SHE came to Tod Talbot in the hour of his need, picking him up in a bar, hiding him from the law, offering him her heart and her caresses. Why? Vickie Paul knew that Tod had been judged a killer!

All the world shunned him, even the red-haired Beth Conley, whom he had tried to help. Even Harlan Young, his closest friend, Even Jane, of the fiery blood and sultry beauty—Jane, his own wife! So what would a girl like Vickie want with him?

When murder struck again, Tod stalled the cops—invaded the stronghold of Luke Adams, the racket guy—maneuvered to shoot it out with his old friend, Harlan. He was fighting for Jane whom he desired, for Beth whom he pitied. Yet it was Vickie, in the end, who taught him which woman was his real love—and which the homicidal lady!
HOMICIDAL LADY

Day Keene

GRAPHIC BOOKS
ALL CHARACTERS IN THIS WORK ARE FICTITIOUS
AND ANY RESEMBLANCE TO PERSONS LIVING
OR DEAD IS COINCIDENTAL

A Graphic Original Novel

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Homicidal Lady
It wasn't a pleasant sensation, this knowing that through your efforts a man had been condemned to die. As Talbot watched, a bead of perspiration escaped the hollow of Beth Conley's throat and trickled down her flesh to disappear into the deep cleft between her breasts. Even with her red hair sodden with rain and her gray eyes swollen with weeping, she was a beautiful girl. He didn't blame Conley for wanting to live.

The girl made a futile gesture with her hands. "You won't phone the governor, then?"

With the windows closed it was hot, breathlessly so, in the big knotty-pine paneled office. Talbot had never been so tired. His voice was almost as lifeless as hers. "It wouldn't do any good. Not unless you have some new evidence to present."

Beth Conley met his eyes. "Such as?"
"The missing money."
She spoke as to a child. "But I've told you. Jim told you. He never saw that money."
"He was identified by four witnesses."
"Witnesses have been wrong."
"That's true."
The pelt of the rain on the windows grew even louder. The red-haired girl stood up. Her body was as pretty as her face. The smallness of her waist accented her full bosom. Her long legs tapered to slim ankles. “Look, Mr. Talbot. This thing can cost you a wife. It’s going to cost me a husband.” She glanced at the jeweled watch on her wrist, “In exactly thirty-seven minutes. But Jim didn’t hold up that bank. He didn’t kill that teller. He didn’t kill Al Baker.” She tried hard not to cry, and failed. “Give him a break. Please. If you call the governor and ask him to grant a stay, he’ll surely allow Jim thirty days. Thirty days isn’t long but something may turn up. You’re executing an innocent man.” She didn’t bother to wipe away the tears.

Talbot felt like a heel. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Conley.”
“You won’t?”
“No.”

The red-haired girl continued to cry softly.
Talbot wished he could think of something to say to comfort her. He couldn’t. Telling her that she was young and pretty, that she wouldn’t have any difficulty in finding another man, wouldn’t assuage her grief. She was in love with James Conley, just as he was in love with Jane. He glanced at the calendar on his desk as he opened a fresh package of cigarettes. It seemed incredible that six weeks had passed, that in the morning he would lose Jane as certainly as Beth Conley was going to lose her husband. The only difference was, Jane would still be alive. She would return to Sun City. He would see her every day, and in seeing her, be reminded daily of just how much he had lost.

Talbot repeated, “I’m sorry.”
She got to her feet slowly. "Yes. So am I. You won't give Jim a break?"
"You mean by phoning the governor?"
"Yes."
"It wouldn't do any good."
"It would if you told him there was some doubt in your mind as to Jim's guilt."
Talbot stood up back of his desk and lit the cigarette in his lips. There was a medicinal taste to the smoke. He said, "Conley had a fair trial."
"Your wife didn't think so."
"She was counsel for the defense."
"Thirty days isn't much to ask when a man's life is at stake."
"Please, Mrs. Conley."
"You won't phone the governor?"
"No."

Beth Conley picked her purse from his desk. Her shoulders sagged. Her voice was lifeless. "Well, I thought I'd ask you. It's the last thing I can do for Jim." She stood a moment longer, watching him, then walked slowly from the office, closing the door behind her.

Talbot looked from the closed door to the four-column picture on the front page of the home edition of the Evening Times. The Times was milking the story for all it was worth. The picture showed Conley in the corridor outside his cell, with the warden and the priest. Conley's face showed the strain he was under. The caption read—

With only hours to live, James Conley maintains the State is executing an innocent man.
"Before God," he swears, "I didn't hold up the Midtown National Bank. I didn't kill that teller. I didn't kill Al Baker."

The still, hot air in the office made breathing difficult. Talbot raised a rain-streaked window and surveyed the courthouse square. The sidewalks and streets gleamed wetly. The lawn was sodden with rain and littered with dead fronds wrenched from the storm-battered palms.

It was a hell of a day for a man to have to die.

He considered placing a long-distance call to Jane and rejected the idea. He was damned if he'd beg. If Jane was so certain Conley was innocent, the least she could have done was stay around and file an appeal instead of acting as she had.

Sweat dripped into his eyes and blinded him. It was the old army game all over. If rank had its privileges, it also had its responsibilities. He washed his face in his small private lavatory, then studied himself in the mirror. There were lines in his face that hadn't been there before, not even when he'd walked ashore on Iwo. Still, Jane wasn't the only woman in the world—or was she?

He looked at his watch. Thirty-two minutes before twelve. He didn't want to be in the office when Conley was executed. The Times hated his guts. They had made a big thing of Jane divorcing him because as counsel for the defense she had insisted, even after the jury had been polled, that Conley was an innocent man, a victim of circumstantial evidence and mistaken identification.
HOMICIDAL LADY

He should have let Harlan try the case. Then none of this would have happened. But to have done that would have been an admission of weakness, both as a husband and as an officer of the law. After all, he was state’s attorney.

Talbot picked up his hat and raincoat from a chair and walked into the outer office. “I’m taking the rest of the day off,” he told Miss Carter.

Miss Carter stopped typing. “Yes, sir.”

Harlan looked up over the rough draft of the brief he was dictating. “What did Beth Conley want?”

Talbot fitted his hat to his head. “A thirty-day stay.”

“On what new evidence?”

“None.”

Miss Carter looked embarrassed. Assistant State’s Attorney Harlan Young shook his head. “A shame. She’s a very pretty girl.” He studied Talbot’s face. “You all right, Tod?”


The second-floor hall smelled of wet clothes and stale tobacco and sweeping compound. Talbot walked down the grooved wooden stairs to the first floor. Luke Adama was coming out of the recorder’s office.

Adama grinned on one side of his face. “So you’re burning your first one, hey, Tod?”

Talbot lit a cigarette from the stub of the one he was smoking. “A jury found him guilty.”

Adama’s grin widened. “A shame Jane didn’t feel the same way.”

Talbot gave him a straight look and walked down the hall to the rear of the building. The parking lot back of the courthouse was ankle-deep in water. The
rain felt good on his flushed face. He'd sleep at the beach cottage again tonight. He felt better at the cottage than he did in the apartment, perhaps because he and Jane had used it so infrequently, because it wasn't filled with her clothes and perfume and personal possessions.

The bay was dotted with whitecaps. He could hear the pound of the surf before he was halfway across the causeway. The storm had been even wilder on the beach than it had been in town. In spots the Gulf was washing across the beach road. Talbot parked in front of Reilly's and went in.

"Oh, you again," Reilly said.

Talbot drained the rain from his hat and straddled a bar stool. "The usual. And sack a bottle for the road."

Reilly set a glass and a bottle on the bar. "You're twenty-one. You know what you're doing. I hope."

"I hope," Talbot agreed.

The only other customer in the bar was a youthful blonde in a simple white sports dress spotted with rain. She looked vaguely familiar to Talbot.

"Some weather, huh?" she smiled.

"Yeah. Some weather."

"You don't remember me, do you?"

Talbot wasn't much interested. "Afraid I don't."

"I'm Vickie Paul."

The name meant nothing to Talbot. "Yeah." He refilled the shot glass in front of him, still debating phoning Jane. Tomorrow would be too late. He wouldn't have to beg. He could just ask her to reconsider. On impulse he carried his glass to the phone booth at the far end of the bar and dialed long distance.
“My name is Talbot. State’s Attorney Tod Talbot,” he identified himself to the local operator. “I’d like to make a person-to-person call to Mrs. Talbot in Reno, Nevada. My problem is, I haven’t the least idea at which hotel she’s stopping. Can such a call be placed?”

The operator assured him it could. “And your number, Mr. Talbot?”

Talbot looked at the dial on Reilly’s phone and read off the numerals. “Call me, operator. I’ll be waiting.”

When he returned to the bar, Vickie had moved to the stool next to his. She was young, not more than eighteen. She looked nice. She smelled nice. She curved in the proper places. The chances were if he bought her a few drinks she would go to the cottage with him. In the state of mind he was in, the thought intrigued Talbot. If Jane refused to reconsider, he couldn’t cry in his beer forever. And there was nothing in his oath of office that said a state’s attorney had to be celibate.

Vickie wrinkled her nose at him. “I know you but you don’t know me. Know something?”

“What?”

“You’re cute.”

Reilly almost dropped the glass he was towelling. “Oh, my God. Now I’ve heard everything. How can a six foot, two-hundred-pound, ex-marine, Cracker state’s attorney be cute?”

Talbot looked at the clock on the back bar. It was four minutes of twelve. “You heard the lady.”

Vickie sipped her drink. “Anyway, distinguished. And if Mr. Talbot is feeling bad because they are doing, well, what they are doing to Conley, he shouldn’t. I
was at the trial every day. And Conley was guilty as hell.”

“Thank you,” Talbot said seriously. “According to the Evening Times and my wife, it’s me who’s the killer in the case.”

Vickie refilled her glass from his bottle. “And there’s another thing . . .” She broke off and stared at the clock on the back bar, fascinated. “They’re doing it to him now, aren’t they?”

Talbot’s mouth felt hot and dry. “In a few more minutes.”

It was hot in the bar with the shutters closed against the rain. Sweat formed on his cheeks and forehead. He wished now he’d called Tallahassee and asked the governor for a stay. Thirty days wouldn’t have mattered one way or another. Still—Talbot reviewed the evidence in his mind, as he had reviewed it a thousand times . . .

Conley and an accomplice, Al Baker, had held up the Midtown National on the morning of March 15th. Three tellers and a vice-president had identified both men and named Conley as the man who had wantonly shot and killed a fourth teller. On March 16th, Baker’s body had been found floating in the bay, a bullet in his head—a bullet from the gun found on Conley when the local police had picked him up three days later. He had protested his innocence, claiming he had spent the entire day of March 15th with his wife. But no one believed him—except Jane.

The phone in the pay booth rang. Talbot got off the bar stool. “Excuse me.”

“Certainly.” Vickie was smiling into her drink.

The local long-distance operator was sorry. No Mrs.
Tod Talbot was registered in any of the better hotels in the city proper or in any of the swank dude ranches surrounding Reno. She wanted to know if Talbot wanted the Reno operator to keep on trying to locate her.

“No,” Talbot said. “Don’t bother.”

He’d been a fool to hope. Nothing he could say would do any good. Once Jane made up her mind, she never changed it.

He walked back to his stool slowly and sat puffing on a cigarette.

Vickie was concerned. “You get bad news or something?”

Talbot deliberately refrained from looking at the clock and looked at her. She was young. She was cheap, at least on the surface. She’d never been to Smith or Vassar, but her type was common to the South. Once she picked a man, she’d stay with him. Once she got that wedding paper, her man could do no wrong.

Vickie’s half-smile faded. “You’re comparing me to your wife, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Talbot admitted. “I am.”

She patted his hand. “Well, I may not be as pretty. And I don’t come from such a good family. But if I was ever married to a chunk like you, they could burn every son in Palmetto County if you said they were guilty. Besides, no woman belongs to be a lawyer. A woman’s place is in her husband’s bed.”

Talbot used his left hand to refill their glasses. “Know something, Vickie?”

“You tell me.”

“You’re as nice to listen to as to look at.”

She said, unsmiling, “I can be a lot nicer. And I will
be if you let me. You don’t remember me. You’re just being polite, because that’s the kind of a guy you are. But once you did me a big favor. And I didn’t just happen in here. I’ve been laying for you for six weeks, ever since I read in the Times that Mrs. Talbot was going to divorce you on account of you made a fool of her in court.”

“You seem to know all about me.”

“I do.” Vickie stopped talking as the door of the bar opened and Harlan Young filled the doorway. Rain dripped from the limp brim of his panama. His white linen suit was sodden.

He looked at Talbot and said, “I just came from the cottage and seeing you weren’t there, I figured you’d be here.” His shoes made a squishing sound as he walked from the door to the bar. “How sober are you, Tod?”

Talbot looked at the bottle on which he’d been working. “Too sober. Why? What gives?”

Harlan asked Reilly for a glass. He poured a drink, then didn’t drink. “I’ve some bad news, Tod.”

“About Jane?”

“No. Conley.”

Talbot looked at the clock on the back bar. It was ten minutes after twelve. “What about Conley? He’s dead.”

Harlan picked up his drink and set it down. “I know. When I couldn’t get through to Tallahassee on account of the storm, I called Raiford from your cottage.”

Talbot was puzzled. “Why should you call the prison?”

Harlan took a typed message from the inside breast pocket of his sodden coat and smoothed it on the bar. “This came in just after you left. From Tampa. A couple
of prow! car men answer a suicide call from the clerk at the Flamingo Hotel and they find a guy named Eddie Marlow—you remember Eddie—with a 12-gauge shotgun on the bed beside him and most of his head blown off.”

Talbot tried to decipher the message on the wet paper. “So what has that to do with us?”

“You can’t make it out, huh?”

“No.”

“It’s a copy of his confession,” Harlan said. He gulped the drink he’d poured. “A confession that he and Al Baker, and not Jim Conley, stuck up the Midtown National. It would seem we’re out on a long limb and Jane was right. We’ve executed an innocent man.”

A drop of sweat escaped the pit of Talbot’s arm and zigzagged down his side. He had to grip the bar to remain upright on the stool. “You’re kidding. This is a rib.”

“Wish it was,” Harlan said. “You remember we pulled Marlow in on account of he was pretty close to the description but none of the bank people could identify him?”

Talbot fought down a desire to be sick. “The Tampa cops are sure he pulled the job?”

“They’re positive. And so am I.”

“How can you be?”

“Well, there’s his confession.”

“Screwballs will confess anything.”

“True,” Harlan admitted. “But the Tampa boys also found five thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills in Marlow’s suitcase. And before I set out to find you I checked the serial numbers against the money stolen
from the bank—and believe me, they were the right numbers.”

Talbot looked at the clock on the back bar.

“Please,” Beth Conley had begged him. “If you call the governor and ask him to grant a stay, he’ll give Jim thirty days. Thirty days isn’t long, but something may turn up.”

And he had said he was sorry, when all he had had to do was reach out his hand and pick up the phone.
The drum of the rain on the roof had stopped but the rhythmic pound of the surf annoyed Talbot. He wished it would stop. He wished he hadn’t awakened. He wished he could sleep for a month. His head throbbed in unison with the surf. His tongue felt a size too big for his mouth.

He opened his eyes with an effort. He was on the big double bed in the beach cottage. A white sports dress was folded neatly over a chair. Someone was rattling dishes in the kitchen. He swung his feet to the floor and felt on the bed table for his cigarettes. There was one left in the package. The tobacco tasted acrid for a moment in his nostrils, then it sweetened.

The dress belonged to a little blonde named Vickie Paul. That much he remembered. She’d driven him home from Reilly’s. They’d done a lot of drinking. Beyond that his mind was a blank. All he could think of was Conley.

He was the state’s attorney. The responsibility was his. “Railroad” would be the term. The press, especially the Evening Times, would use it in banner headlines six inches high. Not that it mattered. All the headlines in
the world couldn’t bring Jim Conley back. Once the electrician at Raiford threw the switch, that was it. Conley was just as dead as if he had been guilty.

He should have listened to Jane. Jane had told him: "Doctors and prosecuting attorneys bury their mistakes, Tod. And this is the biggest mistake of your life."

And she had been right. Jane was always right.

Talbot sucked hard at his cigarette as he studied the white sports dress. As long as he’d made a fool of himself, he hoped he’d had a good time. At least he’d given Jane a reason to divorce him, which was more than she’d had before. Not that you needed a reason in Reno.

There was a pad of bare feet in the hall. "How," Vickie asked, "do you like your eggs? Straight up, or turned over?"

The thought of food nauseated Talbot. Some time during the night someone had opened his skull, removed what passed for his brain and substituted hot sand. He nodded curtly and wished he hadn’t . . .

"Good morning."

The blonde girl in the doorway was pleased. "Hi, honey." She rolled up the sleeves of one of Jane’s beach robes and picked a partially filled glass from the dresser, "You feel pretty bad, don’t you?"

"I’ve felt better."

She brought the glass to his bedside. "I figured that and saved you an eye-opener." Jane’s robe was much too large for this kid. It made her look even younger than she was.

Talbot gulped the whiskey in the glass. It helped some but not much. There was no need to ask her
what had happened. Her “Hi, honey,” had told him that.

Vickie stooped and kissed him. Her breath smelled of
toothpaste. Her straw-colored hair was braided in two
fat braids that hung down over her breasts. Her eyes
were clear and blue. Her cheeks were pink and freshly
scrubbed. If she regretted the night just past it didn’t
show in her face.

Her grin was gamin. “Now you get your shower and
shave. I’ll have breakfast ready by the time you’re
through.”

“What time is it?” Talbot asked her.

She picked his watch from the bed table and looked
at it. “Five minutes after eleven. You’d better get down
to your office.”

“Yeah. Sure. I’m looking forward to it,” Talbot said.

He showered in as hot water as he could stand, then
turned the needle valve to cold. By the time he had
shaved, most of his head had dissipated. The white
dress was gone from the chair and Vickie had laid out
clean linen on the bed. She was a nice kid. He liked
her, but Talbot couldn’t help wondering how she had
happened along so opportunely. Not that it made any
difference. As with Conley, what had happened was
irrevocable.

Vickie had set the table on the porch with Jane’s
fiesta china. The coffee was strong and black. The
toast was hot and crisp. The eggs and bacon on his
plate looked tempting.

“Eat,” Vickie urged him. She was practical. “They’ll
either make you sick or make a new man out of you.”
The gamin look returned to her face. “Not that there
was anything wrong with the old man.”
“Thank you,” Talbot said soberly. Vickie sat across from him. He wondered how a man told a girl he didn’t remember staying with her, and decided it wouldn’t be wise. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

Vickie poured herself a cup of coffee. “What do you think I was drinking last night, root beer?”

Talbot finished his bacon and eggs and looked up to find Vickie staring at him. The gamin expression was gone. She looked older than she had. “You don’t remember, do you? You don’t remember a thing.”

Talbot was frank with her. “No. The last thing I remember, we were in front of Reilly’s and Reilly was telling me I was too drunk to drive and you offered to drive me home.”

Vickie met his eyes. “That’s right. Are you sorry?”

“I don’t know,” Talbot said. He stood up and extracted two twenty-dollar bills from his wallet and dropped them on the table. “Anyway, thanks. Thanks for everything.”

Vickie tore the bills in two, then tore them again and mashed the pieces into the uneaten eggs on her plate. When she looked up her eyes were wet with tears. “Four years I wait for this. I pray every night it will happen.” Her slim shoulders twitched convulsively. “Then, when it does, you don’t even kiss me good morning. And you pay me off like I was some cheap call girl.”

Talbot tried to touch her. “Look, Vickie—”

She brushed his hand from her shoulder. Her eyes were flecked with green and Cracker mean as she snatched up the carving knife with which she had sliced the bread. “Get out of here before I cut you.
I hope they make you resign. I hope the Times calls you every dirty name there is.”

“They probably will,” Talbot said, and waded the beach sand to his car.

It was as if it had never rained. No clouds in the sky. Sun hot and high. The standing water gone. Small groups of laughing colored trusties from the city jail were picking up the trash and dead palm fronds that littered the courthouse lawn.

Talbot’s skin felt too tight for his face. He wondered if he would ever laugh again. The next few hours and days and weeks weren’t going to be very pleasant.

He rode up in the freight elevator and entered his office through the door that connected it with Judge Manners’ chambers. The big pine-paneled office that had once so impressed him had a sterile, empty feeling. He sat back of his desk and asked Miss Carter to come in.

The middle-aged woman had been crying. “Am I glad to see you, Mr. Talbot. The office has been filled with reporters, some from as far away as Tallahassee and Miami, since nine o’clock this morning. And neither Mr. Young nor I know what to tell them.”

“I figured that,” Talbot said. “Tip Harl I’m here but don’t let the reporters know. I don’t want to see them just yet.”

“Yes, sir.” Miss Carter paused at the door and looked back. “I’m sorry, Mr. Talbot. I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am.”

“Yes, so am I,” Talbot said.

Harlan looked like he’d spent a bad night. There
were purple pouches under his eyes. His mouth drooped at the corners. He sat down on one chair and put his feet on another. Even his voice sounded tired. "Some mess, hey, Tod?"

"Some mess," Talbot agreed. "Fill me in, will you, Harl? I seem to have overslept."

"With that cute little trick I saw you with out at Reilly's?"

"The evidence points that way."

Assistant State's Attorney Harlan Young lit one of the small cigars he smoked. "Maybe from now on we shouldn't go by evidence. You've seen the papers?"

"Not yet. Pretty bad?"

"The Tampa papers aren't bad. Mostly they blame Marlow for waiting so long to pull his dutch."

"How about the Times?"

"You know the answer to that one. They want your hide. They mean to get it."

Talbot walked to one of the open windows and looked out over the city. Sun City was a tourist town. It stretched clean and green to the blue waters of the bay and beyond the long causeway to the beach and the Gulf. It was a nice town. He liked it. He had been born in a grove just outside the corporate limits. So had Harlan. So had Jane, but with a difference. Jane was a Painter. And to be a Painter in Sun City meant you were royalty. A Painter had planted the first grove. A Painter had built the first hotel and founded the first bank.

He'd felt lucky, marrying into the family. It had been a big step up for a Cracker boy. True, most of the Painter money was gone. All that was left was the
name and Jane's almost fanatic ambition to rebuild the family fortune. Money meant a lot to Jane. Women of her type belonged in a beautiful frame. She'd been ambitious for herself, for him. And he'd meant to make money for her. Running for state's attorney had just been the first step in the ladder he'd meant to climb.

He had dreamed of the heights he would scale for Jane—had dreamed of nothing else all during the long years he'd viewed the jungles of the South Pacific over the rear sights of Garands. He had meant to be a big man in the state some day, perhaps make the name of Talbot mean as much as Painter did.

It had been a nice dream while it lasted.

His head still ached. His mouth was dry. He took a bottle of bourbon from the bottom drawer of his desk and filled two shot glasses.

"Who do you blame, Harl?"

Harlan sipped his drink. "Certainly not you."

"Then who?"

"Myself. I should have tried the case."

"I'm the state's attorney."

"I'm your assistant. I should have taken it over as soon as Jane dealt herself in as counsel for the defense. That way, you'd still have Jane."

"Did you think Conley was guilty?"

"You know I did. And so did the jury. And so did Judge Manners. So did the Times."

"Everyone but Jane."

Harlan took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Yeah. Everyone but Jane. She must have had a crystal ball or something."

Talbot finished his drink and returned the bottle
to his desk drawer. "Well, putting off never got a man anywhere. Get me a couple of papers, will you, Harl? I want to see what they're saying about me before I talk to the reporters. And ask Miss Carter to step in again."

"Whatever you say, Tod. What are you going to do?"

"There's only one thing I can do." Talbot stopped Harlan at the door. "And while you're out there, look in the files, will you, Harl, and see if we have anything on a Vickie Paul?"

Harlan nodded and left the office. Miss Carter came in with her notebook. "You wanted me, Mr. Talbot?"

Talbot snuffed the cigarette he was smoking. "Yes. Send a wire to the attorney general. Inform him I am resigning as state's attorney for this area as of this date, and that a formal letter of resignation will follow by registered mail."

Miss Carter bit her lip. "Do you have to resign, Mr. Talbot?"

Talbot thought a moment. "No. There's no law requiring me to. But I think it will be best for all concerned."

Harlan came in with a stack of papers as she left. "Nothing on a Vickie Paul in the files. But we've a Nat Paulsen listed. Drunk and disorderly a dozen times or so, one bastardy case, two wife-beatings, and two or three assaults."

The name was vaguely familiar to Talbot but he could not connect it with Vickie.

Harlan looked unhappy. "You'd better see those reporters soon. They know you're in here and they're raising hell."
“In a minute,” Talbot said. He glanced at the headline on the home edition of the Evening Times and smiled wryly as he remembered his first conscious thought of the day.

“What’s so funny?” Harlan asked.

“Nothing,” Talbot assured him. “Believe me, I was just thinking I missed my calling. I should have been a fortune teller.” He pointed to the scarehead running across the front page of the Times. It read—

STATE’S ATTORNEY RAILROADS INNOCENT MAN TO CHAIR!
Talbot had never known one day could be so long. Reporters had been in and out of the office all afternoon. The Times had printed two extra editions. They rehashed the dramatic court battle between Jane and himself, picturing her as a modern Portia and himself as an over-ambitious farm boy who had slick-talked his way into office and Jane into a marriage far beneath her station.

Both the editions stressed the terrible ambition that could drive a man to the point where an unbroken record of convictions was of more importance to him than either justice or his wife.

There were pictures of Beth Conley weeping while Jane had polled the jury. There was a picture of him pounding his fist on the jury box with the caption beneath it reading:

This man's guilt is beyond all doubt and I ask you ladies and gentlemen of the jury to find him guilty as charged.

There were pictures of Conley. There were pictures
of Jane. There were pictures of the dead Eddie Marlow. The call from Tallahassee came at quarter-past-three. The attorney-general was nice about it. Dick Cameron was a nice guy. He called Talbot by his first name. He could find no flaw in the manner in which Talbot had conducted the Conley trial. However, in the interest of party harmony and due to the deluge of adverse publicity he was, regretfully, accepting Tod’s resignation.

It was as nice a way as any to say Tod was washed up politically, that from now on the party wouldn’t dare run him for dog-catcher.

When Cameron had hung up, Talbot fitted his straw hat to his head and walked into the outer office. Harlan was trying a case in Judge Fillmore’s court, but Miss Carter was at her desk.

“This is it,” Talbot told her. “I don’t know who the governor will appoint in my place. I hope he picks Harlan. Anyway, whoever the new state’s attorney is, he’ll have the best legal secretary in the state.”

There was no one in the second-floor hall. Talbot walked down the grooved stairs for the last time. Luke Adama was waiting at the foot of the stairs.

“What are you doing, haunting me?” Talbot asked him.

Adama grinned his crooked grin and straightened the knot in his Countess Mara tie. “Kinda tripped over one, didn’t you, Tod?”

“So it would seem.”

Talbot studied the other man’s lean face. He and Luke and Harlan had been boys together. They’d fished and crabbed and swam and picked fruit in season. But
all that was back of Luke now. Luke had climbed even higher than Tod had, if on the other side of the fence. Luke was a big man in bolita now. He could afford the ten-dollar ties and the two-hundred-dollar silk suits. More, the only rap he had ever taken was the two- to five-year conviction that Tod had handed him. A sentence of which Luke had served eight months.

“Yeah,” Luke Adama grinned. “So it would seem. It was a shame they didn’t burn you, Tod, instead of that poor sucker—”


Adama brushed an imaginary speck from the lapel of his silk suit. “Friends don’t put friends in jail. I hope you starve to death, you big Cracker bastard. You always were too big for your britches.”

Talbot clenched a fist to clip him, but restrained himself. Fighting with Luke wouldn’t get him anywhere. He walked past the other man out to the parking lot and stood a moment enjoying the heat of the sun, dreading what he had to do.

Life could be so simple. But for him, suddenly, it was tied in knots, knots he could feel in his own stomach.

Talbot drove south, toward the ferry. The house was small, on a side street paved with shell. Chinch bugs had eaten the lawn. What shrubbery there was needed water.

He rang the bell and waited.

Beth Conley opened the door. She was wearing tight white shorts and a halter of the same material. Neither garment was ample for its responsibilities. Her tangled red hair hung in a pageboy bob. Her feet were bare. “You’re a day late, aren’t you?” she asked.
“Yes.” Talbot gritted his teeth. “I am.”
She stepped aside to permit him to enter. “How nice of you to call. The crusading prosecutor pays a respectful visit to the grief-stricken widow. Come in. Do. We can have a good cry together.”

The living room was clean but shabby. The plaster of the ceiling was cracked. The living-room floor was uneven under Talbot’s feet. The coffee table was piled with the day’s papers. An inexpensive record player in one corner was playing *Ricochet*.

The red-haired girl shut off the record player, picked up a partially filled highball glass and sat with one bare leg over the arm of an easy chair, facing Talbot.

“What do you want?” Her green-gray eyes were bitter.

Talbot sat down uninvited and thumbed a cigarette between his lips. It was an effort for him to speak. “There’s no use saying I’m sorry.” Talbot had never been so embarrassed. “How are you fixed for money, Mrs. Conley?”

Her laugh was as bitter as her eyes. “You ought to know. You’re the man who was so certain I was sitting on the one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars Jim was supposed to have gotten from the bank. You had the cops search everything I own. You had them third-degree me for days. How am I fixed for money? Fine. That’s why I’m living in a dump like this.”

Talbot’s cigarette tasted sour. He snuffed it in a tray filled with butts stained with lipstick. “Go ahead. Rub it in. I have it coming. I should have listened to you. I should have called the governor.”

“Now you come to that conclusion.”

The red-haired girl began to cry and couldn’t stop.
Talbot sat, embarrassed, wishing she wasn’t so pretty and glad, in a way, she was. It wouldn’t be difficult for her to get another man. It had been brought out at the trial that she had been a model in Miami at the time she and Conley had married. Certainly she had all the equipment.

She stopped crying and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. “I asked you what you wanted.”

Talbot took out his checkbook. “So I’ve made a mistake. I want to help you.”

“How?”

“Financially.”

She swung her bare legs over the chair arm. Her eyes slitted slightly. “You mean keep me?”

“You know the answer to that.”

She shook her head. “No. I used to think I knew all the answers. Now I’m beginning to think I don’t know anything.”

Talbot said, “I only want to do what I think is right.”

“With no strings?”

“No strings.”

The girl walked to the casement window and looked at the chinch-bug-ravaged lawn. “I see, according to the papers,” she said without turning, “that your wife’s six weeks are up this morning.”

“Yes,” Talbot said. “That’s right. Her decree was probably granted this morning.”

“How much alimony did she get?”

“She said she wasn’t going to ask for any.”

Beth Conley turned from the window. “She was satisfied to get rid of you.”

“So it would seem.”
The red-haired girl’s shorts were binding her. She eased them. “And you’re not kidding about wanting to help me?”

“No.”

“Would you consider a lump sum, enough to get me out of here and back to Miami, or maybe New York?”

“Of course. How much would you need?”

She searched his face. “Let’s say five thousand dollars. That is, if you’re not bluffing.”

Talbot uncapped his fountain pen and wrote a check payable to Elizabeth Conley for exactly five thousand dollars and no cents. When the ink on it was dry he handed it to her.

Her eyes were hot and dry as she studied the figures on the check. “Thanks. Thanks a lot. Do we go into the bedroom now or do you respect my grief for a few more days?”

Talbot felt the back of his neck turning red. “I said there were no strings attached.”

“So you said.” The red-haired girl tore the check in half, then in fourths, then into eighths and dropped the pieces in an ash tray. “But I don’t believe you. If I took your money, the first thing I’d know I’d find myself flat on my back. And it happens I loved Jim. Men.” She made the word sound nasty. “You’re all alike. See a woman alone and in trouble and you run after her like a pack of dogs.

Talbot protested. “Look, Mrs. Conley, you have me wrong. All I want to do is help you.”

“I’ll bet,” the girl said. “I’ll bet.” She opened a drawer in an end table and picked up a small-calibered, pearl-handled automatic. “Now get out.” Her eyes glistened
with tears. “Get out. Before I give you what you gave Jim.”

She meant what she said. Talbot walked stiff-kneed to the screen door and closed it quietly behind him. At least he had made the gesture, however she had interpreted it.

Late afternoon was hot. It was a long drive to the beach. He decided to go to the apartment, at least to shower and change clothes. Nothing had changed. The apartment still smelled of Jane. Her picture was still on the Capehart. He fixed himself a stiff drink and sat on the sofa studying the picture.

Jane was as typical of the Old South as he and Harlan were. Only Jane was manor-house South. She belonged in a big stone mansion with tall white colonnades. He’d never felt quite worthy of her and, in the back of her mind, he’d always felt Jane had agreed with him. There had never been the fierce bond between them he had hoped there would be. Even their most intimate moments had been interludes of condescension on her part.

Then, after their first serious disagreement, she had walked out on him. Because he had bested her in court. Because he’d done his job as he’d seen it. Talbot realized his glass was empty. He refilled it with straight whiskey and carried it with him into the bathroom.

So where did he go from here? What happened to ambitious young lawyers who became prosecuting attorneys and then made a mistake serious enough to wash them out of politics? Jane had chosen between him and Harlan, and seemingly picked the wrong man. At least Harlan still had a job. The chances were the gov-
error would appoint him state’s attorney, and he couldn’t pick a better man.

The whiskey blurred the sharp edges of the day. A hot shower eased the tension in his muscles. When he had finished in the bathroom, Talbot put on a light silk robe and carried his glass back to the living room to refill it.

A big paper sack in one arm, Vickie was standing just inside the door. She smiled at him, uncertainly. “I—I knocked. But when no one answered I came in. I guess you were taking a shower.”

Talbot continued to the portable bar and filled his glass. “That’s a logical deduction. What do you want?”

She wet her lips with her tongue. “I thought maybe you might need me.”

Talbot looked at her over his glass. She was wearing a lemon-yellow dress with red butterflies printed on the cotton. On anyone else it would look horrible. On her it looked good. She’d put up her hair. Her face was carefully made up. “Why should I need you?” he asked her.

She shifted the sack from one arm to the other. “Well, no one else seems to like you.”

“You didn’t seem to like me this morning.”

Vickie met his eyes. “Had I any reason to? It may sound corny as hell, but I’d never stayed with anyone before. I thought you were God. Then when you acted like you did, I didn’t care what happened.”

Talbot looked away. “I’m sorry. I’m not myself.”

Vickie came a few steps into the room. “When I got to thinking it over, I realized that. That’s why I’m here.”

Talbot sat on the sofa and covered his legs with the
robe. "Look. Who are you, Vickie? What am I to you?"

She came still farther into the room. "That can wait." She smiled brightly. "Have you eaten anything since this morning?"

Talbot thought back. "No."

"I knew it," Vickie said. "I knew it. That's why I brought a big steak and all the fixin's with me." She turned, instinctively, toward the kitchen. "Now you just sit tight and enjoy your drink, and maybe fix you another, and I'll have supper ready in fifteen minutes."

Talbot looked from the swinging kitchen door to the picture of Jane on the Capehart. It would seem there was a difference in women. If Jane had brought home a steak and offered to prepare it with her own white hands, she would have insisted he stop his drinking and help her.

Vickie had told him to enjoy his drink and fix himself another. Whoever the blonde girl was, she was a remarkable young woman.
Night failed to dispel the heat. Even with the window fan turned on to high speed it was hot in the small dinette of which Jane had been so ashamed. Vickie thought the dinette was beautiful.

“Mrs. Talbot must have good taste.”

“The ex-Mrs. Talbot,” Talbot corrected her.

“It hurts, doesn’t it, Tod?”

Talbot liked the sound of his name in Vickie’s mouth. “Yes. Especially coming on top of the other. It’s one of those times, I guess.”

“I guess.”

Talbot finished the last of his steak. He’d never tasted better. The more he saw of Vickie, the more remarkable she was. The blonde young girl poured his coffee and he said, “All right. Let’s have it, Vickie. Who are you? What am I to you and why are you mothering me?”

Vickie wet her lips with her tongue. “I wonder—”

“You wonder what?”

“Well, if we could have our coffee in the living room, and maybe put a few records on the player. I’ve
read about it in books and seen it in the movies, but I've never done it.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Cross my heart.”

Talbot pushed his chair back from the table. “You bring the coffee.” He put half-a-dozen long-play Carmen Cavallaro records on the player, then settled himself on the sofa. “Okay, let’s have it. Who are you? What am I to you?”

Vickie sat in the easy chair across from him. “You sound like a district attorney.”

“Ex-district attorney.”

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

Talbot studied the slim figure in the easy chair.

“Think back,” Vickie said. “Five years.”

Talbot snapped his fingers. “I have it. You’re the Paulsen girl. The court appointed me to represent you.”

Vickie was pleased. “That’s right.” She put her coffee cup on the end table and folded her hands in her lap. “But I’m not proud of my name. That’s why I changed it to Paul.”

Talbot stared at her, incredulous. It was coming back now. Vickie’s right name was Victoria Paulsen. She had been one of his first cases. But Victoria Paulsen had been a scared little Cracker kid, mostly skinny legs and stringy hair and eyes. Her stepfather was a commercial fisherman. Harlan had read him Paulsen’s record that afternoon. He was a big hulk of a man who beat his wife and children whenever he was drunk. And on Vickie’s fourteenth birthday, in lieu of a present, Paulsen had beaten her with a broken oar and tried to rape her for lagniappe.
Vickie blushed under his eyes. "I've filled out a little since then. After all, that was five years ago."

"Of course," Talbot said. "The court took you away from your mother and Paulsen and sent you to a foster home in Ocala."

"The court nothing," Vickie said. "You did. And you bought me a new dress and shoes and underthings, the first nice ones I'd ever had. And you bought my ticket to Ocala and gave me a five-dollar bill to spend."

Talbot laughed. "I'll be damned. I'd forgotten that."

"I haven't."

"They were good to you in Ocala?"

"Up until I was seventeen. I've been on my own since then. Mostly waiting table in Ocala and Vero Beach. I'd probably still be in Vero Beach if I hadn't read about you and Mrs. Talbot."

"That brought you back to Sun City?"

"Five weeks ago."

"Why?"

"You'd been good to me. I thought maybe I could help you. That's why I was waiting for you at Reilly's. I know I'm not as pretty or as smart as Mrs. Talbot, but, well—I'm a woman. And when a man's hurt and low in his mind, he—he needs a woman."

Talbot patted the sofa. "Come here."

Vickie crossed the room and sat beside him.

"That's why you drove me back to the cottage last night?"

"It was the only way I could help." Vickie bit her lower lip. "Besides—"

"Besides what?"

Her voice was small. "I've been in love with you for
five years. You represented something that I'd never known, probably wouldn't ever know. I—I tried to like other fellows, but I couldn't. They just, somehow, never quite stacked up to you."

Talbot kissed her without passion. "That's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me."

Vickie wiped her eyes on the hem of her yellow skirt. "I know you couldn't ever love or marry a Cracker kid like me. But that doesn't matter, Tod. You can have me as long you as you like. And when you tell me, I'll go away."

"But Vickie—"
"I mean it. I—" Vickie stopped talking as the door of the apartment opened.
"What the hell?" Talbot asked. "Is this the ACL depot, or something?"
Harlan took the cigar from his mouth. "I'm sorry. I should have knocked."
"It's okay. You've met Vickie."
Harlan laid his panama on the Capehart. "Yes. We met last night. I won't stay long. I just dropped in to tell you I'm the new D. A."
"I expected that," Talbot said.
Harlan sat in the chair in which Vickie had been sitting. "I'll turn it down if you say so, Tod."
"Why should you?"
"This thing wasn't your fault. You don't belong to resign."
"Stop talking like a Cracker."
"We both are." Harlan looked from Vickie to the glass and bottle on the floor. "What do you intend to do, Tod?"
“I don’t know.”
Harlan was Cracker practical. “Why don’t you gas up your car, throw a few things in a bag, and you and your new little friend spend a few weeks on the East Coast, until this thing blows over.”
“And then?”
“Come back and go into private practice.”
Talbot tried to keep the bitterness from his voice and failed. “Who’d want me for their lawyer? I burned an innocent man, remember?”
“Stop talking like a fool. You’re still the best lawyer in the county.”
“Sure.” Talbot picked the bottle from the floor and poured whiskey in his coffee. “I’m eloquent. Even Jane admits that. Remember? When Judge Manners asked Conley if he had anything to say before he was sentenced?” Talbot quoted the statement Jane had written for her client. “‘Yes, Your Honor. I do have a final word to say in my behalf. The jury has found me guilty of murder, on manufactured evidence. I am innocent. I didn’t kill that teller in the bank. I didn’t kill Al Baker. I never saw either man in my life. But the state’s attorney has used his office and his eloquence to color the facts. He has twisted the truth. He wants me to die. He doesn’t want his record of convictions to be broken.’”
Talbot realized his hands were shaking. Vickie put her hand on his. “Please, Tod. You’ve no call to low-rate yourself. You did what you thought was right.” She hesitated, added, “I still don’t get it.”
“Get what?”
“Why a punk like Eddie Marlow should kill himself
when no one even suspected him and he had five thousand dollars to spend. And what happened to the rest of the money?"

For a moment the only sound in the apartment was the whirr of the window fan in the dinette. Harlan broke the silence. "The kid may have something there. In all the excitement, I never thought of that."

Vickie pursued the point. "Maybe Eddie Marlow lied. Maybe someone doesn't want Tod to be state's attorney."

Harlan got up from his chair. "Oh, my God. Let's not get off on that angle. Who would want to frame Tod?" He picked his hat from the record player. "Well, I just thought you'd want to know. I mean, about the appointment."

"I'm glad you dropped in," Talbot said. "It couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

Harlan winked at Vickie. "He tells that to every new district attorney. Take care of him, will you, honey? I kind of like the guy myself."

"I'll do that," Vickie smiled. When Harlan had gone, she leaned back against Tod's chest. "You heard what the man said."

She was warm and soft in his arms. Her hair smelled sweet. Talbot buried his face in it. What difference did it make? What difference did anything make? He was washed up, finished. The career he'd hoped for had gone down the Conley-Marlow drain. He was an ex-district attorney, ex-husband. Jane was two thousand miles away.

He got up and locked the door.
Vickie wet her lips with her tongue in the now familiar gesture. “Then I can stay?”
“You can stay.”
Talbot scooped Vickie from the couch and carried her across the room and down the hall, turning out the lights as he went. She pressed her lips to his, then drew back her head and searched his eyes. “You’re all right, Tod?”
“I’m fine.”
“You’re sure you want me to stay?”
“I’m sure.”
Night continued hot. What wind there was came off the land. Talbot wished they’d gone out to the beach. The scent of orange blossoms had an unpleasant connotation. He liked Vickie. She was sweet. He liked Vickie very much. Vickie was flame and fire where Jane had had been condescension. To Jane, the physical relationship between a man and a woman had been a secondary matter, a necessary evil to be endured at stated intervals. But a man couldn’t re-shape his life overnight. He was still in love with Jane. He supposed he always would be. Jane had been a part of his dream.
Vickie snuggled her cheek against his shoulder. “What are you thinking, honey?”
“About us,” Talbot lied.
“What about us?”
“That you’re sweet.”
“You aren’t sorry?”
“No.”
“I’m glad.”
“Then prove it. Hold me.”
Talbot started to snuff his cigarette, and raised himself on one elbow.

Vickie’s eyes glowed in the dark. “What now?”

Talbot sat up and swung his legs to the floor. “I thought I heard the front door open.”

“You couldn’t have. You locked it. I saw you.”

“Yes. I know. But—”

“Tod?” Jane called from the living room. She switched on the lights as she came down the hall. “Tod,” she called again, then switched on the bedroom light.

Vickie sat up and clutched the sheet to her chest. Talbot stared at Jane, incredulous. Her eyes were deeply underlined with fatigue. She was carrying a traveling bag in one hand, her suit jacket and her key case in the other. She stood just inside the door, her slim back pressed to the jamb, her full breasts straining at the nylon of her blouse.

“You’re in Reno,” Talbot said.

It was an effort for the black-haired girl to speak. “Obviously not.” The pulse in her throat throbbed rhythmically. “When I heard about the Marlow confession, I took the first plane home. I thought you might need me.” She looked from Talbot to Vickie. “But it would seem you don’t.” Her black eyes slitted slightly. “I’m sorry I intruded.”

Talbot wished Jane, just for once, would stop being the grand lady. He wished she would scream or curse him, or pick something up and throw it. He tried to think of something to say, and couldn’t. What could he say? How could he explain?

Jane continued to study Vickie. “You’re very pretty, my dear.”
Vickie dropped the sheet she was clutching. "Take a good look. At least I didn't walk out on him when he needed love most."

Jane's smile was tight. "I suppose I deserve that." She looked back at Talbot. "I'm sorry I lost my head, Tod, and acted as I did. It was my goddamn Painter pride." She'd set her bag on the floor. She picked it up. "Well, as I said, I'm sorry I intruded."

She turned and walked back down the hall.

Talbot snatched his robe from a chair and couldn't get his arms into it. "Jane."

The lights flicked out as Jane passed them. The door in the living room shut solidly.

"It's too late," Vickie said. "She's gone." She added, "I'm sorry, Tod."

Talbot passed his palm over his mouth. "Yeah. That's what I told Mrs. Conley."
It was five minutes after three when Talbot returned to the apartment. Vickie was dressed and sitting in the living room listening to a Guy Lombardo recording. She looked up as he opened the door.

“Did you find her?”

Talbot shook his head. “No. She isn’t checked into any of the hotels and if she’s out at the old Painter place, she won’t answer the door.”

Vickie shut off the record player. “Do you want me to go now?”

“What good would that do? The damage is done.” Talbot mixed himself a drink and stood with one foot on the sill of the long casement window in the living room. “And don’t say you’re sorry again. It was as much my fault you were here as yours.”

Vickie sat back on the sofa and smoothed the skirt of her wilting yellow dress. “Well, you don’t need to shout at me.” She was Cracker practical. “If she was any kind of a wife she wouldn’t have left you in the first place.”

Talbot tried to explain. “She knew Conley was innocent.”
“How?”
“I don’t know.”
“I don’t know it now.”
Talbot turned and sat on the sill. “What do you mean by that?”
Vickie continued to smooth her skirt. “I may be dumb. Maybe all I know is how to wait on table. But I’ve waited on a lot of punks. And I never heard of any punk shooting himself with a shotgun while he still had five thousand dollars to spend on liquor and girls willing to help him drink it.”
Talbot explained. “The money was hot. He didn’t dare spend it.”
“How hot?”
“The bank had the serial numbers of most of the money stolen.”
“I don’t remember reading that in the paper.”
Talbot sat his drink on the floor. “No. Come to think of it, it wasn’t. No one but the bank, the police, and my office knew that the serial numbers were known.”
“Then maybe Mrs. Talbot wasn’t right. Maybe you were.”
“Are you insinuating that the Marlow confession is a fake, that I was framed?”
Vickie stopped smoothing her skirt and pleated it. “I don’t even know what insinuating means. But I’ve been doing a lot of thinking while you’ve been looking for Mrs. Talbot.”
Talbot was patient with her. “And you came to what conclusion?”
Vickie met his eyes. “That someone has a knife in you. That someone didn’t want you to be district attorney.”
Talbot got up from the sill. "Now you are being silly. Why should anyone have a knife in me?"
"I don't know."
Talbot looked out the window again. As he did, a cloud scudded over the moon and the night seemed, somehow, ominous. *It's my nerves*, he thought. He was upset over Jane coming back and finding him with Vickie. Then, suddenly, he wasn't so certain.
A lot of people didn't like him. Luke Adama for one. Then there were the Miami boys who had tried to muscle into Palmetto territory. And the Times nominees whom he had defeated for office.
Unless there had been a leak somewhere, no one on the outside had known about the serial numbers. Marlow should have felt free to spend his money. The big veins in his temples throbbed. More, even with five thousand dollars recovered, the bulk of the loot was still missing.
He started as the phone on the hall table tinkled.
Vickie said, tonelessly. "That's probably her now. Go ahead. Tell her your side of the story. Tell her I forced myself on you."
Talbot picked up the phone. "Tod Talbot speaking."
The voice at the other end of the line was distorted as though the connection were poor or the speaker was talking through a piece of tissue wrapped around a comb. It was difficult to tell if it was a man or a woman.
"Talbot?"
"Speaking. Who is this?"
Talbot thought he could hear music in the background.
"That doesn't matter," the distorted voice said. "This
is a friend and a tip. You’ve been had. And if I were you, I’d get out to the Conley house as soon as I could. The Conley dame’s in a tight and ready to talk.”

“Talk about what?”

Talbot repeated his question, then realized he was shouting into a broken connection. He cradled the phone and shaped his hat to his head. Vickie followed him to the hall door.

“Where are you going? To her?”

“No.”

Vickie followed him into the hall. “Then I’m going with you. I’m not going to sit here alone for another five hours. I’ll go nuts if I do.”

With the exception of a frame of light around the closed venetian blind in the front window of the Conley house and the yellow glow of the street lamp on the corner, the street was dark and sodden with sleep. Talbot parked a few houses away and sat looking at the frame of light.

Vickie spoke for the first time since they had left. “Whose house is it, Tod?”

“Conley’s.”

“It was Mrs. Conley who called you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think it was.” Talbot got out of the Buick. “Wait here.”

He walked across the lawn and under the leaves of a stubby pineapple palm. The kitchen light as well as the living room light was on. He tried to see through the slatted blinds, and couldn’t. He could hear a radio or record player, turned down low. He walked back to the front door and pushed the bell.
So Beth Conley was in a tight. She was ready to talk. About what? Conley? Marlow? The still-missing money?

He pushed the button again. If a bell or chime rang he couldn’t hear it. He tried the door. It was unlocked. He opened it and walked in.

“Mrs. Conley.”

There was no one in the hall or living room. The music was coming from a small portable radio. Talbot turned it down and studied the living room. There was a bottle of blend on the coffee table. There was also an empty highball glass smudged with lipstick. A cigarette had fallen from the lip of an ash tray and was burning into the wood. Talbot picked it up and put it out. “Mrs. Conley.”

A short hallway led to the lighted kitchen. Back of the swinging door, someone turned on a water tap, briefly, then closed a refrigerator door.

Talbot walked down the hall and swung the door inward. Beth Conley was sitting in a kitchen chair with her chin slumped on her chest. One arm was hooked over the back of the chair. A lighted cigarette between her fingers sent up a thin column of smoke. She had exchanged the white shorts and halter set for a flowered cotton housecoat.

Talbot crossed the kitchen. “Look, Mrs. Conley. If this is a gag, I’m sorry. But someone just phoned my apartment—” He stopped as she failed to look up and touched her shoulder lightly. The precariously balanced body toppled slowly to the floor.

Talbot stepped back. “For God’s sake—”
The light in the kitchen went out. He was conscious of movement behind him. A hard object crashed down on his head...

His head ached. His mouth was dry. He felt as if he were suffocating. Talbot lay a long moment with his eyes closed, smelling smoke, attempting to orient himself, then sat up and opened his eyes. Whoever had sapped him in the kitchen had dragged him into Beth Conley’s bedroom. The red-haired girl was lying spread-eagled on the rumpled bed. The flowered housecoat had been her only garment.

Talbot touched her bare leg. “Mrs. Conley.”

She continued to stare at the ceiling. There was a distant crackle in the other room. Talbot attempted to pull himself to his feet and found his left arm was useless. More, someone had stripped off his clothes. He was as bare as Beth Conley.

His trousers were hanging over the foot of the bed. His shirt lay wadded on the floor. His shoes and socks and shorts were lying on top of his shirt. The inference was obvious.

He stood a moment looking at the red-haired girl.

But dead women didn’t make love.

She had been very lovely. What light there was in the room was coming from the bathroom. He wove across the floor and studied his reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror. It was like peering through cheesecloth. His hair was rumpled. The lobe of his right ear was smeared with lipstick. There was more lipstick on his face. He ran
water in the bowl and tried to wash it off. It wasn't lipstick. It was blood. Four livid scratches ran from his temple to his chin, the kind of scratches a woman's fingernails might make. There was more blood on his shoulder. Talbot touched the wound and winced. There was a pea-sized hole in his flesh. It was the type of wound that might have been made by the small caliber pearl-handled automatic Beth Conley had pulled on him that afternoon when she ordered him out of her house.

Talbot realized his chest was laboring. It was even hotter in the bathroom than it had been in the bedroom. He walked back into the bedroom. The bottle of blended whiskey, at least a bottle of the same brand, lay empty beside the bed. He reached for his pants and looked over his shoulder at the closed bedroom door as something crashed in the kitchen. He opened the door and the room filled immediately with smoke. The kitchen was red with flame. The draft from the open door fanned it. In the distance he could hear the faint wail of a siren.

Talbot closed the door and tried to open one of the bedroom windows. It was a steel casement window with a removable crank. The crank had been removed. Even if he smashed one of the panes of glass, the space uncovered would be too small to admit his body.

Talbot opened the bedroom door and looked down the hall. The hall was filled with smoke. As he watched, small teeth of flame nibbled their way across the living room rug and bit into the drapes. The flames spread quickly to the ceiling.

He soaked a bath towel with water, held it over his mouth and nose, then turned and looked back at the bed. He couldn't leave Beth Conley to be cremated. She'd
suffered enough at his hands. Besides, with her body burned all evidence of the murder would go up in flame.

It was difficult working with one hand. He fought the body off the bed and up onto his good shoulder. As he did, the skirt of the flowered housecoat caught on a knob of one of the bed-table drawers and peeled from her white body like skin from a banana.

The smoke in the hall was growing thicker momentarily. There was another crash in the kitchen as if the roof had fallen in. Talbot staggered doggedly down the hall. The wailing of sirens welled up and stopped. Outside the house, men were shouting now.

The front door was double-locked. Talbot attempted to shift Beth Conley’s body and with his own body drenched with sweat as it was, she almost slipped from his arms. He fought her back on his shoulder and fumbled with the lock. The door swung in and he staggered out on the porch, sucking in great lungful of air.

A man shouted, “There’s someone on the porch!” A moment later Talbot was ringed with men.

His chest laboring with the effort, Talbot staggered a few more feet across the sparse lawn and lowered Beth Conley to a wooden lawn chair. When he straightened, flame was leaping from the roof of the house. He looked from the roof to the flame-lighted faces around him.

Lieutenant Keller was studying him curiously. Back of Keller, Harlan looked puzzled. Back of them, busy firemen were connecting lengths of hose, shouting crisp commands, moving about the lawn in orderly confusion.
Talbot looked back at Keller. He'd never liked the homicide man. Keller was short and fat. Two gold front teeth reflected the flames leaping from the roof. He sucked continuously on a matchstick. His linen suit looked as if the laundry had forgotten to iron it. A veteran of twenty-two years on the Sun City force, he drove to work in a '39 Chevy but had a '54 Lincoln Capri in the garage of his four-bedroom home on Palm Lane Drive.

It was an effort for Talbot to force words past the constriction in his throat. "What are you doing here?" he asked Keller.

Keller maneuvered the matchstick to the other side of his mouth. "I could ask the same thing of you. I'm working the midnight to eight and we get a call some woman is screaming like some guy is trying to kill her. But I certainly didn't expect to find you. Why did you do it, Tod?"

Talbot's mind was still confused. "Do what?"

"Kill Beth Conley."

"I didn't. She was dead when I got here."

"That's your story." Keller spat out his mangled stick and put a fresh one in his mouth. "From where I'm standing it looks like one of those things. You stink of whiskey from here to there. You and the Conley dame had a party and one of you forgot you were smoking." Lieutenant Keller looked from Talbot to Harlan. "Tell me, Mr. State's Attorney—and forget you're the guy's best friend, did Talbot ever say in your presence that he wouldn't mind putting his shoes under Beth Conley's bed?"

Harlan said, angrily, "Hell, yes. So did I. So did you."
So did every other man under sixty who attended Conley's trial."

Keller's golden grin was smug. "Yeah. Mebbe so. But we weren't found with her buck-naked in our arms," he looked at his watch, "at four o'clock in the morning."
ing room smelled of smoke and charred timbers and the burned rug and drapes. It was no longer hot in the cottage. Pools of water from the fire hoses had gathered in a depression in the uneven floor. The smashed windows sagged open admitting the comparatively cool night air.

Talbot winced as Dr. Nelson probed for the bullet in his shoulder.

Lieutenant Keller was amused. "Not as much fun as what you were doing before the fire started, huh, Tod?"

Harlan said, sharply, "For God's sake stop riding him, Keller."

The fat man put a fresh matchstick in his mouth. "Look, Mr. State's Attorney. You run your office. I'll run mine."

Talbot gritted his teeth against the pain. He knew what was eating Keller. Keller had waited a long time for this. One of his first acts in office had been to throw a first degree murder charge back in Lieutenant Keller's face for want of proper evidence. He could still remember the words he'd used. "In the future, Lieutenant Keller,
please be more diligent in securing sufficient evidence to provide a basis for prosecution."

In his case Lieutenant Keller would be diligent. Lieutenant Keller hadn't forgotten.

Doctor Nelson’s probing forceps found the bullet. The medical examiner looked at the almost intact piece of lead. "A .22 I’d say. Certainly not more than a .25." He laid the bullet on a coffee table.

Lieutenant Keller nodded to a patrolman. "Take it out in the kitchen and give it to Jim. Tell him to take good care of it. Tell him I want him to compare it with the slug that killed the Conley dame."

The patrolman said, "Yes, sir," and waded the pools of water down the short hall to the kitchen.

Doctor Nelson cleaned the wound and dusted it with sulfa powder. "How bad is he hurt, Doc?" Lieutenant Keller asked him.

Doctor Nelson looked up from what he was doing. "Not bad. He'll have a sore shoulder for a week or so. That's all."

"I can question him?"
"I don't see why not."

Lieutenant Keller sat on the arm of a scorched overstuffed chair. "All right. Let's have it, Tod. What happened? Wouldn’t she do it your way?"

Talbot knew a mounting resentment. "You seem to be telling the story."

"I think I can," Keller said. "The way I see it, you’ve been on the make for the Conley dame for a long time. That's probably one of the reasons why you were so eager to see Conley burn, why your wife walked out on you."
“You keep Jane’s name out of your mouth.”

Lieutenant Keller showed his gold teeth. “Ex-wife, I should have said. She divorced you yesterday, remember?” He sucked at the match in his mouth. “So you came here tonight for a little consolation and you and the dead dame out in the kitchen had yourselves a hell of a time. Then the whiskey in you got the better of your common sense and the two of you got to fighting.” He shrugged. “I haven’t the least idea what you fought about but you’ll tell me once I get you down to the station. Right now it’s enough to know you fought. You probably clipped her a time or two and she grabbed the little pearl-handled gun I found in the bedroom and let you have it in the shoulder. That really made you blow your top. So, drunk and nasty, you took it away from her and killed her. Is that the way it happened?”

Talbot shook his head and wished he hadn’t. “No.”

Doctor Nelson laid sterile gauze over the wound in Talbot’s shoulder and fastened it with adhesive tape. “Now what?” he asked Keller.

Lieutenant Keller said, “The Conley dame is on the kitchen table. Take a look at her, will you? Nothing happened to her that hadn’t happened before so you probably won’t find any evidence of rape. But I want to know how recently she had relations with a man. And once you get her down on your table, of course, I’ll want the bullet that killed her.”

Doctor Nelson said, “Of course.”

Talbot watched him down the hall. The burned kitchen door sagged on its hinges. In the bright glow from the trouble-light the technicians had set up in the kitchen he could see Beth Conley’s white body. As
Nelson entered the kitchen a lab man was carefully scraping the residue from beneath her fingernails.
Talbot automatically felt the scratches on his cheek.
Harlan lit a fresh cigar. "You know you're in a bad spot, Tod."
"I know," Talbot said.
"So I think you'd better talk."
Lieutenant Keller was pleased. "That's good advice."
"What were you doing here?"
Lieutenant Keller sniggered. "I think that's obvious."
Harlan ignored him. "I asked you a question, Tod."
Talbot tried to think and thinking was an effort. The truth was going to sound weak. He doubted if Harlan would believe it. He knew Lieutenant Keller wouldn't.

Keller said, "Why horse around with the guy? What can he say? We find both of them buck-naked and the house on fire. His clothes are in the Conley dame's bedroom. His face is all clawed up. He's got a bullet hole in his shoulder and she's dead."

Harlan looked at the tip of his cigar.
Lieutenant Keller continued, "We found an empty bottle of scotch on the floor beside the bed. There was also another bottle on that coffee table. The boys are checking both bottles for prints." He added, as an afterthought, "There were also two partially filled high-ball glasses, one of them smeared with lipstick."
Talbot looked up at him. "Where?"
Lieutenant Keller was patient with him. "On the coffee table beside the bottle of blend."
Talbot considered the information. There had only been one glass on the table when he had entered the
living room. Whoever had done this to him wasn’t passing up any bets.

He tried to identify the voice he’d heard on the phone. All it had been was a voice. Only the words had been clear.

“This is a friend and a tip. You’ve been had.”

And he’d been had in spades.

Lieutenant Keller had allowed him to dress. Talbot patted his pants pocket, then picked his coat and shirt from the floor. There was nothing in any of his pockets. His wallet and checkbook and cigarettes were gone.

He said, “I wonder if I might have a cigarette?”

A detective gave him a lighted cigarette.

Lieutenant Keller grinned. “What’s the matter, Tod? Nervous?”

“I’ve felt better,” Talbot admitted. The cigarette tasted good. He looked up at Harlan. “Now how would you like to hear my version of what happened?”

Harlan’s voice was noncommittal. “I’m waiting.”

“You remember when you left me at the apartment?”

“Distinctly.”

“Was I drunk?”

“You’d been drinking.”

“But I had company?”

“You did.”

“Who?” Lieutenant Keller demanded.

Harlan evaded the question. “You can ask Tod that at the station. I will say this much. When I last saw Tod around nine or ten o’clock last evening, he wasn’t in need of female companionship.”

Lieutenant Keller shrugged. “You know how some guys are. They never get enough. And like you your-
self said, Mr. Prosecutor, there wasn't a guy under sixty who attended the Conley trial who wouldn't have been glad to put his shoes under Beth Conley's bed."

"Go on, Tod," Harlan said.

Talbot debated telling him about the incident with Jane and refrained. He had wronged Jane enough as it was. There was no need to drag her into this. Jane returning as she had and finding him with Vickie was both irrelevant and immaterial. Nor would Vickie's testimony prove anything. Beth Conley's body had been warm when he had touched it. The red-haired girl had been killed minutes, even seconds, before he had entered the kitchen.

Talbot wet his lips with his tongue. "Well, some hours after you left, about three o'clock this morning, I got a phone call."

"From whom?"

"I don't know. Either the connection was poor or whoever called me was speaking through a handkerchief or a piece of tissue or something. You couldn't tell much about the voice."

Jack Neely, the Times' night police reporter said, wryly, "Well, don't keep us in suspense. What did your caller want to know, what time it was?"

Lieutenant Keller and several of the detectives in the charred living room laughed.

Talbot took a deep breath. "No. It was a tip. I was told to get out here as fast as I could, that Beth Conley was in a tight and ready to talk."

"Talk about what?" Harlan snapped.

"The voice didn't say."

"Was it a man or a woman?"
“I couldn’t even tell that.”
Harlan said, “You must have some idea about what Beth Conley might have been ready to talk about—”
“So do you! About Conley, I imagine. My caller also informed me I’d been had.”
“In what way?”
“With respect to Conley’s guilt or innocence, I guess. At least so I thought at the time.”
Lieutenant Keller suggested, “Suppose you tell us exactly what this mysterious caller said. Exactly, understand?”
“Hell, I did tell you.” But Talbot repeated the call verbatim. “Well, first I asked who it was and my caller said it didn’t matter. Then he or she said, ‘This is a friend and a tip. You’ve been had. And if I were you, I’d get out to the Conley house as soon as I could. The Conley dame is in a tight and ready to talk.’”
Lieutenant Keller removed his straw hat and ran thick fingers through sparse gray hair. “We’re supposed to believe that?”
“It’s the truth.”
“In other words you were framed?”
“You’re getting the idea.”
Lieutenant Keller was as amused as Talbot had known he would be. “Now where have I heard that before?”
Talbot forced himself to speak calmly. “I drove here as fast as I could. There was a light in the living room and another light in the kitchen. A radio was playing. I rang the bell, then when no one answered I walked in. There was a bottle of whiskey on the coffee table and one highball glass. There was also a cigarette smolder-
ing in an ash tray. I heard someone run water in the kitchen, then close the refrigerator door. I assumed it was Mrs. Conley."

Lieutenant Keller returned his hat to his head. "So you peeled off your clothes and got in bed with her."

Talbot fought the growing constriction in his throat. No one believed him, not even Harlan. It was the type of a cover-up a smart attorney might conceive and he'd been a smart attorney until he'd sent James Conley to the chair. "No," he said quietly, "I didn't. I called her name, then walked out into the kitchen. She was sitting in a kitchen chair. She looked drunk but I knew she was dead the moment I touched her."

"Then what happened?"

"Then someone slugged me."

Jack Neely said, "And the next thing you knew you were peeled like a banana and having a hell of a time!" The reporter got up from the arm of the chair on which he was sitting. "Have a heart, Tod. Make sense. Let's not bring necrophilia into this. We print a family newspaper—"

Lieutenant Keller growled suspiciously "What is this necrophilia?"

Neely explained, "An insane fondness for dead bodies."

"She wasn't dead," Lieutenant Keller said. "But go on, Tod. You interest me. Then what happened?"

"I woke up in bed with Beth Conley. I'd been shot and the house was on fire."

"How about the call we got that a woman at this address was screaming for help."

"I don't know about that."
"You claim Beth Conley was dead when you got here?"

"I don't claim anything. But she couldn't have been deader."

"Then how did you get those scratches on your face?"

"I don't know about that either."

Harlan asked, "Did you see anyone in the kitchen? I mean beside Beth Conley."

"Hell, man—wouldn't I have told you if I had?"

Lieutenant Keller said, "Well, what do you think, Mr. Prosecutor?"

"I don't know," Harlan admitted. "I don't know what to think."

Lieutenant Keller said, "I do. He's lying to save his hide. It's the kind of story I'd expect a lawyer to tell. A mysterious someone called him for no reason, then slugged him after he got there, carefully took off his clothes, shot him through the shoulder and put him in bed with a dead woman."

"No smart lawyer would give you a story like that, pal—not unless it was true. If I was making up a tale, I'd do a hell of a lot better than that, believe me." Talbot wiped sweat from his face with the tail of his shirt. "Okay. So the circumstantial evidence is against me. What was my motive? Why would I want to kill Beth Conley?"

Lieutenant Keller snorted. "That's easy. She probably threatened to tell that you knew all along that her husband hadn't robbed the Midtown National or killed Al Baker, that you deliberately sent him to the chair so you could get at her."
AN ELECTRIC SILENCE

filled the room. Harlan broke it by asking, "Is that a
guess, Keller, or have you something to back up your
statement?"

"I think I can make it stand up," Keller said. "How
long did you and Tod work on the Conley case?"
"Approximately six months."
"Did he ever come out here alone?"
"Yes, I believe he did."
"How many times?"
"That I wouldn't know."
"A dozen times?"
"I would say so. You see, in view of the fact the
money was still missing, we were very anxious to get
Mrs. Conley to talk."

"Talk. Ha!" Keller said. He returned his attention to
Talbot. "Why did your wife divorce you, Tod?"
"You know why."
"No. All I know is what I read in the Times, that Mrs.
Talbot was seeking a legal separation because of a
sincere difference of opinion over the guilt or inno-
cence of James Conley."
Neely said, "That's what she told one of our reporters at the Tampa airport."

"Sure," Keller said. "That's what she told the reporter. But could be there was another reason. The former Mrs. Talbot came from a good family. A proud family. And it could just be she didn't want the real reason to get out." Keller helped Talbot to his feet. "Come on. Let's go out in the kitchen, Tod."

Talbot walked down the hall after Keller, carrying his shirt and coat. Harlan followed close behind them. "What are you getting at, Keller?"

One of the men had covered the dead girl with a sheet. Keller pulled the sheet off her body. "Take a look. Take a good look, Mr. Prosecutor. A woman doesn't up and divorce a man because of a difference of opinion. There's the real reason why Tod's wife left him. She knew he was cheating on her with the Conley dame, probably right from the start of the case."

"But that isn't so," Talbot protested. "Ask Jane."

"I intend to," Lieutenant Keller said. "But being a high-minded woman and having been married to you, she'll probably lie in an attempt to save your rotten neck." Keller covered the body and asked one of the technicians, "How did you guys make out?"

The technician said, "Fine. His prints were on both bottles and both glasses. We also got a good set off the pearl-handled butt of the gun."

"How about Nelson?"

The technician shrugged. "There wasn't much he could do out here but he said he'd file a full report as soon as he does the post."

Talbot looked at the rounded figure underneath the
HOMICIDAL LADY

sheet. It seemed incredible Beth Conley could be dead. He felt as he’d felt when he’d first awakened beside her, that none of this was real. But the body was real enough. So was the fire-gutted kitchen. Talbot raised his eyes to the ceiling. A portion of the roof was gone. Through the hole he could see the stars.

"Feeling kind of queasy, huh?" Keller asked him.
"Yes," Talbot admitted.
"Then how about making it easy on all of us?"
"How?"
"By confessing you killed her."
"Don’t be a fool. She was dead when I got here."
Talbot appealed to Harlan. "You believe me, don’t you, Harl?"

Harlan was a long time in answering. "If you don’t mind," he said, finally, "I’ll take a raincheck on that, Tod. At least until Doctor Nelson finishes the post mortem."

"In other words you agree with Keller."
"At least his version fits the known facts."

Lieutenant Keller was pleased. "You hear what the man says, Tod. So don’t talk now. You’ll talk when I get you down to the station." The lieutenant nodded to two waiting wagon men. "Okay on the body, boys."

The wagon men transferred the girl on the table to a stretcher and carried her out the back door.

"We’ll go out the front way," Keller said.

Talbot tried to put on his shirt and coat. It was awkward going, with one hand. No one offered to help him. He gave up trying and carried his shirt and coat over his sound arm. It didn’t matter how he looked. He was hooked. If Harlan didn’t believe him, no jury would.
A jury would take one look at the blown-up pictures of the dead girl and find him guilty without leaving the box.

A crowd of morbidly curious neighbors were waiting on the tired lawn. "That's him," a male voice said. "That's Talbot. The big guy without a shirt."

Some woman said, "The louse. It wasn't enough he railroaded her husband, he had to kill her. The chair's too good for the likes of him. If the men in this town had any guts, they'd string him to a lamp post."

"They don't seem to like you," Keller said.

Tod had an impulse to swing at him.

The shadowy figures and angry voices followed them across the lawn to the police cruiser parked at the curb. They were, Talbot thought, the same men and women to whom he had talked dozens of times when he had come to the house to question Beth Conley or make a surprise search for the still missing money. They'd been certain of James Conley's guilt. Now they were equally certain of his.

Harlan got in his car and drove away. So did the two technicians. The two wagon men loaded the body, then came back to Keller's car to ask if he needed any help.

Lieutenant Keller laughed. "You guys kidding? Tod's only tough when he's in court or in bed with some other man's wife." He stabbed a finger at the woman who called Talbot a louse. "You. What's your name, lady?"

"Mrs. Sam Alden," she told him.

"Where do you live?"

"Right next door to the Conley's. In the first house north."

"You ever see Talbot come to the house alone?"
Mrs. Alden said, smugly, "Lots of times. And every
time when Sam came from work I told him I wouldn’t
be at all surprised at what was going on next door,
Mrs. Conley being so pretty and all. In fact, Mr. Talbot
was out here yesterday afternoon."

"That so, Talbot?"
"Yes."
"After Conley had been executed?"
"Yes."
"And you still insist you weren’t playing house with
her?"
"I do."
"Then why did you come out?"
"Would you believe me if I told you I came out to
say I was sorry and to offer Mrs. Conley what financial
aid I could?"
"No."
"I didn’t think you would."

Mrs. Alden retied the belt of the flowered housecoat
she’s slipped on over her nightdress. "I bet. I’ll just
bet he came out to offer her financial aid. And tonight
again, at three o’clock in the morning."

A sergeant of detectives opened the door of the
cruiser. "We through here for now, Lieutenant?"

"For now," Keller said. "But I’ll want to come back in
the morning and talk to the neighbors, Graham."

Sergeant Graham shoved Talbot toward the cruiser.
"Okay. Get in, Talbot."

Not Mr. Talbot. Not please. Just Get in, Talbot.
The queasy feeling returned to Talbot’s stomach. He
was on the other side of the fence now. From here
on in it would be—Do this . . . Do that . . . Sit down
... Come here ... Put out that cigarette ... Answer the lieutenant's question.

And between questions, certain he'd killed Mrs. Conley, Keller would beat on him.

The frame was tight. His fingerprints had been found on the whiskey bottles and the gun. The lab would report the scraping from the dead girl's nails had come from his face. Ballistics would prove the bullet taken from his shoulder had been fired from the gun.

Graham shoved Talbot again. "I said, get in."

Talbot stumbled and dropped his coat and shirt. Free and on the outside, he had a chance to prove he'd been framed. But once Keller got him back of bars, he was finished. Not even Harlan believed him. It wasn't much of a chance but it was the only one he had—

He stooped as if to pick up his dropped garments, and butted Graham in the stomach. The plainclothesman said, "Whoosh," more an expulsion of air than a word, and slammed into the side of the cruiser.

Lieutenant Keller drew his gun. "You son-of-a-bitch. Trying to make a break, huh?"

He clubbed at Talbot's head with the barrel of his gun. Talbot sidestepped the blow and crashed his fist into Keller's nose. Keller went down clawing at his flattened nose, bleating, "Stop him. You guys up at the house. Talbot's getting away."

Talbot forced his way through the crowd of neighbors around the cruiser. Mrs. Alden was screaming. Another woman tripped him and he fell. He got to his feet and started on again only to have a big man grab him by his wounded shoulder.
“Oh, no you don’t,” the man said. “You ain’t going nowhere.”

Half blind with pain, Talbot drove his good fist into the man’s stomach and the man lost all interest in stopping him. Talbot ran up the parkway. If he could reach his car he had a chance. There were two things in his favor. It was dark. The police cars still in front of the Conley house were facing in the opposite direction.

Both Graham and Keller were back on their feet and shooting. A bullet whined past his ear and smacked into the bole of a palm tree. Another bullet ricocheted off the walk and keyholed screaming into the night.

Vickie was racing the engine of the car when Talbot reached it. She leaned across the seat and held the door open. “Get in.”

Talbot hadn’t meant to involve Vickie. He got in, protesting. “But—”

The forward surge of the car snapped him back against the seat. The door swung open, then slammed shut with a metallic bang. Vickie took the next corner on two wheels, without lifting her foot from the accelerator, driving without lights. Its tires screaming, the big car slewed around the corner and raced on. ....

They were on the road to the ferry. When he could speak, Talbot said, “Stop the car and get out, Vickie. I don’t want you involved in this. You don’t understand.”

Vickie spoke without taking her eyes from the road. “Oh, but I do. I mixed with the crowd around the house and heard everything those cats said. Then when I saw them bring you out, I thought you might try this. So I went back to the car and waited.”
“I’m glad you did.”
“How bad are you hurt?”
“Not bad.”
“You’re not lying to me?”
“No.”

Sirens were wailing now. The spotlight of a speeding cruiser stabbed through the fronds of the palm trees and lighted the weeds along the road.

“I shouldn’t have tried it, Vickie,” Talbot panted. “We aren’t going to make it. All I’ve done is get you into a jam.”

Vickie was unperturbed. “We have a chance,” she said calmly. “And that’s more than you had back there.”

She turned left, then right again in a baffling maze of turns that left Talbot completely confused. He watched the speedometer, fascinated as it climbed from seventy to eighty and from eighty to ninety-five. Vickie missed a parked car by inches, slowed the car briefly for a sharp S-turn, then, still driving by starlight, pushed the accelerator back to the floorboards.

“Now do you believe,” she asked, “that someone has a knife in you? That someone didn’t want you to be state’s attorney?”

“Yes,” Talbot admitted.

“Who killed Mrs. Conley?”

“I don’t know,” Talbot said. “I don’t know.”

They were on a shell road. Vickie drove the speeding car into what appeared to Talbot to be a solid wall of foliage and trees that divided at the last second to reveal a narrow lane, the ruts of which gripped the wheels of the car like a flanged track. The trees blotted out all sound. The distant wail of the sirens was
only faintly audible. The needle of the speedometer dropped to a modest thirty.

Vickie said, "They'll think we went on to the ferry landing, then turned west to the Gulf. Right now they're probably blocking the causeways." Her drawl was both pronounced and wry. "This is one of the advantages of having been born poor. Only a few of us you-alls and a few commercial fishermen even know this road is here."

The lane narrowed. The ruts grew deeper. Vickie had to shift the car into low. It was barely moving. The oil pan scraped on a stump rising from the ridge. Dry palm fronds and mangrove branches scraped both sides of the car. Thigh-high grass, dry and brittle, filled the lane from one rut to the other.

Talbot was completely lost. He asked, "Where are we?"

Vickie said, "On Palmetto Point. A whoop and a holler from the old Frazer fish camp. Whenever the conservation men got too hot on his tail, Pa used to come down here to net mullet out of season."

Several swaybacked buildings, deeper blobs of black against the sky, loomed out of the night. The stars glittered on still water. Talbot remembered the camp, vaguely. He and Harlan had fished out of it once as boys.

Still driving without lights, Vickie guided the heavy car between derelict beached hulls and sagging cypress drying racks hung with rotted nets. She drove up to the larger of the two buildings, stopped the car, opened a pair of sagging doors and driving on into the building got out again and closed the doors behind them. They were in the loading room of what had once been a
prosperous fish house. Now the years and the mangroves crowding in from the shore had taken over. It was airless, hot and dark in the shed. The only sounds Talbot could hear were his own hoarse breathing, the croaking of frogs in a slough and the shrill of the cicadas.

Vickie switched off the ignition and slapped at a mosquito. Her eyes gleamed cat-green in the dark. Her voice was fierce with possession. "Now let 'em try and find you."
There was a sour taste in Talbot’s mouth when he awakened. His wounded shoulder throbbed. His bare torso was on fire from mosquito bites. It was an effort to lift his head from the back of the seat. The doors of the shed were still closed but Vickie wasn’t in the car.

He rubbed his eyes and saw the message written in lipstick on the windshield. It was terse and to the point. “Stay put till I get back.”

There was a cigarette pack with four cigarettes in it on the seat beside him. He lit one and sucked smoke into his lungs. His cycle had come full swing, from Cracker boy to state’s attorney and back to Cracker again. Only now he was wanted for murder.

He got out of the car and opened the door of the shed. The shore, lined with mangrove and cabbage palms, looked very much as it must have looked in the days when the first Spaniard landed on the Florida west coast. The trees were alive with birds. The only signs of civilization were a few deserted shacks, the bleached hulls of long dead boats and the sagging drying racks and rotted nets.
Talbot turned his attention to the water. He was oriented now. The camp was on Pelican Pass, a body of water five miles long and a mile wide, separated from the bay proper by a series of low-lying keys, the names of which he couldn’t remember. As he watched, a fish jumped twenty feet from shore. In the shadows a roseate spoonbill speared a fish and swallowed it with a jerking motion of its slim head. Farther down the shore the shallows were alive with stately white herons.

He might have dropped back two hundred years in time, even though modern, thriving Sun City with its green benches and bait camps and luxury hotels and multi-million dollar pier and TV station was less than five miles away.

Talbot wished he knew where Vickie had gone, what he was going to do now, what he could do. He walked down to the water, shucked off his pants and shorts and shoes and waded out. He remembered his watch at the last moment. It was eleven forty-five. No wonder there was a crick in his neck. He’d been asleep in the car for hours.

He laid his watch on top of his pants and waded out again. The warm salt water felt good. It extinguished the fire of the mosquito bites. His wounded shoulder stopped throbbing. He found, if he was careful, he could even use his left arm without the pain becoming unbearable. He swam for a few minutes, then waded back to shore and allowed the noon sun to dry him.

Dressed, he returned to the car, lit another cigarette and tuned in the police radio he’d had installed in his car to expedite his duties as state’s attorney.
The police band was filled with him. He'd been seen at Seminole Beach. A newsboy had seen him hiding back of the Florida Theatre. A state trooper thought, but wasn't positive, that a 1952 green Buick Roadmaster with license plate 4W-203 had passed him near the Tampa airport before the state patrol had been alerted. Every available prowler car and cruiser had been assigned to the search.

There was no mention of Vickie. There was no reason for the police to connect her with his flight from the Conley home unless Harlan mentioned having seen her in the apartment. And there was no reason for Harlan to suppose she had accompanied him to his rendezvous with Beth Conley. Harlan was stringing along with Lieutenant Keller. Harlan thought he had been playing house with the red-haired girl.

The roof of Talbot's mouth dried as he thought of Harlan. Harlan stood to profit most by his forced resignation. Harlan was Mr. Big now. Harlan was state's attorney. Talbot's mind raced on. More, Harlan had always been in love with Jane. The three of them knew it. It was just one of the things they didn't mention. Still, Harlan would have to hate his guts as no man had ever hated any other man to kill Eddie Marlow and plant fake evidence just to get his job and Jane. He couldn't believe it of Harlan. Then there was the money to consider, the five thousand dollars the Tampa police had found in Marlow's suitcase, and the better than one hundred thousand dollars still missing.

Talbot had never been so mentally baffled. He felt as if he were trying to climb up a sheer wall of glass. None of it made sense, not even Jane coming home to
stand beside him and catching him in bed with Vickie.

He felt a swift flush of affection for Jane. Still, Jane had come. When the chips had been down and she had learned he was in a jam she had come home to do what she could. Jane had been deeply hurt by what she had found. It had been a terrific blow to her pride, he knew that. But perhaps if he could find some way to contact Jane, she would forgive him enough to help him determine the best course of action. He couldn't hide out where he was forever. It was only a matter of time before hunger or the police would flush him out and the merry-go-round with Keller would begin all over again.

"Don't give me that crap. Why did you kill her, Talbot?"

Then the trial, with Harlan prosecuting, trying to be fair but presenting the known evidence as he had done in the Conley case. And after that the small white-painted room at Raiford.

The seat of the car was confining. Talbot snapped off the radio and walked out into the sun again and sat in the shade of a palm tree. Sweat started on his face and trickled down his bare torso as he heard, or thought he could hear, the laboring motor of a car. He listened intently. There was no doubt about it. A car was coming down the lane. Now, of all times, a fisherman had to choose to net Pelican Pass! Talbot pushed his way back into the shrubs and stood eyeing the mouth of the lane. After agonizing moments the hood of a battered Ford appeared, its motor laboring as its wheels spun in the loose sand.

Vickie drove directly to the shed and got out. She
looked different than before. She was all Cracker now. Her blonde hair was skinned back and hung in two long braids. She had exchanged her smart yellow dress for a cheap cotton print. Her tanned legs were bare. Her spike heel shoes had been replaced by a pair of shapeless sneakers. The only make-up she had on was lipstick.

Talbot walked over to the shed. "Where did you get the car?"

Vickie turned to face him. "I bought it for two hundred dollars." She looked tired. There were deep shadows under her eyes. Her youthful face was lined with strain. Her lower lip quivered as she looked at him. "Well, aren’t you goin’ to kiss me good mornin’?"

Talbot kissed her.

Vickie’s face brightened. "That’s betteh. You kin beat me every day, love me every night an’ three times on Sunday but don’t eveh forgit ’t kiss me good mornin’.

Talbot spatted her lightly. "Stop talkin’ like a Cracker."

Vickie was candid. "I belong to talk like what I am. I almost fretted myself silly a-tryin’ t’ make a good impression on you." She took a heavy sack from the car. "You hungry?"

"Starved."

Vickie walked with him to the palm tree under which he had been sitting and put the articles in the sack on the ground. "I figured that." She handed him a quart thermos bottle. "Here’s hot coffee t’ begin with. Then there are hamburger sandwiches an’ an order of fried shrimp t’ follow. I couldn’t figure how t’ carry eggs an’ bacon. Asides, they’d have been cold by the time I got back here."
“How did you get out of here?”

Vickie shrugged her slim shoulders. “I walked.”

“But it’s five miles to town.”

Vickie unwrapped a hamburger sandwich and handed it to him. “You’re telling me! I walked every step of the way. They’s some new dungarees an’ a shirt an’ a bottle of drinkin’ whiskey in the car. You want a drink?”

“No. Not right now,” Talbot said. He gulped the hamburger in four bites and began on another. “But why buy a car? Just to keep from walking back?”

“To get you out of heah,” Vickie said simply. “The police are runnin’ around in circles lookin’ for you. But they’re looking for a state’s attorney in a big shiny Buick an’ not a Cracker boy in a beat-up Ford. All of the roads out are blocked—they think. But I know a couple of back ones an’ if we light out after dark, the chances are we kin get around the bay an’ down to alternate U. S. 41.”

Talbot ate a fried shrimp. “Then what?”

Vickie was candid. “I haven’t figured that far. Once we get out of town it’s up to you.” She opened her purse and counted the bills in it then handed them to Talbot. “Heah. You’re the man. You’d best take this. There’s ’most two hundred left. An’ it only costs ten dollars t’ fly to Cuba from Key West.” She added, “If we can get that far south.”

It was a tempting prospect. Talbot looked at the bills in his hand. “Where did you get this money and the money you used to buy the car, Vickie?”

She met his eyes. “I waited table for it. Now don’t be uppity proud. Put it in your pocket and when you
finish eatin' we'll study on what's best for us to do."

"Us?"

"Where you go I'm goin'."

"Why should I involve you in my mess?"

"Look, Tod. I told you why I came back t' Sun City. I know I'm just a Cracker kid that doesn't belong to be with a man like you. But heah I am." She meant what she said. "And I'm goin' to cling like a burr 'til you're out of trouble or you tell me t' git out."

Talbot leaned forward and kissed her. "Know something?"

"What?"

"You're sweet. And very pretty."

Vickie was pleased. "You ought to know. You've seen what there is to see."

Finished eating, Talbot poured himself a second cup of coffee and lit the last two cigarettes in the package. He sucked them to a glow and handed one to Vickie. The cigarette dangling from her lips, she fished in the sack. "They's more in heah somewhere. I bought four packs at the drive-in."

"You didn't buy a paper, did you?"

Vickie stood up and got a Times and the clothes she'd mentioned from the front seat of the car. "You best put on the shirt afore you get all tourist red."

Talbot put on the blue chambray work shirt and read the front page of the Times. Jack Neely had really gone to town on him. It was about what he had expected. The Times had tried and convicted him before he had even been indicted. Both the Times and Lieutenant Keller were certain of his guilt. Harlan had refused to go on record. So had Jane. Neely had inter-
viewed her out at the old Painter house and all he could report was that the former Mrs. Tod Talbot, while obviously under a strain and admitting she had flown home to stand beside her husband after the Marlow confession had been made public, refused to comment on the latest development in the case.

Talbot refolded the paper and fanned himself with it. Vickie sat cross-legged beside him. "How is your shoulder?"

"Fine." Talbot lifted his arm to prove it.

The hot sun felt good on his body. His stomach was full. The deserted fish camp was quiet and peaceful. It was nice just being with Vickie. He had a cigarette in his mouth and four more packs in the bag. There was a bottle of drinking whiskey in the Ford. If this was reverting to type, he liked it. He thought, as he had thought many times before, men placed too much stress on financial and social success. If he hadn't been trying so hard to make good for Jane, none of this would have happened. As far as he, personally, was concerned he could be happy in a bait camp.

Vickie wet her lips with her tongue. "Well, I suppose we'd best face it. What are you goin' t' do, Tod?"

"I don't know," Talbot admitted. "But you were right last night. Someone has their knife in me, and good."

"Who?"

"If I knew I'd turn myself in."

"An' let that pot-gutted match-chewin' gold-toothed poor white trash detective beat on you?"

It was a good description of Lieutenant Keller. "I mean," Talbot explained, "if I knew who doesn't
like me I'd have a take-off point. This way I'm floundering in the dark."

"Could it be whoever called you last night?"

"Yes. He knew what I was walking into. I think it was planned that way."

"You didn't recognize the voice?"

"No."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"I couldn't tell. The voice was distorted."

"And you didn't see anyone when you got to the Conley house?"

"No one but Mrs. Conley. But there was someone else in the kitchen. They sapped me from behind."

Vickie snuffed her cigarette. "I damn near died waitin' in the car. Then when I heard the sirens and the police cars and fire trucks arrive I didn't know what to do."

"Did you see anyone come out of the Conley house?"

"No."

"Did you hear any screaming?"

"No." Vickie thought a moment. "But about five minutes after you went in I did hear a car start, up the street a piece."

"Did you see the car?"

"No. It went the other way. Then after that things happened so fast I never called it to mind until now."

It was a small thing but a point, a point to remember. Talbot leaned back against the bole of the palm tree. In the light of everything that had happened, from where he sat the whole thing, beginning with Eddie Marlow's confession, began to look like a plot to get him out of
office, cost him Jane, and eventually cost him his life.

He fingered the wet bandage on his shoulder. If the bullet had caught him three inches lower and an inch to the right he'd be dead. The police or the firemen would have found him beside the dead red-haired girl and his case would have been written off the books as murder and suicide or a double suicide pact. It hadn't been intended for him to regain consciousness as soon as he had.

The little things, he thought.

Talbot cracked the cellophane on a fresh package of cigarettes. On the other hand, why should anyone want to kill him? He'd already resigned as state's attorney. He'd lost Jane. He wasn't in anyone's hair.

At any angle from which he viewed it, the whole thing refused to make sense. He rubbed at the stubble of beard on his jowls. "You didn't happen to think to get a razor and some blades."

Vickie was contrite. "No. I didn't. That's one thing I clear forgot. But I'll go back an' get some."

Talbot stopped her from getting to her feet. "Relax. It doesn't matter."

Vickie leaned against his shoulder. "Not to me." She twisted the hair on his chest into tufts. "You could have beard all over an' I'd still feel the same way I do about you."

Talbot spatted her hand. "Let's not get off on that tack. I have to think."

"Why don't we just run for it? We can get through t'night. I know we can. An' by tomorrow mornin' we can be in Key West ready t' take off for Cuba."

Talbot shook his head. "It wouldn't work, Vickie. I
might stay out of the net for a week or two but, eventually, they'd get me. No. Running away never solved anything. The best thing I can do is stay and tough it out, try to find who has a knife in me."

"How?"

"I could contact Jane."

"She'll turn you over to the police." Vickie snapped her fingers. "Like that."

"I doubt it."

"She walked out on you, didn't she?"

"She came back."

"Yes. An' what did she find? She looked slantwise at me, like effen I was dirt."

"We were wrong."

"How?"

"You shouldn't have been in the apartment."

"Why not? She'd walked out on you. She'd divorced you." Vickie added earnestly. "I had a better right t' be in your bed than she did. I was there acause I love you."

There was no answer. From a strictly emotional viewpoint Vickie was right. Talbot made no attempt to point out that in the circles in which Jane moved such things weren't done or, if they were, the parties involved made certain they didn't get caught at it. He thought a moment. "I don't dare go to Harl. He's state's attorney now. It would be his duty to turn me in. But Jane is both smart and a lawyer. I can retain her as my attorney. Then anything I tell her will be a privileged conversation and she won't have to report it. And if I can make Jane believe me, make her realize this whole thing is a
frame, she can put out wires and find out who’s back of it.”

“You think she will?”

“If only from an ethical standpoint.”

“What’s ethical mean?”

“Conforming to professional standards of conduct. It’s an attorney’s duty to defend the innocent.”

Vickie’s green eyes slitted. “That ain’t just big talk, Tod? You ain’t just trying t’ sell yourself a bill of goods, while all the time what you’re really doin’ is crawlin’ back t’ kiss her foot like a kicked hound?”

Talbot wished he knew. He was in love with Jane. He supposed he always would be. But everything he’d said was true. Jane was an attorney. She was ethical. She was smart. It was an attorney’s duty to protect the innocent. “No. Of course not,” he lied.

“And in the meantime?”

“We’ll risk staying here.”

Vickie shrugged. “You’re the man. You do what you think is best. You know her better than I do. But I still think you’re makin’ a mistake. After the way she looked at us, before I’d go to that woman fo’ help I’d swim a bayou filled with ‘gators.”
Sun City was built on a peninsula with the Gulf of Mexico on one side and lower Tampa Bay on the other. The peninsula itself was dotted with numerous bayous and bays and salt-water creeks. The old Painter estate was on one of the salt-water creeks. The original homestead had consisted of over a thousand acres, most of them in grove. Most of the orange and grapefruit trees were gone, cut down during the 1925 boom when the place had been subdivided and cut up into lots.

The few trees left were gnarled and neglected. Their fruit was sour. Grass-grown red brick streets with no houses on them led back into thick tangles of slush pine and cabbage palms. The grounds of the Painter estate were in little better condition. The twisting red brick road leading back to the house had lost its fight with the weeds. On both sides of the private road both common and imported palms and large oleander and hibiscus bushes grew in jungle-like profusion. The boles of the trees were choked with clinging vines. The smell of night-blooming jasmine hung heavy on the still air.

87
Talbot parked the Ford in front of what had once been a formal garden and sat looking at the house. The upper floor was dark but lines of light escaped the drawn drapes of the living room.

Jane was home. He hadn’t been followed from the fish camp. As far as he could tell there was no police stake-out on the house. He doubted if Lieutenant Keller would give him credit for nerve enough to attempt to contact Jane.

He sat a long time just looking at the house. It had been Jane’s dream to refurbish both it and the grounds. It was a passion with her. He had hoped to help make her dream come true. Now, in time, the creeping jungle that had already reclaimed the grounds would claim the Painter house. No one else wanted it. It would cost more to restore and rebuild the old hollow tile, two-story, Spanish hacienda than to build a waterfront, ultra-modern four-bedroom four-bath home.

He got out of the car and walked around the house to make certain he wasn’t underestimating Lieutenant Keller. The only car on the grounds was the late model Lincoln Capri that he had given Jane on their fourth wedding anniversary. Satisfied, he crossed the front patio to the front door. The bell had long since ceased to work. What with the place in town and the cottage on the beach, he and Jane had seldom used the old house, then only when they had wanted seclusion, when one or the other of them had been preparing a case.

Talbot lifted his hand to knock, then tried the door and it opened under his hand. The huge entrance hall smelled of dry rot and decay. Light streamed out
the double doors of the living room to form a yellow river leading up the winding stairs to the second floor. He closed the door behind him and walked slowly toward the light.

Jane, wearing a filmy negligee over equally sheer scanties and bra, was sitting in an easy chair, reading an *Evening Independent*. There was a half-filled highball glass and a bottle of scotch and a syphon of soda on the end table beside her.

Talbot stood, watching her, fascinated. He had almost forgotten how really beautiful Jane was. Every shining black hair was in place. Her patrician features were classical in their perfection. Her full breasts strained at the flimsy material covering them. Her legs were long and white and tapered. She was everything a man might want. And at one time she had been his.

Jane looked up from the paper and saw him standing in the doorway. Her gray eyes travelled slowly from his unshaven cheeks to the blue chambray work shirt and the cheap dungarees and his sneakers. Her voice was more amused than angry.

“Well, the lord of the manor returned—in disguise. What are you made up for, Tod, a yard man?”

Talbot advanced slowly into the room. It wasn’t the reception he’d expected. But then, he’d never known just how Jane would react to anything. The words sounded silly as he said them. “I’m in a jam, Jane. A bad one.”

Jane folded the paper she’d been reading and laid it beside her chair. “So I’ve just been reading. And hearing over the radio. And having drilled into me all day
by one Lieutenant Keller.” She lit a cigarette without offering one to him. “Just why have you come here, Tod? Is this a professional or an emotional call?”

Talbot sat on the edge of a chair. “Both. I didn’t kill Beth Conley, Jane.”

She repeated what Harlan had said. “That doesn’t fit with the known facts.” She sucked smoke into her lungs and exhaled slowly. “Although I must admit, even knowing your appetites and capacity, it doesn’t seem logical or reasonable that after finishing with the little blonde with whom I last saw you that you would go directly from her to another assignation.”

Talbot forced himself to speak calmly. “I didn’t. I never touched Beth Conley. She was dead when I reached the house. Someone phoned me about three o’clock, right after I got back to the apartment, and said—”

“I know,” Jane interrupted him. “I read your statement in both the morning and the evening paper. But you seemed quite pleasantly occupied when I last saw you. What do you mean when you got back to the apartment?”

“Just that. I spent three hours looking for you. I checked every hotel and motel in town. I even came out here and beat on the door.”

“I know. I heard you,” Jane said. “Anyway I heard the pounding and assumed it was you.”

“It was.”

“But why should you look for me?”

“You know as well as I do. I wanted to tell you how sorry I was you walked in on what you did.”

“It was my fault, not yours. I had no reason to in-
trude. You had good reason to assume you no longer owed me any loyalty."

Talbot felt his throat beginning to constrict. "What do you mean by that?"

Jane snuffed her cigarette. "Just what I said. I'm sorry if it embarrasses you, Tod. But you see when I learned the awful twist the Conley case had taken, I didn't wait for the divorce. I flew straight home to you."

"Then we're still married?"

"Legally, yes."

Talbot got to his feet and started across the room. Jane stopped him. "No, please, Tod. Don't touch me. I don't know how I might react. You see I might fall into your arms because it so happens I still love you. I might hit you with the first thing I could pick up. After all, I have my pride and having sacrificed it to come back it wasn't very pleasant to find you in bed with that cheap Cracker tart."

Talbot wanted to protest that Vickie wasn't cheap but this was no time for personalities. What Jane had just told him touched him deeply. Jane still loved him. She was still his wife. But that didn't alter the fact that he was wanted for murder.

He sat back on the edge of the chair.

"That's better," Jane said. "Much better. Now what do you want of me, Tod?"

Talbot was candid with her. "I want you to help me, Jane. I know how you felt and probably still feel about the Conley case."

"It would seem events have borne me out."

"Superficially," Talbot admitted. "But I still think he
was guilty as hell and the Eddie Marlow confession and the finding of the five thousand dollars were all part of the frame to discredit me and force me to resign. But that wasn’t enough for whoever has his knife in me. He wants me completely out of his hair. He wants me dead.”

“He?”

“He or she, then.”

“But why? I mean why would anyone want to discredit you or see you dead?”

“I don’t know.” Talbot took a package of cigarettes from his pocket. “May I smoke?”

Jane was the gracious hostess. “Forgive me. I’m not myself. Of course. Would you care for a drink, Tod?”

Talbot was as formal as she was. “No, thank you.” He lit the cigarette. “Will you help me, Jane?”

“How?”

“By trying to find out who is back of this.”

Jane patted the perfect waves of her hair and said. “But your story is incredible, Tod, and based on the original bone of our contention, James Conley’s guilt or innocence. A man has confessed that he and not Conley robbed the bank and killed Al Baker. What’s more, in his remorse at having brought about the conviction of an innocent man he killed himself and the Tampa police found five thousand dollars of the missing money. He figured his confession note would be in time to stop the execution.” She added, “And the serial numbers check, I know. I’ve talked with Harl.”

Talbot sucked at his cigarette. “Did you happen to check Marlow’s record?”

“Yes,” Jane said. “I did. He was a punk with a
Long record of minor offenses, with two convictions and one term on the road gang behind him."

"A ladies' man."

"If you can term the sort of women who consort with such a man 'ladies.'"

"A free spender. A heavy drinker."

"I believe that was noted in his record."

Talbot quoted Vickie almost verbatim. "Now tell me this. Did you ever hear of any such punk shooting himself with a shotgun while he still had five thousand dollars to spend and girls willing to help him spend it?"

Jane's eyes grew thoughtful. "No. It's an angle I hadn't considered."

"Then there's another angle. What happened to the rest of the money? Over a hundred thousand dollars is still missing."

Jane added more scotch to the soda in her glass. "You're a good lawyer, Tod. You make your points stand up. But if what you're assuming is so, it means you've been right all along, that Conley was guilty as charged."

"Exactly."

Jane sipped the drink she'd poured. "And following that line of reasoning, someone who has reason to hate or envy you used the Conley case as a wedge to pry you out of office."

Talbot repeated, "Exactly."

"But why kill Mrs. Conley and frame you for her murder?"

"I don't know."

Jane moved her head from side to side. "Forgive me, Tod, if I'm not too enthusiastic. Maybe I'm just being a
woman. But I still think Conley was innocent, the Marlow confession was true, and Mrs. Conley being murdered had nothing to do with the case.” She paused, continued quietly. “But I do know you. You might stay with a woman as pretty as Beth Conley was.” Her smile was wry. “You’ve proven that. But I doubt if you’d kill any woman for any reason.”

“You.”

“Where have you been all day?”

“Hiding out in a deserted fish camp.”

“Which one?”

“Frazer’s. Down on Pelican Pass.”

“Oh, yes. I remember it, vaguely. Anyway, the name.”

Jane stood up in front of the light and Talbot wished she hadn’t. The lamp light dissolved the sheer fabric of her negligee. In his overwrought state of nerves the torture of seeing Jane again was almost as bad as being wanted for murder. He’d lost a lot. Jane paced the room slowly. “But being practical, assuming for the moment that your theory is correct, who has reason to hate you so much, Tod?”

“I don’t know.

“Harlan?”

“I doubt it.”

“How about Luke Adama? You sent him up for the only term he ever served.”

“It could be Luke.”

“It could be. Adama is Cracker proud and you caused him to lose face. You also cost him money. I heard before I left town that while he was in Raiford the Tampa boys chiseled in on his bolita racket and he had a hell of a time getting back into the saddle.”
“I heard the same thing.”

Jane stopped pacing. “Would you consider giving yourself up to Lieutenant Keller, Tod, and allowing me to act within the law, as your attorney?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because Keller hates me as much as Luke does. Keller is hand in hand with the rackets. He drives to work in a ’39 Chevy but he has a Lincoln Capri in his garage and a four-bedroom home on Palm Drive.”

“True.”

Talbot continued. “Believe me, Jane. I’m not belittling your ability as an attorney. You almost sprung Conley. Guilty, or innocent, I wish now you had. But I doubt if you can do as much for me.”

“Why?”

“Sentiment is bound to be against me. In the people’s minds I’m an ex-state’s attorney who betrayed their trust and confidence for personal and political gain.”

“A red-haired woman and an unbroken string of convictions.”

“That’s the way they’ll see it.”

Jane crossed the room and stood so close to Talbot he could smell the perfume of her body. “You won’t give yourself up?”

“No.”

“Will you compromise?”

“How?”

“First tell me this. Do you trust me?”

“Implicitly.”

Jane rested one hand on his shoulder. “I’ll tell you what I have in mind when the time comes. I was think-
ing when you came in, hoping you’d try to contact me. But this has all come so suddenly, it means giving up so much, that I’ll have to have a few more hours in which to make my decision.”

“About what?”

“About what I have in mind. But meanwhile, to satisfy yourself—”

Talbot stood up facing her. “Yes—?”

“Why don’t you talk to Adama? You’re smart. You’re the smartest prosecutor Palmetto County ever had. You should be able to tell by talking to Luke if he hates you enough to have killed Beth Conley and framed you for her murder.” Jane put her fingers on Talbot’s lips. “No. Hear me out. You’ll have to be careful, very careful, but having avoided the police this far, I think you can manage for a few more hours. What do you think?”

It was an effort not to kiss the fingers pressed to his lips. Talbot said, “Luke lives on the bay. I won’t have to pass through town to reach his place. There’s no reason for Keller to expect I might go there. Yes. I think I can manage.” He added, wryly, “If I’m lucky.”

Jane raised herself on her tiptoes and kissed him. “Be lucky. I want you to be lucky. And after you talk to Luke, come back here—to me.”

Talbot put his hands on the small of her back and pulled her to him. “Don’t do this to me unless you mean it.”

“I mean it,” Jane breathed. She kissed him again. “I always mean everything I do. You know that, Tod.” She slipped out of his arms. “Now go talk to Luke.” She opened a table drawer. “And here. You’d better take this with you. But don’t use it unless you have to.”
HOMICIDAL LADY

Talbot stuffed the automatic pistol into the waistband of his dungarees. The flat metal of the large-calibered gun felt cold against his bare belly. "Thanks."

Jane walked him to the front door. "And remember I'm waiting for you, Tod. I wouldn't let you go at all but I know how bull-headed you are and I want you to be satisfied in your own mind before I tell you what I think you ought to do." Jane corrected herself. "What I think we ought to do."

Jane clung to him a moment then closed the door between them. Talbot looked from the closed door to the night walling the flagstone patio. He was glad he was forgiven. He was grateful Jane still loved him. But instead of feeling elated, for some reason, he felt like a small boy who'd been patted on the head then told to go out and make mud pies without getting his hands dirty.
NIGHT CONTINUED HUMID.

What breeze there was blew hot and from the south and brought with it swarms of the salt-water mosquitoes that bred in the low-lying mangrove keys off shore. Talbot wondered how Vickie was making out at the fish camp. He wished he knew what he was going to do about Vickie. He wished he knew a lot of things.

The Adama bay-front home was huge and ultramoderne. Luke could afford to, and did, buy half the politicians and law-enforcement officials in Palmetto County. Talbot was fair. The current state of affairs hadn’t been brought about because local politicians and police were especially venal but because Adama was smart enough to deal in a commodity the bulk of the electorate, white and negro, demanded they be allowed to enjoy. You couldn’t legislate morals. In most men the desire to gamble was as inherent as their interest in propagating their own kind. They reasoned that if they bet a dime, a quarter or a dollar on a number in hope of a big pay-off it was their own business. What they didn’t realize was that in bolita, as in all number games, the pay-off could be manipulated and
the dimes and quarters and dollars they paid Luke Adama's runners were making him a millionaire.

The local police were equally tolerant, if only because they were practical. They realized if Luke didn't run the local game some hood from Tampa or Miami would and it was much easier for them to deal with one of their own kind.

On impulse, a quarter of a mile from the house, Talbot parked the Ford under a clump of Brazilian pepper trees, cut back to the bay on foot and walked the balance of the way along the sea wall.

A long steel-and-concrete pier jutted out from the landscaped Adama lawn. In the slip alongside the pier a 50-foot late model Chris Craft Catalina rose and fell with the gentle swells of the bay. Talbot lit a cigarette as he looked at it. The three-engined cruiser, complete with extras, had cost Luke more than his salary in five years of being state's attorney had totaled.

Talbot crossed the lawn to the house. A forty-foot, glassed-in, Hawaiian type lanai overlooked the water. Talbot peered in through one of the slitted glass jalousies. His lean torso bare, barefooted, wearing only a pair of expensive silk slacks, Luke was lying on a red leather chaise longue. There was a silver champagne bucket beside him. Equally scantily dressed, wearing only her slip, an attractive teen-age brunette was stacking records on an expensive-looking TV, radio and record-changer combination.

"Put on a lot of them Carmen Cavallaro records," Luke told her. "Especially that one with 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart' and 'Stay as Sweet as You Are' on it. I get a charge out of them old songs." He patted the
girl with his eyes. "For that matter I get a charge out of you."

The brunette giggled as she set the player arm. "That's a new name for it."

Talbot found the door and walked in. "Hi, Luke."

If Adama was frightened it didn't show in his face. He didn't even bother to rise. "Well, our late state's attorney. Haven't the cops got you yet?"

Talbot crossed the terrazo floor. "How about asking your friend to step out for a few minutes, Luke?"

"Why should I?"

"I want to talk to you."

Adama scratched at the hair on his chest. "No dice. I got nothing to say to you. You got nothing to say to me."

The brunette gasped, "It's Talbot, the man who killed Mrs. Conley!"

Adama glanced at her. "Sit down."

The brunette sat like an automaton. Adama fished in the cracked ice in the champagne bucket and came up with a bottle of Coca Cola. He opened it then spoke over the neck of the bottle. "Okay. Let's have it, Tod? What are you doing here and what are you got up to look like?"

Talbot sat, unasked, in a Chinese peel chair. "Don't give me that, Luke. You know why I'm here."

"Why?" Adama asked him. "To borrow some dough so you can get out of town before Keller burns you like you burned Jim Conley?" Still poker-faced, he slid a hand in the pocket of his slacks. "Okay. I'll spring for a quarter." He tossed the coin on the tile. "Pick it up and get out. It'll get you across the causeway. And once
you're on the other side you can keep on walking west as far as I'm concerned."

The brunette giggled. "He'll get all wet if he does."
Adama's thin lips parted in a mirthless smile. "Yeah. That's what I mean. Not quite such a big shot as you thought you were, hey, Tod? That was always your trouble, even when we were kids. You never quite filled out your britches."

Talbot fingered the butt of the gun in the waistband of his dungarees.

"So you have a gun. Having a gun and having the guts to use it are two different things." He sipped at his Coca Cola.

"Why did you do it, Luke?" Talbot returned.

"Do what?"

"Frame me on the Conley-Marlow deal and kill Beth Conley."

"Now I know you're crazy."

Talbot shook his head. "No. It's just I've developed an allergy to being electrocuted for something I didn't do."

"You sound like you're serious."

"I am."

The brunette asked, "You want I should call the cops, Luke?"

"Hell, no," Adama said. "Let 'em find him. I wouldn't tell a cop the right time of day. You mean what you just said, Tod? You think I framed you out of office, then had the Conley dame killed to make sure you were out of my hair?"

"I do."

Adama shook his head. "Uh uh. Why should I do that?"
"Because I sent you to Raiford."

"Uh uh," Adama repeated. "Getting tucked away once in a while is an occupational risk in my racket. Besides, it done me good. It gave me a rest I needed. I even put on twenty pounds. No. I didn't frame you, Tod. And I didn't kill the Conley dame."

It was hot in the room. Talbot felt a drop of sweat drip from his chin. "You're lying."

Adama met his eyes. "You ever know me to lie, Tod? I mean, outside of business and maybe to the internal revenue people."

"No," Talbot had to admit. "At least I've never caught you in a lie—that is, as you say, about anything personal."

"Not even when we were kids," Adama said. "I never gave enough of a damn for anyone's opinion. And certainly not yours. Now get your fanny off my chair and get out."

Talbot shook his head. "No. Not before you talk. If you didn't frame me you must know who did."

"I don't even know you were framed. All I know is I hope Harl is easier to do business with than you were." Adama warmed to his subject. "You don't know how much I'm enjoying this, Tod. You always were pretty biggety about some things. And after you come back from the war and married Judge Painter's daughter, you got even worse. Instead of being willing to live and let live, you were going to reform the whole goddamn world. You got to thinking of yourself as a statesman and a future attorney general, maybe even governor, instead of what you really were, a small-town Cracker prosecutor."
HOMICIDAL LADY

It was a long speech for Adama. He opened two fresh bottles of Coca Cola. He gave one to the brunette and ran the other bottle, cold and wet, over his perspiring torso. "In a way, I'm glad you came, Tod. It gives me a chance to get a few things off my mind. Sure, I was a little sore when you sent me away. I don't hold with men, even state's attorneys, who send their old friends to jail." He sat up on the chaise longue and scratched his left ankle with the toes of his right foot as he studied Talbot's face. "You're big. You're tough. You made a hero of yourself in the Marines. When you came back to Sun City you meant to climb the ladder no matter who you had to use for rungs—to prove you were as good as a Painter. You gave a lot of guys reason to hate your guts. I don't know about the Conley dame. Maybe you scragged her, maybe you didn't. I do know you were framed out of office."

Talbot stood up. "What did you just say?"
"You heard me."
"By whom?"
Adama admitted, "I don't know. But the way I hear it told around in the circles in which I move, the Marlow confession is phony as hell. The guy couldn't have robbed the Midtown Bank or killed Al Baker."
"Why not?"
"Because he'd just knocked over a couple of supermarkets and you know how those punks are. They got to get rid of the dough before it burns their pockets. And on the day the Midtown was robbed, Eddie Marlow was in the middle of a three-day binge in the Ybor City Hotel."
Talbot stood with his hand on the butt of the gun in
the waistband of his dungarees. Adama had told him too much or not enough. "If you hate my guts so, why are you telling me this?"

Adama was amused. "Because I don't think you're going to be able to do anything about it. You'll never get across Gandy or Davis Causeway. Every cop in Sun City has orders to shoot you on sight and ask questions later. And even if you should get to Tampa, you can't prove a damn thing. Eddie Marlow is dead, remember?"


He had started to draw the gun Jane had given him from the waistband of his dungarees. Before he could, Adama came off the chaise longue like a coiled spring and smashed a hard right to his mouth that sent him staggering back against the record changer. The drawn gun dropped from his hand and skittered across the terrazo floor.

Adama was even more amused. "Sure, you're tough. But not tough enough to mix with a professional, Tod. Being tough is my business." He picked the gun from the floor and walked over to where Talbot was lying. "I almost wish I had my shoes on so I could stomp you a little."

Talbot cleared his head by shaking it and got to one knee. Back of him the record player was still playing I Love You. He got to his feet and threw his left fist at Adama's stomach. Forewarned, Adama tightened his stomach muscles. It was like hitting a stone wall.

Adama cuffed him away from the record changer. "Just so you don't break nothing," he grinned. His voice was filled with contempt. "Now go on. Get out of here
before I get mad. You’ve lived soft so long, Tod, you couldn’t punch your way through a cream puff.”

Adama continued to cuff at Talbot, backing him to the door of the glassed-in lanai. At the door he handed Talbot his dropped gun. “Because,” he grinned, “I know you ain’t got guts enough to use it. We’ve both come a long way from the time when we were kids together, but in different directions.” Adama opened the door. “Now go and get yourself pinched like a good square. And when they burn you for killing the Conley dame, don’t forget to ask the warden to send me an invitation.”

The glass door slammed in his face. The back of Talbot’s ears felt hot. Luke had made a fool of him. He’d never felt so small. He looked at the gun in his hand. Still, shooting Luke wouldn’t get him anything but more trouble—and Luke knew it.

He walked around the house and down the drive toward the road and his parked car. There was no moon and few stars. Swarms of mosquitoes settled on his exposed hands and neck and face. Talbot wiped them off and walked on. His call on Luke hadn’t been entirely futile. Regarding his own involvement, Luke might be lying, he might be telling the truth; but Luke had come across with the information that Eddie Marlow couldn’t have robbed the Midtown Bank or killed Al Baker. It seemed logical to assume whoever had framed him in the Conley-Marlow affair by killing Marlow had also killed Beth Conley.

Only the smell of cigarette smoke mingled with the fragrance of night-blooming jasmine saved him. Talbot ducked back of a bush and stared at the deep blob of black a few feet from the end of the Adama drive. As he
watched, the tip of a sucked cigarette glowed and Sergeant Graham said:

"I think we're wasting our time. Talbot won't show here. If he has any sense, and he has, he's halfway across the state by now."

The detective sitting beside Graham said, "We're in the wrong racket, Tony. Did you get a good look at the chick Adama has in there?"

Graham swatted at mosquitos. "I'd like to do more than look at her. What has Luke got we haven't got?"

His partner told him. "Money."

His blue work shirt drenched with sweat, Talbot stood a moment longer, listening, then retraced his steps to the sea wall and walked down it to the pepper tree under which he had parked the Ford.
JANE WAS CONCERNED.

“What do you mean there was a stake-out on the Adama place?”

Talbot had never been so tired. He felt as if he had been running for days instead of hours. He said, “Just that. Tony Graham and his partner were parked a few feet from the drive. I almost walked into the side of the cruiser.”

“They saw you?”

“No.”

Jane smiled wryly. “I didn’t give Lieutenant Keller credit for so much intelligence.” She mixed a stiff drink as she spoke. “Drink this. Then you’d better take a shower and get into some other clothes. I think you’ve an old suit upstairs. Anyway a robe. You’re perspiring like a field hand.”

Talbot sipped the drink. It tasted good. “I’m beginning to think I should have stayed one.”

Jane ran her fingers through his hair. “Nonsense. Now come along and shower before we talk.”

Talbot followed her up the winding stairs to the master bedroom on the second floor. Jane drew the
green shades carefully, then turned on the water in the shower. "I'll find your robe while you bathe." She noticed his bloody mouth and touched it with her fingertips. "What happened to your mouth?"

"Luke hit me."

"With what?"

"His fist."

Jane's voice was fierce. "Why didn't you shoot him? I gave you a gun."

Talbot laid the gun on the dresser. "I tried to. But Luke was quicker than I was. He was also tougher. As Luke put it, being tough is his business."

It embarrassed Talbot to undress in front of Jane. It seemed strange two people who had been so close could be so far apart. He was glad when she left the bathroom to search for his robe.

He took a hot shower, then a cold one. He was toweling when Jane returned with the robe. She was matter-of-fact about it. "Here. Put this on. Then we'll talk." She added, "If you want to shave, the razor I use under my arms and some fresh blades are in the medicine cabinet."

Talbot found the razor and used it. When he returned to the bedroom Jane had turned on the ceiling fan and changed into a filmy nightdress. She was sitting with her bare feet curled up under her, leaning back against the headboard of the old-fashioned double bed.

"Now," she said, "you look better. You look more like the Tod I knew." She patted the bed. "Come here and sit down, Tod."

Tod felt like a bridegroom. "You know what will happen if I do."
Jane's smile was wry. "I'm well aware of the physical facts of marriage. We've been married five years, remember? But perhaps you can restrain yourself for a few minutes."

Talbot sat beside her. "I shouldn't be here."

"Why not?"

"If Lieutenant Keller should think of looking here and find me with you, he could charge you with being an accessory after the fact of murder."

Jane laid her hand on his arm. "I'll chance that. Now tell me all that happened at the Adama place. Do you think Luke killed the Conley girl?"

Talbot didn't know what to do with his hands. He clasped them on his knee. "I doubt it."

"How could you tell?"

"By the way he acted. Me showing up the way I did didn't bother him a bit. All it did was amuse him."

"He wasn't acting?"

"If he was he's good at it."

Jane smoothed the fabric covering her breasts. "If you remember, I wasn't very hopeful. Luke is shrewd but he isn't smart, at least not smart enough to do what's been done to you. I just wanted you to be satisfied in your own mind before I tell you what I think we ought to do."

"What?"

Jane wet her lips with her tongue. "I'll come to that." The revolving blades of the fan blew a lock of hair into her eyes. She pinned it back in place. "Are you satisfied?"

Talbot said, "I'm satisfied Luke didn't kill Beth Conley." He hesitated before continuing. "Look, Jane, I don't
want any more unpleasantness between us. Certainly not over a dead man. But—"

"But what?"

"I did learn one thing."

"What?"

"Luke claims to know for a fact that the Marlow confession was a fake, that Eddie Marlow couldn't have robbed the bank or killed Al Baker."

"Why couldn't he?"

"Because at the time both events took place he was on a three-day binge in the Ybor City Hotel."

The revolving blades of the fan unpinned the lock of hair again. Jane thrust out her underlip and blew up at it. "In other words, you were right and I was wrong. Conley was guilty as charged and Marlow's alleged suicide and confession were just a part of a plot to frame you out of office."

Talbot was miserable. "I said I didn't want any unpleasantness between us."

"I'm not being unpleasant," Jane said. "But I do have a right to my own opinion."

"Of course."

"We're right back where we started. You still think Conley was guilty?"

"I do."

"I don't."

"Then why should Luke say such a thing?"

"To hurt you. Because he's jealous of you."

"Why should Luke be jealous of me?"

"Because while he has money and an expensive home and certain political connections he's still a piney-woods Cracker and it's all he can ever be. And you have an
education and social standing. You're a state's attorney."

"Former state's attorney."

"Even so." Jane stretched her legs in front of her. The sheer nightdress and the lock of hair dangling in her eyes made her look somehow wanton. "Don't you see, Tod? All Luke wanted was to hurt you."

Talbot had been so certain. Nagging fingers of doubt returned to torment him. Possibly Jane was right. Jane was always right. He repeated his desperate protest. "But why should a punk like Marlow kill himself while he still had five thousand dollars to spend?"

"I don't know," Jane admitted. "I don't claim to be omniscient. I don't know why Marlow killed himself. I don't know why the Conley girl was killed in such a way as to involve you in her murder." She ran her palms along the side of her head and pressed her hair together at the nape of her neck. "Look at me, Tod."

Talbot met her eyes.

"You swear you were never intimate with Beth Conley?"

"Never."

"And what you've told the police is true? Someone did phone you at the apartment and tell you Beth Conley was in a tight and ready to talk and it was to your advantage to see her as soon as you could?"

"I swear."

"She was dead when you got there?"

"Yes."

Jane pleated the skirt of her nightdress. "What happened after I left the apartment last night?"

"I dressed and went looking for you."

"And the girl in my bed?"
"What about her?"
"Who is she?"
"Her name is Vickie Paul." Talbot felt a strong surge of loyalty toward Vickie. He couldn't belittle her. He wouldn't belittle her. Vickie had given him everything and asked nothing for herself.

Jane continued to pleat her nightdress. "You're in love with her?"

"Let's say she's in love with me."
Jane repeated, "Who is she?"
"Just a nice kid I befriended some years ago."
"And when I walked out, she moved in to console you."

"You could put it that way."

Jane was more understanding than Talbot had known she could be. "I was wrong. When you needed me most I wasn't there. And while I have the normal wifely reaction to sharing you, even temporarily, with another woman, I'm very grateful to Miss Paul."

"Grateful?"
"Yes. She, Miss Paul, heard the voice of this person who phoned you?"

"No."
"And you didn't recognize the voice?"
"No."
"A shame." Jane stopped pleating her nightdress and lay with her arms at her sides. "I don't know what to think, Tod. I don't mean about you or what you've told me. I know you're telling the truth. I mean about this whole affair. And I'm afraid."

"Afraid?"
"Yes. For you. This seems so much bigger than both
of us, so far beyond our understanding. The only logical assumption I can make is that someone hates you, hates you so much he seized on the Marlow confession as a motive for you to kill the Conley girl and framed you for her murder, thereby completely eliminating you from the Sun City scene."

"Who?"

"If I knew, for certain, I wouldn’t be lying here worried sick about you. I’d be down pounding on desks, talking to Lieutenant Keller and Chief Ghether. It could be any one of a number of men. You’ve been the best state’s attorney Palmetto County ever had. And because you refused to be bribed or frightened, you’ve made a lot of enemies." Jane counted them on her fingers. "There is the Miami crowd. The Tampa boys. The Time’s candidate for state’s attorney. Lieutenant Keller and the other itchy palm boys on the local force. And Luke Adama." Jane wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Then, of course, there’s always Harlan."

Talbot gripped her shoulders. "What about Harl?"

Jane met his eyes. "You know Harl is in love with me, has been in love with me since the three of us were children."

"I know."

"I’ve never said anything about it because he was your best friend, but—"

Talbot’s fingers dug into the soft flesh they were gripping. "But what?"

"Please, Tod. You’re hurting me."

"I’m sorry. But what about Harl?"

"Well, for one thing, Harl’s never come into a room where I was that I didn’t have the feeling he was un-
dressing me with his eyes, being mentally intimate with me.”

“Has he ever said anything or touched you, physically?”

“No,” Jane admitted, “he hasn’t. But a woman knows such things. And believe me, Tod, your best friend or not, if I’d given Harlan the least encouragement, if I’d been the type of a woman willing to be unfaithful to her marital vows, Harl would have had me flat on my back or up against the nearest wall before I could say writ of habeas corpus.”

Talbot took a cigarette from the package on the bed table and lit it. “Puff?”

Jane shook her head.

Talbot sucked at the cigarette. Harlan Young was his best friend. They’d been inseparable as boys. They had enlisted on the same day. They’d fought through the South Pacific together. Harlan had saved his life twice. Still no friendship was ever as strong as the biological urge of a man for one woman.

His mind raced on. Harlan, too, was ambitious. As assistant state’s attorney, Harlan had been vocally vehement in his belief in James Conley’s guilt. Harlan was in a position where he could have manipulated the Marlow confession and alleged suicide that had forced him to resign. Now Harlan was state’s attorney and if he was convicted and executed for Beth Conley’s murder Harlan could marry Jane.

Jane laid her hand on his thigh. “See what I mean?”

“Yes,” Talbot said. “I do.”

Jane played with the tab of the belt of his robe. “It could be Harl.”
Talbot snuffed the cigarette he was smoking. “It could be. But I’d still like to know whether that Marlow confession is truth or a phoney.”

Jane took the pillow from against the headboard and scrunched down in the bed. “What difference does it make, Tod? Come on. Lie down beside me and hold me while we talk.”

“You know what will happen if I do.”

“I want it to happen. I want to prove how much I love you. But first I want to tell you what I think we ought to do.”

Talbot stretched out beside her and took Jane in his arms. It was a strange sensation but he felt vaguely disloyal to Vickie. “What do you think we ought to do?”

Jane snuggled into his arms. “I think we ought to run for it.”

“Run for it?”

“Yes. We’re both lawyers. We both know the value of circumstantial evidence and all the evidence is against you. Your fingerprints were found on the gun that killed Beth Conley. Your flesh was found under her nails. And you were found with her stark naked at four o’clock in the morning.” Jane pressed her fingers to his lips. “I know. You were framed, undoubtedly by whoever phoned you. But we can’t prove it and I’m just trying to look at the case as it will appear to a jury.”

Talbot admitted, “I haven’t a chance!”

“Not a chance. A jury will find you guilty without leaving the box. That’s why I think you ought to run.”

Talbot drew back his head so he could see her eyes. “You said we before.”
"I mean we. But you'll have to go on ahead or it will look suspicious. Here's what I have in mind."

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow morning I'll draw some money from our joint account, enough to tempt one of the local fishing captains with a boat large enough to raise Cuba or Mexico. You know as well as I do there are a dozen captains along the waterfront who will do anything for a few thousand dollars."

"I know."

"We'll decide on some Caribbean or Gulf port where you'll be safe and smuggle you aboard the boat tomorrow night. Then in a month or two when the heat has cooled and the police stop watching me, I'll draw out the rest of what money we have and join you. Meanwhile I'll sell this place and the beach cottage and with what we have in the bank we'll have enough to start a new life together in Central or South America."

It was a tempting prospect. Talbot protested. "But that would mean giving up your career."

Jane kissed the lobe of his ear. "I have no career but you. I know that now. You're all that matters to me." Her voice was as hot as her kisses. "And I won't have you jailed and tried and convicted and executed for a murder you didn't commit."

This was a new Jane, a Jane he hadn't known existed. Talbot returned her kisses as fiercely as she was kissing him. The words were a moan in his mouth. "Please, Tod. Forgive me and hold me. Let me prove how much I love you." Jane leaned across his body and switched out the bed lamp. There was a rustle of silk in the dark as she
slipped out of her negligee and pulled her nightdress over her head. "There, my darling. Now."

It was as no night Talbot had ever known before. It was basic, primitive, elemental, Adam and Eve in the Garden when they'd first tasted the fruit, male and female naked and unashamed. Jane was a fire, a fever in his arms, insatiable, demanding, her desire feeding on his love.

The night was old and thin and tired before Jane slept. Talbot tried to sleep and couldn't. The night crowding in through the window of the old house was too huge. There was too much happening in it. In the distance he could hear the undulating wail of a police car siren. The siren grew, then died away. Talbot continued to stare hot-eyed at the ceiling he couldn't see.

He shouldn't be where he was. He shouldn't have listened to Jane. He shouldn't have involved her in this. This was his problem, not hers. It was all very pleasant to talk about starting life over in Central or South America, but all it was was talk. It wouldn't work. It wasn't practical. The only way the situation would resolve itself was for him to prove he hadn't killed Beth Conley.

He lay thinking of what Luke Adama had told him: "I don't know about the Conley dame. Maybe you scragged her, maybe you didn't. I do know you were framed out of office. The Marlow confession is phoney as hell. The guy couldn't have robbed the Midtown Bank or killed Al Baker. On the day the Midtown was robbed, Eddie Marlow was in the middle of a three-day binge in the Ybor City Hotel."

Talbot struck a match and passed the flame over Jane's
face. The sleeping girl didn’t stir. Her sleep would last until morning. She had reason to be tired.

What wind there was had died. It was hot in the big room. The old house smelled of decay. Perspiration beaded on Talbot’s body as he inched to the side of the bed and stood up. Tampa was only twenty miles away. He could drive there and back before dawn. He could be back beside Jane before she awakened—if he wasn’t arrested.

He found his clothes in the unlighted bathroom and dressed. It was Lieutenant Keller’s contention he had allowed an innocent man to be executed so he could make love to the man’s wife. It was also Keller’s contention that he had killed Beth to keep her from telling the authorities what he’d done. If he could prove that Marlow’s confession was false, the rest of the state’s case would fall apart. Jane could defend him in court, could prove he had no motive to want to kill Beth Conley.

Dressed, Talbot walked back to the bed and struck another match to make certain he hadn’t disturbed Jane. He hoped she didn’t awaken before he got back. He didn’t want her to worry.

In the yellow flame of the match her body was sculptured white marble. She lay with one arm over her head in a position of complete and relaxed abandon. For some reason looking at the sleeping girl made him feel unfaithful to Vickie. It was a ridiculous thought. Vickie was just a nice kid who had attempted to befriend and console him. The girl on the bed was his wife.
The tide was out. The tide flats smelled of mud and decayed vegetation. The narrow road rimming the upper end of the bay was pitted with chuck holes and alive with frogs; big frogs, little frogs, silver objects that leaped in the beams of the headlights of the car, then crunched under the wheels.

Talbot drove breathing through his mouth, fighting a desire to be sick. He was emotionally and physically exhausted. The drive from Sun City to Tampa normally took half an hour. It had taken him two hours and Ybor City was still two miles away. There had been police barricades on both the main causeways and he had been forced to drive miles out of his way, keeping to the back and side roads winding through the saw palmetto and mangrove.

He glanced anxiously at the sky. The night had worn so thin the first red feelers of dawn were beginning to show in the east. There were other cars on the road now, most of them farm cars or pick-up trucks loaded with okra and lettuce and hampers of beans and broccoli and tomatoes and collard greens for the Tampa produce
markets. Talbot's throat contracted every time he passed or was passed by a car. It wasn't a nice feeling, this being—wanted. He almost wished he had stayed with Jane. He wished he was in the abandoned fish camp with Vickie, anywhere but where he was. He'd never felt so vulnerable.

He was glad when he reached the city proper and could turn off the highway into a maze of sleep-sodden streets that lead toward the Latin-American section of Tampa that is known as Ybor City.

Now red brick cigar factories dotted the dawn. Elaborate wrought iron balconies began to appear on buildings. The names on the awnings and store fronts took on a Latin flavor—Fernandez, Carillo, Gonzales, Sanchez, Mendes, Garcia.

Talbot parked the Ford a block from the rapidly dimming red neon sign of the Ybor City Hotel. As he sat gripping the wheel the sign winked out. Work-bound men and women, yawning their ways to the respective bus stops, began to appear on the streets. A couple eyed him incuriously as he got out of the car and walked slowly toward the hotel.

A porter was sweeping the walk. The tiles in the lobby were freshly scrubbed. A dozen potted palms rose out of mosaic containers. Talbot walked gingerly toward the desk. The clerk, a black-haired youth in his early twenties, was engrossed in a racing form spread open on the counter. One of his eyes was discolored and puffed to a narrow slit.

Talbot cleared his throat. "Pardon me."

The clerk glanced at Talbot's sweat-stained blue chambray shirt and dungarees, then back at the race he was
picking. A sign on the desk announced his name was Larry Hernando but he spoke with no trace of an accent. “Sorry. We’re full up, mister.”
  
Talbot thought. In other words, “Scram, you bum. This isn’t your kind of a hotel. We don’t want your money.” Still, money talked. It had the loudest voice of any inanimate object in the world.
  
Talbot fingered the money Vickie had given him and laid two ten-dollar bills on the desk. “I don’t want a room,” he said. “I want to buy information.”
  
Hernando looked at the bills, then at him. “What kind of information? Horses?”
  
“Information concerning one of your guests. I should say, former guest.”
  
Hernando fingered his discolored eye. “Don’t tell me you’re another cop. Not in that kind of an outfit.”
  
Talbot said, “Okay. I won’t tell you I’m a cop. Did you ever hear of a cop paying for information?”
  
“No,” Hernando admitted. “Anyway, not in this man’s town. But if you’re sucking around for a girl, put your money back in your pocket, pal. The heat is on, on account of that Tod Talbot affair over in Sun City and the town is closed tight as a—” He sought for a simile and failed to find one. He studied Talbot’s face. “Say. You look kind of familiar!”
  
Talbot made a small tent of the bills he’d laid on the counter. “I wouldn’t dwell on it, son. All I want to know is if a certain party was registered here on a certain date.”
  
“And the two tens are mine?”
  
“The two tens are yours.”
Hernando pulled a wood card-filing case from under the counter. “Okay. Who’s the party?”

“Eddie Marlow.”

Hernando set the case gently on the counter. “Now, wait a minute. What the hell. Who are you?”

Talbot fingered the butt of the gun Jane had given him. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain. “My name is Talbot.”

“The guy the cops are looking for!”

“You’re so right.”

Hernando sucked in his breath and exhaled slowly. There was grudged admiration in his voice when he spoke. “Right under their noses. I give you credit for guts, mister. But you’re taking a big chance—”

“I’ve got a big rap against me.” Talbot added a third ten to the money on the counter. “Yours for telling me if Marlow was registered here on March fifteenth.”

“What difference does it make to you?”

“It could make a lot of difference.”

Hernando shrugged. “So what have I to lose?” He fingered through the files. “Yeah. He was. He checked in on the morning of the fifteenth. Here’s his card right here.”

“Were you on duty at the time?”

The clerk thought back. “Yeah. Come to think of it, I was. I was working days then. Yeah. Sure. I remember him checking in.”

“How? I mean, why do you remember?”

“Because Marlow was stinking drunk. What I mean, he was boiled. And he threw dough all over the joint, a ten to the boy who carried his bags, a ten to the elevator girl, a ten to me. Probably part of the dough
he got from the Midtown Bank.” The clerk’s fingers hovered over the bills on the counter. “My money?”

“In a minute,” Talbot said. He added a fourth ten to the bills. “Now tell me this. What day was the Midtown Bank robbed?”

Hernando grinned. “That’s easy. There isn’t anyone in Hillsboro or Palmetto County who doesn’t know that. It’s been in the Sun City Times and the Tampa Tribune for months. The Midtown was robbed about noon on the morning of—” Hernando’s face ran down like an unwound clock. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he breathed. “That was the day the bank was robbed.”

“At what time?”

“About noon. And Marlow checked in at ten o’clock. It says so right here on his card.”

“And he was drunk?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he leave again after he got here?”

“No.”

“You knew him? He’d stopped here before?”

“Half a dozen times.”

“Alone?”

“No. He always had some babe with him.”

“The same girl?”

“No. Always a different one.” The clerk looked at the card in his hand, incredulous. “Well, I’ll be damned. If he checked in here at ten o’clock he couldn’t have robbed the Midtown.”

“Precisely.”

Hernando was indignant. “Then why did he write that confession and knock himself off? It’s things like that give a hotel a bad name.” He fingered his black eye. “The cops
‘talked’ to me four hours the other night. ‘Where is the rest of the dough? Why didn’t someone hear the shot? Why did the maid clean his room so late that morning?’

Talbot took another ten from his pocket and added it to the growing pile on the counter. “Would you be willing to tell the cops what you just told me?”

Hernando debated the matter as he lighted a cigarette. “No. Water on the local cops.” He added, “But I would be willing to talk to the new Palmetto County state’s attorney.”

Talbot realized he was holding his breath. He exhaled slowly. “That’s fair enough. He may talk to you later today, in fact as soon as I can contact him. How about the day Conley was executed and Marlow committed suicide?”

An early rising guest of the hotel laid his key on the counter and yawned his way through the lobby to the street. When he had gone, Hernando asked, “What about it?”

“How long had Marlow been checked into the hotel?” Hernando consulted another card. “Two weeks.”

“Could you be mistaken?”

“No. it’s right here. Mr. and Mrs. Eddie Marlow.”

“Was the girl a blonde or a brunette?”


“Describe her.”

Hernando smiled wryly. “The cops ask me the same question for hours. But what’s to describe about a dame? She’s got what she should have where she should have it. But unless you know a dame personally, one heinie
wobbles very much like another. I do know she was a pretty hot number."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because she and Marlow hardly got out of the sack except to eat. Then they usually called room service or had one of the bellboys bring up a fresh bottle and some sandwiches."

"The police know about her?"

The clerk was patient with Talbot. "Look. It's on the card. Mr. and Mrs. Eddie Marlow. The cops ask the same questions you're asking, only harder. They're very anxious to find the blonde, see? They figure it two ways. One, if she hadn't walked out on Eddie he wouldn't have knocked himself off, not with five yards left to spend. Two, it could be she has the balance of the loot."

"Just when did she walk out?"

"We figure some time that morning, although none of us seen her leave." Hernando shook his head. "Funny."

"What's funny?"

"How things happen. The maids are supposed to make up all the rooms by ten o'clock on account of noon is checkout time. But that day the fourth-floor maid was sick and the third-floor girl had to do her rooms for her and she didn't get to 416 until after eleven-thirty. But if the fourth-floor maid hadn't been sick she'd have found Eddie much earlier and the day man would have called the cops and the cops would have read the confession and called Raiford or the governor and Conley wouldn't have gone to the chair. He'd have gotten a stay of execution and a new trial." Hernando was puzzled. "But if Marlow didn't knock over the Midtown and kill Al Baker,
why did he leave that confession and where did the five grand come from?"

Talbot looked through the plate-glass window at the street. Morning was full. The street was beginning to crowd with people. "That," he said quietly, "is what I'd like to know."

Hernando picked up the bills on the counter. "My money?"

"Your money."

Hernando put the bills in his pocket. "Now, look. Be a good guy and blow. I don't want any shooting in the lobby and the cops have been in and out of here for days, like the hotel was a ready room or something. But before you go, tell me one thing, will you?"

"What?"

"Did you kill the Conley dame?"

"No."

"It was framed on you, huh?"

"That's the way it stacks up." Talbot took a step toward the door and turned back. "I suppose as soon as I leave you're going to dial Tampa 118."

Hernando spat back of the counter. "Look, Mr. Talbot. I don't know whether you killed the Conley dame or not. I don't care. But after what they put me through, I wouldn't call the cops if I saw someone raping the chief's wife on the steps of City Hall." He fingered his discolored eye. "'Where's the rest of the dough?' they asked me. 'Where's the hundred grand still missing from the stick-up?' With gestures. Like the blonde tramp who was shacked up with Marlow and the day man and myself and the bellboys spread it around between us—like them cops in that Kansas City kidnapping." He shook his
head. "No. What with your picture spread all over the front page of the Morning Tribune, I doubt if you'll get two blocks. But I won't dial 118."

Talbot walked through the lobby and out the street door. Even this early it was warm. Ybor City smelled foreign, of good tobacco and strange spices and exotic foods. Two men, talking in voluble Spanish, passed the hotel and turned into a coffee shop a few doors up the street. A newspaper truck paused at the corner to drop off several bundles of papers. The news vendor on the corner ripped the cords from the papers and shouted:

"Read all about it. State's attorney who murdered executed man's wife still at large. Read it in the Tribune. Tod Talbot escapes police net."

The bilingual vendor repeated in Spanish what he'd just shouted. Three men waiting for a bus bought papers. A fat woman waved the Tribune aside and bought a Spanish language paper. In one of the buildings across the street a baby began to cry. Talbot bought a paper and walked on a few feet then glanced at the front page as he leaned against the window of a dress shop.

Hernando had been right about his picture. It was on the front page of the Tribune, flanked by pictures of Jane and Beth Conley. He compared his reflection in the window with the picture in the paper. Clothes made a difference. The picture had been taken on the day he'd been sworn in as state's attorney. His reflection looked like a bum, at best a working stiff. He could be a farm or factory hand or a shipyard worker. On the far side of the street a drugstore opened for the day. Talbot crossed and to further the illusion bought a metal lunch pail and a stiff-brimmed khaki-colored cap of the type
affected by most tourists and some outdoor workers.

The coffee in the steamer back of the lunch counter was freshly made. It smelled good. Talbot sat at the white tile counter and ordered coffee and hot Cuban bread and guava jelly. He read the paper as he ate. The Tribune was less vindictive than the Sun City paper. All it printed was the known facts. But the facts were enough to convict him. Ballistics had established the bullet that had killed Beth Conley had come from the gun on which the fingerprint men had found a perfect set of his prints. The police lab had established the blood and flesh under Beth Conley's nails had come from his face. Only one thing puzzled the reporter who had written the story for the Tribune. Despite the fact both he and the Conley girl had been found naked and her unburned bed showed evidence of use, Doctor Nelson insisted the autopsy had failed to reveal any trace of sexual intimacy between them.

Talbot pondered the information as he drank a second cup of coffee. A man sat on the stool beside him.

"Quite an affair, eh, fellow?" he asked Talbot.

"Yes," Talbot admitted. "It is." He looked from the paper to the man beside him. It was a uniformed Tampa policeman.

The policeman pushed his white cap on the back of his head as he ordered coffee and doughnuts, then confided, "Of course all I know is what I'm told. Little guys like me don't get in on the inside stuff, but from the front seat of my prowler car it looks to me like someone done it to Talbot."

Talbot forced himself to breathe normally. "You know Talbot?"
The uniformed officer hooted as he dunked his doughnut in his coffee. "Don't be silly, fellow. A prowler can never get to meet a state's attorney. But like I hear one of our detectives say the other day when we're fanning the hotel across the street, you know the one where Marlow did a dutch, something is awful screwball when a guy who's been as straight in office as Tod Talbot blows his top and sends what he knows is an innocent man to the chair just to get a piece of quail, then kills her to keep her from talking about it, especially when the act is never completed. It just doesn't stack up."

His fingers shaking slightly, Talbot spread a piece of toast with guava jelly. "You have a point, all right."

The policeman talked through the second half of his doughnut. "For another thing," he wiped coffee and crumbs from his lips with the back of his hand, "whoever heard of a punk like Eddie Marlow—and he was a punk.... hell, I've pinched the guy myself—blowing his top because some babe walks out on him and him with five grand in his kick to buy five hundred other babes. No. You mark my words. There's more to this than has come out so far."

"I hope so," Talbot said.

The policeman lit a cigarette and slid off the stool. "You keep on reading the papers and see if I ain't right. Well, so to the mines." He confided, "You see, we're keeping a stake-out on the Ybor City Hotel just in case the blonde who was shacked up with Eddie should show. But the night man tells me no one has showed so far except the registered guests and some working stiff, probably looking for a job as porter or something."

Sweat trickled down Talbot's torso as he watched the
policeman out of the drugstore. When he tried to pick up his coffee his hand shook so badly he rapped the cup sharply against the saucer.

The youthful waitress was concerned. “Somethin’ wrong, mister?”

Talbot used a paper napkin to pat the perspiration from his face. “No. Everything’s fine,” he assured her. “All I need is some brains.”

The waitress glanced at the metal lunch box he’d just purchased. “You an’ me both, mister,” she said. “You never get nowhere workin’ for a livin’. An’ if I had any brains I wouldn’t be standin’ on my feet eight hours a day for thirty-seven fifty a week.”
Talbot finished his coffee and toast, then walked to the rear of the drug store and phoned Jane from a booth. The phone rang for a long time before she answered. Her voice was both cautious and strained.

“Yes—?”

“This is you know who,” Talbot told her.

“Where are you?” Jane asked sharply. “How could you walk out on me like that? I almost died when I woke up and found you gone.”

“I’m in Tampa,” Talbot told her. “In a drugstore across from the Ybor City Hotel.”

“Why?” Jane demanded. “What are you doing in Tampa?”

Talbot crossed mental fingers. He hoped Jane would understand. “Look, honey. I had to know. I found out. I was right and you were wrong about Jim Conley. Eddie Marlow’s confession is false as hell. He couldn’t have robbed the Midtown Bank or killed Al Baker.”

“Why not?”

“Because on the morning of the day the bank was robbed he checked into the Ybor City Hotel stinking
drunk and he didn’t leave the hotel, in fact he hardly left the room for three days.”

“You know this to be fact?”

“I saw his registration card and talked to the clerk on duty.”

Jane’s voice lost its sharpness. “Oh. You’ve contacted the Tampa police?”

“No. I want you to do that for me. Ask them to check on the registry cards from March 11th through the 16th.”

Jane asked, “In what capacity? I mean in what capacity shall I contact the police?”

“As my attorney.”

“You intend to give yourself up?”

“No. The Tampa boys would merely turn me over to Lieutenant Keller. And I want to find out who’s back of this before I let them lock me up.”

Jane was silent a long moment. “I think that’s smart, Tod. But I’m worried, so worried, for you. I mean it. I almost died when I woke up and found you gone.”

“I thought I’d be back before you woke up but there are police blocks on both barricades and I had to drive around the bay.”

“I could have told you that.”

“I know, but you were asleep.”

“I had reason to be tired.”

“I know that, too.”

Jane puzzled, “But if Marlow wasn’t guilty, why did he leave that confession?”

“I don’t think he did.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I think someone left it for him.”

“You mean you think he was murdered, that someone
left the confession and the money, then shot him as part of the plot to force you to resign as state's attorney?"

"That's exactly what I mean. What do you think?"

Jane's legal training showed. "I'll have to think it over, Tod. After all, it's only a conclusion. We haven't any proof. Was Marlow alone in the hotel? I mean on the day he died."

"No. He was checked in with a blonde."

"Could the clerk describe her?"

"Only that she was pretty."

"That isn't much of a description."

"No. It isn't. The clerk said she stayed in their room for two weeks, in the sack as he put it."

"She was in the room when he died?"

"No. She walked out on him that morning, some time before noon, they think. The Tampa police are looking for her now. The clerk said because they think she may have all or part of the still missing money. But that's twisted reasoning on his part. If he didn't rob the bank, what money Marlow had was planted in his room."

The Tampa operator broke in on the conversation. "Your three minutes are up. Deposit twenty cents please."

Talbot fingered through his change and thumbed two more dimes in the slot.

Jane asked, "So what are you going to do now, Tod?"

Talbot said, "That's part of the reason I called you. To ask your advice."

"You won't consider what we talked over last night? You won't let me arrange to get you out of the country and then join you?"

It was hot in the closed booth. Talbot was impatient
with Jane. "Please. Don't start that again. Running never
got anyone anywhere."

"Just until the first shock of this blows over?"

"No." Talbot added, "Besides, I've no reason to run
now. If we can prove Conley was guilty it will eliminate
the premise on which Lieutenant Keller is working, that
I had reason to want to see Beth Conley dead."

Jane's voice mirrored the strain under which she was
laboring. "You're a bull-headed Cracker, Tod."

"You knew that when you married me."

"But not how bull-headed."

Talbot looked through the glass of the booth. A woman
was waiting to use the phone. "Shall I try to get back
to the house?"

Jane was silent a long moment. "No. I don't think I'd
chance it, Tod."

"Why not?"

"Lieutenant Keller phoned just before you did and I
think he knows that you've contacted me."

"How could he know that?"

"He can't know. But they haven't been able to find
you. And the county and state police swear you haven't
slipped past the road blocks. This is the one place they
haven't looked and while Lieutenant Keller didn't say so
in so many words I imagine he and Harlan will be out
this morning with a warrant to search the house."

"Has Harlan phoned?"

"No. But I phoned him just before Lieutenant Keller
phoned me."

"Why?" Talbot asked. "Why should you phone Harl?"

Jane said, "Because when I found you gone I thought
you might have got to thinking about what I told you
last night, about Harl being both ambitious and in love with me. And, knowing you, I thought you might have gone to his place to have a showdown with him."

"Do you think it could have been Harl who framed me?"

"Men in love do strange things."

"I know."

"And Harl wants me. It was in his voice when I talked to him this morning."

"What did he say about me?"

"Just that he hadn’t seen you."

The woman waiting to use the phone booth rapped on the glass. "You going t’ be all morning, mister? Tell her you love her and hang up. I have to make a business call."

Talbot cracked the door. "Just one moment, please." He closed the door again. "Look, Jane. How about me turning myself into the Tampa police, letting them take it from here?"

Jane’s voice was fierce. "No. No. Don’t you dare do that, Tod. I—I couldn’t bear to see you in a cell and I’ll need at least twelve hours in which to work. Promise me you won’t be foolish."

"I promise."

Jane was silent a moment. "I tell you what I think you’d better do, get back to that fish camp, the one you told me about last night. What’s the name?"

"Frazer’s."

"That’s right. Meanwhile I’ll phone Tampa and get the Tampa boys busy on the Eddie Marlow angle while I see what I can pick up around here. Now we know you were framed we have something on which to work."
Whoever planned the Marlow thing killed the Conley woman.”

“That’s the way I figure.”

“You phone me again tonight.”

“At the house?”

Jane hesitated. “No. I don’t think I’d better stay here. I know Lieutenant Keller and Harl have already searched the apartment and the beach cottage. So try both places. I’ll be at one or the other as soon as it gets dark.”

“Right.”

Jane added, “One other thing, Tod.”

“Yes—?”

“Is that girl with whom I found you still out at the fish camp?”

“I presume so. Why?”

“I was just thinking,” Jane said. “You say the clerk at the hotel told you that Marlow was living with a blonde. And as I recall Miss Paul she definitely falls into that category.”

Talbot protested, “But, honey—” There was a click at the other end of the line. Jane had hung up her phone. Talbot picked his lunch box from the shelf and left the booth.

“It’s about time,” the waiting woman said. “And they talk about women being long-winded.”

Talbot walked past her to the lunch counter and extracted the thermos bottle from the metal lunch box. If Vickie was still at Frazer’s, she should be half starved by now.

“Black coffee with just a little sugar,” he told the girl behind the counter. “Two fried-egg sandwiches to go.
And you’d better give me three or four of those jelly doughnuts."

He sat on a stool as he waited, comparing the pictures of Jane and Beth Conley. Both were beautiful women. Talbot made a mental correction. Beth Conley had been beautiful, her full-bosomed body as lovely as her face. It seemed incredible that whoever had slugged and shot him and killed her hadn’t assaulted, or attempted to assault, her before he had snuffed out her life. Few men willing to commit murder draw the line at rape.

Talbot searched the story in the Tribune for the paragraph he wanted. It read:

A further note of mystery was added to the case by the statement of Doctor Alvin Nelson, medical examiner for Palmetto County, who told this reporter that, despite the fact the first officers to arrive on the scene found both Talbot and the dead woman in a complete state of undress, his post mortem on the Conley woman’s body proved conclusively that she and Talbot had not been intimate.

Talbot read and reread the paragraph. It seemed it should suggest something to him. It didn’t. He transferred his attention to Jane’s picture. Her pale, oval, face framed by a wealth of black curls, Jane was even more beautiful than Beth Conley. He was a lucky man, especially now that he had broken down the invisible physical wall that had existed between them since the first days of their marriage—if he lived to enjoy her.
Last night there had been no protests or requests to be careful of her hair. Jane had been fire and flame, insatiable, wife and mistress in one skin.

"Forgive me and hold me," she'd begged him. "Let me prove how much I love you."

And she had.

The counter girl packed the coffee and sandwiches and doughnuts into the metal lunch box. Talbot tipped her a quarter, paid his check, and opened the plate-glass door. After the cool of the air-conditioned drug store the street was humid and hot. There were children on it now. A group of chattering little girls were playing a Spanish version of Sky Blue. Some boys were bouncing a ball against the wall. There were more cars at the curb than there had been. Talbot looked up, then down, the long row of parked cars. The uniformed policeman to whom he had spoken sat slumped on his spine back of the wheel of an unlettered Chevrolet. From time to time the officer glanced at the marquee of the Ybor City Hotel but he seemed much more interested in the physical proportions of the black-eyed señoritas passing on his own side of the walk.

Talbot strode to the Ford, set the lunch box on the seat and slipped in back of the wheel. No one shouted at him. No one blew a whistle. Still, the fish camp was twenty miles away, thirty miles the way he had to go. And a lot could happen in thirty miles.

He turned right at the first intersection, then right again and drove back the way he had come, being careful to observe all stops, signs, and traffic regulations. He was glad when the city dropped behind him and he was on the bay road again. There were few cars
on the road. The truck farms and groves were widely spaced. The bay on his left was a vast sheet of unrippled green water broken only by an occasional fisherman in an outboard boat.

Despite the risk he was taking, he was glad now he'd come to Tampa, glad he hadn't allowed Jane to persuade him to run. At least now he had a foundation on which to base his defense, his claim that he had been framed. He had been right and Jane wrong. He hadn't sent an innocent man to the chair. Conley had been guilty as charged and the tardy Marlow confession merely a part of the plot to frame him out of office. It followed, logically, that Marlow hadn't committed suicide. He had been murdered. By whom? The blonde girl with whom he had been living?

Talbot wiped his sweating palms on the dungarees Vickie had bought him. He wished Jane hadn't mentioned Vickie. Even if he came clear of this thing, Vickie would always be a sore spot between them. Jane would always remember Vickie as she had seen her, usurping her place, taunting her with the fact that she, Jane, had walked out on him when he had needed her the most.

Talbot wished he knew more about Vickie than he did. She said she had been working in Vero Beach, but had she? Her appearance in Kelly's, her arrival on the scene just when his morale had been lowest was, to say the least, very fortuitous. She said all she wanted to do was help him, but was Vickie telling the truth? Vickie, by nature, was even more amorous than Jane had been the night before. She said he was the first man she'd stayed with, but was he? Hernando had described the
girl who had lived with Marlow as a hot little number and, as Jane had pointed out, Vickie was definitely blonde. If Vickie were involved in this she could have been sent to watch him, to keep him occupied while the frame had been completed by murdering Beth Conley.

Talbot tried to consider Vickie objectively as a suspect. It didn’t make sense. Vickie was definitely not a bleached blonde. More, if she were mixed up in the frame she wouldn’t have jeopardized her own freedom by helping him get away from Lieutenant Keller. Nor would she have spent her small savings on the car and food and clothes—or did she have some bigger money stashed away somewhere?

Here the narrow road was lined with a tangled mat of cabbage palms that cut off all breeze. The sun beat on the roof of the car. The aged engine sent waves of heat up through the openings in the floorboards. Talbot’s head ached. Pain knifed his wounded shoulder every time one of the wheels of the car jolted over a chuck hole. But he tried to keep thinking. . . .

Then there was Harlan to consider. Harlan was his friend. They had been friends since they had been boys. But, as Jane had stressed, Harl was in love with her and ambitious. He undressed her with his eyes every time she entered a room and the biological urge knew no conscience. No friendship between two men was half as strong as one hair from a woman’s head.

It was a problem, this not being able to really trust anyone but Jane.

Talbot drove through the village at the head of the bay. Its residents were mainly retired couples come to
Florida to lengthen their lives in the sun. An old man working on his lawn glanced up incuriously, then went back to pulling weeds. A woman rocked on her porch. Two other women talked over a fence, possibly about him, Talbot thought.

He was back in his own county now. The small business district through which he had to pass was moderately busy. There were people on the walk and cars in the street driven by men and women who had voted for or against him in the last election. His campaign pictures had been tacked to poles and displayed in store windows. They all knew he was wanted for murder but no one recognized or tried to stop him.

It was an eerie sensation, almost as if the Tod Talbot he had been had ceased to exist and he was another man, a man in a blue chambray work shirt and a long-billed khaki cap driving a battered Ford bought out of a waitress' modest earnings.

Talbot was disgusted with himself. Perhaps he'd had no right to be state's attorney. If he was as smart as he thought he was, now was the time to prove it. There had to be a solution to this thing.

The Tampa paper lay folded on the seat beside him. He glanced at the picture of Beth Conley. The red-haired girl had pleaded for her husband's life. She had pretended to despise him, Talbot. She'd torn up the check he'd given her. But back of her histrionics, Beth Conley had been a woman of the world, cold, capable, calculating.

In the light of what had happened since that morning in his office it stood to reason she had known Conley was guilty, that her last-minute plea for a stay of execution
was merely a technical maneuver. In that event, the Eddie Marlow confession could have been as much of a shock to her as it had been to him. But she had seen a way to capitalize on it. That could be why she’d turned down his money. She’d been gambling for bigger stakes.

Talbot’s mind raced on. What if Beth Conley had known, or suspected, who had killed Eddie Marlow and left the purported confession? Whoever had murdered Marlow had at least five thousand dollars of the missing bank money in his possession. It seemed logical to assume the killer knew where the rest of the money was. One hundred thousand dollars, even a hot one hundred thousand dollars, was a lot of money. It could easily be discounted for near its face value in any South or Central American country.

What if Beth Conley had threatened to blow the whistle unless the killer split the money with her? Having killed once, there was no reason why whoever had killed Eddie Marlow shouldn’t kill again.

Talbot realized he was driving too fast and slowed the car. He forced his fingers gripping the wheel to relax. The key to the whole thing lay in ferreting out whom Beth Conley had suspected of murdering Eddie Marlow and planting the false confession.

The corners of Talbot’s mouth turned down. The queasy feeling returned to his stomach. His mouth was dry. His throat felt sore. From here on in he had it made. From here on in it was easy. All he had to do was read a dead woman’s mind.
Fourteen

The day grew older and hotter. As traffic began to thicken Talbot felt more and more like a sitting duck. He'd meant to be back before daybreak. It was five minutes after ten when he reached the corporate limits of Sun City in convoy with four other cars and a truck. He saw the gray police car too late to do anything about it. If he pulled out of line or attempted a U-turn he would attract even more attention to himself.

Sweat beaded on his upper lip as he drove on, being careful to maintain the exact legal distance behind the car ahead of him. The police car, plainly lettered POLICE in ten-inch characters, was parked on the far shoulder of the road facing the oncoming traffic. As Talbot passed the car he recognized Sergeant Graham back of the wheel.

Graham was talking into the hand microphone of his two-way radio. The plainclothesman swept the convoy of cars with his eyes and continued to talk into the hand microphone, Talbot watched the gray car in his rear vision mirror until the sweeping curve in front of the Veteran's Administration Hospital erased it from the
glass. He realized he was holding his breath and exhaled. Graham was smart. He was an honest cop. He'd been bucking for Keller’s job for years. It would have been a feather in Graham's panama and a commission in his pocket if he had recognized him.

Talbot thumbed a cigarette into his mouth. One thing was certain. One way or another, after Jane had had a day in which to work, he was turning himself in. So let Keller beat on him. Anything was better than this strain.

His luck continued to hold. En route to the road to the ferry, he passed a dozen cars driven by men he knew, local men who knew him. None recognized him. None shouted, “There goes Talbot!”

It proved something, possibly that people weren't as observant as they should be. They clung to a mental picture and their mental picture of him was a well-dressed man with a fixed political smile driving a two-tone Buick Roadmaster. But Sergeant Graham was another matter.

Graham was a trained observer. Thinking back it seemed to Talbot that Graham’s glance had lingered a moment longer on the Ford than it had on the other cars. Still, Graham had no reason to pass him. The last Graham had had of him had been a punch in the jaw.

Talbot's body was drenched with sweat by the time he reached the turn-off to the fish camp. He hoped Jane was making progress. Now he was back in the net again, his arrest could be a matter of minutes.

It was unnaturally quiet in the clearing. The narrow pass was a sheet of green glass, unbroken even where it lapped the shore. The weathered fish house and shacks
and sagging drying racks and rotted nets and beached hulls looked like a set from a Grade B picture. The only sound was a distant squawking of gulls.

The big doors of the fish house were closed. There was no sign of Vickie. Talbot parked the Ford back of a sprawling clump of wild pepper and switched off the ignition. It was a physical effort for him to pick the metal lunch box from the seat and open the door of the car.

He waded the dry grass and breast-high sea oats to the fish house and called, "Vickie?"

He thought, but wasn't certain, that she answered. He tugged one of the loading doors open and closed it after him. It was breathlessly hot and dark in the shed. Vickie was lying on the front seat of the Buick listening to the radio. She'd taken off her yellow flowered dress and wedgies. All she had on was a white bra and a pair of tight-fitting panties. Perspiration had darkened her light hair around the edges. Her eyes were puffed as if she had been crying. When she saw him she covered her lap with her dress and switched off the radio.

Vickie's drawl was more pronounced than Talbot remembered it. "I 'most gave you out," she said. "I didn't think you were comin' back."

Talbot opened the door of the car. "I didn't think you were here."

Vickie sat up on the seat. "I told you I'd be waitin'."

Talbot was embarrassed for her, for himself. When he hadn't returned, Vickie couldn't help but know what was happening. And while he'd made love to Jane, she'd lain fighting tears and mosquitoes until she'd cried herself to sleep.
Vickie extended the coverage of her dress. "She—uh—Mrs. Talbot forgave you?"

Talbot was even more embarrassed. "You could put it that way."

Her voice small, Vickie said, "Then you won't need me any more. Do you want me to go now?"

"No," Talbot said. He was being truthful. He didn't. Vickie tried to smile. "I'm glad."

Some sunlight seeped through the cracks in the fish house. Talbot unscrewed the top of the thermos and filled it with coffee. "You must be starved."

Vickie took a sip of coffee. "I was 'most ready to go out and catch me a mess of grunts." She unwrapped one of the fried-egg sandwiches. "I would have, effen I had some corn meal and dared build a fire to fire 'em."

On her, Cracker talk sounded good. It belonged.

Talbot laughed. "What happened to the proper young lady I met in Reilly's bar?"

Vickie shrugged her bare shoulders. "I don't have t' pretend any more. It don't matter now how I talk, now Mrs. Talbot's took you back." She bit into a jelly doughnut. "Where did you get these? In that drugstore in Tampa?"

"How do you know I was in a drugstore in Tampa?"

Vickie nodded at the radio. "It was on the police band. They think you're still in Tampa. They even dispatched some cars an' men from here t' help look for you."

Talbot's feeling of unreality, of moving through a dream, deepened. Any number of things could have happened. Hernando could have called the police. It could be the stake-out had recognized him tardily. Jane's
phone call to the Tampa police could have set the wheels in motion.

Vickie licked jelly from her lips. “I’ll bet Mrs. Talbot gave you hell about me. I’ll bet she low-rated me plenty.”

“No,” Talbot lied, “she didn’t.” He knew Vickie knew he was lying by the way she looked at him.

She wiped her face and shoulders with her dress and laid it over the back of the seat. “What happens now?”

“Jane is going to work on the information I’ve gathered.”

“And then—?”

“I’m to contact her again tonight.”

“You found out who killed Mrs. Conley?”

“No. But I did find out the Marlow confession was a fake, that he couldn’t have robbed the bank or killed Al Baker.”

“Why couldn’t he?”

“He was drunk in the Ybor City Hotel at the time both crimes were committed.”

“This can be proved?”

“It can.”

“Then why didn’t you turn yourself in to the Tampa police ’stead of takin’ the chance you did t’ get back heah?”

“Jane advised me not to.”

“Oh?” Vickie said.

Talbot was hot. He was tired. He hadn’t slept for forty-eight hours. Vickie’s tone irritated him. He defended Jane. “It just so happens Mrs. Talbot is a very smart attorney. She knows what she’s doing.”

“I’m sure she does,” Vickie said.
“She’s one of the smartest attorneys in the state.”
“She didn’t do so good for Conley.”
“That was different!”
Vickie smiled.
“What’s so funny?” Talbot asked her.
Vickie told him. “You. All men. A woman can set a spare table. She can feed a man pig pork an’ collards. She can gad all around the country. But as long as once in a while she loves him good an’ oohs an’ ahs an’ makes him think he’s a better lover than Kirk Douglas and Marlon Brando an’ Elsie the Cow’s husband all rolled into one, she can keep him eatin’ right out of her hand.”
“Now you’re insulting Jane.”
Vickie said hotly, “I’ve no call to love her. I—” She thought better of what she’d been about to say. Instead she said, contritely, “I’m sorry, Tod. It’s just I’m worried for you. I didn’t go for to bait you or low-rate Mrs. Talbot. I knew what I was getting into, that I couldn’t have you for good. You don’t remember but I told you that that first night out on the beach.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “You’re ’most beat, aren’t you, honey?”
Talbot allowed himself to be placated. “I’ve never been so tired.”
Vickie moved over on the seat and pulled his head down on her breasts. “Then don’t be mad at me. Please. We kin talk after you rest.”
“Can talk,” Talbot corrected her.
“Can talk,” Vickie said meekly.
Her young body was soft and strangely cool. Her fingers felt good in his hair. For all her alleged virginity, and he’d been too drunk to know, Vickie knew how to
handle men. Talbot wondered, sleepily, if Vickie was handling him, if she was the girl who had stayed with Marlow. Jane had suggested as much. If so, he was being foolish, but he was too tired to care. One way or another, despite what Jane was or wasn’t able to accomplish, he intended to surrender to Keller after he had talked to Jane. He had run as far as he could. He’d done all he could on his own.

The flesh under his cheek smelled sweet. He lay thinking of the events of the three days and nights just past. It seemed to him he was overlooking something. He tried to think of what it was but before he could, the faces of Jane and Vickie and Harl and Beth Conley and Luke Adama and Lieutenant Keller and Larry Hernando and the Tampa officer and the woman who had wanted to use the phone became a gibbering montage of moving lips and wailing sirens and contradictory statements, one face dissolving into another in a kaleidoscopic pattern of brightly hued angles and sharp edges. Then sound was deleted from the picture. The bright colors faded. His heavy-lidded eyes closed. Without conscious volition he slipped his arm around Vickie’s waist and slept.

It was cooler when he awakened. Vickie had shifted her position. She’d moved to the far side of the seat and was cradling his head in her lap. The sun had moved around the fish house to form a pattern of dull gold bars on the east wall. Talbot looked up through the spokes of the wheel. His mouth was cotton dry. His head ached dully. “How long have I slept?” he asked Vickie.

Vickie looked down through the wheel. “All day. It’s
'most on to dusk dark.”

“And you’ve held me all this time?”

She fingered his face. “I’m not complainin’. It could be the last time I’ll ever get to hold you.”

Talbot felt a hard object pressing into his back. It was the gun Jane had given him. He thrust it back into the waistband of his dungarees and sat up. He felt sticky and uncomfortable. “I wonder if it would be safe to take a swim?”

Vickie peered through the sand-pitted glass of the cobweb-hung window closest to the wheel. “I don’t see why not. Once I thought I heard a noise like someone was movin’ around outside, but I guess it was just my nerves. Either my nerves or a dog.”

Talbot ran his fingers through his hair. “Has there been anything new on the radio?”

“I don’t know,” Vickie said. “I was afraid to turn it on for fear of wakin’ you.”

Talbot switched on the radio in the Buick. The police band was concerned with small business . . . A drunk on the corner of 4th and Central . . . A disturbance on Dartmouth Avenue . . . A barking dog on Country Club Road. There was no mention made of him. The absence of further news was somehow ominous. Talbot turned off the radio and opened the door on his side of the car. “Well, let’s take a swim.”

“And then—?”

“I’ll contact Jane.”

Vickie opened the door on her side but continued to sit back of the wheel. “You’ll have to help me out. From you sleepin’ on ’em so long my legs are all rubber an’ stuck with pins an’ needles.”
Talbot lifted her from the car and held her until she could stand. Vickie still felt good in his arms. He tipped up her chin and kissed her.

“No,” Vickie said. “Please don’t.”
“I thought youliked me.”
Vickie met his eyes. “That’s why.” She slipped out of his arms and opened one of the doors.

Talbot followed her through the door. The water had turned a deep purple. A flock of great white herons were feeding in the shallows. A flight of squawking gulls wheeled over them. The last of the sun was setting on fire the tangled mat of jungle that rimmed the clearing. Night was only minutes away. This far south there was no twilight. It was day, then it was night.

Vickie stepped on a sand spur. “Ouch.” She limped back into the fish house to get her wedgies from the car, then led the way to the beach.

Talbot followed a few feet behind her. On Vickie the white bra and tight scanties looked modest and a natural part of the scene. Talbot wondered if it were possible for a man to love two women.

The crack of the rifle was out of place in the peaceful setting. The report filled the clearing. Talbot heard a bullet whine past his ear and the gulls wheeled into squawking flight. A second, a third, a fourth bullet chipped wood from the beached hull beside which he was standing and shattered one of the windows in the shack.

Fingers bit into his shoulder. He realized Vickie was screaming at him. “Get down, Tod.”

The unseen rifleman fired again. Vickie stopped screaming and leaned against his chest. Talbot held
her with one arm as he snatched the pistol Jane had
given him from the waistband of his dungarees and
fired in the general direction from which the shots
had come.

There was a thrashing in the mat of underbrush. A car
door opened and slammed. A motor accelerated. Wheels
spun in sand. There was a scraping of metal on dry grass
as the car got underway.

Talbot fired a second, then a third time at the sounds.
It was an eerie sensation, part of the nightmare through
which he'd been moving for days. It was like shooting
into a bale of cotton. There was no answering slap
of lead on metal or whine of a ricochet. The unseen
car gathered speed. The roar of the motor grew fainter,
then faded into the deepening night.

Talbot looked down at Vickie. Her eyes were closed.
Her body was a dead weight in his arms. The fifth and
final bullet fired from the edge of the clearing had
entered the right side of her back, high up, near her
shoulder.

Talbot thrust the pistol back in his waistband and
tilted her chin with his fingers. "Vickie."

It was an effort for her to open her eyes. "Are you
all right, Tod?"

Talbot slipped his hand under her knees and held
her. "I'm fine. How bad does it hurt, Vickie?"

She wet her lips with her tongue. "I just feel sort of
numb. Did you see who shot at you, Tod?"

"No."

Her voice was even smaller than it had been, "Neither
did I. But all cats are one color in the dark. You can even
change a cat's color, some folks say."
Talbot raised her lips to his. "Vickie. What are you trying to tell me?"

She attempted to answer him. Her lips moved earnestly but made no sound. Then her mouth went slack and her head lolled back over his arm. Talbot carried her to the parked Ford and lowered her gently to the seat. Then he switched on the ignition and ground the starter.

Nothing happened. The car was dead. Talbot got out and raised the hood. In the last of the rapidly fading light he could see a jumble of wire ripped loose from their connections.

It hadn't been a dog Vickie had heard in the clearing. It hadn't been her nerves. Whoever had tried to kill him hadn't wanted him to get away. This time the killer had meant to make certain.
Talbot drove swiftly, without regard for stop signs or traffic signals. It was a few minutes after eight when he reached St. Anthony’s Hospital. He braked the Buick in the glow of the red neon—EMERGENCY—and walked around the car.

A tired-eyed intern was stealing a smoke in the doorway. He used the gauze mask dangling under his chin to wipe the perspiration from his face, then asked, “What’s up, mister?”

“Gunshot wound,” Talbot told him.

He opened the door of the Buick. Vickie’s eyes were closed. Her breathing was heavy. The makeshift bandage he’d made from his shirt had slipped and the wound was bleeding again.

The intern looked over his shoulder. “Take her into the examination room. Straight down the hall. The first door to your left.”

“I know where it is,” Talbot said.

He carried Vickie through the doorway and down the hall. It smelled like all hospital corridors. His sneakers made no sound on the tile floor.

As he held the door of the examination room, the intern
eyed Talbot's bare torso and said, "You're Tod Talbot." It wasn't a question. It was a statement.

"That's right."

"And the girl?"

"Her name is Vickie Paul."

A nurse spread a sterile sheet on one of the examination tables. "Put her down here."

Talbot lowered Vickie to the table and the intern removed the makeshift bandage. "Hmm. High in the right shoulder. Rifle or pistol?"

"Rifle."

"How long ago?"

"Not more than fifteen minutes."

The intern took Vickie's pulse. "You know I'll have to call the police."

Talbot wiped sweat and blood from his face with his forearm. "I know."

The intern spoke to the nurse. "Have Doctor Ambler paged. Then call Sister Mary Collete and ask her to phone the police."

"Yes, doctor."

Vickie's inert body looked pathetically small and young. "How bad off is she?" Talbot asked.

"That's hard to say," the intern said.

"Will she live?"

The intern washed his hands. "I'm a doctor, not a fortune teller." He looked back at Vickie. "It will be a shame if she doesn't. She's a pretty little thing. What did you say her name is?"

"Vickie Paul."

"Miss or Mrs.?"

"Miss."
"Did you shoot her?"
"No."
"Who did?"
"I don’t know."
"You expect anyone to believe that?"
"It’s the truth."

The intern toweled his hands. "Well, that’s between you and the police. Now wait out in the hall, will you, Talbot?"

"Whatever you say."

There were several chrome and green leather chairs in the corridor. Talbot started to sit in one, then paced the tile floor instead. His head ached. The roof of his mouth hurt. The abortive shooting in the clearing made less sense than the events that had preceded it. He should be dead. At the distance, the rifleman shouldn’t have missed him. Talbot wiped his wet palms on the hip pockets of his dungarees. On the other hand, he would be dead if Vickie hadn’t stepped in front of him. Standing as she had been standing, the bullet that had pierced her right shoulder would have gone through his heart.

A youthful-looking doctor and a surgical nurse hurried down the hall and entered the emergency ward. Neither of them paid any attention to him.

It was hot and close in the corridor. It smelled of medicine and antiseptic. Talbot walked to the rear door and studied his reflection in the glass. His bare torso and arms were smeared with Vickie’s blood. His hair was uncombed. He needed a shave. He looked more like a drunken fishing guide just off a two week bat than he did like a former state’s attorney.
The police would arrive any minute. Reporters and cameramen would be close behind them. His picture, as he was, would be on the front page of every morning and evening paper in the state.

On impulse he opened the door. It was cooler on the concrete apron in the rear of the hospital. The motor of the Buick was still running. In his haste to get Vickie into the hospital he had forgotten to shut off the ignition. Talbot walked around the car and sat back of the wheel.

He felt sticky and uncomfortable. He would stay that way for days. Lieutenant Keller would scoff at the theory the shot that had wounded Vickie had been meant for him. He would be booked and held without bail on suspicion of two murders. The Eddie Marlow angle of the affair wouldn't even enter the picture until after an exhaustive investigation had been made.

Acting on impulse, Talbot shifted the lever on the wheel from Park to Drive and rolled the Buick down the ramp and out into the traffic on 9th Street. He'd done what he could for Vickie. He wanted a drink. He wanted a bath. He wanted a change of clothing. He wanted to talk to Jane before he saw Lieutenant Keller and Sergeant Graham and Harlan. Jane, acting as his attorney, could surrender him to Lieutenant Keller. It always made a better impression on a jury if a man on trial for his life had surrendered of his own accord. It gave the defense attorney a slight edge on the prosecution. A jury reasoned, not illogically, there must be some doubt as to the prisoner's guilt.

Jane was waiting for him at either the apartment or the beach cottage. Jane could phone the police while
he bathed and changed his clothes. A few minutes one way or another wouldn’t matter.

Talbot’s wet hands were slippery on the wheel. He forced himself to be honest with himself. He was stalling. He was afraid to face what he knew he had to face. It was easy to be glib about a man in trouble, to say he should have done this or that, but it was an entirely different matter when it happened to you, when you were the man in trouble.

Traffic was normal for the time of night: couples on their way to their beach, families headed for the ball park or a drive-in, a few late-staying tourists gawking at the palm trees, men and women with nothing but the evening on their minds.

He drove, expecting at any moment to hear sirens in the still night behind him. His two-tone Buick was well known. He passed a policeman directing traffic on 9th Street and 5th Avenue North. Another officer was investigating an accident on 5th and 28th Street. Neither man even looked at the Buick. Talbot’s back ached from the strain of waiting. First Sergeant Graham, now this. It was almost as if the local force had been instructed to ignore him.

The windows of the apartment, when he reached it, were dark. As far as Talbot could tell, there was no stake-out on the building. Jane might or might not be waiting back of the unlighted windows. He debated driving on to the beach and hadn’t the physical strength. If Jane wasn’t in the apartment he would phone the cottage and ask her to meet him in front of the police station.

He parked the Buick half a block from the building and walked back. It was an effort for him to climb the
stairs and unlock the door. The air in the living room smelled of unemptied ash trays.

Talbot closed the door and leaned against it. "Jane."

The only answer was a faint echo. Talbot felt his way across the unlighted room to the hall and down the hall to the bedroom. In the bedroom he chanced flicking his lighter. Jane wasn't in the apartment. The rumpled bed was just as he and Vickie had left it. How long ago had that been? It seemed like years.

He sat on the edge of the bed and took off his sneakers and dungarees. It was strange how unfamiliar a familiar room could be in the dark. He felt his way across the bedroom to the bath and turned on the knobs in the shower. He showered with hot, then cold water. The water felt good on his body. He felt refreshed and clean.

The bathroom was in the rear of the building. A light couldn't be seen from the street. He closed the door and drew the blind on the window then switched on a light so he could see to shave.

The mirror was misted with steam. Talbot wiped it with a towel and studied his reflection. He'd aged ten years in three days. There were lines in his face that hadn't been in it before. His eyes mirrored the strain he'd been under. He looked frightened.

Talbot rinsed his face and dried it.

He hung the towel on a rack and rubbed after-shave lotion on his face. The familiar habit amused him. He was dolling himself up for jail. It was up to Jane now. If Jane couldn't figure it out and come up with a feasible defense the chances were that in six months or so he would be shaking hands with James Conley.
He turned out the bathroom light and felt for clean shorts and socks in the dresser. There was a clean linen suit in the closet. He put on the pants, then transferred his money and the pistol from the dungarees. As he slipped into a shirt he peered out of the unlighted window. It looked as if a gray car were double-parked beside the Buick. He immediately lost all benefit of the shower. His body was as wet with sweat as it had been before he'd bathed.

Snatching the linen coat from its hanger he strode down the hall and looked through the living room windows. If there had been a car parked beside the Buick it was gone. There was nothing to see but the pools of light under the street lamps.

Talbot felt for a bottle in the bar and drank from the neck of the bottle. In the dark his hand had closed on a bottle of Vermouth. The thick, sweet wine nauseated him. There was no lift, no afterglow.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. This was it. He'd dodged and twisted as long as he could. If Jane was at the cottage she could take it from here. If Jane wasn't at the cottage he'd phone either Harl or Lieutenant Keller and surrender.

He returned the bottle of Vermouth to the bar and dialed the beach cottage. Dialing in the dark, he got a wrong number and had to dial again. The phone at the other end rang for a long time. When Jane did answer her voice sounded as if she had been crying.

“Yes—?”

On the chance the phone was tapped, Talbot attempted to disguise his voice. “I promised I’d call.”

Jane sounded relieved. Her voice gathered strength.
"Thank God. Where are you?"
Talbot said, "The other place you said you might be."
"The police are watching it?"
Talbot sat on the arm of a chair. "I don't know. I thought I saw a police car a few minutes ago but no one stopped me from coming in."
"You are under arrest? No one is making you talk?"
"No."
"And you're all right?"
"As right as I can be under the circumstances."
"What do you mean by that?"
Talbot felt unutterably weary. Talking to Jane gave him no more lift than the Vermouth had. He said, "Someone had another try for my life."
"Where?"
"At the fish camp."
"When?"
"About half an hour ago."
"What do you mean someone had a try for your life?"
"Just that."
"Exactly what happened?"
"Someone fired five shots at me."
"What about the pistol I gave you?"
Talbot wished Jane would stop questioning him and tell him what to do. He said, "I shot back. Three times. But I didn't hit anything."
"You're wounded?"
"No. But Vickie is."
Jane sounded cynical. "A shame. How badly is she wounded? Will she live?"
"I don't know."
"What do you mean by that?"
“I just dropped her off at St. Anthony’s, before I came here. And the intern on duty, at least the one I talked to, refused to commit himself.”

“He phoned the police?”

“One of the sisters did.”

“Then why weren’t you arrested at the hospital?”

“I left before the police got there.”

Jane was silent a moment, then she said, “You fool. I mean—risking your own life to take her to the hospital. Why didn’t you phone me and come directly here?”

Talbot defended Vickie. “I owed her that much.”

“A Cracker tart.”

“No. A nice kid who tried to help me.”

“That’s what you think.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’ll tell you when you get here. You saw who shot at you, Tod?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“He fired from the edge of the clearing, then scrambled through the brush when the clip in his gun was empty.” The nagging thought that refused to crystalize returned to torment Talbot. “Look, Jane—?”

“Yes—?”

“How many people did you talk to today?”

“I don’t know. A lot of them. Perhaps a dozen.”

“You phoned the Tampa police?”

“Immediately after you called me.”

“Did they check with the desk clerk at the Ybor City Hotel?”

“They promised they would.”

“But you haven’t heard from them since?”
“No. I haven’t. And the local police refuse to give me any information.”
“Why?”
“That’s another thing I’ll tell you when you get here.”
Talbot repeated, “Look, Jane—”
“Yes—?”
“You say you talked to a number of people.”
“I did.”
“Are you certain you didn’t let slip I was back in town, that I was hiding out at Frazer’s?”
“I’m positive.” The life went out of Jane’s voice. The words sounded as if they were rasping her throat. “But after what has just happened to me, it isn’t difficult to guess who might have figured where you were hiding. Of course. I should have known. He practically told me so in so many words.”
It was close in the dark living room. The oily film of Vermouth in his mouth was cloyingly sweet. The room smelled, faintly, of the cheap perfume Vickie used. Talbot wished he hadn’t put on his coat. He loosened his tie and the top button of his shirt. “After what happened to you? In the name of God what are you talking about, Jane?”
Jane’s voice was as small as Vickie’s had been. She said, “I can’t tell you over the phone. I won’t. I’m too ashamed.” She hesitated, added, “Tod—”
“Yes—?”
“You aren’t thinking of doing anything foolish, are you?”
Talbot shifted the receiver to his other hand. “Such as—?”
“Turning yourself in?”
I considered it."

Her voice grew stronger. "But you mustn't. Not until we've talked. It would be suicide, Tod. You see I know who hates you."

"Who?"

Jane was impatient with him. "Don't keep on asking questions. Just get out here as fast as you can. Don't let anyone stop you. And you're not to turn yourself in. You hear me, Tod?"

"I hear you," Talbot said. He wiped his face with his coat sleeve. "But why are you so upset? What's happened?"

Jane stifled a sob. "Nothing that hasn't happened to me before. But tonight it was forced on me. Just a few minutes ago. Just before you called. He must have come directly from the fish camp."

"Who?"

"The man back of all this. The man who hates your guts, has hated them since the three of us were children, because I preferred you to him. Your best friend. Our current state's attorney."

Talbot could feel his head expand. He said, "For God's sake, Jane. You don't mean that Harl—?"

She sobbed, "You know what I mean. You remember what I told you about him, how he acted whenever he entered a room I was in?"

"Yes."

"Well, tonight he used more than his eyes."
Through the open window of the house in front of which the Buick was parked, Talbot could see a lighted television screen. The audio was as distinct as if he were sitting in the room. His inevitable cigar tilted at an angle, Groucho Marx was asking a pair of contestants the current name of the city formerly known as Constantinople.

Istanbul, you fools, Talbot thought.

It was easy for a man to be smart when he wasn’t on the spot. And he wasn’t smart, he was dumb. He was an educated Cracker. His best friend had fooled him for years. All the time Harl had been patting his back, he had been feeling for a spot to sink a knife. Talbot wished it had been Luke Adama, anyone but Harl.

If there was a stake-out on the Buick, the officers were well-hidden. Talbot debated taking a cab to the beach and decided it wouldn’t be smart. He wanted to talk to Jane. He had to talk to Jane before he was arrested. If what Jane had implied was true, Harl couldn’t afford to let him live, allow him to come to trial. Shortly after he was arrested he would “fall” down a flight of stairs, or “hang” himself in his cell and the
Sun City Morning Times would be pleased to print his obituary.

He crossed the dark walk to the Buick, slid back of the wheel and drove away from the curb. No one materialized out of the night. No one attempted to stop him.

The night continued warm. Everyone in Sun City seemed to be headed for the beach. The night clubs and juke joints and smoked-fish stands were doing capacity business. The parking lots of the Surf Club and the Municipal Bathing Beach were black with cars.

It was cooler on the beach road but the salt air was foul with exhaust fumes and the stench of spent gasoline. Talbot's head continued to ache. Small, disembodied fingers had tied hard knots in his groin. He drove with his radio tuned to the police band. There was a constant squawking of this and that, but no mention of him. It was almost as if he had died.

The line of cars thinned as drivers turned into their favorite pleasure spots. Great open gaps of sand and sea oats began to appear between the night clubs and motels and beer joints. The wind off the Gulf was fresh and clean. A white froth of surf edged the sand in little dips and scallops, like lace on the edge of a girl's panties. A red dot in the distance became Reilly's bar sign. Talbot eyed it as it grew. His circle was complete. He was back where he'd started. Talbot swiveled his head as he passed the isolated bar. He wished he could stop for a drink, a drink of anything that would wash the taste of Vermouth out of his mouth. But he couldn't. Time had run out on him.

The cottage was a quarter of a mile beyond Reilly's.
The venetian blinds were closed but light leaked out around the edges. The overhead door of the garage was open. Jane's pale yellow convertible was half in and half out of the garage.

Talbot drove a few hundred feet past the cottage, parked on the shoulder of the road and walked back along the beach. The hard-packed sand felt good under his feet. The pound of the surf was a natural, pleasant sound. If he hadn't been ambitious, if he hadn't been determined to make good for Jane, the sand and the surf and the star-studded night would have been his for as long as he lived to enjoy them. Ambition did strange things to a man.

The door of the screened patio overlooking the Gulf was unhooked. Talbot opened it and walked in. It was as cool in the wind-swept cottage as it had been on the beach. Jane wasn't in the kitchen or the front room. The bedroom door was closed. He opened it and looked in.

Jane's yellow satin slipper chair was lying on its back. There was a torn pastel-green dress on the floor. A pair of ripped panties and a bra lay beside it. The rumpled condition of the spread gave mute evidence of the purpose for which the bed had been used.

The bathroom light was on. Talbot opened the door and looked in. Jane was lying in the tub. She started to cover herself with her hands then said, "Thank God it's you. I thought maybe he'd come back."

It was an effort for Talbot to speak the name. "You mean Harl?"

Jane ran more water in the tub. Her smeared mouth was sullen. Her eyes slitted as she nodded. "Your best
friend. The best man at our wedding. Are you certain you weren’t followed?”

Talbot leaned against the edge of the wash basin. “Not certain, but I don’t think so.”

Jane’s mouth turned even more sullen. “Don’t look at me like that. I fought him.”

“I’m certain you did.”

Jane scrubbed her smeared lips with a wash rag. “Men.”

Talbot tried to think of something to say and couldn’t. He lowered the cover and sat on the facility. The sensation was new to him, seeing Jane in the nude and being completely without desire. In their five years of marriage he’d never felt so alone with Jane, yet so far apart. He studied the patrician face of the girl in the tub. Her eyes were swollen from weeping. Her black hair had lost its highlights. It looked dull and flat, almost as if dyed. He gazed dully.

Jane put a wet hand to her forehead. “Stop staring at me like that. I tell you I couldn’t help it.”

“I know,” Talbot said.

“And stop saying I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

Jane’s voice was unnaturally loud. “Then do something about it instead of just sitting there staring at me as if I was a cheap Cracker bitch like that little blonde Harlan planted on you.”

“That Harlan planted on me?”

“She’s in this up to her—” Jane cupped her breasts in her hands. “Well, you know what I mean. That’s why Harl tried to kill you both at the fish camp. He wants you dead and he doesn’t want her to talk.”
Talbot wiped his face with his sleeve. "So it has been Harl all along."

"Right from the first. He must have been planning this for years and the James Conley case gave him the opportunity for which he was looking. He wanted your job. He wanted me."

It was an effort for Talbot to force the words past the constriction in his throat. "You know that Conley was guilty?"

Jane met his eyes. "I know it now. But I didn't know it then. If I had known I wouldn't have gone to Reno. I wouldn't have filed for a divorce." She pressed one hand to her forehead. "Now I don't know whether I'm glad I came back or not. If only you'd listened to me last night and let me arrange to get you out of the country. But no. You were Cracker bull-headed. You had to talk to Luke Adama. You had to sneak out on me while I was asleep. You had to go to Tampa."

Talbot didn't follow her reasoning. He started to say so. Before he could, Jane continued:

"Now this has happened and nothing will ever be right between us again unless we do something about it."

"What can we do?"

Jane ran her wet fingers through her hair. "I'll come to that. You do love me, don't you, Tod?"

"You know I do."

"And you know I love you." There was an almost feverish glitter in Jane's eyes. "I proved that to you last night. Well, don't just sit there. Say something. I did prove it, didn't I?"

"You proved it," Talbot said.

Jane splashed water on her chest. "It's been Harl
from the start. I can see that now, clearly. Oh, but he's been clever, so clever. He knew only one thing would bring me back from Reno. So he rigged the Eddie Marlow thing to break on exactly the day Conley was to be executed. He knew the sensation it would cause. He knew it would force you to resign and I would come home to help you."

"Then you think Harl killed Eddie Marlow?"

"Or had him killed in such a way as to substantiate that phoney confession."

"And the blonde girl who spent two weeks with Marlow?"

"Was your precious Vickie Paul. Who else? And when he no longer needed her to set Marlow up for what he was planning, Harl sic'ed her on you."

It was a logical explanation for what had happened. Talbot lit a cigarette and offered it to Jane. "Puff?"

"No, thank you," she said primly.

The room was small and filled with steam. The green vinylite seat was hard. The scent of perfumed soap and wet flesh flavored the sweet film of Vermouth in Talbot’s mouth. The invisible fingers continued to tie knots in his groin. He asked, "How long are you going to stay in that tub?"

Jane raised her eyes to his, then lowered them again and wept silently.

Talbot was impatient with her. "Crying won't change a thing. It won't get us anywhere."

Jane wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I know," she said fiercely. "I'm a Painter, remember? Bathing isn't going to help a bit. There's only one thing we can do that will let me hold up my head again."
Talbot thought he knew what she was thinking. He evaded the issue by asking. “And Beth Conley?”
“What about her?”
“Why was she killed?”
“I think that’s obvious. To get you sent to the chair. Because she knew.”
“Knew what?”
“That the Marlow confession was false. So I was wrong. She knew. She had to know her husband was guilty.” Jane pressed the back of her hand to her forehead again. “I’ve been trying to think ever since this thing happened to me. And the way I see it, as soon as the story broke, the Conley girl contacted Harl and tried to blackmail him.”
“Why should she contact Harl with the Marlow confession?”
“Because he’d gotten your job. Because he was in love with me. Women know such things. She even remarked about it several times during the trial.”
“And then—?”
“Harl refused to be blackmailed. He knew if he started to pay her it could go on forever. So he disguised his voice and made that phone call to you and killed two birds with one stone.” Jane brushed a damp lock of hair out of her eyes. “You know you weren’t supposed to walk out of the Conley cottage. You were supposed to die with her.”

Talbot cracked his knuckles. “I know.”
Water gurgled as Jane opened the drain in the tub. Her voice was matter of fact. She might have been presenting a case to a jury. “Harl shot and killed Beth Conley, then he slugged you and dragged you into the
bedroom and undressed you and shot you with the same gun. Then he set the house on fire.”

“You think that’s the way it happened?”

“I know it is. And when you regained consciousness too soon and walked out of the burning house, you put him in a spot, a bad one. He was like a madman tonight. He swore he would find you and kill you if it was the last thing he ever did.”

“But I thought it was Harl who shot at me at Frazer’s?”

Jane stood up in the tub. “It was. Did you two ever fish out of the camp together?”

“A dozen times, as boys.”

Jane reached a towel from the rack. “Don’t you see? That’s how he knew where you were hiding. He was a madman, I tell you, Tod.” She used the towel. “Probably because he’d missed you. Looking back I can piece that together from the little things he said.” The corners of her pretty mouth turned down. “When he wasn’t too busy to talk.” Jane pressed her forehead to the comparative cool of the tile. “It went on forever. I thought he’d never leave. And every time I protested or tried to scream he struck me with his fist.”

Talbot studied her slim white back and flaring hips. She might be a statue standing in the tub. Her body looked like sculptured white marble. Everything about Jane was beautiful with the exception of her hair. Its usual sheen and highlights were missing. Its faded dullness worried Talbot. He didn’t like what he was thinking.

Jane turned and faced him. “You saw the bedroom?”

“I had to walk through it to get in here.”

“Then you know he wasn’t gentle with me.”
"I know."
Jane lost her temper. "And you're just going to sit there and say 'I know'?"
"What do you want me to do?"
Jane stepped out of the tub and dusted her body with bath powder. "What any normal man would do if such a thing happened to his wife."
"You mean, kill Harl?"
"What else? If you don't I'll never be able to look at myself in a mirror or let you take me in your arms. I'd see his face in the mirror, leering at me. It would be his arms holding me."
Talbot sat watching her, fascinated. It was almost as if he were seeing Jane's familiar body for the first time. He'd been so in love with it, with her, but tonight her body was so much white flesh. Love was a funny thing. It came. It went. It was as fragile as a man's dreams and his ambitions. One moment love and dreams were concrete, tangible things, worth fighting for, dying for if need be—then they no longer existed. He lifted the vinylite lid and dropped his cigarette in the facility. They were like a smoked cigarette flushed down a drain.
Jane finished powdering and reached a filmy negligee from the hook on the bathroom door. "No man can treat me the way Harlan has treated me. And there's even more to it than that." She rested her pink palms on Talbot's chest. "Don't you see, darling? Harl hates you and wants me. You won't ever be safe as long as he's alive."
Talbot said, "There's the law."
Jane scoffed. "The law. A lot of good it's done you. And now Harl has your job, he is the law." Her eyes searched his face. "But maybe you're different from other
men. Maybe you don't object to your wife being raped. Maybe you like the feeling of being a hunted animal."

"You know better than that," Talbot said.

Jane brushed past him into the bedroom. "Then let's do something about it."

Talbot followed her into the bedroom and leaned against the wall. "What have you in mind?"

Jane straightened the slipper chair. "We'll take care of Harl, now, tonight. Then we'll get out of the country together. The law doesn't want me. My car won't be stopped. I can drive us to Miami." The unbelted negligee floated out behind her as she moved about the bedroom straightening it as she talked. "We can go to Miami or Marathon Key and charter a cabin cruiser for Cuba. From there we can fly to Caracas, Lima, Buenos Aires, anywhere we decide to go."

She picked the torn dress and bra and panties from the floor and stuffed them into a dresser drawer.

It was an odd sensation, watching her. Talbot felt more like a spectator watching a mildly pornographic technicolor movie than an active participant in what was happening in the room. He asked, "And just what are we going to do for money?"

Jane picked her purse from the dresser and took out a thick sheaf of bills. "I thought of that. And early this afternoon, hours before Harl forced himself on me, hoping you might listen to reason and run for it like I suggested last night, I drew most of our money out of our joint account." She riffled the bills. "We can go a long way on this."

"A long way," Talbot agreed.

Jane pushed the mattress square on the bed and
smoothed the rumpled chenille spread. "I'll get Harl here. You do what has to be done, then we'll take off in my car, after we dispose of his body. If we are clever about it, it may be days or weeks before he's found."

A small hard lump formed in Talbot's stomach and ballooned rapidly.

When Jane had finished straightening the room she sat on the edge of the bed and fluffed her damp hair into becoming waves. "You have the pistol I gave you?"

Talbot took it from his pocket. "Yes."

"You've used it?"

"I shot at whoever shot at me in the fish camp."

"How many times?"

"Three times."

"Then you've four bullets left, plenty to take care of Harl." Jane fluffed the pillow against the headboard of the bed and lay back. "Now I'll take a cigarette, if you please."

Talbot lit a cigarette and gave it to her.

Jane sucked the tip to a bright glow. Then blowing smoke through her nose she picked up the receiver of the French phone on the bed table and dialed a number with deft, businesslike, precision. A faint smile haunted her lips. Her freshly bathed body glowed pink and white under the sheer material of her negligee. Talbot tried not to look at her and wasn't very successful.

"Harl?" Jane asked when the number answered. "This is Jane. I have to see you right away. Yes, I'm still at the beach cottage. No. I can't tell you over the phone. Just that it concerns Tod. Fine. I'll be expecting you in ten minutes."

Jane cradled the phone and looked at Talbot.
"He's coming?" Talbot asked.

Jane was impatient with him. "Men. How dumb can you be? You heard me tell Harl I'd expect him in ten minutes." She sucked at her cigarette again. A lock of damp black hair had fallen into her eyes. It made her look incredibly abandoned. "Well, don't just stand there staring at me. Turn out the ceiling light and sit in the slipper chair so Harl can't see you until after he's in the room."

Talbot did as he was told. The soft glow of the bed lamp erased the strained look from Jane's face. With her long legs stretched out in front of her, their rounded taper rising to the flaring hips and full-breasted torso juncture, she was tempting bait for any man.

Talbot looked from the girl on the bed to the pistol in his hand. The lump in his stomach continued to balloon. The stillness in the room bothered him. The only sound was Jane's rhythmic breathing. It was an eerie sensation, this waiting in a dimly lighted room to shoot a man who had been his friend for twenty years.

Jane wet her lips with her tongue. "Are you frightened, Tod?"

"Not particularly," Talbot said. "What's there to killing a man? All you have to do is pull the trigger."
of car wheels on the gravel drive. A car door opened and closed, Talbot got to his feet as the doorbell chimed.

“No,” Jane whispered fiercely. “Stay where you are. And don’t try to talk to Harl. Don’t let him lie his way out of this. Shoot him as soon as he comes into the room.”

“What if he shoots back?”

“That’s a chance we’ll have to take.” Jane arranged her negligee. “But he won’t see you at first. He’ll be looking at me.”

It felt good to sit back in the chair. “Whatever you say,” Talbot said.

The bell chimed again. “Come in, Harl,” Jane called. “I’m back here in the bedroom.”

The front door of the cottage opened and closed. The floorboards squeaked under his weight as the newly appointed state’s attorney of Palmetto County walked down the hall and through the open doorway of the bedroom. He walked halfway into the room and stood looking at the black-haired girl on the bed.

“Now,” Jane screamed. “Now, Tod. For God’s sake pull that trigger.”

177
“No,” Talbot said as Harlan whirled to face him. “My killing Harl or Harl’s killing me wouldn’t solve anything for either of us.”

Harlan lowered the gun he’d slipped from his shoulder holster as he turned. His voice was as tired as his face. “I thought I might find you here, Tod.”

Talbot rested the pistol Jane had given him on his knee. “It’s quite a mess, hey, Harl?”

Harlan backed to a position against the wall from which he could see both Jane and Talbot. “Yes. Seems to be one of those cases they didn’t teach us about in law school.”

Jane’s face was contorted with anger. She sat up on the bed and swung her bare feet to the floor. “I warned you not to talk to him. Kill Harl before he kills you.”

“There’s plenty of time,” Talbot said. “We’re both good shots. We can’t miss at the distance.”

“No,” Harlan agreed. “Hardly.” His voice was surprisingly gentle. “How much has Jane told you, Tod?”

“Just that you forced her against her will.”

The sound was more an expulsion of air than a word. “Oh,” Harlan breathed. “And when did this take place?”

“About an hour ago.”

“In this room?”

“In this room.”

“I see.”

“You admit you were here?”

“I do.”

Jane pressed her palms to the side of her head and ran them back over her hair. She sounded as if she was trying to convince herself of the truth of the allegation. “Harl raped me. Right on this bed. I tried to fight him and he struck me with his fist. He said if I didn’t let
him have me, he’d kill me. But even then I fought him.”

Talbot looked from her to Harlan. “You’ve always been in love with Jane, haven’t you, Harl?”

Harlan nodded. “That’s right. Madly in love with her. Ever since the three of us were kids.”

Talbot asked, “And a trifle jealous of me?”

“Yes, that, too,” Harlan admitted. “For more reasons than one.” He continued to cover Talbot with his gun as he felt in his coat pocket for a package of the small cigars he smoked. “And I had reason. When we were kids in school you always got the A’s while I had to be content with A minus.” He put a cigar between his lips and lit it. “You were captain of the football team. All I was, was an end. And the same in the army. You were a captain. I was a first lieutenant. Not far behind you, but always just one step. Then, of course, there’s always been Jane. We both courted her but I wound up as best man. It followed that when you became state’s attorney I would be your assistant.”

“And it galled you,” Jane taunted. “Back of that Cracker poker-face of yours it made you boiling mad. That’s why you lost your head and did what you did to me tonight. That’s why you framed Tod out of his job.”

Harlan looked at Talbot. “Is that the way you have it figured, Tod?”

It was an effort for Talbot to breathe normally. “It’s logical,” he said quietly. “You had both motive and opportunity. You knew what would happen if I sent a reputedly innocent man to the chair.”

Harlan nodded. “What would happen to any state’s attorney.”

Talbot continued, “There’s no way of proving you
haven’t been working against me all this time, that you didn’t pick Vickie Paul out of our files and sic her on Eddie Marlow to keep him put and content until it was time to forge that phoney confession and kill him.”

“And Beth Conley—?” Harlan asked.

Jane answered before Talbot could. “She knew. The chances are you’ve been playing house with her ever since her husband was first arrested. She probably gave you the five thousand dollars in stolen money you planted in Marlow’s suitcase. Then when the confession came out and Tod was forced to resign she tried to blackmail you and you killed her and framed her murder on Tod.”

Harlan rolled his cigar between his lips. “Is that the way you have it figured, Tod?”

Instead of answering, Talbot pointed to a pair of china figurines on the dresser, a shepherdess and a shepherd. “Do you think you could hit that shepherdess, Harl?”

Harlan lifted his revolver. The report filled the room. The two-inch high shepherdess disappeared. Lead slapped into the plaster wall.

Talbot nodded his approval. “Nice shooting. How are you with a rifle?”

“I qualified as a sharpshooter.”

“At what distance?”

“The usual. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred yards.”

“Then, using a rifle, you think you could hit a man at two hundred feet?”

“I’d have to be drunk to miss him.”

Jane stood up beside the bed. “This is insane. If you love me, Tod, kill Harl.”

Talbot ignored her. Harlan said, “But in shooting, as
in everything else, you’ve always shaded me a trifle. I made sharpshooter. You made expert.” He nodded at the figure still standing on the dresser. “Okay. I got the girl. Let’s see you get the boy.”

Talbot shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Talbot pointed the pistol at the figurine and pulled the trigger four times. The room rocked with the blast of the shots but the figurine remained intact. There was no slap of lead on plaster.

“That’s why,” Talbot said quietly. “Because the shells in my gun are blank, the gun my beloved wife gave me to go get tough with Luke Adama, hoping Luke would fill my guts with lead, just as she hoped you’d kill me when I pointed the damn thing at you.”


Talbot studied her face. He had the same sensation he had experienced in the bathroom. It was as if he were seeing her for the first time, seeing the cunning, greedy, mind behind the facade of well-bred respectability. “Of course, it would have been better,” he said, “if she could have reloaded the gun with live shells. That way we could have killed each other and she wouldn’t have to bother with tricking or killing you. Unfortunately, the gun was in my possession. And she probably figured one dead man was better than none.”

Talbot continued. “What else can I think? You said it in the bathroom when you were flaunting your body like a red lamp in the window of a parlor house. How dumb
can a man be? For how long? It's you. It's been you all along."

Jane ran her hands over her breasts as if they pained her. "What do you mean by that?"

Talbot told her. "I mean you're the one who hates me. You hated me even when you were lying in my arms. You've hated me since the day we were married, first because you felt you had married beneath you, then because I turned out to be an honest state's attorney instead of a lovesick Cracker who jumped whenever you snapped your fingers, whenever you condescended to open your arms."

"You can't believe that, Tod."

"I know it. Just as you knew James Conley was guilty when you took his case. Money is your god. It always has been. What did Conley have to do to engage the wife of the state's attorney as counsel for the defense, turn over the bank loot to you?"

Jane was patient with him. "You don't realize what you're saying, Tod. You've been through too much."

Talbot wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Don't be patient with me. Don't be a Painter. I've more respect for a two-dollar tart. She doesn't pretend to be anything but what she is. You never went to Reno. You never filed for a divorce. The farthest you got was Tampa. It was you with your hair bleached or tinted who slept with Eddie Marlow for two weeks, then killed him in a last desperate attempt to stay Conley's execution, to earn your fee, to prove how smart you are. Money and position and being winner are all that matter to you. At that, you almost saved Conley. You would have if it hadn't been for one of the little things—a maid
getting sick and another maid having to take over her rooms."

Jane took a cigarette from the package on the bed table and crumpled it between her fingers. "And Beth Conley—?"

"Beth Conley tried to blackmail you, not Harl. She knew what you'd done and she threatened to blow the whistle. After all, you had promised to get Jim off—which was why they gave you half the spoils. You failed, and Beth meant to get back the money. So you did the only thing you could—you killed her. And because you were still afraid of me, because I refused to take what had happened to me lying down, you made the phone call that got me to the Conley house, then slugged and shot me and left me to die beside her."

Jane opened her fingers and let the tobacco dribble to the floor. "You can't believe what you're saying, Tod. You can't believe a word of it. I love you."

Talbot watched the last of his dream die. "You don't know the meaning of the word. But you are right about me being dumb." He thought of what Vickie had said in the fish camp. 'A woman can set a spare table. She can feed a man pig pork an' collards. She can gad all around the country. But as long as once in a while she loves him good an' ooohs an' ahs an' makes him think he's a better lover than Kirk Douglas an' Marlon Brando an' Elsie the Cow's husband all rolled into one, she can keep him eating right out of her hand.' He continued quietly. "I should have known all this last night when you put on that hot lips act, when you tried to get me out of the country or shot before I stumbled over the truth that was right in front of my nose all the time. I should have known at the fish camp. Harl might have guessed I was
there. You knew. And if Harl had fired five shots at me I wouldn’t be here. I’d be dead.”

Jane’s negligee floated behind her as she took a few steps away from the bed. She made no attempt to cover herself. Her voice was that of a little girl unjustly accused of stealing cookies. “You don’t believe that, do you, Harl?”

Harlan’s smile was wry. “Don’t try to bribe an officer of the court in the performance of his duty, Jane. Besides, I’ve already had you. I took you against your will, remember? When the truth of the matter is you got me out here earlier tonight and offered yourself to me, because you were afraid things were going against you, because you wanted a friend in court. It was a good try, Jane. You had me fooled for a long time. You had all of us fooled. And as Tod just said, you almost got away with it.”

Talbot crossed the room and sat on the sill of an open window. “How long have you known, Harl?”

Harlan said, “Since this morning. Since I checked with the Reno court and the Reno police. Then, too, the Tampa boys found a beauty shop where a pretty blonde answering the description of the girl who had been shacked up with Marlow had her naturally black hair dyed its normal color within an hour of the time Eddie Marlow was killed. In fact we’ve had a hell of a time not arresting you. But we were afraid if we did, Jane would panic and blow before we could prove what we knew.”

Jane’s tone was slightly superior. “You’re guessing, both of you. You can’t prove a thing.”

“Not so far,” Harlan admitted. “That’s why I didn’t arrest you when I came out here the first time tonight to find you practically hysterical—I know now it was because
you failed to kill Tod at the fish camp. You figured with Tod dead the investigation would sag and, eventually, we'd write the whole case off the books."

"But why?" Talbot asked. "I mean what started all this? Why did Jane need money so badly?"

Harlan said, "That's another thing still to be proved. But, knowing Jane, I imagine she has been using money entrusted to her by her clients. In fact two complaints came in today from people who figured it was useless to bring their suspicions to the law as long as she was married to the state's attorney. She was probably facing exposure and disbarment when the Conley case came along and she grabbed at the fee he offered, probably half or all of the bank loot. That's something only Jane can tell us. She figured she could handle you and, if she couldn't, she could beat you in court. But she couldn't handle you and you were too good a prosecutor. You sent Conley to the chair and ruined everything for her."

Jane wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "What happens now?"

"I'll have to take you down to the courthouse," Harlan said.

Jane was amused. "Like this?"

"No. Get dressed."

"Whatever you say." Jane dropped the negligee on the floor and padded barefooted across the bedroom to get a clean bra and a half slip from one of the dresser drawers. Then, sitting in the slipper chair, she drew on a pair of stockings, slowly, carefully, crossing one leg over the other, making certain both men realized what they were sacrificing.

Talbot was embarrassed, for himself, for Jane, for Harl. Jane was amused by his embarrassment. "You act like
you never saw a woman before. But as one of you southern gentlemen suggested, my body doesn't matter. It's only a tool and you'd be surprised how much help a pretty body is to a woman lawyer. I often wondered why neither of you figured out how I got so many hung juries, why one male juror always held out."

Harlan looked at the floor. Talbot continued to look at Jane, mentally comparing her to Vickie. It wasn't Vickie who was cheap. It was Jane. Breeding and family background had nothing to do with being a lady. Being a lady was an inner personal decency, a state of mind.

Jane put on high-heeled shoes and pulled a dress over her head. Then she opened her big shoulder bag and applied lipstick in front of the mirror. "So I missed. I came close." She compressed her lips on a piece of tissue. "And who knows? I still may come clear of this."

"What are you talking about?" Talbot asked her.

Jane dug deeper into her purse as if looking for her compact. When she turned she had an automatic pistol in her hand. "This," she said coldly. "I offered to leave town with you. I offered the same thing to Harl. But as both of you turned me down, it looks as if I'll be taking a plane by myself."

"I've a gun, too, Jane," Harlan said.

Jane's smile was cynical. "But you wouldn't use it on a woman. Cracker or not, you're too much of a goddamn gentleman. But I have no such scruples. Toss your gun on the bed, Harl."

Harlan tossed his gun on the bed.

Jane backed toward the bedroom clothes closet and picked a smart director's case from the floor. "I'm walking out of here if I have to kill both of you. In fact I think I will. That will give me a few hours start while the
police mill around, thinking you killed each other.”

Harlan sucked in his breath. “Just like you killed Eddie Marlow and Beth Conley.”

Jane taunted him. “That’s right. Just like I killed Eddie Marlow and Beth Conley. Once I got into this thing, the only way I could go was on. It’s still the only way I can go.”

“No, Jane,” Harlan said quietly. “It’s over. You’re caught.”

Jane’s smile was insulting and superior as she backed to the door of the bedroom. “Caught? By whom?”

The door flew open. Sergeant Graham reached over her shoulder and twisted the gun from her fingers. “I’ll do for a starter, miss. If I’m not enough, the hall back of me is filled with men. And there are more men outside.”

He took the director’s case from her and walked on into the room. His place in the doorway was immediately filled by Lieutenant Keller.

“I’m sorry, Tod,” Keller apologized. “I mean about treating you the way I did. I was dumb enough to think you’d killed the Conley dame. Then when we did get wise, it seemed best to play along with Mrs. Talbot until we could catch her with the money.”

“It’s in here, I imagine,” Sergeant Graham said. He set the case on the bed and opened it. “Yeah. At least most of it.”

Jane looked from the packed sheaves of bills in the open case to Harlan. Her face was an evil thing of ugly angles. “You bastard. You big Cracker bastard,” she cursed him. Then, covering her face with her hands, she sank sobbing into the yellow satin slipper chair.
THE HOSPITAL CORRIDOR was filled with the hush of early morning. Talbot stood a moment in front of the elevator looking through the dimness at the oasis of light formed by the lamp on the desk of the nurse on duty. He should be tired. He wasn't.

The last few hours had not been pleasant. The next few weeks and months would be even less so. It was never pleasant to bury a dream. Then there was Jane's trial to face. God only knew what she would claim or try to prove. A lot of facts and angles remained to be uncovered. But that was police and state's attorney business, not his. Harlan had offered to resign. Harlan had wanted to call the attorney general, but he had refused to listen to such a thing. He didn't want to be reappointed state's attorney. He had found out something: he wasn't smart or tough enough for the job. Harlan could be the big man, politically, he had once dreamed of being. For once Harlan could be top dog. He'd earned it.

Talbot tiptoed down the hall to the desk. The nurse, a middle-aged woman with prematurely white hair, looked up from her record-keeping.
“Oh, yes,” she said. “Sister Collete phoned you were on your way up. It’s very irregular, but in this case perhaps wise.”

“How is she?” Talbot asked.

“Holding her own,” the nurse said. “But up until now I’ve had the distinct impression Miss Paul didn’t much care which way it went.”

“I see,” Talbot said soberly.

He followed the nurse down the hall and through the door she opened. Vickie’s bright straw-colored hair was combed straight, back and braided into twin braids. She looked pathetically wan and tiny on the high hospital bed. She was awake, lying with her face to the window looking at the brightening dawn.

The nurse was professionally cheerful. “Is there anything you want, Miss Paul?”

Vickie said without turning, “Just one thing. And you can’t give it to me.”

“Maybe I can,” the nurse smiled. “Now don’t stay too long,” she warned Talbot.

“I won’t,” he said. “I promise.”

Vickie turned her head at the sound of his voice. Talbot stood by the side of the bed covering one of her small hands with his big one. “Now listen and don’t try to talk. They tell me you’re still in danger. But it’s over and I’m in the clear. And all that matters now is for you to get well.”

Vickie’s big eyes searched his face. “You’re not just saying that?”

“No,” Talbot said. “It’s still a mess. God knows what the newspapers will say about me, about you. But both the police and the state’s attorney’s office know the truth.
It's been Jane all the time. You suspected her, didn't you? That's what you meant in the fish camp when you said 'All cats are one color in the dark. You can even change a cat's color . . .'

Vickie moved her head in a barely perceptible nod. Talbot continued. "It was Jane who stayed with and killed Eddie Marlow. It was Jane who shot Beth Conley. It was Jane who shot you in a desperate attempt to kill me."

Vickie's eyes continued to search his face. "And you aren't sorry?"

"No," Talbot said. He tried to analyze his feelings. He wasn't sorry. He didn't even feel angry. In her greed and arrogance and pride Jane had befouled a dream that could have been very lovely. But he had a new dream now. It wouldn't matter to Vickie what he did or how much money he made. He could go into private practice. He could open a bait camp. It wouldn't matter to Vickie. She had come to him out of nowhere, because he needed her. She had asked nothing and given everything she had. Her love and her faith had never faltered.

Her small hand moved under his as she repeated what she had told him the very first night they had met. "I told you I'd stay for just as long as you wanted me to, then when you told me to go away I would. Do you want me to go away, Tod?"

Talbot bent over the bed and kissed her. "You know better than that."

Vickie's voice was small but fierce as her lips drew strength from his. "Then I won't go."

"Never?"

"Never," Vicki promised.
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