand grips at my spine 'cause I see the same thing the cop saw. I know why she was so nice to me in the car and I also know she can't do it by herself, but maybe she won't listen.

My voice sounds pinched and strange. "Look, baby, I've got cal-luses on my hands an inch thick and their still getting sore. Yours will be like hamburger in five minutes. You won't be able to drive."

"If we put the shack on top of

him they'll probably never find him. You can't do it alone and somebodys dog will have him dug up in a week."

Death is still peering at me from behind her eyes, but I'm getting to her.

It's like cutting my own throat but I take my jacket and drop it in the grave. My voice is shaking bad now and she can see I'm telling the truth, "It ties me in with the whole thing. They nicknamed me Tiger down at the jail and the cops would remember that jacket. I'd be crazy to open my mouth now."

Her face is getting softer and I began to hope.

"We're good together, baby. I'll go to work. I'm big and strong. I can get a job almost anywhere. I'll take care of you real good but you gotta give me a break."

I think I am already dead and I'm being reborn when she finally lowers the gun. Later I know I'll hate her for making me crawl like that, and myself for doing it, but right now I'm going to live; there's no room to feel anything else.

After we get the dirt on top of the cop and his bike, it takes both of us to set the shack right side up. I throw the extra dirt off in the woods.

It's time to go and we move towards the car.

I'm going to have to stick with her and treat her real good. I just

hope she knows I'm never going to talk. Pictures of me working from nine to five every day run through my tired head and I wish to hell I'd never layed eyes on her.

I open the door on the passenger side and she slides in, the light is on. She reaches way over to put

the keys in the ignition and her dress pulls tight across her bosom, soft waist and thigh.

I look at the brighter side of our arrangement, then moving around to drive, the night air feels suddenly chill because she's deep in thought again.

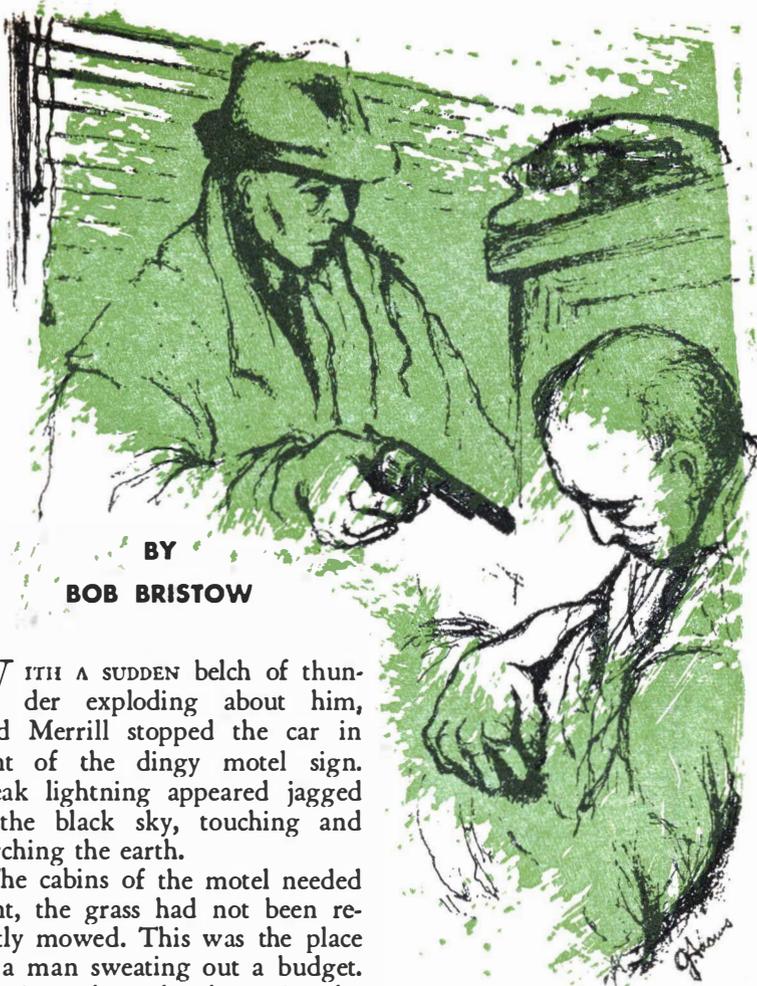


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BY
BOB BRISTOW

WITH A SUDDEN belch of thunder exploding about him, Fred Merrill stopped the car in front of the dingy motel sign. Streak lightning appeared jagged in the black sky, touching and scorching the earth.

The cabins of the motel needed paint, the grass had not been recently mowed. This was the place for a man sweating out a budget. Running through the rain, he

NIGHT OF DEATH

The girl was soft and warm, her eyes glassy with her gluttonous desire. With the gun pointed at his stomach she would make him do it.

opened the door to the office, saw a desk, a dim lamp on the table whose shade was fly specked, a bell on the desk, the sign ordering in clumsy letters, *Ring For Manager*. Suddenly he was aware that he was very tired from the long drive.

Fred Merrill shook the rain from his hat, sighed and reached for the bell. Then he saw the river of blood spreading from beneath the army surplus desk. The blood, dammed by the uneven floor, stopped briefly, then darted toward his shoes.

Fred reached the other side of the desk, saw the man lying on the floor like a crumpled piece of discarded paper. He placed the man, a small balding fat man of about forty-five, in a more comfortable position. The wounds were fresh, and being a hospital lab technician, Fred Merrill recognized their severity. One bullet had entered just beneath the heart. This wound bled profusely and in all probability an artery was damaged. The other wound was lower, the bullet having entered below the rib cage. From his breathing, Fred knew that the man needed immediate medical attention, and his odds were not good at that.

He reached for the telephone.

"No, Dad . . . don't touch it," she said.

An icicle of fear moved down his back. As he turned, his hand frozen a few inches from the phone, the woman came into the room.

She had been inside the living quarters. *You fool. You didn't think!*

She was young, built solidly, dressed tastefully, yet she held the revolver in her gloved hand in a skilled, professional manner. A dark brunette, with almost brown skin. But the color of the skin was affected with a strange pallor. The secret was written in the face, the sick, diseased face that displayed the results of fear and desperation. And more specifically in the eyes, the pupils contracted to pinpoints. Fred had seen it before. He was dealing with an addict, one who was desperate, one who would kill to satisfy the insane, gluttonous demand for drugs.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said. "It must have been the storm." Her voice came from the incredible dream world of the addict, yet diabolically clever, brilliantly unreasonable. He had seen it before.

"He needs a doctor," Fred said, his voice betraying his concern, for the man and for himself.

The woman laughed. "Maybe you didn't spoil anything after all."

"Lady, for God's sake, if this man doesn't see a doctor . . ."

The woman drew back the hammer of the .38 revolver, stopping his words in mid-sentence.

"Are you going to shoot me?"

Fred asked, knowing that the question was wrong as soon as he had spoken. Obviously the woman had recently had a fix. Perhaps her

mind was not clear of the cobweb-like confusion that preceded the narcotic. Such a suggestion might put ideas into her mind.

"No . . . I'm not going to kill you." She smiled, for a moment losing the expression of lingering desperation. The smile died at her mouth. "Unless you force me," she said. She arched her shoulders, thrusting her breasts toward him defiantly.

"We've got to help him. He'll die. If we don't help him it will be murder."

"You hear that, peddler?" the woman said to the gasping man on the floor. "If we don't help you it will be murder. What a dirty loss."

"Is he a peddler?" Fred asked.

"He was. He got me started. Old man, do you remember? It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"He raised the price on you . . . he made you struggle?"

"Yes . . ." the woman's almost pupilless eyes aimed toward him, like the very small barrel of the revolver, perhaps as deadly. "Do you know what a woman will do for drugs. Do you?"

"Yes," Fred said.

"He put me through the ringer. How do you like it now, old man? Was it worth it?" The injured man's face was pale, his breathing shallow. He made no indication that he had heard, no effort to reply.

"If you give up, a jury will be

sympathetic. Maybe we can save him. People are disgusted with peddlers. You'd get treatment. The cure."

For an instant the woman considered this.

"I want him dead. And I don't care for the cure. I know what withdrawal is. You don't kid me."

"You can't just let him die."

"No . . . I won't. Do *you* want to live?" she asked, a cynical smile at her mouth.

Fred did not answer audibly. He nodded.

"You've got a chance, Dad." The woman laughed. "Maybe you're a gift from heaven. Move back. Slowly. I don't kid with this thing." She gestured with the gun.

"All right," Fred said. He felt his feet moving. He was near the door. He might gamble. If he jerked the door open, dived low . . .

You'd never make it. That would be suicide. Just be calm and let her do the talking.

The woman opened the drawer of the desk, keeping him in her line of vision. She took a .45 automatic from the desk. "Turn around," she said. "Lean against the wall with your hands flat."

Fred turned, keeping his face at an angle. Expertly the woman flipped the safety on the automatic and laid it on the desk. This done, she removed the cartridges from the .38 revolver. All except one. She left one.

"Now turn around," she instructed.

Fred turned. The woman took the automatic and left the revolver on the desk. She backed through the door to the living quarters, pulled it almost closed after her.

"All right, Dad," she said. "The old man keeps his money in a metal box in the bottom drawer of the desk. You come over and take it out of the box. Get your prints on the box. Then you take the revolver. You have one shot. With that one you finish the old man. Do you understand? If you try to get me, I'll empty this .45 in your face. It's very simple. You came in and tried to rob the old man. He didn't bluff. You shot it out. You hit him three times with that gun." She indicated the revolver on the desk. "But he got you too. He got you with the .45 automatic. I put the old man's prints on the automatic when you are both dead and I leave, with what I came after. You'd better do as I say."

"You found where he hid his drugs?" Fred asked.

"That's right. A lot of it. Horse. Real good H. Not the cut stuff he sold me. Dad, I'm giving you a chance. You finish the old man. Then we leave in your car, and if you can beat the cops on down the road, you go free. I just want out of town."

"I can't do that," Fred said.

"You don't have to worry. He's bound to die anyway. Remember,

all I've got to do is shoot you. I told you I'm giving you a break."

Fred stared through the crack in the door, at the automatic leveled at his chest. "You can't kill me like that," Fred said. "I've got a woman out in the car. She would see you leave." He wasn't a very good liar.

"Good for you. That gives you an ace. But you wear a wedding ring. You said a woman, not your wife. If I finish you it might look bad to your wife. Besides, there is a back door to this place."

Fred studied her carefully. His ace hadn't taken the pot, but the woman seemed less certain that she should kill him. But he couldn't gamble with her. The man on the floor had tried that.

"Now I'll give you three," she said. "When I start counting, you come over here and take that revolver and shoot the old man. I want him shot right between the eyes. If you don't be a good boy, you are dead. There's only one shot in that gun. All right. I'm counting. One . . ."

Fred rubbed his face wearily. The peddler's blood was soaking into the rough floor. He felt nauseated. If he didn't, what chance did he have? He thought of his wife, his daughter. They would never know that he really hadn't murdered the peddler. Maybe he'd have to die, but not here . . . not this way.

"Two . . ."

Fred started across the room.

"Easy, Dad. Easy," she warned.

Could he kill the man? Could it ever come to that? He reached the desk.

"The money first. Get that metal box," she ordered.

Fred leaned down and opened the drawer. The box was on top. He took it from the drawer and placed it on the desk, then closed the drawer.

"Now open it," she said.

Fred opened the box with the small key which was attached to a string. Below him the peddler breathed with difficulty.

On top he saw the fives, and lower in the box a few tens, one or two twenties. It looked to be about a hundred dollars.

"Put it in your pocket," she said. "At least you get something."

Fred scooped the money and dropped it in his coat pocket.

"Very good. Now take the gun. Aim it for his head. And honey, God help you if you miss. I won't."

Fred took the revolver in his hand, knowing that as he did, her scheme was working, that his fingerprints were invisibly etched there. He looked down at the man who lay suffering. As a hospital technician, he knew that the man would in all probability die. The Mayo Clinic couldn't save him. . . . Still, to aim the gun. To pull the trigger and . . .

"I don't think I can do it," he said feeling the sweat at his eyes.

"You don't have to do it, Dad. I can go on from here. If you want to live, you'd better get hot."

"Look . . . you want my prints on the gun. Okay. They are there. Now come out and do it yourself. Then I'll handle the gun again if you want. But don't make me do this."

"Lover . . . you had better hurry. You are nearly dead."

Fred wondered if he had even a slight chance to escape later. But then any chance was better than none. He remembered how it looked, the money in his pocket, his prints on the revolver. His family would have to bear a guilt that was not his if he didn't get out. His daughter would have to live out her life the child of a killer. The man was going to die anyway. Maybe if he stalled . . . maybe he'd die soon.

"You have about five seconds, Dad. Then I'll finish you."

"No . . . don't shoot." There was no choice. Fred aimed the gun at the dying man's head, seeing the barrel tremble under his grip, the sights dancing madly.

"Now pull it," she said.

He hasn't a chance. He's nearly dead. There is no alternative.

He left his finger on the trigger, watched the unseeing eyes of the peddler, felt the pressure on the trigger. He heard the explosion, felt the revolver jump in his hand, smelled the powder smoke in the

closed room. The peddler was dead.

"Put the gun in your pocket," the woman instructed calmly, coming from behind the door facing.

Fred dropped the gun into his pocket, aware of the thing he had done, sickened, weak.

"That wasn't so bad, now was it?" she said lightly.

He felt the muscles of his stomach contract, felt the first tears burning in his eyes. He began to break, felt himself going, when suddenly the searing pain appeared at the side of his face and he knew that she had hit him with the automatic.

"Now listen, Dad. You're doing fine. But don't play out on me. You know I don't intend to let you foul me. Now stand there. Don't make a sound."

The woman took the telephone and dialed a number. She spoke in a hushed tone.

"Hello . . . police . . . listen, please. A man has just robbed the Shady Lane Motel on Highway 62. Please come quick . . . he's . . ." The woman screamed, a hideous, shrill expression. "Please don't . . ." she cried. "Leave me alone . . . please . . ." Then she replaced the receiver. It had been an incredibly believable performance. She smiled a self-satisfied smile and gestured with the gun toward the door.

"Let's go. It won't take them long."

Fred Merrill opened the door and went to his car, aware of the woman close behind him.

"Open the door," she said.

Fred opened it.

"Well," she said, "you really didn't have a girl friend, after all, did you? But you do now, Dad . . . I'll get in and slide across. Then you get in. Don't be cute. Remember the old man."

"I remember," Fred said.

When she moved to slide across the seat beneath the steering wheel, he would have an instant to make a break. In the darkness she might miss, though he couldn't depend on it. But where did that leave him? When the police arrived, she'd tell them that the robber ran away on foot. The local officers would be so concerned with setting up a manhunt that the woman would be all but forgotten. She could make her escape at leisure while they hunted him. The officers would be shooting to kill. If he gave himself up, how could he explain the money, the gun with his prints? His prints on the metal box? He couldn't come back and wipe the prints clean because the local police would be there in a matter of minutes. It was hopeless.

Fred closed the door.

"Honey . . . don't waste time," she said. "If the police get here before you leave, I'll kill you and say I wrestled the gun away from

you while you were fumbling for the car keys."

"I'll do as you say."

"Let's go."

Fred started the car and drove south on the highway. The sight of the dead man reappeared in his mind. He had killed before, during the war, but it had never been like this. The enemy was always a faceless creature in the distance, and a man had the comfort, amid the turmoil of war, to believe that when the enemy fell, the bullet might have come from any number of rifles other than his own. But this was different. There was no doubt. It was close and horribly personal.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked. He felt the sticky humidity that had followed the sudden rain. His face was sweating, the droplets on his brow.

"Straight ahead," she answered. She was silent now, planning the next move. Fred knew that he could not underestimate her. To do so would be fatal.

"How long have you been hooked?" he asked.

"About a year, maybe less. Who knows what happens to time."

"What did you do to buy drugs?"

"I owned a millinery shop. When I lost that, I worked for the new owners. When that ended, I was a waitress. Then the old man started jumping the price of a fix. It made it real tough. I had to do

without nearly everything to satisfy the craving. Then I had to start picking up men to get money. In bars. You know."

"Yeah."

"Then the old man got a little more greedy. I couldn't make enough to buy horse. So one night I watched him get it, through the keyhole in the door. Tonight I took all he had, and he had plenty. I won't have to worry for a long time. What about you?"

"Not much to know. I was on my way to a new job."

"What kind of job?"

"I work in a hospital. I'm an orderly."

"Do you have access to drugs?" she asked urgently.

"No. I work in the lab."

"Turn at the next mile line," she said.

Fred glanced at her. She was turned in the seat, holding the gun steadily, her back arched against the door. Her skirt had been brushed back, exposing attractive warm thighs.

"You like what you see?" she asked.

Maybe she's vain. You've got to figure. She's planning something right at this moment.

"What I can see I like," he said, wondering if he was overdoing it.

Fred turned off the highway, followed the smooth graveled road until he reached a bend. It was

not raining now, the frogs croaking in the darkness.

"Stop the car," she said.

He stopped, turned, noticing the skirt had carelessly exposed more of her thigh. She scooted toward him.

"Honey . . . don't make a mistake." He felt the automatic against his ribs. "Just love me a little. I feel so good. So good." He watched her lips moving closer, saw the hunger in her eyes. "Nice . . . so nice, Dad," she whispered. The gun was firm against his chest.

Fred tried to think, tried to reason it out. With a feeling of quick, nauseating awareness, he knew! He was certain now. Why hadn't he seen it? The old peddler was too smart to be surprised by an addict if he kept an automatic within arm's reach. *He had been lulled.* She had made suggestive advances toward him, asking for a fix in exchange for favors. He had demanded proof of her intent. She had been close to him, kissing him when she fired the shot in his stomach. Then she had fired again into this chest. In a few moments she would pull the trigger of the automatic and finish him in the same manner.

Fred turned his face away from her lips and laughed. His body shook with the convulsive laughter.

He heard her scream angrily.

"You're wrong," he said. "You made it look like I killed the peddler and you did that all right. I was

a lucky break for you. But if you pull the trigger now, you'll make a liar out of yourself."

"All right, fink . . . keep talking." She was angry, her voice acid.

"The bullet . . . you'd tell them you wrestled for the gun and it went off and killed me. But the way you've got the gun aimed, you wouldn't fool a six year old kid."

For an instant doubt flickered across her face. She withdrew the automatic, and he could tell she was figuring the proper angle. As the gun eased from his ribs, Fred drove his elbow back against her arm with all his strength. He heard the shot and felt the hot, knife-like pain strike through his body. The bullet entered below his shoulder, seared through his body and punctured a hole at the base of his neck as it escaped. He slumped, gasping for breath. When he turned, she was groping for the gun with her left hand. He swung with all his strength and caught her at the side of the jaw, knocking her across the car. She slammed against the opposite door and lay still.

Breathing deeply, he located the automatic and slipped it on safety. Then he took her purse. With the narcotics, he could explain to the police. Besides, his fingerprints were high on the wall where she had made him stand.

She stirred, held up her right hand and began to whimper. The

right arm was bent grotesquely. He had broken it. Fighting against the pain, Fred leaned across and drove his fist against her jaw again. As she fell to the floorboard, he started the car, turned around slowly and headed back to town.

The old man would have traces of lipstick on his mouth. That would help his case. And the narcotics would cinch it. In a mat-

ter of hours she would begin withdrawal symptoms. She'd be begging to confess for a shot of heroin.

Fred turned back on the highway. He was not bleeding badly, and from the sound of his breathing, he felt certain the bullet had missed his lungs.

Up ahead he could see the motel, the blinking lights of the squad cars. It was nearly over.



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that
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A prostitute, a widow with a bottle of nitro, and a very astute killer give the bulls of the 87th Precinct an afternoon of terror.

KILLER'S WEDGE

a full length novel

BY ED MC BAIN



It was a normal everyday afternoon at the beginning of October and outside the grilled windows of the 87th Precinct's squadroom, Grover Park was aflame with color. Indian summer, like a Choc-taw princess, strutted her feathers, wiggled her bright reds and oranges and yellows on the mild October air. The sounds of the

street outside joined with the sounds of the squadroom. The sounds ranged from the woosh of a bull's fist crashing into a thief's belly, to the roar of a bull wanting to know where the hell his ball point pen had gone, to the quietly persistent verbal bludgeoning of an interrogation session, to the muted honeyed tones of a phone conver-

sation with a Mall Avenue debutante, to the whistling of a rookie delivering a message from Headquarters, to the romantic bellow of a woman filing a complaint against her wife-beating husband, to the gurgle of the water cooler, to the uninhibited laughter following a dirty story.

Cotton Hawes sipped at his coffee and grinned. He was a tall man, six feet two and weighing in at a hundred and ninety pounds. He had blue eyes and a square jaw with a cleft chin. His hair was a brilliant red, lighted now by the lazy October sunshine which played with intensity on the streak of white hair over his left temple. The white streak was a curiosity in that it was the result of a long-ago knife wound. They'd shaved the original red to get at the cut, and the shaved patch had grown in white. "Which shows how goddam scared I was," Hawes had said at the time.

Now grinning at Meyer, he said, "Seems to me, I told you this same joke over two weeks ago."

"Christ, what a cynic!" Meyer said.

Hawes turned suddenly.

The woman who stood just outside the slatted rail divider which separated the squadroom from the corridor had entered so silently that none of the men had heard her approach. She cleared her throat, and the sound was shockingly loud, so that Kling and Meyer

turned to face her at almost the same moment Hawes did.

She had deep black hair pulled into a bun at the back of her head. She had brown eyes set in a face without makeup, without lipstick, a face so chalky white that it seemed she had just come from a sickbed somewhere. She wore a black overcoat and black shoes with no stockings. Her bare legs were as white as her face, thin legs which seemed incapable of supporting her. She carried a large black tote bag, and she clung to the black leather handles with thin bony fingers.

"Yes," Hawes said.

"Is Detective Carella here?" she asked. Her voice was toneless.

"No," Hawes said. "I'm Detective Hawes. May I help . . ."

"When will he be back," she interrupted.

"That's difficult to say. He had something personal to take care of, and then he was going directly to an outside assignment. Perhaps one of us . . ."

"I'll wait," the woman said.

"It may take quite a while."

"I have all the time in the world," she answered.

Hawes shrugged. "Well, all right. There's a bench outside. If you'll just . . ."

"I'll wait inside," she said, and before Hawes could stop her she pushed open the gate in the railing and started walking toward one of the empty desks in the cen-

ter of the room. Hawes started after her immediately.

"Miss, I'm sorry," he said, "but visitors are not permitt . . ."

"Mrs.," she corrected. "Mrs. Amos Dodge." She sat. She placed the heavy black bag firmly on her lap.

"Well, Mrs. Dodge, we don't allow visitors inside the squadroom except on business. I'm sure you can appreciate . . ."

"I'm here on business," she said. She pressed her unpainted lips together into a thin line.

"Well then, can you tell me . . .?"

"I'm waiting for Dectective Carella," she said. "Detective Steve Carella," and she said the last words with bitterness.

"If you're waiting for him," Hawes said patiently, "you'll have to wait on the bench outside. I'm sorry, but that's . . ."

"I'll wait right here," she said firmly. "And you'll wait, too."

Hawes glanced at Meyer and Kling.

"Lady," Meyer started, "we don't want to seem rude . . ."

"Shut up!" the woman said.

The detectives stared at her.

Her hand slipped into the pocket on the right hand side of her coat. When it emerged, it was holding a .38.

The woman with the .38 and the black tote bag sat motionless in the straight-backed wooden chair. The street noises outside the squadroom seemed to magnify the silence that had followed her sim-

ple declaration. The three detectives looked first at each other and then back to the woman and the unwavering .38.

"Give me your guns," she said.

The detectives did not move.

"Give me your guns, or I'll fire."

"Look lady," Meyer said, "put up the piece. We're all friends here. You're only going to get yourself in trouble."

"I don't care," she said, "Put your guns on the desk here in front of me. Don't try to take them out of the holsters or I'll shoot. This gun is pointed right at the red-headed one's belly!"

Again, the detectives hesitated.

"All right, redhead," she said, "Say your prayers."

There was not a man in that room who did not realize that once he relinquished his weapon he would be at the mercy of the woman holding the gun. There was not a man in that room, too, who had not faced a gun at one time or another in his career. The men in that room were cops, but they were also human beings who did not relish the thought of an early grave. The men in that room were human beings, but they were also cops who knew the destructive power of a .38, who also knew that women were as capable of squeezing triggers as were men, who realized this woman holding the gun could cut down all three of them in one hasty volley. And yet, they hesitated.

"Dammit!" she shouted. "I'm not kidding!"

Kling was the first to move, and then only because he saw the knuckle-white tension of the woman's trigger finger. Staring at her all the while, he unstrapped his shoulder rig and dropped holster and Police Special to the desk top. Meyer unclipped his holster from his right hip pocket and deposited it alongside Kling's gun. Hawes carried his .38 just off his right hip bone. He unclipped the holster and put it on the desk.

"Which of these desk drawers lock?" the woman asked.

"The top one," Hawes said.

"Where's the key?"

"In the drawer."

She opened the drawer, found the key, and then shoved the guns into the drawer. She locked the desk, then removed the key, and put it into her coat pocket. The big black purse was still on her lap. "Okay, now you got our guns," Meyer said. "Now what? What is this, lady?"

"I'm going to kill Steve Carella," the woman said.

"Why?"

"Never mind why. Who else is in this place right now?"

Meyer hesitated. From where the woman was sitting, she had a clear view of both the lieutenant's office and the corridor outside the squadroom . . .

"Just Lieutenant Byrnes," Meyer lied. In the Clerical Office, just out-

side the slatted rail divider, Miscolo was busily working on his records. There was the possibility that they could maneuver her so that her back was to the corridor. And then if Miscolo decided to enter the squadroom on one of his frequent trips, perhaps he would grasp the situation and . . .

"Get the lieutenant," she said.

Meyer began to rise.

"Before you go, remember this. The gun is on you. One phony move, and I shoot. And I keep shooting until every man in this place is dead. Now go ahead. Knock on the lieutenant's door and tell him to get out here."

Meyer crossed the silent squadroom. The lieutenant's door was closed. He rapped on the wooden frame alongside the frosted glass.

"Come!" Byrnes called from behind the door.

"Pete it's me. Meyer."

"The door's unlocked," Byrnes answered.

"Pete, you better come out here."

"What the hell is it?"

"Come on out, Pete."

There was the sound of footsteps behind the door. The door opened. Lieutenant Peter Brynes, as compact as a rivet, thrust his muscular neck and shoulders into the opening.

"What is it, Meyer? I'm busy."

"There's a woman wants to see you."

"A woman? Where . . .?" His eyes flicked past Meyer to where the

woman sat. Instant recognition crossed his face. "Hello, Virginia," he said, and then he saw the gun.

"Get in here, Lieutenant," Virginia Dodge said.

A frown had come over Byrnes' face. His brows pulled down tightly over scrutinizing blue eyes. Intelligence flashed on his craggy face. Lumberingly, like a man about to lift a heavy log, he crossed the squadroom, walking directly to where Virginia Dodge sat. He seemed ready to pick her up and hurl her into the corridor.

"What is this, Virginia?" he said.

"What does it look like, Lieutenant?"

"It looks like you've blown your wig, that's what it looks like. What the hell's the gun for? What are you doing in here with . . ."

"I'm going to kill Steve Carella," Virginia said.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Byrnes said in exasperation. "Do you think that's going to help your husband any?"

"Nothing's going to help Frank anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Frank died yesterday. In the hospital at Castleview Prison."

Byrnes was silently meditative. He did not speak for a long while, and then he said only, "You can't blame Carella for that."

"Carella sent him up."

"Your husband was a criminal."

"Carella sent him up."

"Carella only arrested him. You can't . . ."

"*And* pressed the D.A. for a conviction, *and* testified at the trial, *and* did everything in his power to make sure Frank went to jail!"

"Virginia, he . . ."

"Frank was sick! Carella knew that! He knew that when he put him away!"

"Virginia, for Christ's sake, our job is to . . ."

"Carella killed him as sure as if he'd shot him. And now I'm going to kill him."

"And then what? How do you expect to get out of here, Virginia? You haven't got a chance."

Virginia smiled thinly. "I'll get out, all right."

"Will you? You fire a gun in here, and very cop in ten miles will come barging upstairs."

"I'm not worried about that, Lieutenant."

"No, huh? Talk sense, Virginia. You want to get the electric chair? Is that what you want?"

"I don't care. I don't want to live without Frank."

Byrnes paused for a long time. Then he said, "I don't believe you, Virginia."

"What don't you believe? That I'm going to kill Carella? That I'll shoot the first one who does anything to stop me?"

"I don't believe you're fool enough to use that gun. I'm walking out of here, Virginia. I'm walk-back to my office . . ."

"No, you're not!"

"Yes, I am. I'm walking back to my office, and here's why. There are four men in this room, counting me. You can shoot me, maybe, and maybe another one after me . . . but you'll have to be pretty fast and pretty accurate to get all of us."

"I'll get all of you, lieutenant," Virginia said, and the thin smile reappeared on her mouth.

"Yeah, well I'm willing to bet on that. Jump her the minute she fires, men." He paused "I'm going to my office, Virginia, and I'm going to sit in there for five minutes. When I come out, you'd better be gone, and we'll forget all about this. Otherwise I'm going to slap you silly and take that gun away from you and dump you into the detention cells downstairs. Now is that clear, Virginia?"

"It's very clear."

"Five minutes," Byrnes said curtly, and he wheeled and started toward his office.

With supreme confidence in her voice, Virginia said, "I don't have to shoot you, lieutenant."

Byrnes did not break his stride.

"I don't have to shoot *any* of you."

He continued walking.

"I've got a bottle of nitro-glycerin in my purse."

Her words came like an explosion. Byrnes stopped in his tracks and turned slowly to face her, his eyes dropping to the big black bag in her lap. She had turned the

barrel of the gun so that it pointed at the bag now, so that its muzzle was thrust into the opening at the top of the bag.

"I don't believe you, Virginia," Byrnes said, and he turned and reached for the doorknob again.

"Don't open that door, lieutenant," Virginia shouted, "or I'll fire into this purse and we can *all* go to Hell!"

He thought in that moment before twisting the doorknob *She's lying. She hasn't got any soup in that purse, where would she get it?*

And then he remembered that among her husband's many criminal offenses had been a conviction for safe-blowing.

But she hasn't got any soup, he thought, Jesus, that's crazy. But suppose she does? But she won't explode it. She's waiting for Carella. She wouldn't . . .

And then he thought simply *Meyer has a wife and three children.*

Slowly, he let his hand drop. Wearily, he turned to Virginia Dodge.

"That's better," she said. "Now let's wait for Carella."

Steve Carella was nervous.

Sitting alongside Teddy, his wife, he could feel nervousness ticking along the backs of his hands, twitching in his fingers. Clean-shaved, his high cheekbones and downward slanting eyes giving him an almost oriental appearance. He sat with his

mouth tensed, and the doctor smiled gently.

"Well, Mr. Carella," Dr. Randolph said, "your wife is going to have a baby."

The nervousness fled almost instantly. The cork had been pulled, and the violent waters of his tension overran the tenuous walls of the dike, leaving only the muddy silt of uncertainty. If anything, the uncertainty was worse. He hoped it did not show. He did not want it to show to Teddy.

"Mr. Carella," the doctor said, "I can see the pre-natal jitters erupting all over you. Relax. There's nothing to worry about."

Carella nodded, but even the nod lacked conviction. He could feel the presence of Teddy beside him, his Teddy, his Theodor, the girl he loved, the woman he married. He turned for an instant to look at her face, framed with hair as black as midnight, the brown eyes gleaming with pride now, the silent red lips slightly parted.

I musn't spoil it for her, he thought.

And yet he could not shake the doubt.

"May I reassure you on several points, Mr. Carella?" Randolph said.

"Well, I really . . ."

"Perhaps you're worried about the infant. Perhaps, because your wife is a deaf mute, born that way . . . perhaps you feel the infant may also be born handicapped. This

is a reasonable fear, Mr. Carella."

"I . . ."

"But a completely unfounded one." Randolph smiled. "Deafness, though sometimes congenital, is not hereditary. With the proper care and treatment, your wife will go through a normal pregnancy and deliver a normal baby. She's a healthy animal, Mr. Carella. And, if I may be so bold, a very beautiful one."

"Thank you, doctor," Carella said.

"Not at all," Randolph answered. "Good luck to you both. I'll want to see you in a few weeks, Mrs. Carella."

In the corridor outside, Teddy threw herself into Steve's arms and kissed him violently.

"Hey!" he said. "Is that any way for a pregnant woman to behave?"

Teddy nodded, her eyes glowing mischievously. With one sharp twist of her dark head, she gestured toward the elevators.

"You want to go home, huh?"

She nodded.

"And then what?"

Teddy Carella was eloquently silent.

"It'll have to wait," he said. "There's a little homicide I'm supposed to be covering."

He pressed the button for the elevator.

It was the job of the policemen of the 87th to keep the inhabitants from engaging in another popular

form of slum activity: the pursuit of a life of criminal adventure.

Virginia Dodge wanted to know how many men were doing this job.

"We've got sixteen detectives on the squad," Byrnes told her.

"Where are they now?"

"Three are right here."

"And the rest?"

"Some are off duty, some are answering squeals, and some are on plants."

"Which?"

"Look, Virginia . . ." The pistol moved a fraction of an inch deeper into the purse. "Okay. Cotton, get the duty chart."

Hawes looked at the woman. "Is it okay to move?" he asked.

"Go ahead. Don't open any desk drawers. Where's *your* gun, lieutenant?"

"I don't carry one."

"You're lying to me. Where is it? In your office?"

Byrnes hesitated.

"Goddamit," Virginia shouted, "let's get something straight here! I'm dead serious, and the next person who lies to me, or who doesn't do what I tell him to do when I . . ."

"All right, all right, take it easy," Byrnes said. "It's in my desk drawer." He turned and started for his office.

"Just a minute," Virginia said. "We'll *all* go with you." She picked up her bag gingerly and then swung her gun at the other men

in the room. "Move," she said. "Follow the lieutenant."

Like a small herd of cattle, the men followed Byrnes into the office. Virginia crowded into the small room after them. Byrnes walked to his desk.

"Take it out of the drawer and put it on the desk," Virginia said. "Grab it by the muzzle. If your finger comes anywhere near the trigger, the nitro . . ."

"All right, all right," Byrnes said impatiently.

He hefted the revolver by its barrel and placed it on the desk top. Virginia quickly picked up the gun and put it into the left-hand pocket of her coat.

"Outside now," she said.

Again, they filed into the squad-room. Virginia sat at the desk she had taken as her command post. She placed the purse on the desk before her, and then leveled the .38 at it. "Get me the duty chart," she said.

"Get it, Cotton," Byrnes said.

Hawes went for the chart. It hung on the wall near one of the rear windows, a simple black rectangle into which white celluloid letters were inserted. It was a detective's responsibility to replace the name of the cop he'd relieved with his own whenever his tour of duty started. Unlike patrolmen, who worked five eight-hour shifts and then swung for the next fifty-six hours, the detectives chose their own duty teams. Since there were

sixteen of them attached to the squad, their teams automatically broke down into groups of five, five, and five—with a loose man kicking around from shift to shift. On this bright everyday afternoon in October, six detectives were listed on the duty chart. Three of them—Hawes, Kling, and Meyer—were in the squadroom.

"Where are the other three?" Virginia asked.

"Carella took his wife to the doctor," Byrnes said.

"How sweet," Virginia said bitterly.

"And then he's got a homicide he's working on."

"When will he be back?"

"I don't know."

"You must have some idea."

"I have no idea. He'll be back when he's ready to come back."

"What about the other two men?"

"Brown's on a plant. The back of a tailor shop."

"A what?"

"A plant. A stakeout, call it what you want to. He's sitting there waiting for the place to be held up."

"Don't kid me, Lieutenant."

"I'm not kidding, damnit. Four tailor shops in the neighborhood have been held up during the daylight hours. We expect this one to get hit soon. Brown's waiting for the thief to show."

"When will he come back to the squadroom?"

"A little after dark, I imagine. Unless the thief hits. What time is it now?" Byrnes looked up at the clock on the wall. "4:38. I imagine he'll be back by six or so."

"And the last one? Willis?"

Byrnes shrugged. "He was here a half-hour ago. Who's catching?"

"I am," Meyer said.

"Well, where'd Willis go?"

"He's out on a squeal, Pete. A knifing on Mason."

"That's where he is then," Byrnes said to Virginia.

"And when will *he* be back?"

"I don't know."

"Soon?"

"I imagine so."

"Who else is in the building?"

"The desk sergeant and the desk lieutenant. You passed them on your way in."

"Yes."

"Captain Frick who commands the entire precinct in a sense."

"What do you mean?"

"I control the squad, but officially . . ."

"Where's he?"

"His office is downstairs."

"Who else?"

"There are a hundred an eighty-six patrolmen attached to this precinct," Brynes said. "A third of them are on duty now. Some of them are roaming around the building. The rest are out on their beats."

"What are they doing in the building?"

"Twenty-fours mostly." Brynes

paused and then translated. "Duty as records clerks."

"When does the shift change again?"

"At a quarter to midnight."

"Then they won't be back until then? The ones on beats?"

"Most of them'll be relieved on post. But they usually come back to change into their street clothes before going home."

"Will any detectives be coming up here? Besides the ones listed on the duty chart?"

"Possibly."

"We're not supposed to be relieved until eight in the morning, Pete," Meyer said.

"But Carella will be back long before then, won't he?" Virginia asked.

"Probably."

"Yes or no?"

"I can't say for sure. I'm playing this straight with you, Virginia. Carella may get a lead which'll keep him out of the office. I don't know."

"Will he call in?"

"Maybe."

"If he does, tell him to come right back here. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

The telephone rang. It cut the conversation and then shrilled persistently into the silence of the squadroom.

"Answer it," Virginia said. "No funny stuff."

Meyer picked up the receiver.

"Eighty-seventh squad," he said, Detective Meyer speaking." He paused.

"Yes, Dave. Go ahead, I'm listening." He was aware all at once of the fact the Virginia Dodge was hearing only one-half of the telephone conversation with the desk sergeant. Casually, patiently, he listened.

"Meyer, we got a call a little while back from some guy who heard shots and a scream from the apartment next door to his. I sent a car over, and they just reported back. A dame got shot in the arm, and her boyfriend claims the gun went off accidentally while he was cleaning it. You want to send one of the boys over?"

"Sure, what's the address?" Meyer said, patiently watching Virginia.

"23-79 Culver. That's next door to the Easy Bar. You know it?"

"I know it. Thanks, Dave."

"Okay." Meyer put up the phone. "That was a lady calling," Meyer said. "Dave thought we ought to take it."

"Who's Dave?" Virginia asked.

"Murchison. The desk sergeant," Byrnes said. "What it is, Meyer?"

"This lady says somebody's trying to break into her apartment. She wants us to send a detective over right away."

Byrnes and Meyer exchanged a long knowing glance. Such a call would have been handled by the desk sergeant directly, and he

would not have annoyed the Detective Division with it. He'd have dispatched a radio motor patrol car immediately.

"Either that or he wants you to contact the captain and see what he can do about it," Meyer said.

"All right, I'll do that," Byrnes said. "Is that all right with you, Virginia?"

"No one's leaving this room," Virginia said.

"I know that. Which is why I'm passing the call on to Captain Frick. Is that all right?"

"Go ahead," she said. "No tricks."

"The address is 23-79 Culver," Meyer said.

"Thanks." Byrnes dialed three numbers and waited. Captain Frick picked up the phone on the second ring.

"Yop?" he said.

"Marshall, this is Pete."

"Oh, hello, Pete. How goes it?"

"So-so. Marshall, I've got a special favor I'd like you to do."

"What's that?" Frick asked.

"Some woman on Culver is complaining that someone's trying to get into her apartment. I can't spare a man right now. Could you get a patrolman over there?"

"What?" Frick said.

"I know it's an unusual request. We'd ordinarily handle it ourselves, but we're kind of busy."

"What?" Frick said again.

"Can you do it, Marshall?" Standing with the receiver to his ear,

Byrnes watched the shrewdly calculating eyes of Virginia Dodge. *Come on, Marshall*, he thought. *Wake up, for Christ's sake!*

"You'd ordinarily handle it?" Frick asked. "Boy, that's a laugh. I've got to kill myself to get you to take a *legitimate* squeal. Why bother me with this, Pete? Why don't you just give it to the desk sergeant?" Frick paused. "How the hell'd you get a hold of it anyway? Who's on the desk?"

"Will you take care of it, Marshall?"

"Are you kidding me, Pete? What is this?" Frick began laughing. "Your joke for today, huh? Okay, I bit. How's everything upstairs?"

Byrnes hesitated for a moment, phrasing his next words carefully. Then, watching Virginia, he said, "Not so hot."

"What's the matter? Headaches?"

"Plenty. Why don't you go up and see for yourself."

"Up? Up where?"

Come on, Byrnes thought. *Think! For just one lousy minute of your life, think!*

"It's part of your job, isn't it?" Byrnes said.

"What's part of my job. Hey, what's the matter with you, Pete? You flipped or something?"

"Well, I think you ought to find out." Byrnes said.

"Find out *what?* Holy Jesus, you have flipped."

"I'll be expecting you to do that then," Byrnes said, aware of a frown starting on Virginia's forehead.

"Do what?"

"Go up there to check on it. Thanks a lot, Marshall."

"You know. I don't understand a damn thing you're . . ." and Byrnes hung up.

"All settled?" Virginia asked.

"Yes."

She stared at Byrnes thoughtfully. "There are extensions on all these phones, aren't there?" she said.

"Yes," Byrnes said.

"Fine. I'll be listening to any other call that goes in or out of this place."

I wonder if she smokes, Byrnes thought.

If she smokes . . . now wait a minute . . . now, let's work this out sensibly. Let's say she smokes. Okay. Okay, we've got that much. Now . . . if we can get her to put the purse on the desk, get it off her lap. That shouldn't be too hard . . . where's the purse now? . . . still in her lap . . . Virginia Dodge's goddamn lap dog, a bottle of nitro . . . okay, let's say I can get her to put the purse on the desk, out of the way . . . then let's say I offer her a cigarette and then start to light it for her.

If I drop the lighted match in her lap, she'll jump a mile.

And when she jumps, I'll hit her.

I'm not worried about that .38—well, I'm worried, who the hell wants to get shot?—but I'm not really worried about it so long as that soup is out of the way. I don't want to have a scuffle anywhere near that explosive. I've faced guns before, but nitro is another thing and I don't want them blotting me off the wall.

I wonder if she smokes.

"What are your plans, exactly, Virginia?" Byrnes said.

"I've already told you. When Carella gets here, I'm going to kill him. And then I'm going to leave. And if anyone tries to stop me, I drop the bag with the nitro."

"Suppose I try to get that gun away from you right this minute?"

"I wouldn't if I were you."

"Suppose I tried?"

"You won't."

Byrnes took a package of cigarettes from his pocket. Casually, he moved to her side of the desk, conscious of the .38 against the fabric of the purse. He gauged the distance between himself and Virginia, gauged how close he would be to her when he lighted her cigarette, with which hand he should slug her so that she would not go flying over against the purse. Would her instant reaction to the dropped match be a tightening of her trigger finger? He did not think so. She would pull back. And then he would hit her.

He shook a cigarette loose. "Here," he said. "Have one."

"No."

"Don't you smoke?"

"I smoke. I don't feel like one now."

"Come on. Nothing like a cigarette for relaxation. Here."

He thrust the package toward her.

"Oh, all right," she said. She shifted the .38 to her left hand. The muzzle of the gun was an inch from the bag. With her right hand, she took the cigarette Byrnes offered. Standing at her right, he figured he would extend the match with his left hand, let it fall into her lap, and then clip her with a roundhouse right when she pulled back in fright. Oddly, his heart was pounding furiously.

Suppose the gun went off when she pulled back?

He reached into his pocket for the matches. His hand was trembling. The cigarette dangled from Virginia's lips. Her left hand, holding the gun against the purse, was steady.

Byrnes struck the match.

And at that moment there was a sudden commotion in the corridor outside. Virginia tensed where she sat at the desk.

"All right, inside, inside," a man's voice said, and instantly Hal Willis and a prisoner came into view.

The prisoner, to be more accurate, *burst into view*. She was a tall Puerto Rican girl with bleached blonde hair. She wore a purple topcoat open over a red peasant

blouse which swooped low over a threatening display of bosom. Her waist was narrow, the straight black skirt swelling out tightly over sinuously padded hips. She wore high-heeled pumps, red, with black ankle straps. A gold tooth flashed in the corner of an otherwise dazzlingly white set of teeth. And, in contrast to her holiday garb, she wore no makeup on her face which was a perfect oval set with rich brown eyes and a full mouth and a clean sweeping aristocratic nose. She was possibly one of the prettiest, if flashiest, prisoners over to be dragged into the squadroom.

And dragged she was. Holding one wristlet of a pair of handcuffs in his right hand, Willis pulled the girl to the slatted rail divider while she struggled to retrieve her manacled wrist, cursing in Spanish every inch of the way.

"Come on, *cara mia*," Willis said. "You'd think somebody was trying to hurt you, for Christ's sake. Come on, *liebschen*. Right through this gate. Hi Bert! something, huh? . . . Hello, Pete, you like my prisoner? She just ripped open a guy's throat with a razor bl . . ."

Willis stopped talking.

There was a strange silence in the squadroom.

He looked first at the lieutenant, and then at Kling, and then his eyes flicked to the two rear desks where Hawes and Meyer sat silently. And then he saw Virginia

Dodge and the .38 in her hand pointed into the mouth of the black purse.

His first instinct was to drop the wristlet he was holding and draw his gun. The instinct was squelched when Virginia said, "Get in here. Don't reach for your gun!"

Willis and the girl came into the squadroom.

"*Bruta!*" the girl screamed. "*Pen-degal Hijo de la gran puta!*"

"Oh, shut the hell up," Willis said wearily.

"*Pingal!*" she screamed. "Dirtee ro'n cop bastard!"

"Shut up, shut up, shut *up!*" Willis pleaded.

The girl was possibly three inches taller than Willis, who just cleared the minimum five-foot-eight height requirement for all policemen. He was, assuredly, the smallest detective anyone had ever seen, with narrow bones and an alert Cocker Spaniel look on his thin face. But Willis knew Judo the way he knew the Penal Code, and he could lay a thief on his back faster than any six men using fists.

He surveyed the gun in Virginia Dodge's hand, already figuring on how he could disarm her.

"What's up?" he asked the assembly at large.

"The lady with the gun has a bottle of nitro in her purse," Byrnes said. "She's ready to use it."

"Well, well," Willis said. "Never a dull moment, huh?" He paused and looked at Virginia. "Okay to

take off my coat and hat, lady?"

"Put your gun on the desk here first."

"Thorough, huh?" Willis said. "Lady, you give me the chills. You really got a bottle of soup in that bag?"

"I've really got it."

"I'm from Missouri," Willis said, and he took a step closer to the desk.

For an instant, Kling thought the jig was up. He saw only Virginia Dodge's sudden thrust into the bag, and he tensed himself for the explosion he was certain would follow. And then her free hand emerged from the purse, and there was a bottle of colorless fluid in that hand. She put it down on the desk top gently, and Willis eyed it and said, "That could be tap water, lady."

"Would you like to find out whether it is or not?" Virginia said.

"Me? Now, lady, do I look like a hero?"

He walked closer to the desk. Virginia put her purse on the floor. The bottle, pint-sized, gleamed under the glow of the banging light globes.

"Okay," Willis said, "first we check the gat." He pulled gun and holster off his belt and dropped them very carefully on the desk top, his eyes never leaving the pint bottle of fluid. "This play's a little like Dodge City, doesn't it?" he said. "What's the soup for, lady? If I'd known you were hav-

ing a blowout, I'd have dressed." He tried a laugh that died the moment he saw Virginia's face. "Excuse me," he said "What do I do with my prisoner, Pete?"

"Ask Virginia?"

"Virginia, huh?" Willis burst out laughing. "Oh, brother, are we getting them today. You know what this one's name is? Angelical Virginia and Angelica. The Virgin and the Angel!" He burst out laughing again. "Well, how about it, Virginia? What do I do with my angel here?"

"Bring her in. Tell her to sit down."

"Come on, Angelica," Willis said, "have a chair. Angelical Oh Jesus, that breaks me up. She just slit a guy from ear to ear. A regular little angel. Sit down, angel. That bottle on the desk there is nitro-glycerin."

"What you mean?" Angelica asked.

"The bottle. Nitro."

"Nitro? You mean like a bom'?"

"You said it, doll," Willis answered.

"A bom'?" Angelica said. "*Madre de los santos!*"

"Yeah," Willis said.

Patently, Meyer turned back to his typing.

He was reasonably certain that Virginia Dodge would not walk over to his desk to examine his masterpiece of English composition. He was also reasonably certain that he could do what he had to

do unobserved, especially now that the Puerto Rican bombshell had exploded into the room. Virginia Dodge seemed completely absorbed with the girl's movements, with the girl's string of colorful epithets. He was sure, then, that he could carry out the first part of his plan without detection.

"What's your name?" Byrnes asked the girl.

"What?" she said.

Your name! "*Cual es su nombre?*"

"Angelica Gomez."

"She speaks English," Willis said.

"I don' speak Een-gles," the girl said.

"She's full of crap. The only thing she does in Spanish is curse. Come on, Angelica. You play ball with us, and we'll play ball with you."

"I don' know what means thees play ball."

"Oh, we've got a lallapalooza this time," Willis said. "Look, you little slut, cut the marine tiger bit, will you? We know you didn't just get off the boat." He turned to Byrnes. "She's been in the city for a year, Pete. Hooking mostly."

"I'm no hooker," the girl said.

"Yeah, she's no hooker," Willis said. "Excuse me. I forgot. She worked in the garment district for a month."

"I'm a seamstress, tha's what I am. No hooker."

"Okay, you're not a hooker, okay? You play for money, okay?"

That's different. That makes it all right, okay? Now, why you'd slit that guy's throat?"

"What guy you speaking about?"

"Was there more than one?" Byrnes asked.

"I don' sleet nobody's thro'."

"No? Then who did it?" Willis asked. "Santa Claus? What'd you do with the razor blade?" Again, he turned to Byrnes. "A patrolman broke it up, Pete. Couldn't find the blade, though, thinks she dumped it down the sewer. Is that what you did with it?"

"I don' have no erazor blay."

Angelica paused. "I don' cut nobody."

"You've still got blood all over your hands."

"Tha's from d'hann cuffs," Angelica said.

"Oh, Jesus, this one is the absolute end," Willis said.

"You know whose throat you slit?" Willis asked.

"I don' know nothin'."

"Then I'm gonna let you in on a little secret. You ever hear of a street gang called the Arabian Knights?"

"No."

"It's one of the biggest gangs in the precinct," Willis said. "Teenage kids mostly. Except the guy who's leader of the gang is twenty-five years old. In fact, he's married and has got a baby daughter. They call him Kassim. You ever hear of anybody called Kassim?"

"No."

"In fiction, he's Ali Baba's brother. In real life, he's leader of this gang called the Arabian Knights. His real name is José Dorena. Does that ring a bell?"

"No."

"He's a very big man in the streets, Kassim is. He's really a punk—but not in the streets. There's a gang called the Latin Paraders and war has been on between them and the Knights for year. And do you know what price the Paraders have set for a truce?"

"No. What?"

"An Arabian Knight jacket as a trophy—and Kassim *dead*."

"So who cares?"

"*You* ought to care, baby. The guy whose throat you slit is Kassim. José Dorena."

Angelica blinked.

"Yeah," Willis said.

"Is this legit?" Byrnes asked.

"You said it, Pete. So you see, Angelica, if Kassim dies, the Latin Paraders'll erect a statue of you in the park. But the Arabian Knights won't like you one damn bit. They're a bunch of meanies, sweetie, and they're not even gonna like the fact that you cut him—whether it leads to his untimely demise or not."

"What?" Angelica said.

"Whether he croaks or not, you're on 'their list, baby."

"I di'n know who he wass," Angelica said.

"Then you did do the cutting?"

"Si. But I di'n know who he wass."

"Then why'd you cut him?"

"He wass bodderin' me."

"How?"

"He wass try to feel me up," Angelica said.

"Oh come on!" Willis moaned.

"He wass!"

"Dig this, Pete," Willis said. "Why'd you cut him, baby? And let's not have the hearts and flowers this trip."

"He wass grab by bosom," Angelica said. "On the steps. In fron' the stoop. So I cut him."

"He grabbed your bosom, huh?" Willis said. "Which one? The right one or the left one?"

"Iss not funny," Angelica said. "For a man he feels you up in public, is no funny."

"So you slashed him?"

"Si."

"'Cause he grabbed you, right?"

"Si."

"What do you think, Pete?"

"I believe her," Byrnes said.

"I think she's lying in her teeth," Willis said. "We check around, we'll probably find out she's been making it with Kassim for the past year. She probably saw him looking at another girl, and she put the blade to him. That's more like it, isn't it, baby?"

"No. I don' know thees Kassim. He jus' come over an' get fresh. My body iss my body. An' I give it where I want. An' not to peegs with dirty han's."

"Hooray," Willis said. "They're really gonna put a statue of you in the park." He turned to Byrnes. "What do we make it, Pete? Felonious assault?"

"What condition is this Kassim in?"

"They carted him off to the hospital. Who knows? He was bleeding all over the goddamn sidewalk."

"Keep in touch with the hospital, Hal," Byrnes said. "Let's hold the booking until later. We can't do much with . . ." He gestured with his head to where Virginia Dodge sat.

"Yeah. All right, Angelica. Keep your legs crossed. Maybe Kassim won't die. Maybe he's got a charmed life."

"I hope the son of bitch rots in his gray," Angelica said.

"Nice girl," Willis said, and he patted her shoulder.

Meyer pulled the report from the typewriter. He separated the carbon from the three sheets, and then he read the top sheet. He read it carefully because he was a patient man, and he wanted it to be right the first time. There might not be another chance after this one.

THE DETECTIVES OF THE 87TH SQUAD ARE BEING HELD PRISONER BY A WOMAN WITH A GUN AND A BOTTLE OF NITRO-GLYCERIN.

IF YOU FIND THIS NOTE, CALL HEADQUARTERS AT ONCE! THE NUMBER IS CENTER 6-0800. HURRY!

DETECTIVE 2ND/GR MEYER

The window near the desk was open. The meshed grill outside the window—which protected the glass from the hurled brickbats of the 87th's inhabitants—would present only a small problem. Quickly, with one eye on Virginia Dodge, Meyer rolled the first report sheet into a long cylinder. Hastily, he thrust the cylinder through one of the diamond-shaped openings on the mesh and then shoved it out into the air. He looked across the room.

Virginia Dodge was not watching him.

He rolled the second sheet and repeated the action.

He was shoving the third and final sheet through the opening when he heard Virginia Dodge shout, "Stop or I'll shoot!"

Meyer whirled from the open window.

He fully expected a bullet to come crashing into him, and then he realized that Virginia Dodge was not looking at him, was not even facing in his direction. Hunched over, the .38 thrust out ahead of her, she had left the desk and the bottle of nitro-glycerin and was standing a foot inside the slatted rail divider.

On the other side of the divider was Alf Miscolo.

He stood undecided, his curly black hair matted to his forehead, his blue suspenders taut against his slumped shoulders, his shirt sleeves rolled up over muscular forearms.

Total surprise was on his face. He had come out of the Clerical Office where he'd been sweating over his records all afternoon. He had walked to the railing and shouted, "Hey, anybody ready for chow?" and then had seen the woman leap from the desk with the gun in her hand.

He stood in indecision for a moment longer.

He turned and started to run down the corridor.

Virginia Dodge took careful aim and fired.

She fired only once.

The bullet entered Miscolo's back just a little to the left of his spinal column. It spun him around in a complete circle and then slammed him up against the door to the men's room. He clung to the door for an instant and then slowly slid to the floor.

The bottle of nitro-glycerin on the desk did not explode.

There was, of course, no such thing as a locked-door murder mystery.

Steve Carella knew that with the instincts of an inveterate murder mystery reader and a true cop.

And yet here he was investigating a homicide which had taken place in a windowless room and—to make matters worse—the victim appeared to have hanged himself after locking the door from the inside. It had taken three strong men to snap that lock before they could open the door they had told him

yesterday when he'd first investigated the case, and that's what they were telling him again today.

Maybe it is a suicide, Carella thought. The police department treats all suicides exactly like homicides, but that is only a formality. And maybe this is truly a suicide, what the hell, why should I always go around suspecting the worst of people?

The trouble is these sons of his all look as if they are capable of tripping a blind woman and cutting out her heart. And the old man left a fortune to be divided among them. And was it not possible that one of those sons—or maybe even all of them acting in concert—had decided to put the blocks to the old man and get that loot quick? According to the old man's lawyer, whom Carella had interrogated yesterday, the old man had left \$750,000 in cash to be divided among "his beloved sons upon his death." That was a lot of scratch. Not to mention the whole of Scott Industries and various other holdings throughout the country. Murders had certainly been committed for less.

But, of course, this was a suicide.

Why didn't he simply wrap it up as such? He was supposed to meet Teddy at the precinct at seven—hey, I'm going to have a baby, how about that? — and he certainly wouldn't get there in time if he hung around this creepy old man-

sion and tried to make a homicide out of an obvious suicide. Oh, was he going to wine and dine her tonight! Tonight, she'd be a queen, anything she wanted he would get for her.

So let's wrap the damn thing up and meet her on time, what say? What time is it anyway? He glanced at his watch, 5:45. Well, he still had a little time so he might just as well do a thorough job. Even if it didn't smell like suicide . . . oh, smell, smell, what the hell determines the smell of a case? Still, this one didn't smell like suicide.

The musty old mansion was an anomaly for the 87th Precinct. Built in the 1890's, it clung to the shoreline of the River Harb like a Charles Addams creation, hung with dark shutters, shrouded with a slate roof, its gables giving the house strange and shadowy angles. Not three miles from the Hamilton Bridge, it nonetheless gave the feeling of being three centuries removed from it. Time had somehow bypassed this eerie house squatting on the river's edge, its rusted iron fence erecting a barrier against society. The Scott Mansion. He could still remember taking the call yesterday.

"This is Roger . . . at the Scott Mansion. Mr. Scott has hanged himself."

Roger, of course, had been the butler, and so Carella immediately discounted him as a suspect. The butler never did it. Besides, he

seemed more broken up over the old man's death than anyone else in the house. The old man, in any case, had not been a pretty sight to see. Obese in life, the coloration of death by strangulation, had not enhanced his appearance at all.

They had led Carella to the storage room which the old man had converted into a private study, away from the larger study downstairs. The three sons—Alan, Mark, and David—had backed away from the door as Carella approached it, as if the horror of that room and its contents were still terrifyingly fresh in their minds. The door jamb had been splintered. Pieces of splintered wood still rested on the floor outside the door. A crowbar was lying against the corridor wall.

The door opened outwards into the corridor. It opened easily when Carella tried it, but he saw instantly that the inside lock, a simple slip bolt, had been ripped from the door jamb when the door was forced. It hung from a single screw as he entered the room.

The old man lay in a crumpled fat ball at the opposite end of the rope. The rope was still around his neck even though the sons had cut him down the moment they'd entered the room.

"We had to cut him down," Alan explained. "To get in. We used a crowbar to break the lock, but even then we had trouble getting the door open. You see, Father had tied one end of the rope to the

doorknob before . . . before he hanged himself. Then he threw the rope over that beam in the ceiling and . . . well, after we forced the lock, we still had his weight to contend with, his weight pulling the door closed. We opened it a wedge with the crowbar, and then cut the rope before we could get in."

"Who cut the rope?" Carella asked.

"I did," Alan said.

"How'd you know the rope was there?"

"When we got the door open a crack, we could see the . . . the old man hanging. I stuck my arm into the opening and used a jackknife on the rope."

"I see," Carella said.

Now, standing in the room where the hanging had taken place, he really tried to see. The old man, of course, had been carted away by the meat wagon yesterday—but everything else in the room was exactly as it had been then.

The room was windowless.

Nor where there any secret panels or passageways leading to it. He had made a thorough check yesterday. The walls, floor, and ceiling were as solid as boulder dam, constructed in a time when houses were built to last forever.

All right, the only way into this room is through that door.

And the door was locked.

From the inside.

So it's suicide.

The old man had, indeed, tied

one end of the rope to the door-knob, thrown the length of rope over the ceiling beam, and then climbed onto a stool, fastened the rope to his neck, and jumped. His neck had not been broken. He had died of slow strangulation.

And surely his weight had helped to hold that door closed against the efforts of his sons to open it. But his weight alone would not have resisted the combined pull of three brawny men. Carella had checked that with the laboratory yesterday. Sam Grossman, in charge of the lab, had worked it out mathematically, fulcrum and lever, weights and balances. Had the door not been locked, the brothers could have successfully pulled it open, even with the old man's weight hanging at the end of the rope attached to the door-knob.

No, the door had to be locked.

There was physical evidence that it had been locked, too. For, had the slip bolt not been fastened against the retaining loop of metal, the lock would not have been ripped from the doorframe when the crowbar was used on it.

"We had to use the crowbar," Alan had said. "We tried to pull it open by force, and then Mark realized the door was locked from the inside, and he went out to the garage to get the crowbar. We wedged it into the door and snapped the lock."

"Then what?"

"Then Mark stepped up to the door and tried to open it again. He couldn't understand why it wouldn't open. We snapped the lock, hadn't we? We used the crowbar a second time, wedging the door open. That was . . . was when we saw Father. You know the rest."

So the door had been locked.

So it's suicide.

Or maybe it isn't.

What do we do now? Send a wire off to John Dickson Carr?

Wearily, Carella trudged downstairs, walking past the clutter of wood splinters still in the hallway outside the door.

He found Christine Scott in the small sitting room overlooking the River Harb. I don't believe any of these people's names, Carella thought. They've all popped out of some damn British comedy of manners, and they're all make-believe, and that old man up there *did* commit suicide and why the devil am I wasting my time questioning people and snooping around a musty garret room without any windows?

"Detective Carella?" Christine said.

She looked colorless against the flaming reds and oranges of the trees which lined the river bank. Her hair was an ash blonde, almost silvery, but it gave an impression of lack of pigmentation. Her eyes, too, were a lavender-blue

but so pastel as to be almost without real color. She wore no lipstick. Her frock was white. A simple jade necklace hung at her throat.

"Mrs. Scott," he said. "How are you feeling now?"

"Much better thank you." She looked out at the flaming trees. "This is my favorite spot, right here. This is where I first met the old man. When David first brought me to this house." She paused. The lavender-blue eyes turned toward Carella. "Why do you suppose he killed himself, Detective Carella?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Scott," Carella said. "Where's your husband?"

"David? In his room. He's taking this rather hard."

"And his brothers?"

"Around the house somewhere. This is a very big house, you know. The old man built it for his bride. It cost seventy-five thousand dollars to build, and that was back in 1896 when money was worth a great deal more than it is now. Have you seen the bridal suite upstairs?"

"No."

"It's magnificent. Huge oak panels, and marble countertops, and gold bathroom fixtures. And these wonderful windows that open onto a balcony overlooking the river. There aren't many houses like this one left in the city."

"Mmm, I guess not," Carella said.

Christine Scott crossed her legs, and Carella noticed them and thought *She has good legs. The stamp of America. Legs without rickets. Firm fleshy calves and slender ankles and shoes that cost her fifty-seven-fifty a pair. Did her husband kill the old man?*

"Can I offer you a drink, Detective Carella? Is that allowed?"

Carella smiled. "It's frowned upon."

"But permitted?"

"Occasionally."

"I'll ring for Roger."

"Don't bother, please, Mrs. Scott. I wanted to ask you some questions."

"Oh?" She seemed surprised. Her eyebrows moved up onto her forehead, and he noticed for the first time her eyebrows were black, and he wondered whether or not the ash blonde hair was a bleach job, and he realized it probably was, no damn woman alive owned the impossible combination of ash blonde hair and black eyebrows. Phony, he thought. Mrs. Christine Scott, who just stepped out of a British comedy of manners. "What kind of questions?"

"About what happened here yesterday."

"Yes?"

"Tell me."

"I was out back walking," Christine said. "I like to walk along the river. And the weather's been so magnificent, so much color, and such warm air . . ."

"Yes? When what?"

"I saw Mark rush out of the house, running for the garage. I could tell by the look on his face that something was wrong. I ran over to the garage just as Mark came out with the crowbar. 'What's the matter?' I said."

"And what did he answer?"

"He said, 'Father's locked himself in the den and he won't answer us. We're going to force the door.' That was all."

"Then what?"

"Then he rushed back to the house, and I followed after him. David and Alan were upstairs, outside the door to Father's den. He was in there you see, even though he's got a very large and beautiful study downstairs."

"Did he use the den often?"

"Yes. As a retreat, I suppose. He has his favorite books in there, and his music. A retreat."

"Was he in the habit of locking the door?"

"Yes."

"He always locked the door when he went up there?"

"As far as I know, yes. I know I've often gone up to call him for dinner or something, and the door's been locked."

"What happened when you went upstairs with Mark?"

"Well, Alan said they'd been trying to open the door, and it was probably locked, and they were going to force it."

"Did he seem anxious about your father-in-law?"

"Yes, of course he did. They'd been pounding on the door and making all sorts of noise and they'd got no answer. Wouldn't you have been anxious?"

"What? Oh, yes. Sure, I would. Then what?"

"They stuck the crowbar into the crack between door and jamb, and forced the lock."

"Then what?"

"Then Mark tried to open it, but it still wouldn't open. So they tugged on it and saw . . . saw . . ."

". . . that the old man had hanged himself, is that right?"

"Yes." Christine's voice dropped to a whisper. "Yes. that's right."

"Who was the first to notice this?"

"I was. I was standing a little bit away from them as they pried the door open. I could see into the crack, and I saw . . . this . . . figure hanging there, and I . . . I realized it was Father and I . . . I screamed!"

"Who noticed it next?"

"Alan did. And he took a knife out of his pocket and then reached into the room and cut the trope."

"And then the door opened easily, did it?"

"Yes."

"Then what?"

"They called Roger and asked him to phone the police."

"Did anyone touch anything in the room?"

"No. Not even Father."

"None of them went to your father-in-law?"

"They went to him, but didn't touch him. They could see immediately that he was dead. David didn't think they should touch him."

"Why not?"

"Why, because he was dead."

"So?"

"He . . . he knew there would be policemen here, I suppose."

"But he also knew his father had committed suicide, didn't he?"

"Well . . . well, yes. I suppose so."

"Then why did he warn the others not to touch the body?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Christine said curtly.

Carella cleared his throat. "Do you have any idea how much your father-in-law was worth, Mrs. Scott?"

"Worth? What do you mean worth?"

"In property," Carella said. "In money."

"No. I have no idea."

"You must have some idea, Mrs. Scott. Surely you know he was a very wealthy man."

"Yes, of course I know that."

"But not *how* wealthy, is that right?"

"That's right."

"Did you know that he left \$250,000 to be divided equally among his three sons—not to mention Scott Industries, Inc. and vari-

ous other holdings. Did you know that?"

"No. I didn't . . ." Christine stopped. "What are you implying, Detective Carella?"

"Implying? Nothing. I'm stating a fact of inheritance, that's all. Do you find the fact has implications?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, damnit, it has implications. It implies that perhaps someone deliberately . . . that's your damn implication, isn't it?"

"You're making the implications, Mrs. Scott. Not me."

"Go to hell, Mr. Carella," Christine Scott said.

"Mmm," Carella answered.

"You're forgetting one little thing, aren't you?"

"What's that?"

"My father-in-law was found dead in a windowless room, and the door was bolted from the inside. Now perhaps you can tell me how your implication of murder . . ."

"*Your* implication, Mrs. Scott."

". . . of murder ties in with what are the obvious facts. Or do all detectives automatically go around looking for dirt? Is that your job, Mr. Carella? Looking for dirt?"

"My job is law enforcement. And crime detection."

"No crime has been committed here. And no law has been broken."

"Suicide is a crime against the state," Carella said flatly.

"Then you *do* admit it was a suicide."

"It looks as if it might have been. But a lot of suicides that look like suicides turn out to be homicides. You don't mind if I'm thorough about it, do you?"

"I don't mind anything except your excess of bad manners. Provided you don't forget what I mentioned earlier."

"What's that?"

"That he was found in a windowless locked room. Don't forget that, Mr. Carella."

"Mrs. Scott," Carella said fervently, "I wish I *could*."

Alf Miscolo lay crumpled against the door to the men's room.

Not thirty seconds had passed since the slug took him in the back. The people in the squadroom had frozen completely as if the explosion of the .38 had rendered them impotent, incapable of either speech or movement. The stench of cordite hung on the air with the blue-grey aftersmoke of the explosion. Virginia Dodge, in clear silhouette against the grey of the smoke seemed suddenly to be a very real and definite threat. She whirled from the railing just as Cotton Hawes broke from his desk in the corner.

"Get back!" she said.

"There's a hurt man out there," Hawes said, and he pushed through the gate.

"Come back here or you're next!" Virginia shouted.

"The hell with you!" Hawes said, and he ran to where Miscolo lay against the closed door.

The bullet had ripped through Miscolo's back with the clean precision of a needle passing through a piece of linen. Then, erupting at its point of exit, it had torn a hole the size of a baseball just below his collar bone. The front of his shirt was drenched with blood. Miscolo was unconscious, gasping for breath.

"Get him in here," Virginia said.

"He shouldn't be moved," Hawes answered. "For God's sake, he . . ."

"All right, hero," Virginia said tightly, "the nitro goes up!" She turned back toward the desk, swinging the gun so that it was dangerously close to the bottle of clear liquid.

"Bring him in, Cotton!" Brynes said.

"If we move him, Pete, he's liable to . . ."

"Goddamnit, that's an order! Do as I say!"

Staggering with his load, he carried Miscolo through the gate and into the squadroom.

"Put him back there," Virginia said. "On the floor. Out of sight." She turned to Brynes. "If anybody comes up here, it was an accident, do you hear me? A gun went off accidentally. Nobody was hurt."

"We're going to have to get a doctor for him," Hawes said.

"We're going to have to get *nothing* for him," Virginia snapped.

"The man's been . . ."

"Put him down, redhead! Behind the filing cabinets. And fast."

Hawes carried Miscolo to a point beyond the filing cabinets where the area of squadroom was hidden from the corridor outside. Gently, he lowered Miscolo to the floor. He was rising when he heard footsteps in the corridor outside. Virginia sat at the desk, quickly putting her purse up in front of the bottle, moving the pistol directly behind the bottle so that it too was hidden by the bag.

"Remember, Lieutenant," she whispered, and Dave Murchison the desk sergeant came puffing down the hallway. Dave was in his fifties, a stout man who didn't like to climb steps and who visited the Detective Division upstairs only when it was absolutely necessary. He stopped just outside the railing, and then waited before speaking until he caught his breath.

"Hey, Lieutenant," he said, "what the hell was that? Sounded like a shot up here."

"Yes," Brynes said hesitantly. "It was. A shot."

"Anything the . . . ?"

"Just a gun went off. By accident," Brynes said. "Nothing to worry about. Nobody . . . nobody hurt."

"Jesus, it scared the living be-jabbers out of me," Murchison said. "You sure everything's okay?"

"Yes. Yes, everything's okay."

Murchison looked at his superior

curiously, and then his eyes wandered into the squadroom, pausing on Virginia Dodge, and then passing to where Angelica Gomez sat with her shapely legs crossed.

"Sure got a full house, huh, loot?" he said.

"Yes. Yes, we're sort of crowded, Dave."

Murchison continued to look at Brynes curiously. "Well," he said, shrugging, "long as everything's okay. I'll be seeing you, Pete."

He was turning to go when Brynes said, "Forthwith."

"Huh?" Murchison said.

Byrnes was smiling thinly. He did not repeat the word.

"Well, I'll be seeing you," Murchison said, puzzled, and he walked off down the corridor. The squadroom was silent. They could hear Murchison's heavy tread on the metal steps leading to the floor below.

"Have we got any Sulfapaks?" Hawes asked from where he was crouched over Miscolo.

"The junk desk," Willis answered. "There should be one there."

He moved quickly to the desk in the corner of the room, a desk which served as a catch-all for the men of the squad, a desk piled high with Wanted circulars, and notices from Headquarters, and pamphlets put out by the department, and two empty holsters, and a spilled box of paper clips, and an empty thermos bottle, a fingerprint roller, an

unfinished game of Dots, the scattered tiles of a Scrabble setup and numerous other such unfileable material. Willis opened one of the drawers, found a first aid kit and hurried to Hawes, who had ripped open Miscolo's shirt.

"God," Willis said, "he's bleeding a stuck pig."

"That bitch," Hawes said, and he hoped Virginia Dodge heard him. As gently as he knew how, he applied the Sulfapak to Miscolo's wound. "Can you get something for his head?" he asked.

"Here, take my jacket," Willis answered. He removed it, rolled it into a makeshift pillow, and then—almost tenderly—put it beneath Miscolo's head.

Byrnes walked over to the men. "What do you think?"

"It isn't good," Hawes said. "He needs a doctor."

"No doctor!" Virginia called across the room. "Forget it. *No doctor!*"

"Does that answer you?" Byrnes wanted to know.

"It answers me," Hawes said.

The men split up. Angelica Gomez watched them with an amused smile on her face. She rose then, her skirt sliding over a ripe thigh as she did. Swiveling hip against hip socket, she walked over to where Virginia Dodge sat chastely with her gun and her bottle of nitro-glycerin. Hawes watched them. He watched partially because he was mad as Hell at

the Skipper and he wanted to figure out a way of putting Virginia Dodge out of commission. But he watched, too, because the Puerto Rican girl was the most delicious-looking female he had seen in a dog's age.

"Hey, ees that really a bom'?" Angelica asked Virginia.

"Sit down and don't bother me," Virginia answered.

"Don' be so touchy. I only ask a question."

"It's a bottle of nitro-glycerin, yes," Virginia said.

"You gon' esplode it?"

"If I have any trouble, yes."

"Why?"

"Oh, shut up. Stop asking stupid questions."

"You got a gun, too, hah?"

"I've got two guns," Virginia said. "One in my hand, and another in my coat pocket. And a desk drawer full of them right here." She indicated the drawer to which she had earlier added Willis' gun.

"You min business, I guess, hah?"

"I mean business."

"Hey, listen. Why you don' let me go, hah?"

"You stay put, sweetie," Virginia said.

"*Porque?* What for?"

"Because if you walk out of here, you talk. And if you talk to the wrong person, all my careful planning is shot to hell."

"Who I'm gon' talk to, hah? I'm gon' talk to nobody. I'm gon'

get the hell out the city. Go back Puerto Rico maybe. Take a plane. Hell, I slit a man's throat, you hear? All thees snotnose kids, they be after me now. I wake up dead one morning, no? So come on, let me go."

"You stay!"

"Yeah, suppose I walk out, hah? Suppose I jus' do that?"

"You get what the cop got."

"Argh, you jus' mean," Angelica said, and she walked back to her chair and crossed her legs. She saw Hawes' eyes on her, smiled at her, and then immediately pulled her skirt lower.

Hawes was not really studying her legs. Hawes had just had an idea. The idea was a two-parter, and the first part of the idea—if the plan were to be at all successful—had to be executed in the vicinity where the Puerto Rican girl was sitting. The idea had as its core the functioning of two mechanical appliances, one of which Hawes was reasonably certain would work immediately, the other of which he thought might take quite some time to work if it worked at all. The idea seemed stunning in concept to Hawes and, fascinated with it, he had stared captured into space and the focus of his stare had seemed to be Angelica's legs.

Now, taking advantage of the girl's presence near the first of the appliances, realizing that Virginia Dodge had to be diverted before he could execute the first part of his

plan, he ambled over to where Angelica sat and took a package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

"Smoke?" he said.

Angelica took the cigarette. "*Muchas gracias*," she said. She looked up into Hawes' face as he lighted the cigarette for her. "You like the legs, hah, cop?" she said.

"Yeah, they're good legs," Hawes agreed.

"They dam' good legs, you bet," Angelica said. "You don' see legs like thees too much. *Muy bueno*, my legs."

"Muy," Hawes agreed.

Flatly, emotionlessly, Angelica Gomez said, "How you like to see the res' of me?"

If the phone rings, Hawes thought, Virginia will pick it up. She's listening in on conversations now, and she sure as hell won't let one get by her, not with the possibility that it might be Steve calling. And if her attention is diverted by a phone call, that'd be all the time I'd need to do what I have to do, to get this thing rolling so that the big chance can be prepared for later on. Assuming she acts impulsively the way people will when they're . . . well, we're assuming a lot. Still, it's a chance. So come on, telephone, ring!

"I ask you a question," Angelica said.

"What was the question?"

"You like to see the res' of me?"

"It might be nice," Hawes said.

His eyes were glued to the tele-

phone. It seemed to him that during the course of the day, the telephone usually rang with malicious insistency every thirty seconds. Someone was always calling in to report a mugging or a beating or a knifing or a robbery or a burglary or any one of a thousand offenses committed daily in the 87th. So why didn't it ring now? Who declared the holiday on crime? We can't stand a holiday right now—now with Steve waiting to walk into a booby trap, not with Miscolo bleeding from a hole the size of my head, not with that bitch sitting with her bottle of nitro and her neat little .38. "It be dam' nice," Angelica said, "an' tha's no bull. You see my bosom?"

"I see it."

Come on, phone! He could hear Angelica's words, and they drummed in his ears, but his ears were straining for another sound, the shrill sound of the telephone, and the squadroom seemed to be an empty vacuum waiting only for that single sound.

"Iss my real bosom," she said.

"No bra. I got no bra on. You believe it."

"I believe it."

"I show you."

"You don't have to. I believe it."

"So how 'bout it?"

"How about what?"

"You talk to the others, you let me go. Then you come see me later, hah?"

Hawes shook his head. "No dice."

"Why not? Angelica some piece," Angelica said.

Hawes nodded. "Angelica some piece," he agreed.

"So?"

"Number one. You see that lady sitting over there?"

"Si?"

"She's not letting anyone out of here, some piece or not. Understand?"

"Si. I mean when she iss gone."

"If she is *ever* gone," Hawes said. "And then I couldn't let you go anyway because that man standing over there near the bulletin board is the lieutenant in charge of this squad. And if I let you go, he might fire me or send me to prison—or even shoot me."

Angelica nodded. "It be worth it," she said. "Believe me. Angelica some stuff, believe me."

"I believe you," Hawes said.

He did not want to leave the girl because he had to be in her vicinity when the telephone rang, if it rang, wouldn't the damn thing ever ring? At the same time, he sensed that their conversation had reached a dead end, had come as far as it could possibly go. Stalling for time, he asked a timeless question.

"How'd you get to be a hooker, Angelica?"

"I no' hooker," she said. "Really."

"Now, Angelica," he said.

"Well, sometimes," she said.

"But only to buy pretty clothes. I dress pretty, no?"

"Yes, Oh, yes."

"Listen, you come see me, hah? We make it."

"Honey," he said, "where you're going, they don't make anything but license plates."

"What?" she said, and the telephone rang.

The sound startled Hawes. He almost turned automatically to reach for the wall, and then he remembered that he had to wait until Virginia picked up the phone. He saw Byrnes start toward the instrument on the desk nearest him. He saw Byrnes waiting for Virginia's nod before he picked up the receiver.

The phone kept shrilling into the squadroom.

Virginia shifted the gun to her left hand. With her right hand, she picked up the receiver and nodded toward Byrnes. Byrnes lifted his phone.

"Eighty-seventh Squad, Lieutenant Byrnes."

"Well, well, how come they've got the big cheese answering telephones?" the voice said.

Hawes edged toward the wall, backing toward it. Virginia Dodge was still partially facing him, so that he could not raise his hand. Then, slowly, she swiveled in the chair so that her back was to him. Swiftly, Hawes lifted his hand.

"Who is this?" Byrnes asked into the mouthpiece.

"This is Sam Grossman at the

lab. Who the hell did you think it was."

The thermostat was secured tightly to the wall. Hawes grasped it in one hand, and with a quick snap of his wrist raised the setting to its outermost reading.

On one of the mildest days in October, the temperature in the squadroom was set for ninety-eight degrees.

Sam Grossman was a detective, and a lieutenant, and a very thorough man. A less thorough man in charge of a police laboratory might have allowed his call to wait until the morning. It was, after all, three minutes to six and Grossman did have a family at home waiting to begin dinner. But Sam Grossman believed in laboratory work, and he believed in crime detection, and he believed that one went hand in hand with the other. Sam would never miss the opportunity to prove to his colleagues who did the actual legwork that the lab was a vital part of detection, and that he should use the lab as often as possible.

"The M.E. gave us a look at the corpse, Pete," he said into the phone now.

"What corpse?"

"The old man. Jefferson Scott."

"Oh, yes."

"Carella working on that one?" Grossman said

"Yes."

Virginia Dodge sat up straighter in her chair at mention of Carella's

name, and now she was listening intently to the conversation.

"He's a good man," Grossman said. "Is he out there at the Scott house now?"

"I don't know where he is," Byrnes said. "He might be. Why?"

"Well, if he is, it might be a good idea to get in touch with him."

"Why, Sam?"

"The M.E. set the cause of death as strangulation. You familiar with the case, Pete?"

"Yes."

"But he wasn't strangled by the rope. He didn't hang himself."

"What happened then?"

"We've discussed this thoroughly with the M.E., Pete, and we're pretty sure we're right. The bruises on the victim's throat indicate that he was strangled *manually* before that rope was place around his throat. There are rope bruises and burns, too, but the majority of the bruises were left by human hands. We tried to get prints from the skin, but it didn't work. We're not always successful in getting prints from the skin of . . ."

"Then you think Scott was murdered?"

"Yeah," Grossman said flatly. "We also did some tests on that rope. Same as that Hernandez kid. The direction of the fibres in the rope show that he didn't jump down from that stool, the way it looked. He was *hauled* up. It's

a homicide. Pete. No question about it."

"Mmm, Well, thanks a lot, Sam."

"The thing is," Grossman said, "if you think Carella's over at that Scott house, I'd contact him right away."

"I don't know if he's there," Byrnes said.

"Well, if he is. Because if he is, somebody in that house is a murderer with pretty big hands. And I like Steve Carella."

David Scott sat with his big hands clenched in his lap. His hands were square and flat and covered with light bronze fuzz that curled along their back. The same blondish bronze hair decorated the top of David's crewcut head. Behind him, far out on the river, the tugboats pushed their mournful night sound into the air.

It was 6:10 P.M.

Before him sat Detective Steve Carella.

"Ever argue with the old man?" Carella asked.

"Why?" David said.

"I'd like to know."

"Christine has already told me a little about you and your ideas, Mr. Carella."

"Has she?"

"Yes. My wife and I keep no secrets from each other. She told me your mind is working along certain channels which I, for one, find pretty damn objectionable."

"Well, I'm awfully sorry you find

them objectionable, Mr. Scott. Do you find homicide objectionable, too?"

"That's exactly what I meant, Mr. Carella. And I'd like to tell you this. We're the Scott family. We're not some slum foreigners living in a crawly tenement on Gulver Avenue. We're the Scotts. And I don't have to sit here and listen to idle accusations from you because the Scotts have lawyers to take care of tin horn detectives. So if you don't mind, I'd like to call one of those lawyers right now and . . ."

"*Sit down*, Mr. Scott!" Carella barked.

"Wh . . .?"

"Sit down, and get off that god-damn high horse! Because if you feel like calling one of those Scott lawyers you mentioned, you can damn well do it from the crawly squadroom of the 87th Precinct which is where I'll take you and your wife and your brother and anybody else who was in this house when the old man allegedly hanged himself."

"You can't . . ."

"I can, and I will! Now sit down."

"I . . ."

"Sit down!"

David Scott sat.

"That's better. I'm not saying your father didn't hang himself, Mr. Scott. Maybe he did. Suicides don't always leave notes, so maybe your father is a legitimate suicide. But

from what I've been able to gather from Roger . . ."

"Roger is a servant who . . ."

"Roger told me that your father was a very jolly man who was interested in life and living. He had not seemed depressed over the past few weeks, and in fact he's very rarely known him to be depressed. Your father was a wealthy man with a giant corporation going for him, and holdings in sixteen of the forty-eight states. He's been a widower for twelve years, so we can't assume his suicide was caused through remorse for his dead wife. In short, he seemed to be a happy man with everything in the world to live for. Now suppose you tell me why a man like that would want to take his own life."

"I'm sure I don't know. Father wasn't much in the habit of confiding in me."

"No? You never talked to him?"

"Yes, of course I talked to him. But never intimately. Father was a cold person. Very difficult to know."

"Did you like him?"

"I loved him! He's my father, for God's sake."

"Which might, in modern psychiatric terms, be a good reason for hating him."

"I've been seeing a lay analyst for three years, Mr. Carella. I'm well-acquainted with psychology. But I did not hate my father. And I certainly had nothing to do with his death."

"Getting back . . . did you ever quarrel with him?"

"Yes. of course. Fathers and sons always have little squabbles, don't they?"

"Ever been up in that den of his?"

"Yes."

"Were you there yesterday afternoon?"

"No."

"Not at all?"

"No. Not until we discovered the door was locked."

"Who discovered that?"

"Alan. He went up to get the old man, and the old man didn't answer. He tried the door, and it was locked. Then he called the rest of us."

"How did he know it was locked?"

"It wouldn't budge. Not an inch. How else would we know it was locked? We all tried to open it, and it wouldn't move. Then we all tried together, and it still wouldn't move. Obviously, it was locked from the inside. And obviously, if you're hinting—with about the subtlety of a steam locomotive—at foul play, I should think you'd take that locked door into consideration. It would have been impossible for anyone to kill Father, get out of the room, and then lock the door from outside. Absolutely impossible."

"How do you know that?"

"The door fits snugly into the jamb. There is hardly any tolerance

between door and jamb, Mr. Carella."

"You seem to have made a study of the problem."

"Only after it was discovered that Father was dead. I'll admit it crossed my mind that someone might have killed him. Not anyone in the family, you understand, but perhaps *someone*. And then I realized no one could have. Because the door could not have been locked from outside that room. It had to be locked from within, and there was no one in the room but Father. So that lets out murder."

"Mr. Scott," Carella said, "would the tolerance between door and door jamb permit the passage of a piece of strong cotton thread?"

"Why do you ask?"

"A piece of thread looped over the handle of the slip bolt, pulled into the crack where door met jamb, could be handled from the outside so that the bolt could be pulled shut and then the thread removed. All from the outside."

"That would have been impossible with this door and this jamb. Surely an observant detective such as you must have noticed."

"Noticed what?"

"There is a strong draft rushing through that upstairs corridor, coming from the window at the end of the hall. The den was rather uncomfortable when Father first had it finished. And so he storm-proofed the door to the den in much

the same way one would storm-proof an exterior door."

"And what way is that?"

"A metal runner on the door, and a metal lip on the door jamb. Runner fits into lip to seal the door snugly."

"No so snugly, I'll bet, that a piece of cotton thread couldn't pass through it."

"Possibly not, Mr. Carella. But that's not my point."

"What *is* your point?"

"The weather-proofing made the door difficult to close. It was put on later, you see, after Father discovered how chilly the room was. The lock was put on first."

"So?"

"So, in order to bolt that door, you had to lean on it with all your weight—and Father was a heavy man—and then shove the bolt across, practically force it into the bracket set in the jamb. I know. I've been in the den many times when Father locked the door. Do you see what I'm driving at?"

"Yes. If the bolt needed so much force, it would have been impossible to simply slide it closed from the outside using a piece of thread. I see what you mean."

"So let's assume I hated my father, if you will—which I didn't. Let's assume I was hungry for my share of the estate—which I wasn't. Let's assume we *all* wanted him dead—which we didn't. The locked door still remains. The locked door with a slip bolt that needed

all of a man's strength to close. No outside thread locked that door, Mr. Carella. It was locked from the inside. And knowing this to be the case, even you must admit that the only possible conclusion to be drawn is that my father committed suicide."

Carella sighed heavily.

The man walked with his head bent.

There was no breeze blowing, not a strong breeze in any case, only a mild caressing murmur of air, but he walked with his head bent because he never really felt quite like himself in this city, never really felt quite like a person. And so he ducked his head, pulling it into his shoulders as far as he could, almost like a turtle defending himself against any blow which might come.

The man was nicely dressed. He wore a tweed suit and a neat blue tie fastened to his white shirt with a tiny gold pin. He wore dark blue socks, and black loafers, and he knew he looked like any other man walking the streets, and yet he did not feel as if he were a real person here, an individual, a person who could walk with his head up and his shoulders back. The city had done that to him, the city had given him this feeling of not belonging, not *being*. And so he walked with his hands in his pockets and his head bent.

And because his head was bent,

he happened to notice the blue sheet of paper lying on the sidewalk. And because he was in no particular hurry to get anywhere in this city of hostility which made him feel unimportant, he picked up the paper and studied it with curious brown eyes.

The blue sheet of paper was the original Detective Division Report which Meyer had typed and floated down from the second-storey window of the precinct house. The two carbon copies of the D.D. form were nowhere in sight on the sidewalk. There was only the one blue sheet, and the man picked it up and studied it, and then walked to one of the big trash baskets sitting under the lamppost on the corner of the block. The trash basket read **KEEP OUR CITY CLEAN.**

The man crumpled Meyer's message and hurled it into the trash-basket. Then he put his hands into his pockets, ducked his head, and walked on his way in this hostile city.

The man's name was Juan Alverra, and he had arrived from Puerto Rico three months ago. Juan Alverra read and wrote only Spanish.

Cotton Hawes unobtrusively closed first one window and then the other. Outside, the sultry night pressed its blackness against the window panes, filtered by the triangular mesh beyond the glass.

The six hanging light globes, operated by a single switch inside the railing near the coat rack, feebly defended the room against the outside onslaught of darkness. A determined silence had settled over the squadroom, the silence of waiting.

Cotton Hawes wondered if the room were getting any hotter.

It was difficult to tell. He was sweating profusely, but he was a big man, and he always did sweat when the pressures mounted. He had not sweated much when he was a detective assigned to the 30th Squad. The 30th was a posh precinct and he had not, in all truth, relished his transfer to the 87th. The transfer had come through in June, and now it was October—four paltry months—and here he was a part of the 87th, working with the men here, knowing the men here, deeply concerned about the welfare of a single solitary man named Steve Carella.

I wonder if it's getting any hotter? Hawes thought.

He looked across the room and saw that Willis had unloosened his tie. He hoped desperately that—if the room were truly getting hotter—none of the men would mention the heat, none of them would go to the thermostat and lower it to a normal setting.

Leaning against the bulletin boards near the coat rack, Lieutenant Byrnes watched Hawes with narrowed eyes.

Of all the people in the room, Byrnes had been the only one to see Hawes raise the thermostat. Talking with Grossman on the telephone, he had watched Hawes as he stepped swiftly to the wall and twisted the dial on the instrument. Later, he had seen Hawes when he closed both windows, and he knew then that Hawes had something on his mind, that both actions were linked.

He wondered now what the plan was.

He also wondered who or what would screw it up.

He had seen the action, but he was reasonably certain no one else in the room had followed it. And if Hawes were banking on heat, who would soon comment on the heat? Anyone might. Bert Kling had already taken off his jacket and was now mopping his brow. Willis had pulled down his tie. Angelica Gomez had pulled her skirt up over her knees like a girl sitting on a park bench trying to get a breeze from the river. Who would be the first to say, "It's hot as hell in here?"

And why did Hawes want heat to begin with?

Bert Kling was beginning to sweat.

He almost walked over to the windows and then he remembered something.

Hadn't Cotton just walked over there to *close* them?

Hadn't he just seen Cotton . . . ?

And wasn't the temperature in the room controlled by thermostat? Had someone raised the thermostat? Cotton?

Did Cotton have a plan?

Maybe, maybe not. In any case, Bert Kling would melt right down into a puddle on the wooden floor before he opened a window in the joint.

Hal Willis was about to comment on the rising temperature in the room when he noticed that Bert Kling's shirt was stained with sweat. Their eyes locked for a moment. Kling wiped a hand across his brow and shook perspiration to the floor.

In an instant of mute understanding, Hal Willis realized that it was *supposed* to be getting hotter in the room.

He searched Kling's eyes, but there was no further clue in them.

Patiently, his underwear shorts beginning to stick to him, he wiggled on his chair and tried to make himself comfortable.

Meyer wiped the beaded sweat from his upper lip.

It's hot as hell in here, he thought. *I wonder if anybody found my notes.*

Why doesn't somebody turn down the goddamn heat? he thought. He glanced over at the thermostat. Cotton Hawes was standing near the wall, his eyes fastened to Virginia Dodge. He looked for all the world like a

sentry guarding something. What the hell was he guarding?

Hey, Cotton, he thought, reach over and lower that damn thermostat, will you?

The telephone rang.

Seated at her command desk, her brow hung with tiny globes of perspiration, Virginia Dodge nodded to Kling who picked up a receiver and waited for her to follow suit. She nodded again.

"Eighty-seventh squad, Detective Kling."

"Hello. Carella there?"

"Who's this?"

"Atchison at the lab. Where's Carella?"

"Out. Can I take a message?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. What'd you say your name was?"

"Bert Kling."

"I don't think I know you."

"What difference does it make?"

Kling asked.

"I like to know who I'm dealing with. Listen, on this Scott kill?"

"Yeah?"

"Sam Grossman gave me some photos to study. Of the door jamb?"

"Yeah?"

"You familiar with the door jamb?"

"Carella's talked to me about it. Give me the information and I'll pass it on to him."

"What's your hurry? Don't you like conversation?"

"I dote on it. But we're a little busy here right now."

"I blew up the photos and stud-

ied them. There are markings on the inside of the doorjamb, where the lock was hanging loose. It was hanging by one screw, do you follow, allegedly snapped off when the guys there used a crowbar on the door."

"Go ahead."

"Well, it looks as though somebody used either a chisel or a screwdriver to pry that lock loose from the *inside*."

"What are you saying?"

"That the crowbar used on the outside didn't rip that lock loose. There's evidence that it was torn off from the inside. The jamb's all marked up. The guy who did it was probably in pretty much of a hurry."

"You're saying the door *wasn't* locked."

"That's what I'm saying."

"Then why couldn't they open it?"

"That's the sixty-four dollar question, Mr. Kling. Why couldn't three strong guys open a door that wasn't locked? We thought maybe the body hanging like that held it closed. But three strong men could have pulled it open in spite of the body. Either that, or the rope would have snapped. So it ain't that."

"Then what is it?"

"Tell you what you do," Atchison said.

"Yeah."

"Ask Steve," and he hung up.

Kling replaced the receiver on

the cradle. Virginia Dodge put down her phone.

"Is there any way of reaching Carella?" she asked.

"No. I don't know where he is," Byrnes lied.

"Shouldn't he have all this information that's pouring in?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you call and give it to him?"

"Because I don't know where he is."

"Wouldn't he be at this Scott house? That's where the murder was committed, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right. But if he's interrogating suspects, he could be anywhere."

"Why don't we try the Scott house?"

"What for?"

"Because if he's there, I want you to tell him to come back to the station house immediately. It's hot as hell in here, and I'm getting tired of waiting."

"I don't think he's there," Byrnes said quickly. "Besides, if I pull him back to the squad, he'll think something's fishy."

"Why should he think that?"

"Even you should realize that homicide gets priority over anything else."

Virginia Dodge thought this over for a moment. "I wish I knew whether or not you're lying," she said. But she did not ask Byrnes to make the call.

Sitting behind the high desk downstairs in the muster room, the desk which looked almost like a judge's altar of justice, the desk which had a sign requesting all visitors to stop there and state their business, Dave Murchison looked through the open doors of the station house.

Murchison tried to reconstruct the dialogue in his own mind. He had gone upstairs to see what the hell the noise had been about, and the loot had said it was just an accident, and he had said something about well, so long as everything's okay, and the loot had said yes, everything's fine or something like that and then . . . now here was the important part, so let's get it straight.

He had said to the loot, "Well, long as everything's okay. I'll be seeing you, Pete."

And Byrnes had answered, "Forthwith."

Now that was a very strange answer for the loot to give him because in police jargon "Forthwith" meant "Report immediately."

Now how could he report immediately if he was already standing there in front of the lieutenant?

So, naturally, he had said, "Huh?"

And the loot hadn't said anything in answer, he had just stood there with a kind of sick smile on his face.

Forthwith.

Report immediately.

Had the loot meant something? Or was he just clowning around?

And if he meant something, what did he mean? Report immediately. Report to *whom* immediately? Or maybe report *something* immediately. Report what?

The gun going off?

But the loot said that was an accident, and everything sure as hell looked copasetic upstairs. Did he want him to report the accident? Was that it?

No, that didn't make sense. A gun going off by accident wouldn't make the loot look too good, and he certainly wouldn't want that reported.

Argh, I'm making too much of this, Murchison thought. The loot was having his little joke, and here I'm trying to figure out what he meant by a gag. I should be upstairs working with the bulls, that's what. I should have been a detective, trying to figure out the meaning of a stupid little thing the loot tells me. It must be this Indian Summer. I should be back in Ireland kissing Irish lasses.

Forthwith.

Report immediately.

A light on Murchison's switchboard exploded into green. One of the patrolmen was calling in. He plugged in his socket and said, "Eighty-seventh Precinct, Sergeant Murchison. Oh, hello, Baldy. Yep. Okay, glad to hear it. Keep on your toes."

All quiet on the Western front,

Murchison thought. He pulled the wire from the board.

Forthwith, he thought.

Virginia Dodge rose suddenly.

"Everybody over there," she said. "That side of the room. Hurry up. Lieutenant, get away from that coat rack."

Angelica stirred, rose, smoothed her skirt over her hips, and walked toward the grilled windows. Hawes left his post by the thermostat to join the other men who began drifting toward the windows. Byrnes moved away from the coat rack.

"This gun stays trained on the nitro," Virginia said, "so no funny stuff."

Good! Hawes thought. She's not only thinking of the heat, she's also worried about the nitro. It's going to work. Jesus, the first part of it is going to work.

I hope.

Virginia backed toward the coat rack. Quickly, she slipped the coat off her left shoulder, the gun in her right hand aimed at the nitro on the desk. Then she shifted the gun to her left hand, slipped the coat off her right shoulder and, without turning, hung it on one of the pegs on the rack.

"It's hot as hell in here," she said. "Can't someone lower the heat?"

"I will," Hawes said, and he went immediately to the thermostat.

There was a grin on his face. He looked across the room to where Virginia Dodge's shapeless black coat hung alongside Willis' hat and coat on the rack.

In the lefthand pocket of Virginia's black garment was the pistol she had taken from Lieutenant Byrnes' office.

Anxiously, Hawes began to review the plan in his mind.

The gun was now where he wanted it, in the coat pocket of a coat hanging on the coat rack near the bulletin board. Between the coat rack and the bulletin board, on the short stretch of wall inside the slatted railing, was the light switch which controlled the overhead globes. It was Hawes' idea to amble over to the bulletin board, busy himself with taking down some notes from the Wanted circulars and then—when and if the opportunity presented itself—snap out the lights and reach for Byrnes' pistol in the coat. He would not use the pistol immediately because he did not want a long-distance shooting duel, not with that bottle of nitro on the desk in front of Virginia. He would hold the pistol until it was safe to fire it without the attendant possibility of a greater explosion.

He did not see how the plan could fail. The switch controlled every light in the room. One flick, and the lights would go out. It would take him no more than three

seconds to snatch the gun, hide it, and flick on the lights again.

Would Virginia Dodge fire at the nitro in those three seconds?

He did not believe so.

In the first place, even if she did fire, the room would be in total darkness and she probably wouldn't be able to hit the bottle.

Well, that's a hell of a gamble to be taking, he told himself. She doesn't even have to fire at it, you know. All she has to do is sweep if off the desk with her arm, and there goes eternity.

But he was banking on something else, a person's normal reaction to a suddenly darkened room. Wouldn't Virginia, in the confusion of the moment, assume there'd been a power failure or something? Wouldn't she hold her fire, hold the sweeping motion of her arm at least long enough to be certain one way or the other? And by that time, the lights would be on again and Hawes could invent some excuse about having turned them off by accident.

It had better be a damn good excuse, he told himself.

Or did it really have to be a good one? If, when the lights went on again, everything was apparently as it had been before the darkness, wouldn't she accept any alibi? Or would she remember the gun in the coat pocket? Well, if she did, they'd have it out then and there, nitro or no nitro. And at

least they'd be evenly matched, a pistol for a pistol.

Again, he went over the steps in his mind. Get to the bulletin board, busy myself there, flick out the lights, grab the gun . . .

Now wait a minute.

There was an alternate switch at the far end of the corridor, just at the head of the metal steps. This switch, too, controlled the lights in the corridor and the squadroom so that it wasn't necessary to walk the entire length of the hall in complete darkness when coming onto the second floor of the building. But Hawes wondered if he had to do anything to that second switch in order to ensure darkness in the squadroom when he made his play. He did not think so. Each switch, he hoped, worked independently of the other, both capable of either turning on or extinguishing all the lights. In any case, it had better work that way. Virginia Dodge had already used her gun once, and she showed no sign of reticence about pulling the trigger again.

He rose. Virginia Dodge had turned her attention back to the desk. She sat quite silently, staring at the bottle in front of her. Casually, Hawes walked to the bulletin board near the light switch. Casually, he took a pad from his back pocket and began writing into his pad aimlessly, waiting for the precise moment of attack. Ideally that moment should be when Virginia

Dodge was at the other end of the room. Unfortunately, she showed no signs of moving from the desk behind which she sat in deadly earnestness, staring at the bottle of colorless fluid.

He watched in fascination as Virginia Dodge slowly but surely turned to look across the room toward the grilled windows.

Hawes moved instantly. His hand darted for the light panel, shoved downwards on the protruding plastic switch.

There was blackness, instant blackness which filled the room like a negative explosion.

"What the hell . . . ?" Virginia started, and then her voice went dead, and there was only silence in the room.

The coat, Hawes thought.

Fast!

He felt the coarse material under his fingers, slid his hands down the side of the garment, felt the heavy bulk of the weapon in the pocket, and then thrust his hand into the slit, reaching for the gun.

And then suddenly, blindingly, unimaginably—the lights went on.

He felt like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

For a moment, he couldn't imagine what had caused the sudden blinding illumination. And then he realized the lights were on again, and here he was reaching into the pocket of Virginia's coat, his fingers not an inch from the gun. Oddly, time seemed to lose all meaning as

soon as the lights went on. He knew that time was speeding by at a remarkable clip, knew that whatever he did in the next few seconds could very well mean the life or death of everyone in the room, and yet time seemed to stop.

He decided, in what seemed to take three years, to whirl on Virginia with the revolver in his hand.

He closed his fingers around the butt of the gun in the warmth of the dark pocket, and the closing of his hand took twelve years. He was ready to draw the gun when he saw Arthur Brown, a puzzled look on his face, striding rapidly up the corridor. He decided then—the decision was a century coming—to yell, “Get out, Arthur! Run!” and then the time for yelling was gone because Arthur was pushing through the gate and entering the squadroom. And then, too, the time for pulling the revolver was gone, all the time in the world had suddenly dwindled down to its proper perspective, perhaps twenty seconds in all had gone by since the lights went on, and now there was no time at all, time had gone down the drain, now there was only Virginia Dodge’s cold lethal voice cutting through the time-rushing silence of the squadroom.

“Don’t pull it, redhead! I’m aiming at the nitro!”

He hesitated. A thought flashed into his head: Is there *really* nitroglycerin in that bottle?

And then the thought blinked

out as suddenly as it had come. He could not chance it. He released his grip on the pistol and turned to face her.

Thunderstruck, Arthur Brown stood just inside the gate.

“What . . . ?” he said.

“Shut up,” Virginia snapped. “Get in here!”

“What . . . ?” Brown said again, and there was complete puzzlement on his face. He knew only that he’d returned to the precinct after sitting in the back room of a tailor shop all afternoon. He climbed the metal steps leading to the second story as he’d done perhaps ten thousand times since joining the 87th Squad. He had found the upstairs corridor in darkness, and had automatically reached the light switch at the top of the steps, turning on the lights. The last person he’d seen was Cotton Hawes reaching into the pocket of a coat hanging on the rack. And now . . . a woman with a gun.

“Get over here redhead,” Virginia said.

Silently, Hawes walked to her.

“You’re a pretty smart bastard, aren’t you?” she said.

“I . . .”

The gun in her hand moved upwards blurringly, came down again in a violent sweeping motion of wrist and arm. He felt the fixed sight at the barrel’s end ripping into his cheek. He covered his face with his hands because he expected more. But more did not come. He

looked at his fingers. They were covered with fresh blood.

"No more stunts, redhead," she said coldly. "Understand?"

"I understand."

"Now get out of my way. Over there on the other side of the room. You!" She turned to Brown. "Inside. Hurry up!"

Brown moved deeper into the room. The puzzlement on his face was slowly giving way to awareness. And fast on the heels of this came a look of shrewd calculation.

Virginia picked up the bottle of nitroglycerin, and she began walking toward the coat rack, the bottle in one hand, the gun in the other. Her walk was a jerky nervous movement of shoulders, hips, and legs, devoid of all femininity, a sharp quick perambulation that propelled her across the room. And watching her erratic walk, Hawes was certain that the liquid in her left hand was not the high explosive she claimed it was, and yet . . . nitro was funny. Sometimes it went if you breathed on it. And other times . . .

He wondered.

Nitro? Or water?

Quickly, Virginia removed Byrnes' pistol from the pocket of her coat. She walked back to the desk, put the bottle of nitro down on its top, unlocked the desk drawer, and tossed the revolver in with the others.

"All right, you," she said to Brown. "Give me your gun."

Brown hesitated.

"The bottle here is full of nitroglycerin," Virginia said calmly. "Give me your gun."

Brown looked to Byrnes.

"Give it to her, Artie," Byrnes said. "She's calling all the shots."

"What's her game?" Brown wanted to know.

"Never mind my game," Virginia said heatedly. "Just shut your mouth and bring me your gun."

"You sure are a tough lady," Brown said. He walked to the desk, watching her. He watched her while he unclipped his gun and holster.

Virginia pushed Brown's gun into the top drawer.

"Now get over there," she said. "The other side of the room."

"Is it okay to report to the lieutenant first?" he asked.

"Lieutenant!" she called. "Come here."

Byrnes walked over.

"He's got a report for you. Give it here, mister, where I can hear it all."

"How'd it go?" Byrnes said.

"No dice. And it isn't going to work either, Pete."

"Why not?"

"I stopped off in a candy store when I left the tailor shop. To get a pack of cigarettes."

"Yeah?"

"I got to talking with the owner. He told me there's been a lot of holdups in the neighborhood. Tailor shops mostly."

"Yeah?"

"But he told me the holdups would be stopping soon. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because—and this is just what he told me—there's a bull sitting in the back room of the tailor shop right up the street, just waiting for the crook to show up. That's what the guy in the candy store told me."

"I see."

"So if he knows, every other merchant on the street knows. And if they know, their customers know. And you can bet your life the thief knows, too. So it won't work, Pete. We'll have to dope out something else."

"Mmm," Byrnes said.

"You finished?" Virginia asked.

"I'm finished."

"All right, get over on the other side of the room."

Byrnes walked away from the desk. Brown hesitated.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

"Then move!"

"What's the gun and the nitro for, lady?" Brown asked. "I mean, what do you want here. What's your purpose?"

"I'm here to kill Steve Carella."

"With a bottle of soup?"

"With a gun. The nitro is my insurance."

Brown nodded. "Is it real?"

"It's real."

"How do I know?"

"You don't. Would you like to try belling the cat?" Virginia smiled.

Brown returned the smile. "No, thank you, lady. I was just asking. Gonna kill Steve, huh? Why, what'd he do to you? Give you a traffic ticket?"

"This isn't funny," Virginia said, the smile leaving her mouth.

"I didn't think it was. Who's the floozie? Your partner?"

"I have no partner," Virginia said. "She's a prisoner."

"Aren't we all?" Brown said, and again he smiled, and Virginia did not return the smile.

Hal Willis walked over to the desk. "Listen," he said, "Miscolo's in a bad way. Will you let us get a doctor in here?"

"No," Virginia said.

"For Christ's sake, he may be dying! Look, you want Carella, don't you? What's the sense in letting an innocent guy . . ."

"No doctor," Virginia said.

"Why not?" Byrnes asked, walking over. "You can keep him here after he treats Miscolo. Same as all of us. What the hell difference will it make?"

"No doctor," she said again.

Hawes drifted over to the desk. Unconsciously, the four men assumed the position they would ordinarily use in interrogating a suspect. Hawes, Byrnes, and Brown were in front of the desk. Willis was standing to the right of it. Virginia sat in her chair, the bottle

of nitro within easy reach of her left hand, the .38 in her right hand.

"Suppose I picked up a phone and called a doctor?" Hawes asked.

"I'll shoot you."

"Aren't you afraid of another explosion?" Willis said.

"No."

"You got a little nervous when Murchison came up here last time, didn't you?" Hawes said.

"Shut up, redhead. I've had enough from you."

"Enough to shoot me?" Hawes said.

"Yes."

"And chance the explosion?" Brown put in.

"And another visit from downstairs?"

"You can't chance that, Virginia, can you?"

"I can! Because if anyone else comes up, the nitro goes, goddamn-it!"

"But what about Carella. You blow us up, and you don't get Carella. You want Carella, don't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then how can you explode that nitro?"

"How can you chance another gunshot?"

"You can't shoot any of us, can you? It's too risky."

"Get back," she said. "All of you."

"What are you afraid of, Virginia?"

"You've got the gun, not us."

"Can't you fire it?"

"Are you afraid of firing it?"

Hawes came around to the left side of the desk, moving closer to her.

"Get back!" she said.

Willis moved closer on the right, and Virginia whirled, thrusting the gun at him. In that instant, Hawes stepped between her and the bottle of nitro-glycerin. She was out of the chair in the space of a heartbeat, pushing the chair out from beneath her, and starting to rise. And as she started the rise, Willis—seeing that her hand was away from the bottle, knowing she was off balance as she rose—kicked out with his left foot, swinging it in a backward arc that caught her at the ankles. Hawes shoved at her simultaneously, completing the imbalance, sending Virginia sprawling to the right, toppling toward the floor. She hit the floor with resounding force, and her right hand opened as Hawes scuttled around the desk.

The gun fell from her fingers, slid across the floor, whirled in a series of dizzying circles and then came to a sudden stop.

Willis dove for it.

He extended his hand, and Hawes held his breath because they were getting rid of the crazy bitch at last.

And then Willis shrieked in pain as a three-inch dagger of leather and metal stamped his hand into the floor.

The black skirt was taut over the extended leg of Angelica Gomez. It tightened around a fleshy thigh, pulled back over the knee, ended there in sudden revelation of shapely calf and slender ankle. A black strap circled the ankle and beneath that was a red leather pump with a heel like a stiletto. That heel was buried in the back of Willis' hand.

And then Angelica pulled back her leg and stooped immediately to pick up the gun. From the floor, her skirt pulled back over both knees, her eyes flashing, she whirled on Lieutenant Byrnes who was reaching for the bottle of nitro on the desktop.

"Don' touch it!" she shouted.

Byrnes stopped cold.

"Away from the desk," she said. "Everybody! Back! Back!"

They moved from the desk, fanning away from it. Angelica Gomez had stabbed a man and, for all they knew, that man might now be dead. She had the law to face, and she also had the street gang to face, and so the look on her face was one of desperate resignation. Angelica Gomez was making her pitch for better or worse, and Lord help those who stepped into her path.

She rose, the pistol unwavering in her fist.

"I'm ge'n out of here," she said. "Don' nobody try to stop me."

Virginia Dodge was on her feet now. She turned to Angelica, and

there was a smile on her face. "Good girl," she said. "Give me the gun."

For a moment, Angelica did not understand. She looked at Virginia curiously and then said, "You crazy? I'm leavin'. Now!"

"I know. Give me the gun. I'll cover them for you. While you go."

"Why I should give you the gun?" Angelica said.

"For Christ's sake, are you on their side? The ones who want to send you to jail? Give me the gun!"

"I don' have to do you no favors. I ask before you let me go, an' you say no. Now you want the gun. You crazy. *Loco.*"

"All right, I'll put it in black and white. If you take that gun with you, I'm jumped the minute you leave this room. And that means they'll be on the phone in four seconds and the whole damn police force will be after you. If you give me the gun, I hold them. I keep them here. No phone calls. No radio cars looking for you. You're free."

Angelica thought about this for a moment.

"Give me the gun!" Virginia said, and she took a step closer to Angelica. The Puerto Rican girl stood poised like a tiger, her back arched over into a "C," her legs widespread, the gun trembling in her hand. Virginia came closer.

"Give it to me," she said.

"You hol' them back?" Angelica asked. "You keep them here?"

"Yes."

"Come then. Come close."

Virginia moved to her side.

"Your hand," Angelica said.

Virginia held out her hand, and Angelica put the gun into it.

"I go now," she said. "You keep them here. I get away. Free," she said, "free."

She started to move. She took one step away from Virginia, her back to the woman. Quickly, Virginia raised the gun. Brutally, she brought it crashing down on the skull of Angelica Gomez. The girl collapsed to the floor, and Virginia stepped over her and moved rapidly to the desk.

"Does anybody still think I'm kidding?" she asked quietly.

Roger, the servant who had been with Jefferson Scott for more than twenty years, was sweeping out the hallway when Carella went upstairs again. Hunched over, a tall thin man with white whisks of hair circling a balding head, he swept up the wooden rectangles, squares, triangles, and splinters of the crowbar's destruction. The foxtail brush worked methodically in thin precise fingers, sweeping the debris into the dustpan.

"Cleaning up the mess?" Carella asked pleasantly.

"Yes," Roger said. "Yes, sir. Mr. Scott liked things neat."

"How well did you know the

old man?" Carella asked.

"I've worked for him a long time, sir," Roger said, rising. "A long time."

"Did you like him?"

"He was a fine man. I liked him very much."

"Did he ever have trouble with any of his sons?"

"Trouble, sir?"

"You know. Arguments. Real quarrels. Any of them ever threaten him?"

"They argued from time to time, sir, but never violently. And never any threats. No, sir."

"Hmm. How about the daughter-in-law. Any trouble when David brought her home?"

"No, sir. Mr. Scott liked her very much. He often said he wished his other sons would do as well when they married."

"I see." Carella paused. "Well, thanks a lot." He paused again. "I want to look over the room another time, see if anything else turns up."

"Yes, sir." Roger seemed reluctant to leave. He stood with the dustpan in one hand and the foxtail in the other, seemingly waiting for something.

"Yes?" Carella said.

"Sir, we generally dine at seven. It's past six-thirty now, and I was wondering . . . sir, did you plan to stay for dinner?"

Carella looked at his watch. It was 6:37. "No," he said. "In fact, I'm supposed to be back at the squad by seven. My wife's meeting

me there. No, thanks. No dinner." He paused and then, for no earthly reason, said, "We're going to have a baby. My wife is."

"Yes, sir," Roger said. He smiled.

"Yeah," Carella said, "and I'm kinda anxious to get back."

In the dimness of the corridor, the two men stood smiling at each other.

"Well," Carella said, "back to work."

"Yes, sir."

Carella went into the room. Outside, he could hear Roger's footsteps padding down the corridor.

The room.

No windows. Assuredly no god-damn windows.

No trapdoors or hidden panels.

Jefferson Scott found hanging here—about ten feet from the entrance doorway, overturned stool at his feet.

Rope thrown over that beam in the ceiling and fastened to the doorknob.

Door opens outward into the corridor.

Scott's weight alone could not have held the door closed.

Hence, door was locked; nor could it be forced open by three heavy men—Christ, these Scotts grow big!

He walked over to the door and studied the bolt hanging loose from one screw. The doorjamb was badly marked, that crowbar had certainly done an excellent job. Old Roger had swept up enough splin-

ters to start a toothpick factory. Carella closed the door. Sure enough, the door was weather-stripped, and sure enough you had to slam the damn thing and then pull on it hard in order to close it properly. He opened the door into the corridor again, stepped outside, and closed it behind him. Then he stooped down.

There was a half-inch of space between the bottom of the door and the sill of the room. Carella stuck his fingers under the door. He could feel the metal runner of the weather-stripping, starting about a quarter-inch back from the corridor side of the door. He opened the door again. The weather-stripping lip was set into the doorsill, slightly farther back, to catch the runner securely when the door was closed. Again, he closed the door. And again he ran his fingers under the bottom edge, between door and sill. The metal seemed to be dented in one spot, but of course he couldn't be certain. Still, there seemed to be—to the touch at least—a sharp narrow valley at one point. He slid his fingers along the metal, smooth, smooth, smooth, and there! There it was. The sudden small dip.

"Lose something?" the voice bebind him said.

Carella turned. Mark Scott was a tall man even if you were standing beside him. Crouched on the floor as Carella was, Mark looked enormous. He was as blond as his brother David, broader in the shoul-

ders, with the same huge bone structure. His face in fact, despite the covering layers of skin, seemed to have been chiseled from raw bone. He had a flat hard forehead, and a flat hard nose. His cheekbones sloped sharply downward to break the otherwise flat regularity of his features. His mouth was full, the lips thick. His eyes were grey, but in the dimness of the corridor, they were almost no-color, almost a colorless opaqueness beneath the bushy blond brows.

Carella got to his feet and dusted off his trouser knees.

"No," he said pleasantly. "I didn't lose anything. But in a sense, I'm trying to find something."

"And what might that be?" Mark said, smiling.

"Oh, I don't know. A way into this room. I suppose."

"Under the door?" Mark asked, the smile still on his mouth. "Have to be awfully thin, don't you think?"

"Sure, sure," Carella said. He opened the door again and stepped into the den. Mark followed behind him.

Carella tapped the hanging slip bolt with his finger, setting it swinging. "I understand this bolt was pretty hard to close," he said. "That right?"

"Yes. One generally had to pull in on the door and then ram the bolt across with all one's strength. I spoke to Father about changing it, but he said it suited him fine.

Provided the exercise which was lacking in his life." Mark smiled again. His smile was a charming one, a sudden parting of the thick lips over dazzlingly white teeth.

"Just how hard did you have to pull on the door?" Carella asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"When slipping the bolt."

"Oh. Very hard."

"Do you imagine your father's weight pulling against the door-knob would have provided the pressure necessary to slip the bolt?"

"To hold the door shut, perhaps yes. But it took quite a bit of pressure to push the bolt across. You are thinking, are you not, of someone having managed it from the outside? With string or something?"

Carella sighed. "Yeah, I was sort of thinking along those lines, yeah."

"Impossible. Ask any of my brothers. Ask Christine. Ask Roger. That lock was impossible. Father should have had it changed, really. We discussed it many times."

"Ever argue about it?"

"With Father? Gracious, no. I made a point of never arguing with him. At least, not after I reached the age of fourteen. I remember making my decision at that time. I made it, as I recall, with a good deal of horror."

"The dread Scott decision," Carella said.

"What? Oh. Oh, yes," Mark said, and he smiled. "I decided

when I was fourteen that there was no percentage in arguing with Father. Ever since that time, we got along very well."

"Mmm. Right up to now, huh?"

"Yes."

"Who discovered this door was locked, Mr. Scott?"

"Alan did."

"And who went for the crowbar?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"To force the door open. We'd been calling for Father, and he didn't answer."

"And did the crowbar work?"

"Yes. Of course it did."

"Who tried the door after you'd used the crowbar on it?"

"I did."

"And this time it opened?"

"No. There was still Father's weight hanging against it. But we managed to open it a crack—using the crowbar again—and Alan stuck his arm in and cut the rope."

"Did any of you use the crowbar on the *bottom* of the door?" Carella asked.

"The bottom?"

"Yes. Down there. Near the sill."

"Why no. Why would we want to do that?"

"I can't imagine. Are you gainfully employed, Mr. Scott?"

"What?"

"Do you have a job?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Yes or no?"

"I've been studying at one of the factories. Preparing for an executive position. Father always felt that executives should learn from the bottom up."

"Did you agree with him?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Where were you . . . ah . . . studying?"

"The New Jersey plant."

"For how long?"

"I'd been there for six months."

"How old are you, Mr. Scott?"

"Twenty-seven."

"And what did you do before you went into the New Jersey plant?"

"I was in Italy for several years."

"Doing what?"

"Enjoying myself," Mark said. "When Mother died, she left me a little money. I decided to use it when I got out of college."

"When was that?"

"I was twenty-two when I graduated."

"And you've been in Italy since then?"

"No. The government interfered with my graduation plans. I was in the Army for two years."

"And then you went to Italy, is that right?"

"Yes."

"You were twenty-four years old at the time?"

"Yes."

"How much money did you have?"

"Mother left me thirty-thousand."

"Why'd you come back from Italy?"

"I ran out of money."

"You spent thirty-thousand dollars in three years? In *Italy*?"

"Yes, I did."

"That's an awful lot of money to spend in Italy, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"What I mean is, you must have lived rather grandly."

"I've always lived grandly, Mr. Carella," Mark said, and he grinned.

"Mmm. This executive position you were training for. What was it?"

"A sales executive."

"No title?"

"Just a sales executive."

"And what was the salary for the job?"

"Father didn't believe in spoiling his children," Mark said. "He realized that the business would go to pieces if he simply put his sons in at ridiculously high salaries when they didn't know anything about running the business."

"So what was the starting salary?"

"For that particular job? Fifteen thousand."

"I see. And you live rather grandly. Ran through ten grand a year in Italy. I see."

"That was a *starting* salary, Mr. Carella. Father fully intended Scott Industries to belong to his sons eventually."

"Yes, his will would seem to sub-

stantiate that. Did you know about his will, Mr. Scott?"

"All of us did. Father talked of it freely."

"I see."

"Tell me, Mr. Carella," Mark said. "Do you think I killed my own father?"

"Did you, Mr. Scott?"

"No."

"He committed suicide, isn't that right, Mr. Scott?"

"Yes, that's right." Mark Scott paused. "Or do you think I crawled into the room under that crack in the door?"

Angelica Gomez sat up and shook her head.

Her skirt was pulled back over her knees, and she propped her elbows on both knees and shook her head again, and then looked around the room with a puzzled expression on her face, like a person waking in a hotel.

And then, of course, she remembered.

She touched the back of her head. A huge knob had risen where Virginia had hit her with the gun. She felt the knob and the area around it, all sensitive to her probing fingers. And as the tentacles of pain spread out from the bruise, she felt with each stab a new rush of out-raged anger. She rose from the floor and dusted off her black skirt, and the look she threw at Virginia Dodge could have slain the entire Russian army.

And in that moment, she wondered whether the liquid in that bottle was really nitro-glycerin.

Cotton Hawes touched his cheek where the gun sight had ripped open a flap of flesh. The cheek was raw to the touch. He dabbed at it with a cold wet handkerchief, a cloth no colder than his fury.

And he wondered for the tenth time whether the liquid in that bottle was really nitro-glycerin.

Steve Carella, she thought.

I will kill Steve Carella. I will shoot the rotten bastard and watch him die, and they won't touch me because they're afraid of what's in this bottle.

The telephone rang. It was 6:55.

Hal Willis waited for Virginia's signal, and then picked up the receiver.

"Eighty-seventh squad," he said. "Detective Willis speaking."

"Just a second," the voice on the other end said. The voice retreated from the phone, obviously talking to someone else in the room. "How the hell do I know?" it said. "Turn it over to the Bunco Squad. No, for Christ's sake, what would we be doing with a pickpocket file? Oh, Riley, you're the stupidest son-of-a-bitch I've ever had to work with. I'm on the phone, can you wait just one goddamn minute?" The voice came back onto the line. "Hello?"

"Hello?" Willis said. At the desk opposite him, Virginia Dodge watched and listened.

"Who'm I speaking to?" the voice asked.

"Hal Willis."

"You're a detective, did you say?"

"Yes."

"This the 87th Squad?"

"Yes."

"Yeah. Well then I guess it's a crank."

"Huh?"

"This is Mike Sullivan down Headquarters. We got a call a little while ago, clocked in at . . . ah . . . just a second . . ." Sullivan rattled some papers on the other end of the line. ". . . six forty-nine. Yeah."

"What kind of a call?" Willis said.

"Some college kid. Said he picked up a D.D. report in the street. Had a message typed on it. Something about a broad with a bottle of nitro. Know anything about it?"

At her desk, Virginia Dodge stiffened visibly. The revolver came up close to the neck of the bottle. From where Willis stood, he could see her hand trembling.

"Nitro?" he said into the phone, and he watched her hand, and he was certain the barrel of the gun would collide with the bottle at any moment.

"Yeah. Nitro-glycerin. How about that?"

"No," Willis said. "There's . . . there's nothing like that up here."

"Yeah, that's what I figured. But the kid gave his name and all, so it sounded like it might be a real

squeal. Well, that's the way it goes. Thought I'd check anyway, though. No harm in checking, huh?" Sullivan laughed heartily.

"No," Willis said, desperately trying to think of some way to tell Sullivan that the message was real; whoever had sent it, the damn thing was real. "There's certainly no harm in checking." He watched Virginia, watching the trembling gun in her hand.

Sullivan continued laughing. "Never know when there'll really be some nut up there with a bomb, huh, Willis?" Sullivan said, and he burst into louder laughter.

"No, you . . . you never know," Willis said.

"Sure." Sullivan's laughter trailed off. "Incidentally, is there a cop up there by the name of Meyer?"

Willis hesitated. Had Meyer sent the message? Was it signed? If he said "Yes," would that be the end of it, and would Sullivan make the connection? If he said "No," would Sullivan investigate further, check to see which cops manned the 87th. and would Meyer . . .

"You with me?" Sullivan asked.

"What? Oh, yes."

"Answer him!" Virginia whispered.

"We sometimes get a lousy connection," Sullivan said. "I thought maybe we'd got cut off."

"No, I'm still here," Willis said

"Yeah. Well, how about it? Any Meyer there?"

"Yes. We have a Meyer."

"Second grade?"

"Yes."

"That's funny," Sullivan said. "This kid said the note was signed by a second grade named Meyer. That's funny, all right."

"Yes," Willis said.

"And you got a Meyer up here, huh?"

"Yes."

"Boy, that sure is funny," Sullivan said. "Well, no harm in checking, huh? What? For god's sake, Riley, can't you see I'm on the phone? I gotta go, Willis. Take it easy, huh? Nice talking to you."

And he hung up.

Willis put the phone back into the cradle.

Virginia Dodge put down her receiver, picked up the bottle of nitro, and slowly walked to where Meyer was sitting at the desk near the window.

She did not say a word.

She put the bottle down on the desk before him and then she brought her arm across her body and swung the gun in a back-handed swipe which ripped open Meyer's lip. Meyer put up his hands to cover his face, and again the gun came across, numbing his wrists, forcing his hands down until there was only the vicious metal swiping at his eyes and his bald head and his nose and his mouth.

Virginia's eyes were bright and hard.

Viciously, cruelly, brutally, she kept the pistol going like a whip-

saw until, bleeding and dazed, Meyer collapsed on the desk top, almost overturing the bottle of nitro-glycerin.

She picked up the bottle and looked at Meyer coldly.

Then she walked back to her own desk.

"I hated the old bastard, and I'm glad he's dead," Alan Scott said.

He seemed to have lost all the shocked timidity with which he'd greeted Carella yesterday. They stood in the gun room of the old house on the main floor, a room lined with heads and horns. A particularly vicious looking tigerhead hung on the wall behind Alan, and the expression on his face now—as contrasted to his paleness yesterday—seemed to match that of the tiger.

"That's a pretty strong admission to make, Mr. Scott," Carella said.

"Is it? He was a vicious bastard. He's ruined more men with his Scott Industries, Inc. than I can count on both hands. Was I supposed to have loved him? Did you ever grow up with a tycoon?"

"No," Carella said. "I grew up with an Italian immigrant who was a baker."

"You haven't missed anything, believe me. The old bastard's power wasn't quite absolute, but he had enough to make him almost absolutely corrupt. As far as I'm concerned, he was a big cancer dripping corruption. My father. Dear

old dad. A murdering son of a bitch."

"You seemed pretty upset by his death yesterday."

"Only by the facts of death. Death is always shocking. But there was no love for him, believe me."

"Did you hate him enough to kill him, Mr. Scott?"

"Yes. Enough to kill him. But I didn't. Not that I probably wouldn't have sooner or later. But I didn't do *this* job. And that's why I'm willing to level with you. I'll be damned if I'm going to get involved in something I had nothing to do with. You *do* suspect murder, don't you? That's why you're hanging around so long, isn't it?"

"Well . . ."

"Come on, Mr. Carella, let's play it straight with each other. You know he was killed."

"I know nothing for sure," Carella said. "He was found in a locked room, Mr. Scott. In all truth, it looks pretty much like suicide."

"Sure. But we know it isn't, don't we? There are a lot of clever people in this rotten family who can do tricks that'd make Houdini look sick. Don't let the locked room throw you. If somebody wanted him dead badly enough, that person would find a way of doing it. And making it *look* like suicide."

"Who, for example?"

"Me, for example," Alan said. "If I'd ever decided to really kill

him. I'd work it out, don't worry. Somebody just beat me to it, that's all."

"Who?" Carella said.

"You want suspects? We've got a whole family full of them."

"Mark?"

"Sure. Why not Mark? He's been pushed around by the old bastard all his life. He hasn't said a word against him since the time he was fourteen. All that hatred building up inside while he smiled on the outside. And the latest slap in the face, sending Mark to that New Jersey rattrap where—when he finishes his cheap on-the-job training—he goes into the firm at the magnificent salary of fifteen thousand dollars a year. For the boss' son! Why the old bastard pays his file clerks more."

"You're exaggerating," Carella said.

"All right, I'm exaggerating. But don't think Mark liked what the old bastard was doing to him. He didn't like it one damn bit. And David would have had his own reasons for killing dear father."

"Like what?"

"Like lovely Christine."

"What are you saying, Mr. Scott?"

"What does it sound like I'm saying?"

"You mean . . ."

"Sure. Look, I'm playing this stright with you, Carella. My hate is big enough to share, believe me. And I don't want to see my neck

stretched for something somebody else did, even if he deserved it."

"Then your father . . ."

"My father was a lecherous old toad who kept Christine in this house by threatening to cut David off penniless if they left. Period. Not nice, but there it is."

"Not nice at all. And Christine?"

"Try talking to her. An iceberg. Maybe she liked the setup, how do I know? At any rate, she knew who buttered her bread. And it was well-buttered, believe me."

"Maybe you all got together, Mr. Scott, to do the job. Is that a possibility?"

"This family couldn't get together to start a bridge game," Alan said. "It's a wonder we managed to open that door in concert. You've heard of togetherness? This family's motto is 'apartite.' Maybe it'll be different now that he's dead—but I doubt it."

"Then you believe that someone in this house—one of your brothers, or Christine—killed your father."

"Yeah. That's what I believe."

"Through a locked door?"

"Through a locked bank vault, if you will, with six inches of lead on every damn wall. Where there's a will, there's a way."

"And there was a fat will here," Carella said.

Alan Scott did not smile. "I'll tell you something, Detective Carella. If you work this from the motive angle, you'll go nuts. We've got enough motive in this rundown

mansion to blow up the entire city."

"How then, Mr. Scott, would you suggest that I work it?"

"I'd find out how somebody managed to hang the bastard through a locked door. Figure out *how* it was done, and you'll also figure out who did it. That's my guess, Mr. Carella."

"And of course," Carella said, "that's the easiest part of detective work. Everyone knows that."

Alan Scott did not smile.

"I'm leaving," Carella said. "There isn't much more I can do here tonight."

"Will you be back tomorrow?"

"Maybe. If I think of anything."

"Otherwise?"

"Otherwise it's a suicide. We've got motive, as you say, plenty of it. And we've got means. But, man, we sure are lacking in the opportunity department. I'm no genius, Mr. Scott. I'm just a working stiff. If we still suspect a homicide, we'll dump the case in the Open File." Carella shrugged.

"You didn't strike me as being that kind of a man, Mr. Carella," Alan said.

"Which kind of a man?"

"The kind who gives up easily."

Carella stared at him for a long moment. "Don't confuse the Open File with the Dead Letter department of the Post Office," he said at last. "Good night, Mr. Scott."

When Teddy Carella walked

into the squadroom at two minutes past seven, Peter Byrnes thought he would have a heart attack. He saw her coming down the corridor and at first he couldn't believe he was seeing correctly and then he recognized the trim figure and the proud walk of Steve's wife, and he walked quickly to the railing.

"What are you doing?" Virginia said.

"Somebody coming," Byrnes answered, and he waited. He did not want Virginia to know this was Carella's wife. He had watched the woman grow increasingly more tense and jumpy since the pistol whipping of Meyer, and he did not know what action she might conceivably take against Teddy were she to realize her identity. In the corner of the room, he could see Hawes administering to Meyer. Badly cut, Meyer tried to peer out of his swollen eyes. His lip hung loose, split down the center by the unyielding steel of the revolver. Hawes, working patiently with iodine, kept mumbling over and over again, "Easy, Meyer, easy," and there was a deadly control to his voice as if he—as much as the nitro—were ready to explode into the squadroom.

"Yes, Miss?" Byrnes said.

Teddy stopped dead outside the railing, a surprised look on her face. If she had read the lieutenant's lips correctly . . .

"Can I help you, Miss?" he said. Teddy blinked.

"Get in here, you," Virginia barked from her desk. Teddy could not see the woman from where she stood. And, not seeing her, she could not "hear" her. She waited now for Byrnes to spring the punchline of whatever gag he was playing but his face remained set and serious, and then he said, "Won't you come in, Miss?" and—puzzled even more now—Teddy entered the squadroom.

She saw Virginia Dodge immediately and knew intuitively that Byrnes was trying to protect her.

"Sit down," Virginia said. "Do as I tell you and you won't get hurt. What do you want here?"

Teddy did not, could not answer.

"Did you hear me? What are you doing here?"

Teddy shook her head helplessly.

"What's the matter with her?" Virginia asked impatiently. "Damn it, answer me."

"Don't be frightened, Miss," Byrnes said. "Nothing will happen to you if . . ." He stopped dead, feigning discovery, and then turned to Virginia. "I think . . . I think she's a deaf mute," he said.

"Come here," Virginia said, and Teddy walked to her. Their eyes looked over the desk. "Can you hear?"

Teddy touched her lips.

"You can read my lips?"

Teddy nodded.

"But you can't speak?"

Teddy shook her head.

Virginia shoved a sheet of paper

across the desk. She took a pencil from the tray and tossed it to Teddy. "There's paper and pencil. Write down what you want here."

In a quick hand, Teddy wrote "Burglary" on the sheet and handed it to Virginia.

"Mmm," Virginia said. "Well, you're getting a lot more than you're bargaining for, honey. Sit down." She turned to Byrnes and, in the first kind words she'd uttered since coming into the squadroom, she said, "She's a pretty little thing, isn't she?"

Teddy sat.

"What's your name?" Virginia asked. "Come over here and write down your name."

Byrnes almost leaped forward to intercept Teddy as she walked to the desk again. Teddy picked up the pencil and rapidly wrote "Marcia . . ." She hesitated. A last name would not come. In desperation, she finally wrote her maiden name—"Franklin."

"Marcia Franklin," Virginia said "Pretty name. You're a pretty girl, Marcia, do you know that? Can you read my lips?"

Teddy nodded.

"Do you know what I'm saying?"

Again, Teddy nodded.

"You're very pretty. Don't worry, I won't hurt you. I'm only after one person, and I won't hurt anybody unless they try to stop me. Have you ever loved anyone, Marcia?"

Yes, Teddy said with her head.

"Then you know what it's like. Being in love. Well, someone killed the man I loved, Marcia. And now I'm going to kill him. Wouldn't you do that, too?"

Teddy stood motionless.

"You would. I know you would. You're very pretty, Marcia. I was pretty once — until they took my man away from me. A woman needs a man. Life's no good without a man. And mine is dead. And I'm going to kill the man who's responsible. I'm going to kill a rotten bastard named Steve Carella."

The words hit Teddy with the force of a pitched baseball. She flinched visibly, and then she caught her lips between her teeth, and Virginia watched her in puzzlement and then said, "I'm sorry, honey, I didn't mean to swear. But I . . . this has been . . ." She shook her head.

Teddy had gone pale. She stood with her lip caught between her teeth, and she bit on it hard, and she looked at the revolver in the hand of the woman at the desk, and her first impulse was to fling herself at the gun. She looked at the wall clock. It was 7:08. She turned toward Virginia and took a step forward.

"Miss," Byrnes said, "that's a bottle of nitro-glycerin on the desk there." He paused. "What I mean is, any sudden movement might set it off. And hurt a lot of people."

Their eyes met. Teddy nodded. She turned away from Virginia

and Byrnes, crossing to sit in the chair facing the slatted railing, hoping the lieutenant had not seen the sudden tears in her eyes.

The clock read 7:10.

Teddy thought only *I must warn him*.

Methodically, mechanically, the clock chewed time, swallowed it, spit digested seconds into the room. The clock was an old one, and its mechanism was audible to everyone but Teddy, *whirr, whirrr*, and the old clock digested second after second until they piled into minutes and the hands moved with a sudden click in the stillness of the room.

7:11 . . . 7:12 . . .

Finally the clock read 7:13.

That isn't nitro-glycerin, Hawes thought.

It can't be. She handles it like water, she treats it with all the disdain she'd give to water, she wouldn't be so damn careless with it if it was capable of exploding. It isn't nitro-glycerin.

Now wait a minute, he told himself, let's just wait a minute, let's not rationalize a desire into a fact.

I want desperately for the liquid in that bottle to be water. I want it because for the first time in my life I am ready to knock a woman to hell and back, a woman who is about to reduce every man in this room to a pile of rubbish.

So here I am, Virginia.

I'm one hundred percent Ameri-

can, raised by God-fearing parents who instilled in me a sense of right and wrong, and who taught me that women are to be treated with courtesy—and you have turned me into a jungle animal ready to kill you, hating you and wanting to see you dead.

The liquid in that bottle is not nitro-glycerin. I am going to make myself believe this, Virginia so that I'll have the guts to do what I know has to be done. It's not nitro . . . not nitro . . .

The answer came to him all at once.

Sometimes it comes that way.

He had left Alan Scott in the old mansion, had walked through the stillness of a house gone silent with death, into the huge entry-hall with its cut glass chandelier and its ornate mirror. He had taken his hat from the marble topped table set in front of the mirror, wondering why he'd worn the hat, he very rarely wore a hat, and then realizing that he had not worn a hat yesterday, and then further realizing that the power of the rich is an intimidating one.

Smiling grimly, he had faced the mirror, set his hat on his head, and then opened the huge oak door leading outside. Darkness covered the property. A single light burned at the far end of the walk. There was the smell of woodsmoke on the air.

He had started down the path,

thinking of October, and woodsmoke, and burning leaves, and musing about this bit of Exurbia in the center of the city. How nice to be exurban, how nice to burn leaves. He glanced over his shoulder, toward the garage. A figure was silhouetted there against the star-filled sky, a giant of a man, one of the brothers no doubt, the smoke from the small fire trailing up past his huge body. One of the magnificent Scotts burning leaves, you'd think a job like that would be left to Roger, or the caretaker, no caretaker for the Scott estate? tch, tch, no caretaker to burn the . . .

It came to him then.

Woodsmoke.

Wood.

And one of the brothers burning his own fire.

Wood. Wood! For Christ's sake, wood, of course, of course!

He turned suddenly and started back up the path to the house.

How do you lock a door? he thought, and his thoughts mushroomed onto his face until he was grinning like an absolute idiot. How do you lock it from the outside and let it seem it's been locked from the inside?

To begin with, you rip the slip bolt from the doorjamb, so that when the door is finally forced open, it looks as if the lock was snapped in the process. That's the first thing you do, and by Christ, that explains all the marks on the

inside of the room. How the hell could the crowbar have got that far inside, why weren't you thinking, Carella, you moron?

So first you snap the lock.

You have already strangled the old man, and he is lying on the floor while you work on the slip bolt, carefully prying it loose so that it hangs from one screw, so that it will look very realistically snapped when the door is later forced.

Then you put a rope around the old man's neck, and you toss one end of it over the beam in the ceiling, and you pull him up so that he's several feet off the ground. He's a heavy man, but so are you, and you're working with extra adrenalin shooting through your body, and all you have to do is get him off the floor several feet. And then you back away toward the door and tie the rope around the doorknob.

The old man is dangling free at the other end of the room.

You shove on the door now. This isn't too difficult. It only has to open wide enough to permit you to slip out of the room. And now you're out, and the old man's weight pulls the door shut again. The slip bolt, on the inside, is dangling loose from one screw.

And you are in the corridor, and the problem now is how to give the appearance of the door being locked so that you and your brothers can tug on it to no avail.

And how do you solve the problem?

By using one of the oldest mechanical devices known to mankind.

And who?

It had to be, it couldn't be anyone else but the first person to try the door after the crowbar was used on it, the first person to step close enough to . . .

"Mark Scott?" Carella said.

"Yes? Who's that?"

"Me. Carella."

Mark stepped closer to the small fire. The smoke drifted up past his face. The flames, dwindling now, threw a flickering light onto his large features.

"I thought you'd gone long ago," he said. He held a rake in his big hands, and he poked at the embers with it now so that the fire leaped up in renewed life, tinting his face with a yellow glow.

"No, I'm still here."

"What do you want?" Mark said.

"You," Carella said simply.

"I don't understand."

"I'm taking you with me, Mark," Carella said.

"What for?"

"For the murder of your father."

"Don't be ridiculous," Mark said.

"I'm being very sensible," Carella said. "Did you burn it?"

"Burn what? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the way you locked that door from the outside."

"There's no outside lock on that door," Mark said calmly.

"What you used was just as effec-

tive as a lock. And the more a person tugged against it, the more effective it became, the tighter it locked that door."

"What are you talking about?" Mark said.

"I'm talking about a wedge," Carella said, "a simple triangle of wood. A wedge..."

"I don't know what you mean," Mark said.

"You know what I mean, damn it. A wedge, a simple triangular piece of wood which you kicked under the door, narrow end first. Any outward pressure on the door only pulled it toward the wide end of the triangle, tightening it."

"You're crazy," Mark said. "We had to use a crowbar on that door. It was locked from the inside. It..."

"It was held closed by your wood-en wedge which, incidentally, put a dent in the weather-stripping under the door. The crowbar only splintered a lot of wood which fell to the floor. Then you stepped up to the door. *You*, Mark. You stepped up to it and fumbled with the doorknob and—in the process—kicked out the wedge so that the door, for all intents and purposes, was now unlocked. And then, of course, you and your brothers were able to pull it open, despite your father's weight hanging against..."

"This is ridiculous," Mark said. "Where'd you..."

"I saw Roger sweeping up the debris in the hallway. The splintered

wood, and *your* wedge. A good camouflage, that splintered wood. That's what you're burning now, isn't it? The wood? *And* the wedge?"

Mark Scott did not answer. He began moving before Carella had finished his sentence. He swung the rake back over his shoulder and then let loose with it as if he were swinging a baseball bat, catching Carella completely by surprise. The blow struck him on the side of the neck, three of the rake's teeth entered the flesh and drawing blood. Mark pulled the rake back again. Carella, dizzy, stepped forward with his hands outstretched, and again the rake fell, this time on the forearm of Carella's outstretched right arm.

His arm dropped, numb. He tried to lift it, tried to reach for the Police Special in his right hip pocket, but the arm dangled foolishly, and he cursed its inability to move and then noticed that the rake was back again, ready for another swing, and he knew that this swing would do it, this swing would knock his head clear into the River Harb.

He lunged forward, inside the swing, as the rake cut the air. He grasped with his left hand, reaching for a grip on Mark's clothing, catching the tie knotted loosely around his throat. Mark, offbalance from his swing, pulled back instantly, and Carella moved forward with the movement of the bigger man,

shoving him backward, and then suddenly tugging forward again on the tie.

Mark fell.

He dropped the rake and spread his hands out to cushion the fall, and Carella went down with him, knowing he must not come into contact with the bigger man's hands—hands which had already strangled once.

Silently, grotesquely, they rolled on the ground toward the fire, Mark struggling for a grip at Carella's throat, Carella holding to the tie as if it were a hangman's noose. They rolled over the fire, scattering sparks onto the lawn, almost extinguishing it. And then Carella dropped the tie, and leaped to his feet and, his right hand useless, his left lacking any real power, brought his foot back and released it in a kick that caught Mark on the left shoulder, spinning him back to the ground.

Carella closed in.

Again he kicked, and again, using his feet with the precision of a boxer. And then, backing off, he reached behind him with his left hand in a curious inverted draw, and faced Mark Scott with the .38 in his fist.

"Okay, get up," he said.

"I hated him," Mark said. "I've hated him ever since I was old enough to walk. I've wanted him dead ever since I was fourteen."

"You got what you wanted," Carella said. "Get up."

Mark got to his feet. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Back to the squad," Carella said. "It'll be a little more peaceful there."

Teddy stared at the clock, watching each second tick by. I must warn him, she thought. I can see the length of the corridor from here and the top step of the metal stairway leading from below. If I could hear I would recognize his tread even before he came into view because I know his walk, I have imagined the sound of his walk a thousand times. A masculine sound, but lightfooted, he moves with animal grace, I would recognize the sound of his walk the moment he entered the building—if only I could hear.

But I cannot hear, and I cannot speak. I cannot shout a warning to him when he enters this second floor corridor. I can only run to him. Virginia Dodge will not use the nitro, not if she knows Steve is in the building where she can shoot him. She needs the nitro for her escape. I'll run to him when he starts down the corridor. I'll shield him. Steve won't die.

And the baby?

The baby, she thought. Hardly a baby yet, a life just begun, but Steve must not die. Myself, yes. Even the baby. But not Steve. She can shoot all she wants but she won't hit Steve.

Teddy had almost lost him once, she could remember that Christmas as if it were yesterday, the painfully

white hospital room, and her husband gasping for breath. She had hated his occupation then, detested police work and criminals, abhorred the chance circumstances which had allowed her husband to be shot by a petty pusher in a city park. And then she had allowed her hatred to dissolve, and she had prayed, simply and sincerely, and all the while she knew that he would die and that her silent world would truly become silent. With Steve there was no silence. With Steve she was surrounded by the noise of life.

This was not a time for prayer.

"Where is he?" Virginia Dodge said impatiently. She looked up at the clock. "It's almost seven-thirty. Isn't he supposed to report back here?"

"Yes," Byrnes said.

"Then where the hell is he?" She slammed her left fist down on the desk top. Hawes watched. The bottle of nitro, jarred, did not explode.

It's water, Hawes thought. Damn it, it's *water!*

"Have you ever had to wait for anything, Marcia?" Virginia said to Teddy. "I feel as if I've been in this squadroom all my life."

Teddy watched the woman, expressionless.

"You dirtee bitch," Angelica Gomez said. "You should wait in *hell*, you dirtee bitch."

"She's angry," Virginia said,

smiling. "The Spanish onion is angry. Take it easy, Chiquita. Just think, your name'll be in the newspapers tomorrow."

"An' your name, too," Angelica said. "An' maybe it be in the *dead* columns."

"I doubt that," Virginia said, and all humor left her face and her eyes. "The newspapers will . . ." She stopped. "The newspapers," she said, and this time she said the words with the tone of discovery. Hawes watched the discovery claim her face, watched as she stirred her memory. Her eyes were beginning to narrow.

"I remember reading a story about Carella," she said. "In one of the newspapers. The time he got shot. It mentioned that his wife . . ." She paused. "His wife was a deaf mutel!" she said, and she turned glaring eyes on Teddy. "What about it, Marcia Franklin? What about it?"

Teddy did not move.

"What are you doing here?" Virginia said. She had begun rising.

Teddy shook her head.

"Are you Marcia Franklin, come to report a burglary. Or are you Mrs. Steve Carella? Which? Answer me!"

Again, Teddy shook her head.

Virginia was standing now, her attention riveted to Teddy. Slowly, she came around the desk, sliding along its edge, ignoring the bottle on its top completely. It was as if, having found someone she believed

to be related to Carella, her wait was nearing an end. It was as if—should this woman be Carella's wife—she could now truly begin to vent her spleen. Her decision showed on her face. The hours of waiting, the impatience of the ordeal, the necessity for having to deal with other people while her real quarry delayed his entrance showed in the gleam of her eyes and the hard set of her mouth. As she approached Teddy Carella, Hawes knew instinctively that she would inflict upon her the same—if not worse—punishment that Meyer had suffered.

"Answer me!" Virginia screamed, and she left the desk completely now, the bottle of nitro behind her, advanced to Teddy, and stood before her, a dark solemn judge and jury.

She snatched Teddy's purse from her arm, and then rifled through it. Byrnes, Kling, Willis stood to the right of Teddy, near the coat rack. Miscolo was unconscious on the floor behind Virginia, near the filing cabinets. Only Meyer and Hawes were to her right and slightly behind her — and Meyer was limp, his head resting on his folded arms.

Quickly, deftly, Virginia snapped open the purse. She found what she was looking for almost immediately. Immediately, she read it aloud.

"Mrs. Stephen Carella, 837 Dart-

mouth Road, Riverhead. In case of emergency, call . . ." She stopped. "Mrs. Stephen Carella," she said. "Well, well, Mrs. Stephen Carella." She took a step closer to Teddy, and Hawes watched, hatred boiling inside him, and he thought *It isn't nitro, it isn't nitro, it isn't nitro . . .*

"Aren't you the pretty one, though?" Virginia said. "Aren't you the well-fed, well-groomed beauty? You've had your man, haven't you? You've had your man, and you've still got your good looks, haven't you? Pretty, you bitch, look at me! LOOK AT ME!"

I'll jump her, Teddy thought. Now. While she's away from the nitro. I'll jump her now, and she'll fire, the rest will grab her, and it will be all over. Now. Now.

But she did not jump.

Hypnotized as if by a snake, she watched the naked hatred on Virginia Dodge's face.

"It was pretty once," Virginia said, "before they sent Frank away. Do you know how old I am? I'm thirty-two. That's young. That's young, and I look like a hag, don't I, like death one of them said. Me, me, I look like death because your husband robbed me of my husband. Your husband, you bitch. Oh, I could rip that face of yours apart! I could rip it, rip it for what he's done to me! Do you hear me, you little bitch!"

She stepped closer, and Hawes

knew the gun would flash upward in the next moment.

He told himself for the last time *There's no nitro in that bottle*, and then he shouted, "Hold it!"

Virginia Dodge turned to face him, moving closer to the desk and the bottle on it, blocking Byrnes and the others from it.

"Get away from her," Hawes said.

"What!" Virginia's tone was one of complete disbelief.

"You heard me. Get away from her. Don't lay a hand on her."

"Are you giving me orders?"

"Yes!" Hawes shouted. "Yes, I am giving you orders! Now how about that, Mrs. Dodge? How about it? *I* am giving *you* orders! One of the crawly little humans is daring to give you orders. Keep away from that girl. You touch her and . . ."

"And what?" Virginia said. There was a sneer in her voice, supreme confidence in her stance—but the gun in her hand was trembling violently.

"I'll kill you, Mrs. Dodge," Hawes said quietly. "That's what, I'll kill you."

He took a step toward her.

"Stand where you are!" Virginia yelled.

"No, Mrs. Dodge," Hawes said. "You and I are going to have it out, Mrs. Dodge. Here and now. You know something? I'm not afraid of you, or, your little bottle. You know why? Because there's

nothing but water in it, Mrs. Dodge, and I'm not afraid of water. I *drink* water! by the gallon, I drink it!"

"Don't take another step!" Virginia said desperately, the gun shaking.

"Why not? You going to shoot me? Okay, damnit, shoot me! But shoot me a lot because one bullet isn't going to do it! Shoot me twice and then keep shooting me because I'm coming right at you, Mrs. Dodge, and I'm going to take that gun away from you with any strength that's left in my hands, and I'm going to stuff it right down your throat! I'm coming, Mrs. Dodge, you hear me?"

"Stop! Stop where you are!" she screamed. "The nitro . . ."

"There *is* no nitro!" Hawes said, and he began his advance in earnest, and Virginia turned to face him fully now. To her left, Byrnes gestured to Teddy, who began moving slowly toward the men who stood just inside the gate. Virginia did not seem to notice. Her hand was shaking erratically as she watched Hawes.

"I'm coming, Mrs. Dodge," Hawes said, "so you'd better shoot now if you're going to because . . ."

And Virginia fired.

The shot stopped Hawes. But only momentarily, and only in the way any sudden sharp noise will stop anyone. But the bullet had missed him by a mile, and he began his advance again, moving

across the room toward her, watching Byrnes slip Teddy past the railing and practically shove her down the corridor. The others did not move. Shut off from the bottle of nitro, they stood rooted in the room, facing an imminent explosion.

"What's the matter?" Hawes said. "Too nervous to shoot straight? Your hand trembling too much?"

Virginia backed toward the desk. This time, he knew she was going to fire. He sidestepped an instant before she squeezed the trigger, and again the slug missed him, and he grinned and shouted, "That does it, Mrs. Dodge! You'll have every cop in the city up here now!"

"The nitro . . ." She said, backing toward the desk.

"What nitro? There is no nitro!"

"I'll knock it to the . . ."

And Hawes leaped.

The gun went off as he jumped, and this time he heard the rushing *whoosh* of the bullet as it tore past his head, missing him. He caught at Virginia's right hand as she swung it toward the desk and the bottle of nitro-glycerin. He clung to her wrist tightly because there was animal strength in her arm as she flailed wildly at the bottle, reaching for it.

He pulled her arm up over her

head and then slammed it down on the desktop, trying to knock the gun loose, and the bottle slid toward the edge of the desk.

He slammed her hand down again, and again the bottle moved, closer to the edge as Virginia's fingers opened and the gun dropped to the floor.

And then she twisted violently in his arms and flung herself headlong across the desk in a last desperate lunge at the bottle standing not two inches from its edge. She slipped through his grip, and he caught at her waist and then yanked her back with all the power of his shoulders and arms, pulling her upright off the desk, and then clenching his fist into the front of her dress, and drawing his free hand back for a blow that would have broken her neck.

His hand hesitated in mid-air.

And then he lowered it, unable to hit her. He shoved her across the room and said only, "You bitch!" and then stooped to pick up the gun.

"It's over," Hawes said.

Byrnes had moved to the telephone. "Dave," he said, "get me the Bomb Squad! Right away!"

"The Bom . . ."

"You heard me."

"Yes, *sir!*" Murchison said.

The call from the hospital came at 7:53, after the men from the Squad had gingerly removed the suspect bottle from the room. Byrnes took the call.

"Eighty-seventh squad," he said. "Lieutenant Byrnes."

"This is Dr. Nelson at General. I was asked to call about the condition of this stabbing victim? Jose Dorena?"

"Yes," Byrnes said.

"He'll live. The blade missed the jugular by about a quarter of an inch. He won't be out of here for a while, but he'll be out alive." Nelson paused. "Anything else you want to know?"

"No. Thank you."

"Not at all," Nelson said, and he hung up.

Byrnes turned to Angelica. "You're lucky," he said. "Kassim'll live. You're a lucky girl."

And Angelica turned sad wise eyes toward the lieutenant and said, "Am I?"

Murchison walked over to her. "Come on, sweetie," he said, "we've got a room for you downstairs." He pulled her out of the chair, and then went to where Virginia Dodge was handcuffed to the radiator. "So you're the troublemaker, huh?" he said to her.

"Drop dead," Virginia told him.

"You got a key for this cuff, Pete?" Murchison said. He shook his head. "Jesus, Pete, why didn't you guys say something? I mean, I was sitting down there all this time. I mean . . ." He stopped as Byrnes handed him the key. "Hey, is that what you meant by 'Forthwith?'"

Byrnes nodded tiredly. "That is

what I meant by 'Forthwith,'" he said.

"Yeah," Murchison said. "I'll be damned." Roughly, he pulled Virginia Dodge from the chair. "Come on, prize package," he said, and he led both women from the squad-room, passing Kling in the corridor.

"Well, we got Miscolo off okay. The rest is in the laps of the gods. We sent Meyer along for the ride. The interne seemed to think that face needed treatment. It's over, huh, Pete?"

"It's over," Byrnes said.

There was noise in the corridor outside. Steve Carella pushed Mark Scott through the slatted rail divider and said, "Sit down, Scott. Over there. Hello, Pete. Cotton. Here's our boy. Strangled his own . . . Teddy! Honey, I forgot all about you. Have you been waiting lo . . ."

He shut his mouth because Teddy rushed into his arms with such fervor that she almost knocked him over.

"We've all been sort of waiting for you," Byrnes said.

"Yeah? Well, that's nice. Absence makes the heart grow fonder." He held Teddy at arms' length and said, "I'm sorry I'm late, baby. But all at once the thing began to jell and I . . ."

She touched the side of his neck where the blow from the rake had left marks crusted with blood.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "I got hit

with a rake. Listen, let me type my report and away we go. Pete, I'm taking my wife to dinner, and I dare you to say no. We're going to have a baby!"

"Congratulations," Byrnes said wearily.

"Boy, what enthusiasm. Honey, let me type up this report, and away we go. I'm so starved I could eat a horse. Pete, we book this guy for homicide. Where's a typewriter? Anything interesting happen?"

The phone rang.

"I've got it," Carella said. He lifted the receiver. "Eighty-seventh squad, Carella."

"Carella, this is Levy down the Bomb Squad."

"Yeah, hi, Levy, how are you?"

Fine. And you?"

"Fine. What's up?"

"I got a report on that bottle."

"What bottle?"

"We picked up a bottle there."

"Oh yeah? Well, what about it?"

Carella listened, inserting a few "Uh-huhs" and "Yes'es into the conversation. Then he said, "Okay, Levy, thanks for the dope," and

he hung up. He pulled up a chair, ripped three D.D. sheets from the desk drawer, inserted carbon between them, and then swung a typewriter into place.

"That was Levy," he said. "The Bomb Squad. Somebody here give him a bottle?"

"Yeal," Hawes said.

"Well, he was calling to report."

Hawes rose and walked to Carella. "What did he say?"

"He said it was."

"It was?"

"That's what the man said. They exploded it downtown. Powerful enough to have blown up City Hall."

"It was," Hawes said tonelessly.

"Yeah." Carella inserted the report forms into the typewriter. "Was *what?*" he asked absently.

"Nitro," Hawes said, and he sank into a chair near the desk, and he had on his face the stunned expression of a man who's been hit by a Diesel locomotive.

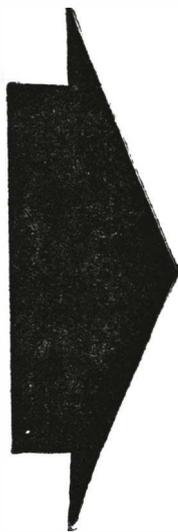
"Boy," Carella said, "what a day *this* was!"

Furiously, he began typing.



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