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ALFRED HITCHCOCK

ROGUES' GALLERY

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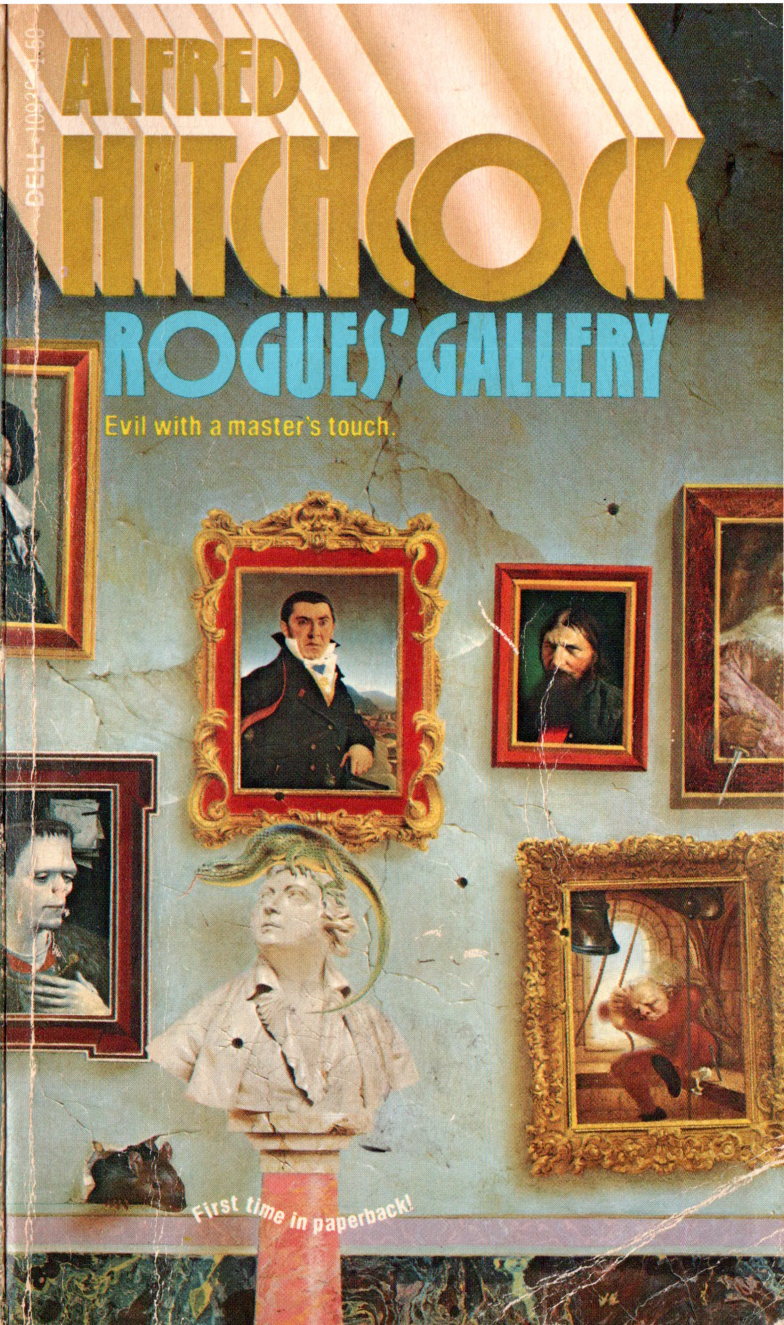

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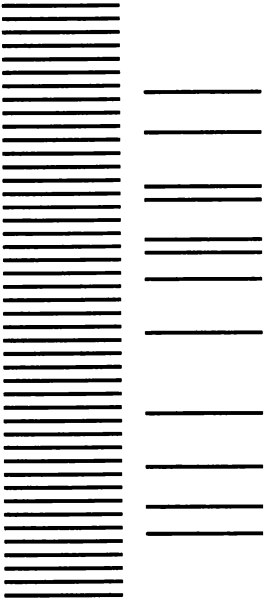

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where a song of love turns into a shriek of horror when blood-lust calls the tune . . .

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ROGUES' GALLERY

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

ROGUES' GALLERY

A DELL BOOK

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ROGUES' GALLERY

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INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia is with us again, as it was when Adam and Eve looked back on the good old days as being that time when they could take a leisurely stroll through the garden without fear of being accosted by a snake.

These days, however, the backward view is not quite that limited. With the passing of the centuries, people now have the opportunity to look back fondly on times they have never actually known. It is no rarity today, for instance, for the young person in his or her twenties to recall with exquisite rapture the good old days when the air was pure and the government could be trusted. Those, incidentally, were the same good old days—the 1970s—that people who actually lived through them recall as the period of chemical pollutants in the ozone and the Watergate scandal.

Normally, and in the main, I am a forward-looking fellow. Perhaps that is because I remember a terrible hangnail I had in those same '70s and I am afraid that if I look back too penetratingly my left thumb will begin to hurt again. Call my hangnail a hangup, if you will. I have decided, nonetheless, to brave the consequences and do a bit of looking back. If I suddenly run shrieking from the room, blame it on a throbbing left thumb.

The greatest advance over the years, I suppose, has

been made in the field of medicine. The younger readers will not remember it, but there was a time when most people, after the age of 150 or so, ended up dying. There isn't much of that any more. Now, the instant people show the first sign of succumbing—a bad case of sniffles will do it—they are hermetically sealed in plastic and hooked up to a machine that does the rest of their living for them. According to current statistics, we have some 900 million such living bodies packed away in that exceptionally tall but inconspicuous-looking building at the south end of the shopping mall. And before long we will all be there. Won't that be bonzer!

I'm afraid we have not fared quite so well in television. Having sets that consist of a fifty-foot screen (measured diagonally) and one transistor that is invisible to the naked eye does not make up for the decline in quality and variety in programing. I confess that I look back with some wistfulness on the days when ninety percent of the viewing time was given over to reruns of *I Love Lucy*. Although, I suspect, what I liked most about it was the ten percent that was something else.

Now, though, with NFL football on the screen twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, I sometimes find it difficult to fill my government-mandated quota of hours in front of the set. And, frankly, I am not too happy about what they have done with the pre-game ceremonies, expanding them to include, in addition to the playing and/or singing of the national anthem, a flyover by Air Force saucers and a prayer delivered by ESP (and by whom and from where, God only knows).

Where we have gone wrong most drastically, it seems to me, is in the area of relations between and

among nations. The troubles began in the late 1990s when Britain's prime minister referred offhandedly to Italy as "skinny," and the U.S. Secretary of State added gratuitously that the high heel on Italy's boot made the country look as if it were running downhill. The result, as we all know, was the pasta embargo, directed against the entire free world, which continues to this day.

Nor did the U.S. Secretary of State win any laurels in tact when Texas, having developed the world's biggest slingshot, seceded, becoming an independent nation. His comment, "So what if they have the world's biggest slingshot, we have all the rocks in Vermont," merely made matters worse. Not only did it miff the Texans, it drove up the price of Vermont rocks to where now only the very rich can afford them.

And, sadly, the Secretary of State continues in that manner, insisting, when the subject of negotiations arises, that it would be far easier for the Texans to come to him than for him to go to them. His reasoning—that the Texans have tipped the state up on its side and mounted it on wheels and installed a motor in Amarillo, creating the world's biggest Cadillac—may be sound, but it is not astute diplomacy. Especially in view of the latest investigative report on the matter in the *Times*, which suggests that there is more than coincidence to the fact that Monaco has lately been receiving large gifts of oil wells while at the same time enormous boulders have been disappearing from its royal rock garden.

I will concede, though, looking back, that considering our failures, we have certainly adapted well physically. I shudder to think what life would be if our arms had not grown to the length that now enables us to turn off the TV set in the den without

moving from our chairs, no matter what other room in the house we happen to be sitting in. And how fortunate we are to have evolved these rubber heads. Those Texas rocks will bounce right off.

Of one other thing, I am quite sure. When, millenniums from now, nostalgia seizes us again and we look back on the spine-chilling suspense tales we found in this volume, we will most assuredly think of these as the good old days.

—ALFRED HITCHCOCK

O TANNENBAUM

Frank Sisk

The chairman of the executive committee had delegated, nay drafted, me to take Dr. Hilliard Pfennig, the visiting lecturer, to the Maryland Club for cocktails. As we sat chatting over the first round in the plush leather of the lounge, I offered Pfennig dinner too, but he said he would dine on the airplane. He very much liked to eat aboard planes, he said. There was something about the high altitudes that seemed to stimulate his taste buds.

While I was still pondering this, he ventured into a monolog that soon began to sound like a tortuous footnote to the lecture on telepathic relationships that he'd delivered earlier in the afternoon.

Lila, the shapely cocktail waitress, was meanwhile lurking in a dim corner. The bartender, a graduate student named Winkelmann, was attentively immersed in a buff-covered periodical—either the school quarterly or *The American Scholar*, to judge from its exterior format—and in the dining room the string ensemble was tuning up.

Coming back to Pfennig's voice, deep and didactic, I was clobbered at once by the phrase "telekinetic phenomena" and then, off balance, by "hypothetical prediction" and "topological psychology." Pfennig

obviously deserved his reputation as an irrepressible shoptalker.

With a sudden decisive twang of strings the ensemble entered upon its traditional overture, *Maryland, My Maryland.*

Pfenning stopped in midsentence. An expression of almost cherubic rapture suffused his apple-cheeked face. At first I thought the tune was evoking memories of a Confederate skeleton sinistrally hidden in his Teutonic closet, but he quickly disabused me of this idea by removing his bifocals, lowering the lids dreamily over his pale blue eyes and beginning to sing in an off-key *sotto voce*:

"O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum/Wie schön sind deine Blätter . . ."

Of course! The Maryland Club's theme song, the air round which the armies of Lee and Jackson erstwhile rallied, had been based by its sentimental composer on the old German Christmas carol and that in turn, if memory for trivia serves, had been cribbed from a twelfth-century drinking song popular with mead at Oxford, *Mihi est Propositum.*

When the ensemble glissaded into the modern era with a rendition of *Moon River,* Pfennig fell silent, opened his eyes, and replaced his glasses, a reminiscential smile lingering on his lips.

"Bravo!" I said for lack of anything else.

"Unseasonal the song," he said, "but I could not resist the coincidence of it."

"The coincidence?"

"Ja, Professor. The coincidence that I should be discussing telepathy in general terms vhen all of a sudden up pops Tannenbaum. So ve go by the coincidence of music from the general to the

particular. For in the case of Tannenbaum ve have a classic example of the telepathic personality."

"I'm afraid, Doctor," I said, "that you've left me in the dark, as it were, with an unlighted Christmas tree here in the middle of September."

"Please forgive me. Impetuosity of thought. The fir tree of the carol is of no importance vhatever. A trigger only. Tannenbaum vas the name of a patient. He consulted me three years ago vhile I vas still in active practice."

"Now I see the light."

"Tannenbaum vas not his real name. Nein. I vas in the process at that time of coding my files. You vill no doubt recall, Professor, that a psychiatrist's files vere not inviolate in those days. Vatergate, plumbers, and vat-not. Tannenbaum's real name vas Furbush. In assigning code names I vas favoring alvays an etymological approach if possible."

"Ingenious," I said, signaling Lila from the shadows. "I think we owe ourselves another drink."

"Vhy not?" Pfennig said, eyeing his empty glass.

"Do it again, Lila," I said.

"O Tannenbaum," Pfennig said as soon as Lila left on her mission of mercy. "He comes first to my office vithout an appointment. My name and address he gets from the Yellow Pages."

"A convenient source," I said.

"On that day I have not a tittle of time for him. Ve chat for two minutes only. I observe him vith care. He dresses vell. He is thirty-six years of age. His hair is vhat you call sandy. He vears it longer than yours or mine. From his ears to the underneath part of his chin he cultivates a preposterous fringe of vhiskers. Vun sees similar adornments in certain depictions of Tennyson, Thackeray, and Thoreau. I might vunder

vhether the letter *T* they hold in common signifies something—except that my patient's name is not really Tannenbaum."

"Ah," I said.

"Luckily he sports no *schnurrbart.*"

"A moustache?"

"Ja, a moustache. I say luckily because he is a chain smoker of cigarettes. A moustache vould constitute a fire hazard. He seems a very nervous man and so I arrange for him an appointment a few days later."

"What was his trouble, Doctor?"

"His vife vas his trouble, Professor."

Again I said, "Ah."

"During that first session I find out a few basics about the nervous Mr. Tannenbaum. Right avay I find out one thing he *doesn't* have to be nervous about is—"

Lila arrived with the new drinks.

Smiling patiently, Pfennig awaited upon her withdrawal before continuing. "About money he does not need to be nervous. He is a man of considerable means. A few years earlier he has inherited simultaneously—you hear me right, Professor—simultaneously he has inherited two tidy fortunes. Vun from his father, another from his mother. These parents have died together in the crash of a private plane and Tannenbaum is the sole offspring of their union.

"Meanvhile he has met and married a very attractive young voman. He displays to me from his vallet a snapshot in color of this vife. Oh, a tasty dish she is, a dainty dumpling. For the office record I christen her Margarita, but of course—" with an elaborate wink of his right eye, "—that is not her actual name."

"Margarita Furbush," I said, lifting my glass.

"Half right," Pfennig said, his own glass aloft. "I toast Margarita Tannenbaum. I toast her anonymity."

"As you wish, Doctor."

"*Prosit,* Professor."

With grave courtesy we drowned goodly swallows and set the depleted glasses on their respective coasters. Pfennig helped himself to a few assorted nuts from a small bowl.

I said, "This man you call Tannenbaum appears to have enjoyed certain advantages usually regarded as prerequisites to a fairly blissful life: namely, a barrel of money and a beautiful wife. So why was he so jumpy?"

"Tannenbaum's problem vas twofold," Pfennig said, munching. "First, the man vorshipped the ground this beautiful vife valked on. Second, he harbored a strong fear that she vas going to vanish from his life like a—how to put it? Like a, like a *tautropfen* in the desert dawn. Qvickly."

Tautropfen? I thought. *Dewdrop?*

"So this fear was gradually grinding the man down," Pfennig said, going for more nuts. "Vhen he came to see me he vas sleeping already like a regular insomniac and eating like a sick *vogel-scheuche.* His head vas not functioning too vell either."

Vogelscheuche? Scarecrow? "Was there another man in the offing?" I asked, garnering a couple of nuts for myself.

"Nein." Pfennig chewed throughfully a moment. "Nein," he said again, more emphatically. "There vas no other man at this time. I think it is safe to say that."

"Then what in the devil was putting the man offstride, Doctor? A pathological delusion?"

"Vhich of us can truly tell vhere delusion ends and intuition begins? Or vice versa."

"I dare say," I said.

"Suffice it to say, Professor, that Tannenbaum vas absolutely convinced that a catastrophe vas about to overtake his vife. He told me of storm clouds he could practically see forming above Margarita's head, like in a cartoon."

"Did the catastrophe have specific shape?"

"Not yet. It is vhat you might call amorphous vhen he first consults me. A cloud, a shadowy hint, a faint vhisper. Sometimes he vakes in the middle of the night and catches a strange vord coming to him out of the darkness, sort of bouncing softly off the valls."

"Always the same word?"

"Alvays. *Odemort.* That is the vord he alvays hears."

"A death ode?"

"Myself I thought of that also. Later I discover another interpretation vhich I vill come to in a moment. Meanvhile, Professor, a question. Are you familiar vith the theory of Odylic force?"

"It rings a bell dimly, Doctor."

"That is as it should be. It is at best a dim hypothesis. It vas originally propounded in the middle of the last century by a German industrialist, Baron von Reichenbach, who may be remembered by a few chemists today as the inventor of creosote and paraffin. But the baron's own favorite invention, the idea of Odylic force, vas given small credence by men of science even a hundred years ago. Vhat it amounted to vas the baron's unshakable belief that nature contained a mysterious element theretofore undetected by mankind. This element vas a power lying somevhere betveen the existence of animal magnetism and the energy vaves generated by heat, cold,

and light. The baron claimed that this power, though all-pervasive, vas so subtle that the majority of humans vere incapable of sensing it. Those gifted few who do feel the emanations of Odylic force, according to the baron, vere often granted a special avareness, an unerring instinct for events impending, much like birds vhich migrate in advance of polar frigidity or fish vhich return to the rivers of their birth to spawn and die."

Lila, responding to an emanation of my own, loomed peripherally. By gesture I made known the need for more drinks, more nuts. She nodded silently and floated toward the bar.

Pfenning, undiverted, pursued his divagations.

" . . . von Reichenbach's absurd theory came to mind vhen Tannenbaum vas describing for me other manifestations of his prescience. For instance, on more than vun occasion at breakfast, vhile Margarita vas pouring the coffee, he vould feel a cold moist curtain drop betveen them for a few seconds. On other occasions, as they lay basking beside their svimming pool, he vould feel the hot sunlight suddenly leave his body as if an eclipse vere in progress, but vhen he opened his eyes there vouldn't be a single cloud in the sky. Old von Reichenbach vould call these phenomena proof of Odylic force."

"What about Margarita? Was she conscious of these cold flashes that her husband felt?"

"Not at all. She heard no vords in the middle of the night. She felt no damp curtains, no eclipsed sun. Until her husband finally confided these things to her, she vas blissfully ignorant, maybe even happy."

"Did she entertain the idea that her husband might be off his rocker?"

"Ja, eventually she suspected as much. But not at

first. Tannenbaum, understand, had already a case history of supernormal foresight. Past instances of this he imparted to his vife. Initially she listened with a respect that vas more or less Höflichkeit, for after all vun of these instances concerned herself. It vas Tannenbaum's contention, you see, that vhen he first set eyes on her at a neighborhood cocktail party she vas shrouded for a fleeting moment in a prismatic mist, a sort of *regenbogen,* and from this unique enfoldment he somehow deduced (and rightly so) that he vas destined to take this voman to be his vife vithin the fortnight."

"A *regenbogen*?" I said, taking a gulp of the drink that Lila had just set in front of me.

"A *regenbogen,*" said Pfennig, likewise drinking.

"Like that which the mythical pot of gold is at the end of?"

"Exactly," Pfennig confirmed.

"What other instances of allegedly provable prevision did this gentleman experience, Doctor?"

Pfennig gazed owlishly for several seconds at the new bowl of nuts and then reached for it with raking fingers. "Your skepticism, Professor, is no greater than vas mine in the beginning. It is all there, black and vhite, in my files. I record my early doubts, my modified opinion, my slow acceptance."

"Do you mean you're now a true believer?"

"Let us say I am an agnostic in accordance vith the axiom set forth by Thomas Huxley—that is, in the psychic and spiritual vorld I see no certitudes but I am alvays villing to explore."

"Fair enough."

"During our first sessions I regarded Tannenbaum's revelations vith mostly a raised eyebrow. He said he began to receive flickers of foresight vhen he vas still

a small boy—six or seven. The earliest incident he could recall clearly concerned a soft-boiled egg. He vas sitting at the kitchen table as vas his morning custom vhile a voman named Ethel, the family cook, prepared his usual breakfast—a glass of orange juice, two slices of toast and vun three-minute egg. Just a moment before Ethel started to do vhat she'd done hundreds of times in the past—namely, to lift vith a spoon from the pan of boiling vater the soft-boiled egg preparatory to rinsing it under the cold-vater faucet at the sink—just a moment before she started to do this, Tannenbaum's mind saw for a second a sharply delineated image of an egg breaking on the floor, its yolk a splatter of yellow on the red tile. And even as this mental picture vanished it vas succeeded almost at vunce by the actuality. The soft-boiled egg rolled from the spoon in Ethel's hand and shattered Humpty-Dumpty at her feet.

"By itself, this particular event vould have seemed trivial to young Tannenbaum, but in the light of vhat followed in veeks to come, he vas forced to face the possibility that he vas gifted vith a certain foresight."

"You're sure it wasn't hindsight, Doctor?"

"I stated already my eyebrows vere raised. Vhen he told me about the hailstorm that came a few veeks after the egg, my eyebrows vent higher up."

"What about the hailstorm?"

"He dreamed vun night that stones vere falling from the sky, stones the size of marbles, breaking vindows, ripping through awnings, giving people lumps on the head. Vhen he told his parents about the dream, they scoffed. It vas, understand, the month of July, a bright Connecticut morning. That afternoon the sky all of a sudden grew dark and turbulent and a

cold vind svept down and around, followed by a downpour of hailstones that lasted for five minutes. Meteorologists in the area vere dumbfounded. Nothing like it had occurred there in thirty years. After that, Mr. and Mrs. Furbush—or Tannenbaum as I generally think of them now—gave their son's predictions somevhat more serious attention. Not too much so, because he vas still a child and often he vas not absolutely right."

"It seems to me, Doctor, that coincidences like this can be found in hundreds of family histories, thousands."

"And so it seemed to me, Professor, until Tannenbaum brought to me his diaries."

"Diaries can be doctored, Doctor."

"I vould profess that idea myself, Professor, except in the case of Tannenbaum's diaries. Let me explain. You vill see for yourself. Tannenbaum began to keep a rudimentary diary at the age of fourteen and he vas still keeping it, with a refinement of detail, tventy-two years later vhen he first entered my office. Ve are talking here of several volumes of varying size and content, each showing successively gradual changes of handwriting, vocabulary, style, and thought. There is no vay such a record could be tampered vith. Even the most careful emendation or revision vould stand out like a sore thumb, and Tannenbaum vas by temperament and training rather a *dudel-sack* in these matters."

"A bagpipe?"

"Ja, an instrument of limited range actuated solely by vagrant vinds."

"That was Tannenbaum?"

"That vas Tannenbaum."

Beginning to feel mildly drunk, I semaphored for another round.

"But in the matter of the diaries," Pfennig said, a replete smile oiling the lower half of his face, "the man vas definitely an instrument attuned on many occasions to the vinds of the future, occult currents. As vitness this:

"Vherever he vould enter in his diary an intimation of some future event vhich might eventually come to pass, he later underlined in red ink both the prediction and the event as it happened. Throughout the diaries I counted forty-seven items paired like this. Some, being matters of public record, vere easily verifiable."

"I suppose, like so many other seers, he predicted the assassination of Kennedy," I said.

"Vhich Kennedy have you reference to?"

"I vas—I was thinking of John F."

"Nein. But of Robert F., ja. Tannenbaum saw it clearly in a dream three veeks before it happened, a dream like the hailstorm dream, only more detailed. The diary entry, dated the 14th of May, 1968, describes the scene of the assassination vith uncanny accuracy. A long hallvay, dingy valls, dirty floor, a serving counter slippery vith grease, a stack of serving trays, unvashed dishes. Also is mentioned the presence of a huge black man, veeping. Roosevelt Grier, as it soon turned out. But vhat vas missing from the dream vas the location of this fatal hallvay. Tannenbaum told himself often after the fact that if he had known vhere that hallvay vas situated he might have averted this tragedy. Who knows?"

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed.

"Vell, perhaps. But vunce a rendezvous is set in—"

"I mean that's a dreadful gift, Tannenbaum's."

"I vouldn't vant it myself. Take the case of his parents. Their fate he also foresaw but could do nothing about it although he tried."

"How was that?"

"Have I mentioned that they died in the crash of a private plane?"

"You have."

Pfennig shook his head slowly, sadly. "It seems they were scheduled to take off early vun morning from Bradley Field, outside Hartford. Their destination, as I recall, vas to be Peapack, New Jersey. A horse show there, I think. These Furbushes vere never happier than vhen they vere in a plane or in a saddle. Anyvay, on this same morning Tannenbaum happened to be in a hotel in Boston. He had come to the city the previous day to attend either a hockey game or a soccer game, I forget vhich. He vas hung up, as they say, on all sorts of spectator sports. Around four in the morning he vas avakened in his hotel room by vun of these bodiless voices vhich vere not altogether unfamiliar to him and this voice, speaking in chorus from several corners of the room, vas saying—"

Lila replaced empty glasses with full ones."

"—this voice vas saying, 'Go to John, go to John.' Over and over again. He described to me the tone of voice as frantic."

"Am I to infer this was a call of nature?"

Pfennig guffawed. "Nein, nein," he said. "Although now I see it could be taken that vay too."

"What other way can it be taken?"

"John vas the name of a cousin of his. John vas a licensed pilot. John vas the *flieger* of the plane vhich vas going to take off from Bradley Field in another hour."

"I see," I said, sipping defensively.

"Tannenbaum bounds out of bed and places a call to this cousin. John lived in a Hartford suburb—Vethersfield. He vas a bachelor. Nobody answers the phone there. Ergo, nobody seems to be home. So next Tannenbaum phones Farmington vhere is situated the family *landgut*. He soon avakens vun of Ethel's successors. She informs him his parents have departed already for Bradley. He scratches himself and tries again. At this hour of the morning the svitchboard at Bradley is apparently in the hands of an idiot and she is totally incapable of connecting him vith the airport manager or either of his two assistants. Everyvun is out for coffee. He demands, in that case, to be put through vithout further delay to the flight-control tower, emphasizing the matter as vun of utmost urlency. As a result, he finds himself talking nonsense consecutively to the baggage-claims room, the information desk, the maintenance closet, a ticket counter, the paging service, and the security office.

"Vhen he finally reaches the flight-control tower it is too late. He is told in a crisp vell-modulated voice that his cousin's small plane has just cleared the field and is now out of sight on its vay to Peapack, New Jersey. Vhat's to be done? Not much. Nothing. So back to the sack goes Tannenbaum and slides into a deep untroubled sleep. Vhile he composes himself vith Morpheus, the plane plunges to earth in the Mountain Lakes area of New Jersey, exploding like a bomb on impact. Charred sections of human anatomy vere found half a mile from the buried fuselage."

"How devasting that must have been for Tannenbaum," I said.

"Vell, ja," Pfennig said. "I suppose at first he vas

somevhat shaken. But pretty soon he begins to see the bright side."

The bright side? Pray point it out to me, Doctor."

"I vill be as candid as I can, as candid as Tannenbaum vas vith me. He confessed, you see, that he vas not in emotional step vith his parents. They did their thing and he, vithin limits, did his. By limits I mean that his parents kept on him a tight financial rein, even thought he vas thirty-four already at the time of their death. In short, he played by their rules or he didn't play at all."

"I get it."

"And so, vhen they vent down vith the plane, he became heir to a couple of small fortunes vhich together made a nice large vun."

"I think I see the bright side now."

"On the other hand, the death of his parents convinced Tannenbaum of two things: first, that his second sight vas a curse; second, vhatever he glimpsed of the future vas never alterable. So it vas in this spirit of utter despair that he came to me vith the problem of his vife Margarita. The cryptic communications he vas receiving—the curtain at breakfast, the cutoff of sunlight at the svimming pool, the senseless vord *odemort* coming out of the valls all night—he knew from experience that these vere forebodings of a black future that he could do nothing to change.

"He said to me on vun occasion, 'Do you think I killed myself, Doctor, that I vould leave a void in the future big enough for Margarita to escape through?' Vith a straight face he asks me this."

"About that word *odemort,*" I said. "You mentioned earlier that you finally fathomed its meaning."

"And I did so. Or perhaps I should say *ve* did so—Tannenbaum's vife and I."

"Oh?"

"Ja. I suggested to Tannenbaum that he send her to see me. I thought she might shed new light on the situation vhich vould help me better to treat his strange neurosis. As soon as I saw her I knew vun thing for certain. The Tannenbaums vere as dissimilar in temperament and outlook as man and vife could possibly be. Vhere he vas naturally deliberate and sluggish, she vas impulsive and mercurial. She set off his introversion vith an outgoing personality. He brooded. She sparkled. Vhile he vas forever searching his turgid soul, she vas ready to dance or drink or sing. Ja, Margarita loved the Luxus and Lust of life. After her second visit, she frankly admitted to me that she had married Tannenbaum because he vas incredibly naive and comfortably rich—a combination perfectly tailored to her own sybaritic ambition.

"Now, of course, Tannenbaum vas running downhill fast. His pathological vorry over vhat lay in vait for his vife had transformed the man from a vell-meaning chump into a morbid jerk, and Margarita thought I ought to do something about it. 'Give him some pills to make him sleep at night,' she said. 'Give him some other pills to keep him avake in the day,' she said. 'At least give him something so he's not mooning over me twenty-four hours a day like a dispossessed undertaker,' she said. 'All he does lately,' she said, 'is drink orange juice and svim in the pool, drink grape juice and dive into the pool, drink gin and sleep beside the pool.'

" 'Ah, the pool,' I said. 'The pool may be the key to his fixation.' And she said, 'How is that?' And I said, 'It could be directly related to that vord he

claims to hear at night.' And she said, *'Odemort?* I don't seem to follow you, Doctor.' And I said, 'Vhat is the pool filled vith?' And she said, 'Vith vater, of course.' And I said, 'Say vater in French.' And she said—"

"Eau de mort," I said.

"Precisely," Pfennig said. "Vaters of death."

"Speaking of water," I said, "do we have time for another drink?"

Pfennig glanced at his wristwatch. "I'm afraid not."

The string ensemble was playing Liszt's Second Hungarian Rhapsody as we left the club.

Pfennig sat in smiling silence, perhaps relishing the remainder of the Tannenbaum story as I drove cautiously through the midtown traffic. He continued to nurture this silence even after we had reached the comparative openness of the interstate highway.

At length I said, "Well?"

He glanced at me glintingly through his bifocals. "I beg your pardon, Professor?"

"I can't stand the suspense, Doctor. How did the Tannenbaum affair finally end."

"Most calamitously for him."

"Yes?"

"If he had been using the sedatives I prescribed, he might have avoided vhat happened. But he vas dead set against drugs. He said he vas hallucinatory enough vithout them. I suppose that vas so. Anyvay, he was having a sleepless night and he left the bedroom vithout disturbing Margarita and then he did vhat he had often done before. He vent to the pool and climbed to the high board and dove in. The gardener found his body there in the morning."

"Drowned?"

"Nein. His skull vas fractured and his neck vas broken. There vas no vater in the pool. It had been drained dry the previous afternoon."

"On whose orders?"

"On his own orders. Once he learned the possible significance of *eau de mort* he instructed the gardener to empty the pool at his earliest convenience. That vas a few days before the accident. Vhen the gardener finally did empty it, he allegedly told Margarita—"

"Allegedly?"

"Ja, allegedly. She svore he never told her any such thing."

"What's your personal opinion, Doctor?"

"At the time I thought she vas telling the truth. Now I think she may have been lying."

"Why the change of mind?"

"Greater insight, I suppose."

The enormity of what Pfennig was implying was hard to digest. I was still mulling it over as I brought the car to a stop at the terminal entrance. Preparatory to getting out. Pfennig squinted at his watch.

"Good time," he said. "I've even got time to phone Pearl and have her meet me at Bradley." Holding his attaché case in his lap, he opened the door.

"Is that your wife's name?" I asked.

He gave me a peculiar look over his shoulder, a hooded look, and nodded. "Thanks for the hospitality, Professor," he said, placing his feet on the pavement. "I hope I can reciprocate in the not too distant future." Then he slammed the door and hurried toward the entrance, the sleek attaché case under his right arm.

Heading back to the city, I kept telling myself that a pearl in Latin is a margarita.

A few months later I read in the *Times* that Pearl Pfennig, the wife of the well-known psychiatrist, author, and lecturer, had died of drowning after falling in her bathtub and apparently rendering herself unconscious. I wouldn't have been at all surprised to find a follow-up story stating that Dr. Hilliard Pfennig was being closely questioned in connection with his wife's death, but no such story ever appeared and the glib doctor is still going strong on the lecture circuit.

Of course there is always the possibility that the *eau de mort* reached out at last to verify Tannenbaum's prediction—or maybe I imagine too much.

HIJACK

Max Van Derveer

Sergeants Pierce and Anderson were rewarded for their patience three minutes after the 10:10 streamliner from Seattle arrived at 10:40 that hot July night. The man they wanted was in one of the crowds surging through the doors into the station from the debarkation platform. Pierce gauged the description while Anderson, the chain smoker, lit a fresh cigarette. The man was Caucasian, looked twenty-eight, was about five-ten, one hundred and sixty pounds, and moved with a slight limp, right leg. His disguise was amateurish, dyed red hair and dyed red brush mustache, both near a burnt orange color.

Pierce nodded to Anderson, and the two detectives from Central Police Headquarters edged through the mushrooming crowd expertly to flank the man. "Mr. Greene?" Pierce inquired in a firmly polite voice.

The man jerked and halted. His head pivoted between Pierce and Anderson. Pierce identified himself and the man paled immediately. Flesh pinched at the edges of eyes that became fear-coated.

"Your left forearm please, Mr. Greene," Pierce said.

The man remained frozen.

Anderson took the arm, pushed up the coat sleeve and opened the cuff button of the shirt. Pierce

grunted with satisfaction when he saw the tattoo on the underside of the forearm, the naked girl entwined in a snake.

The man looked ready to bolt.

"Don't," Pierce said in an even voice. "Seattle police picked up Mrs. Flora at the air terminal before she boarded her plane. They are holding her now. She will not be waiting for you. She provided your description, Mr. Greene, and she has also admitted her part in the slaying of her husband, naming you the accomplice."

"I love her," Mr. Greene said in a voice that was a low whisper of defeat.

Pierce took his suitcase, and the two detectives escorted him toward the exit doors. Pierce was looking forward to fresh air. The air in the station was dead and pressing in. He felt wet and he wondered why some people found it necessary to hurry on such a hot night. The man ahead of them was hurrying. He was forty feet in front of them perhaps, a small man, neatly attired and carrying two new suitcases. He was moving toward the idle, uniformed policeman near the street doors, with short, quick steps.

Pierce saw the two youths slide in on the man and knew immediate premonition.

One of the youths bumped the man on the right. The other hit him from the left. The youth on the left brought the edge of a stiff hand down hard against the back of the man's neck. The man cried out. Each youth grabbed a suitcase. The man went down on his knees. His hat sailed from his head and rolled across the station floor as the youths bolted toward the street door. The startled uniformed policeman there stood flat-footed for a moment, then moved to block the escape route.

The sound of the gunshot was echoingly thunderous in the station. Somewhere a man chortled an oath of surprise, and a woman screamed as the uniformed policeman went up on his toes, his face caught in an expression of astonishment.

The youths burst past him. One of them hit his shoulder, and the policeman half turned and went down.

Pierce shoved Greene into Anderson. "Hold him, Andy!"

Pierce bolted from the station, but he was too late. A sports car carrying the two youths leaped from a stall in the parking area and bounced toward the avenue, then skidded into the glut of traffic and was gone.

Greene was in a cell, awaiting the arrival of Seattle police, and a cop had been slain.

The pall in the shopworn squad room at Central Police Headquarters that hot July night was a blanket. The quick death of one of them was not new. Collectively, they were subconsciously aware of Death's shadowed presence. It hung over them day and night, week in and week out, as an imagined halo hangs over an altar boy. It was a hazard of their occupation, yet none were prepared for the reality that came with Death's happening. None could quite accept, even with the reality, a new weight on their shoulders.

Sergeant Hugh Pierce, twenty-six, powerfully constructed, with dark good looks that made him a hellion with women, a member of the Detective Division ten months now, sat slumped at his desk. He had shed his suit coat and was in shirt-sleeves, the sleeves rolled back from massive wrists. The fingers of his

right hand were wrapped around a paper coffee cup, his constant companion, as he stared bleakly on the broad back of Sergeant Crocker.

Crocker, ill-dressed and lumpy, stood at an open, smoke-filmed window, looking out on the night. His pudgy hands were locked behind him, and Pierce watched the fleshy fingers twitch reflexively. Crocker had been at the window almost five minutes now. He hadn't spoken since Pierce and Anderson had escorted the natty man who had been slugged at the train station into the squad room. Crocker had heard about the uniformed cop's death by the time they had arrived and was already in a black mood. No one, not even the boys on the night trick who now hung in the background, could blame him. At forty-seven, he was a veteran in police work. He knew many of the men in the service—beat patrolmen, car patrolmen, desk men, detectives—and he had viewed, but never had accepted, many deaths. Each was a blow to him even if he did not know the victim. But the killing this night had a personal touch. The dead cop was a veteran, too. Crocker had served with him, walked a companion beat in their early years on the force.

"Gentlemen, may I inquire why I am being detained?"

The natty man sat calmly in a straight-back chair near Pierce's desk. He had fitted a cigarette into a long, black holder, and now he held the holder almost delicately between two fingers of a manicured hand that rested on a carefully crossed knee.

Pierce lifted an eyebrow at Anderson. The chain smoker lit a fresh cigarette from the butt in his fingers and ground out the butt. Behind him, the night-trick boys stood silent and grim-faced, some braced against the wall, some one-hipped on the corner of

vacant desks. No one said a word. They just waited for Crocker to explode.

Crocker did not oblige. He turned his bulk slowly from the open window and fixed a gelid stare on the natty man. "You say your name is Nathan Moss?" His voice was flat.

"That's right."

"And you came in from Butte, Montana?"

"Again correct."

"You're a salesman?"

"I made my statement, Sergeant."

"You sell maps to schools."

Nathan Moss drew on the cigarette holder, exhaled. "May I be released?"

"You're a cool customer, Moss. Let me remind you, a police officer has been killed."

Nathan Moss drew more smoke. "Yes. I saw the man die."

"So maybe you can tell me why those two punks wanted your suitcases?"

"Again I say, one contained clothing, one contained a supply of world maps I was prepared to present in an effort to sell your city schools. You draw the conclusions. This is my first journey to your city—and I hope my last."

"You'll have to stay in town a few days?"

"Why?"

"I want you to identify the punks when we pick 'em up."

"Then apparently you are an optimist. How can you be so sure?"

"We've been known to apprehend a man or two."

Nathan Moss became coldly sarcastic. He looked Crocker straight in the eye. "Perhaps you should

concentrate on a quarter of a million dollar armored car robbery?"

The detectives reacted simultaneously. Most stiffened and eyed the natty man with cold stares. Some shifted nervously and cast quick glances at each other. Crocker became a lump of rooted speculation. But before any of them could say a word, Nathan Moss continued, "I read newspapers in my spare time. An armored car robbery occurred in your city last week. A quarter of a million was stolen. That is a large enough amount to make a news story, even in Butte, Montana."

"Beat it, Moss," Crocker snapped.

"Thank you."

"But stay in town."

"Certainly."

All eyes in the squad room watched the natty man stand and snub out his cigarette carefully in an ashtray on Pierce's desk. He smiled at Pierce as he removed the butt from the holder, but the smile did not mean a thing. He dropped the butt into the tray. "Gentlemen," he said in departure, and then he was through the railing that separated the work area from the entry and was gone.

"Pierce," Crocker snapped. "I want to know where he goes."

Nathan Moss went straight to a downtown hotel. He left a cab and marched across the sidewalk and into the lobby of the hotel as if he were expected. Pierce watched him from a distance as he registered. Then Nathan Moss obtained a handful of change and stepped into a pay telephone booth. He was in the booth almost five minutes. Pierce wondered why he preferred the inconvenience of the pay phone over

the telephone in his room. Was it because he did not want a record of the call?

Nathan Moss left the phone booth, crossed the lobby and disappeared into an elevator. Pierce waited until the door had closed on him, then he found the registration clerk polite and efficient. Moss had registered as a resident of 1023 Bowie Street, Butte, Montana. He had told the clerk he would be retaining his room several days, and then he had asked for change, enough to make a long distance call to San Francisco.

When Pierce returned to Central Police Headquarters, queries were sent to police departments in Butte and San Francisco.

Wednesday was another brilliant and hot day, and Sergeant Gilbert Crocker was in a sour mood when Pierce arrived in the squad room. Pierce put the paper cup of coffee on his desk that he had taken from the vending machine, shed his coat, and rolled up his sleeves. Lieutenant Gifford, the blintz addict, arrived at 8:30. He was angry. The death of the uniformed patrolman had been senseless. He wanted the two youths apprehended fast. He also wanted action on the armored car robbery. There was only one hood in town big enough to pull the job. Everyone knew Courtney Klane had engineered the hijack and Klane had been interrogated thoroughly, but Klane was also free. Not one shred of evidence pointed a finger at him. Only speculation pointed the finger. There was no evidence. The cops were stuck high and dry on this one, so far.

"Pierce and Anderson take the slaying," Lieutenant Gifford decided. "Gil, the heist. Get me something. All of you."

Crocker grunted and Gifford turned on Pierce, "I want those kids in here, Sergeant. *Someone* has to know them. Hit every tipster in the city."

"They aren't pros. I'd stake my last dollar on that."

"Why?" Gifford asked bluntly.

Pierce shrugged. "They were twenty, twenty-one maybe, well dressed. Anyway, pros would have let Moss get out of the station, out where it was shadowed and there was less chance of being tripped up by a gutsy bystander."

"One of them is a cop killer," Gifford said penetratingly.

"I'll find them, Lieutenant."

An answer to their Butte query arrived at 9:40. Butte police had no record of a Nathan Moss of that city. He was not listed in the telephone book, city directory, or with the driver's license division, and 1023 Bowie Street was a fictitious address. As fictitious as a map-making company. There were no map-making firms in Butte.

San Francisco police provided the link. Nathan Moss was an alias used by Nathaniel Logger, a syndicate man who had been known to transport large sums of money from one section of the country to another. San Francisco's description of Nathaniel Logger fit Nathan Moss perfectly.

Crocker growled, "So now we know why two suitcases were so damned valuable."

"Moss . . . er, Logger was bringing in money?" Pierce frowned.

"Small, used bills to be exchanged for some of the armored car stuff. I'll bet on that, Sergeant. Two suitcases—I'd say that'd be about $50,000, just as an estimate."

"But how would two kids know about a syndicate operation?"

"*How* isn't important. The important things at the moment are Moss and the fence."

"Jerold Bishop?"

"Do you know a bigger fence in the city?"

"No."

"Let's bring 'em in."

But Nathan Moss had checked out of the downtown hotel and vanished.

Pierce and Crocker drove in silence into the newly named Kennedy section of the city. Neither cherished returning to headquarters and Lieutenant Gifford's wrath when they would be forced to tell him of Moss's disappearance. Pierce braked the official sedan at the curbing in front of the bookstore in the quietly substantial neighborhood. The store occupied the ground floor of a huge stone edifice. Jerold Bishop, fence and store proprietor, was a softly polite little man of thirty-five years with a thick mane of gray-black hair, bushy eyebrows, and a hearing aid. Bishop acted as though he didn't have a care in the world. He greeted the sergeants amiably.

"Get off the dime."

"Jerold."

"Hot."

"Very."

Bishop adjusted the hearing aid with his fingertips and led them back through the bookshelves and air-conditioned comfort to richly appointed bachelor quarters. He offered them brandy, which they refused, and put them in deep chairs. He sat opposite them, lit a large cigar, and waited politely.

Crocker said, "We talked to a friend of yours last

night, as you undoubtedly have heard. We'd like to talk to him again, but he has taken a flyer."

"Friend?" Jerold Bishop arched a bushy brow.

"Nathan Moss, or maybe you know him as Nathaniel Logger."

"Moss? Logger?" Bishop's face didn't change. "Never heard of him, Sergeant."

"Get off the dime."

Bishop shrugged. "Sorry."

"He was bringing in exchange money. You've heard of exchange money, haven't you, Mr. Bishop?"

"I've never heard of Moss—or Logger."

Crocker stood up. His voice hardened. "Okay, Jerold, let's go downtown."

Bishop didn't move in his chair. "Why?"

"In our books, there's only one guy in town who can move a quarter of a million."

"I believe you gentlemen have talked to Mr. Klane about that."

"Right now, I'm talking to you, Jerold—*about* you."

"I've never seen a quarter of a million in my life, Sergeant."

"Damnit, creep, a police officer was killed!"

Bishop's face changed this time. He looked sad as he studied the growing ash on the lit tip of the large cigar. "Yeah, I heard about that, Crocker. Tough."

"Out of the chair, creep."

"Maybe you should try College Boy."

Crocker glowered. Pierce inventoried Bishop carefully. College Boy. His name was Peter Ambler. He belonged to Courtney Klane.

"College Boy is in trouble," Bishop continued. "Deep trouble, I hear. There's a stable. You know, a guy with his looks has gotta have a stable. There's a

doll named Billie. Another'n named Cynthia. Others. That kind of stable—and horses—all require green."

"How much green?" Crocker snapped.

Bishop shrugged and puffed on the cigar. "I hear about fifty thou."

"Where?"

"The Shark."

"The juice man?"

"Who else has dough these days, Sergeant? Not banks."

Crocker looked at Pierce. The young detective was thinking rapidly. It could figure. Klane could have pulled off the heist, Klane could have arranged the exchange. College Boy would be on the inside. He'd know who was coming in with the money. He'd know *when*. And he might be just fool enough to stage the hijack. It would be suicide when Klane caught up with him, but College Boy might be a big enough fool to . . .

"The punks, Bishop," Crocker was saying. "Who are the punks?"

Bishop shrugged. "Things happen in town, Sergeant, even I don't know about." He left his chair then, stood neat and at ease before Crocker. "Are we still going downtown?"

"We want them. Fast."

"I can't help you."

"If I find out you're lying to me, creep—"

"I'm not."

Crocker measured him for a long time. "So it's College Boy, eh?"

"Try him, Sergeant."

"Like I say, creep, if I find out you're lying . . ."

He let the words dribble off as Jerold Bishop calmly turned off his hearing aid. He stared at

Bishop, and then he turned and stomped out of the bachelor quarters. Pierce trailed after him. Pierce had a tremendous urge to yank the hearing aid from Bishop's ear and stuff it down his throat.

In the heat of the sun again, Pierce asked, "So how do we find Peter Ambler, Sergeant?"

"Alive—I hope," Crocker said sourly.

"Then we'd better get to him before Klane does."

But that Wednesday was not a day designed for cops or search. It became a day of almost unbearable heat, greasy bodies, short tempers, and futile search. The detectives did not find Peter Ambler, nor were they able to pigeonhole Courtney Klane when they finally turned their humanized radar beams on him. By late afternoon they felt as if a poniard had been stuck in their bodies, individually. Then the poniard was twisted. A pick-up order for Jerold Bishop was sent out. But Bishop had disappeared, too.

Crocker swore harshly, and the night-trick boys who had just come on duty at 6 P.M. wisely remained in the background. Only Pierce and Anderson met Crocker's wrath head-on. And Pierce felt like swearing back at him.

"We should have brought him in this morning," he and flatly.

"Yeah," Crocker growled. "We could've saved his shyster a trip, too. Right, Sergeant? We could've swung around and picked *him* up on the way downtown."

Anderson lit a fresh cigarette, snapped the used match to the scarred floor. "Maybe we're going at this thing wrong, Gil. Maybe we should be concentrating on the two punks."

"Concentration' on em!" Crocker exploded. "Hell, we don't even know 'em!"

Pierce went out into the hall and got a new cup of coffee from the vending machine. He was tired, dog-tired, and he felt soiled. He suddenly wanted a bath and the soothing equanimity of his wife, Nancy. The equanimity was a quality about her he treasured. Nancy knew his moods, his frustrations. More important, she knew the salve.

He looked up at the ancient wall clock as he returned to his desk. Ten minutes before nine o'clock. Nancy could be ironing, reading, or merely waiting. He decided he needed her this very minute. He said, "How 'bout calling it a day, Sergeant?"

Crocker ignored him and answered the jangling demand of the telephone on his desk. He grunted, listened. His scowl deepened. And Pierce watched him with a queasy feeling of impending doom. Pierce could not hear the words being rattled into Crocker's ear, but he knew the message was not good.

Crocker slammed the phone together and sat swearing as he fixed Pierce and Anderson from eyes that gleamed with determination. "Another'n," he said in a viciously soft voice. "Another cop has been killed."

Silence hung in the squad room.

"Patrol car," Crocker continued, the words coming as if they were being churned out by a machine. "One dead, one wounded. Two kids in a sports car. Drunk. Our boys attempted to stop them."

It was a long time before Pierce ventured: "Two kids in a sports car?"

Wednesday night became a long and horrendous night for Pierce. Not even Nancy's placations could reach him. He smoked cigarettes, drank coffee, paced, pondered, damned, vowed, tossed in their bed, wanted to shout at the muscle spasms in his legs. And

Thursday came too soon, dawned too hot. He got up with a dull throb between his eyes. Coffee had a dishwater taste. Cigarette smoke burned his lungs. Crocker was a sore boil.

A ballistics report received at 10:20 in the morning only heaped misery on misery. Bullets from the same gun had killed the beat patrolman in the train station and the car patrolman who had attempted to halt a pair of drunks.

Then Peter Ambler was found. Bruised, wire-bound and dead, Peter Ambler was fished from the river.

College Boy had been graduated. The only trouble was, he was not wearing the traditional cap and gown in the photographs used by the afternoon newspapers.

Lieutenant Gifford had slid beyond the edge of caution when he addressed Pierce, Crocker, and Anderson in the squad room. His thoughts were no longer with shysters, adverse publicity for the department, or the ire of his superiors if he was wrong. His face was a mask. His words were terse. "Bring in Courtney Klane. I don't care if you find him in Anchorage—bring him in."

The three detectives stood quiet.

A girl fractured the silence. "Is this . . . this the Detective Division?" she asked in a voice that was a combination of uncertainty and desperation, almost whispered.

She was tall and lithe, with gold-blonde hair framing a Hellenic face, a girl on the brink of full-blown womanhood who looked nineteen but probably was twenty-five. She wore a fresh white blouse and a fitted gabardine skirt, and she stood at the railing that divided the room, long fingers of one hand twitching

against the top edge of the gate, dark eyes dancing pleadingly.

Pierce had an instinctive liking for the girl, and a deep-seated desire to set her at ease, give her peace of mind. Some of both stemmed from a taunt. She was vaguely familiar; far back in his catalogued memory, she was an image. He attempted an appearance of nonchalance and an easy grin.

"Can we help you, Miss . . ." He let it hang purposely.

"Weatherly," the girl said quickly. She came through the gate. The dark eyes became rooted on him. "Lucy Weatherly."

"This is the Detective Division, Miss Weatherly," he said, nodding. "I am Sergeant Pierce." He forced the grin to remain alive over disturbing curiosity. He had her with the name.

"I came here to . . ." She hesitated. The dark eyes danced away in a moment of indecision, flashed back and held with fresh determination. "A desk sergeant downstairs said you might be able to help me."

"Yes!" Pierce said patiently.

"It's about . . . Peter Ambler." Perfect white teeth caught her lower lip briefly, but the eyes remained steady. "At least the afternoon newspapers said Peter Ambler was his name. I knew him as Danny Sloan."

Pierce was unable to stem the sudden tenseness of his muscles, but he managed to resist the magnetic impulse to flash looks at Gifford, Crocker, and Anderson.

"What about Peter Ambler, Miss Weatherly?"

"Well . . . I just don't understand."

Pierce waited.

"I mean—Danny Sloan, Peter Ambler, College

Boy—what the newspapers say he is . . . was . . ." She caught the lower lip again. "Please . . . I'm confused."

"He was Peter Ambler and he was everything the newspapers said," Pierce said, wishing he was on the sidelines and listening to Gifford or Anderson or any other detective.

The hurt appeared in her eyes, but it did not push out acceptance.

"How did you know Peter—er, Danny Sloan, Miss Weatherly?"

She met his look and he knew an even greater liking for her. "We dated."

"Isn't your father Arnold Weatherly?"

"Yes."

"Was he acquainted with Ambler—Sloan?"

"No. Father and Danny never met."

"By design?"

"I—don't understand."

"Perhaps you didn't want them to meet, Miss Weatherly."

Her eyes changed suddenly. Pierce didn't like what he found there now. "It wasn't that at all, Sergeant," she said, clipping the words slightly. "Danny Sloan was not like the man described in the newspapers this afternoon. The only reason he and father did not meet was, my father is quite busy these days. He seldom is home for very long periods of time."

"I believe he is about to announce that he will be a candidate for the U.S. Senate."

"He is."

"Would he have approved of Danny Sloan?"

"He would have."

"Peter Ambler?"

"I—" She stopped. Her nostrils flared slightly. "No.

Father would not have approved of Peter Ambler." Her words were suddenly soft.

"I'm sorry things worked out this way for you, Miss Weatherly."

"Thank you."

She turned. Pierce remained silent.

"Just a minute, Pierce."

Lieutenant Gifford's voice was hard and the muscles in his face were set when Pierce looked at him. "Perhaps there are some things Miss Weatherly can tell us about Ambler," he said. His eyes rooted on her. "Understand, Miss Weatherly, two of our officers have been killed and we have reason to think Ambler knew about those murdered."

"Yes," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

Pierce boiled inside as he stared at Gifford. The girl had reached him. No one in his right mind could possibly conceive that she would have any knowledge of Peter Ambler's—Danny Sloan's, or whatever you wanted to call him—true self. No one could even *think* she might know anything about murder or gangland slayings or armed robbery. Yet here was Gifford bulldozing into her as if she had been taken from a lineup of street girls.

Pierce swelled but managed to hold himself.

After all, the Lieutenant was being a police officer. He was investigating murder. Three murders.

They used the privacy of Gifford's office for the interrogation. His questions were polite but pointed, the questions of an expert at work. But, surprisingly, Lucy Weatherly was an expert, too. She refuted, fended, and defended beautifully. And Pierce found himself gradually slipping into the role of an entertained spectator as he remained in the background and allowed his initial irritation to fade before the

tide of admiration for the foes. He was witnessing a classic in query and answer, a running conflict of clever mind against clever mind. And it was dusk before the foes backed off and surveyed their opponents anew. Each had earned the respect of the other, and each saw the futility of continuance.

Gifford said, "I think that will be all, Miss Weatherly."

"Please do not *think*, Lieutenant," she said calmly. "I do not wish to return."

"That will be all, Miss Weatherly."

"Thank you."

She stood, smoothed the gabardine skirt across her hips, and left the office as if she were leaving a beauty salon.

Pierce went after her, expecting a sharp summons from Gifford. None came. "Miss Weatherly?"

"Yes?" She stood at the railing, half-turned.

"Do you have transportation?"

"I came in a cab."

He grinned. "Then I'll give you a lift."

"It isn't necessary, Sergeant."

Pierce opened the railing gate for her.

"More questions?" she asked.

"No questions," he grinned.

She rode beside him in the front seat of his dented sedan as if it were natural for her to be there. Their conversation was idle and exploratory, and Pierce was conscious of her oblique inventory as he piloted the sedan expertly through the city traffic and into a residential district. The Weatherly home was a massive stone structure in the dusk of evening, set far back from a quiet street on a sculptured lawn. Pierce braked on the curving concrete drive behind a

topdown sport convertible, and Lucy Weatherly left the sedan with an economy of movement.

She leaned in the open door. "Thank you, Sergeant," she said with a genuine smile.

He sat stonefaced, suddenly gripping the steering wheel hard, as a blond boy who looked twenty came out of the stone house and ran down the front steps. The boy was neat in dark sports coat and slacks and white bucks. He danced between the front of the sedan and the back of the sports car with a lifted arm.

"Sis," he said in greeting.

And then he was inside the convertible and the motor came to life.

"What's the matter, Sergeant?" Lucy Weatherly's face was pleated with a frown.

"Your brother?" Pierce asked, bobbing his head toward the car that was moving away now.

"Bernie? Yes."

"Good evening, Miss Weatherly."

She straightened slowly, shut the door of the sedan, and Pierce knew she was deeply troubled, but he did not have time for explanations now. Anyway, she wouldn't like the explanations if he gave them.

He drove after the sports car. He wasn't sure that he actually had recognized the car. But he was sure about the youth. Bernard Weatherly had been one of the youths who had grabbed a suitcase from Nathan Moss in the train depot.

The car was not difficult to follow, but Pierce was cautious. He was positive about Bernard Weatherly and the train station, yet the connection was difficult to accept. His mind churned. Bernard Weatherly was from a family of wealth and stature. Why would he

hijack a man? Why would he steal? Why would he kill?

Had Bernard Weatherly killed?

Pierce was forced to admit he did not know which one of the two youths had fired the fatal shot.

His thoughts leaped to the now-dead Peter Ambler. Bernard Weatherly's association with College Boy was easy—Lucy. Which, in turn, almost had to mean Bernard had discovered *who* Peter Ambler really had been, and *what* he had been. And this meant Bernard had hoodwinked his sister and probably the rest of his family, if Lucy Weatherly had told the truth during the squad-room interrogation.

Pierce shook his head. He didn't like the thoughts, the possibility that Lucy Weatherly may have lied to them.

Taillights on the convertible flashed, Pierce slowed the sedan and watched it turn through an iron gate. He braked at a curbing. He had a clear view over a thick hedge of a driveway and a sprawling redwood house. He watched Bernard Weatherly swing the car through a U-turn in a large, vacant carport, and stop. Another youth, also neatly attired, popped out of the house and jumped into the front seat of the small car beside Weatherly. The car shot down the drive, hit the street, and turned away from Pierce.

He followed it across the city. If Weatherly and his companion knew they were being tailed, they were not concerned. They slowed, turned from the street into a parking lot beside a cocktail lounge. Pierce eased his sedan into a slot at the curbing and sat watching the youths leave the lot to enter the lounge. He looked around. It was dark now, a hot night. He recognized the area of the city. It was on the edge of the warehouse district.

He went into the carpeted dimness of the neat lounge. Business was slow and he saw his quarry immediately. They were in swivel chair-stools at the bar. He knew he should call into the squad room. On the other hand, he had not had a good look at Bernard Weatherly's companion yet. And what if he were wrong about Bernard?

He sat alone at a table near the street door and ordered a bourbon and water. He did not touch the drink as he inventoried the youths. Bernard's companion was the right build, the same as the second youth at the train depot.

Pierce beckoned his waiter again. "Those two at the bar," he said. "Do you know them?"

"Mr. Weatherly and Mr. Poswold," the waiter said crisply.

"How often do they come in here?"

"Nightly."

"Tuesday night?"

The waiter hesitated. "No, now that you ask, they were not in last night."

"I know the Weatherly boy. What about the other one? Poswold?"

The waiter was frowning now. "I don't believe, sir, that I should say—"

Pierce identified himself and the waiter decided to become neutral. "Mr. Randy Poswold, sir. His father is Judge Poswold, I believe."

"Thanks."

Pierce waved the waiter away and sat for a long time wrestling with his thoughts. Judge Poswold, huh? He knew the jurist by reputation.

He kept an eye on the waiter and noted with satisfaction the man remained away from other employees and from the youths at the bar. It was a good move

on the waiter's part. Communication with others would have called for immediate action from Pierce, and he was not yet ready to move in. He still had not had a good look at the Poswold youth.

Well, there was only one way to get that look.

He left his untouched drink and went to the bar. He knew an immediate need for wariness as he met the direct looks of Bernard Weatherly and Randy Poswold. He wanted both.

"Hey . . ." Bernard Weatherly let it fade as he stiffened and stared hard at Pierce.

The detective knew the youth was struggling for recognition, was unsure. He attempted to keep him off-balance. "Sergeant Pierre. Central Police Headquarters." He moved his hand. He was in position to take out his gun quickly. And watching the eyes of the youths, some of the tension left him. Both had noted the move, both knew what it meant.

"My sister," Bernard Weatherly breathed. "He was with my sister . . ." He let it trail off.

Randy Poswold was stone. His expression was black, his eyes glittering with hardness, but he did not move. He said, "What do you want with us, copper?" He spoke almost without moving his lips.

Pierce bobbed his head toward the street door.

Neither youth moved.

Pierce stepped back, waited, ready for anything. Poswold turned on the swivel seat of the chair-stool, stood. Bernard Weatherly followed quickly. They walked side by side toward the street door. Pierce trailed them, his confidence swelling with each step. He'd cuff them outside, before they got into his sedan. He didn't want to stir the other customers in the lounge.

Suddenly Poswold hunched, whirled, and shot a fist

straight into Pierce. The fist drove him back with a gasp of breath. Blows pounded his body. He heard oaths. He struggled to get his hand to his gun. And then a fist came up under his jaw and snapped back his head. He knew he was reeling. He heard his own hoarse shout. His heels caught something. He sat down jarringly.

The room swirled, cleared quickly. He shook his head. The youths were not in sight. Hands caught his armpits. He struggled up, shrugged off the hands and lunged toward the door unsteadily. He hit the sidewalk. The sports car bounced out of the parking lot. Street traffic swerved and squealed. The car roared through a sharp turn in front of a careening police patrol car. And then the sound of a shot filled the night. Pierce heard the whine of the bullet, went down on the sidewalk and rolled. The wail of a siren started low, took on stature. And Pierce was on his feet again and racing to his sedan.

He drove through the spread traffic expertly, using the path cleared by the siren and flashing red light of the patrol car ahead of him. He heard what sounded like gunshots. The sounds came again. He saw the police car weave and shoot at an angle into the opposite lane of traffic to smash head-on into a parked car. He saw the back of the police car lift off the street and start to come around, then he was past the wreck and his eyes were glued on the taillights of a weaving convertible. It had slowed, seemed out of control.

When the boy spilled from the driver's side onto the street, he knew why.

It required all of his skill to miss the body. He used his brakes to start into a side skid. He cut the steering wheel at the final second. The back end of the sedan

whipped back and he was skidding in the opposite direction, but he had managed to slide around the prostrate form. He eased off the accelerator, allowed the sedan to right itself, and then he shot after the sports car that now was widening the distance between them rapidly.

They roared into the warehouse district. Good. They had lost the benefit of a siren or red light to warn traffic now. They had weaved in and out crazily. But in the warehouse district, the traffic thinned abruptly and Pierce was able to concentrate on closing the distance between the two vehicles.

Suddenly he saw the convertible go into a turn and he shouted an involuntary warning. He knew the car would never navigate the intersection corner at its speed. He saw the small car swing wide, hit the curbing, bounce, go up on the sidewalk and then into the skid.

And then he was past the intersection and sliding to a stop. He hadn't even tried to make the same turn. It would have been suicide.

Rolling from the sedan, he stumbled, righted himself, drew his gun, and raced back to the corner of the building. The sports car was folded around a streetlamp pole, the pole seemingly protruding from the driver's seat, but instead of the driver being limp inside the car, Pierce saw him pounding down the middle of the street, racing into the heavy shadows of the squat warehouses.

He shouted and ran after the fleeing figure. He did not know whom he was chasing, Bernard Weatherly or Randy Poswold, but he knew now that he had a chance. In the auto chase he had been at a distinct disadvantage. The small car was faster than his sedan, maneuverable. In the hands of an expert, it could

have lost him easily by using corner turns. But the driver had not been an expert, had not seized his advantage. And now the odds had narrowed considerably.

Pierce saw the youth turn a corner and disappear. He slowed, slammed into a brick wall. He had no desire to burst around that same corner and into a barrage of bullets. With his gun gripped in his right hand, he gasped for breath and eased his head out from the building. The street and sidewalks ahead were dark with shadows and vacant.

He stepped out from the protection of the building, stood silent. Nothing stirred in the shadows. He moved forward cautiously. His slow steps sounded unusually loud in the still, hot night. Sweat poured from his pores. He felt on fire. He stopped in stride when he saw the light. It came from a door that was wide and open, a vehicle door in one of the warehouses. Was the youth inside the warehouse? Pierce knew he would be exposed to almost any kind of attack when he stepped into the patch of light. He stood at its edge, breathing heavily, listening intently, but there were only the normal night sounds of the city.

He drew in a deep breath, held it, and stepped quickly into the warehouse, gun poised, ready for anything.

The warehouse seemed empty of humanity. That was odd. Had someone carelessly departed without locking up? Or would he find men working in the far reaches of the large structure?

His eyes moved constantly. To his right and left were solid, stacked wooden crates. Straight ahead was a wide gap, wide enough to accommodate large trucks easily. There were no vehicles in the building. He lis-

tened again for men at work. Nothing. He moved slowly into the building.

The hiss of indrawn breath was his warning.

Pierce hunched, whirled, and took the blow on his shoulder. His gun flipped from his fingers and clattered against the concrete floor. He clutched futilely at the youth's shirt front as his knees came unhinged. The youth was armed. He brought the gun down on Pierce's left wrist. Pierce sprawled on his hands and knees, knowing that Randy Poswold had come out from a hidden aisle behind the stacked crates.

All he could see now was the polished toes of Poswold's shoes as Poswold let him hang there for a long time. Pierce blinked hard against the pain in his shoulder and wrist. His left arm was numbed. Scrambled thoughts whirled through his head. He remembered the body sprawled in the street. It had to be Bernard Weatherly. Was Weatherly dead? He remembered the hard glitter of Randy Poswold's eyes when he had approached the two youths in the cocktail lounge. Now he saw that glitter as Death. And he remembered Sergeant Crocker's time-worn warning, "Never take a punk alone, Sergeant!"

Randy Poswold shuffled his feet. "Up."

The command jerked at Pierce. He forced his head up slowly. Poswold stood about four feet away, ugly and taut with youthful ferocity.

Wasn't there anyone else in the warehouse? Why didn't they show?

"Up," Poswold repeated loudly.

"Take it easy, Randy."

Poswold grinned and stepped forward as Pierce pushed back on his knees. Pierce saw the gun flash, but he was unable to pull his face out of the way.

The gun slashed against his mouth and the yell of protest was jammed back in his throat. He spilled back and then on his side. He could taste the blood through the blinding pain and he knew that one of his lips, perhaps both, had been split against his teeth.

"How do you like it, copper?"

The words came from far away. Pierce shook his head, attempted to get the youth in focus.

"You coppers shouldn't have killed Bernie."

Pierce pushed up into a sitting position. Everything whirled. He moved his legs under his body, remained still. His head was clearing slowly. Pain was taking over. His mouth felt swollen all out of proportion. He couldn't feel his teeth with his tongue. Maybe those teeth were gone. But he didn't remember spitting them.

"You shouldn't have killed Bernie!" Poswold repeated with animal shrillness.

Pierce got him in focus. He pushed up on his knees, planted a foot and stood slowly. He bobbed, but he could feel the strength flowing back into his muscles.

Poswold held the gun steady in his right hand. His mouth was wire-tight, his eyes narrowed and gleaming. Pierce saw his own gun on the concrete floor. It was ten feet away.

Suddenly Poswold's lips thinned in a grin that wasn't a grin at all. His eyes flicked to Pierce's gun, came back. "You're in a jam, huh, copper?"

"Are you going to kill me, Randy?"

"You damn right I'm going to kill you!"

"Just like you killed the others."

"Just like you coppers killed Bernie."

"You've already killed two police officers and College Boy. You've already——"

"Not Ambler!" Poswold was actually grinning now.

"You and Bernie and College Boy. The three of you. College Boy knew the money was coming into town with Nathan Moss. He set up you and Bernie. He had to cut you two in. Nathan Moss would recognize College Boy but not you two. He—"

Poswold opened his gun, looked in the chamber, snapped the gun together again, laughed deep in his throat. "One slug, copper. This is gonna be fun." He leveled the gun on Pierce. "A little Russian roulette, huh?"

It hit Pierce hard. He'd been stalling, attempting to gain an advantage.

He saw the gun quiver and he knew Poswold was squeezing the trigger.

The snap of the firing pin striking the empty chamber was loud in the stillness of the warehouse.

Pierce jerked reflexively.

Poswold laughed.

The gun quivered again.

And Pierce leaped. He shot a large fist into the megalomaniac's face. The fist hit home with the second empty click of the gun and Poswold went back with a howl. Pierce followed with a looping uppercut that struck Poswold's wrist and brought his arm up. The gun left his fingers and sailed back over his shoulder. Pierce drove a right jab into the youth's stomach and sent him down to the concrete with a looping left. He was over the groveling body quickly and wrenching Poswold's wrists back to his spine. He whipped on the handcuffs and then he stood erect and spread-legged over the youth, taking in air with huge gulps.

He found a man in a sweat-stained shirt and pants and checkered cap gaping at him round-eyed from fifty feet away.

The man was frightened and cooperative. The warehouse door had been open because he had been expecting a delivery truck in to load. He had been working at the back of the building, had heard voices, had thought the expected truck had arrived, but had come up front to find Pierce smashing Poswold into the concrete.

Randy Poswold was sullen and silent. He refused to say more than to give his name and address and demand permission to telephone a lawyer. Sergeant Crocker suggested calling his father. The youth told Crocker to "go to hell."

Poswold was hustled downstairs and into a cell to cool, the warehouse man was dismissed, and the newspaper boys were given their story.

Crocker fixed Pierce with a steady look. "How're you feelin'?"

"Like hell."

"You look like hell. How many times have I told you never to take a punk alone?"

"I figured I could handle him."

"Sure."

Even the night-trick boys flinched under the sarcasm.

Pierce asked, "The Weatherlys know about their son?"

"Yeah."

"How 'bout our boys?"

"One wounded, the other smashed up in the wreck, but both will make it, Doc says. Speaking of docs, you'd better see one."

"My wife will take care of me."

"Yeah," Crocker grunted, and Pierce walked out of the squad room.

He found the night still hot, but he felt better inside. A job had been completed. He touched his swollen mouth with his fingertips, tasted new blood on the split in his upper lip. His shoulder was sore and his wrist ached. He drove slowly across town to the modest apartment. He was thinking about Lucy Weatherly and the shock of her brother's death to her and the family. The man seated in the front room of his apartment caught him unprepared. The man held a gun on Nancy.

Pierce became rooted two steps inside the open door.

"Close it," Jerold Bishop said without looking at him.

Pierce kicked the door shut. "What's with you, creep?"

"He's been here almost thirty minutes," Nancy said. "What happened to your mouth?"

She was calm, but slightly wide-eyed as she stared at him. She sat on a large footstool near an ironing board. She was in shorts. The lone signs of tension were in the way she pressed her knees together and clenched her fist on her thighs. Across the room the television set was turned off now, probably at Bishop's demand, but Pierce knew that earlier his wife had been ironing in the front room so that she might also watch the TV shows.

"I got the flash on the radio," Bishop said.

Pierce attempted to hide his ignorance. "Yeah?"

Bishop shrugged without taking his eyes or gun from Nancy. "So I gotta have a way out of town. Figures?"

"Maybe."

Bishop's laugh was a grunt. "No cat and mouse, Sergeant, please. The Weatherly kid is dead, and you've got Randy Poswold in the clink. I know the punk. I've been dealing with him for a couple of years now, although, thinking back, I don't know why. The kid always was potential trouble. But he came in with some good stuff to move. His stuff always had class. I don't know where he got it. I never asked. It brought a good price, so I handled it. That was a mistake. I can see it now."

Some of the jumbled thoughts began to straighten out in Pierce's mind, but he stalled. "You fenced for him, eh, creep?"

"I never should have. He always smelled of trouble."

"And then Courtney Klane hit the armored car and came to you to set up the money exchange."

"Fifty thousand is big dough, Sergeant."

"You needed a couple of guys to hit Nathan Moss, somebody Moss wouldn't recognize. That'd be Poswold and Weatherly."

"Randy brought in Weatherly. I never saw the kid in my life until this setup."

"Let's see—their cut would be about five thousand."

"Ten. They came high, but I couldn't quibble. It had to be quick."

"College Boy?"

Bishop flicked Pierce a glance, grinned. "A sucker. You and Crocker were pressing so I give him to you to keep you off my back."

"And then killed him so he couldn't talk."

"College Boy always did have a big mouth when there was a squeeze."

"But tonight we got Randy Poswold."

"Yeah. Let's quit stalling, Sergeant. I know punks. They bleat. You know all of this, so let's quit stalling. I gotta get out of town. Klane ain't gonna like me now. Nor you guys. That's where you and your doll comes in. You're gonna take me. I figure that by this time you boys have got the exits plugged, waiting for me to make my move. Well, I'm making it—but with you and the doll. You two are gonna drive me out, nice and quiet-like. Get it?"

"Yeah."

Bishop got out of the chair suddenly, fingered his hearing aid. "So let's roll."

The reflexiveness of domesticity never ceased to amaze Pierce, and all he could do was shake his head when his wife stood and said, "You'll excuse me a moment, Mr. Bishop?"

She wet the tip of a forefinger and touched the bottom of the iron upended on the board. The iron sizzled. She gave Bishop a tiny smile. "See, the place could burn down while we are gone."

"Yeah," he grunted. He swung his gun on Pierce, kept it there.

Pierce saw his wife lean over the board and pull the cord from the wall plug. When she turned from the board, Bishop was profile to her. The movement was smooth. She swept up the hot iron as she took the step to join her husband. She brought the iron up and around fast. Bishop flinched, but she managed to slap the iron against his cheek. He howled. His gun boomed.

And then Pierce was on him, driving a fist deep into his stomach and catching the gun wrist. Pierce whirled, brought up his knee and smashed Bishop's wrist down across his thigh. The gun flipped from his fingers. Bishop stiffened with another howl and when

Pierce looked, he found Nancy pressing the flat of the iron against Bishop's spine.

Pierce spun Bishop across the room and followed with his fist. Bishop went down on the carpeting and Pierce was on him fast, cuffing him.

It was a long time before he looked up at Nancy. She stood slightly spread legged, the iron still clutched in her hand. She was half turned, staring at the new bullet hole in their plastered wall. She faced him. He shook his head in amazement. "You're dangerous with that thing, love."

She hefted the iron, held it aloft. And then a grin spread over her face. "Remember that, darling."

BLOOD MONEY

Wenzell Brown

Seems to me like Connie Blish is the most cold-blooded female I ever laid eyes on, but Maw claims it ain't so, that I'm just lackin' in understandin' where women is concerned. I reckon she scores a point at that. We been hitched nigh onto thirty-three years, ever since I was first elected sheriff o' Pisquaticook County, and I ain't even pretendin' to understand her yet.

I just happen to be sittin' in the county car in front o' Powers' fillin' station the day that Connie hits Cripple's Bend. More often 'n not the big bus headin' north zooms right past, but today it swings on to the apron, the door swishes open and a woman steps out. I don't know it at the time, but she's Connie Blish.

Connie ain't exactly a beauty but there's somethin' about her that catches your eye. She's got ash-blonde hair worn low over one shoulder, fair skin, and nicely rounded calves. She's a bit on the skinny side for my taste and her shoulders slope like she's carryin' a weight around with her but for all o' that she's graceful as a cat.

I'm watchin' her so close I almost miss the second passenger. He don't get off 'til Connie's out o' sight somewhere in Powers' place. To tell the truth, he ain't much to look at. He's middle-aged and middle

height, with hornrimmed glasses and a face so ordinary you'd never do a double take 'less, like me, you was sorta on the lookout for strangers in town.

I don't think no more about either of 'em 'til next day when I go into Gimpy's Diner and find the girl waitin' on table. I call Gimpy over and ask him how come. He shrugs. He says the girl just showed up in the mornin' askin' for a job and, as the summer crowd'll soon be pilin' in, he decides to give her a try-out. She's on the quiet side but she seems to be workin' out pretty well.

Later on when I want seconds on coffee, I beckon to Connie. Close at hand she's both older and prettier than I'd thought. Her eyes is clear blue and her features fine cut, but her mouth's on the sulky side and there's traces o' blue veins around her temples and dark pouches beneath her eyes. I ain't much on guessin' women's ages but I reckon she won't never see thirty again.

She brings me my coffee and gives a polite sort o' smile when I crack a joke, but she don't say nary a word.

That afternoon a visitor comes to my office. I don't recognize him at first, then I realize he's the man as got off the bus the same time as Connie. He ain't the talkative type and we spar around 'til he shows me his credentials. His name's Clarence Judson and he's an FBI agent. I don't like it much. In all my years as sheriff there ain't been no trouble in the county I warn't able to handle myself.

He says, "I'm checking a woman recently come to your community."

"Meanin' this girl Connie who's workin' at Gimpy's, I take it."

He turns on a smile and says, "You're very astute, Sheriff."

Sure, I know he's butterin' me up but I feel myself warmin' to him all the same. I says, "She ain't been stealin' gold from Fort Knox, has she?"

Judson laughs like the joke was a real good un. "No. Nothing like that. The truth is I'd hate for Connie to get into trouble. You see, she's not the one I really want."

I don't see nothin' but I nod anyway. Judson waits like he's expectin' me to fire questions at him, but I decide to let him carry the ball.

He says, "Does the name Bob Yoder mean anything to you?"

It rings a bell and I reach into the lower left-hand drawer of my desk for the "Wanted" flyers I keep there. I don't have to look far afore I find Yoder. He's a young feller with a dark, lean, handsome face, who looks more like a matinee idol than a crook.

I glance through the flyer. Yoder's high on the list o' the FBI's most wanted men. He's thirty-two and has no record 'til about a year ago. Then Yoder starts at the top, so to speak. He pulls a bank robbery single-handed and gets away with close to forty thousand dollars. That's bad enough, but when the police close in on him in St. Louis, he shoots it out and kills an FBI agent named Lance. So they want him, like a baby wants his bottle, and they ain't never goin' to give up 'til they see him strapped in the chair.

I'm listenin' but I don't see what all this has got to do with Connie Blish, so Judson spells it out to me.

Seems like Connie, when she's still in her teens, wins a beauty contest out west somewhere that entitles her to a trip to Hollywood and a screen test. I reckon Connie's luckier than most. She ends up with

a contract, some bit parts, and the lead in a horse opera or two. For a time it looks like she's goin' great guns and that's when she meets Bob Yoder. He's been a bit actor in New York and lands up in Hollywood with a stack o' clippin's in his wallet. Like Connie, he starts the long climb to what looks like stardom and, like Connie, he gets dumped.

The two of 'em just naturally drift together. Yoder's got a wife somewhere who's walked out on him without botherin' about a divorce. He promises Connie as soon as he's free he'll marry her. Mebbe he means it and mebbe not, but the promise is enough for Connie to start keepin' house with him.

Both of 'em is waitin' and hopin' for the big break, the phone call that'll tell 'em they're back in show business. Meanwhile, Connie works here and there as a waitress, a hat-check girl, or whatever comes along. Yoder takes a job once in a while but he never keeps it more 'n a day or two. 'Tain't too long afore they both realize they're washed up, but they take it in different ways. Connie wants to leave Hollywood and settle down to an ordinary life in a small town. That ain't good enough for Yoder. He wants big money and he wants it fast, and that's how he comes to plan and carry out this here bank robbery.

Yoder's got more money 'n he can spend, but he's been identified and he's on the run. Connie rides along with him 'cause she's still head over heels in love. She's with him in the St. Louis motel the night he shoots the FBI agent. After that they split up and Yoder drops out o' sight. But the FBI don't have no difficulty in pickin' up Connie's trail. They stick to her like they're glued to her tail 'cause they're certain it won't be long afore she and Yoder are back together again and tryin' to run.

All the time I'm a-listenin' to Judson, I keep seein' Connie in my mind, with her bent shoulders and the pouches beneath her eyes. I ain't got no sympathy for Yoder. A man who'll kill once will kill again, I reckon. But I can't see Connie as a menace to no one and I say as much to Judson.

His mouth goes hard and mean. "She's an accessory after the fact and maybe worse. Either she'll play ball or she'll spend the next ten to fifteen years in a federal penitentiary, I'll guarantee that."

"What do you want her to do?"

"Help lay a trap for Yoder. If she hands us Yoder, she'll go scot-free. But if she doesn't——" He bit off the words and then added, "I'd better tell you something, Sheriff. Lance, the man Yoder killed, happened to be my best friend."

Like or not, I can see there ain't nothin' I can do but cooperate. That afternoon, when Connie's through at the diner, we go over to Cripple's Inn where she's rented a room. Judson does the talkin' and I do the heavy lookin' on. Connie's defiant but she ain't much of a liar. At first she denies she's Connie Blish and claims her name's Constance Warren, which is the one she's workin' under. As for Bob Yoder, she says she's never heard of 'im. Judson hammers away 'til she caves in and admits she was with Yoder in St. Louis, but she insists they had a fight and she's left him once and for all, that she ain't got the ghost of an idea where he's holin' up. By this time she's cryin' and wringin' her hands.

Judson lays it straight on the line. He says, "Either you help us catch Yoder or I swear I'll send you to prison 'til you're an old, old woman."

Connie throws me an appealin' look. "Can he do it, Sheriff?"

"I reckon he can and sure as tarnation, he's goin' to try."

Connie's sobbin'. "I still love Bob. I can't play Judas. You can't expect me to."

I shrug. "Look at it this way, Connie: The FBI ain't never goin' to rest 'til they grab Bob. It ain't a matter of your skin or his. He ain't got the chance of a snowball in hell, but you can still save yourself."

Connie throws herself face down on the bed, and has as fine a set o' hysterics as I ever did witness. But it don't do her no good. Judson sits beside her and goes over the same ground again and again: "Why throw your life away to give a killer a few more days of freedom?"

Finally she sits up and spits at him, "I won't betray him. I won't, do you hear?"

Judson's voice is cold as ice. "In that case, you're under arrest, Miss Blish. Put on your coat and come with me. And I want this clearly understood—once you pass the threshold of this room, there's no recanting. I swear before everything I hold sacred to send you to prison."

Connie gets up slowly and puts on her black coat. Judson takes her arm and starts leadin' her toward the door but when she gets close to the sill, she hangs back.

Judson snaps at her, "Make up your mind, Miss Blish. One side of this sill means freedom; the other side means the penitentiary."

Connie's hands fly up to cover her face. Then she swings 'round and crosses to the dormer winder that looks out over the bay. She says over her shoulder, "I'll do what you want. I guess I'm a coward, but I'll do it."

There's a rockin' chair by the winder and she sits

down and rocks back and forth while she spills all she knows. She and Yoder has split up right enough and she swears she ain't got the slightest notion where he is. He reckons they'll be safer travelin' separate and he'll be able to lose himself in a big city, 'specially seein' as how he's skilled at makeup. He tells Connie to find herself a job in some small town off the beaten track and, when she's sure there's nobody on her tail, to insert a message in the personal columns of a weekly New York paper called *The Voyager.* The ad is to read: "Byron, please come home," then the name o' the town and that's all. She's to wait to hear from him afore the next move.

The way the words is wrung out of her, there ain't no doubt she's tellin' the truth. Judson nods when she's finished and says, "You better write that letter right away."

Connie don't argue. She goes over to the writin' desk, prints out the message and addresses the envelope. Judson takes it from her and slips it into his pocket. As he goes out he says to her coldly, "You're a free woman, Miss Blish, but you won't be long if you try any tricks. From now on, our cause is yours. There'll be no excuses for failure, no second chances."

Judson goes out, and me with him. He stops at the reception desk and talks to the night clerk. By this time he's got a couple more agents workin' with him. Things is fixed up so Connie can't get a phone call through or post a letter without it bein' stopped. He's got the bus stop covered and even the ferry as runs across the bay. Connie may be a free woman but it don't look to me like she's goin' to travel far, no matter how much she may want to.

I leave Judson outside the hotel and head home for

supper, but even though Maw's fried up a fresh mess o' tinker mackerel, I can't seem to work up no appetite. After dark I take the county car and go back and park outside o' Cripple's Inn. 'Tain't long afore I spot a battered black sedan half-hidden in the shade of a horse-chestnut tree up the road a piece. There ain't a sign o' life about it, but I got a hunch that Judson or one o' his men is a-watchin' the same as me.

It's close to midnight afore Connie climbs through a winder to the porch o' Cripple's Inn. She's wearin' her black coat with the collar turned up and a dark bandanna around her hair. She's so like a shadder flittin' across the porch and dartin' in and out o' the dark patches in the lawn that I have to rub my eyes to make sure I ain't seein' things. She works her way to the back o' the hotel and along a field that's fringed with scrub pine. I got a good idea where she's goin'. She's headin' for the blacktop that leads out o' Cripple's Bend and joins with highway number one at Bradford. There's enough moonlight so I can circle around without lights and cut across Bay Road to the blacktop. In my rear-view mirror I can see the sedan follerin' me but I don't pay it no mind.

Once I'm on the road, I snap on the lights and start cruisin' slow and easy. The sedan drops back and leaves it up to me. I ain't gone far when my lights pick out Connie, standin' by the road and signalin' for me to stop. I pull up aside her and she runs over and opens the door. When she recognizes me she gives a moanin' sort o' cry and then freezes.

I say, "Don't be a dang fool. Connie. Hop in and be quick about it. Judson or one of his boys is back there and, sure as shootin' if he catches you hitchhikin' he'll cook your goose for good."

She climbs in and sits beside me, holdin' herself ramrod straight. She says, "I can't go through with it. Somehow I've got to stop that message. If I don't I'll have blood on my hands."

"Lookin' at it from Judson's point of view, you got blood there already."

"Can he really send me to prison?"

"I can't say for sure, but it would sort o' surprise me if he couldn't. Did he tell you Lance was his best friend?"

She gasps at that but she don't say nothin' more. When we're back at Cripple's Inn, I see her as far as the top o' the stairs. When I come back down the walk, the black sedan's beneath the horse-chestnut tree like it ain't never left. I amble over. The winder's rolled down and Judson's sittin' behind the wheel.

He lets out a long sigh. "You're very chivalrous, Sheriff."

The way he says it gets my dander up. I snaps back at him, "There warn't nothin' to stop you from takin' her in if you wanted to."

"You're forgetting something, Sheriff. Connie Blish is just a pawn in this game. It's Bob Yoder I'm after. All I want of Connie is that she stays put. Have you got some woman you can deputize to make sure she does?"

I think it over. The only female in Cripple's Bend I dare trust on such a mission is Maw. So I swear her in to serve as deputy without salary as long as Connie's in town. Maw sleeps in the room with her and sticks to her like a leech, savin' when Connie's workin' at Gimpy's Diner.

A week goes by and nothin' happens. We got the hotel staked out and the diner, too. Judson reckons

Gimpy's is the most likely spot for the contact. Yoder ain't got no address in the town but he knows Connie works as a waitress. Besides, the diner's a more public sort o' place where he can move out fast if he don't like the looks o' the setup.

Meanwhile, Maw and Connie's gettin' thicker'n thieves. Accordin' to Maw, Connie's still crazy in love with Yoder. She spends a lot o' time cryin' and a lot more recollectin' the good times they had together. Maw's certain if Connie could think of a way to warn Yoder against comin' to Cripple's Bend she'd take it and suffer the consequences. But Judson's got everything nailed down tight. There ain't no escape from the trap.

The week stretches into ten days and I'm beginnin' to think that Yoder's got a whiff o' trouble or that mebbe he's ditched Connie for good. Even Judson is growin' tense and snappy.

When Yoder does show up, I almost miss him. Even though I know he's good at makeup, I'm still expectin' a young man and a handsome one. This feller who waddles into Gimpy's has a paunch and heavy glasses. His hair is gray and his nose looks like it's been broke and ain't set right. He's leanin' on a cane and his blue serge suit is rumpled and dirty. He limps over to the counter and raps on it, demandin' tea with two pieces o' lemon.

Connie brings the order and I see her eyes go wide with fear. She's so nervous she spills tea all over the counter. Judson's half-hidden in one of the booths. He comes out fast and silent. He's quicker'n me to fill in the picture, but I'm closer and between Yoder and the door. Yoder swings around on the stool and he's in a crouch. His hand has darted into his belt and I

see the ugly snout of a revolver pointin' straight at my chest.

I pull up short, but his finger's already white on the trigger. Connie's arm snakes out from behind the counter and with the flat of her hand she jerks Yoder's wrist up. The two shots come so close together it sounds like a single rumblin' report. Yoder takes two staggerin' steps forward and then he sprawls on his face. I reckon he's dead afore he hits the floor.

I just stand still. It takes me the better part of a minute to realize I ain't hit and another to reckon out that Yoder's bullet went high and at the same moment Judson pumped a bullet into him.

Things get pretty confused after that. Maw shows up out o' nowhere and hustles Connie back to the hotel. Judson takes charge and everthin' runs so smooth and easy that by the time the newspapers catch onto the story, there ain't nothin' to show. Somehow Connie's name never comes up and Judson's good as his word about quashin' charges against her.

Me and Maw goes up to see Connie afore she leaves town. The way I work it out, I owe Connie a debt. If she hadn'ta tilted Yoder's arm up, like as not I'd be dead. But Connie ain't the same as she used to be; no more cryin' and no more hysterics. Either she's got herself under iron control or she just don't care no more.

We take her down to Powers' fillin' station to wait for the bus. We see it comin' 'round the bend and I turn to Connie and say, "If there's anything I can ever do for you, let me know."

She gives me a long steady look. "I'm glad to hear that, Sheriff," she says. "There was a five-thousand-dollar reward posted for the capture of Bob Yoder. I want that money, and it seems to me I earned it."

The bus is swishin' to a stop and the door flies open. Connie hugs Maw and kisses her on both cheeks. Then she hops aboard and that's the last I ever seen o' Connie Blish.

But she collects her reward money right enough. 'Tain't long after that she writes to Maw as how she's gettin' married and the money's goin' for a down payment on a home.

When we learn about it, Maw says, "A woman's got the right to build a new life out o' the ashes o' the old."

It seems to me some'at like takin' blood money, but I ain't arguin' none. I'm just a-statin' the plain facts because I reckon folks have got a right to decide for themselves about the kind o' woman Connie Blish is.

DEVIOUS

Irwin Porges

I'd walked to the drugstore to get cigarettes and was returning home when I heard this cracked, singing voice. A fellow had just lurched around the corner and was walking toward me. I watched him weave from side to side and thought, boy, he sure has a snootful. He drew nearer and I moved to one side, giving him plenty of room to pass. Lucky I'd had that nervous, jumpy feeling for days, because he straightened suddenly and I caught the gleam of the knife rising in his hand. I ducked and dropped to the pavement. He was right after me, but I clamped a hold on his ankle and yanked. He tumbled hard and rolled over. I heard the clatter of the knife. Then he was on his feet and running. I had no intention of chasing him. I just sprawled there and tried to catch my breath.

When I got home and poured myself a drink, I decided it was time to examine all the angles. After a *second* attempt on my life, there was an obvious question to be asked: what enemy do I have? I considered making a list of names or setting up columns headed *Friends, Acquaintances,* and *Enemies.* Then, by elimination I might come up with the right answer. I even took a sheet of paper and began writing, but after a few minutes I crumpled it up and threw it away.

I said to myself, use common sense. You're Martin Brooks and you're planning to marry a girl named Dana Loret. She's lovely and is going to inherit piles of money when her old Uncle Alf Nesbitt dies. Alf, a retired business buccaneer, wasn't too concerned about who got trampled when he was busy amassing his fortune. Then there's George, Alf's adopted son. He's cut in for a slice of the money in Alf's will, and he's also out to marry Dana. Nothing like being hoggish, combining all the money in one fat heap, and he had clear sailing until I appeared on the scene. Now things look kind of seesaw. Could be that he won't get Dana and all the loot.

Well, where does logic point? Right at George's slick, glowing face. On the surface George is all smiles and exudes sportsmanship—you know, may-the-best-man-win stuff—but beneath that phony facade George is concealing mayhem. He has to be the one. Who else would have a motive? First there was the bullet that came from a passing car and almost parted my hair, then a fake drunk tried to puncture me with a knife. I'm convinced that George's neat little brain devised these capers.

Sure, I've been accused of having a tendency to complicate things. That's why I'm being sensible *now,* keeping myself scientifically rational, refusing to let my imagination run wild. It's George, of course. That's definitely settled. I'll prove Miss McElroy wrong yet. She was my old teacher. She used to say, "Martin, there's only one word to describe you—*devious.* It never occurs to you to do things directly. You never heard of the shortest distance between two points. With you, lines always zig or zag."

She was right—Miss McElroy was usually right—and I kept reminding myself of that as I drove down to

the office. I work at the Wellman Corporation, sitting at a desk and shuffling papers around. I've been there three years. Let's face it, I'm just a clerk, a kind of minor flunky. At one time that used to bother me. I fretted about the chances for promotion, was eager to work overtime, tried to make an impression on Franklin, the office manager. Now I'm indifferent to the whole petty business. If there's an assistant manager's job opening, let Edgar Appleton have it. He wants it bad enough. He's been there longer than I, and he's the likely candidate for the job. I intend to keep my eye on the main chance, as the British say, and that's Dana and her inheritance from Uncle Alf. Once I win *that* prize, it's goodbye to shiny desks, paperclips and office memos.

When I got to the office, I found it hard to settle down to work. Thinking about George and the murder attempts made my mind foggy. I must have been staring into space, because I didn't even realize that Appleton was standing on one side, gabbing in my ear.

"You seeing a vision?" he was asking. "Or was the alcohol flowing too freely last night? Get with it, boy, get with it."

"Get with *what*?" I said. "Look, Edgar, I can operate this job with half a mind. That's all it takes, half a mind."

"Maybe that's all you've got," he said, snickering at his own joke. He walked off, shaking with laughter.

I dug into the chores for a while, working to clear the mound of papers off my desk. Several hours later, when it was time for a break, I went down to the coffee machine. I sat and sipped, and began to meditate about George again. It had seemed so plain before, but now it didn't make sense. Consider

George—intelligent, a college grad, sharp mind—would he do anything so stupidly obvious? We're rivals for Dana's hand and fortune. If I were murdered, wouldn't all the suspicion fall on him? George would not only be suspect, he'd be the *only* suspect. He *must* be aware of that.

No, I can't accept the theory that George is behind it, and I've got to stop worrying about what Miss McElroy said. Let's look at it another way. Intelligent people *are* devious, aren't they? A man with George's background would simply be too devious to operate so crudely. Well then, who else?

Wait—there's Anthony Oliver, Uncle Alf's combination secretary and valet. We'll follow that thread and see where it leads us. He's been with Alf for years, and of course he'll inherit a juicy sum in the will but, naturally, he wants more. How to get it? I think I see what he's been doing. Clever—clever. *He* fired the shot and wielded the knife, but was he *really* trying to kill me? Of course not. He just wanted it to *appear* that way. He knew I'd suspect George. Then Anthony figured I'd arrange a little escapade of my own—get even with George, eliminate him. Real neat. I'd do Anthony's dirty work for him, and at the end he'd wind up with a double share. To think I'd actually been considering it. *That* was a narrow escape.

Hold it. I could be missing something. Let's line it up another way. Suppose Anthony *planned* to kill me. He'd never be suspected. George would. Maybe he'd even plant something so the police would grab George. I never realized how clever that guy is! Talk about being *devious*, he's working on a scheme to eliminate two rivals at once. He kills me, and then George is arrested for my murder. Anthony stops me

from marrying Dana and cutting in on the gravy, and he pulls up at the finish line with George's money.

I'm sitting there, the coffee forgotten in my hand, when I hear a woman's voice. "Lost in a dream, or is it a daze?"

I could tell who it was without looking. The scorn was thick enough to cut with a knife. That's the way Jeanette's been sounding ever since I stopped dating her. She's Franklin's personal secretary, and at one time she was beginning to get ideas about me and her. You know, the usual cliches, a cozy little home in suburbia, commuting during the week, gardening on weekends, a couple of chubby kids, a life spent clawing my way up the ladder at Wellman Coropration. I never encouraged her too much, but I figured she might be kind of helpful in boosting me to Franklin. That was all before I met Dana. Once I broke it off, Jeanette turned as icy as a winter day in the Arctic.

"Company business," I answered her. "Just sitting here, my mind's tossing around a scheme that'll save the corporation thousands of dollars."

She glared at me, swung around, and stalked away. I could imagine the kind of poisoned comments she'd be pouring into Franklin's ear. Lucky I'm not interested in promotion anymore.

I gulped the rest of the coffee and headed back to my desk. Going down the aisle, I could see Jeanette bent over, batting her lashes at Gerald Wilson. He was new around the office and sort of young and impressionable. She was pouring on the allure, and he had the hypnotized look of a rabbit face to face with a beady-eyed snake. I was wise to Jeanette's act. The week before, when I walked by, she was hovering around stodgy Appleton. When she focused her sultry

gaze, I could practically hear the guy panting. Now I swept past them, putting on a preoccupied look.

By the time I arrived home I'd made up my mind. No question about it, Anthony was the man, and the course of action was plain—get him before he gets me. I already knew quite a bit about him. He was a nature lover, one of those guys who likes to plod along the beach, examine rocks, and pick up shells and listen to them. He always had his face flattened against a pair of binoculars, staring out at the sky or some bird that was flapping around.

That weekend I decided to follow him to see if I could get any ideas. He started to drive and I was right on his trail. He maneuvered his car up a twisting road that climbed to a crest where a narrow cliff jutted out. I parked below and clambered up to watch him. He sat on the edge of the cliff, his legs dangling, and peered through his binoculars. He seemed content to sit there by the hour. I'd seen all I needed and crawled back down.

The next day I followed him again, chugging along behind, out of sight. I parked below and climbed up again to see what he was doing. This time he was standing, the binoculars tilted toward the sky. I scrambled down in a hurry, got the car, and sent it roaring up the slope. When I reached the top I swung it around in a wide curve, like a driver circling to head back. He turned, smiled as though he recognized me and even lifted a hand to wave. I swerved suddenly, seemed to lose control of the car. It slid straight toward him. He dodged backward. I jerked the wheel around just before the cliff's edge, catching him in the same second, and sort of nudged him on the side. He let out a croaking yell and plunged over the cliff.

I parked the car and walked over to look down, although I was certain that where he'd tumbled there'd be no returning. He lay sprawled out on the rocks. The whole scheme was foolproof. If the police found a bruise on one side, they'd think it was caused by the fall.

With *that* obstacle out of the way, I could settle down to the business at hand—namely, Dana. Of course there was the tragedy of poor Anthony, which upset her for a while, but that wore off and I was seeing her again regularly. She even seemed more receptive to my pleas that she set the date. I returned home one evening particularly pleased with events and convinced that Lady Luck was on my side. I definitely had the inside track with Dana. George was writhing with jealousy and chagrin.

I sat near the window, reading the paper, the lamp glowing over my shoulder. I think I heard the splintering noise and felt the jagged fragments of glass before I could figure out what had happened. Next I was aware of a pain in my ear and I reached up to touch it. Blood was dripping from the lobe. I saw the hole in the glass, remembered the explosion, and everything added up. I'd been nicked by a bullet.

For a moment I was too stunned to think. Then the whole significance dawned. It hadn't been Anthony, after all. Someone was still out to get me. While I was bandaging the ear, I forced myself to concentrate. Nothing would come. I sat down at the desk, took a sheet of paper and began writing names. This time I'd do things in a calm, organized manner. I wrote *George, Uncle Alf, Dana*—who else was left? A lot of minor characters—Frank, the handyman; the chauffeur; butler; and maid—but that didn't make sense. I had no suspects.

I *must* be missing someone. I'd had that feeling right along. Then it came to me. Man, I'd been stupid. The lawyer—the family lawyer—came over to see Uncle Alf quite often. What was his name—Eller, David Eller. A real cool, slippery customer, but what was his motive? Why should it be any different from anybody else's? Money, of course. He handled all of Alf's investments. Let's follow *that* through. Obviously, he's been embezzling, lining his pockets with Alf's dough. But why should he want to kill me? I can't see any connection . . . unless . . . that's it. Dana is kind of simple and trusting. Once Uncle Alf is dead and she inherits her money, she'd never inquire about anything. She'd just take it for granted that good old Eller, family lawyer and friend, is one hundred percent honest, but with me married to her, well, foxy old Eller would know I'd pry and investigate until I'd uncover all his juggling and pilfering. He couldn't afford to take any chances on that. Eliminate me—*that* was his project.

Eller's exit from this world had to be the first item on the agenda. One thing was certain, a shifty guy like him must be weighed down with enemies. I didn't have to worry about making it appear an accident. It turned out to be easier than I thought. I only had to follow him twice and then the inspiration came. He lived alone in one of those plush hillside homes. What's the first thing that most people do when they come home from work? It's a universal habit. They walk through the gate or up the front stairs, and they open the mailbox and stick their hand inside. Taking it from there was child's play.

I waited until the afternoon, watched the mailman leave, and then set to work. I wired the mailbox cover so that the bomb would go off as soon as Eller

lifted the lid. Then I parked in a nearby cul-de-sac and waited. The explosion was as loud as a sonic boom. I didn't have to go back to look. Besides, the papers told the whole story. Old Eller had been blown across the great divide. The police were sifting through his tangled affairs. They had nothing but suspects—a long list of shady clients that would keep them occupied for at least a year. They detained four guys in five days and wound up releasing all of them. I wasn't worried. They had an inexhaustible supply.

Everything was clear sailing now. All I had to do was to keep applying the pressure and Dana was bound to say "Yes."

That noon I was taking my usual after-lunch stroll around the block. I stopped to gaze at an old boarded-up house, noticing the sign that announced plans for the erection of a medical building on the site. The huge stone that came whizzing down missed my head by inches. It crashed on the pavement, shattered, and a large piece ricocheted against my shinbone. I clutched the leg and hopped around in pain. From the top of the house I could hear creaking noises. Somebody was probably running down the back stairs.

I sat on the curb and rubbed my bruised ankle. When the pain subsided, I limped back to work. At the desk I tilted the swivel chair and just lay there staring at the ceiling, too bewildered and frustrated to start that old train of thought again. Reclining, with my eyes half-closed, I heard the nagging voice of Franklin, the office manager. "Maybe we ought to furnish beds," he said. "Have you looked at the clock lately?"

I let the chair drop with a thud and gave him a sour look. For the past few days he'd been as edgy as

a mother bear with a litter of cubs. I knew what was agitating him. The big mogul, old Randolph Wellman, founder of the corporation, was scheduled for a visit, and today was the day. I happened to be aware also, through the office grapevine, that there was an opening for a west coast manager. Franklin was dying to get that position.

Later that day I could tell by the excitement that Wellman had arrived and was being conducted on a tour of the place. I was poring over a mound of papers when he and Franklin approached my desk. I started to spring to attention, but Wellman gave a cackling laugh and said, "As you were, son. No ceremonies. All wrapped up in your work, eh? That's the way we like to see 'em? Right, Franklin?" He tittered again and Franklin joined in.

The introductions were made and the old man nodded and beamed. "Brooks, eh? One of the ambitious ones, I'll bet; one of the bright young men who'll guide the corporation in the future. Brooks, is that it? I never forget names. I've heard of you, I believe. A favorable report, young man, a favorable report." He looked at Franklin and served up another cackling noise.

Old Wellman sounded senile to me. I didn't know what to make of him. This business of "bright young men" and "favorable reports" seemed like a corny line that he carried around with him and dispensed at all the branches, but I noticed that Franklin wasn't exactly happy about it. The word "young" made him wriggle. He was in his mid-fifties and I'd bet he was scared stiff that some young man would snatch the choice promotion. I caught the irritated gleam in his eyes.

Wellman clucked approvingly. "Keep it up, young

man, keep it up. The world needs youth." He clapped me on the back. "Bursting with ambition and impatience, eh? Can't wait to start climbing the ladder of success? Well, I want you to know we've got our eye on people like you." He turned to Franklin. "I'm sure you recall memo number A-784 that was sent around recently, the one headed, *"The Modern Corporation Looks at Promotion?"* Great new approach, eh?"

Franklin offered a mechanical grin, but his face had a white tinge.

"A forward-looking policy," said Wellman. "Today's corporation doesn't always go through channels, doesn't always stay in old ruts. Promotion mustn't always be automatic, based upon seniority. The corporation has an obligation. When it spots a qualified young man it can promote him at once, move him up so that he skips a few rungs of the ladder. Right, Franklin?"

Franklin nodded feebly.

"Anything is possible." Wellman chortled at me. "Who knows—west coast manager, or even general manager—these could be awarded to some outstanding young man."

I mumbled and smiled while he pounded my back again. Then he walked off, and Franklin, his complexion a dull gray, dragged behind him. It was a pity that promotion was the farthest thing from my mind. If I really cared to put forth the effort, I might grab the big job away from Franklin.

I sat around that night in a gloomy mood. The big question still hadn't been answered. Who was plotting to rub me out? I stared at the three names over and over—George, Uncle Alf, Dana. Nothing came. The letters just floated before my eyes. I got

disgusted and decided to take a drive. I'd drop in on Dana.

Fifteen minutes later I pulled up at Uncle Alf's big house. The butler let me in. I walked up the staircase to the second floor. I was going to call Dana when I heard her voice coming from the library. The door was closed. I listened. Uncle Alf was growling and sputtering. He was obviously in a rage.

"I don't understand," Dana was saying. "Why shouldn't I see Martin?"

"Why shouldn't you?" Alf shouted. "I'll tell you why, since you haven't got brains enough to see it yourself. He can't be trusted. He's a fortune-hunter, just after your money, that's all. Good heavens, girl, isn't that plain?"

"Really, Uncle," said Dana, "you've said that before. But it isn't true. He never even mentions money to me."

"Never mentions." Alf made a jeering sound. "Of course not. He's too crafty for that. A slick article—he knows how to pretend. He's sure pulled the wool over your eyes. I want to tell you something." He was shouting again and pounding on the desk. "He's not going to marry you. Do you hear? I'll never allow it. I'll do anything to stop it—anything."

I heard a noise on the stairs and walked away. I was so shocked I just chatted with Dana for a few minutes and then left. At home I wrote the three names again and scratched out *Dana* and *George*. My eyes were finally opened. Of course it'd been Alf all the time. He was the mastermind behind the murder attempts. Who was doing his dirty work? The handyman? A hired killer? Alf had said he'd do anything to prevent the marriage. Well, he wouldn't stick at murder. The old pirate had no scruples. He was abso-

lutely ruthless, had wiped out more than one rival who stood in his way. I could see now I'd have to move fast.

I spent the rest of the evening devising and rejecting schemes. Alf may have been old, but he was still alert and cunning. He'd be hard to catch. To get him alone at home would be difficult or even impossible. No, the job must be done someplace else. It was a question of habits. I discovered that once a week his chauffeur drove him into town and, after finishing his business, Alf always headed for a movie theater. He was especially fond of Westerns and war pictures. The chauffeur would deposit him there and return to pick him up later. I couldn't have had a more perfect setup.

When he went inside the theater I was right behind him. To make sure he wouldn't recognize me and that nobody could identify me, I wore a three-day beard and sunglasses, and had my hair combed wild and hanging down. The place was half empty. He walked down to the fourth row, where nobody else sat, and I took a seat right behind him. There was only one other fellow in my row, and after a while he got up and left.

I had the noose ready in my pocket. In the middle of the Western, while the cowboys were shooting at a horde of Indians, I moved forward, threw the noose around his neck and jerked it tight. He had only time to make one gurgling sound. I pulled him hard against the seat. He kicked and clawed at the rope for a while, but I held firm. Seconds later all his motions stopped. I waited, then slipped the noose off, shoved it in my pocket, and got up and left. Nobody had the slightest suspicion of what had happened.

As I drove away, I felt supremely confident that the

whole business was finished. I'd even accomplished something I hadn't planned to do—given Dana her inheritance, and removed any danger of Alf turning her against me. I arrived home, walked into the living room and switched on the lamp. I heard an odd rustling in the opposite corner of the room. Startled, I swung around. A man's voice called, "Don't move."

I peered into the darkness, unable to make out who it was, but there was certainly a familiar ring to the voice. "What do you want?" I asked.

"Want?" The man laughed. "You know what I want. This time your luck has run out. Tonight I won't miss."

He took a step toward me and I could see who it was. I found it hard to believe. *"You!"* I said. Thoughts raced through my mind. Why should *he* want to kill me? Of course, the reason was obvious, but the poor fool—he was mistaken.

"Appleton," I said, "you're all wrong. I don't want that assistant manager's job. Believe me, it's all yours. I'm not even in the running. It means nothing to me."

"Assistant manager's job?" The words choked in his throat. "Who cares about that? You think I'd want to kill you for something like that?"

"Not the manager's job?" I gaped at him, incredulous. "Well, what then?"

He was trembling with rage. "I hate you, that's what. I've always hated you from the first day you came to the corporation. You act so high and mighty, think you're so superior to everybody."

"Appleton!" I cried. "What are you trying to tell me?" It was unbelievable. "You don't kill people just because you *hate* them. That's no reason. Are you out of your mind?"

"Oh, I don't, don't I?" He was almost incoherent. He raised his gun. At the same moment I picked up the desk lamp and hurled it at him, then dropped to the floor and rolled behind the desk. The bullets whistled over my head. I lay still. The room was silent, but I could hear his breathing. My only hope was to get my revolver out of the bottom drawer of the desk. I opened it slowly and slipped my hand inside. The floor creaked. I knew he was coming around the side toward me. My hand touched the cold metal. I saw the moving shadow just as I pulled the gun out. I turned and fired. He let out a cry and staggered. I fired again. I saw his white hand clutch his chest, heard his gun drop, and then he fell to the floor.

I stood gazing down at him. He stared up and his lips moved. He was trying to tell me something. I knelt close to him.

"Didn't succeed." His face twisted in pain. The words were forced through his lips in a whisper. He was saying something else that I could barely hear. "Tried . . . times . . . still failed . . ." Was that what he said? I wasn't sure. He head fell back and his eyes closed. He was gone.

I got up, feeling weak and dizzy. It had been a close call. I poured myself a drink and sat down to think it over. So it had been Appleton all the time. And the reason? Just because he hated me, as simple as that. I thought of old Miss McElroy. She was right, as usual. I should have listened to her. Life wasn't complicated, it wasn't devious—it was simple. Appleton had proved it. What a fool I'd been. Well, there was one consolation. I'd finally gotten the right man.

So it was all settled. But was it? I had an uneasy

sensation. Something about this didn't ring true. Let's be logical. People don't kill other people just because they hate them. There has to be a motive. Take Appleton, a timid nonentity, a stuffy fuddy-duddy. Was he the kind that would plan these murder attempts? *On his own?* I'd almost lulled myself to sleep. Of course Appleton wouldn't do it on his own. Someone was behind him, but who? Let me think. *Franklin!* Why hadn't I seen it before? He's known about the new promotional policy for some time, and he knew that Wellman was impressed by my ability, was actually weighing *me* for the job. I was in line for the fat position that Franklin coveted. He egged Appleton on to do his dirty work.

But wait, I've forgotten somebody else at the office. What about the old saying—a woman scorned . . . or, the female is more deadly than the male. Could it be Jeanette? She was always whispering in Appleton's ear. She manipulated him, planned everything. Clever—clever. Jeanette pulled the strings and he was the puppet.

This time I won't be hasty. I've an uncomfortable feeling that something has escaped me. It's coming back to me, Appleton's lips, barely moving. What did he say? *Tried three times* . . . Wasn't that it—*three times?* His lips shaped a T. I'm certain of that now. He said *three* times. But how could that be? Counting tonight, there'd been *five* attempts on my life. How blind I've been!

I took a sheet of paper and wrote the names—*Franklin, Jeanette, George, Dana.* It was clear as crystal to me now. *Two* people had been trying to kill me all this time, and I'd overlooked the two most important ones, George and Dana. Which one is it?

Cunning George, of course, he knew I'd never suspect him. His murder attempts were fakes, just to trick me into retaliating, and I wiped out all of *his* rivals for Alf's money.

Or is it Dana? I wonder if I'm getting a bad headache. Where was I, oh, yes—Dana. She *is* sitting pretty now, a real smoothie. Of course the argument with Alf was deliberately staged by her. She *knew* I was listening outside the door. She manipulated me so that I got rid of Alf for her and she raked in a pile of dough.

Wait—are they working together, in cahoots? Could that be it? What's the matter with me? I've got a funny buzzing in my head, and my eyes are blurred. I seem to be having a dizzy spell. I must get hold of myself. Remember what Miss McElroy said . . . watch it . . . don't be devious . . . watch it. I'm all right . . . I'm calm and logical. I'll list the names again. Let's see, there's *Anthony* and *Franklin* and *Dana* . . . why do the letters swim around? anthony? Did I write *Anthony*? Wasn't he eliminated? Or was it Franklin? I'm not sure. I'll start over again—*George, Uncle Alf, Dana, Eller*—now, let's see. George? Is he still here? I thought he was gone. No, no, it's Uncle Alf . . . silly, it's Eller, I'm sure . . . but could it be . . .

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN THIS WOMAN?

John Lutz

David Hastings awoke slowly, painfully, not really wanting to lose the oblivion of sleep. As he opened his eyes to slits, he raised a hand gingerly to his throbbing head and touched his fingertips just below his hairline. His hand came away with blood on it, and his eyes opened all the way.

He was in the bedroom, he realized, lying on his back on the made bed. Every beat of his heart echoed with pain in his head. It was morning, judging by the softly angled rays of light filtering through the curtains, the bark of a faraway dog, the distant clanging of a trash can. Hastings's mind was blank to everything but an unexplainable dread, a terrible fact just beyond his consciousness that he knew he would soon have to face.

With great effort Hastings raised himself and supported his upper body on the bed with his elbows. Summoning even more strength, he twisted and sat on the edge of the mattress, noticing that his white shirtfront was covered with scarlet-brown splotches. He saw, too, that there were several stains on his wrinkled checked sportcoat and his tie. Hastings stood, took a few heavy steps, and leaned on his dresser to look at himself in the mirror.

Vacant, frightened eyes stared out of a face stained

with blood from a long deep gash high on his forehead. There was another deep cut on his left cheekbone. Quickly, Hastings turned away from the mirror. He was hot, his body suddenly burning. He peeled off his coat and tie and hung them in the closet, then he unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt.

The door to the living room was half open. For a reason he couldn't fathom Hastings knew he didn't want to go through that door, but he also knew that he must. He began moving toward the door with uneven groping steps, realizing for the first time that he was wearing only one shoe. As he pushed the door all the way open and stepped into the living room, he shuddered; his disbelieving eyes narrowed.

There were slivers of clear glass scattered over the dark green carpet as if a crystal bomb had exploded in the room. Hastings's left shoe was lying on its side, still tied, near the armchair. On the other side of the room, where the shattered pieces of crystal were heaviest, the carpet was soaked by a huge reddish stain. And in the center of that stain, near the television with its wildly rolling and distorted silent picture, lay the still, the unbelievably still body of Agnes.

In horrible fascination Hastings extended his outstretched hands before him, as if pushing something away, and stepped slowly over and gazed down at his dead wife.

Agnes's nightgown was torn and wrapped about her neck and shoulders. Her face, framed in a tangle of auburn hair, was completely crusted with dried blood, and the head had been unmercifully battered, unmercifully and brutally mutilated.

Hastings's breathing was abnormally loud, like

steam hissing in the small room. He began backing away from the body, cutting his stockinged foot on a piece of broken crystal. Then he slumped down and sat on the floor, his back against the wall. His mind was a revolving, horror-filled maze, a jumble of terrible puzzle pieces that would not fit together no matter how they were turned. With dazed eyes he looked slowly about the living room, and he knew then where the shattered crystal had come from.

The swan. The glass swan that Agnes's mother had sent them from Mexico last summer. Probably it was a typical tourist item, but Agnes had liked it and placed it on the bookcase in the living room. Hastings had also rather liked the swan. It seemed to be made of a very delicate clear crystal that had a prism-like effect so the shapes and colors reflected within the rounded body and long graceful neck were dimembered and twisted to fit the graceful lines of the sculpting. And now it had been used . . . for this.

Hastings closed his eyes and rested the back of his head against the living-room wall, and with a pain that was both physical and mental he began trying to recreate in his mind the horror of last night.

He remembered parking his car in front of his small brick home on Lime Avenue, he remembered that clearly enough. He had worked late at the office and hadn't left until almost nine o'clock.

The house was lighted, the glow of the living-room swag lamp shining through the drawn drapes. Hastings walked up the winding cement path onto the porch and turned the doorknob. But the front door was locked. That hadn't seemed normal to Hastings; Agnes seldom locked doors of any kind. He drew his house key from his pocket, unlocked the front door and entered the house.

Here Hastings bowed his head and rested it painfully on his drawn-up knees. He didn't want to remember the rest—his mind recoiled from it. But he made himself fit the pieces together.

Agnes had been at the opposite end of the living room, near the turned-on television set, and she was struggling with a man, a tall man dressed in dark clothes, a man who had his gloved hand pressed to Agnes's mouth.

What had the man looked like? His features were blurred—as if he had a nylon stocking pulled down over his face.

The man saw Hastings and was motionless for a second, then he felled Agnes with a chopping blow across the back of her neck and came at Hastings.

The man was bigger than Hastings, and stronger, so the struggle didn't last long. Hastings remembered being shoved back toward the bedroom door, remembered seeing the man's gloved fingers curl around the natural handle of the crystal swan's neck. And then the swan smashed into his head. The man pushed him violently against the closed bedroom door, breaking the latch and springing it open as Hastings staggered backward into the bedroom. Again the swan smashed into his head, and Hastings fell backward across the bed. He remembered feeling the welcome softness of the mattress before losing consciousness.

Hastings raised his head from his knees and looked at the bedroom doorframe, at the splintered wood near the latch. Then he looked again, for just a second, at the still body of his wife.

After knocking him unconscious, Hastings thought, the man must have gone back into the living room and continued his attack on Agnes. Somehow

Hastings knew that the object was rape from the beginning. Agnes must have regained consciousness, must have begun to fight or scream, or attempted to run, and the man with the stockinged face must have used the swan to beat her to the silence and submissiveness of death.

Slowly Hastings raised himself to his feet and stood unsteadily, leaning against the wall. Then he made his way into the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. For a long time he stood slumped over the washbasin, watching the red-tinted water swirl counterclockwise down the drain. When he was finally ready, he went back into the bedroom and picked up the phone.

The police converged on Hastings's house in great numbers, photographers, dusting for fingerprints, examining, discussing. And then Agnes was taken away by two men in white uniforms, and Hastings was left with a Lieutenant Sam Newell, a crewcut, heavy-browed man who had been personally assigned to the case. Hastings's neighbor and good friend Philip Barrett also remained in the house after all the other policemen but Newell had departed. The three men sat in the living room drinking coffee that Barrett had been thoughtful enough to brew.

Agnes's murder had occurred in Plainton, the community in which they lived, a scant few miles from the city, and while the larger and more efficient metropolitan police department would give some assistance, solving the crime was the responsibility only of the Plainton police department, for everything had happened within their jurisdiction. A murder investigation was not the sort of task Lieutenant Newell undertook very often.

"How old was Agnes, Mr. Hastings?" he asked, flipping the leather cover of his notebook.

"Thirty-six, the same as me," Hastings replied, watching Newell make quick jabbing motions at his notepaper with a short pencil.

"And did she have any enemies that you knew of?"

"Agnes was well liked by everyone," Phil Barrett said in a sad voice. "It's impossible to believe this has happened."

Lieutenant Newell glared at him over the rim of his coffee cup. "If you don't mind, Mr. Barrett, we'll get to your statement in the course of the investigation."

Barrett said nothing, raising his own steaming coffee cup to his lips as if he hadn't heard the lieutenant.

"Phil's right," Hastings said. "Agnes didn't have any enemies that I knew of."

"Somebody didn't like her," Newell said. "That swan was shattered into such small pieces we couldn't fit it together." He made a short notation in his book. "Understand now, Mr. Hastings, this next question is simply part of the routine. Did your wife Agnes have any . . . extramarital affairs? Had you heard any rumors of her running around?"

Hastings couldn't keep the agitation out of his voice. "We were happily married, Lieutenant."

"You know what they say about who's the last to know," Newell said. He glanced at Phil Barrett.

"Agnes wasn't the type to go out on her husband," Barrett said.

"What kind of activities was she interested in?" Newell asked.

"As I told you," Hastings said, "we never had any children. Agnes contented herself pretty much with

staying home, watching TV, and she worked hard keeping the house neat." He looked around at the bloodstained disarray of the living room and put his head down.

Lieutenant Newell flipped his leather notebook shut and stood slowly, betraying what he was, a policeman with sore feet. "In all honesty there's not much here to work with. The description of the man you struggled with—tall, average weight, dark clothes, stocking mask—it's a phantom. We'll be in touch with you, Mr. Hastings, and I'll let you know about the coroner's report on your wife." He nodded. "I'm sorry," he said and left.

"Don't pay too much attention to his questions, Dave," Phil Barrett told Hastings when they were alone. "They're routine."

"I don't mind the questions," Hastings said, "if they'll help catch Agnes's killer."

Barrett stood and drained the last of his coffee. "Why don't you go in and get some rest?" he said. "I'll clean this place up—the police said it'd be okay."

Hastings nodded, feeling suddenly as tired as he'd ever felt. "That's nice of you, Phil."

Barrett shrugged. "Listen," he said in a concerned voice, "if you'd rather spend tonight at our place, Myra and I would be glad to have you. . . ."

"Thanks anyway," Hastings said, "but with a shower and some sleep I think I can face things here." He rose to go to the bedroom, and the hurt and anger seemed to rise with him. "Dammit. Phil! Why would anybody want to kill Agnes? Why did this maniac have to choose her for a victim?"

"Who knows?" Barrett said in a sympathetic voice. "He might have just seen her somewhere and followed her to find out where she lived. I guess the hus-

band of any victim would be asking himself the same questions you are."

"I guess so," Hastings said wearily. He touched the bandage on his forehead over the wound that the police surgeon had stitched, as if to assure himself of its reality, and sidestepping the broken glass, he walked from the living room.

The next afternoon Lieutenant Newell telephoned Hastings to inform him of the coroner's report. Agnes had been sexually molested. Newell then asked Hastings about any men who had expressed interest in Agnes, any rejected suitors. But Hastings could think of no one. He and Agnes had been married fourteen years. The murderer might have been a psycho, Newell speculated, a maniac who had chosen Agnes by chance out of millions without even knowing her name and struck her as lightning might strike. He assured Hastings that the police would keep working on the case and hung up....

A week passed, and as far as Hastings was concerned the Plainton police department wasn't working hard enough. They had come up with nothing.

The desire to see Agnes's killer apprehended had grown in Hastings, causing him agonizing days and sleepless nights. And the feeling persisted that there was something he should know, something that skirted the outer edges of his mind and that, try as he may, he could never grasp.

Hastings began to telephone Lieutenant Newell regularly, asking him about progress on the case, about what the Plainton police department was doing to bring about progress. But there was never any news. He always got a polite brushoff. He came to re-

alize that the Plainton police department had finished digging, that they would never apprehend Agnes's killer.

It was then that Hastings decided to take action himself. Lying awake nights he worked out a general plan of investigation. The first thing he did was to go next door and talk to his neighbor. Phil Barrett. Here Hastings possessed an advantage over the police, for he knew that Barrett would talk to him confidentially and with complete honesty.

Barrett was in his long narrow back yard, spraying his rosebushes. As Hastings approached him, he stooped to spread the aerosol mist on the bottom side of some perforated leaves and smiled up at Hastings.

"Morning, Dave."

Hastings nodded, watching some of the spray drift up and past him.

"Haven't seen you," Barrett said. "How are you getting along?"

Hastings smiled and shrugged.

Barrett straightened and wiped his hands on the paint-stained trousers he was wearing. "Have the police found out anything?"

"No," Hastings said, "and it looks now like they won't. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Phil. I need some honest answers to some questions."

Barrett looked at him with a vague puzzled frown. "I wouldn't lie to you, Dave."

"Not unless you thought you were doing me a favor," Hastings said. "I want to know about Agnes."

Barrett grinned and shook his head. "She was your wife. You know more about her than I do."

"But you might have heard some things. Things a woman's husband wouldn't hear." The breeze mussed Hastings's combed brown hair, causing a lock to fall

over the red scar on his forehead. "Did you hear anything, Phil?"

The aerosol can hissed as Barrett loosed some spray in the general direction of one of his rosebushes, then he stood staring at the ground. "I heard a few things, Dave. They didn't mean anything, they were none of my business."

"They're my business now," Hastings said quietly.

Barrett continued to stare at the newly mowed grass for a while before speaking. "I heard she'd been seen a few places around town," he said, "restaurants, taverns, places like that. That's all I heard . . ."

"Seen with men?" Hastings asked, holding back the sudden flow of anger and disbelief that he should have expected.

"Yes, Dave." Barrett raised his head to look Hastings in the eye. "With men, different men, but like I said all I ever heard was second or third hand. It could be that none of it was true, just the kind of loose talk that sometimes follows an attractive woman."

"Did you believe what you heard?" Hastings asked.

Barrett looked at him with an agonized expression as he squinted into the sun. "That's not a fair question, Dave. I didn't know whether to believe the stories or not. You know Agnes was—she just didn't seem the type."

No, Hastings thought, by all outward appearances Agnes wasn't the type. Auburn-haired, dark-eyed Agnes, slender, pretty in her plain dress or modest slacks, smiling as she worked about the house . . .

"I'm sorry, Dave."

Hastings felt sick. Lately someone was always sorry for him. He nodded to Barrett, said his thanks, and walked back to his empty house.

The bottle of bourbon he'd bought a month ago was in the kitchen cupboard above the sink, still over half full. He got it down, sat at the table and poured himself a drink. He couldn't imagine Agnes having affairs with other men. That was another side of her that he couldn't believe existed. But there had been stories, rumors that had never reached his ears. It could be that they were false, and yet who knew what happened on the dark side of a person's mind?

Hastings stood and replaced the bottle in the cupboard, setting the empty glass in the sink. Then he went into the living room and began to rummage through the desk drawers for a clear and recent photograph of Agnes. Finally he settled on one, a color snapshot of his dead wife wearing a pink blouse, staring out of the photo directly at the camera with a tender and somewhat embarrassed smile.

As Hastings slipped the photo into his wallet he found its exact duplicate, another print, behind his identification card. He slid the second photo into the cellophane pocket on top of the first.

That evening he began. He shaved for the first time that day, put on a suit, and drove toward town.

The first place he stopped was on the outskirts of the city, a lounge and restaurant named Tony's. He went to the bar and showed the bartender Agnes's photograph.

"Do you recognize her?" Hastings asked. "Have you seen this woman in the past few months?"

"You the police?" the bartender asked.

"No," Hastings said, "I'm her husband."

The bartender looked at Hastings, then squinted at the photograph. He shook his head. He hadn't seen her, he told Hastings. At least if he had he couldn't

recall. There were a lot of women who came in here with men. There were a lot who came in alone and left with men. It was impossible to remember them all.

Hastings thanked the bartender, bought him a beer and left.

He drove to three more places, and none of the people there remembered Agnes. Though at a place called The Lion's Mane a red-vested bartender had stared at Hastings in a peculiar fashion as if he were about to say something; then a customer had called him away.

Hastings's last stop was at The Purple Bottle on Wilton Avenue. The bartender was a round-faced man with a mustache who reminded Hastings of somebody. He approached Hastings and smiled at him.

"Bourbon and water," Hastings said. He was sitting toward the end of the long bar, away from the other customers, and when the bartender returned with his drink he opened his wallet and showed him the photograph.

"Do you recognize her?" he asked. "Do you remember ever seeing her in here?"

The round-faced bartender set the glass on a coaster and stared down at the snapshot.

"She's pretty," he said, "but I don't ever remember her coming in here. Of course, I could have forgotten." He turned and beckoned to a younger bartender who was working at the other end of the bar, a slender young man with long black hair.

"Billy," he asked the young bartender, "have you ever seen this woman?"

Billy stared at the photograph curiously, then looked at Hastings.

"No," he said, "but I think I remember her picture."

Hastings's hand began to tremble as he raised his glass to his lips.

"Sure," Billy said, "somebody came in here—must have been about a month ago—showed me a photograph and asked me if I'd seen the girl."

"Are you positive?" Hastings asked.

"I don't know. I seen her picture before somewhere."

"Could it have been the newspapers?" Hastings asked.

Billy's lean face brightened. "Maybe. Maybe the paper. Why? She do something?"

"No," Hastings said, "nothing."

The round-faced bartender's eyes moved to convey a look to his companion, and the younger bartender moved away toward the other end of the bar.

Hastings left without finishing his drink and drove home.

He shut his front door behind him and stood leaning against it, breathing as if he'd been running hard. The nerve of that young punk, saying he'd seen Agnes's picture before! The nerve of him!

Hastings wiped his forehead, got undressed and took a shower. Wearing pajamas and a bathrobe, he walked into the kitchen to prepare something to eat. He couldn't get the young bartender's words out of his mind, the sincere expression in the eyes.

There was nothing in the refrigerator, only frozen food that would have to thaw, and Hastings was hungry. He decided to get dressed and go out someplace to eat, someplace that stayed open late. He would treat himself to a steak dinner and forget about the

rest of the evening. Slamming the refrigerator door shut, he turned and walked into the bedroom.

He dressed in dark slacks and a white shirt, then walked to the closet, and absently pulled out his checked sportcoat, not realizing until after he'd put it on that it was the one he'd worn the night of the murder. It was still wrinkled and blood-spattered. Unconsciously he slipped his hand into the right side pocket, and his body stiffened as if a thrown switch had sent electricity through him.

Hastings withdrew his hand from the pocket, staring at it as if it belonged to someone else. Clutched firmly in his grip was the graceful head and jaggedly broken neck of the glass swan.

He stood staring at the crystal head, felt the heft the smooth glass in his hand. He remembered now. *He had to remember! He* had been in that tavern before, asking the young bartender about Agnes. Lately she had been cold to him, and Hastings had heard the rumors about her and had simply wanted to check. And no one had recognized the photograph—in the half dozen likely places he'd gone to that night no one had recognized the photograph.

Still, that hadn't been enough for Hastings. He had gone home at nine that evening after his inquiries at the various night spots, and he had tried to force her to make love. Agnes had refused his advances and he had confronted her with the ugly rumors he had been unable to substantiate. She had said he was crazy, that they were only rumors and he could believe them if he liked. Then she had screamed that she no longer loved him, that she wanted a divorce. He had grabbed her then, and she had struggled. He could see her now as he pushed her toward the bedroom, her slender hand closing on the crystal swan neck.

Then she had struck him twice, brutally, on the head.

Hastings shuddered as he remembered his rage, as he remembered wresting the swan from Agnes and smashing it against her head until she was dead, walking her about the living room in grotesque dance, striking her over and over until her face and head were a horrible bloody mass among glittering pieces of broken crystal.

And then . . .

He refused to remember what had happened then. He remembered only stumbling to the bedroom, kicking open the door, falling dizzily onto the mattress.

Hastings stood in trembling horror staring down at what he'd pulled from his pocket. Then, as if a sudden soothing hand had passed over him, he stopped trembling.

He walked into the kitchen and laid the neck and head of the broken swan in the sink. Trancelike, he opened a drawer and brought out a metal meat-tenderizer mallet. Then, rhythmically, he brought the mallet down again and again, shattering what was left of the swan into tiny crystals that he washed down the drain in a swirl of water. After replacing the mallet in the drawer, he opened the cupboard above the sink and got down the bottle of bourbon. With a slow and clumsy rhythm, he walked back into the bedroom.

He awoke slowly, painfully, not really wanting to lose the oblivion of sleep. It was morning, judging by the softly angled rays of light filtering through the curtains, the bark of a faraway dog, the distant position on the edge of the mattress, knocking the empty bottle onto the floor. Too much to drink last

night, he told himself reproachfully, wondering why he had been so foolish. Looking down at his wrinkled and bloodstained sport coat, he remembered it was the one he'd been wearing the night of Agnes's murder.

Drawing a deep breath, he stood. He peeled off the sport coat and hung it in the closet, then he removed the rest of his clothes and stumbled into the bathroom to shower.

After a breakfast of eggs and toast, he picked up the telephone and called Lieutenant Newell to see if there was any news on Agnes's case. There was none, the lieutenant said in an officially sympathetic voice. He assured Hastings that the Plainton police department had done everything possible.

Hastings thanked him and hung up.

That evening he drove into the city and at random chose a neon-lighted tavern. Benny's was the name of the place. Hastings stared straight ahead as he walked across the parking lot, entered and sat at the bar. When the bartender came he ordered a beer and as his drink was set before him he withdrew his wallet and showed the bartender the picture of Agnes.

"Has she ever been in here?" he asked. "Have you ever seen this woman?"

CAPTAIN LEOPOLD FINDS A TIGER

Edward D. Hoch

Maggie Drummond awoke to the distant growling of the animals, and slipped out of the bed without disturbing her husband's slow and regular breathing. Putting on a jacket over her pajamas, she went downstairs and stood for a moment by the door, listening. Something had disturbed them. A prowler, perhaps, or another animal. No need to wake Jack; she'd handled such things before. She slipped into a pair of muddy boots by the door, bundled the jacket about her against the chill of the May morning, and started out the door. Then, as a precaution, she went back to the desk and took her little .22 automatic from the drawer. It was good to carry in one's pocket, and quite sufficient to scare off vandalizing teen-agers.

Leaving the door slightly ajar, she went down the hill and across the railroad tracks to the zoo, following the hard dirt path she knew so well. It was still an hour before daybreak, but the moon was bright and she had no trouble seeing. By the time she reached the outside cages and animal pits, they'd quieted somewhat, but there was still a restlessness about them. Here, beneath the full moon, she was reminded of those safari nights in Africa, when she and Jack would wait together in the darkness by a waterhole or a baited trap.

There was no sign of an intruder, and she hadn't really expected to find one. Since the city had installed the high fence and the gate that they could lock at dusk, the zoo had been relatively free of the sort of thoughtless juvenile vandalism that had caused the death of three small African deer the previous summer.

Still, something had upset the animals.

She passed the tiger pit and peered inside, leaning over the safety railing. There was no sign of Rolf down below, but he could have been in his den, asleep. Usually he wasn't bothered as much as the others by noises in the night. She remembered when they'd captured a tiger very much like Rolf, on a trip to India nine years earlier. She'd had the fright of her life when a second tiger came up behind her in the dusk, and only a quick shot from Jack had saved her life. She often thought that when death finally came to her, it would appear as a tiger stalking her from behind.

The tiger had been a symbol to writers as different as William Blake and Frank Stockton, and so, a symbol to her, too. Rolf was one of her favorites, and perhaps the reason was the very power she saw in his eyes.

Ahead, the polar bears were growing restless again, growling at the night. She felt a chill in her spine, as if something unknown and very dangerous were loose among the animals. Something only they could see.

Then she heard a sound behind her, and turned to face her tiger.

Lieutenant Fletcher was already on the scene when Leopold arrived, looking down over the fence while the photographers and lab men worked. "What is it?"

Leopold asked, his breath visible in the morning chill. It was still cold for May.

"A bad one, Captain. Jack Drummond found his wife in the tiger pit. You knew Maggie Drummond, didn't you?"

"I'd met her," Leopold said. Everyone around town had met Maggie and Jack at one time or another. They'd been the city's newest celebrities when they accepted the zoo job three years earlier. Jack Drummond, a tall, middle-aged man with prematurely white hair, was said to be one of the finest wild animal collectors in the country. Maggie, who'd met him a decade earlier while filming a TV documentary and then stayed on to marry him, was a bright, fearless young woman as much at home on New York's Fifth Avenue as in a jungle encampment. In an era when wild animals had all but vanished from their natural habitats, the Drummonds reminded one of an earlier, better day.

"They got her body out, but it was too late to save her," Fletcher said.

"When did it all happen?" Leopold was searching the thin crowd of onlookers for the familiar white-haired Drummond, but he didn't see him.

"Just before dawn. Drummond was in bed and he thought he heard a scream. When he saw she was missing, he went in search of her. He found the tiger, Rolf, clawing at her body."

"No one could fall into that pit accidentally."

"Hardly seems likely, Captain. Hell of a way to commit suicide."

"If it was suicide." Leopold was staring up the hill at the house. "Where's the husband?"

"Up there. He called a friend of his who came right over."

Leopold started up the worn path to the house. He crossed a single set of railroad tracks, then went up the rest of the way and onto the porch of the two-story white house that went with the job of zoo director. Before he could ring the bell the front door opened and a youngish man wearing glasses greeted him.

"I'm Sam Lang, a friend of the family. Can I help you?"

"Captain Leopold of the violent crimes division. I'd like to speak with Mr. Drummond."

"Certainly." Lang led the way into the quiet house. They found Jack Drummond at the kitchen table, staring at a tumbler half full of bourbon.

Leopold introduced himself and expressed his sympathy.

Jack Drummond shifted his eyes from the bourbon long enough to say, "It was no accident. Somebody killed her."

"Naturally we're investigating that possibility," Leopold said.

"Last summer there were some deer killed, before the city put up the fence. Kids came in the middle of the night and threw rocks at them."

Leopold cleared his throat. "Did your wife sleepwalk, Mr. Drummond?"

"No, never. And even if she'd fallen in there accidentally, Rolf would never have attacked her."

"Was the tiger destroyed?"

"I . . . no, I wouldn't let them. I put him to sleep with a tranquilizer dart."

"Very humane of you," Leopold said, "but animals have been known to do the unpredictable. This tiger, Rolf, might have——"

"No, never! I've seen Maggie playing with him

sometimes while she was feeding him. He's just a big baby."

"Then what took her down there before dawn?"

"She'd often do that, if she heard the animals making a commotion. Ever since the deer were killed last summer she kept a little gun in the desk near the door. If one of us went down there during the night, we took the gun along."

"It's hardly the sort of thing a woman would do. Why didn't she wake you if the animals were restless?"

Drummond sighed and drained his glass, set it on the table.

Sam Lang answered the question for him. "Maggie was absolutely fearless, Captain. Jack's told me plenty of stories about their travels in Africa and India. She faced a charging elephant once without turning a hair. It was nothing for her to walk down that hill to check on the animals."

"And you think someone was waiting for her there?"

"Her own personal tiger," Drummond mumbled.

"What?"

"Once in India I killed a tiger that was charging her from behind. I think it was the only time in my life I ever saw her frightened. She told me after that about a dream she had of a personal tiger—one that would come to her bearing death."

Leopold was not one for mysticism, if that was what it was. "Who had a motive to kill your wife, Mr. Drummond?"

"Kill Maggie? No one!"

"It's been my experience that a number of people have motives for killing any single individual. In the

case of a married woman, her husband is always a prime suspect."

"This is hardly the time or place for such talk!" Sam Lang exploded. "The man's wife has just been killed!"

Jack Drummond held up a hand for silence. He licked his lips, ran his fingers through his white hair, and poured himself another drink. "Captain, in this age of easy divorce, there's no need to kill one's wife. I loved Maggie. I saved her life once and I would have done it again. If she was murdered, it was a gang of kids she found tormenting the animals."

"What about the fence?" Leopold asked.

"Kids can climb fences."

"But they're not likely to, at five in the morning," Sam Lang said. "I live over on the next street, and I heard the animals around that time. I thought it was unusual, but I turned over and went back to sleep."

"Did you hear a scream?"

"No. Just the animals."

"All right," Leopold said. "Thanks for your time, Mr. Drummond. Sorry about the circumstances."

He left them there and went back down the hill. Fletcher and the others were just finishing. "The doc took a look at her, Captain. He said there were only a few claw marks from the tiger—nothing deep."

"Then what killed her?"

"Looks like a stab wound to him. He thinks she was dead before she was thrown into the tiger pit. That may be worth checking."

"Then it's murder," Leopold said quietly. He'd never really doubted it.

Policewoman Connie Trent was just bringing Leopold's afternoon coffee when his phone rang. It was

the medical examiner with the official verdict. Maggid Drummond had been stabbed once in the chest, a fairly deep wound that had gone straight to the heart. "Then she saw her killer," Leopold said.

"It would seem likely, unless he grabbed her from behind."

"Okay. Thanks, Doc."

"Is that the zoo killing?" Connie asked, handing him his coffee.

Leopold nodded. "What do you know about Maggie Drummond?"

"As a woman, I admired her. She was liberated before anyone thought of the word. Filming TV documentaries while still in her twenties, marrying a famous animal expert, and then joining him on trips to remote corners of the globe. Settling down at the zoo here must have been quite a change, but she took it well. She had a certain charm, a personality that came across especially well on television. She'd shown animals on daytime TV shows in Boston and New York, and was probably better known than her husband as far as the general public was concerned."

"Would that be a reason for him to kill her?"

"Hardly, unless he's crazy."

"He seems sane enough," Leopold replied. "You might check him out, though—see what you can learn. Was he fooling around with another woman, or any other gossipy things?"

"I always get the great assignments, don't I, Captain? While you and Fletcher are out checking on drug addicts and sex criminals, I can read the gossip columns."

Leopold chuckled and sipped his coffee, which was always worse in the afternoon, and today was no exception. "I know, it's probably a waste of time.

Chances are she was killed by some kids she found bothering the animals. But we have to figure all the angles."

Fletcher came in then, carrying a large brown envelope from the property clerk's office. "Hi, Connie. How are you?"

"Fine. What's that?"

"Contents of Maggie Drummond's pockets."

"I thought she was wearing pajamas."

"She'd put a jacket on over them," Leopold explained. He watched while Fletcher emptied his envelope. "The .22 automatic been fired?" Leopold asked him.

Fletcher shook his head. "Looks like she never got it out of her pocket."

She'd carried little else with her—a balled-up handkerchief, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, and a folded piece of paper.

"This looks like a note," Connie decided, pouncing on the paper. She was still young enough to be intrigued by such things."

"Probably to the milkman," Fletcher said.

"No! Listen to this: *Maggie—I must see you. Meet me at five at the usual place.* And there's no signature."

"Men who don't sign notes like that take an awful lot for granted," Leopold observed. "All right, Connie. That's all yours. Get on it."

"Wasn't she killed around five?" The prospect of action excited Connie. "Couldn't this note have lured her to her death?"

"It might have been in the pocket for weeks," Leopold said. "If you write someone to meet you at five, without specifying today or tomorrow, morning or afternoon, you usually mean the afternoon of the

present day. Assuming the note was delivered by mail or hand during a given day, the sender would have been more explicit if the meeting were to be at five the following morning."

"Maybe," Connie admitted, not quite certain. She started to go out.

"Good luck. Find out what you can," Leopold told her.

When they were alone, Fletcher said, "She's a great gal. She won't be back till she has something." Then, as Leopold stood up, he asked, "Are you going out too?"

Leopold nodded. "Back to the zoo."

There'd been some thought of keeping the zoo closed for the day, but Jack Drummond had insisted on opening it at noon. Now, as the May afternoon warmed into a pleasantly sunny spring day, the place was full of after-school children and more than a few curiosity-seeking adults. Leopold noticed a large crowd of gawkers at the tiger pit and steered clear of there.

Drummond himself was nowhere in sight, but an older man in green denims was feeding the sea lions. "This is usually a big attractions," he commented, only half to Leopold, "but today they all want to see where she died."

"I'm Captain Leopold, investigating the case. Could I ask you a few questions?"

The man hurled another fish to the waiting sea lions. "Sure, ask away! I'm Robby Blake. Been working her for seventeen years, long before the Drummonds took over."

"Did you get along well with them?"

He snorted and went on with the feeding. "Sure, as

long as I kept my mouth shut! They had their fancy ideas—pastel-colored walls, music for the animals." For the first time Leopold became aware of gentle taped background music played softly over the zoo's public-address system. "I asked her once about it and all she said was it soothed the animals!"

"Had any trouble with vandals lately?" Leopold asked.

Robby Blake scratched his gray head. "Not much since the fence was put up."

"The fence runs around the entire zoo, including the Drummonds' house on the hill?"

"Yeah."

"What about the railroad tracks? There must be an opening for them."

"Well, sure. But this spur line is hardly ever used anymore. There's a gate across the tracks."

"Do you live on the grounds?"

"Me? Not on your life! I get enough of these animals all day! Most zoos have a caretaker, but with the Drummonds living right here it's really not necessary."

Leopold thanked him and moved on. He walked out to the railroad tracks and followed them to the gate in the wire fence. If there had once been a padlock on the gate, it was no longer there. A chain held the gate closed, but it was not locked.

He went back to the zoo, walking past the polar-bear pit to the enclosure occupied by the tiger Rolf. Most of the crowd had drifted away now, and the great beast sat quietly in the sun without moving. Perhaps it was still logy from the effects of the tranquilizer. The whole zoo seemed strangely silent in the afternoon sun, as if the animals were waiting for something unknown. Then, all at once, a half-dozen

of them set up a howl. The restlessness spread to the others, and in a few moments the place was a bedlam of noise.

Leopold saw Robby Blake coming out of the zoo's office. "What's the matter with them, Blake?"

"Damned if I know," the man replied. He went back into the office and left Leopold standing by the tiger pit, staring down at Rolf's large golden eyes. The great beast growled, as if in answer to the others, and Leopold turned away. It was not this tiger he sought, but another—one that prowled the city and had to be found.

Fletcher had some information when Leopold returned to his office. "First, Captain, I talked to some of the neighbors near the zoo. Four of them were awakened by the animals' unusual restlessness, and two who checked the time put it at around five o'clock."

"That confirms what Sam Lang told me. It seems certain there was a prowler bothering the animals. He probably entered the grounds through an unlocked gate across the railroad tracks."

"Then I picked up a kid named Mike Ragovitch," Fletcher went on. "He's eighteen, on probation for killing those deer last summer. Want to see him?"

Leopold followed Fletcher into the detention room. Ragovitch was a sullen, long-haired youth who stared at the floor and wouldn't look up when Leopold spoke to him. "I haven't done anything," he mumbled.

"Where were you at five this morning?"

"In bed. At my apartment."

"You live alone?"

"Yeah. Pa booted me out after the trouble last summer."

"Then you can't prove where you were at five this morning?"

"Do I need to?"

"There was a killing at the zoo."

"I heard about it on the news."

"Did you do it, Mike?"

"Hell, no!" His head came up. "Is that why I was picked up? I want a lawyer!"

"Nobody's accusing you of anything. We just brought you in to ask a few questions. Do you own a knife, Mike?"

Ragovitch shook his head. "I'm not talking without a lawyer. You're not getting me for violation of probation!"

Leopold sighed and he and Fletcher went back to his office. "Question him for another hour, Fletcher, and then turn him loose if you don't have anything. I think he's clean."

"Where does that leave us, Captain?"

Leopold moved the papers around his desk in mild frustration. "I don't know. One of two things happened: Either it was a random killing by some bum or vandal, or someone meant to kill her. If we knew which, we'd have a good chance of cracking the case."

"There was no evidence of vandalism at the zoo, Captain."

"I know. Yet something stirred up those animals. Are we to believe in evil spirits. Fletcher?"

It was the following morning before Policewoman Connie Trent landed her first real lead. She'd been interviewing the dead woman's friends, moving through the various levels of the city's social elite,

from the Friends of the Zoological Society to the Yacht Club where the Drummonds had maintained a membership since coming to the city. It was only when she reached Sara Peacock, a close friend of Maggie's, that she pressed the matter of the marriage.

"Were they happy—Maggie and Jack Drummond?"

Sara Peacock was a slim, almost boyish woman in her mid-thirties. As a contemporary of Maggie Drummond's, she spoke with unusual frankness. "Were they happy! At least Jack was. He worshiped her. And apparently she adored him! I think I've heard that story of his saving her life a dozen times!"

"Then Jack isn't fooling around with anyone else?"

"Heavens, no! He's as straight as they come, unless maybe there's a llama at the zoo he has an eye for. I always kidded him and said the animals were Maggie's only competition." She grew somber. "I guess I won't be kidding him about animals anymore."

"You understand we have to check all the angles. A lover could have had a motive for wanting Maggie dead. But since they were both so straight—"

"I didn't say *both*, dear."

"You mean Maggie Drummond had a lover?"

"I wouldn't put it quite that strongly," Sara Peacock said, backtracking a bit. "But she had a close friend. A close male friend."

"Would you mind giving me his name?"

The slim woman hesitated only a moment. Then, in a gesture born of some lingering malice, she said, "Sure—why not? It's Sam Lang."

Captain Leopold sat back and listened to Connie's report. When she'd finished he said, "I met Sam Lang briefly yesterday at the Drummond house. He's a

friend of the family, lives nearby. That might explain the note in Maggie Drummond's pocket."

"Want me to check him out?"

Leopold was starting to reply when Fletcher poked his head into the office. "Jack Drummond's here, Captain. Says he has to see you."

"Send him in."

Drummond entered quickly, like a man obsessed. Ignoring Connie, he thrust a crudely printed note into Leopold's hand. "That came in the morning mail!"

Leopold read it aloud: *I know you killed your wife. You can have the evidence for ten thousand dollars. Wait for a phone call at three this afternoon.* It was unsigned. "Who sent it?"

"Probably the real killer," Drummond said.

"That doesn't seem likely."

"What should I do?"

"Answer the phone at three o'clock. We'll be there too."

When he'd gone, Leopold turned to Connie. "This might be the break we need. The printing on this note doesn't match the note in Maggie Drummond's pocket, but there still is a chance Sam Lang's involved. Use some excuse to call on him at his office around three."

That afternoon, Leopold and Fletcher sat in the house on the hill, waiting for Jack Drummond's phone to ring. Fletcher had made arrangements to trace the call, though they both knew it was a virtual impossibility if the conversation were brief. At ten after three, Fletcher said, "It was a hoax, Captain. Nothing's going to happen."

"We'll see."

At three fifteen the phone at Drummond's elbow rang. "Hello?" he answered.

Leopold picked up the extension across the room and heard a muffled voice say, "*You* killed your wife, Drummond."

"I didn't! Who is this?"

"I can prove it. I have the evidence here in front of me."

Even though muffled, the voice sounded oddly familiar to Leopold, but if Drummond recognized it he gave no sign. "How much do you want?" he asked, raising his eyes to meet Leopold's.

"I told you in the note. Ten thousand."

"Where?"

"The trash barrel at the entrance to the zoo, just outside the gate. Leave it there this afternoon——"

"Wait a minute! I can't raise ten thousand this afternoon! The banks are already closed!"

"Tomorrow morning, then. Put the money in an empty popcorn box and drop it in the barrel at eleven o'clock. Then leave the area and return to your house."

"All right."

"I'll take the money and leave another popcorn box with the evidence. You can get it any time after one."

"Fine," Drummond said. Almost at once the connection was broken.

Fletcher snorted. "That guy's really an amateur! Imagine having a drop like that in a public park in broad daylight! We can have a dozen men watching that barrel."

"He's either very dumb or extremely smart," Leopold said. "We don't know which."

"Will you have people watching the barrel?" Drummond asked.

"Just one," Leopold answered after a moment's thought.

At ten thirty the following morning, Connie Trent was stretched out on a blanket reading a book, less than a hundred feet from the entrance to the zoo. With the May temperature barely seventy, it was not the sort of day she would have chosen for lounging in the park, but the sun was bright and in her sweater and jeans she did not seem out of place.

It had been Leopold's idea, of course, after she returned with a dejected report that Sam Lang had been in conference at his law firm during the crucial three o'clock to three thirty period. She hadn't been able to see him or to confirm the conference. She also hadn't been able to confirm Sara Peacock's story about Lang and Maggie Drummond. "I'm a failure, Captain," she said sadly.

Leopold had merely smiled.

"Maybe tomorrow you can make it all up. How'd you like a morning in the park?"

So here she was, with her blanket and her book, and a .38 Special in her purse. There was plenty of grass for lounging within sight of the trash barrel by the entrance.

At eleven o'clock she watched Jack Drummond appear with a crumpled popcorn box and drop it casually into the green barrel. She kept watching for an hour after that, but no one approached the barrel. The few people entering the zoo at that time of the morning did so without a second look at the trash receptacle.

Then, just after noon, a boy on a bike rode up. He

was carrying a popcorn box very much like the one Drummond had. He paused, glanced into the barrel, and quickly exchanged boxes. Connie's hand hit the tiny walkie-talkie in her purse. "The boy on the bike picked up the money. Should I take him?"

"We'll follow him," Leopold's voice crackled. "You pick up what he left, but be careful!"

As the boy rode away on his bike, she casually stood up, stretched, and walked over to the barrel with a crumpled tissue. The popcorn box was on the very top. She took it, opened it, and a small reel of recording tape slid out into her hand. There was nothing else in the box. Leopold had told her to be careful. Had he feared a bomb?

Then she saw a police car drive up along the zoo road. Fletcher was at the wheel. "Get in," he said. "The Captain's after the kid."

"It's a tape recording."

Fletcher scolded, "You shouldn't have opened the box till I got here."

"You *did* think it was a bomb!"

"Somebody killed Maggie Drummond. Maybe the same person's after her husband."

He speeded up the car and adjusted the two-way radio. Leopold's voice reached them from somewhere close by. "I'm losing the boy in the traffic. He's too fast on that bicycle."

"What about the motorcycles?"

"I'll tell them to move in. We'll have to take him."

Fletcher cursed softly. "We didn't figure on a long-range chase or we could have put a beeper in the package—you know, a directional transmitter."

Connie was silent until they pulled up behind Leopold's car a few blocks away. The boy was there, surrounded by Leopold and three uniformed officers,

looking thoroughly frightened. "I don't know anything," he was insisting. "A guy paid me to do it!"

"What guy?" Leopold asked.

"I don't know."

"Where did you meet him?"

"He stopped me on the street, just down the block from here."

"And you were to bring this box to him there?"

"Yeah. He gave me five bucks and promised me another five."

Leopold turned to Connie. "Go with him. It's probably too late, but our man may be still hanging around."

There was no one at the appointed meeting place. They waited half an hour and no one came. Whoever it was had been frightened away.

Captain Leopold finished playing the tape for the second time and stared down at the reel without comprehension. "Did you hear what I heard, Fletcher?"

"Sure did, Captain. A big fat nothing. The tape is blank."

"I played both tracks, backward and forward. There's nothing on it."

"Looks like our caller was a fraud after all. Maybe it's a new kind of racket—go through the obits and phone everyone whose wife has died and say, 'I know you killed her.' I wonder how much money you'd make."

"He wouldn't have made much off this phony bundle we had for him."

Connie came in to join them. "I've gotten a description from the boy, for what it's worth, Captain. Older man, white hair, sort of seedy looking."

"That's the best he could do?"

"That's it."

Leopold picked up the phone and dialed Jack Drummond's number. When Drummond answered, he said, "Leopold here."

"I've been waiting for your call. Did you get him?"

"Afraid not. He sent a boy to pick up the money. We have a description, but it's not very good."

"Did he leave anything?"

"A tape recording."

"Is there anything on it?"

"No. Not a thing. Looks like the whole thing was a hoax."

"Then you're no closer to finding Maggie's killer?"

"We have a couple of other leads," Leopold answered vaguely. "One thing, Mr. Drummond—I'd be very careful for a while. There's still the possibility the killer's after you, too."

"Don't worry. These nights I sleep with a gun under the pillow."

Leopold said, "Good. I'll be in touch," and hung up.

While Fletcher and Connie decided who would go for coffee, Leopold stared out the window at the sun-drenched parking lot. Spring again in the city. A large black dog came bounding out of one of the cars, ignoring its owner's shouted commands, and that reminded Leopold of something. He watched the dog for a moment and then turned to Fletcher. "See that dog down there?"

"The black one? Sure, Captain."

"Go get him for me."

"Get him?" Fletcher looked blank.

"Bring him up here."

"Here? In your office?"

"That's right. Hurry—before he gets away!"

"Captain, are you feeling all right?"

"I never felt better, Fletcher. Go get that dog!"

Jack Drummond awoke to the distant growling of the animals. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was not yet two o'clock. Slipping on a jacket over his pajamas, he reached beneath the pillow for the little .32 Colt and put it into the pocket. At the front door he remembered his boots, put them on, then bundled the jacket around him and started down the hill.

There was no sign of an intruder, and he hadn't really expected to fine one. Still, something was upsetting the animals.

He passed the tiger pit and peered into the darkness, searching for Rolf. There was no sign of him, but he could have been in his den. He remembered that tigers had always been something of a symbol to Maggie—a symbol of her death, she'd told him.

The night air was good as he walked along. The wolves, baying at the moon, the polar bears restless in their cage, none of it bothered him just then. He was at peace for the first time in days.

Then he heard the sound behind him, and turned to face his own special tiger.

It was Captain Leopold.

"You're under arrest, Mr. Drummond, for the murder of your wife."

Drummond simply nodded, and let the gun fall from his limp fingers. "Yes," he said. "Yes, it's over, isn't it?"

While they were booking Drummond and allowing him to call his lawyer, Leopard sat in his office with

Fletcher and Connie. He was playing the tape again, and this time they were all listening.

"I still don't hear anything," Fletcher said, looking puzzled.

"You're not supposed to. It's too high-pitched for human ears. But that dog you brought up here this afternoon certainly heard it."

Connie smiled at the memory of it. "We all thought you'd flipped, Captain, if you'll pardon the expression. How'd you know there was something on that tape?"

"Somebody was blackmailing Drummond—or trying to—and I decided it was serious and not a hoax. After all, why blackmail an innocent man? When the blackmailer phoned, he never even warned Drummond away from the police. He must have been certain Drummond would pay up instead of talk. That meant he had to have something against him. When I telephoned Drummond, I said we had a tape recording. He immediately asked. *Is there anything on it*? Not *What's on it*? which would be the normal question, but *Is there anything on it*? He was relying on the fact that the high-pitched whistling would be inaudible to our ears."

"But," Connie asked, "if he were guilty all along, why come to the police with that blackmail note?"

"You don't become a wild animal trapper without guts and nerve. When the tiger, Rolf, didn't mangle the body as he'd hoped, Drummond was the first to insist his wife was murdered, because he knew the autopsy would find the stab wound anyway. Likewise, he came to us with that note because he wasn't about to spend the rest of his life paying blackmail. He was hoping that even if the tape turned up, we wouldn't realize there was anything on it."

Fletcher scratched his head. "He played the tape over the zoo's public address system?"

Leopold nodded. He used a timer to switch it on a little before five in the morning. The high-pitched whistle was enough to awaken some of the animals and make them restless. That in turn stirred up the others. He knew his wife would go down to investigate, as she had in the past. He could kill her there, drop her body in the tiger pit, and make it look like some horrible accident or the work of a murderous vandal. And the noise of the animals would disturb the neighbors, offering further evidence of a prowler at the zoo. When I confirmed the tape's purpose with that dog in my office, all we had to do was sneak into the zoo through the unlocked railroad gate and play it over the public address system. I wanted to see if the sound would really disturb the animals, and it did. I wanted to see if the animals would awaken Drummond, and they did. They must have awakened him the other night too, but he pretended to be asleep so his wife would go down the hill to investigate. Then he followed her and killed her."

"How do you know Drummond used the tape?" Connie asked. "Couldn't it have been another zoo employee?"

"Only Drummond could be certain Maggie would go to investigate the disturbance. And remember, though she was facing her killer, she never drew the gun from her pocket. It had to be someone she trusted, someone she wasn't surprised to see there."

"And the blackmailer?"

"The boy's description fits Robby Blake, and he had no love for the Drummonds. I'm having him picked up. I think he found the tape on the machine in the zoo office and was suspicious of it. I think he

actually played it the morning after the killing, before Drummond had a chance to remove it. I was at the zoo at the time, aware of the music playing through the public address system. Then after a time there was silence, and the animals grew restless. At just that time Blake came out of the zoo office to see what was up, and then went back in again. He realized what the tape was, and the next morning the blackmail note arrived."

"And the note in the dead woman's pocket?"

"From a prior meeting with Sam Lang. I suppose Drummond found it, and that set him off. He would have recognized the handwriting of his friend."

Later, as he was going home, Leopold stopped to listen to Jack Drummond's statement. He was dictating it to a police stenographer while his lawyer and Fletcher stood by. "I saved her life once, back in India," he was saying. "It belonged to me, not to Sam Lang nor any other man. It belonged to me, as surely as those animals I brought back!"

It was a melancholy confession of murder, and Leopold did not linger to hear the rest.

ELEGY FOR A SONGBIRD

Clayton Matthews

THE LOUNGE held only about ten people at nine o'clock. Roger Cates rippled his long fingers lightly over the piano keys, a minimum of his attention required.

Behind him, through the wide expanse of window, the night lights of Greater Los Angeles glittered. It had rained earlier in the evening, sweeping the night clear of smog. The club was perched on a high bluff, the cocktail lounge jutting out into space.

"I beg your pardon?" Roger's head snapped around. "I guess I'm daydreaming tonight."

Of the five couples in the lounge, two sat at the piano bar. One of the women, blonde and fifty, said, "Play *Mood Indigo*, will you, Roger?" She fluttered a dollar bill into the brandy snifter on the piano.

"*Mood Indigo*. Just for you, Betty."

Roger automatically swung into the melody, but his attention was at that moment caught by a tall woman just entering the lounge. There was no rule against unescorted women, yet it was a rare event. The club was isolated, unadvertised, and patronized mainly by club members or by people familiar with Roger's playing and singing.

The woman came directly to the piano bar, taking the first seat on Roger's right, close by the

microphone. She wore a flowered pants suit. Her face was rather long, framed by long black hair sweeping to her shoulders. Her complexion was pale, a thing uncommon in Southern California, her face without makeup except for the faintest touch of lipstick. The mouth, full, sensual, Roger found curiously exciting. Brilliant black eyes appraised him candidly before she turned to the short-skirted waitress at her elbow and ordered a stinger.

When her drink came, she took out a cigarette case, extracted a long cigarette and lit it, nostrils flaring delicately as she exhaled smoke. She took a sip of her drink.

Roger, fingers resting on the keyboard, said, "Anything you'd like to hear, miss?" There was no wedding ring on her finger.

She squinted through drifting smoke. "How about *Raindrops*?"

Roger played the opening bars of *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head,* then said, "Do you sing?"

"A little. I'm not very good." Her voice was low, husky.

He swung the mike around toward her. "Suppose we be the judge of that."

She stared at him hard for a moment, sipped at her drink again and cleared her throat. To his muted accompaniment, she began to sing, voice uncertain at first, but picking up volume and confidence halfway through the lyrics. Her voice was untrained, but good, with what Roger thought of as a smoky quality. Not in the same class as Irene, of course, but few were.

At the end of the song there was a small ripple of applause. She glanced around with a start, as though

she had forgotten where she was. She smiled with shy pleasure. "I've never sung in—"

"In a place like this?" he finished.

"Do many women just walk in like this," she gestured vaguely, "and sing?"

"As many as I can con into it. It makes my job easier."

"Are any of them any good?"

"Not many. A few." Roger shrugged. "You are one of the few."

"Why . . . thank you."

Her name was Jean Forbes.

Roger began playing softly. Jean cocked her head for a moment, frowning with a puzzled expression. "I don't recognize that . . ."

"Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair."

She shook her head. "I don't think I've ever heard it."

"I like all the old ones. I suppose that dates me a little."

"You don't look so old to me." She finished the stinger and, with the applause still ringing in her ears, her initial shyness had receded, and she took on a faint, perhaps unconscious, coquettish manner.

She sang a few more songs and Roger felt much older than his forty years as he listened, watching her warm to the applause and his attention.

He had been thirty-five the night Irene came into the lounge where he was appearing at the time. Then, just being with her had made him feel younger.

Jean confided that she had stopped in for only one drink before going home, but she stayed until Roger played and sang his theme song, *Good Night, Irene.*

She appeared again three nights later, a Saturday, and the crowd was much larger. She came in at ten

o'clock and stayed until Roger finished. Her singing was more confident this time, the applause more generous.

When Roger drove his car out of the parking lot a short time later, he saw her standing under the entrance awning. It was raining hard. He drove up and opened the curb door. "Waiting for someone?"

She ran down to peer in. "Oh, Roger, it's you! I'm waiting for a cab."

Roger hesitated only briefly before saying, "Hop in, I'll drive you home."

She lived in Hollywood. On the way they talked of music for the most part. Jean had wanted to become a professional singer, that was her original reason for coming to Hollywood, but it hadn't worked out. "The competition was just too stiff. I tried it for over a year, got a few paltry singing jobs, then gave it up as a lost cause."

"You gave it up after only a year?" Roger was incredulous.

"Sure, I realized I might be old and gray before I made it, if ever. Just a few weeks ago I was offered this gig as soloist with a band on tour, but I turned it down."

"You turned down a singing job?"

Something in his voice made her laugh uncertainly. "Sure, I've got this good job now, secretary in a large investment firm. I would have had to give that up—and for what? The tour was for only six months."

Roger said nothing, staring straight ahead at the driving rain.

Jean rode for a few blocks in silence, but she was soon chatting away again. She had been married once, divorced now for over a year.

Talking of her marriage, she became bitter. "I

loved Bart, but he was no good. He drank too much and was jealous, possessive. He would get drunk and beat me for no reason at all. Once I was in the hospital for a week. That was when I decided I'd had enough."

Roger said nothing to any of this.

Two blocks from her place, Jean said, "You don't talk much about yourself, Roger. Have you ever been married?"

"No."

Undeterred by his curtness, she said lightly, "Not even in love, not ever?"

"Once."

She lived in a court, the last one in back on an alley, and she instructed him to drive down the alley. "It's easier that way."

It was late now, all the courts dark.

She turned toward him, her face a blur in the dimness. "Roger . . . I know it's late, but would you like to come in for a drink? Or a cup of coffee?"

Since he seldom got home much before two, Roger always slept late. The police woke him a little after eight the next morning. Roger, yawning, came to the door of his bachelor apartment, not even bothering to put on a robe over his pajamas.

There were two of them, in dark suits, about the same size and age, with neutral faces and hard eyes. They introduced themselves and showed their card cases. They asked politely if they could come in. They had some questions.

Roger stepped back and let them in. He yawned again before saying, "Questions about what?"

"Do you know a Jean Forbes, Mr. Gates?"

"Jean Forbes? No. . . ." Roger started to shake his head, then paused. "Yes, of course, I know her."

"You admit knowing her?"

"If she's the one who came to the club a couple of times, yes, I know her." He frowned. "Why? What's this all about?"

"You drove her home from the club last night?"

"Well, yes. . . . She was waiting for a cab and it was raining. Yes, I drove her home." His glance was puzzled, a touch truculent. "You still haven't told me what this is all about."

"You drove her home, then went in with her, for a nightcap, maybe?"

"I did not," Roger said emphatically. "She asked me but I left her at the door."

"You didn't go in?"

"No, I did not go in, Officer."

"Can you prove that?"

"No, I suppose not. On the other hand, can you prove I did?"

This didn't rout the two officers, but it blunted their driving edge. "Jean Forbes was found murdered in her court apartment this morning. She had been strangled, her killer used a venetian-blind cord. She died early this morning, sometime between two and three o'clock."

Roger whistled softly. "I see. Then that's why . . ." He shook his head. "Lord, I am sorry. I didn't know her all that well, but still . . ."

They agreed that it was a shocking thing, if that was what he had started to say. They asked a few more routine questions, the steam gone out of them then, before departing.

Roger turned away from the door, again yawning.

He was still sleepy. He hoped he had seen the last of the police, yet he knew he hadn't.

Two other officers came for him shortly before noon. This time he was told he was wanted downtown for questioning. He was driven downtown and escorted to an interrogation room in the police department. The room was painted an institutional gray, with a table and three straight-back chairs, and a single, hooded lamp dangling low over the table.

They left him alone for almost an hour. Roger sat, smoking one cigarette after another. He sat facing the door. Sure he was under observation, he tried to appear relaxed, yet from time to time he caught himself leaning toward the door, tension coiling in him. He didn't know if the door were locked, and it took all his willpower not to step over and see.

Finally it opened, and two men came in, both in plainsclothes. One was tall, well over six feet, the other just making the height requirements.

It was the short one who did most of the questioning. His long face was pitted, as though from a childhood bout with smallpox, and it gave him a sinister look. Yet he was patient, polite, his voice so soft Roger sometimes had to strain to hear. He sat across the table from Roger. He pulled the light down until it shone mostly on Roger, his own face blurred in shadow. The other officer leaned against the wall directly behind Roger, smoking quietly.

"My name is Owen Harter, Mr. Cates. We have a few questions."

"I thought I answered all the questions for the other officers."

"Not quite all. We need to go back a little, about eighteen months ago, in fact. You see, we always look into the background of people involved in a homi-

cide. We did that in your case, and we found Irene Webb."

Roger said tightly, "I was cleared of that."

"Yes. Yes, you were," the soft voice said. "But her killer was never found. And she used to come in to sing at the piano bar where you worked at the time. In police work, we are always suspicious of coincidences. Of course, the Webb girl was killed with a knife, the girl last night was strangled."

"There is another difference—I was in love with Irene, we were going to be married."

"There *is* that, but then you must admit that the similarities do raise some questions."

"All that I see is that I'm being hounded because I once was—" Realizing that he was shouting, Roger lowered his voice. "Am I going to have to live with that for the rest of my life?"

"I'm afraid so, if you are in any way involved in a homicide."

"I don't know what else I can say," Roger said resignedly, "to convince you that I didn't kill Jean."

There was a sudden movement behind him, and the second officer stepped up to place a rough hand on Roger's shoulder, forcing him back against the chair. "You can tell us the truth!" he said in a hard voice. He leaned down close. "You went into that house last night, didn't you? You tried something, she resisted and you killed her! Isn't that the way it was, Cates?"

"No, sir, it is not," Roger said steadily.

The hard fingers dug in. "You're lying!"

Harter leaned forward, scarred face swimming into the light. The soft voice said, "Now, Jack, we don't know that Mr. Cates is lying, do we? Of course, if he is, it will go much easier for him if he tells the truth

now. Jean Forbes wasn't raped, we know that. Were you frightened off, Mr. Cates? Or did you kill her for another reason? You can tell *me*, Mr. Cates, I'm your friend here."

Roger's glance skipped from one to the other. Then he laughed harshly. "The good-guy, bad-guy routine, huh? You'll get nowhere that way. I've been through that bit before."

There were a few more questions after that. Finally Harter said wearily, "Okay, Cates, you can go now. Just don't leave town suddenly."

"I'm not going anywhere. I have no reason to."

Roger had been playing in a little bar in Santa Monica, only a block from the beach, when he met Irene. Slim, golden, a green-eyed goddess right out of an erotic dream, she had come in late one night with a man whose name Roger never learned.

Both were a little high, and Irene was singing into the mike before her first drink was served. Her voice was as golden as the rest of her, with a "lilt of Irish laughter." Roger learned later that she'd had some voice training and had cut a few records that were a modest success. She had been offered several singing jobs, but had turned them all down. To be a success as a singer was too arduous, demanding too much of her. "I'm having too much fun to go through that gig."

This was something Roger couldn't understand. He had always wanted to be a singer. He had struggled toward that goal, sacrificing everything, surmounting one disappointment after another until one day a shrewd talent manager told him, "You've got a pleasant enough voice, Cates. And it's true many singers make it big with a worse talent than yours,

but they have the funky sound to make it big today. Or a gimmick. This is the age of the gimmick singers. Find a gimmick and you just *might* have a chance."

Roger couldn't find the right gimmick and had to continue eking out a living as a lounge entertainer. So he couldn't understand anyone fortunate enough to have the necessary talent *and* the opportunity, refusing to take advantage. By the time he had learned this much about Irene, however, it didn't really matter. He was in love with her.

A week passed after that first night, and he didn't expect to see her again. Then she came back—alone, and sober. She sang a dozen songs and was a big hit in the small lounge. She seemed totally unimpressed by the applause and flattering words. She said later, "What does it really mean? A pack of barhounds, smashed and sob-sistery over a few sentimental songs."

She stayed until the lounge closed. She seemed to take it for granted that Roger knew she was waiting for him.

They walked along the deserted beach. It was late fall, long after midnight, and the fog hung like ectoplasm around them.

Irene hugged his arm against her side and shivered. "I love the fog. It's my Gaelic blood, I suspect."

He turned, took her into his arms. Her mouth was soft, with a tart flavor, her body pliant in his embrace, and he loved her very much.

"I love you, Irene."

"That's nice. I think I like that."

She was a creature of many moods, alternating between gloomy and gay, highly independent of spirit and quick to anger. At times there was a wanton quality about her that troubled Roger.

She made a habit of dropping in two or three

nights a week, and afterward they would walk along the beach if it wasn't raining, sometimes attending a movie or a play, sometimes not. Irene had a little sports car, and she liked to drive it fast, hair whipping in the wind, eyes wild.

A plan gradually took shape in Roger's mind. Actually there were two plans, both part of the whole. He made a few inquiries, and received encouraging responses.

It was raining hard the night he was ready to broach it to Irene. It was late when she came in, and she had been drinking. He wanted to go someplace where they could talk quietly, but she insisted they walk on the beach. He finally gave in. Since meeting her, he had taken to keeping a raincoat in the bar, and she was wearing one when she arrived. Although late in the year, it wasn't too cold, the rain was unseasonably warm, and they walked along the beach barefoot.

The rain slanted down, wind-driven, and Roger found it very difficult to talk, but it had been building up, a pressure not to be denied, and it all came spilling out.

"Irene, I've asked around. A couple of places are interested in us cutting a record—you singing, me on the piano. And I found a club, a top club, willing to give us a tryout, the same setup, you singing, me on the keys. Within a year we could be on top, making big money."

She said something, but the wind and the rain tore her words away.

In his urgency Roger seized her by the arm and pulled her to a halt. "What did you say?"

"I said, who needs that scene? I told you before, I'm not interested."

"But all that talent going to waste! And this is a chance that doesn't come to many people."

"It's my talent. Roger, it's cutthroat up there."

"I'll be there to back you up."

"For a while maybe. But the best of teams break up sooner or later."

"You don't understand!" He shook her hard. "This is for keeps. We'd be man and wife. I'm asking you to marry me, Irene!"

"Marry you!"

At first he thought she was crying. He peered closely at her. She was laughing! "What's so funny?"

"You are! You have to be out of your gourd! A piano player with very little talent, doomed to mediocrity . . . You think I'd marry *you*?"

His mind groped toward some measure of understanding. "But I told you I loved you! You've been going out with me . . ."

She shrugged. "It was fun, something to pass the time. Now it isn't fun anymore."

His fingers bit into her arm. "You can't mean that!"

"Oh, but I do mean it. You're hurting my arm!" She wrenched free of his grasp. "This is the finish. I won't be seeing you again, Roger."

He stood, unmoving, as she walked away from him. Within fifty yards she was swallowed up by the rain and the dark.

She was found on the beach the next day, a knife driven into her ribs just below the heart. She was still barefoot. The rain had washed away any possible footprints in the sand near her body, and the knife was never identified. There were no clues of any kind.

Roger was questioned exhaustively. It was a well-

known fact that he had been seeing her, and he didn't deny being the last one to see her alive, with the possible exception of the killer. Fortunately for him it was eventually discovered that Irene had been seeing at least two other men, both possessively jealous, and had quarreled with both of them before witnesses; and no motive could be ascribed to Roger.

The investigation uncovered the fact that there had been tentative plans for Irene and Roger to cut a record, and there was the job offer from a reputable nightclub. Still, there wasn't enough evidence to indict Roger—or either of the other two men, for that matter. In the end the case was marked unsolved, and the investigation dwindled away.

Roger wasn't questioned again about Jean's death, which surprised him a little. With Irene he had been questioned almost every day for weeks. Then, two days after Jean's body was found, he read the explanation in the paper. Jean's ex-husband had been charged with her murder. According to the newspaper story, he had never really accepted the divorce. On several occasions, when drunk, he had bothered her at work and had threatened her life. Just a week before her death he had appeared at her door, again to make drunken threats; and on the night she was killed, he had no alibi, had been bar-hopping, with only vague recollections of where he had been.

Roger had one more visit from the police, the soft-spoken Owen Harter who had questioned him at the police building. Harter had with him a blown-up picture of Jean's ex-husband. "Did you ever see this man? Did he ever come into the bar where you work?"

Roger examined the picture carefully before say-

ing, "No, I've never seen this man before in my life."

"You're sure, now?"

"I'm positive."

Harter sighed softly and put the picture away. He studied Roger curiously for a moment. "Well, we've indicted him . I doubt we'll ever convict him. I'm far from satisfied, but I'm outvoted. If I only had more time, I'm convinced I could—" He broke off, head canted to one side. "One rather curious thing I did find out in my poking around, however. It seems that you've made several demonstration records in the past. None caught on. Then, after a hiatus of over a year, you made another—one more disaster."

"All right, so I don't have what it takes to make it big," Roger said tightly. "I don't see why that should interest you."

"Maybe it shouldn't, I don't know. But it does strike me as curious that you just got word that there was no interest in the last one the very day Jean Forbes was killed. My superiors think it means nothing. Maybe they're right. Who can say?" He started out. "So long, Cates. Not good-bye. I have a strong hunch we'll be seeing each other again, one of these days."

Roger went back to work. The police had questioned the club employees and the regular customers, but no suspicions had been voiced about Roger, so his job wasn't in jeopardy.

The storm that had moved into the city three days ago still lingered on, erupting into intermittent showers, and the club wasn't crowded all evening.

Around ten Roger glanced up and saw a strange girl sliding onto the stool nearest the microphone. She was a redhead, very attractive, and well under

thirty. Her gray eyes regarded Roger with bold curiosity.

"Hello," Roger said.

"Hi," she said brightly.

Softly, Roger began playing *Laura*, humming a few bars under his breath. Then he said, "Do you sing, Laura?"

"Well . . . I like to think so. But probably not very well."

"Suppose I be the judge of that." He bent the microphone around to her. "What song would you like, Laura, and in what key do you sing?"

Roger could only hope that her voice would be terrible.

THE VOLCANO EFFECT

Elijah Ellis

It was Sheriff Ed Carson on the phone and he didn't sound happy. "There's a man and his wife here in my office. Man claims he's scared some fella is goin' to kill him."

"Any attempts been made?" I asked.

The sheriff laughed. "I don't think so. Truth is, these people ain't impressed with me. They want to see the county attorney. I'll bring them up."

"No, I'll come down," I said, glancing at my watch. "It's time to go to lunch anyhow."

Minutes later I left my third-floor office and went down the zigzag flights of grimy marble stairs to the ground floor of the ancient Pokochobee County Courthouse. I went into the sheriff's office. I walked across the big, dingy outer office toward the open door of Carson's private cubbyhole. His desk faced the door and he rose as he saw me coming.

Inside, I found a man and a woman on chairs facing the desk.

The sheriff said, "Mr. and Mrs. Trent, this is Lon Gates, the county attorney that you asked for."

Trent got up to give my hand a brief, clammy shake. He was a squat, burly man with bloodshot eyes and stubbled jaw. He looked as if he hadn't had much sleep lately.

"Maybe you can help," he said. Scowling at the sheriff, he added, "All we can get from this guy is a runaround."

Mrs. Trent gave a deprecating murmur. She had dark hair and a nice face. There was a sparkle of diamonds on her fingers and she tapped ashes from a cigarette into a tray on the desk.

I lifted an eyebrow at Ed Carson. As usual, he had on faded khakis and his lank gray hair needed trimming, as did his ragged pepper-and-salt mustache.

He said mildly, "I been tryin' to explain that there's not much we can do to help—"

"This man followed us down here from Memphis, our home," Trent broke in. "He's going to kill me if he can. He as much as told me so back home."

"What man?" I asked.

"Richard Royce, of course," Trent said impatiently. "The thing is to get him behind bars where he belongs, right now. We can talk later."

I asked, "What's he done to you?"

Trent waved thick, hairy arms. "He's here, isn't he? He followed us, didn't he? That's enough."

I exchanged a glance with Carson. His eyes had a sardonic gleam. He didn't speak.

Now Mrs. Trent said, "Let me explain, Mr. Gates. My husband was associated with Richard Royce in a business deal—real estate speculation. The deal fell through and—and Royce lost a lot of money."

"I told him it was risky," Trent muttered. "Nobody twisted his arm. Just because I managed to salvage a few bucks, and he didn't, he claims I took him to the cleaners."

Mrs. Trent nodded. "In any case, Royce was very upset. He made things so difficult at home that Darren and I thought we'd get away for a while and

drive down to Florida for a few weeks, hoping that Royce would come to his senses while we were gone. But instead—"

"Instead, the bum tailed us," Trent blurted. "We drove all last night, and checked into a motel here this morning to get some sleep. About an hour ago I got up, stepped out the door of our cabin, and there was Royce. Darned if he didn't have the cabin right next to ours. You see?"

I said patiently, "But just what has he done?"

Trent growled, "He laughed, and told me to enjoy myself, that I was about out of time—and all the while he was patting his trouser pocket. He had a gun in there."

"Were there any witnesses to this?"

"I'm telling you, that's what happened," Trent snapped. "There wasn't anyone around close enough to hear. Royce is too smart for that. Just like back home in Memphis. He never made any threats when outsiders were around, but I'd see him on a downtown street, and he'd ease up beside me and whisper, 'I'm going to get you, Trent—real soon, now.' Or call up in the middle of the night—"

"I can swear to that," Mrs. Trent said. Her lips tightened. "I answered the phone a couple of times when he called, always late at night. It was awful."

"Did you notify the police in Memphis?"

Trent grimaced. "I talked to a detective there. He gave me the same song-and-dance as this dumb-head sheriff. They wouldn't do a thing to help. What am I supposed to do? Let this guy kill me, and then the cops maybe will believe my story? Hell of a lot of good that'll do me."

I summed up, "You and Royce went in together on a business deal that didn't come off. Royce blamed

you, and made threats against your life. Isn't that a little—extreme, Mr. Trent? Just because he lost some money?"

Trent didn't answer.

His wife gave me a glance, then coughed and said, "Well, there's more to it than that. You see, at one time I was engaged to Richard Royce, but, well, Darren came along. And I—I broke off with Richard, to marry Darren."

She hesitated. Her face flushed slightly. She twisted the diamond rings around on her finger and looked toward her husband, but he had gone to stand in the open doorway, his back to us.

"Anyway, Richard must have been more hurt than anyone knew," Mrs. Trent said finally. "We remained friends, the three of us—or so I thought. And he was eager enough to invest money with Darren in this land speculation thing. But maybe losing his money, on top of this other, was . . ."

Her voice trailed off into silence.

Trent wheeled around. "All right. What are you going to do about it?" he asked me.

I thought about it. "There's nothing we can do. If you want my advice, I suggest you and your wife go home. When you get there, go to a local magistrate, and have Royce placed under a peace bond. That should—"

"Peace bond," Trent exploded. "Good night, Royce is a nut. He's crazy. You think a lousy peace bond will stop him? Oh, I get it. All you want is me out of your lousy little town here. Sure. Lot you care if I get murdered—so long as it doesn't disturb you two-bit hick politicians—"

"Now, that's enough," the sheriff said. He had been leaning against the front of his desk, arms folded

across his chest. "Frankly, I think your conscience is your main problem, Trent. But whatever, you've given us no proof at all that you're in any danger."

Trent, becoming more and more agitated, suddenly lunged past me, kicked a chair out of the way, and took a wild swing at the startled sheriff. There was a meaty thud as his fist caught Carson on the shoulder.

"Hey, wait!" I shouted, grabbing at Trent. He shoved me back, and took another swing at Carson. His wife was up now, wringing her hands, making little squealing sounds.

Carson, off balance, was knocked back onto his desk. There was a trickle of blood from his split lower lip. Trent was on top of him, clawing for his throat.

"Conscience, huh?" Trent panted. "I'll 'conscience' you, you stupid son of—"

That's when I clobbered him with a chair. It didn't knock him out, but he lost interest in fighting. Carson pushed the slack body off to the side and scrambled to his feet.

Mrs. Trent was whimpering, "He didn't mean—"

By now Deputy Buck Mullins had rushed in from the outer office. He stared from the sheriff to Trent, who was sprawled face down, half-on, half-off the desk.

Carson dabbed at his bloody lip. "Take him out of here, Buck," he snapped. "Take him over to the jail. Put him in a cell. If he makes trouble, knock his head off."

The big deputy hauled the dazed Trent to his feet, manhandled him out of the office. Trent struggled feebly, but it didn't do him any good.

There was a moment's silence. Carson pushed his handkerchief against his mouth. He glared at Mrs.

Trent. She started to speak, stopped, turned mutely to me. I shook my head.

"But he didn't mean it," she said imploringly. "It's just that he's been under such a strain. Please—"

I shook my head again. "We may be a bunch of hicks down here, but we don't appreciate people assaulting the county sheriff, Mrs. Trent. Not even a little bit. I suggest you see a lawyer."

She straightened up. Her eyes gleamed with sudden anger. "I will. I'll call our attorney in Memphis and have him fly down here. The very idea! We come to you for help, and you throw my husband in jail!"

She stalked out of the office without looking back. I decided she didn't have such a nice face after all.

I turned to Carson. "You all right?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "Guy kind of gave himself away, didn't he?"

I laughed shortly. "You could say that. More than likely he bilked this Richard Royce for all he was worth. I'd like to hear Royce's side of it."

While Carson went to wash his face and put antiseptic on his split lip, I called the two motels in the area. I found that the Trents, and Royce, were registered at the Travel Inn, on the highway just north of town.

As Carson and I were leaving the office, Deputy Mullins reported from the jail. "What's with that guy?" the bulky deputy asked. "I put him in a cell, and he started raising heck, yelling that he had to get out, his wife was in danger. I don't know what all."

"Yeah, well, he's goin' to stay right where he is, for a few hours anyway," Carson said grimly. "He wants to fight, he can take on the cockroaches in his cell."

We got the county car from the courthouse parking lot and drove through Monroe's small business dis-

trict and on out the north highway. The Travel Inn was only a half mile or so beyond the Monroe city limits.

There was a large neon sign in front. Behind it was a little office. Behind that were two rows of shabby cabins facing each other across a wide, weed-grown courtyard. We stopped at the office. The manager, an elderly, balding man named Ferris, wasn't overjoyed to see us.

"Whatever you all heard, it's a lie," Ferris greeted us. "We run a respectable place here—no bootleg whisky, no wild parties an' no call girls or anythin' like that."

Carson grunted. "Which cabin is Richard Royce in?"

Ferris looked relieved. "Oh. Let's see . . ." He thumbed through a small stack of registration cards on the counter that bisected the office. "Here he is. Royce. He's down in cabin nine unless he's gone to eat lunch somewheres."

"What about a Mr. and Mrs. Trent?" I asked.

"They're in cabin ten, right next door to Royce. I remember them. Big car. Good lookin' woman, too. When the man paid me, he pulled out a roll of bills would choke a horse."

"What time did they check in?" Carson asked.

" 'Bout five o'clock this mornin'. This here Royce, he come in not long afterwards. I kind of got the idea he knew the Trents—asked me to put him in the cabin next to them, an' all. Nice feller."

We left the office and followed the manager's directions along the row of cabins on our right. Each cabin was separated from the next by a carport. The whole place had a dreary, shabby look to it in the glare of the noon sun.

We parked in front of cabin nine. There was a dusty car with Tennessee plates in the carport beside it. The cabin door opened as we walked toward it.

A tall, well-built man wearing slacks and T-shirt looked out at us. "I'll be darned," he said. "They had the nerve to go to the cops."

"You Richard Royce?" the sheriff asked.

"Yep. I take it you're the local law. Come in."

We followed him inside the cabin—one large room with a bed, a couple of battered chairs, a dresser with a cracked mirror, and a closet and bathroom opening off the back, a typical cabin room.

Royce didn't offer to shake hands when we introduced ourselves. He gestured us to chairs, and sat down on the edge of the rumpled bed and lit a cigarette.

"What happened to your lip, Sheriff?" he asked. "Run into a door?"

"Somethin' like that. What's this trouble between you and the Trents?"

Royce shrugged. "No trouble. Yet."

"Did you threaten to kill Trent?" I asked.

Royce took a thoughtful puff of his cigarette. He nodded abruptly, and said, "I'll lay it out for you. Darren Trent is a thief, though the polite term for it is 'wheeler-dealer.' He's been in a hundred shady deals, mostly land speculation and construction contracts, and always come out with a profit. Well, I don't like the bum, personally, but he is a money-maker. So I invested a bundle with him. How much, or how I got it, is my business. Okay? What I didn't know was that a state investigating committee was breathing down his neck. Not until it was too late. To make it short, Trent gathered up all the cash he

could lay his hands on, and took off. Me, I want my money back. So I followed him."

A bottle and a glass were on a little bedside table. Royce poured a drink and gulped it down. He chased it with a drag from his cigarette and then flicked the ash.

"That's not the way the Trents tell it," I said.

Royce grinned, showing large white teeth. "I bet it isn't. But that's the way it is. They're heading for Florida, and from there to South America, more than likely."

Again I asked, "Did you threaten to kill him?"

Royce hesitated. Finally he said, "Just talk. Tried to scare the jerk into returning my money. I thought I had him this morning. He turned white as a sheet when he saw me. But he put me off, as usual. Then he must have headed straight for you guys. Talk about gall. Man!"

"If he's in trouble, why would he come to us?"

"Why, to get me off his back, of course," Royce said. "At least long enough for him and Janet to blow out of the country."

Carson got up. "You have a gun, Royce?"

"No, of course not." He looked uneasy.

"You won't mind if I look around here, then?"

"Not if you show me a search warrant."

The sheriff glanced at me. I shook my head slightly. Carson sat back down. Royce relaxed a little and poured himself another shot of bourbon.

"What about you and Mrs. Trent?" I asked sharply.

His hand jerked, spilling whisky over the table. He set down the bottle. His dark eyes flicked at me, then away. "That has nothing to do with this. All I want is my money. As for that cheap broad, Trent's welcome to her."

He rose, crossed the room and stared out the front window. His hands clenched into fists at his sides. Then he turned back toward us, a dark silhouette against the sunlit window.

"Where are they now?" he asked. "I know they're still around town here. They didn't take their bags when they drove out this morning."

"They're around," I said. "You leave them alone, Royce. If you've got a legitimate beef, make it to the law."

"The law," Royce said bitterly. "Don't make me laugh."

Carson and I got up to leave. As we went out, Carson growled, "You heard what the county attorney said, Royce. Leave those people alone."

Royce didn't answer. He stood at the door, watching us drive toward the highway. He was smiling, but not as if he thought anything was funny.

On the way back into Monroe I said, "That's a nice mess. It's probably a good thing we have Trent in jail. I wouldn't mind putting Royce in a cell, either, at least until we find out the truth about all this funny business."

Carson grunted agreement. "I'll call the Memphis police soon as we get to the courthouse. Wonder where the Trent woman is."

It was an hour before we found out the answer to that. In the meantime, Carson called Memphis long distance. The police there had nothing on Trent, beyond the fact that he did have a rather dubious reputation as a businessman. Richard Royce had a record—neither Carson nor I were too surprised at that—and had done three years for armed robbery some time ago. He had been arrested several times, but had only the one conviction. He was suspected of

being involved in at least one murder. Not a nice man at all, but at the moment there were no warrants out for him.

"So it looks like both sides were telling the truth, more or less," Carson said, when he'd finished the call. "Trent did get into Royce for a bundle, and Royce probably did threaten to put a few slugs in Trent. I just wish they'd kept their lousy mess out of Pokochobee County."

I didn't argue about that. We left to get a belated lunch, stopping at the city police station on the way, to ask the chief to have his patrolmen keep an eye out for Janet Trent, and to have a man tail her, if and when she was spotted around town.

It was close to two o'clock when we got back to the courthouse. I plodded up to my office on the third floor and tried to get interested in the heaps of paper work on my desk. Then the phone rang. It was the sheriff.

"About Mrs. Trent," he said. "A city cop found out she was over at the LaGrande Hotel; made a long-distance phone call from the lobby there. And Buck Mullins says she called my office, while we were havin' lunch, to let us know her husband's attorney was on his way, an' we're goin' to regret throwin' poor Trent in jail. Don't know where she is now."

"Hope she has enough sense to stay away from the motel."

"Yeah, I—hold it a minute, Lon. I have another call."

The line went dead for a few moments, then Carson came back on. He sounded grim. "That was Ferris, out at the motel. Been a shooting out there. He was too excited to tell me what happened. You want to ride out with me?"

I was already on my way out of the office.

When we reached the motel we found a small group of people milling around excitedly in front of one of the cabins in the row on our right. Carson skidded to a stop on the edge of the crowd. We jumped out and pushed our way through to the open door of cabin nine, Royce's cabin.

Ferris, the motel manager, was in the doorway, keeping the crowd out. He was shaking like a leaf, and practically collapsed into the sheriff's arms as we reached him.

"Awful—blood all over—awful thing," he chattered.

I noticed a long black sedan parked in front of the Trents' cabin next door. Mrs. Trent was huddled in the front seat, her face buried in her hands.

Deputy Mullins had followed us in a second car. He kept the crowd back as Carson, Ferris, and I went inside the cabin. Richard Royce was sprawled on the floor. He was lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling. There was a large red stain on the chest of his white T-shirt. I went over, knelt beside him, then shook my head at Carson.

Royce was dead. There was a pistol near his outflung right hand. Bending far down, I sniffed the muzzle of the gun. It had been fired not long ago.

"What happened here?" Carson barked at Ferris.

The elderly motel manager was dancing from one foot to the other in excitement. "I don't know. I heard the shots, ran out of the office and saw that there Mrs. Trent comin' out of this cabin. She looked awful—dress all tore away from her shoulders, an' her face scratched. Lordy!"

"Did she shoot this man?"

"Sure. She had a little gun in her hand—gave it to

me, then went over and got in her car. Didn't say a word."

At Carson's sharp order, Ferris fumbled a small .25 automatic from his hip pocket and handed it over. Carson examined the gun. Then he looked around the floor.

Almost at once he pointed to a bright cartridge case lying on the worn rug about midway between the body of Royce and the cabin door.

"Just one shot fired from this gun," he said, after pulling the clip from the butt of the automatic and checking it. "And there's the ejected shell. Uh huh."

"There was two shots," Ferris said. "I heard 'em. All them folks outside heard 'em. Two shots."

I gestured toward the pistol near Royce's dead hand. "He must have fired the second one," I said.

Ferris exclaimed, "Lordy—maybe that poor woman was hit!"

"I doubt it," I said. "She wouldn't be up walking around. That's a .38 caliber pistol there."

"Let's talk to her," Carson said, wheeling toward the door. "Ferris, you help my deputy keep people out of here."

Carson stopped suddenly. He stared at the window beside the door. Following his gaze, I saw a neat round hole in the window glass, surrounded by radiating fracture lines.

"That's where Royce's bullet went," I said.

Carson nodded, and we went on outside. While the people out there gaped at us in silence, I headed for the Trent car, while the sheriff paused a moment to examine the bullet hole in the window, then the bare ground just beneath it. He carefully picked up two tiny bits of glass and placed them on the windowsill. Then he joined me.

Mrs. Trent was still huddled in the car, her face in her hands. I saw that her blouse was torn, exposing her shoulders. There were scratches on the white skin. She sat up as I opened the door, and dropped her hands to her lap. Her face was tear-stained. A lump marred the line of her jaw.

"He tried to kill me," she said hoarsely. Fresh tears spilled out of her eyes.

I slid onto the seat beside her, and Carson leaned in behind me, bracing his hands on either side of the door frame.

"Take it easy, Mrs. Trent," I said. "Try to tell us what happened."

She gulped, moistened her lips with her tongue. She stared straight ahead. "He tried to kill me," she repeated. "I—I didn't think I was in any danger—it was Darren I was worried about. But—" She pressed her fists to her mouth.

"Please. Tell us what happened here," I said gently.

"I made some calls in town," she said. "Then I drove out here to get our bags so that when our attorney got here and—and got Darren freed, we could leave right away. Get out of this awful place."

Her hands were in her lap again, fingers locked tightly together. I could hear her breathing. Her ripped blouse slid down, exposing a black lace bra. She didn't seem to notice. Behind me Carson stirred impatiently.

"I packed our bags and put them in the car," she said, finally. "Then he—Richard Royce—came out. He was nice enough. He said he didn't have anything against me, even invited me to come into his place for a drink. Oh, I was a fool, but I went in with him. I had some crazy idea that maybe I could persuade him to stop bothering us. But then, soon as we were

in the cabin, he—he ran over and grabbed a gun from under the pillow on the bed. He came toward me, grinning, and pawed at me with his free hand, clawed at me. He hit me—here, on the face—with the gun." She took a long, shuddering breath.

"Go on," I said.

"Somehow I fought him off. I was screaming. I tried to get to the door. Then he fired at me. I had my little gun—Darren gave it to me a long time ago—I had it in my purse and managed to get it out. I turned and fired once, blindly, just as he was aiming at me. He—he fell to the floor, and I ran out. That's all I remember."

Carson said over my shoulder, "But he fired at you first, is that right? After tryin' to attack you?"

"Yes," she whispered. "It was a nightmare . . ."

By now the ambulance had arrived from Monroe. The county coroner was in Royce's cabin.

Mrs. Trent turned her head, glared from swollen eyes at me, then at the sheriff. "You!" she snapped. "If you hadn't put Darren in jail this wouldn't have happened. It's your fault."

"I think you're right," Carson said mildly. "Come along, Mrs. Trent. I want you to show us exactly what happened."

"I can't. I can't go in there."

"I'll see that the body is covered. Come along." He made it an order.

Slowly, still protesting, Janet Trent got out of the car after me. I gave Carson a puzzled glance. He winked. I had more than a few doubts about the woman's story, but for the moment I couldn't see any way to break it down.

Carson went on ahead, while Mrs. Trent and I followed. She stumbled and I took her arm. She was

trembling. The crowd pressed in for a close look at her, but Buck Mullins had them in hand. I helped her up the single step and into the cabin. I noticed that the coroner, Doc Johnson, had spread a sheet over the body.

"Now," Carson said, "you came out here, Mrs. Trent. You packed your bags, put them in your car."

She nodded, keeping her face turned away from the sheet-covered figure on the floor.

Carson went on in the same casual voice. "Then you went back into your cabin, ripped your dress, scratched your shoulders and hit yourself on the jaw to make that bump——"

"What? What are you saying?"

Carson talked on over her startled interruption. "An' then you were all set. You waited till the courtyard was empty. Then you ran out of your cabin. Royce was standin' in here, lookin' out the window, just as you knew he would be. You shot him through the window. He staggered back an' fell there on the floor. You grabbed the ejected cartridge case from the ground where it had flown out of your gun. You came in, threw the case on the floor yonder. Then you found Royce's gun—maybe under the bed pillow, or in his pocket. You fired a shot from it through the open door, pressed the gun into his hand for a second, an' left it there by him. Then you grabbed up the tiny pieces of glass from the window and ran outside. By then people were coming out of other cabins, but that was fine. All you had to do was drop the little pieces of glass on the ground outside the window. Perfect picture of self-defense."

Janet Trent opened her mouth, shut it, opened it again. "You're insane," she breathed. "You can't—that's not—"

"I can, and it is," Carson said grimly. "It was a good plan you and your husband dreamed up—have him take a poke at me, knowin' I'd do just what I did. Throw him in jail an' give him the best possible alibi, while you took care of Royce. Oh, yes. A good plan."

"You're crazy," Mrs. Trent shouted, jerking away from my grasp on her arm. "It was self-defense."

"Sorry, lady." the sheriff said. He walked to the window, pointed at the bullet hole. "Funny thing about bullets and glass windows."

I went over and finally saw what he'd seen earlier. Around the hole was a miniature crater, slanting down to the hole itself. And the crater was on this side.

"Uh huh," Carson said. "Some folks call it the 'volcano-effect.' An' it's always—always, Mrs. Trent—on the side of the glass where the bullet comes out."

Janet Trent leaned against the wall beside the door. She looked sick. I didn't blame her. She'd just been convicted of murder.

The sheriff walked toward her. "Let's go into town. I'll get you a nice cell right next to your husband. I imagine you and him will have a lot to talk about."

THE JOB

Henry Slesar

CHRIS knew it was coming; he could see the paternal gleam in Professor Dane's eyes. Sure enough, just when the bell tolled freedom for the rest of them, Dane waggled a pencil at him and said, "Oh, Chris, would you mind staying after class a minute?" Chris nodded sullenly, yanked at the strap of his textbooks, and spread his legs into the aisle.

Dane did some paper shuffling before he got down to business. Democratic, he left the front of the room and came down to Chris's level, sitting atop a nearby desk and crossing his ankles.

"Maybe you know the scoop already," he grinned. Dane was young for an associate professor, but his attempts to talk Chris's eighteen-year-old lingo were painful to the boy.

"I suppose my old man called you," Chris said glumly. "Pop hates to give lectures; he figures that's your job."

"I won't lecture you, Chris, I'll save that for class. I just want to talk."

"Look, Professor, I got to meet some of the guys—"

"What guys, Chris?"

The boy blew air out of his mouth. "Okay," he said. "Nickie Cooke and his brother. Anything wrong with that?"

"You know what's wrong with that." Dane leaned toward him. "Chris, I'm worried about you, about what you do after classes, with those pals of yours. I know Nickie Cooke; I was on campus the day he slugged Professor Wald and got booted out of school. I know his brother Hal, too. He quit high school at fifteen, but he had an education, all right; at the state farm for delinquent boys. Is that the kind of company you like?"

"They're my friends."

Dane sighed. "What happened to you in the last year, Chris? When you were a freshman, there was nobody who showed more promise. Remember those talks we used to have? About teaching?"

"I remember," he said surlily.

"You thought it was the greatest job in the world, then. You were willing to work hard, go on to Teacher's College. You had the intelligence then, and you still do."

"But now I'm not interested, Professor. That's all there is to it."

"What changed your mind? Was it your old man?"

Chris snorted. "My *father* had nothing to do with it. My father doesn't know enough to change his socks."

"I mean about losing his job. It was just about then, when your mother started to work again, that you began running around with Cooke. Is that what did it?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I just got sick and tired of sticking my nose in books. Maybe I wanted some kicks out of life." He had decided not to argue, but there was something boiling inside of him. "Look, Professor, don't give me that stuff about the glories of the

profession. What's so glorious about a hundred and twenty bucks a week? You tell me that."

Dane pulled back, as if from a blow. "So that's it. Teaching doesn't pay enough for you."

"A hundred and twenty bucks," Chris said bitingly. "And how many years did you have to work to get it? Ten, fifteen? I've been getting smart, Professor, that's what has been happening to me."

"Is that what you call it?" Dane interlaced his fingers in an attitude almost of prayer. "Chris, listen to me. You're right about the money. You want to know the truth? It stinks. If I ever had any ideas about getting rich as a teacher, I wouldn't have bothered. You think your family is having a hard time? I have four kids with big appetites and a wife that hasn't had a new winter coat in six years. We're up to here in unpaid bills. I'm doing what I can, but it's not easy—"

"So you see?" Chris said. "You see what I mean?"

"No," Dane said flatly. "I don't see. If you want to teach, you'll teach. If the salaries are cut down to pork and beans, you'll teach, Chris, or else you're not worth facing a class. But there's something else—"

"What?"

"There's hope, buddy. People are thinking about the problem, worrying about it. They're forming committees, acting up in the legislatures. I might even get a raise next year. And by the time you're ready for a teaching job, who knows? You might even make more than a truck driver."

"Maybe," Chris said. "And maybe not."

"Do you think Nickie Cooke can help you? Do you think running around with hoodlums solves anything?"

"Is that all you wanted to tell me, Professor?"

Dane stood up, put his hands behind his back, and said, "That's all, Chris."

Nickie and his brother Hal were horsing around at the curb when Chris showed up. Hal was bigger, beefier, but Nickie, wire-muscled, had one arm locked behind Hal's back and was reaching for the keys in his hand.

"Lemme have them," Nickie said. "Come on, you jerk, let's have those keys."

"Ah, you promised I could drive her," Hal whined. "You promised, Nickie." He looked up hopefully at Chris's arrival. "Hey, Chris, didn't he promise I could drive?"

Chris looked at the hoodless jalopy at the curb, and kicked one worn tire. "What's the difference?" he said, tossing his books onto the rear seat. "We don't have any gas."

"That's what you think," Nickie grinned. "The tank's full and I got this left over." He pulled a five from his pocket.

"Hey!" Hal said, wide-eyed. "Where'd you get it, man?"

"Give me the keys and I'll tell you."

Hal handed them over, and Nickie climbed into the driver's seat. Chris got in beside him, and Hal went in back. The ignition sparked weakly, and the motor wheezed, coughed, but didn't respond.

"This baby's had it," Nick said, cursing. "I cleaned the points and everything, but it's no good."

"Drive her to the junk heap," Chris said. "Maybe you can get two bits for it."

"If we had fifty bucks," Hal said dreamily. "Man, if we had fifty bucks, there's a '49 Olds at Berry's joint. He says he'll unload it for fifty, and it's a nice heap."

"Yeah," Nick said. "If we had fifty. Know what I

had to do for the five? I sold my old lady's sewing machine."

Chris tried to look bland. "You stole it from her?"

"I didn't steal it, I sold it, like she asked me. I got twenty-seven, but I only gave her twenty. Commission, you know?" He chortled as the cylinders turned. "Here we go, men!"

They had the five spent by eight o'clock. At a roadside diner, they stopped for double hamburgers and beer. Nickie put change into the jukebox, and they stood with their faces at the window, hoping some itinerant women would come by. When nobody showed up, they fed dimes into a miniature bowling game, hooting at every strike and jeering at every split. They left at eight thirty, with Nickie driving.

"Let's cruise, man, let's cruise," he said. "Let's find ourselves some dames before it gets too late—"

"I got to be home early," Chris said uncomfortably. "I promised the old man."

"What's the matter, teach?" Hal grinned mockingly. "You got studying to do?"

The jalopy's pistons emitted a couple of explosions and they came to a halt. Nickie cursed and climbed out of the car. He bent over the engine, burned his hand on the metal, and yelled in anger. Then he kicked the fender, loosening the bolts still further. "This rotten heap!" he cried. "We gotta get ourselves some real transportation."

They got it started again, but not before nine. It was too late for prowling, too late for almost everything in the quiet town. Their mood was black.

Then Nickie pulled the car to the side of the road and turned to face them. "Look," he said, tightly, "we talked about it last week, it's about time we had some action. What do you say we pull that job tonight?"

"Do what?" Chris said.

Hal smiled foolishly. "Hey, you forget already, man? You remember the job we talked about."

"I was drunk that night—"

"Well, we're all sober tonight," Nickie said bluntly, "and that's the time to do it. We could get us fifty bucks like *that*." He snapped his fingers. "And maybe more."

"You're off your head," Chris said. "You can't stick up a joint without a gun."

Nickie looked at his brother, and Hal chuckled. Nickie said, "What makes you think we don't have equipment?" He nodded to Hal, who hopped out of the rear seat athletically.

He went to the trunk, and when he came back, there was a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Chris looked at it with surprise, and then at Nickie.

"Where'd you get that thing?"

"It's Pop's, only he don't hunt no more. So I sawed it down and made a real cannon out of it."

"Eh-eh-eh-eh," Hal said, wielding it like a machine gun. "Who we knockin' off, Nickie, huh? How about that pizza joint?"

"Too crowded," his brother said, watching Chris's face. "What's the matter, buddy, you don't look happy."

"I don't know if I want to get mixed up in this—"

"Aw, come on, teach," Hal jeered. "It'll be a cinch. You can drive the getaway car." He laughed wildly, suddenly excited by the notion, hugging the weapon in his arms.

"We could buy that Olds tomorrow," Nickie said. "We can really start living. Come on, man, don't be chicken. I know just the place—"

"Where?"

Nickie smiled. "Same place I filled the tank this morning. Marvie's Garage, right at the edge of town. They got one guy at the pump at night, and there's three of us."

"And this," Hal said, patting the shotgun. "Don't forget this, Nickie."

"You with us, man?"

Chris set his jaw.

"Okay, let's go."

Marvie's Garage was an eyesore by day, a weather-scarred shanty falsely modernized with a phony brick facade and a picture window. By night, with one dim light illuminating the inner office and pumps, it was almost handsome.

As they approached it from the intersection on Route 17, they could vaguely discern the lone figure of the attendant in his white uniform. Chris, at the jalopy wheel, gritted his teeth and found that his foot was icy on the accelerator.

"Take it slow," Nickie cautioned.

Chris pulled the car up to the first pump. The tires clumped over the warning line on the concrete, and a bell rang inside the garage office.

"The guy's not coming out," Hal said.

"We'll go in for him," Nickie said. He looked at his brother, and Hal stashed the sawed-off shotgun under his leather jacket, pulling the zipper up tight. "You wait here," Nickie told Chris, "and keep that motor idling."

"What if she quits on me?" Chris said nervously. "I don't like this, Nickie—"

"You *are* chicken," Nickie said contemptuously. Then he slapped Hal's shoulder, and they climbed out of the jalopy and marched toward the office.

Chris heard the attendant's voice behind the door. "Be with you in a minute, fellas."

"No hurry," Nickie answered. "Want to use the rest room."

They went inside.

Chris was getting colder by the second; the wheel felt frozen in his fingers. He knew it was only nerves, but that didn't help; he shivered, and blew on his hands, and wished he were anyplace else. For some reason he found himself thinking about college, and the warm, overheated classroom.

He tried to make out what was happening inside, but there was nobody in his line of vision. Then he saw Hal cross to the Coke machine. The attendant was stacking oil cans. Where was Nickie?

Then he saw him. He came out of a side door and walked up to Hal. They talked a minute at the dispensing machine; Hal took a swig of soda, dropped the bottle into a box, then started reaching for his jacket zipper.

A crazy thing happened—Chris heard himself yell. He yelled loudly, wordlessly, not even sure it was a cry of warning. He jumped out of the car and started running for the garage; he saw the attendant's start of surprise, saw him whirl just as Hal brought out the weapon. By the time Chris reached the door, the attendant was sinking to the ground, stunned by a blow from the gun butt, his face on the concrete.

"You *louse*!" Nickie shouted at him. "What's the big idea?"

"You killed him!" Chris said, looking at the prone figure. "You killed the guy—"

The attendant moaned, and his hand moved. Hal blubbered something, and Nickie punched his arm.

"The register! Get the register!"

Hal went to the register and punched it open. He scooped out coins before bills, greedily, using both beefy hands. His face fell with disappointment. "Gee, it's only twelve bucks, Nickie, only twelve—"

"Take it!" Nickie shouted. "Take it and let's get out of here! You, too," he said, pushing Chris ahead of him.

Chris looked back once at the attendant, who was trying to rise. Then they hurried out to the car. The motor kicked and complained when Nickie put it into gear, but then they were rolling.

"Twelve bucks," Hal muttered. "Twelve lousy bucks. We can't get that Olds for this, Nickie."

"It's better than nothing." He looked at Chris with contempt. "At least we know who our friends are, huh?"

"You shouldn't have hit the guy. It wasn't worth hittin' a guy—"

"You going to make trouble?"

Chris slumped in his seat. "I won't make trouble," he said sullenly.

Chris didn't have to make it; trouble was waiting for him. He was just coming out of the house the next morning, on his way to school, when the two men blocked his path. He knew their official status, without seeing badge or uniform, and he was glad that his father didn't see what was happening.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not yet," one of them said, "but we want to talk to you at the precinct. You and some others."

The others were Nickie and his brother. Hal was too scared to do anything but whimper, but Nickie was dry-eyed and tight-lipped.

They were kept waiting half an hour before a lieutenant named Summers was ready to see them. He

was a tall, white-haired man with an offhand manner.

"All right, boys," he said casually, "we know what you were up to last night, so let's hear the story."

"We didn't do nothing," Nickie said flatly. "We don't even know what you're talking about. Right, guys?"

Hal stuttered something meant to be affirmation, and Summers frowned.

"I thought we'd do this the easy way," he said. Then he pulled a pad from his pocket and began to read. "Around nine forty-five, you drove up to Marvie's Garage on Route 17 in a '39 Plymouth, license number J50013. You," he said, pointing to Chris, "were behind the wheel when your pals went inside. There was one attendant on duty; you slugged him with the butt of a shotgun. Then you took twelve dollars and seventy cents from the station register, and left." He flipped the book shut. "And before you start denying, boys, I want to tell you this. We got positive identification on you."

"The attendant," Chris said carefully. "Is he okay?"

"He's okay," Summers nodded. "He's got a headache, but he's in good enough shape to stick you hoodlums where you belong." The lieutenant turned to a waiting officer. "Bring him out here, Slim. Let's let the boys meet their victim."

The officer wasn't gone long. The man he brought back had a tired look, and a crisscross bandage on the back of his head.

"He's the one I told you about," Professor Dane said, pointing to Chris. "He tried to stop them, Lieutenant, tried to warn me about what they were going to do."

"You sure about this, Professor?"

"I'm sure," Dane said, looking Chris squarely in his

befuddled eyes. "I know the boy; he wouldn't do such a thing. He's going to be a teacher some day, I think." Dane touched his bandaged head and grinned. "Even if he has to take a night job, like filling gas tanks. Say, Lieutenant, you got an aspirin around this place?"

THE VITAL ELEMENT

Talmage Powell

I WOULD never again love the warm water of the Gulf of Mexico . . . never find beauty in its blue-green color . . . never hear music in its rustling surf . . .

The dead girl had been hurriedly buried in the gulf. She was anchored in about thirty feet of water with a hempen rope that linked her lashed ankles to a pair of cement blocks.

I'd stirred the water, swimming down to her depth. Her body bobbed and swayed, with her bare toes about three feet off the clean, sandy bottom. It was almost as if a strange, macabre, new life had come to her. Her long blonde hair swirled about her lovely gamine face with every tremor of the water. A living ballerina might have enjoyed her grace of motion, but not her state of being. I wept silently behind my face mask.

A single stroke sent me drifting, with my shoulder stirring silt from the bottom. I touched the rope where it passed into the holes in the cement blocks and out again. A natural process of wear and tear had set in. The sharp, ragged edges of the blocks were cutting the rope. In a matter of time, the rope would part. Her buoyancy would drift her toward the sunlight, to the surface, to discovery.

I eeled about, careful not to look at her again, and

plunged up toward the shadow of the skiff. My flippers fired me into open air with a shower of spray and a small, quick explosion in my ears.

I rolled over the side of the skiff and lay a moment with my stomach churning with reaction. Sun, blue sky, the primitive shoreline of mangrove and palmetto, everything around me was weirdly unreal. It was as if all the clocks in the world had gone *tick*, then forgot to *tock*.

"You're a too-sensitive, chicken-hearted fink," I said aloud. I forced myself to peel out of my diving gear, picked up the oars, and put my back into the job of rowing in.

I docked and tied the skiff, then walked to the cottage with my gear slung across my shoulder. Sheltered by scraggly pines, the lonely cottage creaked tiredly in the heat.

I stood on the sagging front porch. For a moment I didn't have the strength or nerve to go inside. The cottage was its usual mess, a hodgepodge of broken down furniture, dirty dishes, empty beer bottles and bean cans, none of which bothered me. But *she* was strewn all over the place, the dead girl out there in the water. She was portrayed in oil, sketched in charcoal, delicately impressed in pink and tan watercolors. She was half finished on the easel in the center of the room, like a naked skull.

Shivering and dry-throated, I slipped dingy ducks over my damp swim trunks, wriggled into a tattered T-shirt, and slid my feet into strap sandals. The greasy feeling was working again in the pit of my stomach as I half-ran from the cottage.

Palmetto City lay like a humid landscape done with dirty brushes as my eight-year-old station wagon nosed into DeSota Street. Off the beaten tourist paths,

the town was an unpainted clapboard mecca for lantern-jawed farmers, fishermen, swamp muckers.

I angled the steaming wagon beside a dusty pickup at the curb and got out. On the sidewalk, I glimpsed myself in the murky window of the hardware store: six feet of bone and cartilage without enough meat; thatch of unkempt sandy hair; a lean face that wished for character; huge sockets holding eyes that looked as if they hadn't slept for a week.

Inside the store, Braley Sawyer came toward me, a flabby, sloppy man in his rumpled tropical-weight suit. "Well, if it ain't Tazewell Eversham, Palmetto City's own Gauguin!" He flashed a wet, gold-toothed smile. "Hear you stopped in Willy Morrow's filling station yestiddy and gassed up for a trip to Sarasota. Going up to see them fancy art dealers, I guess."

I nodded. "Got back early this morning."

"You going to remember us country hoogers when you're famous, Gauguin?" The thought brought fat laughter from him. I let his little joke pass and in due time he waddled behind the counter and asked, "You here to buy something?"

"Chain." The word formed in my parched throat but didn't make itself heard. I cleared my throat, tried again, "I want to buy about a dozen feet of medium weight chain."

He blinked. "Chain?"

"Sure," I said. I had better control of my voice now. "I'd like to put in a garden, but I have stump problems. Thought I'd dig and cut around the roots and snake the stumps out with the station wagon."

He shrugged, his eyes hanging onto me as he moved toward the rear of the store. "I guess it would work—if that bucket of bolts holds together."

I turned and stared at a vacant point in space as

the chain rattled from its reel. "Easier to carry if I put it in a gunny sack, Gauguin," Sawyer yelled at me.

"That's fine." I heard the chain clank into the sack.

Seconds later Sawyer dropped the chain at my feet. I paid him, carried the gunny sack out, and loaded it in the station wagon. Then I walked down the street to the general store and bought a few things—canned goods, coffee, flour, and two quarts of the cheapest booze available, which turned out to be a low-grade rum.

I'd stowed the stuff beside the gunny sack, closed the tailgate, and was walking around the wagon to get in when a man called to me from across the street. "Hey, Taze."

The man who barged toward me looked like the crudest breed of piny woods sheriff, which is what Jack Tully was. Big-bellied, slope-shouldered, fleshy-faced with whisky veins on cheeks and nose, his protruding eyes searched with a sadistic hunger. His presence reminded me that not all Neanderthals had died out ten thousand years ago.

He thumbed back his hat, spat, guffawed. "Kinda left you high and dry, didn't she, bub?"

An Arctic wind blew across my neck. "What are you talking about, Sheriff?"

He elbowed me in the ribs; I recoiled from his touch, not the force behind it. "Bub, I ain't so dumb. I know Melody Grant's been sneaking out to your shack."

"Any law against it?"

"Not as long as the neighbors don't complain." He gave an obscene wink. "And you got no neighbors, have you, bub?"

His filthy thoughts were written in his smirking, ig-

norant face. No explanation could change his mind, not in a million years. Might as well try to explain a painting to him.

"Maybe she ain't told you yet, bub?"

"Told me what?"

"About young Perry Tomlin, son of the richest man in the country. She's been seeing him, too, now that he's home with his university degree. Going to marry him, I hear, honeymoon in Europe. Big come-up for a shanty cracker girl, even one as pretty as Melody. I reckon that shack'll be mighty lonesome, knowing you'll never see her again."

"Maybe it will, Sheriff, maybe it will."

"But . . ." We were suddenly conspirators. He gloated. ". . . there's one thing you can waller around in your mind."

"What's that, Sheriff?"

"Son of the county's richest man is just getting the leavings of a rag-tag artist who's got hardly a bean in the pot." Laughter began to well inside of him. "Bub, I got to hand you that! Man, it would bust their blood vessels, Perry's and the old man's both, if they knew the truth."

Raucous laughter rolled out of him, to the point of strangulation. When I got in the station wagon and drove off he was standing there wiping his eyes and quaking with mirth over the huge joke.

Back at the cottage, I opened a bottle of the rum, picked up a brush, and stood before the easel. I swigged from the bottle in my left hand and made brush strokes on the unfinished canvas with my right. By the time her face was emerging from the skull-like pattern, the rum had begun its work. I knew I wasn't cut to fit a situation like this one, but the rum made up a part of the deficit.

I dropped the brush and suddenly turned from the canvas. "Why did you have to leave me? Why?"

She was, of course, still out there when the gunny sack dragged me down through thirty feet of water. Her thin cotton dress clung to her as she wavered closer. Behind and beyond her a watery forest of seaweed dipped and swayed, a green and slimy floral offering.

I felt as if my air tanks were forcing raw acid into my lungs as I spilled the chain from the gunny sack. My trembling hands made one . . . two . . . three efforts . . . and the chain was looped about her cold, slender ankles.

I passed the chain through the holes in the cement blocks, and it no longer mattered whether the hempen rope held. The job was done. No risk of floating away.

In the cottage I picked up the rum jug and let it kick me. Then I put on a clean shirt and pants and combed my hair nice and neat.

I went to the porch and took a final look at the bloodstains on the rough planking. My eyes followed the dripping trail those blood droplets had made down to the rickety pier and the flatbottom skiff. Before my stomach started acting up again, I dropped from the porch, ran across the sandy yard, and fell into the station wagon.

I pulled myself upright behind the wheel, started the crate. Through the non-reality of the day, the wagon coughed its way over the rutted, crushed seashell road to the highway. Trucks swooshed past and passenger cars swirled about me.

On the outskirts of Palmetto City, I turned the wagon onto the private road that snaked its way across landscaped acreage. The road wound up a

slight rise to a colonial mansion that overlooked half the county, the low skyline of the town, the glitter of the gulf in the far distance. A pair of horse-sized Great Danes were chasing, tumbling, rolling like a couple of puppies on the vast manicured lawn.

A lean, trim old man had heard the car's approach and stood watching from the veranda as I got out. I walked up the short, wide steps, the shadow of the house falling over me. The man watched me narrowly. He had a crop of silver hair and his hawkish face was wrinkled. These were the only clues to his age. His gray eyes were bright, quick, hard, as cold as a snake's. His mouth was an arrogant slit. Clothed in lime slacks and riotously colored sport shirt thirty years too young for him, his poised body exuded an aura of merciless, wiry power. In my distraught and wracked imagination he was as pleasant as a fierce, deadly lizard.

"Mr. Tomlin?"

He nodded. "And you're the tramp artist who's become a local character. Didn't you see those no trespassing signs when you turned off the highway?"

"I've got some business with your son, Mr. Tomlin."

"Perry's in Washington, tending to a matter for me. He flew up yesterday and won't be back for another couple days. You call, and make a proper appointment. And get that crate out of here—unless you want me to interrupt the dogs in their play."

My stomach felt as if it were caving in, but I gave him a steady look and said in an icy voice, "If Perry's away, you must be the man I want to talk to. Sure. Perry wouldn't have killed her, but you didn't share your son's feeling for her, did you?"

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

He knew, all right. The first glint of caution and animal cunning showed in his eyes.

"Then I'll explain, Mr. Tomlin. Yesterday I went to Sarasota to try to interest an art dealer in a one-man show. When I got back this morning I found some bloodstains. They led me to the water. I spent the morning diving, searching. I found her in about thirty feet of water."

I expected him to say something, but he didn't. He just stood there looking at me with those small, agate eyes.

"It wasn't hard to figure out," I said. "She'd come to the cottage to tell me it was all over between us. The shanty cracker girl was marrying the richest son in the county. But you didn't cotton to that idea, did you?"

"Go on," he said quietly.

"There's little more. It's all very simple. You sent Perry out of town to give you a chance to break it up between him and the cracker girl. Not much escapes your notice. You'd heard the gossip about her and the tramp artist. When you couldn't find her in town, you decided to try my place. I guess you tried to talk her off, buy her off, threaten her off. When none of it worked, you struck her in a rage. You killed her."

The old man stared blindly at the happy Great Danes.

"Realizing what you'd done," I said, "you scrounged a rope, couple of cement blocks, and planted her in thirty feet of water." I shook my head. "Not good. Not good at all. When the blocks sawed the rope in two, a nosy cop might find evidence you'd been around the place; a tire track, footprint, or maybe some fingerprints you'd left sticking around."

He studied the frolicking dogs as if planning their

butchery. "You haven't named the vital element, artist; proof of guilt, proof that I did anything more than talk to her."

"Maybe so," I nodded, "but could a man in your position afford the questions, the scandal, the doubts that would arise and remain in your son's mind until the day you die? I think not. So I helped you."

His eyes flashed to me.

"I substituted a chain for the rope," I said. "The cement blocks will not cut that in two." I drew a breath. "And of course I want something in return. A thousand dollars. I'm sure you've that much handy, in a wall safe if not on your person. It's bargain day, Mr. Tomlin."

He thought it over for several long minutes. The sinking sun put a golden glitter in his eyes.

"And how about the future, artist? What if you decided you needed another thousand dollars one of these days?"

I shook my head. "I'm not that stupid. Right now I've caught you flatfooted. It's my moment. Everything is going for me. You haven't time to make a choice, think, plan. But it would be different in the future. Would I be stupid enough to try to continue blackmailing the most powerful man in the county after he's had a chance to get his forces and resources together?"

"Your question contains a most healthy logic, artist."

"One thousand bucks," I said, "and I hightail it down the driveway in the wagon. Otherwise, I'll throw the fat in the fire, all of it, including the chain about her ankles and my reason for putting it there. And we'll see which one of us has most to lose."

Without taking his eyes off my face, he reached for

his wallet. He counted out a thousand dollars without turning a hair; chicken feed, pocket change to him.

I folded the sheaf of fifties and hundreds, some of them new bills, and slipped it into my pocket with care. We parted then, the old man and I, without another word being spoken.

The station wagon seemed to run with new life when I reached the highway. I felt the pressure of the money—the vital element—against my thigh.

The chain on her ankles had lured Tomlin, convinced him that he was dealing with a tramp interested only in a thousand bucks, so he had signed his confession of guilt by putting his fingerprints all over the money.

I didn't trust the gross sheriff in Palmetto City. I thought it far better to take the vital element and every detail of the nightmare directly to the state's attorney in St. Petersburg.

I was pretty sure the battered old station wagon would get me there.

A POSSIBILITY OF ERROR

Richard M. Ellis

To be on the safe side, Edgar Remmick got there early. He crouched on the fire escape in the rain and windswept early evening darkness, breathing rather heavily after the three-floor climb up from the alley.

After a moment he turned to the window. It was unlocked. Even though this fact saved him the bother of jimmying it open, Remmick sighed with a touch of exasperation. Considering the value of some of the items within the dark apartment beyond the window and the sleaziness of the neighborhood, one would think that Patty Blake would at least lock her bedroom window.

But not Patty.

Remmick twitched aside the drapes and peered into the warm, perfumed blackness. He did not intend to enter if he could avoid it. Almost at once he saw that there was no need. A faint, ghostly yellow glow hung in the darkness some distance from where he stood outside the window. The glow would be the specially treated light-switch plate just to the right of the apartment's front door. Since he could see it, he knew the bedroom door was open, and also the door at the far end of the short hallway opening into the living room.

Remmick knelt on the wet iron of the fire escape.

He took from his trench coat pocket the long-barreled .22 caliber pistol he had purchased a few days before, and from another pocket the silencer that he had picked up at an obscure pawn shop in the city's skid row district. He clamped the silencer onto the muzzle of the pistol. Then, resting his left forearm on the windowsill, he laid the barrel of the pistol across it.

Sometime within the next quarter-hour or so, the apartment door would open. Patty Blake would be silhouetted there for a moment—long enough—against the bright light of the third-floor corridor behind her. She would have no more chance than a clay pigeon at a shooting gallery.

Remmick waited, with the rain pelting down from the black sky and the blustery wind rattling the lids of garbage cans in the black canyon of the alley below him; with the cloying scent of Patty Blake's perfume in his nostrils. The perfume had once been as erotically exciting to him as the girl who wore it in such lavish quantities. But no more.

He waited, and thought about his wife Stella. It was for Stella that he was here. Dear, sweet, patient Stella. How could he ever have been such a fool? To risk losing Stella—his lifelong love—for something as transitory and meaningless as a furtive affair with a shallow-brained blonde half his age; Patty Blake, a gum-chewing, wide-eyed, big-breasted creature whose only possible purpose in life was to afford momentary pleasure to middle-aged business executives with more money than common sense. Remmick had no doubt that he was far from the first of his breed to pay little Patty's bills.

But he would be the last.

The nerve of her—the unmitigated nerve. After all he had done for her—the gifts, the regular weekly

bundle of cash—and she showed her gratitude by threatening blackmail when he had made it clear a few nights ago that the affair was ended.

It had never occurred to Remmick that she might make trouble. Even now the memory set his heart to pounding and his gloved hands trembling with rage.

The infantile smile on her pouting red lips, the flutter of her eyelashes, and the cold words: "Uh uh, lover. I want you around, you know? Everything just like it is. Or else I'm afraid I'd have to go see your old lady—what's her name. I'd hate to do it, but . . ."

But she would do it; of that Remmick was now sure.

The very next day following that night, Remmick had gone home from his office to find Stella lying across the bed in her bedroom, her eyes swollen from weeping. She had received an anonymous, obscene phone call—and the voice spouting the filth had been a young woman's voice.

For some time before that, Remmick had been uneasily aware that Stella suspected things in spite of all his precautions to protect her from knowledge of his occasional peccadilloes. Yet her suspicions were one thing, and the distinct possibility of having it thrown in her face by Patty Blake was quite another.

That Remmick could not, and would not, allow.

He was left with a choice of unpleasant courses of action. To him the least unpleasant was murder, though he hardly thought of disposing of Patty Blake in those terms. Ridding himself of a nuisance was more like it.

At first he thought of poison. He even managed to obtain a lethal dose of cyanide, encased in a thick gelatin capsule. But how to administer the poison was

something else. Patty was, naturally enough, on her guard.

No, poison was not satisfactory; there were too many possibilities for error. And Remmick did not intend to make any errors, anymore than he allowed errors from himself or his employees in his business office.

He thought of other ways, but all contained flaws.

Then he read in the newspapers, to which he had turned for inspiration, that a part of the city was having the latest in a long series of unprovoked sniper attacks on women. This particular sniper, armed with a .22, had the habit of firing through windows at women who had neglected to draw their window shades at night . . . and the part of the city affected was not far removed from the apartment building wherein he had established Patty Blake.

He tossed aside the newspaper and then, moments later, picked it up again to check the weather forecast. It called for clear weather for the next day, with a chance for rain in the days after that.

Today the rain had come; rain and wind, and now darkness, to cover his movements along the half-deserted streets, down the alley and up the slippery iron fire escape.

He waited, rather enjoying his discomfort, for it was in a good cause. He was in a way atoning for his foolish actions in the past, and he would make it up to Stella in other ways.

He murmured into the whine of the wind, "I've learned my lesson, darling. From now on, it's you—and only you."

Perhaps he could take Stella on a long trip, a sort of second honeymoon. Why not?

Suddenly, a slash of yellow light in the darkness be-

yond jerked him back to the present and the business at hand. The apartment's front door was opening.

He had not expected Patty quite so soon. He knew that she always had dinner at a restaurant downtown, always arriving home within minutes of eight o'clock. She was a little early.

So much the better.

He squeezed one eye shut, with the other sighted along the barrel of his gun, now faintly visible in the light from the doorway. There she was, hesitating on the threshold, her raincoated figure blackly silhouetted against the light, raising one arm now to fumble for the switch inside the apartment.

Remmick fired. The .22 made no more noise than a clap of the hands. The woman jolted back, throwing up her arms. He fired again and again into the black figure which slowly sagged to its knees, then sprawled forward, motionless.

Aiming carefully, Remmick put two more slugs into the body. Not that they were needed; he was an excellent shot, and he was confident that his first bullet would have done the job. . . .

It was eight thirty and the rain was lessening when he turned his car into the driveway beside his suburban home. He noticed with some surprise that his wife's car was not in its usual space in the double garage.

Probably she had driven over to the shopping center for something or other.

Remmick sat in his car for a moment, checking back on his movements. After stripping down the gun to its component parts, he had tossed it into the river that ran not far from his homeward route.

There was nothing to connect him to the death of Patty Blake; nothing to show that he had even known

the girl. He had taken care to keep their relationship a secret, even to the point of surreptitiously wiping away any fingerprints he might have left on objects he had touched during his clandestine visits to her place. Of course, that had been done with only normal prudence—not with any idea that he might one day murder the creature. But the end results were the same: no possible connection between Edgar Remmick and Patty Blake.

He was humming cheerfully as he left his car and entered his house. Almost the first thing he saw was the note propped on the little table in the living room, the table where Stella habitually placed the day's mail.

The note was in Stella's writing. He was still humming under his breath as he picked it up and began to read the message from her.

Then words, phrases, leaped up from the scribbled page: *Sorry, but can't take any more . . . I know all about Miss Blake . . . followed you . . . I must face her . . . have it out with her . . . I found the key . . .*

Remmick made a whinnying, groaning sound, remembering that he had taken the key to Patty's apartment off his ring that morning and tucked the key under a pile of socks in his bureau.

. . . the key, and am going now to see her. If she is not in, I will enter the apartment and wait for her . . . must settle this . . . I love you too much, Edgar, to lose you without a fight . . . .

The note fell from Remmick's suddenly numb hands, and drifted slowly to the carpet.

"No," he whispered; then shouted, "No! It couldn't have been! It couldn't!"

And yet, hadn't the woman's figure in the doorway

been just a shade too tall, a shade too narrow for Patty Blake? There had been something about it—something that even as he had fired had impressed him vaguely as being wrong. He had forgotten the impression, but now it loomed larger and larger in his seething thoughts.

He had killed his wife, Stella.

It was as simple, and as deadly final, as that.

In a daze he walked through the empty rooms of the empty house. He paused only once, long enough to take the capsule of cyanide from its hiding-place in his den; from there he returned to the living room. He reread the last part of Stella's note through tear-dimmed eyes. He swallowed the capsule. It would take a few moments for the gelatin coating to dissolve in his stomach. Then the end would be mercifully swift.

Now—*now*—there was no possibility of error. None.

He waited, breathing loudly in the stillness, reading: *I love you . . . Edgar . . . I love you . . .*

There was the sound of a key in the door. Stella walked into the room, her hair glistening with drops of moisture, her coat damp from the rain. She saw him and stopped short.

"Oh. I—I was hoping I'd get home before you. In time to destroy that note." She sighed. "I didn't go, Edgar. I lost my courage at the last moment, and . . . Edgar? Is something wrong? Are you ill?"

He was.

THE "METHOD" SHERIFF

Ed Lacy

THE BANK was a small, modernistic building, a branch of a big city bank many miles away. It was built on a recently landscaped field on the outskirts of a sleepy village, facing a turn-off connecting the highway with a new bridge.

Sheriff Banes was much like the village: old, squat, and shabby. Now, as he rushed into the bank, panting, the thin teller raced over to him and screamed, "Uncle Hank, we were robbed! Robbed!" Her face was pale with hysteria, eyes big with fright.

"A h-holdup?" The sheriff's shoulders sagged and his eyes seemed bewildered with shock. He shook himself, patted the teller's trembling shoulder with one hand, loosened the gun in his holster with his other hand. "Emma, you take it easy. Tell me what happened."

"Oh, Uncle, a—" Emma began to cry.

"Emma, call me Sheriff Banes, this is official business. It's important you get a grip on yourself, tell me exactly what happened." Walking the weeping teller to a chair, he turned to the only other man in the bank, the manager. "Okay, Tom, what happened? Make it fast, the first minutes after a crime are the most important."

"We opened as usual at 9 A.M., a half hour ago.

These two men came in. I was busy at my desk, opening the morning mail. The men were strangers, but they didn't look suspicious. Emma had her window open and Helen was in the vault. After a few minutes they walked out and then Emma screamed. They'd handed her a note, telling her to fill a big paper bag with bills or they'd kill us all. I heard a car drive off, but with so much traffic passing, I can't say in which direction they went. Anyway, I ran to the door, then I called you."

Sheriff Banes felt in his windbreaker pockets for his notebook, finally grabbed a pencil and paper from the manager's desk. "Okay, what was the exact time of the robbery, Tom?"

"I'd say . . . 9:32 A.M."

Nodding, wetting the pencil with his lips, Sheriff Banes wrote that down. "How much did they get?"

"I haven't checked, but around $26,000, all in small bills." The manager sat down, holding his head in slim hands. "Hank, we only opened this branch three months ago and a holdup already. I'll be fired!"

"Stop moaning! Can you describe them pretty well, Tom?"

"Well, I only glanced at them, you understand. They both seemed about . . . thirty, of average build. Wore dark suits and . . . yes, the heavier one carried a shopping bag. He was the one without a hat and had black hair, neatly combed. The other one had a folded newspaper and wore a hat . . . . I don't remember what color his hair was."

"I had a good look at them, Hank," Helen Smith said, coming out of the vault behind the tellers' partition. She was a middle-aged, dumpy woman with faded blonde hair. "The hatless one had very dark hair and a sharp face, a foreign-looking fellow, with

one of those thin moustaches. The one wearing the hunting cap, I do believe he was bald and—"

"What color hunting cap, Helen?" The sheriff asked, pencil posed in his pudgy hand.

"Why, sort of a brown cap."

Emma sat up in her chair. "No, no! It was a kind of orange hat! He was the one who gave me the note, rested his folded newspaper on the counter."

"Did he talk with an accent?"

"Uncle, none of them talked, just gave me the note. It was typed and read:

> Fill this bag with money, or everybody will be killed. There's a sawed-off shotgun in the newspaper. Wait ten minutes before giving any alarm. We have a man with a submachine gun outside.

"I was so scared, I just shoved all the cash I had in my drawer into this big paper bag and nearly fainted! They were blocking my window, so I couldn't signal to Tom or—"

"Where's the note?" Sheriff Banes cut in.

"The note? Why, they took it, with the money."

Banes groaned. "Think carefully, Emma. Did you notice anything special about the shopping bag?"

"Yes! Now that I think of it, the shopping bag had A&P printed on it!"

The sheriff pushed his hat back and scratched his wild gray hair. "Damn, must be a dozen of those supermarkets within a fifty mile radius of here. Well . . ." He turned to the desk and picked up the phone. "I'd best call the state trooper barracks. Anybody notice the make of their getaway car?"

The two women and the manager shook their heads. Emma said, "I think, but I'm not sure now, I saw an

old gray sedan parked outside, through the window."

Shaking his head, the sheriff put the phone down. "Anybody else in the bank?"

Tom said, "No sir, we'd just opened."

"How come you had so much cash on hand?" Banes asked.

"Now, Hank—Sheriff Banes, you know one of the reasons they built this branch is, with the bridge open, we handle the payroll for those two factories on the other side of the river, $19,568 every Wednesday morning. We make up the payroll Tuesday nights. Then there's always five or six thousand in cash in Emma's drawer, at the start of a day."

Helen shook her head. "Don't know what the world's coming to. We never had a holdup before in the village, you know, Hank. We——"

The sheriff suddenly walked over to the tellers' counter, said, voice full of excitement, "Prints! Did any of you touch this counter?"

Emma shrieked, "I forgot! They both wore pigskin gloves!"

Sheriff Banes shook his head sadly. "Dammit, nothing breaking for us." He crossed to the window and moved the shade, stared out at the night. "Might get some rain," he announced.

After a moment he turned and sat on the desk, tore up the paper with his notes. "Okay, that wasn't bad. Emma, you got to keep up your crying act more, especially when the state troopers come. Aunt Helen, you were fine with that description, acted like a real confused hick. Tom, you were good, too, but you have to seem more upset. You know, like it's the end of the world. We'll have a last rehearsal tomorrow, Tuesday night, and I'll take the twenty-six grand with me. I've fixed up a nice hiding place under the floor boards in

the jail. Wednesday, you phone me as soon as the bank opens and there's no customers. That's about all. Except keep in mind, we don't talk about this to anybody. We'll wait six or seven months before splitting the money. By then we all came into a little inheritance. Tom, how did I do?"

"You acted the part of a hick cop perfectly, Dad."

NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

Robert Colby

GLENN HADLOCK had been combing the want-ad sections of the L.A. papers with the desperation of a recent graduate of San Quentin, when suddenly his attention was caught and riveted by an oddly worded, remarkably promising offer.

> Licensed driver for bodyguard-escort to charming young lady. No Experience Necessary. Will train rugged, athletic, highly personable single man, 25–35. Well-disciplined, intelligent. Luxury living provided. Salary $500 mo.

There was an address in Beverly Hills.

For Glenn Hadlock this was a dream ad. "No experience necessary," implied no need to furnish references. Although Hadlock was something of a drifter who avoided work that restricted his chronic pursuit of pleasure, he was not a perpetual bad-boy.

After belting a few too many one night, during a barroom fracas over his girl of the hour, he had exploded with six-feet-four inches of solid beef and no little skill. When his opponent promptly died, he was given five years of cooling time in San Quentin. He got out in two.

Since then he had barely existed on flunky jobs

that required no experience and asked no questions. Thus the ad suggested a windfall, but "highly personable" was a silly label for a man, a ridiculous bit of double-talk. Why didn't it just come right out and say, "Wanted: a sharp, good-looking guy with plenty of muscle who can drive and has a way with women."

A self-made cynic, Hadlock was slightly less skeptical about the whole pitch when he wound his laboring '57 car up the long twist of drive that advanced toward an imposing mansion enthroned upon at least an acre of ground in Beverly Hills.

A heavy remote control gate, set into a massive brick wall, swung wide only after he announced his business into a push-button intercom. The voice at the other end was abruptly masculine. Beside the gate a sign declared the owner of this lavish estate to be Victor D. Scofield.

A motley dozen or more cars were assembled before the mansion as Hadlock approached the door.

It was opened by a man in his forties who seemed at least as tall as Hadlock and even more powerfully constructed. The man had dark, brush-cut hair, bony features, and cool, unforgiving eyes. His squared, towering posture, his severely tailored beige uniform, made him appear more military than servile.

For a moment his eyes measured Hadlock head-to-toe. With a small nod of approval, he stepped aside, said, "Follow me, please, sir," but the humility of his words was denied by their inflection.

They moved through an exquisitely furnished living room to a large, paneled study. Seated around a conference table in the center of the room, studiously filling out application sheets were several sturdily

built, muscular young men whom he figured to be his competitors for the job.

The militant butler, if such he was, handed Hadlock a similar sheet with a pencil, and motioned to a chair. "There will be no talking at any time," he cautioned in a stern, soft voice, then departed.

Happily, the application did not demand a list of past employers or references, but only statistical information concerning purely personal qualifications and background. Hadlock wrote answers to the questions rapidly, then sat back to wait, his curiosity intense.

One by one, Uniform led the others from the room. At last, with a crook of his finger, he signaled Hadlock. They passed through the house to a garden patio, then followed a flower-hemmed walk to a kidney-shaped swimming pool.

Uniform disappeared and Hadlock was left alone with a girl in her mid-twenties. Wearing a microscopic bikini which clung uncertainly to the sweeping terrain of a marvelous figure, she lounged in a padded chaise beside the pool. Her long, auburn hair parenthetically embraced delicately sensual features. Motionless in the glare of the sun, she wore glasses so darkly tinted that for a moment he thought she might be asleep, unaware of his presence.

Then she languidly removed the glasses, gave him a frank, unsmiling appraisal as she stretched her hand lazily for the application. She merely glanced at the form, then put it on a table, weighting it with a gold pen.

"Hadlock," she said, pursing her lips prettily. "Glenn Hadlock?"

"That's right, miss."

"My name is Eileen Scofield," she announced. "*Mrs.* Eileen Scofield."

He said nothing, but was disappointed. He had thought maybe she was Victor D. Scofield's daughter.

She asked, "What makes you think you would like a job nursing me around town, Glenn?"

"Five hundred a month and," he glanced about, "all of this. It's too early to say if I'd like the rest of it, Mrs. Scofield. Might love it, might hate it, though I doubt that." He smiled.

"No ambition, Glenn? No success drive?"

He shifted his weight. "I drive toward a good time and easy living with the least possible effort. That's real success in my book."

She shook her head disapprovingly. "Is that any way to sell yourself?"

"Yes, if you buy the truth."

"Well, at least you're honest." Gazing at the pool, she said, "Do you swim?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you good?"

"Not many better."

"Like yourself, don't you?"

"It was love at first sight." He grinned.

"And you're really quite bold."

"I'm not exactly shy. Do you like shy men?"

"*I'm* asking the questions. Can you dance?"

"Like crazy. Anything but ballet. Will there be much dancing?"

She still didn't smile. "You look very strong. Formidable. If we were out somewhere and a stranger insulted or pawed me, what would you do?"

"I'd count to ten—then I'd beat his face in."

She was thoughtful. "What do you think of me, Glenn?"

"I think you're a very beautiful woman."

She waved the compliment aside. "I don't mean that. People tell me that all the time. But what do you think of me as a person, someone you'd be—uh—closely associated with."

"Well, you don't smile much," he answered.

"Maybe I don't have very much to smile about." Then she did smile, though sparingly. "Sit down here beside me, Glenn. I want to tell you quickly why we need someone like you."

He drew up a chair and sat waiting.

"My husband is a double amputee, lost both legs."

"How—"

"It happened in the war. He was a major. A mortar shell exploded near him. He has millions and can't enjoy one dollar of his wealth—you see?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"So, since he doesn't want to confine me to the same limited, narrow life he must lead, and since he can't very well ask his friends to tote me around, it gets down to hiring someone to be a kind of chauffeur–escort. Just that and no more. A completely impersonal relationship. Casual, perhaps; even friendly, but impersonal. I want to make that very clear from the start."

"Yes, ma'am. I understand perfectly." *All too perfectly*, he thought.

"That's all, then," she said. "I don't make the final decision. It's entirely up to Mr. Scofield. And let me warn you that you had better take a slightly different approach with him. He's not a man who likes gay little jokes or well-fed egos that override his own. He may have only half a body but in his mind he's a giant. Eccentric, perhaps, but brilliant, so don't underestimate him."

She handed him the application. "Walk the way you came and you'll find Ben in the living room. He's the man who brought you to me and now he'll take you to Mr. Scofield."

"Thanks. I hope I'll be seeing you again, Mrs. Scofield."

When she didn't answer but only stared at him, her face empty of expression, he turned and moved down the walk.

"Glenn," she called after him, barely lifting her voice.

He went back. She took the application from him, scrawled something across the top with the gold pen and returned it. Her eyes narrowed and the tiny flick of the left one was almost imperceptible, but as he took the paper from her hand he was almost certain that she had winked.

The moment he was out of sight, he opened the sheet and read the one-line comment she had written. "If it matters in the least, I happen to like this one best! E."

He smiled. That would make him—or break him, just as likely. Anyway, it gave him a hint as to the nature of the relationship between Eileen Scofield and her husband.

He found the big, militant Ben, who led him up a graceful curve of stairs, then down a deeply carpeted hall to a door. Taking the application, Ben told him to wait, knocked and entered. The door closed in Hadlock's face and for a span of two or three minutes he fidgeted uncomfortably in the hall, wishing it were over, one way or another. Finally Ben came to the door and motioned him in with a jerk of his head.

The room was large, splendid, and semicircular. Heavy drapes concealed all but the eastern exposure,

the down-sweeping, tree-graced lawn at the front of the house. Against the back wall, fixed to command a panoramic view, stood an immense bed. Left of the bed was a table that held three rows of signal buttons and two telephones, one white, one red.

In the center of the bed, pillowed upright, was the aborted half-man known as Victor D. Scofield. As they approached the bed, Ben moved unobtrusively to one side of it, stood motionless in a kind of parade rest.

Scofield wore a green silk robe gathered about surprisingly broad shoulders and a big slab of chest. He seemed about fifty. His hair was jet black with startling slashes of gray at the sides. He had a lean, handsome face, clear-boned and strong-jawed, spoiled only a little by a prominent nose. His eyes were dark, sullen, like poised deadly weapons in search of a target.

"Glenn Hadlock," Scofield read, "age twenty-seven, born in Cleveland, Ohio. Both parents dead?" His eyes lifted from the application.

"Yes, sir."

"No brothers or sisters." He continued as if speaking to himself. "Only living relatives an aunt and an uncle, also Cleveland. When did you see these people last, Hadlock?"

"About five years ago."

"Not very devoted, are you?"

"No, sir. We were never very close."

"How many friends do you have, Hadlock? Friends with whom you have established a mutual loyalty, friends you meet on a regular basis?"

He tried to think of even one. "I don't have any real friends locally," he replied. "I move around quite a lot."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "If I stay in one place too long, I get restless."

Scofield cocked his jaw. "Have you some special talent or ability, Hadlock? Beyond simply driving a car and charming pretty women. I assume you have these qualifications, since you applied for the job."

"Yes, sir."

"Then you admit to being charming with women?"

Hadlock scratched an ear. "Well, I don't admit it, but I don't deny it either." He grinned.

"I see that you have a fine sense of humor," Scofield said icily. "I must make note of that."

Hadlock glanced quickly at Ben to check his reaction. Eyes straight, still nearly at attention, the man's face was rigidly closed.

"Don't you think he has a grand sense of humor, Sergeant?" said Scofield, turning to Ben.

"Yes, sir," Ben replied, though he continued to stare straight ahead. "If I had the major's permission, I might be tempted to laugh right out loud, sir."

Though his anger was rising, Hadlock listened to this curious exchange with surprise and amusement.

As if reading his mind, Scofield explained, "Ben Kimble here was my sergeant. We fought an entire war together, and I know he's an excellent judge of character." He paused. "Good or bad, Hadlock, is there anything you should tell me about yourself?"

"No, sir," he said hesitantly.

Scofield's hand lifted, came to rest upon the white phone. "Let's suppose that for some good reason I can't imagine at the moment, I decided to give you this delightful position. I would then make one call and in half an hour I would know every important detail about you. Right, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. Any man who lies to the major is gonna regret it."

"You get the point, don't you, Hadlock?"

"Yes, sir." His fists clenched.

"However, anything *you* tell me will not be held against you." His head sank back in the attitude of one who is prepared to wait indefinitely.

Hadlock shrugged, impatient with the whole idiotic inquisition. This sawed-off Hitler was a nut. Hell with it, let the chips fall. . . . "A couple of months ago I was in San Quentin," he said defiantly, "because one night a guy made a pass at my girl and I beat his brains out. I used to box, was a small-time pro. The fists of a pro are considered deadly weapons so I got five for cooling this character. They set me free in two."

Scofield's hand returned from the phone. "In your lifetime were you ever arrested or convicted for any other offense?"

"No, sir."

Scofield nodded. "You were merely stupid. If you're going to kill someone you need a better motive—and the brains to get away with it. But I like your honesty and I could use a man who can take care of himself in any situation. Mrs. Scofield must be protected at all times. Once she leaves the grounds, I can personally do little to help her. Here at home, nothing escapes me. I have instant mobility. Would you like a demonstration?"

"Yes, sir, I certainly would."

He pushed one of the buttons in the panel on the bedside table and gazed at the outsized screen of a monitor across the room. In a moment there was a wide-angle, complete view of the living room. The room was empty.

He pushed another button and a large kitchen, furnished with expensive appliances and gleaming utensils, appeared. Two female servants in uniforms sat hunched over sandwiches at a table. One poured wine from a tall bottle into glasses. The click of bottle touching glass was clearly audible.

"A fine imported wine, no doubt stolen from my cellar," Scofield commented dryly. "Investigate quietly, Sergeant, then report to me."

"Yes, sir. I'll trace it down for you, Major."

Scofield pressed another button and there was an exterior view of the swimming pool. Eileen Scofield was in the same chair, idly turning the pages of a magazine. Letting the magazine fall to her lap, she slowly lifted her head. There was the impression that she gazed directly into the camera.

Scofield said, "A beautiful woman, isn't she?"

Scofield fingered a button, his wife vanished and the study replaced her. Around the conference table, the Sunday-suited, muscle-happy young applicants now sat listlessly waiting.

One man coughed, another cleared his throat. A third glanced at his watch, shook his head and made a face at the group to show his irritation. "What the hell," he said in a near whisper, "is this a funeral—we can't talk?"

"Yeah," said a blond, college-boy type, "it's a regular boot camp, complete with drill sergeant."

Scofield gave the button a quick, furious jab. Picture and sound were erased. "Send them all packing, Sergeant," he barked. "The party's over, we've got our boy. Haven't we, Hadlock?"

"Yes, sir," he beamed. "I sure hope so."

When Ben Kimble had left, Scofield said, "It's his own idea, you know."

"What's that, sir?"

"That we maintain this—this military relationship, the C.O. and his faithful sergeant. It restores his old image of me: the dashing battalion commander, a flawless physical specimen, a fearless leader of men; right up there on the line with his troops. Stuff like that." He paused. "Ridiculous, isn't it?" His eyes dared Hadlock to agree with him.

"No, sir. I think not."

"At heart, Kimble never was anything but a soldier, you understand. Even now, in hand-to-hand combat he could take on three trained, husky men and kill them all if he wanted to. Do you believe that?"

"If you say so, sir."

"He would still be a soldier today, if not for his intense, unswerving loyalty to me. I expect the same loyalty from you, Hadlock. I demand absolute loyalty and obedience. I reward these qualities handsomely. The punishment for disobedient or treacherous conduct will be swift and relentless. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, I think so, sir." But he was not at all sure. Was it Scofield's military phrasing? Or was there an ominous threat in the warning? If so, what twisted arrogance! Why, he could take this mutilated fragment of a man and crush him like an eggshell.

". . . need loyal people because obviously there are certain physical functions which I can no longer perform," Scofield was saying. "In truth, I live totally up here, in the mind. For me, most of life's physical enjoyments are remembered, or imagined, or taken vicariously.

"I used to go out for a drive now and then, but it was more an ordeal than a pleasure. The spirit is

crucified when one has to be carried like a baby and treated with the same coddling attention.

"Let me tell you something, Hadlock." He leveled a finger. "If my father had not left me his millions, if I had been a poor man, major or not, where do you think I would be now? I would be over at the V.A. hospital and I would be just another basket case. Once a month or once a year, someone like Kimble would visit me for an hour and then hurry off, glad to be gone, glad to be relieved of that fleeting guilt most people feel when confronted by a human remnant who has been ravaged by the same fate that has allowed them to pass through life unscathed, complete.

"So, in that sense, I consider myself lucky. And I intend to take good care of my wealth and possessions, including my wife.

"That's where you come in, Hadlock. You are to be Mrs. Scofield's chauffeur, bodyguard, and escort. She is not to consort with strangers and her only permissible friends are those we share, here at home. Believe me, I will be the first to know of any deviation from that rule, and I will hold you personally responsible.

"Otherwise, while in your company and under your close protection, she will be allowed to go where she wants in this area, and do what she likes. You are to report to me anything she does which seems unusual or threatening to my welfare. Use your judgment.

"Your own conduct with her will be courteous but reserved. You will never at any time, under any circumstance, cast yourself in any personal role with her—such as adviser, friend, or lover.

"And don't bother with that wounded air of surprise and shock. I am hardly naïve, Hadlock. Just do

exactly as you are told. Betray me once and you'll wish you were still locked away in the comparative safety of San Quentin. But on the other hand—"

"Now wait a minute, Mr. Scofield! If you think you can—"

"But on the other hand, for every year of loyal service, you will receive a bonus of five thousand dollars cash. And always remember that you are serving *me*, and that Mrs. Scofield does not have a penny to call her own, other than the allowance I give her.

"Now, you'll find Kimble below and he will apprise you of the various other benefits of the job, such as the garage apartment and a complete wardrobe of new clothes, since you will not at any time be wearing a uniform.

"You may go, Hadlock. If there's a problem to discuss, you know where to find me. Physically speaking, I never leave this room . . ."

The garage apartment was large and tastefully furnished. Kimble gave him the address of a men's shop in Beverly Hills where he would be outfitted with a wardrobe suitable to every occasion. It had all been arranged. He spent the afternoon moving his belongings from his room over a flower shop on West Pico, and trying on costly suits and sport clothes which made him feel somewhat as if he were being cast for the romantic lead in a modern-day movie production concerning the social involvements of the very rich.

One of these suits, a "midnight blue" affair, needed only a slight alteration to the trousers and was rushed for his pickup in the late afternoon.

He did not expect to begin his duties until the following day and was therefore a little surprised when Mrs. S. called him over the interior phone system. A maid had just delivered a sumptuous roast beef din-

ner on a tray, informing him that he would not eat with the help but would be served in this when not dining out with Mrs. Scofield.

As the maid departed, he heard the ring and, swallowing a chew of beef, hurried to answer.

"I'll need you at eight sharp," she announced. "Did they have one of the suits ready in time?"

"Yes, ma'am ."

"Wear it, then. You'll find me in the study, and please be prompt."

Click! She was gone.

There were four luxury cars in the garage, and she chose the convertible. Dressed in a green silk sheath which tautly embraced her stunning figure, she unsmilingly waited for him to open the door, climbed in back and settled herself primly.

In silence they swept around the drive and out the big electric gate, opened with precise timing by Ben Kimble from within the house.

"Go right," she said then, "and take me to the Beverly Hills Hotel. I'll direct you from there."

As they came to the east side of the hotel she ordered him to pull to the curb. Without waiting for an assist, she got out and leaned toward him.

"I have an appointment with a gentleman, an old friend from out of town," she declared. "He's staying in one of the hotel cottages along here, but I'm not certain which one until I check the numbers. I'll be gone about two hours, three at the most. Please wait."

She turned and started off. He called her name, but if she heard, she ignored him, hurrying on. He started after her.

"Sorry, Mrs. Scofield," he said firmly, "but I can't allow you to keep that appointment."

"*You* can't allow *me* to keep an appointment!" she

said incredulously, pausing to show him an angry, determined face. "Don't be silly, my poor little man. You're making a very bad start with me. Now run along and sit yourself straight up behind that wheel before you find yourself a loser on the first play of this little charade."

"Sorry," he said again, "appointment canceled, no rain check. Boss's orders. Would you like me to read you from the Bible? 'Mrs. Scofield will not be allowed to consort with strangers and her only permissible friends will be those we share—at home!' "

"Oh, well—you aren't going to take that seriously, are you, Glenn?" Her hand fell lightly upon his shoulder, lingered there, smoothing an invisible wrinkle.

He removed the hand. "I *am* going to take it seriously, Mrs. Scofield. There is nothing I take so seriously as a job that pays five hundred a month plus a sweet bonus for *loyal* service, a cozy apartment, and two-hundred-buck suits. The eating is good too." He grinned.

"I see. And what would happen if I simply walked away and did just as I please?"

"You wouldn't have to walk, I'd carry you, tucked under my arm."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me."

Turning sharply, she went back to the car and stood waiting for him. He opened the back door but she climbed in front. He shrugged and got in beside her.

She said, "You didn't really think I was going to meet some guy in one of those cottages, did you? It was only a test. I always test a new man first to see

how much rope he'll give me." For the first time she smiled broadly.

"What if I'd been a milquetoast and let you run free?"

"Then I could look forward to a much more exciting future. But I'm not at all sure how it would end for you, if I got caught."

"Have there been many—before me?"

"A few. Oh yes, a few."

"What happened to them?"

"I don't know. I never saw them again. They just vanished."

"Vanished?"

"They left in a hurry, I mean. They were told to pack up and get out. It's done quietly in the early morning, and I never know about it until they've gone. Then Victor tells me."

Hadlock caught the implication of a warning but he let it drift away, and said, "What reason does Scofield give you?"

"He has a different reason every time. Logically, none of them make much sense. If I had to guess, I'd say that Victor is hiding an enormous jealousy. He's afraid that if I'm too long with one escort, I'll grow fond of him."

"Is he right?"

"That depends on the man." She smiled again, invitingly. Removed from Scofield's domain, her whole personality had changed, as sun bursting through a somber sky.

"Are you the same person I met beside the pool?" he asked.

"You're meeting me for the first time. The other was an act. That house is one great closed-circuit TV

station. Victor was probably watching us, and listening too."

He nodded. "Yeah, I got a demonstration from the control room."

"Listen," she said, "why do we waste time sitting here? Do you like to have fun? Do you swing?"

"Like Tarzan, in all directions!"

She opened her purse and produced a bill that she passed to him. Ben Franklin winked and sent him a hundred-dollar smile, or so it seemed.

"Let's go!" she cried happily. "It's been nearly a month since Tully Sanders, he was the last one, got the sack. I haven't been out since."

"Where to, then?"

"I know a place in Malibu that practically walks right into the ocean on stilts. It's a marvelous place to cast off from. Two or three drinks and you can almost hear the shackles of Scofield's dungeon falling away."

Chatting like old friends, they wound over Sunset to the sea, then slid north along the coast. They parked beside a slender wood-frame building that clung nervously to the edge of a cliff above the restless wash of the Pacific.

It was one of those places where you needed a seeing-eye dog to find your table, with candles, dark wood paneling, the muted, liquid whisper and tumble of water below wall-to-wall windows.

She was on the happy side of three stingers when she said suddenly, "We're not married, you know."

"We're not?"

She giggled. "To Victor, I mean. He simply rents me. It's a year-to-year lease."

"You're kidding."

She shook her head. "Perfectly serious. D'you think I would marry a creep like that?"

"Well, it did strike me as odd—when you also consider the age gap."

"Even in one piece I couldn't bear him! He's subhuman."

Fascinated, he leaned toward her across the table. "You have an arrangement?"

"Did Beethoven have an arrangement? Well, this one will go down in history, too. A hundred thousand tax-paid dollars a year in escrow, complete with a legal contract in which I'm specified as his housekeeper. Ha! If I can hold on and endure the pain for ten years, I'll be worth a million. But let me tell you right now, I'm not gonna make it!"

"How long has it been?"

"I've served two years in that pen, two years and five months. No matter what, I've got to last another seven months, because the way the contract reads, I don't get a penny until the end of the first three years. So I'm trapped. What a monster!"

"How did it happen, Eileen?" She had insisted that he use her first name while they were out.

She began a fresh drink and held the glass cupped in her hands. "How did it happen? I was a model, of sorts, making a poor living. Victor used to hold private little fashion shows around the pool. He would invite the neighbors and he would watch in bed, on that horrible, sees-all, knows-all, screen. He paid well and I became a regular.

"When he saw some gal he liked, he would have Ben, the good sergeant, bring her up. He gave the girls hundred-dollar bills as presents, just to sit and talk with him. If you didn't know him as I do now, it was pathetic. The girls would come back, just for the money, and sooner or later he asked them to marry him or become what he called his 'social secretary.'

"They all turned him down, every one. I happened to come along at the point when he was desperate. He wanted me to be his wife, but I politely said, no thanks. Ugh! Then he offered this other proposition with all the money involved. Well, I was poor and I was young and I figured I could afford to sell a few years to make myself independent for life. I would be a wife in name only, and nothing would be demanded of me but my presence, my companionship.

"I tried to make a deal to live my own life on the side—freedom to come and go, see friends, date now and then. Nothing doing, says Victor with the first menacing glint in his eye, so I was ready to back out until we agreed on this paid-escort thing. He would advertise and I would choose. He would approve or veto. Until you came along, most of my selections were vetoed."

Hadlock said, "Any particular reason why he let me pass?"

"No, unless you just happened to fit some previous conception of his. He never explains what he does and I gave up asking long ago. Anyway, what Victor wants for me is not an escort, but a watchdog, a spy."

"Then why doesn't he use the sarge, his faithful soldier?"

She made a contemptuous face. "Because I despise him and Victor knows it. Besides, they're inseparable. Victor is the head and Kimble is the body. Victor thinks and Kimble acts. Take Kimble away for an hour and Victor would go mad. He'd be helpless."

"What if I took everything you've said back to Scofield, word-for-word?"

She laughed. "You won't. They never do. You'll hate Victor, you'll fear him. But you'll never be completely on his team. If you told him the things

I've said about him you'd destroy his flimsy ego and he wouldn't be able to stand the sight of you. You'd be gone the next day and it wouldn't affect my legal position one bit. My lawyer fixed it so the contract can't be broken for any cause but desertion."

She sighed. "Just talking about Victor bores me. Bottoms up and let's go, Glenn. Okay?"

Music throbbing softly from the radio, a briny wind enveloping them, they sped along the coast. This exotic woman beside him, the heady feel of the drinks, the smooth, surging power of the car filled Hadlock with a delicious sense of luxury and well-being. Already he could see that it was going to be an expense-paid ball, really a dream of a job. He hoped there would never be an awakening.

"Take that next road to the left," she said, "and go up the hill. I just love to see the lights and the water from high places."

Then when they had nearly reached the summit, she directed, "Now swing right. There's a little turn-around where we can stop a minute and look down."

He pulled up, facing the coast, and lighted her cigarette. They were silent for a while. She sank down and pillowed her head comfortably against the back of the seat.

Her voice drifted lazily out of the darkness. "Well, Glenn, what do you think of the job now?"

"Fantastic. A beautiful dream."

"And me?"

"The same."

She turned toward him. "I'm going to be very happy with you, Glenn," she murmured. "I knew that from the beginning."

"So did I."

"Conceited!"

"Not really."

"Tell me, Glenn. Are you going to be *my* boy, or Victor's?"

"At heart, I may be your boy. But when the chips are down, I belong to daddy. He pays the bills and holds the whip."

"Nothing will persuade you?"

"Nothing."

"Sure?" She slid gently against him and lifted her face, lips slightly parted, the warm, sweet-scented nearness of her jolting his heart, racing his blood.

Suddenly mindless, impulse driven, he gathered her in his arms and kissed her.

"Now are you persuaded?" she asked him smugly.

"No. And that was a mistake, the first and the last. This is one job I don't intend to lose. So do me a favor and give up. It would be easier for both of us."

He started the motor, backed, and drove recklessly down the hill to the highway.

He had won but it was a bitter victory. She was never quite the same toward him. Sometimes she was maddeningly polite, other times she was irritable and demanding. Their conversation became impersonal, trivial. She seldom spoke of her private life and she seemed to take no interest in Hadlock as a man. She avoided lively or romantic night spots, rarely asked him to stop for a cocktail.

On two or three occasions she attempted to escape him, using one dodge or another, like the time she went to the hairdresser and ducked out a back door into an alley, but he was prepared for such tricks and always caught her. Soon the job became mechanical and he began to regret the firm stand he had taken from the outset.

At first he looked forward eagerly to his day off,

usually an interval of frantic searching for excitement, a time of too many drinks and too many wasted hours in cheap little bars. Since he had only the one night, girls he used to date were usually busy, having found more available boyfriends.

He grew lonely and restless, bored. When even his day off had lost some of its appeal, he began to resent the confinement of the job. The pay was good, but above all he was a man who loved to live carelessly for the pleasure of the moment.

In this frame of mind, he was summoned to Victor Scofield's room, unexpectedly, for he seldom saw the man at all.

"It was nothing special," Scofield told him, speaking from the permanent sanctuary of that huge bed in which his body was pitifully, grotesquely lost. "I merely wanted to express my appreciation for your finely disciplined behavior with Mrs. Scofield, and for your continuing loyalty and devotion to duty."

As always, there was that military flavor to his speech, Hadlock observed, as if he read from a citation in praise of heroism under fire.

"During what sometimes might be considered as trying circumstances," he went on, "you seem able to manage superb control. Keep it up, and one day soon you'll be rewarded with more tangible evidence of my gratitude."

It was the only time in his memory that Scofield had smiled.

"Meanwhile, Hadlock, if there are any problems or special confidences, please come to me at once."

Hadlock thanked him gravely for the accolade and departed.

Despite the applause for his "devotion to duty," Hadlock was disturbed by the implications of the

little speech. It had suggested that Scofield was completely aware of the exact relationship between himself and Scofield's captive "wife."

Consequently, that evening, as they were en route to still another movie, the so-called Mrs. S., now properly commanding from the back seat of her favorite, the convertible, Hadlock pulled to the curb and turned toward her.

"Mrs. Scofield," he began, "I wonder if tonight we—"

"I am not *Mrs.* Scofield," she said peevishly, "and why are we stopping?"

"There's hardly a picture in town we haven't seen, so I wonder if tonight we could skip the movie, Eileen. You see—"

"I can see that you don't want to go but if you don't care too much, I'll make up my own mind about how I'd like to spend *my* evening. After three nights at home with Victor, I'm not in a mood to be charming or gracious."

This was an irritable night. Yesterday, when they went shopping, she had been coolly polite.

"Certainly the decision is always yours," he said pleasantly, "but I wanted to talk to you about something rather personal, and I think the paying customers at a movie would not find anything I have to say very interesting."

"Maybe it would bore me too," she said haughtily.

"I don't think so. Anyway, will you give it a try? We could go back to that same cliff-hanger in Malibu, and over a couple of drinks—"

"Why do you want to go *there* in particular?" she questioned. "As I remember it, on the only occasion we went to that place, we began as friends and became strangers, if not enemies."

"That's true," he agreed. "But sometimes a mistake can be corrected by returning to the scene of the crime, so to speak." He offered her his disarming smile.

For several seconds she considered him thoughtfully. "You're a most unpredictable guy," she told him with a narrow smile. "All right, I'll gamble just one more time with you. And now that you bring it up, Glenn, I'll tell you quite frankly that I was debating some sneaky ways of having you replaced. Don't think I couldn't do it if I wanted to make it a campaign, because I don't like stuffy, inflexible people who remind me of Victor."

"Well, if you want a war, at least declare it," he said seriously. "Until then, how about a peace talk in Malibu?"

"With at least three stingers to celebrate a truce?"

"Who counts?" he replied.

"Please be a gentleman and open the door," she said. "I do believe I'll ride in front."

On the way, Hadlock grew uneasy. Had he implied too much latitude, when all he really intended was to sweeten the cup from which they both were forced to drink, while he got a bit of information that might solve a mystery? Well, there was still time to back off a little.

"I'm having fun," she informed him later, "but so far it's just chit-chat. You had something deliciously personal to discuss with me."

She was coming on strong after not three, but four sticky stingers. He had been forced to match her, though he drank manhattans, a no less volcanic potion. They sat by the same salty, wall-to-wall glass, whitecaps in the distant darkness beyond, giant

coiling waves rising to full stature, then impaling themselves upon jagged, somber rocks.

"Well," he opened, "today I was called to the Throne Room for a brief meeting with His Highness. . . ." He related the conversation, or monologue, as precisely as he could.

"So you got a pat on the back," she responded indifferently. "What does it mean? Only that if you keep needling me into line, holding me on a leash, you have it made. But a woman can twist a man, especially a *half* man, around her little finger. In about five minutes I could convince Victor that you were playing the heavy with me, the wolf baying and pawing, while I shrank in terror. You would hardly have time to pack and run."

"Would you call that blackmail?" he asked her.

"I'd call it a loaded gun at your head."

"Yes, but you miss the point, Eileen. I don't care what Scofield thinks or how he feels, as long as it doesn't spoil a good thing. It's what he *knows* that counts, and that was what I wanted to discuss with you. How could he *know* that I was a good boy on all counts? Unless, of course, you told him."

She shook her head in denial. "He doesn't know! He has built-in radar and he senses things, yes, but practically, he has not the least knowledge of what I think, say, or do on the outside."

"Perhaps, Eileen, but you mustn't underestimate him. Wasn't that your first advice to me? Here is a man with millions. He could hire a dozen, a hundred men to check and report."

"No, I've never been followed."

"How can you be sure?"

"I have my own built-in radar. And I never go out that I don't watch—powder my nose as we ride along,

sneaking a look in the mirror, things like that. Besides, I've made certain foolproof tests to spot anyone following me."

"Not with me, you haven't."

"Of course not. With you, sweet innocent, it was never necessary."

That told him something more about her, hinted at the nature of her past, but suddenly he didn't care. He was sick to death of the whole childish intrigue, wanted to burst out of the web of restrictions and be a man with a woman on his own terms.

"The hell with it," he said. "Either way I jump, I'm a loser. If I dance to Scofield's tune, you'll shoot me down behind my back; if I go your route, he'll eventually catch up with me and give me the ax. But that will take longer and it offers a few laughs. What do you want from me, anyway? A pass to run free while I cover for you?"

"I want nothing from you, Glenn. Just be yourself. Have you ever been yourself with me?"

"Only once."

"I remember," she said. "And that was the real Hadlock. That was a man I could even fall in love with."

"Then let's go," he said. "Maybe that same guy is still around, and maybe we can find him up on that same hill above the coast . . ."

They had been parked for nearly an hour when she said, "I know a cozy little place off the road to Santa Barbara. All the rooms look right out at the ocean. We could be back well before morning."

"Great idea," he said. "But dangerous. We can stay right here."

"Big, rugged guy like you, what're you afraid of? That loathsome creep?"

"Suppose we're tailed?"

"Never. I told you that. But just in case, I'll show you some wonderful tricks to dodge and detect the best tail in the business."

"And if he ever did find out?"

"In a few months I'll be unchained from my warden and I'll be worth over a quarter of a million. You can help me spend it. Meanwhile, I could keep you from drowning by sending you chunks of my allowance."

"Well, I always did live on the razor's edge of trouble," he said carelessly. "Too late to change now."

He flipped the key and brought the motor to life.

Early next morning, as Hadlock slept, Ben Kimble stole quietly into the garage and lifted the trunk lid of the convertible. From a hidden compartment he disconnected a small black box and carried it aloft to Victor Scofield's room. It was nothing new; the major had been listening to these crazy tapes from the first month that evil woman came to live in the house.

Over the past couple years, the electric ears had recorded some startling dialogue. Even though the contract stated that Eileen would still collect by default if the major tossed her out before the first three year period, Kimble could not understand why Scofield kept her around to torture him. If that was love, the major could have it.

Kimble set up the tape recorder beside the major's bed, jacking the machine to a series of sensitive speakers so Scofield could hear every subtle nuance of inflection. The first part of the tape was not very special but, after a long gap, the scorching exchange of words blistered the walls.

Immediately, the major's face became a complex of agonized expressions, now demented with anger, now revolted, now despairing, sad. When it was done, Scofield gave Kimble the usual instructions, then ordered the sergeant to leave him alone with his troubled thoughts, with no interruptions.

At nine o'clock, shortly after Hadlock had devoured a breakfast that seemed even more elaborate than usual, he went to answer the phone. Scofield's penetrating bark filled his ear, commanding him to go at once to the wine cellar where he was to join Ben Kimble. They were to carry up cases of imported champagne and deliver them as a gift to a neighbor whose daughter was to be married at noon.

As a rule, Hadlock was not required to perform such menial tasks but, laden with the guilt of the night before, he hurried off obediently. Sure enough, in the frigid wine cellar, he found Kimble waiting. Despite the deep chill of the air, Kimble was stripped to the waist for the job. Apparently his hide was too tough to feel the cold.

"We keep the best stuff in here," Kimble said, producing a large key and opening a thick, solid-oak door. He stepped aside to let Hadlock pass before him, after which the big door was closed with a backward shove of his foot, and locked automatically.

The high-ceilinged room was not as large as the one from which they had just come but it was cooler. Set in the far wall were two rows of large metal drawers, each bearing a typewritten label. Above these drawers, a phone was suspended, a red phone, matching the one beside Scofield's bed. The room was otherwise barren, all of its space mysteriously wasted.

"What room is this?" Hadlock asked, a note of ap-

prehension creeping into his voice. "Where's the wine?"

"In these drawers," Kimble told him.

"Well, let's get to it, then," Hadlock replied with some relief.

"No," said Kimble, "we got to wait for a call from the major. He hasn't decided which lot he wants to send. Right now he's goin' over the list of the stock. We'll hear from 'im in a minute."

With that, Kimble leaned indolently against a wall, eyeing Hadlock curiously.

Above in his room, Victor Scofield was listening to a rerun of certain of the more shocking sections of the tape, and at that very moment, Eileen was saying with such sneering contempt, he could almost see her lips curling in scorn, ". . . Big, rugged guy like you, what're you afraid of? That loathsome creep?"

Mouth gaping, his features ravaged by an emotion like physical pain, Scofield suddenly began to jab the buttons on the panel beside him, filling the monitoring screen with a passing parade of empty-room shots as he searched frantically for Eileen. She must have been in transit from her bedroom, for he caught her in frame just as she entered the patio and fell into a lounge chair.

Even as she lay back with her eyes closed to the sun, her face wrapped in that expression of cat-purring contentment that he had come to understand so well, her tape-recorded voice was telling Hadlock, ". . . In a few months I'll be unchained from my warden, and I'll be worth over a quarter of a million. You can help me spend it. Meanwhile, I could keep you from drowning by sending you chunks of my allowance. . . ."

Mentally, Scofield pictured her shocked disappointment when she learned he had sent Hadlock "packing" for his insubordinate refusal to obey a direct order concerning a task he felt beneath him. Although Eileen had unwittingly exposed her plan to leave him the minute she got her greedy paws on the first big slice of his financial cake, the game—for now—would go on. Though each time he won another round he was being self-tortured, slowly destroyed at the center of his being, the game provided a challenge, the one flickering candle in the dark waste of his life.

He pressed a button to reverse the tape. When this was done, he fed the sound into that macabre room below where Hadlock and the sergeant stood waiting. After capturing them clearly on the monitoring screen, he plucked the receiver from the red phone and told Kimble to stand by for the playback of the tape—a reading of the charges and specifications before the execution of the condemned.

The last incriminating echo of the recording died in the wine cellar room and was followed by a beat or two of silence before Ben Kimble said quite casually, "Well, that's it, Hadlock. If you got nothin' to say, you can go now."

His face pallid, wary, Hadlock stared for a moment, then wheeled sharply and went to the door. Of course it was locked, and when he turned back, Kimble was dangling the key tauntingly from the fingers of one great ham-fisted hand. "S'matter, Hadlock? I said you could go. All you got to do is take this key from me. Now I ask you, 'big, rugged guy,' could anything be so simple?"

Scofield observed while Kimble followed his in-

structions to the letter. In the beginning, to prolong the major's entertainment, he boxed furiously with Hadlock, bringing to the fight more sheer guts and bullish power than skill, but it soon became obvious that Kimble was outmatched and was in some danger of being pounded senseless.

At this point, Kimble switched to karate. Since he had spent half a lifetime perfecting the art, the tide of the battle immediately reversed in his direction.

With only a little effort, he could now dispatch Hadlock to his oblivion; but again, this was not the way the game was played for the major, who not only demanded the thrills of an enduring contest, but also the vicarious satisfaction of seeing his enemy slowly and carefully reduced to a whimpering, bone-fractured cripple of a man, somewhat like himself.

So Kimble took his time, neatly chopping with the steelhard blades of his hands, knifing and kicking with blows that ruptured and crushed, but were just short of final until, at last, upon a signal from the major, just a ring of the phone, he broke Hadlock's neck.

His breathing labored, gasping as if he had delivered the deadly beating himself, Scofield cut sound and picture. Sagging against the pillows, feeling almost as if he were a Roman emperor for whom two gladiators had fought to the death, he sat entombed within his own ponderous thoughts.

Suddenly he scooped up the white phone. The game must go on. Hadlock's body would be consigned to one of the freezer drawers below, and Eileen would view all her departed companions in the final drama, when she would join them. For now, however, he

must find another vagrant, friendless victim who would never be missed.

He dialed the number, waited, then said, "Give me classified."

THE PERFECTIONIST

Helen Nielsen

IT WAS almost two A.M. when Claudia Shane eased away from the last dedicated group of celebrants at the Solimar Point Country Club bar and, on the pretext of visiting the powder room, made her way to the locked door of the executive office. Claudia was thirty-one, slender, and elegantly poised. She rapped smartly on the door and it opened from within.

There were two men in the room: Pete Kelly, a chubby, white-haired Irish cherub with bright pink cheeks, who was holding a black attaché case clutched tightly to his dinner jacket, and Alex Ward, who was leading-man handsome and as instantly aware of Claudia's entry as if their psyches were connected by electric wires.

Pete Kelly was leaving. Waving the attaché case as he neared Claudia, he crowed, "How about that? Alex stages the annual Founder's Day brawl and we come out three hundred bucks in the black! First time in the annals of the organization. The man's a bloody genius!"

"Are you just becoming aware of that?" Claudia chided. "Good-night, Peter, dear."

She eased him through the doorway with the grace of a queen dismissing an unwanted caller who would forever believe that his departure had broken her

heart. Then she locked the door and turned to meet Alex, fitting into his arms as if they were home.

"Claudia, it's been too long!" he said.

"Only two weeks," she answered.

"Two centuries! Don't ever do that to me again. No more separations—trial or otherwise."

"You're sold, then?"

"You know it! You must have known months before you went to Palm Springs."

"But now we're both certain, aren't we?"

She stepped back and let him gaze at her, confident that he could see only what pleased him. She had picked up a tan at the spa, and it was strikingly set off by a simple dinner sheath that had come off the rack in one of the local shops. A woman with style had no need of an expensive couturier. Widowed at twenty-six, Claudia Shane had carried on with her husband's insurance brokerage and prospered with the Solimar Point boom. Energies that might have gone into homemaking and childbearing had blossomed in another direction, but not at the expense of femininity.

"Now that we've eliminated the last doubt," she added, "there's only one question left. When are you going to marry me?"

"Soon," Alex said.

"Darling, I hate to be forward but there's so little time! I've missed too much of life. So have you. I want to marry you now and live with you, and make love with you with the doors unlocked and the drapes open—"

"You're shameless," Alex scolded.

"About some things, yes. When, Alex?"

Alex feigned interest in his wristwatch, then exclaimed, "It's after two! I've been trying all evening

to have five minutes alone with you, and now I have to go out to the office and close up shop. The caterers were paid only until two-thirty. I mustn't lose that precious profit. How about lunch tomorrow?"

Claudia protested, "I'm serious, Alex. It has to be soon or we close the doors. I'm not the Back Street type."

"Tomorrow at one. Same place. We'll set dates. I promise."

Claudia left the office. Alex waited five minutes, then followed. The ballroom was deserted now. The brilliant jazz combo the Founder's Club board of directors had whined so about importing from London were packing up their instruments and preparing to depart. They had been a bit too riotous for the old establishment group, but executives were coming younger these days and the portion that remained was the group that had drained the bar of its private stock and thus turned the annual ball into a profit-making function. It was simple logic. Alex Ward had made one million dollars in the past five years by using simple logic and hard-nosed driving power. There was no luck involved. It was good judgment, good timing, and chutzpah. It was the art of being a perfectionist.

It was also because he had inherited, through marriage, the management of Harry Dragerman's realty business when the old man died five years ago, and that left one severe drawback to Alex's enjoyment of his well-deserved affluence—his wife, Phyllis.

When the ballroom was completely cleared, Alex signaled the janitors to clean up and then walked out to the parking lot. The combo's van, a service truck, and his own car were all that remained to give evidence of a successful evening. Alex went to his sedan

and slid in behind the steering wheel. Phyllis, swathed in mink, was curled up in the backseat. She raised up and blinked at the panel light.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

Her voice was a familiar whine. "I slept some," she said, "but I'm chilled through."

"I told you to call a cab and go home."

"Alone—at night? You know how nervous I've been since that Dorrit girl was strangled on the beach."

"That was two miles away and nearly a month ago," Alex said.

"But the police haven't made an arrest. Alex, why were you so long? You knew I had a headache."

Alex started the motor and drove out of the parking lot. There was no traffic at this level. What was still awake and lighted in the Point was spread out below them as they rolled toward the highland estates. This was land Harry Dragerman had leased out for pasture until Alex took over the business and turned it into prime white-water-view residential lots. As he drove, Alex watched Phyllis in the rear-view mirror. She was terribly pale, and her face had become quite puffy with the passing years. In spite of the mink—and the Parisian gown beneath it—she was dowdy. She had never been a great beauty, but she had been cute and uncomplicated. But life wasn't uncomplicated. Now that he was a successful man, Alex wanted a more meaningful companionship with a woman. Deep down inside, Phyllis was still Harry Dragerman's little girl, and nothing was more irritating than a thirty-five-year-old teen-ager.

"I thought Dr. Kuperman said those headaches were cured," Alex said. "Psychosomatic and cured. God knows we paid him enough!"

"Let's not talk about it," Phyllis said. "I'll be all

right as soon as I've had a hot bath. It was the crowd and that awful music—"

"It's the best beat of the day."

"I know. You're always right about business things, Alex."

Pathetic. Claudia had fruged with the best of them, but if she hadn't liked the group she would have told him so with no qualifications. There was no challenge left in Phyllis. She was as dated as the business concepts that had kept her father on the edge of survival for fifty professional years.

"Phyllis," he said abruptly, "I think Kuperman is right. Those headaches are psychosomatic—and I know why. It's our marriage. It's just not working out. Let's be civilized and call it quits."

He knew how Phyllis would react. She was completely predictable.

"Alex, no! Not that again," she begged.

"Why not? We know it's true. Divorce me, Phyllis. You'll feel wonderful!"

Phyllis drew the mink closer about her face. She was weak, clinging, adolescent, and deadly, because she held the winning cards and knew how to play them.

"It's Claudia Shane, isn't it? That's why you kept me sitting in the car so long. You were with her. I saw her come out—"

"Phyllis, leave Mrs. Shane out of this. It's between you and me!"

The pale face in Alex's rear-view mirror smiled knowingly.

"All right, then. If it's just between you and me, I'll give you the divorce," Phyllis said, "but that's all I'll give you. Absolutely all. Is that sufficiently clear?"

Alex's grip tightened on the steering wheel. His

foot bore lower on the accelerator. They were climbing too fast, as if he could run away from that nasal whine in the backseat.

"I know you think it's unfair," she said. "You did make the fortune—but with the business I inherited from Papa. It's still mine, Alex—"

"Phyllis, shut up!" Alex said.

"You know it is. You know the law. Can you make another million, Alex? Are you sure Claudia will want you if you can't? Are you sure you can fit into her sophisticated world without a bankroll?"

"Phyllis, if you don't shut up—" Alex threatened—and then Phyllis screamed. Instinctively, Alex's foot found the brake pedal. They had swung around the curve and picked up a flashing red light in the headlight beams, then an ambulance jutting out from a wide driveway, and a big man in a leather coat who planted himself in the path of the sedan as it lurched to a stop.

"Alex Ward?" the man called out. "Is that you?"

It was Captain Jimmy Collins of the Solimar Point police department. He came to the side of the car and poked his face in the open window, his teeth clenched.

"You damned near hit my police car, Alex," he said. "I should run you in for reckless driving, but I don't have time. You just pull around the ambulance easy and go on home."

The ambulance was now bathed with light. The rear doors were open and a couple of white-garbed attendants came out of the driveway bearing a covered stretcher.

"This is the Sandersons' house," Phyllis said. "What's happened, Captain?"

Collins hesitated. He was a tight-lipped profes-

sional, and it was obvious that he didn't appreciate having his operation observed by unofficial callers. However, the stretcher was too close to be ignored. Then, to cement the situation, a lanky, hatless man wearing a battered trenchcoat and fogged bifocals emerged from the driveway and tapped the captain's right shoulder.

"All vacuumed and fingerprinted," he announced in a nasal voice. "Doubt if we have much more to go on than we did in the Dorrit case, but look in at the lab in a couple of hours to make sure."

"The Dorrit Case?" Phyllis echoed.

"Ennis, shut up!" Collins ordered.

It was too late. The lanky man was Wesley Ennis, who constituted the one-man crime lab at the Solimar Point police station. He was a man who loved his work; a crime buff who had lectured before the Founder's Club and every other organization within a radius of fifty miles that would have him.

His presence at the Sandersons' could mean only one thing, and it was Collins who told the story. The Sandersons had returned from the Founder's Ball to find Angie Parsons, their seventeen-year-old baby-sitter, dead. She had been strangled with one of her own silk stockings—a repeat of the technique used on the Dorrit girl in the beach-house murder.

Phyllis began to whimper in the back seat, and this time Alex couldn't scold her. He was feeling exactly what she was feeling—icy fear.

Ennis took a piece of pale blue tissue from his pocket, removed his glasses, and wiped them clean. His curly, steel gray hair was damp with fog, and his shoulders hunched against the chill. Having cleaned the glasses, he replaced them and smothered a yawn.

"Don't know why murderers usually strike at such ungodly hours," he said. "See you later, Captain."

As Ennis started to cross in front of the sedan's headlight beams, a shout came from the dark driveway, followed by a shot and the sound of running feet.

"Stop him! Stop that man!"

At that moment, a slender male figure in tight denim trousers and leather jacket dashed into the arc of light. Temporarily blinded, he stood pinioned by shock. Ennis seemed paralyzed, but Collins's reaction was automatic. He blocked the fugitive with a low tackle and sent him sprawling back into the arms of the pursuing officer.

Snaking free, the runaway yelled, "I haven't done anything! I haven't done anything wrong!"

He was only a boy, wild now with terror. He clawed his way toward the sedan and grabbed hold of the door next to Alex with clutching gloved hands.

"We found him in the garage," the officer said.

"I was asleep. I was cold. The garage was open so I went in and fell asleep. Then I heard sirens—mister, help me! I didn't steal anything! I didn't hurt anybody! Help me, mister, please—"

Collins yanked the suspect loose from the sedan and buried him in a blanket of lawmen, but not before Alex Ward had a good look at the face of the man who was going to set him free.

A civilized society must be based on law. Captain Collins was aware of that, but, like all good law officers, gnashed his teeth at the shackling restrictions of the courts. The leather-jacketed prowler called himself Arne Farmer. He carried a thin wallet containing twelve dollars which, he claimed, was

what was left of his last paycheck from a temporary job at a hamburger stand at the beach. The job was over. Politics, he said, which Jimmy Collins translated as emotional instability. Farmer was a drifter. He gave his home as San Diego and claimed to be an orphan. He could offer no local references, and Collins was well on his way to a confession when Alex Ward appeared at the police station in a surprising role.

Prior to marrying Harry Dragerman's realty business, Ward had taken the time and trouble to pick up a law degree. As the member of several civic organizations, he announced that he felt duty bound to see that the suspect received adequate legal advice.

While Collins fumed, Wesley Ennis emerged from the laboratory and looked on with bemused interest. He had traded the trenchcoat for a white linen jacket, and his eyes were owlishly large behind the thick lenses of his spectacles.

"Mr. Ward," he said, "I didn't realize that a man of your stature took such an interest in justice. I thought you were only concerned with making money."

"There's nothing wrong with making money," Alex said.

"No, there isn't. Unfortunately, neither the captain nor myself have much experience in that field, but our work does have compensations. The captain, naturally, is interested in an arrest and a conviction. The force of public opinion falls on him if he doesn't deliver miracles. But my interest is purely scientific: evidence. I'm sorry to say, Captain, that we have no evidence. I found no fingerprints in the house, no lint from Farmer's clothing, not even any of the dirt his boots picked up in the garage where he was found."

Alex Ward weighed Ennis's words. "Then it's Arne Farmer's statement against—"

"Circumstance," Ennis said.

"Then no formal charge."

"Not without a confession," Collins sighed, "and he's guilty as hell. I'm sure of it. He admits to being in the area for a month. He worked at the beach where he could have seen the Dorrit girl promenading in her bikini—"

"Jeanne Dorrit wasn't raped," Ennis said quickly.

"Was the Parsons girl?" Alex asked.

"No."

"Still," Alex reflected, "it's a sex crime, isn't it? I mean, the use the girl's stocking—"

"You are observant," Ennis remarked. "You probably noticed, too, that Farmer was wearing gloves when he grabbed hold of your car tonight. Even so, there's still no evidence to put him inside the Sanderson house, and that leaves the captain handcuffed. Farmer will go free."

"To kill again," Collins muttered.

"Very likely," Ennis said. "If he is the strangler, he will kill again. It's a compulsion. Not a pleasant thought for realty values, is it, Mr. Ward?"

"It's not a pleasant thought for the ladies of Solimar Point," Alex answered.

Ennis was right. Arne Farmer was held for three days until his statements could be verified and his fingerprints checked out of Washington. He was clean, no record of arrests of any kind. Lacking a confession, Captain Collins had no choice but to release his suspect, with an admonition to put distance between himself and Solimar Point. He drove Farmer to the bus depot to be placed on the first bus for San Diego; but there Collins was met by Alex Ward, who had

telephoned the police station and learned of the captain's plans. He had given the matter of Arne Farmer some thought, he explained, and it didn't seem fair to the boy, or to the community, to hustle him out of town that way with so little hope of a productive future.

"Farmer's been printed and mugged," he explained, "and I'll wager you've alerted the San Diego police that he's on his way. The minute he tries to get a job, a check will be run on his background and he'll get a fast brush. Who will hire a suspected murderer?"

"So what do I do?" Farmer challenged. "Commit suicide?"

"I helped you the night you were arrested," Alex said, "and I still feel responsible. I've got a new property development opening up a couple of miles up in the hills. Construction's hung up in this tight money squeeze, but the field office is completed and the electricity and water are connected. I need a watchman. How would bed, board, and fifty dollars a week strike you? The job's yours as long as you can hold it. By that time Captain Collins may have caught the strangler and you'll be really clean."

"You're taking a big chance," Collins warned.

Alex drew Collins aside. "Isn't it better to know where Farmer is as long as he's still suspect? Incriminating evidence may turn up, and San Diego's awfully close to the Mexican border."

Viewing the situation in that light, Collins agreed. As for Farmer, he had no choice. He was transferred from the police car to Ward's, and Alex drove to the new development. Farmer liked the big sedan. He stretched out his legs and stared at his boots for a few minutes and then began poking through his pockets

for a pack of cigarettes. Alex offered his own open case with a crisp new fifty-dollar bill folded inside the cover.

"Go ahead, take it," he said. "It's not marked."

"What's it for?" Farmer hedged.

"An advance on your salary, but I advise you not to go back into town to spend it. Feeling's running high about those murders."

Satisfied, Farmer took the bill and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. He then took a cigarette from the case and got his light from the instrument panel, and this act brought his eyes in line with a chrome nameplate proclaiming: THIS CAR WAS MADE FOR ALEX WARD.

Farmer emitted a high-pitched laugh. "Alex Ward—big shot!" he said. "Now that the fuzz is gone, why don't you tell me what this is really all about?"

"Would you like a matched set of twenty of these fifty dollar bills?" Alex asked. "And a good job with a construction outfit in South America?"

"What happens if I don't like it?"

"Nothing—unless somebody fans up the hotheads in the Point and they come up to the construction office some night to make sure there are no more stocking murders."

After that, Alex and Arne Farmer had a perfect understanding. The construction office contained a hot plate, a cot, and blankets, and enough canned goods to keep Farmer out of circulation for at least a week. It would take that long, Alex explained, to arrange for an air ticket to South America and a passport. The boy understood and seemed willing to follow directions, and Alex's only fear, as he drove back to the Point, was that the fifty-dollar bill might

be too hot for Farmer's jacket pocket until it was time for the strangler to strike again.

The Red Sails was a smart bar and dining room adjacent to the new marina. Claudia's sports car was parked on the lot when Alex arrived. He hurried inside and found her waiting in their usual booth with their usual cocktails. He glanced at his watch. It was, oddly enough, exactly five o'clock.

"I am here, as promised," he said.

"And a good thing, too," Claudia remarked. "You stood me up for lunch. That sort of thing bruises the ego."

"But you know why that happened. It was that mess at the Sandersons'. Ran right into the worst of it on the way home from the country club."

Claudia knew about it, of course. The papers and airwaves were full of it, and Rumorsville had been working three shifts.

"They let the suspect go," she said. "I feel creepy. Think I'll buy a Great Dane or something for protection."

"Don't," Alex said. "I've already applied for the job as protector."

"Any references?"

"The best."

"Alex, really? Did Phyllis finally—"

"Yes, Phyllis finally agreed to the divorce. Now, drink your drink like a nice bride-to-be. Everything's being arranged."

She was Claudia, and Claudia was too sophisticated to cry, but her eyes were moist and her voice had dropped at least an octave when she said, "How? When? I mean, how did you do it, darling?"

"I'm magic," Alex said. "Seriously, Phyllis just de-

cided to agree that we're both civilized people, and civilized people don't deliberately destroy one another. She took it rather well, as a matter of fact. You understand, of course, that she keeps the house, and there'll be a settlement. Anyone who has put up with me for fifteen years deserves more than a pat on the head."

"Alex, how can you say that? She was the one who was so ugly about the divorce!"

Alex leaned across the table and silenced her with a kiss. "Grudges get heavy," he said. "To a new life?"

They touched glasses and Alex watched her drink. He had no need of stimulation. Something electric had started generating the moment he took Arne Farmer off the bus. It was exciting, like opening a new development, or watching a sleeper stock take off and soar. For the rest of the evening he would enjoy Claudia, listen to her and converse with her, but the creative part of his mind would be checking and rechecking his plan for any possible bugs. There was nothing morbid in this. Phyllis had already become an inanimate object. She existed only as the central character in the soon-to-be presented drama of her death.

On the following afternoon, Alex appeared at the police station to register a snub-nosed .38 caliber handgun. Captain Collins was in the office, and his reaction left nothing to the imagination.

"Now, why did a sensible man like you have to buy this silly private-eye pistol?" he demanded. "Everybody's doing it, but I didn't think you would. Do you have any idea how many people get killed with these household arsenals every year?"

"It was Phyllis's idea," Alex said. "She's been a

bundle of nerves since the Parsons girl was killed. That got pretty close to home."

Collins shrugged. "All right, I can't stop you from owning the gun. But I can appeal to your common sense not to be careless with it. Fill out the form."

Alex lied, of course. He already owned a service pistol, but he needed an excuse to return to the police station and remind Collins that Phyllis was nervous about the murder, and that he meant to fulfill his husbandly duty to protect her from harm. He also needed an opportunity to see Wesley Ennis again and make sure the authorities weren't holding back any important data on the strangler's modus operandi.

The lab was locked only when Ennis was working on tests. Evidence pertinent to unsolved cases, or cases pending trial, was locked away from prying eyes and damaging fingers. Alex found the one-man criminology department poring over an impressive tome which he immediately closed at the welcome sight of a visitor.

Like all men, Ennis had an ego. Alex fed it small, leading tidbits until Ennis unlocked the files on the two recent stranglings and displayed the murder weapon in each—a sheer silk stocking.

"A killer has a signature," he said. "We know the Dorrit girl and the Parsons girl were killed by the same man because of a small detail in technique. We don't know how the girls were initially approached. Perhaps they screamed, but the beach house where the first murder occurred was remote, and the Sanderson house is on a hillside where anyone approaching is usually driving at a good rate of speed, or in low gear."

"And the Sandersons had gone out for the evening," Alex added. "The killer had to know that."

Wesley Ennis scowled at him through those penetrating bifocals. This was his milieu and he intended to direct the dialogue.

"I think that we can assume our killer, lurking on the premises, could make that observation for himself. The Parsons girl lived farther down the hill. Sanderson drove down and brought her up to his house at about seven thirty. There was nothing secretive about it. That's beside the point. Whatever happened before the girls were strangled, and there were bruises to indicate some struggle, the interesting thing is that each girl, while not sexually molested, was stripped of one, and just one, article of clothing—a pair of stockings."

Alex held the evidence in his hand, each of the strangulation nylons carefully protected by a sealed plastic bag.

"You said a *pair* of stockings," he said. "There are only two stockings here."

"Exactly," Ennis responded. "That's one of the reasons Farmer was released. He didn't have the second stocking on him, and Collins's men couldn't find it in Sanderson's garage. We think he has both stockings—maybe more from other crimes we know nothing about—hidden away somewhere. It's a fetish. If so, he'll come back to them. Where do you suppose the cache is, Mr. Ward?"

Alex was uncomfortable. Ennis seemed to enjoy his macabre profession too much, and those owlish eyes had a way of making a man feel his subconscious was showing. "If you're trying to frighten me," Alex said, "don't bother. I'm already scared to a ghostly white."

Ward smiled thinly. "You should be. Have you ever

seen a woman after strangulation? I have some photos here—"

Alex instinctively backed away. Murder was a crime of passion. It should be done in hot blood, with no time to contemplate such consequences as the ghastly distorted face of a victim.

"Not very pretty, are they?" Ennis remarked. "I have quite a collection of these photos. Victims of gunshot, knifing, even ax murders. We live in an age of violence, Mr. Ward. It's in the air, and you know how young people get caught up in trends. To me, the act of strangulation seems the most cruel and primitive. Bare hands, as it were. And the victim has time to know what's happening, hence the terror an distortion of the features, as you can see."

"I'm sorry," Alex said quickly. "I have to pick up Mrs. Ward at the medical center."

"So?" Ennis reluctantly put aside the photos. "Nothing serious, I hope."

"All in her imagination. Always is," Alex answered. "You know how women are."

"I'm not married—except to my profession, Mr. Ward. Do come back when you have more time. I have some interesting color slides, very interesting—"

Alex ran two stoplights on his way to the medical center. Ennis either took sadistic delight in shocking people, or was so engrossed in his work he couldn't appreciate other sensibilities. By the time he reached the parking lot, Alex's face was beaded with perspiration and his hands were clammy on the steering wheel. He sat there in the bright afternoon sunlight and tried to think rationally about the subject of murder. He had loved Phyllis once. Old man Dragerman's shabby little realty office hadn't sparked the marriage. He had taken Phyllis for the same rea-

son any man takes a wife. He wanted to be free of her now, but he didn't want to see her looking like those photos in Ennis's file. He could try once more to reach her with persuasion.

Phyllis emerged from Dr. Kuperman's office, scanned the parking lot and then walked toward the car. She was definitely overweight, and had the knack of choosing clothes that accentuated the bovine in her figure, but for the moment Alex was oblivious to these faults. He imagined her as he had seen her fifteen years ago: soft, feminine, and in need of manly protection. A wave of forgotten warmth swept over him. He leaped out of the car and held open the door for her entrance.

Phyllis glared at him. "What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "Did the doctor telephone you? Don't get over-mobilized, Alex. I may not drop dead for another forty years. I know how happy you are to hear that."

Alex's illusion dissolved abruptly. "Why should the doctor have called me?" he asked.

"Never mind. If he didn't think my condition was serious enough to tell you, I won't. You can get this prescription filled at the pharmacy on the way home, and don't brake the car so fast that I bounce around in the backseat the way I did the night you almost hit that ambulance. I slipped a disc in my back. Alex? Are you listening?"

Alex wasn't. He was thinking of the best way to handle Arne Farmer.

The first step was to make a diagram of the house, showing the location of Phyllis's room and the means of access. Farmer wasn't a mental giant so the plan must be kept simple.

The visit to Ennis's lab had been a disturbing ex-

perience, but without it Alex wouldn't have known about the stocking fetish. He selected a pair from Phyllis's dressing room. True to form, she had taken to bed immediately after the visit to Dr. Kuperman. The prescription was for her heart and was kept on the bedside table. Alex encouraged the invalidism; it made her more accessible. In the years since her father's death, Phyllis had imagined herself the victim of almost every known disease and a few not yet diagnosed. One more added to her repertoire of ailments didn't alter his plan.

The important thing was to leave nothing that could be traced back to himself. He took off a day to drive into the Los Angeles International Airport and, on the pretext of being called to the telephone, enlisted another passenger to purchase a one-way ticket to Buenos Aires. He borrowed nineteen fifty-dollar bills from the office safe so no withdrawal would show on his bank account, and then, carrying a small camera, returned to the construction office in the hills.

He found Arne Farmer stretched out on the cot, nursing the dregs of a bottle of soda pop. He had made a paper airplane of the fifty-dollar bill and sailed it across his torso while Alex displayed the diagram and explained the plan. At seven thirty of the following evening, Alex would leave for a regular meeting of the realty board in the Solimar Civic Center. He would make certain the window to the service porch was unlocked. There were no resident servants; Phyllis would be alone. Farmer would go directly to her bedroom (she always kept a night light burning) and do the job as quickly as possible.

Alex produced the stockings. "I bought a pair," he said. "I don't want you poking about after the job's done. You can add the extra to your collection."

Farmer accepted the stockings without comment. He dangled them before his eyes for a moment and then stuffed them into his jacket pocket. "Whatever you say, boss man," he sighed.

"Now sit up and let me snap your picture. I've got an unexpired passport and a friend who can doctor it up to fit your description."

Alex was trying to make the setup look genuine, and Farmer had never seen the passport. He examined it closely between poses.

"When do I get the bread?" he demanded.

"Tomorrow night, after you've done the job. I'll leave the meeting at exactly ten o'clock. It takes fifteen minutes for me to drive home. Meet me at ten fifteen on the rear patio, the one you use to get into the house. I'll give you the money, the passport, and ticket, and a head start. I won't discover the body until morning. The police will be told that I rapped on my wife's door when I came home. She didn't answer and so I assumed she was asleep. By the time the third strangulation is reported, you'll be on a plane somewhere over Mexico."

Farmer returned the passport. "I want to see the bread first," he said.

Alex was prepared. He removed a long envelope from his inside coat pocket and let Arne Farmer examine the contents: the nineteen fifty-dollar bills and the ticket. But with Alex's coat open, Farmer caught a glimpse of the handgun in the holster.

"What's the iron for?" he demanded.

"Protection. I'm carrying almost a thousand dollars in cash."

There was an instant when Alex feared Farmer was getting wise. He counted the money carefully and studied the ticket. When Alex held out his hand,

Farmer returned the money but retained the envelope and the ticket.

"Just in case you try to cross me," he said.

"Don't be so suspicious, Arne," Alex answered. "I'm helping you and you're helping me. We need each other. Now, let's run over the plan one more time."

When Alex returned to his car, he pocketed the money and locked the passport and camera in the glove compartment. They had served their purpose as props and wouldn't be needed again. He let Farmer keep the ticket, which was useless without the passport, because it gave him a sense of security.

On the following evening, Alex stepped into Phyllis's bedroom before leaving for the meeting. She was propped up in bed with an open box of chocolates in her lap and a confession magazine in her hand. The sight of her roused nothing in him but impatience to get the night's work done.

"I thought you would never come," she whined. "It's time for my medicine and there's no water in the carafe. You should hire a nurse for me, Alex. Dr. Kuperman said I shouldn't be left alone."

"Dr. Kuperman should have said that chocolates make fat, and fat's dangerous to anyone with a heart condition," Alex retorted. "He can't be too worried. As for leaving you alone, you do like all that money I make for you, don't you? You must like it or you wouldn't be so reluctant to let me get away with my share."

The needling brought no response. Alex picked up the medicine and stalked into the bathroom, but his nerves were tauter than he realized. The bottle slipped from his hand into the basin, and all of Dr. Kuperman's expensive prescription went rushing

down the drain. It was as clear as the water coming from the tap. Alex faked the dosage with a few drops of mouthwash, refilled the bottle from the tap and returned to Phyllis. She took the medicine without protest. Having replaced the bottle on the night table, Alex then left for the meeting.

Alex was better than his word to Arne Farmer. At nine thirty he excused himself on the grounds of his wife's frail health, and drove home. He cut the headlights and parked a short distance from the house, then walked to the rear patio. There were no lights showing except in Phyllis's room, and the service-porch window rattling in the night wind told him that Arne Farmer was already inside the house. He took the handgun from its holster and waited. Action came faster than he expected. He heard a high-pitched yell, and then the rear door burst open and Farmer ran wildly across the patio.

"Farmer!" Alex called. "I'm here!"

The boy whirled about. When he saw Alex he stretched out both hands in a clawing gesture. "Man," he gasped, "give me the bread and the ticket!"

"Is she dead?"

"She's real dead! Look for yourself. Now, give me what's coming to me."

"I will," Alex said, and shot Arne Farmer through the head.

Farmer dropped. Alex leaned over him and felt his pulse until certain that he was dead. The long envelope containing the airline ticket was protruding from one of the leather-jacket pockets. Alex transferred it to his own inside coat pocket, then walked into the house and down the hall to Phyllis's room.

One glance told him all he needed to know. He went into the den and telephoned Captain Collins.

Later, at the police station, Alex made a full statement. "I left the meeting early because my wife was nervous when left her alone in the house at night. I drove home and parked beyond my driveway because something was wrong. I had left the patio lights burning. They were off. I walked to the house and approached through the rear patio. There I could see the light in Phyllis's room and the open window on the service porch where Farmer must have entered. I heard a cry and Farmer opened the back door and came running out. He saw me and yelled: 'She's dead! I've killed your wife!' He looked insane, and I guess I went a little crazy too. I shot him."

The police stenographer stopped writing. From behind his desk, Captain Collins faced Alex with an unblinking stare. Ennis, whose eyes were lost behind the reflected light on his bifocals, slouched against the water cooler. Alex sat stiffly in a straight-backed chair. It was Collins who finally spoke.

"I wonder why Farmer said he killed your wife. He must have known she was already dead when he put the stocking around her throat."

"Already dead?" Alex's lips felt dry. He wet them with his tongue. "But that's impossible! I saw——"

"Did you go into your wife's bedroom before you called me?"

"No—" Alex reflected. "I looked in at the door and saw her sprawled over the edge of the bed with a stocking twisted about her neck. I didn't want to touch anything."

"I'm glad you didn't. But that stocking was too loose to strangle anyone, Alex. Your wife died of a heart attack. No wonder Farmer came out of the

house yelling. We'll never know for sure, but it's possible she heard him break in, felt an attack coming on and tried to get to her medicine. The cap was found on the bedside table, the bottle on the floor, empty. Dr. Kuperman verified the prescription, but what we can't understand was why the stain on the carpet had no medicinal content. It was just flavored water."

"I can explain that," Alex said. "I accidentally broke Phyllis's medicine bottle before I went to the meeting. It was too late to get the prescription refilled, so I used tap water. I didn't want to worry her, and I didn't dream the stuff was important. She's been a hypochondriac for years."

Collins listened. His expression didn't change, but when Alex was all through he said, "I'll have to take your gun, Alex."

"My gun?"

"I can hold you on the charge of carrying a gun until I get something stronger. That permit I issued was just a registration, not a license to carry."

Collins stepped forward quickly and peeled back Alex's jacket. He yanked the .38 out of the holster and, with the same motion, flicked the long envelope from Alex's inner pocket. "Now, what have we here?" he said.

Alex didn't confess until after Collins took the ticket out of the envelope. It had a grimy thumbprint on it that made Wesley Ennis's face glow in anticipation, and Alex had no cover story for the evidence Ennis brought back from his lab, or for the exposed film Collins found in the camera in the glove compartment of his car, or for Arne Farmer's fingerprints on the passport. Finally, when Ennis showed him a close-up photo he had taken of Phyllis before

she was removed from the bedroom, Alex told everything.

After Alex was booked, Collins congratulated Ennis on his ingenuity. "I never would have thought to analyze Alex for evidence," he declared. "You must be psychic."

"Not psychic—thorough," Ennis explained. "Criminals have patterns, as you've often heard me say. The stocking strangler's first two victims were lovely young girls in their teens. I took one look in that bedroom and knew that Mrs. Ward didn't fit."

Collins didn't pursue the subject, which was just as well.

Ennis returned to his lab and placed the almost-strangulation stocking in a plastic bag. It wasn't an authentic murder weapon, but it did belong to the Strangler Collection. Peevishly, because it was an abominable thing for one man to steal another's style, he examined the second stocking they had found on Farmer's body, then folded it gently and placed it in his coat pocket. Outsider that it was, he would still take it home and put it in the drawer with the stockings he had taken from the Dorrit and Parsons girls, having first deftly strangled them in a manner bespeaking a perfectionist who had no fear of leaving damaging evidence which he alone, in the course of duty, would later discover.

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