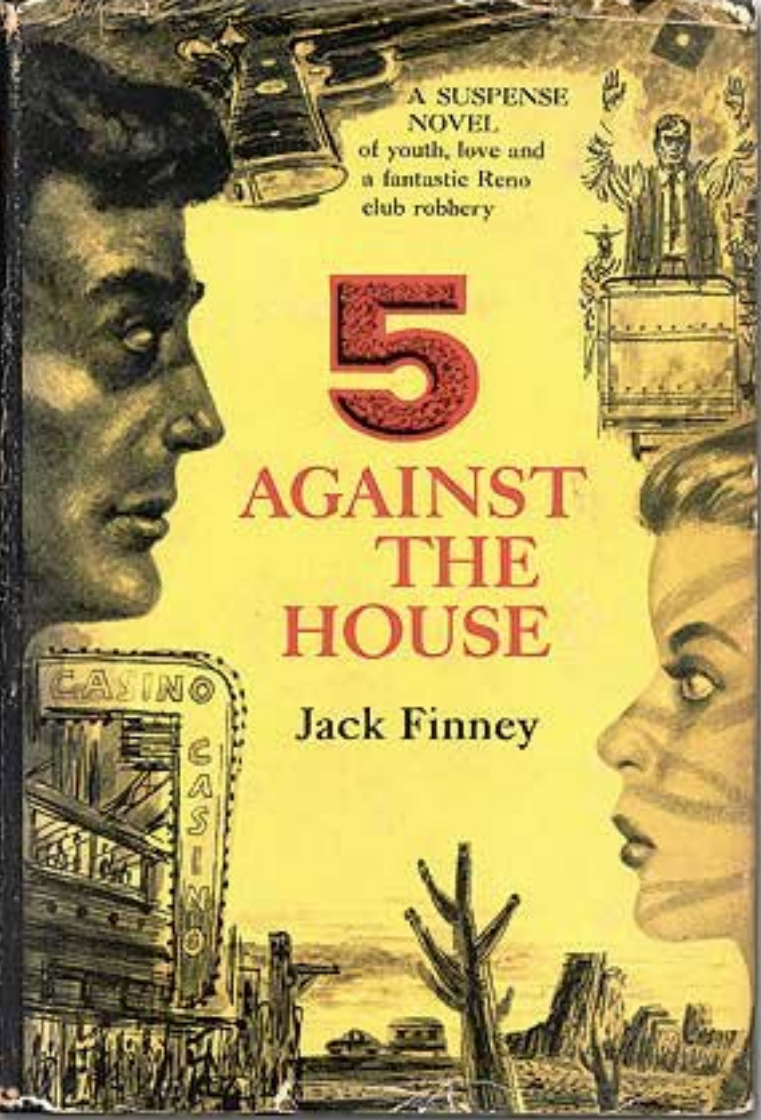
A SUSPENSE NOVEL
of youth, love and a fantastic Reno club robbery
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AGAINST THE HOUSE
Jack Finney
CASINO
CASINO

5

AGAINST THE HOUSE

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC., GARDEN CITY, N.Y., 1954

BY

JACK

FINNEY

All characters and incidents in this novel are fictional, and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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AGAINST THE HOUSE

1

I didn't want to go to my two-o'clock class, stay here in my room, or go out either. I didn't want to stay sober, didn't want to get drunk; and I'd already seen both movies in town. I might have called up a girl, but I was broke. I walked out, and down the fraternity-house hall toward Brick's room; I was looking for something—trouble, maybe.

I was nineteen, a junior at a small Illinois college; and even though it was early June, it might as well have been February. It was drizzling outside as it had been for days, and I'd been indoors too much for too long. I was in perfect health, weighed a hundred and sixty, with a kind of black-haired average good looks; and I was stir-crazy. I wanted to *do* something, I didn't know what; preferably something no one had ever done before.

Guy Cruikshank was in Brick's room, slouched in one of Brick's leather chairs, staring at the fireplace and the half-dead fire. "Al," he said by way of greeting, glancing up at me; he's

a short, stout, good-humored boy with a coal-black crew cut.

"Hi," I answered; I could see he was bored as I was. As usual Guy looked a little sloppy; white rumpled shirt, baggy old pants, and those worn-out slippers that somebody nailed to the ceiling once.

"You going to class?" he said.

"I don't know." I walked over to the windows, and stared out at the lifeless drizzle. "No."

"What're you going to do?"

I shrugged. "Kill myself."

"Move over," Guy murmured, then said disgustedly, "What the hell *is* there to do?"

"Swallow goldfish. Steal panties from the girls' dormitory. Hoax the nation. Write a book. Get married, killed, drunk, or all three."

"Slower; I'm making notes."

I didn't bother answering.

Guy said, "A kid told me about some school; the whole campus went nuts over a mythical country they invented. They were all citizens, they had a king, made laws, wrote a history, and published a newspaper. Even made up a language. Finally, they actually printed money, and it was good; among themselves, that is. Had themselves a hell of a time."

I nodded without turning around. "Probably happened just about this time of year."

"You suppose we could start something like that?"

I shrugged, and we were quiet for a minute or so.

Then Jerry Weiner wandered in; he's eighteen, a sophomore, a tall, slender, very graceful kid, as fair as I'm dark, and a bright quick-witted boy. He was wearing tailored green slacks and a matching wool shirt, always smart-looking. Jerry took one look at our faces, then shrugged and walked over to the other big chair; he felt the same way.

"*Think* of something," Guy said desperately, "or I'll have to go up and study."

From Brick's windows you can see clear across the campus to Church Street, three blocks away; an armored car was just starting up from a traffic light. "There goes a Brink's truck," I said. "Let's rob it; they're always good for a million or so." I was kidding Jerry, half-heartedly. He's a true-crime fan; owns a lot of books on famous murders and crimes of all kinds.

He smiled, knowing what I was doing. "Suits me," he said. "You guys ever hear about the armored-car robbery in Brooklyn, fifteen, twenty years ago? A classic case." We shook our heads, and Jerry said, "I've read several accounts of it, and it's the most beautifully planned thing I ever heard of."

There are worse ways than a bull session for killing time on a lousy afternoon, so I wandered over, took a log from the wood basket, and laid it on the smoldering fire, hoping it would catch, then sat down on the floor by the fireplace.

"Every afternoon," Jerry began, "this armored car unloaded in a paved courtyard beside their Brooklyn office. The guard up in the cab would open his door, pistol in hand, slide out, slamming the door, then stand at one side, on guard. That took

maybe three seconds. Then the driver'd get out, they'd walk to the back door, rap on it, then stand off, pistols ready. The man in the truck would open up, and carry the money sacks out.

"One day a man showed up at the public tennis courts across the street, and lay on the grass watching the players all afternoon; he just lay there, chewing a blade of grass now and then, lighting a cigarette. For weeks he did that, day after day, till he became part of the neighborhood scenery; just a guy with time on his hands."

Sitting on the floor, arms on my knees, I stared down at my old blue pants and sweater, my everyday going-to-class outfit.

"A man began coming around with one of those little white pushcarts," Jerry said, "selling ice-cream bars. Had a perfectly legitimate ice-cream cart with a bonafide city vendor's license, and did a fair business among neighborhood kids."

"I love this," Guy said. "I want to be the guy who lies on the grass."

Jerry smiled, and wrapped his arms around his long legs, his chin on his knees. "Next door to this courtyard was a little ice company; people'd come around to buy a chunk of ice; and pretty soon a new man got a job there. Between customers sometimes, it was perfectly natural that he'd jump down off his platform and stroll around the little courtyard, smoking a cigarette. Sometimes he'd be there when the armored car turned in, and he'd nod casually, and they'd nod back. They got used to him, too."

Chapter 1

There's a little handful of moments scattered through your life that stick in your mind forever. This moment, Jerry quietly talking, is one of them for me. A windowpane rattled, rain slashing against it, and then, on cue, like a radio drama, the log in the fireplace caught with the little snap and crackle of new flame. The room was warm and felt good, the long rainy-day leisure stretching ahead. Then the door opened and Brick walked in, and now our circle was complete. *Fraternity* means brotherhood, the framed charter down in the living room said, but we had our share of jerks and phonies, and Brick, Guy, and Jerry were the three guys I really gave a damn about.

Brick said, "Hi," smiling in the way he had that made you feel he'd been hoping you might be there. We answered, and taking off his leather jacket, Brick said, "What's the topic for today?"

"We're going to rob Brink's," I said. "If it ever stops raining."

"Fine." He nodded toward the windows and the rain outside —"It's a good silly-season project." He turned toward the fireplace, and Guy got up, gave him his chair, and sat down on the other side of the fire from me.

The atmosphere of the room had subtly changed. Guy said, "Bring him up to date, Jerr." Then he nodded vigorously up at Brick—"It's a good story; you'll like it."

Jerry resumed talking, repeating the beginning of his story, but I noticed he was choosing his phrases more carefully, a little extra anxious to interest Brick.

And I found myself, too, looking up at Brick instead of Jerry, to see if I could tell whether this interested him.

Brick was older than us—twenty-two. He'd dropped out of school for a couple years, then come back, was a senior now, and a sort of living legend on the campus. He'd been part of the school's greatest football team, the only member of it still in school, though he no longer played. Now he sat unfastening his cuffs and listening; a big muscular, very hairy man who made the rest of us still seem like boys. He was no taller than Jerry, but he weighed two hundred and five, and now, as he began rolling up his sleeves, you couldn't see his forearms for the copper-wire hair that covered them. It was his shade of hair, and rough pinkish skin, that gave him his nickname, of course. In five more years he'd be fat, I suspected; already he had a half-dollar bald spot showing. Now, though, intent on Jerry, his face had a kind of ugly handsomeness and strength; thick pink brows on a bony ridge, his jaw massive and absolutely square. His red-brown eyes were extra large, and alive now, as they so often were, with a friendly-mocking intelligence.

Jerry was saying, "All this time these three guys were doing something else. When the tennis-court man would leave each day, he'd stroll across the street, and on past the courtyard entrance. Looking bored, he was mentally timing himself; getting the exact feeling of precisely how long it took him to reach that entrance. The iceman, jumping off his platform and wandering over to where the truck always stopped, was doing the same.

"Until one day, when the truck turned in, the tennis-court man

was wandering absently across the street, the ice-cream man was standing with his cart beside the courtyard entrance, as he sometimes did, and the iceman, a cigarette in his mouth, just happened to be hopping down into the courtyard."

Jerry grinned delightedly. "He nodded, and they nodded back, but the guard wasn't paying much attention to him. Gun in hand, he was ready instead for the stranger who'd never yet showed up. He opened the door, swinging his legs around to slide out, his eyes searching the courtyard on past the iceman. And in just that moment, the two or three seconds when that door was open, the iceman was beside the guard, shoving a pistol, hard, into his stomach."

Hugging his knees, Jerry actually rocked back and forth in his chair with pleasure. "He took the guard's pistol, and there stood the tennis-court man, his pistol aimed at the driver. There was nothing they could do but climb down, hands clasped on their heads, around to the back of the truck, and the iceman rapped on the door, as he'd so often seen the driver do. The ice-cream vendor had lifted a sub-machine gun from the bottom of his cart, ready for anyone else who might come along.

"The back door opened, and the man inside found a pistol aimed at his nose; he raised his hands without anyone having to explain things. They made him open the vault in the truck, the ice-cream man covered all three guards, his partners climbed into the truck, and shoved half a million dollars' worth of baled-up currency down into the ice-cream cart. They wheeled the cart to the street, and lifted the whole works into a parked car. They

honked the horn, the ice-cream man backed out of the yard, then turned, ran to the car, and away they went.

"Within sixty seconds an alarm was out, with half the patrol cars in Brooklyn heading for the district. And the district was on a point of land; there were only two bridges and a few streets they could get out on, and police were already guarding them, checking every car that could possibly be them. But they didn't use those bridges or streets. A few blocks away, they were in a power boat and off into a mist they'd been waiting for, for nearly ten days. They got across to New York, into a car, and were lost in traffic, with no description of the car out, before it occurred to anyone that they might have escaped by water."

Jerry frowned. "But they had bad luck. They had a shotgun in the boat, somebody tripped over it, and it went off and nearly tore the leg off one of them. Even at that, they got safely into hiding, but getting medical help, and later trying to get rid of his body when he died, as I recall, provided the clues that eventually caught them. Except for that one bad break, there's not much doubt that they'd've gotten away with it."

We all sat there for a dozen seconds or so; I could hear my wrist watch ticking. Then I smiled up at Jerry, and nodded; I thought it was a wonderful story. Brick murmured, "Good story; damn good." Then Guy sat up suddenly, and said, "I love it; I'm nuts about it. Hand me down my gun and slide rule, boys; let's get to work on the crime of the century!" And that did it.

We wanted to do it! It burst in our brains! We were suddenly red-hot to plan some spectacular crime in every beautiful detail,

just like the guys in Jerry's story! I don't mean actually *do* it. But the planning, the working it out, sounded like wonderful fun; something new, fresh, and exciting to do; and we were all up on our feet, wandering the room in excitement.

I think all of us, lost in sudden thought, had a set of pictures in our minds, like a handful of snapshots. We could all see ourselves—standing casually on a street corner, secretly studying the arrival and departure of an armored car; or following a guard or someone down a street; walking into a bank-like building and unobtrusively memorizing the floor plan; then assigning tasks and duties to each of us.

It was nothing but glorified cops-and-robbers, if we'd stopped to think about it. But it sounded like fun, it answered some kind of bottled-up need in us, and—maybe you don't understand, or remember, how it could catch our imaginations, there in the restlessness of a dreary spring. But "college boy," "college man," neither one is quite right. One minute he's a full-fledged adult with an adult's mind and capabilities; but in the snap of a finger he can revert to the child he was only a short time before. And for us the very pointlessness of this notion was what *gave* it a point, like the college and its mythical kingdom that Guy had talked about. Or maybe it was rebellion against adult authority; I don't know. Anyway, it was something to *do*.

So when Guy turned from Brick's desk, where he'd been absently fiddling with some pencils, and said, "What do you say?" we all knew what he meant, and looked at each other, grinning, our eyes bright with excitement, even Brick's.

And now the room wasn't big enough. We wanted action, wanted to get out and *move,* and Jerry said, "Where's the Brink's office; anybody know?"

Guy and I spoke together—"Out on Fleckman Street," and grinned at the coincidence; then Guy added, "Across from the old horse-auction barns."

Slowly, and smiling—like an adult who finds himself in a kid's game, enjoying it more than he'd have thought—Brick said, "We can take my car."

2

Within minutes we were all downstairs and in Brick's car, a green '52 Ford convertible, parked in front of the house. Brick had his leather jacket on, Jerry had a forest-green cashmere sweater pulled over his wool shirt, I'd put on my navy-surplus jacket, and Guy came along last, managing, as usual, to look ridiculous, in a long green slicker, plaid cap, and a wide grin.

We drove out Main, the windshield wipers clacking away, on past the main business district, and into Fleckman Street, forking off to the left; it took us ten minutes, maybe, to reach the Brink's office. We were all exuberant; Jerry and Brick, in the front seat, quietly so, not saying anything, but turning to glance back every now and then with a grin. In the back seat with me,

Guy had that damn plaid cap pulled over his eyes. "The perfect disguise," he said, "because who'd ever wear a fool outfit like this? Nobody, obviously; so I can never be identified." Then he had the cap turned around on his head, the peak at the back. "Call me Robin Hood," he said. "I'm giving my share, except for a few hundred thousand, to the deserving and pitiful poor. 'Bless you, Guy!' hungry widows and orphans will cry. 'Bless you, and your old plaid cap, symbol of mercy and courage!' Poor but beautiful young girls will fling themselves at me. 'Take me, Guy!' they'll beg. *'Please!* It's an honor, for you are our benefactor!' "

All the way out, he kept up that chatter, the rest of us smiling, delighted with him and ourselves. "We'll impregnate a bunch of one-dollar bills with a chemical I read about," he said. "After a certain length of time it bursts into flames. We deposit them in the bank in the morning, later on Brink's picks up the day's take, and fire breaks out in the truck. The guard's strangling from the smoke, has to open the back door, and we're following along, disguised as volunteer firemen. So, naturally——"

We parked maybe thirty feet south of the Brink's office, and across the street. It was a one-story concrete building, with a little strip of grass on each side. The building just south of it was a dental-supply place, with a dentist's chair in the window. On the other side was some kind of little factory, because we could hear the sound of machinery, and there was a bunch of brown cartons stacked in the window. There were no windows in Brink's; it was a squat little concrete fortress. But just below

roof level, a double row of glass blocks ran around the building, admitting the daylight. The door was wood with a heavy-looking glass pane; just below the glass, fastened to the door, was a big bronze shield that said *Brink's.*

Brick turned off the ignition, the wipers stopped, and we could hear the drizzle on the canvas top. We lit cigarettes, and slouched down to watch. Nothing happened. Cars passed, the tires humming on the wet street, but nobody came in or out of that office, and after a while I was aware that my feet were getting cold.

Finally Guy said, "Right now, or at any time in the next fifty years, I could draw you an exact picture of the outside of Brink's office. For whatever good that will do."

Jerry nodded slowly, and said, "Yeah." No one else had anything to say, and I think we all began to feel ridiculous. Then Jerry said, "All right; we haven't learned a thing of any use here. So what? Patience is the big thing. Let's go find out what that truck does."

That pepped us right up again, and Brick started the car, U-turned, and headed back for the heart of town. Then we toured the business streets, up and down, looking for the armored car, for maybe forty minutes. Just as we were getting fed up with that, Guy spotted the car parked a block off Main, angled in at the curb in front of the supermarket. "Call me Ahmed Kah, the mysterious Arab!" he yelled, and Brick swung into the street, and we parked half a block behind the truck, the motor running.

Within a minute a uniformed Brink's man came out, carrying

a canvas sack, another Brink's man a few paces behind him, gun in hand. The store manager, in his apron, carrying a broom, followed them out, and said something, and the man with the sack smiled and nodded, unlocking the back door of the truck with a key; the other man stayed on the sidewalk, watching. The first man climbed into the truck, closing the door behind him. Then he came out, slammed the door, and both men got back into the cab of the truck. The truck backed out, then lumbered away down the street.

We followed. They turned right, right again at the next corner, and down to Main. On Main, they parked at the Burkee Building; the two men went inside, the driver staying in the truck, and we parked half-a-dozen cars behind. In ten minutes they were out, this time with two canvas sacks, and they put them into the truck in the same way as before, then they were off again.

They stopped at the savings-and-loan, Stragle's Restaurant, a jewelry store, the Follett Hotel, then at O. W. Johnson & Son, neon-sign manufacturers, on Colonial Street. Each time we trailed along, keeping several cars between us whenever we could, and parking when they did, half a block or so behind. In a way it was monotonous, and at the same time quietly exciting. I felt we were learning something, slowly assembling facts that, useless at the moment, would gradually shape up into a plan. I felt like the men in Jerry's story; careful, watchful, infinitely patient. And I discovered, slowly trailing that armored car through the drizzle, that spying on people who don't know you're

there has a quiet tingling excitement of its own; it was fun like nothing I'd ever done before, and I felt tough, hard, and competent. We weren't talking; no one had said much ever since we'd first spotted the armored truck.

Both doors of our car were yanked open simultaneously, and two black metal rods were shoved inside—my mind was absolutely confused, I couldn't make myself get hold of what was happening. "Stay just like you are. Don't move, and you won't get hurt," a slow tense voice said. The metal rods turned themselves into shotgun barrels, with two men holding them, and now I saw their brass buttons and blue uniforms; police.

"You at the wheel"—a cop's face appeared at Brick's side, red and tough, looking in through the open window over his gun barrel, eyes hard—"turn off that motor, and do it slow." Brick's hand reached carefully out to the ignition key, turned it, and the motor died. "Now, get out, and keep your hands in sight." Very carefully, slowly as an old man, Brick slid out, then stood in the street, beside the cop.

"Now you," the cop on the other side said to Jerry, and Jerr got out, and stood on the sidewalk.

Guy and I were next, and we stumbled out, stooping under the canvas roof, our hands up at our shoulders, palms out. Brick's cop brought him around with us, then we all stood huddled together on the corner of Colonial, a cop on each side, their gun barrels, now, aimed down at the walk. I saw their patrol car parked half a dozen car lengths behind us, a cop at the wheel, his face blurred behind the moving windshield wiper.

The armored-car man, the one who'd carried the sacks, was coming toward us, walking quickly.

"Now, what the hell do you think you're doing?"—Brick's cop spoke to all of us, but turned to Brick for an answer.

Brick's face had gone sullen. "Not a thing," he said, looking squarely back at the cop; the cop was just about his size and build, I noticed.

"Don't give me that, god damn you"—he sounded dangerous. "You've been following that car around for an hour."

"What car?" Brick said, and I thought the cop might actually hit him, but now the uniformed Brink's man stopped beside us, glancing back at his truck.

"These the guys?" the other cop said quietly; he was taller and younger than the other, but not as broad.

"Yeah," the Brink's man said, and nodded firmly. "Been trailing us for half an hour."

The young cop's eyes flicked over us; I saw him glance at Guy's cap, and he shook his head in mock admiration. "I'll bet he's got a record as long as your arm"—he nodded at Guy. "He looks plenty tough." Then, quietly contemptuous, he said, "You college boys?"

Before Brick could answer, I said, "Yes, sir," and I said it meekly.

"All right," the first cop cut in. "Now, what the hell you been doing, and if you feel like getting smart about it, it's all right with us. We'll take care of you, college jerks or not"—he glanced at Brick.

Again I answered fast—"It was just a gag. A joke. Something to do. We followed them around just pretending we were going to hold them up." I'd never in my life said anything more ridiculous; a few yards up and down the street, three or four people had stopped in store doorways, watching.

"Hold them up, hah?"—he sounded grimly pleased.

"Not really," Jerry said anxiously. "We weren't really going to *do* it or anything like that. We were just fooling around."

"That's right," said plump little Guy, in his long green slicker, nodding earnestly, that damn plaid cap bobbing up and down; he was laying it on thick, being college-boy as hell. "Honest, mister." He quickly corrected himself—"Officer." He did fine.

The looks in their eyes grudgingly relaxed, and I knew they'd had to believe us. "College boys," the big one said. "You guys had to get out and work for a living, you'd quit acting like a bunch of goddamn babies." I could see he was sorry there wasn't going to be trouble, and he glanced at Brick, and as though making a last effort to stir something up, sneered, "You a college boy, too?" But then he just turned away and said to the Brink's man, "Well, what about it, Phil? You want to do anything?"

"I don't know"—the man shrugged a shoulder. "I guess not. I'll have to make a report, though; I don't know what the company'll want to do."

"You got some identification?" the young cop said. They were bored and contemptuous now, their gun butts resting on the walk.

We dragged out wallets, and showed them enough—Student

Athletic Association cards, chemistry-lab fee receipts, and the like—to prove we were bona fide students at the college.

"All right"—the young cop lifted his gun, ready to turn away —"I guess we can find you if we need you. Now, get the hell out of here."

"Yeah"—the other cop picked up his gun, too. "Go on back to your school and play with the daisy chain." I don't know just what he thought he meant by that, but the sneer in his voice was plain enough.

We got back into the car; Brick started the motor, and pulled away from the curb. I glanced through the back window, and the tough cop was shaking his head disgustedly, the Brink's man and the other cop laughing at something the cop was saying.

For a block we didn't speak, Brick gunning the car straight ahead, hunched over the wheel. Then Guy said, "Well, fellows; I'm going straight. Not because crime doesn't pay, but because I'd have drilled those cops in another second. If I'd only had a rod, and knew how to use it. And killing cops is illegal." Jerry smiled sadly, I managed a smile, too, and Guy snarled, "I'm a cop-hater, you hear me? They'll never know what a close shave they had, tangling with Greasy-Thumb Cruik——"

"Shut up," Brick said viciously.

For a moment Guy stared at the back of Brick's head, then he slouched down and said quietly, "Okay. You're right. I was just talking against the way I feel."

"Brick, let me out," I said, "I'll see you guys back at the house." Brick just nodded, slowing the car, then he pulled into

the curb. I got out, muttering, "See you later," and turned away.

The drizzle wasn't much more than a mist now, and I walked off, hands in the pockets of my navy jacket, hearing the car draw away behind me. I was going nowhere. I just wanted to be alone with the way I felt, letting my disgust with myself wash over me, not resisting; just walking through the semi-rain and taking it. I hadn't thought it was possible I could act so childish, and I felt inferior, and diminished. I was physically a grown man, who hadn't acted like one, and I deserved the contempt I'd gotten from men who weren't children. I felt humiliated, felt ashamed.

At Main, I turned right without thinking about it, then I realized where I was going; to The Bowl. The Bowl is a college hangout on East Main; a soda-fountain, hamburger-and-sandwich place with booths along both sides. Every college has a place or two like it, I guess. And I was going to see Tina Greyleg. I'm no psychiatrist, and if you told me I wanted to see Tina, just now, because I was really looking for a mother or something, I wouldn't argue it. Or if you said I wanted to regain my manhood, that's okay, too. All I knew now was that I had to see Tina; I just had to.

3

She was there, just coming on duty, standing in the back room, her weight on one leg, one hip thrust out, both arms raised to

her head, her fingers adjusting her starched cap in her hair. Esther, a thin, bitter-faced woman in her fifties who hated all college students, was just going off duty. There was only one customer, a man at the fountain eating a sandwich.

Tina saw me and smiled, still working on her cap, and I flicked a hand, greeting her casually, and sat down in a booth. Then Tina walked in; the man at the counter looked up, stared, then beckoned, wanting something else, and I sat glaring at the back of his head. He was just a guy, in his thirties at that, but I could have knocked him off that stool because he was sitting there, watching Tina and getting that still, silent look every man who ever saw her gets on his face, and I could feel his thoughts reaching out toward her. I sat waiting, and doing exactly the same thing; while Tina got the guy a piece of pie I knew he wouldn't have ordered from Esther.

I'm ashamed of this, I admit it, and I swear I'm not the guy, and Tina's not the girl, this might make you think. But I'd be lying if I said I could look at Tina, even now in a plain starched uniform, without being terribly aware of the body underneath it.

She had a beautiful figure—but you can walk down any busy street and probably pass a girl with a beautiful figure, and forget her in a half-dozen steps. But never Tina. She was not quite slim. At one and the same time, she gave an impression of slimness—her waist was tiny—and buxomness, too. Maybe her figure *wasn't* quite perfect; maybe it was even better. Maybe the unbroken swell of her hipline was just a breath more pronounced than beauty-contest standards, and the calf of her leg just the

hint fuller that could make you think you were losing your mind. All I know is that Tina could, as she did just now, shift her weight to one leg, lean forward to write out a check, then straighten, lifting an arm to tuck a pencil back in her hair, and you couldn't think of anything else.

There's a reason for telling this; I'm not just talking for the pleasure of baring my soul. Tina was standing, now partly hidden by the end of the counter, but I could see an ankle, marvelously fine-boned and slim, flowing up in a gentle curve that suddenly swelled into the magnificent roundness of her calf. She reached for a fork, her weight on one foot, and under the sheer skin of her stocking the calf tensed, hard and firm, the delicate tendons of her foot springing into relief. She stepped back, the calf went smooth again, the tendons fading into unbroken silkiness and once again, as so often with Tina, there was a blind instant when I wondered if I could stop myself from standing up, walking over, and grabbing her.

There's a thing Tina did occasionally; deliberately, I'm certain. She's the only girl I ever knew who sometimes wore sheer grey stockings; it's a shade you almost never see. And somehow the novelty of those gorgeous legs in sheer grey made an image you couldn't forget. She wore them, I know, because her name was Greyleg, so that when you heard or thought of her name that image rose up in your mind, until the very sound of Tina Greyleg could give you that desperate feeling that makes you think of wild things like smashing your fist through plate glass.

It made things worse that I liked her. I mean even if Tina had

been a homely girl, I'd have liked her personally. She picked up the pie, glanced over and winked at me, telling me she knew I'd been watching, knew what I was thinking, and was laughing, and teasing me about it. But she wasn't taunting me; there's the big difference between Tina and many a girl. She knew she was a woman, and saw nothing wrong with your knowing it, too.

She came over at last, leaving the guy with his pie and nothing to do but sit and eat it. Tina sat down in the booth, across from me, said, "Hi," and smiled. I answered, and then sat frankly studying her face, realizing as always that it wasn't actually pretty, and that it was the most attractive face I'd ever seen. I think her eyes were the reason; they were big and grey, the whites very clear, and as she sat smiling at me, they were friendly and knowing. Her hair was very soft, gently waved, but an ordinary brown in color. Her complexion was nice, but not perfect, the flat cheeks slightly marred by faint pockmarks, I didn't know from what. As though by rote, I went through the same thoughts I had each time I saw her; that Tina's face made her real; that if it had been beautiful, she'd have been a movie star or something else as remote and inaccessible to ordinary human beings; but that as it was, Tina Greyleg's face, only ordinarily pretty, intelligent, and human, made it possible to think that sometime, somehow . . .

"When do you get off?" I said.

She glanced at her watch. "At eight."

"I'm broke," I said. "I've got a quarter and three pennies. But I've got to see you tonight. I mean this isn't ordinary. I mean

even if you've got a date; Tina, you have to *break* it. You don't understand, it's hard to explain, but——"

"All right, all right"—she touched my arm to shut me off. "I haven't any date; I'll be glad to see you. I'll want to eat dinner when I'm through, and not here, but I've got money for that. Enough for you, if——"

I shook my head. "I'll have had dinner."

"Well, all right then; relax." She smiled. "We'll do something; we'll find some way to spend your twenty-eight cents. What's wrong, Al?"

I shrugged, and said, "Nothing." For a moment I sat staring at her, then I deliberately let my eyes drop, studying her figure, as far as I could see it. "You know what I'm thinking?"

"No," she said, widening her eyes in exaggerated innocence. Then she grinned, and leaned forward over the table toward me, close and provocative. Lowering her voice almost to a whisper, she said, "But tell me."

So I did—till she stopped me.

4

The house was full when I got back; guys home from classes, jobs, play practice, baseball, track; all sitting around the living room, waiting for dinner, reading papers or talking, three guys

jammed into the phone booth in the hall. I greeted them with a conventional insult, found part of the evening paper on the floor, and sat down to wait.

Dinner was the usual lousy meal, dried-out meat loaf this time. We all griped about it as usual, two sophomores began throwing bread, and the fraternity president, Dick Pulver, bawled them out in his usual stuffy way; a typical meal among the brotherhood.

I skipped dessert—bread pudding—and went up to Brick's room, and sat there until, one by one, Guy, Jerry, and Brick arrived; then Brick closed and locked his door. We'd said nothing about meeting, but we were all of us here.

Brick poked up the fire, got a flame or two, and laid a couple new logs on. Then he took one of the chairs, Jerry had the other, and Guy and I stretched out on the floor, backs against the fireplace.

So far no one had said a word. Now Brick spoke casually, almost cheerfully. "Some night around town I may run into that cop alone. And if there's any trouble, of any kind, for any reason, I'm going to beat the——" He told us what he would do to that cop, and I knew he meant it.

"Well"—Jerry shrugged, not trying to talk him out of it, or even caring; just taking a different view—"he was only doing his duty, as the saying goes."

"I don't *give* a damn! I don't care who's right or wrong, I'll beat that bastard half to death if I get the chance!" Brick sat glaring at us.

I shrugged. "It's been a long time," I said, "since I've felt so stupid. I feel humiliated. Disgusted. I don't know at who or what, though. Myself, I guess."

Guy glanced at me from across the fireplace, arms folded on his chest, and nodded in agreement.

Brick was irritated. "Sure," he answered me. "That's right; that's what I'm talking about. But what I've been wondering ever since is: are we really that stupid? Is it true we can't even fool around with something like that, without being picked up like a bunch of kids on Halloween?"

"Looks like it," Guy said.

Brick studied him appraisingly. Then he did an odd thing. Turning sideways in his chair, his back against one arm, legs over the other, he clasped his hands behind his head, and gazing at the ceiling, smiling reminiscently, he said, "Reno. Good old Reno."

We nodded then, each of us, smiling a little, too; we'd all been in Reno the summer before, and remembered it with pleasure. Guy and I have to work each summer; and Brick and Jerry decided to work, too, so we could all spend the summer together. I think it was Guy who thought of Reno, and it seemed like a wonderful idea. We were all going to get jobs at the gambling casinos; as blackjack dealers, roulette croupiers, stick-men at the crap tables, or whatever. It was a way to make money, a way that would be fun, and a wonderfully romantic thing to come back to school having done. It would put all the boys who'd worked on road crews, and the like, completely in the shade,

and the day school closed we drove off for Reno in Brick's car.

Of course we didn't get the jobs we'd wanted, except Brick. All the places had long since hired their summer help, and they'd never have taken us on anyway. But Brick came from Chicago, and had hung around some, we discovered, in Chicago gambling joints. He actually had dealt poker and blackjack, and even worked at a crap table, a little. Not as a regular job; but after he'd gotten to know the dealers, they let him relieve them once in a while, during off hours, just for the fun of it. He hadn't even done much of that, but it was enough to talk himself into a morning-hour relief job at Harold's Club. Jerry and I ended up as bus boys in a cafeteria, and Guy pumped gas at a filling station. We'd all had a wonderful time, though. Reno's a gaudy, exciting place, a perpetual carnival during the summer, especially around rodeo time, and we were all going back there to work this next summer, as soon as school ended.

"Remember Ida?" Brick said, and we all grinned, and Guy looked embarrassed and pleased. Ida was in the floor show at the Riverside Hotel; a very nice, almost beautiful girl, who liked Guy. He liked her, too, and they might have had a good summer together, except that she was—actually—about a foot taller than he was. Guy did take her out a couple times, for drinks, getting them seated as quickly as possible. But as he said, "You can't date a girl sitting down all the time," and he quit seeing her.

"Remember Harold's Club?" Brick said. We all nodded, and

I could picture it again in my mind; the most incredible sight I'd ever seen. It must be the biggest gambling establishment in the world; two immense floors and a smaller third floor, crammed with more gambling equipment than you ever before saw in your life. There's row after row, *acres*, of slot machines, a lot of them made for silver dollars, and I've actually seen people waiting in line to play them. And there must be scores of roulette, crap, poker, and blackjack tables, and at least three bars.

"Those bars," Jerry said, and shook his head in amazement. One of them has real whisky trickling over a waterfall in a painted scene over the back bar, and another has over ten thousand silver dollars sunk into the top of the bar. The whole place just sparkles with color, chrome, and immense paintings of the West on glass, lighted up from behind, and it's alive with sound —the gaudiest, busiest place you could imagine.

"I say we're *not* that stupid," Brick burst out, and we stared at him, surprised. "But I'll tell you why we went wrong. Not because we're stupid or childish, but because we just didn't have the *feel* of the thing."

We waited, and Brick said angrily, "What do we know about Brink's? Nothing! We've seen the armored truck around town, and that's all." He shook his head—"You want to plan a thing like that, it's got to be something you've *lived* with. Something you're intimate with, and know, and really have the feel of. Why, hell, figuring out how to rob Brink's was impossible—for us. Because for us it just wasn't *real*."

I understood that, all right—now. But I wondered what his point was.

He sat there, hands clasped behind his head, waiting till he had our attention completely, the room silent except for the little murmur of chimney draft and crackle of flame. Then he said very softly, "But who says it has to be Brink's?"

In chemistry, using a Bunsen burner, you turn the gas on full and a flame instantly rises from nothing at all to a sudden spike of blue-hot flame. That's how the emotion shot up in me then.

"Harold's Club," Jerry breathed, in an awed whisper.

"Hot *dog*," Guy murmured.

"We know it! We've been there!"—Brick swung his legs to the floor, eyes glittering. "We know it in our bones, we've got the feel of it, it's *real!* And we're going again! Why, damned if I don't think we could pull it off!"

I just sat staring at Brick. An instant before, I'd have sworn I only wanted to forget this whole foolish idea. But now I knew better, knew that what we'd started today wasn't finished, and I sat looking at Brick a thousand times more excited than I'd been before—and in a new, very different, infinitely more serious way.

Brick explained it. Leaning intently toward us, forearms on his knees, hands clasped before him, he said quietly, "I've been made to look and feel like a fool. I don't like it, and I don't feel like taking it. Not from anybody, including myself." I nodded, staring; he was saying it for me. "Because I'm not a fool"—

Brick's eyes were narrowed; he looked almost sleepy. "I'm not a child, and I won't be slapped on the wrist and laughed at." He sat back in his chair, hooking his thumbs in his belt. "If I say I can do something, I can."

And now I was no longer a kid who could dash out in the rain and follow an armored truck around without a second thought or knowing why. This was still a game, a project, call it what you like, but now it almost had a feeling of reality. Now it was somehow something to be approached soberly and thoughtfully, just as though we were actually going to do it. What had happened on Colonial Street had been lying on my mind like an indigestible lump, and now I knew, like Brick, what had been eating me ever since; I knew I had something to prove.

So did Jerry and Guy. We didn't even have to discuss or debate this; we were thinking and acting in unison. Jerr said, "We'll be there this month," and he said it thoughtfully; an afternoon had been enough for Brink's, but now several weeks wasn't too much time.

"I know their routine for handling the money," Brick said slowly. "I know where they keep it, and it wouldn't be easy to rob that place—don't ever kid yourself. But I honestly think it could be figured out."

"How?" said Guy.

"I don't know. That would depend. On the rest of your plan; how you figured to get away with it, how you planned to get out of Reno, and all that."

Jerry was nodding in agreement, staring at the fire. "I've read

a lot of true crime," he said thoughtfully, "and it's funny; sometimes it's easier than you might think to rob a place and actually get out with the cash in your hands. The tough part is not getting caught afterward. I've read of many a holdup that was beautifully planned, but that's as far as the plans really went. All they thought of then was jumping into a car and running like hell. A week, ten days later, they're caught, maybe three thousand miles away." Jerry glanced at us soberly. "The way you rob Harold's Club depends on what you plan to do afterward. And on what you did before."

Then he added something that made me feel, with a cold little thrill, that maybe he actually knew what he was talking about. "Commit a crime," he said, "and you are *chased two ways*."

"How do you mean?" Guy said.

Jerry looked at him, eyes bleak. "They don't have to follow you to where you went, if they can follow you back to where you came from. Leave a trail that leads back here, to Brick Vogeler, Al Mercer, Guy Cruikshank, and Jerry Weiner, and what good is a perfect crime and escape? You can't hide forever, and when you finally come out, if they've found out who you are they've got you."

"Jerome Weiner," I said, "I confer upon you the degree of Doctor of Crime."

"Magna cum laude," Brick said.

Jerry just nodded. "So the first thing to work out is: how do you reach Harold's Club without leaving a trail? How do you

get to Reno with absolutely *nothing* that could lead them back here to us? The rest of your plans don't mean a thing till you figure that out."

We were quiet for a few moments, the fire going good. Then I said, "Plane? Each arrive on a separate flight, on different days, maybe. Each leave from a different city, even." I was thinking out loud, and it was sounding good. "Board the plane first, and get the very last seat, so none of the passengers sees even the back of your head all through the trip. Sit with your elbow in your lap and your face in your hand as though you were asleep or airsick, and don't say a word more than necessary to the stewardess. Who'd have any reason to ever remember you?"

Brick nodded, and Jerry said, "Okay; now follow it through. Harold's Club is robbed, and it's robbed by four men. That much the police will know"—he folded one finger down on his palm. "There's no practical way to disguise your height or general build"—he bent a second finger down. "So they'll know that much, too. And no matter how we disguised ourselves, the very way we move and sound will give them our approximate ages"—a third finger closed; then Jerry opened his hand, and shrugged, saying, "So I think you've got to work with the fact that they'd have a pretty fair general description of us.

"So what about arriving by plane? Say we escaped, they couldn't find us, and had to start tracing back. I'll admit it would be a hell of a job questioning every plane and train crew that could have brought us in, but Harold's Club would spend

the money to do it. For them, even worse than the actual money they lost would be having the place successfully robbed. So this wouldn't be some little filling-station robbery; I think plane and train crews *would* be questioned, wherever they might be, and whatever the cost in man-hours and money.

"All right; suppose passenger lists of every flight into Reno for days back were studied; hundreds of names." Jerry's voice dropped in warning. "Half those passengers would be women. Of the other half, all men found to be older than, say twenty-five, would be eliminated. Of the rest, they could eliminate all who obviously couldn't possibly fit our general descriptions. They'd get down to a few dozen names."

Jerry was staring at nothing, thinking out loud, thinking hard. "I think everyone on that list would be personally called on, by police or private investigators, all across the country. And when they reached us, we'd be in for some questioning about why we visited Reno, and what we did there. And that would be the beginning of the end; I wouldn't give a dime for our chances from then on."

"What about false names?" Guy said quietly.

Jerry nodded. "Follow it through. Practically all the passengers would have real names, and could be located afterward. But say Brick flew in on Flight 17 from St. Louis, under the name of Roy W. Thompson. Okay. They couldn't find this Thompson, and that in itself would be a possible clue, and Flight 17's stewardess would really be questioned about that particular flight. There'd be a damn good chance she'd draw a

blank; she'd have had dozens of flights since; why should she be able to remember that one?

"But on the other hand, suppose she could? Maybe that was the flight the pilot made a pass at her. And she'd remember it, and the big bulky red-headed guy asleep in the last seat, around twenty-two years old. And she can give a damn accurate description of him. Enough, at least, to be worth printing up and posting in police stations and post offices everywhere in the country; especially since he was the only guy on the plane who couldn't be found for questioning." Jerry shook his head—"We'd be in the position of just having to hope that someone wouldn't fit that description to Brick. And it wouldn't be just Brick. There are four of us; three more trails that might, finally, lead back to us." He was silent for a moment, then he added, "A train is different in detail, but basically the same. You don't give a name, but you're seen a lot more, by a lot more people, and for a longer time. It could provide the same kind of details that might conceivably lead back to us. Unlikely, maybe, and the odds are with us. But it's a real danger, and I wouldn't like it at all."

"Good," Brick said. "You're doing fine, Jerr. Now what about driving? We wouldn't take a stewardess, interesting as the idea sounds."

Jerry shook his head impatiently. "This will be a big case, remember. Harold's Club will see to that, believe me. And we're absolutely lost if we don't take that into account every step of the way."

I suddenly realized that he was using the present tense, and my chest filled with pressure.

"This will get more work than many a murder. Police or hired investigators will work back over every possible way into Reno, and there aren't very many. Every place you bought food, gas, a night's lodging, or anything else will be reached; with the same potential danger. No, sir," he said, "I don't want to risk anything that could give them more than the absolute minimum; our heights, our builds, our approximate ages. Not a hint more than that, or of where we could possibly have come from."

"I've just seen the folly of evil ways and companions," Guy said. "We can't fly into Reno, come in by train, or drive. I assume walking, piggy-back, or burrowing under ground are all equally bad?"

"Worse," Jerry said, grinning. Then he frowned, and shook his head, his face puzzled. "Look, fellows," he said, "I don't know exactly what we're doing, or what we think we're doing; offhand, I couldn't say. But if we're just daydreaming, we can dream we held up Harold's Club with cap pistols, and then hid under a crap table, and they didn't know where to look for us. You can have it any way you want, in a daydream." He glanced at each of us, appealing for agreement. "But a realistic plan for robbing Harold's Club in Reno, Nevada, means this; you've *got* to find a way to arrive in Reno right out of thin air, impossible as that sounds. With not a shred of trail they can pick up and follow back to you. And for me, the fun of this, the thing that really gets me, is planning it realistically."

That made sense to us, and for a few minutes we all sat thinking, but nobody came up with any suggestions on how to cross the country like invisible men. So Jerry's remarks put a period to things; but I wasn't disappointed. The very fact that we were stumped seemed to make this more solid and real; I felt we'd made a start on a fascinating project, and the days ahead no longer looked dull and endless. Dressing in my room later, I was already busy, like a student cramming for an examination every waking moment, trying to dope out an answer to the problem Jerry had set for us.

5

I met Tina at eight. It had stopped raining, and when we stepped out of The Bowl the air was cool, and wonderfully fresh. As we passed out of the light from the store windows, into the dark nearly empty stretch of Main Street sidewalk ahead, I glanced at Tina. She was tasting the freshly washed air, her eyes half closed, chin slightly lifted, her nostrils flaring as she breathed it in; oh, lord, she looked wonderful.

She was wearing a grey dress, grey stockings, the seams absolutely straight, as always, a dark cloth coat nipped in at the waist, and a cute little grey felt hat. And she had her arm tucked snugly under mine, gently pressing my arm to her side,

and I could feel the little shifts and sways and slight changes of balance as she walked, and was absolutely aware of Tina Greyleg in every least cell of my mind and body.

We were just passing Stamm's shoe store, dark and silent. The entrance is deep, twenty feet back from the sidewalk between double display windows, and I stopped suddenly on the walk, turning toward it. "Come here," I said, and Tina looked up at my face, but she saw I was serious, and we walked in, onto the white tiles that had *Stamm's Shoes* picked out in blue, then back into the darkness to the door, and I turned to her. "Do something for me, Tina"—I was frowning and anxious; this was terribly important. "I want you to kiss me. Please; I want you to." For a moment she studied my face, then stepped close, lifting her arms, and I drew her tight to me, and kissed her. I'd kissed Tina before, but I mean this exactly; this was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened in my life. I didn't know where I was, I didn't know anything, there wasn't room for anything but the sensation of Tina wrapped in my arms, my mouth on hers. Nothing like this had ever happened to me; you could have cut me in half and I wouldn't have known it.

Then Tina pulled loose, and walked back toward the sidewalk, and I followed. She was frowning, her face flushed, and she wouldn't look at me. We started walking again; I took her arm and tucked it back under mine, and she glanced up at me for an instant, and smiled a little, but worriedly. "Tina, listen" —I was speaking simultaneously with the impulse—"would you ever marry me?"

She didn't answer. Then we passed under a street light, and I saw the muscle bunched at the corner of her mouth in a tight little knot; she was mad, I didn't know why, and that made me mad. "Well," I said, angrily, "would you?"

She yanked her arm loose, and walked along, looking straight ahead. "What's the difference," she said coldly, "whether I would or not."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing!"

For half-a-dozen steps I kept quiet, then I spoke very quietly and gently. "What do you mean, Tina?"

She shrugged impatiently, and hesitated as though wondering whether to bother answering. Then she said, "For one thing, you *can't* get married, so why talk about it."

It was a surface reason, not what was really eating her, but I said, "Why can't I?"

Tina just sniffed.

I said, "There's no law that I have to keep on with school. There are plenty of people younger than me out earning a living." She didn't answer, and I said angrily, "Where we going?"

"The Ship," she answered shortly. The Ship was a tearoom kind of restaurant, fixed up inside with false portholes, life preservers on the walls, and so on. It was a block away, and we walked it not saying a word, with me sullen and irritated, wondering why it was we so often quarreled over something that never quite came out in the open.

There weren't many people in the restaurant; dinner was

nearly over; and we got a corner table with no one near us. The Ship is an inexpensive place with paper doilies instead of tablecloths, and a lighted candle in a bottle at each table. Tina ordered dinner, I ordered coffee, and we sat waiting; she looked marvelous in the candlelight. I was nineteen, and had sense enough to know I wasn't particularly experienced about women or anything else, and that before I was through I'd have known a lot more women than I had so far. But I also knew that I'd never again meet a woman who could do what Tina did to me.

I sat terribly conscious of her, wanting to say something that would sting and hurt. Tina glanced at me, then turned wearily away. So I started to talk, about nothing much; something or other that had happened that morning in one of my classes; trying to talk us out of this mood before it set the pattern for the evening.

Tina had her coat off, over the back of her chair. Her dress had long loose sleeves, and she took a sip of water, then sat holding the glass, listening, not paying too much attention, her arm at a forty-five-degree angle to the table. Her sleeve began to slide slowly down her arm as I talked. It hardly moved, and for a moment, my eyes on her face, but seeing her arm, too, I wasn't sure it was really moving; then I saw that her arm was being imperceptibly revealed. Very gradually the sleeve moved down, baring her skin, and I was intensely aware of the delicately blue-veined, impossible smoothness of her inner arm. Its own weight dragging it, the sleeve continued to slide, the swell

of her forearm slowly exposing itself, and in the candlelight I saw the faint gold down of the outer surface.

I kept talking, watching without looking directly, then her sleeve suddenly dropped all the way, revealing the whole forearm, and the smooth girl's-muscle, clear down to the milk-white perfection of her inner elbow—and Tina laughed. I don't know what I'd been saying, but it had stopped making sense, and she'd been watching me, knowing what I was looking at. We stared at each other, then I laughed, too, and the tension between us was gone like that.

Tina pulled down her sleeve, folded her hands demurely in her lap, and said, "I ought to wear a blanket when I'm around you. Even my arm . . ." She didn't finish, but just shook her head, smiling.

I grinned. "Oh, lord, Tina," I said, and sighed actually hard enough to flicker the candle flame.

Smiling, Tina said quietly, "You're imagining going to bed with me."

I looked at her, startled, then I shrugged and said, "Well? Is there something wrong with that? I imagine it often; it's my hobby."

"No"—she smiled a little. "As a matter of fact, it's just possible that I . . ."

She stopped, and I whispered, "Tina," reaching across the table, trying to make her bring up a hand to meet mine.

But she shook her head. "And that's the reason you want to marry me."

I just looked at her.

"So any talk of getting married," she said, "is silly, and doesn't mean a thing, because when I get married, it'll have to be for a lot more reason than that."

I made a mistake; I didn't answer. But I wasn't going to lie just now, and I sat staring at Tina, trying to think straight and find out the truth before I spoke. I had to admit that marrying Tina seemed unreal to me, though I didn't know why. And it was true I'd spoken on impulse—from emotion, not thought—and that probably there'd been nothing in my mind past a honeymoon. That was as far as I got in my thoughts, and I should have been saying something instead.

Because Tina burst out in a low angry voice, "You college boys make me sick. You're babies! You think like fools! You think any girl who's a waitress . . ."

She didn't finish, but I knew what she meant. Sometimes a college boy, glorying in a brand-new possession, an adult body, seems to turn into a childish, lying braggart; lying about a worldly wisdom he hasn't got. And a part of that is that there are certain myths he'll swear to, looking wise, or that he hasn't the courage to question for fear of seeming innocent; and one of them is that a waitress is somehow a pushover. Not all college boys think in such ugly stereotyped terms, and I'd been certain I wasn't one of them. But now I wondered if this superior college-boy attitude toward waitresses, among others, hadn't unconsciously affected me; and if Tina hadn't sensed it.

Her dinner, and my coffee, arrived, and we sat watching the

girl arrange things on the table, waiting till we were alone again.

Then Tina said quietly, "Look; I wouldn't be here if you were like that." Picking up her fork, she sighed a little. "It's just that sometimes things aren't easy to take, and you get on the defensive, suspicious of everyone." She began cutting her meat, then she looked up, staring past me, her face lost in thought. "I'd like to be a college girl," she said bitterly. "I'd like to be going to college now, wearing a tweed skirt and an expensive sweater. Living in a sorority house. Riding around town afternoons, in somebody's convertible." She looked at me now. "I've got better sense than that, but it's what I'd like just the same. I've got more sense than this, too, but just the same you feel inferior sometimes, wearing a uniform, and handing them their cokes. And the college boys sit there with their coeds, but watching you on the sly, and you get mad and resentful of everything, and think to yourself that you could take any one of them away from any of the girls, and you feel like doing it just to prove something. I can see why a waitress might start behaving just the way they think she ought to because they're college boys and she's a waitress, and—oh, to hell with it." Tina concentrated on her dinner, her eyes on her plate.

I waited a few moments, then I said, "Tina, I can think about living with you, day after day after day, for the rest of my life. And it sounds wonderful to me. In every way. And I think I know what I'm saying."

She nodded, acknowledging that she'd heard what I'd said,

busy with her food. Then she looked up at me, and said calmly, "I wouldn't marry you, Al. And I'm not talking about whether you could quit school, or get a job. And I don't doubt that if you aren't in love with me, you could be very easily. And maybe I love you, or close to it." She kept right on with her dinner. "But I don't waste any time wondering or thinking about that." For a moment she looked at me intently, almost coldly. "Maybe you'll think less of me for this, but I've had enough of not having anything. I won't marry a college boy who hasn't a dime. And who'll be drafted for a couple years at least, with another five or six after that before he has anything. I'll marry someone a lot further along than you'll be for a long time, and who either has money or is making a lot of it. Not rich; this isn't a day-dream. But I want to *have* something, and *be* something. I want to be the equal of the people around me, for a change; in what I have and am. I want to stop being a waitress; in every way. And a college boy looking for a job isn't the answer. Hell"—she twisted her mouth in disgust—"what are we even talking like this for; it's silly."

As far as I know, I didn't hesitate or think for an instant. Filling my mind was the certain knowledge that I had to have Tina, that I'd do anything I had to get her, and it didn't bother me at all to know it. "Suppose I had money, Tina. A lot. So much that we'd be set for years, and even if I had to do a tour in the army, I'd come out and we'd have so much it wouldn't matter what job or salary I got for half-a-dozen years more."

Tina looked at me for a moment, then shrugged.

I leaned forward over the table, holding her gaze. "I'll have it, Tina," I said softly, "in less than three weeks."

She stared at me long enough to make sure I meant it. "What do you mean?"—she was frowning, suddenly worried.

So I told her, very quietly, sitting there in the almost deserted restaurant, sipping my coffee now and then. I told her just what Brick, Jerry, Guy, and I were planning; only I didn't say it was only a game.

Tina looked at me steadily, quietly thinking about what I had said. Then, crossing her arms, she pulled her coat up over her shoulders, picked up the check, and stood up. "Let's talk about this at my place," she said, and we walked over to the cashier's desk.

Something happened outside that I laughed about several times afterward. We had to cross a park to reach Tina's place; a block-long rectangle of grass, shrubbery, big old trees, all in new, bright green leaf now, and a winding maze of paved walks. Angling across that park, we walked slowly—talking in dead earnest about a plan to commit a big-scale robbery. We were strolling, actually, and we were holding hands, turning to look at each other often, smiling sometimes, very aware of each other, and we spoke in low tones.

A couple was approaching us, an elderly man and his wife, and I was only absently aware of them. But when they were half-a-dozen steps in front of us, I saw the woman nudge her husband slightly, and I saw that they were both smiling a little, and as they passed they glanced at us fondly, their eyes amused

and tender. I suddenly realized that to them we must have looked like a magazine-cover picture of a boy and girl strolling hand in hand under the trees, and I wondered what they'd have thought or done if they'd known what was really going on.

We hadn't said anything till we'd gotten off the business streets and into the park; and I'd been wondering what Tina's reaction would be. She said, "This Jerry; I've seen him in The Bowl. He looks bright, but he's a kid, and he seems to be doing a lot of your planning."

"What he says makes sense, though."

Tina nodded, agreeing to that, and was quiet for a dozen steps or so. Then she said, "Al, how sure are you of yourself; and the others? How do you *know* that you know what you're doing, I mean? This isn't for kids. It's no joke, you can't fool around. You've got to be very sure and certain you know what you're *doing*"—her voice rose in sudden fright and irritation. Then she stopped on the walk, put a hand on my arm, and looked up at me, appealingly, worried. "I can't marry you if you're dead, Al. And I won't marry you if you're in prison." Then she walked on again.

I just said, "Time will tell, that's all. When we work it out, you'll know the answers to your questions. And if it looks half-baked, to you or to me, if it looks as though we're going off half-cocked, still a bunch of kids, there's no law says we have to go through with it. But I think it'll work out; I mean it."

We walked on, holding hands, under the trees, and the clear night sky. We passed the old couple, and smiled at each other.

Then Tina looked at me, curiously. "You know something? You're talking about actually stealing a fortune; and you haven't said a word about the right or wrong of it. Doesn't that bother you?"

That startled me. She was right; the morality of this hadn't entered my mind. "It's funny," I said slowly, trying to understand it, "but I wouldn't steal five cents, even from a man I despised. Or from anything or anybody except Harold's Club, or another place like it. I guess it's this"—I was thinking out loud. "I think gambling is wrong. People have learned that everywhere, and gambling's been outlawed nearly everywhere, in all civilizations. Now, just because a handful of men in the state of Nevada make it technically legal, doesn't make it right. Hell, gambling's *wrong*, and you know it. A few people profit, giving nothing and doing nothing in exchange. And I think everyone concerned is harmed by it.

"So I say they're fair prey." I shrugged. "Maybe I'm only rationalizing, I don't know. But I feel I'm honest, and wouldn't steal. But to me this isn't stealing; by any standard I respect, that money doesn't belong to Harold's Club, and I'll take it if I can, and it will never bother my conscience for a moment."

I don't think Tina had even been listening; she spit the words out—"You'll be drafted! Two years of your life taken away from you; or maybe all of it. And you'll be giving those years for the benefit of the rest of the country, who'll all still be at home"—she was furious. "Who *are* all these people who'll be tossing away money in Reno, while you're in the army at a few

dollars a month? Who's Harold's Club to be getting richer and richer while you're in the army for their benefit as much as anybody's! I say if you can take it, *take* it! They won't lose a meal! They'll still be rich! You're not hurting *any*body."

They say adrenalin is released in your body when you're mad; that a chemical action goes on in your blood stream. By the time Tina was finished, I could feel it. Like everyone my age I knew, the thought of the army and what it might mean was in my mind a lot. I never gave much thought to the right or wrong of it, but I did know that damn few people I met who weren't going in themselves seemed to give it any thought at all. They were going right ahead with their business; they didn't care, *they* didn't have to go. And I didn't feel that because I was nineteen and healthy I owed any more to the country than some fat and prosperous fifty-year-old. Get ahead!—that seemed to be everyone's motto, and I didn't know why I should be different, and I thought Tina was right. If you can take it, *take* it. And it was true; I wouldn't really be hurting anyone. No one in Harold's Club would miss a meal or cigar.

Tina lived in an old two-story frame house, converted into little apartments; she had one room, a bath, and a tiny kitchenette, on the top floor. Inside, she turned on a couple lamps, and I sprawled on the bed that served as a couch during the day. It was covered with a tan denim slip cover she'd made, and there were a couple ornamental pillows. She had the place fixed up pretty nice, though she didn't have much; a wooden rocker in an old sort of out-of-date style, a little desk and chair, some framed

pictures on the wall. The best thing she owned was a pale tan, woolly sort of rug that covered nearly all of the floor; it was new and clean; she'd spent some money on that. She'd calcimined the walls herself; the same shade. And I'd painted the doors and the two windows a dark green one Saturday afternoon. The desk and chairs were green, too, and so the room had a color scheme, and looked nice.

Tina hung up her coat and hat in the little closet by the entrance, smoothed her dress, and asked me if I wanted a drink. I said no, and she said she didn't either; neither one of us ever drank much.

"Come on over here"—I patted the bed, beside me.

"All right"—she came over, and sat down, then lay back, fixing a pillow under her head; but she was frowning, a little impatiently. "But don't act like a kid; we're here to talk about this."

"Okay."

Tina said, "Jerry's right; you've got to reach Harold's Club out of thin air. And I know how to do it."

I looked at her, surprised, yet feeling with the thrill of sudden certainty that she did know. Lying on my side, one elbow on the bed, my head propped in my hand, I listened, absently fingering a fold of her skirt between my thumb and forefinger, and when Tina finished talking, I knew she was right.

This was it; the one, simple, direct way of traveling across country to Harold's Club, as though we were actually invisible. I was grinning, shaking my head with a new startled respect for

Tina. I hadn't known, when I first told her, how she'd take this whole idea; whether she'd laugh at me, be frightened, or just unbelieving. But she'd taken it, all right; taken it and run with it, far ahead of the rest of us, showing more sober intelligence than any of us so far. Lying there, smiling over at Tina, looking at the length of her there on the bed, I knew she was the most desirable woman in the world, worth doing anything for, and I knew I could get through anything that happened to me in the army, with a woman like her to come home to.

She had a hand on my chest, saying warningly, "You'll have to stop in just a few minutes," and I said, "All right," and then drew her to me, and kissed her long and hard. Then I looked at her, my face just over hers, my eyes half closed, feeling that sleepy excitement building. I rubbed my cheek slowly against hers, then she took my face in both her hands, looking at me, then pulled it down to hers, and I kissed her again, feeling the whole world, everything but this and now, fade out of being. I didn't and couldn't stop now—but she could.

Tina twisted away from me, and held me off, saying, "You're still a dead-broke college boy, with nothing but a plan that might or might not work out."

"It'll work out; don't worry."

"Okay"—she smiled—"then see me after Harold's Club."

"That's a long time."

"That's right. And with plenty to do." Tina frowned at me appealingly—"I don't like it any better than you do, Al, and I think you know it, and can tell." But she stood up, smoothing

her dress, and then put a hand on my shoulder, and made me stand up, too. "Go on home," she said, and I knew I had to, and shrugged, and walked to the door.

She came along, and at the door I kissed her once more, sliding my hand up and down her back, and along one arm. "Oh, god, Tina," I said, "I love you."

"I know"—she nodded. Her voice almost matter of fact, she said, "And I love you. I have for a long, long time. And I'll tell you something, Al"—she looked up at me, her face dead serious —"I'm going with you. To Reno. With the four of you." I started to say something, but she just shook her head, cutting me off. "We can argue it later; argue it all you want. But it's going to end up with me going along." Her voice suddenly harsh, almost snarling, she said, "This is serious! You can get your head blown off!" For a moment she glared at me, then she smiled at me, fondly, and reached up to brush her hand across my cheek. "I told you what I wanted, and had to have, before I'd marry you; and I'm willing to have you take your chances trying to get it. But I told you I loved you, too, and I do; and I'll take my chances right along with you." She smiled. "I think better than you do, Al, on some things. And you're not going off half-cocked on this; I'll see to that. I'm going along."

She opened the door, and pushed me gently out. "Go on home," she said.

6

It wasn't late when I got back to the house, but I went right to bed; everyone but Brick, who had a day bed in his room, slept in a dormitory on the top floor, in double-deck cots. When I got into bed, I lay there, my hands clasped under my head, thinking; and after a minute or so, from a few cots down the line, Jerry's voice whispered, "You awake, Al?"

I said, "Yeah," and Jerr didn't say any more, but I felt that he was lying there, smiling like a kid in the dark.

From across the dorm, springs squeaked, and Guy called out softly. Guy lives in town, but sometimes he'd sleep here at the house. "Bang, bang," he said quietly, and I grinned a little.

I fall asleep pretty fast usually, and I did tonight. But I had time to think about several things first. I thought about Tina going with us, about how it would be, married to Tina; and about what it would be like to be—not rich—but to have really plenty of money. For the first time in my life, the phrase "having money" suddenly conveyed something to me. Suddenly, owning a nice home, buying things, having things, having more than the few dollars in your pocket, loomed up in my mind as something real, possible, and imminent, and as something that could actually happen to me. And it was a breath-taking thought. Then, as people do when something big and exciting has happened all

of a sudden, I thought of what a long way I'd come since only that morning.

Something rose up in my mind, with a horrible strength, and absolutely no warning. You reach a state, lying in bed, where you think you're still wide-awake—but you aren't. Your thoughts have taken themselves out of your control, moving on of their own volition into sudden startling paths of their own. The police, with their guns, and the cold hard look of their faces, suddenly yanking open the door of Brick's car, sprang up in my brain. Only the image wasn't those police, and it wasn't here. I was in Reno, standing in a vague room, and police were walking toward me, closing in on all sides. They weren't threatening, they weren't menacing; they were simply going to arrest me, and the most frightening part of it was the impersonal, disinterested, implacable look on their faces. What I felt, or thought, now no longer mattered; it was far too late. I had *done* something, big and important, that could never be undone, and now they were taking me for it, and maybe Tina, too; and the fact that I was a college boy, or that I was only nineteen, or that I hadn't meant to do it, could no longer help me or her.

All your life you see police, walking a beat, directing traffic, passing by in a patrol car, and they have nothing to do with *you*. Once in a while you ask a cop for a street direction, or you get a parking ticket; but you rarely give actual thought to the real business and purpose of the uniformed men with guns at their sides. But now, what had happened that afternoon gave me a glimpse, clear and sharp, of the terrifying actuality of what it

means to be arrested for something real and terribly serious, as you wish with all your soul that it could somehow be undone, knowing that it can't. Lying there, I knew, as never before, that the moment of arrest—your freedom only just gone—is a terrible thing.

Wide-awake, desperate, I rushed back over the day in a panic, looking for an out; trying to find a way to backtrack and change my mind. But the incredible thing is that I couldn't. I lay there in a silent agony of fear, understanding the actuality of what might happen to me in a matter of days—and knowing all the same that I was going ahead with it if I possibly could. And then I fell asleep.

7

An odd little thing happened next day. At my request, we didn't eat lunch at the house. We sat in Brick's car, parked in front of the *Coney Island Red Hot* joint, each with a frank or hamburger and bottle of pop—when the armored truck came lumbering along.

Guy couldn't resist. He rolled down his window, and leaned out, pointing a forefinger. "Bang, bang!" he yelped, flicking his thumb up and down, and the three uniformed men grinned and waved.

Instantly, I was so depressed I wished I were dead. Those men looked so exactly the way they had yesterday, that the feeling of being a damn fool kid overwhelmed me again. "Pow!" Guy shrieked, leaning far out of the car, "You're dead, you rascals," and I knew we couldn't steal a licorice whip from a candy store and get away with it.

I couldn't swallow any more. It was impossible, I realized, to turn this project into reality, in Guy's mind, Brick's, or Jerry's either. But I sat staring out at the dreary, grey business district —it wasn't raining, but it was overcast—and I knew it was a lousy world waiting for me, and that if I didn't do something about it I'd simply go under, along with all the others who just sat and waited for whatever life wanted to do to them.

"Okay, Al"—Brick popped the last of his hamburger into his mouth—"what's on your mind? You solve the big problem?"

I nodded, and finished my pop. "Maybe," I said. A cop was strolling toward us, a block away. I couldn't tell if it was one of the two who'd grabbed us yesterday, but I didn't want to risk Guy shooting him with his finger, or drawing his attention in any other way. "Brick, let's drive a little," I suggested. "Head for Guy's house, if you don't mind."

He nodded, leaned forward to switch the ignition, then pulled away from the curb, heading north.

I took a deep breath, then said it. "I think I've got the answer. I thing I know how we can get to Reno as though we were invisible, or close to it. And I don't doubt that we can figure a

way to rob Harold's Club. I think we could actually do this, with a damn good chance of getting away with it. And now I'll tell you something; that's what I want to do. I want to quit playing; I want to *do* this; I mean *really* do it. And I want to know how you guys feel."

Nobody said anything. Brick, driving, glanced over his shoulder at me, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Then Guy, beside me, began to talk. "It's funny," he said, and smiled, "but by an amazing coincidence, I've been toying with similar thoughts; last night and all this morning."

I was annoyed; I didn't see anything to be amused about, and wasn't in the mood for it.

Then Guy quit smiling. He shoved his hands in his belt, and staring straight ahead, said, "My father was a doctor who never hounded anyone over money; and he left my mother over seven thousand dollars in uncollected bills that practically no one has ever even offered to pay her. She's worked hard ever since, clerking in a dry-goods store six days a week, plus Saturday nights. And she hasn't a dime to spare; she's needed some dental work for a year and a half, and we just don't have the dough. I work, spare time, every chance I get, but I'm just barely paying my way at school; I'm no help to her yet." Guy looked around at us, then he said quietly, "Personally, I don't think she gets much out of life. She's only fifty, and I've often wondered if she's going to go on for another twenty-five years, always right next door to being downright poor. Because before I can do anything much for her—by the time I'm out of school and the army,

working and finally getting somewhere—why, hell, it could be ten or fifteen years. If ever."

His eyes hard, Guy spit the words out. "So hell, yes, I'll rob a gambling casino, if we can actually figure it out with a better than even chance of pulling it off. And if anybody talks morals or ethics to me, I'll spit in their eye." Suddenly he grinned. "But I can't add a funeral bill to my poor grey-haired old mither's expenses. Plus the exorbitant cost of shipping my cold little body from Reno. And it seems to me we're moving along pretty fast, all of a sudden. Yesterday we fell flat on our faces, following a damned armored truck around. And today we're seriously talking about robbing Harold's Club." He shrugged. "Well, maybe. Damned if I know, and I don't think any of us know right now what we're capable of. And maybe we're just four kids not capable of much."

Guy leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees. "So I say this, if Brick and Jerry are interested, too. Work out our plans. Do everything we have to, the best we know how, and set out for Reno just as though we were going through with this. And see how it all shapes up. See if it still looks good, and if our nerve holds up when we're on the edge of actually doing it, instead of just sitting back here talking about it. Make the Nevada boundary the dividing line. If it all looks good then, if it looks real and possible, and not just a crazy idea, and if no one has backed out before, then we're committed and we go through with it. Otherwise, we just breeze into Reno, get summer jobs again, and the whole project was only for laughs, and to make the trip

interesting." Guy sat back in the seat. "Otherwise, count me out right now, I'll guarantee you I'll never say a word about this to anyone no matter what the rest of you do or don't do, and I don't want to hear another word of your plans."

Brick slowed for a stop sign, then crossed Ecklander Boulevard. "Comments?" he said.

"Well"—Jerry turned toward the back seat, pursing his lips thoughtfully—"personally, I don't have any reason for wanting a big slug of money. But planning a thing like this interests me. Hell, it fascinates me." His voice was quiet, steady; but his eyes were glittering, and I noticed that his hand, holding a cigarette, was trembling, so that the smoke ascended in little waves. "And I'd be even more fascinated," he said, "by actually testing those plans; in the only way you can. So what Guy says sounds okay to me. Only I won't carry a gun; not a loaded one, anyway. And if anyone else wants to, I'm out. If you guys are talking about actually going through with this, I'll help you rob Harold's Club. But no outsider is to be killed, wounded, or even scratched. This is still a sort of game with me, and no one is to be hurt for my fun."

We turned onto Prairie Street, Guy's street, and Brick said, "Al?"

"To hell with my reasons," I said shortly, "I'm in. And what Guy and Jerry say sounds good to me." Then we all looked at Brick.

He smiled a little, turning to look at the back seat. "In that case"—he shrugged—"we're all set. Personally, I've been ready

since yesterday afternoon." I must have looked surprised, because Brick laughed, turning his eyes back to the road. "What's the matter, Al?" he said, sort of teasing me a little. "Did you think you were the only one who's been doing a little thinking?"

I didn't answer, just grinned, because it was true. I realized now that I might have known I wouldn't be the only one who'd been moving along, traveling further down the road we'd all turned into without knowing it yesterday afternoon.

Guy's house was just ahead on the right, and I pointed. "Swing into the driveway," I said to Brick, "and drive on back to the barn."

Brick turned into the cinder-packed driveway, and we drove on past the big, old-fashioned, sort of run-down house where Guy lived with his mother. At the back of the property was an old wooden stable, and Brick stopped at the doors, set the hand brake, and turned off the motor.

"Can we go in?" I said to Guy. "Your mother at work?"

"Sure," he said, and opened the door on his side. At the big double barn doors, he pulled one open, and we all walked in with him. Guy twisted the old-type light switch, a round black knob on a porcelain base, and high up on the beams three bulbs went on. They were dusty, but gave off a fair light, and the inside of the barn had been whitewashed once, so you could see pretty well. But it was large enough so that the far corners were still semi-dark.

"Anyone ever use the place?" I said to Guy.

He shook his head—"No. Not since my dad was alive, and

we had a car. I don't think my mother's been in here twice in five years."

I glanced around. "Could anyone come snooping around, and see into the place?"

Guy said, "No one ever does. There's a hasp on the door, and we can snap a padlock on it. The nearest neighbors are a good fifty yards away, and they're old people. Anyway, look at the windows."

We all looked at the windows along the side walls; the glass was dead black, shiny under the electric light.

Guy said, "I started to set up a darkroom in here when I was in high school. Painted the windows over, and tacked tar paper over every crack in the walls and doors. The place is actually lightproof. No one ever comes around here, and if they did they couldn't see a thing inside."

They all looked at me now, waiting, and I nodded toward the back of the barn; there in the gloom of a corner sat an old buggy, one wheel missing, the axle held up by a wooden sawhorse. "Let's sit down," I said, and walked toward it.

We all climbed in; it was an open buggy, with two leather seats, and high narrow fenders over each wheel. The fenders had been patent leather once, but now the leather was mostly cracked off, exposing the grey-black old cloth underneath. Jerry bounced a little in the front seat, and a little mist of fine dust rose up from the undercarriage. "Giddyep," he said, and laughed, then he sat back and looked at me. "Okay, Al; how do we get to Reno, like invisible men?"

In the back seat, beside Guy, I said, "We buy a used car. A Ford, Chevrolet, or Plymouth. A '49 or '50, not too old, not too new; it should look like ten million other cars. One of us buys it in another town, maybe even another state, using a fake name and address. And he buys a small used trailer, as nondescript as the car." I glanced around the big old barn. "We hide the outfit in here, and we work on it in here; and believe me, there's plenty of work to be done."

I went on talking; I described Tina's plan in detail, only I didn't say it was hers. I didn't feel quite right about that, but this wasn't the moment to bring her into this. Every once in a while Jerry interrupted quietly with a question, and I answered it. When I finished, finally, he had a few more questions. Then he glanced at the others, and shrugged. "I like it," he said. "I like it fine. It's about as close to perfect as you could hope to come."

Brick was nodding. "Sounds good to me; damn good." He glanced at Guy.

"Smart," Guy murmured. "I like it; I'm beginning to think we might actually . . ." He stopped, staring straight ahead at nothing, his eyes widening with pleasure at whatever he'd just thought of. "Hey!" he said softly, and glanced around at us. "The Fourth of July!"

We just stared at him.

"Look"—he grinned at us in delight. "What's the busiest time of year in Reno? When is Harold's Club the most crowded and confused? Crammed full of strangers from everywhere?"

Then we understood, and I answered, my heart beginning to pump with excitement. "Rodeo Week; the Fourth of July week end!"

"Right, friend! And what's the biggest week end of the entire year at Harold's Club? When the take is the largest, for us to get our greedy little hands on?"

"The Fourth of July!"—we all yelled out the reply, fascinated.

"Correct! And what are they *wearing* then? Three quarters of the men you see!"

I wasn't sure what he meant. "Cowboy outfits?"

"Cowboy outfits, and *beards*," Brick said, and his voice was awed. "Big black *beards!*"

"Right"—Guy's voice was quiet and serious now. "Whiskers, real and false; the town's full of them Rodeo Week, the Fourth of July week end especially. So tell me, good friends, when is the best time to rob Harold's Club? Where and when can four bandits walk into a place with wide-brimmed cowboy hats pulled low on their faces, disguised in big, bushy, false beards, without drawing even a second glance? Where and when is the one place you can think of that that could possibly happen?"

Grinning, practically bouncing with excitement, Brick said, "Harold's Club! Rodeo Week! Fourth of July!"

And now the air was electric; sitting there, staring at each other like happy idiots, we were nearly blowing our tops in a kind of silent ecstasy of excitement. Brick, his eyes burning, said slowly, "I've got some money; a fair amount. In a Chicago

bank. I'm willing to put up enough for a used car and trailer." The rest of us didn't say anything; just nodded our heads as though we were in a trance.

Lying across two rusty nails protruding from the whitewashed walls beside us, was an old buggy whip. Jerry reached out, picked it up, and leaned forward to flick it at an imaginary horse. Then he quoted the roadside advertisements you see all over the western United States. " 'Harold's Club,' " he said, and smiled wryly, " 'or bust.' " And as he spoke those last two words, it occurred to me that I might be killed.

I don't mean that the idea had never crossed my mind before, but it hadn't seemed real. But now, all of us silent in that old buggy, each taking in the idea that we actually meant to do this, it hit me, really, for the first time. I could actually be lying on a dirty, cigarette-strewn floor in Reno, Nevada, very soon, in the center of a ring of staring strangers, with a bullet hole in my head; a still warm, but never-again thinking, feeling, or breathing body. For all I knew, I might now be living the last days of my life.

8

Less than thirty minutes later, I was trying to explain all that to Tina. Brick drove us back to the campus, and we agreed on the

way that he'd run up to Chicago on the night train—it's a two-and-a-half-hour trip—get an expense fund from his bank in the morning, and be back for his two-o'clock class tomorrow. We'd alibi for him at the house and around the campus, and there was no reason for anyone to realize he was gone.

When I tapped at her door, Tina answered, and I said quietly, "It's Al"; then the bolt turned, the door opened, and Tina stood looking at me, wearing a long belted robe. Over her shoulder, on the little green table beside the upholstered chair, I saw her manicure equipment, a bottle of nail polish, and a cigarette burning in an ash tray. Tina stepped aside to let me in, and I walked on past her, and sat down on the day bed, facing her chair. She sat down, picked up her cigarette, and looked at me, pleasantly but wonderingly.

I told her, first, what had just happened, and she listened, asking a question occasionally. But when I'd finished, Tina went back to work on her nails, waiting; knowing I had something else on my mind. I noticed she was being very careful about her robe, keeping it snugly around her, however she moved; I couldn't even see her ankles. I smiled a little at that, reaching into my shirt pocket for a cigarette; and glancing up, Tina saw me and smiled, too, and shrugged.

Then I took a breath, and said, "All right; look. I may be dead; in a matter of weeks. They won't fool, Tina. They'll cut me down, if they can; they'll put a hole through my head. Tina, these may be the last couple weeks I've got to live." Her nail file motionless, she was staring at me. "Or they'll throw me into

a Nevada prison for twenty years. Tina, it's true. It can happen. It *may* happen." She nodded slowly, and now her eyes were fearful. "From the moment I step into Harold's Club, I may never see you again. And in that case, Tina, it hasn't been enough."

I couldn't sit there; I stood suddenly, came over to her chair, squatted down beside it, and took her hand in mine, looking up at her face. "Do you know what I mean?" I said softly. She nodded, and I said, "I want you to live with me, Tina. I've got no place of my own to ask you to; I want to move in here with you. From now till we leave." I looked at her, trying to find the words. "I think it's right," I went on, but that wasn't saying it, and I tried again. "I think it's the right thing for us to do. Oh, Jesus Christ, Tina!"—I stood up, furious in case she refused.

Tina stood, too, not worrying about her robe any more. In fact, standing there facing me, she deliberately shifted her weight to one leg, the perfect curve of her hip jutting out. Then she slowly smoothed her hands down the front and sides of her robe, stretching the cloth tight to her body. Both hands came to rest on her hips, and her pose as provocative as she knew how to make it, she looked at me mockingly. Then she smiled, her eyes amused and kind, reached out suddenly, took my chin and tweaked it, shaking my head till I yanked back; I must have looked like a thwarted two-year-old. "I think so, too, Al," Tina said then. She nodded at the day bed across the room. "It's narrow; not too comfortable for two, I imagine." She smiled again. "But maybe you won't mind."

I grabbed her, yanking her to me so fast and hard that she stumbled, and I had to hold her up till she got her footing again. She didn't resist, or try to pull away, but she said, "Not now, Al; I don't want to have to leave and go to work. Tonight——"

"To hell with work!"

But she shook her head. "There's no money to live on, Al; there just isn't. I've got to keep working till we leave. Tonight, Al," she insisted gently, "when I don't have to go out and leave you. You get your things, and bring them here; I'll give you my key. But not now, Al, when I have to leave in half an hour." She reached up and smoothed her fingertips across my cheek; I could feel each separate finger. "We'll be together for the rest of our lives, and I want us to start out right. I'll be back at eleven tonight; you be here waiting for me."

I spent half the afternoon sitting in the fraternity-house living room waiting for Dick Pulver, the fraternity president, to come back from his classes, or wherever the hell he was. When he finally came up the front steps—a blond, wholesome-looking, empty-faced boy—I slouched down in my chair, and deliberately put my feet up on the table near the center of the room. Pulver walked into the front hall, and I heard him setting a good example by hanging his hat in the front closet, instead of tossing it on a chair or the radiator cover. Then he walked into the front room, looked at me, and sighed wearily; one of his most irritating habits is to act the harassed adult burdened with the responsibility of a bunch of unruly children.

"Look, Al," he said, in the tiredly patient voice he uses on

such occasions, "how many times have I asked you to keep your feet off——"

"Too goddamn many times," I said, "and I'm sick and tired of it. This crumby joint isn't a museum; it's supposed to be a place to live in." I crossed my ankles, and settled back in my chair.

"Listen," he said quietly, "if I have to make formal charges against you at the next chapter meeting . . ."

The details—what he said, and what I said—don't matter. I let myself go, and pretty soon we were shouting, and when the four or five guys in the house at the time heard us and got down to the living room, I yelled, "To hell with you, Pulver, I'm moving out!" turned on my heel, and walked upstairs to pack.

I didn't like doing that. I didn't care for Pulver, but I didn't hate him, and I knew this would worry and hurt him, but I had to do it. It occurred to me that there'd be still more people I'd have to hurt, in a lot of ways, before I was through, and I didn't feel good, walking up the stairs to my room. But there had to be a reason for my moving out of the house, and now the whole school would soon know why I'd moved, without my having to offer any other explanation. I was out of the house before Brick, Guy, or Jerry showed up for dinner, and I ate at the C B & Q depot restaurant, where no one from school ever goes. Then, carrying my laundry bag under one arm, crammed with everything I owned, I walked through the darkness, using side streets, to Tina's.

For over four hours, I sat in her apartment, waiting. I tried

to read, but nothing ever printed could have caught my interest. I smoked steadily, and once when I lighted a cigarette while another was burning in the ash tray beside me, I told myself I wouldn't smoke again till Tina was home. Within five minutes I found another lighted cigarette in my hand. I mixed a drink I didn't want, and couldn't finish. Several times I sat holding a hand in front of my eyes, watching it tremble, and my stomach muscles began to ache from constant tensing. Finally I just sat, in the upholstered chair, the radio on low, waiting out the time, thinking about where I was and why, and hardly able to believe it. After a while, I thought about what we were going to do in Reno, and it seemed impossible, and I wondered how it was that human beings got themselves into incredible situations just through a chance word or encounter; through having looked out a window at one moment instead of the next.

It was a long time later when the door opened, and Tina stepped in; she'd tiptoed up the stairs to surprise me. She locked the door behind her, and when she did that, my heart began to pound, and I couldn't talk.

She was beautiful. She wore her good coat and hat, grey stockings, and I could see the collar of her new maroon knit dress. It was her best outfit and I realized, stumbling to my feet, that she'd worn it to work and back, just for this moment. Then I helped her off with her coat, grinning sheepishly. Not a word came to my mind, and I wished I'd thought to have something wonderful to say all prepared. Then, her coat off, Tina just stood there, letting me look at her, and I actually felt faint.

That dress hugged each line and curve of her body, and her figure was stunning, it was staggering. Her ankles, her legs, were perfection; gorgeous. Tina Greyleg was the most exciting thing I'd ever seen, and I stood looking at her, then swallowed, and said, "Well."

"Yeah"—she nodded. "Well."

Then the blood clogged in my throat and behind my eyes, and I stepped toward her—and Tina lost her nerve. Before my hands could quite reach her, she'd turned quickly away, toward my laundry bag on the floor, and I knew she was nervous as I was, and didn't try to touch her.

We put in some time stowing away my things. Kneeling before her combination desk-and-dresser, Tina cleared out a drawer for me, taking out her slips, bras, stockings, and so on, and to me the sight of those things in her hands, realizing what she was doing, was incredible. Then she laid my three good shirts carefully in the drawer, then my socks, all rolled up into little balls, my handkerchiefs, and all the rest of it, including my clean pajamas, and I stood watching, and couldn't ever get a deep enough breath.

At the bottom of my bag she came to my soiled linen, and when Tina took that into the bathroom, and put it into the clothes hamper right along with her things, it was the most intimate thing I'd ever experienced. We'd hardly said a word—we were terribly nervous—and now Tina took my good shoes to her closet, and set them on the floor between two pairs of her own. She pushed her shoes together to touch mine on both sides,

looked up at me and smiled. I grinned, too, but my eyes smarted, though I couldn't have said why, and I stepped forward quickly, took her in my arms, very gently, and we just stood there holding each other; actually, I guess we were clinging to each other.

I'm an orphan; my parents were killed in a highway accident when I was eight. I was raised by my mother's older sister, a widow. She was and is a fine woman, but she was eighteen years older than my mother, she was never too well in all of her life, and raising a child was really too big a job for her. And when it was over—when she sat in the high-school auditorium at my graduation exercises—she was glad and relieved, and so was I. With no ill will or resentments, she'd never loved me, I'd never loved her, and there was very little between us any more. She was old now, and lived alone with her cat and radio. A couple times a year I'd write to her, and presently she'd answer, and that was that. She owned her house, had a pension, and needed nothing; and I knew for a fact that visits from me simply upset the orderly old-lady routine of her life, and I seldom saw her any more. And so—I don't feel sorry for myself about this; it's simply a fact—for most of my life I never felt I really belonged to anyone, or had anyone to love or be loved by.

Tina's parents were alive; they were farm people somewhere in Illinois; but she hadn't seen them for nearly three years. I didn't know much about it, except that, without hating them, she had no use for them. The point is that I knew we both felt the same thing, as we stood staring at our shoes, side by side on her closet floor. It hit us with enormous force that now we belonged

to someone, each of us; that I had moved in here, that we were together, and our lives were joined now and had become one and the same thing. That's when we turned to each other.

For seconds, my alarm clock quietly ticking away on Tina's desk, we just stood there, letting ourselves experience what I tried to describe. Then—that feeling continued—but now I was becoming terribly aware of Tina pressed against the length of me; and so was she. She turned away, and quite simply and naturally took hold of a corner of the tan denim slip cover on her bed, and I walked around to the other side, and together we folded it back.

There was fresh white linen on the bed, the top sheet folded neatly down over the blanket, and when I saw there were two pillows, I grinned, took one, and tossed it over to a chair. Tina grinned back, and—safe on the other side of the bed—she winked at me, very slowly. I lunged for her, over the bed, caught a wrist, pulled her down, and began kissing her. Then she broke loose, and sat up, cheeks flushed, hair mussed, laughing at me. Her skirt was twisted and up high, revealing the full length of those sheer grey stockings, and—nothing in the world could possibly be that exciting; but it was.

Then Tina lifted her hand, and stroked her fingers along my brows. "I'm glad you're here, Al," she said quietly, and now when I put my arms around her, and kissed her again, it was—exciting, god, yes—but it was something more, too. Now I knew, really *knew* for the first time, that I was in love with her. And I knew that the human being who has never had what I felt then

has missed the greatest thing life can give you. This girl sitting there on the bed with me was exciting in reality beyond anything I'd ever imagined, and I'd imagined a lot. But now I knew that what I felt no longer had much to do with how beautiful her body was, or was not. Maybe it began that way; I guess it did. But it was far beyond that now. For better or worse, this was the woman in my life, all of my life, and to marry her I knew I was going to do what I had to do in Reno, or die trying. Then we went to bed.

9

In the days that followed, an impossible number of things happened, and when I think about them, they seem telescoped together like a rapid series of abbreviated scenes in a movie. That next night, Brick back from Chicago with the money for them, we bought the car and trailer; Brick and Jerry made the trip. They drove to Indianapolis in Brick's car, arriving after dark, as planned. Then they cruised around till they spotted a used-car lot that also sold trailers.

There was only one salesman on duty, and Brick parked half a block away, where he could sit and watch, while Jerry, wearing a plain grey suit, a cap, and his leather gloves, walked ahead to the lot. It was an ordinary used-car lot, just out of the main

business district, with one of those painted wooden archways, and a string of light bulbs across the front.

Jerr was a fair amateur mechanic; that's why this was his job; he knew enough, at least, not to be too badly gypped. He walked straight to the Chevrolet '49 coupe and 12-foot-trailer combination they'd spotted from Brick's car. The salesman wandered over, Jerr inspected the Chevie, then they drove it around town for twenty minutes, came back, and Jerry looked over the trailer. Then he dickered a while, and finally said okay. He'd rather have bought the thing and been off the lot with it in three minutes flat, but this way, he said, the salesman would be a lot less likely to remember him than if he'd been in too big a hurry.

He had to argue a little about taking the outfit right then and there, with no plates or registration. But money talks, and Jerry had it and showed it, telling the guy he only lived a few blocks away and was willing to risk driving it that far. So the man shrugged, they signed the papers, and Jerr drove the rig off the lot, down the street, and around the corner, Brick following in his car, not too close behind.

On a quiet residential street, they parked in front of the first unlighted houses they found, and put Brick's front plate on the front of the Chevie. Before they'd left home, they'd oiled and loosened the bolts holding the plate to Brick's car, and they had screw driver and pliers ready. Working in the dark, they changed that plate in less than a minute by Jerry's watch. Driving out of town, Brick kept as close to the rear of the trailer as he

could without being conspicuous, to hide the fact that there was no rear tag on the trailer, no front tag on the car. On the highway, he kept a car length or two behind Jerry, and no car ever got between them.

Nobody stopped them. Around two in the morning, Jerry drove right into Guy's barn, cutting the motor so that he coasted most of the length of the driveway and into the barn; Guy had opened the doors wide before he went to bed. Jerry snapped on a padlock we'd bought, walked quietly down the cinders to Brick's car, and they were back at the house and in bed within fifteen minutes. Trailer and car cost nineteen hundred and fifty dollars.

Next morning, a Friday, Guy spent his first free hour between classes in a phone booth, with a classified directory and two dollars' worth of dimes, phoning hardware stores, garages, drugstores, and then every other place he could think of that might possibly sell empty five-gallon cans. Nobody had any, or knew where he could buy them; most of them wanted to know what he wanted them for. Guy told them he was shipping some maple syrup, which was ridiculous, but no one seemed to doubt him, and one of the drugstores suggested glass jugs instead, and that's what we ended up with.

Jerry said they were a better idea for carrying gasoline than cans, because we could smash them, as used, and scatter them off the road a lot easier than crushing and burying metal cans. Next morning, in Davenport, Iowa, fifty miles away, he bought twenty-five clean used jugs from a junk dealer, for a quarter

apiece, and came back with an Iowa license plate he'd found stuck up on a phone pole beside the road. In the barn with us, he held it up, proud as though he'd found the Kohinoor diamond.

"What's that for?" Guy said.

"The trip"—Jerry grinned. "We need license plates; here's one of them."

Guy nodded a little, but frowning. "We'll need more than one."

"I know"—Jerry walked over to lay the plate beside the front of the car. "But keep our eyes open between now and the day we leave, and we ought to find another. You see them all the time, just like I saw this one, stuck up on a phone post or telegraph pole. A plate comes loose, drops off someone's car, and somebody finds it on the road and sticks it up anywhere handy, in case the guy comes back looking for it. Find another Iowa plate, use them to start out with, and somewhere along the way—it's a couple thousand miles, after all—we ought to find others from one of the western states, and switch to those." He grinned again—"Just to make it harder to even guess where the trailer and car came from."

Brick looked up from a carton he was packing. "The front and back plates won't match. You'll never find two from the same car."

"I know"—standing there, hands in his pockets, Jerry was pleased as hell with himself. "And it's just possible we'll get picked up for that somewhere. But I doubt it. Who ever looks to see if your front and back plates are the same; even cops?"

"What about getting picked up for something else?" Guy said. "Some little traffic violation? They'll check our plates, and driver's license, too, and nothing'll match."

Jerry shrugged. "In that case we'll probably be hauled to the pokey, and the whole plan would be off, that's all. Drive carefully, though, and there's no particular reason to be stopped."

Brick nodded. "I guess so. It's just a risk you take, that's all. Like the motor and body numbers of the car; they'll find them, and trace them."

"Probably," said Jerry. "But say they trace the outfit right back to the dealer we bought it from, and talk to the salesman who sold it. All he can say is that some young guy bought it, and they'll know that much already. The guy paid cash, the salesman has never seen him, before or since, and the name and address he gave is meaningless. Why, hell, the salesman might not remember the sale at all by then, or even be there any more."

I said, "It's a good idea, fellows, and it'll work," and Guy and Brick nodded.

While Jerry was buying jugs, that Saturday morning in Brick's car, the rest of us were out buying canned goods; beans, corned beef, prepared meat, fruit, sardines, canned bread, fruit juice, and so on, a few cans at each store. I bought breakfast food, a big carton of paper cups, three good can openers, half a dozen cheap spoons, and two dozen cheap cotton gloves in assorted sizes. Jerry got back around eleven, filled the gas tank at the edge of town, and in Guy's barn we siphoned off fifteen gallons into three of the jugs. We felt wonderful, working away,

tying newspapers securely around the jugs so they'd travel, packing canned goods into cartons; then, wearing gloves, we made a good start on ripping out the trailer bed and bunk, breakfast table and benches, wardrobe, and the little refrigerator, sink, and butane stove, stripping the trailer to a shell. There's something fascinating about working hard in close co-operation with others on something that means a lot to all of you; it was fun like nothing I'd ever done before.

Yet that afternoon it looked as though we had to abandon the whole project, because we ran up against a solid stone wall, with not a chink in it we could find. It was absurd, I felt like an idiot, and it scared me to realize we could go as far as we had without even thinking about a huge and obvious flaw in the plan.

In Brick's room Saturday afternoon, we went over our whole method for getting to Reno, and it looked good. That led us into talking about the escape, and the very difficulty of getting out of Reno solved the problem it created. Reno lies on a flat plain, a valley ringed on three sides by mountains, and leading off into a desert on the fourth. There are only a few highways out of Reno, or you can go Southern Pacific, or United Airlines. Within minutes after a major robbery, it was a cinch depot and airport would be guarded, and the mountain passes and long desert road to Vegas blocked, so the answer was—not to leave.

We decided we'd separate, and Guy, Jerry, and I would look for jobs, anywhere we could find them; college boys again, working for the summer. Brick would stay at one of the guest ranches around Reno—he had the money to do that—as though

he were establishing residence to get a divorce, actually going through the motions of retaining a lawyer. We knew the procedure. You arrive in Reno, pick a place to live for six weeks, and retain a lawyer; then there's not much for either of you to do till your six weeks are up, and you go into court. You pay him a retaining fee right away, which Brick would do, and pay the rest just before the court action, which Brick wouldn't do. After a month, maybe, he'd announce that he'd talked to his wife by phone, and that they were reconciled; that happens often enough in Reno. Then he'd leave.

None of the four of us would see each other in Reno, unless we had to; and we worked out a simple foolproof plan of making contact in that case. We felt good about the whole scheme; it was perfectly possible, even likely, we realized, that we'd be questioned by the police—along with the scores or hundreds of other people who arrive in Reno to live or work each summer. But we were certain we could take that, all right.

Then we reached the question; how do you rob Harold's Club? And we stayed with that problem the rest of the day—and got nowhere. It stunned us, realizing as the hours passed that we couldn't even begin to think of an answer. It was ridiculous, and couldn't be true, yet the fact grew plainer and plainer that there simply wasn't any way to rob Harold's Club. And only the fact that we'd gone too far to stop kept us hopelessly talking and thinking around and around the same closed circle.

Thousands and thousands of dollars come into Harold's Club on a busy week end in summer; and on rodeo week end it *pours*

in, but they don't keep it sitting out on the floor in bushel baskets. There in Brick's room, the air heavy with smoke, Jerry did the same thing he'd already done two dozen times. He had a big loose-leaf notebook of grilled math paper—we were all sitting around Brick's desk—and now, once more, he said, "Here it is," and began to sketch with a soft lead pencil.

Carefully, he drew a large square. "That's the ground floor of Harold's Club," he told us. He drew a much smaller square in the center of the first one. "And that's the cash room." We sat in a trance, staring at Jerry's pencil point as though we hadn't seen all this before. Beside the top of the small square, Jerry's pencil made an *x*. "That wall is solid. It's plaster, with heavy masonry probably, or even steel netting, underneath." He made a second and a third *x*—"And so are those walls." Now Jerr reversed his pencil, and with the eraser made a little opening in the bottom of the small square. "There's the only doorway, the only possible entrance into the cash room; for us, or anyone else." Carefully, he drew a dotted line across the little doorway. "And the door is made of heavy steel rods from floor to ceiling."

From the little barred door in his diagram, Jerry sketched a short hallway extending straight out into the main room. "There's the little corridor that leads from the cash-room door out into the main room. One wall of that corridor is the back wall of a bar"—Jerr sketched in a bar complete with bar stools, and it ran right along one wall of the little corridor, on back the length of the little cash room, and extended past that, clear to the wall of the big main room of Jerry's diagram.

"The other wall of that corridor"—Jerry began to sketch again—"is a wall of the ladies' room." He completed his sketch by drawing a little square. The square fitted into the angle made by the cash room and the short corridor leading up to it. "Now, then"—Jerry drew one more dotted line, across the mouth of the little corridor—"there's a second barred door. You have to go through that door to get into the corridor. And when you're in the corridor, you have to get through the next barred door, before you're in the cash room. Any of you ever notice how those doors work?"

Brick nodded that he had, but neither Guy nor I said anything. We knew how the doors worked because Jerry had told us now; thousands of times, it seemed. But we hadn't known before.

"Well," Jerry said patiently, "those two barred doors work automatically. You can't open one door unless the other one is closed and locked. Now, here's what that means"—he leaned back in his chair. "When we were in Reno last summer, I sat at the end of the bar, right next to the cash-room corridor, drinking coke. They wouldn't sell me anything else, because I'm not twenty-one." I'd long since noticed that when Jerr explained anything, he omitted nothing. "Here's what happens. An employee who's authorized to go into the cash room walks up to that first barred door. He presses a little button on the wall beside the door. You can see the button, if you stand at the end of the bar there; it looks like an ordinary little doorbell. The bell rings in the cash room, and whoever is in there looks out through

the two barred doors. If they see it's someone who has a right to come in, they push a button inside the cash room. Then automatic machinery takes over. The first outside door opens slowly. It works by compressed air; you can hear it hiss. When the door is open, the guy steps through, and now he's standing in the little corridor. But the second door, the one into the cash room, isn't open yet. And it won't open, it *can't* open, until the first door closes, and locks behind him. That means the guy is trapped in that little corridor, until the people in the cash room press the button once again. Now, suppose you'd forced your way into the little corridor with him? The people in the cash room simply wouldn't open the next door. You couldn't shove a pistol through the bars either and make them open it. Because the door to the cash room is covered, floor to ceiling, with heavy steel netting, too small for any gun barrel. But if everything's okay, if the authorized employee is just standing there waiting, they press the button. Then the second door opens, and he walks on into the cash room."

Jerry yawned, and Guy turned to stare out the window beside Brick's desk. "To get out of the cash room," Jerry's voice droned on, "it's the same damn business in reverse; it reminds me of the locks on the Panama Canal." Jerry tossed his pencil down on the desk, and slouched back in his chair. "So please tell me, fellow holdup men, just how the hell we rob Harold's Club?"

Guy said, "We've got a way to get into Reno as though we were invisible, and a way to hide afterward. It looks to me as though we've discovered the perfect method of entering Reno

and leaving again so no one will know we've even been there. Or give a damn. *I* don't know how the hell we rob Harold's Club; those selfish bastards have got it fixed so we can't!"

Brick slowly stood up, walked across the room, then turned to a front window, and stood staring out at the street.

"Yeah," Jerry said, answering Guy. "Harold's Club is unique as a place to rob. Why, damn it, any bank would be easier!"—he smacked a fist into the palm of his other hand. "What drives me nuts is that those double barred doors are actually a fairly simple kind of protection. The local bank right here in town has a far more complicated system. But banks close, occasionally!" He stood up. "So does any other kind of business in the world except Harold's Club, or another place like it. Why, hell, in a bank, once you take care of the watchman and the alarm system, you can work all night or all week end, with drills or acetylene torches or whatever they use, and cut your way into the vault." He began pacing the room, his hands actually clasped behind his back. "But Harold's Club's best protection, its *unique* protection, is the simple fact that they never close. They're open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, twelve months a year. So you can't drill through a wall, and it's idiotic to even think about it. You've *got* to walk in through those doors, in full sight of dozens of people, and all the guards sitting behind one-way-vision glass in the walls and even the ceiling. And you've got to walk out the same way, and if you can tell me how anyone in the world can do that, I'll be eternally grateful!"—he was practically shouting when he finished.

After a moment, Brick said, "Let's face it then; you *can't* get into that cash room. No one could. But the money doesn't stay there forever; it's got to come out sometime. There's our best angle."

Jerry just shrugged, standing there in the middle of the room. "I don't know this for a fact," he said, "but I'm certain the money never leaves there all at once. It's only common sense to take part of it out at a time, and bring it to the bank, or whatever they do with it. You'll never get a crack at the whole day's take anywhere but inside that room. We've *got* to find a way to get into that room." He walked back toward the desk.

"And there is no way," I said. "There just isn't."

Then we all sat there some more. No one had quite said it yet, but I knew the same thought was lying in all our minds; in all the years it's been operating that cash room in Harold's Club had never been robbed because it *couldn't* be robbed; our project was washed up.

I think if it hadn't been for the actuality of the car and trailer, the canned goods, and gasoline sitting in Guy's barn, we'd have quit. Guy said bitterly, "It'd be easier to win the day's take by planning on making forty-nine straight passes at the crap table. Jerr, what about mass hypnosis? Hypnotize everybody in the joint, including the guards back of the glass, then . . ."

With no real hope, I spoke then; I'd been thinking of this for some minutes now, and it seemed to me there was nothing to lose by bringing this up now. "We thought we were stuck once before," I said, "but that problem was solved."

"Sure," Brick said ironically, turning from the windows, and then, like a radio master of ceremonies, "And congratulations, Al Mercer! You came up with the answer before; now do it again."

"No," I said, "I won't come up with the answer. But I didn't do it last time either."

Jerry stared at me, his eyes narrowing. "No?" he said softly. "Who did?"

"Tina."

"*Tina?*"

"Sure. I told her about the plan; she knows all about it." I shrugged—"Maybe I shouldn't have, but I did. And she gave us the answer on how to get to Reno; all of it; everything I told you. Maybe she can do it again." It was out now, and no one said anything. I couldn't tell what they were thinking, and I didn't care; I felt pretty sure our project was finished.

Walking back to the desk, Brick said softly, "Does she want a share?"

That annoyed me. "And what if she did?"—I looked up at him. "So far a full share of nothing is nothing. And looks like it'll stay that way, unless she comes up with that answer, too. Unless you've got the answer, and are now ready to reveal it."

"No," he said quietly, standing there. "Take it easy; I was just asking."

"Well, the fact is she doesn't want a share, and never asked. She and I would split mine."

"Look," Brick said, "if Tina's in on this, she's in. And if she

can answer this one, I'm personally damn glad of it. She working now?"

"I don't think so. She's probably home."

"Let's go then"—Guy stood up. "Without her, we're finished, so what can we lose?"

Ten minutes later we were sitting in Tina's living room; Brick, Guy, and Jerry in a row on the day bed, Tina in the easy chair, and I sat near her at the desk. She looked nice. She was wearing a flowered spring dress, ready to go out; she was due at The Bowl in half an hour. None of my stuff was in sight.

Once again Jerry was carefully explaining the problem, drawing his diagram on a sheet of paper Tina had given him. When he finished, she thought for maybe a minute. And she reached exactly the same answer we had; it just didn't take her as long. And now I knew we were finished.

She shook her head—"I don't know the answer. It looks impossible to get in there. And maybe it is." She was silent for a moment, biting gently at her lower lip. Then she said, looking around at us, "But I just can't believe there's any such thing as guarding something so well that someone else can't find a way to get at it. Can you?"—she looked at us, but no one answered. "I doubt if anyone has ever done that," she insisted, "including Harold's Club. No"—she shook her head—"there's a way to do this. Because there just has to be. But I can't imagine what it is and I don't think any of us will find it here."

Quietly she said, "Someone has to go to Reno. One of us has to go to Harold's Club, and practically live there. He has to sit

around, stand around, walk around, and see everything there is to see, everything your memories may have missed. He has to find a new approach to this, and think, and think, and think; right there on the spot. This is one you can't solve in your mind; you've reached a dead end. I think this has to be answered right there. And that someone can do it." She smiled at him—"Personally, I think it's Jerry."

It's funny, but that swung the tide right around. The enthusiasm came flooding back, and we were suddenly as elated and happy there in Tina's living room as though she'd solved the whole problem. She'd done no such thing, yet I was certain she'd found the answer; that old Jerr could go to Reno and somehow come back with the problem solved, and so were the rest of us, Jerry himself, especially. Then we sat and chattered, all excited and eager, all talking at once half the time, till it was time to drive Tina to work.

We left then, got to The Bowl a minute or two early, and sat in the car talking some more. At one point Tina said something or other about when we'd make the trip, and Jerry very gently said, "We?"

Tina nodded. "Yeah," she said.

Jerr nodded, neither disputing nor agreeing, and looked inquiringly at Guy.

"Well, why not?"—Guy shrugged. "What the hell; we wouldn't even be making the trip except for Tina."

Jerr nodded again, and turned to Brick.

"Suits me," Brick said. "Suits me fine, in fact." He looked at

Tina for a moment, then grinned slowly. "Personally, I'm very glad you're coming along."

I spoke then, and when Brick's glance turned to me, I stared squarely into his eyes, not smiling at all. "Tina's coming along with us, all right," I said. "But she's going with me." I waited a moment, then smiled pleasantly. "All clear?" I said.

"Why, sure," he said easily. "Only do me a favor"—he turned back to Tina. "For my own peace of mind, on that long, long trip"—again he grinned slowly—"wear slacks, will you, Tina? Loose, non-form-fitting slacks."

She looked at him coolly. "I planned to," she said, then reached for the door handle, turning toward me. "See you later," she murmured, and smiled into my eyes. Brick leaned forward to let her past his seat, she got out of the car, and walked into The Bowl.

We watched her go in, and walk to the back of the store. Then Brick turned to me. "She's a nice girl, Al," he said soberly. "And a bright one. You're a very smart guy."

I just nodded and let it go at that, and Brick started the car to drive back to the house.

On the way, Jerry suggested that we have the gas tank filled again, and siphon it off into jugs that evening; and when Brick pulled into the Standard station on Locust Street, Jerr got out, went to the outside phone booth, and pulled the door closed. A minute or so later, he came out, changed a couple dollars for quarters with the filling-station attendant, and went back into the booth.

When we drove away, Jerry was grinning. "All set," he said. "I got a United Airlines reservation from Chicago, at eleven-fifteen tomorrow morning. I'll take the train to Chicago tonight, and by tomorrow evening I'll be in Harold's Club." All excited, he grinned again. "I'll tell them at the house that I'm going to Chicago for a wedding in my family, or something like that."

"What about classes?" Guy said.

"I don't have many cuts; I never do. I can stand a few now."

"How about money?" I couldn't help asking that, though there was nothing I could do to help out, and I knew Jerr had it, anyway.

"I've got enough at the house to get me to Reno, and I'll give you a check tonight for more. Cash it Monday when the bank opens, and wire it to me." He paused for a moment. "Better drive over to Davenport and send it; whoever has time. Don't wire it from here."

Monday the rest of us went to classes; we could cut, Jerry insisted, only when it was strictly necessary. We had to have dates, too, he said, and put in time loafing around the house, playing cards, and ping-pong. And we had to study, or at least sit in our rooms and go through the motions. So outwardly, we kept right on living pretty much as we normally did, and since the four of us always had spent a lot of time together, we didn't think it would occur to anyone that we were up to anything unusual. Each of us began telling anyone interested that this summer we weren't going to Reno, or anywhere else together. And on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday nights, gloves on again, using small

crowbars, we finished the job of stripping the inside of that trailer down to nothing but walls, roof, and linoleum-block floor.

10

Wednesday morning, Jerry was back. He checked his bag in a coin locker at the Q depot, and walked straight to the campus in time for his first class that day; it was hard to believe he'd actually been to Reno. As it happened, I saw him crossing the campus toward Old Main, but there was time to talk to him for only a minute. He was quietly elated, confident he'd solved the big problem, and I was on top of the world.

But an hour later, when his class was over—I'd rounded up Brick and Guy in the meantime—we sat out on the lawn in front of Old Main, and as Jerry explained his plan, it scared me. I didn't like any part of it.

He'd been busy in Reno, all right, and damned ingenious; no question about that. As he told us what he'd done, he was grinning, actually wriggling with delight sometimes, constantly plucking blades of grass, shredding them with his nails, then tossing them away.

For one thing he'd bought a seventy-five-dollar camera in a Reno pawnshop on Commercial Row, the kind that prints its own pictures in sixty seconds right inside the camera. Obviously de-

lighted with himself, he told us how he'd spent six hours alone in his hotel room, working out a way to wrap that camera in a brown-paper package and carry it under his arm and still take pictures with it. Working with scissors and cellophane tape, he made a good strong cardboard box that fitted the opened camera exactly. He put the camera in the box, wrapped the box in brown paper, tied it with string; then with a razor blade he cut a small hole in one end of the box, through both brown paper and cardboard, exactly over the camera lens. He glued the round snip of paper back onto the little cardboard disk he'd cut out, and refastened it in its original place on the package with a little cellophane-tape hinge. Then he ran a rubber band through a little puncture in the cardboard disk, and looped it back over the camera; this pulled the disk back against the camera lens and made the package look whole again. From the outside of this little hinged trap door, a length of string hung down; it looked like a loose end of the string he'd tied the package with. Holding the package under one arm, Jerry could pull that little piece of string with the fingers of the same hand; the little round trap door would open, exposing the lens for an instant. When he let go of the string, the taut rubber band would snap the little door shut over the lens. On one side of his package Jerry cut a hole just big enough to poke a finger in; he held that surface against his side so the hole couldn't be seen. Jerry finished up by writing an address on his package and sticking a bunch of postage stamps on it.

Then he practiced, for hours alone in his room, till he could

aim that camera, held under his left arm, at whatever he wanted to photograph. Practicing before the full-length mirror on the closet door, he'd bring up his right hand casually, poke a finger through the hole in the side of the package, and trip the shutter.

Most of the time, no matter how much he practiced, it didn't work. He'd get only an edge of what he was aiming at, or miss it entirely. And—actually inside Harold's Club—he'd had to go to the washroom, inside a booth; unwrap his camera; develop his print; and if it was no good, reset the camera and wrap it up again. For every picture he snapped, Jerry had to spend ten minutes inside that washroom.

But eventually—it took him hours and several visits—he got what he wanted; and sitting there on the grass in the warm June sun, he showed us the prints. Harold's Club is brilliantly lighted, but Jerry's prints were still underdeveloped and just a shade blurred. But they were good enough for his purpose. For three days' time and work, and at a cost of several hundred dollars, Jerry had several prints of what looked like a metal teacart standing on the cigarette-littered floor of Harold's Club, plus the slightly blurred image of a man holding the handle of the cart. The cart, as the prints showed clearly enough, was a rectangular metal box less than a yard wide, somewhat longer, and several feet deep. It was mounted on four hard-rubber swivel wheels and had a tube-metal handle, like a baby buggy's, for wheeling it around.

We looked at the prints, passing them among us; then Brick gave them back to Jerry, and we all looked at him, waiting.

He was beaming, so pleased with himself he was busting. "Tina was right," he said delightedly. "I'd forgotten all about that thing; never would have remembered it without actually visiting Harold's Club again. I've got the dimensions; I stood against it for a second, and I know exactly where the top edge hits me on the leg. We'll get that measurement in inches, and I know how to calculate the others from the photograph."

I didn't know what the hell he was talking about, and neither did Brick or Guy, and Jerry grinned, and began explaining his plan.

When he finished, I was so disappointed I didn't know what to say. I thought he'd lost his mind, and I said so. The others felt the same way, and poor Jerr was so let down, he looked as though he were going to cry. Instead, he got mad. "*Why?*" he demanded, looking around at us. "What's wrong with it? Just tell me what's wrong!"

For a moment or so, we stared at the grass, not knowing how to say it; then Guy looked up, and answered for all of us. "Nothing, Jerr," he said gently. "That is, I can't find any actual holes in it, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Well"—he shrugged—"it's just too . . . I don't know what. Good lord, Jerr," he burst out then, "no place in the world was ever robbed that way! It's fantastic!"

For a moment Jerry was silent. Then he smiled, quietly confident again. "Yes, it is; isn't it?" he agreed pleasantly. We were all sitting cross-legged or half lying on the grass, and he glanced

around at us. "Maybe I should have said this first, before explaining the details." Jerry tossed away the blade of grass in his fingers—"It *has* to be fantastic; don't you see that? It has to be something so absolutely unheard of, so completely *unthought* of, that no one in Harold's Club has even dreamed of such a thing, or how to guard against it. Or else—tell me!—how the hell do we get into that cash room?"

He waited a moment, looking around at us, then went on. "Tina said it; we needed a whole new approach. We were studying *their* precautions, then trying to figure a way to beat them. Well, that was wrong; you're playing their game, and can't win. They've long ago thought of everything we could think of in that line, and they've protected against it. So we need something entirely new; something they've never thought of or guarded against; something—fantastic."

Jerry looked at us, and when he saw absolutely no enthusiasm in our faces, he said quietly, "Listen; describe this briefly the way I just did, and it sounds impossible; I know that. But build this to scale"—he tapped the print in his hand with the knuckles of the other hand—"buy the sheet metal, buy a welding outfit, learn how to use it, make this thing the way it's got to be made, never skipping a single step or detail, never letting ourselves go slipshod or discouraged, do everything else we have to, and do it all to perfection"—he stopped to suck in a breath—"then practice, practice, practice, with a prepared typed script in our hands, and *this will work!*"

Sitting there on the grass, eyes suddenly fierce, he was actu-

ally breathing hard; furious. "Why, god damn it," he said softly, "what do you think we've been talking about? We're talking about a major robbery! Stealing *several hundred thousand dollars!* From a place no one ever *has* robbed, and that ten thousand people have thought about robbing, without ever figuring out how! You think you do that without *work?* And endless preparation? Like robbing some goddamn filling station?" He glared at us. "Why, hell; the Brooklyn robbery I told you about, the thing that *started* all this; those guys spent weeks in nothing but preparation. Every movement they finally made was studied and rehearsed a thousand times. *Their* scheme was fantastic! That damned ice-cream cart was ridiculous! But it worked. It went off. They did it. No, sir; you don't steal a fortune with fifteen minutes' planning and ten minutes' easy work. You get yourself killed, if you try." Once again he rapped the print in his hand with his knuckles—"But this is the way it can be done."

Jerry impressed us. He got to us all right. But it was Tina who really swung us around. She sided with Jerr completely; the same arguments came to her mind when she heard his plan; she even used some of his very phrases. So we compromised; we agreed to work, under Jerry's direction, and decide when we'd finished whether to go on or not. Jerry put up four hundred dollars; we went to work, and I've never worked so hard, never accomplished so much, never beat down so many frustrating obstacles, small and large, as I did and we all did, in the next ten days.

It was incredible how little sleep we got by on. In Peoria we bought a secondhand welder's torch and outfit, and a supply of

stainless sheet metal from a restaurant supply house. In Guy's barn, afternoons and nights, we learned how to cut, bend, shape, and handle stainless steel, and that isn't easy. We learned how to weld from an instruction manual, and actually that wasn't too hard. We never became professionals, but if our seams were messy on the undersides, they were strong.

But it took *time,* the work ate up the hours. And we made mistakes, we spoiled sheet metal, and Jerry simply would not allow any sloppy work to get by. If it was anything less than perfect for our purpose, it had to be done again. But by simply going doggedly ahead, one step at a time, solving each problem as we came to it, we finished the job—at two-thirty one morning. When we all stood there then, like kids around a Christmas tree, looking at what we had done, I never felt more proud of anything I'd ever accomplished in my life before.

In Chicago, at a West-side wholesale house, we bought a first-quality tape recorder. We bought a six-volt automobile storage battery, and a transformer. In Guy's barn, we welded holding brackets for them, mounted them on sponge rubber, wired and soldered electrical connections, tested the thing over and over and over, then jounced and banged the whole works around, giving it twice the punishment it would have to take in Reno and during the trip; and it stood up fine. Then we wiped every last square inch clean with alcohol swabs.

Oh, we did it; Jerry's fantastic brain child became a reality, but—have you ever seen a movie, or read a story, in which elaborate equipment is set up with no trouble at all? I remember

a story: a television camera was secretly hidden in the crooks' hide-out; concealed in the attic, with the lens over a small hole made in the ceiling. Wires ran from the camera—it wasn't explained who did that or how—to another house, connecting it with a television set. There were hidden microphones, too, and the good guys sat at their television set watching and listening to the crooks' secret plans. I accepted all that when I read it. Why, sure; just install your handy television camera, set up your microphones—why not?

But working in the reality of Guy's barn, night after night, I often thought of that story. And now I wanted to know just where they got that television camera, exactly when and how they lugged the thing into the crooks' attic, and who made a hole in the ceiling without knocking the plaster down? Who bored holes in the woodwork for the connecting cable? How was that cable concealed outdoors, and so on and on. Because, in reality, even the comparatively simple thing we did is incredibly difficult.

It just doesn't go smoothly; you make impossible little mistakes in measuring, and something that should drop into place doesn't fit at all. Everything takes hours, and you wear blisters, and then calluses on your hands, handling metal shears. You hurt yourself, burn yourself, you get tired, and you have to stop to eat. You run out of things you need, and have to drive downtown to a hardware store before you can go on. You get your arc too hot or too cold, and a weld comes apart in your hands. An electrical circuit that, by all the laws of physics and the universe, ought to work just doesn't. And it takes two and a half hours to

pull it apart and put it together before it finally does work, and you never know why it didn't in the first place. One night Guy suddenly dropped a pair of pinch-nosed pliers and a roll of friction tape, turned aside, and vomited, out of sheer physical weariness. But we finished what Jerry had described to us the day he came back from Reno.

Then, typed scripts in our hands, we rehearsed and recorded, rehearsed and recorded, with Jerry coaching, till we hated him. But when finally that was done, too, and done right, and we were completely finished, we knew Jerry had been right; this thing could be done, it could actually work. But it carried no guarantees, and we knew it, and were able to think of a fair number of ways in which it could all go wrong. And there were moments when I was certain we were all insane, moving along of our own free wills to death, or imprisonment for the best parts of our lives.

11

Guy made a trip to Chicago and a theatrical supply house. We got the last of our jugs filled with high-test gas. We bought two big cans of motor oil from Montgomery Ward's, extra spark plugs and a fan belt. I stole several quarts of distilled water from chemistry lab, we bought a supply of paper-covered mys-

tery novels, playing cards, a first-aid kit, aspirin; we filled glass jugs with water for drinking, and for the car—we thought of everything. And late in June, around eleven o'clock, two nights before we were due to leave, we packed the stripped-down trailer, lashing supplies and equipment in place according to a chart we'd worked out, with Jerry standing there crossing off items on a check list in a clipboard, like Noah supervising the loading of the Ark.

Tina had given notice at The Bowl; she was going home to her folks, she told them. And suddenly, a day and a half early, we were ready to leave, with nothing more to do but attend a few final classes, and catch up on sleep.

Brick was graduated, and had to attend the ceremonies. A lot of good-bys were said on the campus and at the fraternity house, and then one noon, school was suddenly over. That afternoon, the campus already had its sleepy summertime look, green and beautiful, and almost deserted. That night, at two-thirty, the streets and houses dark and silent, Brick was at the wheel of the car, in front of the barn, the motor off, his foot on the brake. Guy, Jerry, Tina, and I sat silently on the floor of the pitch-dark trailer, wearing our gloves. Brick released the brake a little, and the trailer rolled slowly down the cinder driveway, pulling the car along behind it. Out in the empty silent street, Brick started the motor, released the clutch, and we felt ourselves moving ahead at last; north toward Chicago, before turning west.

It wasn't too bad in the trailer. The highways to Chicago are concrete, and the loaded trailer rode smooth. On top of our sup-

plies, we had a heavy layer of newspaper, with blanket padding over that, and it was actually pretty comfortable.

Outside of town, rolling along the highway at an even forty-five, we turned on the light; a good powerful battery light in the ceiling. The venetian blinds were closed tight over the windows, and Guy, grinning but not saying a word, pulled open a cardboard carton. Silently, he began passing around the outfits we were going to wear into Harold's Club, and—grinning, too, now—we put on the green, red, black, and yellow cowboy shirts he handed us; Tina took Brick's. Then we put on the cheap felt cowboy hats, and Guy buckled on his toy pistol. Finally, grinning so widely it actually hurt, we hooked on the false beards Guy had bought at the theatrical supply house.

Then we looked at each other. For a moment the three of us stared at Tina, wearing that ridiculous mustache and beard, then we began to scream with laughter. We knew we ought to be quiet, but in a moment we were actually rolling on the floor, howling with delight, and when Guy began snapping his pistol at us, I laughed so hard it hurt to breathe. It probably wasn't really that funny, but it seemed so; some sort of release from tension, I suppose. And I don't know what that trailer sounded like if anyone passed it rolling along the dark highway toward Chicago at three o'clock that cool June morning.

The trailer slowed, then stopped at the side of the road, and an instant later the door opened and Brick stood there, his face blank and astonished at the uproar. When we looked at him—that astounded face staring in at us—it set us off harder than

ever, and we shrieked and howled, Guy snapping his pistol at him and yelling, "Bang, bang! Fall over; you're dead, you bastard!" The tears were rolling down our cheeks, and Brick grinned, shook his head helplessly, and closed the door again. The trailer started up and as we moved on, toward Chicago, then Reno, it was actually rocking a little on the road, we were jumping and cavorting around so much, all except Tina; Guy snapping his pistol, all yowling like maniacs, dressed in our cowboy outfits, mustaches, and beards.

12

Huddled against one wall of the trailer, Brick was asleep; he'd driven till dawn, and now Jerry was at the wheel for the day. Guy said quietly, "I have here in my hands, in a large cup of delicate bone china, some freshly made, perfectly brewed, steaming hot coffee; together with sugar in a silver bowl, and a pitcher of fresh, thick country cream. What am I bid?" In shirt sleeves, like Brick, Jerry, and me, he was lying on his back, smiling, his head on a rolled-up blanket, gloved hands clasped behind his neck.

"Five dollars," I said.

Guy sneered. "Obviously this man hates coffee. Do I hear a real bid?"

Tina smiled a little, and sighed; she was sitting beside me, wearing slacks and a sweater, her back to the wall of the trailer. "Right now I think I'd give twenty-five dollars for a good cup of coffee; I really do."

"The lady has a faint, very mild hankering for coffee. Myself, I'd give everything I own, including my shoes, and throw in my right arm, for a cup. It wouldn't even have to be very good. It could be yesterday's coffee, warmed over, and served in a tin can. Just so it was hot. Steaming hot coffee; I'd sell my sou——"

"Don't," I said. "I'll kill myself."

Staring at the ceiling, Guy said, "You can have your bacon, crisp, and right out of the pan; canned peaches are okay with me. You can have your eggs, beautifully scrambled or perfectly fried; I'll get along with dry cereal right out of the box. But coffee! A goldfish bowl full of it, held in my two, trembling hands, while I sniff it like fine old brandy. Coffee, sustainer of the human spirit, builder of morale and nerve tissue. Good, hot——"

"Listen," I said, "there must be some way we can get it without violating security too much. Why can't Jerry just pull in to some roadside joint, like any other guy dragging a trailer, and——"

"No"—Tina was shaking her head. "You know better."

I nodded. "I know. I just like to torture myself. Think of something else to talk about, Guy."

He sat up, elbows on his knees, hands dangling between his ankles. Then he said, "L."

"O," I said, turning to Tina.

She thought for a moment, then said, "S."

Guy shook his head regretfully at Tina. "I."

I shrugged, turning to Tina. "N."

She considered that, then shrugged, too, and said, "All right —G."

"I'm sorry to announce"—Guy smiled at her—"that you finished the word *losing*, and are one third of a pig."

"Ghost," said Tina. "It's one third of a ghost, not a pig."

"Al? We let her get away with that?"

"Sure. Your turn again, Tina; you start the next round."

"D," she said, and we played on, with Tina and Guy ganging up on me till I lost three times, and was a full-fledged ghost, or pig. Then Guy brought a pack of cards out of his shirt pocket, removed his gloves, and began riffling them invitingly. "A little canfield? Russian bank? Faro? Piquet? Or should we wake up Brick for some bridge?"

I shook my head. "I can't play cards in a moving car; makes me sick." So Guy and Tina played casino, while I lay back with my eyes closed, for a few moments; then I dozed off.

I woke up, aware that the trailer had stopped. Brick was awake now, and the four of us glanced expectantly at each other. A car whizzed by, then Tina opened the door on the opposite side a fraction of an inch, and stood peeking out, me beside her. We waited, another car passed, then as its sound receded, the motor of our car raced for an instant, and at that signal from Jerry that the road was now clear, Tina stepped out of the trailer. I

kept the door open half an inch, and watched her walk quickly across the yard of a deserted country schoolhouse, then disappear around a corner of the building.

Several cars passed, widely separated. Then, the road once again clear of traffic, Tina stepped quickly out from behind the schoolhouse, and came back to the trailer. The motor raced immediately, and the rest of us, including Jerry, got out, and laughing like hell for no good reason, we raced for the boys' room behind the school.

Everything was fun that day; canned peaches for breakfast, the breaks at country schoolhouses—twice during the day and again at night, when we all slid down the slides and bounced on the teeter-totter in a pitch-dark little schoolyard—and all the other things we did to pass time. We talked a lot, laughed a lot, read, played word games, we even played mumblety-peg with Guy's pocketknife on the top of a carton. And we all napped easily; we had a lot of lost sleep to make up, and the trailer seemed comfortable. Some of the novelty had faded the second day, but it was all still new and interesting enough to sustain us.

But beginning about midmorning of the third day out, it was suddenly pretty bad. Breakfast was over; canned fruit again, zwieback, dry cereal, and water; and we began our routine of games, talk, cards, and reading. But none of them lasted long. One after another we began the things we'd done to pass time, and were sick of them almost before they began. Long before noon we were sitting or lying in the jiggling trailer, trying to sleep, or staring into space, waiting for the morning break, the

feel of solid ground under our feet, and something new to focus our eyes on.

Then, the break over so quickly it only tantalized us, we sat waiting for noon, and the lunch we didn't want. That afternoon —I couldn't read in the moving trailer without getting dizzy— Tina read aloud; a mystery novel. And from then on, we put in a fair amount of time that way, Guy and Brick spelling Tina at reading.

But still—I'd tried imagining what the trip would be like, never even glancing out a window, never showing our faces— this was worse than I'd expected. For the first time in my life I began experiencing actual claustrophobia; at times I had to hold onto myself to keep from yelling that I wanted to get out; it was like traveling in a coffin. The inside of that trailer is printed on my mind forever, and I hated the look of it; we all did. And we began to be aware—at first slightly, then acutely—of how much we were in each other's way. You'd shift position, and your back would press the heel of a shoe, or someone's sleeve would brush your ear, and you'd want to slash out at him.

We even began looking forward to gas stops, as some sort of break in the terrible monotony, though we couldn't get out, or do anything but lie there motionless and silent. We were saving our bottled gas for the last thousand miles, and each night around dusk—not full daylight, but just before the gas stations would be turning lights on—Jerry would stop, his cap pulled low, wearing sun glasses.

He'd pick a station with no other cars waiting, and he always

bought to the even dollars' worth, the bills waiting in his hand; never once did he have to wait for change. When they'd ask about checking oil and water, he'd just shake his head no; he let them clean the windshield, though. Often as not, Jerr would get in and out of a filling station without having to say any more than, "Four dollars' worth; ethyl."

We'd lie there in the dark, listening to all the little sounds; the gas-tank cap coming off, the quiet whirr of the pump; and straining to hear whatever was said. Most of all, though, we enjoyed—we drank in—the simple wonderful fact of temporary motionlessness. In some ways the never-ending, tiny jiggling of the floor of that trailer was becoming hardest of all to bear.

There was no stopping for meals, a bottle of pop, a cup of coffee. No scenery to watch, or quitting at night for a decent night's sleep. No wandering around a strange town of an evening, or seeing a movie. No stretching your legs every few hours, or laying over somewhere for a day. We saw not a single new face, and hardly a new sight to provide material for new conversation. There was nothing. No change, hour after hour after hour. And no position was comfortable now. Once I stood up in that vibrating trailer for twenty-five miles, just for the relief it would be to finally lie down again. And coffee—the terrible need for a cup of hot coffee in the mornings—was no longer a subject to be funny about.

But Tina's plan was working. We were doing what Jerry had said we had to do; we were crossing the country as though we were invisible, or as close to it as could possibly be done. For no

one ever saw anyone but the driver; and at most they'd catch a glimpse of him, a cap pulled down on his forehead. And all they'd have seen even then, all that would be left in their memories, if anything at all, was just one more dusty car-and-trailer rig, typical of a million others on the highways everywhere, all summer long. Let the Reno police check gas stations on all the roads into Reno—we carried twenty five-gallon jugs of high-test gasoline, and even with the load we were carrying, we'd get ten miles to the gallon, and for the last thousand miles into Reno be as independent of gas stations as though we were using atomic power. Let them check restaurants, motels, every other place we might conceivably have stopped at; we were stopping at none of them, our wheels would hardly stop turning day or night, that final thousand miles, our faces never seen, our voices never heard.

The night driving saved our minds; in some ways those three-hour shifts at the wheel are among the best moments of my life. Tina rode with me, up in the car. She never drove; we didn't want anything even as slightly out of the ordinary as a woman driving a trailer rig. Going through towns, no matter how late, she'd sit on the floor out of sight, and I wore the cap, pulled low. If I even stopped for a traffic light, I'd have my elbows on the wheel, hands at my face, as though I were tired and massaging my eyes.

The first few minutes of the nighttime shifts were especially wonderful; it was like being born again, to step out into the world once more. Whoever was driving would wait, toward the

end of his shift, for a deserted stretch of country road, then stop quickly, leaving the motor on, climb out, and hurry back to the door of the trailer. Whoever's turn it was next would pass him on the way, climb in, and be off.

Every sight and sound as you got the trailer moving again was as fresh and interesting as they must be to a child. A darkened farmhouse, dim white in the night, was exciting to see. Stars in the sky were something to feast your eyes on, and to drive through a closed-down empty little Main Street was an experience.

We'd sit there, Tina and I, sniffing the soft June air through the open windows, glancing from side to side at whatever there was to see; roadside fences, signposts, billboards, fields of corn at first, then wheat, and after a time, the endless sweep of desert country. For a little while, we'd listen for sounds; crickets or frogs usually, sometimes a bird, or cattle stomping as we passed a barn. Then after a time, we'd settle back, find some dance music on the radio, and start to talk—in a way, and about things, that weren't possible back in the trailer. Driving was no strain; we'd tool along at an even forty, seldom passing anything except for an occasional slow truck.

I got to know everything about Tina, in those nighttime tours. I learned what had happened, down on the farm in Illinois, with her folks. It was the old story of misunderstanding, fear, and finally the hate or indifference of a child for her parents, but it fascinated me. I learned that her name was Betty, not Tina; she'd changed it herself, when she was fifteen. But even more im-

portant than the facts of her life, I learned what Tina liked to do, and read, and think; and what she believed and hoped. Each night I fell deeper and deeper in love with her.

We were five days out before we talked about the project, to amount to anything. We were in desert country now, and that night I had the siesta shift, twelve to three. The "siesta hour" was Guy's idea. In the desert it was easy now to turn off the road and bump slowly along, picking a path among the sagebrush clumps, for a couple hundred yards off the road, invisible to passing traffic. It was easy, and absolutely necessary now; we simply had to get out of that trailer for more than a few minutes at a time. We had to feel solid ground under our feet for long enough to get used to it again, had to get free of the walls and roof, and get away from each other and be alone.

We'd stop for one hour, smash our empty gas jugs, and bury empty food cans and refuse. Then each of us, usually, would wander off alone, into the desert a way, for maybe three quarters of the time. Then we'd straggle back, and standing around, we'd chat a little, refreshed and alive again, or at least able to get back in and go on when the hour ended. "Siesta hour" meant everything to us, it kept us going. Jerry even woke up for it, just to get free of the car and trailer.

Now, around two-thirty in the morning, our car and trailer a fat bug on the vast carpet of the desert floor, we were moving along a road straight as a ruler, the sage flowing past our windows, and stretching endlessly ahead and to the sides in the moonlight. The light was very white and even, and there was

nothing but sage and sand; it looked weird; we might have been on another planet. "Al!" I swung my head to Tina, and she was asleep, frowning, and her cry had been muffled, the kind of shriek you utter in a dream. She twisted her body, moving her head on the upholstery of the seat, then opened her eyes.

I smiled at her, then turned my eyes back to the road—"Dreaming?"

"Yeah"—she spoke slowly, stared at me for a moment as though she didn't know me; then she sat up. "Oh, Al! I dreamed I was—somewhere. In Reno, I think." She suddenly moved closer, huddling against me. "And they were telling me you were dead; killed."

That got to me, it bothered me, there in the moonlight, alone on that silent world, but I smiled. "Who's 'they'?"

"I don't know; just some people. A woman and two men, I think. And they were grinning as though they were glad."

I smiled again. "Well, they're wrong; I'm alive, and can prove it."

But she didn't smile back. "Al, I have that dream every night now; that you're killed in Reno. Al, I'm *scared*"—she sounded as though she could cry very easily. "Oh, Al, I wish it were just the two of us, driving along now. To somewhere new, just to settle down, nothing else, no one else along."

"Me, too."

"I've been thinking, for days now, and I've changed my mind"—she was talking feverishly in a low intense tone. "I don't want you to go through with this, I'm scared to death. I

don't want the money, I don't *want* it, I want you, that's all." I started to say something, but she cut me off. "Listen to me, darling; you can understand this. There was a pressure on me, back at The Bowl. I was alone in the world, I had nothing and nobody. I *was* nothing, and it seemed to me that I just had to have money, position, status, or whatever you want to call it. But now it's *us*, Al, and that's all I want, and I don't want to lose it, I couldn't stand that. Quit, Al! *Please!* I just want you, to settle down somewhere new, and have children, and live just like everyone else. You'll be killed!"—she began to cry. "This is crazy, it won't work, and I love you; oh, Al, I'm so scared!" I had my arm around her, and she was trembling violently.

I knew Tina was right. The very thought of robbing Harold's Club was suddenly insane, certain death, and it was impossible that we'd ever seriously considered it. I knew this, too; that if she didn't want the money, neither did I. I wanted what Tina wanted; just us together, I didn't need anything else.

"All right, all right," I said gently, squeezing her to me with my free arm, patting her shoulder. "It's done; I'll quit." And now I knew, with the most enormous relief, that we'd been driving to doom, carried on by a meaningless momentum, and that now I could, and did, drop the whole burden of it, and I'd never been so happy. I wanted to shout and cry out with relief, and I *had* to kiss Tina. It wasn't siesta time yet, but I shifted to low, and very slowly and carefully edged off into the desert. Then I drove along, carefully as I could, rocking the trailer no more than I could help, for a hundred and fifty yards or so. I stopped

and listened; there wasn't a sound from the trailer; they were still asleep. Then I cut the motor, turned to Tina, and kissed her, and held her, and talked and murmured to her for I don't know how long.

The sound of metal, fingernails drumming on the car door, sounded beside me, and I turned fast, startled. It was Guy, still looking sleepy, grinning a little. "Seventh-inning stretch," he said quietly, and turned away.

"Tell them now?" Tina whispered.

"Might as well," I said, and opened the door.

Tina got out and strolled off, ahead of the car. Guy and Jerry were wandering off, separately, into the sage. Brick stood at the door of the trailer, a bulky silhouette against the silvery aluminum of the trailer under the moon. Walking toward him, I saw him fumbling in his shirt pocket for a cigarette. "Got a minute, Brick?" I stopped before him.

"Yeah," he said, and I turned from the trailer, Brick following, and we walked off into the desert.

I don't know what accounted for the impulse to talk first to Brick, and alone. We'd appointed no one leader of the project. There was no boss, and if there had been, logically it should have been Jerry; he'd done most of the detailed planning. But somehow, not realizing it then, I wanted to talk to Brick first, almost as though I were asking his permission.

We threaded our way through sagebrush. Maybe a hundred yards straight out from the side of the trailer we found an abandoned fence post or railroad tie, and sat down on it.

"Brick, I kind of hate to tell you this——"

"But you and Tina want out." He drew on his cigarette, and as it glowed I saw he was smiling. "That it?"

"Yeah, I guess it is. I'm sorry, but . . . Well, I can tell you our reasons if you're interested."

"No," he said casually, "I'm not. I could probably make a pretty good guess."

"I guess you could."

"But I'm not interested in your reasons"—Brick drew on his cigarette again; he was still smiling, looking at me pleasantly —"because they don't matter. Not any more. Because I just can't let you quit, Al; this is too important to me. We've almost got our hands on real money; this'll work, and we'll never get another chance like it. I want money, Al, and I'm going to have it."

I was embarrassed. "Brick, I'm sorry as hell, but this is something each guy has to decide for himself. That was the agreement. If you're worried about me talking, in case you go ahead——"

"Oh, no." Brick's tone was polite. "It isn't that. It's just that three aren't enough. I've got to have you."

"I'm sorry, Brick."

"Look, Al"—he put a hand on my knee for a moment—"I hate to talk tough; to a guy I like, especially. But I am tough," he said softly. "I think you know that, but I don't think you know how tough I really am." Quickly he added, "Don't make me talk about that, though. I want you to change your mind, Al,

of your own free will, without me having to say any more. Al, you'll be glad! Think of the mon——"

"What's this tough talk, Brick? Tell me more; don't save my face. Go ahead; scare me."

He was silent for a moment or so, sitting there on the desert. Then he took out his cigarette pack. "Cigarette, Al?"

"Thanks." I took one and lighted it, looking at him steadily, so that he could see my face as the match flared.

"Al, you have to understand and believe this: I'm a guy who wants money. Then, if you really know anything about me, you'll know I'll do absolutely anything I have to to get it. This is the way to get it, and it's too good to pass up. We're going through with this. All of us. Don't make me say any more."

I shook my head. "No; go ahead. You interest me."

Brick flicked his cigarette away in a long curving spark; the spark shattered on the sand. "All right, Al, listen. You're going through with this or I'm going to give Tina a beating. By that I mean I'll work her over for a long time; it might take a good half hour. When I finish, she'll be alive, nothing broken; she'll be in the hospital, but she'll recover—physically, that is. But, Al, it would do something to her spiritually that she'd never get over. I know people, and that's how it would be with Tina. It would be very painful. She'd scream, and after she couldn't scream, she'd——"

"I'll kill you." I whispered it. Then I stood up suddenly, a raw red mist over everything, and started to scream it. "You son of a bitch, I'll *kill*——"

He yanked me down hard by one arm. "Shut up!" I was filling my lungs again when he actually shook me so I couldn't talk. "Shut up, Al, or believe me you'll be sorry; *listen* to me now!"—the words spilled out before I could answer. He paused, watching me for a moment, then said, "I know you will, if you can. You'll certainly try—if you can find me. But I won't be around, Al; I'll run because I'll be afraid of you. You'll want to kill me, if you die for it; but I'll be on my way and I'll keep on going. I don't think you'll find me. Anyway, that's a risk I'll take."

The red mist was gone, the rage quiet and controlled. "I'll kill you beforehand. Before I'll let you even lay a hand——"

"No." Brick reached into his shirt pocket for another cigarette. "That's the funny thing, Al; you won't. You ought to, but you won't. It's odd, but I think little Guy would, if he were in your spot. But not you. *Afterward,* yes; lord, I hope I never meet up with you then." He shrugged. "But you just aren't a guy who could ever bring himself to kill a man before he'd actually *done* anything. Think about it a minute."

I sat staring, pulling the cigarette smoke in, in great heavy drags—and I didn't know. I just couldn't tell whether Brick was right or not, and the possibility that he was right scared me. "Listen, Brick, this is foolish. Whether you're right or wrong about what I'd do to stop you, what good would it do you? You ever touch Tina, and this much I know—I'll kill you."

He nodded. "I know. If you can. But afterward, not before."

"All right. Maybe. Only don't be too sure."

Brick just grinned, dragging on his cigarette.

"Okay," I said impatiently. "But what's the point? The plan will be finished then, and——"

"This is the point." He tapped me on the knee to emphasize it. "I'll have to go through with it then—because of what it means now. Don't you see that? Right now, you've got to *know in your bones that I'll do it.*"

"If I tell Guy and Jerry——"

"They'll side with you, and the project will be finished," he said impatiently. "Al, don't you see? You kill this plan in any way and what I said goes."

"I'll stick with Tina every second from now on. We'll leave the trailer, and you'll never get the chance——"

"Impossible. If not one day, the next. If not one week or month, then the next, or the next after that. If not here, somewhere else. You can't stick with Tina forever; there'll have to come a time when you're not around. But I'll be around, wherever you try to go. I mean it, Al, because I've got to mean it." He sat watching me for a moment, then stood up and walked on back toward the trailer.

Once again we were moving, the trailer swaying gently, the floor vibrating quietly, Guy at the wheel for the last nighttime shift. Tina lay asleep between me and the trailer wall, Jerry slept against the opposite wall, and beside me Brick lay quietly asleep on his back. My hands clasped under my head, I lay there awake till daybreak.

I thought first about running. I could simply open the trailer

door when we stopped for a traffic light in some town, taking Tina's hand, step out onto the street, and announce that we were through. Brick could follow us, but would he? I thought he might not. Because with the project actually washed up, what *would* be the point, no matter what he had said? And yet—he might; people do foolish and useless things. He *might;* I just couldn't tell!

I figured out then how to kill him; a flat tire, here on the desert. If I got a nail in the trailer tire, a slow leak, the jack would have to stand on sand. Get Brick changing that tire, and when the wheel was off, the others inside the trailer out of the sun, hit him; with the tire iron, probably. Then jam his head under the fender, kick out the jack, and half the weight of that trailer would drop onto his neck. It was a likely kind of accident. It could happen, if a man were careless; maybe had happened, occasionally, here on the desert. I pictured it, Brick in the blue-black shade of the trailer, kneeling beside the exposed axle. I saw myself pick up the tire iron, feeling it warm in my hand from the sand; saw myself raising it to shoulder height, just behind Brick's bowed head, tensing my grip—then the picture broke, like a torn movie film, became unreal, unbelievable, impossible.

He was right! There are people with the violence in their natures to act without thought at the right moment and place without care of consequences. And there are people, instead, who think too much. Brick knew me; I was one of the people who planned, imagined, and went over the act in their minds until

the act itself was impossible. I remembered the phrase from *Hamlet;* we'd studied it in an English literature class. "Sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," Shakespeare said. It was true; you can think till the act becomes sickly and unreal, impossible. The kind of violence it takes to kill a man wasn't possible for me until the man had done something—not threatened —but actually *done* something. Against Brick's threat alone, I was helpless.

Tina asked no questions that day. I'd told her the night before, when I came back to the trailer, that I just hadn't been able to break the news yet, I knew they'd be so terribly disappointed. But there was time yet, I said, and I would pretty soon. She'd had to accept that; Brick was already in the trailer, Guy and Jerry were approaching, and a few minutes later we were on our way.

We opened canned fruit the next morning, and passed around zwieback and water, our standard breakfast. After the first couple days, we didn't talk at breakfast. We all just sat, staring at the floor or a wall, making ourselves eat, getting set to wait out one more day. And we got through it; as we had all the others. I slept a lot, or lay pretending to sleep. In the afternoon Tina read aloud; a mystery novel in which people seemed to have no trouble bringing themselves to kill a man.

That night I asked for the first relief shift; Brick was willing, knowing, I supposed, why I wanted it, and Guy didn't mind. In the car with Tina, I offered an explanation of why I had to stay with the project. Brick *had* to have the money, I said, for reasons

I couldn't explain, and I felt honor-bound to go through with it. I told her, too, that I'd thought it over, and still wanted the money, and I repeated all the reasons we'd given ourselves back at school, trying to sound as though I still believed them.

She argued; quietly and confidently at first, but time passed, moving along through the night, and when finally we'd each said everything there was to say, she saw I hadn't changed. She didn't like it, it scared her, but she had to accept it. There's a stubborn mule-headed insistence men sometimes get about obscure points of ethics, and women—knowing better themselves—get to know there is nothing to do about it, and I think Tina attributed my decision to something like that. She accepted it; she had to finally, and for the last twenty minutes we just sat there with nothing to say.

That night, several hundred yards off in the desert, we added water and new oil to the car, filled the gas tank, then buried deep in the sand absolutely everything that had been in that trailer except the clothes we'd wear in Reno, our luggage, and enough food and gas for the next day. When we abandoned trailer and car in Reno tomorrow, they'd be empty as the day they were made.

During Guy's shift that night, he honked the horn in shave-and-a-haircut rhythm, and we knew we'd just crossed the Nevada state boundary. Jerry said, "Yay!" in a mock cheer, and so did Brick; he was tactful enough not to look at me, and I managed a smile, as though I were glad, too.

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At seven forty-six that evening, Jerry at the wheel, the horn sounded once, and Guy and I stood up to peek through the slits in the venetian blinds. An instant later the black-and-white *RENO City Limits* sign slid past, and we saw that the highway was turning into a city street. We sat down then, and waited, and I knew that already the signposts on each corner we passed were reading *S. Virginia St.* Within a few minutes, we felt the street curve, and I knew that just ahead the Riverside and Mapes hotels were silhouetted against the neon-pink sky, the Truckee River tumbling along below and beside them. Now we crawled in low gear, the street heavy with traffic, and from the sidewalks I heard the shuffle of leather, voices and laughter, and knew the town was jammed with people.

The white slats of the blinds turned pink, and all around us, we knew now, was the screaming red, green, white, yellow, pink, and orange neon of the gambling casinos, and even through the walls of the trailer we heard the Reno-sound; the unceasing mechanical clunk of the slot machines. And loudest of all, the biggest and brightest—I knew we must be passing it this moment —was the club with the enormous sign, over two stories high, running right up the north corner at the front of the building.

Harold's Club, it was saying in huge brilliant letters across its top, then repeating itself in a vertical line down the front of the building; *Harold's Club.* A moment later, we bumped across the railroad tracks, and were suddenly out of the small, gaudy gambling center of the city, and the venetian blinds were white again, the light coming through them far fainter.

The trailer swung slowly, rocking, in a tight awkward circle, then stopped. We heard the hand brake set, and knew we were parked just across the railroad tracks, less than a block from the thronged heart of the city. The motor died, and outside the trailer it was almost silent. Here, as in most of Reno—once you cross the boundaries of the few square blocks of gambling casinos—we were in a quiet small town. Reno is mostly tree-lined streets, small houses, people watering their lawns in summer. Within the narrow limits of the center of town, it's as crowded, brilliant, and feverish as Broadway; cross a street, walk on a few paces, and you begin to hear summer locusts drone in the trees.

The trailer door opened, and Jerry stepped in, closing it behind him. Then Guy turned to a cardboard carton, opened it, and as he had the first night out, began handing us cowboy shirts and hats. This time he wasn't smiling; our faces were set and tense; Jerry's was dead-white under the battery light in the ceiling.

I took my shirt and hat, and now Tina stood before me, slipping her hands under my arms, holding onto me, looking up at my face. Guy, Brick, and Jerry busied themselves around the

cardboard box, buttoning their shirts, taking out the false beards; giving Tina and me, as well as they could in the tiny trailer, a last moment alone.

"Al," said Tina. That's all she said, but her face said the rest. I was horribly frightened; with all my being I wanted to do what she was asking me. From a corner of my eye I could see Brick's back bent over the box of equipment, and knew he was listening. I smiled, putting my hands on Tina's shoulders to draw her to me. "See you in half an hour, baby," I said quietly, then kissed her, holding her to me for several long seconds. Then I looked down at her again. "You got the address?"

Tina nodded, touching the purse in her hand. "Yes"—her eyes were sick, and I knew she was wondering if she'd ever see me alive again.

"Go ahead, then. The sooner we start, the sooner we'll be through." A hand on her shoulder, I urged her gently toward the door.

She stepped to the door, touched the little knob, then turned to look at us again. She nodded several times, unable to talk; then she swallowed, and her eyes filled with tears. "Good luck," she whispered, stared at me for a moment, then opened the door, stepped out, and the door closed behind her.

She was going to the address I'd given her, a boardinghouse—Mrs. Kressman's—some three blocks away. I'd stayed there last summer; it was quiet and decent; and Tina had written for a reservation. There are scores of such places in Reno; private homes that take two or three, four or five, prospective divorcees

or summer workers, giving them an inexpensive room and one meal, usually breakfast. Tina carried a small suitcase; she'd tell Mrs. Kressman she'd just arrived on the bus.

Guy, Jerry, and Brick had their shirts on, and now they began fastening their neckerchiefs. I put on a bright green shirt over my own, tucked in the tails all around, then pulled them out a little, blousing the shirt to make it harder for anyone to judge my weight. I saw Guy buckle on his fringed holster and toy pistol, the kind they make for kids nowadays; an absolutely real-looking, authentic copy of a Colt .44 revolver. I tied a red neckerchief fairly snug around my neck, then put on a flat-crowned, wide-brimmed western hat; cheap black felt with an imitation tooled-leather band.

Guy did smile a little—we all did—as we put on our beards. They hooked on with earpieces like a pair of glasses; and we'd bent and adjusted them so the beards fitted snug. Looking at Guy, Brick, and Jerr, now, I was sure no description of them as they were now would have much connection with the men underneath.

"Al?" said Jerr gently. "All set?"

I nodded.

"Good luck. You'll be all right. You've got it all in your mind; just allow for a little stage fright at first, and don't try to hurry; take your time. Good luck, Al," he repeated quietly, and held out his hand.

I shook hands with Jerry, wished him luck, then Guy put out his hand, and I shook hands with him. I reached up to fiddle

with the earpieces of my beard, as though they needed adjusting, then turned toward the door, hoping Jerry and Guy wouldn't notice that I hadn't shaken hands with Brick.

Jerr stepped past me, opened the door, and stepped out, closing it behind him. A moment later we heard the car door close, and knew Jerry was at his post, slouched behind the wheel in the darkness, with a clear view of *Harold's Club,* across the tracks, down the street to the south. He had to stay in the car from now on; that was one argument he'd lost. We'd insisted on it, all the rest of us; he'd been seen in Harold's Club too much, too recently.

Half a minute passed, then the horn sounded—just a tap, not loud—and I opened the door, stepped out, closing it behind me, walked ahead to the sidewalk, and turned south on Virginia Street.

I crossed the railroad tracks to Commercial Row, crossed the street, stepped onto the sidewalk, and I was in the sluggish current of people moving up and down Virginia Street, and into and out of the casinos, restaurants, and bars. It was bright as day, the sidewalk shadowless, and crammed with people; you just took your place in the stream and moved along with it. I felt ridiculous in my touristy cowboy outfit and beard, but all around me were dozens of men more or less like me. A few were real cowhands, from working cattle ranches, in dungarees permanently bent at the knees from riding. They seemed drab, their high-heeled boots scuffed and dirt-colored, their hats sweat-stained and worn. But they were in the minority; everywhere,

moving along with me, and passing in the opposite direction, were gaudy shirts, clean new sombreros, fancy boots; and mustaches, sideburns, chin beards, and full beards, real and false. People glanced at me without interest, no one's gaze lingering. Walking slowly along a crowded street in a bright green shirt, red neckerchief, and cowboy hat, wearing a black, bushy, obviously false beard, I was actually inconspicuous.

And now there it was, directly across the street; *Harold's Club*, brilliant and unreal as a movie set. I stepped out of the crowd into a darkened doorway leading up to a group of second-floor offices; then I stood, staring across the street. From the roof of Harold's Club, searchlights probed the sky endlessly, blue-white and intense, their ends hinged to the roof, their edges sharply defined as a ruler's edge. Senselessly they swept the sky, their ends fading into the night far above. Below the lights began the immense fantastic painting covering the entire front of Harold's Club to the very top edge of the entrances. It was two stories high and twice as long, the figures in it gigantic. Running across the painting's top edge were the red-neon words, *Dedicated in all humility to those who blazed the trail,* and, as I had the first time I'd seen them, I shook my head in wry amazement. For the giant figures of the vivid painting below this sentiment were a group of men and women in frontier costume; pioneers making camp in a half-circle of covered wagons. Above them the painted sky was orange; it was sunset. To the side, hidden from their sight by a whitely perfect waterfall, Indians hid on a rock cliff, watching, and, I assumed, preparing to attack. What

this scene had to do with Harold's Club and the activities inside it, I couldn't imagine, but I doubted if Reno cared.

At street level, below the great painting, the windows were opaque, painted with humorous Western scenes. There were three entrances spaced along the front, one of them at the corner of Virginia Street and the alley, Douglas Alley, which ran beside the casino's north wall. Above this corner entrance, soaring beyond the roof, was the giant red sign: *Harold's Club*, it said; *Harold's Club.*

Now I crossed the street, threading my way through the slow-moving stream of cars, toward the corner entrance. On the curb, just outside the stream of pedestrians, I stopped and looked idly around. To the north, on the Commercial Row corner, a quarter of a block away, Guy stood; I spotted his red shirt first, then recognized him. His thumbs were hooked in his belt and he was gazing around him. I lifted my hand, adjusted my hat, and a moment later saw Guy do the same thing in response. Then I cut across the current of people on the walk, pushed open the plate-glass doors of the corner entrance, and stepped inside.

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In that moment what I had to do seemed utterly beyond me; I was overwhelmed and helpless. The place was an incredible roar of sound; hundreds of voices, the shuffling of countless feet, all

the movements of human beings in mass, plus the steady clatter of great silvery banks of slot machines, the little sounds of whirling roulette balls, the dry rattle of the bingo cage, and—strangely audible through all this—the shuffle and slap of cards at the panguingue and blackjack tables.

The sound tore at the senses, and people moved through every aisle and open space like ocean currents made visible. The moment I stepped in I was being pushed. Constantly my balance was shifted, my feet forced to move, by the unceasing nudging of shoulders, hips, and elbows moving in through the doors after me, or going out past me. I had to actually struggle back to the wall at one side of the doors in order to stand still and look the place over. In that moment if our plan had called for any least action from me, I'd have had to give up—to turn and walk out, abandoning the whole thing; this was impossible.

The place was too big; the great room stretched out before me was crammed with potential enemies, clustered around every green-topped table like flies on lump sugar, packing the slot-machine aisles solid. Every kind of human being was there, in rodeo costumes, expensive summer outfits, shabby old clothes, and I knew that every one of them—young boys, old men, housewives, and silver-blondes in shorts—was automatically my enemy the moment I moved.

But Jerry had warned me; I had all the time I wanted. Nothing started till I was ready; so I stood beside the doors, building up my nerve, and confirming last summer's memory of what this building contained.

Beside me were the old men at the panguingue tables. There was a bar at my right, along the wall, every stool occupied, with as many more people standing behind or leaning between them, elbows on the bar, glasses in hand. Crap, roulette, and blackjack tables filled the center of the room, slot machines lined the walls. To my right, on past the bar, I could look through a wide archway into the next room, filled with more of the same, plus an escalator, every step occupied, carrying an endless line of people to the floors above—where there were still more crap tables, more roulette and blackjack, slot machines, bars, people, noise, and money, money, money, constantly changing hands.

Guy strolled in through the archway from the other room, according to plan, carried along in a slow current of people; he'd come into the casino by one of the alley entrances. I was startled—for the first time I saw him in costume from a distance, and the false beard and western hat which should have made him absurd, did nothing of the sort. Across that room, his gaze passed casually over me, and the somber brown eyes between the wide tan hat brim and black mustache of his beard looked cool and competent. He raised a hand to adjust his hat, telling me he'd seen me, and I was suddenly calm and able to move. I stepped out from the wall, to move slowly through this room, then on into the next, beginning my search.

I was hunting the man, whoever he might happen to be today, who would either now or later be pushing a little cart through these rooms; the cart in Jerry's photograph. A part of the great crowd, I moved with the currents till I'd explored the entire first

floor. I didn't find the cart; I hadn't expected to. It was on one of the other floors, perhaps, in which case I wasn't yet interested in it; or it was in the cash room. Toward the back of the casino, at the south wall near the Lincoln Alley side, I stopped beside a poker table to wait for the cart. Not twenty feet from my elbow, though I didn't look at it directly, was the steel-barred door of the little corridor leading into the cash room. In plain sight of anyone who cared to glance at them were the two barred doors behind which lay a fortune. I stood looking at the poker players seated at a round felt-covered table, but the first barred door lay just within my vision.

Every instant I was aware of the mirror glass covering the wall beside me and a part of the ceiling above, though I never looked up at the ceiling. There were paintings on the glass; historical scenes of the early West. But they were sketchy, there was much more mirror than paint, the greater part of those surfaces reflecting the throng of people, and the gambling equipment beside or underneath them. I knew those mirrors were one-way-vision glass, and that behind them men were continually watching. Just behind those walls and the ceiling, they maintained never-ending guard, watching the people, the gamblers, and their own dealers. And—always—waiting for the time when, someday maybe, a man would make a move to rob this place.

It was hard not to glance at the ceiling, but I didn't; I knew what was there; catwalks prowled by the guards. From the floor they looked like large beams, perhaps, ornamentally enclosed by the mirrored, painted glass. You might come into Harold's

Club a hundred times, and never guess what they were. I kept my chin down, eyes on the poker game, my face hidden from the ceiling by the wide brim of the hat. From the side, only my eyes and nose, in the shade of the wide hat brim, were visible; the beard covered the rest of my face.

A girl wearing riding breeches and a fringed black vest, *Harold's Club* embroidered on its back, walked to the steel-barred door at my right; she pressed the bell in the wall beside it. It was too noisy to hear it ring out here, but now the barred gate opened slowly, and I heard the hiss of air under pressure. She stepped through the gate into the dark little corridor beyond it; then stood waiting. The air hissed again, the door closed and clicked shut behind her, and she was trapped in the little corridor between the two barred doors. Then the second door swung slowly open, and she walked on, into the cash room, turning to the left and out of sight. Perhaps a minute passed, then she reappeared, a slip of paper in her hand. Again a door opened, letting her into the corridor. Only when it closed and locked behind her, did the next door open, allowing her to walk into the main room once again. I realized now, as never before, how right Jerry had been; the only possible way of getting at the cash in that room, the only chink in the armor, was the way he had figured out.

Somehow I'd expected to wait a long time, hours if I had to, before the little cart appeared. But in perhaps less than a minute, I heard the air-pressure hiss, and from the corner of my eye, I saw it; a big heavy-set man, wearing a white shirt, black tie,

his sleeves rolled to the elbow, exposing powerful forearms, was wheeling the metal cart from the cash room into the dark little corridor. It wasn't the man who ordinarily handled the cart. Today, for some reason, it was somebody else I'd never seen before. Maybe the regular man was sick. Now he stopped, hands on the tube-metal handle, and waited. The door closed behind him, clicked shut, a moment passed, then the outer door opened, and he came wheeling his cart out into the room. Edging it into the crowd, he turned right toward the front of the casino.

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I kept my eyes on the poker game for a good five minutes longer. Then, the cart long since out of sight, I turned idly away, glanced around as though wondering where to go next, then turned and drifted along with the crowd toward the front room.

In the front room, the cart stood beside a blackjack table, the man in shirt sleeves waiting while the girl dealer, bent over the table, signed a receipt. I knew what had happened; there'd been a run on her table, she was short of silver dollars and had signaled for more. Now the man with the cart had brought them out to her from the cash room; that was its purpose. Every large club had a cart like it, of metal or wood, enclosed to protect the silver in transit from snatch-thieves. It wasn't worth an armed

robbery attempt; at most it carried a few hundred bulky silver dollars.

I knew what the shirt-sleeved man would do now. While he had the little cart out on the floor, he'd replenish the silver-dollar supply at any table that might need it, or take away any excess they gathered in. As far as I knew, he did not handle paper money.

Near the wide archway leading out of this room and back toward the cash room, I leaned against one of the few wall surfaces not lined with slot machines; the little cart had to pass here to leave. Five yards from my elbow, Guy stood playing a slot machine; I knew he'd seen me, and was ready.

The metal cart paused at a roulette table, the croupier said something to the big shirt-sleeved man, who laughed, replied, then moved on again. He glanced around the room, looking for any other dealer who might signal him, and when none of them did, began wheeling his cart toward the doorway and me.

People glanced at him in mild curiosity as he passed, and I glanced at him, too; it would have been unnatural to ignore him. And now, for the first time, I really saw what he was like, and looked quickly away, wishing he were smaller. His size, I told myself, actually didn't matter, but it intimidated me all the same. He was big and tough, not in a movie-gangster sense—his expression was pleasant enough—but his eyes and the set of his face were cool and hard, very knowledgeable and dangerous. He looked to me as though he knew all there was to know—about gambling, legal and illegal, and all the other tougher aspects of

life—and I felt like a boy, and wondered what I'd do if he just sneered in my face.

I tried to fight the feeling, telling myself some wordless version of "the bigger they are the harder they fall," told myself I was here to do what had to be done, that it would be done, to this man and by me. Then I made myself look at him again, moving toward me, my glance deliberately contemptuous, forcing myself to feel able to handle him; and it worked. I was ready.

Moving slowly along with the crowd, the front of his cart now was an inch from my toes. I turned toward him, glanced idly at the man's face, and as his eyes met mine, my face lighted up with sudden recognition, and I pushed myself from the wall, eagerly yet a little awkwardly and bashfully. "Hi!" I said, smiling at him tentatively, as though I weren't sure he'd remember me. He'd never seen me before in his life, and he stared for a moment, eyes faintly puzzled, a little bored. Then he nodded without recognition, said, "Hi," and when I put out my hand, he had to stop, and shake hands.

Smiling, bobbing my head eagerly, I began to talk. I was certain that—talking to the man with the money cart—I was being invisibly watched from the ceiling overhead; and I wanted this to look like a scene that happens often in a place like this. I wanted to look like the tourist who's been here before, trying to re-establish a fleeting acquaintance with a man who meets so many people he can't possibly remember them.

Shrugging bashfully, I said, my tone faintly disappointed,

"I guess you don't remember me; Mr. Gunderson introduced us, but that was some time ago." Gunderson was just a name I'd picked out of the air.

"Well"—he smiled; polite to a customer—"you meet a lot of people."

"Oh, sure, sure," I said quickly. "It's just that—well, I wanted to talk to you. It's sort of important, if you could spare just a minute." I smiled brightly.

Trying not to look irritated, the big man stepped back to the wall with me, edging his cart just out of the stream of passing people. I kept the foolish grin on my face; anyone still watching us could imagine precisely the kind of conversation we were having.

He looked at me inquiringly. Still smiling away, hands shoved into my belt at the back, obviously harmless and not planning a holdup, I dropped my voice and said, "Don't look too quickly, but if you turn your head a little to the right, you'll see a man in a red checked shirt, and a beard." I grinned fatuously, as though I were inquiring about his family or something. For a moment the man continued to stare at me, then he turned his head slightly and saw Guy. Not four yards away, Guy stood leaning against this same wall on the point of one shoulder. Half facing us, one hand negligently resting on the butt of his holstered pistol, he was apparently idly watching the crowd. As the man in shirt sleeves glanced at him, Guy moved his eyes, his head remaining motionless, to stare out from under the brim of his hat straight into the big man's eyes. For a moment the two stared, then the

big man turned back to me, frowning a little. "Well? What about him?"

My bright grin widened a little. "Listen to me very very carefully"—leaning casually against the wall, hands at the back of my belt, my lips were only a few inches from his ear, and I spoke softly. "That man is my partner. Maybe you noticed that his hand is on his pistol." I was speaking slowly and distinctly. "He is an absolutely first-class shot; a pistol expert. He'll shoot you in the back, he'll kill you in the next few seconds, if you make one wrong move." I stopped, and just looked at him, still smiling, giving him a moment to take in what I'd said. Then I said, "Do you hear me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I hear you"—his face was expressionless.

"Then listen. Don't look up at the ceiling, don't even glance at it, or you'll get that bullet, and believe me, I'm not fooling. Don't try to signal in any other way either; or you'll get that bullet in the spine. And starting now—right *now*—you better start smiling, mister. Look at me, and *smile*, by god. This is a friendly conversation, and that's what it better look like to anyone watching us." He just stared at me, and very softly I said, "Smile," and was astonished myself at the viciousness in my voice; I was scared sick.

Slightly, feebly, he smiled, and I said, "You can do better. I'm telling you, you son of a bitch, you'll be *dead*, if——"

He smiled. His eyes were deadly; watchful, wary, not frightened, but very careful. But his smile looked the way it ought to now.

"The first thing"—still leaning against the wall, I brought one hand out from behind my back, and palm up, folded the little finger down on my palm. "The first thing I've got to tell you is that you better remember this; from now on till I'm finished with you, don't speak to anyone by name. Absolutely no one. If somebody speaks to you, answer; but don't ever call them by name." Endlessly the crowd moved past us, some of them occasionally glancing at us, just out of the traffic stream there by the wall.

"Why not?"

"Because—keep smiling, mister!—because I don't know their names, that's why. You call a guy Jim when his name is George, you call a girl Doris when her name is Mary, that may be all the signal you need to give. You understand me?"

"Yeah; why not?"—his tone was deliberately cool and contemptuous now; he was sizing me up.

I grinned at him, and put my hand back into my belt with the other, obviously helpless and wide open to any move he wanted to make. "Be a hero," I said. "It's up to you. The guy in back of you will shoot. I'm telling you, mister, he won't mind shooting; that's why he's got the job. Myself"—I shrugged—"I probably wouldn't shoot; I admit it. But that guy scares *me*, and I'm his partner. He'd *like* to shoot. I mean it, mister."

"Okay, okay; what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing much. Just push your cart straight ahead through the archway to the blackjack table on the other side of the escalator in the next room—don't look at it, mister!" His eyes

turned back to me, and I said, "Smile at me, real friendly, and say, 'I'm glad to see you again, Charley.' "

"I'm glad to see you again, Charley."

"Wheel your cart around in back of the blackjack table, right next to the girl dealing. We'll be with you. This is what you say to the girl; get this exactly right, word for word. You say, 'Keep an eye on this; the boss wants me.' That's all you say, then you walk away before she can answer."

The man in the white shirt shrugged. "She'll think it's funny I'd do that."

"She'll think it's funny but she'll do it; because you told her to. Remember; don't call her by name." I smiled, reached up to adjust my hat, and at that signal Guy stepped forward from the wall.

He moved casually, face bored; just one of the hundreds of rodeo week-end tourists wandering through Harold's Club. He stepped idly into the crowd moving toward the archway ahead. I could see him, but the big man with me, his face turned toward mine, could not.

I waited a moment or so. If anyone was watching us, I wanted it plain, once we started toward the blackjack table in the room ahead, that Guy wasn't following us, that he'd moved first. "Now, do it," I said. "Wheel this thing to the table, and I want you to turn and smile and say something to me on the way over. We'll be right at your back."

We walked ahead, the big man pushing his cart, me at his elbow half a pace behind, hands shoved in my belt behind me,

my face friendly and smiling. A step or two, and the man in shirt sleeves turned and spoke to me, smiling. What he said was, "You're crazy, little boy; we'll shoot you down." I smiled in response. Moving toward the escalator and blackjack table beyond it, never looking at us, Guy was beside me inches from the white shirt. Watching the big man, I knew he'd seen Guy from the corner of his eye.

He wheeled his cart into the next room, around the escalator, and behind the table, beside the girl dealer in her fringed vest; the escalator hid us from the room we had left. Shuffling the cards with casual expertness, the girl glanced at him, then began dealing, head cocked for whatever he might say. "Keep an eye on this for me," he said to the girl. "The boss wants me." She glanced at him, brows raised in bored inquiry. But he simply turned away and the girl glanced at the cart and shrugged slightly, never interrupting her deal.

Moving away now, back again toward the big room we'd just left, I said to his ear, "Straight ahead to the Douglas Alley entrance. Keep smiling. Keep talking. Don't look at the ceiling. And don't even turn once to look at our friend behind you."

"Why don't you walk out of here now while you can, sonny? And I promise you I'll forget the whole thing."

"It's sure nice to see you again," I said fairly loudly. "I didn't think you'd even remember me." This—right now—was one of the biggest gambles we were taking; we'd argued and debated it more than any other single point of our plan. Guy was no longer following us, no longer in back of us. He'd fol-

lowed for a pace or two, from the blackjack table, then he was to saunter to a front entrance, step out onto Virginia Street, and adjust his hat. Half a block away, across the tracks, Jerry would start the motor, and pull out into Virginia Street.

So I was alone now. We couldn't hope to move through Harold's Club uninvestigated, we'd finally decided—this man, with a bearded stranger at his elbow and another at his back. But if the man would move along with only me directly beside him, my hands in plain sight and obviously unarmed, the two of us smiling and conversing, there was simply nothing for anyone to question or wonder about.

We had to gamble—*I* was gambling right now—that the man beside me would do as he was told; that he couldn't be certain he wouldn't get a bullet in his back if he dared turn his head.

We made our way across the room; once more I smiled and said, "It's nice to see you again. I wasn't sure you'd remember me." I knew this man could grab me and break me in two before I could move a foot, any time he wanted to; any time he turned and saw Guy wasn't there. I was so scared I was sick.

But my own fear helped me. I yawn when I'm scared; a lot of people do. It has something to do, I once read, with your body increasing the intake of oxygen in preparation for struggle. And so I yawned now, and several more times, as we moved across that big front room, toward the side-alley entrance. They were big genuine yawns; the man beside me stared in wonder, the first time it happened. To him, and to anyone watching, I must have seemed a picture of unconcern.

No one stopped us. Together we reached the double wood doors at the Douglas Alley side entrance. The big man never turned his head the fraction of an inch, he kept a smile on his face, and I could see that his face was pale. He might or might not have been fully convinced that we'd put a bullet in his back, there in that crowded casino. But he wasn't sure enough we wouldn't, to risk his life on the guess.

Now, at the doors, I reached an arm past him to push one door open, holding it politely, smiling agreeably, forcing him to walk through first. This entrance, on Douglas Alley, is the least used of the half-dozen entrances to Harold's Club. On a side alley near the middle of the building, it cannot be reached from the outside without passing at least one other entrance; and most people coming into Harold's Club use the very first entrance they come to. Even today, as I'd noticed earlier—and we'd counted on this—it wasn't being used too often.

These, too, were the only doors that did not open directly onto one of the two alleys or Virginia Street. Instead, they opened into a small linoleum-floored vestibule. You crossed the vestibule, passed two phone booths in a corner, then stepped through another set of doors before reaching the alley pavement.

Holding the door for the big man to step through, I was sick with fright. If they'd moved on schedule, after Guy's signal, Brick and Guy would be waiting in the vestibule. Jerry, at the wheel of the car, would be around the corner in Lincoln Alley. But if Brick and Guy weren't there, if something had gone wrong, I didn't know what I could do—except try to crash past

this man, bang through the outer door into Douglas Alley, and then run like hell, I didn't know where; we'd planned for success, not failure.

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He stepped through, with me almost treading his heels, the door swung closed behind us, and Brick instantly slammed the heel of his left hand into the white shirt, straight-arming the man back against the wall in front of the phone booths. Neatly taped to the glass of both phone booths, I saw the signs we'd prepared; *Phone out of order.* Holding the man to the wall with his left hand, Brick raised the other; there was a small, rounded, leather-covered blackjack in his fist. "Behave," he said softly, "or I'll crack your skull"—he smiled brutally. Speaking very fast, he said, "Now, listen; people will be passing through here any moment, going in and coming out. When they do, *smile*, god damn you. Smile, talk, look happy." He nodded at Guy—"Give him that cigarette, Eddy." Silently Guy handed the lighted cigarette he had ready to the big man. "Lean against the wall," Brick said. "Get yourself comfortable. Every time anyone goes through here, smile and say, 'It's nice to run into you again.' Then take a drag from that cigarette."

Now Brick leaned forward, bringing his eyes close to the big

man's, boring into them. "If you yell for help," he said quietly, "we'll run. And you'll have saved your boss some money; he'll be that much richer. But just before we run"—he slowly raised his right hand and the blackjack again—"you get this. On the head. Just as hard as I can smash it into your skull." Brick smiled, and shrugged. "It might not kill you; I couldn't say." With his left hand, Brick patted the biceps of his right arm. "But I can hit hard, mister; you might end up a dead hero, with some bone in your brain. We all set now, Jack? You understand me?"

The big man nodded, and I'll say this for him; he kept his eyes on Brick's, hard and tough, dragging on his cigarette, waiting. Then his eyes widened in utter astonishment. For the first time he'd had a chance to notice, over Brick's shoulder, the metal cart parked neatly beside the phone booths, out of the way of the doors. Apparently—and he couldn't believe it—it was the very same cart he'd left back in the casino, with the girl at the blackjack table, behind the escalator. There was no way he knew of that it could have gotten here; but I knew. Jerry had swung car and trailer onto Virginia Street, driven a third of a block to Douglas Alley, turned in and stopped just outside these doors. Guy stood lounging there, waiting, and as the car stopped, the trailer door opened, and Brick was pushing the little cart we had made, out of the trailer. Guy grabbed the other end, and bumping open the door, they wheeled it into the vestibule to the place it now stood. Jerry, in the car, was already pulling ahead a hundred feet or so, turning the corner into Lincoln Alley,

where he was waiting now beside the casino. I didn't know whether anyone had passed by in the alley, or come in or out through the little vestibule during the ten or fifteen seconds it took to get the little cart in here; I was slowly crossing the room inside at the time, the big man beside me. If anyone had seen them then, the plan called for simply ignoring him, as though what they were doing were perfectly legitimate.

For perhaps ten or twelve seconds the big man studied the little cart on the floor. Then his eyes narrowed, and he glanced up at Brick.

Brick smiled, nodding his head just as though the man had asked a question. "That's right," Brick said, "it's a duplicate. Not quite, though. Every last detail may not be exactly like your cart, and maybe you've noticed that it's larger; just a few inches longer, wider, and deeper. But it's close. When you push this thing through the crowd inside—and that's just what you're going to do, mister—nobody'll have any particular reason to realize it isn't your regular cart. And I don't——"

An inside door swung open into our vestibule and a man and a woman stepped in. We were all standing precisely according to plan, so that no one was in the way of the doors. Brick and the man in the white shirt stood leaning side by side against the wall in front of the phone booths; Guy and I stood directly before them, my hand resting on the handle of the little cart. The couple walked past our little group, glancing at us, but with absolutely no interest, hardly seeing us, really, their faces set and angry.

"——*told* you," the woman was saying bitterly, "but no,

you had to go, and——" They were out in the alley, the outer door swinging closed behind them.

Instantly, Brick continued. "You're going to take this cart, wheel it inside, and on back into the cash room, just like you'd have done with your regular cart." With his thumb, Brick indicated a neatly folded canvas sack lying inconspicuously on top of the cart. "Inside the cash room, you're going to take all the bills but the ones and fives—*everything* from tens on up—and stuff them into that sack. You'll take *everything*, understand, but fives and ones; there's room in that sack; don't come back saying there wasn't. All you say, inside the cash room, is that the boss wants the money, wants it quick, and sent you to get it. If anyone is curious and wants to know why, you just shrug; you don't know, and don't care. Then tie the sack, put it on top of the cart, and wheel it out of the cash room again. You got that? You understand?"

The big man shrugged. "Sure," he said calmly, and took another drag of his cigarette.

Brick smiled. "Maybe you're wondering," he said softly, "just why you should do all that, once you're safe in the cash room, out of our reach?"

Again the big man shrugged. "It crossed my mind."

I was still standing, according to plan, beside the little cart, one arm and hand resting casually on the handle bar, the hand hidden by my body from the big man's sight. My thumb rested on a tiny metal stud on the inside surface of the tube-metal handle.

"Well," Brick said, enjoying this, "meet the other member of our little group"—my thumb pressed down, and the little stud moved a fraction of an inch.

Inside the little cart, current flowed from a brand-new, six-volt, automobile storage battery, through a transformer, and a plastic tape moved on its reel. Jerry's recorded voice, harsh and grating, said jeeringly, "Glad to meet you, mister. I hope I don't have to kill you."

The big man's jaw actually dropped. He simply stood for a moment, staring down at the cart. Then his mouth closed, his jaw tightening, and he deliberately studied the cart, eyes narrowed and moving over it. Then he turned questioningly back to Brick. My thumb had released its pressure; the plastic tape inside was motionless again.

Brick nodded slowly. "That's right," he said. "You'll have company inside the cash room, friend, and every step of the way there and bac——"

An outer door opened, and two girls in their twenties stepped in, then stopped, looking at us. They seemed confused; obviously they'd expected to step directly into Harold's Club, instead of this vestibule.

Guy smiled at them, and touched his hat brim politely. "Straight ahead, girls, and they'll relieve you of your money, quickly and painlessly." As he spoke, Guy let his eyes rove boldly over the girls from head to foot. One of them actually blushing a little, they thanked Guy very quickly, and pushed hastily through the door and into the casino.

"Our friend will sit inside that cart," Brick said, smiling, "and you're going to wheel him into the cash room with you, and out again. Now, just why will you do that?" Brick nodded at me —"Tell him, Louis."

Nodding down at the cart beside me, I said carefully, "The guy in there is five feet three inches tall; no bigger than a lot of jockeys. But we still had to make this thing a little larger than yours to give him room to move. He's a lot older than us; I won't tell you how old. And he's served time in a state penitentiary; I won't say which one. He's been out for a while, because he escaped.

"Now, listen to me, mister," I went on quietly. "We've each got our jobs in this thing, and I'll tell you why he's inside that cart, instead of any of the rest of us. First, he's a marksman, a dead shot, and I'm not fooling about that. Second, he says he'll never serve time again." My thumb, on the tiny stud, moved the fraction of an inch, but I went right on speaking the words I'd rehearsed so many times. "And I'll tell you this; I believe him. If there's anything I'm convinc——"

The voice from the cart interrupted bitterly, "You goddamn right you believe me. I'll never do time again; I'll shove this pistol in my throat and pull the trigger—right after I kill you, mister. I'll get you first, don't fool yourself. You son of a bitch, I'll get you first."

My thumb relaxed on the stud, and I shook my head, my face worried and tense, staring into the big man's eyes. My voice pleading, I said, "Listen, Jack, he means it; for god's sakes, be-

lieve me. I want to get out of this, and away—clean. I don't want anybody hurt. If you ever listened to anything in your life, listen to this. He'll never do time again; he means that; I know. He'll kill you, then kill himself. I know him, and that's the truth. He's a nice guy," I said hastily, and my thumb moved on the little stud, "one of the best." From inside the cart, came a low malicious chuckle, and I released the stud. "But he scares me, and he's the last guy in the world I'd ever cross." For a moment longer I simply stared into the big man's eyes. Then I sighed, implying that I'd done my best, and if he didn't recognize good advice when he heard it, it was his funeral now.

The big man didn't answer, and I went on. "This cart's a little different from yours. All around the sides"—I pointed—"is an open slit. It isn't wide; you can see that. It's only two inches, but that's enough—plenty—so that he can see you all the time." I pointed to the top of the cart. "These open louvers," I said. "They're not particularly noticeable to anyone glancing at the cart, but they're there just the same. He'll be watching through them, too. He can see you all the time; any false moves"—I shrugged—"and you've had it. Now, *get* this. The top isn't fastened down. All he has to do is stand up, the top falls off, and he's standing there shooting; at you. He can push any one of the sides, and it'll fall right out. You can't trap him in there, you can't keep him in there, from the moment he decides to kill you. You following me, mister?" I pressed the stud. "You getting this?"

The voice from the cart said mockingly, "That's right, mister; you getting this?"

The big man swallowed, nodding at me; then he glanced at the cart, and said, "Yeah."

Brick said, "There's no question about it; you can capture our boy any time you want to. Get him between those two barred doors, and just glance up at the ceiling. Or push a signal button. Or start yelling. Or inside the cash room, try scribbling a quick note, while your hands are on the shelves filling the sack. Or give someone a quick wink, or a look, in the cash room, or out on the floor. And I don't know"—Brick shrugged—"I don't say it's absolutely impossible that you could get away with it. I just say I'm pretty damn sure that you can't."

Dozens of times we'd rehearsed all this, every word and gesture, standing in Guy's barn just as we stood now. We'd hated Jerr then, but now I was glad. Automatically now, without ever having to think, without a worry that I'd miss a word or cue, I stood there, my thumb pressing the little stud, then releasing it, at precisely the right moments; and the tape recorder, the battery, and transformer, welded into place on sponge-rubber mountings, worked exactly as they had, in test after test. If they hadn't we'd have run for it.

Deliberately repeating what we'd already said, Brick went on talking. "You better get it through your head, that if you try any kind of signal whatever, he'll see it, and kill you if it's the last thing he does. Hell"—Brick laughed shortly, and I pressed the

little stud again—"it *will* be the last thing he does, and you better——"

Tense and violent, the recorded voice snarled, "For god's sakes, get going! Shut up the talk! If he don't believe it now, he never will till I prove it! Shut up and get *going*."

I released the stud as Brick said hurriedly to the cart, "Okay, okay, I'm sorry." To the man he said quietly, "Get going. Into the cash room, and get *all* the cash; we're not through with you till we check that you brought it all. When you come out, have the sack on top of the cart, and wheel it to the south entrance on Lincoln Alley. Get that; no mistakes; *the south entrance on Lincoln Alley*." Brick nodded toward me—"He'll be standing there, just inside the door, waiting for you. Any questions, mister? Speak up."

The big man thought for a moment. His face was pale but expressionless; it was impossible to tell what he was thinking or what he would do. Then he shook his head. "Guess not," he said.

"Then move," Brick said, nodding at the cart, and as the big man stepped forward, taking the handle of the cart, I turned back to the inner doors. Keeping just ahead of the metal cart, I opened one door, hiding the cart with my body, as it came through after me, as well as I could. The sustained roaring drone of the room tripled in volume, and we were inside the big room again, the door closing behind us.

We'd often debated the next step. My post, when the man in the white shirt came out of the cash room with the cart again—if he ever did—was at a corner entrance at the back of Harold's

Club; the south entrance on Lincoln Alley. Instead of walking through the casino to reach it now, I could have stepped out of the vestibule into Douglas Alley instead, then walked around the corner, turning into Lincoln Alley, where Jerry was waiting with the trailer, and stepped into the casino again, through the south entrance, to my post.

I desperately wanted to do that, instead of walking the whole length and width of the casino, as I was doing now. For the next half minute, I wanted to be out of this place in case the big man let out a shout once he was safe inside here. But we'd decided no; someone had to be here watching him, forming an opinion on whether he was bluffed or not, whether he was behaving as he should; we couldn't let him out of our sight a moment longer or sooner than we had to.

So I stepped through the door first, into the roar of Harold's Club again, and I walked slowly forward through the crowd in the general direction of my post at the farthermost corner of the next room. I turned, gave the man with the cart a smiling nod, as though I were leaving him, but I walked on slowly enough so that he kept just behind me. Then I stopped for a moment beside a roulette table, he passed me, and I let several people get between us before I walked on again, following. But I didn't look at him directly any more; I looked around as I walked, a sight-seer again, as far as anyone could tell.

Nothing changed, nothing happened, that I could see. All the feverish activity of a great gambling establishment on the busiest day of the year went on around me. No one seemed to pay any

attention to me or the man with his cart. Behind the escalator ahead, completely out of sight, stood the genuine cart, as far as I knew. I told myself this was working exactly as we'd planned.

But all the time I knew that for three or four seconds, absolutely unavoidably, the man in the white shirt could have been seen pushing the cart we had given him in through the doors from that vestibule outside—where he had no reason to be with it. To any patrons seeing him, that fact would mean nothing. An employee might wonder about it, but it wouldn't be up to employees to question what this man did.

But the guards behind the mirror glass; had they noticed him during those few seconds? Maybe not; their biggest job today was to watch the thronged gambling tables, not this man and his cart. But suppose they *had* noticed him coming in from the vestibule, what then? Would they simply wonder about it, making a mental note to question him later, if at all? We felt that they would. For obviously he was moving along of his own free will; no one with him, no one coercing him. Why should anyone do more than wonder a little, at most, about why he'd been out in the vestibule?

But maybe they'd noticed him earlier, wheeling the genuine cart to the table behind the escalator. Then maybe they'd watched him cross the room to the vestibule without his cart; and now, some minutes later, maybe they'd seen him come back into the room, mysteriously in possession of his cart once more. But we didn't think so; there was far too much going on this busiest day

of the year, too much that needed watching, for such sustained attention to the man with the cart carrying, at most, a few hundred silver dollars.

Moving through that crowded casino, those were the things I told myself, fighting to believe them, but underneath lay the simple terrifying thought; suppose we were wrong? I'd be the man they'd grab if they were suspicious at all—the bearded guy in the green shirt who'd been so busy talking to the man with the cart. Right now, and in the next few minutes while I stood at the Lincoln Alley entrance, I'd be a sitting duck. I could be surrounded without knowing it by plain-clothes men; grabbed before I could move a muscle. For all I knew they were around me now.

Making my way along through an aisle, the cart slowly wheeling ahead of me toward the cash room, I was sweating. Then the big man stopped at the barred door of the little corridor leading to the cash room. Passing directly behind him, I saw him, from the corner of my eye, push the little button in the wall, and heard it ring inside the cash room. I didn't look at him directly, and his back was toward me; but I could feel how intensely aware of each other we were. Air pressure hissed, the barred door swung open, the man stepped forward pushing our cart, and then I passed on with the crowd, toward my post across the room.

I reached it, standing at the end of a crap table against the south wall, where I could watch the barred door; it was closed again. My eyes on the green-felt surface of the crap table, I stood, doing my best to look casual, just a part of the crowd. All

I could do now was wait; to be suddenly grabbed by three or four pairs of hands; or for the big man to come out again, finally.

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It wasn't too bad, waiting; I was actually able to follow the game, watching to see if the shooter, a middle-aged woman wearing sunglasses, would make her point with the dice. It was partly that I had no more to do, now; all I could do was stand and wait. And it was partly that I'd almost had the illusion myself, out in the vestibule, that there really *was* somebody in the cart; the voice had sounded utterly real and believable. It seemed to me now, watching the crap game, that the man in the white shirt simply had to believe what he'd been told. All we ever know is what our senses tell us; and he'd *heard* the man in the cart, without question. He'd heard him respond to and actually take part in our conversation; and the weight in the cart he'd pushed was exactly right for a small man. He *had* to believe there was a man inside it.

But did he believe the man in that cart could and would kill him? I could only wait here and see. I told myself that he wouldn't take chances; it wasn't his money he was guarding, but it was his life. If I were in his place, I said to myself, I'd take no chances; I'd do what I was told. The woman made her point at the crap table, let her bet stand, and stood waiting to roll out

the dice again. Across the room the barred door remained closed, and the thought rose up in my mind that people are different; they don't always think and act logically; they get mad or frightened and act recklessly. I could feel the sweat spring to my pores again; I was so scared I felt faint.

Jerry was smart; just a kid, but wiser than I'd realized, I knew that now. Two thousand miles away, and long ago, he'd described precisely how I'd feel at this point. "You won't be able to judge time with any accuracy, Al, and we've got to give that man a good six minutes. Use a stop watch. Give him six full minutes by the clock, then turn, walk out, get into the car, and we'll be off as fast as we can make it."

Holding the watch in my pants pocket, I'd clicked it on the moment the man with the cart had rung the little bell at the cashroom corridor. Now, standing at the crap table, I waited till I was certain two minutes, then three, then a little longer for good measure, had passed. I took out the stop watch and glanced at it then, as though it were an ordinary watch, and I was checking the time. The tiny indicator on the dial said that just over one minute had passed, and I knew the watch had stopped, and got panicky. Then I saw that the sweep second hand was passing from the fifteen to the twenty-second mark; the watch was running, only a minute had actually gone by, and I wondered if I could possibly keep my nerve till that hand had crept around the dial five more times.

The watch in my pocket again, I was determined to wait three more minutes before I looked at it once more. I waited. Nothing

happened. Nothing in the room changed, and I waited some more, *feeling* the time slowly pass, watching the dice tumble out on the green table, and stop, over and again. Then the panic rose up in me. I was suddenly certain that six, maybe seven or eight, minutes had gone, and trying not to move so quickly I'd attract attention, I pulled out the watch. Two minutes and thirty-five seconds had passed, and I closed my eyes for a moment and actually moaned.

Now the men on either side of me at the crap table were a menace; plain-clothes men about to grab me, slug me, or ram a gun in my side. And I could feel the hostile eyes back of the mirrored glass beside me, watching me every second, fully aware of everything I'd done since the moment I'd arrived. I began to count to myself, "One hundred and one, one hundred and two, one hundred and three"—I'd read somewhere that you could time pretty accurately that way. When I'd timed two minutes in that way, I reached for my watch again, and as my hand touched it the barred door across the room opened, and the man in the white shirt came out slowly, wheeling the cart across the room toward me.

I turned casually from the crap table, toward the alley entrance a few steps away; then I stood beside the door, trying to look bored, pulling a cigarette from the pack in my pocket. A dozen yards away now, slowly nudging through the crowd, the cart moved toward me; lying on its top was the grey canvas sack, plump and full.

The man in the white shirt stopped beside me, my mouth

opened and the rehearsed words came out automatically. "Now, get this," I said, smiling at him, the cigarette in my mouth, my hands shoved in the back of my belt, making no move to touch the sack, not even glancing at it. "I pick up the sack, turn, and step out the door. I get into a car waiting outside, the horn honks twice. The instant he hears it"—I glanced down at the cart—"he pushes out the side panel, and gets out that door as fast as he can move. He'll have his pistol ready, and if you try anything he shoots." I paused, looking at the big man, and still smiling, I made my eyes as cold and hostile as I could; this was important, the lie he had to believe if we were going to get the few minutes we had to have now. "If the car *isn't* outside yet," I said carefully, "if it's late getting here, mister, then you stand right here and you wait. Stand right where you are with the cart; don't try to walk away, or give any alarm. Understand? You wait right here till the horn honks twice outside. If the car isn't out there now, it might take five minutes, maybe ten or fifteen to get here. But you *wait till it does*. Wait till the horn honks twice, and my partner busts out of that cart, no matter how long it takes. You understand? You getting this, mister?" I smiled at him pleasantly.

He nodded. "I've got it so far, haven't I?" He raised his voice just a little, glancing down at the cart. "I'll wait, don't worry. I just want your friend to take it easy, and not get nervous. I've done what you said, all of it; I've done my part"—his voice began to rise higher—"I just don't want him to get wild at the last minute. I don't want——"

I shut him off. "Just follow directions," I said quietly, "and you'll be okay. He's not shooting anybody he doesn't have to."

I hesitated a moment, not able to do it; I couldn't bring myself to make the next move. Then I took a deep breath, reached out, picked up the sack, turned on my heel, and stepped through the door out into the night and Lincoln Alley.

The car wasn't there. It simply was not there. Where our car and trailer should have been standing, there was empty pavement. It simply wasn't to be believed; my eyes and brain wouldn't accept it, and I kept glancing around, from one direction to the other as though I could make it appear where it had to be. I realized vaguely that I was taking tentative little steps, a few paces north, a few paces south, then back again, the stuffed canvas sack in my fist. My brain wasn't working; I was like a rat in a maze, helpless in a predicament beyond his imagination. Because there was simply nothing I could do. I couldn't start running down that alley to nowhere; that was disaster for sure. I couldn't walk back where I'd come from, I couldn't turn right, couldn't turn left, yet I couldn't stay where I was. The car and trailer had no *right* to be gone, but they were; and I stopped pacing, and just stood in that semi-dark alley, the sky above me pink with neon, and there was suddenly and simply no place for me on the face of the earth.

18

My muscles were screaming for action, but—like a pair of enormous hands on my shoulders holding me in place—I forced myself to stand still and think; there in the darkness of Lincoln Alley, Reno, Nevada. Twenty yards away, on Douglas Alley, intersecting this like the top of a capital T, a man passed, glancing in my direction with no particular interest, then disappeared on past the corner of Harold's Club.

Now I looked in the only direction left to me; up. Directly above hung the building's fire escape; the usual kind, its final flight parallel to the pavement and maybe eight feet above it. I've played some basketball, and holding the canvas sack in both hands at my chest, I glanced around—no one was in sight—then arced it up onto the fire escape. Instantly, I took a short run, and leaped, harder and with more desperation than ever before in my life, and caught the iron sides of the steps. Heaving my feet up, I struggled onto the fire escape, cracking my head on a metal support. Then I rolled to my stomach, and lay motionless, eyes darting, covering the alley below me.

The doors I'd come out of swung open, the brilliant white light from inside glaring into the alley, and a rush of men spilled onto the pavement. Above the sustained roar of sound from in-

side, I heard a voice—"I tell you there is! There's a man inside it!"—then the doors swung closed. Instantly they opened again, and more men poured out to join the swelling knot of people below me; I had a crazy impulse to reach down with one arm and sweep off their hats. Darting glances to one end of the alley or the other, some stood, some hurried a few paces in baffled pursuit, actually bumping into each other in utter confusion. Three or four had run down to Douglas Alley, and two men tore down toward Second Street.

I was paralyzed. All I wanted to do was curl into a tight ball, knees to my chest, and squeeze my eyes shut; it could only be seconds till someone glanced up. Even in the bowel-twisting fright I was experiencing, I realized—and it surprised me—that there was very little talk; only low and excited questioning murmurs that I couldn't make out. But the scrape of leather on pavement was constant.

I kept my brain working, as well as I could, and now I made myself stand, slowly, picking up my sack. Then moving quietly on the balls of my feet, I began to climb, fast. But the stiff tip of my sole struck a stair rod, and the low-pitched iron sound rang out. I stopped dead, waiting for a dozen faces to turn toward me. But no one heard it above his own excitement, or at least no one connected it with its source. I kept on then—it probably took six or seven seconds at most—up past the top floor, and threw myself over the ledge running around the roof of the building. I fell a yard to the graveled surface, scraping a shoulder, then lay there listening.

An angry authoritative voice said, "Well, they wouldn't be waiting out here, for Christ's sake!" Someone answered—a quick murmuring question—and the first voice, furious, said, "What?" The low excited murmur began again, but fading in volume, and I guessed they were moving inside. Incessantly, the swinging doors opened and closed, and a voice, a woman's, said, "What happened?" and now I forced myself to ignore the alley below. Behind me, from the center of the roof, the mechanism of the moving searchlights clicked monotonously, and I rolled to my back, glancing at them, then looked around. There were no higher buildings near by; no one could see me as long as I kept below the yard-high parapet.

Something moved, a sudden sharp rasp, on a far corner of the roof ahead, and I scrambled to my knees, facing the sound. An enormous dark bulk moved toward me, I couldn't tell what—it was hard to see past the blue-white beams of the searchlights—then it retreated, the rasping, scraping sound repeating itself. I closed my eyes, limp and spent with relief. The great moving bulk, I realized suddenly, was the balloon—the Harold's Club balloon that hung high over Reno in the daytime—now reeled down to the roof for the night; and the rasping sound was the gas-filled bag scraping the parapet or the graveled roof, as it swayed on the moving night air.

The idea sprang to my mind full-blown, and I acted instantly, walking bent at the waist across the graveled surface on past the searchlights, picking my way between ventilator outlets, ducking under wires strung over the roof. As I moved forward, the air

around me, and the roof under my feet, turned blood-pink from the neon glare of the enormous sign rising along the front of the building, and soaring on past the roof. *Harold's Club,* I could read in great letters across the top of the sign above my head, feeling the neon heat on my face, and I could see the first two—*HA*—of the letters running down out of my sight toward the street below.

I squatted beside the balloon, looking it over. In shape it was a miniature dirigible, blunt-nosed, plump-sided, with tail surfaces at the back; it was maybe twenty feet long, and several feet taller than a man. I could see the lower edge of a small network of roping running over the balloon's top like a saddle; it narrowed at the sides to a heavy double rope cinched around the balloon, and this was tethered to a cable wound tight to a winch for the night. On each side of the dull grey surface of the balloon, huge letters read, *Harold's Club.*

Still squatting beside the balloon, I shoved my canvas sack under my feet, and began to tread on it, twisting my feet hard, in a tight awkward circle, jouncing my weight up and down. Under my feet, inside the sack, I could feel the bands enclosing the thick packets snap, the mass of paper crushing and flattening. Then I picked up the sack, a miniature flattened pillow, and stood facing the balloon, its high sides, taller than I was, hiding me from the street.

I jumped, reaching with one arm for the top of the balloon, and caught the rope netting, so that the balloon revolved toward me as I dropped. I pulled harder, turning the great bag till it lay

on its side, its top surface facing me. Hooking my elbow through the netting, I held the balloon in place, canvas sack in my hand. With the other hand, I shoved the plump pressure of the balloon away from the netting, then forced my sack underneath the ropes. I worked it smooth, adjusting its position, getting it neatly in place under the crisscrossed roping, then pulled out my hands, and the balloon swelled against the underside of my sack, and it was in place; jammed between the balloon and its net. It made a bulge, but a smooth one, not overly conspicuous, and I gradually released the balloon, slowly paying out the rope on its side through my hands. When the balloon hung level once more, my sack was on its top, out of sight of all but the angels.

Bending low again, I walked across the roof back to the alley side, and sat down, my back to the parapet, listening. When they came up to take me—now or in the next minutes or hours—I was more or less ready. I'd insist, through no matter what kind of questioning, that a partner had the money; I couldn't have said why, but now I felt safe.

The voices and movements below continued, then a police car arrived, its siren on low and moaning only once, not loudly, as it stopped. A car door opened, the murmur of voices rose for a moment or so, then the door slammed shut, and the car went away, south toward Second Street.

I could only wait to be caught. I wanted a cigarette, but decided against the flare of the match. Time passed, and presently the alley below me was quieter. The sound of the swinging doors, I realized, was coming less frequently, and there were fewer

people outside. And then, in time, the alley became silent and empty once again, except for occasional passing footsteps. I began unbuttoning my shirt.

I took it off, crammed my false beard and neckerchief into the crown of the cowboy hat, then wrapped the hat tightly in the shirt, tying the arms like a bundle of laundry. On my knees, I tucked in the tails of my own white shirt, tightly and neatly; then combed my hair with my pocket comb, and dusted off my pants.

The bundle under my arm, I crawled to the south corner of the roof, and peeked over the edge of the parapet. From Douglas Alley, at my left, I heard steps approaching, and stayed where I was. A man walked on, past the mouth of Lincoln Alley, and the instant he passed, I held my bundle over the side, clear of the building, and opened my fingers. The bundle dropped, an instant later it hit almost soundlessly, and lay in deep shadow a foot from the wall of the building.

Saying the words over and over—"Just ten seconds now, that's all I ask"—I climbed over the parapet onto the iron rungs. Then I ran, on tiptoes, down the stairs, hung by my arms for a second, then dropped on my toes to the alley. Scooping up my bundle, I darted across the alley, lifted the lid of a restaurant garbage can, dropped the bundle inside, and replaced the lid. Lights swung into the alley from Second Street, a hundred and fifty yards south, and above the twin white headlights was a ruby-red spotlight.

To stay here in the alley, alone and available for questioning by the police coming toward me, was impossible. To start run-

ning was insane, and there wasn't a fraction of the time I needed to walk ahead and turn into Douglas Alley. I did the only thing possible; the police-car headlights swung into the alley, sweeping the walls, and in the moment before they straightened to bear down on me, I darted across the dark alley, opened the swinging doors before me, and stepped back into Harold's Club.

19

The white glare struck my eyeballs, and for a moment, after the dark of the alley, I couldn't see what was waiting for me, but I had to walk on. I felt a queer sense of calm, resigned to whatever was going to happen; events were in control of me now, not the reverse.

The gambling was in full swing, the place looked exactly as it always did; I think an ax murder could take place in a busy Reno casino and play would be resumed within ten minutes, the patrons stepping over the body to get at the tables. The tables were crowded now, people packed tight around them, the dice rolling, the wheels spinning, the cards flashing; and like the Gulf Stream, the sluggish tides of people never stopped moving through the aisles. There is always an air of sustained excitement on a busy day in a place like Harold's Club; if there was additional excitement in the air now, I couldn't tell it.

Beside me, a woman turned from a slot machine, her face set and angry, and I took her place, bringing a little handful of change from my pocket. It seemed important to be busy, a player here, not the watchful bystander who could seem to someone like the criminal drawn to the scene of his crime. I wasn't going to shoot craps, though, play roulette, blackjack, or anything else that could bring a glance to my face. Alone with the slot machine, my face to the wall against which it stood, I picked out the nickels from my change, and began feeding them in, pulling the lever. Irrationally, I felt safe and untouchable as long as I was a player here, and when the machine took the last of my nickels with no return, I stepped a few paces down the row to a dime machine, selecting the dimes from my change.

An insane thing happened. The preposterous kind of coincidence, that couldn't possibly occur now, happened. I fed in the first, then the second of the three dimes I had found. I dropped in the third, and—Harold's Club advertises the most generous slot machines in the world—*clunk, clunk, clunk,* one after the other, the three bars that meant jackpot dropped into place behind the little glass window. I was petrified. Here, as in most Reno casinos, the machine doesn't pay off when you hit a jackpot. Instead, you shout, "Jackpot!" and one of the change girls appears, verifies that you have one, screams, "Jackpot!" and then pays you off in cash, while everyone looks at you, and maybe your neighbors at the next machines even congratulate you.

I *had* to get those three bars off that machine, and I pawed

desperately through the change in my hand for another dime, the woman at my one side, the man at the other, oblivious to everything but the whirling disks of their own machines. I found quarters, a half dollar, pennies, but no dime. Leaning forward over the machine, hiding those bars, the hope of every player in Reno but me, I tried to think what to do. To call the change girl for more dimes was impossible; she'd notice. I had to leave the machine, yet if anyone took my place and saw those three bars soon enough to remember I had been playing, he'd certainly call after me—"Hey, mister! You got a jackpot! Hey, *you!*"

For a moment, standing over that machine, I thought of turning to the doors I'd come through while I still had the chance, pushing through, then running. But if the police were still outside . . . I didn't have the nerve. I turned quickly away, pushing blindly into the crowd, trying to get distance between me and that machine. But hurrying was impossible; my skin flinching from the voice I expected, I had to move along with the crowd. Six slow steps, seven, then eight; suddenly I sucked in a gasping gulp of air; I'd been unconsciously holding my breath.

I never knew what happened; what the next player to step up to that machine must have thought as he saw the impossible—a jackpot with no one to claim it. Maybe he was quick-thinking enough to wait, making sure no one returned to dispute him, then claimed it for himself; maybe he dropped in his dime without even glancing at the little glass window.

It was impossible, now, to stay here. I'd meant to wait around for an hour or more, realizing, strange as it seemed, that I was probably safer in Harold's Club than anywhere else I could get to. But I couldn't take it now; I had to get out of here, into the outside air and the night, even if the streets were alive with cops picking up every possible suspect.

The crowd carried me along, on past the cash room, and I didn't even dare glance at it, past the escalators; then I pushed through the plate-glass doors, and stepped onto the bright-as-day sidewalks of Virginia Street. A few doors south, in a little magazine shop, I saw a popcorn stand, and bought a sack. Then I sauntered along toward Second Street, gawking like any tourist; a man eating popcorn, it seemed to me, couldn't look guilty of anything.

On Second Street I turned west, crossed Virginia Street, walked on past the corner, and within a dozen more steps the gambling heart of the town and its protective crowd were behind me. The store windows beside me—the little jewelry shop, the florist's, the hat shop—and the movie and J. C. Penny's ahead were dark. A group of young airmen in blue uniform approached, then passed me, and now in the darkened blocks ahead, clear to the lights of the El Cortez Hotel, there was no one in sight. I was alone on the stretch of sidewalk—my heels sounded loud on the pavement—and it seemed to me my white shirt must gleam in the dark. From behind, approaching, I heard a car, and didn't dare turn my head. It passed, a Yellow cab, and there was another behind it. Then it passed, too; a patrol

car, two uniformed cops in the front seat. They didn't so much as glance at me, and now I knew that for the moment I was safe. Reno, tonight, was filled with strangers; hundreds of young men on the streets of the town, any of whom could have been the men behind the beards in Harold's Club. Whatever the police were now doing to find them, they weren't stopping to question every stranger in sight.

A block farther on I stopped at a filling station, dark and locked. But the little green outside phone booth that I'd remembered stood open. I looked up Mrs. Kressman's number, dropped in the dime I'd gotten in change at the popcorn stand, dialed, and when Mrs. Kressman answered, I asked to speak to Tina.

Perhaps thirty seconds later, Tina reached the phone, and I could picture it, a wall pay phone in the hall beside the living room where Mrs. Kressman spent her evenings. "Don't say anything, Tina, don't say my name, don't say a word, just listen"—I spilled the words out the moment she spoke. "This is Al, and I'm okay. I'm perfectly okay, Tina, everything's fine, and I'll see you in just a few minutes"—I heard her long sigh of relief. "Now, Tina, say, 'Yes, Mr. Baxter, I'll be sure to do that.' " She repeated the words. "Listen," I went on, "I want to know your room number, but don't say it out loud; is it room one?" Tina said no, and I said, "Room two?" She said no, I said, "Three?" and Tina said, "That's right, Mr. Baxter."

I knew the layout of Mrs. Kressman's house; room three was on the ground floor next to the kitchen, the cheapest room. "Go back to your room," I said, "and raise the window. Take a good

couple minutes to do it, an inch at a time; don't make a sound. And leave your light off."

"Okay, Mr. Baxter"—I could tell she was grinning—"it'll be nice to see you in the morning."

Another block, and I turned right onto a quiet tree-lined, small-town street. Lights were on in living-room windows; I saw a woman knitting, saw a man asleep in an easy chair, hands clasped on his chest, and the air all around me hummed with the summer sound of tree locusts. I turned in at Mrs. Kressman's as though I belonged there, following the walk around the side of the house. I walked boldly, but my feet made no sound. At the back, Tina's window was up, and I crawled through, turned and closed it, then pulled down the shade. Then the light clicked on, and Tina stood there, in a pastel blue nightgown, her eyes wide, and bright with relief. She stepped toward me fast, and I grabbed her to me.

20

We whispered, and murmured—just words and names and fragments of sentences—holding each other tight. I kissed her, long and hard, then we both sighed, drew back to look at each other, and grinned. Then I told Tina, sitting beside her on the bed, what had happened, talking quietly in a semi-whisper. We tried

to guess what had happened to the others, but we didn't know; there was nothing we could do for them now, and if they were caught and the police arrived here for us tonight there was nothing we could do about that either. It was when we'd said that that I looked at Tina and said, "They don't just get divorced in Reno; there are more marriages than divorces." Eyes smiling, she waited. "You can get married without any wait in Nevada; how about it, Tina? Tomorrow morning?"

She nodded, eyes shining.

"It's unfair to you," I said. "God knows what'll happen; I could be arrested five minutes after; or even tonight."

She just shook her head. "It's past the time for talking like that," she whispered. "You know what we're going to do."

I nodded, turning to kiss her. We lay back, and when I held her, the full length of her, with the knowledge of what we were going to do, kissing her alone in this room shut off from the whole world, it was the most wildly exciting thing I'd ever felt. "Come to bed, Al," she whispered, and now it didn't matter what happened to me. Now, if they were going to arrest me tomorrow, if they were going to hang me in the morning, it didn't matter; this was my wife, this was worth it, this was worth anything.

One time during the night when I woke up, it was very late, very dark and quiet, the world asleep. Tina lay sleeping, facing me, both arms up at her chest, fists huddled under her chin. I lay very close, an arm over her, and her lips just brushed my cheek. I could feel her breath, slow and regular and very warm on my skin. It would press warm and steadily for several seconds, a

pause; then I'd feel it again, and I didn't move. For I don't know how long, I lay motionless, feeling the wonder and awe of Tina so close, in the trusting helplessness of sleep, and it seemed to me I couldn't possibly have deserved anything so wonderful. And now it did matter what happened tomorrow. I wished we were free, ten thousand miles from here, alone and together like this, and the thought of being caught, of this ever ending, was unbearable.

Go to Reno for a honeymoon, if you're planning one; it's wonderful. The next morning—and it's like this day after day all summer long—the sky was a strong deep blue, the mountains chocolate brown and visible for countless miles, the highest peaks sugar white and shining with snow, the sun lying yellow over everything. I left Mrs. Kressman's very early, the way I'd come in, and walked downtown. I had coffee and toast, then later when the stores opened, I bought a new white shirt, shorts, socks, wash pants, and a handkerchief at Montgomery Ward's; then I got a shave at the Riverside Hotel barbershop. After that I paid admission to the Riverside swimming pool. I didn't go into the pool, but in the showers I had a long twenty-minute bath and shampoo, finishing with a cold shower—snow water direct from the mountains, and so cold I couldn't breathe. Then I bundled up my old clothes, and put on my new ones, ready for anything, wanting to live forever, and so hungry I couldn't stand it.

The Reno paper was out, stacked on the stand in the lobby as I left, and I bought one, then walked to Cal-Neva in town; on the way I dropped my old clothes in a city trash basket.

Tina was waiting at a table, her little suitcase on the floor, and wearing a white, off-the-shoulders, summer linen dress, and her eyes were brilliant. Then we ordered breakfast; scrambled eggs and sausages, and those wonderful fried string-potatoes they serve in the West. While we were waiting, I opened the paper.

There was a story on the robbery, and I pointed at it, and we read it together. It wasn't a big story; two short columns and a headline across them, on the lower right-hand corner of the first page. It was a vague, very guarded story, referring to "an attempted holdup." It said nothing about how it was done, didn't mention our cart, and referred to three men in disguise. It said very few of the patrons saw anything happen, that almost no one realized a robbery was going on, and that "play continued as usual." It didn't exactly say this, but it gave the impression that the men would soon be caught, and that the whole thing wasn't too important, or worth much mention; I supposed that the police, for reasons of their own, had asked that it be handled this way. I was certain that if Guy, Brick, or Jerry had been caught, this story would have said so, and I whispered that to Tina, and she agreed; we felt wonderful.

Tina said, "I wish Guy and Jerry could be our witnesses."

For a moment I thought about it, wondering if it weren't possible, but the answer had to be no. "Wish they could, but——"

"But it doesn't matter. Oh, Al, let's hurry!"—she was radiant.

Our breakfast arrived, and we finished it quickly, not even drinking our coffee. At a South Virginia Street jeweler's—the

one with the big clock out on the sidewalk—we bought a plain gold ring for five dollars. Within twenty-five minutes, in an office at the big white courthouse building four blocks farther on, we were speaking the words, the impressive important words, that made us married.

There are a lot of things to do, besides gamble, in and around Reno, and we bought tickets for a visit to Virginia City, some twenty-odd miles away. The bus, a shiny new, oversize, tan sedan carrying seven passengers, wasn't due to leave for an hour; so we walked out into the residential area, past various boardinghouses. At the first pleasant-looking place with a *Vacancy* sign, we looked the room over; it was nothing special, but nice enough, and had its own bathroom. We took it, paying for a week in advance; we told the landlady we'd just arrived, by bus. When I signed the register, *Mr. and Mrs. Al Mercer, Chicago,* I couldn't help grinning, and the landlady nodded complacently, and said, "You can't beat Reno for a honeymoon."

There are a hundred thousand square miles of Nevada, and only a hundred and sixty thousand people living in it; nearly one square mile for every person. And with most of the population in the towns and cities, it's easy to get the whole world to yourself. Ten minutes out of Reno, our car was the only moving thing as far as the eye could see. Tina and I sat in the back seat by a window, holding hands, the car moving swiftly and smoothly over the asphalt road winding, and always climbing, through the hills toward Virginia City. There was nothing but dry sage, hills, mountains, and blue sky; not a fence now, not a house;

nothing but the road to show that a human being had ever been here before. The sun was yellow and hot, and we knew that all we were seeing had looked exactly the way it did now, ten thousand years before.

In Virginia City we left the other passengers—a middle-aged couple and their high-school daughter, and two vivacious sad-eyed prospective divorcees from one of the guest ranches—and walked through the silent crumbling back streets. Virginia City is a ghost town; eighty years ago, forty thousand people lived here, and mined and fought for the millions in silver they dug out of these hills from the famous Comstock Lode. Now, surrounded by the still raw-looking old slag heaps, maybe five hundred people live in the dead town, running bars, restaurants, and curio shops for tourists. Off the main street, we walked past empty old houses, grey and paintless, silent in the sun, their windows gone, their porches sagging, wallpaper peeling, their fancy, once-expensive, ornamental porch railings hanging twisted and loose, or lying half-hidden in the weed-grown front yards. We stared at roofless walls that had once held a family, trying to imagine it. At one end of town, we walked up a broken flight of stone stairs leading to nothing but weeds, rubble, and humming insects, the house that had stood there long since gone. All the time, we walked terribly conscious of each other, holding hands, turning often to look and smile at each other. And presently we just sat on the side of a hill in the sun, in sight of the bus parked on the main street below, looking across it out into the vast space before us, toward the brown, lavender-shadowed

hills rising endlessly, like waves, farther than we could see even in the thin brilliant air.

As we drove down out of the hills toward Reno, the town lay spread out before us, miles ahead; a miniature city at one end of a green plain enclosed by hills. I nudged Tina, and she followed my gaze; a tiny grey-blue dot hung high in the sky over the city, the *Harold's Club* balloon. There—incredibly in sight of every soul in Reno—a fortune hung in the sky. I grinned, shaking my head at the thought, and Tina smiled, too. But I saw the fear back of her eyes again, and as I continued staring at that speck in the sky, I felt my grin fading. I hated to be going back toward it; and all it meant and threatened. I had all I wanted right here; yet now I knew that maybe I didn't have it at all; that maybe I'd only held it for these past few hours, and was on my way right now to losing it forever.

21

We had lunch at a drugstore; I bought a razor, shaving soap, and a toothbrush, and walked south toward the Truckee River bridge beside the Mapes Hotel. I took my time; I was to be there at three, and still had eight minutes. Ahead, on the bridge, I could see the usual handful of people fishing; several old men and three or four boys, each with a bamboo pole or just a line and

hook. The Truckee is a swift tumbling stream rushing down from the mountains, and in the spring and early summer, the snow still melting, it's several feet deep; people often catch trout from it, right here in the heart of Reno.

I sauntered slowly along Virginia Street, then onto the bridge, keeping on the west side of the street. Leaning casually on the iron railing, I glanced down at the rushing green-white water below me, then turned to look casually across the street. Brick was there, lounging against the railing, watching the fishers. His gaze passed over me, and I knew he'd seen me. We were neither of us, though, according to the plan, to cross the street to the other, unless one of us had something absolutely necessary to say; if there was nothing vital to communicate, I was to walk on after a minute or so. Each day we'd show up on the bridge at a different time, following a schedule we'd memorized.

If I had a message for the others, I'd give it to Brick; two strangers in casual conversation. Then he'd make a phone call, or pretend to, from a phone booth, leaving a note stuck with gum to the underside of the little shelf; otherwise he wouldn't go near that booth. Each day, twenty-five minutes after Brick and I were scheduled to meet, Jerry would walk into that phone booth. If there was no note, he'd pretend to look up a phone number, then leave. If he found a note, he'd read it quickly, then dial a number. Guy would be waiting at that number—in another phone booth somewhere in town—the phone already at his ear, the telephone cord wrapped around the pronged phone hook, holding it down. If the phone rang—if Jerr called him—he was

ready to let that hook rise the very instant it rang, and listen to Jerry's message. If it didn't ring within three minutes by his watch, he'd leave. Neither Brick, Guy, nor Jerry were ever to use the same phone booths twice in a row; again they'd memorized a list, then destroyed it, of a dozen or so phone-booth combinations to be used in the plan.

Once again, later in the day, we followed the same scheme—in reverse. Messages could pass, in the first meeting, from Tina and me to Brick, to Jerry, to Guy. Messages could move in the opposite direction, from Guy, to Jerry, to Brick, to Tina and me, the second time. The beauty of the plan was that we none of us talked to each other, or even saw each other, except Brick and I, unless we had something essential to say.

Right now, I knew I ought to walk on. Exactly what had happened last night to Brick, Guy, and Jerry didn't matter now, as long as they were safe. And if they hadn't been safe, Brick would be crossing the street to tell me. Nor did it matter to them now what had happened to me. I obviously hadn't been caught, and if I didn't try to talk to Brick, they'd know everything else was okay. But I crossed the street just the same.

On the other side, one of the boys had caught a fish, a tiny one, and using that as an excuse, I strolled over, smiling a little, my eyes on the boy trying to take the squirming fish off the hook. Watching the boy, I leaned on the stone railing next to Brick; after a moment I turned casually, and said, "Some fish," and smiled.

"Yeah"—he nodded.

Still watching the boy, still smiling, I said, "What happened?"

"Jerry was parked right where he should have been." Brick spoke very quietly, a little polite smile on his face, apparently discussing the tiny fish. "Guy and I got in the trailer okay, changed our clothes according to plan, and we were sitting waiting for you." Brick yawned, and glanced casually around; no one was paying any attention to us. "A patrol car stopped right beside Jerr. He almost died; he thought we'd had it for sure"—Brick smiled genuinely. "But all that happened is that the cop told him to move on; he couldn't park in the alley. Jerry tried to argue. He told the truth; said there was a friend inside who'd be out in a minute, but it was no dice. We had to move on, that's all; it was just that simple."

I shrugged, and said nothing, staring at the fishers again. We'd thought that could happen; we'd talked about it. And we'd decided it was simply a risk, a calculated risk, we'd have to take; there was no way to avoid it. There wasn't too much chance, we figured, that anyone would bother us in just the seven or eight minutes we'd have the trailer in the alley. It had happened, though; and it could have been worse. It could have happened just as I'd come popping out with that sack in my hand.

"Soon as we got out of the alley, Jerry parked on Second Street, jumped out, tore around to Virginia Street, and walked straight into Harold's Club to warn you, in case you were still standing there waiting. But by that time you were gone, no telling where, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do for you.

He was right there when all hell broke loose in the casino, and he got out fast; there was no way he could help you, wherever you were. Where were you?"

I didn't answer. I just nodded and smiled, as though he'd said something amusing about the boy and his fish; the kid had the fish off the hook now, and was arguing with another kid about whether it was big enough to keep. "What happened in the casino?" I said.

"The guy with the cart did a pretty smart thing; something none of us thought of. Jerry saw him do it, standing back in the crowd where the guy couldn't see him. The guy was standing waiting; you were gone. He had both hands on the handle of the cart, and there was a moment when the floor right in front of him happened to be pretty clear of people. Then he heaved hard on that handle. He gave the cart one hell of a yank, full strength, and the thing spun like a top on those swivel wheels. Jerry says the guy spun it so hard it was just a blur, skidding across the floor, with people skipping out of the way like crazy. If there'd really been a guy inside that cart, his brains would have come out of his ears, and he couldn't possibly have shot a pistol or anything. The cart smacked the corner of a crap table so hard, the cart almost went over, and the guy in the white shirt dived behind a table and started yelling about a man inside the cart; people just stood there staring at him for a few moments like he was crazy; they didn't know what the hell was happening." Brick smiled—"Jerry did, though, and didn't wait for any more. He walked out fast, came back to the trailer, and drove on. If you'd

still been in Harold's Club he'd have brought you along with him. As it was, all we could do is hope you'd make out all right, and we went on according to plan. We dropped the disguises and pistol in a gutter, and when the night train from Chicago came in, I walked into the depot with the passengers, met the ranch owner, and he drove me out to the ranch. We'd dropped Guy off near the Y—he has your suitcase, by the way. No way to get it to you, though."

"I know. I bought new things."

"Jerry was to ditch the trailer and car somewhere, then go to his boardinghouse. Now, what happened to you?"

We'd been talking long enough, and I said so, adding, "I got away okay, and that's all that counts."

"You sure you weren't spotted?"

"I'm sure."

"Where's the money?"

"It's safe; don't worry," I said shortly, then pushed myself erect from the railing, ready to walk on. His eyes narrowing at my answer, Brick looked at me hard, but I just smiled, and nodded at the kids sitting on the railing with their fishlines. "Well," I said brightly, and fairly loudly, "they do a lot better than I would at that"—I smiled politely at Brick; two strangers concluding a casual conversation; but I stared him in the eyes, letting him know I had no intention of telling him where the money was. Then I walked away.

In the room with Tina that afternoon, I felt safe. Our landlady believed we'd arrived that morning, in case anyone asked her.

And Tina had told Mrs. Kressman, when she left, that she just couldn't go through with her divorce, and was going back home to try again. That had happened before among Mrs. Kressman's guests, and she just wished Tina luck, and didn't question it. But more than those facts, it was so wonderful and beyond belief there with Tina, we were so marvelously alone and shut off from the world, that I couldn't help feeling nothing could get in and touch us. I knew the police had had time now, a lot of time, to do whatever they were going to to find us; and that if we were going to be caught, it had to come soon. I hated to leave that room.

We had to, though; it was natural for honeymooners to spend a fair amount of time in it, but not all the time. After dark, Tina left to buy sandwiches and milk shakes, and twenty-five minutes later I met her at Evans and Fourth streets, well outside the bright-lights district. Then we walked on under the trees along the quiet street, to the north end of town, and the University of Nevada campus. I didn't know whether this really mattered, but it seemed wiser to keep out of the gambling center of town.

The campus was dark and deserted, full of the summer smell of fresh-cut grass. There's a little stream winding through it, and we sat beside it under a tree, well back from the walks, had our supper, and talked; and an odd thing happened.

We both wanted children, and we talked about that, then we talked about the kind of house we wanted, what it should be like, for the children's sake, and so on. And after a while I realized we were both referring to "when we can afford it"; talking as though we didn't have a dime, as though the Harold's Club

money didn't exist. But it did. We *had* robbed Harold's Club, and the fortune we'd stolen hung there in the darkness over Reno this moment, and now I knew what Tina and I had been doing. Unconsciously we'd been pretending a false normality, a future like anyone else's. And then it hit me that for us a future didn't yet exist; that even the present was only an illusion.

For Tina's benefit, I tried to laugh that feeling away, and pretty soon we were chattering once more; but we never again referred to the future.

We drove to Mount Rose and to Lake Tahoe next day; I rented a car. We had just over a hundred dollars left—Tina's savings—and we were going to have a honeymoon as long as seventy-five of those dollars lasted; then we'd find jobs here in Reno, and wait out the time.

You can't describe a honeymoon, of course. In Reno, the temperature was ninety-three degrees, and in less than thirty minutes we were standing on a six-foot snowbank on the crest of Mount Rose, ten thousand feet above sea level. We had lunch at Cal-Neva Lodge, sitting at a window overlooking Lake Tahoe, and that lake, ringed with pine trees, is so blue and beautiful it looks almost artificial; anyone would have enjoyed it, and we were on a honeymoon. I couldn't get over the wonder of being married to the girl beside me, and I thought that for a day like yesterday and today a man ought to be willing to pay any price, but he isn't; he's greedy and wants more and more of the same, forever. Underneath everything I thought and felt lay a dark, ignored little pocket of dread; together with a feeling, at the

same time, that nothing could happen. We were too happy; nothing could break through that and touch us, nothing can happen to a man and woman on their honeymoon.

22

At two-fifteen, annoyed at the interruption, I walked onto the Virginia Street bridge again, the east side this time, near the Mapes. A man in overalls stood fishing near the north end of the bridge, his short pole over the side, a pipe in his mouth, and I stopped near him, watching idly. Brick was across the street, and since I had no news to pass on, I turned and, forearms on the railing, stood looking down at the water, ignoring him. If he didn't come over in the next minute, I'd leave, and glad of it.

But Brick appeared; a half-dozen steps from my side, he stood leaning against the rail, facing the street, staring absently at the passing traffic. I didn't believe he had any real message; he was itching to know where the money was, I felt certain, and I smiled. He wasn't going to find out, and I deliberately turned my back to him, leaning on one elbow, facing the fisherman again. I supposed Brick was waiting, hoping a few more people would come along and lounge at the rail so we wouldn't be too conspicuous talking.

Cars passed; more of them with California licenses, I noticed,

than Nevada. Pedestrians crossed the bridge. From the Mapes, two young men walked toward us, and passed, conversing. They both wore identical black pants, white shirts, bow ties, and grey coats with long unnotched lapels; orchestra players from the hotel band, I imagined. Three thin-legged grade-school girls went by, actually skipping every few steps, hot as it was. In grey suit and felt hat, a short, placid-looking man of early middle age strolled toward us, an eight- or nine-year-old boy holding his hand; the kid looked around him eagerly, the man looked bored.

Brick hadn't made a move, and I wasn't going to wait forever. Absently watching the fisherman, I decided I'd leave in a few seconds if he didn't do something. The kid with the man raised his arm and pointed, not quite at but just past me, and said something to the man, looking up at him. The man stooped and replied, and the boy nodded eagerly, and pointed again. "That's him!" he said excitedly, "I know it is!" and the man took a pistol from a shoulder holster and aimed it at Brick from waist level, walking toward him all the time.

"Don't move, mister," the short little man said quietly, walking past me, his eyes steadily on Brick. "Take it easy, if you know what's good for you"—with his free hand, he'd pushed the boy in back of him, sheltering him with his body.

My mouth gaping, I could only turn and stare. Brick stood just as he had, facing the street, his back at the bridge rail. But his hands at his sides were flat on the rail, his body tense, as though he might shove himself forward hard, at any instant.

Then he relaxed, his shoulders dropping, and raised his hands, palms outward, and they were trembling. "Easy with the gun," he said, and he was scared. "I'm not moving."

Ducking his head, the man with the gun spoke to the boy behind him, his eyes never leaving Brick; he'd stopped a good six feet away, where Brick couldn't reach him without stepping toward him. "You sure now, Bobby? Take a good look; don't be wrong about this."

"I'm sure!"—the kid was peeking out at Brick. "That's him; I remember, all right; that's him!"

A black patrol car pulled smoothly to the curb, stopped, and two cops in the front seat slid out, one on each side of the car, moving casually but swiftly. They walked up to Brick, and then, one on each side, they held him, each with an arm linked through Brick's, their other hands holding his wrists. The man in grey put away his gun, and the boy stepped out from behind him, staring at Brick, fascinated, nodding his head all the time.

"Okay"—one of the cops started to move forward. "Let's go."

"Wait!"—eyes desperate, Brick stared at the little man in plain clothes, and the cops waited, watching his face. On both sides of the bridge, pedestrians had stopped dead, and were staring; in the street the cars barely moved, everyone in them staring out, too, mouths open. I had sense enough to realize that leaving would be the most unnatural thing I could do, and I couldn't have moved anyway. "Listen," Brick said to the little man, his voice low but frantic, "would it help any if I got you

the money back? If you recovered it all?" I stared, wondering what sort of desperate bluff this was.

The plain-clothes man shrugged noncommittally. "It usually does."

"Okay"—Brick was talking very fast—"and remember I told you this." He gestured with his chin; at me. "Get him! He's got the money! Get him! Quick!"

The three cops moved fast, but still—for a second or two—they were startled, taking in what Brick said before their muscles could respond. But I'd understood instantly and no fraction of a second passed before I moved. I was still leaning, my side to the bridge rail, and as I turned to face it, my hands grasped it and pulled hard as my legs sprang, and—the cops and Brick moving for me—I shot over the rail, falling, and landed in a hard splash, flat on my belly, hands and arms outstretched and slapping down on the water, breaking the fall in a racing-dive start. It hurt, my arms and chest banging the bottom, and I hadn't known what I might hit.

But nothing broke, and already I was moving fast, downstream with the tumbling current, gagging and choking, the water bitter cold. I couldn't swim overarm; I tried, but my arms struck bottom, and the current was twisting me sideways. Then I switched to an awkward breast stroke, my feet kicking, and the next bridge, a block down, was coming at me fast, and the cops were shooting.

It's incredible how much thinking and seeing you can do in seconds in a terrible emergency. I saw the two uniformed cops

running, nearly abreast of me, in the paved alley alongside the Mapes and paralleling the river. They'd both had to run to the same side, I realized; we'd been too near the end of the long bridge for one of them to run to the opposite side. And I saw that although they were shooting, their gun barrels pointed upward, whether to avoid hitting me, or bystanders, I didn't know. I knew they could easily run well ahead of me, and that at the next bridge one of them would cross, and then they'd have me, one on each side of the stream. Already, though I was only midway between the two bridges, they were eight or ten paces ahead of me, running hard for the Center Street bridge.

I dug into the water hard with my right arm, got a foot down on the bottom, and shoved. Then I staggered to my feet, stumbling out of the water, and began clawing my way up the short bank on the other side, glancing over one shoulder. For two more steps the police ran hard ahead, then one looked back, shouted, and they stopped and began shooting, and this time I saw they were aiming, and heard the bullets thwacking into the dirt embankment. Hitting the top of the bank, I hurled myself over it, rolling hard, away from the river, then rolled onto my knees, and feet, and ran—terribly fast—over the lawn toward the big grey-white bulk of the post-office building fifty yards straight ahead. On the walk alongside the post office, a woman and a man stood staring at me running toward them, and the man said, "Hey!" in a hesitating way; I don't know what he thought that would accomplish. Dripping wet, my feet pumping water from my sodden shoes every time they smashed onto the grass, I ran

over the lawn, crossed the sidewalk, up the post-office steps, and pushed the door open—quickly but not crashing through—and stepped into the post office. Then I walked.

I moved quickly, straight ahead for the Mill Street exit on the other side, but trying as well as I could to look casual; a man taking a short cut through the post office. Anyone looking at me could see I was soaked, and I knew my feet were leaving wet prints on the mottled stone floor. I'd been sobbing for breath, but through the twenty-odd steps across the width of the Reno post office I kept my breathing shallow and silent, though the blood seemed to stop in my head from the effort, and I thought I might faint.

The three or four people in a short line at the stamp window, the middle-aged woman and the young man writing at a wall desk, didn't glance at me. And when I pushed through the doors, and stepped onto the stone stairs, walking quickly down to the walk, the scene was a normal one; parked cars on both sides of the street, a man, his back toward me, walking ahead toward Virginia Street, a woman on the other side, pushing a child in a stroller; none of them yet knowing what had just happened on the other side of the big post office.

I walked quickly along the line of parked cars, glancing into them, and at the first one with a blanket in the back, a sedan, I opened the door, got in, pulled the door closed, not slamming it, lay down on the floor, pulled the blanket over me, and lay motionless. What happened now wasn't up to me, but to Fate.

Time passed. Twice someone walked by the car, but the steps

were unhurried. Twice a car passed in the street, the second one moving very fast, and I was certain it was a patrol car. Under the blanket, I stripped naked. Then, lying on my stomach, I took my soaked handkerchief from my pants pocket, rolled it up, with my socks, in my shorts, and shoved them down out of sight behind the back-seat cushion. I sat up cautiously, bending low at the waist, keeping my head below window level. Taking my shirt, I squeezed the water from the tails, cuffs, and collar; then, as well as I could, I smoothed collar and cuffs flat, between my hands. I took my wallet out of my pants, and wrung out the pockets, the waistband, and cuffs, smoothing them flat, too. With a blanket corner, I wiped my shoes hard, then rammed a wad of blanket into each shoe, twisting the heavy cloth, soaking up and wiping out all the water I could; then I spread the shoes wide, and set them on the back seat, in a patch of sun. All the time I was listening for approaching steps.

Now, shirt over one arm, pants over the other, I began waving them slowly through the hot dry air. My arms got tired, then they began to ache and get numb, but I never stopped. The air in Reno is brittle-dry; you almost never visibly sweat even on the hottest days, and your lips and nostrils dry out, till you get used to it. In ten minutes, fifteen perhaps, my shirt and pants were—not dry—but no longer dripping. Then I put them on, put on my shoes, and shoved my soaked wallet back into my pocket. I ran my comb through my hair, then got out of the car, slowly and casually as though it were mine.

I walked fast, but not obviously hurrying, half a block to

Center Street, turned south, half a block to the public library, and even in that time I could feel my clothes drying on my skin, the parched air around me pulling the moisture out of the threads. Glancing down at the front of my shirt, I saw that it was damp, but evenly and not noticeably; it simply seemed an off shade of white. I walked into the library; a high-school girl was talking in low tones to the woman at the desk; an elderly man sat at a table, copying from a book. I crossed the room silently to the shelf stacks at the back, and disappeared among them. At the very end of a shelf, in the darkest corner I could find, I snatched a book from the shelves, opened it, and then stood there, staring at the print.

In twenty minutes, the library around me quiet and peaceful, my clothes were dry, or dry enough. At the pockets and waist, my pants still felt cool on my skin, and my shirttails were bunched up and damp. But everywhere else my clothes were dry again, or looked it, even my shoes; and I walked on out of the library.

South on Center Street for four or five blocks, then west to Virginia; there was nothing to do but walk and hope. On Virginia I took a bus, one of the square little yellow Reno buses, and rode north. I passed the bridge I'd jumped from not forty-five minutes before; now a boy, a man, and a woman were fishing, pedestrians and cars passing as usual. On North Virginia, five or six blocks across the tracks, I got out, and walked west back toward our room and Tina.

23

Thirty minutes later, watching from the window of our room, I saw the cab Tina had gone off to find pull up at the curb; and I picked up her suitcase, and walked out to it. I was wearing a clean shirt, shorts, and socks, but the same pants and shoes; I didn't have any others. In the cab as we pulled away, Tina handed me the new hat and cheap jacket she'd bought, and I put them on. "Drive us to Sparks, will you, please," I said to the driver, and he nodded. Tina murmured to me, "There's one leaving in twenty-five minutes," and I knew what she meant. While I waited in the room, she'd gone out to buy the clothes, and to phone Sparks, the nearest town, to find out when the next bus for anywhere at all was leaving. Then she'd found a cab, and come back for me. Now, sitting back in the cab, we smiled at each other, each trying to look optimistic.

At first she'd wanted me to stay in the room, and hide; under the bed, if I had to, while she brought food in each day. But I'd known, and she'd finally recognized, too, that that was only slow death; that in a day, or two days, or three days, the cops would reach this particular boardinghouse, and that would be the end. The only realistic hope was getting out of Reno and away, right now, before there was time, we hoped, for all escapes to be blocked off. I'd had to accept Tina going along; she simply

would not listen to or even discuss anything else. She had to know, she said—she *had* to—that I'd gotten away.

I wondered how far we'd get. We drove three blocks, four, then turned south to Fourth Street and Route 40 to Sparks, some three or four miles away. On Fourth Street, my lips close to her ear, I lied to Tina. "I'll make it," I said; I tried to sound eager and convincing. "The town's full of people coming and going, they haven't found me yet; I'm going to make it okay. Now, I want you to get out; at the next stoplight. I'll phone you, Tina, tonight or tomorrow, soon as I'm okay. I can travel faster without y——"

She was just shaking her head, slowly and steadily. Nothing I was saying had any bite. I didn't believe it, and neither did she; we both knew. At Fourth and Evans—we'd met on this corner only last night—the cab swerved sharply into the curb, the driver leaning on his horn, and stopped so fast we shot forward, bumping into the front seat.

Tina made a grab for the door handle, but I stopped her, holding her wrists; they'd shoot at us for all I knew, and in any case they'd catch us before we'd run fifty yards. I was tired of running, tired of it all, and I pulled her back on the seat. Then we sat waiting through the nine or ten seconds it took the patrol car to back out of the side street the cab driver had seen it in, then swing sharply, and shoot up beside us, braking hard.

I had my hands raised, fingers spread, palms facing the door, as the cops drew alongside, and I stayed that way, not moving a muscle as the cops piled out of their car, moving fast but warily,

guns out and their eyes on me, cold and deadly. "Easy," I said, as well as I could—"I'm not moving till you tell me."

The one cop nodded, and opened my door with his free hand. "Okay; out, and keep the hands up." I got out very slowly, remembering the last time I'd done this; when it hadn't mattered, when I'd been just a college boy caught in a prank. "You, too, Miss," the cop said politely enough; then he said to the cabbie, "Nice work, Eddie."

The cab driver shrugged modestly. "A cinch," he said. "I spotted him right away; maybe ten minutes after the call came through"—he nodded at the loudspeaker in his dashboard, and I knew what had happened. Most Reno cabs are radio-dispatched, carrying a phone and receiver; probably every cabbie in town had been watching for me, and it didn't much matter which one Tina had picked. If he hadn't seen the patrol car, he'd have phoned for one, probably using a code.

Casually and carelessly, standing there on the street as Tina got out, I said to the cops, "You don't have to bother with her; she wasn't in on it, and doesn't know a damn thing about it. Hell"—I looked at her contemptuously—"I don't even know her last name; picked her up at the Cal-Neva bar this morning."

The cops didn't even answer that. One of them frisked me, fast but thoroughly, then nodded at the patrol car. "Inside, both of you. You in the front seat," he said to me. "You in the back," he said to Tina. "Thanks, Eddie."

"Any time"—the cabbie grinned, then put his car in gear, and pulled away.

I think I'm like a lot of people who've spent a little time in Reno and get to thinking they know the town, when all they really know are a few square blocks in the heart of it. There's an old-looking red-brick building a block from the Mapes; the City Hall—and I'd always supposed the police station was somewhere inside it. The building has a quiet, old-fashioned, small-town look, and I suppose I'd had a vague picture of a chief of police sitting in a dusty room inside it, feet up on a roll-top desk, maybe; a plump and placid elderly man in shirt sleeves, smoking a pipe, and with maybe a nickel-plated badge on his suspenders, peering over his glasses.

We drove south to Second Street, slowed, and swung left, heading east, not west, and I was startled and sat up in my seat; this wasn't the way to the police station! We drove on, out of the business and gambling district, and in maybe a minute or so bumped over an iron bridge I'd never seen before in my life. Then, just ahead, on the left, I saw it; a massive, soaring, smooth-planed stone building rising several stories into the air. On the top, high above the street, I saw a tall steel-mesh fence, enclosing a square of roof, and guessed that it was a prisoners' exercise space. *This* was the Reno police station; official, impersonal, coldly modern; and now I was scared in my bones, and I knew we were in the hands of a smart and deadly efficient police force.

Up the wide stone steps, walking fast, my cop carrying our suitcase, through heavy bronze and glass doors, into a tall, cool, waxed-linoleum corridor. Ahead at the left, behind a low

polished-wood enclosure, was a switchboard, the subdued buzzer sounding regularly, the tiny lights flashing. We paused there, waiting till the girl turned, then my cop said quietly, "We've got him; pass the word, will you?" She nodded, glancing at us with professional disinterest, and we turned away, and into a corridor of pebble-glassed doors. My cop opened one of the doors, motioning us with his head to walk in past him. Loud-speakers, a girl's quiet voice, began sounding in the corridor. The door closed behind us, and I couldn't make out what she was saying, but I knew it concerned us.

We were in a large neutrally painted room with the same block-linoleum floor as the corridors, venetian blinds at the windows, four desks and swivel chairs, each with a straight-backed chair beside it; everything looked well-taken-care-of and expensive. Two of the desks were occupied by men in plain clothes. One was the pleasant-looking man who'd arrested Brick. The other was bigger and younger, with the kind of ordinary unmemorable face you might see anywhere, except for his eyes; they held the calmly ruthless, not-quite-blank stare of the professional policeman. They didn't seem to be doing anything; the younger man had been cleaning his nails, as we came in, with a long steel file. They just looked at us.

Nodding at me, my cop said, "At Fourth and Evans, in a cab. Eddie Quatrell's cab, by the way; he flagged us. Heading for Sparks with a suitcase"—he set the suitcase on the floor, by the wall. Then, nodding at Tina, he said, "She was with him."

"Thanks"—the little detective smiled pleasantly. "You pass the word?" The cop nodded. "Okay"—the little man nodded, dismissing him, and both cops left the room. After a moment, while Tina and I just stood there at the door, the little man looked up at us and said, pleasantly but absently, as though he hadn't yet gotten around to thinking about us, "Sit down; might take a few minutes."

We took the chairs beside their desks, Tina at the older man's, I at the other. Then we waited; the younger man was cleaning his nails again. Once he said, glancing up at me, "Fourth and Evans?" and I nodded.

After a moment, I looked over at Tina and smiled in what I hoped was a reassuring way. She smiled back, but her eyes looked sick.

The door opened, and a tall, wide-shouldered man stepped in, carrying a manila folder in one hand. His face was lean, cutting in sharply below the cheekbones, his hair crisp and thick; he was young, his eyes amused; the most knowing and quietly dangerous-looking man I'd ever seen in my life. He was beautifully dressed; his tan single-breasted suit tailor-made and expensive. He looked highly paid, he looked unruffled and calm, as though nothing could disturb him; he looked able to handle anything. He was smiling pleasantly, and as though he had known since eight o'clock this morning exactly this would be happening.

For several ticks of a clock he stood there looking at us contemplatively, soundlessly slapping his cardboard folder against

a pant leg. Then he nodded at the suitcase on the floor beside him. "Is the money in there?" I shook my head. "We'll search it, you know. Is the money in there?"

"No; just clothes. Look if you want."

He nodded, knowing it was true; he seemed to waste no motion. Then he beckoned with his head, turning back to the door. The two detectives stood, so did Tina and I, and we all followed him out into the hall, walked down it, turned a corner, then followed the back of that beautifully pressed suit through a metal door, and down a flight of concrete stairs.

We were in a big well-lighted garage, the outer doors closed. Beside one wall stood our car and trailer. There was a policeman's motorcycle in the room; nothing else. At one and the same time, that car and trailer looked sickeningly familiar, and—in that setting—very strange. There they stood, silent and dust-coated, their every line imprinted on my brain, yet looking now, utterly different, under the electric glare.

24

"You did a good job," the tall man said quietly, gesturing at the trailer; his voice was approving, complimentary. "We had them in here and processed, in less than an hour afterward. But the prints we found were the former owner's, and his wife's; we

knew that by noon the next day. And there weren't any other prints, and not a shred or scrap of anything else, not even a cigarette butt; no clues. The front plate"—he opened his folder, and glanced at a paper inside it—"belonged to a sixty-five-year-old farmer; he'd reported it lost. The rear plate belonged to a dead man; killed in a highway accident two weeks ago. Probably the plate was lost in the accident, where you found it. Good job," he repeated, nodding his head. "We spent half the night working over that rig, and it told us nothing. Walk around it," he said to me. "Look it over."

I did what he said; walked clear around the trailer and car, staring at the familiar strangeness of it, my mind numb, wondering what was happening to us. Then I stood, back where I'd been, looking at the tall man with the calm amused eyes.

"Next morning"—tucking the folder under one arm, he walked to the garage doors, stooped for the handle, then raised the doors; they rolled to the ceiling, and the late-afternoon daylight slanted into the room. "Next morning, a traffic man opened the garage doors, and walked past the rig, between the trailer and wall. Walk around it again," he said to me.

Again I walked, past the front of the car, then along the length of car and trailer beside the garage wall; this time the tall man followed, and so did the others. Near the rear of the trailer I stopped in my tracks. The white daylight, sunless now, but clear, slanted across the smooth dust-filmed side of the trailer. Sharp and plain, now, printed in the dust in awkward capitals, under a film of newer dust, was, *Bob Streik, Salt Lak*——" The tail of

the *k* trailed sharply back to the end of the trailer in a yard-long curve.

The tall man beside me nodded as though I'd asked a question. "Yeah," he said, "who is Bob Streik, of Salt Lake City? The Salt Lake police chief found him in the phone book, while we held the line: Robert Streik, an address, and a phone number. We waited while he called him on the local phone; we could hear them talking. Streik is a businessman, a salesman; he was just finishing breakfast, about to leave his house. He knew nothing about you, your trailer, or why his name should be written on the side of it." The tall man in tan smiled at me. "But his son did; Robert Streik, Junior, nine years old. He was there, and we talked to him."

The tall man leaned comfortably back against the garage wall, hands shoved into his pants pockets, the manila folder under an arm. "You did good," he said to me once again. "You lay back there in that trailer, one of you driving, and who the hell would ever look at the outfit, who'd remember it? Nobody. And you abandoned it for us to find, and it didn't tell us a damn thing. Nine o'clock one evening, you sat at a stoplight in Salt Lake, people passing in front of the car, and maybe some of them glanced at the driver, maybe not. If they did, so what?" He nodded approvingly—"You thought of everything people might see or do, and you thought right. About adults. That's what you thought about, naturally; adults and what they might do. So don't blame yourself. Who the hell could expect you to figure what a nine-year-old kid would do?

"This Streik kid, coming home from the movies, passed in front of your car, and looked up at the driver. He was interested; envious. He's been pestering his father to buy a trailer; thinks it would be wonderful to have one. On the sidewalk, a yard from the side of your trailer, he stopped to look it over; and saw the film of dust you'd picked up. So what did he do? What any nine-year-old might do; he wrote in the dust with his finger." The tall man smiled—"He tells us he almost wrote, *Wash me,* but didn't. He wrote his name, and was working on *Salt Lake* when the light changed and your friend Brick started up and drove on."

The tall cop pushed himself erect from the wall, without taking his hands from his pockets. Then, motioning with his head for me to walk on ahead of him, he said, "The kid got a free trip to Reno out of that. The same day. By plane. With his mother. Harold's Club footing the bill." We stopped by the open garage doors, Tina and the other cops beside us. "Then the boy saw the sights, walking up and down the streets here, two hours in the morning, then lunch and a nap. Two hours in the afternoon, and another hour at night before he went to bed. He was in every gambling casino"—the man smiled—"by special police permission; more than any Reno kid can say, or any other for that matter. And pretty soon—eventually—he saw the man who'd been driving the trailer rig the night he wrote his name on the side of it." The tall man grinned—"You were there at the time."

For a long time, several seconds, the man in the tan suit stood watching me. Then he opened his folder, and pointed. Standing at his elbow, I looked at the sheaf of flimsy white paper his finger

rested on; there were four or five sheets stapled together, carbon copies of a long list of names and addresses. "I had this list on my desk by noon, the day after the robbery. Every man, at every hotel, rooming house, guest ranch, or motel, who could possibly be one of the men we were after." He turned the stapled list face down in his folder, exposing another underneath. This was shorter; one page, and part of another, in single-spaced typing. "By four o'clock, we'd eliminated all but these; sixty-four names."

I stared at the list; black pencil lines were drawn through a lot of the names.

"By ten this morning, half those names were eliminated." He handed me the list—"Look it over; you'll find your name and Brick's."

They popped out at me; my name, and the address of our boardinghouse; Brick's name, and the name of a guest ranch just out of town on Route 40. Then I looked for, and found, *Guy Cruikshank*, *YMCA*, and, *Jerome Weiner*, a street number and address.

"And you've just seen the names of your other two pals."

I shook my head firmly, looking straight into his eyes. "No. They're not here." I handed the list back—"They left Reno that evening."

He continued to smile at me. "A lot of people left Reno that evening; by plane, train, car, and bus. And every day and evening since. But not the men who robbed Harold's Club, or any one of them."

I shrugged. "How can you tell? How would you know?"

He just kept on smiling. "Don't talk foolishness; what do you think our business is? You think a casino robbery would catch us flat-footed? That we wouldn't know what to do?" He closed his folder, and walked on toward the concrete steps. "They haven't left town, they're here in Reno, and I'll give you ten to one they're in this station by midnight." The rest of us followed him, up the steps, down the halls, and back to the office we'd left.

And now it occurred to me, walking up those stairs—the point of what had just happened. No one had beaten me up in a windowless police-station cellar. No one had questioned and threatened me for hours, a strong light glaring in my eyes. No one had touched me, but in ten minutes' time I'd been softened up all the same. I was finished, absolutely defeated by what I'd just seen, and I was suddenly bone-tired, helplessly and impotently angry. Because it wasn't *fair!* We'd done everything anyone could possibly have done! We'd missed nothing anyone could hope to think about. Who the hell could guess some snot-nosed kid would write his name on the side of our trailer!

And yet even if he hadn't, what about that list, shrinking and shrinking in length, yet always containing our names? I felt finished, hardly caring any more. The man in the tan suit, walking casually down the corridor ahead of me, had known exactly what he was doing down in that concrete garage.

25

Brick was in the office. He stood at a window, staring out past a tilted slat of the blind. When we walked into the office, a uniformed cop folded the newspaper he'd been reading, got up from the desk he'd been sitting on, and walked out.

Brick turned, seeing me and Tina, but his face was expressionless. Tina and I took the chairs we'd had before, facing him. The tall man in tan sat on a window ledge, facing into the room. The younger detective carried a chair from one of the empty desks, and set it beside the man on the window ledge. "Sit down," he said tonelessly to Brick, and Brick had to sit facing us. Hooking his thumbs in his belt, he slouched in the chair, crossing his ankles; a careless, defiant pose. But he couldn't look at me, and sat staring at his feet, moving the toe of one shoe a little. The two detectives sat down at their desks.

"Where's the money?" the tall man said quietly, talking to me. "I don't want you to give us the trouble of finding it ourselves. You're caught; get that into your head. You're caught, and the only thing left is to make the best of it. Make it easy on yourself, don't try to be a hard guy. Where is that money?"

I was ready to tell; he had me completely drained of resistance or hope. Then—it was either pure accident, or the tall

man overreached himself; I didn't know—the door opened, and Jerry and Guy stepped in, a cop behind them. They just stood there then, looking around the room at all of us. I saw the tall man raise his brows inquiringly, and the cop at the door said, "The other two. Cruikshank and Weiner."

"Good," said the tall man, and watching him, I thought two things; I mustn't recognize Jerry or Guy by a word or look; and I was suddenly convinced that the man on the window ledge was faking. This was too staged, this timely arrival of Jerry and Guy; the whole thing was too staged, it seemed to me suddenly, all designed to demonstrate to me how hopelessly and completely we were caught, and break me down. Instead, energy and fight roared up in me again.

"I don't know what's going on here," I said, "but if I'm supposed to know these guys, I don't."

Jerry smiled wanly. "Thanks, Al," he said, "but don't bother. They know us; all of us."

"Okay," I said to the tall man, "but you're faking just the same. I don't think you had any list yesterday. I don't think you had any way of narrowing it down to just our names. I think the whole damn thing was typed up today, just for my benefit—after you got Brick. *He* gave you Guy's and Jerry's names and addresses, and you brought them in; they've probably been here an hour. Brick would do that for a candy bar, or your used cigarette butt; wouldn't you, you scummy son of a bitch?" I jumped to my feet; I couldn't sit still.

The man on the window ledge shrugged, still smiling. "You'd

have been caught. All of you," he said. "With or without the kid from Salt Lake, and with or without Brick's assistance. Though it's true"—he reached out, and tousled Brick's hair in mock affection, but he was actually rough about it, his eyes contemptuous—"that he's on the side of law and order now." Brick just stared at his shoes, eyes murderous. "The point is," the tall man went on, "that it doesn't matter how you were caught. When a thing like this gives at any point, it's like a leak in a mud dam; the whole damn thing crumbles and collapses. Now, don't give me any trouble; we want to wrap this up. Where's that money?"

But now he was too late. "Ask him"—I stepped forward and stood looking down at Brick. Brick lifted his face to stare up at me, and I said, "Ask the talking machine; he made the big promises, he said he'd get you the money. Well, let him deliver." I looked down into Brick's eyes. "Go ahead, Brick; save your neck. Tell the man where the money is." I spit into his face.

The room was utterly silent, Brick looking up at me, eyes alive with hate, while I stared back. Then he looked away, down at his shoes again.

Waiting till he was quite sure nothing more was going to happen, to his possible advantage, the tall man glanced tolerantly at Brick, and said, "Don't be too hard on him. You're mad, but don't let yourself get so mad you use less sense than he did. He knew he was caught, and made the best of it. You better do the same."

"I'm not mad," I said, and it was true now. I walked back to my chair, smiling. "But if he could make a bargain, I can, too.

The same one; only I can deliver." I nodded at Tina—"She had no part in this. She begged me not to go through with it, and I mean *begged*. And she couldn't stop it. Here in Reno she had absolutely no part in the robbery; nothing. She wasn't even around. I want her out of it."

The tall man looked at me for a few moments, then smiled. "All right. If what you say checks out; if she took no part in the robbery, she's out; that's a promise."

"Al"—Tina started to speak, but I cut her off.

"Shut up. It'll be easier for me to take what's coming; you can see that, Tina. I want you out of this." I turned back to the man on the window ledge; I had no real hope of this, but I couldn't lose trying. "And I want us out, too; Cruikshank, Weiner, and me. You can have Brick; he's the guy who forced this through, and I can tell you exactly how he did——"

The smiling man was shaking his head. "Quit while you're ahead, Mercer; that's a good rule in Reno. We can find the money ourselves, if we want to put in the man-hours to do it. It's worth something to wrap this up now, and the girl's out if she didn't participate. But that's all. Now, where's the money; don't make me lose patience."

"And no deals with him? He gets it?"—I glanced toward Brick.

"Right along with the rest of you."

"All right"—I stood up—"I'll *show* you the money. Right now." Sick as I was feeling, it was some satisfaction to see this cool, imperturbable man startled, even slightly. He stood up,

frowning now, not knowing what I could possibly be talking about. Brick's face was blank and astounded, and he started to stand; the little detective put a hand on his chest and shoved him down again, hard. Then the tall man and the young detective followed me to a window at the other end of the room.

I raised the venetian blind a few feet, then pointed. "There's your money," I said. "Right in plain sight all the time. Take a good look." For a moment they stared out the window, then turned back to me, frowning, and I realized I'd better not be too smart. "On top of the balloon," I explained then. "The Harold's Club balloon. It's shoved under the netting on top, in the canvas sack."

They stared out across the city at the miniature grey dirigible hanging there in the cloudless blue sky over Reno, shining in the late-afternoon sun. Then the tall man turned to me, smiling again. "Pretty good," he said, nodding his head. "I like it. Life can be interesting every now and then. It'll be a pleasure to break the news."

Turning back into the room, he crossed it to one of the desks, picked up the phone, and said, "Get me Harold's Club, and tell them who's calling." The detective and I walked back to our chairs. "Hello?" the tall man said into the phone. "What the hell's wrong with you people?" He grinned. "I mean all this complaining about a robbery. Don't you ever look around your own place?" He paused, listening. "I mean it's been there right on the premises, all this time." He grinned again, kidding the man at the other end, enjoying this, prolonging it, having a good

time; and I was suddenly lower and more heartsick than I'd been till this moment.

Because this was happening to us, to *me*, and the friendly, polite, smiling man on the phone really didn't care, it was nothing to him—he could joke about it! Our freedom was lost; for years, or forever. And it was just an incident in the day's work to him and the other cops, something to kid about over the phone. I've never felt more lost and alone.

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The tall man replaced the phone, sat staring at us for a moment, then nodded at Tina. "All right; you can go. Get the hell out of Reno."

Tina stood, and walked toward me, but the tall man jumped down off the desk, and stood between us. "No!" he said, and gestured at the door with his thumb. "Out! Right now."

"But we're married!"—Tina's voice was a cry of anguish. "Just yesterday!"

"You are?"—he seemed surprised. "Well, in that case, *don't* leave Reno. Stay here; for six weeks. Get your divorce. You might even get an annulment; I'd talk to a lawyer." Tina tried to step around him, to me, but the tall man blocked her off. "No!" he said. "Can't you understand? It's finished, it's over.

He's going to jail—for years. You've seen him for the last time in your life, unless you hang around for the trial. Break it off! Get out, get your divorce, and forget him. I mean it; get out of here; *now.*"

She had to go. The tall man herding her toward the door, blocking her view so that she had to turn and stoop to get even a last frantic glimpse of me, he forced her out, closing the door after her, while I sat there hating him.

Walking back, he looked at me. "You think it's cruel, don't you? A pointless bit of police viciousness. Well, it isn't pointless." He stood in the center of the room, glancing from one to the other of us. "You god-damned fools," he said softly, and shook his head in disgust. "Don't you know what's *happened* to you yet?" he said furiously. "Don't you know that it's over! And that it's time to break off with wives and women and everything else outside the walls of the Nevada state penitentiary? *Jesus Christ!*" he burst out suddenly. "You've kicked your lives away! How old are you; eighteen, nineteen, twenty? Not much more!"

He stood there in the center of the room, glaring at us, actually breathing hard; then he went on softly. "Well, I don't prosecute, and I don't sentence, but I know what you'll get. Thirty years, and you'll serve a full twenty. You know something? The people you've gone to school with—some of them will have children as old as you are now, children in college, by the time you get out again."

He swung to me. "Married, are you?" he said viciously. "Well, congratulations. I hope you had a wonderful two days of

it, because it's all you'll ever have. You think she'll wait for you? Well, so does she, and she will; for a year, maybe. That's the usual average. Sometimes it's two years, sometimes three or four. The longest I ever heard of was seven. But she won't wait twenty years, you goddamn fool, because she can't! Life isn't that long. She's *got* to divorce you. And marry somebody else. It's the only life she has; she can't wait."

He began pacing the room, his face set and angry; staring at the floor, turning his head often to dart vicious little glances at us. "She'll have children. She'll lie in a bed with somebody else, not you, and she'll have children, and two years from now she won't be able to remember your face. And you won't be able to remember hers. Five years, ten years, and she'll never even think of you any more."

Once more he stopped to stare at our faces, one after the other. "You can't imagine twenty years," he said softly, almost whispering it. "Your minds won't take it in, and you think you'll start life all over when you get out. You think about it, and you picture yourselves just about the way you are now, when you get out; a few grey hairs, maybe, but otherwise just the same, like in the movies. You think you'll be married. Well, you won't; ever. What can you do, you poor bastards, when you get out? How will you earn a living? And who the hell will marry you!" He walked to the window ledge, and sat down again. "Because do you know what happens to you in prison? You get fat, usually, and it's a different kind of fat, *prison* fat, and it's like nothing you see outside a penitentiary. It's a puffy, unhealthy, bloated kind of fat.

There are guys less than thirty with bellies, fat arms and legs, and rolls of fat on their necks. You don't exercise much, there's nothing but food in your life any more, and it turns to fat." He lowered his voice, leaning toward us intently. "And I don't know why, but they lose their hair, and they lose their teeth. Yeah! Your goddamn *teeth* fall out! People ask me—they visit the prison, and they ask me—why are there so many old men." He laughed; a short bitter sound. "They aren't old! They're twenty-eight and -nine, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, and they're bald as eggs, not a tooth in their heads, and *fat*—my god, you wouldn't touch some of them without scrubbing your hands for twenty minutes afterward. That's the young ones. The older ones go the other way; dried-up skeletons."

He sat there nodding his head at us, smiling a little. "Think about women, boys," he said softly. "Think about them, because that's all you can do for the rest of your lives, now; just think about them." He sighed—"Lord, you never had a chance. You did good, planned smart; I couldn't have improved it. And you never had a chance. The bad breaks didn't matter; one way or another, we'd have had you; the thing was impossible. You got nothing, and you threw your lives away. You're *dead* men, all of you; it's over for you! Why, god damn it, you make me sick. *All* of you."

Then he just sat there, swinging one leg a little, angrily, the way a cat switches its tail. I wasn't even thinking about what he'd said; instead, I was wondering how soon I'd get the chance to kill myself. Because I knew in my bones that what he'd told us was

true. That morning we'd stood on Mount Rose, Tina and I, playing in six feet of snow, the sun warm on our backs, the sky high and blue all around us. We'd had lunch at Tahoe, looking at the pines and that incredible blue water. That was all true, and now it was only a few hours later and I'd never see those things again, never see Tina again, except for maybe a few minutes' visit with nothing to say, and steel netting between us. I knew I'd have the nerve to kill myself.

"Well, boys, how do you feel?"

No one answered him. I looked up, and Guy glanced at me, but there was nothing in his eyes. Jerry just stood, deathly pale, withdrawn into himself, looking at something not in this room. Brick sat, elbows on his knees, head hanging, and I could see the beginning bald spot on the crown of his head.

A man came into the room. Under one arm was a canvas sack, and I recognized it; our sack. "Well"—he was crossing the room toward the man on the window ledge, his face puzzled and frowning—"here it is." He handed the sack to the tall man in tan, and stood waiting, inquiringly.

"Thanks"—the tall man took the sack without answering the other's unspoken question, then walked toward a desk, untying the cord from the neck of the sack. "I want you to know," he said to us, stopping at the desk, "what damn fools you really are. You had the man fooled with that cart of yours. He believed there was a man inside it; why not? Inside that cash room at Harold's Club the money lies there on plain unpainted pine shelving. Quite a sight; almost gives me ideas." He smiled. "My

friend here likes to give people the impression that there's a big, steel, burglarproof vault in that room, and it's not for me to contradict him, but . . . Anyway, people do funny things. The guy with the cart thought the man inside it might kill him, and was scared, and he packed your sack for you. You think there's a lot of money comes into Harold's Club? You're damn right, but what *form* do you think most of it is in; cash? Not as much as you'd think; they take in thousands and thousands in *checks*, you damn fools! Cash more checks than a bank! The guy's hands on those shelves couldn't be seen from your cart, he knew it, and here's what he filled your sack with!"—he dumped out the sack on the desk, shaking it, and the paper spilled, piling up in a mound; green, white, pink, yellow, hundreds and hundreds of checks cascading on the desk.

"That's what you stole! That's what he gave you!" The tall man shook his head. "Hard to say why he did it; people do funny things. The checks would be no good to you, it's true. But to Harold's Club they're money, just as big a loss if they weren't recovered, as cash. Anyway, there you are, boys; look at it." He gestured at the mound of paper—"That's what it's all been about."

27

For several long moments he just stood, letting us look at that useless foolish heap of paper; then he began stuffing it back into the sack. "You didn't use a gun," he said, almost as though he were talking to himself. "Not a real one; we found that cap pistol where you threw it. Whose idea was that; not using a gun?" No one answered for a moment, then I said, "His. Jerry's." Jerry looked up then, and shrugged. "We all agreed to it," he said. "No one was to be hurt."

"Well"—the tall man nodded—"that much I liked. I hate the bastards; the punks with guns. Take a life, cut a man down; they don't care; they even like it. You didn't use guns," he repeated, his voice mildly surprised, "and that was part of your plan. I like it, all right." He continued scooping checks back into the canvas sack for several moments, then he said quietly, "Harold's Club won't prosecute. They don't like it that you got even as far as you did. They don't like it that you were even half successful. And they don't want it discussed and yammered about, all through a trial. Nobody's too damn sure of what they could get you on; the lawyers have been chewing it over for a day and a half. Nobody's too sure of just what you stole, legally speaking. As far as you or anyone but Harold's Club is concerned"—he nodded at the sack in his hands—"this is so much waste paper.

And did you steal it, or only try to? It never left the premises. The defense might do very well with these things. And was it armed robbery? No, it wasn't." He shrugged. "You could be got on something, all right. You'd get some sort of term, but for what and how long? Nobody will come out with a firm opinion.

"They want to drop it," he repeated, looking around at us. "Not because they or any of us give a goddamn about you. But they don't want it written about and talked about and rehashed for weeks, without a good stiff sentence waiting for you at the end of the trial. It might give some other damn fools ideas; there's always somebody thinks he can improve on your mistakes." Staring at us, the tall man shook his head thoughtfully. "We go along for our own reasons; mainly because of that gun. God damn it"—he still seemed surprised—"you weren't going to *kill* anybody." He shrugged. "Anyway, we catch them; we don't prosecute, that's not our department." He held up his hand, thumb and forefinger almost, but not quite, touching. "By that much you missed; by a hair. Bad luck caught you; it had to. Dumb good luck saved you; and it didn't have to. Twenty years in prison, when you're eighteen, nineteen years old; you almost had it. You're lucky, and you don't deserve it"—he handed the filled canvas sack to the man who'd brought it in, then turned back to us.

"No one likes you too much around here," he said tonelessly. "Get the hell out of town, and thank God every step of the way." He turned on his heel, and walked out of the room; the other man, with the sack, after a glance at us, turned and followed.

The other two detectives sat waiting, looking at us, as our brains took in what had just been said, and what had happened. Then, one after the other, our heads turned to look at them. The younger one, then, leaning back in his swivel chair, just lifted a weary arm, and gestured with his thumb at the door, his face expressionless. Then we got to our feet—I stumbled a little—and walked out, and all I could think of was getting to Tina.

We flew home that evening, Jerry, Guy, Tina, and I. Jerry cashed a check and loaned us the money, and though I knew it would take far longer to pay it back than if we'd traveled by train or bus, I wanted to fly; to get out of here and home the fastest way possible. Where Brick went, or how, I didn't know; Jerry or Guy didn't say, and I never saw him again. We sat there, the four of us, on a bench in the darkness of the little public park where we could watch for the United Airlines bus that leaves from the Riverside Hotel across the street. We didn't talk very much, and there was a feeling of strain between us. Every once in a while someone would sigh, shake his head, and say, "Lord," or something like that, and the rest of us would nod a little in agreement. Most of the time, sitting there waiting for the airport bus, we just sat, watching the people and cars on the walks and street before us, feeling the summer night air on our faces, enjoying the wonder of being free.

Once Jerry said, thinking out loud, "Well? What does it all add up to?"

Guy shrugged. " 'Crime doesn't pay,' " he said. "Or 'Money isn't everything.' I don't know."

I thought about it, and I didn't know either. I didn't feel contrite or repentant, I hadn't changed my mind about much of anything; yet I knew I was somehow different. Maybe now, I thought, I know what's important and what isn't, and what life is for. But I wasn't sure, and in the darkness, I shrugged.

This sounds absurd, as though I'd made it up, but it happened; Reno's a small town after all, and we'd been sitting there nearly an hour, so maybe it isn't so strange. Anyway, we sat staring out at the street—and a Brink's armored car drove by. We watched, following it with our eyes till it moved out of sight, past the Mapes. Then, from the far end of the bench, Guy turned to us, grinning. "Listen," he said, "I've got a great idea," and we all began to laugh. We sat there, shaking with silent laughter, the tension between us gone, and all of us, I knew, feeling wonderfully alive and happy and free for the first time in weeks.

Then the black airport limousine drew up before the Riverside, and we all stood. I reached down, took Tina's hand in mine, and now I knew what was important and what life is for—I felt the ring on her finger, solid, real, and warm from her body. My hand tightened over it, then we walked on across the grass.