



The Big Caper

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Munsey's
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The wheels were beginning to turn. From all parts of the country quiet, tough men slipped into the small southern coastal town and took up the final vigil.

There was the arsonist, the safe blower, the boy-faced killer—there was a regiment of crack, lawless men waiting out the minutes until Saturday night—the night the town would explode into violence.

For in the center of town sat the bank—a citadel of twelve million dollars, impregnable as Gibraltar, safe as a church.

Safe—until precisely ten-fifteen on Saturday night. Until the wheels began to pick up momentum, and suddenly a fire lit the sky, and the power went off all over town and under way went the king-sized knockover.

The grand slam.

The Big Caper.

Chapter One

I.

Kosta arrived on Tuesday.

Frank had already left for the gas station, over in town on Route Number 1, two blocks from where the principal street of Indio Beach intersected the four-lane north-south highway. This main street, Orange Drive, continued on east for another three or three and a half miles, through the better residential section of the town. It then crossed the new, state-financed concrete bridge spanning the river, ultimately terminating in a dead end at the public beach on the Atlantic Ocean.

Kosta came in a taxi, driven by a colored man, at eight-thirty on this Tuesday morning, the last week in January. Kay was alone on the flagged patio, sitting there with her third cup of coffee and her seventh cigarette and postponing what awaited her in the large, rather old-fashioned kitchen.

What waited was the collection of dishes from their breakfast, along with the dishes from the night before, when they had entertained the Loxleys, the young couple that lived a quarter mile down the narrow sand road and ran the laundromat on Coral Street.

The Loxleys, like themselves, were fairly new in town. In a community such as Indio Beach, population 4,351 in the summer and 9,332 in the winter, there are three distinct and separate groups of people. There are, first of all, the “natives,” those that have lived there for a long time. A long time, in Florida, is anywhere from ten years to a generation or so. There are the newcomers, that group which has almost doubled the static population of the town within the boom years since the war. And there are the winter

residents and tourists, who come down to spend anywhere from a week to four or five months, and whose money keeps the economy of the town on a very level and very prosperous keel.

It was to the middle group that both the Loxleys and Frank and Kay belonged, and from this same group that they had drawn most of their friends.

According to the instructions that Flood had emphasized, they had circulated with the “natives” as much as possible. They also had hoped to form friendships with some of the winter visitors, particularly the more gregarious ones. But the wealthy Northerners who came down for the season were not exactly hobnobbing with the proprietor of a gas station and his wife, even if the wife was a slender, attractive blonde with nice manners, and the old residents formed a tight little clique of their own and were extremely reserved; if not downright cold.

A taxi pulled up on the hard-packed sand in front of the house and Kosta backed out of the rear compartment, hauling a cheap, imitation-leather suitcase after him. He handed the driver a bill and waved the change away and then turned toward the semi-enclosed patio on which Kay sat sipping her coffee.

She knew who he was at once, although she had never laid eyes on him before. Flood had telephoned Sunday night to warn them that he would be arriving on Tuesday.

Kosta was the arsonist.

She observed with an almost aloof curiosity his slow, labored approach up the long path that circled in and out among the worn-out orange trees, the heavy suitcase banging against his short legs and impeding his progress. The house sat well back from the road in the center of what had once been a fairly prosperous citrus grove, but which, through the passage of years, had been allowed to degenerate until the fruit was no longer salable.

It was an old house, for Florida, where any house more than twenty or twenty-five years old is considered a landmark. Built during the boom years in the twenties, it was a large frame and stucco monstrosity showing neo-Moorish influence.

Flood himself had found it. It suited his purposes very well, being at once outside of the town proper and in an isolated section; having as it did more than a dozen rooms; and, possibly most important of all, being available at an extremely reasonable rental.

Kay was standing, holding open the screen door, as Kosta approached. She noticed that the short walk had brought large drops of perspiration to his forehead. He looked, she judged, about forty.

He hesitated as he reached the door, looking up at her. “Flood's girl?” The voice had a high, thin quality, and he spoke barely above a whisper.

Kay nodded and he passed her without another word and stepped onto the patio.

She stepped around him and opened the second screened door, which led into the square, sparsely furnished living room. He followed her, dropping his suitcase the moment he was in the room. He went at once to an oversized rattan chair and slumped into it. He removed his hat, and, taking a handkerchief from his inside breast pocket, carefully wiped his forehead. His breath made an odd, wheezing sound.

“We weren't expecting you until this evening!”

He said nothing as he fought to regain his wind.

She was at once aware of his eyes. Unusually large, they were of an odd russet brown and they bulged out from their sockets in a manner that she realized must be the result of a chronic thyroid condition. They were extremely expressive eyes, but at the same time she couldn't guess exactly what it was they expressed. They reminded her somewhat of the eyes of a very sick person or a sick animal. They didn't ask for sympathy, or even understanding. They merely seemed to reflect the inner misery of the person that owned them.

His eyebrows were so white as to be almost invisible, although his untrimmed hair was a deep yellow. There was no sign of a beard under the dead white skin of his face. He was only five feet, five inches tall, nearly two inches shorter than Kay. His obesity made him appear even shorter.

“I took a bus,” he said. “Jesus, what a trip!” His voice held a faint trace of a lisp. “He wanted me to fly,” he went on, “but the hell with that. I started two days early and took a bus.”

She nodded and reached over to an ash tray and crushed out her cigarette.

“No damn sleep,” he said. “Not a wink.”

Kay looked at him and tried to feel sympathy.

“Your room's made up and ready,” she said. “Wouldn't you like to wash up? I'll call Frank and tell him you're here.”

He wiped the back of his neck with the handkerchief, which she couldn't help observing was very dirty, and then bunched it up and blew his nose into it loudly.

“Did you have breakfast?” Kay asked.

He looked up at her as though he didn't quite understand her question. Slowly he shook his head.

“Breakfast!” He got to his feet, using both hands—tiny little fat hands, like those of a baby—to pull himself up from the chair. “I could use a drink,” he said.

Kay nodded. “Come on out to the kitchen.”

He followed her from the living room, through the bare, unused dining room, and down the long hallway to the kitchen, at the rear of the house. There was a long trestle table in

the center of the room with a half-dozen armless, straight-backed chairs pulled up around it. He made a wobbling beeline for the nearest chair.

Kay went to the drainboard, which still held the dirty dishes from the previous evening's party. At one end stood half a dozen partly filled bottles of assorted liquors, several empty soda bottles, and an ice bucket in which the cubes had been allowed to melt.

"Any particular drink?" she asked.

"You got gin?"

Kay said that she had and asked him how he wanted it.

"Straight."

She found the half-filled gin bottle, which she had neglected to cap last night after making the Collinses, and poured out a double shot in a Martini glass. She went to the brand-new refrigerator and took out the bottle of spring water and poured a glassful and then put both glasses on the table in front of him.

She couldn't help noticing the odor of stale perspiration that lay about him like a dank miasma.

Back at the drainboard again, she poured herself a Scotch and mixed it with soda. She did it almost automatically, at the same time subconsciously censoring herself for drinking so early in the day. But special occasions called for special measures.

When she turned to lift her glass and drink with him, she saw that he had already swallowed the gin. He didn't touch the water.

"Another, if you please," he said.

She put her own drink down untouched and walked over and took his glass. When she brought it back refilled, she brought the remainder of the bottle of gin with her.

He looked grateful.

He swallowed the second glass of straight liquor without a grimace, and then looked up at Kay.

"You alone?"

She nodded. "I'll go phone Frank that you're here," she said.

He reached for the bottle as she left the room.

The telephone was in what had originally been designed as a sewing room, off the hallway between the dining room and the kitchen. She dialed the number, standing beside the small table on which the instrument rested. She heard the sound of the buzzing as the bell rang at the other end of the line. It would ring three times and then there would be a short interval before it would start ringing again.

She waited several minutes. She wasn't impatient. She knew that Frank could very well

be busy, out in front by the pumps, waiting on a customer. Ham wouldn't have arrived yet and Frank would be handling the service station alone.

She waited almost four minutes before he picked up the receiver.

“Harper's Service Station!” He spoke in a crisp, businesslike voice.

“Frank? Kay. Your uncle has just arrived.”

It was a private line, but still she didn't take any unnecessary chances.

They hung up simultaneously, neither having said another word.

2.

Frank Gerald Harper placed the receiver on the hook and was turning away when a bell rang sharply. It was the bell actuated by the rubber hose, that ran from the front door of the small office to the curb, giving warning that a car had been driven up to the gas pumps.

It was a blue Cadillac convertible with the top down and there was a large, red-faced man behind the wheel. A girl who could have been his daughter, but looked like something else altogether, sat close at his side, and they were talking quietly to each other.

Frank passed behind the car, absently noticing the New York plates, and approached on the driver's side.

“Fill her up and check the oil.” The man didn't bother to look at him and he gave the order in an indifferent, almost insolent voice.

Frank reached for the hose attached to the pump marked “Special,” smiling wryly. Six months ago he would have taken exception to being spoken to in that careless, offhand manner. Now he cared only that something like four or five dollars would be rung up on the cash register.

What made it really funny was that he was getting a kick out of it—and it didn't mean a thing to him. Not one damned thing.

Almost without thinking about it he lifted the hood, checked the oil;—the Caddie didn't need any—then checked the radiator and the water in the battery. He sprayed the windshield and wiped off the collection of dust and dead bugs. The car took fourteen gallons and two tenths, and Frank took the ten-dollar bill from the red-faced man and went in and rang up the sale on the register. He brought back the change and said thanks and stop back soon.

The Caddie pulled out, the back wheels once more ringing the signal bell.

Frank went back into the station. He wasn't thinking about the Caddie or the red-faced man or even the pretty little brunette who had been with him. He was thinking about the telephone call from Kay.

“So he's here,” he said in a voice just barely above a whisper. It was a habit he had formed lately, this talking to himself half aloud.

Harper, tall, thin, and in his early thirties, had the broad shoulders, narrow hips, flat stomach, and tanned, healthy complexion of a man who had always kept himself in top physical condition. His hair was a little too dark to be called true blond, and he had large, rectangular blue eyes in a lean, high-cheekboned face. His mouth was possibly a little too generous, but his chin, which needed shaving, was square and firm.

Slouching into the battered, one-armed chair facing the scarred desk, he looked up at the electric clock on the wall. It was just nine o'clock, and, once more speaking in a barely audible whisper, he swore softly.

“That goddamned Ham,” he said. “He would be late again today.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth, however, when he heard the unmistakable rattle of the old Ford service car as it pulled in beside the gas station and came to a creaking halt. A moment later he heard Ham Johnstone slam the car door. He had the usual apologetic grin on his wide, black face as he rounded the building and entered.

“Mawnin', boss,” he said.

Frank stood up. Again he looked at the clock.

“Damn you, Ham,” he said, “you're late again.”

The colored man kept nodding his head as Frank spoke.

“Save it,” he said. “I've gotta run out to the house for a few minutes. Uncle of mine just got in for a visit. You take care of things. There's a couple of tires have to be changed, and watch those pumps. And goddamn it, don't try to use the cash register. I'll leave the change drawer open and you just make change and mark it down.”

The colored man kept nodding his head as Frank spoke.

A minute later Frank was outside and hurrying to his parked Chevvie. He was about to open the door when a police car pulled in and stopped just short of the pumps. Frank looked up and smiled.

“Morning, boy.”

“Hiya, Waldo,” Frank said.

He strolled over and leaned against the door of the tan sedan. There was a large red spotlight on the top of the car, a tall, sturdy radio antenna at the rear, and a chromed siren mounted on the right front fender. Otherwise it was a stock Ford, except for the racks behind the front seat that held the automatic rifle and the tear-gas bombs.

Sergeant Waldo Harrington yawned and stretched. He was alone in the patrol car.

“Goin' be hot,” he said.

Frank nodded.

"I'm gettin' off at noon," the Sergeant said. "Thought we might go over to the beach and do a little surf castin'. Hear they're gettin' a few blues."

Frank shook his head. "Like to, fella," he said, "but I can't make it today. My uncle just got in from the North and I have to run out and get him settled."

Harrington stepped on the starter. "Too bad," he said. "Well, some other time." He pulled out of the station, still yawning.

Frank got into the Chevie. He drove two blocks north and then turned west on Orange Drive. He crossed over the Florida East Coast tracks, continued on another couple of blocks, and found a parking space a few yards from the entrance to the Ranchers and Fruit Growers Trust Company. He cut the engine and climbed out of the car, at the same time reaching into his pocket for some change. He stopped in front of the car and put a couple of pennies into the parking meter. Then he crossed the sidewalk and entered the bank.

The Ranchers and Fruit Growers Trust was the only four-story structure in the town. It stood, an imposing monument to the prosperity of Indio Beach, at the intersection of Orange Drive and Seminole Avenue, in the very heart of the business section.

Capitalized at \$12,000,000, and a member of the Federal Reserve System, it was as strong as the Rock of Gibraltar. Its reputation and its soundness were beyond question.

On this Tuesday morning, a few minutes after nine, the pseudo-marble lobby, recently redecorated and air-conditioned, was crowded. There was a preponderance of tanned, dungareed ranchers from the Glades, wearing wide-brimmed Western hats. There were half a dozen men whom Frank recognized as orange and grapefruit growers from the eastern end of the county, a few housewives, and perhaps half a dozen sunburned, sport-shirted men with well-developed paunches whom he immediately placed as visitors from the North.

Hal Morgan, the bank's vice-president, was sitting at his desk in the enclosure just beyond the entrance and was talking to a tall, gaunt woman who stared at him with glazed and skeptical eyes. Hal looked up and smiled as Frank passed. Frank nodded and waved.

Frank went to the row of high desks in the center of the lobby and, taking a wallet from his rear right pocket, extracted three checks. He endorsed them on the back and then made out a deposit slip. They were small checks, one for three dollars and fifty cents, one for ten dollars, and one for twelve dollars and thirty cents.

He passed the half-dozen tellers' windows until he came to the last window on the north side of the room. The gold lettering on the sign said, "Miss Simpson."

Miss Simpson was the chief teller. Forty-six years old, thin to the point of emaciation, with a leathery, bony face hiding behind gold-rimmed glasses, Miss Simpson was an

exceptionally competent person.

But for the accident of the Second World War, Mary Lou Simpson would probably never have been anything but a stenographer, or possibly a saleslady. But the war came along and the Ranchers and Fruit Growers Trust, like banks all over the country, suddenly became aware of an acute manpower shortage.

Miss Simpson had been hired and from the very first had proved to have an amazing adeptness for the work. Now, after a dozen years, she was an institution within an institution, and there was even talk of putting her on the board of directors someday.

It was only the second time that Frank had approached her window, but she remembered him at once. She greeted him with a thin but friendly smile.

“Mr. Harper,” she said. “Nice to see you.”

Frank smiled back and pushed the checks and the deposit slip under the grille. He was through in less than a minute and a half and turned to leave the bank.

For three months now, since the first week he had leased the run-down gas station, he had been making it a practice to stop by at the bank at least two or three times each week. He chose a different day of the week each time, a different hour of the day, a different teller's window. By now he knew the routine of the bank as well as it was possible for the casual layman to know it.

Leaving through the double glass doors of the bank, which opened and closed through the use of an electric eye, he saw Sam Loxley about to enter.

“Some night!” Sam, a small, wiry, dark man in his late twenties, smiled broadly.

“Sure was.”

“Don't forget,” Loxley said, “our house on Friday. And this time we'll really show you how to play canasta.”

“Gee, I don't know, Sam,” Frank said. “Kay and I may have to call that off. My uncle got into town this morning. Fact, I'm on my way out to the house now. Don't know what it'll do to our plans.”

Sam Loxley shrugged. “Hell, boy,” he said, “bring 'im along. The more the merrier.”

Frank hesitated for a second. “Well,” he said, “I don't know. The old boy's been a little under the weather, from what I've heard, and I don't just know...”

Sam stopped smiling and looked serious. “That's too bad,” he said. “But we'll hold it open. Anyway, Kay and Alice can get together on it.”

He said good-bye then and turned to enter the bank. Frank walked over to the curb, opened the car door, and climbed behind the wheel. He had to wait for the stop light, the only one in the center of the town, and then headed west on Orange Drive until he came to the city limits, some thirty-five city blocks out.

He cut over a lateral throughway to the south and drove another mile, then turned west once more and continued for about ten minutes. On this last road he passed few houses and no cars. Once more he turned left. This was a dead-end road, of hard-packed sand, extremely narrow and little used. He drove by several groves without seeing a house, then passed the small, neat, modern one-story bungalow that the Loxleys had recently built.

Alice Loxley was hanging clothes in the yard; Bitty, the three-year-old golden-haired baby, playing in the basket at her feet. Alice waved.

He waved back and then drove another quarter of a mile and turned into the driveway circling around in back of the rambling old house where he and Kay lived, in complete respectability, as Mr. and Mrs. Frank Gerald Harper.

Kay was standing in the driveway by the back porch. Her long legs were bare and she wore a pair of pale-blue shorts. She had a halter, also blue, around her high, full breasts. In between, the skin was bright gold, and it had an almost iridescent quality. Her long straw-colored hair was turned under at the ends. The bangs failed to cover her wide forehead completely, and they were ragged, but very attractive.

Her eyes were blue with a strong greenish tinge.. Her face was just a trifle too long and thin to be considered beautiful in the classic sense, and possibly her well-formed, full mouth was a bit too large. But she was the picture of health. Even women considered her attractive; men found her completely stunning.

She looked exactly like what everyone that they knew in Indio Beach believed she was —the young, extremely attractive wife of a nice-looking ex-Marine who was establishing himself in business and was about to settle down and raise a fine, healthy family, which would be an asset to the community.

Kay spoke as Frank braked the car to a stop.

“Well, he's here,” she said. “And drunk as a pig.”

3.

Kosta stood at the window, his round, fat body naked except for shorts. He was not drunk; he was never drunk. Liquor did many things to him, but the one thing it never did was to interfere with the clarity of his mind.

Kay had directed him to a bedroom on the second floor, and the moment he'd closed the door, he'd stripped off his clothes. He wanted to talk with Frank, but that could wait. Right now his main wish was to lie down and rest. The gin had relaxed him, temporarily relieved that strange tension under which he always moved, especially when he was physically exhausted.

He had gone to the window to pull down the shade so as to darken the room, and that was how he happened to look out and see Kay and Frank walking along the path leading to the garage, sixty or seventy yards to the rear of the house.

Frank had his right arm around her waist in a half-careless, thoroughly familiar manner, and, watching them, Kosta sensed a strong intimacy between the two.

His normally phlegmatic expression suddenly changed and there was a peculiar, almost avid look in the bulging eyes.

“Flood's in for a surprise,” he muttered under his breath.

He turned then and left the window, falling on the bed without bothering to remove the spread.

In another moment he was once more in that strange, exciting half-dream world in which he spent the greater part of his life.

4.

Sam Loxley, who had sat in a canvas deck chair and spent most of his time opening cans of cold beer, and Jim Dexter, the local carpenter whom Frank had hired to help him do the work, had got a big kick out of the garage.

“You're like all those crazy Northerners who come down here,” Sam had told him. Sam himself had been in Florida a little more than a year. “Just like the rest of 'em. Think you have to build like you do in the North. Hell, you don't need nothin' but a roof.”

Jim Dexter was being paid for his work, and so he didn't say much one way or the other, but it was obvious that he thought Frank was wasting his time.

Frank had tried to explain it.

“You see,” he'd said, “I'll probably get a little repair work now and then, and hell, the gas station just isn't big enough for it. I figure I can bring a car or two out here and this old barn will be a nice place to work on them in my spare time.”

“But why bother to close it in?” Sam asked. “All you gotta do is keep the rain off of 'em.”

Frank told him that he'd just feel safer if the cars were locked up when he wasn't around. And so he had gone ahead, following the plans that Flood had given him, and rebuilt the ramshackle barn into a tightly closed garage that would hold three cars and a good-sized workbench. There were double overhead doors and only one small window, high up in the back. Even Jim squawked about that.

“Boy,” he said, “you'll roast to death working in here. You gotta have air in this country. Wait till you try and come in here in the summer.”

But Frank had gone ahead anyway and let them think he was stupid. Flood wanted the garage in back of the house, and what Flood wanted he was going to get.

Kay and Frank passed the doors of the garage and then circled around the left side of the building. There were two folding lawn chairs and a weather-beaten redwood table under a large rubber tree a few yards from the building, and they sat down there.

“No,” Frank was saying, “I’ve never met him. But I know all about him. He’s the best torch in the business. Flood wouldn’t have him if he weren’t the best.”

“But Frank,” Kay said, “you should see him. Doesn’t look as though he could get out of his own way. And his eyes. He looks insane. There’s something sick, unhealthy, about him. He gives me the creeps.”

“Look, kid,” Frank said, “of course he gives you the creeps. What the hell, the guy’s a maniac. If Flood wasn’t paying him to do it, he’d do it anyway. That’s how he gets his kicks. He likes to see ‘em burn.”

A shiver went through her and she shook her head. “Well, thank God, he’s your problem,” she said. “But you better get him sobered up and out of those smelly clothes before you start taking him around town. The way he looks and smells, he could be locked up on general principles.”

“Don’t worry about him,” Frank said. “He’ll be all right. I’ll let him rest up and take him around this afternoon. It’ll have to be this afternoon. Paulmeyer gets in tomorrow and I’ll have to drive down to Fort Pierce and see him. I want to take him the plans and go over the details.”

“Paulmeyer?” Kay said. “He’s the... ”

“He’s the dynamiter,” Frank said.

Suddenly he turned in his seat so that he was facing her. His face was very sober and there was a petulant expression in his eyes.

“Goddamn it, baby,” he said, “I wish you didn’t have to go to Palm Beach: I wish you didn’t have to see Flood tomorrow.”

She reached quickly for his hand and squeezed it. She tried to be easy and casual about it, to keep the undercurrent of worry out of her voice.

“Don’t worry about Flood,” she said. “I can handle him all right.”

“Nobody can handle him,” Frank said. “I know.. My God, I’ve been around him enough.”

He looked down at the ground between his feet, his eyes half squinted and worry lines around his mouth.

“What I still can’t get is his sending you down here with me. He might have figured—”

“Not Flood,” she interrupted. “You know how he figures. Nobody would ever have the guts to take anything from him. He’s not used to losing.”

“I know,” he said. “He keeps ‘em until he’s tired of ‘em and then he throws ‘em out.”

She took her hand away suddenly and her eyes held a hurt, unhappy look.

“We weren’t going to talk about it, Frank,” she said.

“O.K. O.K., we won't. But I can tell you one thing: The second this job is over and done with, I'm through. Through for good. Then we cut and run.”

She looked over at him and again her hand found his.

“That's right, Frank,” she said. “We'll both be through. So don't worry about him. It won't be long now. Just until Saturday. Nothing can happen until then. You know Flood. He won't let anything, anything at all, interfere with this one. This is his pet, the big one. The job means more to him than anything else.”

He leaned over and kissed her lightly.

“I still wish you didn't have to see him,” he said.

They stood up then and started back toward the house. They held hands as they walked.

“I'm going up and see Kosta,” Frank said as they reached the porch. “Drunk or sober, he's got to get up. I want him out and around the town this afternoon. I want him to go over the maps.”

“I've got to get those damned dishes done,” Kay said.

“Alice is bringing the kids over this afternoon and I promised I'd go to the beach with them.”

She pulled him to her suddenly and her arms went around his waist and she lifted her mouth to his kiss.

“Don't ever worry about Flood again,” she said.

Chapter Two

1.

Nothing suited him. The warm, indolent climate, the second-floor room in the tourist home that he had rented for a week, the restaurant two blocks away where he had his meals—he hated them all, the same as he had hated the long ride down on the train.

He was an old man, well past seventy, and he was set in his ways. Never married, with any memory of family long faded, with neither friends nor companions, he was a man who had always lived alone and who had become intolerant of change. No human being in the world meant anything to him, and the few persons with whom he was forced to deal in the course of his solitary life he accepted only grudgingly.

The ones whom he would be working with on this job he neither knew nor wanted to know. He had no curiosity about them, no interest in them.

Flood had hired him and Flood was the only one who meant anything at all to him. Flood meant fifteen thousand dollars in cash—the money he was being paid to do what he had to do.

There were only a very few like him left and he knew it. He knew his value. That was

one reason he had been able to drive the bargain with Flood when he had been approached. That's why he had told Flood to take his percentage and shove it; that his price was fifteen thousand, paid in advance.

And he had had his way. Flood had been forced to agree.

For Flood he held a certain degree of respect, if not liking. Flood was an expert in his field. Not a specialist, but at least an expert.

This old man with his faded blue eyes, his veined, gnarled hands, his sunken chest, and his gaunt, stooped frame was a specialist. He knew his business backward and forward. He'd started out in Bavaria as an apprentice in a toolmaking shop and he'd been several years learning his trade. What he had learned he'd learned well, and it had always stayed with him.

When he had first come to the United States he had worked in a shipyard, and then later he had worked for a safe and vault firm. That's where he had obtained the second part of his education.

Years later, long after he had finished his first stretch in the penitentiary, he had taken up explosives, and he had mastered the delicate technique of handling them with the same thoroughness that characterized his mastery ” of his other crafts.

He never forgot anything and he never lost the amazing dexterity that had made him an artist in his field. Not even the last long stretch, the fifteen years in the federal penitentiary, had made him lose it.

He was one of the very last of an old school. In his entire career he had never carried a gun or found the necessity for using one. He didn't understand or approve of the current crop of burglars and hoodlums. He was a criminal and that he freely admitted, but he belonged to a different generation and a different time, an era that no longer existed.

And now he was an old, old man and this would probably be his last job. With what he already had saved and safely invested in government securities, the fifteen thousand dollars would see him through until he died.

When it was over he'd just get on the train and go back up North to the little town where he owned the tiny bungalow, and he'd sit on his porch in the sun and know that he was all through and that there was nothing else left to do but wait for death. No worries, no fear of ending up in the poorhouse.

He had a tremendous pride and he'd always had it. He wanted to be dependent on no mail.

His needs were simple: a roof over his head, plenty of the kind of food that he liked to cook for himself, a glass of schnapps now and then for his stomach's sake. And the music.

He'd go down to New York when they had one of the Wagnerian operas or a Beethoven

concert. Those he loved. And in between times he had his own Capehart and his fine collection of records. It was his only indulgence, the only thing beyond the bare essentials of existence on which he spent money and on which he squandered the diminishing fund of his desires.

In the meantime, he sat here in this room that he had rented, his feet thrust into a pair of worn bedroom slippers, his old tired body wrapped in a faded dressing gown, and waited.

Flood had said Wednesday, and today was Wednesday. Today the other one would come and give him the information he had to have. He knew no curiosity about the " " man who was going to meet him; he only hoped that he would be intelligent and able to answer his questions. He hoped that he would have competent floor plans of the building, a layman's knowledge of the vault and its location, and, if possible, its make. Anything else would be fine, but that was all he expected and that was all he would really need. And of course the tools.

Those and the protection that Flood had guaranteed him for the few minutes it would take him to do his work.

He understood the risks. He had been taking risks like this all his life. Sometimes he had won out and sometimes he had lost. When he had lost he had paid for it. Usually it was because of someone else's carelessness. Once it had been just as a bad break. That was the time the nitro had been poor and something had gone wrong and he'd had to take a half hour longer than he'd counted on. The patrol car had returned before it was expected and then everything had happened at once.

Old Jonesy, who had worked with him on half a dozen jobs, had been killed in the first blast of gunfire, and he himself had been hit in the leg. He still limped from the wound. That was the job that had drawn him the twenty-year stretch in the federal can; the stretch of which he had done fifteen years before he'd finally got out.—He hoped this one would be different.

One thing had impressed him: Flood himself would be present on this deal. And Flood wasn't one to take any chances at all. Not where his own freedom was concerned.

He lay back in the armchair and his withered hand reached for the pipe on the table at his side. He lighted the dottle that had been left in the bowl from the last time he had smoked it and then coughed an old man's hacking cough.

He hawked and spat, aiming at a wastepaper basket in the corner of the room. And just then he heard the knock on the door.

2.

Kosta didn't get up on Wednesday morning, and Kay and Frank had breakfast together on the patio at seven o'clock.

Both were tired and both looked worried and nervous. As the time approached, the

tension was beginning to tell.

Tuesday afternoon, Frank had driven Kosta around the town. He'd shown him the beach first, feeling that maybe Kosta would like to see it, but then, when the dumpy little man had expressed no interest or curiosity, they'd driven back to the main section of the village.

Frank had shown him the courthouse and the public park where the shuffleboard courts were and the old couples from the tourist camps and trailer courts playing in the sun. Later they had driven out past the school, a large sprawling collection of buildings, five blocks to the west of the business district.

Kosta had expressed keen interest in the school auditorium. It was a large frame structure with a great deal of glass, and it contained an indoor basketball court, an enclosed amphitheatre where the high-school students held their rallies and put on amateur theatricals, and several smaller meeting rooms.

This was the building that Flood had picked out as the principal target.

Later he had driven by the warehouse along the railroad tracks and then circled around past the two-story department store at the east end of the business district.

Kosta had looked at the block-square building and shaken his head.

“Never do at all,” he said. “Flood should have known. All steel and concrete. It would take forever to get started.”

Frank hadn't commented. This was not his part of the business. All he was supposed to do was show the other man around. It was up to Kosta—and Flood himself, of course—to select the spots.

Frank had stopped at the drugstore to get a pack of cigarettes and he'd met Waldo Harrington again, this time in civilian clothes.

“Thought you were going fishing,” Frank had said.

Waldo shrugged. “Wife got ahold of me before I could start,” he said, smiling. “Wanted me to take her shopping, and so here I am. She figures my day off is her day off.”

“With your connections you should get her locked up on your day off,” Frank told him, and laughed. He'd brought Harrington over to the car and introduced his companion;

“My uncle,” he'd said, not bothering with a name. “Want you to meet Waldo Harrington. He's the guy you'll see behind you in the patrol car if you're going too fast.” And again he laughed.

They had shaken hands and Harrington said he was glad to know Frank's uncle.

It was a nice break. He wanted to establish an identity for Kosta, just in case.

Later they had stopped by the gas station and Frank had spent a little time with Ham Johnstone checking up on the day's business. As usual, Ham had tried to operate the cash

register, and things were all fouled up. But Frank didn't worry about him. He knew the money end of it would work out all right. Ham was honest.

They'd gone out to the house then and Kosta had spent the night drinking straight gin. He hadn't talked at all, just drunk and stared at Kay until she had at last got up and gone upstairs. Sitting there, with his bulging eyes watching her, had not only made her nervous; she'd felt a sense of nausea.

And now it was Wednesday morning and they were having a hurried breakfast. Frank had already stopped at Kosta's room and told him that they'd both be gone for most of the day.

Without opening his eyes, Kosta had said, "Go ahead. I'm staying in bed. Don't feel good."

And then, as Frank had been about to shut the door, he'd spoken again, lying there half nude and obscene and not opening his eyes.

"Tell the girl to say hello to Flood for me," he said. "Have her tell him that everything is fine. I'll take the city hall and school auditorium."

He'd started to snore by the time Frank had the door closed.

Frank was pouring the coffee. He still had the petulant, worried look that his face had, worn yesterday afternoon when he and Kay had talked out in back of the barn.

"Honey," he said, "suppose I were to go on down and see him after I get through with Paulmeyer. I could tell him you're sick or something."

"No," she said. "No, it wouldn't do. You know Flood. He'd know at once that something was wrong. He'd come back with you. We don't want that. It's best if I go. Don't worry about me. I won't be staying. I'm only going to see him for a few minutes. I doubt if I'll even be alone with him. We have to do it this way. It's what he's expecting and there's no point in risking trouble. After all, he can't know anything."

"It isn't that," Frank said. "It isn't that I care if he did know. It's only..."

She reached over and caressed the side of his face with the soft palm of her hand.

"Baby," she said, "stop worrying. I've told you. He was through with me a long time ago. Everything was over. He was just hanging on, waiting for something else to come along. He doesn't care any more. Anyway, I can handle him."

"Nobody can handle him when he wants something," Frank said. "You know that. And you know that the minute he sees you it's going to start all over again with him."

"It may start with him," she said, "but it won't start with me. Let me worry about it, honey."

They left the house together just before eight o'clock.

Passing the Loxley house, Kay turned to him and put her hand on his arm.

“How about Friday night?” she asked. “You think we better stop by and call it off?”

Instinctively his left foot went to the clutch, and then he took the pressure off and continued on.

“No,” he said. “No, we better go along just as we planned. We don't want to do anything at all out of the way. We said we'd show up for dinner and we better do it. It won't make any difference.”

“Yes,” she said, “I know. But don't forget. They'll all be here by then.”

“Let 'em,” Frank said. “Let 'em. We'll still go.”

They stopped in town for a minute and Kay left a grocery order at the chain store. She said that they'd be in late in the afternoon to pick it up.

A few minutes later they stopped at the gas station. Ham had already opened up. He smiled widely when he saw Kay, exposing two rows of large white teeth. He thought Kay was a fine woman. Frank was the best boss he'd ever had and he sure hoped that the gas station was going to work out all right and make money. Like most people in Indio Beach, both black and white, Ham knew everyone's business. He knew that Frank Harper had rented the gas station and taken over the franchise some three months back. He even knew that he was paying two hundred dollars a month on the lease.

Ham had worked for the man who had previously leased the station, and more often than not he'd gone home on a Saturday night with either no pay check or at best a partial pay check. The man had been a drunk and didn't much care whether he made a go of it or not.

But this fellow, this Frank from up North, he was different. He was a plugger. Look at the business they were doing already, after just three months.

Frank didn't waste any time. By nine-thirty he was driving south toward Fort Pierce.

Once there, he parked a couple of blocks from the place where he knew that Paulmeyer was staying. He sat for a while behind the wheel without moving while he and Kay had a final cigarette together. At last he opened the door at his side and stepped to the street.

“Take care of yourself, baby,” he said. “I'll take the two-thirty Greyhound back and you come on home as soon as you can get away. Tell Flood everything is under control.”

She leaned out of the car on her side and kissed him good-by.

“Don't worry about a thing, honey,” she said. “Nothing. You know whose girl I am.”

Frank turned without a word and stared down the street.

Kay shifted over in the seat and started the engine.

Ten minutes later she had left Fort Pierce behind her and was starting the sixty-odd-mile drive to Palm Beach.

Her eyes were very sober and her mouth was set in a hard straight line.

It wasn't going to be easy.

She tried her best not to think about it. Thinking about it only reminded her of those other months and years when she had been in truth Flood's girl.

The very thought of it made her a little sick. God, she wondered how she had ever been able to do it.

She shook her head and again tried not to think about it. She tried to think only of Frank, and the difference these last three months had made in her life.

3.

Frank knocked and waited until he heard the old man's voice. Then he reached for the knob and opened the door and entered the room.

He'd been hearing about Hans Paulmeyer for years. The man was a living legend. But he'd never actually met him before. As he closed the door behind himself and turned and saw him sitting there, hunched down in the chair, a dozen swift thoughts passed through his mind.

Lord, he thought, so this is him. This ancient relic of a man who looks like he should be in an old soldiers' home or in a county poorhouse. This is the man who has stolen more than five million dollars in his day. The biggest and the best of them all. It was almost impossible to believe.

"I'm Frank," he said.

The old man nodded. "Sit down," he said.

Frank pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Can we talk here?" he asked.

"Yes," Paulmeyer said.

"We can talk, but keep your voice down. Ain't no one on this floor but me. Nobody else would be crazy enough to live in the goddamned place. Why anyone wants to come down to this Godforsaken country in the first place is more than I'd know, anyway."

He stretched and pulled himself out of the chair and Frank was surprised to observe that in spite of a pronounced stoop, he stood well over six feet.

Walking to the bureau, Paulmeyer pulled open a drawer and took out a pad of paper and a stubby pencil.

"Let's go over it," he said, moving back to the chair.

Frank nodded.

It was the strangest sensation, but he felt almost like a schoolboy in front of a stern teacher who was about to give him an oral examination.

“First,” the old man said, “the acetylene.”

“Got it,” Frank said. “Also an electric arc job.”

Paulmeyer nodded and made a check mark on the paper.

“Won't need the electric,” he said. “Hope I don't need the other. Next, the hand drill.”

Frank nodded.

“What kind?”

“Master brand,” Frank said.

The old man shook his head.

“Light,” he said. “Too light. You should have got a regular professional make. But we'll have to make it do.”

“I can borrow a bigger one,” Frank said.

Paulmeyer looked at him out of cold, bleak eyes.

“Don't be a fool,” he said. “Borrow! Suppose we have to leave it? Never borrow. Where'd you get the one you got—and the other stuff?”

“Miami,” Frank said. He wondered why he'd been stupid enough to suggest borrowing a drill. Hell, he knew better without being told. “Bought them at a secondhand tool place in Miami. No chance of their being traced.”

The old man stared at him for a second or two and then lowered his eyes to the paper again.

“Drills?”

“A couple of dozen, from a sixteenth to a half. The very best.”

Paulmeyer grunted and continued down the list. He mentioned peen-ball hammers, chisels, hack saws, crowbars, and a half-dozen other assorted items, checking them off as Frank told him that he had them ready.

“Not,” the old man said, “that I hope I haf to use all this junk. May not use nothing but the soup. But we gotta be prepared. I know how these goddamn tank-town boxes are. Never know for sure what you run into. All right, let's see the floor plan.”

“I can explain...”

“Explain later,” he said. “Let's see the plans.”

Frank took a folded paper out of his wallet and handed it over. He stood up and stepped to the side of the chair, so that he could see over the other's shoulder.

“It's a little rough,” he said. “Had to pace it off a little bit at a time, whenever I got a chance. And there were always ten or twenty people around. I had to be careful.”

The old man studied the rough drawing for several minutes without saying anything and then he nodded. He looked up at Frank out of his Weak, faded eyes.

“All right, son,” he said. “Now explain it.”

Frank reached down as he talked and pointed out various features of the floor plan. He explained about the double plate-glass front doors, the alarm system, the ceiling-high bars three quarters of the way back in the huge lobby that shut off the vault department from the banking floor proper. He had carefully marked in partitions, windows, and every possible detail of the inside of the building.

The architects who had planned the interior would have been surprised how complete and accurate the plan was.

The old man studied it for a long time. At last he grunted once more, coughed, and spat into the corner of the room. He carefully folded the plans and put them into the pocket of his bathrobe.

“Damn good thing,” he said, “that Flood's going to knock out the power station. Never could do this job otherwise. My God, the damn place is built like a greenhouse. Any sonofabitch and his brother can stand across the street and see right into the guts of the place.”

For a moment Frank was tempted to tell him that at the time the job was pulled there wouldn't be any so-and-so and his brother around to look. Everyone would be too busy in another section of town, watching something a lot more spectacular.

But he said nothing. He didn't know just how much Flood had told the old man about the plans. Flood never took anyone completely into his confidence. When he blueprinted a job, he allocated certain phases to certain people, and half the time one group didn't even know who the others were or what they'd be doing. Flood considered this the-safest plan. It had a double advantage. It kept the members of a mob from gossiping among themselves before a job was pulled, and it avoided any chance of jealousies and clashing personalities. And then later, in case someone was picked up, he couldn't spill too much because he didn't know too much.

So Frank said nothing.

He and Kay were the only ones outside of Flood himself who had a pretty fair idea of the whole general setup. Frank had to know. He not only was fingering the job and supplying the hideout, but was also, to a great extent, the co-ordinator, the contact man.

He had to know a lot of things, but even he didn't know who else would be in on it. There would be Flood himself, of course. And he'd probably want at least two others with him at the bank itself. Then there'd have to be a couple of boys to take the powerhouse out. Somewhere in the background, probably in Miami, would be a lawyer and a bail bondsman waiting for possible trouble.

There might be others.

A job of this size, involving a figure that well might run close to a million dollars, was complicated and tricky. It took real teamwork. It took brains.

Flood had the brains, all right.

Frank spent another half hour with the old man. He told him a little about the town, a lot of incidental information about the bank. He got a street map and explained exactly how far the railway station was from the bank.

Frank knew that old Paulmeyer was planning to take the twelve-fifty train, which came up from Miami and went on through to New York. Whether the job was completed or not, the old man was going to be on that train. That had been the agreement he had made with Flood and nothing was going to interfere with it.

The old man was pleased that it was only a three-block walk. He was going to get in and out as fast as he could.

“I'm going to be on that platform when she blows,” he said. “An' if I time it right, the train will just about be pulling in.”

Frank finally got up to leave. Paulmeyer didn't offer to shake hands with him, just nodded. He didn't know whether he'd ever see Frank again and he didn't care.

He was reaching again for his pipe as Frank left the room.

4.

Leaving the rooming house, Frank walked into the main section of town. He made a point of stopping at a wholesale auto-parts place and putting in a small order for a few supplies for the gas station. He wanted to have a legitimate excuse for his visit to the town in case it should ever be questioned later.

The bus wasn't very full and he had no trouble finding a seat. It was only a short ride, less than an hour, but he was dozing as they came into Indio Beach. The bus station was on Route 1, just a little past the Orange Drive intersection and only a few blocks from his gas station. He woke up as they growled to a stop and he knew at once that something was wrong. He sensed it even as he shook himself awake and started for the door.

He was stepping down to the pavement, suddenly conscious that the bus station was virtually deserted, when he happened to look up, over toward the town, and saw the smoke.

There was a colored man in a chefs hat and white apron standing in the doorway of the restaurant that served as the bus depot. He too was looking toward the south, where great billowing masses of black and purple smoke rose up like huge flowers into the blue sky. His thick-lipped mouth was half open and his eyes were big.

Hurrying around in front of the bus, Frank heard the sudden wail of a siren, and he quickly stepped back off the highway as a state police car roared by.

Frank knew that it was a patrol car,” probably out of the substation twenty miles north of the town. He began to run south on the highway. As he ran he watched the smoke and saw the sudden yellow flames shoot up out of it some seventy or eighty feet high. A moment later there was the dull roar of an explosion and then nothing else again but the smoke.

It took him less than three minutes to reach the fire. He had known at once what it was that was burning. It was the long line of warehouses just south of the Florida East Coast station.

There must have been more than a thousand persons already gathered there when Frank arrived. He saw that the three local fire engines were on the scene. The two police patrol cars were also there, and officers were trying to keep the crowds back.

The town had a volunteer fire department, with only three hired professionals and the rest of the membership made up of merchants and citizens of the town.

There was a good deal of yelling and confusion and the men on the big pumper were apparently having trouble making a hose connection. Among them Frank saw Sam Loxley, and he remembered that Sam was a volunteer fireman. Loxley had on a white helmet and had stripped to his waist. His thin, wiry body was sooty and dripping with sweat.

At the far edge of the crowd he suddenly spotted Ham. Quickly he went to him. Ham's eyes were wide and he was so excited he could barely talk.

“All of a sudden, boss,” he said. “Jus' all of a sudden! One big bang and then she took right off.”

He managed to tell Frank that the fire had started less than a half hour ago.

Frank asked him who was taking care of the station and Ham merely shrugged. The fire had his total attention.

“Well, get the hell back there,” Frank yelled at him. “Somebody's gotta be there. Go on, now, get back, and I'll be along in a few minutes.”

“But, boss,” Ham said, “de whole town's heah!”

“Get back, Ham,” Frank said. “Hell, one of them sparks lands on us, we'll be on fire too.”

Ham nodded then with quick understanding. He hurried away.

The entire east wall of the warehouse suddenly burst into flames and the crowd surged back as it fell. The driver of the hook and ladder quickly climbed behind the wheel to get the truck out of the way, and Frank heard Waldo Harrington yelling for the people to clear the road. A moment later he reached over and tapped Waldo on the shoulder. He asked if there was anything he could do.

The police sergeant turned, his face angry, and then he recognized Frank. He smiled tightly.

“Hell, boy,” he said. “Ain't nothin' anyone can do. That damn warehouse was filled with furniture and building material. Tar paper, from the looks of all that smoke. No chance saving it. Only thing the boys can do is try and keep her from spreading.”

Frank watched for another ten or fifteen minutes and then turned and walked to the gas station. Ham was standing in the driveway, looking over toward the fire, when Frank arrived. He was still excited.

“Listen,” Frank said. “I'm going to take the Ford pickup for a while. Want to run out to the house. Be back later.”

Frank had just remembered something. Something very important.

It took him the better part of a half hour to get through the traffic jam in the town. He was amazed at the number of cars that had suddenly converged on the scene.

Reaching the house, he pulled the car around-the drive and parked in front of the garage. He climbed out and started for the back door. Entering the house, he went directly upstairs and to the room in which he had left Kosta.

The room was vacant.

He took his time and made a thorough search of the house and the grounds. There was no sign of the other man.

Frank finally went into the kitchen. He went over to the cupboard, opened it, and took out a bottle of rye. He got a glass from the dish shelf and poured it a third full and then added water. He drank it standing up.

He needed a drink.

There was no doubt in his mind at all. He knew what had happened.

This was it. When Flood found out, he'd kill Kosta. There was no doubt about it, he'd kill him. And he'd blame Frank. Flood always blamed someone.

Frank poured another drink, carrying the glass out to the patio. He didn't know what was going to happen and he wanted to think. He wanted to plan. He got up once, half tempted to go to the phone and call Palm Beach, but then he changed his mind. In the first place, calling Palm Beach would be too damned risky. And in the second place, what could he say?

He knew in his own mind what must have happened, but there was still a lot he didn't know. He still didn't know where Kosta was.

He suddenly realized that he was silently hoping that Kosta was in the center of that warehouse, right at this very moment.

He was out in the kitchen, making himself another drink, when he heard the car pull into

the drive and stop. For a second he had an almost irresistible urge to turn and run. But he shrugged his shoulders and, a grim look about his mouth, left the room and walked to the front of the house. He reached the door in time to see Waldo Harrington get out from behind the driver's seat. Waldo saw him and beckoned.

He set the drink down on a table in the patio and opened the door and walked toward the driveway.

Waldo was opening the rear door of the patrol car.

“Better give me a hand here, boy,” he said.

Looking over the police sergeant's shoulder, Frank saw Kosta in the back seat of the car.

The little fat man was sitting straight up in the seat, his bulging eyes wide. His mouth was half opened and his face was a sickly greenish white. He looked as though he were in a trance; there was no movement in his face or body. He was staring straight ahead and it was obvious that he was seeing nothing.

“Found him like this, leaning against a building over in town,” Waldo said. “Does he have these seizures often?”

Kosta smelled of stale gin. Frank said something about his having been sick.

“Remember you said he wasn't well,” Waldo said. “He shouldn't be wandering around alone.” His voice was disapproving.

Together they got him out of the car and carried him into the house. They didn't try to move him upstairs, but laid him out on the couch in the living room; Frank went into the kitchen and got a glass of water and put a little brandy in it. In the meantime the policeman loosened his clothes. When Frank came back, they forced some of the liquid down his throat, and Kosta mumbled something and for a moment seemed to be recovering. But then his head fell back and he breathed heavily. His eyes remained wide open.

“Guess I better call the doc,” Waldo said.

Frank shook his head. “No,” he said. “No, it isn't necessary. This happens now and then. We had a little party last night and he drank a bit too much. He shouldn't drink at all. And then I guess he went out and started walking around in the hot sun and it hit him. Happens now and then. We know what to do for him.”

Waldo stood up. “Must of been quite a party,” he said. “My God, I could use a shot myself. First the goddamned fire and then this.”

He followed Frank out into the kitchen and they had a drink together.

“Better keep an eye on the old boy,” Waldo said as he was leaving. “He's in no shape to be wandering around.”

Frank asked him how the fire was coming along.

“About burned out,” the Sergeant told him. “I was back in town trying to clear up the traffic mess when I spotted your uncle. Lucky.”

Frank thanked him again and in a few minutes Waldo left. Frank went back into the living room. The other man hadn't moved. For several minutes Frank stood there, staring down at him.

“You insane sonofabitch,” he said at last in a tight, hard voice. “Flood should have known better. He might have guessed.”

He turned and started again for the kitchen.

Thinking of Flood made him think of Kay. Right now he didn't want to think of Kay. He had too much on his mind as it was.

He decided to call the gas station and tell Ham he wouldn't be able to get back.

He didn't dare leave the house alone. Not with Kosta in it.

Chapter Three

1.

U.S. HIGHWAY 1 stretches south from Fort Pierce for the better part of a hundred miles before entering the northern suburbs of West Palm Beach. For the most part it is single-laned each way, although it is one of the most heavily traveled arteries in the state, and, in fact, the entire Eastern seaboard. It is an almost straight and, for the most part, flat road; dull, uninteresting, and without character.

The dullness and the scenic monotony of the highway are the cause of innumerable accidents, as drivers frequently find their passage over it so tiring that they tend to doze.

Kay had made the trip three times before, and each time she found it difficult to keep awake. But this time she was wide awake. Kay had plenty on her mind to keep her awake. Kay was thinking of Flood.

She had known Flood for four years; for most of them she had been his mistress.

She had never been in love with him.

Contrary to generally accepted conventions, Kay was neither more nor less moral than thousands of other young women her age. She was, however, a great deal more attractive than most other girls, and circumstances had had a lot to do with the establishing of her destiny.

Her full name was Katherine Jane Garner, and she had been born into a middle-class family in a middle-class sort of town in Ohio. She was an only child, and her father, a linotype operator, had died of lung cancer when Kay was ten years old. He had, thoughtfully, left fifteen thousand dollars in insurance, and that sum, plus what her mother was able to earn as a part-time trained nurse, enabled Kay to obtain the proper

high-school education and attend business school for two years. It was during the week that she was to be graduated that her mother was struck by a hit-and-run driver and killed.

Kay stayed on in the Ohio town long enough to see to the funeral, and then, feeling lost and unhappy, she had decided to go to New York.

She hadn't much liked the business school and she had no desire to be a secretary. What she had wanted to do was to become a dramatic actress.

Kay arrived in New York City on her nineteenth birthday, and she took a small apartment in Greenwich Village. She also enrolled in a dramatic school that guaranteed to teach radio and television techniques, as well as stagecraft. It was several months before Kay realized she was learning nothing of value and paying far too much for the experience.

Disillusioned, she concluded that all schools were rackets and decided to seek practical experience. Because of her beautiful figure and her spectacular good looks, she found no difficulty in finding work in a night-club chorus line. The pay was not much, but she still had several thousand dollars left from her mother's estate, and so money wasn't any problem.

In her second year in New York, Kay discovered two things. The first and perhaps most important was that New York was not really much different from any other place, including her small home town in the Midwest.

Most of her friends also came from small towns. Some of them had jobs; some were in New York studying and living on money sent from home.

It is true that she was in theatrical work of a sort, but it was, for the most part, hard, tedious, and uninspiring. She was just as far from being a real actress as she had been when she started out.

It wasn't that she was actually disillusioned; she was merely becoming bored and beginning to wonder where it was going to end. She couldn't see any particular future for herself.

The second discovery was Artie.

Artie Monroe was a couple of years older than Kay and he was a musician. He too was from a small town in the Midwest and he had come to New York to study music. He had ended up at the end of a year playing with a small orchestra in a place on West Fifty-second Street. He had an apartment in the same building in which Kay lived.

Artie was a tall, dark, good-looking boy with a nice face, long eyelashes, and a weak chin.

Kay never analyzed her feelings about Artie. She knew only that she liked him from the very first, that he was kind and attentive, and that he offered companionship. It wasn't

until she'd been going with him for about six months that she found out he was also married and the father of a child.

By that time it was too late to do anything about it. She was already pregnant.

They had been planning on getting married, or at least she had, and Kay had taken the few thousand dollars she still had left and put them into a joint bank account with Artie. The day she found out that he was already married, she found out too that Artie had gone to the bank and drawn out every penny from the joint account. She never saw him again.

Kay went to work that night in the spot up on the East Side where she had a walk-on part in the floor show. She was four months pregnant and the shock of having found out about Artie was just too much. She fainted in the dressing room, about ten minutes before she was to go on, and when she failed to come out of it, one of the girls had called a doctor.

That was the night she'd met Flood.

Flood owned the night club, or a big interest in it, and he'd come in with the doctor to find out what was wrong. From the doctor he found out part of it, and from a couple of the other girls he found out the rest.

He'd had her sent home in a cab; later on he'd arranged for the abortion. He saw to it that her salary was continued while she was at home recovering. He even sent her flowers every couple of days.

At first Kay had not known that Flood was a racketeer. She knew nothing about him except that he had been kind to her and helped her when she'd needed kindness and help; that he had taken care of her when she desperately needed someone to take care of her.

She never did go back to the floor show. Within a month she was living with Flood in an East Side apartment.

Actually, it was more her apartment than it was his. He merely paid the bills and spent a day or two a week in the place. He was neither good to her nor bad. They never had made any actual verbal arrangement; the thing had just gradually developed. She had learned very early never to ask him questions, never to make demands.

During the four years in which he had kept her in the apartment and taken care of her, she had never known whether he was married or where he spent his time when he was away from her.

Until some six months ago, she had just drifted. She'd spent her own time, except on those occasions when Flood took her to the track or to night clubs or out dancing, doing almost nothing. She window-shopped, bought clothes now and then. She read a good deal, mostly popular novels and magazines. She went to movies and occasionally to plays. She had few friends, and Flood never brought any of his friends or acquaintances around.

Then, six months ago, Flood had stopped coming to the apartment, though he'd gone on paying the rent and sending her a few extra dollars every week. At the end of about six weeks he had finally come to see her, and he'd laid it down to her without any preliminary sparring.

The time had come when she was going to have to do something for him. The something had been to come to Florida with Frank Harper, ostensibly as his wife, and to set up the background for the bank robbery. She had met Harper only once before and she was under the impression that he worked for Flood.

By this time, of course, she knew that Flood was mixed up in rackets; that he was, in short, a crook.

When he had given her the story, outlining his plans for robbing the bank and explaining the part she was to play in the scheme, she had been as much surprised as she had been shocked. The fact that he was dishonest, that he was a criminal, she had more or less taken for granted. The fact that she herself might ever become involved had never occurred to her.

But Flood had been smart about it. He'd given her no chance to protest.

"I'm broke, see," he said. "Wiped clean. I'm putting every last buck I've got into this one. And you're helping me with it. For four years now you've been living on my dough. It's time you paid back. This is your chance to do it."

Two weeks later she and Frank had left for Florida. They'd come down by bus, because that was the way Flood had it planned. He had everything planned. He even knew about the house that they were to rent; he knew about the gas station that Frank was going to lease. He'd made all the arrangements. He'd given Frank the background and the stories to tell and enough money to set it up.

Flood had talked to her alone the morning she and Frank left. Frank was waiting outside in the taxi.

"Just remember one thing, kid," he'd said. "You're going down there as Frank's wife. In public you're going to act like his wife. Right up to the hilt. But after dark you're going to remember you're my girl. Don't ever forget it. My girl!"

He hadn't kissed her good-by.

It was a strange thing, but now, just three short months later, as she drove south on Route I and thought about it, she found it almost impossible to remember what Flood had really looked like. She couldn't, to save her life, even recall the color of his eyes. The whole thing, that entire four-year interlude, had faded into the background of her mind. It seemed never to have really existed at all.

It was incredible that three months could have made so much difference. It was exactly as though now, for the first time in the twenty-five years of her life, she were really living, were really an actual human being.

As she thought about it, one strange thing suddenly occurred to her. She had never been aware of it during the four years she had lived with Flood, but she must have been frightened to death of him during the entire interlude. For the first time she had the clarity of understanding to realize it. It was as though she had been mesmerized, and the very intensity of her fear had kept her from consciously recognizing it.

2.

Roy Cluney sat on the edge of the day bed and shook a cigarette out of the pack and lifted it to his cupid-bow lips. He was nineteen years old and he had the round, half-formed face of a baby. His large, agate-blue eyes seemed perennially startled; his small ears were set close to his head.

He was dressed in gray slacks, tennis shoes, and a striped polo shirt; he didn't wear socks. His blond hair was carefully combed and parted on the right side of his spherical head. He was watching Wally and Wally's girl, Doll, where they sat across the room having breakfast, which had been sent up from downstairs.

Roy, Wally, and the girl had been in the hotel for two days now and they were thoroughly bored. They wanted to get out, to go down to the beach, or to a bar, or almost anywhere away from the hot, airless hotel room. But they didn't dare leave. Not until they heard from Flood. When he'd call or come, they didn't know. All he had told them was to go to the hotel, check into the rooms that he'd reserved for them, and stay there and wait.

So, on Wednesday forenoon, they were still waiting.

It wasn't so bad for Wally. He had Doll, and Doll was enough to keep anybody from getting bored. If Wally wasn't such a selfish sonofabitch, Doll would have been enough to keep Roy from being bored also. But Doll was strictly Wally's girl, and Wally was going to keep it that way.

Wally was ten years older than Roy, a tall, broad-shouldered, dark-browed man with a surly disposition. He had a short, unfriendly way of speaking, and he had the reputation of being plenty tough.

This last didn't bother Roy at all. Roy, in his own way, was also plenty tough. But he knew that it would never do to mix it with Wally. Not now, certainly. Flood had laid it down for Roy and he knew what he had to do. He wasn't afraid of Wally one bit, but Flood was another matter altogether.

And so he sat there, smoking the cigarette and watching Wally and Doll from across the room.

They had just about finished their late breakfast and Roy was opening a new pack of cigarettes when the phone rang. Wally reached it first.

He said yeah a couple of times and then listened for a while. Finally he said yeah again and hung up. He ignored Doll and turned to Roy.

“The boss,” he said. “He’s in Miami, tied up. Said he won’t be in till late. Said someone’s on the way to meet him here; someone from you know where. We’re to tell her to hang around until he shows.”

“He say who it was?” Roy asked.

“Nah. Just said ‘she’.”

Roy looked interested.

“It’ll be good to see somebody around this dump for a change,” he said.

Doll looked over at him, her red mouth petulant.

“Just whattaya mean by that crack?” she asked.

Wally glared at her. “Shut up,” he said. He sat down and poured himself a second cup of coffee from the silver serving thermos.

“I mean,” Roy said, “that I’m gettin’ damned tired of sitting around here doing nothing. Damned tired.”

“You’ll be doing plenty before long,” Wally said.

“Yeah?” Roy looked over at him. “I guess I will. You too. And you’ll be doing a little explaining to the boss when he shows.”

Wally stared at him. “I don’t explain nothin’,” he said.

“Oh, yes, you do,” Roy said. “You explain why we ain’t in this room alone. You know damn well Flood told us to come down here and check in alone. You know he—”

“I know that what I do is none of your business,” Wally cut in. “There’s no goddamn reason I can’t have Doll along with me. What she don’t know ain’t hurtin’ anyone, and Flood knows she’s my girl.”

“Listen,” Doll said, her small pert face angry, “what the hell—”

Wally’s right hand went out and he slapped her across the cheek. “Keep out of it,” he said.

He turned back to Roy. “Don’t you worry about me,” he said. “When Flood shows, I’ll do my own explaining. In the meantime, me an’ Doll are going out for a while. Long as the boss will be late, there’s no use the both of us hanging around. You can wait for whoever’s coming.”

“That’s all right with me,” Roy said. “It’s fine. Go right ahead. But when Flood comes an’ he asks me, I’m tellin’ him you went, see? I’m tellin’ him.”

“Tell him any goddamned thing you want,” Wally said. “Come on, kid.”

He and Doll got up and left the apartment.

Roy was glad to see them go. He was getting damned sick of sitting around with them.

Jeez, the way they acted, you'd think they were on a honeymoon. You'd think they were alone in the place.

He got up and crossed the room and looked down at the dirty dishes. He spotted a half of a piece of toast that hadn't been touched and he reached for it. Going back to the couch, he pulled a comic book from his rear pocket and opened it and began to read. His lips moved as he laboriously spelled out the words.

He was still reading when the knock came on the door-He got up slowly, stuffing the folded book back into his pocket. He crossed the room with all the subtle litheness of a large cat. He stood at one side of the door and carefully reached out and jerked it open.

Kay stood there and looked at him.

He said nothing, just stared at her.

"I'm sorry," she said then. "I was looking for Mr. Flood's room. I guess I've made a mistake." She started to turn away.

Instead of speaking, he half jerked his head back, opening the door wider.

When she still hesitated, he said in a half whisper, "No mistake."

She entered the room and he carefully closed the door behind her. He turned and for another second stared at her and then quickly spoke as Kay herself suddenly blushed and started to open her mouth.

"You're expected," Roy said. "He called from Miami and said he was going to be late; that he got tied up. Said you'd be coming along and to tell you to wait."

Kay nodded and went over to a large overstuffed chair and sat down. Roy went back and sat on the couch. For another three or four minutes neither spoke. And then Roy coughed and stood up.

"Want me to get you a drink?" he asked. "I don't drink myself, but I'll get you a drink if you want."

Kay looked up and half-smiled.

"Yes," she said, "I guess I could use a drink."

3.

At exactly the same moment that Roy Cluney was mixing a Scotch and soda in the hotel apartment in Palm Beach, George Candle was mixing a gin and tonic with a couple of ice cubes in the front room of the efficiency apartment a couple of blocks from the beach at Indio. He was mixing two of them, in fact, one for himself and one for Shorty, who lay sprawled out on the day bed, his hairy body flaming red with sunburn and glistening with lotion. He was stripped down to a pair of gaudy nylon swimming shorts.

Candle was wearing a gray linen suit, a gray shirt, gray socks, and gray suede shoes. A big man, well over six feet two, he was heavy across the chest and had arms and legs

that bulged with strength. His face was hard and rugged; he was a man who kept himself in top physical condition. The collar of his shirt was tight and he was sweating.

“Damn fool,” he said. “Sittin' out there in that goddamn sun. You might have known.”

“Just mix it, chum,” Shorty said. “Just mix it and don't talk. You ain't got no idea how I feel.”

Candle looked over at him and smiled. He had a pleasant, friendly smile. In spite of the almost meticulous care with which he dressed, there was something open and casual in his manner.

“We were supposed to make like a couple of goddamn tourists,” he said, half laughing, “but that didn't mean you had to go out and get yourself broiled, kid.”

He finished making the drinks and carried them across the room and handed one to the man on the bed. Shorty pulled himself up, groaning, as he reached for it. He lifted the glass and they drank together.

“How'd you make out?” Shorty asked.

Before answering, Candle went to the door and closed it. On the way back he snapped on the electric fan, then went to the wide jalousied window and looked out. He came back and pulled a nylon-seated aluminum chair up next to the day bed.

“Well, we'll be earning our dough,” he said. “It's both bad and good.”

Shorty looked at him, not concealing his curiosity.

“Tell me about the bad first,” he said.

“Bad this way,” Candle said. “They got two men on at night. Shift changes at six o'clock and the night crew stays until two, and then one guy comes on and takes over for the next shift.”

“Two men,” Shorty said. “Hell, that ain't bad.”

“It isn't that that worries me,” Candle said. “Just the general setup. You saw where the place is. Over past the tracks, not more than a half mile from the police station. One private road leads into it from a dead-end street. There's the big door in front, one at the side, and one at the back.

“Once we get in, we could have a little trouble getting out. We'll have to leave the car parked outside on the street and walk in. Otherwise we might find ourselves trapped. That's the part I don't like, leaving the car out on the street. Never know who might come along and spot it while we're in the place.”

Shorty looked thoughtful. “Only one thing to do,” he said at last. “We don't use our car.”

“I thought of that,” Candle said. “But a hot car could be too risky. They could spot a hot job and be waiting for us.” He hesitated a minute or two and then went on. “Only thing I can see to do is run down to the next town, or maybe West Palm or Miami, and rent a

job.”

Shorty thought about that for a while and again nodded his head. “We ain't got too much time. Saturday isn't very far away.”

Candle agreed with him.

“The good thing,” he continued, “is the inside layout. It's a cinch. One of the guys is an old duck and he won't be no trouble at all. The other's a kid. He may get a little flighty, but he'll be all right. The main thing is the phones. We got to be sure to keep the old guy in line so he answers and says the right thing. The machinery itself is a cinch. I can fix that in no time at all. It's a big double job, and I can have it out within five minutes after we start to work. They won't be getting juice through for at least twenty-four hours the way I'll fix it.”

He got up again, reached for Shorty's empty glass, and went to the kitchenette, where he mixed two more drinks. When he was back in the chair and had handed Shorty his refilled glass, he continued talking.

“Of course,” he said, “a hell of a lot of it is going to depend on Flood. He told me that we definitely don't have to worry; that every cop in town will be busy as hell taking care of something a lot more important.”

“Didn't tell you what, did he?” Shorty asked.

“No, he didn't. And I didn't ask and I don't want to know. The less we know about what's going to happen Saturday night, the better I like it.”

“Yeah,” Shorty said. “Yeah—maybe. But I'd feel a little better if—”

“Listen,” Candle said. “Don't worry. We're gettin' paid and we're gettin' paid good. Twenty grand and it's already in the bank up North. What we don't know can't hurt us. After all, what we got to do is simple enough. We go in and we put that light plant out of commission. Then we get out and we leave. Either we come back here, if that looks like the best bet, or we take off and blow the town altogether. Either way, all we done is a little sabotage job. We ain't robbed nobody and we ain't killed nobody. We won't have nothing on us—not even the guns—by the time we're through.”

“That's the thing that makes me wonder,” Shorty said. “Twenty grand is a lot of dough. A hell of a lot of dough. For that kind of money, this caper is going to be awful important to Flood. Whatever it is he's going to do, it must be big.”

“I still don't want to know about it,” Candle said. “Nothing at all. The only thing we got to worry about is taking care of our end of it. We got to see that those lights go off promptly at eleven o'clock and that they stay out for at least four hours. That's all. Meanwhile, you better get that damn sunburn fixed up. When we do start moving, we're going to have to move plenty fast.”

Shorty suddenly slapped at a fly that had landed on his heavy thigh. His big hand came

down hard on the raw, sunburned flesh, and he howled. Then he looked over at Candle again.

“You got the route all figured?” he asked.

“I got everything figured,” Candle told him. “And tomorrow I think I'm going downstate and pick up that rented car. If it turns out we have to make a fast getaway, I want to be able to use our own car and I don't want it Hanging anywhere around that powerhouse on Saturday night.”

“I don't want to be hanging around there myself a damn minute longer than I have to,” Shorty said with a distorted smile.

Candle took the last drink out of his glass and then put it down on the table at the end of the day bed.

“I got a little news for you,” he said softly.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Get this. When I stopped over in town early this morning I went into a gas station, an' who the hell you suppose was running the joint and filled up the car for me an' wiped off the windshield?”

“Well, who?” Shorty said. “Who? What is this, a goddamn quiz show?”

Candle smiled slyly. “A guy named Harper,” he said. “Frank Harper.”

“An' who the hell is Frank Harper?”

“I guess maybe you never knew him,” Candle said. “Harper's a young guy who worked for Flood up in New York. He came out of the Marines and he took a job driving for Flood. He wasn't exactly a chauffeur—he was more of a bodyguard.”

Shorty whistled softly under his breath.

“You don't say,” he said. “You don't say so. Well.”

“I guess,” Candle said, “we'll be seeing some other old familiar faces around town in the next day or two. I wouldn't be at all surprised. Not at all.”

“Look,” Shorty said suddenly. “Did this Harper guy spot you? Did he—”

“No,” Candle said. “Never gave me a tumble. No reason he should. I never knew him personally; never even met him. But I used to see him around now and then. I knew who he was, all right.”

“We'll probably see him again sometime before Saturday night is over,” Shorty said.

Chapter Four

1.

Ed Morningside telephoned the Harper residence at six-fifteen.

Frank was sitting in the living room at the time and he'd been on edge for more than an hour, hoping to hear the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. It had been a rough day and he was tired and nervous, and when the bell in the phone box jangled, he jumped up from his chair, startled, and for a moment was unable to associate the sound with the other sound for which he had been anxiously waiting.

In a second, however, he recovered and hurried to the table, holding the instrument. There was a sudden relieved expression about his grim, tight mouth.

It was probably because he was so sure it would be Kay that he was abrupt almost to the point of insult when he heard Ed's voice.

“Yes, goddamn it,” he said into the mouthpiece, “this is Harper. What do you want?”

“This is Ed,” the voice at the other end of the line said. “Ed Morningside, down at the supermarket.”

“Sure, sure,” Frank said. “How are you, Ed? Sorry I yelled. I was expecting someone else. What's on your mind?”

Ed sort of half laughed and he spoke in the soft Southern drawl that he'd brought along to Florida from Georgia when he'd settled in the town some five years back.

“Well, I tell you, boy,” he said. “Your missus stopped by this mawnin' and she left an order and said she'd pick it up sometime this afternoon on her way by, but she hasn't showed up yet and we're closin' shop. Guess maybe she forgot, but anyway, she ordered some hamburger and some milk an' some other stuff an' I just thought maybe she was plannin' on it for supper and so I thought I better call you about it. I can stay on a while if y'all want to stop by an' pick it up.”

Frank started to say that he'd be right along. But then he remembered Kosta.

“Why, I tell you, Ed,” Frank said, “she had to run down to West Palm Beach and I guess she got tied up. You know how women are when they shop.”

Ed said he knew.

Frank went on to say that he'd like to pick up the order but that he had to wait for a phone call. That if it would be all right, he wished Ed would just put the stuff in the refrigerator, and then he or Kay could get it first thing in the morning.

But Ed cut in before he was through. He said that probably Mrs. Harper was counting on the food for supper, and that he'd be only too glad to drop it off on his way home.

Frank started to protest, but either Ed didn't hear him or he didn't want to. Anyway, he said he'd stop by in a half hour and then hung up.

For a moment, as he put the phone back in the cradle, Frank Harper stopped thinking about the thing that had been bothering him for the last two hours: Kay and Flood.

Instead he was thinking that it was damned nice of Ed. Hell, back in New York something like this just couldn't happen. You left something in a store up there and the damned clerk would likely enough take it home and eat it himself.

As he turned, his eyes went at once to Kosta.

The bloodshot russet eyes were open and watching him, although the man's pudgy body had not moved since Frank and Waldo had placed him on the couch.

Frank walked over and stared down at him. He sensed that the man was conscious at last and could understand him.

“Get up,” he said, his voice harsh and low. “Get up, you crazy bastard, and get up those stairs and into your room. Don't give me any trouble at all. Get into bed and stay there. Hear me? Stay there! One goddamned peep out of you and so help me God...”

Kosta half rolled off the couch and came to his feet. He weaved slightly, but at last turned and wordlessly shuffled toward the staircase in the hallway.

Frank turned his head and followed him with his eyes. A moment later he heard the door of the room on the second floor slam shut. He turned and went out into the kitchen. Without thinking about it he began to put the partly filled rye and brandy bottles back in the cupboard and the dirty glasses into the sink.

Ed had said half an hour, but Frank knew that as likely as not he would come any time now. He wanted the place to be looking neat when Ed showed up.

He tried not to think again about Kay as he cleaned up and emptied out the ash trays. Thinking about Kay was getting him nowhere. She should have been back long before this. He cursed himself for ever having let her go down to meet Flood. He should have been firm about it. He should have gone himself. At least, he should have gone down with her.

He was still thinking about it when he heard the sound of the car as it pulled up in front of the house.

His ears told him that it wasn't their car. Hell, he could tell the sound of the Chevvie's motor without even trying. He'd done enough work on the old car to recognize its wheeze in his sleep. But in spite of himself, he half ran toward the front door.

It was Ed Morningside in his Ford station wagon. Ed was already walking up the path through the worn-out fruit trees, a large brown paper bag in his arms.

Ed followed Frank out into the kitchen and he allowed that he just would have time for one quick one before he had to be getting on home.

“The old lady'll have my supper waitin',” Ed said, “and she raises all hell when I'm late.”

Ed lifted the straight rye and smiled and winked. He drank it, and then Frank poured a second glassful for him.

“So Mrs. Harper went down to West Palm to do a little shoppin’?” he said. “Well, boy, I know how it is. She probably won't be back for hours. Probably buyin' out the goddamn town. Yeah,” he said, his face wrinkled with good nature, “probably buyin' out the town. That is, course,” he added slyly, “if she hasn't run into one of them rich old city boys from New York and decided that she's just been wastin' all those good looks on an ol' no-good grease monkey like you.”

He laughed at his own joke and slapped Frank on the back and then downed his drink. Frank walked with him to the door. He was trying to grin, to make a joke out of it, too.

“Yeah,” Ed said. “Couldn't blame her, a real beauty like Mrs. Harper. Probably got herself a real live one—Caddie roadster, probably a yacht or so. Real live dough.”

He was still laughing as he turned and waved before climbing into the station wagon.

Frank turned back and entered the house.

Christ, he thought. Jesus Christ! If Ed only knew. That's just what she had done—got herself a real live one. Caddie, money, and all. Flood. James Xavier Flood.

Frank slumped into a wicker chair and his long, narrow eyes stared sightlessly down at the floor between his feet. He was thinking of Flood, of the first time he had ever seen Flood.

It had happened about a year and a half ago, less than two months from the time he had been discharged from the Marines.

The Marines. Well, he had no squawk about the Marines. Korea had been tough, almost unbelievably tough. But he'd joined up because he'd wanted to and because he'd felt in some vague way that it was his duty to do so. Some of the finest guys he'd ever known had been his buddies during those terrible days when he'd fought in the hills and in the valleys of that barren, dismal country.

No, he had no squawk about that, in spite of the fact that he'd ended up with a chunk of a land mine in his left leg.

Flood had come along a couple of months after his discharge, after the series of incidents that had swiftly embittered him and had almost made him despise himself for ever having been in the service in the first place.

It had started right after he'd been released from the hospital and been given his honorable discharge. He'd been taken for better than a thousand dollars by a couple of con men on the train somewhere between Chicago and Detroit.

He'd still been weak and wobbly. Otherwise the liquor wouldn't have hit him the way it had; otherwise he just wouldn't have been such a sucker.

It wasn't exactly that the police had laughed about it. They'd just shrugged and said that there wasn't much they could do. Returning servicemen who carried around a wad of dough and got drunk were constantly being rolled. They didn't have time to baby-sit

with every soldier who didn't have enough sense not to get drunk and play cards with strangers.

And then the business in Cleveland when he had gone back to the construction company to see about his old job. It wasn't as though someone else had taken his job. No, it was merely that things were not quite so good, at the time and they just didn't have a spot for him.

But big Hal Mefford, his old foreman, had felt sorry about it and had insisted on loaning him a hundred dollars.

So he'd gone to New York, still wearing the uniform, still limping with the pain that had been left over after the wound had healed.

Maybe he had been a fool, maybe he had been weak and disillusioned and sorry for himself. But this time he didn't even look for a job. He just drifted around for a few days and then he ended up that Saturday night in Harlem. He'd picked the girl up in a dance hall. A pretty, slender, olive-skinned girl who had smiled up into his face and caressed his cheek and suggested that he come home with her.

The attack had taken place while they'd been walking down the street, one of those dark side streets somewhere off St. Nicholas Avenue, very late at night.

He knew now that the girl had been a part of it.

There were at least five or six of them. Short, too sharply dressed little men, with felt hats in which they wore feathers. On minute he and the girl had been walking along, his arm around her waist, and then in an instant she had seemed to slip away from him and there were the others.

They came at him wordlessly, seemingly without anger and without any particular feeling. He saw the flash of a knife, felt an arm circle his neck, was conscious of fists beating against his face.

He never could remember whether or not he was conscious of the car that pulled to the curb. Dimly he seemed to recall the other one wading in, his arms flailing. Of course he didn't know anything about the blackjack in the other's hand or the deadly precision with which he used it.

Moments later he was aware of the man leaning over him and pleading with him to get up.

"Quick!" The face was close to his own and he was remotely conscious of the urgency in the voice. "They'll be back, soldier. We only have a second or two. Try and help yourself."

He struggled to get up and he knew that the other's arms were under him and helping him.

And then he was in the car, slouched over in the corner of the front seat, and he knew

that the powerful engine had come to life.

Later he'd turned and looked at his companion, at the man who had risked his own life to save him, a complete stranger, from what might have been a fatal mugging.

He had looked over and for the first time had seen the face of James Xavier Flood.

They'd gone to a hotel and a doorman in a braided uniform had helped Flood get him through the lobby and into the elevator. A doctor had come, and although Frank hadn't realized it until much later, the doctor had gone to work on him and patched him up and made him comfortable and only then turned to Flood and taken the ten stitches to sew up the long gash where the knife had cut into his left arm.

Flood listened to his story the next day while they had breakfast from a tray that had been sent up by room service. Frank tried to thank him, but Flood cut him short. Flood was more interested in hearing about Frank than he was in listening to any expression of gratitude. He was interested in knowing how Frank had got himself into the spot in the first place, and in knowing what his plans were now that it was over and done with.

When Frank thought back on it, it didn't seem that he'd really had a lot to do with it. Flood had started taking over at the very moment when he'd been driving by and had seen the attack. He continued to take over.

He'd had him patched up, given him a place in which to rest and recover; and then he'd given him the job.

It was a hard job to define. A sort of combination chauffeur, companion, and secretary. Actually, more of a glorified messenger boy.

Not, certainly, that Frank had minded the office-boy part of it. The way he felt about Flood, he'd have done anything, for him. He'd have been a hell of a lot more than a mere driver and messenger boy. And he wouldn't have worried whether he got paid for doing it or not. And that's the way it was until three months ago. Until the day Flood called him in and told him what he wanted him to do; about Florida and the Ranchers and Fruit Growers Trust Company, and Indio Beach, and Kay.

2.

Roy handed her the drink and she noticed that his hand was small and pudgy with very clean, polished nails. It looked like the hand of a child. She looked up into a pair of guileless, large blue eyes.

He was a child, or almost a child. For a brief second she wondered if, after all, she wasn't in the wrong place. What in the world would Flood be doing with this boy who looked as though he still hadn't quite lost his baby fat?

Roy didn't smile back; he just handed her the drink and stared into her face without expression. For a second their eyes met and held, and then Kay quickly looked away.

He was no baby.

"I'm Roy," he said, still without expression. He turned then, tossed the comic book into the seat of a chair, and crossed the room. He sat down in a second chair, facing her, and once more his eyes went to her face and stayed there. He watched her, unblinking, as she lifted the drink and sipped it.

In spite of herself, Kay felt the blood creep into her face.

For the next five minutes neither of them spoke a word.

Kay finished the drink and reached over and put the glass down on the end table next to the couch. She leaned back and then at once sat straight again. She was suddenly conscious of the fact that she had been sitting with her long slender legs crossed and that the thin skirt she wore left her knee exposed. It was the sort of position that she had assumed upon a thousand occasions, in front of friends and strangers alike, and it had never before made her feel self-conscious. But suddenly she uncrossed her legs and placed her feet closely side by side, sitting straight on the couch. She looked up again-at Roy.

"Did he say how long he'd be?" she asked. "When I might expect him?"

For a minute she didn't think he was even going to bother to answer. He just sat there and stared into her face. At last the cupid-bow lips opened and he spoke. He had a high, thin voice, the voice of an adolescent.

"Naw. Just to wait. You want something or other while you wait?"

"Want something?" She didn't know what he meant.

He shrugged. "Yeah. 'Nother drink—or anything."

"Nothing, thank you," she said.

A half hour went by and neither moved. Kay finally looked down at her watch and saw that it was getting on toward four o'clock. She looked up at Roy, who still sat in the same position, his eyes never having left her face.

"He's sure late," she said, and smiled weakly.

"I don't drink and I don't smoke," Roy said. His face remained without expression.

"Don't smoke the weed, I mean," he added. "Don't take no junk at all, and I save my dough. I can get plenty of girls. Any time I want. Plenty."

For a moment she just stared at him. She didn't know whether he expected her to say anything or not. She found herself wishing that Flood would come soon, in spite of her fears and in spite of the way she'd been feeling about him these last few weeks.

"That's nice," she said at last, and at once felt like a complete fool.

For the first time Roy smiled. It was a thin, almost sickly smile that seemed more like some gainful contortion of the facial muscles than an actual smile.

"Sure," he said. "Nice. Mr. Flood trusts me, you know," he added, completely

irrelevantly. "He understands me and he trusts me."

"I'm sure he must," Kay said.

Roy got up and turned to the other room.

"Get you another drink," he said. He was mumbling something about girls as he left the room.

He was gone for at least ten minutes, and Kay was feeling uneasy when once more he appeared in the opened doorway between the two rooms.

He had stripped to the waist, exposing a broad, thick, very white, and completely hairless chest. He had taken off his shoes and was in his bare feet.

There was no drink in his hand. Instead, he was whirling, in long slow arcs, a slender, long leather belt, which he held by the buckled end.

For what seemed like hours to Kay, they held the tableau: Roy standing there in the doorway, whirling the belt; she sitting wide-eyed, on the couch.-

And then there was the quick tattoo of the triple knock on the door.

"That will be Mr. Flood," Roy said, and suddenly he smiled. Once more he looked like an innocent youngster from some prep school.

3.

He disliked Miami for the same reason that he disliked Hot Springs; for the same reason that he disliked Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Saratoga during the season, Chicago at any time. You never knew for sure who you might run into, but the chances were a little better than even, in any of those towns, that it would be some hoodlum or racket guy. Or perhaps a detective, which could be even worse.

It wasn't that he objected to hoodlums, or, as far as that went, to detectives that worked on the racket squads. It was merely that living the way he did, and doing the sort of things he did, it was a lot healthier to stay clear of them.

He had never been mixed up with the syndicates, with organized crime. He'd never messed around with prostitution or drugs or even professional gambling. In fact, he had been, for the most part, completely legitimate. There had been the night clubs, there'd been the booze, 'way back in the old prohibition days, when he'd still been a kid. And, of course, on very rare and exceptional occasions, there had been a few far more questionable things. But he'd always played it alone; alone as far as the organized underworld was concerned. At times he'd brought in others on jobs, but the others had worked for him, not with him. He always selected them with extreme care. He went out of his way never to move in on anyone else's territory, and he'd been equally cautious, in selecting those that worked for him, to pick the odd ones, the loners, the eccentrics who, for one reason or another, weren't tied in with the regular mobs.

There had been, of course, disadvantages. When things had gone sour, such as the recent New York operation, and he'd been hard pressed for money, he hadn't been able to call on any of the regular so-called underworld sources. It was during these times that he'd been forced to light out on his own and temporarily forget his preoccupation with being a legitimate businessman, and take an exceptional risk in doing something highly spectacular in order to recoup.

The only possible compensation lay in the fact that he'd never had to depend on the others, and so had been able to keep the big money for himself. Once he'd made a new stake, he was free to return to more legitimate and safer fields of commercial endeavor.

Consequently, when he'd alighted from the United airliner that morning, he had at once checked into a middle-class, rather obscure hotel in Miami, rather than one of the top-flight spots over at the beach. Before checking in, he'd gone to the automobile agency at the airport and, using the false identification papers he carried with him, rented a Cadillac convertible.

His luggage carried the proper initials to fit the identification papers and was as conservative and unostentatious as the well-tailored clothes that he affected. There had been no difficulty about leaving the airport, as none of the several detectives assigned to check incoming travelers had recognized him.

The first telephone call had been to Feeney, the lawyer. He arranged to meet him at the golf course at eleven, and the only thing discussed over the telephone was the fact that they would try to get in eighteen holes.

Although the sole reason for his having come to Miami instead of going directly to Palm Beach was to see Feeney, and leave with him what he had to leave, he still looked forward to the eighteen holes of golf as much as he did to taking care of the far more important thing that had brought him to Miami in the first place.

Clarence Feeney was waiting on the porch of the clubhouse when he arrived. Feeney was a man in his mid-sixties. His hair, which he wore long, in the style of an old-time Southern politician, was patrician white; he was a heavy-set, rather stout man with a very red face, which was completely without lines or wrinkles. He looked exactly like what he was; a very expensive, very respectable attorney who sometimes took on a criminal case, but more often confined his practice to routine corporation and estate matters. He had been, at one time, a state senator; later he had been a municipal court judge. A family man of conservative habits, he was well known throughout Florida and several other Southern states and enjoyed a reputation for, if not outstanding legal brilliance, at least thorough honesty and integrity.

Feeney walked to the three steps leading down to the patio as Flood pulled the car into the driveway in front of the clubhouse, braked it, and handed his keys to an attendant. He reached into the back and took out his golf bag, at the same time smilingly waving a second attendant away. A moment later he was standing in front of Feeney, his right

hand outstretched.

“Well, Senator,” he said, “nice to see you.”

“And you, my boy,” Feeney said. “Very nice, very nice indeed. It certainly looks like we have a perfect day in front of us.”

It wasn't until the fourth hole that they had a chance to get far enough from the caddies to talk.

“You told me damned little when you called from New York,” Feeney said, his rather pompous, heavy voice holding a petulant note.

Flood hesitated and then stopped, taking a package of cigarettes from his pocket and extracting one. They were midway between holes and there was no one in sight.

“Senator,” he said, “you really wouldn't want me to tell you anything much, would you?”

Feeney smiled. “Nothing much,” he said. “Naturally not, my boy. But still and all, I gather you are here for something besides golf?”

“Right,” Flood said. “I'm here to give you something.”

Reaching into the pocket of his linen jacket, he took out an envelope and handed it to the Senator.

“There are ten one-thousand-dollar bills in this,” he said. “Five of them belong to you.”

Feeney took the envelope without hesitation and put it unopened in his inside breast pocket. He nodded slowly.

“Should I ask for what? And should I ask about the other five bills?”

Flood smiled thinly and shook his head.

“It will not be necessary to ask, Senator,” he said. “If you don't know by next Sunday or Monday, you are merely to keep your five and return the other five to me at your convenience. On the other hand, I feel quite sure that should the other five have to be used for some more important purpose, you will know about it. You will, without doubt, read about it in the papers.”

“You plan to be in Florida long?” Feeney asked.

“The five thousand is to guarantee that I am not,” Flood said. “That is, of course, unless something should come up to delay my return North this week end.”

“And in case you might not be able to get in touch with me, should something come up to delay that departure, just where...”

“Somewhere between Palm Beach and Jacksonville on the east coast,” Flood said. “I am quite sure, should anything happen, and I am not able to reach you, you will know where to reach me.”

Feeney nodded.

“Will there be anyone else who might need help leaving—in case, as you say, anything might happen?”

“No.”

They walked on for a few yards without further words and then Flood asked,—“And Goldfarb?”

“Simon is fine. Still doing the biggest bail-bond business in town.”

“Just thought I'd ask,” Flood said.

That was all of it. They finished five more holes and went into the clubhouse and had a light lunch. Feeney insisted on picking up the tab. Flood saw that it was well after one o'clock by the time they were back on the course, and he told Feeney that he had an appointment around three and asked if Feeney thought they'd have time to get in two or three more holes before he'd have to pull out. Feeney told him they would.

Flood was back at the hotel at exactly three, and that's when he called the apartment in Palm Beach. He made the call from a public phone booth in the lobby. Then he went upstairs, took a quick shower, changed his clothes, and packed a one-suitcase. He left his golf bag and the other suitcase in his room, and stopped at the desk in the lobby and explained that he'd be away visiting friends in the Keys for several days and asked that his mail be held, in case any arrived during his absence.

Then he went out, carrying his light suitcase, and got into the rented car.

Driving north, he took the cutoff route to avoid traffic and kept the needle of the speedometer at an even sixty. He didn't want to waste any time; on the other hand, he was taking no chances on getting a speeding ticket.

He wasn't a bit worried about how things had been going at the other end. He had complete confidence in each of the others. In fact, it was their very eccentricities that had been responsible for his having selected each one for his individual part in the over-all scheme.

Flood felt very much like a Broadway producer who starts out with a perfect script and then, luckily, is able to hire the perfect actor for each part in the drama. Only a completely unforeseen accident could possibly mar the perfection of the end result.

4.

With a backward flip of his wrist, Roy Cluney tossed the belt on the bed in the room behind him. He walked to the door and opened it and then stepped back.

Flood entered.

For just the fraction of a second he stood still, a couple of feet inside the doorway. Then he turned and carefully closed the door and snapped the lock. He looked over at Kay and

there was no expression at all on his face. But his right eye closed in a slow wink. Then he looked at Roy.

“Where's Wally?”

Roy shrugged.

“There's something I got to tell you, boss,” he said. His eyes went to Kay and then back to Flood. It was obvious he didn't want to speak in front of her.

Flood said nothing. He walked across the room and entered the bedroom. A moment later Roy followed him and the door slammed behind them.

Roy stood next to the dresser. He looked nervous.

“Jeez, Mr. Flood,” Roy said, “I told him not to go out. I told both, of them—”

“Both of who?”

“That's what I wanted to tell you about,” Roy said. “Wally's got a dame here with him.”

For a moment Flood just stared at him.

“Jesus Christ,” he said at last. “What dame? Who is she? Where'd he get her? Come on, stupid, talk up.”

Roy backed away a little.

“I don't know who she is, Mr. Flood,” he said. “Some bum he picked up in New York before we left. She met us at the railroad station. Name's Doll.”

“Doll. My God!” Flood looked disgusted. Suddenly he whirled on Roy and his face was white with anger. “You punk,” he said. “You dumb punk. Why the hell didn't you get hold of me and tell me about it?”

“You told me not to call you, no matter what,” Roy said. “Anyway, you said I was to take my orders from Wally. You—”

“All right. All right,” Flood said. “You did right. But who the hell is she? And what has Wally told her?”

“I think they're old friends,” Roy said. “Anyway, they sure act like it. My God, he spends about half the time in the saddle.”

“The hell with that,” Flood said. “Just tell me how much she knows.”

“She knows we're down here on some kind of job. Nothing else, or at least I don't think anything else. Just that Wally and I are down here for some sort of caper. That's about all.”

“That's plenty. More than plenty. All right, where are they? I told Wally to sit tight; not to go out.-So where are they?”

“They went to the beach, I think,” Roy said. “Anyway, after you called and said you'd be

late, they left. And then this dame came.”

Flood looked at him coldly, slowly nodding his head.

“O.K.,” he said at last. “All right, Roy. Now let's take up the next thing. What the hell are you doing prancing around with half your clothes off?”

“I was just getting ready to take a shower,” Roy said. He looked at flood blandly.

Flood sat on the edge of the bed. He didn't look at the boy at all and he spoke in a low, controlled voice. He spoke very slowly and distinctly.

“You have apparently forgotten how I happened to pick you up, Roy,” he said. “But I haven't forgotten. No, I haven't forgotten at all. Maybe you were about to take a shower. And then again, maybe you weren't. Maybe you were about to do something else.”

He looked up now at Roy, and he picked up the leather belt that Roy had tossed on the bed. He doubled it over and gently slapped his hand with it several times. Then he stood up.

He was facing the window, his back to Roy, and he still spoke in a low, casual voice.

“You want to remember things, Roy,” he said. “You want to remember what I told you that other time. Remember that I told you the next time it happened—well, I'd just toss you to the wolves and that would be that.”

As he finished speaking, he suddenly wheeled and lashed out, loosing one end of the belt. It caught Roy full across the face, just under the eyes, and it struck with a vicious slap. The blood began to seep from the red welt almost at once.

Roy sat down in a chair and started to cry. It wasn't a loud cry; it was more a low, sick moan.

Flood dropped the strap.

“Now get dressed and go out to a movie and be back here in exactly four hours,” he said. “Four, no sooner.”

Without another word he walked over to the dresser and picked up the bottle of whisky there and poured something less than an ounce into a glass.

He left the room, walked through the living room, never once looking at Kay, and went to the bathroom. He found a second glass and filled it half full with water.

Once more he returned to the living room, this time sinking into a large upholstered chair directly facing Kay. He lifted the glass with the whisky, looked at her, and smiled slightly.

“Hello, kid,” he said.

Chapter Five

1.

He was a stranger. It was as though the four years had never existed; as though these last three months had, by some strange magic, enabled her completely to erase those other months and years.

Looking across the room at him, she saw the familiar lean hardness; the blue-black hair graying at the temples; the almost black eyes, shaded by the heavy brows; the lean, hard-boned face, fine nose, squared chin. For a moment the thought crossed her mind that she hadn't the faintest idea what his age was. He could have been anywhere from thirty-eight to fifty-eight. She couldn't guess.

Four years. Of course she knew him. She couldn't have forgotten. And then a second thought crossed her mind. It was true that she knew every inch of his body, but underneath the surface of that finely kept exterior, beneath the skin and the flesh, he had always been a stranger.

And now, after these last three months, he was a dangerous stranger; a stranger who had it within his power to wreck her and to wreck that which she loved.

He was smiling at her, the casual, indifferent smile that she remembered so well; the smile that wasn't really a smile at all, because it had nothing of laughter or even of humor about it. It went no farther than his thin lips and the perfect even white teeth.

"Glad to see me, kid?" he asked, making it a question that demanded an answer.

"How are you, Flood?" she said. She tried not to be nervous. And even as she asked, it struck her—for the first time as being odd that she had always called him Flood. He'd hated to be called by his first name, and he'd told her he never had had a nickname. Somehow, in spite of the intimacy of the years, she had never been able to use any of the more familiar and endearing terms that other women used with their men.

"How are you, and how are things in New York?"

He ended the smile with a short laugh. He nodded slightly toward the closed door behind which Roy was dressing. She knew that he did not want to talk until the boy had left the apartment.

"A drink?" he asked.

She nodded.

He looked for ice and there was none, and so he went to the telephone and asked that some be brought up. He also ordered a couple of bottles of soda and some quinine water. He drank almost nothing himself, possibly one or two ounces of whisky a day at the very most. The rest of the time he drank the quinine water, in a glass with an ice cube, merely to be polite.

The bellboy came with the ice as Roy was leaving. Kay noticed the nasty red welt across his face, but Roy studiously avoided looking at her. He started to say something to Flood, but then, looking into the uncompromising eyes, he merely nodded and left the room.

Flood handed the bellboy two dollar bills, and then they were alone together in the room.

He made her a drink, and as he mixed it she found it impossible to keep her eyes from watching him. Immaculate in his inevitable gray sharkskin suit, spotless white linen shirt, conservatively patterned tie, black silk socks, and polished black oxfords, he was as coolly imperturbable as he always was. Nothing had changed about him; nothing would ever change. And yet he was a stranger.

She felt like a bird under the hypnotic spell of a snake as her eyes followed his quick, light movements.

He handed her the drink.

“You've been happy?”

For a moment she almost lost the thin edge of her control, and she knew that the blood rushed to her neck and face. But at once she realized that the question was probably without meaning, like all of the questions he had ever asked her concerning how she felt, or what she had done, or what she wanted to do. It was merely one of Flood's odd mannerisms, his peculiar habit of selecting words that had a definite personal meaning, but uttering them in a tone that canceled out all emotion and all significance.

He didn't wait for an answer, but went on talking as he poured his quinine water over an ice cube.

“Better tell me what's been happening,” he said, “before Wally gets back.”

She told him that Frank had contacted Paulmeyer and was giving him the information he would need, and that he had purchased the tools and materials that would be used. She told him about Kosta's arrival and about the garage Frank had built out of the old barn. She told him everything they had done while they had been in Indio Beach setting up the job.

That is, she told him almost everything. About Frank and herself, of course, she said nothing.

He asked a hundred questions. Questions about the town, whom they had become friendly with, whom they knew, about the neighbors, the streets, the weather, even where they stopped and how the gas station was doing. He wanted to know everything.

She sat in the same position on the couch that she had assumed when she first entered the room. Her slender hands played nervously with each other in her lap and her body was still and tense, but her eyes constantly moved, following him as he paced back and

forth across the room.

He was never still, never relaxed. A driving nervous force seemed to activate him constantly. He seemed utterly controlled, calm, and poised, but never still; never at peace with himself.

Once, passing in back of her, he dropped his right hand and casually stroked her shoulder. In spite of herself she felt the fine skin go taut under his touch and she knew at once that he reacted to the gesture and understood it.

The next time he stood in front of her and looked at her, she saw the odd, half-quizzical expression in his gray eyes.

He repeated his questions endlessly. He was particularly anxious to know about Frank. Finally, once more standing in front of her and looking down into her face, he said, "Sounds like Frank likes the town. Is *he* happy?"

"Happy?" She didn't understand him.

"Yeah," he said. "Happy. Is Frank happy? He should be, you know. It isn't every young fellow who finds himself a ready-made wife."

She opened her mouth to say something and then quickly found that there was nothing she could say.

She realized suddenly that he was all through asking questions about the job. He'd found out everything he needed and wanted to know about that. Now it was something different; something personal.

"Yes, Frank," he said, once more stepping back a foot or two and beginning again to pace. "He's a good boy. I just wanted to be sure he's happy."

"I guess he's happy enough," she said, and she knew that her voice was no longer natural.

He swung back toward her suddenly. "Stand up," he said.

Slowly she got to her feet, her eyes wide. She tried not to look startled. She knew something was coming, but she didn't know what. For a moment the thought occurred to her that she was experiencing a feeling of guilt. She hated herself for it, but she couldn't control it. She felt as though she had done something wrong; that in some way she had betrayed him. Well, in a way, she supposed that she had.

He wheeled, quickly and stood in front of her, close, so that the buttons of his coat brushed the thin fabric of her dress. He made no effort to touch her.

"You haven't kissed me," he said. His voice didn't change. It was a casual remark, seemingly in context with the previous pattern of his conversation. But the words struck her like a slap across the face.

She started to open her lips, to form the words of a reply. But once again she found it

impossible to say anything. Once more that strange, unpleasant feeling of guilt overcame her.

He didn't give her a chance.

It wasn't at all like the old familiar gesture to which she had long ago grown accustomed. There was nothing casual about it this time. Quickly one arm reached behind her and he pulled her close to him. At the same moment his other hand went under her chin and tilted up her face. He leaned forward and his mouth was hard and cruel against the softness of her lips.

She couldn't help herself.

She knew that she shouldn't; that it was both foolish and dangerous. She knew that she should give herself to him, answer his passion and desire with a matching enthusiasm, or at least passively submit to him.

But he had never been like this before. He'd never approached her with this almost sadistic fury of feeling. And so in spite of her intelligence and in spite of realizing the danger, she was unable to help herself and she instinctively struggled to pull her face away.

His hands were tearing at her then and he was pushing her toward the couch. She was able to take her mouth from his for a brief moment, and she looked into his face. She half cried out.

As suddenly as he had reached for her, he released her. He stood back and, suddenly freed of him, she fell back on the couch.

He laughed. The sound was hard and metallic against her ears.

"You hurt me, Flood," she said.

It didn't work.

He took a cigarette from the pack on the mantel and then turned back to her. His face was again perfectly controlled.

"Something has changed," he said. "What is it, kid? Don't tell me you've forgotten me in three months."

"It isn't that, Flood," she said. "I haven't forgotten you. Only—only you surprised me. And you were rough. You hurt me."

"So nothing's changed?" he asked.

She looked up at him and found that she had to drop her eyes. "Nothing's changed," she said, her voice barely audible. "It's just..."

"O.K.," he said suddenly, the voice now soft. "O.K. Nothing's changed. So go on in the bedroom and get yourself ready."

“But Flood,” she said, speaking quickly and knowing that she wasn't fooling him at all, “the others will be back any second now. We don't want to...”

“Maybe you don't,” he said; “I do. You say nothing's changed? All right, kid, let's go inside and prove it. Let's find out.”

He smiled at her as he spoke, but the smile was completely without humor. She knew him; knew what he'd do if he was crossed. At the same time she realized instinctively that it wasn't that he really wanted her. He never had cared much about their sexual relationship. But it was his innate cleverness. He knew. There was no doubt that he knew.

It was the one thing she had feared.

She knew what she had to do. She'd have to allay his suspicions, because unless she did, Frank would be the one that would be hurt. Flood wasn't the man ever to let someone else take something away from him.

She knew that she should start at once to make him forget the thing that had begun working in his mind. She would do anything for Frank, anything in the world to keep him safe.

Flood didn't give her a chance.

Reaching down, he pulled her quickly to her feet.

“Nothing's wrong?” he said. “Nothing's changed? All right. Give.” Again he pulled her to him and again the cruel hard mouth found her own. She tasted the blood from her bruised lips.

2.

Wally made two mistakes.

He opened the door without knocking. And then he Started to laugh.

Flood was standing almost in the center of the room, his broad lean back to the door. Kay was held close in his arms and he had bent her head far back and he was forcing it back even farther as his lips pressed harshly against hers. The window was behind them, so that their blended figures were a dark silhouette against the afternoon sun, and it is doubtful if Wally recognized Flood at all. What he saw was a man kissing a girl, obviously against the girl's will.

It was the sound of Wally's laughter that made Flood realize that the door had opened. He pushed Kay away from him as he swung around.

Doll, seeing the expression on his face, and neither knowing Flood nor understanding the danger, giggled. She was the first to speak.

“Gee, Wally,” she said, “you suppose Roy's rentin' the room out for a—”

She didn't get any further.

Wally had recognized Flood. He also recognized and correctly evaluated the expression of pure fury that had torn the suave mask from Flood's face. Without a word he reached out and slapped Doll across the mouth.

“Shut up,” he said.

“You louse!” she said, her voice high and breaking with sudden anger at the blow.

Flood moved like some large cat, silent and swift. Doll felt the steel pressure of his hard fingers as they dug into the soft flesh of her upper arm. Her mouth was still half open as Flood propelled her violently across the room. She brushed against Kay as she passed her and then stumbled and fell as she came up against the couch.

Flood slammed the door and swung around to face the room. Wally took a couple of backward steps, staring at him, his eyes wide.

Kay froze into immobility as she watched the scene.

Flood just stood there and stared. He made no movement at all. Doll's childish, spoiled mouth started to open, but then in a moment even she caught the drama of the situation. Her mouth remained half opened and her large blue eyes went wide as she saw Flood's right hand slowly start for his left armpit.

Wally broke the silence.

“No,” he said. “No, Mr. Flood. Wait. Let me explain.”

His low, narrow brow was corrugated and the muscles of his jaw worked nervously as he spoke. The tanned skin of his face was bloodless and his heavy square fingers played hide-and-seek with each other at his sides. He knew the temper of the other man, understood the fine, tenuous thread upon which his nervous system was strung.

Flood continued the movement of his right hand and then a moment later he had taken a white square of handkerchief from his inside breast pocket. Seemingly unconscious of the gesture, he wiped it across his lips.

It was as though the room had been a vacuum and then suddenly someone had opened a window and it had once more filled with air.

Kay turned and went to the couch and sat down beside Doll, and Wally took a long breath that ended in a half sob. Without a change of expression, Flood spoke. His voice was low and expressionless.

“Kay,” he said, “stay here and keep an eye on that little tramp.” He turned then and started for the bedroom. Wally followed him and a moment later the door closed behind their backs.

Doll took a compact from the leather bag that hung on a strap from her shoulder. She extracted a powder puff, squinted into the tiny mirror lining the cover of the compact, and carefully began to make up her face. She finished with the powder and then went to

work with a lipstick, accentuating the cupid bow of her lips. When she was finished, she neatly put the make-up back in the bag and then turned to face Kay.

“My God,” she said, “that's the first time I ever saw Wally scared. Scared stiff. Your boy friend is some guy!”

Kay forced a weak smile.

“Yes,” she said, “some guy.”

3.

Fingers interlaced behind his head, Frank lay on the rattan day bed out on the screened porch. His lean body was stretched out straight and he lay on his back without a pillow. He had stripped to a pair of shorts and nothing covered him, but nevertheless there was a thin layer of sweat on his skin as he lay there. The air was dead still, heavy with moisture. The temperature had barely dropped since the sun had gone down.

He had extinguished the last light in the house shortly after nine o'clock. The porch too was in darkness now. He had been lying there, staring sightlessly at the ceiling, for a long time. He guessed that it must be close to midnight.

A dozen times he had been tempted to get up and look at the clock, but each time he had resisted the temptation. There was no point in finding out how many hours had passed, no point in torturing himself.

He didn't move until he heard the sound of the car approaching far down the narrow dirt road.

Even before the twin headlights slanted into the driveway leading to the house, Frank knew that it was Kay. He had recognized the chronic knock in the car's engine; it was unmistakable.

And yet, despite the fact he had been nervously awaiting her return for hours, he made no attempt to get up as the car pulled in beside the house and he heard the engine die out. It wasn't until the screen door slammed shut and he heard the soft soles of her low shoes as she crossed the porch that he spoke.

“I'm here,” he said. His voice was listless.

Kay stopped. She said nothing for a moment. And then she reached over and turned on a shaded floor lamp. He was staring up into her face as she looked down at him.

“You startled me, honey,” she said. “What in the world are you doing out here?”

“Too hot to sleep,” Frank said. He swung to a sitting position. “You're late. Did everything go all right?” He tried to make it sound casual and disinterested. He took his eyes away from her face as she started to answer.

“For me, yes,” Kay said. “But there was a little trouble. I'll tell you about it.”

Frank got all the way to his feet. He still avoided looking at her.

“You sit down, baby,” he said. “It must have been a hot, tiring drive. Take it easy for a few minutes and I'll go in and get us each a drink. I had a little trouble up here, too.”

“Trouble, Frank?” Kay couldn't keep the worry out of her voice.

“Nothing too bad,” Frank said, moving toward the door. “Nothing to worry about. I'll get the drinks and then we'll talk.”

“Make mine a Coke, or something soft,” Kay said. “I've had my quota for one day.”

“So've I,” Frank said. “But I think I'm going to have another anyway. You better have one too.” He didn't wait for her answer.

Kay had kicked off her shoes and was lying back on the day bed when he returned. He'd taken time to slip into a pair of slacks and a sport shirt. He handed her a Scotch and soda.

„ “Tell me what happened,” he said. He sat beside her, not touching her, but staring at the floor between his feet.

Kay gave it to him in short sentences. She told him about everything, everything except about Flood's attempt to make love to her. Frank waited until she was through before he spoke. He sensed that she had glossed over something, and he thought he knew what.

“Well, what took you so long?” he asked at last.

“I had to stay with the girl while Flood was in with Wally. He was there for a long time. And then later, after Flood had decided that things had gone too far and that it was no longer safe to throw the girl out, there was another long discussion about what to do with her. At first they thought I should bring her back here to stay with us.”

“And why didn't you?”

“Flood finally decided against it. Afraid it might look bad, her coming back with me. She's not exactly the type—”

“He was right,” Frank said.

“Anyway,” Kay went on, “I think he wanted her where he could keep an eye on her. They'll all be here by tomorrow night, in any case. But anyway, tell me what's been going on here.”

“In just a minute, honey. There's something else. How was Flood? I mean about you. Did he...”

He didn't want to ask her; didn't want to know. But he couldn't help herself. He had to know.

“He was all business,” Kay said quickly. “All business. Wally and the girl came in right after he got there. We didn't hardly have a chance to speak before they came in. And then he was so damned mad about the girl that there still wasn't any chance for us to talk to each other alone.”

Frank nodded. “And you don't think...”

Kay reached out and took one of his hands in her own.

“Listen, Frank,” she said. “You know Flood. You probably know him even better than I do. I don't know what he thinks. Right now he's completely involved in the job. He isn't thinking of anything else at all. But there's no point in fooling ourselves. He's going to know sooner or later. He's got to know. Even if he doesn't figure it out for himself, he'll still have to know.”

“Yeah, he's got to know. As far as I'm concerned, I'd just as soon tell him right off—die second he shows up.”

Kay looked at him with sudden alarm.

“No,” she said. “No, not when he shows up. You know Flood. He'd go crazy. There's no telling what he'd do. You know”—she hesitated a moment, looking directly into his face—“if it wasn't for this job, we could just leave now. Take off and get away.”

“Are you suggesting that we give up...”

“No,” she said. “No, I guess we're in too deep now for that. The only thing is, I just wish it had never started. I wish we'd never heard of the job in the first place.”

Frank smiled at her suddenly.

“If we hadn't heard of the job, we wouldn't have found each other,” he said. “Anyway, forget about it for now. I said I'd see this thing through, and I'm going to. No matter what else I may think of Flood, I promised him I'd see him through on this deal. I owe him that, at least. I owe him a lot more than that. But let's not talk about Flood any more tonight. I want to tell you what's been going on around here today.”

He told her about the fire at the warehouse, about Kosta. He told her about seeing Paulmeyer earlier in the day.

It was almost two o'clock before they finally left the porch and went upstairs.

Chapter Six

1.

Sunrise was at exactly five-twenty-six on Thursday morning. It was a large, hot, yellow sun, and even as it slowly hoisted itself over the horizon where the still Atlantic blended into the cloudless sky far to the east, the day began with no promise of release from the heavy sub-tropic heat that lay over Florida.

Old Paulmeyer had been awake for at least three hours before daylight and he welcomed the first dim light of dawn. He pulled himself out of bed and went into the bathroom at the end of the hallway and filled the tub with lukewarm water. He lay quietly in the water until it had become the temperature of the room, and then he scrubbed himself and

stepped out of the tub and rubbed his lean old body dry with a rough towel.

After that he shaved, using a straight razor, which he frequently stopped to hone on a double leather strap that he'd anchored to one of the faucets in the sink.

Returning to his room, his gaunt frame encased in the faded bathrobe that he had worn for years now, he meticulously put his shaving things away in a dresser drawer and then began to dress.

He made no compromise with the sultry heat. He started with his usual knit underwear, gartered up heavy wool socks, and then climbed into a blue serge suit and a white shirt. He buttoned the collar and put on a thin black tie. Before getting into his coat, he pulled on the congress shoes that he had worn for years over his bunion-distorted feet.

Carefully brushing the lightweight felt hat that he wore winter and summer, he slanted it across his forehead and then left the room, carefully locking the door behind him.

It was almost seven o'clock when he stopped at the newsstand in the bus depot and bought a Miami morning newspaper. Then he found a restaurant and went in and ordered breakfast.

Although he knew that he would only pick at it, he ordered a breakfast of fruit, cereal, two eggs and bacon, buttered toast, and a pot of coffee. He liked to linger over his meals.

Today he had plenty of time. Time to kill. There was nothing to do now but wait. He had nowhere to go once he left the restaurant, except back to the rooming house. He wanted to postpone that as long as possible.

Had he happened to look up at about the time he was pouring his second cup of black coffee, he would have seen the car waiting at the corner just outside the restaurant window. It was waiting for the traffic light to turn from red to green at the main intersection of the town, where Route I passed the restaurant on its way south to Palm Beach and Miami.

But it would have meant nothing to him. He had never met its occupants. He had never met Candle, who was driving, or Shorty, who was sitting next to him.

Shorty sat on the extreme edge of the upholstered seat, careful to keep his heavy shoulders from rubbing against the back. Perspiration rolled down his face and neck and he was extremely uncomfortable.

The light changed and Candle shot the car into gear and eased it forward, at the same time sneaking a glance at his companion.

“Still bothers you, eh, kid?” he said. His voice was sympathetic.

“Not as bad as yesterday,” Shorty said. “Jesus, I didn't know the sun got this damned hot. Didn't hardly feel it while I was lying there on the beach.”

Candle grunted. He was wheeling along at sixty now, south of town.

“Maybe you should have stayed back at the beach,” he said. “Rested up.”

“Rested up, hell!” Shorty said. “One more day in that dump and I'd have been ready to flip my lid.”

“Look,” Candle said. “Millionaires spend thirty-five to fifty bucks a day to stay there.”

“Millionaires are nuts,” Shorty said. “Otherwise they wouldn't work so damned hard to become millionaires. Anyway, as long as you'd decided to run down and pick up the rented car, I figured I'd come along.”

“You must like to suffer,” Candle said.

Shorty smiled. “You don't know why I decided to come,” he said. He laughed. “While you're out renting the car, I thought you might just as well drop me off at the track.”

Candle nodded and his mouth turned up at the corners.

“You think that's news? Hell,” he said, “that's why I started early, chum. We'll pick up the car in Palm Beach, leave this one in the parking lot, and then drive down to the track together. We can stop and get the car out of the lot on the way back. You can drive this and I'll take the rented job.”

“You suppose the millionaires down here go to the track too?” Shorty asked.

“No. Only the poor guys go to the track. If the millionaires went to the track, they wouldn't be millionaires.”

“After this week end *we'll* be millionaires—at least for a couple of weeks,” Shorty said.

“We'll go out to Las Vegas and lose our money honestly then,” Candle said. “The hell with the track.”

“We'll go back to New York and sink it into a Columbus Avenue barroom,” Shorty said.

“Like we planned. A Columbus Avenue barroom. I'm getting too old for these kind of jobs.”

Candle drove on in silence. He was thinking of the bar and grill that he and Shorty planned to buy when they returned to New York. He certainly hoped there'd be no foul-up on this job. He didn't think there would be. He'd had a pretty good chance to look over the police force at Indio Beach the afternoon before, when he'd been downtown during the fire and they'd all been out. No, he figured everything would go smoothly enough. Flood always had top people working with him. People that didn't make mistakes.

Kosta was running the water in the bathroom and it was the sound of the water that woke Frank Harper just after seven in the morning. He climbed out of bed noiselessly and, pulling on a pair of shorts, left the room and went downstairs. He had finished

putting the coffee on and was squeezing orange juice when Kosta entered the kitchen.

Aside from slightly bloodshot eyes, Kosta looked as normal as he ever looked. He had shaved and the razor had knicked his chin, but he'd pasted a piece of adhesive plaster over the cut and it had stopped bleeding.

He still wore the trousers of the suit in which he had arrived, but now he wore a wildly patterned, flowered sports shirt, opened at the throat and with the tails hanging outside of his trousers. His small feet were encased in tennis shoes. There was a trace of color in his pasty, fleshy face, and his hands were steady as he went to the matchbox over the stove, took out an old-fashioned kitchen match, and lighted his cigarette.

He didn't say good morning, gave no sign that he was aware of Frank's presence. He went to the kitchen table, pulled out a chair, and slumped into it, leaning his elbows on the table.

Frank spoke out of the side of his mouth without looking at the other man. "Breakfast?"

Kosta stared up at him. "Like a drink," he said.

For a moment Frank stopped dead still, and then he swung around.

"A drink, huh?" he said. "So you'd like a drink, would you, you slimy, foul sonofabitch?"

Kosta stared at him with neither fear nor surprise. "I'd like a drink."

"What would you do," Frank said, "if I gave you one? Go out and set the whole damned town on fire this time?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kosta said. "You must be nuts."

Frank turned away and shrugged. "You're insane," he said. "Insane. Flood should have guessed it." He reached for the gas cock under the percolator and turned it down. "I'll give you one shot with your coffee after you've had breakfast," he said. "And God help you if you go nuts on us again today. God help you. Flood's coming tonight."

2.

It was the sound of the dishes clattering in the kitchen, directly beneath the room in which she slept, that awakened her. For a long time she just lay there, her eyes still closed. She lay on her right side, her long legs slightly bent and one arm thrown out across the white sheet, half caressing the hollow, warm place next to her. She always awakened very slowly, gradually becoming aware of where she was and who she was. It took her a little time to identify the kitchen noises coming from below, but once she did, she quickly opened her eyes, staring at the gray-white wall of the room.

For a moment then, as she realized that Frank was already up and that it must be he downstairs preparing breakfast, she felt a twinge of guilt that she had let him get up first and do the work that was normally hers. Back in New York, in the apartment, she hadn't

bothered to cook or prepare food, except for odd snacks and sandwiches, and she had almost forgotten how until she had come down to Florida and Indio Beach. But in these last three months she had once more got into the habit of working in the kitchen. It was a part of the plan, a part of the act they played. She had been told that she must pretend to be the young, happy bride, and the business of buying groceries and preparing meals was a piece of the general pattern.

Quickly she had discovered that it was something that she liked to do. What had started out as a chore had soon become a pleasure and something she looked forward to each day. She wasn't a very good cook because she had never really learned how, but she tried very hard and she had a great deal of enthusiasm.

Frank had been a perfect partner in the game of make-believe domesticity. He himself had almost forgotten what it was like to eat home cooking, to have someone wait on him and try to please him. And so they played the game, and before long it was no longer a game, but had become a part of the fabric of their life together. Before either of them realized it, it was no longer an act. She couldn't have tried harder or been more deadly serious if they had actually been married and starting out in a real home of their own.

So she felt slightly guilty and turned quickly, shaking the long blonde hair out of her eyes, and began to sit up.

It was then that she heard *the* mumble of voices from the room beneath her, and she at once realized that Kosta must also be in the kitchen. She sank back on the pillow. She couldn't face Kosta just yet, not after what Frank had told her. She didn't think Frank would mind if she waited a while before going downstairs; Frank understood how she felt about the man.

So she lay back on the bed and for a minute or two she closed her eyes, thinking that perhaps she might once more fall asleep. But sleep didn't come.

In trying not to think of Kosta, she found that her mind returned to Flood, who would be arriving that evening.

She shivered. She didn't want to think of Flood, either; she wanted to think only of Frank. But thinking of Frank meant that she had to think of Flood.

It was then, for the first time,, that a sudden consciousness of the last four years swept over her, and she became acutely aware of what they had meant to her. And for the first time she sensed a deep, bitter regret for those wasted, pointless, inane years.

Her body trembled and she stifled a sob and turned her head and buried it in the pillow as her shoulders shook. It was as though she had been half dead for the whole four years, and now she was suddenly fully alive, fully aware of everything that had taken place.

She didn't like to think of it; but the years had happened and the things she had done had also happened, and there was no wiping them out. God, she thought, if only they had never been, if only she had never met Flood, never even gone to New York at all. But

then, almost at once, she reflected that if she hadn't gone to New York, hadn't met Flood, she would never have found Frank.

She took her face from the pillow and turned on her back and stared up, dry-eyed, at the ceiling.

With the quick, clear logic of a woman who has found love, she at once dismissed the four years and the regrets and the memories, and she began to think of herself and of Frank and of what lay ahead for them. Suddenly, from nowhere, a new idea crossed her mind.

What in the name of God, she thought, are Frank and I doing here? Frank is no criminal, no bank robber. Neither am I. Perhaps we have done some unconventional things, perhaps we have even done things that are not legal. But neither of us is a criminal. How did we ever get into this? I certainly don't care about the money, and I'm sure Frank doesn't, either. All we want is each other. Each other and a chance to start a real life together. To be let alone and allowed to live.

Suddenly she tossed the sheet aside and slid from the bed. She went into the bathroom for a quick shower.

She wanted to get downstairs as soon as she could and talk to Frank. She wanted to tell him about it. She must tell him, now, right away, before it was too late.

The thing was at last clear in her mind.

3.

Roy knew that Wally, lying flat on his back in the twin bed next to the one on which he himself was sprawled, was awake. He had listened as the other man turned and tossed, breathing heavily through his mouth. He had heard him cough and clear his throat. He knew that Wally was awake, but still Roy couldn't help laughing. Just thinking about it made him laugh, and although he made an effort to muffle the sound, he realized that Wally heard him and knew that he was laughing. So what? Let the sonofabitch hear him.

It was certainly funny, although he doubted if Wally appreciated the humor of it. No, Wally wouldn't think it was funny at all. Wally had been so tough, so damned sure of himself.

Well, Mr. Flood had certainly shown him how tough he really was. Roy wished he had been there the afternoon before when Wally and Doll had walked in on Flood. That must have been something. The real action, of course, had been all over by the time Roy had returned to the apartment. From the looks of Wally's face, it must have been good.

Roy chuckled again as he remembered the scene when he had knocked at the door and entered.

Wally—beetle-browed, tough, dangerous—had been sitting over on the couch with his face in his hands and the blood still running from the corner of his mouth. And Doll,

who had never given Roy the time of day, had been sitting on the edge of a chair just staring wide-eyed at Flood. Flood, apparently, had just finished telling her off.

Flood had looked up when Roy entered the room and then had sent him down for sandwiches and some soft drinks. Later the four of them had sat around and had a sort of light supper together. Flood hadn't said anything until they were all through. That was when he had handed Wally the news. He had talked just as though the girl hadn't been in the room with them.

“So you got only yourself to blame,” Flood had said, staring at Wally. “You did the one thing you knew you shouldn't do. You brought this dizzy broad along with you. She may not be smart, but she knows we're down here for something. She knows too damned much.”

Doll had been scared stiff. There was no doubt about that. Doll didn't have many brains or much imagination, but she knew the spot she was in.

She had started to say something, but Flood had merely looked over at her and she shut up quick. Wally hadn't even tried to talk.

Flood said, “If I had a little more time, I'd let Roy here take her out someplace for a date. His kind of date. I might even make you do the job yourself, Wally. But we haven't time and I don't want to take any extra chances at all. So there's only one thing to do. She stays with us until the whole thing is over and done with.”

He had hesitated then and Roy could hear Wally draw a long breath of relief. Even the girl had sat back in the seat and started to look a little less frightened. But Flood had continued to speak.

“Afterward,” he said, “I don't know just what we'll do with her. It will all depend. In the meantime, she's getting out of here. You and Roy are staying in this place alone, the way we planned it. Tomorrow, late in the afternoon, you're going to check out of here and drive up to Indio Beach. You got the map and the directions. You know where to go. I may not be there when you arrive, but that part doesn't matter. Just don't make any more bad plays; don't get yourselves in any sort of trouble. Don't drink, don't drive too fast. And try to get there without calling attention to yourselves. Above all, remember, if there are any cars around the place, when you get up to Indio, outside of the Chevvie, don't stop. Come back later.”

Wally looked over at Doll then.

“Roy and me,” he said. “What about...”

“About her?” Flood said, turning toward Doll. “Don't worry about her. You've already worried too much. From now on, she isn't your problem any more.”

He took his coat from the back of a chair.

“Pack up, sister,” he said. “You're coming with me.”

Yeah, that had been something. Roy laughed again, a muffled, mean little laugh, as he remembered the expression on Wally's face when Flood and Doll had walked out of the room. Flood hadn't offered to help her with the suitcase and Doll had looked sick with fright as she had passed in front of him while he held the door open.

Wally's voice cut into his thoughts.

“What's so damned funny?” Wally asked. But he didn't sound tough any more. His voice was a whine as he spoke.

“You are,” Roy said, turning over. “You're funny. You and that Doll of yours.”

“The hell with her,” Wally said. “Who wants her?”

“I don't, that's for sure,” Roy said. “But I can't help wondering what the boss is doing with her. I never thought he'd be the kind of guy to take a wet deck from anybody. I never—”

“Don't be a sap,” Wally said. “Flood just figured she might be dangerous. The chances are he took her outta here and—”

“Don't you ever think it,” Roy said. “Not Flood. If he wanted her bumped, he'd have me do it. Flood isn't the kind to take care of his own dirty work. He'd never soil his lily-white hands.”

Wally grunted something and sat up and reached for a cigarette. “Well, the hell with Doll, and Flood, too,” he said. “We got a day to kill and we're stuck with each other. So the hell with them. Let's forget it. You feel like sending down for something to eat, or should we go out?”

“Let's get dressed and go out,” Roy said. “We can eat and maybe hit a movie.”-

“Movie my fanny,” Wally said. “Where the hell you think you are, New York? The movies in this dump don't open till afternoon. Let's see if we can't find a poolroom, or anyway go over to the beach and get in a swim.”

“Make it a poolroom,” Roy said. “Breakfast and then a poolroom.”

He yawned, stretched, and then slipped out of bed.

“I still wonder what the hell he's doing with her,” he said as he started for the bathroom.

4.

It was shortly after nine-thirty on Thursday morning when Mrs. Carrie Emerson Gillette checked Cabin 9 to make sure that Hettie had changed the sheets and towels and swept under the desk. She also carefully inspected the blankets and counted the ash trays, to be certain that the occupants hadn't taken anything when they had checked out an hour earlier.

She smiled grimly as she noticed that one of the hand towels was missing, as well as the light bulb from the lamp over the double bed. She made a mental note to have Hettie

replace them, and then closed the door of the cabin behind her and turned toward Cabin 10.

She saw that the black Cadillac convertible was still in the drive beside the cabin. She knew at once, from the number on the Florida plate attached to the rear of the car, that it was a rented car.

She shrugged and started back to the office. She knew what a rented car meant. Probably they'd stay until noon. Mrs. Gillette's tourist court was on the main road just outside of town and she very rarely got anything except overnight transients. People who came down to Florida for several days or a week always went over to the beach, or else they checked into one of the fancier roadside motels, one of those places with swimming pools and restaurants and such.

Well, the day hadn't come yet when she'd put in a swimming pool, thank God. She'd rather put up with the over-nighters. After all, she didn't have much trouble getting her share of the business, and she'd be darned if she'd spend a nickel more than she had to. She did wish, though, that people would have the decency to get out early in the morning so she'd have a chance to get the rooms cleaned up and get her work out of the way. It was nothing less than criminal the way people slept half the day away.

Back in the tiny office, she yelled for Hettie, and then, not waiting for an answer, walked behind the desk to check the registration book.

It was just as she thought. A Mr. and Mrs. George Harvey, from Miami.

Humph. Mr. and Mrs. Harvey. She just bet. Probably some potbellied businessman with a wife and five kids, sneaking out for a night with his secretary. She knew the type. She yelled again for Hettie.

It didn't matter to her, one way or the other. At least there was one thing about the ones that showed up in the rented cars and spent the night with their secretaries or girl friends: They weren't any trouble. They never stole anything and they didn't make a lot of noise. All they wanted was to be left alone.

It was the sound of Mrs. Gillette's shrill voice, calling Hettie, that awakened Flood.

He reached over automatically and picked up his solid-gold wrist watch from the night table. The Venetian blinds were closed but there was enough light seeping through to allow him to read the face. He replaced the watch and started to stretch. His right hand struck the breast of the girl that lay beside him and for the first time he remembered where he was and how he happened to be there.

He twisted his head so that he could see her face. The shoulder-length red hair was disarranged and covered her closed eyes. The carmine-smeared mouth was opened and she was breathing heavily and Flood noticed that she had surprisingly white teeth. But her almost childlike face was streaked and dirty and she hadn't bothered to remove her

make-up before going to bed. She lay on her back, her legs stretched wide, and there was a gentle movement of the thin sheet across her nude body as she breathed.

Looking at her, Flood suddenly thought, Jesus, it's fantastic how completely unfastidious a man can become once he finds himself in a double bed. His mouth twisted in self-disgust and he moved to get out from under the sheet.

The movement disturbed her and she grunted in her sleep.

Getting up, Flood went at once to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

He hated the idea of having her on his hands for the rest of the day. Thank God, at least when he had checked in the night before there had been no one around except the colored boy in the office. If there was one thing Flood had never done, it was to allow himself to be seen hanging around with an obvious tramp. And this Doll was just about as obvious as they came.

He wondered why it was that these silly, stupid little pushovers didn't at least learn how to dress, how to do their hair and make up their faces so that they didn't look so exactly like what they were.

In spite of the night he had just spent with her, Flood cursed the girl and the necessity of being seen with her in public. He hated the idea, but he knew there wasn't much he could do about it. He was damned if he was going to let her out of his sight until everything was all over.

Then? Well, then he guessed he'd turn her over to Roy. Get them a couple of tickets on a plane to Cuba or the Virgin Islands or someplace where they wouldn't need passports. He could count on Roy to take care of her. He wouldn't even have to tell Roy what to do.

He smiled as he stepped under the shower. No, he wouldn't have to say a word to Roy. Roy would do it without being told, without even caring whether Flood wanted him to do it or not. Flood only hoped that he might be doubly lucky and that Roy would get himself picked up after he'd done to the girl what Flood knew that he would do.

The chances were that, without Flood around to take care of him and to advise him, Roy would be picked up. With Roy it was just a case of time. Sooner or later, somewhere or other, they'd get him. There would be a girl and Roy, and then they'd have Roy.

Flood hoped that the girl would be Doll.

By the time he was through with his shower and was standing in front of the mirror and shaving, he had stopped thinking of Doll. He was thinking about Kay.

"The little bitch," he said under his breath. "I might have known what would happen."

His thin lips twisted and his eyes half closed as he leaned forward to scrape the blade across his jaw.

She didn't really matter; he was tired of her, anyway. It was only that no one, no one at

all, was going to put anything over on him. He could have handed the girl over to Frank and never given it a second thought. But he'd be damned if he'd let them make a sucker of him. Well, once this caper was over, he'd tie up the loose ends. There were several that would need tying up. Roy, Doll, and Wally. Frank and Kay.

The others, old Paulmeyer, Candle, and Shorty, he didn't have to worry about. Or Kosta. Kosta was like Roy; sooner or later he'd take care of himself. It was just a matter of time.

Christ, the people a man had to do business with in order to make a decent living!

5.

By late Thursday afternoon, a sudden high wind had come up from the north, bringing sheets of rain. Storm warnings went out and weather prophets up and down the coast closely watched the barometers, preparing to issue hurricane warnings. It was very late in the season for hurricanes, but one could never tell. The weather in Florida did some funny things. One thing was certain: It was going to be cold—cold for Florida. Already the thermometer had dropped almost a dozen points.

Hal Morgan had spent the morning at his desk in the bank. At noontime he drove out Orange Drive and across the Indian River to the beach and parked his Pontiac sedan in front of the Atlantic Grill, where the Rotary Club met once each week. Hal attended these meetings for two reasons. First, it was good business to mix with the merchants and small businessmen of the town. The second and more important reason was that it gave him a perfect excuse for taking the rest of the afternoon off and getting in nine to eighteen holes of golf.

As Hal explained it to old R. P. Matthews, the president and biggest stockholder in the bank, lunching and then later playing a few holes of golf with the bank's customers put things on a sort of casual, informal basis and tended to make firm friends of old as well as potential clients. Old Matthews had, of course, built the bank up from nothing, without ever having learned to play golf and without as much as ever splitting a ham sandwich with a customer, but he was broad-minded about the thing, and he knew that competent vice-presidents who would work for little more than you'd have to pay a good bricklayer were hard to come by. So he had merely nodded sagely and told Hal that it was all right if he felt it necessary. Take an afternoon off each week, he said, but remember, the important part of the job was behind the desk. That's where the depositors showed up—the ones that gave money to the bank instead of taking it away.

The wind was already blowing at about twenty miles an hour when Hal parked in front of the Atlantic Grill, so he carefully wound up the side windows of his car to keep the sand out before going inside.

He stopped at the bar, said hello to Eddy, the bartender and pulled up a stool. He was the first one to show up, and Eddy, without asking, mixed him a Martini. Hal always had two Martinis before the Rotary group sat down in the dining room at the rear. He had

learned a long time ago that a Martini was the best buy for the money, and as long as he felt it necessary to limit himself to two drinks, he wanted to get a bang out of them if possible.

He was halfway through the first drink when the door opened and Paul Turner, who owned the smaller department store over in town, came in accompanied by Big John Reardon, the local dairyman.

Big John clapped Hal on the shoulder with a hand like a small steam shovel, while he nodded to Eddy. Eddy said hello to John and reached for the Scotch bottle. He ignored Turner. Turner didn't drink and he didn't buy.

Eddy liked Big John. The dairyman, who also had an interest in cattle and citrus, was just about the only local businessman who drank Scotch. He was also the only one who ever thought to leave a tip.

Big John was telling them about a football game that he had driven up to Georgia to see over the week end when Sam Loxley entered. Sam didn't leave tips either, but he never ordered a drink without offering to buy someone else one, and he always asked Eddy to have one too. Eddy didn't drink, but each time he'd religiously take a cigar and put it into his inside breast coat pocket.

Sam was talking about the previous day's fire when Eddy got around to serving Hal Morgan his second Martini.

"Damnedest thing," Sam was saying, "but I was talking with Waldo a few minutes ago. Said that the railroad people were around and they suspected arson. Said they figured someone must have set the blaze."

Morgan looked over at him, startled. "Set it? Who the hell would have set it?"

"How do I know?" Sam said. "I'm just telling you what Waldo told me."

"Doubt it," Big John said in his slow Texan drawl. "Doubt it, boy. No insurance angle."

"That's what I told Waldo," Sam said. "No insurance, so why the hell would anybody want to set a warehouse on fire? A railroad warehouse. Only stuff in it was some furniture and building materials that hadn't been delivered yet. Railroad would be responsible for all of that."

Eddy was shaking a cocktail and he looked up. "Could be one of those fire bugs—you know, whatever they call 'em."

"Pyromaniacs," Morgan said. "But we don't have that kind of people in Indio. Hell, we got the tourists and God knows they're crazy enough, but we don't get criminals or maniacs. Not in this town, we don't. This isn't Miami."

Big John laughed and told Eddy to pour another round.

"All tourists are crazy," he said. "For my dough, boy, they could be maniacs and

criminals, too. We just been lucky so far. Only drunks and a few queers an' a coupla crazy artists and writers, but you never know, boy, you never know.”

“Not in this town,” Morgan said. “Not in Indio Beach. Why, we haven't had a major crime here in twenty years. Outside of a couple of stabbings over in Black Town, of course.”

Chapter Seven

1.

Had it not been for the fact that a certain Millie Hartman, a hairdresser who worked without enthusiasm and certainly without ambition for the Bijou Coiffeurs of Indio Beach, was thinking of her boy friend, a married women's-wear salesman working out of Jacksonville, rather than of her profession late on that Thursday afternoon, Roy and Wally probably never would have encountered two other men whose destiny was closely related to their own.

Alice Loxley visited the beauty parlor once each month to have her hair done. On this particular Thursday, her regular day, she had been forced to miss her appointment, as she had been unable to get her steady baby-sitter. And so she had arrived at the beauty salon at ten minutes to five, just as Millie was about to quit her job for the day.

A smile and the expectation of a good-sized tip had combined to persuade Millie to stay on and take care of Mrs. Loxley's corn-silk tresses. The only trouble was that Millie's mind was more on her gentleman friend than it was on perfecting Alice Loxley's already almost perfect beauty. As a result, Millie picked up the wrong bottle from among the numerous lotions on the glass shelf that held her aids to charm, and instead of establishing a soft sheen in Mrs. Loxley's fine head of hair, ended up by leaving a long blueish-black streak over that lady's left temple.

Mrs. Loxley finished with the hairdresser, not realizing what had happened to her, left the expected tip, and returned home.

It wasn't until an hour and a half later, when she was preparing dinner for Sam, at the same time feeding three-year-old Bitty and six-year-old Sammy, that she became aware of the damage. Sam arrived home hungry, as usual, and reached for her to give her the nightly kiss and hug. He got the hug in and was starting to work on the kiss when he suddenly released her and stepped back, his eyes wide.

“My Gawdamighty,” he said. “What the hell have you done to your hair?”

Alice stared at him for a minute and then went to the mirror in the bedroom off the kitchen. She was gone some time and when she returned she was almost in tears. She wasn't quite sure just what had happened, but she was pretty sure Millie probably had something to do with it. She tried to get the beauty shop on the phone, but it was closed.

She turned to Sam. “That girl!” she said. “She must have put something on it.”

“Well, hon,” Sam said, “don't let it worry you. A lot of women with dark hair fake in white or gray streaks.”

Alice wasn't amused. She said that as soon as supper was over, she'd run down the road to the Harpers'. Maybe Kay would have something to take the streak of color out.

“You do that, sweetie,” Sam said, and finished the kiss he had started before.

2.

Kosta was back upstairs in the bedroom, lying with all his clothes on, covered to the chin by a thin blanket and staring sightlessly at the ceiling. Frank and Kay had just finished dinner and were having a cup of iced coffee before getting up from the table. They had eaten alone. Kosta had refused to join them when Frank had refused him a drink before dinner.

Frank was the first to hear the car pulling into the driveway and he was out of his chair and halfway to the window by the time Kay got up. Kay was pale and nervous and she almost spilled her coffee in leaving the table. She knew that Flood and the others were due at any time, but she prayed that they hadn't come yet.

The sense of relief as she recognized the Loxleys' old station wagon was immense.

The minute Alice Loxley opened the screen door of the back porch and entered the kitchen, Frank knew that he would have to get rid of her as quickly as possible. The one thing that Flood had insisted on was that the coast be clear when he and the others arrived.

Frank knew what he had to do, and yet, for some perverse reason that he was unable to figure out, he heard himself welcoming the girl and then telling her to sit down while he made her a drink.

“It's too soon after dinner for a drink,” Alice Loxley said, “but I'll take one anyway. The shape I'm in, I need one.” And then, before anyone could say anything else, she turned to Kay and started telling her about the hairdresser.

Kay looked nervously across at Frank, but Frank only winked. He walked over to the cabinet above the sink, opened it, and took out a bottle of gin. He knew that Alice liked gin and Coke.

“The hell with the iced coffee,” he said over his shoulder to Kay. “This calls for stronger medicine. We'll join Alice in one of those cracker cocktails she and Sam like.”

“But shouldn't we be getting dressed and ready?” Kay said. Alice couldn't have misunderstood. It was obvious that Kay didn't have any time to spare, that she and Frank had something to do.

Frank knew that Kay was right. They had to get rid of her. But even while he was admiring the way Kay was handling the thing—doing it so that Alice wouldn't be offended—he again felt that odd sense of perverseness that he was completely unable to

understand.

“We've all the time in the world, baby,” he said. “Relax. Plenty of time for a drink.”

Kay weakly backed him up, and in another couple of minutes the three of them were sitting around the table with drinks in their hands, listening to Alice on the subject of hairdressers.

The first drink was followed by a second round, on Frank's insistence. He went so far as to suggest that they give Sam a ring and ask him to join them.

“Sam has to stay with the kids,” Alice reminded him. “Anyway, you'll be at our house tomorrow night and Sam can make up for it then.”

They drank the second round and the clock over the stove showed eight-thirty. It was almost completely dark in the kitchen and Frank got up and turned on an overhead light. He walked over to the window to look out at the trees bending in the high wind. He started to comment on the weather, but stopped speaking suddenly as he caught sight of headlights coming rapidly down the road.

He turned and, muttering an excuse, left the room.

Frank was out on the front terrace, standing at the door, as the car slowed almost to a stop and then quickly surged forward again.

Frank felt a sense of relief as he returned to the kitchen. Alice was getting up to leave.

“Not on your sweet life,” Frank said. “You don't leave this house on only two wings. I'll make one for the road.”

Kay watched him in bewilderment as he reached over and playfully pushed Alice back down in her seat. A moment later he had gathered the glasses and was refilling them.

3.

Shorty had his usual luck. He was broke by the end of the fourth race. He had done what he always did when he went to the race track. He'd taken ten dollars for expenses, ten dollars for the daily double, and an additional ten dollars for each of the eight races. The rest of his money he had carefully hidden under the mattress when he and Candle had left the house that morning. In spite of having spent the major part of his life as a thief, Shorty always hid his money in the one spot where a burglar would look first.

He lost on the daily double and the first race, but hit a winner on the second and broke even on the third. And then, following an old pattern, he'd shot the bankroll on an even-money bet in the fourth. As far as anyone knows, the horse is still running.

Candle accompanied the five-dollar loans before each of the other races with a series of lectures. He also paid for the drinks that they consumed during the remainder of the afternoon. As for Candle himself, he ended up the day with a \$280 profit. He kindly and laboriously explained his technique to Shorty as they left the track.

“You see, kid,” he said, “I can't help but win, the same as you can't help but lose. You go out and buy all the goddamned tip sheets, you check the past performances, read the experts, figure the jockeys, go down to the paddock and look the nags over. You take a pencil and paper and figure the odds, the track conditions, the weight handicaps the scratches, and God only knows what else. Then you pick your horse, and naturally you lose.

“Me I'm stupid. I look over the entries, see a name I like and I bet it—on the nose. So I win.”

“Just don't talk,” Shorty said. “Drive.”

They picked up the other car and Candle followed Shorty up Route 1. They were in Indio Beach at eight o'clock after leaving the rented car in a roadside garage, Candle telling the attendant to give it a wash and a grease job and to change the oil.

“Better backflush the radiator, too,” he added. “Take your time. Won't need it until sometime late tomorrow.”

The attendant, relieved that he wouldn't have to work on it himself, said that he'd see to it. He'd leave it for the morning shift. Candle took the wheel when they left.

“Let's head out to that tavern just south of town,” he suggested to Shorty. “Some guy said they have good steaks.”

“As long as you're buying,” Shorty said, “fine.”

The Hillside Inn—there were no hills within miles—was a large, rambling, weather-beaten, and badly constructed frame building just off the highway some four miles south of town. It served good food and so it did a good business, in spite of its rather grim exterior, the bad taste of its interior decor, and the constant blaring of its gaudy jukebox.

By the time Shorty and Candle walked into the place on Thursday evening, the bar was crowded and about a third of the tables were occupied. The two men found a table just past the bar, neatly placed between the jukebox and the swinging door of the men's room. A tubercular-looking waiter in a soiled white jacket listlessly wandered over to take their order.

“Double bourbon, water on the side,” Shorty said.

“Make it two,” Candle added. “Now. We'll give the food order later.” He stood up, reaching into his pants pocket as the waiter walked off. “Big night,” he said. “Let's have music.” He walked over to the jukebox and inspected the list of records for several moments. Then he inserted a coin into the slot. The machine had started to play by the time he had returned to the table.

“Recognize it?” he asked, sitting down.

“My God,” Shorty said. ‘Somebody Stole My Gal.’ Where the hell did they ever dig that one up?”

“You should see the others on the list,” Candle said. “Most of 'em go back before my time, even. By the way, you want to play that thing, you get two tunes for a quarter. Some racket.”

“That's because the songs are old enough to be museum pieces,” Shorty said. “You gotta pay for antiques, you know.”

They were finishing their second drinks and had already ordered steaks, hash-browned potatoes, French-fried onions, and a salad when the swinging doors opened and Roy and Wally walked into the place and found two stools at the bar.

4.

Roy Cluney had started out the day feeling fine. True enough, Flood had given him a hard time the previous afternoon, but on the other hand, Flood had given Wally a lot harder time. It was enough to make Roy feel good by comparison.

They'd had their breakfast and then they'd walked around town for a while, finally finding a pool parlor that was open. They had the place to themselves most of the day. Wally began drinking beer, but Roy touched nothing but Cokes.

Roy kept buying beers for Wally, figuring that sooner or later Wally would get just a little edge on. Enough of an edge so that his pool game might be affected.

Wally hadn't disappointed him. He'd started out shooting his normal excellent game, a game that Roy was able to match but not to beat. But then, as he went on drinking beer, he became careless. At three o'clock in the afternoon he was still playing and still hoping to get even. Roy was running the table almost at will. Wally raised the stakes, hoping that that would help. Roy kept right on winning.

Wally finally went to the men's room. He went, however, not because of biological necessity, but in order to take inventory of his wallet. He discovered that he was better than forty dollars out. Returning, he suggested a final game for the forty dollars. Roy smiled and agreed. Roy won.

Wally threw his cue halfway across the room.

“Lucky bastard,” he said.

“Well, you know what they say,” Roy said, collecting his winnings. “Lucky in love, unlucky at—”

“Aw, shut up,” Wally snapped. “Let's get going. We still have to pick up our stuff and we don't wanna be late.”

Roy wanted to drive, but Wally wouldn't let him. He knew about Roy and cars. It was the way it was with girls. Once Roy got in a car and started going, he didn't know when to stop. The craziness came over him and he just had to put his foot down all the way. Flood knew about this and therefore he had instructed Wally to do the driving.

Wally waited downstairs while Roy went up for their luggage and paid for the room. He was feeling meaner every minute. Goddamn Flood, he thought. If it hadn't been for Flood he wouldn't have been stuck with this creep Roy, and he wouldn't have lost his money playing pool; he'd have been driving up to Indio with Doll.

He hated Flood, but for some odd reason, he didn't blame him—he blamed Roy. Roy was nothing but a goddamned freak. The car was a late-model Ford sedan that Wally had rented in Miami the previous week. In spite of his blazing anger and bad temper, Wally drove carefully, and he timed himself so that he arrived at the outskirts of Indio Beach just as the sun was sinking below the western horizon. Roy held the map that Flood had given him and they had no difficulty finding the turnoff at Orange Drive.

“Think Flood will have Doll with him when he shows up?” Roy asked.

“What the hell do you care?” Wally said. He continued on through town, carefully noticing the bank as he passed it...

“There's baby,” he said.

“Damn thing's lit up like a Christmas tree,” Roy said. “How the hell you think Flood ever figures to—”

“Don't worry,” Wally told him. “You can be sure he's got an angle. He doesn't talk, but you can bet he has it all planned out.”

“I sure hope so,” Roy said. He sounded worried. “After all, you and I are going to be in there—an' I don't feel like playing clay pigeon for these country cops.”

“Christ,” Wally said, irritated, “what the hell are you doing? Getting chicken? You don't want to take chances, what the hell you come in on this caper for?”

“Let it lay,” Roy answered. “Just drive, brother.”

When the car passed the Loxleys' place, Sam looked out of the window curiously. He knew that the road ended a half mile beyond and that the house occupied by the Harpers was the only other place after his own bungalow. Well, at least Alice would be getting back if the Harpers were going to be having visitors.

But Alice didn't get back. Instead, Sam heard the car returning a few minutes later and again looked out at it curiously. Some dope made a wrong turn, he figured.

Wally was madder than ever.

“Goddamned fool,” he muttered. “The guy knew we were expected. You'd think the least he could do was keep people away.”

“Maybe the wagon belonged to Flood,” Roy said, although he didn't believe it.

“Hell, no,” Wally snapped at him. “Flood always drives a Caddie. You don't see him with anything that's second-class.”

“He's with Doll,” Roy said with a sneer.

Wally looked straight ahead and his mouth tightened. “Keep it up, you sonofabitch,” he gritted between his set teeth. “Just keep it up.”

When they got back to town, Roy suggested that they hit a movie for an hour, but Wally ignored him. He turned south on Route I and drove until he came to the Hillside Inn. Viciously he cut the car into the drive and braked it to a halt.

“I'm going in for a drink,” he said. “You can either stay or come with me. If I got to kill time, I'll be damned if I'll do it looking at some goddamned horse opera.”

Roy shrugged and opened the door on his side of the car. Mario Padino, the Hillside Inn's owner, was behind the bar, and he was busy squeezing some fresh lime juice. He was conscious of the two men as they entered, but he was busy at the moment and so he went on with his work.

Wally waited less than a minute and then he reached into his pocket and took out a half dollar. He banged it on the mahogany.

Padino looked down at him, then went back to squeezing limes.

Wally's face suffused with blood. He spoke in a slow, normal voice, but the words carried clearly above the sound of the jukebox.

“You working this bar or not, ginso?” he said.

Padino stood dead still for a moment, half of an unsqueezed lime held in his right hand. Then carefully he put the fruit down, wiped his hands along the front of his apron, and walked over so that he was facing Roy and Wally.

“What you say?” he asked.

“I said, greaseball, that I want some service.”

For a full half minute the old man stared at Wally. His heavy-lipped mouth was half opened and his big brown eyes were incredulous. Then his eyes narrowed in anger and his right hand slowly reached out toward the sawed-off baseball bat that rested on the ice under the bar.

“Go ahead and reach for it,” Roy suddenly said, his voice soft, almost indifferent. “Just reach for it.”

Padino's hand stopped as though controlled by an electric switch. His eyes went from Wally to Roy.

Roy stood there, completely relaxed, half grinning, almost friendly. He had spoken in a voice without anger, without threat. He looked like a friendly high-school kid, but as Padino watched him, the hot blood of anger retreated from the old man's face, leaving it

pale and sick-looking.

“What'll it be, gentlemen?” he said. “Sorry, didn't see you come in.”

Roy laughed softly.

“Rye and water,” Wally said.

“Coke,” Roy said.

“And shut that goddamned jukebox off,” Wally said.

Without a word, the old man turned and walked to the end of the bar. He rounded it and went over to the jukebox. He reached behind the machine and pulled the plug from the wall socket. Then he started back to the bar to get the drinks.

Shorty looked up as the music stopped, halfway through “Somebody Stole My Gal.” He saw Padino and then his eyes went to the electric cord lying on the floor beside the machine. He beckoned to the waiter.

The waiter waited until Padino had finished serving the drinks and then went to the end of the bar. When Padino walked over to him, they held a whispered conversation for a moment or two. The waiter nodded and went at once to the table where Shorty and Candle were sitting.

Leaning over, he explained to Shorty in a low voice.

Shorty looked over at Candle. Candle smiled at him and looked over at the bar.

Shorty stood up slowly. He walked over to the jukebox and studied the list of records for several minutes. Very deliberately he took two quarters from his pocket and put them in the slot. He pushed the number-twelve button, the one for “Somebody Stole My Gal,” four times. Then he reached down and put the plug into the electric socket before he walked back to the table and sat down.

Wally had the drink half raised to his lips when the machine started playing. With the first bars of the music, he smashed the glass down on the counter so that the contents spilled and the liquid rolled in a quickly spreading puddle until it began to drip off the edge of the bar. His eyes went to the jukebox.

“The fat guy sitting at the table next to it,” Roy said, smiling maliciously.

Without a word, Wally started for the table where Candle and Shorty sat. Both men were watching him.

“Never could stand punks,” Shorty said...

Candle glanced at Shorty for a quick moment and then his eyes went back to Wally.

Wally didn't hesitate. He'd been feeling mean all afternoon, mean and in a fighting mood. He was unconscious of Padino and the waiter, standing motionless at the end of the bar, blind to everything but Shorty, who had started the jukebox after he'd ordered it

stopped.

He halted when he came to the table, leaned down, and spoke in a harsh, guttural voice. "You turned that goddamned thing on?"

Shorty stared at him, his expression indifferent. Then he looked away and over at Candle and winked. Candle started to get to his feet, and then two things happened quickly. Wally reached out with one hand and grabbed Shorty by the front of his shirt, at the same time doubling his right fist and pulling his arm back. Candle, seemingly without effort, hit Wally with a short rabbit punch that couldn't have traveled more than twelve inches. The blow caught Wally on the Adam's apple and he gave a short, almost soundless grunt. His left hand loosened its grip on Shorty's shirt and his other hand dropped to his side as he took a quick backward step. He seemed to be fighting for all.

Roy left the bar and started for the table.

At that moment a woman on the other side of the room screamed, and just then the wide double door of the place again opened.

Flood walked into the barroom.

5.

The second he pushed open the doors and entered the place, Flood knew something was wrong. Instinctively, barely glancing around, he caught the tenseness in the atmosphere, seemed to understand that something was happening. Whatever it was, he wanted no part of it. He started to swing around to leave the place, his eyes quickly circling the bar. He saw Padino and the waiter standing there motionless, staring. And then, a second later, he followed the direction of their gaze and took in the tableau at the table.

He didn't know what had happened, but he didn't have to know. The juxtaposition of the figures made the scene only too clear. It was obvious that Wally had just been hit; there was no doubt about what Roy, who was moving in, was planning to do. Shorty was reaching for the water pitcher and Candle's hands had found the back of a chair as he prepared to raise it over his head.

Flood moved with lightning speed. He was across the room and at the side of the table before Roy reached it. Flood didn't bother to look at either Shorty or Candle. He brushed Wally aside and turned to face Roy.

Almost without hesitating in his stride, Roy turned off at an oblique angle and went on into the men's room. A moment later, Wally followed him.

Candle showed no sign of recognition, but he quickly put the chair back in place and sat down. Shorty hesitated a second, and then he too sat down.

Flood said nothing, but swung on his heel and went to the men's room after the other two. Wally and Roy were alone in the place when he entered.

"Get out. Pay your check and get out!"

He spoke the words in a low, tense, bitter voice, finding it difficult to control his rising fury.

Roy started to say something, but Flood cut him off.

“Later,” he said. “Just get out of here now—quick.”

Roy left the room, and as Wally started to follow him, Flood gave him a shove between the shoulder blades.

Doll, sitting outside in the Caddie, looked up as the door of the place opened and Roy and Wally hurried down the steps.

“Well, I’ll be!” she said. She leaned out of the car window. “Hey, Wally,” she called.

Wally looked over at her, but kept on past the car without saying a word. A moment later he and Roy were back in their own car and Wally was pressing the starter button.

Candle waited only until he saw Roy and Wally leave the washroom. As the two walked past the bar, Candle got up.

Flood was washing his hands as Candle entered the men's room.

Candle went to the next sink and turned on the water spigot. He caught Flood's eye in the mirror behind the sink. He spoke, barely moving his lips.

“What do you say, boss?” he said.

“What was the rumble about?” Flood had to repeat the question a little louder before Candle could make out the words.

“Oh, just a couple of young punks who decided they didn't like Shorty,” Candle said. “It wasn't serious. They came in looking for trouble. Asking for it.”

Flood nodded grimly.

“That kind always does,” he said. “Everything all right on your end?”

“All set,” Candle said.

“I’ll be seeing you,” Flood said, turning from the sink. He left the room and bought two packs of cigarettes at the bar. Then he left the place without looking back.

“Well, I’ll be goddamned,” Shorty said when Candle returned to the table. “How the hell you suppose *he* happened to walk in just at that moment?”

“Don't be a sap,” Candle said in a low voice. “Those punks were a couple of his boys, that's how. I thought they were local, but I shoulda known better. Didn't you see their faces when they saw him?”

Shorty nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah,” he said. “You must have it right. A couple of his boys, all right.”

“I wouldn't want to be in their boots when Flood gets them alone,” Candle said.

An hour later they finished their dinner and left. They returned to their room at once and spent the rest of the evening playing gin rummy. Candle won, as usual.

Chapter Eight

1.

The minute Alice Loxley left, Kay started the thing all over again. They'd been batting it back and forth most of the day, whenever they had been alone and sure that Kosta was unable to overhear them. They had got nowhere.

“You've still got to make a decision, Frank,” Kay said. “We haven't got much more time. They'll be here any time now. I heard a car pass only a few minutes ago and then go back down the road. It could have been them.”

“It could have,” Frank said.

“Well, what are you—”

“What can I do?” Frank asked, looking miserable. “Don't you see, I just can't quit now. We're in the thing too deep. If we walked out now, it might kill the whole plan. You know what Flood would do then, don't you?”

“What do you think he'll do after it's over and he finds ” out we're leaving together?”

“That isn't the point,” Frank said, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. “I still think I owe him something. I agreed to go through with this and I just can't back out now.”

Kay looked at him, her eyes sick.

“Anyway,” Frank said, “this isn't murder. It's only robbery. And I've told you already that as long as you feel the way you do about it, I'll pass up taking my share of the money. At least I won't be getting anything out of it. But I have to see the thing through. Once it's over, you and I'll just disappear.”

Kay stood up and walked around the table until she was standing in front of him. She reached out with both hands, putting her arms around his waist as she looked up into his eyes. She opened her mouth to speak.

Each heard the car coming down the road at the same moment. Even as Kay stepped quickly back, the lights cut across the window as the machine pulled into the drive. It continued on and through the opened doors of the garage.

The two of them were still standing there, waiting in stiff silence for the back door to open, when the second car pulled into the driveway and headed for the garage.

Frank nodded toward the other room. Kay turned without a word and left. Frank heard the sound of her footsteps on the stairs a moment later.

He was facing the door leading onto the screened back porch when Wally opened it and

entered the room, quickly followed by Roy. A moment later the door again opened and Doll walked in. Flood was directly behind her.

Without a word, Flood went to the window and closed the Venetian blind.

“Haven't you enough sense to keep the shades down?” he said, turning back to Frank. He didn't wait for an answer, but went on speaking in a low, controlled voice. “Take this girl upstairs and have Kay stay with her,” he snapped. “You two,” he indicated Wally and Roy, “sit down there at the table. Where's Kosta?”

“Upstairs in his room,” Frank said.

“Good,” Flood said. “Bring him down as soon as you get the girl upstairs. Where's Kay?”

“She's upstairs seeing to the rooms,” Frank said.

“Listen,” Doll suddenly cut in. “I don't wanna—”

“Do what I tell you,” Flood said, glaring at her.

She followed Frank out of the room.

Wally avoided Flood's eyes as he sat at the table. Roy sat across from him, staring at the floor. Flood pulled a chair up so that he half faced each of them.

“Didn't I tell you two to stay out of trouble?” he asked. He watched them coldly as they avoided his eyes. “Are you so stupid you'd take a chance on getting into a jam now? What the hell were you doing in that barroom?”

“Wally wanted a drink,” Roy said.

Wally looked over at Roy with a mean expression. He spoke up quickly. “It wasn't that at all,” he cut in. “We came out here. There was a car in the driveway, so we headed back toward town. I didn't want to be seen hanging around town, or just driving around, so we went in to get a drink.”

“You went in to get a drink,” Flood said. “Great! So why the hell weren't you at the bar having a drink? What were you doing starting a fight with the customers?”

“A couple of wise guys,” Wally said, still looking anywhere but at Flood.

“You damned fool,” Flood said. “God, what I ever wanted to tie up with a couple of punks like you for!”

He stood up as the kitchen door opened and Frank returned.

“Kosta will be right down,” Frank said.

“You get the girl taken care of?” Flood asked.

“Kay's with her. Didn't expect her, so we didn't have a room ready for her,” he added.

“She can stay with Kay in her room,” Flood said shortly. “Sit down.”

Kosta came into the room as Frank was pulling a chair up to the table.

Flood gestured to Frank. "Come out to the garage with me," he said. "Want you to help me bring in a couple of things. The rest of you stay here and be quiet. You hear a car coming, get upstairs quick. Kosta, you take the boys to your room if anything happens. And remember, no lights."

A moment later, he passed through the rear door, followed by Frank. They went to the garage behind the building and Flood stopped beside the Cadillac.

"Won't need a light," he said. "But close the overhead doors."

Frank closed the doors from the inside, and when he was through he went back to the Caddie. Flood was sitting in the front seat, dimly illuminated by the dash light.

"Come in and sit down." He waited until Frank was seated beside him. Then he said, "All right, what's been going on?"

"Plenty," Frank said. "We had a nice fire yesterday. Warehouse burned down. While it was still going, a cop picked up Kosta walking around the streets. He'd been drinking, but it was something more than that. He was in a complete stupor. The cop brought him out to the house."

"Good God," Flood said. His surprise was genuine. "Did the cop make any connection?"

"I don't think so," Frank said. "I'd already introduced Kosta to the cop as my uncle and said he'd been sick. Cop just thought he'd got a little too much to drink."

"The dumb bastard," Flood said bitterly. "That's the trouble with using men like him on a job. You never know when they might go nuts. But I didn't think..."

"He'll be all right," Frank said, "as long as you don't let him out of your sight. But how about afterward? Is he going to be safe then?"

"As safe as guys like that ever are," Flood said. "I've been having a little trouble with the other boys, too," he added. "They picked up that girl I brought in with me and started spilling their guts all over the place. God, the people you can get mixed up with on one of these deals!"

In the darkness he looked over at Frank, his eyes veiled. "Thank the Lord for you and Kay," he said. "At least I don't have to worry about you two."

Frank sat very still in the seat beside the other man. He didn't want to look at him. He couldn't tell whether there was a double meaning behind those words.

"Outside of Kosta," Frank said, "everything else seems all right. I guess Kay told you about my seeing Paulmeyer?"

Flood grunted. "How was he?" he asked.

"Fine," Frank said. "Everything under control. He'll be no problem at all."

“No, he won't be a problem,” Flood said.

Frank again wondered if the words had some hidden meaning.

“I don't want to leave the others in there alone together too long,” Flood said.

“Well, everything is all right at this end,” Frank said. “Should be a cinch if everyone keeps his head. Only thing worries me is the bank itself. It's lighted up like a Christmas tree at night.”

“It won't be on Saturday night,” Flood said. “Don't worry about that part of it. Just tell me about the rest. You set up all right here in town? No suspicions? Nothing unusual?”

“Nothing,” Frank said. “Everything is fine. But I didn't think you'd be showing until tomorrow night. How come—”

“I didn't intend to,” Flood told him. “But that damned fool Wally picked up this girl. I was afraid to leave her with him and Roy, and at the same time I couldn't have her hanging around with me. Nor could I just throw her out. There's no telling what she knows or what she may have guessed. So the only thing I could do was get her away from Wally and Roy before there was a battle over her, and bring her out here.”

“What happens to her afterward?”

“Don't let it worry you,” Flood said shortly. “Just worry about your own end of it. Anyway, I've had to change my plans. I'm going to stay here until it's all over. I want to keep an eye on the boys.”

Thinking of Kay, Frank said, “I can handle them all right. Them and Kosta, too.”

He saw Flood look at him curiously out of the corner of his eye.

“You got plenty to handle without them,” Flood said. “No, I'll stay on now. The girl—her name's Doll—can stay with Kay. I want you to stick close to Kosta, and I'll stay with Wally and Roy.”

Frank started to say something, but Flood went on talking.

“We've got to be very careful,” he said. “Daytimes, I want you to keep right on doing as you've always done. Only thing is, try to keep everyone away from the house. I don't want anybody hanging around.”

He opened the door of the car. Walking around to the rear of the Caddie, he inserted the key in the lock of the back compartment.

“The long canvas duffel bag,” he said. “Handle it carefully. It holds the guns.”

Frank took the canvas bag and hoisted it to his shoulder.

Kosta, Wally, and Roy were still sitting at the table, saying nothing and not looking at each other, when Frank and Flood returned.

“These are the guns,” Flood said, indicating the bag as Frank carefully put it down on

the floor. "Wally, you understand guns. I want you to go over them carefully. Check them."

"I'm not carrying any gun," Kosta suddenly said, staring at Flood with his opaque eyes.

"I wouldn't let you carry a gun," Flood snapped at him. "What you have to do doesn't call for a gun."

He reached down and unlocked the small padlock that held the thin chain drawn tightly around the neck of the duffel bag. The others were watching him. It was probably because they were watching him so intently that no one heard the sound of the car's engine. No one heard anything until the harsh noise of the horn cut the night air. It came from the driveway beside the house.

Flood was the first to recover after the shock of hearing the blast.

"Jesus!" he yelled. "Quick, Wally, take the bag! Get upstairs. All of you. Frank, give us half a minute and then get outside and see who it is. Whoever it is, get rid of them. Don't do anything suspicious, but get rid of them."

He was pushing the others from the room as he finished speaking. Wally stumbled under the weight of the bag and Flood swore softly.

Frank waited about twenty-five seconds and then went to the back door. The first thing he noticed as he stepped onto the porch was the red light on the top of the patrol car.

2.

Sergeant Waldo Harrington carried a half-gallon jug of whisky in his right hand as he stepped from behind the driver's seat of the patrol car. His wide, open face was very red and he was wearing a big smile. Walking over to the porch, he held the jug high in the air.

"Fella," he said, "just looky what I got!"

He crowded past Frank and went across the porch and into the kitchen, sitting the bottle on the top of the table. He took off his policeman's cap and wiped a thin line of sweat from the top of his forehead.

"Well, for God's sake," Frank said. He didn't know anything else to say.

"Just getting off, an' after a tough day," Waldo said, still smiling. "And what do you think? Passed a couple of old boys from out in the Glades. They were in a jeep, busted down by the side of the road. Well, I went over to see what was the trouble, and damn if they didn't have a load of booze. Stuff they made themselves."

Frank whistled under his breath. "You take 'em in?" he asked.

Waldo looked at him in shocked surprise. "Hell, no," he said. "I did not. You think I'm some goddamn federal man? No, I just told 'em to get their damned ol' jeep going and get out of my county. So they gave me this little present to remember them by."

Frank laughed. "From what I've seen of bootleg stuff," he said, "you'd be better off if you never saw them."

"Don't you kid yourself, boy," Waldo said. "This is good straight corn likker. I know those boys and I know the stuff they been makin'. Hell's bells, Frank, you drink it more often than not outta phony bottles and don't even know it. Only difference is, this ain't been cut. Get us a couple of glasses and a little water."

Frank went over and took down two glasses from the cupboard. He filled a pitcher with water and threw in some ice cubes.

"Would the missus care to join us?" Waldo asked when he returned to the table. "I won't ask that uncle of yours," he added, and laughed.

"She's upstairs," Frank said, putting the water down on the table. "You pour and I'll run up and ask her."

Quickly he left the room. Waldo was unstrapping the holster that held his service revolver as he left.

Flood was standing in the doorway of Kosta's room as Frank rounded the head of the staircase. He walked over to the room on tiptoe and Flood reached out and pulled him inside, closing the door softly. He spoke in a whisper.

"That's a cop's car outside," he said, his voice tense. "Who is he? What does he want?"

Frank quickly explained, speaking in an undertone. He fended by saying that the cop wanted Kay to come down and join them.

"Which room is she in?" Flood asked.

"End of the hall on the left," Frank said.

"Get back and I'll send her down," Flood said. "But for God's sake, get rid of him as soon as you can. Don't do anything to arouse his suspicions, but do it as fast as you can."

Frank nodded in the dark and left the room, not closing the door behind him. He sensed that the others, Kosta and the two boys, were also in that room, silent and alert.

He returned to the kitchen and told Harrington that Kay would be right down.

As they sat drinking and idly talking, Kay, Waldo, and Frank, two thoughts kept racing through Frank Harper's mind. One was that he had to get rid of Sergeant Harrington as soon as he possibly could. The second was that as long as Harrington remained in the house, Kay would be with them and not upstairs; that as long as he and Kay were together, she was safe from Flood.

Sergeant Harrington, more than half drunk, but still able to walk and mink straight, left the house at a quarter to four on Friday morning. He'd had a swell evening and he thought Frank Harper was a great guy. Mrs. Harper was a darn good scout, too. He liked them both. Nice people. He liked to have people like the Harpers move into Indio Beach.

Backbone of the goddamn country.

Within a minute of the time the sound of Waldo's car had blended with the sounds of the night, Flood was downstairs and standing in the doorway. He had taken off his coat and tie and his hair was disheveled. His mouth was a straight grim line and he had lost his usual urbane, sophisticated manner. He stood still and stared at Frank and Kay, slowly nodding his head. When he spoke at last, his voice was still low and controlled, but it was obvious that he was furious. "What the goddamned hell took you so long?" he asked.

Frank started to say something but Kay quickly got to her feet. Frank was amazed as he noticed her stagger slightly. He knew that she had taken only three drinks during the entire evening.

"Sure shorry," she said thickly. "Guy wouldn't go home. Got no home, guess." She weaved slightly and reached for the table for support.

Flood's eyes opened wide. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "You're drunk."

"Yep, drunky," Kay said.

Flood stepped forward suddenly and for a second Frank thought he was going to hit her. Instead he swung sharply toward Frank.

"Get her upstairs," he snapped. "Put her in with the other dame." He turned and stared at Kay, disgust on his face. "Great," he said. "You come down here to do a job, come down to play being a respectable little housewife, and you end up a lush. You even get slopped on my first night. Get her the hell out of my sight."

He went over to the table and sat down as Frank steered Kay toward the door.

There was a perplexed look on Flood's face as he reached over and pulled the three-quarter-empty jug across the table. He tipped it forward, removed the cork, and sniffed the contents. He wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Good God," he said. "The people I get mixed up with."

3.

At three o'clock on Friday afternoon, Ham Johnstone finished putting a dry patch on a tire, placed the tire back on its rim, and filled it with thirty pounds of air. It was the last tire he had to repair, and he was glad. Not that he minded the work; it was only that he wanted to find time to clean up around the office.

He yawned when he was through, then shivered slightly. It was cold. He decided to go into the office. Ham had lighted the small kerosene stove and it was warmer in there. He opened the door and walked in.

Frank Harper was sitting in the swivel chair at the desk. He was leaning forward on his elbows. His eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily. He was asleep.

“Or boy sure musta tied one on,” Ham said under his breath. He watched Frank sleeping and smiled. Ham didn't like heavy drinkers. They worried him. Heavy drinkers made a lot of trouble. But he knew Frank was no drunk.

Reaching over, he gently shook him. Frank awakened suddenly and looked up, startled.

“Tol' me to be sure you got to de bank,” Ham said.

Frank looked at his wrist watch. “Damn it, Ham,” he said, “it's after three. You know the bank closes at two. What did you wanta let me sleep for?”

“Ain't got no watch, boss,” Ham said.

Frank concealed his annoyance and got up and stretched. He was starting for the door when Sam Loxley pulled up in his station wagon. Frank went out and reached for the gas hose.

“You must have had a brawl last night,” Sam said. “I was up with the kid around three or three-thirty and saw a light on over at your place.”

Frank nodded. “Yeah,” he said, “Waldo stopped by. We killed a few.”

“Well, get a little rest,” Sam said. “Alice and I are expecting you over tonight.”

For a moment Frank was tempted to beg off. But then he quickly changed his mind. He knew that it would be easy to convince Flood that they were expected, and that if they didn't show up the Loxleys might get the idea of coming over to get them. He could explain it to Flood easily enough.

“We'll be there,” he said. “Warm up the ice cubes.”

Sam talked with him for several minutes more while Frank washed off the windshield and checked the oil and water.

“Around seven-thirty,” he said, as he started the car rolling.

Returning to the office, Frank sent Ham out to check the gas and oil in his own car. After Ham left, he reached for the telephone and called his house.

Kay answered almost at once.

“How things going, kid?” he asked.

“Everything under control,” Kay said. Frank could tell by the sound of her voice that she was not alone.

“Sam Loxley just stopped by,” Frank said. “Reminded me about the party tonight.” He hesitated for a second, carefully considering the phrasing of his next remark. “I may be a little late getting home, so you be all set to go. I'll just grab a quick shower and change my clothes. I'll shave down here at the gas station.”

When Kay failed to answer, Frank spoke again.

“We have to go, honey,” he said. “They're expecting us. If we don't show, they'll want to

know why. We definitely have to go.” He hung up.

4.

Kay waited for the click at the other end of the line and then she too put the receiver back on the hook. She had heard the footsteps coming down from above. She knew that someone was standing in the doorway, watching. Slowly she turned around. It was Kosta.

His mild, hurt eyes were clearer than she had ever seen them before. His face even had a tinge of color, and the pudgy, hairless cheeks looked freshly washed.

“They want you upstairs,” he said. Then he walked into the room. He came close to her and she couldn't help taking a step backward. He spoke in a high, thin whisper.

“Lemme have a shot of gin,” he said. He looked at her beseechingly.

“Over the sink in the kitchen,” she said. She turned at once and started for the stairs.

She hadn't seen Flood since he had sent her upstairs at four o'clock that morning, when he had walked in on her and Frank just after Waldo left. She had gone at once to her own bedroom, where Doll was sleeping. There were twin beds in the room and she had quickly changed to pajamas and climbed into the bed next to the other girl. When she had awakened the next morning around nine o'clock, the house had been quiet. She'd got up and gone downstairs. Frank had already left the house.

Around one in the afternoon, Wally had come downstairs. She had made a pot of coffee and some sandwiches and he'd taken them back upstairs with him. A little later Doll came down. Kay fixed breakfast for the girl, but neither of them had been inclined to talk. Then Doll too had gone back upstairs.

Flood was standing in the room down the hall from that occupied by Kosta. Across from it was the room that she had prepared for Wally and Roy. The room she and Frank had shared was at the other end of the hallway, opposite the one occupied by Kosta. Frank, theoretically, had used the fifth room on the floor, a tiny compartment next to the only upstairs bathroom, facing the stairway.

Flood beckoned to her. He stood aside and she entered the room. It was a large, square room and there were two double beds in it, one along the north wall and one along the south. In the center was a large round table, in one corner an open lavatory.

Doll, Wally, and Roy sat at the table. Wally had a disassembled submachine gun in front of him and he was greasing it. Lying next to the machine gun were an automatic pistol and a stack of ammunition.

Flood waited until she had entered the room before speaking.

“I want you to bring us up something to drink,” he said. “Fix up some sandwiches and things. And make me a couple of soft-boiled eggs and some toast.”

“Make mine a beer,” Wally said, without looking up.

“Coke,” Roy said.

“And bring up coffee,” Flood said.

Doll suddenly stood up. “I’ll go down and help you carry it up,” she said.

Flood put his arm out. “You will not,” he said quickly. “I don’t want anyone going downstairs again. I don’t want anyone taking a chance on being seen from now on. She’ll get us anything we need.”

“That other guy’s downstairs,” Roy said, looking up.

“He doesn’t matter,” Flood said shortly. “He’s supposed to be here. But the rest of us aren’t. So we stay up here until we’re ready to pull out tomorrow night.”

Doll had started to complain as Kay left the room and went back toward the staircase. A moment later she felt a hand on her arm. Flood was at her side and he had closed the door behind them. He said nothing, but steered her down the hallway and into her own bedroom.

“You and I,” he said, “are going to have a little talk.” He spoke in a natural voice, but there was something ominous about the words. “Right now, get the food and drinks up. And tell that rummy downstairs that if I find him taking a drink, I’ll let the boys work him over.” He stared into her face as he spoke, but he made no move to touch her. “I heard the phone,” he said. “Who was it?”

“Frank,” she said. “He called from the gas station. About tonight.”

“What about tonight?”

“Well, we’ve been invited over to visit the people next door. We more or less had been planning the party for some time. Frank thinks we should go.”

“Why should you go?” Flood, asked quickly.

“They’d think it funny if we didn’t,” Kay said. “They might stop by and see what was wrong if we didn’t show up.”

“Who lives next door?”

“A man named Loxley and his wife. They run a laundromat. Have a couple of kids.”

“All right,” Flood said, after a moment’s reflection. “If you’re expected, you better show up. But just remember one thing.” Suddenly he reached out and his lean, strong fingers dug into her arm above the elbow. He pulled her brutally to him and spoke in a low, hard voice. “No drinking, get it? No more goddamn lushing it up. Take one or two if you have to, but that’s all. Since when did you start hitting the bottle?” He didn’t wait for her to answer. Instead he squeezed her arm cruelly again and then shoved her away.

“And don’t forget. You and I are going to have a talk. Now go down and get the food.”

5.

At six-thirty Frank got back to the house. Kay was alone downstairs when he walked in. He started toward her but she gave him a warning look, indicating the second floor with a nod of her head.

“I have a pick-me-up in the icebox,” she said in a low voice. “Go on up and change and then come down and we'll leave.”

He noticed that she was dressed in a pair of shorts and a halter and was wearing low-heeled shoes without stockings. She had done up her hair and was wearing fresh make-up. She looked very fresh, very beautiful. He found it difficult to resist the temptation to go to her and take her in his arms. But he turned toward the staircase.

“Be down in a few minutes,” he said.

Wally and Doll were playing two-handed casino with a deck of dog-eared cards when he entered the upstairs room. Flood lay on one of the beds, fully clothed. Kosta was nowhere around and Frank guessed that he'd gone to his own room. Roy sat at the table, ignoring the others as he read a comic book.

Doll was the only one that looked up as he entered the room.

“Pull up a chair, big boy,” she said, “and sit in.”

Flood spoke without moving. “Kay says you have to go out. How soon?”

“In about an hour or less,” Frank said.

Flood pulled himself to a sitting position and then stood up. Frank noticed that he had changed his shirt and had shaved. He looked as meticulously neat as ever.

Without a word he walked to the door. Frank followed him out of the room. In the hallway Flood turned to him.

“Go down and get us a couple of drinks. Straight Scotch for me, if you got any. I'll wait in here.”

He went into the room used by Kay and Doll.

Frank went downstairs and into the kitchen. Kay was at the sink, washing some dishes. She looked up quickly as he entered the room, but Frank shook his head quickly. He took a half-filled bottle of Scotch from the liquor closet, found a couple of glasses, and then opened a bottle of soda.

“You won't be long?” Kay whispered as he passed her on his way back upstairs.

“Not long,” he said.

When Frank entered the room, Flood walked behind him and closed the door.

Frank poured two drinks and handed one to Flood.

Flood held it in his hand but made no effort to drink. He stared for several minutes at

Frank and then at last spoke.

“What was the idea of letting Kay get tight last night?”

Frank hunched his shoulders. He knew what he had to say, how he had to play it.

“Hell, I got nothing to say to her,” Frank said. “I’m not her keeper.”

“No?” Flood stared at him coldly. “She been doing that little trick often?”

“No. Fact is, she hasn’t been drinking any to speak of. Guess the cop coming by just got her nervous. She didn’t get out of line.”

“What made the cop hang around so long?”

“He’s a friend,” Frank said. “It was your idea I get friendly with the local law.”

“That’s right,” Flood said. “My idea. But it wasn’t my idea to have you get my girl drunk.”

“She wasn’t too drunk,” Frank said.

“O.K. We’ll skip it for the time being. About this party tonight. I don’t like it. One of you should be around, just in case someone comes snooping around the house. Another thing, with you and the girl gone, it isn’t a good idea to have any lights on in the place. I’ll be goddamned if I like sitting around in the dark.”

“Kosta will be here,” Frank said. “He’s supposed to be my uncle, remember?”

“Well, that’s right,” Flood said grudgingly. “Kosta will be here.” He shrugged, a look of disgust on his face. “A great little evening,” he said. “Wally and Roy, Kosta and that Doll broad. I’ll love every minute of it.”

“We’ll be back early,” Frank said.

“See that you are.”

6.

It had been a swell evening.

At eleven-thirty Kay was out in the kitchen with Alice Loxley and the two men were still sitting at the cluttered card table in the living room, talking. Kay could hear their voices as she helped Alice with the late supper they were having before going home. Alice herself was over at the stove, stirring a Welsh rarebit. Kay was making the coffee, getting out the cups and saucers, and arranging the tray.

The words drifted in from the front room.

“Lucky,” Sam was saying. “Really lucky.”

“Not luck at all,” Frank said. “Hard work. Yeah, I know it sounds like boasting, but a hundred and ten bucks ain’t hay. That’s what I cleared last week. And the important part is, it was more than half on service.”

Kay, listening to Frank's words, detected the pride in his voice.

“Of course, I like the gas-and-oil end of it,” Frank said. “That's the bread and butter. But the service part of the business is what I've built up myself.”

“You're sure doing a lot better than the last guy who had the place,” Sam said.

He's doing great, Kay thought to herself. And from nothing. Why, he'd taken the business when it was running in the red and in three months really made a going thing of it. There was no telling where he would end up at this rate.

And then, for the first time all evening, she suddenly remembered where he'd end up. For the first time in hours she thought about the house a half mile down the road—their house—and the people in that house.

These two, Sam and Alice Loxley, must have, in their simple way, some sort of magic, she thought. Here, all evening as Frank and I have sat playing cards and talking, I haven't thought of Flood or those others once. I haven't thought of tomorrow. And neither has Frank. He's been thinking about the garage business, or the laundry business, or the card game. It had been a brief and unexpected reprieve.

For four hours Frank hadn't been a member of a gang of criminals planning a desperate and violent crime; she herself hadn't been the ex-mistress of a racketeer and bank robber. No, she and Frank had been, in truth, what they had come down to Florida to pretend to be: a young married couple, starting out with a new business, in a new town with new friends.

Alice's voice quickly brought her back to reality.

“Honey,” Alice was saying, “what in the world are you thinking about? You just poured a whole half pint of cream into the sugar bowl.”

Kay stared blankly at the other woman, and then she smiled quickly and mumbled an apology.

“Just thinking,” she said. “I guess I was dreaming. Getting a little tired. I didn't have much sleep last night.”

“Well, you just go on in and sit with the boys,” Alice said. “I thought you were a little peaked tonight. We'll eat and then you two go on home and get some rest. Sam and I have a big night tomorrow, anyway, and we should be getting some sleep too.”

Alice playfully pushed her out of the room.

Frank looked up quickly. He must have seen something in her eyes, because he at once stood up and came toward her.

“Is anything—”

Before he could finish the question, there was a sudden sound of crying from the back of the house. The four of them quickly froze and listened.

It came from the rear bedroom and it was the cry of a child.

Sam and Alice rushed out of the room. In a moment Alice returned.

“It's Sammy,” she said. “Nothing serious,” she added at once, as Kay started forward. “Just that he woke up and was having a nightmare and became frightened. And now Bitty's awake, too. Honey,” she said, turning to Kay, “will you go out and put some milk on to heat? I'll give 'em both hot chocolate and they'll be fine and go back to sleep. Sam's in comforting Sammy and I'll go in and talk with Bitty. You just yell when the milk comes to a simmer and I'll fix it.” She hurried back to the children's room.

Frank followed Kay out to the kitchen.

It took only a moment for Kay to put the milk into the top of a double boiler and turn up the heat under it. Then she went to the kitchen door and very quietly closed it.

Frank, watching her, realized something had happened; something was on her mind. There was a subtle change about her, a change he couldn't quite understand.

Quickly she walked over and stood in front of him.

“Frank,” she said, “there's something I must tell you. Right now. At once.”

“Honey, let's wait until we get—”

“It can't wait, Frank.”

He reached for her, but she quickly stepped away. She looked up at him and her eyes were oddly somber.

“I've come to a decision, Frank,” Kay said. “I'm not going back. I'm never going near that house again. It's all through. When I leave here tonight, I'm leaving for good. I want you to come with me. But either way, I'm leaving. I can't go back. I love you and I want you. But I don't want you as a criminal.”

Frank stared at her, his eyes wide.

“Baby,” he said at last. “Baby, what's happened? What in the world's come over you? Are you sick or something?” He reached for her again, but once more she pushed him away.

“No, Frank,” she said. “I'm not sick. But I must have been sick for a long time now. For the first time in months, perhaps in years, I'm normal and sane.”

She shook her head slightly and her large eyes rapidly opened and closed as she tried to keep the tears back.—“Can't you see? Oh, darling, can't you see it? We've been mad—crazy! You're no bank robber, no thief. How could you be? How could I love you if you were? You're a decent, honest guy who's been pushed around. But now things are changed. You're like Sam, if you only knew it. A guy with a job, a business, a life ahead of him.”

“You want me to walk out on Flood, just like that?” Frank asked.

“I want you to walk out,” Kay said.

“Flood made the business possible,” Frank said, stubbornness in his voice. “He made this life of ours possible. He made you possible.”

Kay began to cry silently.

“Yes,” she said, “he made it possible. And now he wants to take it all away. He wants to take it away and ruin us.”

“But I owe him something. Very possibly I owe him my life You, Kay—even you admit that Flood was good to you, and kind, when you needed kindness.”

“Yes, yes, I know. And we've paid him back. Paid him back well. I'm not suggesting we turn him in. I'm not asking you to double-cross him or hurt him. I'm just asking you to stop, now. To leave, now, with me, before it's too late.”

This time it was Kay that came to him. She put her arms around him and looked up into his face.

“It has to be that way,” she said, and now she was no longer crying. “It's either us—you and I together—or it's them over there in that house.”

For a long moment Frank looked down into her face. And then suddenly his own face softened-and he slowly expelled his breath.

“All right,” he said. “All right, honey. You don't leave me any choice. It's you and I.”

She tried to smile, but she couldn't.

“And we'll leave, leave here, now and forever?” Kay asked.

“As soon as we finish Alice's rarebit,” Frank said.

His head bent and his lips found hers.

“Well, I never!”

They looked up then and moved quickly apart as they saw Alice standing in the doorway.

“Of all things!” she said, smiling widely. “A couple of real lovebirds, if I ever saw any. And you two an old married couple! Why, it's hardly decent.”

She came into the kitchen, laughing.

“You've let the milk curdle,” she said. “But never mind, I'll take care of it. You children go in and sit around and Sam and I'll be with you in a couple of minutes. We'll eat and then you can go home to bed. Looks to me like that's where you belong, if I may be crude enough to say so.”

Alice, however, was not with them when they sat down to their rarebit and coffee with Sam. She was still in with the children and didn't get back until they were almost through.

She apologized as soon as she returned to the living room.

“That child,” she said, irritation and love intermingled in her voice. “I really suppose I shouldn't blame Sammy too much, though. You see, he's all excited about tomorrow night and he was dreaming about the dragon.”

“The dragon?” Kay asked politely.

“Yes,” Alice said. “You see, Sammy's a shining knight and tomorrow evening, in the play, he's going to kill the dragon. It's his first play, you know, and I guess he's been taking his part a little too seriously. He's worried now that maybe the dragon won't be killed after all. Sammy takes such things very seriously.”

Kay smiled. “Sammy's a dear,” she said. “I wish I had one just like him. And one like Bitty, too.”

Frank looked over at her and smiled.

“What's the play?” he asked, getting to his feet. “I hadn't heard about it.”

“You hadn't heard?” Sam said. “Well, I'll be! For the Lord's sake, fella, I gotta sell you a couple of tickets right now.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a sheaf of cards. “Where you-all been, anyway? It's the big deal of the year. At the school auditorium. Tomorrow night. Why—”

His voice stopped suddenly and his eyes opened very wide. He was staring at Kay.

“For God's sake,” he said, “what...”

Frank caught her as she fell.

7.

The car was parked well off to the side of the road, a half mile from the Loxleys', in the opposite direction from their own house. They'd been sitting there with the lights out for more than fifteen minutes now.

She was still breathing heavily, but she was all right. She started to say something, but Frank quickly put his fingers to her lips.

“Not yet, darling,” he said. “Just take it easy for another minute or two. Get your breath.”

He sat back, his own breath coming short and hard through his clenched teeth.

It had been very tricky back there, for a moment or so, after she had fainted. Of course, Sam and Alice had been fine, almost too fine. They'd done everything. Brought the brandy, the smelling salts and all. They'd even wanted to help Frank take her home. Then when he'd explained about her being sick and needing the medicine that he'd left at the gas station, Sam had insisted on driving in to get it.

But Frank had finally out-talked him, and they'd managed to leave at last, after Frank

had explained that it was nothing serious and that she needed a little fresh air more than anything else.

They'd been very concerned. Worried. They pretended to understand his explanations, but they really hadn't understood at all. However, he didn't believe that they connected her fainting spell with Sam's talk about the play at the school auditorium.

Gradually Kay's grip on his arm relaxed. He could sense her turn to him as she started to speak.

"Oh, God. Oh, God, Frank!" she said.,

"Take it easy, baby," Frank told her. "Just—"

"Take it easy? Frank! Dear Lord, don't you understand? The school auditorium. Tomorrow night. It'll be filled with people. With children. Children like Bitty and Sammy. Tomorrow night. When Kosta..."

She started to cry men and it took him several minutes to quiet her again.

"Frank," she said at last, "what are we going to do?"

He stared at the opaque windshield for several moments before he tried to answer.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I really don't know. There's only one thing I can tell you: We can't leave now."

"No, we can't leave now. We've gone too far to turn back. Oh, God, how did we ever..."

"Never mind that," Frank said, his voice harsh and bitter. "Never mind that. This isn't the time for regrets."

"We'll have to tell them. Have to bring in the police," Kay said.

Again Frank was silent for a long time before speaking.

"No," he said at last. "No—not yet. I could have walked out on the whole thing, but I can't turn stool pigeon. Not on the man who saved my life."

"The man who's planning to set fire to a building filled with women and children? God, Frank, don't you see..."

"He doesn't know about the play—about people being in the building tomorrow night," Frank said. "We didn't even know ourselves."

"But it doesn't matter," Kay said. "They'll be there, whether he knows or not."

"I'm not turning him in," Frank said. "Not yet. We'll just have to go back. We'll have to explain."

"And suppose, after you explain, he still wants to go ahead with it."

Frank reached over and pulled her close.

"Honey," he said, "just trust me. One thing I'll promise you: Kosta won't go near the

school. If they want to rob a bank, if they want to burn up some broken-down, empty building—well, they can do it. But they won't touch the school. That you can be sure of.”

Chapter Nine

1.

It was like a smoldering volcano.

All day the tension had been building up. The very atmosphere, warm, humid, oppressive, seemed a part of it. There wasn't the slightest breath of air, and by six o'clock on Saturday afternoon the mercury had risen to ninety-four. This was high for the time of year; but it wasn't the heat alone.

Mostly it was the people in the house, the expectancy, the fear. And, too, it was the subtle atmosphere of dislike and distrust that had begun to affect them all.

For Flood, Kay, and Frank, there was something else. It had started, likely enough, when Flood had first seen Kay down in Palm Beach. Swiftly his original suspicion had grown until now it flowered like some malignant tropical weed.

There had been that business of her drinking when Waldo, the police sergeant, had arrived. The very fact that the policeman had come at all had been enough to set aflame a fresh spark of suspicion.

And this last thing, this talk about the school.

It wasn't that Flood had said or done anything when Frank talked with him. No, he'd been reasonable enough. At least, reasonable enough for a man who was bent on robbery and possibly murder.

“No,” he'd said. “No, I'm not anxious to have the responsibility for women and children, or anyone else, being killed.”

Frank had noted that the moral aspects of the thing hadn't worried him. He'd been worried only about the possible results of the crime.

“I don't want that,” he'd continued. “You were right to tell me about it. I'll see that Kosta leaves the building alone. He can set off the city hall just as well. It'll be empty.”

He'd sounded reasonable enough about it. But there had been something about his expression, something in the look of his eyes, that bothered Frank.

“You've done your job,” Flood told Frank. “You and Kay.” He pronounced her name with distaste, almost bitterly. “You have nothing more to worry about. I can take it from here on in. All she has to do is sit tight—act natural. And all you have to do is the same. Except I'll want you to drive Kosta tonight. He doesn't know the town and he can't handle a car, anyway. I'll want you to drive him. And then you'll be through.”

Yes, it all sounded fine, but it didn't add up.

And then there was the other thing: the way Flood never let him and Kay have a second alone together.

Of the others, Kosta would have seemed the most likely to start showing the strain and going to pieces as the zero hour approached. But oddly enough, Kosta became increasingly calm and self-contained.

He'd stopped drinking, partly through choice and partly because of Flood's constant surveillance. The bulging eyes cleared and became less hysterical and the general air of repressed excitement that had characterized his actions from the moment of his arrival abated.

Most of Saturday afternoon he spent alone in his room, working over the equipment he had carried with him in the heavy suitcase. Once, as evening approached, he had come out and called Flood aside and whispered with him for a few minutes. Returning to his room, he passed Doll, who was returning from the bathroom. Doll, intent on arranging her clothes as she came down the hallway, neither heard his soft tread nor saw him. She brushed against him as they passed.

She looked up quickly, started to smile, and then saw who it was.

Kosta didn't look at her, but kept moving on to his own room.

"Bitch," he said in a whisper. "Bitch."

Doll stared at him, speechless. Back again across the table from Wally, she spoke in a whining wail.

"My Gawd, the people in this house!" she said. "That fat creep just damn near ran me down in the hallway— and then he called me a bitch."

Wally stared at her and said nothing.

"What's wrong with everyone around here, anyway?" Doll asked. "That blonde dame—who does she think she is? What's she so stuck up about?"

"Shut up," Wally said sharply. "Just sit down and shut up!"

"What are you getting so snotty about?" she asked.

Instead of answering, he reached across the table and slapped her.

"I said shut up."

"Take it easy," Flood said. "I don't want any trouble. Not any at all." He looked at Doll. "Get back to your own room," he said.

Roy lay on his back on one of the beds and said nothing, just watching the others. He felt the excitement, the tenseness, and it made him happy. He watched Wally slap Doll and it made his blood run fast. He hoped that Wally wouldn't stop, that he'd really go to

work on her.

Frank, following Flood's instructions, stayed at the gas station until four o'clock, and then returned to the house, leaving Ham in charge of the pumps. Flood had told him to make some sort of excuse and get home early. Kay herself spent most of the day in the kitchen, doing small chores, trying her best to keep busy. She had to prepare food for the others, had to do it carefully, so that in case anyone showed up at the house by accident, everything would look natural.

It was a bad day for her. She didn't know what Frank planned to do; didn't know what he could do.

At the same time, she didn't know Flood's own plans. She knew only that he would rob the bank, and that he'd return to the house to hide out if they weren't able to make a clean getaway. About Kosta—well, Frank had promised her. She trusted him. But still she worried.

At seven-thirty Kay heard the faint sound of the Loxleys' car start down the road. She went a little pale, and Flood, who was sitting in the kitchen with Frank, raised his eyebrows. He started to get up, ready to leave the room in case the car came in their direction, but then sat down a second later as the sound of the engine retreated into the moist night air.

Finally, at half past eight, he stood up.

“All right, Frank,” he said. “About time. I want you and Kosta to leave before nine. I'm going up to talk with him. You better start getting set.”

2.

Old Hans Paulmeyer packed his suitcase at seven o'clock, and after tightening the leather straps that encircled it, he washed his hands for the last time, carefully wiped them dry, and then put on his necktie, his coat, and his hat. He hoisted the suitcase from the floor and carried it downstairs. He left it in the hallway while he knocked on the door of the rear ground-floor apartment.

When Mrs. Flagman answered, he handed her an envelope.

“This week's rent,” he said gruffly. “Miss Ramsey said to give it to you if I should be leaving. I'm leaving.”

Mrs. Flagman reached for the envelope automatically. “I hope everything is all right,” she said. “I just hope...”

The old man turned and stalked back down the hallway, leaving her hoping. He didn't bother to call a taxi, but went at once to the railway depot, carrying the suitcase and limping slightly as he walked. He went first to the ticket window and purchased a through ticket to New York. Then he went to the baggage room and asked to have the suitcase checked through to New York. The clerk told him he would take care of it.

From the depot the old man went to a restaurant across from the bus station. He entered and sat down, first buying an evening paper. He already knew the bus schedule and he took his time in ordering. He had pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy, two vegetables. Later he ordered apple pie and coffee. He finished everything.

He looked over the headlines as he ate, and when he got up to leave he left the newspaper behind on the table. Walking across the street, he entered the bus station and purchased a one-way ticket for Indio Beach. The ticket agent said the next bus would be through at nine-ten. The old man grunted and went over to the long wooden bench in the waiting room and sat down. He just sat there, quiet and serene, an old, old man, staring at his shoes.

3.

Candle and Shorty left the tourist court sometime after dusk. They had already picked up the rented car, and Shorty drove it while Candle drove his own car. They crossed the bridge that separated the beach section of the town from the older part, and drove down Orange Drive until they had almost reached Almond Avenue. Almond Avenue was the dead-end street that went past the entrance to the power plant. There was a tavern a block down the drive, beyond Almond.

Candle parked just before they came to the tavern; Shorty stopped slightly past it. They entered the place together and walked on past the bar to one of the booths at the rear. Shorty carried the brief case and Candle the golf bag. When the waitress came over, they told her they'd have the regular dinner and a couple of bottles of beer.

The girl brought the beer while they were waiting for the food to come, and Shorty had to move the brief case over to make room for it. The brief case was bulky and very heavy and he handled it with care.

They didn't talk much during the meal.

4.

There was no moon as Frank walked out behind the house to the garage. Flood, who had been careful to look around and make sure no one was in the neighborhood and that no cars were coming, followed directly behind him. Kosta followed Flood, but only as far as Frank's Chevvie, which was parked in the driveway. He stopped there and opened the door and climbed in.

Frank entered the garage and pulled the cord of a single naked bulb that hung over his workbench. Flood was careful to stay away from the window. Frank took a key from his pocket and inserted it into the Yale lock that safeguarded a six-foot tool chest resting on small trestles under the workbench. Flood moved over to watch him as he worked.

Frank reached deep into the box and started removing the tools that he had described three days before to old Paulmeyer. He laid them out neatly on the bench, then reached back into the box and pulled out a pair of cotton work gloves. Using a soft Turkish

towel, he methodically wiped off each tool and then placed it in the duffel bag that Flood had used to carry the guns.

When he was through, he lifted the heavy canvas bag and carried it across the garage to the Ford sedan that Wally and Roy had driven up from Palm Beach. He opened the back door and put the bundle on the floor.

As he removed the gloves, he turned to Flood and spoke in a low voice.

“You're sure now that Kosta understands about the school?”

“He understands,” Flood said, his voice soft, almost friendly. “He knows what he has to do.”

“Why wouldn't it be better for him to take the train out as soon as he's through?” Frank asked. “Why should he bother to come back here at all?”

“Because he's already been here,” Flood said. “People know he's been here. You don't want him disappearing now, at the same time the thing happens.”

Frank had to agree.

“We'll be pulling out at ten-thirty sharp,” Flood said. “We pick up the old man at a quarter to eleven. It will take us about fifteen minutes to get inside the bank. We go in through the rear. But I'm allowing for up to half an hour in case any one's around or we have any sort of trouble. I don't expect trouble. Not if you and Kosta handle your end.”

Frank had already gone over the plans with Flood a dozen times. He wondered why Flood was telling him about it again. A moment later, as Flood continued talking, he understood.

“The only change is this,” Flood said. “When you and Kosta get through, don't return to the house at once. Wait until the fire has a chance to get well started and the alarm has been sounded. There's going to be enough traffic going out of here and I want to be sure that things are all set in town; that people will be running to the fire and that there'll be plenty of commotion. Then, when you return, you probably won't be noticed.”

Frank thought about it for several moments.

“What do you think we should be doing?” he asked. “We'll have some time to kill.”

“Do whatever you would normally do over in town on a Saturday night. Go to a bar, do anything that will be natural. Don't forget, that fire will be burning. The natural thing will be to go to it, the same as the rest of the people in town will be doing.”

“All right,” Frank said. “You want us, then, to wait until you have a chance to leave, before we get back here?”

“Right.”

A minute later they left the garage and started back to the house. Frank went only as far as the Chevie. Flood hesitated a moment, then reached out and patted him on the back.

He continued into the house as Frank climbed behind the wheel.

Kosta said nothing as he pulled out of the driveway. It wasn't until they were halfway into town that he spoke.

“A drink,” Kosta said. “I want to stop somewhere and get a drink before I do it.”

Frank's first instinct was to protest, to remind Kosta that Flood had given strict orders against drinking. And then he changed his mind. A drink would be the best thing possible. It would take time to get a drink; time that Frank himself needed.

At this particular moment Frank suddenly made the final decision, the decision he had been postponing all afternoon and evening; the decision that he had been gradually approaching since the night before, when he had driven Kay home.

There would be no fire. No fire at all. Not only would he prevent the burning of the school auditorium, but he'd keep Kosta from setting the city hall off as well.

The hell with Flood and the hell with all of them. If Flood wanted to take the bank, let him. But no fires. He couldn't call the police; he couldn't turn Flood in. But he could do this one thing. He could prevent Kosta from following through with his end of the plan.

He thought then of Kay, back at the house alone with Flood and those others, and, thinking of her, he felt an icy chill go down the back of his spine.

If there was no fire, Flood would know. He wouldn't leave the house at all. He wouldn't leave unless it was to make his escape. But before he escaped he'd take care of Kay. One way or another. He'd take her with him, or he'd leave her. But if he left her...

Frank needed time to think. And time was running out.

The Tropical Bar was just ahead, on the outskirts of the business district, three blocks from the city hall.

Jerking the wheel to the right, Frank pulled in to the curb. He opened the car door and stepped to the street.

“Let's go,” he said. “We got time for one quick double.”

Kosta followed him into the place. The bar was filled with the usual Saturday-night crowd, but they found a deserted booth.

The waiter had to ask for the order twice. Frank looked up at him blankly for a moment, and then he brought his mind back! He ordered double Scotch for himself and Kosta asked for gin.

It was then that Frank saw the solution. The simplest, easiest way out. He had to give Flood and the others a chance to leave the house, to leave Kay, and they wouldn't leave until a fire started. And at the same time he had to prevent Kosta from setting the fire.

Preventing Kosta from acting should be easy. As for the fire, why not a false alarm? He could set a false alarm at exactly nine-forty-five and then another at ten-thirty, as Flood

would be taking off. He'd hear the sirens; in a town like Indio Beach, everyone within a radius of five miles could hear the sound of the alarms.

Then, the moment Flood and the others were gone, he'd go back and pick up Kay.

If Flood wanted to go ahead with the bank, all right. Let him. That he wouldn't stop.

He was thinking about it, planning it, as he became conscious of the pressure against his arm. He looked up.

Kosta was staring at him and his pudgy, short little fingers were plucking at his sleeve.

“Over there,” Kosta said. “Over there by the door. Isn't that man who just came in a cop?”

Frank looked up, but saw no one he knew. He shook his head.

“He stepped in back of the tall one,” Kosta said. “The shorter one, in back of the tall one with the cowboy hat.”

“So what if he is a cop?” Frank said, irritation in his voice.

“I want to know,” Kosta said. “Please, stretch around and tell me. Tell me if you know him.”

Frank shrugged. He leaned across the booth and still couldn't see the man. And so he stood up and turned his head, stretching.

If it hadn't been for the mirror behind the bar directly opposite the booth, he never would have seen it. As it was, all he caught, looking between the two broad-shouldered silhouettes that partially obscured his view of the mirror, was the image of the glass on the table and the hand slyly reaching over and dropping something into it.

He needed no more than the sight of the hand. He recognized the pudgy, babyish fingers.

As he dropped back into his seat, the thought flashed through his mind that this might be Flood's idea. Or was Kosta doing it on his own? It could be either way.

He spent no time in idle conjecture. He had no time, no time at all.

“Nobody I ever saw before,” he said, and as he spoke he looked straight into Kosta's eyes and his hand reached out for his glass. But he didn't pick up the glass. Instead, clumsily, he knocked it off the edge of the table.

He jumped up quickly.

“Damn,” he said. “Damn it, how can I be so clumsy!”

He didn't know whether he got away with it or not. He didn't much care. It didn't matter what Kosta thought. The only thing that mattered was to get the man out of the place, get him away to some quiet, secluded spot and make him harmless.

But he couldn't take a chance of knocking him out and leaving him. With Kosta he had only two courses. He'd have to turn him in or take him with them when they left. And

you didn't turn a man like Kosta in, unless you were ready to have him talk.

There was only the other thing. A quick blow on the jaw, then tie him up, toss him in the back of the car, and do what he had to do.

Later he and Kay could drop him off somewhere out in the Glades. Somewhere far from Indio Beach and the city hall and the school auditorium.

Someplace where he'd be harmless.

Kosta insisted on another drink and Frank, went along with him. He didn't want trouble if he could help it. The moment the drink came he raised it to his lips and downed it. Then he stood up and handed the waiter a bill.

He started for the door and there was nothing for Kosta to do but follow him. Once in the car, he headed up the street, and when he came opposite the city hall, he cut over to the right to circle the building. He made another right-hand turn and then stopped halfway up the block. They were on a dark, unlighted street, little more than an alley, behind the courthouse. Opposite was a huge vacant parking lot, used during the day by customers of the supermarket on the other side of it. There were no lights in the deserted city hall, and it loomed dark and brooding in the still night.

“The suitcase in the back,” Kosta said. “Will you hand it to me, please?”

Frank turned and leaned, over the back of the seat, reaching for the bag.

The fool, he thought. Trying to give me knockout drops. It was just the sort of thing he could have expected from a man of Kosta's type. But he'd been lucky, nevertheless.

It was the last thought that passed through his mind before the pistol butt crashed into the side of his skull.

5.

At ten-fifteen Alice Loxley stood in the wings just off the stage of the Indio Beach High School auditorium. She held Bitty in her arms. The child had fallen asleep with her rosebud mouth half open and the long dark lashes caressing her pink, rounded cheeks. Alice herself looked somewhat disheveled. It had been a tough night. Bitty had been irritable, and little Sammy, who had been too excited to take his afternoon nap, had grown sleepy along about eight-thirty and had had to be awakened and put into his homemade costume in time to go on stage.

Sam had tried to help, but Alice found that she could handle it better alone, and had shooed him out in front, where he sat with the other proud fathers.

And now at last the curtain had gone up and Samuel Loxley, Jr., had walked out across the stage, and in front of the outstanding citizens of Indio Beach was facing a dragon. The dragon consisted of three fifth-graders partially concealed in a long, oddly bulging tube of velvet, which everyone in the audience recognized as a piece from the old curtain at the Bijou Theatre.

Alice put up a hand to wipe the perspiration from her forehead and at that moment the sound of the fire siren began its pulsing wail.

Hal Morgan, sitting two seats down from Sam Loxley— Hal's ten-year-old son, Dick, was the middle part of the dragon—was so intent on watching his offspring that for a second or two he didn't get the full significance of the alarm.

By the time he did, Sam was already trying to get past him. Torn between admiration for his offspring and his obvious duty—Hall was a lieutenant in the Indio Beach Volunteers—he quickly leaped to his feet and in a second was running down the aisle after Sam.

The children on the stage suddenly ceased all activity, thus prolonging the dragon's life for minutes on end after the time he was normally supposed to have succumbed to Sammy's lance. They stood frozen as they listened to the siren.

The main doorway of the auditorium was crowded with a dozen or more men and there was a general air of controlled confusion in the hall as volunteer firemen rushed for the doorway.

In the meantime, Jane Mellon, first-grade teacher who always played the background piano music for the school festivals, valiantly pounded the keys, her right foot pressing hard on the loud pedal.

The wail of the siren was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a terrific explosion, and for a brief moment, as the entire sky lighted up, the lights within the auditorium dimmed.

Waldo Harrington, who had been standing at the entrance of the auditorium, was already in his squad car and racing toward the center of town before the first earful of volunteers headed for the firehouse, a few blocks away.

A town the size of Indio Beach doesn't have a great many fires, and this, the second one within a week now, created a tremendous amount of excitement, even before most of the people of the town realized that it was their city hall that was going up in smoke.

6.

Ham Johnstone had followed the same procedure he had followed on Saturday nights for as long as he could remember. That is, the Saturday nights on which he received a pay check.

He'd closed the gas station after washing up, and then he'd climbed into the old service car and driven out about three miles north of the city to Black Town. He'd stopped in front of the general store and gone in and cashed his check, at the same time paying his weekly bill for groceries and sundries.

He stopped and talked for a few minutes with the storekeeper and his wife, and then he left and went into the gin mill a half block down the street. Fanny Smith, who ran the gin mill, was an old friend. Ham went to the end bar where Fanny sat in a huge old wicker

chair. He took out his wallet and carefully removed a five-dollar bill. Then he handed the wallet to Fanny.

Each Monday morning he'd stop by and she'd return the wallet to him, its contents intact. Neither dynamite nor the fear of God would have forced her to part with it before that time.

Ham's next step was to return to the middle section of the bar and order a drink for the house. The house consisted of anyone that happened to be in the place at the time. This first drink, on this particular Saturday, set him back three of his five dollars. The rest of his evening would depend on the two remaining dollars, plus any casual drinks that might be forthcoming as a result of his initial generosity.

At ten o'clock, happy, hungry, half loaded, and cold broke, Ham left the gin mill and climbed into the old service car. He started the motor, threw the car into second gear, and headed back through town and out Orange Drive, toward the section past the city limits where he lived in a tiny shack in a deserted real-estate development. He kept the car in second gear all the way, realizing that he'd had quite a bit to drink and wanting to play it safe.

He had reached his turnoff, about a mile from where the Harpers lived, when he heard the siren. A moment later the sound of the explosion reached his ears. He stopped the car and looked back toward town in time to see flames shooting high in the air.

"Well, I'll be," he said. "I certainly will. I'll be."

He started the car again, suddenly and miraculously almost sober.

"Better go over and see if Mr. Harper wants I should get down to the gas station," he said, speaking aloud. "Yes, sir, I sure better."

He remembered Frank's sending him over to watch for sparks when they'd had the warehouse fire.

7.

The five of them sat there and waited. Doll asked Wally to play cards with her, but he didn't bother to answer. She turned to Kay, but Kay sat staring blindly out of the darkened window at the night, so Doll shrugged and kept quiet. Roy was busy with a penknife, cleaning his nails. Flood did nothing. He just sat and watched the others.

Finally, as the clock down in the hall struck ten, Flood stood up.

"Doll," he said, "go to your room."

She looked up at him, startled.

"I said go to your room."

For a moment she opened her mouth to protest, but then, seeing the expression in his eyes, she quickly got up and went out. As soon as he heard the slam of the door down

the hall, Flood turned to Wally.

“All right,” he said. “Go on in there. Tie her up. Tie her and gag her.”

Wally nodded, his face grim. “And you, Roy, you go along with him and see that he does a good job of it.”

Roy put the penknife away and grinned.

“Don't hurt her,” Flood said coldly. “I don't want any screaming.”

When they had left the room, he turned to Kay. She was watching him, her face pale.

“We're leaving in a few minutes,” Flood said. He stared into her face, his eyes bleak and expressionless. “You're to stay here with Doll. I had her tied up so that she couldn't possibly give you any trouble.” He stopped and for a long minute was silent. “Maybe,” he said at last, “you're wondering why I don't worry about you giving me trouble.”

“Me?” Kay said. “Me give you trouble?” She looked at him, startled. She felt fear, but even more than that, she felt the strange sense of guilt.

Moving with the speed of a cat, he swung his right arm and slapped her hard across the face with his open hand.

“Yes, you!” he said. “What the hell do you think I am, stupid or something? Don't you think I can see what's been going on? Between you and Frank?”

He reached out and slapped her again, back and forth across the face, and the tears came to her eyes as she fell back. But he was careful not to hit her too hard. Then he pulled her to him, holding her with one hand twisted in the front of her light cotton shirt. He lifted her chin with his other hand and stared down at her, his mouth a thin, twisted, bloodless line.

“But you won't make trouble,” he said. “You'll stay right here with Doll and do nothing. Not until I come back. And do you know why you will?” She didn't answer.

“You will because your boy friend isn't coming back. Not for quite a while. He's staying with Kosta. He doesn't know it, but Kosta's keeping him with him until we're all through. I want you to remember it. Frank will be with Kosta. When we've pulled the job and come back here, if everything's all right and you've behaved yourself, then we'll let you see Frank again. Then everything will be fine.”

For a second she thought of protesting, of trying to convince him that nothing had changed. But she knew that it would be no good. She couldn't fool him; he was too smart. Saying anything would only make it worse.

“Frank's loyal to you, Flood,” she said. “You must know that. He's been loyal all along.”

“Maybe he has,” Flood told her. “Maybe you both are loyal. I don't know, and I no longer care. I only know one thing: Nothing is going to interfere with tonight. I'm taking no chances. You stay here. Keep your eye on that girl, and don't let her get away. If

everything goes all right, you'll have nothing to worry about.”

No, she thought, nothing to worry about. He knew about her and Frank. With his evil, quick mind and his sensitiveness, he also probably knew that they were planning to run out, as well. And they had Frank. He had suspected and somehow they had trapped Frank. There was nothing she could do now. Nothing at all.

He flung her away from him as the door opened and Wally and Roy came back, into the room.

“She'll hold,” Wally said.

“O.K.,” Flood said. “Let's get started.”

They were downstairs then, in the kitchen, when they heard the distant sound of the fire siren. As though on signal, they all stood dead still for a moment and listened.

“That's it,” Flood said. “Have you got everything?”

Wally, halfway to the door, suddenly stopped.

“Jesus,” he said, “I forgot.” He turned and hurried back upstairs. He was buckling on a shoulder holster when he returned. Roy had shoved his own .38 automatic down inside his belt. He buttoned his light sports coat over it. If Flood carried a gun, Kay didn't know where. She had never seen him with one.

Wally finished pulling on his own coat and then he reached for the submachine gun he had laid on the table when he'd first come downstairs. He and Wally started for the door.

Flood turned back once more to Kay.

“Don't forget,” he said. “Just don't forget.”

Wally had the door half open and Flood was about to pass him when they heard the sound of the car.

Roy quickly ducked back into the room. They stood there like that for the next half minute, like statues, Flood and Wally at the door, Roy tense and poised a couple of feet inside the room, and Kay over by the kitchen table.

There was no mistake about it. It was a car, all right, coming down the road toward the house.

“Kosta?” Wally asked in a hoarse voice.

“No, you fool,” Flood said. “No, someone else. Quick, into the living room.”

It was then that Kay learned where he kept his gun. He whipped it from under his left armpit as he swiftly ushered the other two into the hallway leading to the next room.

“Stay here,” he ordered Kay in a low whisper. “Get rid of 'em quick.”

The car pulled into the yard as Flood stepped through the door leading into the hall and closed it all but a couple of inches.

A moment later there was a quick knock on the back screen door. Before Kay could reach it, the door opened.

Ham Johnstone came into the room.

“Miz Harper!” he said, breathless. “Miz Harper, the boss heah? They's a big fire over town an' I gotta see the boss.”

Kay knew that he must have been drinking, but she knew too that he was sober enough to know what he was saying and doing. And she knew that she had to get rid of him, at once.

“Why, Ham,” she said, “you must have passed him on the road. Mr. Harper heard the siren and he's already left for town.”

Instead of saying anything, Ham took off his cap and scratched his head, shaking it back and forth several times. Then he looked up and grinned.

“Well, well,” he said. “Don't that beat nothin'? He's sure the fast one, that Mr. Harper.”

“You'd better get on over,” Kay said. “He may need you at the gas station, just in case the fire's nearby.”

Even as she spoke she could hear a tiny rustle of sound at the door. She looked at Ham pleadingly. Oh, God, why didn't he leave while he could?

Ham still shook his head, as though he hadn't heard her.

“Can't understand,” he said slowly. “Just can't understand why I didn't pass him comin' in heah.”

Kay stepped forward with her hands out, almost as though to push him from the room. Suddenly she stopped and stared at him. He was looking past her, over her shoulder, and his eyes were suddenly wide. His mouth had fallen open and he was no longer smiling. As Kay swung around, a shot exploded almost in her ears. She saw Flood standing in the doorway, the gun in his hand, before a tiny cry escaped from her lips and she turned back to the colored man.

But Ham was no longer standing there. He had lurched to one side and was down on his knees. As she watched, he fell slowly forward on his face with his arms outstretched.

“And that,” Flood said, stepping into the room, “is what will happen to Frank if you get out of line.”

She was leaning down over Ham, holding back the sob in her throat, but with her eyes still raised and watching them, as Wally and Roy and Flood went out through the kitchen door and crossed, the back porch, heading for the garage.

Chapter Ten

He climbed down from the bus at four minutes after ten. There were a half-dozen people around the lunch counter in the restaurant and they had all turned and watched the big blue and white bus as it pulled in and stopped. They stared at the three or four nondescript passengers that got off, but no one noticed him in particular.

He was just another old man getting off of a late bus. Old men were always getting off of busses in Indio Beach and no one ever paid any attention to them.

Instead of going into the restaurant, he walked over to the long wooden bench in front of the place. He sat down and took off his light felt hat and pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He looked up and then turned so that he could see the clock on the wall inside the restaurant. He pulled the ancient railway watch from his vest pocket and checked it against the time.

Putting the watch back, he took out his pipe and lit it, smoking the remainder of the tobacco that he had packed in and partially smoked earlier. Ten minutes later he looked at his watch again, not bothering with the clock in the lunchroom. As he was putting the watch back in his pocket, he heard the sound of the siren.

He paid no attention to the people who rushed out of the restaurant and looked over toward the town. Not even when the explosion went off and the sky lighted up with swift yellow flames did he move.

The counterman came out then and the others started across the road, in the direction of the flames.

“By God,” the counterman said, speaking to no one in particular, “looks like it's the city hall this time.” He went back and took his apron off and then came through the door again and headed for the fire.

Twenty minutes later, the old man was still sitting there. Once again he checked his heavy gold watch. This time, after putting it back in his pocket, he slowly got to his feet and started walking south along the edge of the highway. He was two blocks from the station, having walked very slowly, when a car came up behind him. It passed him and then quickly braked to a halt.

When he was even with it, the rear door on his side swung open.

“Get in,” Flood said.

He stumbled over the sack of tools as he crowded into the back seat. Wally, who was driving, ground the gears in his hurry to get going.

Three minutes later he pulled into the alley behind the bank. He parked in a dark recess between two large cement trucks, which were backed up to the loading platform of the town's leading lumber and hardware company. The trucks, as Flood knew, were always left there over week ends.

The moment the motor was cut, Flood turned toward the back of the car. “We'll wait

here, Pop,” he said, “until the boys open up. Then you and I go in.”

As Wally and Roy left the car, Flood leaned out the window. The sky was dark, but now and then flames shot up from the city hall, a half-dozen blocks to the north. Even from where he sat, Flood could hear the shouts and the noise of the crowd, and now and then he detected the crackle of flames eating through wood. Several times he heard the sirens in the distance and he correctly guessed that the state police were arriving to help keep the crowds back and control traffic.

He stepped out then and, walking around the car, looked in the direction in which he knew the school lay.

He swore under his breath. Damn it, what was the matter with Kosta? What was taking him so long?

He got back into the car and spoke to the old man. “It will take the boys a few minutes,” he said. “They're not going into the bank, but through the rear door of the millinery shop next to it. We follow them in and we climb upstairs. It's an empty loft up there. We have to break through a wall, which will put us in a bathroom over the private offices of the bank. There's a stairway leading down from the bathroom to the bank's offices. We go down and then we wait for the power plant to go out. When it does, you start to work.”

“How about burglar alarms?” Paulmeyer rumbled.

“None in the millinery store and none in the loft. We don't hit any till we're in the bank lobby. By that time there won't be any electricity. The alarms work off the regular city power system.”

Paulmeyer leaned back in the car and waited quietly. He'd allowed the pipe to go out and he made no further attempt to ignite it.

2.

Candle was looking at the clock over the center of the bar when he heard the sound of the fire siren. Quickly his eyes went to Shorty.

“Forty minutes to go,” he said.

Shorty nodded, not paying much attention. He was watching the customers of the place as they began to stream into the street. A few moments later, when the explosion sounded and he heard the clang of the fire apparatus, he lifted his glass and spoke slowly.

“Better order another one. That bartender looks like he'll take off any minute himself.”

Candle laughed. “These small towns!” he said. “They're something.”

The bartender was still at the door as Shorty picked up their empty glasses and carried them over and tapped him on the shoulder. Reluctantly he returned and refilled them. He went back to the opened doorway at once.

A few moments later, as the siren continued to wail its macabre dirge and they heard the clanging of additional fire equipment, Candle once more looked up, his expression quizzical.

“Nice break for us,” he said, in a barely audible whisper. “If this thing keeps up, it will keep every cop in town tied up. All three of them. State police, too, in case any're around.”

Shorty nodded. “You don't suppose this is a part of it, do you?”

Candle looked at him curiously for a minute. Slowly he nodded. “Could be,” he said. “It could be. You know Flood. Imagination. Plenty of imagination.”

“But hell!” Shorty said. “He wouldn't go around setting fires, would he? Not fires.”

Candle didn't answer, but once more looked at the clock.

“Let's go,” he said. “We'll drive past the fire first. Like to see what it is; how much law is around.”

They took the rented car, leaving their own where it was parked.

Within a block, Candle realized it was a major blaze. The whole town seemed to have turned out to watch, and he knew that if he attempted to get any closer, he might find himself locked in traffic. So he cut down a side street and returned to Almond Avenue.

“You set?” he asked as he drove toward the entrance to the power company.

“Yeah. All set.”

He passed the drive leading into the place and went to the end of the street, which stopped at the fence marking the railroad right of way. Carefully he backed the car around and then drove a few hundred yards and came to a stop. There was no one in sight.

Candle left the key in the ignition and cut the lights. He stepped out of the car and Shorty handed him the golf bag. Shorty sat in the car and opened the brief case! He took out a pair of .38 police positives. One he put in the side pocket of his jacket, the other he handed to Candle.

They walked up the drive toward the entrance to the power plant, Shorty in front and Candle following, lugging the golf bag. There was a single naked bulb over the small door leading into the place. Candle set the bag down on the ground and then reached up and unscrewed the bulb. In the dark, Shorty handed him the Halloween mask, after he had pulled his own over his face. And then they opened the door and walked inside.

The blackout hit Indio Beach at exactly eleven o'clock.

Over at the high-school auditorium, where the Saturday-night festivities had already suffered a serious casualty when most of the male audience had deserted to go to the fire, the curtain was just about to come down on the final sketch of the evening.

And in the Ranchers and Fruit Growers Trust Company, Flood, followed by Roy, Wally, and old Paulmeyer, walked from the executive offices toward the room holding the huge main vault.

In front of the city hall, Sergeant Waldo Harrington, his shirt half torn off and covered with soot, turned to State Trooper Menninger and Fire Chief Nixon and swore loudly as the street lights went out.

“Now what!” he yelled. “Jesus Christ, looks like every damn light hi town is out. Get over to a phone and see what's happened, Menny.”

3.

At first there was nothing, nothing but the pain. The shattering, splitting, throbbing ache. And then, as consciousness gradually returned, he identified himself as a person, as something human and alive and suffering.

He remembered who he was, but for the next few moments he couldn't recall where he was or what had happened to him. There was a sweet-sour taste in his mouth and he was next aware that something soft and warm was coursing down the side of his face. At last he realized that it was blood and that the pain was in his head.

He still couldn't figure out where he was or how he had got there. Trying to think about it, trying to bring some order out of the chaos of his mind, he understood at last that he had been hurt. And then he remembered Kosta, remembered leaving the bar and driving with him to the city hall. He remembered leaning over the back seat of the car.

He was still in the car, but it was moving now. He felt the regularity of the vibrations, smelled the familiar smell of an automobile. He was all crushed up, lying in Stygian darkness half on his knees and half on his side. The ringing in his ears abated then and he knew that he was hearing the sound of an engine.

There seemed to be a great deal of noise, and in his effort to clarify the confusion of sounds, he suddenly identified the shrill note of a police whistle. He heard yells and cries and then there was the rumble of a passing truck, and then a siren.

His mind went back to Kosta, and from Kosta to what Kosta had planned to do.

He groaned and tried to lift his head. At once conscious of his own groan, he shuddered and became still. He knew that he must not warn whoever was driving the car that he had regained consciousness.

The outside noises lessened and for a moment he tried to dismiss the awful thought of the school auditorium from his mind. There was a fire. Those other noises had told him that. But maybe there was still time; maybe it wasn't the school yet. In spite of the pain in his head, he made a terrible effort to think clearly. He had to think clearly.

He was huddled on the floor of a car,. Under the front seat, from the nearness of the sound of the engine. It wasn't hard for him, now, to identify the place in the darkness.

He'd worked under the dashboards of a lot of cars in the last three months.

He began to understand what had happened. Kosta had slugged him with something, probably the butt of a gun, as he had leaned over to get the bag. He had underestimated Kosta all along the line. He hadn't dreamed that Kosta even carried a gun. In fact, he remembered Kosta bitterly complaining when it had been suggested that he might go armed.

Yes, he had underestimated Kosta. He'd been a fool, a double fool, especially after the warning he'd had in the bar.

Kosta had slugged him, knocked him out. And he had set the fire. One fire?

Frank didn't want to think about that. God, he prayed that it was only the one fire. Frank knew what would have happened if that school auditorium were ever ignited with all those people in it.

He knew then a bitter moment of regret; regret that he had ever become involved in the terrible plot in the first place; regret for his stupidity in thinking that one crime could be committed without setting up a pattern of events that sooner or later would lead to violence and murder.

But it was too late now for regrets. He just hoped to God it was not too late for other things.

He knew Kosta. Even if he was lucky and Kosta had only set fire to the city hall, Frank knew he would go on to the school. Kosta would not rest now. Even if Flood had instructed him to pass the school up—and Frank wasn't convinced that he had—it wouldn't matter. Kosta was a madman. This was his night.

Carefully Frank moved his hands. He almost cried out in relief when he discovered that they hadn't been bound.

He understood then that Kosta was on his way to the school now. He'd set one fire and, convinced that Frank was unconscious and would remain so for a long time, he was going now to complete his evil task. The auditorium was to be his masterpiece.

Frank understood something of the queer, twisted mentality of a man like Kosta. An empty building blazing into the night sky would be fine, but it would act only as the first taste of blood. Kosta would want screaming, flaming death before his night's work was through.

But now there was no more time to think about it or to plan. The throb of the engine diminished and then he heard the crunch of sand under the wheels and the forward movement stopped. Frank heard the driver pull up the hand brake.

It was quiet now, quiet except for the low, harsh mumbling from the seat above him. There was a sudden flash of light and Frank closed his eyes swiftly as he felt the beam of a flashlight fall on his face. Then there was a sharp, dull blow, striking his face, and

he knew that Kosta had drawn back his foot and kicked him. He had to exert tremendous self-control not to cry out.

He heard low, maniacal laughter, and then the man crawled across his body and opened the door of the car and stepped out. A moment later he heard the rear door as it was opened and he knew that Kosta was taking out his deadly equipment.

It was torture, but he lay there and waited until Kosta's muffled footsteps retreated into the distance.

His muscles were cramped and one leg seemed dead and bloodless, but torturously he forced himself up until he had his head above the window of the car door.

Off to the left was the school auditorium, and he knew at once that the car was parked in the playground in back of the building.

He half fell out of the car and staggered toward the auditorium.

He knew where to look. There was only one spot that lay in total blackness: the rear door of the building, the one leading into the darkened dressing rooms used by the athletic teams; wooden rooms with wooden benches and wooden lockers, fragile and inflammable.

The door was opened a crack when he reached it.

For a moment he thought wildly of seeking help, of sounding an alarm. But then at once he knew that he would have no time, that already it was too late for an alarm. Kosta would have the kerosene, he'd have the package of dynamite caps. Even if Frank could warn those in the building in time, the explosion would still take place before they could all get out.

He knew what would happen in that auditorium filled with women and children if they all started for the exits at the same time. He knew and he shuddered and threw caution to the winds and ran into the dressing rooms.

The candle in Kosta's hand guided him. He had time to see the other's yellow, pudgy face with the bulging, russet eyes staring at him like some devil's mask as he leaped. His left hand closed on the candle. That was all he was thinking about, the need to extinguish that flame. He wasn't conscious of the burning flesh as his hand closed over it.

The soft, baby hands were at his throat then, but they were no longer soft. The nails were like tiny daggers and he felt the skin of his neck tear.

He felt Kosta's flabby body press against his own and he, dropped the already extinguished candle and both hands went to Kosta's wrist.

But Kosta had the strength of an insane man, and as the channel of his throat closed and he struggled for air, Frank suddenly knew that he would never tear those hands away.

It was then that he became conscious of the hard object pressing into his side, and he knew what it was at once: the gun in Kosta's jacket pocket.

His hands fell from the murderous wrists and he fumbled and then he had the gun in his right fist.

It was a glancing blow, but it struck, and for a moment the hands clawing at his throat relaxed. It gave him his chance and he lifted the weapon again and brought it crashing down on Kosta's head.

He fell on top of him as Kosta toppled to the floor.

He never did remember pulling Kosta back to the car. He couldn't recall why he had wanted to do it, unless some automatic protective instinct was at work and he had subconsciously remembered that Kosta would be identified with him and Kay should he be found there in the back room of the auditorium.

It was only when he was halfway out to the house that things began to clear up in his mind.

There was only a single thought now: Kay. Get back to the house and get Kay. Find Kay and leave.

4.

The thin needle of light wavered and for a moment the small, black hole was in darkness.

“Back,” Paulmeyer muttered. “Back on the hole. Keep it steady.”

Wally found the hole again and the old man went back to work.

“How long?” Flood asked.

“Soon,” Paulmeyer said. “Don't, rush me.”

He worked for another five minutes and then got up off his knees.

“Give me the light,” he said.

Wally handed him the pencil flash.

“All right. Back. All of you. Get back.”

They fell back then, the three of them, Flood, Wally, and Roy. Once more Paulmeyer stooped down and there was the flicker of a match. A moment later he too hurried away from the front of the safe.

When the explosion came, it threw the old man to his knees on the rug of the office where he crouched. Flood saw him fall in the blinding flash that followed within a split second of the terrific roar, but he made no effort to go to his aid. He didn't wait until the billowing clouds of smoke cleared, but rushed at once to the vault. He was like a madman as he plowed through the rubbish.

He didn't have to tell Wally and Roy what to do. They were already there at his side with the empty sack, scrounging in the debris.

Paulmeyer slowly got to his feet. He went first to watch the others as they worked in the dim light of the blackened oil lamp that Wally had set on the floor in front of the gaping vault. He watched for less than a half minute and then he grunted. He turned and walking with unerring instinct in the darkness, made his way back through the offices and upstairs. He coughed as the smoke reached his lungs, but kept on going. Soon he was in the building next door and then he was downstairs and in the alley.

As he reached the end of the alley, he heard the sound of a distant siren. He hurried toward the railroad station.

Far down the tracks, south of the town, the great round headlight of the Sunshine Special, running from Miami to New York, cut through the night air, and the engineer slowly began to release the throttle for the stop at Indio Beach. He thought it odd, as the train pulled into the outskirts of the town, that there was not a light in the entire city.

The Sunshine Special was already four minutes behind schedule and he had other problems on his mind. He was grateful that there was only one passenger standing on the platform. The stop took less than two minutes, and then the lonely whistle of the train cut the night air as once more it started north.

5.

He was turning off Orange Drive into the lateral road when the street lights went out. At first he thought it was only that he had come to the edge of the town, but then almost at once he realized what had happened. He would have to hurry. Flood and the others wouldn't be long now.

Possibly it was because of this hurry that it happened, but he took the corner sharply and skidded. The rear wheel of the car slid off the road and into the broken coral-rock shoulder. The sound as the tire blew was like a pistol shot. Instinctively he let up on the gas, but he didn't stop. He attempted to keep going, to limp far enough to get the car home on the flat.

Quickly he realized that it wouldn't work. He would be able to make it, sooner or later, but he'd waste more time than if he pulled over and changed the tire.

He cursed as he came to a halt. It was necessary to move Kosta to get at the tools, but the man showed no signs of consciousness as Frank lifted his body and dropped it into the back.

It was difficult in the dark, but his practice at the service station during the last three months came to his aid, and after a certain amount of fumbling he had the wheel off.

He was almost finished when he heard the sound of a siren far down the road. He looked up as the car approached from the west, and as it went screaming past he knew that it was a state police car, called in by radio from somewhere in the center of the state.

Time was running out.

At last the spare was on the wheel and he'd pulled up the lug bolts. He didn't bother to take the jack down, but put his shoulder to the rear of the machine and rocked it free.

Seven minutes later the house loomed up like a great gray ghost out of the night as he cut the wheel and turned into his own driveway. He didn't stop in the yard, but drove through the open door of the garage. Then, before he had a chance to turn off the engine and switch off the lights, she rushed up to him, reaching for him with both arms through the open window at his side.

“Oh, God, Frank,” she said. “Oh, thank God. You're here at last.”

She saw the blood on his head and started to cry out, but he quieted her at once.

“I'm all right,” he said. “All right, honey. But we've got to leave at once. Quick, now!”

But as she started to say something, to open the car door, he remembered Kosta.

“No,” he said. “No. Go back to the house. Get what we must take.”

He didn't want her there when he pulled Kosta from the car.

She stared at him, barely able to make out his features in the dim glow from the headlights.

“I can't,” she said. “I can't go back. He's there.”

“Who's there?” Frank asked, sudden new alarm in his voice.

“Ham,” she said. “Ham Johnstone. In the kitchen. He's—he's dead.”

He stared at her wordlessly for a moment, and then slowly he climbed out of the car.

“They killed him,” she said. “For no reason at all, they shot him.”

In a daze he left her and started for the back porch. Quickly she caught up with him.

“Frank,” she said. “Frank, not now.” Her voice was a pleading cry. “There's nothing we can do now. Nothing. If we're going to go we must do it at once. You can't help Ham now.”

He kept going, stalking toward the house as though he didn't hear her at all.

He found the kerosene lantern on the back porch, lit it, and carried it into the kitchen. He leaned down beside the body of the fallen man. For minutes he was still, and then at last he looked up.

“Go to the telephone,” he said, his voice a dull monotone. “Go to the phone and call the police.”

“But Frank...”

“I'm through running,” he said. “All through.”

She looked at him then and the tears slowly came into her eyes.

“Yes, Frank,” she said at last. “I’ll call them.”

She started to turn away, and then stopped for a moment and said, “The girl’s upstairs. Tied up.”

Three minutes later, when he came downstairs, one hand behind him leading Doll, Kay was sitting in front of the telephone, the receiver at her ear. The kerosene lamp was on the floor beside her. She looked at Frank with frightened eyes.

“It’s the operator,” she said. “She says the switchboard is hopelessly jammed up. She can’t get through to the police. There’s no telling how long—”

“Never mind the phone,” Frank said. “We haven’t time now. You’ll have to take the car and drive into town. Find the police. They’ll be somewhere, probably around the fire. At the city hall. Find them and bring them back with you.”

She started to leave and he remembered Kosta. He still didn’t know whether Kosta was alive or dead.

Quickly he crossed the room, reaching the door before she did.

“Wait,” he said. “Wait for one minute. I’ll bring the car out.”

He ran across the yard and into the garage. Opening the rear door of the car, he reached in, and his hand found the fabric of the man’s coat. He jerked and pulled and Kosta rolled out on the cement floor. Frank pushed him to one side and then got into the car and backed it out. Kay was waiting in the side yard as he stopped.

“Frank,” she said. “Oh, Frank, are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” he said. “Dead sure. Hurry.”

He was back in the kitchen as Kay swung out of the yard. Doll stood in the doorway, her horrified eyes staring down at Ham’s body. She looked at Frank when he came into the room.

“You’re crazy,” she said. “Crazy!”

Frank went to the table and pulled a chair out and sat down. He didn’t look at her.

“No,” he said. “I’m sane. Sane for the first time in months. Maybe for the first time in my whole life.”

6.

In spite of the bad breaks, of all the trouble, in spite of everything that had gone wrong, he’d pulled it off. He’d got away with it.

God, he felt great!

Riding in the back seat of the sedan, Flood nudged the bulky weight of the duffel bag on the seat at his side.

A half million, maybe more!

Nothing had stopped him; not Wally with his stupid Doll, not Kosta, that mad, insane pyromaniac with his drinking, not Frank or Kay or any of them. He overcame everything, every obstacle.

In another half hour he'd be behind the wheel of the Caddie and on his way. Roy and Wally—well, he'd pay them off quick, once they were back at the house. And then they, and Doll too, could do what they wanted. He no longer cared. He had the money.

Kay? Kay and Frank? The hell with them, too. He no longer cared about them. The money was the thing, and he had the money.

Thinking about it, he was unaware of the car that passed them as Wally swung into the road leading to the house.

Wally himself hardly noticed the car. He was filled with his own excitement. He had no idea how much money they had taken, but it must be plenty. At least a hundred thousand dollars, he figured. Plenty. Flood had stacked it into the bag so he couldn't be sure, but it would be enough.

Roy was thinking of the money too. Thinking of the money and thinking of other things. He knew how Flood felt. He could tell. He could even guess that Wally was so excited about the success of the plan that he'd be thinking of nothing else. But Roy was thinking of something else. He was thinking of Doll. Doll, up in the bedroom, tied and helpless.

Roy would let the others stay downstairs, and while they were dividing the loot, he'd sneak up and pay a visit to that bedroom.

Wally dimmed the lights as he approached the house.

“Stop in the yard,” Flood ordered.

Wally followed instructions.

“You take the bag,” Flood said. “Bring it in.”

He climbed out of the car and started for the house. Wally and Roy followed, carrying the heavy duffel bag between them.

Possibly it was because of the excitement and his exalted state of nervous tension, or perhaps it was only that he was too preoccupied with the success of his scheme, but for once the subtle sixth sense that had always warned Flood of danger deserted him.

He entered the kitchen and the first person he saw was Doll. Then he saw Frank, standing over to one side. It is doubtful that he noticed the double-barreled shotgun in Frank's hands at all.

“We did it,” he said, his voice shrill with success. “We did it, boy.”

Before he had finished speaking, Wally and Roy crowded through the doorway behind him.

“Doll!” Wally said. “What the hell—”

Doll's shrill scream cut him short.

“He's got a gun,” she said. “Watch out, he's got a gun. And he's tipped the cops. That girl—she's on her way to get the cops!”

As she yelled the words, she jumped toward Frank. He had started to lift the shotgun, but he had to leap back quickly. As he did so, Roy pulled the .38 from his belt. He started firing from where he stood, directly behind Wally.

Flood moved like lightning, grabbing the table and pulling it over and falling behind it. His own gun came out as he went to his knees.

Frank had no time to aim. The gun was pointed toward Wally and Roy and he pulled the trigger almost simultaneously with the crashing blast of Roy's revolver.

Frank never felt the bullet as it smashed through his upper right arm. He was already pressing the second trigger.

His first shot, from a distance of less than eight feet, virtually tore half of Wally's head off. The second blew a hole the size of a dinner plate through Roy's chest.

Flood fired only twice. The first slug entered the left side of Frank's chest, just over the sixth rib; the second one took him in the stomach.

7.

By the time Flood had dragged the duffel bag out to the garage and tossed it into the trunk, Doll was already in the car. He hardly was aware of her presence as he backed out of the double doors and swung around in the yard, barely missing the Ford sedan.

Far off to the east he heard the rising and falling sound of a siren.

Chapter Eleven

1.

He lay there on the clean white, sheet in the white iron bed and his face was almost as colorless as the pillowcase on which his head rested.

They had all gone, the two doctors, the nurse, and the others. Gone and left him alone at last. All of them, that is, except this one man who sat in the straight-backed chair next to the cot where he lay.

He was just as glad that he was unable to move, that he was unable to talk; that all he could, do was lie there and suffer as the morphine wore off and the pain surged through his body.

But he didn't have to move or turn his head to know who the man was that sat patiently at his side.

He was silent, this man, for a long time. But at last he spoke.

“And so,” he said, “that's how it was, Frank. He was doing about eighty-five miles an hour, this guy in the Caddie with the girl. About eighty-five when it happened. You know that stretch of road, just north of Palm Beach. A dangerous stretch at best. But he was doing eighty-five and we weren't far behind him. He swung out to pass the car and there was the trailer truck, coming up from Miami. The driver tried to get out of his way, but there was nothing he could do. They hit head on. The truck driver was lucky; he'll pull through.”

Again he was silent, but he finally continued.

“It was bad,” he said. “So bad that when we finally pulled them from the burned wreckage, there was no chance of ever identifying him. Not him or the girl. It's strange that the only thing that didn't burn was the money.”

He got up, lighted a cigarette, and he passed Frank's line of vision. He was wearing a fresh uniform and Frank inconsequentially reflected that Waldo Harrington always looked good in his uniform.

“Yes,” he said at last, “that's about it. Wound it up. The whole gang of them except for the two that put the powerhouse out of business. We probably never will get them.

“But there's one more thing. The doctor didn't want me to tell you about it because he was afraid of any additional shock. But now he tells me you're going to pull through all right and so I think I better tell you. It's about that uncle who was visiting you. I hate to have to tell you, but apparently, when they missed their way and turned off on the dead-end lane and came to your house, he must have got in their way. So they killed him. Beat his head in with a pistol butt. I hate to have to tell you.”

Harrington put out his cigarette and walked over and looked down at Frank. His face was cold and serious—not the face that Frank remembered at all.

“There's only this one other thing I have to say to you, Frank,” he said. “Don't try to answer me. Just listen to me. You remember a few days ago, one evening, I stopped by your house? I had a jug of liquor. Bootleg liquor I'd taken off a couple of boys I know. Well, I'm a cop, and I think a good cop and an honest cop. Small-town cops, like we have here in Indio Beach, are a little different than your big-city cops. Perhaps a little more human. I don't know. But different. Anyway, a lot of people might think I was pretty careless about that bootleg liquor. Might think I wasn't doing my duty when I didn't arrest those boys. Even worse, that I was doing something criminal when I not only let them go, but drank some of the stuff myself.

“But me, I'm a small-town cop. I look at it different. Those boys were doing wrong, of course. On the other hand, I happen to know the facts. They sell that stuff over in Black Town to a bunch of colored boys who don't have the money to buy the high-priced stuff at the liquor stores. They don't sell much, just enough to get by. It means that those

colored boys, who are trying to get by on starvation wages, are able to get a cheap load on now and then on Saturday night.

“And the stuff isn't bad. It isn't poison or anything like that. If it was, I wouldn't drink it myself.

“Anyway, they bootleg it and just make a bare living. So I just turn my back and pretend I don't know about it. They're doing wrong, but they're not vicious or mean or trying to hurt anyone.

“Well, anyway, that's the kind of cop I am. I let 'em get away with it.”

He was standing directly in front of Frank as he finished talking, staring into his face and looking thoughtful.

“The next time I see them, though,” he said, “I'm going to tell them they gotta quit. Quit before they get themselves into something that they can't get out of.”

He smiled then finally and patted Harper's shoulder. He turned and started for the door.

“I'm sending your wife in,” he said. “She's been waiting outside. She had a pretty rough time of it, but now that she knows you're going to be air right, she's feeling better. She's an unusual woman, Frank. A very unusual woman. It was lucky that it was me she found when she escaped from the house and went for the police.

“Yes, she's been waiting for you.”

THE END

of a novel by Lionel White