Why Detroit Won't Talk About The New Super-Gas

THE NEW

# Bluebook

MAY 1955

25 CENTS

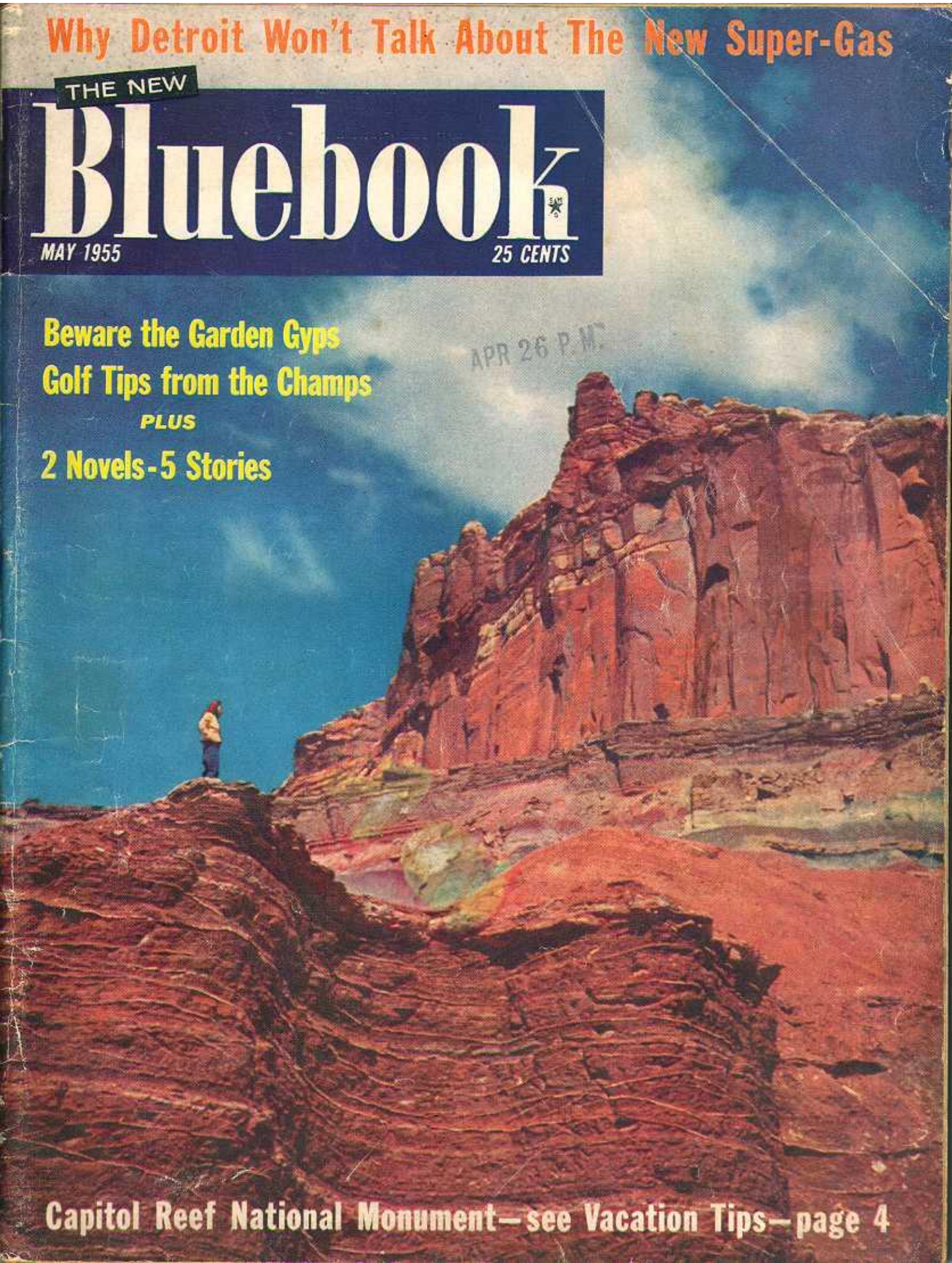
Beware the Garden Gyps

Golf Tips from the Champs

PLUS

2 Novels - 5 Stories





Capitol Reef National Monument—see Vacation Tips—page 4

E. M. Huff

# Bluebook

MAY, 1955 Vol. 101, No. 1

Trademark Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.



**ARTICLES**



**STORIES**



**NOVELS**



**FEATURES**



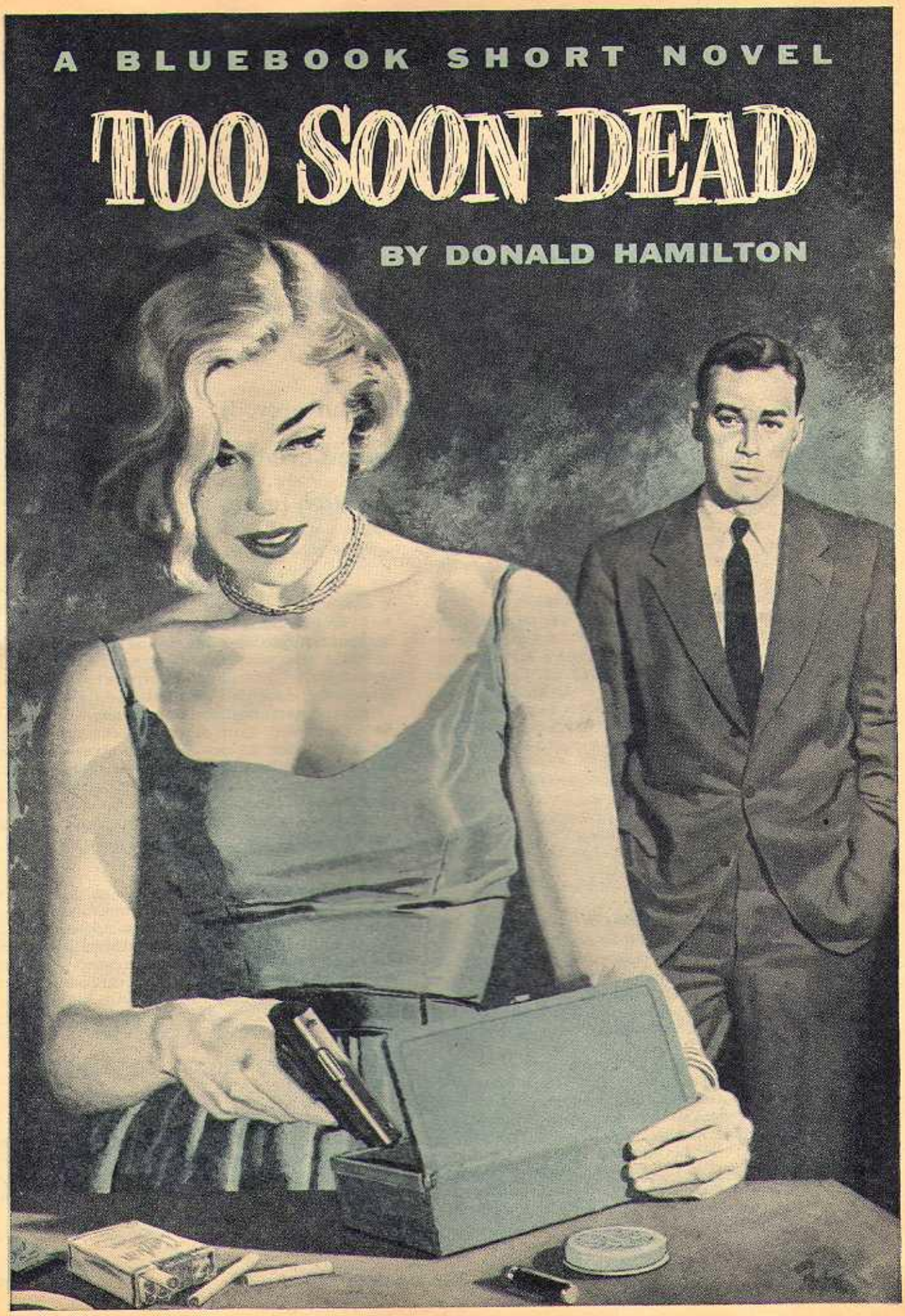
*The short stories and novels herein are fiction and intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.*

BLUEBOOK MAGAZINE is published each month simultaneously in the United States and Canada by McCall Corporation. Marvin Pierce, President; Lowel Shumway, Vice-President and Circulation Director; Edward M. Brown, Secretary; William C. Auer, Treasurer. Publication and Subscription Offices: McCall Street, Dayton 1, Ohio. Executive and Editorial Offices: 230 Park Ave., New York 17, N.Y. MANUSCRIPTS and ART MATERIAL will be carefully considered but will be received only with the understanding that the publisher and editor shall not be responsible for loss or injury. SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION: $2.50 for one year, $4.00 for two years, $6.00 for three years in U.S., Canada and Pan-American countries (Add $1.00 per year for other countries). Send all remittances and correspondence about subscriptions to our publication office: McCall Street, Dayton 1, Ohio. IF YOU PLAN TO MOVE SOON please notify us four weeks in advance. Subscription lists are addressed in advance of publication date and extra postage is charged for forwarding. On sending notice of change of address give old address as well as new, preferably clipping name and old address from last copy received. MAY ISSUE, 1955. VOL. CI, No. 1.  Printed in U.S.A. Entered as second-class matter November 12, 1930, at the Post Office at Dayton, Ohio, under the Act of March 3, 1879.

A BLUEBOOK SHORT NOVEL

# TOO SOON DEAD

BY DONALD HAMILTON



# TOO SOON DEAD

## BY DONALD HAMILTON

**She was a cute kid, hard and bright–and sexy. To Paul McLane she looked as if she'd be fun to spend an evening with on that interrupted bus trip. And she was, up to a point–a gun-point.**

PAT DROVE HIM to the bus station. He was not quite sure that she would get out of the car to say goodby, but when he turned after getting his suitcase from the back seat, she was standing there, tall and slender. She looked very smart in one of those striped cotton suits, high-heeled shoes, gloves, and a hat; she always dressed up a little to come in to Washington, particularly after dark. She was lovely and remote, like a photograph in a fashion magazine.

"Take care of yourself, Paul," she said.

He nodded. "You too."

He saw her hesitate; but there was, after all, no more to be said. She turned abruptly away and got into the car. He lifted his hand as she drove away, but she either did not see, or ignored, the gesture. He picked up his bag and walked quickly into the bus station.

The ticket cost him a little over $40. After getting on the bus, he paid a quarter for the use of a pillow. By the time they reached the rest stop back in the West Virginia mountains he was too nearly asleep to want to go out for coffee. Then the child in the seat behind him woke up and began to cry.

"Mommy!" she whimpered. "I want my mommy!"

Somehow, they all sounded alike when they woke up in the night like that; and Paul McLane shivered abruptly, and rose, and made his way out of the bus without looking back. Outside, it was raining. He could feel himself in the mountains without being able to see anything beyond the lights of the lodge and of the bus parked in front of it, until a car went by on the nearby highway with a hissing sound and a brief flash of illumination, almost like lightning. Then it was dark again.

The bus looked large and wet and prehistoric, in the rain. Inside it, someone was attempting to calm the child, who was developing a typical case of midnight hysterics. McLane went quickly into the lodge. The closing door shut off the sound behind him.

In the restaurant, a dozen passengers and the bus driver occupied most of the stools along the semicircular counter, inside which two girls worked to fill the orders, assisted by someone invisible but audible in the kitchen. There were racks of souvenirs and postcards near the cash register, and a sign on the wall,

ATTENTION, PATRONS: KNIVES, FORKS, SPOONS, ASHTRAYS, AND SALT SHAKERS—NOT A MEDICINE. PLEASE DO NOT TAKE AFTER MEALS

An electric clock above the sign gave the time as a few minutes past four in the morning.

McLane started towards the nearest empty stool, but an obscure sense of duty prevented him from sitting down. He looked around irritably, and moved towards the blonde girl near the end of the counter. She was holding a mug of coffee with both hands and staring into it with a kind of numb and bitter sleepiness. She did not look up, even when he stopped beside her.

"Pardon me," McLane said. "Pardon me, but your little girl is crying."

The blonde girl turned her head slowly to look at him. She was younger than he had thought, not much older than the girls he was accustomed to seeing in his classroom, and she was dressed similarly, in a flounced black peasant skirt, a thin white blouse, and those ridiculous shoes—if you could call them shoes—that were supposed to resemble ballet slippers and actually looked as if they belonged in a bedroom.

Ten years of college teaching had taught McLane a good deal about sizing up students; and he knew instantly that he could have trouble with this girl. She had a street-urchin face with a wide mouth, a turned-up nose, and bright, sharp, sarcastic eyes. In college, she would be the class comic and her tart remarks would keep the boys and girls in stitches for the whole semester, if she was not squelched at the start.

He knew, also, that he had made an embarrassing mistake, even before the girl shook back her short blonde hair with a startled movement, and said, "My God, Mister, do I *look* like a mother?"

He said, "You were sitting beside—"

"If I sat beside you, would that make me your mother?" She hesitated, grimaced, and snapped her handbag shut after dropping a coin on the counter. "Well, if the brat's crying, I guess somebody'd better look after her, although I don't know why the hell I—"

As she rose from her stool, the door opened, and a plump, middleaged woman in a print dress entered, leading the little girl, who was still sobbing loudly, but in a mechanical way that suggested that the worst paroxysms might be past. Upon seeing the girl beside Paul McLane, the child stopped and cried accusingly:

"You leaved me! You leaved me all alone!"

The plump woman urged her along saying, "Never mind, honey. I'm sure the nice lady didn't know you'd wake up and be scared. Now climb up on that stool and say what you want to drink."

"I don't wants anything to drink." She was a small girl with curly dark hair and the bellicose and challenging manner of any child getting over a tantrum. She was wearing a pink sweater over a ruffled yellow dress that was rather grubby and wilted now, after several hours on the bus. "I don't wants anything to drink," she repeated belligerently. "I wants a nice cream cone."

"All right, honey," the woman said. "Wait a minute while I tie your sash, now. All right, up you go. What flavor?"

One of the male passengers, an older man in a neat brown suit, stirred at the counter and said primly, "I really don't think the child should be given ice cream at this hour of the night. Perhaps a cup of hot chocolate—"

"I don't wants no hot chocolate! I wants a nice cream cone!"

The little girl was indignant, and ready to start screaming again. McLane noticed, as she turned on the stool, the badge pinned to the front of her dress. The card behind the celluloid window was neatly lettered in ink:

> MY NAME IS CECELIA EMILY BAXTER, EVERYBODY CALLS ME "BOOTSIE."
> I AM GOING HOME TO MY MOTHER, MRS. EMILY BAXTER,
> 238 SAN JUAN ROAD, ALBUQUERQUE, N. M.
> PLEASE HELP ME. THANK YOU.

The plump woman had swung about to face the man who had spoken. "A little ice cream never hurt any of my kids, Mister!" she said angrily.

"Well, I really think—"

"Ah, listen, Mac," the bus driver said, "Ice cream's good for them. My kids—"

The man in the brown suit said stiffly, "I have two children of my own. And they don't get ice cream at four o'clock in the morning."

A woman spoke up from some distance down the counter, "Heavens, that little thing isn't traveling all by herself, is she? Why, my little boy is eight and I wouldn't dream of sending him off on a bus alone!"

It seemed that everyone in the place had children, knew all about children, and had very definite ideas about what they should or should not eat at four in the morning. McLane went back to his seat on the bus. After a while they all came back, the little girl licking happily on a strawberry ice cream cone; and the bus started off again.

## 2

BY MORNING, the rain had stopped, but mist lay heavy in the mountain valleys through which they passed to emerge at last in clear, pale sunshine. They rolled down a steep grade into a town where the driver turned the bus off the street into a parking area resembling a railroad station, with sheltered platforms. He announced that they had 20 minutes for breakfast. McLane washed up quickly, thought about a shave, and decided his hunger was greater than his self-respect.

The restaurant was a big, noisy, pillared room containing several horseshoe-shaped counters presided over by half a dozen harassed waitresses, one of whom shoved a menu and a glass of water at him as he sat down. She drew him a cup of coffee from a stainless steel urn, shouting his order to the cook as she did so in a language that sounded like gibberish.

McLane sipped the hot coffee cautiously, while the noise of the place washed over him in waves. Around him were passengers from several buses beside his own, in different stages of being fed. He was aware of a rustling sound as someone sat down on the next stool.

A voice said, "Well, I see they've got the little monster cleaned up."

He glanced at the blonde girl, who was settling herself beside him; and followed the direction of her gaze to the door, where the plump woman was just leading the little girl into the room. The child had been scrubbed clean of the accumulated dirt and ice cream of the night; and her grimy yellow dress had been replaced by a fresh two-piece sun suit.

The blonde girl grimaced. "Maybe I wasn't brought up right," she said, "but a halter or bra on a kid that age always looks damn silly to me. What's the sense in covering up something that isn't there, for God's sake?"

She did not seem to expect a reply, but opened her purse and began to comb her hair. McLane sipped his coffee in silence, not looking at her: it always embarrassed him a little to see a woman doing this in

---

***Illustration by MILLER POPE***

public. The girl put her comb away and went to work with a lipstick.

Presently her voice addressed him: "Pass the sugar, will you, Mac?"

A little taken aback, he glanced at her. "Certainly," he said after a moment, complying with her request.

She had noticed his hesitation. "What's the matter?" she demanded; then she laughed. "Don't tell me your name really *is* Mac!"

McLane nodded. "McLane," he said.

"Well," she said, "hi, McLane. I'm Connie. Connie Janicek." She made no more of the introduction than this, but looked down the room and said, "You know, the more I think of that, the madder I get."

"Think of what?" McLane asked.

"Why, putting a kid that age on a bus and expecting other people to take care of it. After all, the driver isn't going to; he's got the bus to drive. It's not like a plane with a stewardess." Connie Janicek stirred her coffee. "The funny thing is, she told me she came east by plane. It seems her folks are divorced, or separated or something, and she spends a month with her papa every spring." The girl laughed shortly. "Her mama sends her to Washington by plane, I guess, and her papa ships her back to Albuquerque by bus. All I can say is, Papa's got a hell of a nerve, wishing the brat off on a lot of helpless passengers."

McLane said, "Well, some people like to take care of children."

"I like to take care of them," Connie Janicek said. "Sure. For seventy-five cents an hour, I love it. But for free, nix. Have you got any kids, Mac?"

He did not look at her. "No," he said.

"But you're married," she said, looking at the wedding band on his hand.

"Yes." He could not help speaking curtly.

She glanced at his face with some interest. "Oh," she said. "Oh—oh. Trouble?"

"No," he said.

"I know," she said, sighing. "It's none of my damn business; but if you wanted privacy so damn badly, Mac, you should have driven your own car instead of taking a bus." He did not say anything to this, and she asked, "Where are you from, anyway?"

"Bayport, Maryland."

"Bayport? They've got a college there, haven't they?" She frowned, studying him. "I've got it; you're a teacher. I was wondering where you got that brooding, big-brain look. Well, go ahead and brood, Professor. I'm going over and make friends with the brat again, just for practice. I used to be able to make them eat out of my hand, when I was working at it."

She finished the coffee, apparently the only breakfast she required, and slipped off the stool. McLane watched her move away. She was a compact, small-waisted, well-proportioned girl; however, the rather long, full, peasant skirt and the ballet slippers combined to give her a sawed-off look, and also effectively disguised the shape of her legs and ankles.

McLane turned back to his breakfast, a little annoyed with himself. As a married man and a college teacher he had, in self-defense, trained himself to look upon female students, and all girls in that general age group, as kids, not to be taken seriously. It saved him a lot of trouble around campus, particularly when the more glamorous ones got the notion that a little work on the professor wouldn't hurt their grades. He was therefore disconcerted to find himself giving the masculine eye to the first attractive young lady he happened to meet, less than 24 hours from home. It was a warning, he reflected: already he was lonelier than he had thought possible, under the circumstances. *That's a nice, innocuous word for it,* he thought—*circumstances.*

Presently they were all filing out to the bus together, and a new driver took them out of town. By lunch time they had left West Virginia behind and were well into Ohio; it was amazing how much mileage a good driver could pile up, even with such a clumsy vehicle, simply by plugging right along, hour after hour. After lunch, McLane fell asleep, awakening with a start to find Connie Janicek standing in the aisle, grinning down at him. The bus was not moving. She had a hand on his shoulder.

"Better grab your bag, Professor," she said. "They're switching horses on us."

He sat up, as she moved along, maneuvering her small suitcase down the aisle ahead of her. When the aisle had cleared, he followed the other passengers off the bus and into the station. The girl was standing just inside the door, having paused to put on fresh lipstick. He hesitated. She looked up and saw him there.

"Some endurance contest," she said, and yawned, stretched, and rubbed her back. "Sometimes it feels like even walking would be an improvement."

He laughed, and they moved to the counter together for coffee. Then they were off again with a new bus and driver, the two of them sharing a seat now. Neither had anything to say; presently the girl made herself comfortable and went to sleep. McLane looked at her with some envy, and with a little uneasiness, unsure of her motives in being friendly, and of his own. He watched the flat farming country of Indiana roll past the windows, very different from the mountains of the morning. He felt groggy from too much coffee and too little sleep; and when they stopped for dinner he did not go into the restaurant with the girl, but excused himself and carried his suitcase into the washroom, where he shaved and changed his shirt. This helped somewhat; and a sandwich and a glass of milk at the 10 o'clock rest stop finished the job, so that when they pulled into St. Louis after midnight he was feeling strong and rugged, ready for the next thousand miles. He had, he decided, got his second wind.

"Well, here's where I leave you, Professor," the girl said, rising to pull her bag from the rack. "Take it easy. So long."

"So long," he said, and watched her move away; then shrugged briefly, and reached up for his own bag.

The driver was telling all through-passengers to reserve space on the express west. McLane asked about this and was referred to Window 12, inside the station. Waiting in line here, he saw that Connie Janicek was nowhere in sight. He knew a faint regret, and a certain relief; life was, after all, complicated enough for him without his making friends with stray blondes in peek-a-boo blouses.

Then there was a policeman on either side of him, and one of them was speaking to a third individual, in a bus driver's uniform.

"Is this the guy?"

The driver seemed uneasy. He said, "Well, I guess so. He was a tallish bird in a gray suit. Yeh, that's the guy."

The policeman who had first spoken took McLane's arm. The one who had said nothing picked up McLane's suitcase. The first man said, "Let's go, Mac."

The second man glanced down at the suitcase and said, "Hell, Bert, you're psychic tonight: look."

He pointed to the initials on the suitcase he was holding: *P. H. McL.* Both men laughed. The first one tightened his grip on McLane's arm.

"Okay, Mac, let's go."

# 3

THE MAN BEHIND the desk had a football player's shoulders and a smooth, executive's face. He wore a blue summer-worsted suit and a thin, striped bow-tie. The man lounging in the swivel armchair beside the desk had white hair and a red face and wore a policeman's uniform, but the insignia on the cap he had laid aside were gold instead of silver. There was another uniformed man in the room, but he did not count. He was just there to take it all down in shorthand.

The room was air-conditioned and newly decorated. It was several stories off the ground. McLane was not quite sure how many, nor did he have any idea where the building was located, except that it was some distance from the bus station. It was hard to keep track of direction when you were being driven at night through a city strange to you, particularly when it was your first experience of riding in a police car. He had been kept waiting half an hour in the outer office; and now that they had at last seen fit to grant him an audience McLane had certain things to say, but the man behind the desk cut him short.

"We fully realize that you've been inconvenienced, Dr. McLane," the man said, "and I apologize for the crude behavior of the policeman who picked you up, but there was no time to issue engraved invitations. Now sit down."

McLane looked about the newly modernized office that still smelled of paint. The young policeman at the small desk in the corner waited for his words with a ready pencil. It seemed like a poor place for a display of temper.

"I'll stand," McLane said. "I've been sitting for twenty-four hours."

"Suit yourself," the man behind the desk said. "Incidentally, my name is North, and here's my authority for making you miss your bus." He slid an open identification folder across the desk, leaving it there long enough for McLane to read the words: *Department of Justice*. "This is Lieutenant Van Sant of the St. Louis police," Mr. North went on. "His department is cooperating with us, as are the State Police."

McLane said, "I feel a little outnumbered. What's the trouble, anyway?" It annoyed him that the palms of his hands were wet; he had the average man's mistrust of the law, or at least of the men who represented the law.

"We'll ask the questions," Mr. North said curtly. "Your name is Paul Howard McLane, is that right? You live at 127 Beach Street, Bayport, Maryland. You are thirty-three years old, married, you have a degree from Hopkins, and your occupation is teaching mathematics at Bayport College. I'm just repeating what you told the officers who brought you here; correct me if I'm wrong." McLane shook his head, and the man behind the desk went on: "A little more than twenty-four hours ago—a little after eleven the evening of the eighteenth—you bought a ticket at the bus depot in Washington, D. C., and got aboard the eleven-thirty west-bound bus. You rented a pillow from a man who came aboard and changed a five-dollar bill to pay for it."

McLane said, "I didn't tell the officers that."

Mr. North smiled briefly. "No. The man remembered changing the five for you. Would you mind telling me how you got to the Washington bus station?"

"My wife drove me up from Bayport; it's only some thirty miles." A thought struck him and he took a step forward. "Has something happened to Pat? Didn't she get home all right? Is that what—"

Mr. North looked up slowly. "Why do you ask that? Do you know of any reason why anything should have happened to your wife? Have you made any enemies that might want to harm her?"

McLane reached the desk and leaned over it. "Damn it, tell me—"

The other man smiled briefly, "Relax, Dr. McLane. Your wife is all right, as far as I know. We've had no report on her as yet."

McLane looked at him over the desk, feeling a little sick and furiously angry; but the detached regard of the other man checked his impulse to violence. He understood that he was being goaded deliberately so that these men could study his reactions, for some purpose that was not yet clear. He swung about and lowered himself into the chair that had been offered him earlier.

Mr. North said, "What was your destination, Dr. McLane?"

"Albuquerque," McLane said stiffly. "Albuquerque, New Mexico."

"And your purpose in going there?"

"Business," McLane said.

"I'm afraid we want a little more than that."

McLane said, "Do you always get what you want, Mr. North? Tell me one thing: am I under arrest?"

"No."

"Am I suspected of a crime?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I want to know," McLane said, "what happens if I refuse to answer any more questions until I'm told what this is all about."

The man behind the desk looked at him for a moment; then grinned abruptly. "What's the matter, Dr. McLane? Aren't I polite enough for you?"

McLane said stiffly, "No, you're not. Either I'm suspected of a crime, in which case I'm entitled to have a lawyer standing by, or I'm helping you out with in-

formation you need. In the latter case it wouldn't hurt you to be civil, damn it!"

Mr. North inclined his head minutely. "Very well," he said. "We'll try it this way. Would you please be so kind as to state the nature of your business in Albuquerque, Dr. McLane, if it's not too much to ask."

He grinned again. He had a nice, boyish grin; and McLane laughed reluctantly. "All right, I don't mind, although I'd rather it didn't get back to Bayport. I was—am—on my way to Albuquerque to see a man about a job."

"The man's name?"

"Dr. Walker Smith, head of the mathematics department at the University of New Mexico."

"Dr. Smith will corroborate that, I suppose."

"I don't see why not. I sent him a wire before I left home."

"Oh," Mr. North said, "then it wasn't a prearranged visit?"

"Well, in a way it was. We'd talked about it at the meetings in Chicago last January; he said he'd have an opening in the department next year and if I was interested, to come on down this spring and look around. I said I'd think it over."

Mr. North said, "It looks as if you're a man of sudden decisions, Doctor."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, apparently you let this one ride from January until a couple of hours after dinner the night before last. Then you shoot off a wire and rush off to catch a bus. Why a bus, Dr. McLane? If you were in that much of a hurry, why not a train or a plane?"

"I wanted time to think things out a little," McLane said.

"Then why didn't you drive your own car? That would have given you plenty of time for thinking."

"I don't drive very much. I—" He could not help the brief hesitation. "I don't like to drive."

"Your wife could have driven; apparently she doesn't mind a sixty mile drive in the middle of the night. Why didn't you take her along, Dr. McLane? After all, if you take a position in Albuquerque, she's going to have to live there, too, isn't she?"

McLane did not answer at once; then he said, "There is something wrong with Pat, isn't there? You keep working around to her."

Mr. North shook his head. "I assure you, I have no information about your wife, one way or the other." He grinned his boyish, engaging grin once more; apparently he could turn the charm on at will. "It's just the technique, Dr. McLane. The hand is quicker than the eye. I'm distracting your attention from the main issue. . . . Now, about the bus. Where did you sit?"

"This is the bus out of Washington?" McLane asked. "I've been on several since then, you know." The other man nodded; and McLane said, "It was on the right side, pretty well forward, as I recall."

"Do you remember any of the other bus passengers?"

McLane nodded. "Why, yes. There were a couple of servicemen in front of me—"

"What branch of the service?"

"Army."

"Any others you remember?"

"A child and a young woman behind me. I made the mistake of thinking they were together and—"

"Any others?"

"Well, there was a middle-aged lady in a print dress sitting somewhere towards the rear, I'm not quite sure where. And an elderly gentleman in a brown suit."

Mr. North nodded. "Now tell me what brought these particular passengers to your attention, Dr. McLane."

McLane said, "Well, the servicemen I just noticed because they were right in front of me and kept talking while I was trying to sleep. The others—" He described the early-morning scene at the mountain lodge.

When he had finished, Mr. North nodded again. "I see. And did you have any further contact with these passengers?"

"Well," McLane said, "I talked to the young lady at breakfast."

"Did she happen to give her name?"

"Yes. Janicek. Connie Janicek."

"Describe her," Mr. North said.

McLane frowned. "She was blonde, about five-feet-four, nice looking. Black peasant skirt, white blouse, and those ballet slipper things. I'd say she was twenty-two or three."

Mr. North said, "The bus schedule tells me that you ate breakfast in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Was this the last you saw of Miss Janicek?"

"Why, no," McLane said. "She woke me up in Cincinnati—"

"In fact, you were on quite friendly terms with Miss Janicek, weren't you, Dr. McLane. Very friendly, for such short acquaintance."

McLane said dryly, "She was a friendly girl."

"You're not asking me if anything has happened to her," the man behind the desk said. "Apparently Miss Janicek's welfare doesn't concern you as much as your wife's."

"Should it?" McLane asked. After a moment, he asked, "*Has* anything happened to her?"

The older man ignored the question. "When was the last time you saw Miss Janicek," he demanded.

"About an hour ago, getting off the bus."

"Where did she go?"

"Into the station."

"And when was the last time you noticed the middle-aged woman in the print dress, Dr. McLane?"

McLane thought for a moment, and said, "I really don't remember. I don't think she came as far as St. Louis, but I wouldn't swear to it."

"As a matter of fact, her name is Peterson and she left the bus about a hundred miles east of Cincinnati. How does it happen that you recall the one case so clearly and the other not at all?"

McLane laughed involuntarily. "If you'd seen the two ladies together, you wouldn't have to ask. Even college teachers are human, Mr. North."

"I'm glad to hear it. But you weren't human enough to offer to help a little girl traveling two thousand miles across the country by herself, even though your destinations were the same, were you, Dr. McLane?"

"What do you mean?" McLane demanded.

"I'm talking about the little girl, Cecelia Baxter. You were the only other passenger on that bus out of

Washington who was going as far as Albuquerque, Dr. McLane. You knew the child's destination; it was printed clearly on the badge she was wearing. Yet over a period of almost twenty-four hours you made no move to help her; in fact, I have here a report that states that you seemed anxious to dissociate yourself from her in every possible way. When she cried at a rest stop you walked out of the bus; at the first opportunity, you changed seats away from her. My report indicates that you acted very oddly where the child was concerned." Mr. North paused. "I gather you have no children of your own."

McLane was silent for a moment. A kind of perverse anger made him answer with strict technical accuracy: "That is correct."

Mr. North drew an impatient breath, and glanced at the uniformed man sitting near him. Lieutenant Van Sant rose and moved to the inner door of the room, opening it.

"Come in, Miss Janicek."

The girl stepped into the room. A policeman showed briefly behind her, closing the door. The girl stood where she had stopped, facing them all with weary defiance. Her face was shiny and her hair mussed as if she had run her fingers through it heedlessly. Mr. North gestured her to a chair.

"You've heard Dr. McLane's testimony," he said. "What do you think of it, Miss Janicek? Does it agree with your own recollections?"

The girl pushed the short, untidy hair back from her face. "Why ask me? You've got all my recollections down on paper. . . . Oh, all right! Sure, it agrees."

"Do you have anything else to add?"

"Not a damn thing."

"You still can't recall where the man in the brown suit left the bus?"

"No."

Mr. North turned to McLane. "What about you, Dr. McLane? You've described an elderly man in a brown suit. He claimed to have two children who didn't get ice cream at four in the morning. Can you tell me how far this man rode with you?"

"I'm sorry," McLane said after a moment. "No."

"What about the little girl; when was the last time you remember seeing her?"

McLane realized that he had no recollection of the child beyond the lunch stop in a town called Chillicothe.

"Miss Janicek can do better," Mr. North told him when he said as much. "Miss Janicek remembers her clear to Cincinnati." He looked from one to the other of them. "Nobody remembers her beyond Cincinnati. She apparently never got any farther."

"What do you mean?" said McLane.

"Why, the man in the brown suit—a respectable Cincinnati citizen named Webb—testifies that Mrs. Peterson left the child in his care. He saw her as far as Cincinnati, got her something to drink there, and was looking for someone traveling farther to relieve him of the responsibility when a well-dressed man and woman came up to claim her. They said they were friends of her mother, who had telegraphed for them to meet the bus and take Cecelia off it and put her on a plane. Webb was glad enough to turn the child over to them."

Connie Janicek asked quickly, "Then what the hell's all the fuss about? If the kid's being taken care of—"

Mr. North glanced at her. "Miss Janicek, we have checked with the mother in Albuquerque. Mrs. Baxter didn't even know the little girl was on her way home; apparently the child was supposed to stay in Washington another week. Mrs. Baxter knows of no people such as Mr. Webb described, and she sent no instructions to anyone. And the little girl has not turned up at the Cincinnati airport, or anywhere else, for that matter."

# 4

A NEATLY DRESSED young man who looked like an insurance salesman or minor executive drove them to a hotel, in a well-polished two-year-old sedan that could have been the pride of any suburban family, but seemed to have a little more power under the hood. The building at which he deposited them was an older one, only part of which was air-conditioned. The girl registered first, and moved away with a bellboy, looking small and young and rather shabby in the ornate lobby. She stepped into an elevator, which took her upward out of sight. She had not spoken a word during the ride, nor had McLane.

He selected a room in the more expensive category and had to wait for the elevator to return; only one was working at this hour. The air-conditioning met him coldly as he emerged at the proper floor; the boy carrying his suitcase led him to the proper room, went through the usual helpful motions, received a tip, and disappeared.

McLane pulled off his coat and stretched out on the big double bed. He had a baffled sense of having had to cope with people and situations completely unfamiliar to him; and he also had a nagging feeling, which he preferred not to analyze, of having failed in some way. He closed his eyes, but despite his weariness sleep was nowhere near him. He sat up. There was a telephone on the bedside table. He looked at it for a moment; and picked it up.

"Long distance," he said, when the girl at the switchboard responded. When the long-distance operator announced herself, he said: "I want to call Bayport, Maryland. Chesapeake 4-3707. Make it collect, please."

"What is your name, sir?"

"McLane," he said. "Paul McLane."

He waited, hearing the call go through at once, at this hour of the morning. The bell began to ring at the far end of a thousand miles of wire. He reminded himself that the telephone was in the downstairs hall; nevertheless, it seemed an endless time before a familiar, soft, sleepy voice responded.

"Chesapeake 4-3707?" the operator said. "Will you accept a collect call from a Mr. McLane in St. Louis, Missouri?"

"What—" The voice faded briefly; then Pat's came through suddenly strong and clear. "Yes. Yes, of course I'll accept the call. Paul?"

"Hi," he said. "Did I wake you?"

"What do you think? It's five o'clock."

"It's four here," he said. "I'm sorry I woke you."

"It's quite all right."

Then she was silent, waiting for him to tell her the reason for this call.

He said, "Are you all right, Pat?"

"Of course," she said. "Why shouldn't I be?" He did not answer immediately, and she went on, clearly puzzled: "Is that why you woke me up at this hour, Paul? To ask if I was all right?" When he still did not speak, she said: "Paul?"

"Yes," he said. "Look, I've stumbled into a kind of a mess here. A little girl who was riding on the bus seems to have disappeared. It's very melodramatic, police and G-Men and everything. I've just been through a polite third degree, and I've been ordered not to leave St. Louis for a day or so. I thought you should know."

A thousand miles away, his wife said, rather blankly: "Oh, I see." Presently she went on: "It sounds terribly exciting. You're not in any real trouble, are you?"

"No," he said. "Well, this call is costing money. I'd better hang up. I just thought I'd let you know I'd be held up here for a while."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, of course. . . . Paul?"

"Yes."

"Disappeared? You mean—kidnapped?"

"That seems to be the theory."

Pat hesitated. "How old. . . . how old was the little girl, Paul?"

"Five or six, I think."

Neither of them spoke for a while; then Pat's voice said briskly, "Well, it would be nice to be able to help, but I don't suppose there's anything you can do about it, is there? Let me know if you need money or anything. Should I wire Dr. Smith in Albuquerque that you've been delayed?"

"That would be fine."

"Well," she said. "Well, thanks for calling."

"It's all right," he said. "I'm sorry I woke you."

He hung up slowly, and sat for a while looking at the sealed window, outside of which the sky was turning gray with dawn. He could still hear her cool voice, and he found himself wondering if she had chosen the words deliberately: *I don't suppose there's anything you can do about it, is there?* But this was unfair to Pat; she was never deliberately unkind. She had probably long since forgotten the words she had used that morning in the hospital a year ago, trying to help him: *But there wasn't anything you could do, Paul, was there?*

McLane rose abruptly and pulled the shade at the window. He undressed, turned out the light, and got into bed; but it was some time before sleep found him. When he awoke, strong daylight was filtering into the room around the drawn blind, but the hands of his watch did not seem to have moved very far. It took him a moment to comprehend that, worn out by the hectic night and the long bus ride that had preceded it, he had slept over 12 hours. He wound the watch, laid it aside, shaved, and took a shower.

Emerging from the stall, he found himself confronted by his own image in a long mirror. He looked at himself critically, but the bruises had long since faded, as had the marks of the tape with which they had strapped him up for the broken ribs; the smell of tincture of benzoin was no more than an unpleasant memory. The cut in the side of his head had healed, the stitches had been removed, and the hair had grown back over the shaved area. He was, you might say, as good as new. *There wasn't anything you could do, Paul,* he thought grimly. *Not a damn thing. Not with the number of martinis you'd had, there wasn't.*

Dressed, he went downstairs. The elevator shaft and the hotel lobby were breathlessly hot after the coolness of his room. He stopped at the large newsstand in the corner and looked over the papers; they had them from as far west as Denver and as far east as New York and Washington. Cincinnati was also represented. He bought a Cincinnati paper and one of the local dailies and then, because there was always something very attractive about a familiar newspaper when you were away from home, he bought the Washington paper that was delivered to their house in Bayport every morning, a copy of which was probably lying on the end table in the living room right now, if Pat had not used it for wrapping the garbage or stuffing around a wedding present to be sent to some friend; it had once been a family joke, the way the morning paper seemed to melt away during the day so that there was often nothing left of it by the time he got home at night to finish reading it.

McLane winced at the thought. There had been very few family jokes during the past year; and Pat had become quite scrupulous in preserving the paper for him intact and unrumpled. It was undoubtedly waiting for him at the end of the living-room sofa right now, just in case he should happen to walk in at this, his usual time for coming home. They had been very careful of each others' feelings of late, treating each other with the meticulous respect of strangers forced by circumstances to live in the same house.

He put the thought of Pat out of his mind; there was nothing to be gained by dwelling upon what he had had and lost. But "lost" was hardly the word, he reflected; "thrown away" or "destroyed" was more like it. The Providence that was supposed to look after drunks and damn fools seemed not to have been around that night a year ago. . . . The memory, as always, sent a small tremor down his spine; he could again see the headlights lurching towards them around the curve, and feel the wheel kick viciously in his hand as the right front tire left the pavement. He sat down quickly on the nearest chair, and forced himself to open and examine the Cincinnati paper, staring at the newsprint until the unwanted images faded.

The paper he held carried no mention of a little girl abducted from the Cincinnati bus station; nor did the St. Louis press print the story. He left the two papers in the chair, and carried the familiar Washington daily into the air-conditioned coffee shop to read in a more leisurely fashion with a doughnut and a cup of coffee. The headlines, and the news associated with them, held his attention for a few minutes, although the world situation was, as usual, quite beyond the understanding of a trained and logical mind. *You'd run things a lot better, no doubt,* he told himself dryly, and he was about to turn to his favorite columnist on the editorial page, for enlightment, when a chopped-off item in a lower corner caught his eye. It had the look of having been inserted at the last possible moment. McLane refolded the paper so that he could read it more conveniently.

CHILD FEARED MISSING IN TORTURE SLAYING
WASHINGTON, Jun. 20. (AP): Fear for the safety of curly-haired Cecelia Baxter, 5, was expressed today by police officials investigating the murder of her father, Charles Baxter, whose brutally beaten body was recovered from the Potomac River last night. The child, described as wearing a yellow dress and hair ribbon, was last seen (p. 2, col. 3)

McLane turned the page, and found the proper column. The child had last been seen, according to the reporter, leaving Baxter's apartment with her father, who had been carrying a small suitcase. This had been quite late at night. The police had not yet determined where the two had been going; when Baxter was next seen, early the following morning, he was dead. The river was being dragged in the vicinity of the place where the body had washed ashore. The police were investigating possible motives for the murder.

McLane glanced at the top of the page, and realized that the date printed there was yesterday's: today's paper had not yet reached St. Louis from the East. Today it would be known that Charles Baxter had put his little daughter on a transcontinental bus before being killed; and that she had come as far west as Cincinnati, and had disappeared. It would be known, but perhaps the news was not being released yet, for reasons of strategy. McLane had no idea what powers of censorship the police and F.B.I. had in a case like this.

The story cleared up a point that had disturbed him since the previous evening: how the authorities had got on the trail so quickly, when even the child's mother had been unaware of what had happened. They had obviously been looking for the little girl long before she was kidnapped, as a factor in a murder case. . . . McLane frowned at the thought. *Only that?* he asked himself, *only murder?* Somehow it seemed as if too much was being made of one obscure dead man fished out of a river. He found himself thoughtfully studying the printed name, Charles Baxter. It was an ordinary name; the surname, Baxter, by itself had meant nothing to him, earlier. But the combination, Charles Baxter, seemed vaguely familiar. He thought he could recall reading it in a newspaper before, in some unsavory connection.

He tried to recapture the memory, but it eluded him. *Leave it alone,* he told himself, *if it was in the papers, the F.B.I. will know about it. They don't need your help. Don't try to play detective; there's nothing you can do.* The final phrase repeated itself in his head, unpleasantly. *There isn't anything you can do, is there? There wasn't anything you could do, Paul, was there?*

Abruptly he rose and climbed out of the booth, dropped 25 cents on the table, and walked out of the place. The heat of the lobby enveloped him damply. He hesitated, stood for a moment in thought, uncertain; then moved to the telephones behind the desk, picking up the one marked *INSIDE CALLS ONLY.*

"I'd like to speak to Miss Janicek," he said when the switchboard operator responded. "Miss Constance Janicek." I didn't know the room number.

Presently the girl's voice spoke in his ear. The telephone made her sound adult and sexy and quite different from the friendly young person he remembered. He was annoyed to find himself perspiring a little more profusely than could be accounted for by the temperature of the booth.

"This is Paul McLane, Miss Janicek," he said.

"Paul what?" She sounded momentarily puzzled. "Oh, *Mac.*"

"On the bus," he said. "Remember?"

"Sure," she said quickly. "Why, sure. What's on your mind, Mac?"

"Dinner," he said.

"What?"

"On my mind."

"Oh," she said. "You're asking me to have dinner with you?"

McLane said, "Well, we're both stuck here until they tell us we can leave, Miss Janicek; and it seemed to me . . . . Besides, there's something I'd like to discuss with you, about the little girl who was kidnapped. Have you seen yesterday's Washington paper? It's apparently quite an involved affair; and I thought if we compared notes, so to speak, maybe we could come up with something useful." He knew that he had put it badly. It sounded like a lame excuse: a belated effort to place the invitation on a business basis.

Connie Janicek laughed. "Okay, Mac," she said. "You twisted my arm. Give me ten minutes to get dressed, and I'll meet you in the lobby."

Emerging from the booth somewhat shaken by the ordeal, McLane took the elevator to his room and exchanged his sports shirt for one that would accommodate a necktie. When he returned to the lobby, 10 minutes had passed; half an hour later, the girl appeared.

# 5

HE WATCHED her step out of the elevator and stand there a moment before catching sight of him. The change in her appearance was impressive. She was wearing a dress of some crisp, attractive blue material; the neckline was square and low. Her shoes were white and had very high heels. With her short, unruly hair and street-urchin face she looked just a little like the neighborhood tomboy all dressed up for a birthday party; but McLane could not help noting her cleavage and that the high heels made her legs and ankles look slim and attractive. He rose to greet her.

"Ten minutes!" he said severely.

She laughed at him. "Now, now, doesn't your wife ever keep you waiting?"

She glanced at him. "And talking about wives, how's she going to take your having dinner with a stray blonde?"

McLane grinned. "Who's going to tell her, Miss Janicek?"

"Don't kid yourself. Somebody always does."

He stopped grinning. "Just between you and me, Miss Janicek, I doubt that my wife is going to be greatly disturbed by anything she hears about me."

"Like that, eh?"

"Like that," he said.

"Well," she said, "that's nice for you."

"Is it?"

She glanced at him sharply. "Well, maybe not," she conceded, "if you still go for the girl. But buy me

a drink before you start telling me your troubles. Don't make me stand out here looking sympathetic."

McLane laughed and, taking her arm in a somewhat gingerly fashion, guided her into the cocktail lounge, which had the usual ineffectual lighting, so that they had to feel their way to an empty booth. A waiter came over to take their order. Connie Janicek asked for bourbon old-fashioned.

"None for me," McLane said.

The girl raised her eyebrows, as the waiter moved away. "What gives? On the wagon?"

"I—don't drink, Miss Janicek," McLane said.

She was studying him curiously in the dim light. "You're a funny bird, Professor. You don't drink and you told that guy last night you don't drive a car. Are you off cigarettes and women, too? What's the idea?" When he did not speak at once, she laughed and said, "Oh, all right, but for the love of Mike stop calling me Miss Janicek, as if I was one of your students or something. Now, what's this about the Washington papers and comparing notes—or was that just a come-on? If so, you didn't need it. Little Connie's a sucker for a free meal."

He said, rather stiffly, "It wasn't a come-on, Miss—er—Connie." He took the folded newspaper from his pocket, passed it to her, and watched her locate the item and read it. "Well," he said at last, "what do you think?"

She refolded the paper slowly, and pushed it aside to make room for the drink the waiter placed before her. "Damned if I know," she said. "It looks like the kid's in real trouble, all right. Do you think maybe she's a witness to the killing, or something? That could be why she was snatched off the bus, so that she couldn't tell who murdered her dad."

McLane shook his head. "I don't think so. That child hadn't just come from watching her father being beaten to death. She was just a normal little girl, a little frightened at riding on a bus with a lot of strangers, but no more than that. No five-year-old is going to watch a murder and keep quiet about it for twelve hours. She'd have told the first sympathetic person she met all about it; she couldn't have helped herself."

Connie glanced at him oddly. "For a guy who hasn't any kids, you talk like you knew a lot about them. You did tell that F.B.I. character no kids, didn't you?"

McLane hesitated, but there was no alternative. If he wanted this girl's help, he would have to be honest with her about his motives. He licked his lips.

"I didn't tell Mr. North we'd never had one."

"Oh?"

"He'd have been six this fall," McLane said evenly. "Only, about a year ago I had a little too much to drink one night and smashed up the car and killed him."

After he had spoken, it occurred to him that he had never told this to a stranger before; as a matter of fact, he had never really talked about it to anyone except the police. Pat, who had remained at home that night, had of course been informed of what had happened long before he regained consciousness in the hospital. He had seen the knowledge in her eyes when she was at last allowed into the room the following morning. She had made the one try at pretending that the accident had been inevitable under the circumstances: *There wasn't anything you could do, Paul.* But they had both known it was only pretense. There was always something a man could do: he could at least stay home if he was too drunk to drive a car safely. They had never discussed it again.

"That's why I doubt whether my wife is greatly interested in what happens to me, Connie," he said. "I must say that I fully sympathize with her point of view."

The girl looked at him for a moment. Her voice was quite gentle when she spoke. "How did it happen?"

"We'd had a cocktail party at home." It seemed strange to be putting it into words, at last, after the time that had passed. "It's a smallish house, just two bedrooms upstairs, and we'd left little Paul with some people living a few miles outside of town so that we could use both rooms for the coats and hats. Afterwards, I drove out to get him, although Pat suggested sending a taxi, or calling up and having them keep him all night—"

Connie said, "I'll bet she wished she'd kept quiet."

"What?" he said, startled.

"I mean, if she loved you, she'd feel that way. She wouldn't want you thinking she was saying I told you so, would she? Not about a thing like that."

It was an idea that had not occurred to him. He frowned at it, and dismissed it. "Anyway, I insisted that I was perfectly sober. Famous last words." He drew a long breath. "It happened on the way home, of course. It couldn't happen while I was alone in the car!"

After a while, the girl said, "So that's why you won't drink or drive."

McLane nodded.

She glanced at him shrewdly. "And now?" she said. "Do you feel you've let another kid down, is that it? Is that why you've got a yen to play detective all of a sudden?"

Her attitude displeased him. He said rather sharply, "Well, I did let the child down. I knew she was going to Albuquerque. It wouldn't have hurt me to make a small effort to see that she got there safely, instead of avoiding her because she reminded me of. . . . Perhaps if I had, she would be home right now, instead of wherever she is."

Connie shook her head quickly. "You're dreaming, Mac. Suppose you'd tried to help her, so what? You'd have turned her over to these characters in Cincinnati, wouldn't you, just like the other guy did? You had no reason to think there was anything wrong. And even if you had, these are tough eggs. They've already killed one guy. What could you have done against them?"

McLane said, "Would you mind not using that particular phrase? There's always something a man can do—if he doesn't let himself get too drunk to do it."

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, Professor. If it makes you feel good to kick yourself, who am I to stop you?"

"I'm not—"

She said, "Sure you are. I guess you're just the type. First you take an accident—okay, so you were a little tight—you take it and twist it into something like you'd murdered your kid with an axe. And now

you're making a thing out of the fact that you happened to be riding on the same bus with a brat that got herself kidnapped. Well, some guys just like exercising their damn consciences, I guess."

McLane started to speak angrily, and checked himself.

"Screwballs!" the girl said. "Always I get the screwballs! Now I suppose you want me to try to remember if there was anything the kid said or did that might give you a clue with a capital K, so that you can put it into higher mathematics and figure out where they're keeping her, and then we'll both go out and rescue her like one of those Mister and Mrs. teams on TV. Well, I'm sorry, Professor. Number One: I can't help you. I told all I know to the cops; I can't think of anything else. And Number Two: If I did think of anything else, I'd tell it to that smoothie from the F.B.I. It's his racket, baby; it isn't yours." She drained the contents of her glass, and laughed. "Well, I guess I've talked myself out of a dinner. Thanks for the drink, anyway."

He watched her rise. His anger died away as quickly as it had come; and he knew that she was quite right at least in one thing: his idea of playing detective had been a foolish one. Besides, he would be unbearably lonely if she left.

"No," he said. "Wait."

She turned, reaching for the white purse lying on the table. "Look," she said sharply, "I just don't want to talk about that kidnapping any more, not even over a five-buck steak. It happens I don't feel any too good about it myself. I could have given the brat more of a hand than I did. But I don't fool myself there's anything I can do about it now except wait it out and answer the questions. And I don't want to spend an evening spinning fancy mathematical theories about it, Professor. If you're going to make like Philo Vance, count me out." She picked up the purse, hesitated, and looked back, with an abrupt, mischievous grin that illuminated her face, making her look very young, and at the same time disturbingly wise and experienced. "Now, if you just wanted to spend a night on the town, since there's nothing better to do, it might be a different story."

After a moment, he laughed and rose to join her. "Maybe that's what I had in mind from the start," he said wryly.

# 6

IT WAS WELL after midnight when they returned to the hotel, and the air was quite cool and a little damp with mist from the river. McLane paid the taxi-driver and followed Connie inside with a sense of coming back to reality. It had been quite an evening for a man who had allowed himself very few pleasures lately. He felt a little guilty, as if he had betrayed a memory by enjoying himself. The girl's dress rustled softly beside him as they walked to the elevators together.

"Which floor?" he asked.

"Six," she said.

There was no operator at this hour. McLane pressed the button, and the doors closed. Connie inspected herself in the mirrow of her purse, touching her hair lightly where it was a little moist and disarranged at the temple from dancing. They did not speak. There was between them the constraint that always comes to a man and woman who have had a good time together, when the moment arrives for ending the evening on a suitable note.

The elevator doors slid open. McLane stepped aside to let the girl out, and followed her down the hall. She stopped before a door, and took a key from her purse.

McLane cleared his throat. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

She gave him a quick, rather surprised glance. "Aren't you coming in?"

"Am I?"

She said, almost irritably, "Suit yourself, baby. I'm having another drink; you can watch me. Or you can have a glass of water. Or you can go to hell." She grinned to erase the sharpness of the words.

He said, uncomfortably, "You don't have to—I mean, I've had a fine time, Connie. You don't—er—owe me anything, if that's what—"

Her quick laughter stopped him. "Mac, you're sweet," she said, taking his arm. "Come on in and keep me company and give your chivalry a rest."

The door closed behind him. He watched her set her purse on the dresser and cross to the open suitcase at the foot of the big bed that took up most of the space in the room. He was a little shocked when she drew out a pint flask and carried it into the bathroom; the thought of a young girl traveling with a bottle of liquor in her luggage jarred his sense of propriety. She came out, after a moment, with a heavy hotel tumbler half filled, sat down on the bed, and reached down to pull off her high-heeled pumps. She was not wearing stockings; and the removal of her shoes gave her at once a rather disconcerting look of being only partially dressed.

"That's better," she said, wriggling her naked toes. "One of these days I'm going to move to a South Seas island and spend the rest of my life barefoot. Toss the junk off that chair and make yourself comfortable, baby. You're a married man; don't let a little lingerie scare you."

He hesitated, feeling awkward now that he was in the room. He saw that Connie was watching him with that mischievous, slightly mocking grin she had; and he understood that the reference to his marriage had been deliberate. She knew quite well that he found the situation disturbing. She was teasing him. He laughed, put her belongings on the suitcase, and sat down on the chair.

She said lazily, "Don't fidget, Mac. Nobody's going to pop in the door with a camera. Your reputation is safe in my hands. I wouldn't compromise you for the world." She tasted her drink and leaned back against her elbows, "If you want some, help yourself. The stuff's right there, and there's another glass on the shelf."

He said, "Thanks just the same. I'd better not."

"It's a hell of an hour to be cold sober," she said. "But suit yourself. I wouldn't want to contribute to your delinquency, baby, not one little bit." He did not respond to the jibe. After a moment she went on: "You're a funny guy. You're not really an alky, are

you? I mean, you can handle it all right if you have to, can't you?"

McLane said dryly, "The evidence indicates otherwise, Connie."

She shook her head. "You know what I mean."

He said, "I know. No, I'm not a compulsive alcoholic."

"It's just another way of kicking yourself around the block, isn't it?" she said. "For being a damn fool."

"Why, yes," he said. "I guess that's partly correct, at least. For being a criminal damn fool."

"The car, too?"

"I suppose so. Or perhaps I just don't trust myself to drive any longer."

"Or perhaps you just don't trust yourself, period."

He laughed. "You should have been a psychiatrist."

"What are you going to Albuquerque for, anyway?" she asked. "Better job? Or just a change of scenery?"

He said, "Both, I guess."

"Is your wife coming out to join you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is she?"

He looked at her for a moment. "I don't know," he said. "I'm not sure." After a while he went on: "Probably not. I think it's unlikely."

"Breaking it up, eh?"

"Well, nothing's been said, but it seems to be indicated."

"What's she like, Mac?"

"Pat?" The question startled him. "Why, Pat is . . ." But there was no way to describe someone you knew too well and loved too much, whose happiness you had destroyed in one moment of incredible folly. Besides, he did not want to talk about Pat to this barefooted and slightly intoxicated young woman. He saw that Connie was grinning again, a little maliciously, reading his thoughts.

"Have you got a picture of her? Of course," she said, "if it's too sacred to show around . . ."

She was getting a great deal of pleasure out of his discomfort, he reflected wryly; undoubtedly he seemed very stuffy to her. He took out his wallet, opened it to the proper section, and passed it across. "It's not much of a picture," he said. "I took it about three years ago. We drove over to Ocean City for the day. That's . . . Paul digging in the sand."

Connie studied the snapshot carefully. "Somebody's been feeding me the wrong dope," she said at last. "I thought all college teachers' wives looked like either cows or horses." She passed the wallet back. "You've got something there, Professor."

"I had something there," he corrected her, adding dryly, "Pat would be glad to know that you approve of her."

Connie laughed. "Mac, your wife wouldn't give one little damn for anything I thought about her, and you know it. To her I'd be just a dead-end kid you picked up in an alley somewhere." She grinned at him cheerfully. "*You* look at me and the first thing you think of is whether I'm setting you up for the old badger game. Your wife would look at me and wonder how often I washed my underwear." Her grin widened. "Don't brood about it, Professor. That's life in this democracy. I don't want to marry you, either. I know when I'm out of my class."

There was enough truth in her words to embarrass him, and he could think of nothing to say. He glanced at the wallet in his hand, and started to put it away. Connie gestured towards it, and added slyly,

"That's something else you're giving up?"

The situation was becoming untenable. He could not help seeing a mental picture of the two of them in the small room late at night: the girl sprawled indecorously across the hotel bed in an attitude that could not but be called suggestive, the man sitting upright on the lone chair, sober and respectable and uneasy, answering questions about his home life. He realized that she was deliberately making a fool of him for her own amusement, and rose.

"Leaving, baby?" she asked, sitting up.

"I'd better go. It's quite late." The mockery in her eyes annoyed him. He felt a need to justify himself to this girl; to prove himself. But he had stupidly allowed himself to be maneuvered into a position where the only logical proof was out of the question; she was, after all, just a kid, and he had a wife with whom he was still very much in love, even if he had forfeited all right to her respect and affection. There was nothing to do but withdraw in an orderly fashion. "Good night, Connie," he said.

She laughed, and came close to him. They faced each other for a moment. Without her shoes she was considerably shorter than she had been, dancing. She had to look up to him. She touched the lapels of his jacket; then quickly raised herself on tiptoe and kissed him on the mouth.

"You're off cigarettes and women, too, baby?" she murmured. Her eyes were bright and knowing.

"Connie—"

Her arms went around his neck, and her lips found his mouth again; lightly at first, teasingly, and then with a frank invitation that was echoed by the pressure of her body. He answered the kiss, since there was nothing else to do that would not make them both look ridiculous; he felt her draw away, sensing his reserve and displeased by it. The slight hint of resistance seemed to trigger a violent and frightening reaction inside him that he was quite unable to control; for some moments he had no desire to control it. He pulled her to him roughly; she made no protest, but responded with equal urgency. When he released her at last, shaken and shocked at both of them, she smiled up at him tightly.

"That's better, isn't it?" she gasped. "That's better than lying in the room across the hall in that cute little house of yours, looking at the Mickey Mouse wallpaper, or is it Donald Duck . . . ?"

"How did you know?" His voice was harsh.

"Baby, you've got that hungry look a girl like me can spot six blocks away on a foggy day."

They were both adults now, on an equal footing; and there was no world outside the four walls of the hotel room and no people in the world except the two of them. She came to him again; they kissed more gently this time, almost playfully, holding themselves in check, prolonging and perfecting the moment. Holding her, he could feel the violent beating of his heart, and, he thought, of hers.

"You're wrong in one thing, Connie."

"What's that, baby?"

"The wallpaper. It's Hopalong Cassidy."

She laughed softly, and pushed at him, turning slightly aside when he set her free. "Let me just get out of this damn dress before you wreck it."

The small hint of practicality broke the spell. The surging wave of emotion passed on, leaving him standing there awkwardly watching a girl he barely knew struggling with the small, refractory buttons of her clothing, with fingers made a little clumsy by too much drink. He heard her swear irritably under her breath. The delay, and the reason for it, were much too familiar: he was a married man and he had been here before. There were always clothes to be removed, precautions to be taken, doors to be locked in case the child should wake up. . . . He shivered abruptly. The desire was still with him, but this was the wrong woman. He was still paying for one moment of heedlessness; he could not add another to the bill. He stepped back.

"Connie," he said. "No."

She looked up sharply, unbelieving. He knew a quick remorse, and thought bitterly that he could not seem to do anything right, these days. He could not even take a girl out to dinner without ending up hurting and humiliating her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have come in here."

He moved to the door. She was quite still behind him. He did not want to look back; but a choking sound made him turn in the doorway.

Connie was laughing at him; laughing so hard her eyes were wet. "Go back and tell Mr. North—" She had to gasp for breath. "Tell that F.B.I. smoothie next time not to send a boy to do a man's job!"

# 7

He stared at her, dumbfounded, resenting the ridicule, but far from comprehending what lay behind it. There was some misunderstanding here, obviously; and he took a step back into the room. An expression of startled regret crossed the girl's face; and he realized that she had not intended this scene at all. She had acted and spoken impulsively, to pay him back for his rejection of her; now she was wishing she had let him go his way unpunished. But it was too late, and she flung back her head and laughed again.

"Hell, I thought you were going through with it like a little soldier, Professor. It must be tough to have a conscience. How did he talk you into it, anyway? I suppose he got you thinking you were responsible for what had happened; it was up to you to help fix it. They must be really scratching the bottom of the barrel when they have to pull stray college teachers off the streets to do their dirty work!"

McLane had instinctively closed the door behind him, afraid that her unguarded voice would wake the occupants of the neighboring rooms.

He said, "Connie, I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about." This was not the exact truth, since her words were to some extent self-explanatory.

The amusement drained from her face, leaving it pale and angry. "Don't give me that! Hell, I knew what was cooking the minute you called me up. Guys like you don't ask girls like me out to dinner just to dance and talk. For that, you stick to your own kind of people. Who did you think you were trying to kid, anyway? Little Connie's been around. An educated sap like you spends money on a girl like me for only one thing. And when I offered you that, you wouldn't take it. I wasn't even good enough for that, in your book. Which means you were roped into the deal from the start."

He was startled by her bitterness, and by the sense of inferiority that he had not dreamed lay behind the easy manner she affected.

"Connie," he protested, "Connie, that's not true."

She laughed harshly. "There were times I was almost sorry for you; it was so damned easy to make you squirm. Stick to teaching, Professor. You're a lousy actor. Although that sob story about your little boy was kind of cute, I'll hand you that. . . . Okay, so it's true. So what? Did you really think I was going to fall for that line about your wanting me to find the kidnapped brat so you could atone for your sins? How stupid can you get?" The laughter came again, a short, unpleasant sound. "Well, you didn't learn anything, did you? You can't help them pin a damn thing on me, can you? Hell, you're my gold-plated alibi; you were sitting right beside me all the time we were in Cincinnati. You can prove I didn't kidnap anybody; didn't make any phone calls; didn't even go to the john. . . . You can go back to the guy behind the desk and tell him you weren't up to the assignment. But you'd better wipe the lipstick off, or he'll be sending somebody to investigate *you*, next."

McLane took his handkerchief from his pocket and scrubbed his mouth deliberately to give himself time to think, while he studied the girl in front of him, trying to understand what she had revealed to him: that, having reason to believe herself suspected by the F.B.I., she had jumped to the conclusion that he had been sent to spy on her. This was disconcerting enough; but her attitude suggested that the authorities might have good grounds for their suspicions.

It was a shocking discovery to make about a girl he had rather liked, a girl he had kissed; it made a lie and a mockery of the pleasant evening they had spent together—of their whole relationship, in fact, since she had made it plain that even her previous friendliness had not been the simple and natural thing it had seemed at the time. Apparently she had played up to him on the bus in a calculated move to protect herself against future suspicion; and the fact that she had thought it necessary to do so was perhaps the most damning evidence against her. If she had known from the start that she would need an alibi in Cincinatti. . . .

The telephone rang, shattering the strained silence. They both looked at the instrument guiltily, like children who had been waiting to be scolded for making too much noise. Connie reached for it as it rang a second time. McLane watched her snatch it up; woman-like, she paused to give her touseled hair a quick shake and pat, as if to make herself presentable for the person at the far end of the wire, before she spoke.

"Hello," she said, and listened, and spoke again, impatiently, with a glance towards McLane: "Listen, I've still got company. . . . Oh."

Her expression became suddenly blank and wooden. She seated herself slowly on the bed, listening poker-faced, while one hand buttoned up the partly open bodice of her dress. Finished, she reached for a cigarette and lighted it, and spoke at last, tonelessly.

"Okay. I've got it."

She put the telephone down. McLane, waiting for her attention to return to him, watched her draw deeply at the cigarette and crush it out with a small, stabbing motion against the ashtray on the bedside table. She arose without looking at him, located and stepped into her white pumps, and moved to the dresser without glancing aside. But he knew she was conscious of his presence by the way she walked, high-heeled and provocative. *This is me,* she seemed to be saying silently, *This is the real me, baby.* It was not a walk a girl would waste on an empty hotel room.

He watched her stop at the dresser and take a cleansing tissue from the purse she had left there. She wiped her lips clean, and defined them neatly with lipstick, and put the lipstick away. When she turned, there was a gun in her hand.

McLane knew a moment of complete, incredulous panic as the weapon steadied; he had learned enough about firearms during the war to be very much afraid of them, particularly in the hands of irresponsible persons. It seemed for a moment as if the girl had taken leave of her senses; as if, brooding over her injured pride all during the irrelevant telephone conversation, she had managed to work herself up to a violent revenge. Then she smiled.

"Are you still here?" Her voice was quite loud. "What the hell are you waiting around for? The show's over; beat it!"

There was a total discrepancy between the words, her expression, and the gun. McLane started to speak, but the weapon jerked in sharp warning. Connie shook her head and gestured towards the door. McLane turned slowly and put his hand on the knob. The gun touched him in the back, checking him.

The girl spoke again, still in the loud voice that seemed to be intended for someone else. "Aren't you going to say good night, Professor?"

Instinct warned him to obey her scrupulously until he gained at least a measure of understanding.

"Good night, Connie," he said without turning his head.

"Ah, get lost!" she cried.

The gun nudged him. He opened the door and stepped out into the hall. The girl's dress made a sound like dry leaves, close behind him. The door was pulled out of his hand and closed more firmly than was necessary. Connie laughed softly, almost in his ear.

"That'll give them something to think about, if they've got the place wired for sound!" she said. "I hope they get callouses on their behinds waiting for you to get down to your room. . . . No, this way. To hell with the elevator. Move!"

She urged him ahead of her down the hall to the right, and around the corner to a stairway. They were walking fast, he moved ahead of her down the stairs, hearing the muted beat of her heels on the carpeted steps above him, and the rustle of her clothing. The thought of the gun in her hand—her finger probably careless on the trigger—made him apprehensive lest she should stumble; she had, after all, had a considerable amount to drink that evening. Then they were at the ground floor, just off the lobby. He turned instinctively in that direction.

"No, not that way," the girl said sharply, behind him. "Back here."

A little protest was in order. "Connie," he said, "I don't understand. Why are you taking me—"

The gun jabbed him in the spine hard enough to make him wince. "Don't argue and don't get brave. The percentage is against you. Keep moving."

The hall ended in a service entrance to the hotel. McLane pushed it open. Outside, the mist had turned to a fine rain, and a trickle of water ran black down the center of the alley into which they stepped. They hurried to the right, towards the street. McLane heard the girl swear behind him as her high heels betrayed her on the rough pavement.

"Eyes front, Professor," she panted. "Keep moving. Left at the corner. I'm putting it away in my bag, but don't kid yourself I can't shoot it from there . . . Okay, now walk beside me like a good boy."

She took his arm, and they moved down the sidewalk together, the purse between them. McLane had no doubt that to the casual spectator they appeared like an affectionate couple too engrossed in each other to realize that it was wet out; there were, however, few witnesses so late in the evening. An occasional car went past, windshield wipers slapping at the thin rain. The sky was a luminous yellow overhead.

The girl threw a quick glance about her, and pulled him towards one of the cars parked along the curb, a light sedan, not new. She jerked the door open.

"Inside," she said. "The key's under the floor mat. Find it and let's get the hell out of here."

# 8

They rolled down the wet street at a discreet 25 miles per hour. The girl sat half-turned in her seat to look through the rear window; but the gun was steady in her hand. Presently she drew a long breath, settled herself more comfortably in the seat beside McLane, and arranged her dress loosely over her knees so that, somewhat dampened by rain, it would not wrinkle too badly as it dried. At last she looked up.

"For a guy who doesn't drive, you seem to be making out okay there, Professor," she said, a little mockingly.

He glanced at her, startled, suddenly conscious of the steering wheel in his hands and the accelerator under his foot as strange objects with which he had had no dealings for a year. It had seemed quite natural to get behind the wheel and drive as he was ordered; and he had been more concerned with the problem of the threatening gun, and the more remote but very important question of what had motivated this abduction. Why would anyone want him badly enough to have him kidnapped like this, right under the eyes, apparently, of the F.B.I.?

He had no answer to this, but it still seemed quite natural to him to be driving. He might never have

stopped—he might never have had an accident in his life—for all the emotion it aroused in him now. The realization made him feel a little ridiculous, as if a suspected attack of appendicitis, about which he had made a considerable fuss, had turned out to be nothing but a mild case of indigestion. He reminded himself, somewhat defensively, that it was not quite as if Pat were sitting beside him in the car. That was, after all, the reason he had not been able to make himself drive again right after the accident: a kind of terror at the thought of ever again putting himself in a position to cause the death of someone he loved. It was a reason that did not apply here.

"You're doing swell, Professor," Connie said. "But move it along, will you?"

McLane increased the speed by five miles per hour. "Where are we going?" he asked. Instinct warned him to display all the expected reactions, even though neither fear nor curiosity were likely to gain him any immediate profit. "What was that telephone call, Connie? Why are you taking me—?"

"Never mind all the questions, Professor."

He said experimentally, "You won't get away with this. If the F.B.I. had a dictaphone in your room, as you seemed to think, it stands to reason they were also listening in on your telephone conversation, in which case they know exactly—"

The girl laughed. "If they check on everything they thought they heard over that phone, they'll have a busy night. Didn't you ever hear of a code? Now shut up and watch your driving. Left here. Take it easy over the bridge: we don't want to be caught speeding. Take the first right on the other side and keep going. And don't forget there's a gun on you, because *I'm* not forgetting it."

They were climbing now, and the lights of St. Louis were falling below them on either hand, each individual light given a yellow halo by the mist. The steelwork of the bridge rose up around them. The river itself was invisible except in the murky distance; bridge designers were apparently all joined in a conspiracy to place the guard rail of their structures always at the point where it could most efficiently block the view from the level of a passenger-car window. They rolled down the long ramp to the Illinois side and made the proper turn at the intersection; shortly they were driving through open country, on a concrete highway liberally patched with asphalt.

"Connie," McLane said after a while, "What's this all about? Who was this Charles Baxter, anyway?"

The girl yawned. She seemed to have relaxed somewhat, now that they were safely across the river. She said, "Charlie Baxter was a yellow slob."

McLane said, "Thank you. That places him exactly."

"Now, don't get too smart," she said. "You damn intellectual jerks are always making with the sarcasm. Charlie Baxter was an intellectual jerk, too. I never knew him to speak to, but I've seen him around, and you could tell him by the glasses and the way he was built. They're all near-sighted from all the reading, and round-shouldered from bending over the big books. They'll bend your ear all day with a lot of theoretical guff that doesn't mean a damn thing. They talk a great big fight, until the fighting starts. Baxter was like all of them, I guess. He was red hot until things got tough; then he sold out like the rest of the cream-puffs with a lot of talk about his damn conscience. . . . Hell, they all have the same routine. Then they testify in front of committees and write books about it and make a lot of money, and everybody thinks they're just too brave for words. They have moral courage. Nuts! Baxter didn't have moral or any other kind of courage. The last thing he did alive was to throw his kid to the dogs; and he was supposed to be nuts about the brat. What kind of a guy is that? First he sells out his friends, people he's worked with for years, people who stood by him and helped him when he got into trouble, gave him a job, even. But he hasn't even got the guts to go through with it; he chickens out and tries to use a five-year-old kid to protect himself—his own kid, yet! And finally, damned if he doesn't doublecross the kid, trying to save his own crummy life. I bet the fish in the Potomac had a bellyache for a week."

McLane, who had kept his eyes on the road during this tirade, could not help glancing at his companion now: it seemed that this girl would always be able to shock him anew. Her contemptuous words did not give the complete story of Charles Baxter, by any means, but they made her own attitude and viewpoint abundantly clear, in the light of the political situation in the world, in the United States, and in Washington, D. C., in particular. It was a revelation even more disturbing, in a way, than the discovery that she was involved in a crime, or that she was carrying a gun and was willing to use it.

He drew a long breath, and said in an even tone: "That tells me what Baxter was. It still doesn't tell me who he was. I'm sure I've heard or read the name somewhere."

"You should have," she said lazily. She seemed quite willing to continue the discussion. "He was a teacher, too. In some high school out West, I think. The school board fired him for refusing to take the loyalty oath." She snorted. "Hell, he had instructions to take the damn fool oath; they all have. But Charlie Baxter made with the principles—or maybe he was afraid of perjuring himself—and got booted out on his tail. Then he went to court about it. It was in the papers; maybe that's where you saw it. He lost the case, of course. Then his wife divorced him; I guess she hadn't been hip to his extracurricular activities. Nobody'd give him another job, naturally. So finally he came crawling back broke, the way I heard it; and they found something for him to do in Washington, and he paid them back by trying to doublecross—" She yawned abruptly, and looked around, peering into the darkness on either side, finally watching the road through the rear window for more than a minute. "Take it slow, now. How far have we come from the bridge? There ought to be a blacktop road going left pretty soon. Turn there, and keep going. We've got a long ways yet, Professor."

She yawned again and, after a moment, kicked off her pumps and moved back into the corner of the seat, tucking her bare feet under her.

"Left here?" McLane asked, as the intersection appeared in the beam of the headlights.

The girl nodded. The gun rested on her knee quite firmly, and despite her obvious weariness her voice was quite clear when she spoke: "Left is right,

baby. What's the speedometer read now?" He gave her the figure and she leaned forward to check it. He made the turn. "Okay, let her rip," she said. "Get reckless, Professor. Shoot the works. Take her all the way up to forty-five, even if it kills us."

They came out of the low hills near the river into flat farming country that was invisible in the mist and darkness but showed itself nevertheless in the straightness of the road and in the prosperous look of the occasional barn or house that showed briefly in the headlights. There was little traffic; they picked up no one going in the same direction, nor did any lights appear in the rear-view mirror. An occasional car passed them going west. The road went on for miles with no abrupt turns and few intersections: just a wet black ribbon of asphalt rolling steadily into the little area of light in front of them.

The rush of the wind past the car, the vibration, and the interminable beating of the windshield wipers, had a soporific effect; and McLane had to deliberately shift position from time to time, and rub his face and neck, in order to keep his attention from wandering. He was aware of the girl behaving in a similar manner, sitting up straight and ladylike for a while, then slumping down on her spine with her legs stretched out as far as the limitations of space would permit, and finally curling up in the corner again. He could not help noting that she became less and less careful of the disposition of her dress as the night wore on, to the detriment of the garment as well as to McLane's peace of mind. It seemed unpatriotic and inconsistent for a man of strong beliefs to find anything attractive about a girl who was committed to the overthrow of those beliefs. He flushed in the darkness as he saw her grinning at him maliciously. Neither of them spoke. Connie made no move to rearrange her skirt more decorously. He realized that she was teasing him, and confined his attention to the road for several miles. When he looked at her again, she was asleep.

# 9

SHE WAS STILL CURLED UP in the far corner of the seat, but her head had fallen back against the rain-swept window beside her and her eyes were closed. She was breathing evenly and peacefully. Her hand was lax in her lap. As McLane studied her warily, forgetting his driving for a moment, the car drifted to the rough edge of the pavement; the slight jolting before he could bring it back to the center of the road jarred the pistol out of the girl's fingers. The weapon slid across her lap and was stopped by a fold of her dress, balancing there precariously. Another jolt would throw it to the floor. A sharp application of the brakes would pitch the sleeping girl against the dashboard, stunned and unarmed.

McLane licked his lips, that were suddenly dry with the responsibility that had been thrust upon him. The decision was his, now. The road of escape was wide open. There was no risk to speak of. He could overpower the girl in an instant, and drive to the nearest telephone, and notify the police and the F.B.I., and the incident would be closed; closed except for some important questions remaining unanswered; closed except for a little girl left to her fate by a man who might just possibly have been able to help her.

This was why he had not yet made an effort to resist or escape: the hope that he was being taken to the place where the child was being held. Yet it was a poor chance at best. There was, after all, no indication that Connie was taking him to the same place. And even if he was being delivered there, what could he accomplish—one inexperienced man, captive and weaponless? The sensible course was for him to turn the girl over to the F.B.I. in the hope that she could be persuaded to talk, now that she had incriminated herself beyond all hope of denial. If she could be forced to give the location of the child's hiding place, appropriate steps could be taken by trained men whose business was law enforcement. A hideout of kidnappers was hardly the place for a moderately frightened associate professor of mathematics.

The car ran on through the darkness under his automatic guidance. A town loomed up ahead, quite dark except for a hanging light over the main intersection; the girl stirred at the brief flash of illumination across her face. McLane glanced at her, and drew a long breath, his decision made.

With his left hand he worked the wallet from his pocket and—after a glance to make sure that Connie's eyes were still closed—pushed it out through the ventilator beside him. It was at least a gesture towards leaving a trail. A wallet was likely to be picked up by someone. Whether it would reach the police was another question.

He glanced at the girl again, and touched the brake lightly, just enough so the nose of the car dipped for an instant before he released the pressure on the pedal. The little square pistol slid off Connie's lap, bounced on the edge of the seat, and hit the floor with a solid thump.

For a moment he was afraid the noise would not awaken her. Then she stirred in her sleep; and her hand, still resting in her lap, closed and found nothing to grasp. He did not dare watch her further. Staring at the road ahead, he was, however, aware of her gasp, her startled look at him, and her quick motion to retrieve the fallen weapon—at which point he made a half-hearted stab at the brake and a belated lunge, to make his own role seem convincing. The muzzle of the gun checked him.

"Back up!" Connie snapped. "Watch where you're going; if you crack us up I'll put a slug through you, so help me."

He brought the car under control again. The girl sat up at her end of the seat, tossed the hair back from her face and pulled her dress down. She seemed shaken by the realization that she had fallen asleep; she did not curl up on the seat again, but put her feet into her shoes and remained sitting upright, slightly turned so that she could watch him. He was aware of her suspicious regard; it was clear that she was wondering if he could have taken advantage of her lapse in some way unknown to her. Then she looked quickly around as another thought struck her. She studied the surrounding blackness, glanced again at McLane, and opened her mouth to ask a question but closed it again. He drove on steadily, trying to look as meek and resigned as possible.

"What's that speedometer read now?" Connie asked.

He gave her the figure. She made a mental subtraction, and looked around again, with obvious and growing uneasiness. There were no landmarks in the wet darkness outside the car; then a road-junction sign appeared ahead, luminous in the beam of the headlights.

"Slow up," Connie ordered.

They passed the warning sign with diminishing speed. The lights picked up an unsurfaced road leading off to the right. On the left, facing it, was a signpost.

"Pull over there," Connie said, and interrupted McLane's protest sarcastically: "If we get picked up for parking on the left, I'll pay the fine, Professor. . . . Can't you get the lights on it?"

She leaned forward, wiping at the inside of the windshield in an effort to see better. Failing to read the sign, she swore, glanced at McLane, pulled the ignition key out of the lock and, with the gun aimed at McLane, opened her door and stepped out into the rain. Crouching to keep an eye on him, she finally risked a quick look over the top of the car. He heard her say a short, ugly, angry word. Then she was back in the car, tossing him the key.

"Turn it around." He did as he was told. "Now step on it. I don't want any more of this damn piddling around, see? Roll her."

They headed back the way they had come. Driving faster than he liked, now, through the rain that was coming down more heavily all the time, McLane could no longer give any of his attention to the girl beside him; but he was, of course, conscious of her presence, nevertheless. He could feel her tenseness like an actual pressure inside the car; she was, he knew, sitting on the edge of her seat, peering through the wet glass in front of her. It was obvious that they had missed a turning while she slept; and that she was worried about it, and even, he thought, a little frightened. She had lost some of her arrogant, adult composure. Her youth was beginning to show.

"Listen," she said almost peevishly, "aren't there any towns in this neck of the woods, damn it?" When he did not speak, she glanced at him and said, "Don't give *me* the big freeze, Professor! Did we pass through town while I . . . Did we pass through a town in the past half-hour?"

He was as eager for her to find the right road as she was, but he could not, of course, admit this. "I don't remember," he said.

"You're not that dumb," she said sharply. "You're a bright boy. I bet if somebody handed you a map right now you could put your finger right where we are. Don't give me that moron act."

He said slowly, "Well, there was a town—"

"Mercer?" she demanded. "Was the name of it Mercer?"

"I don't know that," he said truthfully. "I couldn't see; it was too dark."

"How far back?"

"We ought to be coming to it pretty soon."

A small object on the road glinted in the headlights as they passed; the girl paid it no attention and McLane did not allow himself to look at it. Bitterness assailed him briefly; the one constructive move he had made had already turned out to be a mistake: the wallet he had dropped marked the wrong road. It was not a good omen. Then they were reentering the town.

"Stop at the corner," Connie said. "I want to read the damn signs." He pulled up obediently. She cranked her window down; after a moment she put it up again. "Okay, turn left, and keep bearing down. There's a ways to go yet." He could sense her relief as he had sensed her uneasiness. As they roared out of the town on the new road—heading south according to the reckoning he was keeping in his head—she looked around lazily and said: "Isn't this a hell of a country? Flat as a board."

McLane glanced at her and said, "I suppose that's as good a reason as any other for betraying it, Connie. Or have you got a better one?"

She ignored the remark. He started to speak again, but changed his mind. Whatever he said would make no impression on the girl beside him.

"Take it easy now," Connie said suddenly. She leaned over to read the mileage. "Keep it slow, going up the hill." She cranked her window down, watching the side of the road. "That mailbox up there—let me read the name on it."

The box was an old one, set upon a leaning post that threatened to give way at any moment. The lettering on the rusty tin was barely legible: Joshua F. Vanderwater, Box 36, Route 4.

"That's it!" the girl cried. There was triumph in her voice, almost as if she expected him to share her sense of achievement. "We've got it made! Watch your step now, and don't get any ideas. I'm way ahead of you."

He could feel his heart beating heavily. He had never felt quite so alone; and the only hope of assistance was a wallet left behind on the wrong road. But there was always, he told himself, something an intelligent man could do, sober. At least it was a thought to cling to.

"Do you want me to turn in, Connie?"

"What the hell do you think I want?"

He put the car in gear, and swung it into the dirt road showing beyond the mailbox. The road was soft and deeply rutted; it seemed to continue endlessly along the crest of the ridge. They plunged through a series of puddles that sent sheets of thin mud washing across the windshield and caused the girl to swear and close her window with belated haste. They surmounted a final rise, slewing through deep mud with the engine roaring, found a measure of traction, and pulled up on more solid ground among a cluster of farm buildings.

"Well?" McLane said. The road went no farther.

Connie did not speak at once. He saw her look dubiously around, as if hoping that someone would come forward to greet her. The farm seemed to be deserted; even in the darkness it was clear that some of the outbuildings had collapsed and that there were holes in the roof of the barn. The silo was a ragged, black, topless cylinder staring at the wet sky. The house itself, partly illuminated by the headlights, was tremendous. It was one of those houses that had been added onto, a wing here and a wing there, as generations of sons and grandsons brought their wives home and started families here. Now they had all gone, somewhere; and there was nothing left but the empty

shells of the buildings and some rusting farm machinery.

Looking around carefully, McLane saw that this was not quite all. There was an incongruous gleam from the shadowed interior of one of the sheds. A large, new, expensive car was parked there, sheltered from the rain.

Connie saw it at the same time. The sight seemed to make up her mind. She opened the door and stepped out, and gestured to him to come along. He slid across the seat and stood up beside her. The missing wallet made an odd vacancy on his hip; it was a slender, forlorn hope. Perhaps, having found the place—having come this far—he should have made a desperate effort to escape and reach a telephone and bring the police here. There were so many decisions to make, he thought wryly; so many ways to be wrong. He found time to be glad the rain had stopped.

The girl put the gun into his side and marched him towards the house. The car lights were still burning, throwing their shadows large and black across the sagging porch. Connie had to pause once to retrieve a shoe pulled off her foot by the adhesive barnyard mud. Then they were crossing the porch, avoiding the gaps made by broken boards; it was a wide porch and a long one, made for rocking chairs and gliders. The paint was peeling from the ornate railing, and from the clapboards of the house. They stopped at the weathered door. It opened as Connie reached out to take the knob.

"Go back and turn out those lights!" a male voice said harshly. "Get the car into the barn. Hurry it up. . . . *You,* come in here and watch your step. This is a gun."

The last was addressed to McLane. He stepped forward into a dark hallway. The door was closed behind him. A gun barrel touched his spine.

"Straight ahead." It was a young, tough voice, but it held an edge of excitement and uncertainty. "First door to the right. Walk right in and meet the company, Professor. We've been expecting you."

He opened the door, and was met by the yellow light of a kerosene lantern. There were three people inside but his glance went directly to one, a little girl in a very dirty sunsuit, whose face was the kind of streaked gray mask that only children know how to fashion out of dust and tears.

# 10

IT WAS A ROOM that had undoubtedly been known as the parlor by the people who originally owned the house. The peeling wallpaper had an ornately formal look, but the windows were bare of hangings and covered with some kind of heavy cloth or canvas tacked to the frames so that no light would show outside. None of the original furniture remained. What was there had clearly been scavenged from other sections of the house: a narrow iron bedstead with tarnished brass knobs, a kitchen chair without a back upon which a man was sitting, a sagging card table. The table held an empty milk bottle, a half-empty fifth of whiskey, some bread, cheese, and sandwich meat, a box of ginger snaps, and some cards spread for an unfinished game of solitaire.

A woman's small white hat rested on one of the brass knobs of the bed; a white purse lay on the soiled mattress. The woman stood nearby, holding the child motionless. She was a rather slight, dark woman of medium height in her late thirties, wearing a tailored pink summer suit that was quite wrinkled and dirty. She had a run in one stocking but no mud on her patent-leather pumps; apparently she had come here before the rain. Her eyes were large and dark behind horn-rimmed glasses that gave her a studious, dedicated look; this was intensified by the fact that she wore no make-up at all, obviously from choice rather than from neglect. She gave the impression of being a neat person under ordinary circumstances; aware, now, of her bedraggled appearance. In this, her attitude was in sharp contrast with that of the seated man, who was a little drunk and obviously did not in the least care how he looked.

He was a thick-set individual whose jaw was black with a heavy stubble of beard. He had a revolver in one hand and a sheaf of playing cards in the other. His coat and tie hung from a gas fixture on the wall; the coat, of gray summer worsted, was immaculate and neatly pressed, having presumably been removed shortly after the owner entered this room. It had therefore been spared the fate of the man's shirt and trousers which, like the woman's clothes, were creased and soiled from long wear in these dusty surroundings. The room had a stale odor of liquor and cigarette smoke and human occupancy; the two adults had a trapped and irritable look, like caged animals. They were undoubtedly, McLane thought, the well-dressed couple who had been described as meeting the child in the Cincinnati bus station. Something must have gone seriously wrong with their plans. They could not have expected to spend so much time in this place, or they would have prepared for the ordeal with at least a change of clothing.

The woman was the first to speak. "Where's the girl?"

She was answered by the individual behind McLane: "She's out putting the car away. She was going to leave the damn thing stand out in the yard with the lights on!"

He came into sight on McLane's right, lounging against the wall there, a youth of Connie's age wearing a light, water-repellent jacket, blue jeans, and, oddly enough for this part of the country, cowboy boots. They did not make him look in the least like a cowboy. He had a pale, callow face showing several acne scars, and his brown hair was much too long and thick. Nevertheless, though not a prepossessing figure, he had a look of freshness about him; it was clear that he had not spent the past 24 hours cooped up in this room like the others. He was the go-between, McLane decided, the courier, the contact.

The man at the table said uneasily, "I don't like this. Bringing him here. What if they were tailed?"

"Would you prefer to drive around the country with the child in the car?" the woman asked. "With every policeman in the country out looking for her?"

"The hell with the kid. We've got all we can out of her."

The woman shook her head. "She's a link in the chain. We can't afford to get rid of her yet. We can't be sure she's told us everything." She moved her hand on the little girl's bare shoulder. The child winced at the touch. "Look at this man, dear," the woman said smoothly. "Look at him closely, dear. Is he the man you gave it to?"

McLane stared at the two of them, startled. He saw the child glance at him furtively, and look away. He studied her more closely: she was, as might be expected, incredibly dirty, but this did not matter. Dirt meant nothing to a child. However, he saw with growing indignation that she had also been beaten; both her knees were dark with crusted blood where she had skinned them, falling, and one side of her face was badly swollen under the tears and grime. Her sunsuit was practically in rags. Except for the dust, they were oddly neat rags, McLane noted. They looked as if someone had carefully slit most of the seams with a knife without cutting the cloth, later pinning and tying the dissected garment about the child somehow.

McLane frowned, and looked around the room. His glance came to rest on a small heap of clothing in the corner. Each individual garment that he could see had apparently been similarly cut apart; the soles of the shoes had been separated from the uppers; the plastic backing of a hairbrush had been pried from the underlying wood. The little girl's diminutive suitcase had not only been torn apart, but the fabric covering had been carefully peeled from each piece of plywood. It was clear that the child and her belongings had been searched with ruthless—almost ridiculous—thoroughness. Here was the reason why these people had been forced to remain here longer than they had planned, McLane decided: something they had expected to find easily had apparently eluded them completely.

"Look at him, darling!" The harshness of the woman's voice belied the endearment. "This is the man, isn't it? This is the man you said. Don't you remember, honey? You said the tall man who was sitting in front of you on the bus; the man who acted as if he didn't like little girls."

McLane checked a wild impulse to laugh, as understanding came to him. *A five-year-old!* he thought. *They threaten a five-year-old and expect to get the truth! Don't any of them have any children of their own?* It was idiotically obvious, now, what had happened; why he had been brought here. Not finding the object of their search, they had turned to the child for information, threatening and bullying her, finally asking the obvious question: since she did not have this thing, had she given it to someone? To a terrified child, it would have seemed a wonderful suggestion. *Yes, yes,* she would have cried, *yes, I gave it to somebody. To whom? I don't remember. You've got to remember, darling, or we'll have to punish you again, honey. I remember now; I gave it to the man. What man? The man who acted like he didn't like little girls. . . .* Children usually knew how you felt about them. She had sensed his, McLane's, unfriendly attitude on the bus and, pressed for an answer, had, with childish justice, selected him as her scapegoat, rather than make trouble for any of the people who had shown her kindness.

Now she was studying him fearfully, awaiting retribution. He knew that she was not considering the truth at all; probably she did not know the truth. Charles Baxter had, after all, known something about children, particularly about this child, his own. If he had hidden something among her belongings he had done so without telling her, knowing that no five-year-old could or should be asked to keep a secret. Cecelia Baxter did not know what everyone was looking for, and had not the slightest idea where it was, and did not care. She was merely doing her childish best to decide how all these large, threatening grown-ups could be told what they wanted to hear so that they would not hurt her any more.

The woman spoke sharply: "Well, come on, dear. Speak up, don't be afraid. He won't hurt you." She shook the small figure roughly. "This *is* the man, isn't it, darling? He's the one you said. You weren't lying to us, were you? You know what happens to little girls who lie, don't you, honey?"

There was terror in the child's eyes. McLane cleared his throat and spoke quickly, almost without thinking. "It's all right, Cecelia," he said. "It's all right to tell them."

Relief came into the little girl's face. She looked up at the woman. "Yes, that's him. It is too! I putted it in his pocket when he wasn't looking."

"Which pocket?"

"The pocket of his coat. It was over the seat." Her glance touched McLane warily; she was checking whether she had his permission to go on with these falsehoods. Even if he had not been reasonably certain that nothing had been put into any pocket of his, her attitude would have told him. "I just droppeted it in," she said breathlessly. "I did, too. Nobody seed me, either."

There was a little pause; then the woman said, "All right, darling. That's a good girl. Now you can get yourself a cookie and come back and sit on the bed quietly."

The child slipped out from under her hand, snatched a ginger-snap from the box on the table, and darted to the bed and seated herself there, her bare feet dangling. The woman looked at McLane and started to speak, but was interrupted by a quick movement by the youth, who lifted his gun and pulled the door open. Connie stepped inside. Her white pumps, and her legs, were quite muddy.

"I don't think much of your damn driveway," she said to nobody in particular. "And that barn stinks."

The woman said, "Shut up and sit down somewhere, Janicek. Nobody asked what you thought." Connie started to retort but checked herself, crossed to the bedstead, tested the cleanliness of the mattress with her fingertips, grimaced, and sat down some distance from the child. Her dress rustled as she settled herself comfortably. The woman turned to McLane. "Where is it?" she demanded.

McLane faced her with a certain sense of achievement. He might accomplish nothing else tonight, but at least he had managed to draw their attention away from the little girl.

"Where is what?" he asked.

The woman's pale lips were unpleasantly compressed. "Let's not quibble, Dr. McLane. The child says you have what we want. I'm asking you where it is."

McLane said, "If you'd tell me what you're looking for, I might be better able to help you."

She hesitated, and shrugged her shoulders, indicating that it was a matter of no importance, since he would find no opportunity to use the knowledge. "Three sheets of thin paper stapled together," she said curtly. "Containing certain information. Signed by Charles Baxter. The fool thought he could protect himself by sending them to his former wife with instructions to forward them to the authorities if anything should happen to him. We took steps to make sure they never got that far, after we had learned from him that he had sent them by his child. . . . Now, Dr. McLane, where are they?"

McLane said carefully, feeling his way, "I presume you've searched my things at the hotel and learned they're not there?"

"Naturally. One of the bellboys works for us. He took care of it this afternoon after you'd gone out."

McLane smiled in what he hoped was a confident manner. "Then obviously I still must have them on my person. I suggest that you search me thoroughly."

His attitude did not please the woman. She studied him for a moment through the horn-rimmed glasses; then she shrugged again. "You *could* be bluffing. . . . Danny, stand by the door. Lou, if you can tear yourself away from those cards for a moment, I'd appreciate it very much if you looked him over. I'll hold your gun."

Her irony did not touch the heavy-set man at the table. He rose without haste, put his cards down, and gave her the weapon. Then he walked up to McLane and looked him over. He held out his hand.

"The coat, Buster."

McLane took off his coat. The man called Lou took it and examined it thoroughly, testing the seams, kneading the shoulders and lapels carefully. He took the letter-case from the inside pocket and passed it to the woman, holding the gun while she went through the papers it contained. Then he turned back to McLane.

"Okay, the pants."

It was difficult to maintain a tolerant and amused expression as the ordeal continued. McLane was aware of Connie grinning at him. She was enjoying his humiliation hugely. The woman was, oddly enough, somewhat embarrassed by the situation she herself had created. Her prim discomfort made things worse. At last the big man tossed McLane's clothes at his feet and gestured to get dressed again. He did so quickly, feeling disheveled and humiliated.

"Well, that's it," Lou said. "Unless he's got it sewn in really good somewhere."

"He hasn't had time to get a professional job done," the woman said. "He wasn't out of the hotel all day. . . ." Her voice trailed away. She studied McLane for a moment, and said without expression: "I don't like the way he's acting. Hit him, Lou."

Before McLane could quite grasp the meaning of the casual order, the big man's fist caught him over the diaphragm, driving the breath out of him and doubling him over, momentarily paralyzed so that he could do nothing to avoid the chopping blow to the side of the head that threw him against the wall and down to the floor.

Presently he remembered that he still had a role to play. "This isn't going to do you any good!" he gasped when he could find breath enough to speak. "What do you expect to accomplish—"

"Again, Lou!"

The big man stepped forward and swung his foot deliberately; McLane managed to turn and take the kick on the shoulder. The impact threw him back against the wall, shaking plaster dust over him. He spat the gritty stuff out of his mouth. He was aware of a savage anger, and his mind was working very cleverly.

"Keep it up!" he breathed. "Every time the price goes up!"

"Price?" the woman said.

"What do you think? College teachers don't make fortunes."

The woman laughed. "Charlie Baxter tried to make a deal, too. He changed his mind. It didn't take long. . . . Lou!"

McLane was aware of the big man bending over him. He was hauled to his feet, pinned against the wall, and slapped across the face several times, so that the tears came; then a blow to the pit of the stomach doubled him up again on the floor, and a kick in the side rolled him over. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. He was surprised to find himself thinking lucidly: *Don't fight back. It'll just be worse if you fight it.* Through the pain and anger he knew a strange feeling of satisfaction; opening his eyes he could see the child still sitting on the bed, munching on her cookie, watching this gravely as if on a television screen—she had probably seen much worse on TV—untouched. It was a kind of atonement. Then he saw Connie regarding him curiously. She grimaced, and reached for a cigarette in her purse.

"Dopes!" she said, as if to herself.

The woman heard it. "Do you have some criticism to offer, Janicek? Some constructive criticism?"

The girl struck a match. "Hell, no," she said. "Have your fun. I've got no fight with the way you get your kicks. Have Lou tear his guts out, if you get a charge out of it."

The woman's colorless lips tightened. "If you're implying that I'm doing this for my own edification . . . !"

"Who's implying?"

"I find this whole thing intensely disagreeable."

"Sure, sure," the girl said, drawing deeply on her cigarette. She blew a smoke ring. Her voice was very casual when she spoke again. "Besides, you're doing the screwball a favor, too, so everybody's satisfied. Go ahead. I'm watching."

The woman turned to look at her sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Can't you tell when a guy's making like a hero?" Connie laughed. "He had an accident last year, he told me. His little boy was killed. Ever since he's had a thing about it. Now you're letting him carry the ball for the kid here, and he's feeling swell. Kind of like going to confession or something. He's been wanting somebody to kick him around for a year. He's so happy he could sing. Look at him."

Her amused voice seemed to throw light into dark places, catching them all in ridiculous and em-

barrassing positions. After a moment, McLane rose to his feet and brushed the dust from his clothes. No one interfered with him. Lou shrugged and sat down. The woman made a little brushing motion towards her skirt and pulled her jacket down about her hips, clearly at a loss. The youth by the door was the first to speak, in a bored voice.

"Of course, I got nothing to say around here, but if it was me doing it, I'd find out why the guy wasn't packing a wallet, when he's supposed to have been out on a heavy date."

# 11

THE WOMAN TURNED to look at the youth, who folded a stick of gum into his mouth and began to chew on it placidly, with an elaborate show of unconcern.

The woman said, "But he did have a wallet, Danny. I looked through it myself. What are you talking about?"

"The thing in his coat?" Danny spat at the floor. "Just something for the checkbook and love letters, sweetheart. Didn't you notice? No ID cards, no dough. Particularly no dough. I ask you, how's a guy going to take a dame like that out without any dough? She looks like she'd come high. . . . How about it, baby?" He winked at Connie, and looked back to the woman. "They did the town together. St. Louis isn't for free. I ask you, what did he use for dough? Where's the wallet?"

McLane stood quite still, feeling the ache of the beating pulse throughout his body. The little girl sat quietly on the bed, her hands in her lap. She had obviously learned that it was safest and least painful, in these circumstances, to sit perfectly still; however, she was a child, and she could not quite keep her feet from swinging.

Some distance away from her on the bed, Connie sat motionless, her cigarette forgotten between her fingers. The glance she gave McLane was indignant and even a little hurt, as if she considered it unfair and unkind of him to have tricked her.

"Something else," the youth drawled, pretending great interest in the gun he was holding, a large weapon, apparently of service origin. "Something very interesting, but very. About little Blondie here. She had a job to do, remember? Not much of a job. All she had to do was get next to a kid riding on a bus. Gain the brat's confidence, spill a coke on her or something, get her into a restroom and change her clothes—and go through her stuff at the same time. Easy. Only do you know what happened? Why, Blondie got thirsty. She stepped out for a cup of coffee in the middle of the night. The kid woke up and got teed off because she wasn't there and wouldn't have any more to do with her and had to be snatched instead, and now the whole damn operation's snafu because one sappy little blonde couldn't pass up a cup of joe."

"That's a lie!" Connie was on her feet. "I was told to make it look natural, wasn't I? If I'd stuck to the brat like a band-aid, somebody'd have got wise, wouldn't they? It wasn't my fault that—"

"And what about the wallet, sweetheart?" the youth asked softly. "Another foul-up? Or is it?"

"What do you mean?" the girl demanded. She looked at the hostile faces about her, and her assurance and anger seemed to drain away. "I—I went to sleep," she admitted. "Just for a minute. Hell, they didn't tell me I'd have an assignment tonight, or I wouldn't have touched a drop; when they call you at the last minute like that . . . It was just for a second," she said breathlessly, as no one spoke. "He didn't even get wise—"

"Then how did he manage to get rid of the wallet?" the woman asked.

"I . . . I don't know."

"Where was this?"

"The other side of Mercer. We—we went past while I—wasn't looking." Her face brightened. "He must have dropped it east of Mercer. That means even if somebody finds it, they'll think we just kept going. So what harm—"

"I thought you just said he didn't even get wise," the woman said coldly. "And if he could drop his wallet while you were dozing off, why didn't he hit you over the head and drive to the nearest police station? I must say I don't like this at all."

The youth by the door chuckled. "So don't a lot of other people, sweetheart."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why do you think the front office picked her to bring him here?" He laughed. "Him and her's a couple of smarties, both of them. They played it very cagey. On the bus, a casual pick-up. Cute. But they weren't quite smart enough. They should have stayed away from each other in St. Louis. When the papers turned up missing, the front office started wondering. What's with these two lovebirds, anyway, the front office asked. Then the kid spills that the professor's got it—but who told the kid to slip it into his pocket?" He looked at Connie. "Good with kids, aren't you? Make them eat out of your hand. Make them drop things in your boy-friend's pocket. . . . After that, you stay away from the brat. Make it look good. The boy-friend's got the gimmick, you've got an alibi, and everybody's happy. Except people we know at the front office. They're not happy, baby. They're sad. You showed a lot of promise. They hate to lose kids who show promise. It's wasteful; it's uneconomical. It's tough, baby." He sighed, theatrically. "You shouldn't have tried to bluff it through. You should have taken your tame professor and run like hell. But I guess it's like some feller said: too late ve are schmart, and too soon we are dead."

McLane saw the terror in Connie's eyes; for a moment she looked very much as the child had looked a few minutes earlier. The resemblance went beyond mere facial expression; the long night had left the girl looking little better than any of the other occupants of this dingy room, in her muddy white shoes, and the pale blue dress, the thin skirt of which now stood out about her arbitrarily, still retaining some crispness, but crushed and crumpled like wastepaper.

"I—" she said. "It's not—"

But it was obvious that she was well acquainted with the grim workings of what passed for justice here, from suspicion to verdict to sentence, with no provision for appeal. She licked her lips and started to sit down, shifted a little to one side to avoid the

woman's purse that lay on he bed, and seated herself stiffly. Her own purse was in her lap. After a moment she shook her hair back from her face, and patted at it with a typically feminine movement. She opened the purse in her lap as if to check her appearance in the mirror. No one spoke. She reached inside the purse.

The crash of the shot seemed to shake the whole house; the concussion brought a thin dusting of plaster from the ancient walls. The girl did not move immediately. Then she brought her hand into sight, holding the small pistol. Lou's heavy revolver, that had first spoken, blasted again. The girl's hand jerked, throwing the little gun to the floor. There was blood on the front of her dress. She started to rise, caught at the mattress convulsively, and dragged it down on top of her as she fell, dislodging the child at the far end of the bed.

The man called Lou blew across the muzzle of his revolver. The woman stepped forward and kicked Connie's pistol under the bed. The youth by the door looked considerably paler than he had.

"Okay," he said, swallowing. "Now finish the job and let's get the hell out of here."

The woman looked at him quickly. "What?"

"Orders. There's been enough futzing around. Wipe it out. Go home and forget it."

"But the papers—"

"The front office says to hell with them damn papers. Put the thing on ice. It's been a turkey from the start to finish. If the stuff turns up, it'll just be tough on some people. We'll have to do without them, the front office says. Wrap it up and let's go."

The heavyset man at the table stacked his cards neatly, opened his gun, removed two empty shells, and replaced them with loaded cartridges from his pocket. He looked at McLane, who glanced at him and moved to the little girl still crouching on the floor where she had fallen.

"Hold that, Buster." The big man's voice was almost gentle. McLane gathered the child up. The way she burrowed against him reminded him bitterly of something he had once had and lost. Lou spoke again. "Some guys like it in front. You can turn if you want."

He swung around. There was no fear, only a kind of recognition; he had been here before. He remembered the headlights coming too fast around the curve, far across the white line. He had had the choice, and he had picked the ditch. It had seemed clear-cut in that instant. Only later, after learning that his son was dead, after remembering how much he had had to drink, after seeing Pat's face, had the doubts come.

Now he knew, because this was another such instant—now he knew that there are times when a man could do nothing, drunk or sober, except choose between the head-on crash and the ditch. Here, he could take it charging into the gun like a hero, or standing still. It was simpler to stand still.

He watched the heavy weapon rise and steady. He wondered if Pat would blame herself in any way. There was no reason why she should, but conscience was a strange thing, as he had found. He wondered—

The explosion was a flat, hard noise that came from the wrong direction and was not as loud as the first two reports had been.

McLane jerked his head around in time to see Connie slump back to the floor. There was a gun in her hand and a purse open beside her, not her own. Then the man called Lou leaned against the card table in an odd way. There was a small hole in his forehead.

Then the table crumpled beneath him. There was a crashing of glass, playing cards scattered in all directions, and a large revolver came sliding across the floor.

McLane saw the woman in the pink suit throw herself forward; instinctively he thrust the child aside and met her halfway, throwing his shoulder into her brutally. They struck the floor together. He felt the gun beneath him and grasped it. Someone was shooting wildly now, and the woman was clawing at him.

McLane used an elbow to free himself and rolled to the left, aware of the necessity of keeping the shooting away from the little girl. Behind him, the woman started to rise, looking for a weapon. McLane heard one of the wild shots strike her with an ugly, slapping sound. She crumpled to the floor. Wood splintered beside McLane. He got Lou's gun out ahead of him and aimed it at the youth by the door, who was yanking the trigger of his weapon in a blind frenzy of excitement and panic.

McLane fired. Plaster spurted from the wall beside the youth. McLane fired again, making a greater effort to hold the weapon steady. Something hot seemed to slide across his left shoulder just before the weapon discharged. Danny gasped audibly and shot a hole in the ceiling. McLane pulled the trigger a third time, and the youth sat down.

McLane rose to his feet cautiously, feeling sick and dizzy, his heart beating wildly. He moved forward. Danny's pistol lay on the floor; McLane kicked it gingerly aside, touching one of the youth's shoes in the process. The slight touch threw the seated figure off balance and caused it to slump over to one side. McLane swallowed, picked up the fallen gun, and looked around.

The room was quite still. Suddenly afraid, he ran to the child. She stirred at his touch, and lifted her head cautiously from her arms.

"Is it all right?" she asked. "Did you deaded them all?"

# 12

OUT ON THE PORCH, the air was cool. A section of the sky along the horizon was light with the promise of dawn. The child said something McLane did not hear. He wanted to ignore her, to drag her to the car and flee this place of death; but she had had enough rough treatment from other people.

"What is it, Cecelia?"

"Want my bag," she said.

He said, "It's all broken in pieces. Your Mommy'll buy you a new one when you get home."

"No," she said. "Not bag."

He frowned at the small, dirty face, trying to concentrate upon what she was saying. "Try again," he said. "I'm sorry. I wasn't really listening."

"The . . . the thing," she said, and drew a picture in the air. "The thing like this my daddy gaved me with a pin on it."

He looked at her, frowning. The moment had some importance; he could sense it. He raised the kerosene lantern so that he could see the child more clearly.

"Oh," he said, "you mean the badge? The one you were wearing on the bus? With your name and your mommy's name and address?"

"Yes," she said. "Badge."

"Where is it?"

She pointed to the broken boards at her feet. "Down there." He did not speak, and she went on, in one of those long, childish, explanatory sentences he remembered very clearly. "I trippeted on the step and it fell off and went down through the crack and I tried to get it but that lady kicketed me and said get the hell in the house darling so I did. Can I get it now?"

"Why, yes," McLane said slowly. "Yes, I think you ought to get it, Cecelia. Can you see it?"

"It's right here. I seed it through the crack."

She dropped on her stomach and reached down, pushing herself through the narrow slot; then she came back up again, extricating herself with a wriggling motion.

"Daddy said to keep it," she said, getting to her feet. "Daddy said to give it to Mommy. It was a s'prize or something. I didn't tell those peoples about it. I didn't like them. It was a s'prize for Mommy."

McLane looked down at the small figure with awe and respect. You always underestimated them, he thought; they always understood the conversations you were sure they would find incomprehensible, they always came up with logical, if startling, answers to the questions you assumed would be far beyond them. He found himself wondering, now, if the child could have tripped on purpose so that she could dispose of the badge, but this was probably giving her too much credit. She was, after all, only five years old.

He said, "Cecelia, do you mind if I look at it?"

She hesitated; then put it into his hand. It was a token of confidence and friendship, and he was proud of it. He looked at the cheap identification badge. The front, under a transparent cover, still held the card upon which her father had printed her name and nickname and her mother's Albuquerque address. The back was of metal to which was soldered a large safety pin. These two sections were held together by four turned-down ears of metal.

McLane glanced at the child. "I'd like to open this," he said. "May I?"

"It's a s'prize for Mommy."

"I'll put it back together, just the way that it was."

He pried the ears back without waiting for her response. The badge came apart in his hand. There was the frame, the back, the clear plastic window, and the address card. There was also something else: a wad of paper tightly folded into a rectangle of a size to fit snugly behind the card.

McLane crouched beside the lantern, unfolded the paper, and began to read. It was one of those pompous and pitiful documents of disillusionment, beginning: *I, Charles Turner Baxter, having belatedly realized that the cause to which I have devoted most of my life is a fraud and a crime against humanity. . . .* At the end was a long list of names and addresses.

As McLane folded the papers slowly, and straightened up, headlights turned in from the main road and threw a sudden flare of light behind the trees along the ridge. He started to reach for the child, simultaneously looking for a hiding place, but the sound of a police siren stopped him. A moment later the muddy farmyard was full of lights and cars and he was surrounded by armed and uniformed men, not wholly friendly. A familiar figure in civilian clothes appeared out of the crowd.

McLane said, "Mr. North, I think you want this," and passed the papers to the F.B.I. man. When he turned to explain his action to the little girl, expecting to be accused of treachery, he found that she had vanished. He took a step forward, then he saw her running breathlessly towards a woman who had stepped out of one of the cars. The woman crouched to take the child in her arms. McLane was aware of a moment of envy.

"Mrs. Baxter," North said softly. "Flew in from Albuquerque a couple of hours ago."

McLane told North quickly all that had happened. Then he asked, "How did you find this place?"

"We've been tracking you clear across Illinois, in our clumsy way. Picked up this along the road." North put a damp wallet into McLane's hand. After a moment he said, "If that young lady wanted to slip out of a room full of microphones undetected, she should have picked a dress that makes a little less noise."

McLane said, "She gave me a chance, at the end. I don't know whether it was intended or not, but why not give her the benefit of the doubt?"

The F.B.I. man nodded. "I'll keep it in mind. She's got a family somewhere, I suppose. They all have. Probably good people, too. I wish I knew what makes an occasional kid like that go for that stuff. Maybe the same thing that makes them go for marihuana. Damned if I know. . . . Hey, you're wounded."

"What?"

"There's blood down the back of your coat." North raised his voice. "Doctor! Over here . . . Wait a minute! Where are you going?"

But McLane had stepped off the porch, looking towards an official car of some sort that had just pulled up at the rear of the mass of parked vehicles. A tall, slender figure was just alighting. She stood by the car for a moment, seeming a little taken aback by all the confusion. She saw him coming and took a step forward, then checked herself.

He understood this now. It was all very clear to him. She had been trying to come to him for a year, always to be turned away by the wall of grief and guilt and self-pity he had built around himself. Blaming himself, he had looked for blame from everyone, even from her. She had tried to tell him, but he had refused to listen.

The sky was light enough now so that he could see her face. He walked quickly towards her.

—By Donald Hamilton