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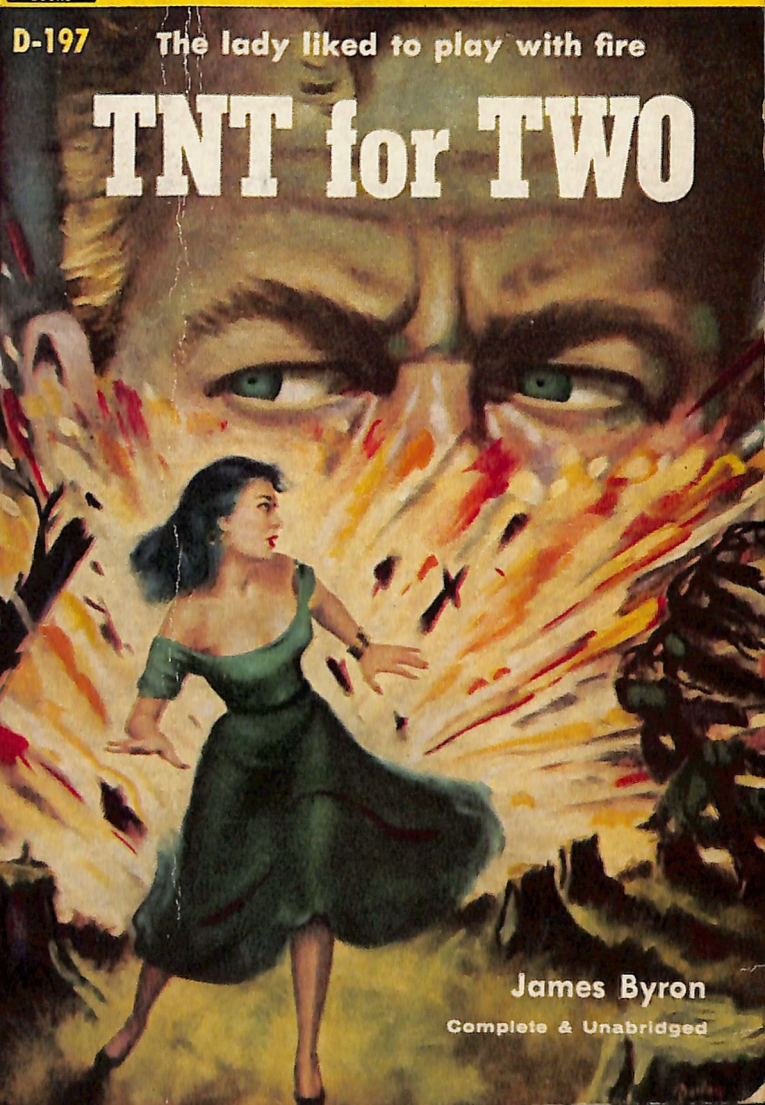
The lady liked to play with fire

TNT for TWO



James Byron

Complete & Unabridged

DYNAMITE WAS HIS BUSINESS— AND HER DELIGHT!

For Cliff Karney, dynamite was just a business. But Helen Kittinger seemed to take a particular pleasure in watching Cliff blast out a pool on the grounds of her home. And a particular interest in having her heavily insured husband assist Cliff in the dangerous job of setting the sticks of TNT.

Helen made a lot of suggestions to Cliff—as an employer and as a woman. Both were equally tempting, but either one placed him on the blowup end of a short fuse to destruction!

Turn this book over for second complete novel

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CLIFF KARNEY

He found that a woman in his arms was as dangerous as a stick of TNT in his hands!

HELEN KITTINGER

She was willing to pay any "premium" for the right kind of insurance.

HARRY KITTINGER

This Number Two man of the police force would never get to be Number One—because his number was up!

MAGGIE

Her rival for Cliff was more witch than woman.

EVERHARDT

An insurance man who tried to give the most personal kind of service—whenever pleasurable or profitable!

HICKEY

He planned the blasting of the site—but not exactly the way it happened.

TNT FOR TWO

JAMES BYRON

ACE BOOKS
A Division of A. A. Wyn, Inc.
23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

TNT FOR TWO

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God said, "Take what you want, and pay for it."
—Spanish proverb

COUNTERFEIT CORPSE

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CHAPTER I

I TOOK THE CHEV over to the new sixteenth fairway where there was a big fir stump. I'd sprung it, and I thought fifty sticks of twenty percent stumping powder would split it six ways to Sunday. I put out the flags and had a couple of grounds keepers sitting off on the knolls. I was ready to shoot.

I was a blaster, a dynamiter, for Hickey Associates who do landscape gardening, they say, but they also clear land if anyone wants to put in another nine holes. A stump in the new fairway might stab the country club set in the knickers, so that is why old man Hickey sent me over. The two younger Hickey boys do most of what they call landscaping. When I first went to work for them, they found out nothing I stuck in the ground ever lived. So they paid me by the hour for their blasting work. Especially in town.

That was how I came to know this Dynamite Widow you've been reading about. Or rather, that is how I came to know one half of the team. Her partner is scattered over her side yard. Maybe you read about that, too.

Anyway, the first thing she said was: "I'm sorry."

I was bent over—like this—with a fire stick in my hand. Another second and that black fuse would have caught. But it did not catch. Afterwards, I've wished it had blown right then. Maybe it would have gotten us both, then.

But it didn't burn. All I could do, when her golf ball hit me where it hurts, was to double over and watch the tip

of the fuse. And groan. I said what you say in a poolroom when the cue ball tags you because some high-school Willie Hoppe gave it too much top english. While I was saying that, she was telling me she was sorry.

I tried to face her, still doubled up, feeling the old sick pain only a man can feel. But I managed to turn, and keep my eyes focused, and that was how I met the Dynamite Widow.

Except she wasn't called that when she stood looking down on me.

She was in a tartan plaid skirt. Afterwards, the woman reporters made a lot of the "customary Black Watch patterns" in her clothes closets. But that was later—a lot of time and blood later.

She was, if anything, what you would call real sweet. Maybe her shoulders did slope a little, but she was wearing a dark blouse, with bows at the short sleeves and where the blouse buttoned. Her black hair was shoulder length, turned up on the end. Later the reporters made all of this "seductive." Later I knew they were right, but at the time, when I was bent double, she did not seem that way.

I handed her the ball. It was between my feet. She had driven from another fairway, and down over the hill. Her Crow-flite hit the stump and bounced back off like a bullet. Right in my side pocket. When she reached out to take her ball, I could see a trace of laughter in her eyes.

"What do you use on a shot like that?" I said. "A mid-iron?"

"I used a driver. And I am sorry."

"So you said."

I was about to go on and say I was glad she was using dollar balls for the job and the next time a spoon would be better. Also, if she had hit a little more square and a little earlier in my life, I would have been saved a lot of trouble with a few women I have known.

But I didn't say this because I noticed she had no golf

sticks with her. She had dropped them to run down the hill to see if I was hurt. She really was sorry. The reason she was laughing a little with her eyes was because she was relieved that it wasn't serious.

She was just another woman standing there. I had never seen her before in my life. Her long black hair, turned up at the ends, winked in the sunlight; the light breeze shopped through her curls. Thirty-six, perhaps, with a sweet half-moon face. She did not look tired, but now that I think back, she was tense around the lips so that you saw her teeth a little. The way a woman is when everything is not right at home. Maybe that is why she hit a frantic ball clear across to a new fairway and into the side pocket, except lower.

She saw the fuse sticking out of the mud. It was a black coiling worm across the clay. The law calls for three feet; I was illegal by half. She grabbed my arm and started to pull me away. She didn't want to ride the blast patterns right into the last GI camp where they tell me all the old soldiers go.

I did not want to go out right that minute either. Not with a woman who was plenty scared hanging on my arm. Or was it because she had knocked me down and then picked me up again?

You never know how the hook gets set. But it gaffs you. Perhaps that time arrives when everything seems ordinary, like a piece of fuse looks ordinary although it intends to burn in a single flash.

"A fuse?" she said.

"That's me," I said. "The Boy Blaster on Fir Stump Farm."

I could see she got a kick out of it. Some people are that way. I am that way and I think my old man was that way too. You see this in the faces of children—little boys or sometimes little girls—when fireworks go off in the city park on the Fourth. It's a real glorious Fourth for everyone, except the working stiff that walks around among the displays with

burning paper falling all around, and with smoke so thick you can't see whoever is dumb enough to work with you. At the last you touch off the big flag and it burns out. And everyone goes home.

Except you can see it in the faces of the little kids. They want the whole display to go off at once. That happens, too. I could see this one got a kick out of thinking the oak stump might touch off. Right now.

"Walk on back up the hill," I said. "I'll be right up."

I took a cigarette lighter out of my pocket. The kind they sell in any army PX.

"No. I'll stay. I want to see you do it."

"My shot," I said, "I'll just use what I got in my hand."

That tickled her. I actually lit the fuse. Then I asked her for a cigarette. She fumbled and sweated around in her purse. Then I lit the cigarette too. If I had stayed there one second longer with the fuse winking in the clay at our feet, she would have screamed. But I stood there, took my drags. I know my business.

"Now we take the big walk," I told her.

I grabbed her arm to hold her back. She couldn't wait to get out of there. I didn't look back once, so she wouldn't let herself look back either. At the top of the hill we turned around together. At that second she blew. The big fir went *"Chuummmmmp!"* The clay and the weeds and the mats jumped up and out. The stump bucked and heaved in the ground. And split. The pebbles and the clods began to fall around us. Then the smell of the powder, like the burning of human hair. It is always that way.

She was clutching my arm. She didn't know how long and hard her red-pointed fingernails could be.

"Be more careful. You should."

I could have said, *Nobody needs to worry about Karney.* But All I said to her was: "I'll do that. If you say so."

"I do say so. I just said it."

"Then at least you owe me your name. After that niblick

in the. . . ." Whatever word I had on my tongue, I changed it to gazookus.

She told me her name. Part of her name, I mean. I got to know the rest of it, the stinger, the next time we met.

Maybe I was staring at the little black bows which held her blouse together at the neck, or perhaps I was staring at the slope of her shoulders that seemed to match exactly the slope of her hips under the skirt. Anyway she only said her name was Helen.

I asked her the last name, but did not say. That would have told me who the husband was. She did not want that, I know now. Now yet.

She stared at me and said once more, "I'm Helen."

She turned around and walked straight across the hills and dales of one of the best little country clubs in the whole Northwest. I noticed she forgot her golf clubs. They were still lying on the grass across the next fairway.

Not being exactly a member, I let her golf sticks lie there. There were caddies for that little errand. Instead, I only followed her with my eyes.

And that happens.

In three days there were three messages. The Chinese clerk who kept the scores for Hickey Associates gave me one. He had written it on some Chinese rice paper, so I had to hold it up to the light to see the telephone number. The next two days the same number was waiting at the boarding house where I keep the slacks and the sport coats. I used to buy a suit sometimes, but since no one I drink with or work with ever goes to a wedding or a funeral, I got out of the habit. In the Northwest you don't wear a suit much anyway.

Mrs. Beale stopped me at the door when I got in the third evening.

"It's that same lady," Mrs. Beale said, worried as a grandmother with a set of triplets. "She sounds *very* worried."

I could have said, "They all do, Granny, they all do."

But she is pretty good to me and worries when I am too rocky to eat much in the way of her fried eggs at the big breakfast. Sometimes she talks to me about "owning your own home" and about "responsibility." For a long time I wouldn't tell her I was a blaster on construction jobs, because I knew she would worry. When I did tell her, she took it very well. She is all right and once when she had to raise the board six bits on the week you would have thought the Bank of England had busted. Mrs. Beale, I remember, gave me Helen's address.

So I drove out beyond Larchwood. Helen let me in herself. She didn't have on the plaid skirt. She had on a creation by Ship 'n Shore. A kind of sailor suit with shorts and the white blouse pulled down low over those hips. She had on the white canvas shoes that go with it, and navy socks that pulled up, British style, nearly to her knee. Between the bottom of the shorts and the top of the socks there was only flesh, the smooth tan kind that you want to bite.

I wasn't the only one who knew how good those hips were. She knew all about them herself. You could tell.

There was a tray on the low table in front of the fireplace in their living room. You could do some living there, too: black spears for curtain rods and, hanging from the brass rings, the kind of drapes that some people bring back from Hawaii. A Tapa cloth resign on a fabric that looks something like ironed-out paper. Everything else was to match, and the whole house rambled on back towards the hills and finally butted its garages against cut-over woods. A stump farm, we call it.

"Daisy isn't here," she told me.

I had arrived at the door at exactly three-fifteen, like she said. If the maid wasn't there I knew Helen had planned it so. But I liked what I saw, and at the same time I did not like it. You will say I was suspicious because I knew she was around the country club a lot and that I was only the kind of person they call in to blast out stumps. All right,

play it that way, but what I really felt was that there was something in this house I could not see. I had the uneasy feeling, back in the darkness of the spine where a dog's hackles are, that I was about to be used. I stood there trying not to think what I was thinking: that I had picked up something here. Besides, this Daisy was gone.

I could see how Helen had it figured out: a tea pot on the little tray in front of the fireplace, some little tea biscuits on the side, and a roaring fire. Except there was no fire in the grate. In fact, this Daisy must have been cleaner than the law requires. The fireplace was scrubbed inside. No one had ever started a fire in it. I remained standing, though Helen motioned me to a chair.

"Oh, have tea. It'll keep the doctor away . . ."

I let that one pass. I was beginning to wonder who the "doctor" was at this long, ranch-type house near the edge of town.

"You must be from The Islands," I said, and jerked my head towards the tapa-cloth drapes.

"No. Native to the Great Northwest."

"Not many of them left."

"Most of us are Oakies or Arkies. Or from Hunger."

"I'm from here, too." I lied to her. And then the truth: "And sometimes from hunger."

"Imagine that," she said, and it was her turn to pass. "I like it near home."

I could have made something of that one, too, but I let it pass. The Ship 'n Shore did it. I sat down.

She was all around me, a regular hostess. I couldn't do anything, not even stir the tea. "Are you sure no lemon?" I was sure. "And not a single lump?" I was sure. "Me, I have a sweet tooth," she said. I was sure.

She was in and out of the kitchen. She was on the couch. She was on the chair and up and down about the tea. Finally I said I would try one with lemon, so she had to get a fresh lemon and explain how putting lemon, like so,

made it turn lighter. That the British used cream. Then all about tea drinking customs in India, until you would think she never drank anything else. After a while I could see she was not getting anywhere with what she called me out for. So I switched to business.

"Exactly what do you want from me?"

"Me?"

"Yes. You."

"Why, I don't know . . . what you mean."

"No?"

"I mean, I don't know. I just thought . . ."

"That I would do this?"

When I stood up quickly she did not draw back that half-moon face. I was astraddle of the tea table when I kissed her.

She kept here eyes open. So did I. She looked at me a little surprised, but she didn't pull away. I was shaky at the fingertips. She felt my fingers, trembling like leaves, on her shoulders. At that second she looked hard. I saw the black obsidian points inside her eyes.

I should have used some of that steam to get out of there when I saw that. Some propositions you should not touch off unless you know where everything is going to fall. But I did not leave. I didn't leave because no man could have left at that moment. Then it was her turn. She closed her eyes, and kissed me.

It was over. She looked a little frightened. She was surprised, it seemed, that we were standing there. My legs were still astraddle of the tea tray and her hip was pressing into my hip.

"I don't do that," she said evenly. "I mean I really don't. I'm married and I love my . . ."

She sat down. She looked towards the side door which led to the patio. I was in at the wrong time or had been too impulsive too soon. Even so, she had given me the first installment, but I was all for Cash and Carry, and no

Lay-aways. Oh, she said she didn't do that, but her fingernails on my arm told me she did like it. At the moment she had thought about her husband.

Now it was my turn to say, "I'm sorry", except I did not say it.

I was thinking at that moment of the time when I would pull her middy blouse up over her head and over that half-moon face. I was thinking she would help me all right. They all do, at the right time.

I was thinking that, and I was thinking about her husband. For once and for all I thought I would find out about that one little item. Not so much his name, of course, as the way in which she would tell me. That's how you see your way ahead, or so it seemed at that moment.

"Who is he?" I said, but not loudly. "Maybe you better tell me. Now."

"Kittinger. They call him Kitt."

At first I thought only that her name was Helen Kittinger. Then I placed him. This was Harry Kittinger. He's an Ace, all right. She saw that I knew.

"The detective," she said, and then with a small inflection of pride: "He's Number Two on the Force. He really is."

He was an Ace all right. All the boys around the Slipshod A.C.—that's where I used to work out on the heavy bag—they all knew him. He was an Ace because he had kicked more bums off freight cars in the depression than any railroad dick on the West Coast. That's how he got his start. You know the type—he was handy with transients because they'll never come back. You hope it will happen, that a canned-heat bum will be kicked just once too often, but they never fight back. What was especially bad about Kittinger was that he could be tough and could pass it off as civic duty. She could speak of him with pride, I thought, because from out beyond Larchwood she wouldn't get around to the places to hear what they said. Especially she would not

hear if he did not let her have a car. She had no car. I guess that too was his civic duty.

You will say that I was jealous, that I hated any kind of authority, but I knew Kittinger was getting it. They all do. He got his in cash. He got it from the Syndicate, and the Madames, and the pinball setup; he got it in every way and every day. He got it in plain envelopes, in cash, handed to him. He got it off the sweat and misery of every poisoned doorstep and bedbug mattress and bootlegged jug of whisky in town.

He did not even take his chances for what he got, for he worked in public on those transients who did not even care enough to avoid him. When he got it he was always in private: in a moving automobile, or from some unrecognized man in a dark alley, or from their bag man who always looked the other way when he left it on the taxi seat between them. I knew this because no detective, even the Number One man, ever gets a big house out beyond Larchwood for nothing. He pays for it. Probably with cash. Oh, Kitty-Kat was an Ace all right.

That was all I needed to hear: no plans, no lay-aways.

"I'll be going now," I said. "It's been real nice."

She did not stand up. She did not look at me. She stared down into the empty tea cup from which I had been drinking.

"Next time"—and I twisted it—"use two-dollar balls. Hit me in the head. Between the antlers."

Before she looked up at me I thought she was crying, except there were no tears.

She said there was something. She really had wanted to talk to me about some business and that was why she had . . .

But I pretended not to hear her.

I was busy heading for the door. Fast.

CHAPTER II

THEN THIS GUY Everhardt telephoned. He caught me at Mrs. Beale's just after lunch. He said it was insurance—about money that was no doubt due me. So I went around.

His cubicle was one of a series along the top deck of a redwood glass-and-plaster "office centre," with a place to park your car underneath. He came around the front of his desk very quickly. He gave me the full grip and the big smile. Then we were both seated, on opposite sides of the desk.

He was on the blocky side, with his blond hair in perfect wavelets across the top of his head. In the rain his hair must have turned to close-matted kinks, except with all the pomade his hair would shed even the Oregon rains. He was about thirty-three, the same age as myself. You see his type in the selling game—cut out for physical work, perhaps construction or logging, but had never done any.

I figured Everhardt as an outside man. That is, he did a lot of calls and met a lot of people, a pusher. He let me know in about two minutes that he played out at the country club. In another two minutes he had mentioned by their first names the almost-big men in town.

He was a little go-getter. You bet he belonged to the Junior J.C., and the Junior Boosters, and the Junior Rotary, if there is one. When he had seen enough people and had made enough deals and had a waste basket of the stuff it takes, then he would be a Big Booster and a Big Rotarian. Except

now, at the moment, he didn't have quite enough of the real money it takes.

While he got around to whatever it was, he talked to me with his regular voice and adjusted his tie in the usual way. At the same time he watched me with another pair of eyes that were not Rotarian at all. I suppose Insurance makes anyone that way.

"This injury, Mr. Karney. We want to—"

"Injury?"

"Mrs. Kittinger—er, Helen—reported it. . . . Ah, she said you would explain just how she hurt you?"

I was wondering about that. I got the idea she might have telephoned him about this *after* I left her house. Evenhardt was too anxious to see me. He was leaning across the desk as though he were a doctor about to say the last blood test wasn't very flattering to my girl friends.

That, or he was too anxious to have me sign a claim. To hear him tell it, all the insurance company wanted to do was throw the money around, just line up and show your scars, no investigation, no signatures, just good clean public service. That was fine, except I did not believe it.

I told him what I thought. First, the Flower of Young American Manhood remained unscathed, almost; secondly, it was a mistake; thirdly, I had discussed it with Mrs. Kittinger and I would accept nothing at all. He looked real hurt when I said that.

"It's golfer's liability," he said. "Frankly, we would rather make a reasonable settlement, now, than have you turn up in six months with a clot on the brain and surgery indicated." He smiled. "Just good business."

I said that was true, but I made it a policy never to bother insurance companies.

"Well, now, don't be too sure. We deal in protection for a man's family and his loved ones. A little forethought now and someone very dear may not end up behind the counter of a ten-cent store at twenty dollars a week. I see it every

day. I see women who are really in dire circumstances, Mr. Karney."

I said I had seen a few myself, but he didn't get it.

"You know, Mr. Karney," he said, "it's a pleasure to talk to someone who really does not want a thing that is not honestly his. You would be surprised how many there are who are anxious to get something for nothing."

"I'm not knocking insurance generally and I am not saying this personal liability is the bunk. If I was a golfer and I had an estate, I would carry it too."

"That's the idea," Everhardt said, and reached into his desk for a printed form, something like the State Highway Patrol uses to report an accident. "Now, where were you standing?"

I told him.

"And Mrs. Kittinger said she had driven her ball across the fairway?"

"Into the side pocket," I said, "except lower."

He looked up quickly from the form. "There?"

He pointed at himself behind the desk. Just below the belt buckle.

"There."

Finally he smiled the nicest, kindest smile on the whole west side of town, perhaps even west of the Cascade Range.

"I see why Mrs. Kittinger was very concerned about this claim. She swore me-ha-ha—to secrecy."

"Did she now?"

"Mrs. Kittinger—very understandably, I see—didn't want her husband to find out. I mean, it would be a locker-room joke. Ah . . . where she hit you."

"So she told you on the telephone to take care of it. Quick. She didn't want me to spring this on the Detective?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Mr. Karney. Wouldn't say that."

I said I would sign the claim. I figured maybe ten bucks, or twenty if I had a doctor call back. I said, furthermore,

I wouldn't breathe a word and for him to tell Mrs. Kittinger I appreciated all she had done for me.

He could not get that last part of "all she had done," but I did. I had not forgotten how she forgot herself and her husband for that single moment in the living room, at the tea table, and how her hip had pressed into mine. Oh, she had done something for me, all right, even though I could not admit it to myself. I already wanted her to do just a little bit more.

Except I did not reason it out that way. I only signed the claim.

"Awfully fine people," Everhardt said as he dried the ink of the signature.

"I wouldn't know," I said, but I was going to make a remark about all policemen.

"Oh, Kitt is a dandy fellow. Does a good job on the Force. He's had some hair-raising experiences. Not that he talks about them."

I was going to say I'd just bet he had. And that he shouldn't. Not if he was smart.

"And Helen—Mrs. Kittinger—we see each other at the club all the time. She worries. She really does. She's afraid something will happen to him."

"Tell her not to worry. It won't."

"Confidentially, I think Kitt knows it's dangerous. He's in and out of all kinds of places."

You bet he was. And not on city business either.

Everhardt was leaning across the desk, telling me about the Great Man.

"You wouldn't believe how much insurance he carries . . ."

With a guy like Everhardt, everybody is a customer. He tells you how the big shots do it and you are ashamed not to play in the Big League too. But I wasn't playing.

"I still carry my GI Insurance," I told him.

"Oh, splendid. Good bargain. I still carry mine, of course."

Sometimes with salesmen, I try to get them to rat on the other guy's stuff. I like to watch them struggle against knocking anything, even a sale another operator is cutting them out of, in this case Uncle Sammy. I don't suppose Everhardt even let himself *think* that GI Insurance nipped off a nice market for "free" enterprise. Just the same, I like to see those outside men squirm.

Now he was really confidential. "Would you be surprised to know that Mr. Kittinger carries over fifty thousand dollars in one policy alone?"

"Golly!" I said, and gave him what he wanted to see, the old Uncle Tom head scratch.

"As much as that?"

Then he said good-bye and he saw me out the door. He said I would be "hearing from us." That everything was just dandy. There was a parking lot right down at the foot of the stairs. Since there were only two cars I might have found it myself. But that's an outside man for you.

Only in the car did it hit me. The insurance—one policy over fifty thousand. That would be an accident policy. That meant Kittinger would be loaded: car—collision and that stuff—personal liability, protection against fire, falling aircraft engines, and lots of life insurance. All at once their house and the comfort it represented did not seem attractive. Hard cash also has an architecture that is much in fashion.

For what reason I do not know, I thought of Helen. Those black hard eyes and the moment near the tea table when it seemed that I had awakened something inside her that for a moment she could not control.

I wanted to think she called me up to their home near the butte outside the city limits, only to tell me about a ten-dollar accident claim. At that moment, in my car, I knew there was something else on her mind.

I had felt it that day, in the center of their living room where the black spears held up the curtains. Now, in the Merc, in a vacant parking lot, I saw it clearly, but not in

relation to myself. At that moment I thought I was not involved.

I tried to start the car. The tip of the switch key was trembling so that I could not find the hole.

There are two things about where I live. One is Mrs. Beale, the greatest radio listener of them all. She has an old Sears Roebuck console. The older the tubes get, the closer she puts her ear to the speaker grille. Perhaps the tubes in her ears are also getting old. Anyway, she keeps her ear very close to the speaker.

The second thing is the rain. In the Great Northwest, all during the winter, it rains. It was raining three days later as I sat upstairs looking out the window. I was looking out into the rain on the kind of night where the sidewalks seem to point straight down instead of leading to somewhere.

A little before "The Brighter Side of the News" came on, I heard the telephone. I knew who it was when I heard the ring. Our phone is always mixed in with the static her old console picks up from the bell circuit, but I knew who it was. It is never hard to beat Mrs. Beale to the hall.

"Yah?" I said, as though I were talking to a man. "Yah, I could come over. We could talk about . . . the job."

She told me where she was waiting.

There was a buzz on the wire after she hung up, but I kept right on talking, even louder "Yah, I got tools. I do that kind of work. No, no, no underwater stuff. O.K. Be right over."

When the telephone rang I had been sitting at the window, looking over the window sill and into the rainy darkness. For a moment, sitting there, thinking of her, I had drawn back.

The more I sat there, staring out the window and into the rain, the more I did not like it. After you have drifted away from home because there is not enough in the house for the oldest ones to eat, and when you have gone from hard

rock to construction, and stood on a coral reef up to your armpits, fighting a jack hammer, and have dynamited the reef so the lighters could get in, and when you have been through a winter in Europe during the war, sneaking up on the backside of concrete bunkers to blast them like egg crates, then you get suspicious of something which comes too easy. More than that, you hate to be used.

I thought about her as I looked out the window. She wanted something. Everyone does. Perhaps what she wanted was like the dynamite which fascinated her—dynamite is something which only wrecks; it is a kind of anarchy. Except you are obliged afterwards, always, to construct something. I doubt if she understood this.

Also, with a woman, you must always consider the husband, for there, in him, is her treasure. How could she use me to please her husband? Or—I thought of this—what did Kittinger himself want from me? I tried all the angles. No good.

On the other hand, in the landscape of the night, around the reflected glare of street lights on pavement. I could see this was something she played. I was not of her crowd—whoever they were—so I was fair game. When she hit me with a golf ball, I had the advantage; I forced it in their living room. Now she had an advantage a person in a boarding house never has—a husband. Perhaps this was it, after all. Her own little game.

This was not, however, how her voice sounded on the telephone when she called. She said to me, simply: "Meet me."

Nothing could keep me away. Not away from her.

Helen was in the movie. For a minute I did not see her. I took the aisle she said, near the exit on the left. I did not see her because she came in the opposite end of the aisle. She had been waiting in the shadows in the back until she saw me in place. As she sat down beside me, her

ankle nuzzled over against mine, like a puppy that is building its nest.

I managed to look sideways. I could see nothing but the pale half-moon of her face. She was in Black Watch tartan slacks, with a dark turtleneck sweater. It was high-school stuff, in the Northwest, but on her it seemed better. Her hair was clinging to the side of her head. It rains, I could see, even up in Larchwood. Also, there must be windows up in Larchwood to stare through and out into the darkness. But if you live with Mrs. Beale, you get to thinking it rains harder in the city below. My hand found hers. They got acquainted in the darkness of the theatre.

This wasn't an uptown place, with stars twinkling down from a blue wallboard sky. This was the kind of place where the gilt is carved and woven around the screen, with little wooden angels blowing long wooden trumpets at each other. While our hands became better acquainted, I looked directly ahead at the screen. It was one of those African pictures, with newsreel shots of charging rhinos spliced in between the kissing scenes of the White Hunter and a starlet. She always worried about his health, but she always kicked him out of her tent. Then she would fall out of her hammock at midnight, or something like that.

I wasn't interested in the movie any more than she was. Pretty soon, never having said a word, she got up and went to the exit. At that minute I would have killed anyone who got in my way. I went through the exit after her.

I caught up with her in the alley.

She had a place to go. So we went there. Two coffees was what she ordered, and I tried to make a joke about lemon or sweet tooth, which would she have?

She looked a little startled, as though she had forgotten how I stood up in the middle of their living room, astraddle of the tea table, and kissed her.

Then I said, "Where is your husband?"

"Out of town."

"On pleasure?"

"Sometimes I think so. He's helping the sheriff with an extradition."

"Non-support?" I said, saying the first thing that came into my mind. She didn't take it the way I meant it. We both took a tiny sip of our coffee. She looked across the rim of the cup at me.

"Sorry about the movie. I told Maggie I was going to a movie. She will want to know the plot. I'll tell her how it came out."

"New maid?"

"No, my daughter—er-stepdaughter."

"Old enough for movies? The kind where the hammock dumps over?"

"Nineteen. She's a very nice girl."

Well, we talked about the humidity down here on the flats, and the liquid sunshine that falls out beyond Larchwood. How TV reception was blocked out up in the hills sometimes by low-flying aircraft and how I would run her home in a minute. She didn't say anything for a while. I figure it was her party so I didn't say anything either.

"I'm sorry about Friday," she said finally.

"But not very sorry?"

"A little. I haven't—I mean I *don't* do that. Not since I got married."

"So you came down to tell me."

"Yes, I did."

"To say you're sorry. We've been over that one. Remember?"

"No, I came down to say I remember—"

"So do I. A lot."

"But I really love my husband. He's—"

"He's tough, but has a heart of gold. Is that it?"

"No. He is also brutal. I know something about him. And . . ."

I said nothing. It was her move.

"He's been good to me. You don't know."

"I hurt your feelings, is that it?"

"No, Karney. I couldn't say that."

I put down the coffee cup. I should have put her bus fare on the table. She could have hopped the same bus she caught down to the movie. But I couldn't do it.

"But it is your husband?"

I am dumb, you see. I am so dumb that I figured if *everything* was all right at home, she wouldn't be here. I didn't suspect anything, but that's the only reason they slip out to see the tail-end of a double-z movie. It was as simple as that.

The first time she let it go.

"The claim," she said, to change the subject, "I hope that's right."

I told her I had not heard one way or the other, but that I was sure Everhardt wouldn't turn up as Bobby Shafto; I told her I was sure he wouldn't hold out ten bucks on a working stiff. While I was alive, that is.

She laughed. She said Everhardt was a joke around the club. She said he happened to handle Kitt's insurance, but that she didn't know anything about it except she thought they were simply insurance poor. Kitt was a great one for protection. I guess he thought he needed it.

"If I'm wrong," she went on, "I always try to square things up. Someway."

As all of this came out she really did. She really did square things up, but that comes later.

As it was, she said something just as I looked at the door. Outside under the light was a tall cop, looking down the entrance step, talking to someone. From her side she could not see him. I did not like it.

"Karney?"

"Yes?"

"I was just thinking . . ."

I wondered if she was thinking the same thing I was—about the cop in the door seeing us.

" . . . thinking that— Well, do accidents ever happen? I mean, does dynamite sometimes hurt people?"

"Not if you respect it. When you handle it a lot you soon know exactly what you can do."

"There *are* times when something happens?"

I told her that the Blaster's Handbook pretty well covered the subject. But men get careless. Sometimes you have a misfire—not often—but then you wait the prescribed half hour. Oh, lots of things like that. I told her one that happened once in a thunderstorm.

"Uh huh," was all she said.

Funny question, you think? At the time, no one would have thought so. You would be surprised how many people asked. You will be working close in, perhaps with a steady line of traffic only a few yards away. One of these retired types come over when you are very busy. Pretty soon the old guy says, "Killed anyone lately?" But from Helen, it surprised me a little. I took it, naturally, that she wanted nothing to happen to me.

"I was thinking of the movies. Or a mystery book. That would make a good mystery. Now wouldn't it? I mean the detective could find—"

"Oh, sure," I said and rode along with the gag. "Mike Hammer could use nitro and then he could say, 'It was greasy, baby.' "

"Or a movie," Helen said, "I think it would make a good movie."

"Oh, sure," I said. "With Granger Twist and Scarlet O'Plaid. They could blow up Boggart, except he gets away. The Hump would like that one, huh?"

She didn't go along with the fast stuff. She could be pretty dignified. I guess she thought I was making fun of her ideas. I guess maybe she had the kind of daydreams a lot

of women do—about movies, or writing a mystery book. I can understand that.

Nothing happened for a while. When she picked it up again it was as if she was only making conversation. I know she didn't mean it like it sounded.

"To square things up," she said. "Maybe you would be interested . . . in something."

"Like what?"

"We are going to build a pool. In our back yard."

"Would that be in back of the patio?"

"Why, yes. How did you know?"

"That's where all the stumps are. On the butte."

"You are smart."

"Oh, sure, I come up—and you and I shoot them. You like that stuff, don't you?"

"No. You and Mr. Kittinger could do it. We have to clear the ground."

She looked straight at me. I think that was the first time I ever saw the challenge in her eyes, but I did not know what it meant. I thought she was angry with me. Angry at what I'd said about her liking to shoot the stuff. The way she saw it, I guess, here she was, trying to give me a break, and I was showing her the back of my hand. Something like that.

She started to gather up her purse and her dark navy gloves. She was even fumbling with the check. It was still her party. She had tried to do me a favor, but I'd played it wrong.

As she stood up I reached over under the table and swept her feet out from under her. She sat back down, hard.

"I just want you to know, Helen, I am not crazy. Maybe you have been thinking about this. Anyway, baby, I'm not your man.

"Three things I don't do"—and I took care that the expression on my face did not change—"I don't take dope, I don't kill men, and I don't go—"

She was furious. "I will not . . . stay . . . here." Her words were spaced with cold precision.

I felt very bad. I wished I hadn't acted so tough.

"I will not hear such terrible things."

"O.K., but—"

"I'm going."

She did. Very quickly. Out the side door.

She left me holding the check.

CHAPTER III

So I DREW BACK, that time, from the place where you fall.

I really guessed what was in her mind, what she could not admit to herself. I confronted her with her own secret, innermost desire.

For that I was crude, for I told her directly I was not the man for the job. Therefore I was only what I seemed, to her: a better than average blaster with a short fuse on his temper and long dry spell in his heart.

So you think that she simply walked out of the restaurant where bus jocks and City Transit stable boys drink the coffee, but bring their own sandwiches. You think she went back to the Country Club and there she sat, happy ever after, drinking cokes and telling the girls what a quaint person she'd met. But she didn't. In a week she called me again. We met in another movie.

The next time I called her.

I treated her bad, like you would treat a whistle punk in the woods on a logging operation. Then I treated her

her like a floosie. She came right back for more. In the end I didn't want to get rid of her, and sometimes we saw almost half a movie. That was all. I couldn't touch her. I tried all the ways.

At that time she was a talker. She sometimes talked about the swimming pool. How he would have to get all the land cleared. She had plans for a big kidney-shaped tub, with ledges of rock. She kept saying I must help him take out all those stumps. I kept saying, "No, thanks."

You wouldn't know, so her plans may sound very natural. An acreage in back, cut years ago and with stumps taller than a man, and she wants the big pool. She wants the pool and her husband wants a patio near it. He wants to put on a chef's apron and canvas gloves so he can cook a big steak for his chums. Sure, sounds fine.

But when you have been around and when you have been in and out of contracting, you know it isn't right. I mean it isn't natural she would handle this. These jobs come through an outfit like Hickey Associates. Maybe they have a blanket permit for blasting inside the city limits, and they keep a blaster with a ticket, like me, to handle the work. Hickey has three magazine sheds and the Chev pickup, wth boxes welded on top of the fenders—one for power and one for caps. It's all legal. Outside the city we might cut a few corners.

So Hickey holds the papers, for insurance and so on. Maybe he also has a dozer. Someone else, perhaps a swimming pool outfit with an Esther Willams franchise, gets the contract for the pool. A regular stone mason gets the ledges, and so on. Somewhere around the deal maybe there is a limp-wrist architect and you may work partly through him. If you have been around, you know these things; from her, secret-like, it was not natural.

Usually I would say, "Well, it sounds real good. I will think about it."

"Oh, do, Clifford. Kinda for me?"

We would be out in my car, then, and she would kiss me. That was all she would do.

Oh, I got the big picture all right. The way it shaped up in her mind, Kittinger would be out there in the yard, working beside me. He would like to see the stuff go off, too. He was like the little boys who are fascinated by the fireworks on the Fourth of July. He would be after me to put in just a little bigger charge.

Kittinger—a real helpmate. He would be beside me, in the evening. He would have a mattox and a shovel, and his billy club and lead pipe and handcuffs, and the right-sized rubber hose. I had asked around and it was easy to find out about him. Before he was a railroad dick, dumping bums off the reefers in the dead of winter, he'd been a deputy sheriff in Michigan. He was always on the right side.

No one seemed to know how he got on the Force, but he must have caught someone in the wrong bed or maybe he was in bed at the time himself. He had gone up fast. Some told me this was because of his past experience in the enforcement game. I preferred to think it was something else. In no time at all he was Number Two Man on the Force.

Now, the way the blueprint was lining up, he would be a different character. A country gentlemen. He would be taking off a little weight, lugging mats or shoveling dirt to bank the shot. Helen would be watching from her kitchen window, hoping something would happen. We would be two men, with explosives around. When you get right down to it you don't have to be too smart for most of them. For women, I mean.

One night when we were parked out near the edge of a ravine, on a little side road, she began it.

"He's been very nice to me. Kitt is a good husband. He is terribly brave and efficient. But . . ."

I told her again what I had said once before. I did not like this beating around the herring barrel. I wasn't having

any. Somethings—like I said—I won't do. So I put it on the line.

"You want to kill him," I said. "Don't you?"

"How could you say such a thing!"

"Because it's true. You ought to be told what you are really thinking."

She said I was all wrong, but she didn't tear herself from my arms. She said she did love me. Loved me more than anyone else in the world. But I had misunderstood her. I was never to mention it again. Not ever again.

"But Helen, because I know what you're wishing, it doesn't mean you won't do it." I didn't really believe that, either. She wasn't the type.

She laughed and said I knew very well how I fascinated her (yes, that was the word she used all right). If you don't think that one will work, get a woman to say it to you when no one else has ever said it exactly like that before. I mean, with her hands rubbing the back of your shoulders very hard, and her pressing against you.

"But, Karney," she said, as though surprised, "why should you talk like that? It's crazy."

"No. It's murder."

She had not thought of that word before. I told her how it was in a courtroom and about the chair. She did not answer. Then she said, "There is money. We could go away. Together."

She might get someone else who might want to do that, was all that I said.

She laughed strangely then, a laugh much too loud and prolonged. "Oh, Clifford, it is crazy," she said. "The way you talk."

"But you really want to do it, don't you?"

Then she laughed that one off too. "You're too good. And so is he."

She kissed me again, very much like a promise.

This went on until fall came like a snowdrift of smoke above the city. Deer season opened and all the deer hunters in the Northwest—every male over fourteen and under ninety-nine—took to the woods to shoot at each other through the trees. I did not go deer hunting opening day, or the week after, or the week after that. It was nothing complicated. Since the war, deer hunting did not appeal to me. I had been missed all through the winters in Alsace by mortars and then missed by the civilians dressed like soldiers all through Germany. After that it might be my luck to stop the big one in some forgotten ravine on opening day.

If anything, my mind was on their rambling house, beyond Larchwood. The living rooms, the garages butting out into the cut, and in my imagination the glitter of the completed swimming pool on the heights above. No doubt I secretly wanted to be a part of that, to be comfortable and accepted at last, to sit in the big living room with an air conditioner whispering softly somewhere back in a utility room that no one could see. So I stayed at Mrs. Beale's and thought about that, and I did not go deer hunting opening day.

I worked off and on, for the Brethren Hickey, but mostly for the old man. When it got too miserable I began to think about the South, and the desert.

A lot of people do that in the Northwest. You see them down there—retired school teachers and preachers too old to talk for a living, doing water colors. They go to the desert for the sky and the colors. Or you see Mr. and Mrs. Money bags loafing at Palm Springs or trying to get a little action at Del Mar. The heavies ride on down in an El Dorado, with the top down and with power even in their steering. For them, travel is no work at all. The others ride down on a stinking bus. As a group they were either high-minded or with no mind at all. At least I realized I was miserable.

Late one afternoon I got up off the bed by the window

and put my sport coats and my slacks in a black tin suitcase. Mrs. Beale was glad when she saw me coming down the stairs for she always encouraged me to go. She thought I should get away and then perhaps I would meet some nice girl and would want to settle down. She always knew, she said, that I would find the right one some day, just for me. When I told Mrs. Beale I'd be coming back, she said she'd hold my room. She wouldn't take money for it, of course; she only wanted me to have that much more for a good time.

So I went down South for a few months. I worked a little and lay in the sun as much as I could. The pension checks always caught up with me and the sun was very good for the skin grafts on my legs.

Towards the last, I spent all my time in the sun. I lay staring at a swimming pool, the desert hot and white all around. There is something purifying about the sun on the desert. It burns away the canker which grows inside you when you live too long in the rain.

This will sound funny, but the two months in the sun really did burn away whatever was inside me. There in the depths of the pool, where the stripes of tar keep the tiles from leaking, I saw what it might be like—something dark and writhing and evil. I saw this in two ways. I saw the suffocation that would come over me if I killed a man again, for since all those concrete bunkers where they'd screamed, I was through with that. Also, perhaps from the kind of caution that handling explosives brings to a man, I saw that no one could get away with it. No plan was complete enough or clever enough to bring it off.

In war, no one cared, but in a city, even at night, things were different. This was only a crazy woman's crazy dream, and it was not for me. These things I saw in the bottom of a sunlit pool.

Besides, it was a fact that the police love their brothers, possibly because no one else can. They would stick together,

like Masons. Perhaps it is part of their code; more likely they are protecting themselves by making it especially hard on anyone dumb enough to pick on a uniform or a badge. It is a part of the protective coloration that all authoritarian, official things generate, as an animal may generate a new skin in the spring.

When everything inside me was finally burned away by the hot, indifferent sun, I knew I didn't want to die. I had been through that feeling in the war, and once you have been pinned down in a field, and have dug the biggest hole that you can with your nose, and when you have slobbered into the wet clay, you never can forget how much you really want to live. That was me: I wanted to live.

Consequently, I did not want to make anyone else die. I saw that what had been going on was all a mistake. I had been giving Helen the rough, tough movie act, the make-believe, and I know in my bones she knew it too. For the excitement, it seemed to me, she had played along. Besides, what was wrong with talk? Like her golf, this was a game she played.

Nor did I come to all of this in one afternoon, or in one evening, or in one night of lying on my back staring at the board ceilings of a dozen motel rooms. I was down South three months. It took nearly all of that time, but at last I whipped it. Finally, when I had it all figured out and when the sun burned away whatever was inside me, I was ready to go back once more to Oregon.

I told all of this to Helen when I got back. She laughed and said of course she understood. Oh, I was perfectly right. Really, *should* we see each other again?

And that is how I drew back from the edge. I saved myself by the trip, during the winter months, to the South. I avoided the dark place of suffocation where you may sometimes fall.

And that happens, too.

CHAPTER IV

"ANOTHER THING I'd say, Mr. Kittinger, is about storage. I can't bring explosive just any time. There was a case up in Washington where young boys got into some stuff that was left in a garage and . . ."

Normally, I keep my mouth shut. I let someone like Kittinger ask the questions. If he balls it up, it's his responsibility.

"Responsibility" is a word they use a lot around army headquarters and police headquarters. They say it often but they also run out when the boom comes down. I like to keep reminding all those Guardians of the Republic, army or police, just where the responsibility lies.

Kittinger listened, but his answer was not addressed to me. "We can handle that, can't we, Hick?" he said.

We were sitting around the empty fireplace, where the tapa cloth drapes hung from the black spears above the windows. Kittinger was giving me the hired-hand act—not that I minded. Helen was fluttering around with the tea pot or standing with one hand on the casement of the door. Maggie, their daughter, was there. She was reading a book over in the corner. She was by then just past nineteen. Very nice.

"Yes, we can," Hickey the Elder said. We can set out a magazine."

That was another thing. For eighteen stumps, by count, you wouldn't have a magazine and a permit and all. But

this was about ten feet beyond the city line, and Hickey and Kitt were thinking about the big steak.

So it seemed to me that things were working out in some kind of a plan, but to no plan of my own. Helen said nothing. She had Kittinger lined up. He would say what needed to be said. She got her way merely by passing the sugar.

I had to hand it to her. When I entered and was introduced, she gave me as cold a hand as I have ever taken. As for her face, she had turned off all the juice there, too.

"There won't be a drainage problem. Not at all," Hickey was saying, and lit up another one of Kittinger's cigars.

"Helen wants it. So I'm for it," Kittinger said. "Besides, we can work this out so I won't have a rigid schedule—if Karney is willing. I'll have some fun out of it. You know?"

Kittinger was sitting with his back to the tapa cloth drapes. He was in one of these boomerang-shaped TV chairs that are designed to save your heart while you tank up on the evening popcorn. He leaned back, throwing fist-sized balls of cigar smoke at the top of the room. It was my first look at the Great Man. The flesh on the top of his head was pushed up through the hair around his ears.

Affable, I suppose the newspapers would have called him if they had ever done a feature story on the efficiency of the Detectives of the City. He would rock forward in his boomerang-covered TV chair and say something; then he would rock back, and the smoke would careen off the ceiling. Affable, that was it. He never forgot a name; he was the kind who smiled when you got up off the floor of a boxcar so he could give you the wringer once again.

"I'll have some fun out of it," he said for the sixth time. "Yes, I will."

This was a couple of weeks after I got back. Helen and I had seen each other only once since then. When I'd told her what I'd been thinking, she'd said, "Oh, it, was only a game." It was as though she had read my mind. She said that even before I left for the South she had forgotten all

that silly idea. Knowing I agreed made her feel better. So we got that straight, once and form all.

Then, only about a week after our date, the Chinaman at the timekeeper's shack handed me a piece of his rice paper. It was a police number. Kittinger was waiting in his nest at Headquarters. He wanted me up to the house. Talk over a little proposition. Wanted to make a swimming pool. Part time. Interested?

I told him yes, except I did not do contracting any more. I asked him if Mr. Hickey wouldn't be a good one to ask. In fact, I said I'd speak to him in about five minutes. He was coming in off a job. Couldn't Mr. Hickey and I come up to the house together? Kittinger said that would be just fine.

That was why we were sitting in the living room, hearing all about it. All about the place Helen had "forgotten!" I was going to do the stumps but it was Hickey's contract.

This is where habit kills you, in a way. Because Hickey held the paper on this job, so to speak, I did not fully realize this was a pattern of events, a kind of general situation, that Helen and I really had often talked about.

I must have been lulled into a kind of sleep, the kind that a regular pay check induces. My trip, it seems, had not changed anything after all.

We would be working together, Kittinger and I, in the evening. He would be there with his long-handled shovel and I would come around to shoot the stuff. He would take off a little weight and would save a little money. We would be there together, with explosives all around. Helen would be watching us from her kitchen window. There was a name for what might happen.

I didn't want to think about it. It was too much for me.

I was ready to go, but Hickey said he'd stay on and he and Kitt would thrash out the details. Besides, he added, there was some other business too. I'll bet there was—with a bottle.

When I turned to leave, I found I had a passenger. Maggie. She had to ride down to a movie.

"Sometimes I go to the movies," I said, making sure Helen could hear me. She didn't bat an eye.

After Maggie got her sweater buttoned, and a coat under her arm, we went out to the car. She was nice. When we were on the road and rolling down around the curves, I saw she had some too. She was so nice, you thought of her as though she were your younger sister. By the time we were halfway downtown she was chatting away. It seemed she was pretty mature for her age, and was a sophomore at the U. She took a cigarette from the package I held out.

"If I tell you something, Mr. Karney, will you not tell daddy?"

I said I wouldn't.

"I'm not going to a movie."

"I don't blame you."

"Some people I know would."

"Like your mother?"

"Oh, no. My real mother wouldn't. But I never knew her. Helen is my stepmother. You don't *know* her!"

I said that was probably right, and that I wouldn't tell a soul.

"I'm meeting him at the drug store. Would you . . . ?"

"Oh, sure. I'll run you both on downtown."

"That's really sweet of you. It's no bother?"

I stopped and she ran into some place called the Chock-Sweet or The Bowl—not really a drugstore. Pretty soon she came back out with this young, sheepish guy.

"This is Bobby Richman," she said in such a way I knew where he stood. She paused a minute until he had slammed the door. "He's a philosopher. He's a *graduate* student."

He grinned but he didn't deny it.

"Any advice for the lovelorn?" I said. "Or is that the next lesson?"

"I am a logical positivist," he said, and that stopped me.

They didn't know where they wanted to get off. Maggie said something about the library. Or would this Bobby like to do the shop windows?

"So that's why no movie?" I told her. "And no bus fare either?"

She wouldn't deny it.

"Well, you know how it is with us philosophers," Richman said. "Wealth all tied up in brains . . . yeah."

Finally she said she would consider two bucks as a loan. But I said forget it, that I'd overcharge her father some way on the pool. Just leave it to me.

She got a kick out of that.

Finally I left them at the front of an off-beat movie house that was showing *The Beggar's Opera.*

She turned around after her boy friend had gotten out.

"You're sweet," she said. "I really mean it."

She did mean it, too.

I found that out later.

"Now for stuff like this, Mr. Kittinger, what you want is the radial roots. You see how a very big root makes a saddle? The stuff wants to be down, and under. The idea is to keep the expansion directly contained. The higher you bank them, the better."

We were working on the first clearings for the pool. Hickey Associates wasn't really doing much so he had the boys spot a magazine: a shed with boiler plate at the door, lined with inch board and with sand between the studs. It was not far from the garage, towards the hill.

Maggie was there, too. If I were hanging around the back door for a glass of water, she would always put some ice cubes in it and would wink at me from behind the screen door. Maggie was all right, except she had Bobby-boy on the mind, I suppose.

All that showed of Helen was a face at the window, and that only when I touched off a shot. The more we worked,

the more Kittinger liked the explosives. I showed him how to spring a stump with a two-inch fuse. Illegal as hell, but this was outside the city. The stuff gets you, all right. It's as though you have power suddenly resting in your hands, waiting to do anything you may direct. Also, there is the delay. In the moment before you press down the notched shaft of your blasting machine, an old Number Three, something happens inside you spine. Kitt liked that part, I think.

"Another thing," I told him that afternoon, "you can do stuff with explosives that sounds impossible."

I told him about the "Iron Man" stunt. The guy digs a trench out in front of the grandstand. He wears a crash helmet with chin straps and ear plugs. The rest of the costume depends. The one I knew wore white mechanic's overalls with enough old newspaper mats inside to keep off the singes. Over him they put boxes, always crates with open slats. In the grandstand, the drums roll off and his helper sets off six sticks, resting on his chest. Most of the sticks are dummy, naturally, but the lettuce crates blow sky high. Then the "Iron Man" gets up and acts groggy. The explosive arc goes *up*. All the Iron Man gets is a kick in the chest. Like being tackled very hard.

"Yes, tackled by a Brahmin bull," Kittinger said. "What won't they do for a hundred bucks?"

I didn't have the heart to tell him the guy I worked with got thirty-five. And bad ears, as a bonus.

The stump farm was back of the house on the upper slope. The butte had been logged off and then burned over one summer when the humidity was down. The builder for the house had carved out a kind of shelf and the house rested on that, overlooking the valley to the north. Erosion made some of the old snags seem unnaturally high out of the ground. But don't think those big Douglas Fir roots didn't go deep into the hard pan. With a couple of good shots, though, you could split them so they would burn, or you could roll the stumps where you wanted them. I was using

lots of matting, old rubber tires cut up and woven together.

"They are mistaken," Kittinger said. He liked to get on the subject of crime. I had to hand it to him. He didn't miss a chance to give his message to a private citizen like myself.

"I mean criminals and crime. Their kind of work takes a professional attitude. They can never realize that. Ninety percent of the criminals, for example, never hear a criminal proceeding before they are in court themselves. That's why they don't realize how identification can hang them. Maybe a passerby sees the crime. The next thing you know, the identification is made in court. It's a sure element for conviction."

"I'll watch that," I said.

"Of course we catch them," he said as though he were losing patience with everyone who broke any law of the land, "because we're trained to do so. The professionals, I suppose, we never catch."

He joined me then for the business at hand. "Now *this* looks simple," he said.

It is simple, I guess. A child can set the stuff off. There are cases in point where they have. All my life I have worked with this stuff—in hard-rock mining with my father, and on the line island jobs at Palmyra and Johnson before the war. I have worked underwater and in ice jams, and once when a contractor promised not to use regular dynamites (they wanted it to be a wrecking bar job) we kicked down an old factory with black powder. Well, the city fathers screamed on that one.

I've dug and tamped and blasted and razed and split the earth from the Panhandle to Kodiak and from coral reefs under the sea—to let barges in—right on up to topping Douglas firs. I handle it with care. With respect. It's not how much you set off, but where; it's not what goes up, but where it comes down. I am careful because I am afraid. I'm scared to death whenever I pick up one of those smooth waxy cylinders. I have reason to be afraid. But I always act casual

—all the guys who work with the stuff do. But I know this: the good ones are afraid.

"Put in a few more," Kittinger was saying. "Make it a good 'un."

That was at six minutes after five.

Naturally, I was using waterproof cable. Lots of it, and a Number Three machine. In the firing box there is a magneto. The notches on the handle turn a pinion gear on the mag. You slam down the plunger to fire. The juice gigs the detonators. And that's it, Jocko.

But don't worry, I never get the three things, the charge and the cable and the firing battery, in one sequence. Not until the last moment, and only after I get a twenty-five check on the galvanometer. That part is deep habit, the kind of habit that makes you live, if you know what I mean.

I stuffed just sixty of twenty per cent stumping powder into the gopher hole. The wire was stretched from the stump, clear down the hill. The squid box, which is what a guy I once knew at Palmyra called it, was still in the magazine. The door to the shed was unlocked and the padlock was hanging unlocked on the hasp. The key was in my pocket.

I finished the taping with the black friction tape and I did the hookup. Kittinger was saying again, "Make it a good 'un."

I remember exactly what I was going to say. I was going to say, "This will do the job."

But I never said it.

Helen was out on the cement slab between the back door and the breezeway to the garages.

"Yoo hoo!" she called, the way a woman will who has no idea how far her voice will carry. "Yoo hoo!" She was standing there in a Black Watch plaid skirt and a black sweater, waving a white tea towel, flagging us in.

"Looks like something's up," Kittinger said.

That was about his speed.

She had the sandwiches laid out on the dinette. "Coffee break," she said.

We had been working too hard, she said. She had been watching us, and we should just sit right down. Kitt was working too, too hard, that's what he was. There was just no sense in it.

Old Kitt ate it up. I mean that "tired" business. He rolled his head over to one side and rolled his eyes up in his head towards her and said something about "Poppa's not tired tonight," or something like that.

She pulled away from his hand when he tried to grab her apron strings. I figured he also pinched waitresses. You know that stiff, crabwise little motion some men have with their hands—the motion that always comes at the wrong time? That was him.

Helen was sitting across the table from me. Everything was nice. She could bring a kind of decorum even to a half dozen sandwiches. Yet the minute we were in the dark, or were parked in a car, or Kittinger was away on some kind of police work, she was a different, a smoldering volcano of a woman. Looking at her now, the decorous Helen across from me, and recalling the woman she had been when we were alone, I found myself suddenly wondering how someone who was young and innocent and pretty was getting along. That would be Maggie.

"How is she, anyway?" I heard myself asking. "In school, that is."

"In school," Kittinger said, "terrible. Terrible."

"Well, if you would listen to me," Helen said. "You think I am not exactly like her mother, but who was it who really raised her, loved her? Oh, I'd stop it, all right."

They went at it. Right there over the sandwiches. I have never seen anyone change so quickly. Helen was a real tiger, right after her Kitt-Kat's scalp, what there was left of it. He was snaffing and saying Maggie was a good girl. And so on and so on.

Helen wouldn't have that. I myself didn't care about it. I thought what a hell it must be for Maggie to live in.

"She's been sneaking off to see a man," Helen said, just to fill me in. "We know who he is."

"I had the boys get a line on him," Kittinger the sleuth said. "He's all right."

"He is, is he? He's a *man,* isn't he?"

The way she said that was like opening a little door through which you see something very frightening.

"It's not that he's a graduate student," Kittinger said.

I could see that, all right. The real thing was something else that was being kept from me. It was something Helen knew. Something that frightened her. That, or she was the world's most jealous woman.

"Nope," I said, when she turned quickly and asked me. "Never seen him around."

I was lying just to keep out of the family quarrel. I'd seen Maggie and Richman after the first time. Once they'd brought back the two bucks, just as though they were paying off the mortagage on the old folks' ranch. Once Maggie had come out back of the house to sit and talk.

The telephone rang. I was glad of that. For a minute it looked as though I would have to stay on until one party or the other fell asleep. The call was for Kittinger. He went back to his "study" in the rear of the house. Helen and I were together, alone, for the first time in three weeks. That is a long time.

Like a dark-pelted, unleashed animal, she stepped up to me. I was standing then, too. Before I knew what was in her eyes, she crushed my mouth into her lips. In the rush to be at my lips, she twisted me backwards a step, my back against the kitchen drawers. Fiercely, she mortised her leg, her thigh and her shoulder into every curve of my body. To breathe, I turned my head only a little sideways. She was whispering into my ear, *"You . . . won't . . . desert . . . me. Say you won't, my man, my man, my man."*

She could get the rhythm of all the bedrooms in the world in her voice.

I didn't have to answer her. I grabbed her thigh, strained and tense beneath the skirt. I put my mark on her, in purple, through the cloth.

Sure, I should have stayed when he came back. I should have gone up the hill. There was dynamite lying in the stump. The storage shed was not locked. But what would you have done when Kittinger came in and said it was six, almost? Take off, he said. He would be glad to put the stuff away, he said. No bother at all.

You can see how I wanted to get out of there. I was afraid he might see how it was, in his own kitchen. Suppose I hadn't heard him coming from the back part of the house, from his study? You bet I tossed him the padlock key and got out of there. Anyone would.

I've wished, though, a thousand times I had waited. Perhaps two minutes. I should have at least done the workmanlike thing. I should have at least taken away the wire, or I should have at least snapped the padlock on Hickey's magazine shack before I climbed in my automobile. But I didn't do that. I was too glad to leave. I drove off down the valley. Much too fast. But not scared.

CHAPTER V

SHE WAS IN a white skirt. That's why I saw her. She was on the sidewalk, a block this side of the bus turn-around at the limits. She wasn't walking fast, either. She was staring at

the ground, carrying some private burden up the half-mile slope that twists around to their house. I slewed around where the trolley buses turn, and drew up alongside her. It was Maggie.

"Ride?"

She said no and kept on walking. Then she remembered the voice and looked up. When she saw who it was she smiled and got in.

"Oh, Clifford," she said, "I just don't know if I want to go up there or not."

She was crying. There is only one thing I know about woman for sure—when they are crying, don't ask why. Don't worry, they want to tell you. When the time comes.

"We could cruise around," I said. "How's for that confectionary?"

"You are sweet. You really are. You wouldn't mind?"

But when we got there, she didn't want to get out. She said she didn't feel up to it. And besides, the high school kids hung out there and she was past that stage. She supposed that she should go home after all.

I didn't even turn off the engine. We turned around and headed back up the hill towards her place.

"It's Bob. Bob Richman."

She was going to tell me. I didn't say anything.

"I've seen him. He's told me some awful things about dad. But it's *not* just daddy. You can't change a city."

"Is it true," I said. "These 'things'?"

"We do live well."

"Then it might be so?"

I didn't want to stir up trouble between her and her father. There was enough trouble up there already. On the other hand, she was old enough to know a few things they don't talk about in college.

"But the house and things," she said. "Some of it was my real mother's.'

"So it is partly yours?"

"My real mother—she had insurance. Quite a bit of insurance. Father got that. Afterwards Helen stayed on with us. They got married."

I didn't say anything.

"The pool is something daddy wants partly because he thinks that's the way my real mother would have wanted it. But *not from graft!*"

Maggie certainly had a different version of old Kittinger than either the pool-room boys or Helen. For Maggie, he was not a bad guy. He was a victim of circumstances which began with the sudden death of his first wife. That wife's insurance made all the difference. He could afford to be honest. The way Maggie said it, I wanted to believe in Kittinger, just a little. Maggie was that kind of a girl. She changed your mind about things.

"Besides, Bobby says I'm an idealist."

"Aren't you? Don't you want everything okay?"

"Yes, I do. No, that's not what— Oh, I don't know."

Then I told her how nice she was. How smart she was. How Bob was just a young guy that was crazy about her, too. I told her I could see that and not to worry. If she needed any help, why, I was always around.

"Oh, Cliff," she said, "You understand everything. It's nice to talk to you. I mean, you have been around and—"

"And?"

"I mean, you're nice. I could . . ." Her voice trailed off. That was all she said.

We were at their driveway. I did not want her to say anything else just then. I knew I wanted her feelings about me to be vague because then I would put my own construction on them. If she went farther she would spoil all of that. She would say, finally, I was like a big brother to her. I couldn't bear to hear that because every time I thought of her and me I came back to the same thing—she was only nineteen and I was thirty-three. Just thirty-three, and soon she would be twenty. For a few weeks there would be only thirteen

years difference. But thirteen was all I could squeeze it, no matter how I changed things around in my own mind.

We stopped at the foot of their driveway. For one tartan-plaid, black-haired reason, I did not want to go up to the garage.

"This will be fine," she said. "Thanks just loads. I really mean that."

Up on the hill Kitt was moving among the stumps. The sun was down pretty far now, but I knew the Hawaiian sport shirt he had been wearing. While she got out, I watched him through the door frame of the car. He was bending over, his face very near the ground, as though looking closely at the footprint of some strange animal he had never seen before.

I turned the car and drifted down the hill for the second time, wondering if Maggie had revealed the truth to me about her and her father and their past life.

Helen had never said anything at all about the first Mrs. Kittinger. That was natural. Could it be some of Maggie's inheritance that went for the heavy insurance policies that Everhardt talked about? And could it be that Helen, for her cold decorum, could never rid herself of the image of the first Mrs. Kittinger? Was that the thing she had been keeping from me? Was she reminded of this every morning when she awoke and found herself living on the bounty of a woman she was powerless to attack, because no matter what the first Mrs. Kittinger's faults may have been, now only her virtues and her money haunted the house where the garages butted up against the stump farm?

I got in at ten-thirty. I thought Mrs. Beale was listening to "Double Your Money" and was all set for "Sandy and Sally." She was in her customary chair, with her head down. But the radio was not on.

"Where did you eat?" she said.

I told her I hadn't eaten anything.

"Then you went to a movie?"

I told her I had been drifting around in the car. I drove up the Valley and south. I didn't tell her I had been thinking about me and Helen. And also about Maggie.

"I'll bet you didn't see a single soul. Did you buy gasoline?"

I told her I hadn't even stopped, though I was pretty sure where I had been.

She had never spoken to me that way before. When an older woman who has always been more or less like a mother to you suddenly gets hard and terse, there is something frightening about it.

"I'll tell you where you were," she said. "I'll tell you. You were here until nine o'clock. Then at nine one-and-one-half, you were right there, with one foot on the steps, going up to your room. You played *Some of these Days* and a Glenn Miller record. I heard you. Now go up there and put the Miller record on the phonograph. Actually, lie down in the bed. Sleep in it for the hardest, longest ten seconds of your life. Then get back here. Now run."

I ran. When I got back, she was in the kitchen. The telephone was off the hook. She motioned to the telephone. "Just leave it that way."

"You drink this coffee, Clifford. I want to tell you something. You think you know all about me. I'm an old cluck that listens all the time to a lousy radio. An old woman. Yes."

"Mrs. Beale, I never said that. You've been better to me than anyone in my whole life. Why, you're like—"

"Like a mother," she said as though weary. "That's why we are going to do this job. Right now."

I nodded.

"You never asked about Mr. Beale. Well, he was a con. A convict. He did three years and a day; ten years and two days; and was up for the rest of it. For life. Finally another convict stabbed him in the mess hall.

"That's why I *know you were here tonight.* I know how

they are going to ask you questions. You had better have an absolutely airtight, not minute-by-minute but second-by-second story. Of course, I'll say the same thing. I'll say exactly what you are going to memorize now. At seven-thirty, the Ronnie Parks show. Here's a joke you remember. Now who was the sponsor?"

I told her. Finally I had all the programs down perfect. In fact, I believed it myself. I really had been with Mrs. Beale all the time. I had come straight back down the hill. I had come home. We listened straight through. Now we were having coffee and a bologna sandwich because I felt hungry.

"I'll go get a paper," I said. "We can read about it."

"Like hell," she said, and looked at me as though her face were carved of the same kind of granite they must use on prison walls. I guess she had lived outside those walls, keeping regular visiting hours long enough to know what they looked like.

"You stay here. It was on the radio."

I told her I appreciated what she was trying to do for me. Since the exact time of his death wasn't yet released, I had to be covered. I hoped she wasn't taking too much of a chance.

"You think I like the police? Now you just listen to an old woman. . ."

Finally she ran down. She knew all there was to know about police methods and penal institutions and the other side of the law. Finally I asked her about her husband.

"Him framed?" she said. "Like hell. He liked armed robbery. He got caught. Often he didn't, but usually, when it counted, he did. Between you and me, he was a little dumb. But that's past. That's why I moved out here from around Joliet. Isn't this about as far as you can get from Joliet?"

The next morning I went out and got a paper.

There it was:

CITY DETECTIVE BLAST VICTIM

Suburban Clearing Project Fatal to Longtime Plainclothes Man

A gaping hole in the hillside where he had apparently been attempting to blow out a stump in a "do-it-yourself" project for a family swimming pool, marked the death site of Harry (Kitt) Kittinger, a member of the City Police Force for many years.

The rest was the usual stuff—suicide ruled out . . . accidental death indicated . . . police were investigating. Then biographical data, kin, clubs and lodges, highlights of his career.

That same morning they called me.

As it turned out, Hickey came around. He took me down to the police station with him. He said they just wanted to talk to us. It was routine. He kept hauling at his collar and looking over at me.

I was thinking about Maggie.

Then I thought of Helen, and all the things we had talked about and all the things we had agreed to forget. Now they had happened. I felt like a rabbit must feel the second it realizes that the heavy, crushing weight that just broke its spine was a deadfall. That the hunter, whoever he is, will be there in just a minute—if the dogs don't get there first.

All headquarters smell of creosote. This one was very well lighted. There were safety posters about automobile wrecks tacked up around the walls. Someone told Hickey good morning in a low voice. Everyone, it seemed, was shocked. It seemed that the chief himself would talk with Hickey in the private office. Just to get what they called the background.

Then somebody stabbed a finger at me.

"You," he said, "come along into the back room."

CHAPTER VI

YOU DON'T FORGET the details. The corridors are well worn by all the other feet that have followed the stripes on a sergeant's arm into all those small back rooms. At a desk the officers took off their guns. After they took out the clips, the girl put their guns in a rack. The officers put the loose bullets in their pockets like small change. They patted me under the arms and we walked back into what was left of the old city jail. There was no one at all in the cells, but the officers still parked their guns outside. Regulations.

I thought it would be a small iron desk and three iron chairs, and a solid iron door that has no window at all. In the movies a cocked forty-five is on the desk between the policeman and the one they are going to work over. That would be me. But this police sergeant did not kick me as we walked through the door. He only said something about have-a-seat and he introduced himself and we shook hands. His name was Clifford too.

Once this back room was for the police matrons. They ducked in for a smoke. The furniture was wicker, two parlor chairs, a lounge, and a cute ivory desk with a pinup shade. At the windows were draw curtains with ruffles. There was a scruffy rug on the floor and over in the corner a bridge table, with one leg bent under. Since there had never been a door, the second officer pulled a curtain that hung on a wire across the entrance. Except for the odor of face powder and creosote, it might have been the parlor at Mrs. Beale's.

The sergeant sat down at the little ivory desk and stretched his feet through to the other side. He fooled around with a ballpoint pen, trying to get it to write. No one said anything.

In a way it seemed these two did not know where to begin. Finally I smiled a little bit, the way you do if you have never been in the back part of a city jail before. I tried to get things started.

"Well," I said, "what can I do for you?"

"Everyhing," the sergeant said. "It's all one helluva business. But you tell us everything."

It was all taken down. I had to slow up sometimes so nothing would be lost. I told them what time I drove up there, about my working with Kitt, and then the wife—I never spoke of her as Helen—calling us down from the hill. At the time she called, the stuff was in the holes, the wires taped on.

I told all about the sandwiches, even the small talk. I mentioned Maggie and how she was doing at school. From the way I put it, you wouldn't think it was a family squawk. Then there was the telephone call.

"That was from me," the sergeant said. "I called him from here. I asked him about our bowling league."

That was why Kittinger had sent me home. I was on by the hour, so he said to take off. He said he'd lock up the storage shed, I told them. He had the key. Then I picked Maggie up at the bus turn-around and gave her a lift back as far as the driveway.

"Did you see Kittinger then?" the sergeant asked.

"Sure," I said. "He was up on the side of the hill, not very far from where we'd been working. Maybe not at the stump, but not very far from where we'd been working. He waved to Maggie. He had on a Hawaiian shirt. He was bent over as though he was poking around with a stick at the roots of a stump."

"Then you went on home?" the other officer said, reeling

off Mrs. Beale's address. "We could check it, you know."

Then I told them what Mrs. Beale and I had got together on about my evening at home. The policeman kept nodding and trying to get some of it down, but of course I saved all of the very small details for later.

That was about all.

The sergeant kept saying it was a hell of a thing. The other officer didn't say anything at all. We went over that a few times while the sergeant put down his notes in the kind of book you use in high school chemistry classes. Pretty soon everything was quiet again. Then they turned on the juice a little bit. "Don't forget, Karney, we may want you again.

We were standing, ready to go back to the desk where the girl would give them back their guns. A plainsclothes man busted in. He was nervous and sweating.

"I've been looking all over for you," he told Sergeant Bowles. "Where you been?"

"Taking Karney's statement, Al, that's where I've been. Right here."

Then Al noticed me. It wasn't love at first sight.

"And you." Al barked at me. "You we got for contributory negligence."

I didn't say anything.

"You go off and leave stuff lying around like that."

"Wrong man," I told him. "Mr. Hickey is the contractor on that job. I'm part time, that's all. I'm legal."

"Oh," Al said, and I saw that was the end of that.

The way he went after me, there was no doubt who was trying get Kittinger's job. It sure wasn't Sergeant Bowles. He was too young anyway.

The patrolman took me out. The sergeant stayed behind with Al. I could hear what they said as I was leaving. They were behind the curtain, but I heard two words. That was enough. The two words spoken together sounded like the clicks of a gun: "Policy" and "Accident."

Right now in some offices in some building the insurance

company no doubt owned, the claims men would be tearing out their hair. They would be howling to the right people for action. Officially, they would be "deeply shocked" but also they would be running down every lead. They would try for a suicide finding by the coroner. Even now the insurance operatives would be prowling around the stump farm. I knew this wasn't the last time I'd be questioned.

On the way out they took me to the chief's office. Old man Hickey was sitting at the end of the chief's desk, his head in his hand, looking very grave. On the desk, spread out in a row but not in sequence, were the pictures. They were still a little damp. Ten-by-twelve glossies.

"See these?" the chief said. "Take a good look."

They were not very pretty. There were the loose ends of wires and a big hole in the ground with some roots sticking up from a crater. There was a formless charred bundle in one heap that someone had mistakenly gathered up. The rest of him was about like a bale of rags broken loose at both ends. I recognized the shirt all right. Even in the picture you could see the printed words in the silk: "Aloha."

I said I had seen enough. If they wanted anything else I would wait outside. But I hesitated a minute. I thought Hickey would come through for me.

I just wanted him to say clearly it was an accident. That even a Kittinger could be wrong for once. That this time he'd fooled with something he could not bully or stomp on or kick off the top of a freight car. But Hick wasn't in there for me. He just sat as near to the chief as he could and stared at the pictures.

"You show Kitt how to use that stuff?" the chief said, and he lowered his eyelids as though we were playing poker and he knew I was trying to bluff.

"He watched. Maybe a dozen times."

"You explained carefully how dangerous it was?"

So now I was guilty by omission.

"I worked by the hour. I observed all precautions. I never had an accident in my life."

"Well," the chief said, "you had one now."

"Look," I said when it was clear that Hickey was just in there for the ride, "he's holding the papers on this deal. Not me. Mr. Hickey's your man on that stuff. I'm legal. Why don't you ask him? Or did you?"

"No, I didn't," the chief says.

I got the picture, all right. The chief and the sergeant and the newspapers and even Hickey couldn't quite face it that Kittinger had balled it up. He had gone to the tool shed and had connected the battery and had slammed home the plunger. Nothing happened. Misfired. Sometimes it does. Then he must have tried it again. Then he wallowed up the hill, probably with one hand on the wire. He rode the wire up the hill to where it disappeared under the stump. He circled it warily. Everything seemed fine—no tiny coil of smoke or that odor of hair burning. Even the tiny pebbles and the small piles of dirt he remembered so exactly were in place as he bent over. That hot trembling crash was much brighter than the sun. After that he simply was not there.

The chief never got a chance to lay it on me. Hickey pulled himself together. I had to give old Hick credit, the way he turned it on.

"A craze," he said and his voice actually trembled. "It's sweeping the country. Every Tom and Harry think they can be welders or pilots or landscape artists. Why, this do-it-yourself will kill us all! No sir, some things are for professionals. Like Karney here. Why, chief, this boy has been with Hickey Associate for years—off and on. He's had a lifetime with explosives. He's our most trusted and indispensible man. Why, let me tell you about our Mr. Karney . . ."

That got me. While they were arguing what a good man I was, and what the do-it-yourself was doing to the country, I walked out to the waiting room and sat down on a bench.

After a while I went on out to the man at the desk. I asked him if they were through with me.

He got on the telephone with the chief and listened for about half a minute. Then he turned to me and said the nicest words I ever heard from a policeman: "You can go now. Thanks."

Then he added, "You get called for the inquest."

The sunshine in the street was very bright. I walked out feeling very odd. Something that I had talked about and that Helen had talked about and that I had gone away to think about, had actually happened. It was a bad dream suddenly come true. It really happened as I had foretold. And, like waking up from a bad dream, I knew I really was not involved.

Even my trip to headquarters was not much. The sergeant was almost apologetic and the others were trying to make points. Even if they had to hang someone, anyone, I was not even in the running. I was safe because I had used my head. Something told me this swimming pool deal was unnatural. So I got Hickey in the living room with me when the deal was made. I was only a third-rater who had left the job a long time before anything happened. Now Hickey was the perfect mat between me and anything. He was fat and big and respectable. He was above and beyond any suspicion. He was as big and soft and safe as all the landscapes he had ever put in. Besides, he couldn't afford to let them accuse me. Better than any of these things, however, was something else. You don't think of this one until you look through the front windows and see outside into the sunlit street: I happened to be innocent.

I was at the door when the crowd began to come up the steps.

At first I couldn't see who was in the middle. Some of the people had cameras and some didn't. They were all milling up the steps and no one could get the door open. A woman seemed to be at the center of it. At her side was

another woman. A reporter. Finally they got through the doors, but there was no time for pictures. The woman they were all crowded around was wearing nothing but blacks —black suit, black blouse, and a half-veil of black. She had been crying, and her cheeks were gray. The color of old prison walls.

She saw me, all right, as they churned past. There was not the slightest hint of recognition. I know she saw me, for behind the half-veil those dark dry eyes stared right through me.

It was Helen.

She seemed old and tired. When I saw her, I stood where I was. At the moment I loved her all right. Like you love a black panther.

That day, out in the sun, I felt very clean.

CHAPTER VII

On the way home to Mrs. Beale's there is a store window I try sometimes to avoid. The bottom part of store front is green and the upper half of the pane is orange. Between, stacked in little displays, the bottles are always waiting. Behind the displays, when you press your face against the glass, you see the shelves.

On the way home from police headquarters I did not walk on the other side of the street. I headed for Sid's Liquor and Pony Keg to pick up a fifth of brandy. I cannot handle brandy at all.

For the first time since I have been at her house, Mrs.

Beale did not have her ear next to the grille of the Sears Roebuck console. She was on the stairs that lead to my room on the second floor. That way she could see out the front windows. When I walked in she was facing me, waiting.

"You look scared," she said.

"I'm not," I told her.

"Most always they are."

"It was nothing. I told them the answers and they said, 'Don't leave town.' "

I laughed, but it was a smaller, more frightened laugh than I had thought might come out. I was only trying to act a little better than I actually felt.

"You keep your nose clean," she said and turned towards the kitchen. Then she came back to the stairs.

"A police force is always like a very big but very clumsy animal. It takes a while to wake up and stretch and to get in action. After that sometimes it don't know when to stop."

I was halfway to my room when she called me back once more. She was standing in the lower hall, not far from the telephone.

"There's an old friend of yours upstairs. I thought you might like to meet him."

There was. He was on the bed. She had left him for me. I had not seen him for some time. He was a fifth of whiskey. I started on that first.

Towards three o'clock in the afternoon my old friend was gone. I was on my bed, staring up at the long question-mark crack which is under the wallpaper if you sight carefully across the ceiling. I thought about putting on a record, but the record player was on an orange crate three thousand miles across the room. The arm of the record player was upreared, the diamond point like a fang. Even if I got to the orange crate and lowered the player arm it might weigh six tons.

I looked across the wrinkled Sahara of the rug. Some-

where across that silent, endless waste, through the motes of dust, my coat hung upon the ribs of a chair back. In the pocket of the coat was the unwinking snout of the bottle of brandy. I looked at it a long time. It was only ten miles away, then two. Finally it seemed I could almost get there. . . .

The next afternoon I woke up. Someone had put a blanket across my legs. After a while I got up and went downstairs.

"I got some eggs I could fry," Mrs. Beale said.

I said that was what the doctor ordered.

I do not think it was.

In something like this, you can't tell everything. I couldn't even if I wanted to. Besides, some things shouldn't be put down where other people can ever read them. It is exactly the things that shouldn't be put down on paper, or even remembered, that I must say towards the last. But first there are the things anyone could know if they hired someone to find out.

About the inquest. The coroner's jury sat there, half of them looking like retired school teachers and the others housewives. The pictures were there and before that everyone identified what was left of the body. Then Hickey got in a few licks about how well organized this project had been and how he had supervised very well. Then I came on. I said exactly what I remembered. They kept hammering at me about the keys, but the keys were found in his pocket. Then they inquired about his health, and I said no, he didn't seem in ill health at the time.

Helen was there.

She had on the black outfit. When she sat down in the chair beside the desk, the reporters all leaned forward. A couple of younger men, who sat with the reporters, did not make a move. They were there to remember everything. They had just one word written all over their faces: Insurance. Operatives. The jury, of course, never even knew

there was such a thing, but just the same, no organization like Provident Mutual that is very tough because it is very big is going to pay off without a quiver. When their big machine says "Jackpot" they get right in there and begin to adjust the machinery so that it won't pay off after all.

Helen told her story beautifully. She talked so softly that you had to lean forward to hear her. If I had not heard from those same lips that she had seriously thought of killing him, I would have believed everything she said. What she said seemed very true. She had called us down from the hill. She had made little sandwiches. We chatted—that's how she put it—and then her husband (sniff, sniff) ordered his helper to go home. That was me.

So the helper had said, would her husband put everything away? Her husband (sniff) had promised the helper to do this. Soon her daughter, Maggie, came in from school. Her daughter went to the back of the house to take a shower. Sometime, while she was getting dinner ready for the family, her busband (sniff, sniff) walked out the kitchen door. She did not know how long it was after that. But it was quite a few minutes. She heard the blast. It was so nearly dark she really couldn't see anything clearly. Just smoke. Later, when he didn't not come in, she went outside. There was nothing at all.

She called Maggie. Maggie ran up the hill first. She was quicker. Helen ran up after her. Right behind her. They found the empty crater. Then over on a stump Helen found what turned out to be his left arm. After that she couldn't remember.

It was either the family physician or the preacher who helped her out of the chair, black veil and all.

Then they read a deposition from Magie, and it said almost the same thing. They wanted to spare her the actual inquest, and everyone understood how it was. Everyone, some way, said his piece.

Finally the jury came back and no one was surprised that "The aforesaid Harry Thurmond Kittinger met his death by an explosion of dynamite the evening of so-and-so, at or about six P.M. while attempting to clear land in the rear of his residence. The aforesaid death is found accidental, but the exact manner is not known to this assembled body." And so on and so on.

Then this doctor or preacher took Helen's arm and walked her towards the rear of the room. It was her show all right. She saw me sitting there, but she turned off the juice. That's the way it was with me too, in public. For the second time in a week I was very glad about that. Even at the police headquarters, with her in black and all, no one ever asked either of us if we had known each other before the "fatal evening." She wasn't the type. Anyone could see that.

When the people drifted out, I walked back home past Sid's Pony and Keg. There were so many old friends on display behind the orange and green window that his place seemed like a Soldier's Home. I did not have the heart to pass all of them by.

That was four days after the big boom and just before the funeral. The insurance company, you bet, had worked the inquest for a short delay. After all, Kittinger's little accident policy for fifty thousand dollars was a very big bite, and their operatives needed time to do some real probing. But even with the slight delay they got on the inquest, they could not come up with anything at all. They were tough and shifty and spent the money, no doubt, but they were fooling with something they did not understand. It was an order of events that their machinery could not really handle. So in the end the claims men restorted to primitive methods.

They refused to pay.

Maggie was there when they got all of the papers of the estate together. It seemed no one was more surprised than Helen about the little accident policy. She had no idea

about that. It seemed Old Kitt never told her anything. Of course, the insurance company turned their agent inside out on that one. A punk like Everhardt hadn't sold that kind of policy. Their man was the one and only owner of the agency, a country club buddy of the deceased, and was sixty-nine years old. He had been retired two years and was clean as an old maid's bird cage. So Federated Mutual, as I said, refused to pay.

They wanted a suit, to get everyone on the witness stand. Helen's lawyer brought suit. Then Federated Mutual paid off, just like their ads say, without a whimper. It never even came to court.

Helen got it all—the house up beyond Larchwood, the car, a rooming house downtown that no one knew about, and that quiet little accident policy that was waiting in the lock box, all folded up in a printed envelope, purring to be cashed. In the end that is the way it worked. Helen, as I saw it, was very much alone and very sad and very cold up in the big house. And very wealthy.

So that was the end of it.

I never worked for Hickey Associates again. I never went near the golf course. I never saw Helen again and I never went up to the house where the double garages butted their heads into the high ground behind the house. I also never saw Maggie again and never took a drink again. Federated Mutual was glad, glad to pay; the police department happily promoted Al to fill Kittinger's old job. I, too, was happy and sat around every night listening with Mrs. Beale to the "Lighter Side of the News." That's the way it ended. Everyone lived happily ever after. That's what they tell me.

Now comes the things you couldn't find out, even if you hired someone to search through every printed word or to track down every echo or rumor about this Dynamite Widow. Maybe it should not be put down on paper ever, but I will do that now.

After the first part was over, winter came around once

more. You will remember the rains came a little late, but they made up for all those long clear days of steady work. It had been raining steadily, the way it does in the Northwest. That rain begins soft as a veil and then in three days it turns to the cold cutting edge of steel.

I was at the window of my room, looking out into the rain and down into the place where sinners fall. I was looking out into the rain on the kind of night when the sidewalks are bottomless instead of leading uptown towards the neon lights. I was thinking of nothing. I was only staring, as you do after three steady days that have winter wrapped up inside them. The telephone rang.

There was no use trying to avoid it. At the first ring I knew who it was. I thought for second I'd pretend I wasn't home, that I'd moved away. But before the second ring, I was on the stairs. It was not hard to get there before Mrs. Beale.

"Yah?" I said into the mouthpiece, for I still hoped it was someone else. But even as I answered, it was clear in my mind that no man I knew would call me at ten o'clock. The men I knew would be either home in bed, or not home —and in bed.

It was a woman all right.

"From a drugstore," she said when I asked where she was. I didn't have to ask if anything was wrong.

"I've got to see you, Clifford. Now."

Something seemed to touch me, even with eight blocks of telephone wire and all that rain between us.

I had not thought of her for a month. Her voice through the darkness seemed to pull me back from the pit that had opened up outside my window when the telephone called me.

It was a woman, all right. They get to be a woman about that age. She was almost crying.

It was Maggie.

CHAPTER VIII

SHE DID NOT kiss me, that first time in the drugstore.

She was almost crying when I found her, but she stared hard into my eyes after I sat down.

"Nobody," she said. "Now I've got no one at all. I'm so alone, Cliff, and you were always so good—" She stopped and looked surprised. "Now I'm calling you Clifford," she went on. "It's just that I haven't anyone. No one at all."

"You got me," I said, and I meant it more than any time before.

She was pretty far gone if simply calling someone older by his first name helped a little. Here and there I've said, "You have me," to a few others, but in a way I didn't have to say anything to Maggie. She also knew I meant it.

She was too big to cry and too scared and lonely to admit it. She really had become a woman since the time I saw her at the funeral. Out of respect, you might say, I went to that. I was in the back and Maggie was in the front of the church. The woman she had become since then was deep in the bones of her face. Beneath the skin her jaw was more firm and her cheeks more high and decisive. A year ago she had the college girl Italian bob, but now she had let that grow out, so that her dark hair could pull back in a bun, low at the back of her head. That did it. When I tried her with a cigarette she took one. She needed it.

"You will think I'm silly, but—but—"

"Now look, Maggie," I told her after the waitress stopped

shifting the napkins around and left us alone in the back booth, "of course you're not silly. You're, you're . . ."

"Am I, Clifford?"

She said that in the direct way of adult inquiry. When a woman talks to you like that, it is no time to be less than strictly honest. I looked from where I was looking, up to her eyes.

"Yes, you are. You're a beautiful woman."

What I felt under the table top was her hand, searching very timidly for mine. If you work at it, two people can hold hands under the table-top of a drugstore booth.

"Then how about Bobby Richman, the Logical Pushover?"

"Logical Positivist. I don't know. Everything was in the papers. I never could let him come to our house. Now I guess he's too busy."

"I guess he's not so positive. Just logical."

"It's his career," she said, and I could tell this was something not easy to say. "He says I'm too pretty for him, and that's a paradox or something."

"You don't see him?"

"No. Those pictures in the papers and . . ."

"Too much logic for Bobby. Right?"

She said it was. I got the idea she was glad. So was I.

Outside, the rain was still coming down. You could see it drifting in easy sheets, through the car lights and under the neon outside. Inside the clean, lighted drugstore, however, it was warm and cozy. They talk about a little home or the honeymoon cottage or the little place in the mountains that nobody knows about, but for some things a nice clean well-lighted drugstore where they keep filling the coffee cups is just right. Like talking with Maggie.

Since I had to know, I waited to ask as long as I could. I let her run through how she had dropped out of college. How she liked her new job. How nice a great many people had been. Then I asked her directly.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't ever see Helen."

No love lost there, I could tell. I remembered the first time Maggie and I had ever been alone together, that day in my car when I drove her into the city for her "movie" date with the boy philosopher. Even then she hated her stepmother, but not with the openness a grown woman can show.

"I moved out," Maggie said. "I couldn't stand her. I've got a little place. Not much room but it's all mine."

"And she's got?"

"Everything. As long as she lives. And everything that goes with it. You know, Clifford, I never want to see her place again."

I could understand that. I didn't want to see it again either. For a moment I thought of the living room with the clean, scrubbed fireplace and the tapa cloth drapes that hung from black spears.

Finally she got around to it. "It's nice the way I feel with you, Clifford."

"Go ahead."

"What I wanted to talk to you about was my father. But it's so hard and I— Well, I keep feeling something is wrong. I keep remembering the last time I saw him alive. He was up on the hill. Behind our house. As I went in the door he waved. That's one reason I wanted to see you tonight. You saw that too."

I said I had.

"What was wrong, Clifford? You have to tell me what was wrong."

I said nothing was wrong. He waved, and that was all.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I have a bad feeling. I don't mean bad dreams or anything like that, but I can't forget him, up there on the hill. You see, he waved. And I—"

"Should have saved him?"

"No. Not that. No one could have known what was going to happen. Things like that no one can stop. I don't really

feel guilty at all. But of all the things that ever happened to him and me—the nice things—since I was a little girl —Well, it was as though . . ."

"Yes, Maggie?"

"As though he waved good-bye. A kind of crippled good-bye."

I didn't say anything. I could see she was thinking about it all over again. When she put it that way, it did seem logical, but it was only a feeling. She had not been present at the inquest. It was all in her mind.

So I told her not to worry and not to remember. If she tried, perhaps the thing which made her wake up at night would go away and she would be left with the nice things about her father that every girl stores up against the time when her father is gone. Besides, some things are best forgotten.

But I left the door open, too. I said if anything else did come up, she knew where I was. I would be right there.

She said thanks, and that it meant a lot to her to have someone to talk to. I could tell that it did.

She stood up and I helped her with her raincoat. As I stood beside her I saw she had slimmed down some. She was all right. And standing there, I suddenly remembered what I had tried to forget—those thirteen years. Thirteen is a bad number, but just then, the way she looked at me, it didn't seem to matter.

"Which way is this new apartment?"

"This way," she said, and smiled.

You will not believe it, and if Maggie ever reads this I doubt if she can really believe it. When the door of her apartment clicked shut and when she vanished behind all those doors that prevent men from following women up darkened stairs, at the moment her door clicked shut, I knew. Her door clicked very loudly in the darkness. I can almost hear it now, but then I was on the rainy side, standing in the street and wanting her very much. I wanted her in a way

that was different. Here and there, I have wanted a few others, but with Maggie I wanted only her lips close to mine.

She did not kiss me at the door.

That came later.

I walked home. The rain was soft and in the Northwest this is not bad if your mother was a duck. I should have stayed in the clean drugstore or in the street outside of Maggie's apartment. Perhaps she would have come back down the stairs to let me in if I had tried.

I was beside the parked car when I really saw it—a new, black Buick with everything but a wrap-around bar. Because I was thinking of something else, I almost walked past, but something inside the coupe *tap-tapped-tapped* and rolled up the glass of the door.

For a moment I was not certain. It was almost midnight and no one at all passed along the street. I heard the tapping again, and stopped. I thought it was a friend in the car, someone who couldn't make it home. I ducked my head to look through the misty glass. I saw the two white circles of her cheeks and the darker splotches that would be her eyes.

It was a friend, all right. She had parked there in her new black car. That way she could see up and down the street and she could also see my window at Mrs. Beale's. She had telephoned and now she was waiting.

It was Helen.

She rolled down the window. Through the small crack there was the softest kind of warm air, like a woman's breath. It was the odor of two things—the sharp cloth and shellac of a new car and her perfume. Her face was very close to mine.

"I'm sorry," she said, "But—"

I had heard that tune before. That is how she always came on.

"So you're lost," I said. "You're afraid in the dark. Is that it?"

I wasn't having any. It had been a long time and things had changed. Once I had thought she was stuck out in a big house, alone, without even a car. Once I had thought she was not bad for looks. Once she'd said I had something that she needed, and that made a difference. I thought I needed her too, but now there was Maggie. I almost drew back. I almost turned and walked directly up the steps and on up the stairs to the room where a question mark is hidden in a crack of the plaster, under the wallpaper. But I did not draw back. I did not know then how one drop of fear will curdle love.

The car door opened.

When the door snapped, a light came on in the top of the coupe. I saw the glitter of chrome and the richer sparkle of golden thread woven into the upholstery. In the same swift motion she had opened the door and had slid over to her side.

"I want you to drive. I really do."

I slid in behind the wheel. She sat very straight, almost prim, on the shotgun side. I closed the door and the dome light quit. We were in the darkness together once again, but in the closer confines of a car that had been driven less than a thousand miles. I tromped it, and there was plenty under the hood. The kind of stuff that presses the gold thread of the upholstery right through the back of your head when you take off.

If you go for scenery, there are plenty of real lovely spots in the Great Northwest. There are roads that branch off very casually into the thicket along the highway, and then climb and twist around the buttes until the bumper of your car stops against a white guard rail at the edge of a cliff. From these viewpoints, on a clear night, you look for miles across the trees of a valley or you see clusters of lights or small *ranchitas* that mean people. Where we stopped, after cruis-

ing around for an hour, was on one of these high places. You could not see the river below. Low clouds embalmed even our headlights.

I turned off the engine and leaned back. It was her move.

She squirmed around on her side of the car. She opened the glove compartment and rummaged for a mirror. Then she rummaged through her deep, wine-colored purse and found two lipsticks. She marked her nail with one to test the color, then she tried the other one. Finally she put everything back in the purse once more. That fussing around reminded me of the way she kept busy the first time she poured the tea.

"It's been a long time," she said tentatively. "I mean I've missed you. And you haven't called or—"

"Hold on," I said. "Let's make it a duet."

"What do you mean?"

"Helen, you're playing the violin. Let me run over the oboe part. That's me, Oboe the Hobo."

"You!"

"Don't stop me, I'm just tuning up. 'Ohhhh, life was dreary until you came along, because I lived in the woods . . .' " Then I got the next line, "There wasn't any sin 'cause there wasn't no gin, and we all know where we stood . . ."

"It's just corny," she said, looking out the window.

"Now the chorus: 'Ohhhh, all of that is past and no one was aghast, and I'm all alone, with no telephone, and a cold little home, and I would if I could and you should . . .' "

"Stop it. I won't listen to—"

"Hang around for the refrain," I said. "It goes like this: 'Ohhhh, come back to Capistrano and we'll eat the gold banana-o and live in two pianos . . .' " I ran out of stuff.

"Say, Helen, what goes with grass?"

That broke up the band practice. It wasn't any joke to her. She curled up over in her corner and began to dab her eyes with a Kleenex. She didn't say anything, but I could see it wasn't funny. Finally she sat up again and said she had

been real lonely and afraid. It had not been easy. This was the first time she had been out of the house. For weeks. And if I thought it was humorous being up there all alone . . .

"How about Maggie?" I said. "Isn't she company?"

"Oh, Karney," she said. "This isn't a nice thing to say. I shouldn't say it to anyone. But—well, I encouraged her to move out. She was so unhappy there. I thought it would be better for her and—"

"I'll take it. The next two bars go like this: 'So now we can make beautiful music. Alone.' "

"I wasn't going to say that," she said fiercely.

"But it's true. Can you deny it?"

"No, Clifford," she said, and she came out of her corner and laid her head on my shoulder. "I won't deny it. But I never said it, even to myself."

"So I said it for you."

She did not answer. Instead she put her right hand just a year and a half above my knee, which is not really very far. In a minute she was closer and that right hand was almost to the here and now. Then I couldn't help myself. I began to think about its future.

In the lowered clouds, away past midnight, in the car it seemed she had brought around only for me, I let my own hands forget about time altogether. Then she put both her hands on my cheeks and turned my face towards hers.

"Kiss me," she breathed very fiercely. "Do it now."

I did that. Then I did it again.

After a while there was nothing else. Helen was shivering a little, though she was up close against me. In the darkness of the car, I didn't think about how she looked. We never talked about it, but I knew she was perhaps a little older than myself. That made me the younger part of the act. It wasn't much of a choice when you thought about it—either being over the top by thirteen years or trying to put on the brakes because, as yet, you don't feel the chilling fog of middle age.

Then she said, "Let's try the heater. I'm a little chilly."

I wasn't chilly at all, but on went the heater.

The minute hand on the dashboard clock turned through the hours. It was after three, and I'd warmed up the motor a couple of times. I had no plans, you might say. It was her party. She seemed to want to talk, but I don't remember everything. I was half listening, not bored exactly but perhaps dozing. Then I woke up quick . . .

"So I want you to come up and work on it some more."

"You mean that damned pool?"

"Oh, yes," she said as coolly as though she were selecting material for an afternoon dress. "Kitt wanted it so much. I'm going right on through with the plans, Clifford."

Not with me she wasn't. I didn't want to say that right out, but I was going to be very busy. Besides, I knew it wasn't exactly true. She had wanted the pool from the beginning. Old Kitt had gone along more or less to keep peace in the family. I *knew* that.

"In his memory," she went on, and I could swear that she rubbed her cheek ever so slightly against my collar.

"Well, that's fine," I said, "We will surely see about it. Just as soon as the weather clears and—"

"Oh, wonderful," she said, and she smiled and kissed me lightly on the ear. "I'm glad you like pools. They're so nice." I could see that the idea excited her. "But it's not for me," she said again. "It's for him."

Then I wasn't half asleep any more.

"You know, Clifford, he's not really gone. I just pretend he's gone out the back door."

"That's a good way," I said. No one could argue with that.

"If you don't think he's gone—why, he really isn't, you know."

For a minute, parked there in the fog, I thought I had gone over the guard rails. In the head, I mean. She was talking as though there had never been an accident on the

hill behind her house and as though she herself hadn't been the central witness at the coroner's inquest.

I could understand that. She didn't want to remember so she didn't remember. It was easier that way: no pain. Lots of women are that way. Just the same there is lots of traffic every evening in the cemeteries.

What I couldn't understand was her arms suddenly around me. She started all over again. I finally thought I knew why. Thinking about what had happened and recalling those last hours out beyond Larchwood and the pictures that the police had taken—all of that excited her. Her face was pale and she almost smothered me in her fierce passion.

"Oh, Clifford! I do love you. Love . . . you."

Even now I don't know what I thought. There was something beyond what I had ever known from her before. You would think that a woman might break into tears, or that she wouldn't bring up the subject at all, or if she did want to talk about it—and I could understand that—she wouldn't hedgehop around so.

But not Helen. She seemed unable to control what she thought. I could tell she was fascinated by everything that had happened. But it wasn't the macabre details—the smell of the police headquarters or the long, hot sermon over a closed casket or the thing she found on the stump that turned out to be his arm—that really got her. No, it was none of those things. It was the bright, sudden exploding sun of the dynamite charge. That's what she seemed to remember—all the bright anarchy in one destructive cone.

"Let's go," I said, and fired up.

"Oh, you don't love me. Now do you?"

I didn't answer that one. I pointed to the clock on the dash. She was surprised too.

We were down off the hill when she said what she had been waiting to say all evening. This was why she had been parked outside on the street.

"You want some tea, Clifford? Sometime?"

That's the way she put it.

"No, I don't."

But she didn't get it. She wasn't paying attention to the way I said it. She was the kind that can put her own construction on anything that is said.

"You want something . . . different?"

There was a red light. I braked to a stop.

"You're not afraid, are you, Clifford?"

I said I wasn't, but that it was early in the morning. We would talk about this later. And I thought, much, much later.

"No need to be afraid, hon."

I didn't say anything. The light changed.

"They don't watch me any more."

"What?"

"Oh, you knew that. For a long time they watched me. I just acted like I didn't know. Sometimes it was an older man. He's gray. He always watched outside until I went to bed."

I wasn't exactly surprised, but I didn't give her enough credit. Helen was crafty, though she kept this covered up when she needed to. When she wasn't crafty she was in another role—the quiet woman, fussing around over a cup of tea. Now the tail was off of her. She was more free than she had ever been before. The day that they stopped watching, she had gone downtown. The first thing she picked up was a fresh new Buick.

Then she came downtown and picked up something else she had in mind—me.

We were at Mrs. Beale's. I stopped a few doors away, on the opposite side of the street.

She couldn't drop it.

Just before I was going to say, "It's been fun and goodbye," she put her hand on my arm. She saved this one for the last minute. I was just beginning to open the door that would let me out in the street.

"I know you want to come, darling," she said. "After all, you did it for me."

"I what?"

"Oh, you did. I knew all the time you did. But I didn't let on."

"Now just a minute. Just a minute!"

"Don't shout, Clifford. I understand how it was. I knew you did it for me. I love you for that, honey. I do, you know."

I didn't get out. I sat right where I was.

"You really think I somehow did that. To him?"

I couldn't believe it, but there she was beside me in her new automobile, saying it.

"Don't talk about it," she said blandly. "But of course you did. I mean we did. I remember just how we planned it. That's why you wanted to work on the pool."

She really believed that.

"Even when they asked me all those questions, I didn't let on. For our sake. And when I passed you in the hall, at the police station— Oh, Clifford, that was hard."

I didn't know what to say. I had to figure things out. I put my hands on the steering wheel, as though I were shaking hands with myself, and said, "Ha, ha, I bet that was."

"Oh, you don't know, Clifford. You just don't know."

And that was the truth.

The first I had heard for quite a while.

"Now we can see each other," she said. "We can go off together. On a long trip."

She had me. As she had said only an hour before, if you don't think a thing is true, then really it isn't true. And if she thought I had done it— Well, perhaps that didn't make it true, but someone else—just anyone—might believe it. A little chill, like one of the winds in the Northwest, went through me. Very near the heart.

So I decided to stall her.

"Sure, Helen," I said. "If they're not watching you any

more, it's all okay. But now it's late. We better go."

I was halfway out the door when she called me back. "You forgot to kiss me, Clifford."

I had to do that. It was like kissing the side of the Buick, or an old bird's nest.

The car slipped down the street like a ghost. It turned the corner and there was nothing in the street at all except me and the first small hint of dawn.

Then I was lying in bed. It was daylight.

I still had my clothes on.

CHAPTER IX

ABOUT THEN I was on the run. Not that I was holed up with three cans of beans waiting for a posse to set the barn on fire or anything like that. But I was on the run. I came and went as usual, I even worked now and then, but I already had taken the first step. I had begun to be cunning.

If no men were assigned to Helen, I knew Maggie wouldn't be watched. Why shouldn't I take her out?

I called her up.

She would like to go out to dinner more than anything. The first time I took her about fifty miles over to the Oregon coast. I said it would be fine to eat where we could look out across the beach and see the ocean. She liked that.

Actually, I was afraid to eat downtown. Someone we both knew might see us. With a new car and with new money, I was afraid Helen might be around. That's the kind of little things you do at first when you're on the run.

If you get the chance, go across the low coastal range of mountains to the coast. Once those black high cliffs were molten shelves of lava that tangled with the sea. Now they are grim and black, and all through the night the ocean slams into the headlands and gouges out caves or grinds a log of Douglas fir into matchwood. In the caves, at the base of steep high cliffs, the sea lions bark in the dusk of evening. All during the summer, if the weather is good, you see families walking down the steps to the place where waves break in a kind of hysteria. At the bottom of these steps they stare at the old bull sea lions sunning on the rocks, surrounded by a harem. Then these families climb back up the steps to the top of the cliffs where the wind blows you clean once more.

I knew a restaurant over on the coast. It is in the bight of a small cove, surrounded by towering walls of stone. Here the wind does not always blow and you can sit near a window in the early evening. Sometimes a tanker goes very slowly across the horizon, well off the reefs.

Maggie talked through the juice and the soup and the salad —why she didn't really want ever to go back to college, and how she would be an assistant to a buyer in a couple of months, and how if she liked it she might go to another school to pick up the dope on buying and lots of other stuff.

It was a little hectic because we were both under a strain. For her it was the big dinner on the coast. She had been around, but I could tell this was special for her. She was working at it. As for me, I looked twice at every black car that happened to pass us on the road and I glanced at every new customer that walked in the door. There are lots of ways to be on the run.

Still, we got along. I didn't say anything about what Maggie told me the last time, about her father. She was through her steak with no trouble. But I wasn't with it.

"You're not eating," she said.

I was hungry all right, but I didn't let myself think about that.

Later, when we were in the car, driving along Route 101 that twists along over the top of the sea cliffs, she brought it up herself.

"I've thought some more about that."

"What?"

"About daddy. And Helen. And me."

"You?"

"I'm ashamed of myself, really I was very wrong. I'm not perfect and I don't know a lot of psychology. But when your father is suddenly—well, simply gone—it's easy to blame someone else. I know I never did like Helen—"

"And never will?"

"I'm going to try. I'm jealous. I know I always have been. When my real mother died, that made me very close to father. Then he married Helen. Of course I hated her because I thought she took him away from me. But I want to forgive and forget, Clifford. I can't undo the past and I know in my mind it's not rational, but—"

"Some things are not rational," I said, wondering what she was leading to.

"I still have a bad feeling."

"About me, or us?"

"No, silly. About—well, it's only a mean, low suspicion. Suspicions don't go far with anyone that counts. They wouldn't like it at headquarters. They don't like anything that works against the organization. It's instinct with them."

Two things made me take notice. In the first place she was right about police. Very sharp indeed. She'd picked it up from what she seen of her father's friends. If she was that good, a suspicion of hers might be a dandy.

I wanted very much to know what she was thinking. If this suspicion became strong enough, she might tell it to anyone. And I had to know first.

We cruised north along the coast for about thirty minutes.

We began to turn back, to weave our way through the low coastal range once more. Overhead the moon patiently searched the overcast. I wanted to ask more, but I was afraid I couldn't make myself sound casual.

"You're not involved in this, Clifford. You see if I'm silly or not."

"Try it on me."

"Well . . . do you know how daddy met Helen? Did he ever tell you that?"

"It never came up."

"My real mother was a very wonderful person. Really she was."

"Maybe mine was too, Meg. Generally they are."

"She was blonde, something like me, except I don't have her body. She wasn't well. After I was born, she was what they called 'run down' and doctors didn't know what they know now. But she loved to ride. Horseback. She seemed well enough, but we had a woman to stay with us. To do the heavy work around the house."

"And that was?"

"Don't you know?"

I guessed it all right.

"We lived back East. In northern Michigan. One day mother and Helen went out to ride. I was on the saddle in front of mother. They dropped me off to stay with a neighbor lady until they came back. I remember it was very late in the fall. All the trees were bare."

"And?"

"It was dark before anyone came for me. I was asleep. Daddy came in the sheriff's car and when he woke me up he began to cry."

"You mean that two went out riding and only one came back?"

"Nobody came back."

I did not understand and Meg did not say anything until we were through a series of curves and over the summit.

While they were riding, it seemed her mother fainted. She twisted out of the saddle, but one foot caught in the stirrup as she fell. Helen finally overtook the galloping horse. It was too late. It had dragged her half a mile in rocky country. They were five miles from home.

"But no one came back?"

"Helen's horse, but not mother's. They found mother's horse a couple of days later, near a stream."

"And Helen didn't come back either?"

"Not until after dark. She was hysterical and couldn't say anything for some time. While Helen was trying to help my mother, her horse broke for home. It knew the trails, of course. Mother's gelding was young and it broke away, or never really stopped."

"That's a horrible thing."

"Helen walked back nearly five miles over some rocky terrain. In riding boots. Then they had to go out and find mother's body . . ."

"So Helen stayed on and she has been with you ever since."

"Something like that. For a month she couldn't move, I've been told. After that she began to run the house. No one was surprised, I guess, when they got married and we moved away."

The way she told it, it seemed like the kind of thing that happens sometimes.

"Can you remember the inquest?" I said.

"Not really. I seem to miss those." She tried to smile, unsuccessfully. "Daddy was a deputy and just starting out on enforcement. I guess it was routine."

"I can see how you would be suspicious now. But you were only a child. It's on the record back there. I suppose it was pretty clearly accidental."

"Very clear."

"But you don't believe it?"

"I *do* believe it, Cliff. I really do."

"So do I," I told her. "You couldn't add anything to the records back in Michigan. Besides, it's been a long time ago."

We were getting back towards town now. The lights along the road were more frequent. The blue and orange plastic spinners that you see around the filling stations out here were whirling in the light, flagging down the customers.

"Now that I'm older," she said, "I visualize the scene. I see Helen beside a stream, with her horse and mother's horse stopped. And I see her laying mother out on the rocks beside the stream. And mother groaning. And asking for water. And Helen, kneeling down and . . ."

Maggie broke out in tears. She put her head down on the back of the seat and when I tried to put my hand on her head to comfort her, she turned away and hid.

"I've spoiled it," she sobbed. "I bitched it. I'm always doing that. I wanted to have such a nice dinner, and now . . ."

I pulled off the road at one of those little roadside parks. There was a table and two benches and a trash can and a tree. We didn't get out. We sat there for a long time, and then it was time for me to put my arm around her and say that everything would be all right.

Finally she came around, but it wasn't good. It would be midnight when we got home and she had to work the next day. We were almost home when she turned quickly to me.

"Would both horses run away, Cliff? Especially one that was gentle? Would *you* walk back over the trails for five miles when you could go up a hill and be almost at a neighbor's house?"

I didn't answer. That's the sort of thing that is in no public record. That's the sort of thing you can't find out, especially from a woman who is hysterical and who can't remember.

"Would a woman be so thirsty that she would crawl back into the pool and drown there? Would she want another drink if her skull was fractured and she was groaning and

laid out comfortable on the bank? Now would she? Would she?"

I did not answer. We were already home.

Some things you don't answer, because if you said what you thought it might encourage a young girl to go straight to headquarters. And the chief would listen, too.

No, some things you don't answer honestly and directly, because when you have started to run you become frightened very easily. You are then beyond an easy cunning.

As Maggie was getting out of the car and as I was seeing her to the door, I made another mistake. This mistake was more overt and larger and more ugly than a trace of cunning.

"Forget it, Maggie," I said. "You don't believe that, I don't believe it. No one else would."

"No, I don't believe it Cliff. I'm only a jealous woman. I really am going to forget and forgive. I'll never mention that to anyone else. And Cliff?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Promise you won't tell anyone either."

You bet I promised.

Then she was gone. I hated to see the door close behind her. That night, you see, I knew I was in love with her.

Not good. Not good at all.

That's all I remember about the next few days. I got up in the mornings and said good-bye to Mrs. Beale. I came home at five o'clock. If anyone called she would naturally say I was at work. I was, all right; I worked on a bench. I sat in the parks downtown and watched the pigeons and the women in Caddies trying to make a parking place.

Some of the others in the little park where I went were very old. They were not Skid Row men, but only very old. They were loggers or teamsters who had become janitors; now they were also out in the park. Naturally there were also the bums. They were dirty and mumbling and always tried to start a conversation if they saw a package of cigarettes

in your pocket. Then, too, there was me. I worked, all right. At ten I even knocked off for coffee.

Not all bad, either. Half of the time when I was sitting in the sun I would think of Maggie. She was all right. She was the kind that could care about the right things. If we went out to dinner, she tried to make me have a good time, but not from a sense of duty, which would have killed it, or from being polite so I would ask her again. To go out was an occasion, an event, for Maggie; she wanted it to be all right. Maybe that comes from being younger, by exactly thirteen years. But I don't think so. It comes from a kind of goodness that stays on for the last act.

Not all good, either. In the background of my thoughts, as though she were one of the rich women who are bad drivers but who of course drive a Caddie, I had to think of Helen. As I sat on the bench I sometimes imagined that I saw her. Then I would know it was time for coffee. . . .

In the early part of the morning a park is a little chilly, but if you are there on time there will be one bench left in the sun. By noon it is shade time. Towards evening you try to play it to get your old place back once more.

On the way home at night I always went on the other side of the street from Sid's Package and Pony Keg. It was as though I were suspended between the park and the room on the second floor of Mrs. Beale's. I wanted no interruption, it seemed, while I thought about it. Except I did not really think. I stared at the grass and waited for something to come to me. But nothing came. All that I could bring to mind was that things had changed. Changed badly.

Before, I had lived in a kind of ease. Not luxury, understand, or even the kind of solid comfort that corrupts, but the ease which comes from being in the right harness. I had a room that looked out on the street and was never too warm and was looked after by someone who cared enough to show concern, but not enough to intrude. Mrs. Beale had the kind

of concern that would call a doctor if you were very sick, but not until then.

The other harness was the same way. A regular pension check, enough work to make me feel like a working man but not enough to be drudgery, and the other, little things: the sport coats and slacks, a Merc sedan, and perhaps six old buddies that drifted up and down the coast if there was a construction job opening up. There was also Sid's Package and Pony, but you could walk home on the other side of the street.

You will say this old life was not uptown, and that there was no future, and that a man should settle down and get married and have his children. That's what they tell me. The idea was coming through to me, too. Already, I saw the signs of a change. Change must be controlled. In Maggie, while we were parked that night along the coast road looking at the ocean, I saw a chance for something not only better, but better than anything I had ever thought possible.

I felt about meeting her the way a man feels at four A.M., when the other six men around the card table have been beating his two high pairs with three of a kind all through the night. At last he picks up four queens and he knows he's got them licked. He was a long time out, but in the final hands his luck is coming in. Maggie was my four little ladies.

Though I'm not a gambling man, you might say I'd bet on those until I die. Yes, until I die.

But there was always the threat of Helen. Or rather, all the Helens. The Helen who could be prim and straight, fussing about her tea thing. And also the Helen in the Ship 'n Shore outfit, not drawing back and in fact meeting me halfway, but going no farther. There was also a third Helen —the woman in black who nearly broke the fingers of my hand in the movie, the one who fiercely threw herself on me the minute her husband left the kitchen, the woman

who said: *"Of course we planned it dear. I didn't tell anyone. . . I didn't let on for our sakes."*

Yes, Helen was a threat, not only to me but to the happiness of Maggie.

In the park, towards the last, one thing kept coming back to me. This was not so much a thought as is was a dim, twisted picture. It drove everything else away. I kept seeing a logged-off butte, guttered by rains with stumps and snags and the disorder of vines, rearing against the sky like a hunchback's terrible deformity. On this hump there was the sudden bright cone of destructive light that can only be dynamite. The uprooted brush and clay and stumps going up made the image of eyes and mouth and a face, rising for a second in the blast. Then it was gone. But in that spot of light I saw Helen's face.

That's when I first saw clearly what I was up against. She was more than a woman. She was a part of the force in this world that destroys, and as always she was encased in what looks normal and innocent and good. She was of the stuff that so fascinated her on the golf course that day. She had simply recognized what was also in herself.

That afternoon, about one o'clock, I got up off the park bench. I went directly home. I took all of the little stuff out of my desk and all of the junk out of the bureau drawers and put everything in a cardboard box. I sealed up the box with gummed paper and took it up to the attic and with a dauber from an old bottle of liquid shoe polish, I wrote my name on this box and added, *Keep Out.*

Then I put my clothes and toilet stuff in a metal suitcase, and the other stuff in a canvas zipper bag, and I left an envelope for the old lady with two weeks rent. I slipped into the Merc and headed east. I drove day and night and stopped only for gas and coffee and even picked up a hitchhiking soldier and let him drive too. That way, in three or four days of sledding along over Nebraska and Iowa and Illinois, I left everything behind. I simply dropped from

sight. Then I stopped at a neat, quiet little town and turned off the motor. I had never been there before. I had never seen it before, but it was home. Home is where you shut off the motor.

Oh, sure. That's what I could have done. But I didn't. At the last minute, ready to leave, I stayed on. Of course, I had a reason to stay around. First, if I left, it would look funny and it wouldn't solve anything. If you are in the States, you are only a teletype message from jail.

The second reason was Maggie.

When you are holding those four little ladies, you don't check and you don't throw in.

You see, in the clutch I found out I was willing to play those.

Until I die.

CHAPTER X

"You love me, Karney. I mean, do you?"

"You know I do, Helen."

That was all I could do with it.

"Oh, sometimes I think you want to get rid of me. That's what I think."

I was in front of her fireplace. The charcoal was burning down. It was the minute a party can go one way or the other. I wanted it to go my way. A louse is what you call a guy like that, but I had to do it. At least, at the time I thought so.

She was too smart to force me on it, but she kept coming

back to me and to her. She wasn't nagging but she was dealing from the same deck, and all clubs. She was beginning to act petulant and coy, the kind of half-joking peevishness that makes you come around. If we were married it wouldn't work. It would be only a cold war on the home front.

"I'm nuts about that dress," I said, and I meant it.

Oh, I liked that, all right. You would too. When I first entered the door, I saw that her dress and the whole evening was a big deal. It had all started like this.

I'd dropped out of sight in those little city parks that people leave to the city as little monuments to themselves: Krausemeir Park or Happy J. Snard Park, and so on. I might have been sitting there yet trying to see the grass grow, but that last afternoon a pair of white soft hands came up from behind and covered my eyes and said, "Guess who." Very corny, yes, but not so loud that the bums could hear.

"Dinner tomorrow night," Helen said when I stood up and managed to walk her to the drugstore for a coke.

I made out I was on an errand and had stopped in the park a minute to rest.

Dinner it was.

She met me at the door.

"Like it?" she said when she took my coat.

"You bet."

"I mean really?" She was talking about the dress.

I'll say this. I know something about women's clothes and from time to time I've paid a tab or three for items they have picked out. Also, if you read the ads or get around the shop windows, you may not spot a Dior or a Ceil Chapman, but you know three hundred bucks when you see it mounted just right.

This frock was raw silk and the first rough idea was a sheath, and you saw, first of all, the round curve of her hips. After that something had been added. The white milk-foam

of a collar made you want to see exactly how a neckline could plunge down to about here. On her finger was a dinner ring. A garnet. That ring flashed around and through me, it seemed, the way some women can do as they take your coat—and your breath—away.

Inside, in the dining room, there were candles. Four candles and places set for two. There was enough crystal to set up the Last Chance Saloon. Dress, ring, candles, crystal, and just the right amount of darkness. Maybe I never had it so good. At first, too, I didn't want to spoil it for her.

"You will have a little drink with me, won't you?"

She smiled because she knew when I walked in the door that she had knocked me out. I was gassed all right. Black silk and white arms; a pile of crystal and that big garnet flashing around in the candlelight. And of course a big bed of charcoal puffing and swelling. It was a large, steady jewel lying in the fireplace.

Then we went into over-drive. Would I have another Scotch?

You bet I would.

I couldn't see what Helen was pouring and after the third one I didn't care. Sid's Package and Pony didn't stock it, but he might order it special if you gave him a week. Around nine we sat down at the table.

"Oh, it's so nice to have someone around," she said very softly as I pulled out her chair and leaned just enough over her shoulder as she sat down.

"Don't you do *that!*" she said, as I let my lips brush across the small crevasse that you find on the side of a woman's head when they have pulled their hair back very tight along the side. Also, there was perfume.

Some things were already on the table, of course. Then she brought in the shrimp cocktail. After that I was helped serve. We were both out in the kitchen, filling the plates

and getting our arms mixed up with those long-handled, copper pans.

"You won't like these," she said, and I had to laugh.

The platter of crabs—those big white ones you get out here—were a jungle of claws and legs, and they didn't want to stay on the platter.

That was the first course.

At twelve, we were still at it.

You know how it is. Some of the food we ate, I think. Half of it we spilled or dropped. The rest of it got thrown away. We got hysterical. I mean there was something else that had to come up. She was nervous. I was—underneath—afraid. That is, I couldn't put out of my mind what Maggie had told me, and what I began to see for myself, though I couldn't put it in words. Then I didn't care.

The charcoal fire was nice. It made a pretty light. We sat on a big white shag rug before the fire. Only the candles on the table in the dining room gave any light, but your eyes got used to that. She threw some powder on the coals that burned suddenly brighter and higher, in tongues of flame that were orange and red. When that burned down there seemed to be no light at all.

Her head was in my lap. She was curled up, the curve of her back towards the hot mouth of the fireplace. The raw silk was a shambles, but no one cared.

We both dozed. Perhaps. I mean I think I did. Time stood still. That's how it seemed.

I twisted a little. There was a pinch near the buckle of my belt. That brought Helen up on her knees, facing the fireplace, swaying back and forth between the fire and me.

"Not comfortable, huh?"

She was not separating her words, what with the Scotch and the fire, but I got it.

I looked around at the tapa cloth drapes that hung from the black spears above the window. Then I looked at the hidden windows and at the clock. She saw me glance around.

Perhaps there was just the least little bit of nervousness somewhere deep inside me. Just enough. The kind that may preserve you.

"I didn't mean that," she said. "Not right here!"

I didn't mean that either. But that's how she took it.

"Back in a minute," she said, and went into the rear of the house.

I heard her rustling around in the closets.

She came back all right. She had gotten out of the sheath and the white milk foam collar, and even the garnet. She had on something that was comfortable, I could see. A three-quarter robe. Lace.

Naturally I whistled.

That choked off dry on my lips. In the dark I had not seen the other thing.

She tossed me the difference. I mean it rustled in her hands and fell like a dead, wet, hairy skin across my face and shoulders. It smelled of tobacco.

"You wear that one," she said. "It's nice, hon . . ."

It was. It was Kittinger's old robe.

That did it.

Oh, I could see how she might keep an old tobacco jar or a fishing pole or the watch and chain and a lodge button—that stuff—perhaps in a small shoe box. But not his black wool robe. And to toss it casually to me . . .

I felt the old instinctual warning hit my blood. It will do that when you are very frightened. It's the primitive, shocking alarm that still alerts you for the showdown, just at it did thousands of years ago in the jungle. A good powderman has lots of that stuff. It's the trigger for that sixth sense of danger. It will still save your life. If you want to live. I still wanted to live, at the moment.

I was cold sober. I was on tiptoe and hard of breath, like when you are out at night, maybe on patrol, and you hear a stone roll somewhere on a path, somewhere ahead in the dark.

She got it all right. I guess that my lips went stone.

That was when she said it, the words of love that came to her so easily. "You love me, Karney. I mean, do you?" And when I said nothing she added quickly, "Sometimes I think you *want* to get rid of me."

At that second it came back to me. For a moment I'd forgotten what I had figured out in the park, and what she had said the night we were parked in the car.

If you don't think he's gone, then he's not. Don't talk about it, but of course you did . . . we did. I remember just how we planned it. That's why you wanted to work on the pool. . . . For Love, Clifford. We did it for love. And now we have each other. Isn't that what you wanted?

She had casually tossed the robe across my head. The robe of the man, her husband, the one she said very blandly we, together, had planned to blow into the shattering quiet of another world.

Would a woman be so thirsty that she would crawl back into the pool and drown there? Would both horses run away, Cliff?

In a moment of awful clarity, as though some deep-buried charge had blown away the face of a sea wall and exposed something no one ever knew was there, I saw it.

If she believed enough to get through everything, up to now, and if she *knew*, in the way that a person with religion *knows*—if with such implacable certainty she simply denied everything . . . then what?

Her word against mine.

My word against her cars and dresses and home and position of bereaved wife, whose husband was late of the Force; against her, the great picture of middle-class life and goodness.

My word wouldn't stand up a minute. I was only innocent.

Her word against mine! The world is not big enough

for two people when it might, by error or jealousy or accident, come exactly to that.

The fear of that ultimate moment, somewhere in the unpredictable future, was what rocked me to the core of my blood.

All that went through my mind as the robe settled into my arms. But she was still smiling. She didn't suspect a thing.

When great fear hits the blood, you think ahead, often with great clarity. In combat a soldier does this when he knows for a single, suspended moment that it's root hog, or die; at the time these things flash through your mind, you keep right on acting. The hands go right on with the motion they might have begun.

"Sure, I love you, baby," is what I said, very coolly, and I stood up. I didn't have to reach for her.

Then I made her know it.

That's what she wanted. That's what she had been thinking about since she'd asked me up for dinner. On the roof I heard the rains becoming louder, for the first large rolling drops had begun to hit about ten. More than anything, Helen wanted to be loved.

So I did that.

Sure, I'm a louse. Lots of men are. I know I am because after I gave only a little bit of what she wanted, I broke—quick and clean. I came back with two Scotch highballs. Also, I was wearing the robe.

Both of those things, you might say I did for my own benefit, especially the Scotch I rigged in the kitchen.

"My, this is strong," Helen said as she snuggled her robe against mine, in front of the fireplace. The rain was increasingly strong now, and the time was getting on.

"Whiskey brought me around Cape Horn," I said, and cut the head off of my drink, right down to the waist.

She said, "It did?" And then she drank all of hers.

After that it was my party. Except we weren't pinning

tails on the donkey. Not tonight. I had a spot shot to the corner pocket. That's how I was playing it.

At some parties they might call it "Truth or Consequences."

Pretty soon the Scotch in her was talking with an accent right off the heather. So I went back out to the kitchen and rigged two more.

"He wants me to wear his robe, doesn't he, Helen?"

She looked for a very long time into the fire, and nodded yes.

"Where did you ever meet him, anyway?"

"Michigan. He needed me so."

"Yes, I know he did."

"He was so tied down by his first wife. She wasn't *good* for him."

"You were, though. I know you were, Helen."

She nodded into the fire and smiled to herself. "I made him beg me. Then I let him. . ." She raised her eyes. "Cliffy, bring me around Cape Horn."

I did that. But I was reefed down.

"And Cliffy?"

"Yes?"

"Answer me something. Real truth."

"Go ahead."

"Love me, don't you? Huh?"

We always got back to that one, so I showed her and she believed what my lips said to hers.

"Now you tell me, Helen."

"Yes?"

"What do you want, now?"

"You."

"I mean after that."

She came out of it then, but she said what she was thinking.

"Little girl. I had one once, Clifford. I really did. Not here, no. After that, I had to go to Michigan."

"Yes?"

"Now I want to travel. I always wanted money. Now I got money. Biggest money of all. I want to take a big trip. You'll take me there, won't you?"

I said I would.

Finally I said very casually, "Where was the little girl?"

"Oh, her. Roscoe City. I told you I was from the Northwest, remember?"

She had. Right in this living room. A very long time ago.

"Let's take the first leg of that trip now, Helen. You ready?"

I had brought the bottle into the living room, so that no one would have to get up. I thought she was going to say more, but there is rough weather, they tell me, coming around the Horn. Some of them don't make it. I don't know what else she was going to say. She fell over on her face. On my lap.

The party was over. For her.

That's how I had planned it.

I was at the door then. The time had come for parting. It was early in the morning.

At the door I turned around. The house was a shambles. The kitchen was piled high with everything that had been on the table. Out in the dining room the big desserts that she had had in the freezer were melted down into a red, pasty glob of meringue and strawberries. There were glasses all around the fireplace. It was pretty bad.

Worst of all, she lay not so much sprawled as drawn up into a little tight ball. Her curved back was towards what was left of the dying fire. She looked like a cinder, a pile of dark lace slag, breathing heavily.

As I stood at the door, leaving. I felt very sorry.

In a way it was a fight to the finish between Helen and and me. Even now I'd drifted into something I never imagined. I was in love with a daughter, but trapped by a

mother. Not trapped in the sense that the click of the steel spring was already in the air, but if I thought a day ahead, or into the kind of future that Maggie deserved, there was that solid sea cliff that someone, sometime, would have to face. That would be me. Oh, Helen might not spring it now, but—but . . .

Still, perhaps, she had given me the key, that tiny clue which would lead me out of the trap. Not that anyone can ever hope to escape. And I don't mean any kind of an easy solution. That kind doesn't grow out here in the Northwest.

All I wanted was to be armed. I wanted something that could help me fight back, if that day ever came. When you know you have to find something that will save you, and when you know a woman is the only one who can tell it, then you had better be a little bit of a louse. Perhaps that will save it for you. I mean, your hide.

But the shambles . . .

When she asked me up here, there was a generosity about it, and that was nice. No one needed to look very hard, through the kitchen and the dining room to the small huddled bundle in front of the fire, to see what all of her work and her generous mood had come to. I knew how she would feel when she woke up tomorrow at noon. And was faced by all of this. It wouldn't be a pretty thing.

So I came back from the door. I picked her up. I took her back to her own bedroom. After I turned back the sheets, there wasn't much to take off.

In the half light, there on her own pillow, she was very still. Her arms were spread out, as though asking for me. As I watched her lying there, she turned her face into the pillow and drew herself up so that the curve of her back was towards the fire, clear through the house, in another room.

So I messed up the other side of the bed. I mashed the sheets. I made my side look slept in.

That was the least I could do—leave her with a little chance at self-respect.

In the dining room, it only took a minute. I gathered up all of the glasses and took them into the kitchen. Then I cleared the table. Not good, but I cleared it, and emptied the ash trays. I snuffed out the candles. Things wouldn't be so bad, that way, until she turned the corner and got a first, hung-over look at what we had left of the kitchen.

I did not dare look ahead through the windshield as I drove down the hill. I drove by looking out the side window at the curb. That way you very well may make it home.

It was nearly dawn when I got there.

Even though I had to follow the curb home, I was not thinking of sleep at all. My body was a little drunk, but I was all right up here.

I was thinking of a little town in the north. Perhaps it was a half-day's drive. There I would find the stuff that would arm me against the future.

Sometimes you think you can actually do that.

Roscoe City.

Helen had mentioned that.

CHAPTER XI

BEFORE NOON I was biting my lips at the shaving mirror. If they weren't numb, I could drive.

Black sloppy scud from the coast hung just above the valley, moving very fast. I let the Merc unwind on Ninety-

Nine, heading north. Economical cruise is sixty-seven miles an hour, so I held her there. You sled along those broad, concrete highways we have out here and you'll be a long way from home by nightfall.

There are many towns between here and Roscoe City. They call it "City," but like Gold Beach or Remote or Wagon Wheel and a hundred other places in the mountains or strung up a valley, this Roscoe City never made it.

Four streets, a town square, and signs warning you to watch out for log trucks. If you live in these towns you find where the action is—in the Elk's Bar or in fishing camps or cabins here and there along a river. I had been through this town many times on my way north, but at the city limits I began to cool off. I didn't really know what I was looking for. If you don't know that, and you insist on looking anyway, you can end up pretty silly.

If anything, I had thought of the public library. Then I saw the office of the county newspaper. It had a big black sign hanging out over the street—*The Star Republican*—which gives you the idea. In the window stood a two-foot chunk of sapling, growing through a horseshoe. There was a giant hen egg and someone's collection of agates. Also, there were a lot of sale bills.

"You an author, by chance?"

That's the Northwest for you. They ask your business and then where are you from. That way there is no horsing around.

A chunky old girl in a long, pointed green eye-shade began to ask me all about it. I was looking around while she was talking over the counter, but all I could find out was that Roscoe City and *The Star,* as she called it, must have come out together. The presses came overland in a wagon, and I guess she must have been driving. Anyway, in the back, the same presses, I suppose, were still running, and on the counter were packages of sale posters and *No Tresspass* signs. Job work.

" . . . Looks like an author, I says to myself when I saw you get out. Don't pay no attention to those parking meters. What did you say your name was?"

"Door," I said. "W.T. Door."

That's a Navy gag: Water Tight Door.

"I've heard of you," she said, and pushed up her cuff protectors. "I review all the books."

By the time she made change for a paying customer, she had forgotten it.

"Your old newspapers," I said. "I dropped by to see them."

"Since what year?"

She had me there, so I said the first thing that came into my mind. "Since Hoover was elected."

She blinked under the eyeshade. "I hoped maybe you was a historical writer. Now my grandfather came across . . ."

She kept the bound copies through a room where the printers hung their clothes. There were also a couple of buckets and a mop. Beyond were the stalls, marked by years, and the back volumes in the dust, like great flat slabs of rock. They hadn't been opened in years.

"When will your book be out?" she said.

"I don't know. It's a scholarly work."

"That so?"

"Yes, it's like Kinsey, except it's on drownings and the Depression."

"Oh," she said, "That sport coat fooled me."

I sat down on an old spider-back chair, not knowing where to begin.

I'm no detective. Hell, I didn't even know what her name had been before she married Kittinger. All I knew was that in a vague way I was looking for Death. Yes, Death was what I was looking for. And Death was easy to find. It was all around me, bound up in the past.

About then all that schnapps began to fight. Oh, I was tough. I was working-man tough—a hard night, a bad head. All day in the sun, no lunch. A beer, maybe for supper, and

sleep that off. It takes years of training, and a streak of meanness, but that was me. Perhaps now I was a little out of shape. Still, I'd played it clean. I had called Maggie and said I'd be gone a day or maybe two. I had put a note in the mail for you-know. That way nothing would rumble.

Now it was catching up with me. I began to feel bad. Not bong-head sick, but done. Perhaps I was trying something out of my line, or maybe the hopelessness of it began to soak in.

Maybe there was nothing at all about someone, her name unknown to me, who later became Helen Kittinger in Michigan. But I had a starting point. I knew about how old Maggie was, for she remembered being on the front of her real mother's horse, and that all the trees were bare. I didn't know how long it took Helen What-Was-Her-Name to go from the Northwest clear over to Michigan.

I could bracket it within about ten years. Ten years in the past of a town called Roscoe City. You have to be patient, I suppose, and cunning to turn up something. I was already feeling bad just facing the job. I sat there with my head on the desk and thought of Maggie. Even she seemed very far away. Then Helen's voice: *For Love, Clifford. We did it for love. And now we have each other.*

The old fear hit me in the back of the neck. I began to pull down big green bound volumes as though I were being paid by the ton. I still didn't know what I was looking for.

But I was turning over a lot of paper.

No luck that day.

I hit the third best hotel in downtown Roscoe City for the night. That was down near the tracks and the train crews stomped up and down the halls all night. Actually, places like that have good beds and nothing else. If I had gone to the best place in town, there would have been the usual loafers in the hotel lounge. This way I didn't have to

talk to anyone, and if I slept until noon the desk clerk wouldn't feel he had to make a joke about it.

Next day at noon, still no luck.

All I found out was a lot about Roscoe City. It was quite a place in the old days. During Prohibition there were lots of shootings and automobile wrecks. The place isn't far from Portland, and a lot of hot shots used to come out to some dancehalls. Every Monday morning the paper would have stuff that happened Saturday night. There were pictures of the Volunteer Fire Department, and of two brass bands, and the foot races they had until the time the streets were paved and automobiles came in; after that people didn't run anymore. I had to watch myself or I'd be reading all of every paper. Once you start that stuff, there is no end to it: old weddings, foreclosures, divorces, and advertisements for steak at 29c a pound.

But no luck. I didn't see anything remotely suggesting any of the particular past that Helen No-Name might have left behind. Yet any one of the thousand pictures of the local brides, smiling out of the old newspaper columns, might be her sister.

"Your car, Mr. Door?"

It was the Eyeshade. Her name was Mrs. Pierce. We were getting real friendly, since I was something of a regular around *The Star*.

"He's giving out tickets. Someone called. Thought I'd tell you."

I went outside and put a nickel in the meter. In Roscoe City you don't put a nickel in unless the marshal is going down the street with a ticket book. The word spreads pretty fast; he never catches anyone but strangers.

"I been thinking," Mrs. Pierce said. "You got the wrong town for drownings."

"That so?" I said.

"This is a fire town. You ought to look for fires. Its the low humidity that does it. Why, any number of houses

and institutions and even the Baptist Church—little loss, say we, begging your pardon if you're of that sect."

I said I wasn't.

"I remember like it was yesterday," she said. "The stark tragedy of it."

"As bad as that?"

"The Home. Run by a retired minister in the old Patchelor residence, who made so much in the lumber business."

I said maybe I'd check it.

She knew the date all right—month, day, and year.

I pretended to be not much interested, since it was out of my line. Just the same I found it in a hurry when she left me alone. The bound volume for that month seemed just as heavy and as dirty as all the others. It was in October.

When I turned a page, I saw it. For a minute I simply sat back and let the spider-backed chair hold me up.

NURSING HOME RAZED. THREE INFANTS PERISH

Reverend Cole Suffers Burns on Hands In Rescue Efforts

Damage in Thousands as Local F. D. Volunteers Battle Flames

The picture was all across the front page: before, when the home was a three-story, turret-and-gable affair; afterwards, when only two brick chimneys were standing among the tall fir trees of the grounds. Mrs. Pierce was right. Roscoe City was a great little town for a fire.

You had to give *The Star* credit for coverage. For the rest of the week it seemed, nothing else had happened: origin undetermined; first discovered by; flames crept up the roof and consumed the attic; among the Fire Department volunteers were . . .

Then I saw what I had been looking for. It was right on the front page.

> Helen Trodt, resident nurse, was confined to her bed and could not be reached for a statement. She was doubly striken by last night's tragedy; her adopted daughter, Sharon Mae, was among the three infants that perished in the nursery. The infant daughter, age ten months, was legally adopted by Miss Trodt when the infant's mother was killed in an auto accident earlier this year. The child's mother was Miss Trodt's sister. . .

On the second page was a picture of Helen in a nurse's cap, the kind they always shoot for graduation, so that the little black band shows. It was Helen, all right. She looked then pretty much the way she looked now. I guess she had looked that way since she was a little girl.

I took out an old envelope and wrote down the year and day and page number. I had come all the way to Roscoe City and I didn't intend ever to look it up again. You will think it funny that all I got out of two days was some scratches on the back of an old envelope. You would be surprised how much better it made me feel.

On the way out I said good-bye to Mrs. Pierce.

"Find anything?" she asked.

I told her I was sorry. It looked like Roscoe City couldn't figure in this latest piece of work.

She hunched up her shoulders and smiled. I guess she was used to Roscoe City running last.

"I looked at the fire, though."

She brightened. She went all over it again, and I recognized some of the same stuff from the paper. Finally she got down to the ashes, and how the place was never rebuilt and the children that were saved all had to be taken somewhere else.

"And no insurance?"

"Only on the life of little Sharon Mae Trodt."

I didn't want to hear the rest of it. "I—"

"Not much—two thousand dollars."

I said something about the blessings of insurance.

"Then Helen Trodt went away," Mrs. Pierce said, "and she never came back. The stark tragedy was too much for her. Another loss sustained by our community."

Then they lost me, too.

I went out to the Merc just as the marshal was walking past. I had five minutes left on the meter.

I headed back home, sledding along that slow curving highway. The more I thought, the slower I drove. Finally I pulled off at a diner for coffee.

It's funny how you can be wrong about a hunch because of two pools: one in Michigan, in a stream. And one in the Northwest, never completed, behind a house. I had been looking for Death and I found it—not by water but by fire.

It came to me then. Fire is also like dynamite.

When I put it all together it made me sick. A little girl in Roscoe City, and in the same nursery two others. For nothing. They died by fire simply because they were around. Then a woman in Michigan died by stones and by water. Then Old Kitt, back out here by dynamite. At the moment, I didn't know how, but I knew why it fit together.

That was the point. Taken separately, there was no connection between those three widely scattered places, and perhaps others before and between.

Also, there was nothing I could add to the public record; all of the inquests were over. Everything was accidental. Yet they did fit into a pattern and that pattern did mean something. But I was the only one who knew. An old prickly feeling started at the base of my skull, as though someone or something lethal was near.

I think that is when I saw it. Helen was a cold-blooded killer. Some way I knew this was true. I did not know how.

And who would be next?

I could think of two good candidates. One was a man. That would be me.

"Look, Jocko"—it was the waitress asking me for the third time—"just how would you like this coffee I've been discussing?"

"Black," I said. "Very black."

CHAPTER XII

No one knows. I don't know myself.

Maybe I never decided to do it at all. Perhaps events themselves always decide for us. But about that time, when I came back from Roscoe City, I knew I had to do something. Oh, not consciously, like a thought-out plot or anything like that, but about then I must have known that one world wasn't big enough for three of us. That would be Helen, and Maggie, and me.

At first, I could think of nothing.

The afternoon I got back there were some letters waiting; one was from the Veteran's Administration. If you got yours in the war, you have to go up for a physical every so often. If it's a new doctor he looks at my legs and whistles and asks if everything is still all right. And I say, always, "About the same." The circulation is what they watch with me. In the GI hospital, when everyone else was burned somewhere, it wasn't so bad. And it could have turned out a lot worse. Mostly I avoid taking showers in locker rooms. That's about it.

"But would you, darling? If I ask you?"

Maggie was leaning across the table, looking into my face. We were over at the coast. About once a week we drove over there, through the coastal range to one of those restaurants. Even if its strictly meat-and-potato stuff, it's always nice to sit down about dusk and have a leisurely meal while the ocean becomes a sparkling metallic sheen under a full moon. It was one of the things we liked to do together.

In the movies, this is the place where the girl's father comes in. Or a truck crashes through the plate glass window, or a mouse frightens the starlet out of her pink skivvies. Nothing at all happened when Maggie said this as we sat before the picture window in this restaurant. Far off, hull down and fading, I saw an oil tanker separting itself by a broader sea from the cliffs and the undersea reefs that extend out for two miles.

I turned from the window and answered her. "No, I wouldn't."

She looked at though I'd slapped her. She lowered her head, and a spot of pink appeared near the double string of pearls around her throat.

"I—I shouldn't have asked you that, Cliff. I just wanted to know. . ."

I said quickly, "What my intentions are? Is that it?"

"No. No, not that."

I didn't say anything.

"Would it make a difference," she said finally, "if I said that it didn't matter what your intentions were?"

I pretended that made a difference, but really I was ashamed of myself and too stubborn to say no.

The only trouble was that Maggie was innocent. There is a terrifying sense of protection innocence brings out, but it also can crowd a man. Now that I think of it, if she hadn't leaned across the table like that and hadn't asked what she had no business to ask, everything might have been all right.

As it was, I hurt her, so I had to begin all over again. At center, it was her innocence that allowed me to hurt her. But it was that same wound that made me want to make her well. Before I could begin, she beat me to it.

"I just thought— Well, that we love each other. And that's all there was to it."

"Look, Maggie," I said, "I do love you. You know that."

She spoke even more softly. "You have to love me, Clifford. Or I don't know what I'd ever do."

It was as bad as that.

"Love is one thing. But I'm—"

"Are you going to play the numbers game with me, Clifford? Up to now it hasn't mattered. Or has it?"

I had to admit it. More than once I had accused myself with the old unlucky thirteen years, but as she said, I had been willing enough to forget it up to now.

"Let's get out of here," I said and stood up to leave. "I don't want anyone else around."

So we hit the road again.

It's nice about eight o'clock, following the black-topped road that seems to be a long skidding tire mark winding through the low places between mountains.

For ten miles I spoke to her very straight. I told her how I lived, where I went when I wasn't with her. Who my friends were. Finally I told her something she hadn't known. About my legs. How they were from the knees down.

"Is that all?" she said, and she stared ahead through the windshield at the long, black skid-mark of a road.

"There's a lot more. Lots more."

I told her I didn't have money and that I did not ever want money and that it wasn't in me to have a nice little place out by Boskyville or Horsechester. All of that, I knew, had been burned out of me and blasted out of my hide. And there were the other reasons, the women. Like each construction job that finally ended, and like each ton of shale I'd torn down from some eroded hillside, those

women and those jobs had taken something away. I was afraid, I told her, that there was simply nothing else left. And that she was young.

"That's really what is worrying you, isn't it" she said. "That there's nothing left?"

I said yes, and by saying yes, I lied to her. You can't tell someone like Maggie about someone like Helen. So I said yes, that's the biggest thing that worried me.

"Look, would you stop for a minute. Please?"

That was easy.

When the Merc stopped grinding small stones under the tires at the roadside, Maggie stopped looking ahead. She turned to me. Then she kissed me. Full on the mouth. And again.

There was something left all right. She knew it too.

Back in the restaurant, she had asked me something that was away out of my line, and I could not face it, so I looked out the window.

She had said, "But would you, darling, if I asked you? Would you please marry me?"

And that happens, too.

Like a lot of things, it's easier to talk after everything has already been decided.

"Don't you see," she was saying, "how I'd perhaps *need* an older person?"

"But not too old?"

"Just right. Like you."

It made a lot of sense while we were alone in the car, sitting at the curb in front of her apartment house. It was one of those nights, and I could have gone upstairs with her, if I'd have held open the door and then walked on in after her.

But I would not do that, I knew. She was different.

For a second—and I hope Maggie reads this sometime—she made me feel better than I ever thought I could feel.

"Would you mind dreaming of me," she said as we were at the door. "Would you do that?"

I said I would. I would start right now.

The door clicked behind her. The click of that machined brass bolt, slammed home in its little black cup of metal, was the click of all the apartment doors in the world. At that moment I knew I could change sides. I knew there was a chance to be on the inside of those apartment doors, for keeps; we would be on the other side of the door together, and all the world, like myself, would be locked out.

But would we be alone. Really?

I thought of the crumpled envelope I had put carefully in my desk at Mrs. Beale's, and of the fire in Roscoe City, a very long time ago; and I remembered the horseback ride, which was even a longer time ago. I knew we would never be alone. A third person would always be in the apartment, wherever we went. Her presence would be in my mind, even when I looked across the bed, when I woke up suddenly at night, to see if Maggie were still there.

Perhaps it was when the lock clicked that night, so unnaturally loud; perhaps I thought of being alone with Maggie, but that I would not ever be really alone, up here. I saw at that moment someone was in the way.

In my line, when something is in the way, you move it.

Outside, yes, but I liked it. As I saw it, I had the bright promise, like a reading lamp above twin beds, that I could —when I wanted it—could be inside. But with the promise came the fear, I see now, that I might lose it after all. The fear made me wonder if everything would really be all right.

You see, I wanted it perfect for Maggie. I was no bargain, so I was going to do everything I could to make her happy. That's what I mean by innocence like hers; it's the kind that lights a fuse somewhere in a part of you that never seemed to exist before.

I began to buy all the magazines on the newsstands. *Western Living, Sunset,* and all of those that tell you about redwood siding on your dream home. They make a big deal out of a natural stone patio and sling chairs and the "family living" kitchens where the kids can learn to operate all the machinery.

Where the first snag came, it isn't easy to say. I had been looking in the magazines and at silverware patterns in the jewelry store windows. Though I was living at Mrs. Beale's and staying in the same room, I was going farther and farther away to jobs that at one time couldn't have gotten me out of bed. That's the way you get ahead. Bu it was no good.

I needed dough, big money, to bring it off right.

Somehow, through something I could not control, the rules of the game were changing. Before, with only a little, selective work, and a single room and a used car and a few records and maybe a total of six friends, I made out. But with the redwood siding and the natural stone patios and the stuff that was nice to read and yet so harsh and far away in reality, I just drifted along, believing what I wanted to believe. Never in my whole life had it been like this. Quite a change for me. Most of all, it seemed at though I was getting very old.

All of this, and a lot of other things—the practical side—was what I was going to have out with Maggie. I was going to cut through all this business of us really needing each other. I'd do anything for her, I knew, but I had to know how we stood. It wasn't a matter of how much she would put up with, but of exactly how much we could salvage of what I was, and what she was, and of all our pasts.

But I never asked her.

I intended to. And I would have, except the next time we had a date—a Tuesday—she was nearly crying.

"Better spill it," I told her, as we went along the side

streets towards a neighborhood movie. I was still being cautious, but she liked it.

In the darkness of the street we walked along hand in hand.

"I said I wouldn't mention it again."

"Forget that stuff."

"You know what it's about?"

I had a hunch, all right, and I didn't like it.

"About daddy."

I had thought it was something else. That word had gotten around about a little party I attended, not so very long ago, where the little crabs slid off the plate, among other things. It shows how you can get. I was actually glad it was about her father. I knew I could handle that one.

Okay, so she was back to that. It wasn't hard to be patient.

"You know I told you once I saw him wave?"

"Sure, I saw him, too."

"Have you remembered anything more about that?"

I said I hadn't.

"Well, I just couldn't forget it, honey. I couldn't."

"So?"

"It was the way he waved his hand that we talked about. But what I remembered today was the shirt!"

I remembered too; only I remembered those glossy photographs on the police chief's desk. I remembered the shirt in those pictures. What there was left of it. Black, with letters: *Aloha.*

Suddenly I did not want to go to the movies. I said. "Let's sit down."

Maybe it was half an hour before she spoke again. We sat there on a bench that was for people who rode the bus. A couple of buses pulled up and sneezed open their doors. I waved them on. It was a little eerie, sitting there, smoking cigarettes, and waiting. It was something like the moment when the lock on her door clicked so very loud.

"The Hawaiian shirt," she finally said. "I thought it was the wave of his hand, but the shirt is what reminded me."

"What?"

"And the reason I didn't make the connection was that I thought, right up until today, it had something to do with him."

"Well, wasn't it his shirt?"

"Of course. She bought it for him. I saw her."

"You saw her?"

"But she didn't see me. She was among the dress racks. But she brought home only the shirt. A present. Daddy always liked loud things like that shirt. It was a—a joke."

"So?"

"She was buying something from the dress racks, but it was only the shirt she brought home. I *saw* her at the racks. She didn't bring them home. Later I saw them in her closet."

Without knowing why, I thought of a robe. A robe that fell across my face like a wet skin, the night I sat before her fire.

"That day she bought a dress."

"Lots of women do, Meg."

"And a lace gown."

I remembered that one all right, but I didn't say anything.

"And Clifford?"

"Yes?"

"The dress was black. And the lace gown was black. All black."

I felt sick.

"That would be the dress," I told Maggie as we turned to look at each other, there in the semi-darkness of the bench. "The one she wore at Headquarters. And at the inquest . . ."

"And how did she *know* she was going to need black—two weeks before?" Maggie asked me, and she held off as long as she could, then she put her head on my shoulder.

"Before what?"

"Why, before the accident," she said.

"You can't go too much on that, Meg. Maybe she just liked black."

We drifted over to a little bar. I felt like having a hair of the dog I hoped would bite me real soon.

Meg rode along with a draft. Just one.

I think it was a half hour later that I seemed to hear a single flute-like voice saying something into my ear. Not "flute-like" because that's movie stuff, but more like a whiskey-voiced clarinet. That was my girl Meg, still hanging on to the fuse of our conversation. In the way of the innocent, the ones that won't use a bar for what it is intended, she was toying with the fuse that would blow us apart. I could see right then it was only a matter of time until she came up with something. Though I didn't let on, I was thinking ahead to that moment and what I could say then. That moment came quicker than I had thought possible.

"Know what I think, honey?"

"You have to tell me."

"Someone must have helped her do it."

Though I had been thinking, I said the wrong thing. "I wouldn't know."

"Oh! I don't suppose *you* would."

When a woman raises her voice like that, you hear a very funny thing at a bar. You hear a silence that flows down the bar until there is a cone of silence around the two people who are arguing. When she said *you* her voice was very high. The bartender turned his back and walked away.

When we got outside, I got her calmed down. I told her I didn't mean it. And that a place like The Shamrock was only for talking over baseball scores. When we were on the side streets once again, I asked for a recount.

That's what I got.

She had first thought of going to her old friend, the police chief, with this little tidbit. She had thought it would clear

up the whole business, or at least she would be able to add this in the statement she gave at the time. We walked for a long-time and I let her do most of the talking. Always it came back to this:

"*I* think someone ought to know."

Even after Maggie got cooled down and knew all over again that I was on her side, I saw there was no use trying to stop her. If I said hands off, she would think she had no friends at all.

Finally I said my piece. I told her there was a right way and a wrong way to go about these things. I agreed that this was very, very suspicious and that someone must know about it. Also, I pointed out that there were no doubt several other explanations. There always are. The dress was maybe for something Helen had in mind, something entirely natural.

Maggie cooled off. You should have heard me.

"Maybe she had planned a party to surprise you. Or something."

She knew that was way out in left field, but she got the idea.

I gave her a clincher. I'd be on a job for two days, but I'd see her after that. In the meantime, try to think of all the angles. Maybe we could explain this to ourselves . . .

"Because . . ." I told her.

"Because why, Clifford?"

"Because you wouldn't want an investigation, or someone keeping an eye on us, now would you?"

I hated to say that, because when someone like Maggie has an idea, there is never any ulterior motive. She wanted only justice, and when you are young, like her, justice seems a very simple matter. You go to the police and tell them she must have planned it, and that someone must have helped her, and who could that be?

"Yes, honey," she agreed. "You're so good about these

things."—we were at the door of her apartment again—"I don't know anything. Because I haven't been around."

So I took her around. A little. That made it all right, when I kissed her. Then I said something into her ear. What I said must have been very funny. Both of us laughed and laughed and laughed.

That's how I lied to her, and touted her off with all the reasons for not doing the right thing. That's how I used our love, to buy a little something that I needed.

Two days' time.

CHAPTER XIII

Two DAYS. That's what I bought. Time comes high. I bought it with something that's not around much any more—the stuff that it takes for someone nice to believe in you. The kind of stuff that comes with a woman in love. You spend it, like that, and soon there isn't any more.

If you have ever done any hard rock work, you know about faults. That's one thing my father told me when I was first starting out. A fault in a rock face is not the same, exactly, as a vein, but you get the idea. Underground, in the hard-rock country, a good man gets his tonnage by knowing about that. At least they used to. Some of the old-time men, like my father, could read the towering, solid walls of grey, far beneath the hills, like you read the lines across a woman's face. You must be cunning and you must drill and tamp and blast along the grain of the rock, for that way the rock works against itself. That way the earth itself seems to come apart

or it may leap out from a ledge like a solid wall of water before it trembles in midair and falls.

"Like a chicken," my father used to say when I was underground in a drift, trying to see by a lamp. "Don't you have to carve a chicken at the joints?"

That's what I meant by events make the decisions for us, though at the time we may pretend we ourselves do it. We think we can blast or carve when there is no fissure or vein or cartilage or joint, but this is always error. The vein or the fault was there from the first. But we do not see it. Not until later.

First day.

I sat in my room looking at the street. I know that little section of bricks and curb and shanty-faced houses very well. At noon there is a break in the traffic. Everyone has stopped, I suppose, to have a bite to eat.

By three o'clock I saw how it was: the veins or the fissures in that hard rock wall which stands for anything you have to move, or that is unknown. In my mind I called it "Operation Helen."

But I had not decided, yet, to kill her.

There were other ways.

You might say I figured my charge. Of course, I only knew what I could see on the surface of that rock face, but that's usual when you think about it.

I knew what explosive I'd use on her. Very suddenly, like the sharp detonation of a mortar shell, I would attack. I would accuse her.

That had not happened to her yet. She had been too "upset" and grief-stricken and respectable for that. I thought a sudden detonation, set off in her face, might make a difference.

First the simple things, like the black dress for mourning, before anything had happened. She'd explain that one, I knew.

Then the little matter about a runaway horse. I spent a lot of time and finally I saw how to place that one. I saw how it could fall; the injured woman on the rocks called for water after Helen whipped up the horse and made it run away. Helen gave Meg's real mother a nice, long, cool drink at the pool. She held her head under. Then Helen walked home. Something like that.

Then I would touch off Roscoe City and two other babies in the nursery that had done nothing at all. Except they were too close to another adopted child that was no child at all. She was only a small, wiggling insurance policy that needed to be cashed.

Since I didn't know about Kittinger, he could wait until the last. Something might come out. You never know.

Then I tried to see how it would, or could, fall. There are only a few possible ways. In my line of work there is something simple and clear and logical. That's why it is so unforgiving of error.

First result: Helen would be gone.

As a force, as a threat, she would disappear forever. She'd quickly see this town was no place for the two of us. She would vanish. Her ticket out, her excuse, was her grief. There would be no problem on that score.

But in a flash—at that moment—I saw something else.

Before that, all I wanted was a clean break. I wanted Helen simply removed, for then Maggie and I would be alone. But from that moment on I wanted something else that was also in the lode. Something with a little sparkle to it. The redwood siding, the natural stone patios, and the kitchens full of white-front enamel.

Helen had said that *we* planned it. Therefore, before she shipped herself out, I'd put in for a little back pay. Those few extra hours on the big pool were double-time, and then some. Blackmail, some people might call it. Helen would have to put up without a whimper.

One night, before the fireplace, her own Scotch had told

me through her own voice that—at last—she had the big money. But Federated Mutual would renege so quick it would make her head swim. I would offer Helen her choice of two different seats—both of them were hot, one was a witness chair.

But would I ask for it, for me? Oh, no. Not for me. I wouldn't touch that slag with a safety-toe shoe. In fact, I did not really want money. For myself. I did want it for us, though.

So before Helen left very suddenly, for—say, Arizona—she could always be generous and good and loving. She could make everything up to a girl who was still very young. Maggie.

Finally, I saw the last possibility. Suppose that Helen simply smiled and poured tea and stood very close to me. And suppose she said, *"We did it for love and now we will go away. Together Clifford, together."*

That one was easy. I'd say yes.

I mean, then Maggie could go to the police station. I would go with her. She would say her piece. Then I would say very hesitantly that I was also worried. Oh, I'd be reluctant and terse. Finally I would have to tell them about a certain bound volume and a whole week of stories in a place called Roscoe City, just up the line.

After that it wouldn't be Helen's word against mine. Then it would be a mother against her daughter.

That was different. Maggie would win in the end. Therefore she would win everything—the big house and all that money and me. After all, she was an only child.

So that is the way I saw it, at first.

Even now I think if it had been a matter of making only a clean break with Helen, it might have worked. Or would it, with all of that sparkle in the same lode? Once you see it sparkle, right there before you, it is not easy to forget.

But I will say this, I did not intend to kill her. Then.

Perhaps it was the fear that something would come be-

tween Maggie and me, that I couldn't measure up or scrape up enough money, that made me see the possibility of fixing us both up, with only a little bit of extra stuff, in the same hole.

I saw all of this very clearly about the beginning of the evening. The one I bought very casually with a lie.

After dark, I went out to eat.

Then I got in the Merc and drove very carefully towards Larchwood. I cruised around until it was very dark and then I drove past the house. It was pretty well blacked out, but someone was home.

I turned around farther up the road and coasted back with my lights off. I parked with the windshield heading back for town.

I walked across the side yard that had never been landscaped, for though it bordered the road, the house really faced the other way. There was lots of privacy.

I didn't think of it until I saw a chink of light through the blinds.

You know how it is when someone pulls down a venetian blind very quickly. Sometimes these new metal fittings catch one of the slats. I saw that one of the slats was almost turned. A knife blade of light came out, almost at the level of my eye. Somewhere inside there was a radio playing.

Something glided past this chink of light. A shadow. Inside. Inside the bedroom.

That shadow was flesh, bare flesh.

They were together, dancing together around and around and around in the bedroom. They were an upright swaying animal, with two backs, circling around and around under the overhead light.

As the man reached across Helen's bare shoulder to turn off the light switch, I saw his face. I could not see it before because his nose was buried in all of her shoulder-length black hair.

It was Everhardt.

But this time Everhardt wasn't selling what you would call insurance, and he wasn't paying off a claim. Or was he?

Now he was an inside man, you might say.

Very quietly, I walked around to the back door.

At the back door, I stopped.

Somewhere in the darkness I heard tires scream on a curve of the tarvi road. Somewhere across the buttes, the city lay. Somewhere up on the wall of the butte the tiny light of an insect crouched in grass.

At the back door I hesitated a minute, something like a man going swimming—he thinks ahead and his flesh cringes, for the skin knows all about the water from glaciers.

In the half glow of the moon, there on the back steps, I looked around. The butte and the stumps overhead had not changed. Not thirty yards away Hickey Associates' little shed was still where they had left it, the roof peaked against the sky. Probably Helen told them to leave it there. Her own new car was in the garage. The other car, identical except that it was red, would be Everhardt's. I got it: his and hers.

I put my hand on the knob. The door was not locked. Someone had been in a hurry.

Oh, I knew I didn't have to be quiet. There are times when a man or a woman can't possibly hear anything. It was about that time.

Still I was very quiet. I had never before, by stealth, entered a house. I knew how a second-story man must feel when he cuts the screens while a party is going on in the basement. There was the feeling of illicit entry, and something else. That final tic of warning. But I was not listening to that.

The living room looked familiar in the half light. I sat down in a chair with my back almost to the fireplace. It was the same chair and the same place I had taken a long time ago, at Helen's big tea party. The black spears still

pointed at each other across the tops of the windows, but the tapa cloth drapes were now only folds of a deeper shadow hanging down from the brass rings.

I was going to light a cigarette, but did not. The tea things were on the little tea table very near my shins. With the tongs, I put a lump on my tongue, then listened to the breakup of the cube inside my mouth.

Then I heard the other sound, the high nickering voice of something—not a person—but a thing. My chair squeaked. I seemed to rise by the strength of forearms, without really standing. I heard it again.

All right. It's funny. But how unclean you suddenly feel when you hear very clearly that high single nickering voice in rooms not far away. The cube of sugar broke like a vial of acid somewhere in the upper part of my mouth, then somewhere in my brain.

If there was a sound after that, I do not remember it.

I was still there, standing on the hearth beside the fireplace when I heard them dressing. It was a little past midnight.

A door in the rear part of the house unsnapped and the hall light came on. Helen walked ahead; Everhardt followed.

Helen walked in and paused in the semi-darkness, remembering something. She walked towards me. She was forgetting his hat. Those outside men always have the hat. It was on another chair. She was two feet away when she saw me. I must have been tall as a tree.

She screamed, the kind of a scream where the mouth is round. With her lips rolled out, like a doughnut, she screamed again.

I have to hand it to Everhardt. He didn't budge. He simply flipped on an overhead light. And there we were.

The introductions went pretty fast. No one shook hands.

Still, Everhardt didn't turn a hair of those nice curls. I could see him looking from Helen to me, with that country-club smile all over the part of his face that you could see.

He must have figured he was the inside money. Anyway, he was all suited up, and he wore a bow tie. He had tied it perfectly in the dark.

Helen fluttered around, groping and saying, "Oh, you scared me, ha ha. You really did scare me."

Everhardt decided he had to carry the ball. He was no fool. You've got to be tough if you are an outside man moving insurance—tough and mean and to the point. And also polite.

"Something—" he said, when Helen fumbled, "something we can do for you?"

I got it: *We.*

"Something," I said, and looked down at her, "with the lady of the house." I slurred it softly, putting him on the sidelines.

He didn't take it up. He looked at Helen and said, "You want to see him?" He could slur it, too. *Him* was some kind of an ape, someone who might not be able to answer the parts of speech.

"A drink," Helen said, and I recognized her busy act. She was in and out of the liquor cabinet before you could say, "On the rocks."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Let's take ten."

It was up to Laughing Boy. He couldn't leave because he had to hear, and yet he couldn't insist because he didn't know anything. Not yet. So he sat down, but he said he had to leave. There we were.

"About the pool, Clifford?" Helen said. Then more insistently when I didn't answer: "Would it be about the pool?"

She looked directly into my eyes. It was my cue. For a moment, I thought I might brazen it out, then talk to her alone. But it was no good. Everhardt, I had a hunch, bought in a long time ago. Besides, that's what she wanted. A nice little chat. Helen could explain anything.

Maybe the curls got me. Maybe it was Helen, sitting there

with her ankles crossed and her hands folded in her lap, leaping forward to hear what this was all about. He was closer to her than I was, smiling but alert. It was the solid wall of their white faces I wanted to smash. A silver-tipped decanter the whiskey people are putting out with their bonded stuff was near me. I poured off another lick. I set the decanter near my right hand. It looked like quite a long conversation.

"No pool, honey," Everhardt said, and I have to give him credit. He was smart. "Our boy wants money."

When I didn't say anything, he went on. "More personal injury? Maybe you got hit a little higher this time?"

"Nothing like that," I said. "Only murder."

Everhardt looked very closely across the table. He didn't sweat a drop. "Has there been one?"

I motioned back over my shoulder towards the crater where once a stump had been. "Sure, hadn't you heard? It's the real Philadelphia story. All the way."

"I will not hear. I won't!"

"It's money, all right," Everhardt said, and he became interested in getting his cigarette lighter to work, and then he yawned and said something about what-is-all-of-this-anyhow.

"Well, once upon a time . . ."

"Don't play games, my friend."

He bowed his head and looked into the configurations of his cigarette smoke. I'll never know, but perhaps at that moment, when he stared into his own cigarette smoke, he thought for the first time that everything the papers had said might not be true.

"Go on. We all ought to hear this." It was the clear voice of Public Inquiry. Not good.

So I set it off for him. On the butte the night that Kittinger died, the charge was laid in the stump, but not fully connected. Kittinger went up the hill for something. Either he was going to put in a few more sticks or someone up

there among the stumps had called down. Or waved. He went up to meet them. Or, perhaps, someone up there had stood behind one of those big stumps and hit him . . .

"With a feather, I bet."

Before that, I knew two people had killed him. Through the window I saw the two dancing. But with Everhardt sitting, laughing at me, on the other side of the tea table, it didn't sound as good as I thought.

I went on. The man on the butte hit him, maybe with one of those new brass putters they are selling. Or maybe with a club. Anyway, the someone I never thought of before walked down the butte and connected the battery box to the wires. Then he walked back up and draped old Kitt over the dynamite charge.

"And everyone lived happily ever after?" Everhardt said.

"No. Whoever it was then walked on across the butte and across the road and on to the golf course. This guy came on in as though he had been playing the back nine. It's not far across there, now is it?"

Neither of them said anything.

So I went on with it. "Someone else came out of the kitchen. She slammed down the handle, as she had seen us do in the back yard a dozen times. That stuff went off. I knew all the time it must have gone off. I don't rig misfires." I paused. "Then after Maggie ran up the hill, that someone in the kitchen ran up after her. Afterwards the Force gathered up what was left . . . or something like that."

Everhardt was not laughing exactly; he was only smiling. "Is that what you came up here to say?"

"I—"

"You go to lots of movies. It's bad for you, Karney."

He turned to Helen and put on the Insurance Jockey smile. He went on to say he would put up a notice at the Pro Shop. He'd ask the boys which one was out of bounds. Then he said, seriously, Helen ought to think about these accusa-

tions. Maybe the police really would investigate. Then he turned and smiled at me.

"The police would, I'm sure, look closer into the central thing. The explosives. That would be your line of work, Karney, not mine."

He had me there. At the station I had come off very well, but what if someone had seen me cruising around. A story in the newspapers might easily turn up someone exactly like that. And some other things, too.

So I tried Helen.

"Look, does the name Helen Trodt mean anything to you?"

"My, yes, Clifford," and for the first time she seemed like something nice was happening to her, "that's my name. My maiden name before I married Mr. Kittinger. Why?"

Do you take cream? . . . The English take cream . . . If you don't think it happened, it really didn't . . .

Everhardt moved in. Closer.

"Look, friend. No more movies. You see too many movies. I thought maybe you had something to sell. Then I thought it was a little payoff. I see guys like you every day and I—"

He checked himself and sat up straight as though I had just signed on for some of that accident policy stuff that is so hard to move. "I might as well tell you now, Karney. Helen and I are engaged."

One of the corner of my eye, I checked her finger. There was no ring. I guess that was one of the things they might have talked over, earlier in the evening.

Somewhere across the room Helen's lips were moving and the words came softly, something about, "I meant to call you later, Clifford . . ."

They had me. All the time I knew there was something else behind Helen's actions. She wanted something from me. Wanted to use me some way. I saw she was no different from a dozen other broads. If she could be that way about me, she would be that way with someone else. For her

it was all the same league; tonight I happened to catch the home team.

Everhardt had been in there a long time before she tagged me near the water line. He had known all about the insurance angle and everything else. He was the last piece of the puzzle to fall into place, it seemed to me. He had something I never thought Helen could have—brains. And she had gone along with his ideas. You know how those outside men are. On the way up. No doubt he also wanted the redwood siding and the natural stone patio. That stuff comes very high. So, with all the directness of signing another contract, he had moved in. It was easy.

And me? That one was easy, too. Maybe they didn't even discuss it. Maybe it was instinct with Helen. But she knew a fall guy when she saw one. For a single moment there was the orange sputter of flame somewhere in my own head. I knew all over again the thing that a man can stand least of all. Being used. And I'd been used again. Fish. . .

Everhardt was squirming, ready to leave. He was smiling and well groomed and friendly as a wet shaggy dog. Through the sharp edge of the fumes from the silver-tipped decanter, I smelled the soft oil of his pomade. He was, at bottom, very mean, but he had it made. He was inside money. They always are.

He would marry her, too. He'd go all the way and there would be nothing for Maggie or me. Everhardt was the kind that would take it all.

He was leaning forward when I said, "Congratulations."

He was picking up the decanter when I hit him.

I caught him straight. He ran right into it. It was a good sound. Nose cartilage and lips. And the old chop of knuckles. His head snapped back, and I could see he was out.

I was standing above him, waiting to see if he'd move.

I felt her arms around my neck. Just the arms, first, and then the soft gnawing of her lips around the side of my face.

"Oh, you did it, honey. You man—you."

I shook her off. But she came right back, and as I straightened she was beside me, holding on as though I had fought suddenly for her, alone. And had won her. There in the middle of the room.

"Like you said, Karney honey. . ."

That was the moment. I had not decided before. At that moment, when she was close to me, there by the upturned tea table, I decided to kill her.

Without thinking at all, I knew it. The world was not big enough for us both. She had used me, though I did not know exactly how; she had in the beginning used me. Now it was Helen and anyone she might pick up against Maggie and me. Forever. There was only one world, and it could not be two ways.

Therefore, in the middle of the big living room, when she said again, "*Together, Clifford, you and I will go away. Together . . .*" that moment I decided to kill her.

At that moment I did not know how I was going to kill her.

But I was going to kill her.

CHAPTER XIV

And yet I, didn't want to kill her.

That's the story. I know I said I did, in the living room, but as I came down off the hill I cooled off. Maybe the town and two members of the Force loitering around at the State Street intersection helped. When I saw them I smelled creosote.

The other thing was Everhardt's face. I altered him. His nice roving smile raked off on my knuckles when he ate it. For me that was payoff enough. I guess that's how I felt.

Next day—Saturday—I was still in bed at noon. Sometimes I do that—sleep around the clock.

"You sick?" It was Mrs. Beale.

"I'm okay."

"You don't look good. You better stay in bed and get some nice rest."

I said I would do that, and rolled over.

I was dopey, later, when she touched my forehead. I opened my eyes. It was Maggie.

"The lady downstairs said you were sick, Clifford."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess I really am."

"You should have called me. You should have called me when you got in from up North."

I'd forgotten. I was supposed to be up there.

"Awful. Just awful."

The way she said it and began to wring her handkerchief made me sit up. I'd been more than half asleep because I did not see until then that Maggie was bawling.

"Look, honey. You go downstairs." I was thinking of my legs under the covers. "I'll be down in a minute."

She caught on. It was funny to see her scoot out of there.

"Spill it," I said when we were milling around in the Saturday noon crowds. The shoppers were all yelping down the bargain trail, jumping the red lights.

"I mean I know who he was."

"What?"

"Who helped her!"

This was a different Maggie. Before, she had been a young woman; now she was hard. I could tell by the way she gripped my hand there was no stopping her, no chance of stalling. I figured she had Everhardt lined out some way. Maybe the engagement of the happy couple was already out.

"A man. I knew it all the time. Why, how else?"

I had also tumbled to Laughing Boy, but it hadn't worked out. I wanted to tell her that great minds work in the same channel, but that mine was quicker.

"Now they can find him. Right now."

Well, in a way she was right, of course. A private citizen ought to go to the police and everything ought to be legal. This was the right way to do it, and Maggie was very right. Naturally, she couldn't wait to tell me.

"Alice Frisbie is a friend A former neighbor. She went up there recently one morning. Helen was asleep. In bed."

I think I said, "Good place" but I was braced for the Third Man Theme. Hell, I thought, let's make it an excursion.

"Alice found Helen *very* sick. There had been a big, hoggish party and—"

"Helen say so?"

"No, Helen acted secretive. Alice saw the party had been for two. By the dishes."

"So what?"

"Wouldn't they have to see each other, Clifford? Wouldn't they *have* to see each other? Sometime?"

I said they would. I ought to know. The party boy was me.

That one had been quite a party all right. Oh, the police could satisfy Maggie about it. They could very quickly find out who was there. After that I could step down. And out.

I don't know what I said exactly, but I said I had to get back.

Maggie acted worried. She wanted me to go back to bed and said there was a virus going around and that she would go to see the chief.

"Look," I said, "it's Saturday. I'd like to come with you."

"Would you, hon?"

Yes, but maybe on Monday."

Her eyes lit up and she said, "Oh, yes, Monday, Monday.

Are you sure you don't want somthing—for the way you feel?"

I didn't tell her, at the door, for now I did not need anything. I had just bought some more time. In fact, by stalling until Monday I had bought the same time again, with the same currency.

Some nights you buy with that stuff come very high.

I waited for darkness to come. Then I moved. I put on a stack of records that would play one hour and twenty minutes. If you've listened to those same records as long as I have, you know about the time. Then I glued a postage stamp across the door lock; if anyone came in, I'd know it.

I stepped out the window and onto the roof of the side porch. From behind the overhanging branch of a maple, I jumped to the only patch of soft grass in the yard. The Merc was in the next block. I walked on past, my hat pulled down.

I took a bus up Capitol to Beardsley, then transferred crosstown. I sat up front, reading the *Blue Streak* and all about the mother and child that stood helplessly on the bank while daddy went all the way. Out here a lot of those fly fishermen slip in over the top of their hip boots.

That's the beauty of living the way I used to live—anonymous. Not ten people in the whole town really knew me. I lived underground, you might say. Without a family, you can drop absolutely out of sight and out of the world for an hour and twenty minutes.

I got off much before the end of the line. I legged it right along. My legs throbbed. If the V.A. found out I could get up hills like that, I suppose they would scream. Hell, I draw eighty percent on those legs.

Then I wished I had ridden just two more blocks. They began to cramp on me. At that time I usually have to have a drink for the circulation or I have to sit down. The cramps

can be terrible. Just the same, I put the old legs on Emergency and kept slogging along.

Finally I topped the butte, the hard way. Through the back. I played it across the lot, then downhill Below, the gravel drive was bright under the outside lights; the garage was a pig back in the dark.

I had to sit down. The pins folded. I was in Helen's other side yard, not fifty feet from the Hickey Associates' magazine. I lay there, trying to rub out the cramps. All I could think of was the records playing.

The deal was simple. The big Buick had all that stuff under the hood. Well, old Kitt's workshop was in the end of the garage. Paint cans, hammers, and so on. That's where we got the black tire tape to splice the wire. Everything was on his bench, right at hand. The hose, the tape, and maybe old paint rags. Helen and I were going to begin to take a nice ride.

Someone, no doubt old Everhardt—though it did not matter—would find her there. Maybe the motor would still be idling the next day. I'd do a sloppy woman's job on the tape. Oh, the blue coat boys would figure it out, finally. After Maggie told them about the man who came to chow, no doubt Everhardt could remember how despondent Helen had been.

Between Maggie being right, and Everhardt being around, and Helen being silent—blue, you might say—it all figured. I was working the vein of the rock on this one. The police would follow out all the leads, of course, but the trail would be very short—only from the front eat of the car, where they would find her, to old Kitt's workbench. There it would end. It would be written off as grief, no doubt.

Finally, in the dewy grass, I could stand up again. I had kept my eye on the watch. I had to lie there seven minutes. It seemed like a year.

So I went very quietly to the garages. The doors were always open. No one ever comes up around Larchwood.

But there was nothing. The garages were absolutely empty. Yet the lights were on and someone had picked up the telephone when I checked the line, and then had hung up. The space inside seemed larger than a barn. But no car. Then I got it. The Buick would be tied up at the dealer's for a two-thousand mile check. This wasn't night.

Well, I stood in the empty two-car garage. The doors were wide open. The hose was there and so was the tape and the rags. Not twenty feet away the light shone brightly out her windows. But no car. The damned car was gone. I felt a little silly standing there wearing gloves.

I had bought the night, and now the part I had bought by covering with the records was half gone. The Duke would just be coming on with *Mood*. The Duke is very great.

I was really hearing the music when the car almost caught me. Somebody was coming up the hill very fast. He skidded on the gravel. He almost nailed me, standing in the center of the garage.

By the time his headlights lowered, I had jumped out through the breezeway, the way I came in. Just in time.

I heard the rustle of tissue paper when the door of the car opened. Through the lattice work, from the darkest shadows, I could see two big ice cream cones—a yard long—that the man was bringing. Flowers. That was the way florists wrapped them.

You should have heard them at the door. It made me sick. I think it was the way they laughed together. I thought I knew who he was, and then the sound of his laugh came through over hers as they stood facing each other in the door.

Helen had been waiting, after all. For Everhardt.

Everhardt went inside. I heard the lock click on the door. I guess he must have locked it. Helen was thinking of something else.

I was outside again.

The lights came on very quickly, in the bathroom. Then the

light from the front room which poured out on the ramp snicked off.

If they had waited a minute, two minutes—if they'd played a record or had poured off a lick, just for old time's sake, or just anything—I would have left. My time was running out.

Exactly then the light in her bedroom came on. They were in a hurry.

I think I turned to run away then. I couldn't take it. I was running full tilt when I almost ran into it.

That's how I saw the vein, the fissure, the great jagged fault that suddenly told me how all of it would fall. It was a vein of lumber, about six by twelve by eight feet tall. With a roof that slanted against the dark clouds.

Maybe you thought the board wall of Number Two pine was dark. Not at all. It seemed like a white, bright wall of flame. If you are a better than average blaster, it's like meeting an old friend. Through the wall, inside that solid, reinforced magazine shed, I felt the presence of something that changed things—something in cases already opened.

That stuff was twenty-percent stumping powder.

That was the difference.

In the papers you've been reading it took thirty minutes. Less than five is more like it. I had to time it.

Actually, the hood was the worst thing. I fooled around the grille for the hood latch but couldn't find it. These new models are like a salmon can, up front. Finally I squeezed and hammered the only lump of metal under there, and the hood popped. It rose slowly like a huge black animal opening its mouth in the darkness of the garage.

Most people don't know it, but the juice that seeps out of a power line can set off this stuff. Naturally, a six-volt ignition system could shoot plenty. When you think of it, a car is the most natural way in the world. I mean, the whole shot is right there on four wheels, if you look at it

that way—a switch that takes the key only one person could possess; a six-volt system; a condenser that will make a sure-fire wad of juice for your caps; and besides the circuit, it's all metal. I mean, the body is by Fisher, safety glass, lots of interior pads, like foam rubber seats; it's all sealed, watertight, no leaks, and underneath is all steel and floor mats. It's very much like a little magazine shed on wheels, but they call it an automobile. For the perfect shot, it's the perfect thing. It's even shaped like a cone. No money down and nothing to pay.

And this was the perfect shot. I saw this clearly as I stood inside Hickey Associates' little magazine shed.

The boiler-plate door was solid behind me. Overhead, the light came down obliquely through the vents. There was a case of stumping powder open, the white-pine box with the lid splintered off, the oily paper lying on the floor. From habit, I counted out the sticks by twos. I put an even dozen of those smooth waxy tubes in a row, in a little ray of light which came obliquely across the length of the lumber-lined magazine shed.

The perfect shot. That's the one that lifts a stump up and out and lays it in three equal sections, as though God himself had arranged it in favor of getting on with the job. In surface work, it gives off the long rumbling blast that jolts a narrow trench across hardpan; when underground, it's the shot which snaps and gouges the quartz, the lode that you always follow, and leaves cleanly the waste granite all around. I saw very clearly how this shot would fall, and I knelt beside the opened pine case to count out a dozen sticks by twos.

In a separate metal box there are detonators, with their brown, cat-whisker wires. I did a funny thing. I counted out twelve and left the box open.

This was better than the perfect shot, because this one had to have the do-it-yourself touch. Like Hickey said, this do-it-yourself will kill us all. Just the same, to look like an

amateur, you have to be a better than average pro; that's why the dozen caps and the lid open on the cap magazine. That would not be Cliff Karney.

Ask anyone who knows me.

In the garage it was easy. I took the handle of old Kitt's wire-cutting pliers and poked holes in the end of each stick. Inside, a stick is like sawdust, so I sat in the driver's seat to do the holes. Someone was going to sweep the garage very carefully a little later.

Then I pushed the slender aluminum detonators into the holes I had punched in each stick, and looped the wire around the outside. No amateur would loop it exactly that way, but the wire would straighten out, so no one would ever know.

I twisted the wires from the detonator caps into pairs, then singled them up until the twisted ends of all the wires were like two metal horns on the top of the squat, flat package: six sticks wide and two sticks deep. It slipped under the seat like a well-folded road map.

Then I began at the other end of the circuit. I used some soft, orange-colored wire that old Kitt had used, I suppose, on a chime circuit for his door bells. You see, a solenoid coil takes the full wallop from the battery when you start a car. That's nice. It's a fine place to drain off your juice —nice and hot.

I taped the length of orange wire to the solenoid terminals and ran the end of the wire up through the hole in the floorboard where the throttle linkage goes to the accelerator pedal. The wire slipped through and up into the car like an orange snake heading for home.

I didn't even have to take up the floor mat, because old Everhardt was a very neat person. In the front he had an extra floor mat in case his shoes were ever muddy. I simply put this mat over the orange wires. I taped the leads on to the two wire horns that poked out from under the seat. All I needed now was a half turn of the switch key. No more.

I snapped down the hood, very quietly, and stood back to think.

Oh yes, the amateur part. No one who knows would use twelve sticks. That would be a crazy guess, and about twelve too many. One cap would set the others off, but a do-it-yourself man wouldn't know that, either. He would arm every stick.

The rest was simple. I put the side-cutting pliers, the rest of the organge wire, and the tape in the glove compartment. Someone would be finding those later.

In the garage, for perhaps thirty seconds, I looked at the car sitting there. Then I released the hand brake and pushed it back about five or six feet. The nose of the hood was now barely outside the garage door. The Buick glistened dully in the light, loaded, ready to take a couple of old friends for a little ride.

I guess I pushed it back about six feet because I didn't want the sides blown out of Maggie's nice garage.

Five minutes for the whole job. Not more.

Then I legged it back across the butte and walked along the bus lines until I got very tired. I waited well down towards town until a bus caught up. It was not the same driver, so I was lucky there. In a minute I was doing what the other three passengers were doing: reading.

That's when I noticed for the first time that my hand was trembling. Also, I was reading the paper sideways. I tried to get a grip on myself. If someone had coughed at that moment, I'd have jumped off the bus. A bowstring was stretching somewhere in my throat. Then I noticed my shoes. They had mud on them.

At Emerald and Epworth I dropped off the back of the bus. I hoped I could walk. It was the last act.

An on-the-street phone booth was lighted and empty. I invested another dime in this job. While I was dialing her number, it passed through my mind that the whole job, figuring detonators at twenty cents each, came to less than five

bucks. But the stuff really all belonged to old Kitt and in a way I felt I was working for him. So, personally, all it cost me was the dime for the telephone call. And my time.

Helen answered right away. She would be speaking from the extension right beside their bed.

She was surprised.

I had to see her. Right away. I sounded tense all right, and that worked for me too. She had to come right downtown. I told her where I'd be. Then she had to know what was wrong, so I told her Maggie was going to the police on Monday, about me and Helen. We had to see Maggie. Together. Now. If was life or death, I told her.

Well, she stalled. I'll bet she was squirming. Finally she said for Maggie's sake she would have to come.

That last one was not for my benefit. That would be for Everhardt, who was right beside her, no doubt.

I hung up. I was back in the room before either of them could possibly have gotten squared away.

It had all worked out. The Merc had a ticket on it for being parked on the wrong side of the street; the shoes went into a barrel of used oil behind the service station next block. The last record was just dropping on the turntable when I came back through the window. The postage stamp was still glued across my door lock. I had it made.

I undressed and went right downstairs in a robe, you bet, to check in with Mrs. Beale.

She had her head in the grille of the old console. She was listening to a couple of comedians.

I drank two glasses of water. Quick.

"You better?" she said.

"I don't think so," I told her, and drank two more waters.

"You go on back to bed."

And that's what I did.

CHAPTER XV

I WANTED A drink, but there was no whiskey. There are times when you want a drink the worst way—when even water seems dry in your throat—so you open all the drawers of the bureau and open the lids of suitcases, though you know perfectly well nothing is in the house. Nothing except water.

So I sat alone in the darkened room. I was "asleep" but just the same I was at the window staring down at the saucer of light dancing in the street. A wind had come up from the coast and the reflector on the light tipped this way and that among the dark branches.

Did you ever watch a three-foot length of tar-colored safety fuse wink and wink and wink? The more you watch it, the more slowly the fire seems to creep back along the fuse. Three feet is a million years, and you are ready to think it's a misfire, after all. Finally, after you have lost all interest, the ground underneath jars very suddenly.

As I sat there, waiting for something I could neither hear nor see, I did not seem to think of anything. Except a drink, and there was none. My foot, it was, made a tapping sound. I looked down at my bare foot on the floor and it was tapping, like a frog humping up and down, getting ready to jump. So I tried to hum a tune to what the foot was tapping, but all I got was a kind of squeak in my throat. And when I could hum a note, nothing came out except old army bugle calls, like Pay Call and Reveille.

The ground.

That's what I remember most about the hard-rock country where I was born. I guess me and my four brothers came out of those tunnels and drifts and tiny passageways beneath the hills, for from the hills my father emerged every evening when he came home from work.

That was before the days of workmen's compensation, and having a blaster's ticket; that was before anyone was organized. A man made enough down under the hills, blasting away at the lodes of darker metal in the granite stuff, to feed his wife and his kids, perhaps. When he came home all you could see was the white circles, which were his eyes, and the little white patches of the lips where his tongue had kept the lips a little moist. The rest of his face was black with the smudge of black powder, for they sometimes used that stuff. He did piece work, by the ton.

One day we first went down together. He took me with him into the hard caves under the hard-rock land. Most blasters begin that way, but when you work up out of the mines, you have to begin all over again to learn surface work. Finally, if you are very good at it, you may work in town, perhaps twenty feet from a dwelling or not far from moving traffic. And always, before you shoot you point your mouth to the sky and yell, "Fyr-uh! Fyr-uh! Fyr-uh!" for that is the law.

I never ran away from home. I simply went out on jobs that were farther away and longer away, until the home I used to know disintegrated in a week, as though it had been blown towards the sky by three cases of forty-percent. An explosion, after all, got my father.

He was standing beside a transport truck while the filling station attendant was putting more air in a tire. The casing blew. The flying rim took off the top of my father's head. He was dead as he stood there, but he did not fall, they said, for almost a half minute. After that, Mother died too. I never did go home again.

That force, which plunges through any barrier or any plan or blueprint, is always with you on construction.

The accidents make you see that to move and to build and to pour concrete, to blast and to fill and to blast again, bring the forces under the earth out into the open. In the brush, when no one expected it, summer lightning once ran down a tall spar tree, and the blast cut the tops out of all the trees one-quarter mile around, and even though I was standing behind a bulldozer at the time, the shock waves laid me flat. Or the dynamite deteriorates and the nitro runs out like molasses, so it is taken to be burned. That time, the boy did not know the wrappings, the cartridge materials, had also become explosive. Or, mysteriously, in a way no one ever understood, a defective transformer that no one knew about near the street railway, dumped current into the circuit. The galvanometer read twenty-five, of course, but all of that stuff went off prematurely, and they never did find Eddie Harper. Or someone leaves metallic tools in the magazine shed, or someone tamps too hard on a primer cartridge, and like the rim of the truck tire which took off his head, you simply are not there any more.

About then, I guess, on a construction job in Texas, I met a girl called Barbara. Maybe we were kids, but it was nice. I called her Skin. That was a pet name I had for her. I called her Skin because when I first knew her she was skinny, and later it was the Skin I loved to touch.

But the job petered out, and there was much rain. I left and when I came back, Skin had married. But it was no good. I heard later she stabbed him with a butcher knife, and after a while they let her out of the woman's prison. But I did not see her after that. But I remember Skin. I guess we were both very young. Nineteen.

The army part you can skip. They can always use a blaster and sometimes at dawn, when it was very cold, two of us would get around behind a pillbox and even if there was nothing to bank the shot, that new explosive we used on

demolition slammed in iron doors. We always blew out the whole casement. That's where I was standing one morning in winter, in the corner of a pillbox, when a phosphorous grenade began to shuck the flesh of my legs. At the time you hardly feel it. That's how I got mine.

And where are they now? Oh, working someplace up or down the Coast or up in B.C. There is Crazy Case Ernie Sloan, who loves to see the stuff blow. On every job he loads it in, and you can tell where he is working because there will be no tops in the trees all along the right of way. Then there is Reefer Terrel, and Ace Malone, and old Jimmy Hall, and there is Three-Finger Castle. Maybe you know some of them. They are all good men, hard rock, surface work, or under the sea. . . .

So you think I set it up for Maggie—the old guy takes on the big one, and thirteen years difference. A long day's work, started in the afternoon? Come again, Jocko, because no one that's all right up here would play those tickets. And I'm not a bug. Not yet.

Most likely it was the big anger. When you see a guy like Everhardt, with all his connections, trying to social climb over a guy like Kittinger, and smiling about it, then a man must stand up. Or perhaps you know they used you and you don't see how exactly, but it was once too often. Or perhaps it is the thing they talk about around the Rock and Tunnel Worker's locals up in B.C., about "finishing out a job."

Maybe this last shot would square it with Kittinger, who also got his. After all, it was because of him that there is a girl called Maggie. Or perhaps it was all these things, rammed together and set off when their nickering laughter floated off like a cloud of smoke in the dark night. At that moment you go a little bit crazy. But you see, very clearly, how the shot will fall.

I was playing out the lode. When I turned to run from the garage and almost ran into the powder magazine, the

decision was made for me. Casual anarchy runs the world. It's dynamite in the fissures and crannies that may appear to change things, but the change was already there waiting to be blasted. That same bright force is also in a woman's heart, or in a man's heart, though often not tamped well or directed.

I knew how it would have to fall. When Helen dressed she would either borrow Everhardt's car, on the ramp, or he would have to take her downtown. If she used the car, Everhardt would have a lot to explain, or, if they got in the car together, it would be a love pact, like you read about, or a case of lovers falling out. Either way, Maggie's piece and the Roscoe City story would tie it up.

That's what I mean. Anyway they elected to play it, they would do the job. On themselves.

And me? Oh, sure, they would question me, very much as they did before. Even if they tried me, I would beat it: that's justice, when they estimate whether or not you did what was possible. So you might say I played it negative. What couldn't be known and what couldn't be proved would save me, if it ever came to that.

By now it was over. They had inserted and had turned the key that would lock them forever in eternity. Then it came to me. I had forgotten one thing.

For the first time I ever remember, I had set one off without first yelling, "Fyr-uh; Fyr-uh! Fyr—uh!" which is the law. So I yelled it then, very softly and to myself.

I doubt if they heard it, up there near the buttes.

The cold wind seemed to make my teeth chatter. I couldn't control my arms at all. I got in bed and pulled up the blankets. But there it was in front of my eyes—the blankets over my chest, where my heart was, and underneath the jumping up and down and up and down and I couldn't stop it.

When Mrs. Beale walked in, I could have kissed her.

"Don't get up, Clifford," she said. "I just came in to see

if you were here. Sure enough." Then she added, "And feeling better?"

I said I was. I couldn't tell what she was up to and she wasn't the kind to let on until she knew where she stood.

"I just wanted to tell you, Clifford," she said after a very long time, with me trying not to shiver under the covers and her sitting alongside the bed, bent over and looking intently into my face. Not prying or accusing, but more like a doctor who thinks there might be something causing the pupils of my eyes to act that way.

"To tell you I remember. Distinctly. I heard you walking up in the room tonight. I heard your records playing. I think I could name a few . . ."

"Yes?"

"And I remember you came down for water—twice—because you were feeling sick. And I remember that I told that girl you were sick, too."

I got the idea. So I said, "I don't remember the program that was playing the first trip for water. I—I just didn't hear it."

You bet I didn't. I was out in a garage at that moment.

"It was 'The Lighter Side of the News'," she said. "And the plug is for Clopay Drapes. If you are interested?"

I didn't tell her anything because I knew she didn't want to know anything. That's the way she wanted it, for she knew everything and she knew nothing. That way we were both safe.

She was standing at the door, one hand on the casement. She couldn't resist one more thing.

"The car. The car is what always got that man I mentioned once to you . . ."

"On the street," I told her. "It's got a ticket on it for being parked all night on the wrong side of the street."

She turned then and went on down the stairs and to the back room where she sleeps. I wanted to run after her and kiss her. I felt like that. She's the best friend I ever had.

She didn't have to tell me what came in on the last newscast.

Maybe I went to sleep after Mrs. Beale turned, with her hand on the casement, and left. Knowing that she was on my side did it. In a minute or an hour, I was asleep, lightly, but with the blaket jumping only a little bit above the spot where my heart was.

The bell.

The front doorbell was ringing, ringing, ringing.

Outside it was just dawn. Clouds today. Sunday.

No one ever rings the front door at Mrs. Beale's. But I knew it was for me. I jumped into a robe and ran down the stairs.

She was standing there, swaying.

Her face was white as chalk, except for the deep dark under her eyes, as though she had been near black powder. Her lips were red, too red and smeared, because she had put on her lips while she walked. I could tell she had been walking, maybe all night. Wandering, was more like it.

Then I saw what I didn't notice at first. She was wearing a tartan outfit. Black Watch. Even the hat was Black Watch. On her it looked horrible. But there she stood, on the porch, swaying, swaying in front of me.

She held out her hands. She walked through the open door. She followed me as I stepped backwards into the hall, withdrawing. When my back touched the clothes hanger, I stopped. She stepped forward and I felt her arms writhe around my shoulders and tighten. I turned my face, but her clammy lips were all around and all over the side of my face. She was very cold. And very stiff.

"You called me, Clifford. You called me!"

That's right. From the lighted pay station.

I could not say anything. I began to feel weak. It was as though she suddenly drew strength from the warmth of my body through my robe. As she whispered, she began to

sway in front of me. Not the kind of a movement a person might do if they were going to faint. It was another kind of motion. It seemed to smother me.

"You called me, Clifford. And I came. To you. . ."

Just then I got another look at her face. Her eyes were wide open, staring. It was a look I had seen before. It was a look I had felt, also—when I'd kissed her that first time, with the tea table between us; or in the movies where carved angels of wood blew trumpets at each other; or through the fierce grasp of a cold hand when we drank coffee in out-of-the-way restaurants; or in her Buick parked at the edge of some view point when fog embalmed even the beams of our headlights.

All those times I thought she was going for me. For Clifford Karney, the better-than-average blaster, with a short fuse in his heart. But I saw it there in the darkened hallway. Last Sunday morning.

You know how quiet the streets are early on Sunday morning? Well, it was just light outside when I saw it in her eyes. When you see that wide-eyed stare, with the pupils fixed, and when you hear that voice that is coming from a throat that is nearly frozen from having walked or wandered all the rest of the night, you have to humor them.

"Sure, honey," I said when I saw how she was. "Sure."

"And you called me, Clifford. Didn't you, darling?"

"Yes, I did."

"And you called because we're going away. Together. We're going away on our long trip . . ."

"That's right, Helen. Trip."

"It's like you planned from the very start, Clifford. That first time I ever saw you. And now I'm ready. To go."

"I'm ready, too, Helen."

"You kiss me, Clifford. That's why I came all the way from—from up there . . ."

That's when I smelled the odor. I couldn't stand up, really, and she wouldn't take her writhing arms from around me.

She was searching for my face, but I had to look the other way. Then I saw the coarse hair on her face. It had grown out. I had not noticed that before. It was black.

"Oh sure, Helen, I called you to take the big trip. Like we planned. To the Islands . . . or somewhere . . ."

"Yes, Clifford?"

"Your car," I said. "We'll have to use a car. Where is the car? The Buick? Think, now."

"Gone," she said. "When he ran out, it— Well, it—it . . ."

I knew. It was gone all right.

"And Mr. Everhardt. Where is he?"

She stepped back and looked into my face with a blank expression. "I don't know anyone by that name. I never did."

"That's right," I said. "You never did."

"But you called, Clifford. I was getting ready to come."

"But Everhardt knew it was a man calling. He grabbed up his hat and he said, 'Go to Hell.' Or he said, 'I'm through.' Or he couldn't stand it any more. So he maybe slapped you —no, he wouldn't do that—he just ran out and jumped in his car. He was leaving you. Isn't that right?"

"Oh, no. No one ever *leaves* me."

That was it. Everhardt knew it was another man on the telephone when I called from the pay station. Maybe he did slough her one. Maybe he knew she would come around the next day to make up. Also he knew she couldn't go anyplace without his car, there on the ramp. So he took off, without her. In a huff. But he didn't go very far. Only a fraction of an inch that the ignition key must have turned.

When I came back down from dressing, she had wandered to the front porch. She smiled when she saw me, but there was no expression on her face. Her lips seemed put on more crooked than ever, and the rest of her face was white as limestone powder.

"We'll go now, Helen," I told her, and she took hold of my arm.

"Oh, so much fun. Like I've always wanted to go . . ."

"To the station," I said and we headed out into the street. "We start from the station."

The sun was already up, already burning the early morning clouds away. As we walked along under the trees, the first church bells began to ring, and then farther across town I heard others, all chiming in discord, as though everyone in the world were listening.

As we walked along, I felt an immense peace come over me. I was very calm. For one thing I had thought, when I saw the sunlit trees, of Maggie. The other thing was that Helen and I were going down to Headquarters together. Though I didn't know why, and still don't, that seemed right.

Under the trees, turning up one street and then another until we hit Farrell, I saw it had worked out. Everyone now had what they had wanted in the beginning.

I had Helen. I had her by the arm, leading her along. That's what I wanted that first time I ever saw her, when I was doubled up near a stump on the back nine. Now I really did have Helen. But not the Helen I had first seen. Now she was different.

Helen had me. There was no doubt about it. She had wanted me, she said, and I was her wish come true. She had known it when I telephoned this last time. The telephone call which set off the blast that made me a little bit guilty. Not much. Only of murder. Now Helen really did have me.

And we had Kittinger, too. Once we'd talked about him being dead. And that came true. Yes, we had each other and we had the condition of making that wish come true. Old Kittinger was dead, all right, and buried as deep as the law allows.

And the other half of the team I mentioned. The other half of the Dynamite Widow's team you have been reading about. I guess Everhardt got what he wanted, too—he wanted to get ahead with Helen, and that was given to him. Then

he wanted to check out. Maybe he saw the truth and turned to run away, as I had turned to run away when I ran squarely into the magazine shed, where the stumping powder was. But he had wanted out. Fast. That's why he had perversely and wrongly and beyond any calculation chosen that split-second to break with Helen. Yes, Everhardt wanted to get far away from her, very fast. And he, too, had his impulse come true.

Even Maggie got it. She wanted to be free of her stepmother, but she also—I think—wanted me. In this world we are only given, it seems, a single wish. And Maggie was free. At last.

Then there was Old Kitt. Only Kitt did not get what he wanted out of all of this, because all he got was a little real estate. A little plot that is going to be hard for him to get rid of at any price. Perhaps it was security, after all, he dreamed of; if this was his secret wish he got it. But like everyone else, I guess he thought of security being not quite so cold, and not quite so much like hard pan.

Then we were at the stationhouse.

I led her up the steps. She didn't even know where she was. She was staring ahead. She was finished, up here.

That's when the reporters began to throw the questions. That's when they took all of those pictures you've been seeing in the papers. They were waiting for a break.

Then this woman reporter, I guess, came in. She'd been out to where the blast went off, about midnight. She's the one who got the woman's angle—the clothes in the closet, the "Customary Black Watch patterns," and all of that. She named Helen the Dynamite Widow.

Everyone had been trying to find her all night, but she had walked right through town to Mrs. Beale's. That's the Force for you.

Someone told me about the way it happened.

The grille went forward through the garage and on through the wall above the work bench, like a mortar shell. The

turret top blew clear over the house, a hundred and fifty yards up the butte. The demolition "expert" already knew how it was done and that it was someone who didn't know a damned thing about it. After that, I didn't hear anything.

They showed me the insides of the back room you hear so much about.

"Look, Karney"—it was Al the plainclothes man, the one who got Kitt's old job—"I don't know where you fit into all of this. But would you write out a statement? Would you mind just starting at he beginning?"

Al was having a big day. You could tell that. So far he knew absolutely nothing.

"A place to write?" I said.

"In here," they said, and they walked with me back through a corridor, past the cells they really do not use any more.

"Could you write on that?"

It was the bridge table, with one folded leg, in the room with the nice curtains where the matrons used to drop in for a smoke.

The man at the door had a gun.

Then I began to write.

CHAPTER XVI

YOU GUESSED IT. This is the statement I began to write on an old bridge table with one folded leg. I kept calling for more paper. They kept bringing more paper, and Al kept saying, "Can't you keep it down?"

Naturally, it's been a big time down at Headquarters since this second blast. You've been reading all about that in the papers. They got hold of Maggie and she told them everything. She's been wanting to anyway. Then I slipped a pretty decent guy the reference from the Roscoe City *Star,* and that fitted in with the Upper Michigan stuff. That's why you've been seeing pictures of the house up by the buttes, and the way she knocked off Kittinger, without any help at all, and the rest of it.

I feel kind of sorry for Helen. The newspapers have tried her, and re-tried her, and convicted her; but so far there's nothing much really going on down here at Headquarters. A couple of times, Sunday, I heard that terrible, long-dying scream from down the corridor. I remember looking up at the man standing near the door, the one with the gun. He just nodded and said, "Pretty soon they will get her quieted down."

Monday, it was, they took her away. I guess you saw the picture, the closeup, of her tied to the stretcher outside the hospital. That's just about it, for her. I don't think there is a regular citizen in town that doesn't know—*know* for sure—that Helen did for Everhardt what she did for everyone else in her past. It was a do-it-yourself job, and since she did it for Kitt with no help, they figure she also wired the car.

That's crap, of course, and I don't think anyone around Headquarters quite goes for that. As a matter of fact, I don't think they are getting any place. And me, I just keep writing.

"You got yourself tied into something, didn't you big boy?" was the first words the Old Guy said to me.

That was on Sunday afternoon.

I looked up. He was standing there, scratching his butt, half-looking over my shoulder. He was about this high, and gray-haired, and wiry. He was wearing a regular suit and a tie and a blue denim shirt. I noticed that right away—a brown tweed suit and a blue denim shirt. About the only

flashy thing was an agate watch fob, the kind they used to wear that looks like several layers of hard candy within a hoop of gold.

"Yes sir, Big Boy," the Old Guy said again very quietly as though he himself didn't believe it, "you got yourself tied into something."

He meant Helen.

At first I told him to blow, then I asked him how to spell *forgotten* and he said two t's. Finally he sat down and said it really was too bad.

"She's a case, all right," he said. "I've been around a long time, but I never do see one like her."

I stopped writing and we began to talk about it.

"She's a pathological case of some kind," he said as though I didn't know that. "but now she's tipped over the edge. She used to go near the edge, and maybe kill someone, like in that Roscoe City fire. Then she would be all right."

I nodded.

"Now she is tipped over. They do that sometimes. I guess she can't be expected to ever get any better. So they say."

I didn't say anything.

"That last blast did it, Big Boy. Still—" he paused—"it would have happened anyway. Time was agin' her."

He had me interested, so I asked him who he was.

You know how old fellows are. He started out away back. He'd been in enforcement all his life. He's worked for lots of insurance companies. Never anything big, but he had been around a long, long time. He'd been retired for ten years, maybe more. He'd heard about Old Kitt and so he came back, just for the hell of it, with Federated Mutual. They were glad to pay him cigarette money. The Force, here in town, knew nothing at all about him. Except for the blue denim shirt and the agate fob, the Old Guy didn't stand out in a crowd. I have to hand it to him for that. He'd known Kittinger a long time ago. That's why he came back.

"So you watched. Is that it?"

"Well," he said, and scratched his butt again, "I'm most too old for any of that rough stuff. No gun work. Mostly I'm a watcher. See a lot that way."

I guess he did.

"That little spread she gave you . . ."

"You see that?"

"I was sitting up on the butte. Smoking."

I remembered I had thought he was only a firefly in the weeds. I should have known; it was the wrong season.

"I guess you know all about Maggie and me," I said.

"Not all. I saw you leave. And you must have et someplace. Then you come back. You was on the right track there, Big Boy."

"Call me Cliff."

"Okay, Big Boy. Cliff."

"She's one hell of a sweet girl."

"Wouldn't know," the Old Guy said dryly, "but she was next."

"From Helen?"

"Sure. Helen wanted it all. I guess you didn't know about the will, or did you?"

I said I didn't.

"She was the executrix, Mrs. Kittinger was. But Maggie would get everything when she married."

I didn't know what to say.

"Maggie would never have made it. Do you think, Cliff?"

I didn't have to answer that. I may not know any psychology but I knew Helen. Maybe Helen would have gotten us both. I suspect she would have. That's one thing, naturally, Maggie will never know. She's got little enough left, as it is. No one will tell her that.

A couple of days passed and I didn't see the Old Guy, and I was writing away and asking for more paper and Al kept saying, "Keep it down, can't you?"

Towards the last the Old Guy came back. He was still standing there, scratching his butt, wearing his blue denim

shirt. Anyone retired, like him, don't have much to run on.

He told me how he figured Helen got Kitt to load more stuff into the stump with all the saddles in it, the one that I'd left wired. She got him to put in more stuff, which wasn't hard. While he was up the hill bending over, she went outside and put the other wire on the terminal of the Number Three blasting machine. And pushed the handle. It was that simple. She just waited until everything that was potentially lethal got lined up; then she pushed the handle.

Maybe that's why she wanted the pool, and the magazine shed, and me around in the first place.

That's the way she operated. She got others to assemble her materials, then she worked within the framework of what was simply around. As in Upper Michigan, she was glad to go for a horseback ride on the chance that opportunity might come up. In a way she planned it. In a crazy cunning way. She also could wait, and she was bold at the right time. That's the kind of stuff no force can handle; it's an order of events that is very different.

"And Everhardt?"

"Shame about him," the Old Guy said. "I don't know which one of you bitched it up the most. About equal."

I didn't get it.

"Federated Mutual assigned Everhardt on this deal," he said. "He was supposed to be social. He was supposed to get near the Widow Kittinger about the accident policy. You know what I mean?"

I knew what he meant. I guess it wasn't hard. What some of those outside men won't do to get along . . .

"But Everhardt went sour. You follow me?"

"No, I don't."

"Why, he got in so good with the Widow Kitinger he was going all the way."

I could follow that. Everhardt was playing it both ways. There was nothing in the world Federated Mutual could do

about it. Of course, that was only a shrewd guess on the Old Guy's part. Everhardt was coming up to the buttes a lot oftener than his operative reports said he was. In the reports he said he was getting no place. Maybe in the end the Old Guy would have got him. I bitched that on, I guess.

Maybe I wrote a couple of more dozen pages, scratching along with a pen. I stacked it up into a good-sized pile on the corner of the bridge table.

"How about last Saturday night. Was you on the butte then?"

"Cliffy . . ." he said, for we saw a lot of each other. Besides, the man at the door with the gun kept walking off and reading his paper, so we could talk. "I had your skin, Cliffy. I really had your ole hide. You walked right past me. I could have touched you.

I could believe it. I was thinking of something else. I guess he saw my legs cramp on me, too.

"And you didn't prevent it," I said. "I mean, after me being in the garage?"

The Old Guy's eyes were very blue, like the shirt. He hemmed around and said he guessed maybe he didn't.

Then I couldn't tell whether he thought maybe my perfect shot was a good idea or whether he was too slow getting down to unhook the wires from the solenoid. It's true he did have my hide right then: attempted murder. And now he had it for something worse. But I guess by the time he got down, or started to get down, the lights began to come on in the house.

Just about that time Everhardt ran out of the house. And turned the key.

The Old Guy said Everhardt was in a terrible hurry.

I didn't say so, but I knew why. Helen had mentioned the police. After that, Everhardt couldn't leave too quick. He knew the insurance company would be turning his past in-

side out. Maybe he thought this call was really for him, after all. Maybe he was trying to leave town.

And yet if he had played a record or had a drink for old time's sake, I guess the perfect one would never have gone off, after all.

But Everhardt did not; or the Old Guy was too slow.

And there it is.

Then he got tough with me. He may have been only about this high, and in a denim shirt, but he was still tough.

"That's why I *know* you are stupid, Cliffy Boy. I thought you was smart. Up to that night. Fact is, I kind of liked you. And you forgot, didn't you?"

I couldn't place it.

"The magazine shed was open. Now wasn't it? Didn't you just walk right in?"

I sat there at the bridge table. By law, a magazine has to be locked. Naturally only Hickey Associates had the key.

"And you, Pops?"

"Now you follow me, Big Boy. Hell, I had to have some place to get in out of the dew now and then. Now didn't I? Nice and warm. Lots of time, up there on the butte, there wasn't much traffic all night long."

It was so natural for me to walk into an open magazine, I hadn't thought anything about it.

Finally, Friday afternoon, I was done. It was quite a statement. I lit a cigarette.

The Old Guy was still around, scratching his butt.

"All done?" he asked.

I told him I was.

"I been around to where you live. The lady of the house likes you quite a bit. 'Bout my age. Says you were home Saturday night. She's a good witness."

I said I thought she was. "And in fact, I *was* home."

"That what you say there?" He pointed to the stack of paper.

"Not exactly."

I got it. If I dumped this in to Al and the Force, no one knew what would happen. On the old hand, a good lawyer might do a lot. At least Helen was out of the way. And Everhardt would not be back in town, in one piece, for quite a while. Not until doomsday.

"Cliffy, you better make up your mind. Now."

"If I had a lawyer, what would it be?"

The Old Guy looked off into space.

"I don't give no advice. You take what you want and you pay for it. But I never did see anyone plead guilty. Not yet."

I figured maybe Old Guy might not be such a bad witness either. Even if he was up on the butte, his eyes were not as good as all that, and besides— Suddenly I thought of Maggie.

Maggie had not been in to see me. I hoped she had gone out of town. Perhaps she had gone down South for a while. I couldn't blame her. Not with all this stuff in the papers again.

When I thought of her, I wanted to live. It didn't make any difference about the mistakes I might have made, now I wanted to live more than anything else. You get that way at the end of a statement.

Al the plainclothes man is going to be burned up. He thought what I was writing would clear up all this, but only the best lawyer in town is going to read it. That way, and only that way, I may sometime, somewhere, see Maggie again.

Maybe she will be waiting.

"Maybe life?" I asked the Old Guy, as though he were all the courts and all the juries and all the judges in the whole world.

"They got to prove it, Big Boy" he said after a while. "They got to get it on the line. That's justice. Me, I don't care one way or t'other."

From thinking about a life sentence, I slipped very easily into thinking about life itself, outside: a Merc sedan, a sport coat, a clean bed, and sometimes Sid's Package and Pony, where the windows are green and orange.

It was something to think about, all right.

And that happens, too.

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