



*she was hot...
too hot for any one man*

A TASTE FOR SIN

GIL
BREWER

A BERKLEY ORIGINAL

Johnson

A Taste for Sin

Gil Brewer

1961

One...

I stopped the Volks in front of the house on Grove.

It was a small place, white with gray trim, set on a green lawn among elms and pines.

I took the bill and the two bottles of Martell's cognac, and moved up the walk. There were three antiquated red brick steps and a small stoop with wrought iron rails. I used the brass knocker; a clown's head. Appropriate?

Clank—clank—clank—

I'd waited a long time to get this close to Felice Anderson. I wondered what would happen. There was something going between us. She had a husband, George, who was the assistant cashier at the Allayne City Trust Bank. So far that hadn't mattered, the way we'd looked at each other when she came to the store to order booze.

The door opened.

"Well, Mr. Phalen. You finally got here."

"Jim."

She smiled. "If I call you Jim, you'll have to call me Felice."

Neither of us was fooling the other with this crap.

"A deal."

She was in smooth soft white belted tightly at the waist. A slim waist. George Anderson was maybe forty-five, Felice maybe eighteen. One of those things. She could balance your libido with her eyes.

"Come in," she said. "I'll pay you for that."

She had a curiously flat, unassuming voice, with a faint lisp. I went in.

I got a whiff of her perfume. I'd had it before, at the store. It was something. I'd done a lot of hard thinking about. Felice Anderson. We just plain weren't strangers, and we both knew it. But there was a glass wall between us.

We were in the living room. She smiled again, broad lips parting, revealing perfect white teeth. She closed the door.

Smooth velvet black hair tumbled down the middle of her back, to between her shoulder blades. It was wild looking,

brushed to a sheen. Maybe she licked it like a cat. I wanted to sink my fingers into it. She had Spanish in her, you could tell. Probably both her mother and father. The look was all through her. I got an ache. She was the complete opposite of Jinny; the old nightmare I couldn't rid myself of.

"Good to see you, Jim."

All right, I thought. Hit her with it.

"I'd like to see you naked with a rose in your teeth."

Somewhere a clock ticked.

She gave a short laugh.

"Be right with you, Jim."

She walked down a hallway, white high heels ringing. She wore sheer black nylons. Her behind was a round personal idea.

"Take those bottles into the kitchen," she called.

The front room took in the front of the house, maybe twenty-five feet. It was furnished with heavy dark rattan, thick, soggy cushions with a flower design on them. There were a couple of bad prints on the walls, some monk's cloth draperies, and thick red rag rugs on the hardwood floor.

In the same house with her, alone, it was something.

I went down the hall, glanced to the left. She was in a bedroom. I saw her face in the mirror of a dressing table, as she opened a purse. She smiled at me in the mirror. Her face was heart-shaped, with high round cheek bones. Her eyes were black.

"The kitchen, Jim."

I went into the kitchen; modern with lots of stainless steel, cream paint, red curtains. I put the bottles on the table and wiped my hands on my pants. I wanted a cigarette.

Oh, you bitch, I thought. *You Spanish bitch*.

She came into the kitchen.

"How much?"

I looked at the bill and told her.

"Here you go, on the button."

You bitch, I thought. I pocketed the money. We stood there.

"Let's have a drink," she said.

"All right"

It was a goddamned game. That sheet of glass was still there.

"What'll you have, brandy or beer?"

"Beer. It's been kind of warm."

She opened the refrigerator. In a moment, we stood sipping from tall delicate Pilsner glasses. Sun slanted through rear windows. Green limbs of elm shadowed. I was beginning to sweat. Then I saw something. She'd had on a brassiere when I'd come, now she didn't. They stuck out lush and big and proud and the nipples showed through the white dress.

"Let's go in the other room."

We went into the living room and stood there.

She said, "You haven't been in Allayne long."

"No."

My husband, George, working at the bank and all... I see a lot of you, Jim, right across the street, that way." it was something between a lip and a hiss. "Yeah."

"We hardly know each other, really," she said. "Do we?"

"How you look at it"

She covered that with a sip of beer.

"I kept an eye out for you today," I said. "It's better to phone in, though."

My beer was finished.

The Happytime Liquor Store," Felice said. "That's a real good name. You like working there?"

I gave a grunt

She motioned me to follow her with a long red-tipped finger. Across the room against the wall was a walnut cabinet with small leaded glass windows. She opened the doors. The shelves were loaded with bottles and glasses. I counted sixteen bottles of Marten's cognac. She closed the doors.

You could hear the mid-May afternoon, the sunlight the shade. The clock ticked.

"Does that answer any question in your mind, Jim?"

"I think so."

She took my glass and set both glasses on top of the cabinet. Then she looked at me again. The top button on her dress had come undone from the movement of her arm. The twin thrusting mounds filled under my gaze.

She spoke more from the throat. "I lie awake nights a lot ever since you came to work at The Happytime, six months ago. I feel we've known each other a long time. Frankly, I watch you every chance I get. You're awfully big, and kind of ugly but..."

"It's the same with me. Only you're not ugly."

Perspiration dewed her upper lip. Her eyes were black. She rubbed her palms against her thighs.

"I wanted to be absolutely certain how you felt," she said.

My throat was thick. "We both feel the same."

"Obviously."

I took a step toward her.

"No," she said. "You've got to leave now"

"What?"

She stepped past me. She ran her hand up my chest and around the back of my neck. It was like fire. But she kept walking to the door.

She opened the door.

"Don't say a word, Jim."

My heart socked against my ribs like a distance swimmer who'd just grabbed the float.

"Why'd you call the damn store? You knew I'd make the delivery."

"I told you. I wanted to be sure."

"Felice."

"You've got to leave, now I mean it"

I stared at her.

She said, "Now, go—God damn you—go!"

"Will I see you?"

"What the hell do you think?"

I went outside. She was closing the door. One eye and her red lips showed.

"So long, Jim—for now."

I grabbed the edge of the door. "You black-eyed bitch." I let go of the door. It closed with a polite snick.

In my mind there was the sound of broken glass.

Two...

I got in the Volks and sat there.

Well, a sane woman could be a bore.

I lit a cigarette and ate smoke, took a last look at the house and saw a curtain flick in one of the windows.

At least eighteen, I thought. Got to be.

Suddenly I felt guilty about sitting there in the car, eyes watching. Think of the future, Phalen. I flipped the cigarette away and drove off.

I went to my place on the river. I rented a room in a big old house, called The River Lodge. It was run by an old frazzle-eyed couple named Fisher, both of whom were well on the way to lushhood. I slipped them a jug every now and then. It helped. But they could turn into snakes the minute you got behind on your rent. I was behind on everything—dream payments included.

I had a slant-floored, second-floor, one-room deal combination everything; a small ancient bath, a toilet that screamed with agony every time you flushed it.

It was a mess and I hated it.

I had trouble paying for one lousy room. I intended to remedy it any way I could. It ate at me now, after Felice Anderson.

You don't even look at flowers like that, let alone pluck them, if you plan to keep things cozy in one ratty room on a liquor store clerk's salary.

Now, what the hell are you thinking, Phalen?

I had to get back to the store, fast. Ned Webster would wonder where I was, pacing up and down, scratching his bald head with that Big Deal scowl on his face. The Boss-Man, he was the type that went by the books, straight down the line. He was one of the big things that worried me.

Because I sure was going to rob his stupid store, right under his baby blue eyes. Tonight.

So many things could go wrong. There was always that image in my mind of the Law, a blue-clothed, vengeful, steely-eyed, glittering All-American monster.

But I'd fight it off, because the black dregs inside me were really black.

Times like this, you have two minds. One says: *"Okay, you're going to snag all the liquor you can. You aren't touching money."* The other says: *"Watch it, Phalen. One of the other guys might see you. if you get caught, that's the end."* The two minds are separate. They fight each other. It's like your skull's divided right down the middle.

Sometimes you wish it was—with an axe.

I went to my room, glanced through the stair window, spotted the Fishers down by the river under a tree. Probably wishing the river was vodka.

In my room, I locked the door.

The phone rang on the nightstand, by the bed.

I stared at it. Webster?

It rang and rang.

In the kitchenette, I got down one of the jugs of absinthe I'd managed to finagle through a contact; not hard when you work in a liquor store. I fixed a drink, watched it change color, drank it down. The phone quit ringing.

Quit thinking, I told myself.

I sat on the bed and stared at the phone. I lit a cigarette and stretched out, then dropped the cigarette in the ashtray and let it come. It came hard.

I lay there and stared at the ceiling and saw Jinny. Thick blonde hair. We were together, in Santa Fe. I was coming into our store; Jinny's and mine. It was in my head like black stinking garbage... seeing her on the ceiling anywhere I looked. In the tight worn blue jeans and the red flannel shirt; one of mine she'd glommed. Slim and quick and bright and questive-eyed, my wife of four years. Jinny McNamara Phalen. In a fluffy white dress, walking in the square, just after it rained. The two of us cutting across the park. Looking at Indian jewelry, spread out under the marquee. Wondering whether we should hire a good-looking Indian girl to sit on the floor in the store with bracelets and beads on a white blanket, among the paintings and frames. To intrigue the tourists. Remembering.

Like an old movie that ran inside your head, the projector out of control.

"I love you..."

Les Pine, an old friend, passing through. He needed a job. We hired him to help with the framing. We had a good business going.

How he framed.

Seven months, he worked.

I lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, hearing the phone ring.

I'd come in and he had her up on the work bench between the vise and the table saw. She wore a fluffy white dress. She squealed with delight.

"Let me brace my foot," she squealed. "Hold one and put the other in the vise, Les. Do something."

On the ceiling.

The front door had been locked, with the little sign:

Gone Fishing. Drunk. Do you really care? Maybe Tomorrow.

I'd come in the side door, and stood in shadow.

I watched Les Pine put her left foot in the vise, both of them laughing. His feet slid among the sawdust, their heads among the squealing. There were some cowbells I'd hung on a nail on the end of the workbench, long before.

How they jingled how they jangled how they clanked.

Then the blood. Pine's blood.

It was all over everything amid the screaming. On her fluffy white dress that was ripped. She screamed and hit me with a tack hammer, one we used for framing.

Pine screamed before he passed out.

She screamed and ran yelling into the street.

I stood there and finished the job on Pine. I made sure it was a perfect job. He didn't care. He couldn't feel anything, because he had passed out.

The table saw worked perfectly. It was simply a matter of adjustment I often thought how suitable that word was. His name was a good word, too. Pine.

The saw sang.

Out on the street, Jinny ran screaming.

Did you read about it in the papers?

Blood shot all over the workshop behind the Navajo blanket curtains of the front part of the store, as I carefully fashioned Les Pine into something that would look like a man when he wore clothes.

If he lived.

He lived.

The phone rang. The cowbells stopped ringing.

Les Pine would never ring any more bells. It was very funny. I laughed about it at the time. Nobody else did. Just me. James Nightmare Phalen. Buzz-saw surgeon.

Out of the black blank of three months, the hospital released me. I returned home. Pine was gone. Alaska, somewhere far away. I was exonerated of all criminal intent. I'd been crazy, see?

I came home, found Jinny in the same fluffy white dress, hanging with her arms in the bathtub, her head hanging, hair hanging, kneeling on the floor.

More blood.

A note:

"Jim. It's only been an hour, I suppose. I knew when your bus would get in and that you would come home to see me immediately. I got all your letters from the hospital, but I didn't bother to open them. You'll find them in the toilet. I'm drunk, now. I want you to know I've been a whore for drinks ever since you've been away. I loved him, you see? I really don't give a crap if you don't see. Just so you find me. Jinny."

She had cut her wrists with a leather-working gouge. They hung in tepid water which faintly resembled tomato soup.

Sometimes I cried.

The phone rang.

In the kitchenette, I drank more absinthe. There is a way to drink it. You shouldn't gulp it. I gulped.

I had fished the letters out of the toilet, but I still could not recall what I'd done with them. One of the things I'd been unable to clear up.

The phone ceased.

I stripped and headed for the shower. My clothes were soaked with sweat, and her name rang in my head, over and over—Jinny... Jinny...

But I almost had it licked. Someday I'd win.

The phone rang.

"I checked with the store and you weren't there," she said. "I hope you don't know anyone named Mary Thornbush, because that's the name I used."

"Felice."

I sat on the bed, listened to those flat, unassuming tones, thought of that Spanish look. I felt the hooks inside me pull and bite deep.

"If you ever park in front of the house again, which you won't, of course—don't just sit there. Houses have eyes."

"Yes. I know. Felice?"

She'd hung up. I grabbed the directory, found her number, and dialed. It rang. Nobody answered.

You bitch, I thought.

I took a shower and dressed. Just as I reached the door, the phone rang. It would be Webster, checking. I got out of there. Going downstairs, I thought, suppose it's her again. Maybe she called back. I didn't dare answer it. If Webster caught me goofing off, he'd fire me. You could hear the phone ring all through the place.

When I got to the store, it was time to begin.

Three...

"Where've you been?" Webster said. "You know the rush'll start any minute."

"Something was wrong with the Volks. Had to get it fixed."

"Nobody else ever had trouble with that car."

I shrugged.

Webster had on his natty tan suit, a blue tie, starched white shirt with French cuffs and ruby cufflinks. He carried a yellow No. 2 pencil behind one ear. He took the pencil and scratched his head with the point. It streaked. He frowned.

Heap Big Business Man Frowning.

He cleared his throat "Let's get with it, Jim."

General Webster in charge of the Bottle Battalion.

I started away, thinking of what I had to do.

"Jim?" It was Webster. He assumed a wise tone. "Who's Mary Thornbush? She called here three times, asking for you. A live one?"

"She's my mother's sister's son's brother's wife's sister's husband's concubine," I said. "She's passing through on a jet. Headed for Paris. Poor Mary. She has fun, though. I'd forgotten to call her, finally remembered."

The Happytime Package Store stood on a corner. The side away from the streets and the back of the store gave way to railroad tracks running at an oblique angle. A lot of our business was drive-in. They came into a parking area by the tracks, drove through a tunnel, and out to Main Street. Allayne was a drinking town. We ran eye-catching cut-rate ads in the papers.

Two other guys worked here. Roy Taft, a tall, red-haired wonder with an idea a minute, none of which was worth hearing. And Joe Yeates, a phlegmatic, bloodshot-eyed lush who drank up everything he made, yawned hung-overishly, watched the clock, told dirty jokes, and was Webster's brother-in-law. Just the same he hung by a thread.

They had caught on I didn't want to talk, after about four months, and finally let it go at that.

Customers began to get thick now. Cars stacked up. It was what I wanted.

I felt fuzzy from the absinthe. Sometimes it helped me forget. It helped now, because looking back later on I saw how I took some hellish chances.

Of course, by then this was a laugh.

I had my car parked beside the store in the weeds, away from the tracks.

The rear end was by the loading entrance. I went into the store room, out back, opened the doors, went out and opened the trunk of the car. I left it half open.

Inside, I got a dame in a beat up Ford her fifth of gin, and case of beer, and rang it up. She'd worn purple shorts and had a mosquito bite on her thigh.

Webster marched around smiling scratching his head with the pencil, promoting a poisonous wine special we had on: liquid sulphur-spiked acid tanked in from the West Coast

"Keep 'em rolling, Jim."

"Don't worry about that"

Roy Taft lugged a case of whisky up front. He said something about working an idea for a conveyor belt, eyes serious. This was the type idea he was afflicted with: a conveyor belt to run cases from the store room up front in a lousy two-bit joint like the Happytime.

Joe Yeates was busy at the counter with the mayor's daughter.

I walked straight back into the store room. I had thought a lot about this; you either took a chance, or you didn't. Breaking in at night you could get caught. Very possible. So, do it right under their eyes. I was keyed up plenty. Maybe I looked all bone, and lanky, but those bones were heavy. I was six-four, weighed two-forty.

I grabbed two cases of the most expensive stuff in the place, walked outside and slid them in the trunk of my car. Actually, it wasn't so much of a chance, when it was busy. I'd often step outside for a smoke. It took no longer than a ten count.

Inside again, I nailed a case of urinous beer, came up front.

"Cooler's low," I told Webster.

I put some cans of beer in the cooler, and thought how with those two cases, I had a month's rent. I owed four. I owed three different loan companies. They were on my neck. My car payments were behind. I had one suit of clothes past the Salvation Army stage, a pair of near busted shoes. The next step would be to garnishee my salary. I'd been told that flatly.

Trips to Schenectady or Buffalo cost money. I'd go there, and spend it and that way I didn't hurt anybody.

I stood there. Something like hell came into me. I threw a can of beer with all my might into the cooler. My heart socked. The can ripped. Beer shot all over.

"Slipped," I said loudly.

I dumped in the rest of the cans. Beer frothed and stank.

I hit the cars again. Webster looked in the cooler, shook his head, and scowled.

I waited on two cars, then returned to the store room. I nailed another two cases, imported champagne this time, the best; took it out to the car.

When I came back into the store room, Webster stood there counting with his pencil. He lifted his eyebrows, like wasp wings.

"Got a headache," I said.

"Aspirin's by the cash register."

I went up front. He might see the car outside, with the open trunk. Be just like him to tell me about it, or close it for me.

I hit more cars. When Webster was up front again, I pulled my same crazy stunt. Right under their eyes. It worked. I kept it up for three hours. I had the trunk loaded solid and locked. I loaded the back floor and the space where the back seat had been before I yanked it out I loaded it to the top of the front seat and covered it with an old army blanket I even put a case of whisky on the floor in front.

The old Chev, with faded maroon paint, was so loaded it looked like an old whore squatting in the weeds to take a leak.

There were close calls, but I skinned through. I took stuff from back stacks. You wouldn't notice it was gone. Webster wouldn't be making any inventory tonight.

I stayed till eight. Then I told Webster I was sick. "Don't know what's the matter. Ache all over."

"You only got a few hours to go."

"Can't make it. Going home to bed."

It had jarred him, my not asking him.

"All right, Jim. Maybe you have a touch of grippe. You better see a doctor. I certainly don't want to catch anything."

Roy Taft watched me kind of funny, but I felt sure he'd seen nothing. Only I had to get to that cash register. I'd forgotten one important item, the gimmick for my skimpy alibi; I didn't figure I'd need much.

"Think I'll take another couple aspirin."

At the cash register, I gulped two aspirin, flipped off my wrist watch and jammed it under some papers.

I went out and got in the Chev and drove off.

I was supposed to deliver the booze to a guy named Sy Krueger, private chauffeur to a wealthy onion, Jack Solengren. Solengren was a big lush-head playboy who threw tremendous parties that lasted for days and sometimes rocked the county. He lived in a rambling mansion on a wooded estate eight miles out on West Lake Road. Krueger and I had a deal. He knew the bad shape I was in, because he had a sister who worked at one of the loan companies. He'd dealt at The Happytime. She'd mentioned things. He approached me. I went for the deal. No questions. I'd get liquor. He'd pay three quarters retail. We both made out because Solengren always gave him a signed blank check to pay for whatever he needed. The main thing, the check, would be taken care of. Krueger would cash the check. I would deliver and he'd pay me in cash. I was as clear as I could get. According to Krueger, Solengren never questioned how he did things. An agreement.

Driving out of town, I thought, Well, I'll make plenty on this. Then I thought, Sure. Plenty to me. But it's really nothing—just plain bat-pee. Because I thought of Felice Anderson and got that ache. She had money in her eyes. I knew she must keep George Anderson strapped. She drove a convertible Chrysler Imperial. Still, that seemed to be the only expensive thing they had. I got to thinking.

George couldn't be much to her at that bank, with an assistant cashier's salary. Not the kind of money she smelled like; country clubs, all that.

Get off it Phalen. Let it lie.

My hands were sweating on the wheel. I'd never done anything like this in my life. But I had to have money. With money I could forget. Maybe this was the way. A beginning.

Why did my hands sweat? Why was I worried?

I had to go back to the store after seeing Krueger, and break in the door, so it looked like outside robbery. This, after the store closed. I was supposed to be home in bed. Suppose Webster called?

I stopped the car. It was black night with a high icy moon. I broke open the case of Old Overholt in the front opened a bottle, and drank. I drank plenty.

It was like a milk shake.



At Solengren's I did as Krueger asked, drove up the curved, crunchy drive, parked behind a row of garages. Cars littered the sloped lawn like discards on green felt T-Birds, Chryslers, Cadillacs, sparkling foreign sports jobs.

It troubled me. I'd had to pass the house with my heap. People could notice. I didn't like it.

The rich. You could see the house, the grounds, like a cascade. He'd even hired live music. You heard the crazy tinkle of glasses, the throaty sounds of a woman's laughter, a red cigarette end arched high into the night like a comet. Music purled and frothed across the soft night air, rustled among rows of moonlit poplars, fluted in silvery leaves. Slim, bright rainbow-colored spotlights speared the night, stirring the dark drink of night like multi-colored swizzle sticks.

"You got it?"

Sy Krueger was a black eager shadow.

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's unload."

We carted it into the back of a garage.

Krueger was a thin wiry uniformed exclamation, with "angles" for ears and "deals" for eyes, and he probably had pawned his dead mother's single gold tooth years before. I didn't like him. There was something too sly, too wise about him.

He had the cash. He paid me. \$900.00.

"Thanks, pal," he said. "We'll work it again, soon's this runs low."

I drove blind out past the laughter and the tinkle and through the silver dream dust. I drove like hell toward town.

You hot sweet Spanish bitch.

At the first gas station, I used the phone while the attendant filled the tank. I called the store. Webster answered.

"I'm in bed," I said. "Every bone aches."

"That's a shame."

"Just want to check. I don't have my wrist watch. Seems to me I took it off and put it by the cash register. I do that when I carry cases up front. It's not an expensive watch, but my sister gave it to me."

"I'll look."

I waited. He would ask about tomorrow, Saturday, a big day.

"It's here, Jim."

"Good. A relief. Put it in the register, will you?" I talked fast. "I'm really beat, going to try to sleep."

I hung up. The attendant was coming back.

I drove off, parked by the river, drank whisky and stared at the water till ten-thirty. I drove on back to town, parked a block down Main on the opposite side of the store, down past the tracks.

The streets were quiet except for the sound of a juke box in a bar. An occasional car drifted past I cut up by the tracks in the weeds and darkness, carrying a jack handle. Out behind the store, everything looked still. I came along the side of the store and almost reached the door when I saw the cop. He came straight toward me.

“You—hold it right there. Hold it!”

I turned and ran like hell.

Four...

I really ran.

He yelled something.

I hit the far ditch beyond the tracks, slid on the bank, and ran under the side of a building that was part of a lumber yard.

"Hold it!" he shouted.

I dropped flat and lay there with my head pressed hard against the cold steel of the jack handle. He came along through the weeds. I saw him standing up there in the moonlight against the sky.

"You drunk—something?" he called. "What the hell you run for, you bastard?"

He stood in the night, glinting.

I held my breath, then breathed through my open mouth. Sweat streamed down me and all I could think was, Christ, did he see me at the door? Did he guess I was going to break in? Would he stand there and wait?

"You stupid bastard!" he called into the night.

A car honked on Main Street. A bunch of kids crossed the tracks down along the sidewalk, four boys and a bouncing, giggling, plump-tailed girl with long blonde hair.

The cop stood up there on the tracks, restless, waiting.

I gripped the jack handle like a madman, sweating.

The cop just stood there. He was about thirty feet away. He might stand there all night. I had to get to the store. I didn't know what to do. I was nervous as hell. I wanted to run for my car and get away. But I had to get to that store.

The night was silent.

The cop turned and came toward me. He walked slowly, determined. He hadn't heard me run and knew I must be here, someplace.

I carefully moved down into the ditch among the weeds. He was right above me. He started down into the ditch. I grabbed his leg, twisted with all my might, and we sprawled into the ditch.

He was big and plenty rough. He grunted, and tried to get at his gun. I came down with the jack handle along the back of his neck, under the lip of skull. He crumbled.

I knelt there panting. He was out. I didn't know for how long. He hadn't seen me, though. I stood up and walked along the tracks, then ran to the door of the store, and jimmied it open. I ripped the wood good, then broke the glass. I rushed into the store room and knocked cases down. I picked up a case and flung it toward the front of the store. It smashed into the counter and bottles crashed. I messed things up good and I did it fast, then turned and ran.

There was no sign of the cop.

I ran along the tracks as silently as I could, panting. I saw him lying down there in the ditch.

I went on to Main Street, reached the Chev, and drove home.

Inside I was all torn up. I'd never had anything like this happen. It had been a hell of a chance to take.

Obviously not much time had elapsed since Webster had closed the store. I knew then I should have waited till later in the night I was scared. There was nothing to do about that, now. All I wanted was to get back to my room and lock the door and lie down and black myself out with absinthe.

I had \$900.00.

Birdseed.

The cop hadn't seen who I was. He would think I was a wandering drunk, but when they found the Happytime had been robbed, they'd know something.

I drove in my place and saw another car turning in the drive behind me. I parked the Chev, got out and started toward it. Then I stopped.

Headlights bathed me. The car stopped and somebody got out

"Jim? Jim?"

It was Webster.

I just stood there. He came over.

"I thought you were sick in bed?"

"I am. Just came from the doctor's." Sweat popped all over me. "He gave me some stuff."

"I see." He hesitated, reached in his jacket pocket "It's not too far out of my way. I thought you might like to have your wrist watch. I—brought it over."

I took it. "Thanks a lot I appreciate it"

"Well, you'd better go to bed, Jim."

I nodded and he went and drove off. For Christ's sake, he was a fool. No. He was being thoughtful. They're always thoughtful when you don't need them, never when you do. If I hadn't come in right when I had... so, now I had to see a doctor, because if anything ever broke, there'd go my alibi, which wasn't any too strong to begin with.

I tried to think. Everything was getting fouled up. I remembered a doctor not too far away. His name was Bucksly.

I got in the Chev and drove over there. His office was in his home. I rang the bell till he finally came, then told him I was sick as hell. It was my stomach.

He was an old bird, wearing steel-rimmed glasses, and he was very tired of everything. He gave me something and I paid him and drove home.

Coming down the hall to my room, the phone rang.

I went in the room, picked up the phone.

"Jim?"

I sat on the edge of the bed.

"Jim, you there?"

"Yes." It was Felice.

"You can come over now, if you want to. I think you'd better, right away. He's away tonight. Park someplace else, the next street behind the house. Hurry up, will you?"

She hung up.

I felt as if I were getting ready to be shot out of a cannon. As it turned out I wasn't far from wrong.

Five...

Well, she had eyes like a cat, all right.

I parked the car a block over behind her place, on the opposite side of the street, halfway between two houses, by some other cars. There was a vacant lot behind the place next to hers. I drifted into the trees, the black shadows of the lot. There was a hot sensation inside me and I wanted her so bad, it had me nuts. I broke through a tall, thick hedge into her backyard.

It was a whisper. "Over here, Jim."

I saw her. She wore a white blouse flared open at the throat, tucked tightly into the slim waist of a dun black skirt that showed everything she had. She wore white pumps and sheer black hose, and her black hair was brushed so it shone with sparkling highlights from a lamp inside the house. The light from the lamp glowed in a rectangle on the lawn, and Felice stood in the middle, so the light bathed her whole body. It was reddish light. She'd set a stage.

"Hi," she said.

There was that flat voice. She had the open neck of the blouse arranged so I could see the round swollen flesh. Her skirt was so tight, I'd never seen anything like it, and so thin you could see the white flesh of her thighs where her stockings ended, and the garter belt and the line of her panties.

She reached and held her thick black hair up away from her head, those dark lips spread and the white teeth gleaming with an expression that was pure animal. She turned slowly and let the red light shine on her back. The firm well-defined buttocks moved tightly. She let her hair fall.

"Well?" she whispered.

I took one step, caught her waist, and dragged her to me. She was utterly still for one instant.

She spoke in a kind of hiss. "You've got to rape me, you hear? That's how I want it. Rape me." She whispered it. "Chase me into the house, Jim. Tear my clothes off, and rape me."

I stared at her.

"Now," she said. "Catch me."

She turned her face up to mine. She looked savage and then she kneed me. She writhed free.

I snared her blouse with my fingers. She tore away, started toward the back porch. She turned. Her hair flopped over one side of her face.

"Come on, damn you! Come on!"

I started for her. Her heels racked across the broad cement porch to the back door. She opened the screen door and half crouched.

"I'll scream."

Part of the blouse had come out of the waist of her skirt. She whirled inside. I ripped the door back. She flung herself into the kitchen. The only light was a dim one over the stove.

"Hurry up."

There was agony in her voice.

"I won't scream loud, you. fool."

Well, she had me as crazy as she was. I caught her in one bound and grabbed her and twisted her around, pulled her up against me and kissed her. Her lips were tightly closed and she fought, trying to kick me. Her nails dug into my back. I got hold of her chin and forced her mouth open and kissed her. She tore her head away, gave a short tight scream, cursed me.

I got one hand on her blouse and ripped it down the front. She ran. The blouse tore in a long string. She got into the hall. I caught her and dragged her back, fighting with her every inch of the way.

"You bastard," she yelled.

It was what she wanted. I caught my fingers in her bra, gave it a yank, and it ripped off. She kicked me in the shin. I got hold of the hem of her skirt and tried to pull it up. I thought she'd pass out with it. Her eyes half-mooned in her head. I held her and stripped every shred of the skirt off her. She backed up, broke free.

"Don't you touch me... don't you touch me... don't you touch me."

She turned and ran down the hall, really running. I went after her. We passed her bedroom with the reddish light I caught her and flung her against the hall wall. I snagged my hands in her pants and tried to rip them. They wouldn't rip. She clawed at me and fought like crazy. I gave a hell of a yank, and her pants split.

She yelled in my ear, broke clean, and ran down the hall into the bedroom. I got her in the bedroom under the red light

at the window. It glowed over the bed and gleamed into the huge dressing table mirror I'd seen before. Only she had moved the dressing table beside the bed. The mirror slanted a little and I knew exactly what she wanted me to do.

She had dressed for me and planned the whole thing. And she'd shot the poison into me.

"Hit me—hurt me."

I socked her. She went down.

"Kick me."

I kicked her and she cried out.

I grabbed her and flung her across the room and she smashed against the wall. I tore my belt buckle loose. She moaned. Her eyes were black holes in her head. They half-mooned again, the whites in an upside-down crescent

"No—no." She cringed against the wall.

I slapped her face, then flung her across the room toward the bed. She sprawled on it on her back, took one quick savage glance at the mirror, then just lay there, watching it.

The red lamplight played in the mirror, glowing across me as I came toward her on the bed.

She squirmed, looking in the mirror, both hands up in claws. Her knees lifted. Her legs opened.

"No—no," she said into the mirror.

I raped her.

We lay plastered together.

"You're mine," she said. "I hate you and you're mine."

Her dark eyes stared at me, serene within their own dark doom.

"Felice. You Spanish bitch."

"*Si. Para siempre.* How did you guess?"

I knew she could make me forget.

Six...

We lay there. The clock ticked somewhere.

"I've asked George, she said. "But he gets all red and blotchy in the face and just stands there."

I said nothing: The clock ticked in the silence.

"How'd you know I was Spanish?"

"I wanted it to be, I think."

I didn't say it was as far from blonde memory as I could get. And truly beautiful of its kind.

"I'm not, really," she said. "My father came from Brazil, a small city up the Amazon."

"That explains some things."

"You fool." She banged her small fist on my chest.

We lay there. I looked at the ceiling and tried to remember, but the ceiling was just a ceiling now, no matter how hard I tried. I pulled Felice closer to me.

She said, "My mother came from Havana. That's in Cuba. Ha-ba-na."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen. I'm not really a bitch, but I love having you call me that. They met in Key West. Then they moved to Tampa, that's in Florida. I was born there. We lived in a part of Tampa called Ybor City. So, you see? I'm American. I had to work on my voice, though—I had to change it."

"Think I know what you mean."

"I didn't want people to know I flattened it out, forced myself to talk in a monotone. But you should hear me if I get angry."

"You have a temper?"

She laughed, but said nothing.

"How long you been married?"

"Two years." Her voice was flat. "Crazy, isn't it? He was in Tampa, some sort of convention, and I met him." There was that hiss, that lisp—only it was really a part of her language background that she'd never rid herself of.

"What'd you say in Spanish a while ago?"

"Forever." She twisted and leaned on one arm, looking at me, the thick hair tumbling on me. "He came to this convention. I met him at the hotel."

"Oh."

"Yes. That's right. I found out he was a banker, so I hooked him. I didn't look fifteen, and he was there for two months, and I told him I was going to have a baby, see?" She nodded. "That's right. But he wanted to marry me, anyway. I told him how old I was and he flipped. Poor George. Because, you see—?" She spoke very rapidly, leaning over me. "I couldn't have a baby, because I'd already had myself fixed."

"What?"

"That's right I fooled him. Because I'd already had a baby, and I never wanted another, never." Her voice went very flat. "I had myself fixed like a cat." She snuggled against me. "He came to my parents and told them he wanted to marry me. We were already married. I told him I'd raise plenty hell if he didn't. So he told my father. My father was going to kill him."

I said nothing.

"My mother wept and tore her hair. They're extremely demonstrative. Me, too."

"I noticed."

"After all the weeping and hair-tearing quieted down, we had a big feast and celebrated. George got their blessing. We went to church and my uncle was there. Then, George and I came home. Here."

She got out of bed and spit on the floor. She could spit very well. "Home," she said. She did it again, and got back in bed and snuggled close.

"And now?" I said.

"And now, I go through hell." Her voice changed. "He's a square jerk, George is. I hate him," she said softly. "I hate his guts." She lay there, then said, "That bank, working in that bank. You can smell the money on his hands when he comes home. I mean it I've smelt money on his hands."

"Where is he now?"

"He went to Schenectady. A meeting. He'll be back in the morning." She looked at the window. It was paling. "It's nearly morning, now—what you know." She got up and turned off the bedroom light and pushed the dressing table back against the wall. It squeaked on castors, across the hardwood floor.

The hours of night had gone bang.

She climbed back in bed. "You don't know how I hate him," she said. "He won't give me anything. He won't do what you

did to me. I have to sneak out on him—*sneak*. I'm his doll, you see? That's what he calls me. 'Doll. Doll, you look positively ravishing. Doll, my sweet little Doll, just sit there Doll and let me look at you.' If I'm his goddamned doll, then why in hell don't he play with me?" She began to breathe that way again. "And you're big," she said softly. "I went crazy when I saw you at the store. I've dreamed of you."

It was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, "So I worked it all out"

I sensed something, but didn't know what. The clock ticked. My left hand was on her right thigh and I felt goosepimples form under my touch.

"Jim?"

"Yes."

"I know a lot about you. More than you'd think. I know you want money. You shouldn't be living in this damned town. Neither should I. I know you like me." She paused. "I know you have nine hundred dollars you got for robbing the liquor store where you work. I know you sold it to Jack Solenoren, working with Sy Krueger, see? I know even about you breaking into the store, afterward. I was parked right across the street. You had me worried when that cop chased you. What became of him, anyway?"

I just lay there like a stone.

"You took an awful chance, then," she said.

I sat half up and stared at her.

She looked at me from the sides of her eyes. "So, you see what I could do if I wanted?"

"How did you know this?"

"Sy told me. He's an old boy friend, Jim. And, Jim, I was at that party, at Solengren's. I saw you drive in, and park out behind the garages. I know plenty about Sy's deals. So I asked him. He's told me lots."

"How'd you get him to tell you who I was?"

I was plenty mad, and cramped up inside.

She smiled. "For a favor."

I said nothing.

"You know what?" she said.

I sat there.

"Well, you're going to help me. Together we can do anything. I've figured it all out."

"And what have you figured out?" I said.

"We're going to rob the bank and kill my husband."

I watched her. She was nuts.

"That's right, Jim. It'll be over a million dollars, at the very least—a million. And listen," she went on. "It's so easy, you'll flip. You'll just flip right through the roof."

She laughed softly, then ran one smooth finger across my lips.

"It'll be real kicks with you, honey," she said.

Seven...

She was a juvenile delinquent with a Spanish tinge, and she was absolutely out of her mind.

I slid off the bed and broke a record getting dressed.

She regarded me soberly.

Small change tumbled from a pocket and scattered all over the floor.

"Money, honey," she said. "Hear that sound?"

I didn't even bother to pick it up. I rammed my tie into my pocket, and snagged my jacket.

I looked at her. She watched the ceiling.

She had the sheet pulled to her chin. The black hair fanned out over the pillow, and a small strand was in her mouth. Her fingertips showed like eight neat splats of blood across the top of the white sheet

"You're out of your cotton-picking mind," I said. "Don't call me—I'll call you."

I got out of there. In the car, I lit a cigarette, and drove home. I went to my room and locked the door. Then I sat on the bed and relit the cigarette that was still stuck in my stupid face.

I sat there.

Because, brother, she had meant it. She meant every damned word of it Solid, Jack—right up the back.

The phone rang.

"Jim? About today—are you...?"

Webster. I slammed the phone in his face.

I sat there, dizzy with it.

I sat there for a solid half hour, without moving. The cigarette burned my lip. I spat it out on the floor.

The phone rang. She came on like velvet.

"All right, darling. You've had long enough to think about it. I've showered and dressed and brushed my hair, and put on lipstick. I'm wearing a rather severe black outfit. You know? The car's in the drive. Now, all I have to do is drive downtown, to Police Headquarters, you see? The Chief of Police is a very

close friend of ours. I use the term advisedly. I'm now once again a mature woman, wife of George Anderson, who is the assistant cashier at the *City Trust*. The Chief of Police is Richard Staddard, and—you won't believe this, I know, but it's the truth—he was with me last night out at..."

"Felice."

"I knew you were hip, Jim. I just knew."

"I'll come over."

"Not so fast. You go to work. You tell your boss you're feeling fine. Exactly twenty minutes from right now—look at your watch, darling."

I scrambled for my watch. I'd put it in my jacket pocket after Webster gave it to me last night.

"Hold on."

I found it

"Okay," I said.

"Check the watch. Synchronize when I say the word. All right, seven thirty-two. Now, in twenty minutes, the phone will ring at the store. Mary Thornbush, remember? You'll make the delivery."

"Not on Saturday. Another guy always on Saturday makes..."

"This Saturday you make the delivery."

"The store doesn't officially open till eight-thirty."

"Twenty minutes."

She hung up.

I sat there. I lurched up and dropped the watch. It cracked on the floor as I grabbed for it. I stepped on it. I kicked it across the room and got out of there.

"No. I feel much better. It must've been the maid," I told Webster. "Why the hell would I hang up?"

"Well, I sure wasn't going to call back. You were canned. I mean it, Jim. After all, an employee—that's no way to act."

"It wasn't me."

I had three minutes. The store was closed. We weren't allowed to sell anything for over a half an hour.

"I didn't think you had maid service," Webster said.

"The owner. The owner's wife, that is. Mrs. Fisher," I said. "She's the owner's wife. She changes the linen on Saturdays."

"You sure you feel well enough to work?"

"I feel all right. The doc fixed me up."

"Haven't you noticed anything?"

The robbery! Jesus Christ the robbery!

I hemmed and hawed and said I'd noticed the mess, all right, but hadn't had a chance to ask him. He explained.

"So the police just left," he said. "We were sure robbed, last night." He began to relax. "They've already got a lead. An officer named Daggerdy chased somebody out back, and got knocked on the head. Bad fight. They think whoever it was had something to do with this."

"But they have a lead?"

"Well, that's their lead."

"My God, imagine. Robbed"

"It happens in this business. They didn't go for the cash register. Just took liquor. The best, too." He shook his head. Time was running out. She would call any second. Neither Joe nor Roy had shown, yet I walked around and tisked and tusked about the mess things were in.

Webster said, "The police think they were drunk. They must've been. Why else would they break bottles this way?"

I glanced at the big electric clock on the wall.

7:52.

The phone rang.

Webster started for it. I don't know how I managed it. I bumped him, said, "Sorry," tripped, and caught the phone.

"Happytime Package Store."

"How nice. This is Mary Thornbush. You have my address, I think. Passion Plaza? Oh, it's you, Richard, honey! I didn't think you'd answer the phone at headquarters, with all those handsome officers—I'm a bit hysterical, Dick, don't mind me. Sorry I had to run out on you last night—a horrible thing happened. I want to report a rape, clothes all torn, lying all over the house. Yes, me! You know this store—this liquor store that was broken into last night? Well, the strangest thing happened—to me..."

"Two, you say?" I said.

"Yes, two. One of each."

"Each what?"

"Body and soul, darling. C O. D. The quart size, too, please. None of those fifths for me. *Pronto!*"

She hung up.

She had rolled the "r" beautifully.

"I can *not* help it," Webster said. "We can't take the chance. I don't give a damn what they say. The store's not officially open for over a half an hour. You should have told them. I tried to motion to you when you were on the phone. And, anyway," he said, "I want you here to take over for me while I'm out. Got to run down to headquarters and give them a list of everything."

"Look," I said. I spoke with immense patience I didn't feel. "This order was for a case—a case of the best champagne in the joint. And a case of Scotch. Get it? Ned," I said. "For Christ's sake, you can't afford to let an order like that slip through your fingers. They want it right now."

"I'll take the order. What's the address?"

"You've got to see the police, remember? This is your store. It was robbed. You've got to take care of things. Now, I know you're disturbed. But that champagne never moves, you know that."

"It moved last night."

"I'll run the order over. By the time I get there, we won't be breaking any law. Besides—" I couldn't think of anything else to say. If he insisted, I'd just tell him I forgot to write down the address.

"All right. I'll have to wait. I can't see why Roy and Joe aren't on time."

I got it, then. He'd suddenly become important, because his store was robbed during the night and he had to visit headquarters.

I tossed two cases into the Volks, and drove away from there. Webster was in the store room making a list

"They got away with an awful lot" he said.

"What the hell—you're insured, aren't you?"

He just looked at me and scratched his head with his pencil. Big business.

I drove across town and it felt as if I had a rat gnawing inside me. I couldn't think at all.

She answered the door just as I'd left her.

Nude.

Eight...

Inside, I put the two cases of liquor on the floor.

"You see?" she said. She ran her hands down her bare breasts and hips. "I was only fooling over the phone."

Right then I felt like really beating the hell out of her. "Don't ever fool again—not with me."

She saw something in my eyes.

"I just want you to know how it is with you and me, Jim. How it'll always be."

The hell of it was, maybe she was right.

Then, I don't know. Her mouth was on mine and mine was on hers, and her tongue went down my throat, and she was in my arms, and then we were on one of the red rag rugs. She kept biting my chin. I had both hands snarled in her thick hair.

"Pull my hair. Pull it."

I pulled her hair.

"Pull it hard—*damn you!*"

She lay beside me on the rug. We lit cigarettes and smoked. She was still breathing fast as she started to talk. She spoke in a monotone like a talking machine that had to say what it had to say because a button had been punched.

"It was my uncle," she said. "I was thirteen and he would come up from Havana to stay with us sometimes. His name is Manual—a big man, huge, and always laughing. Big white teeth, big hands. He would play with me when he came, and when my parents weren't looking he played rough. But he could be gentle, too. I knew enough. I knew what he wanted to do—only I didn't know how he wanted to do it. I just knew it would happen sometime. Because he'd hold me on his lap and I could tell, his hands up my dress, till he had me crazy, and whispering, 'Our secret li'l game, thees thin', hey? Wow!' He would say, 'Wow!' then he would whisper it with his hand in my pants, 'Don' never tol' your momma or poppa.' He had me crazy, I tell you. I couldn't help it. What he did felt so good—and when I was alone I'd think of him and pretend it was him,

my uncle Manual in bed with me nights. He had me out of my head—and I couldn't keep my hands off myself, and his wife would come sometimes with him, and she was a slat just a dirty old slat. Often she'd have a black eye and bruises, or a bandage. She looked pooped all the time. My parents said she was lazy. They said uncle Manual worked so hard, and she didn't do anything but drink the wine, drunk all the time. My mother and father were two people I hated. They wouldn't let me out. I was burning to get out all the time, and especially after Manual came to visit, because Jesus, you know—the boys would come to my window, even, and whisper it. It was like they could smell it or something. They'd whisper the word at the window. I was always dodging my mother and father. *I hate them!* Both of them! And Manual would come. Only we were never alone in the house. It was pure hell. Thirteen—me, thirteen—with the worse case of the hots you ever saw, holding me on his lap and getting me in a corner, just out of sight of them. My God, when I think of it even now—after we—but... so one time I was alone in the house, and he came with his wife. Her name was Maria, and she had another black eye. It was Sunday. My parents were at church and I'd said I was sick, so I could just be alone... and he came with his wife." She looked at me, pale and taking long drags on the cigarette. "When he saw I was alone, he didn't wait for anything—nothing. Right in front of his wife. I mean, she insisted, too—imagine. I mean, he beat me, he beat the living hell out of me, chasing me all over the house with Maria running after us, chewing on a knuckle and scratching herself. He didn't say a word, nothing—he just beat me. He'd catch me and feel me and throw me across the room. Then, finally, he got me and tore my clothes off. I mean, just ripped them into tatters, you see? That's right. I was scared out of my mind. Scared so I couldn't even yell. I just made screams like in a dream when you want to scream only nothing happens. He got me on my bed and raped me with Maria standing there scratching and chewing her knuckle, watching. And he was like an ape, like an animal—and I looked over by the door, and my mother and father stood there, home from church. I'd been scared. Well, right then I began to like it I went crazy—I flipped, it was so good. And I looked at them standing in the doorway, and my father ran cursing and tried to pull uncle Manual off me, but I hung on with all my might. He hit uncle Manual with a lamp, over the head. But uncle Manual kept right on, and I clung to him. And he got up, standing up, and I still clung to him. With Maria chewing on her knuckle and scratching away, watching. Then it was over. Uncle Manual and my father had a big fight I never saw my uncle again. They kept me in the house. Uncle Manual went back to

Havana. That's all I know. And right then was when I began slipping out the window nights. And that's when I had a baby, too. Manual's baby. At thirteen. So I never wanted any more babies—so there was a doctor—a colored doctor, who liked little white girls, see? I wasn't so little, though, not really. I really grew fast. So when I was fifteen, I'd already got money from the doctor—he was really a very nice man—for letting him do what he wanted to do. And I asked him to fix it so I couldn't have any babies. And he did. Are you mad at me now?"

"No."

"Good. I'd better get dressed."

She jumped up and ran down the hall to her bedroom. I followed and sat on the bed. My gaze touched the floor. I saw large grooves in the hardwood where the dressing table had been pulled out time and time again.

"What about the mirror?" I said.

"I don't know. All I know's I like the mirror. I mean, you know, when it's really right. If I'm all messed up inside, I feel better then. I feel perfect. They can all go to hell."

"I know about the mirror, Felice."

"I don't want to know anything about it."

"All right"

I could see her looking into the mirror and I knew who she was and what she saw from where she stood in the doorway of her bedroom, not so long ago, and what she felt, and I knew that for Felice, every day was another possible Sunday with her mother and father suddenly home from church...

It didn't take her long to dress. She skinned bare-assed into tight white Capri pants, curled her toes and thrust them into black pumps, expelled her breath, held it and yanked on a black jersey. Then she turned, leaned slightly so it stuck out marvelously, picked up a brush from her dressing table and began brushing her hair in the mirror, grabbing her hair and brushing savagely.

"Always a hundred times, every morning and night," she said. "My mother taught me."

I sat there and watched. She didn't speak. She counted to a hundred. She put the brush down. Her hair was gorgeous. She stood directly in front of me.

"It's not going to be hard, Jim, you'll see. They have six vaults, but only one of them's the cash vault"

"It's something else you said, too."

"Yes. Kill him."

I stared at her.

"I couldn't get a divorce. He won't hear of it. Besides, he's Catholic, and you can't. Anyway, that's how it's got to be. I don't want a divorce. I want the money, and I'm going to have it. I hate him." She paused, then said, "And when I say a million dollars, that's exactly what I mean."

"A million dollars. Talk sense, will you?"

She spoke grimly. "There's always over a million in cash in the cash vault. The insurance company has a clause in the policy that tells exactly how much they can have. I know all about it. The other vaults are record vaults. They're more valuable than the cash vault but not to us. They don't mean a damn thing to us. And the City Trust can have one million and one half dollars in the cash vault. And most of the time that's what's there. A million and a half, see?"

I sat there. I was stupid to be sitting here. I knew that. It was just words. A million and a half dollars. Meaningless. All right A million and a half Easter eggs. A million and a half razor blades. A million and a half condoms hanging on a clothes line. A million and a half bottles. A million and a half pin-heads.

"Think about it till it means something," she said.

"I've been thinking about it for over a year."

A million dollars, I thought. Jesus Christ.

"You don't rob banks," I said. "It isn't done any more."

"Like hell. When I got to know you a little, I said to myself, 'He's the one—he's going to help me do it.' "

She leaned, kissed me quickly, then looked in the mirror. She snatched a lipstick up, ripped it open—*slash—slash*—capped it—*oomph-ahh*—and her lips were perfect.

"Jesus Christ," I said stupidly. I looked at her. "Why kill him?" I said.

"Because that's how it's got to be. He'll be alone and the vault will be open. All alone. Poor George. See?"

I said the obvious thing. "Why d'you need me?"

Her face was deadly serious. "It should be plain. I can't do this myself. I couldn't just trust anybody. I had to be careful. I know I'm all right with you—even without the liquor store thing. That just fell in my lap." Her tone changed, still very serious, but desperate and faintly pleading, too—but strong. "I need someone to help me think. I've worked out a lot of angles, but I'm not sure it's perfect. It's got to be right. I need somebody strong—and—" she paused—"I just need you, Jim."

"Felice."

"Uh-huh."

"You mean he's in the bank alone with the vault open?"

I could feel something inside me. I didn't like it. But there it was.

"Yes," she said. "And I've been in the vault at night alone, too. With him out there at his desk. I've stood there and smelt the money. You can really smell it. It's like perfume."

A million dollars. One million.

Suddenly, I couldn't help my mind beginning to work.

"The money just doesn't lie there on the floor like autumn leaves," I said.

"These are green leaves, darling, remember? Green leaves don't fall off the trees. They have to be picked off."

I tried to visualize a bank vault I got as close to it as the front door with a large combination and a handle. It was closed. Tight.

She plumped down on the bed. "The money's in individual vaults inside the main vault itself. Each teller has his own money to account for. Number one teller maybe has a hundred and fifty, to maybe three hundred thousand dollars in his vault. Number two or three tellers, they have about thirty-five, forty thousand each. And so on."

"And these individual vaults are closed?"

"Yes."

"Combinations?"

"Yes."

"Then how the hell!"

"I looked at them very closely, Jim. I couldn't open them. It takes strength. You'd have to rip the doors off. Knock off the combinations with a hammer. Something. Tear them open." She felt of my arm. "You could do it with your fingernail, darling."

I stood up. She leaned back on the bed on her elbows.

"Seriously, Jim. It's true. You would be able to do it. I talked with George about it, many times. He said they could be opened easily. When George says something, he really means it, with all his inky heart. If he says it's a million and a half dollars, that's what it is. Exactly. You or me, any sane person, wouldn't give a damn about a few dollars, a few thousand—when speaking of this much. But in a bank, when they say a million and a half, that's what they mean, to the penny."

I looked at her, with this thing inside me.

"Think of it," she said. "They'll sit up half the night for three cents."

I kept hearing my voice. "He just sits there at night with the cash vault open."

"I've told you."

"They allow that?"

"Certainly."

"I thought they had guards."

"They do, working hours."

"It's crazy."

"Accept it, will you?"

"All right. He's alone. The vault's open. It's at night." I paused. "Sure. The front doors of the bank are locked."

"George has keys." She tipped her lips with her tongue. "He's the assistant cashier. He has a key to everything. He's my husband. We just take the key."

"Stop right there," I said. I wanted to laugh in her face. "You've thought this out?"

"I've thought a lot about it."

"Well, you haven't," I told her. Excitement drove into me. "You haven't thought out a damned thing. You can't use his key. What the hell's he doing all this time?"

"He's lying on the floor, dead."

I wanted to stop. I wanted to go. Stop talking and thinking and go home. I couldn't. My brain worked like mad. It had hold of this thing like a starved mongrel. It ran like a machine. It ticked one thing right off after another as easily as you please.

My voice was loud, harsh. "You ever think of the law?" I said. "Yes, the law. That insurance company you mentioned, they have guys who are like fiends—madmen. Rob a bank. Murder a man..."

I stood there.

"Yes?" she said. "Go on."

I smeared one hand across my face. My heart was socking away like mad. She had to be crazy. I had to be crazy.

She got up suddenly, stood listening. She turned and ran out of the room and down the hall.

"Him. It's George. Get out here, in the living room."

I went out there fast

"Stand there," she said. "You just brought that stuff"

That stuff. A case of champagne and a case of whisky and sixteen bottles of cognac in the cabinet and one in the kitchen,

probably, and beer in the refrigerator, and Christ only knew what else jabbed around under mattresses or behind pictures.

I was stunned. But I saw how she looked. I took over.

"Okay." I looked out the window. He was paying a cab driver, eyeing the Volks. He carried a heavy briefcase. "When he comes in, I'll be insisting you ordered this. You deny it."

"Are you going to help me?" Her voice was flat grim. I looked at her. You can say all you want but she meant every word of what she said. She was dead earnest in white Capri pants. No matter what I would say, no matter what I would do—it would mean yes.

"I've got to think," I said. "Only no killing."

She said nothing. I spoke.

"When he comes in, go along with me. Call me anything you want."

"I might slip."

A door slammed.

"Get hold of yourself," I said.

"I'm all right. But if you don't stand still he'll think you've got fleas."

"Shut up."

The door opened.

She made a gesture with her hand. If he saw it we were cooked, right there.

Nine...

"Doll? What's this?"

"George, darling."

"Look, lady," I said, pretending not to pay him any attention, but seeing him plainly. "I have fine hearing. You said, 'Anderson,' and your name's Anderson."

I had my receipt book and a pencil in my hand. He set down the briefcase, took off a pearl grey felt hat with a white silk band, walked over to her, and I thought he was going to kiss her. Instead, he patted her shoulder.

He was a big man, over six feet with broad shoulders, wearing a charcoal gray suit. He wore horn-rimmed glasses. He took them off with an emphatic movement and put them in his breast pocket. He had a hand like a hefty picnic ham. I had formed a picture in my mind of George Anderson, from a distance. The distance had been too great.

Felice winked at me with her left eye. "It's a mix-up, George. A silly mix-up." She flipped her hand out. "This is my husband. George Anderson. He works at the bank, the City Trust"

I nodded.

He lifted his eyebrows. He had very heavy eyebrows and was extremely tired of lifting them at ignorant dopes like myself. Just the same it was an impressive gesture, and he had it down pat.

"What's the trouble?" he said.

She explained I had delivered two cases of liquor and that she hadn't ordered them. "He has the wrong Anderson," she said. "It's probably a northside address, instead of south."

He was tired. "Well, we'll straighten this right out."

He cleared his throat. Glass tinkled from the walnut cabinet across the room. He had toned his voice down. He was big and anything but dumb. He had a jaw like a rock. His eyes looked at you and said, "You're guilty." I felt disconcerted.

He said, "It's quite simple. Mrs. Anderson said she didn't order this. And you, sir—what do you say?"

I shrugged.

"All right" he said. "It's as simple as that."

His head was topped with thick, oiled yellow hair. His face was dark red and it was high blood pressure, but he was the type born with it. He would not die because of it. He took a stride toward me. He belonged in the North Woods, with a double-bitted axe.

"What is George doing all this time?"

"Lying dead on the floor."

Sure.

"You heard what he said," Felice said. "Now, clear out."

"I guess it's a mistake," I said.

George grunted. "Need some help getting those two cases out of this house? Or will you be able to handle the job by yourself?" He spoke slowly and very gently. His normal tone would sound as if he were mad.

"I can make it."

I made it.

Felice closed the door. As she did so, she stuck her tongue out and wiggled the tip at me. He called to her from inside:

"Doll? I'm famished, simply famished. What you say to a good big breakfast?"

I went down the walk to the Volks.

Fifteen minutes later I was seated on the edge of my bed in my room, with the two cases of liquor on the floor by my feet. I wrote out a receipt for the liquor, counted out the cash from my wallet. I would have to pay for them. I fixed a glass of absinthe on the rocks, poured half of it down, and gagged slightly.

"One million dollars," I said. I whispered it, and the walls whispered back, "One million dollars."

I drank off the absinthe.

I'd made up my mind. She was nuts. The hell with the whole thing.

It didn't start eating at me again till late in the afternoon. There was a lot of work at The Happytime. First there were broken bottles. It goes to show you something, because I'd made the mess in the store, and here I was cleaning it up.

She was nuts.

She wanted to be raped.

She wanted me to rip the clothes off her and rape her.

"Hit me—hurt me."

Jesus.

I was in the store room, still cleaning up a little after three in the afternoon when I got this feeling. I stood there like a statue. The whole business raced through my mind. I was hypnotized. Then it broke through.

It was the wildest damned excitement I'd ever experienced. All I could see was Felice. It was a black excitement like hot syrup, maybe mixed with cocaine. Answers to problems began to work themselves out with the ease of grease. She hadn't worked anything out. She was stumbling in the dark.

But I wasn't.

All the time I'd been refusing to think of her, and it, I'd solved half the job. I had to cool off.

"Jim? What's the matter?"

It was Webster. "Nothing."

"You in a daze, or something?"

"Yeah. Daze. You should be in half such a daze as I'm in, Web, old kid."

The thing was I had visualized that million dollars.

I looked at Webster. "I'm okay. Touch of dizziness. Probably something the doc gave me."

"I want to talk to you about that."

I looked him straight in the eye.

He said, "What was the name of that doctor? The police want it."

The word "police" was like a leather gouge in my gut. "Bucksly," I said. "Dr. Carl Bucksly."

I had to talk to Felice.

"Address?"

"What's all this about?"

"The police are checking you out."

"What?"

"It's routine. They're checking everybody. Even me."

It really got me. I suppose it'd been in the back of my mind all the time. They didn't have anything. But I couldn't take one chance, not one. I gave him Bucksly's address.

"Wish I could help somehow, Ned. It tees me off. It's been a rotten job, cleaning up after them."

Webster went away.

I had to see Felice. Because I had the first part of it—a part, anyway. She was going to vanish, right off the face of the earth.

Then, after a little bit, I would vanish, too.

It all began to come to me. I took a break and called her from the corner drugstore phone booth. My feet were an inch off the floor. Either that or I was numb to my knees.

"I've got to see you right away," I said. "And I can't come out there. They'll think you're running a disorderly house or an illegal bar."

She broke in. "I can't possibly see you till Monday. George is outside the house now, he'll be right back in. He wants to drive up the river, stay someplace over Sunday, and fish. He wants to take me fishing. Ugh."

"Got to be before Monday."

"You've been thinking."

Her voice was touched with excitement.

"I mean it, Felice."

"All right, I'll do something. I'll call you."

"When?"

"I have no idea. George is persistent."

"I noticed that. Give me an idea when you'll call."

"I can't. He's coming, right now." She was whispering. "I've got to hang up."

I started to say good-by. She was gone. I stood there in the booth and perspired. And I knew something. Every single thing had to be worked out in minute detail, and some of it was coming to me, bit by bit. Every loophole had to be found. It was hazy, but I knew it was all there. If we were going to do this it was going to be right, straight down the line. Not one flaw. Every tiny thing had to be sweated over, methodically. I knew it might drive me nuts, but it had to be done and done right.

I began to think of birth certificates. False ones. At least two new addresses. Passports. Europe. I slowed down. As I realized all the things that had to be covered, I really began to sweat. But ideas cropped up with demoniac persistence. Because it absolutely had to be that there wasn't a single item left, not one infinitesimal point that could possibly trip us up. Not only trip us up, but even make anybody consider we'd done anything.

When we vanished, we would really vanish.

She would have to vanish first. Then there would be no possible way to attach her to the bank or to George, or to anything. Most of all, to me.

We were going to do it.

We were going to rob that bank of a million dollars.

Because I believed her.

But one thing had me worried.

George Anderson.

Murder wasn't my line.

Then I thought, Yeah. But there's a price tag on everything.
And the cost of this dream is a million dollars.

Ten...

Back at the store, I hopped cars, watched the clock, and worried about the police. They had to investigate. But this close, on me, wanting the doctor's name. I didn't like it.

I felt sure the cop I'd hit over the head with the jack handle hadn't seen my face. But you never know.

And why didn't Felice call?

Maybe George insisted she go with him, fishing.

Thinking that got me bad. I had to see her.

We were busy then, with a rush.

Roy Taft was out on deliveries. Webster was at the counter. Joe Yeates and I took care of cars in the tunnel.

This flashy white 190-SL with the top down, woofed up beside where I stood. A man was driving. A real drunk blonde sat next to him. Orange lipstick was slobbered around her mouth as if she'd been hit in the face with a wet hamburger. She wore a wrinkled red playsuit with a snapped strap.

Then, just as I recognized the guy with the leering mouthful of teeth under the straw sports-car cap, and big green sunglasses, he shouted:

"Hey, Phalen! You crazy old mucker—heard your store was robbed last night. A hell of a thing."

It was Sy Krueger, living it up. I didn't welcome seeing that narrow, neat, wise-featured face. He chuckled, his sharp lipstick-stained silk shirt very neat across sharp shoulders. He looked as neat as a brand new partly folded clasp knife.

I looked at him. "Where'd you hear that?" I wanted to say plenty to him, and couldn't say anything about what he'd told Felice.

He started to speak. He'd been drinking but had it under control.

"You probably read it in the paper," I said.

"Sure, that's right."

"It wasn't in the morning paper. The evening paper's not out yet."

The girl giggled.

"Take it easy," he said softly. "I didn't mean anything." Then he really slipped. "What you got going with this Anderson babe? I used to know Felice. She was asking me a lot about you."

His neat hand with an expensive ring on the pinky, rested on the edge of the car door. I leaned on the hand with the heel of my hand and brought my feet off the ground.

He writhed and sweat spread on his suddenly red face. He moaned. I thought he'd scream. But Joe Yeates was only a few feet in front of the car.

Sy Krueger knew he had goofed. He was in blind agony, tears streaming from under the sun-glasses, his teeth sunk into his lower lip.

"You probably heard it around town," I said.

"Yes," Krueger gasped. "In town."

I stepped away. "What'll you have?"

He held his left hand in his right. It might not work for a few days, maybe three weeks, because it takes that long for bone to mend. And I had felt two small definite dull clicks. The top of a 190-SL door isn't the most comfortable place to rest your hand with two hundred and forty pounds on top of it, especially if the two-forty jounces.

He was stupid. "C'mon," I said. "What'll it be?"

The blonde came to life. She'd seen nothing. "Ho'ey-pie," she said. "S'pose y'givesh a bo'le o' S'leny's—f'ft'—gin. 'n' qui' foo'in' 'roun' wish—ri'?"

She went into a fit of violent giggles which disintegrated into hiccups, which gave way to coughing, just before she put her head between her lush grass-stained knees and puked unhappily all over the floor of the car.

"Dam 'n' shi'!" she gasped.

Krueger's hand was already swelling. "You bastard," he said with a near sob.

I leaned close. "Next time it'll be your face."

He drove away fast. The blonde's head snapped back over the seat lolling, and strings of thick spider webs spun purling from her open mouth.

I looked at the clock. Why the hell didn't she phone?

Evening came on. Maybe she wouldn't call the store. Maybe she figured that wasn't wise. Somebody might catch her voice. I couldn't take every call, and I was so nervous I didn't know what to do. Suddenly this whole thing had become very immediate. And she was inside me. She had her fingernails right in my guts.

There'd been all the years since I'd been old enough to think with the Great American Dream riding me hard; have a million dollars. Worth a Million. A millionaire. And I had always wanted money with all my heart and mind, before Jinny... and after Jinny.

She just didn't call. It was after seven-thirty. I couldn't stand it any more.

"Ned? I forced myself to come in today. I knew you'd need me. But I'm still sick. I feel like hell. I'm going home. I'll be okay by Monday."

It broke his heart. But I must have looked rocky from nerves.

I went home. I wanted to call her but it wasn't wise.

There was a police car in the parking area. Two men in plain clothes got out as I slid from under the wheel of the Chev.

"James Phalen?"

"Yes."

I had a real bad feeling.

One was a tall heavy-set bird, wearing a neat dark, lightweight suit, and a dark tie. He had a big round stolid face, with eyes that looked everywhere but at you. The other guy was small, thin, wiry, and smiling. He wore dark slacks, and carried a light jacket over his arm. A belly-gun was snapped to his belt, left side. He saw me look at it, and quickly slipped his jacket on. He had thin pale blond hair, and tiny pock marks on his cheeks. His mouth, I saw, was shaped forever into a smile, the corners turned up.

The big man said, "Mr. Phalen, could we speak with you?"

"Sure."

"Let's go up to your room. Okay?"

"All right."

They explained who they were. The big one said, "My name's Morgan. This is Sergeant Bliss."

"Hi," Bliss said.

"It won't take long," Morgan said. "Just routine."

"About the store, I guess, huh? The robbery?"

"That's right, Mr. Phalen."

We went up to the room.

"Pretty hot up here," I said.

"Hot everywhere, Mr. Phalen."

I remembered the two cases of liquor, sitting in there on the floor by the bed. It hit me like a hammer. I tried to think and

couldn't. There was no way to explain them. I obviously hadn't bought them to drink myself. I could have bought them for a friend. I began to sweat badly. There had been some of the very same stuff in the load I'd sold Krueger, and these birds had a list of what was stolen. Then my mind just went blank.

We were at the door. They looked at me. I unlocked it and entered. I didn't want to turn on a light I had to. I did.

The two cases of liquor were gone.

They stood there.

"Nice place you got," Sergeant Bliss said.

Now I looked at him, and felt a light touch of fear.

Then, I thought, Down Phalen. He just said that like you sometimes say, "Nice day," when it's pouring like hell.

But had they been in my room? Taken the liquor?

I opened a window and looked at the phone. "You've worked at the store for six months, Webster tells me," Morgan said.

"That's right"

"Well, we didn't want to ask Webster, because, after all, brother-in-law, and all—but maybe you'd tell us, Mr. Phalen. How about this character Yeates."

"Joe Yeates? No. He wouldn't have the nerve for such a thing."

"Well, it looks like an outside job, all right. But you have to consider every possibility."

They could come awfully close. It didn't help how I felt.

"If he was drunk?" Sergeant Bliss said. "He's plastered most of the time. He might think it'd be a hot idea to have a cache, y'know? I don't think he likes Webster much. He has a record of D and D's."

I convinced them that it couldn't be Joe Yeates. But I didn't like the way they took me into their confidence.

Morgan sighed. "Well, I guess that's about it, Elmer." He glanced at Bliss, then at me. "Sorry to have bothered you, Phalen."

"Forget it."

"By the way, how're you feeling now?"

"Rough. I came home from work. Suppose you knew I was sick last night."

"We talked with Doc Bucksly. We also talked with Mrs. Fisher, your landlady. She said you were here, all right."

Bliss grinned. "Say, can I have a drink of water?"

"Help yourself. Cold water in the refrigerator."

He went into the kitchenette. I heard him getting a drink. He came back smiling. "You sure do stock the booze, don't you?"

"I keep a little on hand."

"Yeah, well. Guess working in a liquor store," he said. "You ready, Will?"

Morgan nodded. Bliss smiled at me. The phone rang. It had to be Felice. They watched me, waiting.

I picked up the phone.

"All clear, darling," she said in a flat tone. "Tried to call you several times."

"Sorry," I said. "I feel rotten. Flu, or something. Like last night."

"What's the matter with you. You sure weren't sick last night and you know it. If you call that being sick, I'm moving to a hospital."

"That's right" I grinned at Morgan and Bliss. They nodded. Morgan looked bored. Bliss smiled.

"Oh," she said. "You can't talk—somebody—?"

"That's right."

"Can you get away? Everything all right?"

"Just a matter of time."

"All right Call me soon's you can. I'll wait."

"I'll be okay. Going to hit the sack."

She was gone.

"Sure," I said. "So long."

I shrugged. "Wish I could help, some way," I told the two cops. "I spent most of the day cleaning up the store. Maybe it was kids. They break things—make a mess?"

Morgan opened the door and stepped into the hall. Bliss said, "That is an idea, isn't it" He smiled brightly, and left.

For some reason, he worried me.

As soon as they were downstairs, I dialed Felice. "Can't talk now," I said. "Meet me on County Road two, where it forks toward Bridgedale. I'll wait."

"I'll be there, Jim."

I wanted her to meet me there for a reason. There was a place I wanted to check—a place that might be a perfect vanishing point.

I went into the kitchenette for a drink of water. The two cases of liquor were neatly stowed beside the sink. I remembered what Bliss had said. It jarred me. He'd seen these two cases,

but he hadn't mentioned seeing them. How had they got there? Then I knew. The landlady, Mrs. Fisher, must have cleaned the room and put them there.

I didn't know what to do. I poured some absinthe into a glass with a splash of water, and went to the window. The police car was leaving. I drank the absinthe. I lit a cigarette, waited a few minutes, keeping the excitement down.

Listen, Phalen, I thought. If you were under any suspicion at all, they wouldn't have left like they did.

Finally, I couldn't stand it I went downstairs, then turned and ran up again. I took two bottles of champagne and went down and knocked on the Fishers' door. Mrs. Fisher answered.

"Present for you," I said.

Her name was Gloria. She looked as if she slept with dogs. She had a pale, rouged face. Colorless hair, colorless eyes, colorless dress, and crimson lips with a breath you could rope a steer with. Somewhere along the line, she had misplaced herself and was always searching for the lost body, both fluttering hands poking at her dress, her hair, here and there, to see if she'd located anything yet. Her husband, Tom, was the guy I worried about.

"For me—you darling. Oh! Champagne."

Now to explain the two cases. "There's more where that came from, Glory." She insisted people call her Glory.

She snagged the two bottles and loved them up a bit. I wanted to get away and not see her husband. The bottles vanished to a table top.

"I did notice your saloon upstairs, you sweet thing," she said. She clawed my wrist a little, then poked between the lumpy mashed potatoes on her chest. Her eyes narrowed. She leaned forward and spoke and I nearly fell down. "You going to let me come to your saloon, honey?"

"I just stocked up a little," I said. "I've got to go. Under the weather. I don't want you to catch it."

"Were you going to kiss me?"

"Don't you tempt me." I'd be sick in another minute.

"Jim, you'd better get up some rent money. Tom's having a fit"

"I will."

"I mean it, Jim."

I managed to get out of there. In the car, I headed for the country, with a hundred things running through my mind. This

was the chance. I couldn't muff it. It seemed to crystallize inside me; you go through life and maybe once, if you're lucky as hell, you get a chance like this. If you're smart, you grab it. Only there couldn't be any rush. Think it through. If there's too big a loophole, then drop it flat.

I stopped the car. There was no sign of Felice at the fork to Bridgedale. It was dark and there was no moon.

I thought about those two cops. Then I thought about just the one. Elmer Bliss.

I heard a woosh. A car braked beside me with a light squeak of rubber.

"Hi, Jim."

I looked at her. Her face shone in the dash lights of the big Chrysler.

"Park that clunker of yours," she called. "We'll drive someplace."

I knew the place.

Eleven...

We sat in her car a minute. Finally, she said, "We can run over to Bridgedale. Huh?"

"No. We're going to mix business and pleasure."

"You're pretty sure of yourself."

"Drive straight on. Don't turn off. Get going, before we end up right here."

She had on a full silky pongee skirt and blouse. The blouse had a big flared collar open nearly to her belly-button. There was nothing under any of it. She wore no stockings. Just Felice, like hot silk all over, and heady with perfume that smelled like the taste of her tongue.

She pulled away, her mouth torn, and we went out of there like a bullet.

"Pull your skirt down."

Driving with her left hand, her foot gouging the gas, she pulled herself up a little, wriggled, and yanked her skirt down. Then she pushed the hair back from her face, and the wind caught it. The top was up on the car. She looked so terrific, I felt like dragging her across the seat and the hell with everything. Let the car smash.

She turned and smiled. I reached over and gave her a hell of a horse bite.

"Damn you."

The car swerved, dove crazily at the ditch. She yanked it back and we drove the other way, going seventy-five now. She hit me with her fist on the shoulder, looking at me, laughing.

"Watch it Felice."

She pulled the wheel. The car fish-tailed, tires screaming on asphalt. We were doing eighty-five, then ninety, ninety-five, then one hundred. She put the speedometer needle there and left it there like a rock.

We went through the night. There was a hiss, that was all.

"I come out sometimes and drive like this," she said. "And like this."

She turned all the lights off. We came through the night like a rocket. There was no moon. All you could see of the road

was a slightly paler grayish ribbon, doing a hundred miles an hour.

We came into a curve and she took it as lightly as a feather in a cross wind at high noon. I saw she could drive and let her go.

Then I saw the car coming at us up ahead. She didn't turn on the lights.

"The lights, Felice."

She began to laugh. She slammed the accelerator to the floor. The Chrysler surged and we swept down the road. I didn't dare reach for the lights. The other car came at us. Abruptly it saw us. It gave a violent lurch and went straight off the road, lurching into a field.

"All right," I said. "Slow down." Then I gave her hell. I really laid it on the line. She switched the lights back on and we drove along about forty-five. "Never again," I said. "It's bad enough us even out together. We can't take any chances. None. One slip and we drop the whole thing."

"Okay."

"And don't get mad."

"I'm not mad. Where we going?"

"Just drive." I patted her thigh. "It was fun," I said. "You handle a car good."

She looked at me with those black eyes.

In a little while we reached the place where I asked her to turn off, on a dirt road leading uphill.

"In here?"

"Yeah. It's called 'the old rock quarry' and some call it 'the canyon,' why?"

"You been here before?"

"Yes."

"Who with?"

"Nobody. What the devil d'you mean?"

"This is where you come with your girl when you want to punch her ticket," she said. "Were you ever here with anyone?"

"No." It was the truth. Wandering country roads, months before, I'd traveled through here. "You been here?" I said.

"Uh-huh. Want me to show you the spots?"

"It'd take all night, I suppose."

She laughed. "We're perfect for each other, Jim," she said. "We don't really give a damn, neither of us."

I said nothing. I told her where to drive. Huge boulders and rocks like houses towered on both sides of the road. The road was cut in the rock. It became narrower and we traveled higher up till there were rocks everywhere, and we were among winds that were cooler.

"Turn off, right here," I said.

"Across that slate?"

"Yes. Slow." She did. "Stop, now" She stopped.

"I can't see anything," she said.

I got out and went around and opened her door. Winds sliced across. They made her hair gush out and her skirt looked wet the way it formed against her thighs. "What a wind!" She yanked her skirt up and let the winds blow.

There was a little moon now I turned the headlights of the car off.

"Take my hand," I said, and walked her along in the direction the car had been headed, then stopped. "Now," I said. "Just stand there and don't move."

"I don't get this, Jim."

I picked up a rock a little smaller than a human head.

"See this?" I said.

"Yes. So what?"

"Watch and listen." I took a step and heaved the rock. It vanished.

There was absolutely no sound. Just the wind. Then her gasp.

"Jim."

"Quiet"

The rock hit. It struck hard far down there someplace and then there was a splash. The splash was like a giant's gulp. Very faintly there was a thin wash of water and then just the winds again.

She whimpered. It was the damndest sound.

"That's where you're going to vanish," I said. "Right down there. See? Isn't that good?"

She turned and cried out and started running for the car. I leaped and caught her. She strained and fought, whimpering and shuddering. I shook her. I slapped her face.

"You dummy," I said. "Not for real."

She clung to me, shaking all over. "You scared me, Jim—I can't stand heights. When the rock hit the water, I knew where we were. I've heard of this place." She began to change. Her body began to work against mine. "Jim," she said.

“Do it to me—Jim—hurry up. Right now—don’t wait. Jesus, Jim—hurry—”

Well, she had me as bad as herself, the way she carried on. We got down on the hard slate with the wind and she yelled into the wind, and shuddered, and then yelled some more.

It was just plain crazy.

We sat in the car, and she wanted me to drive back, so I was under the wheel. Outside on the slate, she had been wild. Here, now, she snuggled in my arm. She took my right hand, with my arm around her, and slid it inside her blouse so I held her breast. We sat like that.

“That’s a hole out there,” I said. “There’s water down there and it’s got no bottom. There’s a bottom someplace, but nobody’s ever bothered about finding it. Once a long time ago, the river came through there. That’s what they think, anyway. Then it got switched.”

She shivered. “What’s this stuff about me vanishing?”

“That’s what’s going to happen. I’ve done a lot of thinking. First off, robbing a bank’s a hell of a thing. You’ve got to think of every damned angle. And it’s got to be right. Not a single flaw. If there’s one flaw, you’ve got to drop it... because it’s a million dollars, see?”

She listened. I could tell.

Then she said, “It’s simple. Robbing this bank’s simple. The thing is not to get involved. If you get too complex, then there’s trouble. I’ve already thought of that. In this case it’s very simple. We just kill George and take the money and go someplace. It’ll be at night. He’ll be there alone. We’ll select the night. It’s simple, I tell you.”

“If it’s that simple,” I said, “why isn’t it done every day? Just walk in and knock off a guy and take the money and scam.” It jarred me, where I’d said that about knocking off a guy. “As for not getting complex, that’s where you’re dead wrong, Felice. You got in your mind a car buzzing up to the front of a bank, and machine guns, and run in and grab the dough. Or a little old lady with a squirt gun and a note that says, ‘Give me the money, or else. I’m poor and I really need it. I’m going to pay off my daughter’s pimp so she won’t have to work in a cat house in Schenectady.’ You don’t just kill George and take the money, Felice. You got to have a plan and that plan’s got to be absolutely foolproof, timed to the second. You’ve got to have a place to go. There’re a million things to think of for that million dollars.”

“I’ve thought about it.”

"You've thought about it a lot," I said. "Fine. Tell me, Felice. After you went into the bank at night and killed George, and knocked off combinations, and ripped open the tellers' vaults, and got the money, a million dollars, what then? Just tell me."

She squirmed around. "I'd go home. But I told you, I need help. I can't do everything, I know that."

"What would you do? What did you plan?"

"I'd go home, see? I'd wait. They'd find George in the morning when the vault opens. It's run by a clock, you know? Three clocks, as a matter of fact. And the one with the shortest time opens the safe. Three clocks, so in case one or two go on the blink. Only what I figured was, maybe three or four in the morning I'd phone the police and tell them I was worried. George wasn't home, and I'd checked the bank but there was no answer. So I knew he couldn't be there and I was worried."

"Great."

"Then they'd find him at seven-thirty. And the money'd be gone."

"What about the money?" I said. "It's a million dollars or so, remember? You jam it down your bosom?"

"Bosom?" She laughed. "No, silly. There's no room. You know that. Listen, I worked that out, Jim. What I figure, we'll put it in a whole flock of banks under different names, see?"

"Then what?"

"Then what. You crazy? We wait a while, then we go off and start enjoying ourselves. We spend the money." She paused. "See, there's really no room, it's pretty well taken up, isn't it?"

"Yes." I took my hand out of her blouse and got out a cigarette. "Just dandy," I said. "Just fine. You know how long we'd last?"

"We'd probably live pretty fast, what with all that money. Maybe till we're forty—forty-five?"

"We'd last about two days. About a minute after we withdrew money from one of the whole flock of banks you put it in. If you ever put it in any." I paused. "Felice, first of all, you'd be a suspect automatically, the minute you left Allayne—unless you waited ten years, or something. And how about me?"

"Well, nobody'd suspect you. Why should they?"

"Nobody's going to suspect you or me," I said. "Because in a few days, you aren't even going to exist any more."

She sat there.

I said, "I'm going on my vacation about a week after the bank's robbed. And I'm never coming back. We're both going

to vanish right off the face of the earth. Listen, d'you have any money of your own?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Far from it We've got to have money to work with. I don't have it. I mean, like maybe a joint bank account. You and George?"

"I told you how he treats me."

"How much he got saved?"

"Around twenty thousand."

"I take it he's gone fishing over the week end?"

"No. That reminds me. I'll have to start back soon. He'll be home. He's at the club playing cards."

I had thought of the whole week end with her, one way or another. At least tonight and Sunday. There was a lot to cover.

"Well, get this," I said. "You're going to have a joint bank account with George. You'll spend all day tomorrow convincing him of this fact. I say a joint account because it'll look better. You'll stand a better chance of getting it."

"You're crazy. It's all I can do to get a food allowance. I try to save off that. Believe me, he's tight."

"Nevertheless, that's what you'll do. I don't give a damn how you do it. But it's got to be at least five thousand dollars, Felice. We've got to have that much money. Without it we're sunk. In a little while you'll go home. Call him at the club. Tell him you changed your mind, you want to go away tonight—go fishing with him."

"You've flipped."

"It's what you're going to do. That's the first step, the joint account. You take it out Monday morning. You work the hardest on him you ever worked in your life. Without the money, we're dead. Even with it we still may not do anything."

"Jim, I can't get him to take out an account. Sure, maybe a hundred dollars—maybe."

I turned and grabbed her shoulders and whipped her around with the cigarette smouldering in my lips. I shook her. "This isn't play. You get the joint account. And it's for at least five thousand."

She just looked at me.

"How'd you get this car?" I said.

"It's his. I drive him to work. I told him I had to have a car, that's all there was to it."

"Okay. See?"

"All right," she said. "I see."

It was going to be one hell of a job. But the excitement was all through me, building with every second. Because more and more I began to see how it could really happen. It took hold of me, shaping up so fast I could hardly control it.

"For instance," I said. "There's the key to the bank, the car, passports..."

"Passports?"

"Listen, Felice. Example, when you planned this and George was killed, how'd you plan it?"

"Shoot him," she said flatly.

"What about the sound of the shot?"

I sat there.

"Yes?" she asked.

I said nothing. It was as simple as that. There was no way out. There was the one loophole. There was only the one way that loophole could be plugged.

With George Anderson's dead body.

When you dine with Death, Fear sits at the head of the table.

"There're a couple things I want to mention," I said. "We'll go over the rest later on."

"Jim? I can get George's key, all right. We'll need that, won't we? The key to the front door of the bank?"

"Is there a back door?"

"Yes, but he only has a front door key."

"We'll need a key, but we can't use his. You contact me Monday. A joint account. Make certain."

"This'll be a toughie," she said. "What's this business about my vanishing?"

"This car," I said, "is going down there where that rock went. Nobody'll ever find it. As soon as you get that account, so there's money, you're going on the town."

She looked at me.

"You're going to play hell with your husband."

"Wait—this car down there? Why?"

"What d'you care about a car when you're reaching for a million dollars?" I said.

"It's such a beauty."

"All right. Keep the car."

She nodded. "The car goes down there."

"Yes. You're going to step out on George, as soon as you get that money. And keep your wits while you do it. You drop

hints. You're sick and tired of George. You can't stand him any longer. You have friends? Well, you hint damned broadly to them. You make it plain something's cooking in your head. Play it any way you want with George."

"I'm beginning to get it, Jim."

"Sure. Then after a week or so, you'll draw all the money out of the account and you'll vanish. You'll be living someplace else. Under another name."

"Damn you," she said. "You're driving me nuts. Why do I have to live it up, like you say?"

"Because," I said patiently. "That's what'll build up toward your disappearance. It'll look real. It will be real. Nobody'll question it. Ever. That bastard, George, you tell them. Tell 'em how he coops you up, how he won't spend anything on you, and you got yourself a joint account at the bank, damn him. Lay it on, go ahead. It'll make it good. Let people know how wonderful it is to be free. You're young. You deserve your life. Get mad about it. Talk to your girl friends. So when the time comes, you'll draw all the dough out of the account, take the car, and—boom, you're gone."

"Don't scare me."

"You'll be somebody else, Felice. Both of us will. I've got to work over every detail and I'm half crazy now, trying to keep things straight. Just start thinking about what you've got to do."

"I am."

She turned toward me and knelt on the seat. That heavy wealth of black hair fell around her face. "Phalen," she said. "Do you love me?"

"No."

"That's the right answer," she said. "Because I don't love you, either."

She made a sound in her throat and her face was full of lust.

"What we've got is better than love," she said. "Who the hell wants love?"

I reached for her and tore the loose blouse down over her shoulders roughly and her eyes went nutty.

"If I'm going to get back home in time," she said, "we'd better hurry, Jim. Slide over here—the steering wheel's in the way."

Twelve...

After I left Felice, I drove home fast.

I stretched out on the bed in my room. My mind was in bad shape. I finished a drink, and lay there smoking. I thought of Jinny, and forced myself consciously to relive that time in the workshop back of the store in Santa Fe, when I'd walked in and caught her with Les Pine, but nothing happened. It no longer meant anything.

I had the lights out.

Suddenly I remembered something I'd meant to tell Felice. It was important. Only one thing to do, I dialed her number.

No answer.

She couldn't be home yet. I waited five minutes, then tried again.

"Yes?"

"Felice—make believe it's a wrong number, there's something I've got to tell you."

"I don't think I know anybody by that name. I'll ask my husband."

"Keep the phone to your ear and listen." I heard her ask him something about did he know any "Mary Thornbush?"

"Krueger," I said. "This guy Sy Krueger. I don't know how well you know him, but stay away from him from now on. If you see him, freeze him cold. Don't even speak to him. He's a bastard and he knows about the store, and I don't like the way he acts. Freeze him."

"That's entirely possible," she said. "You'd better check that exchange again."

I wanted to hold her on the line. I wanted to be with her. I didn't want her to hang up. "How you making out with the fishing? The account?"

She said, "You'd better check with the phone company." Then she called off the phone, "Be right with you, hon. Yes, I'll bring your tackle box." Then to me, "Good night, Jim, I'm working. I have all the hooks baited."

She was gone.

I stretched out again, smoking. I was like a cat. She'd said it was called a forty or fifty million dollar bank. The insurance company dictated the bank's policy. George was often there alone at night. I'd always thought banks had guards. Alone in the bank with the cash vault open. It had never occurred to me that a man walked around the streets with the keys to the front door of the bank jingling in his pocket along with car keys, house keys, the keys to his girl's hotel room. She'd said this was perfectly normal. I could see it might be, if the vault door were closed, because that could only be opened when the time clock said so; which in this case, according to Felice, was seven-thirty in the morning.

The insurance company, she said, told them how many guards and how long the guards worked. At the Allayne City Trust, the guards worked average hours, the same as anyone else.

It was insane. Any way you looked at it.

George Anderson, sitting there at night, with the front door of the bank locked, alone, and the cash vault wide open with over a million dollars in it.

It would have to be done fast. As fast as possible.

I wanted Felice. I wanted the money. There was the chance we might be able to get it. But how could we do it without killing him?

I concentrated on it, thinking of every angle. Leave him in the vault. That gives us over night. No good. Take him with us. No good. Pay him off? You couldn't pay George Anderson off. She'd told me he made \$6,500.00 a year. And he'd been working for that bank since the beginning of his time. He'd given them his life. They repaid him with \$6,500.00 a year. Say twenty years, offhand. He'd saved twenty thousand, so she said; scrimping and saving, penny by wretched penny. How she must have worked to get that Chrysler she drove. Because they had nothing else, not really. Probably he mortgaged the house to pay for the car—more likely, took out a second mortgage.

No matter how I came at it, figuring for George Anderson's life, he was always there someplace pointing a finger at us, and saying, "Well, sir—yes. They did it. They robbed the bank."

We couldn't vanish if he stepped out of the vault the next morning yelling, "Felice, my wife! James Nightmare Phalen! They did it! Get them!"

Please, God, I said—show me how, will you?

Silence.

Look, Old Man, You with the long gray beard and the finger in everybody's pie, come up with an answer. I never asked you anything before. Not a thing. The least you can do is save George Anderson's life.

Silence.

So, You refuse me?

I began to laugh. It got loud. I poured another drink and slapped it down my throat.

I lay there. Face it, I thought He has to die.

If we let him live, there would never be a moment of peace in our lives. There would always be that haunt, over our shoulders. The world is small.

He had to die and cool and get stiff inside his precious vault, while we vanished, along with the money. And when they opened the door in the morning, there he would be.

And it would all end, right there.

Lying there, I knew she'd known it all along. That's why she hadn't pressed it; she knew it had to be. She knew I'd eventually see she was right.

Sunday, I was up before dawn.

There was plenty to do. It would be a full day.

I took the car, and with dawn just breaking thin and pink in the East, drove to the nearest all-night drugstore. In my mind, I'd suddenly become a thorough-going monomaniac. I moved in a deliriously excited haze.

Felice. A million dollars. A new life with no possible trace left behind.

I bought two good substantial wallets, a woman's and a man's. They held what I wanted, too, identity cards. This thing was being done from the ground up, covering every possible angle. Everything I did would have an immediate use, then vanish into limbo.

As Felice and I would vanish.

I drove to the Greyhound bus station, then changed my mind. It was a small thing, but a tiny flaw. I drove to Bridgedale, instead. I wasn't known there. I parked on a residential street, where the car could sit all day without being noticed.

At the Bridgedale Greyhound depot, I bought a roundtrip ticket to River-port, a town of fifty-thousand, on the river. It was two hundred and fifty miles from Allayne; far enough, but not too far. The place where Felice and I would begin to vanish, Felice first.

On the way I put one wallet in each of my hip pockets. They would be personalized in this manner, faintly worn. I thought Phalen, you're going too far. I laughed without moving my lips, because that was the idea. My personal demon was quite adequately taking care of things. I refused to concentrate on the idea of the passports; I preferred my subconscious do the laboring, before I picked up threads and knitted them together. Things such as false birth certificates; one for me, one for Felice. I had selected my pigeon, a guy who would never go much beyond the city limits of Allayne.

Roy Taft.

I had to find out where he was born. I began to know how I would do that with the aid of Astrology. I laughed, thinking about it. His age was the same as mine, thirty.

I timed the bus. It took just five hours. It traveled fast but with stops. That's how it worked out. I knew I could make it much faster in a car. I hadn't had to wait more than fifteen minutes in Bridgedale, and it was just going on noon in Riverport, when I arrived.

I couldn't rent a car, because that would mean showing my driver's license; something else I had to take care of. I began to be conscious of the time element now, and didn't like it. But there it was.

I hired a cab and found a house on Old River Road, in Riverport with no houses too close by. Set by the river with lots of big elms. It was perfect a bedroom, a large living room, kitchen and porch. No upstairs. Only trouble was, there was no furniture. I'd checked a lot of other places and it was getting late by then. It occurred to me I could use this angle. It would entail labor, but I was going to do it—build bridges behind me, going in the wrong direction, with wrong names.

I found the landlady who had the house, and I rented it under the name Roy Taft, and got a receipt. The woman's name was Alice Feathers. The rent was steep, one-twenty a month and she wanted first and last month's. But I paid. The house was what I wanted. I told her we'd ship furniture up from our place in Newark as soon as possible, and said I was a salesman, on the move a lot opening up a new district around Buffalo. I took the key to the house and left.

I caught a bus that was just leaving Riverport. In Bridgedale, I picked up the Chev, and was back in my room at eight-thirty that evening.

I wasn't there five minutes when the phone rang.

It was Felice. "He's mad as hell," she said. "Fuming. He's out trying to walk it off. He even quit fishing and we came home. Where've you been? I've called a dozen times?"

"Never mind. How about it?"

"I got it," she said. She spoke in that flat unassuming manner and it soaked into me. "We're taking out a joint account for five thousand dollars tomorrow morning. Jesus, you should've seen me. I should be on the stage, Jim. Now, where've you been?"

"Can't tell you over the phone, not now. We shouldn't even be using the phone."

"Can I see you tonight?"

"No. You've got to butter him up and keep him buttered till you have that money in the bank, under your name. He can back out remember? He can say no and mean it."

Her voice was faint. "All right"

"Tomorrow you start living it up. Spreading the word. This has got to look perfect."

"I will."

"And, Felice—I've got to see you tomorrow, somehow I was thinking about George's keys. We'll work that out. But tomorrow morning you drive him to the bank, right?"

"Yes."

"You'll take out the joint account then. Tell him that's how you want it. Insist. Get mad. However you've been working it."

"You can bet I've been working it."

"Okay. And do it first thing, with him, you shouldn't have to wait till nine-thirty, when the bank opens. You're his wife. I'll be watching from the minute I see you go in—from the store, across the street. See? When you come out of the bank, I want to know if everything went all right. It means everything, believe me. You do this. Come out, walk to the corner, and look straight across the street at the liquor store. Count to ten. Then turn and go back to your car. Got it?"

"Yes." I heard her breathing. "When can we be together tomorrow?"

The minute you get home from the bank in the morning, call my place, here. I'll be here."

"I want to see you."

"I want to see you, too, Felice. It's all I think about. But we can't goof."

"It's not just the other?"

She meant the money.

"That too," I said.

"Good. That's how it should be."

There was a light tap on the door.

I whispered, "Got to go," and hung up.

I went to the door and opened it.

Sergeant Elmer Bliss looked at me, smiling. He seemed embarrassed. He wore a light tan suit now.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Phalen. I—I just wanted to ask you something."

I forced myself. "Come in."

He stepped inside and I closed the door.

He looked around the room.

"What is it?" I said. "I'm pretty damned tired." I started to say something about being ill, again, but didn't.

"Happened to be passing by," he said, smiling. "Saw you turn in. Something I wanted to ask you the other day. Meant to and forgot. Spend Sunday out?"

"Well, I took a ride," I said. "I still don't feel very well."

"I see." He was very bright. He sighed brightly. "Got to ask you this. Don't want you to think wrong, Mr. Phalen."

I nodded. I didn't trust my voice.

"We have to check everything," he said. "You know how it is?"

I wished he'd stop apologizing.

"About the back seat of your car," he said. "D'you have a back seat?"

"No." I spoke quickly. "One of those things I plan to remedy. Caught short when I bought it. Can't seem to get the money together."

The back seat was under the bed. But I'd put it there at night and I was sure nobody'd seen me put it there.

"Well." He shrugged and smiled. "That's all I wanted to ask you. Hope you don't take it wrong."

"You think I was carting liquor in my car?"

He smiled. "Well, we have to check."

I didn't know whether to get mad or what. He was a small guy and he looked young. Smiling all the time. He looked around the room.

"Well, you sure got a nice quiet place here, Mr. Phalen." That again. "Sorry to have bothered you."

"Care for a drink?"

"No thanks. Not on the job—but, maybe a glass of water?"

I went into the kitchenette and got him some cold water out of the refrigerator. He followed me and stood there.

The two cases of liquor were on the floor. He looked at them, then at me, and smiled. He drank his water.

"Any leads on the robbery?" I said.

"No, not exactly. Well, I'd better be going."

He left fast. He opened the door, turned and smiled, went out and closed it.

I stood there.

I went to the window and saw him come out into the parking lot. He paused, lit a cigarette, looked at my car, then went to another car. It wasn't a police car, and he was alone. It was a light tan two door Ford; a fifty-five model. I watched him drive away.

Then I sat on the bed.

I thought a hundred things, all of them bad. He was a smiling snooper. Then I thought, Suppose he gets on to Krueger somehow? Krueger's pulled other things like this.

I sat there. I thought how Sy Krueger would spill his guts.

I fixed a drink and forced myself to think of Felice and what we were going to do.

Now and then Sergeant Elmer Bliss popped back into my mind. Smiling. Always smiling.

Thirteen...

I opened the Happytime at seven-fifteen, before Webster arrived. At the front window, I watched the bank across the street.

The vault opened at seven-thirty. People would be at the bank by then. All I could think was, Would he go through with that joint account?

They showed at seven-twenty-five. The big white Chrysler swept into the curb in front of the bank on Main. I faced the side of the bank, not the front.

She got out and I watched that leg and said to myself, "That's mine." It was gorgeous. She stood on the curb and half glanced in my direction while George came around from the other side of the car. He looked plenty big now, even from here. They moved toward the bank. She was a knockout this morning, wearing tight gold Capri pants, and a loose white sweater. That black hair billowed over her shoulders. She had a strut, that girl.

Then they were gone.

I waited.

I could almost see her right through the gray walls.

I had to get to the library before I went home, and I had to be home right away, because she would call.

Webster came. Joe Yeates showed up, bleary-eyed, and then Roy Taft. Customers filed in. Cars stopped. It was ten minutes to nine, and she still hadn't come out of that damned bank. She had me nuts. I managed to stay at the front window by arranging bottles.

"The window display stinks," I told Webster. "I'm going to change it."

"Well, it's Monday—it'll be slow this morning."

But by nine o'clock, he was getting edgy. That was nothing to how I felt.

"That's fine, Jim. You can't do any better. Let's just leave it."

"I'm not satisfied. A window display's damned important, Ned. I'm trying to think of something that'll make them really thirsty."

"You know well enough nobody has to make 'em thirsty."

I saw her. I froze.

Webster went away, shaking his head.

I watched the bank. I had a bottle in my hand and nearly dropped it. Felice came out of the bank, strutting, and she walked straight for the car. She opened the door and slid in. Let me tell you, I went through the floor. It meant she hadn't got it. Something had happened. I didn't know what to do. I was sick. It all depended on this.

I stared at the white Chrysler.

Abruptly the door opened and she got out. She ran for the corner. She reached the corner and stood there. A big semi cannoned past, racking the gears, and I couldn't see her. Then when it was on by, I saw her. She reached out and snapped her fingers and gave a little shake to her head.

She'd forgotten. A woman all the way.

I watched her. She turned and swiveled it good back to the car, got in, and wooshed away into downtown traffic.

I went to Webster, looking hang-dog.

"It's still dead here," I said. "I've got to run home. Sorry as hell. I forgot my medicine. I'm supposed to take it every two hours."

He bit his lip, but let me go.

I headed for the library, driving as fast as I dared. There, I checked the card catalog. There were so damned many things to do. Well, the planets would lead me to birth certificates.

I found what I wanted. *Astrology For You—A Simple Guide To Your Place In The Stars*, by Wilhelmina Astorholtz Jones. I jotted down the stack number, then checked for something else. I found it under Locks. *The Locksmith*, by Lester T. Weeks. Back in the stacks, *Astrology For You* was there, but *The Locksmith* was gone. I couldn't ask the librarian. Felice was nearly home by now. Suddenly, I saw another title, in big fat red letters on yellow: *How To Make Keys*. I grabbed it. It was by a guy named Rémy De Gourmont. Leave it to the French, every time.

I went behind some stacks and carefully slid the books under my belt at the back. My jacket covered them. I felt fine, like an extraordinarily large and inexperienced camel.

Somebody put his hands on my humps and said, "Any luck, sir? Or is it just the principal's going to give you a hiding?"

I whirled. It was Felice.

She finally ceased laughing, stepped up to me, pushed herself against me and put her mouth on mine. We kissed hard and long, standing there in the shadows.

"I followed you," she said. "It was fun. You said you'd go right home, so I just followed. I couldn't figure what you're doing in here."

"You shouldn't've done it."

She looked wonderful.

"I almost forgot to signal you," she said. "Forgive?"

"You had me going for a minute, there."

"Why'd you steal the books?"

"Keep it down. But first, the money—is everything okay?"

She pulled up the edge of her sweater and yanked something from the waist of her pants. A bank book. She showed it to me. \$5,000.00. It was beautiful. She yanked out something else. "See? A checkbook, too. Believe it or not, my very first I'm excited."

She had me excited, the way she looked. Maybe I cared more about Felice Anderson than I thought.

"You've got to get out of here," I said. "We can't be seen together. But I'll tell you, I've got to see you tonight, somehow. Maybe I can sneak up behind the house, just once more. You've got to bring me out that key of George's, for the bank door. I'll only need a minute. Can you do it?"

"Yes. I'll do it somehow."

"Eight-thirty, if you can't work it, try to let me know. Does he carry them all the time?"

"No. He puts all his keys on the bureau soon's he gets home. Bunches of them."

"You've got to make certain of the right key."

"I know the right one already. I thought of that."

"Eight-thirty, then. I'll wait ten minutes. If you don't come out, I'll know. Then we'll pull it tomorrow night, the same time." I was talking fast. "Felice, something else. You've got to think of a woman you know, a woman you're absolutely positive will never take a trip anywhere. Who will never want a passport. You've got to get her exact name, birthplace, and age. Her age should be close to yours, but try to make it twenty-one, at least."

"But why?"

"I can't explain now. You've got to get out of here. Felice, in a week you'll be somebody else and you'll be living in Riverport." I told her about the house. There wasn't time to go into detail. I felt insecure here. "Now, get going," I said. "Eight-thirty."

A librarian was coming down through the stacks. Felice pushed against me with her hips, then slipped around the

other side of the shelves, and left. I finally went out walking sideways like a crab, wanting to back out with my humps. I got clear, went to the car, put the books on the floor, and drove to the store.

It was then I began to think of Felice out running around town, writing checks, and having herself a time.

It could go to her head.

I sat in the car a minute and checked the book *How To Make Keys*. I knew I had to get some plasticene and maybe some paraffin wax.

During lunch, I went through the book on Astrology, picked up a few things, and in a little while, I got hold of Roy Taft and gave him the business. I shot Ephemerises and Tables of Houses and tines and Greenwich mean time, and sidereal time and zodiacs at him, and told him I wanted to do his horoscope. "A hobby of mine," I said. "You know how hobbies are. Where were you born? I'll need the date, too."

Roy Taft was born July eighth, nineteen-twenty-nine, in Spokane, Washington. His mother was born there, but his father was born in Shreveport, Louisiana. I gave him a lot of stuff about how he was moody, because he was Cancer, and that if he'd curb his temper he could charm the pants off any girl, and that he and John D. Rockefeller were born on the same day, and that he had great talent, maybe music. "Maybe you'll even write a play, or something. Or act in one. You've revealed a little of it through that inventive mind of yours," I said, thinking of his conveyor belt. "Your birthstone's a red ruby. Ought to wear one, a ring, it'll bring you luck. Your flower's Larkspur."

"What the hell's Larkspur?"

I explained it would take a month or so to work his horoscope out, especially since he didn't know the hour and minute of his birth. "Not easy, this horoscoping."

He didn't know the half of it.

I got off work a half hour early. Webster seemed to understand I was still under the weather. As soon as I got home, I took pen and paper and wrote a letter to The Office of The County Clerk, Spokane, Washington. I asked for a copy of my birth certificate, gave my birthdate, July 8th, 1929, and my present address, 242 Old River Road, Riverport, New York and signed it *Roy Taft*.

I went out and mailed it, air mail, then drove downtown. I bought a copy of a horoscope magazine for July; the book was fine but too much trouble to read through. If Roy Taft forced the issue, I'd copy his horoscope out of the magazine.

I went to the Post Office, wrote out money orders, and sent fifty dollars to each of the three loan companies I owed, one car payment to the bank and apologized for getting behind in a note.

Then I drove home, and waited till I saw Tom Fisher, a bubbling, red-faced jolly type who really was a natural born rat and I paid him all the back rent. This left me with a hundred and fifty dollars from the nine hundred. But since Felice had the bank account now, it didn't matter. I wanted my finances as straight as I could get them.

I had to get fifteen hundred dollars from her, right away, so I could move fast. She'd have to get that in the morning.

I had two hours before I saw her. I went through the book *How To Make Keys*, and this bird Gourmont really knew his business.

Then I drove downtown again. At one place I bought some plasticene modeling clay; at another I bought paraffin wax. Back home I worked a gob of each in my hands till they were soft, but not too soft. Then I wrapped each in a wash cloth, put them in my pockets so they'd stay fairly warm, and soft.

I drove over and parked across the block where I had that first night, behind Felice's place. I'd just reached for the door handle to get out of the car when a white 190-SL whisked past. It was Sy Krueger at the wheel. It stunned me. I felt sure it wasn't his car. Probably that drunk blonde's. I didn't think he'd seen me.

But what the hell was he doing around here?

Then I thought, Cut it out. He can ride down the street, can't he?

Sure. But this street One block over. I had to forget it, somehow I sat there for a minute, smoked a cigarette, then got out and went through the vacant lot into her back yard. The lot was really dark, and I moved quietly I came through the hedge.

"Jim."

She was waiting by the garage.

"I'm emptying the garbage," she said. "There's no time for anything. He won't even speak to me. He acts funny."

"You got the key?"

She had it. It was one of an enormous bunch. I unhooked it off the ring and while she clanked the garbage can lid, I forced the key into the clay and the wax. I did it four times, both sides. I carefully held the wax and plastic clay. Then I told her about seeing Krueger.

"You be sure," I said. "Don't even let him talk to you. Laugh in his face..."

"He called me on the phone, Jim."

"What?"

"Yes. He's not working for Solengren any more. He was trying to be nice, you know?"

"What else?"

"That's all. I told him I was busy, and hung up. I've got to get back to the house. He'll be out here."

She looked lovely. She wore a white terry cloth robe, and carried the small kitchen garbage pail. I was putting the key back on the ring.

"I've got to fly to Newark, first thing in the morning," I said. "I want you to take out fifteen hundred dollars from the account."

"But why?"

"I'm going to establish us. Rent a house down there, buy furniture and ship it to Riverport."

"But, Jim—why all this? For God's sake!"

"Because—I'm trying to disperse things and make everything absolutely reasonable. It's got to look perfect. Just in case. I've got it worked out, don't you worry."

"But, Jim—"

"Now, the fifteen hundred, Felice..."

"That's what he's going mad about, in there. I drew two thousand from the bank this afternoon. I told him I just wanted to hold it." She giggled.

"Can you get it to me? I'll wait here by the hedge. And afterward, make him think you still have it"

"I'll get it."

"Something else," I said, my mind working like crazy. "Did you think of a woman? We've got to get you a birth certificate."

"Yes," she said. "I got one. But, Jim—" She gave a shrug. "I guess you know what you're doing. Her name is Gertrude Bingham, and she was born in..."

The back door of the house opened, and George Anderson stood there. "Doll? Doll? Where are you?"

I dove flat by the hedge, holding the wax and clay carefully. The keys fell with a clank.

"Be right in, hon," she called. "Getting a breath of air." Her voice was a little shrill, but it was okay.

"Well, hurry up, Doll. I want to speak with you."

He went back inside.

"I've got to go," she said nervously.

I hunkered by the hedge. "It may be that money. He may want it back. You've got to get it out to me—somehow. And, this Gertrude Bingham. I want to know where and when she was born, day, month, year—also where her mother and father were born. It'll probably be on the birth certificate, but I can't take chances. So, listen, call her—pretend you're interested in astrology. Ask her..."

"That's Gert's hobby," Felice said. "Astrology."

For a minute I couldn't think.

"Okay," I said. "Make believe you want to learn. Get the information and get it out to me with the money."

"Jesus, Jim!"

"I know—you want that million dollars, don't you?"

"I'll get it. You wait." She leaned down and kissed me and ran for the house.

I began to get a headache.

Fourteen...

I waited by the hedge, cramped.

It was like standing on a cliff with a strong wind blowing. I waited twenty minutes. Then I knew she couldn't make it. It was too much to ask. Especially with him in there. I decided to leave. Then I saw the back door inch open very carefully. A hand came out and something sailed through the air and the door closed.

Whatever it was landed in the middle of the back yard.

I juggled the hunks of clay and paraffin, went over through the vacant lot. Crickets chirped.

In the car, I laid down the clay and paraffin very gently on the seat. What I'd picked up on the lawn was a wad of currency wrapped in a strip of pink toilet paper, tied with a rubber band and weighted with a tube of toothpaste.

I drove home and went to my room with this stuff.

She'd written on the pink toilet paper with an eyebrow pencil. "In bathroom." The writing was faint and the paper had torn here and there. "*George mad. Gert Bingham. Br. Dec. 24, 1938, Charleston, S. C, Mth. and Fth. N. Y. C. \$1500. Kiss. Kiss. Kiss!*"

I flushed the paper down the toilet put the paraffin and clay in the refrigerator, phoned the airport and made a reservation. I could catch a plane to Newark in half an hour. I tossed some stuff into a small zipper traveling bag, along with *How To Make Keys*, drove to the airport and managed to catch the plane.

Forty minutes later I was in Newark. I had taken out insurance in the name of Roy Taft, and Mrs. Gertrude Taft would get the loot in Riverport if the plane goofed.

In Newark, I rented an unfurnished house, and explained to the landlord that the rental had to be on a month to month basis, because my job was erratic. We might have to move at a moment's notice. That was all right with him, he'd get the extra dough if my wife and I shoved off.

In a hotel room, I collapsed, then forced myself to stay awake half the night studying *How To Make Keys*.

First thing in the morning, I called Webster at his home, station to station and told him I was in Davenport, Iowa, and that my mother was dying. "I can't say exactly how long I'll be, Ned. I'm sorry. You know how it is. She's failing rapidly."

He was very sorry, but he said, "Your vacation's coming up, you know? If you want.."

"Oh, no. I'm saving that. I want it. I get two weeks. I'll only be a couple days here." What could he do? My mother.

I found a second hand furniture store and bought a flock of stuff; couch, chairs, double bed, dresser, bureau, cocktail table, bookcase, a mess of old books, two rugs, some marvelous old framed prints of cows in a field, the one with the wolf on the snowbank, a herd of wild horses chased by an Indian, and a ship in the sunset with a squashed roach under the glass. I bought a box of tarnished silverware and some dishes. Then I called a moving outfit, refusing delivery by the store itself, and had them pick up the stuff at the store and deliver it to the house. Then when that was taken care of, I called another moving company and had them pick up the stuff for delivery to Riverport, the Old River Road address. I gave them my name, Roy Taft

By now I was beginning to go a little crazy.

Then I went to the Newark landlord and explained about the mix-up. A call had just come through from the front office and I had to leave town. A real mess. I argued about the rent money, then let him have it, to make it look good.

I'd had to buy used furniture; new furniture wouldn't do. I couldn't buy stuff at Riverport. I'd already said we were from Newark. Things had to look normal, and they were going to. Even at the cost of my sanity. I couldn't just ship the junk straight through by van from the second hand store. There was the possibility of word of a screwy guy named Taft in Newark when the van reached Riverport. Every item had to be covered. Besides, there'd be another use for the Newark address.

The moving outfit agreed to put the furniture in their warehouse in Riverport and deliver it to my home at Old River Road on the afternoon of the eighteenth. This gave me six days. It gave Felice six days.

I took a bus to Trenton, and went directly to the Motor Vehicle Bureau. I talked them into letting me take the written and driving tests for a driver's license, and managed to get it the same day. "I've got to have a car and be on the road in two hours," I told them, "or I lose a terrific job."

"How come you don't have a driver's license?"

"I just got out of the army."

They said it was understandable and that it happened. I gave them my Newark address for the license, and signed it Roy Taft.

Then I went out and bought a white fifty-five Buick for six hundred dollars. In a half an hour, I was on the road, headed up-state.

It had been hectic. But with every mile, I was closer to Felice—my Spanish bomb.

I was dizzy with all I had to do. And there were still maybe 700,000 items on the list so I could make it equal the million so I could get the million. Because that's how it seemed to work; one item accomplished, one dollar made toward that load in the cash vault. Every time I'd think I had it ironed out in my head, I'd see one more flaw to be taken care of. It always meant two or three more items on the list.

They say Crime doesn't pay. Well, the catch is you've got to work harder to really make it with crime than you ever worked at anything else in your life.

And you work under near impossible strain.

It was about forty miles to Newark. I went right on through, thinking, My old home town, yes, sir! I stopped in Rockland County, at Nyack, and went to the Post Office and wrote a letter to the County Clerk, Charleston, South Carolina, asking for Gertrude Bingham's birth certificate. I asked to have it sent to Riverport immediately, airmail, and enclosed five dollars and many thanks. Then I drove like a madman.

There was an irresistible pull, a regular yank. It was that bad. I had to get back, and fast.

At Syracuse, I consulted *How To Make Keys*, and bought several different files, a small vise, a pair of cutting pliers at one place, and some graph paper at another, and stiff cardboard and scissors at still another. Then I picked up some various sized key blanks, the closest I could come to the bank key of George's. I was certain one of them would be right I bought two of each for goofing privileges. I bought a thing they use for tracing on metal, and two different pens filled with two different grades and colors of ink. I filled out the identity cards in the wallets I'd bought Sunday. Roy Taft etc., and Gertrude Bingham, with a Hackettstown address and crossed that out with the other pen and wrote Gertrude Taft, with the Riverport address. I put some bills in the wallets and sat on Felice's the rest of the way to Allayne. Somewhere along the road, I threw the pens out the car window.

James Nightmare Monomaniac Phalen.

Or maybe just maniac?

I drove to Bridgedale, utterly exhausted now. I bought garage space for the Buick, caught a bus to Allayne, called a cab and went to the airport, picked up the Chev and drove home.

I was absolutely shot

Yet all I could think of was Felice. I wanted to rest. I had to rest But I wanted to see her. The compulsion was malignant. It devoured my insides. Nothing could stop the gnawing and chewing in there, unless I saw her, and I couldn't see her.

I parked the Chev and started up the stairs to my room.

"Jim?"

It was Gloria Fisher at the foot of the stairs, arm waving, poking, red-lipped and crooked.

"Jim. Somebody's been calling you all afternoon. A woman. She left a number for you to call. It seems to be very urgent."

I stood there with all that stuff in my hands; paper bags with key blanks, files, cutting tools, the vise, and the zipper bag with socks and a shirt and *How To Make Keys*.

"What name'd she give?"

"Mary Thornbush."

"Thanks Gloria."

"Okay, honey. Hope it's nothing serious."

"It's my sister," I said, "passing through. Hope I don't miss her." I thought of something. "Better give me the number she left."

She gave it to me scrawled on a book of paper matches. It wasn't Felice's number.

I got upstairs fast, tossed the stuff on the bed, and dialed.

"Jim?"

"Yes."

"I've been standing here three hours."

"Where?"

"A pay station—a booth." She seemed kind of wild. "You've got to meet me. Right now. Something's happened."

"Where are you?"

She told me. It was on the edge of town. "There's a bar. I've been going in and out, waiting. It's only luck you called just now. I came out, for a walk. Not many people in the bar..."

"What's up?"

"Not over the phone. I'll just tell you, it's Krueger."

She hung up. I put all the stuff I'd bought under the mattress and drove cross-town.

Krueger.

Fifteen...

She looked ready to crack up.

"He called me right on the phone last night, with George in the room. Sy Krueger. He laughed at me. I hung up and told George it was the wrong number. He called right back. He said he knew everything—everything."

"Take it easy," I said, trying not to look scared. "He can't possibly know anything."

We were by this phone booth. She had on a white skirt, a thin white sweater, and white pumps. She was mad and frightened at the same time, and the waiting had told on her. There was night all around us.

"No?" she said. "He can't know anything? You think not?"

"Will you please take it easy, Felice?" I was going to pieces myself, inside. But it couldn't be real.

"...one!" she said, counting it off on her fingers. "He told me you were flying to Newark. He said the car was parked out at the airport. Two! He knows you were going to rent a house in Newark and buy furniture to ship to Riverport. Three! He knows it was to establish us. Four! He knew I drew two thousand dollars out of the bank and that I was going to give you fifteen hundred. Five! He knows we're getting false birth certificates and mine'll be under the name Gertrude Bingham. Six!..."

"Felice, stop."

"No. No, he doesn't know anything. He can't possibly. I want you to see exactly what the nothing is that he doesn't know. Six! He knows you made a wax impression of the key to the bank. Seven!..."

"Stop."

"Seven! He knows we're going to try to steal a million dollars. Eight! He says it's got to be from the bank." She leaned against the phone booth, staring at me, her mouth open, but no more words came. Then she said, "That was last night. I couldn't contact you. I've been through hell. 'Who was that, Doll?' George said right after he phoned, right in the room. 'Nobody,' I said. Jesus. Nobody." She paused. She'd been drinking some and was in bad nervous shape.

I just stood there, my ears ringing.

"He was behind the hedge, listening," she said. "He saw you when you parked, out there. Saw your car. So he drove around the block, and then saw you going into that vacant lot next door. He followed you. And he listened to everything we said, from behind that hedge. All the time I stood there—and he knows about the keys—Jim! I got in the house and I didn't have the keys. I didn't realize it till George was going to bed. I was standing in his doorway, he has his own room, and I looked on the bureau, and no keys. I almost flipped. We dropped 'em out there, when George called from the back door. I had to go out and search and find them and get them back on the bureau." She paused. "Anyway, Krueger knows everything."

"What does he want?" I sounded like Poe's raven.

"He wants to meet me and talk, before you get back from Newark. So I finally just came here and I've been here ever since. If I don't call him by eleven o'clock, and it's ten to now, he's going to do something."

I shoved open the phone booth door. I felt like a piece of old iron with rust on it.

"He wants in on this," she said.

"Well, he's not getting in on this, Felice. You remember where we met the other night—the fork to Bridgedale?"

"Yes?"

"Well, call him. Tell him you'll meet him there. Soon as he can get there. Sound frightened. Sound as if you can't stand it any more—that you give up, and all."

"Sound?"

"Call him."

She stared at me. Her eyes were pieces of jet. "He may not even be home. He said if I didn't call he'd come to the house, George or no George, and he'd get what he wanted from me and then he'd go to the police."

"Call him—tell him—he's faking. You sound frightened, see? And make it look as if he can get what he wants from you, too."

She looked at me. "All right."

She went in and called. I stood by the door. She spoke few words and hung up. She came out.

"He'll be there."

"Where's your car?"

"Down the street, around the corner. I thought..."

"You thought right. C'mon."

We got in my car and drove around the corner. I parked behind the white Chrysler. We got into the Chrysler and I told her to drive.

"There's a bottle in the back on the floor," she said. "If you want a drink. What're we going to do?"

I found the bottle. It was cognac. I drank five long swallows and it was either the best brandy Martell ever made or it was just cool cafe-au-lait. I offered her the bottle and she swallowed some. I put the bottle on the front floor between my feet.

"I don't know what we're going to do," I said. "We'll have to talk with him."

"You can't talk with him. He's crazy. You never heard a laugh like his. A hyena. He's nuts. He knows what we're doing and he'll blow it to hell."

I knew what she said was true. "What about George?"

"He's already had reports from friends."

"That you're sick and tired of how he treats you?"

"Yes."

"Good."

We drove.

We sat there. I was in the back on the floor, out of sight. "See him yet?"

"No."

"When he comes, act just as if you're alone. Get out of the car on the right hand side and walk toward him, whether he stops in front or back. And get him on the right hand side of the car."

"What're you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"There's only one thing to do."

"What?"

"Kill him."

I hunched down there on the floor. I didn't speak.

"You hear me?"

"Yeah—listen, there's a car coming. It's a sports car—that Mercedes, I can tell the sound."

"I may faint," she said.

"You do, fall on your back. He'll think it's natural."

"You bastard."

"You bitch."

"He's slowing."

"Turn your lights off."

I saw the lights of the oncoming car. It slowed fast. She slid across the seat and got out and the door slammed. I still didn't know what to do. The car stopped behind the Chrysler and the engine cut, and then the lights. Another car passed, but this was a seldom traveled road, I knew that. It's why I'd chosen it.

"Well, baby," Krueger said. "See you gave up."

She didn't speak.

"Got a kiss for me, baby?" He was real wise.

No sound.

"C'mon," he said. "I'll be in your pants before the night's out. How's about a kiss for now?"

"No. What do you want?"

Good for her.

"Right now, I want to kiss those luscious lips of yours, baby. Then, maybe we can take a ride in your nice big car—okay? You got a bigger back seat than..."

He must have reached for her because she said, "No!" sharply, and I heard feet scrape.

"Okay." His voice changed completely. It got hard. "So your boyfriend isn't home from Newark yet? Well, I got it figured, Mrs. Anderson—you and I, we're going to screw your boyfriend whether you like it or not. You'll like Sy Krueger, baby, you really will. You liked him kind of, once, didn't you? And I'll like you. And we'll do this thing together. He busted two of my fingers. He acts plenty wise."

I got out of the Chrysler. I didn't think about it. I just got out and closed the door and walked over to them standing there on the shoulder of the road in the moonlight. He knew, and that's all there was to it. I walked up to him.

He said, "What the hell? Baby, you lied."

I hit him. I didn't even see her, really. I just walked up to him and hit him so hard he ran backward and struck the front of the 190-SL with a crash. A car went by. I kept walking.

He got up and looked at me. He wore dark slacks and a dark sports shirt and he came at me like something with a knife and tiger's teeth on *The Untouchables*. He came head on, straight through my guard and hit me in the stomach with his head. It was a hell of a wallop. I drifted back, coughing.

"Jim! Jim!"

I saw her somewhere. He came at me again. I caught a glimpse of his bandaged left hand. I'd never seen anything

like it. He wasn't a big guy, but he was game as hell. He cursed and caught me smack in the middle again, and this time I went down.

"Jim."

He began to stomp me. He was practiced in the art. I caught his foot and swung with it against the pain in my gut, and he went down. He was a snake in the grass, for certain. He slipped away from me into the grass, down in the ditch, and I heard water splashing. Then he came at me again, and this time he held a knife, for real. The blade winked.

I went for him. I caught his wrist. The knife stroked my right hand across the back and blood streamed. The knife was like a razor, and he laughed. I got both hands on his forearm, then I switched my grip with him trying to knee me, so I had one hand on his arm-pit and the other on the wrist, and I laughed in his face and hooked his legs with one foot and whipped his feet out from under him, and came up hard with everything I had, and broke his arm.

He cried out and fell down, panting. He lay there and passed out. He breathed heavily and came around and just lay there. I went back to the Chrysler, feeling foggy, and looked at my hand under the dash light.

It was bleeding badly.

I found Kleenex in the glove compartment and sopped at the blood. He'd stroked the flesh across the back of my hand. I worked my fingers. Another fraction of an inch and that hand might have been gone. I heard her at the trunk of the Chrysler, but paid no attention, because I was hurting plenty inside from Krueger's head, and my hand troubled me and what were we going to do?

I heard the Chrysler's trunk open and close.

"Felice?"

"Yes."

"You okay?"

"Sure."

I sat on the edge of the front seat and let the blood run. It began to slow. I sopped at it with Kleenex.

"Keep an eye on him," I said. I was still foggy.

"I am."

"He comes around and wants to fight some more, let me know."

She didn't answer. I didn't know what to do now. I fished up the cognac and took a long one with my left hand, letting my right hand bleed. And that's when I heard the noise.

At first I thought it was a car coming in the distance, with no lights and a flat tire.

Thunk...thunk...thunk...thunk...

"Felice?"

No answer.

I went back there.

She knelt on the ground at Krueger's side, and her face was nothing in this world. She was beating his head in with a hammer. It was a ball and peen. She was using the peen.

Sixteen...

I went kind of crazy for a moment

I grabbed her and dragged her away. She struggled wildly for a few seconds, her eyes blank. Then she went on hitting the ground with the hammer. It didn't sound much different from Krueger's head. It dug in the same way, too. I caught the hammer out of her hand and flung it aside.

"Felice! For Christ's sake!"

She sat there on the ground, staring, in a trance. My Spanish bomb.

I went over to Krueger. He was as dead as a man can get. He looked as if he'd tried to eat a live grenade.

"I had to do it," she said, her tone utterly emotionless. "Somebody had to do it. You weren't going to do anything, were you?"

I looked down at Sy Krueger and it was quiet for a time.

Not that anyone would recognize what was left of him as Sy Krueger. I wondered about him, in an aimless way, what he'd truly been like inside where it counted, where nobody could ever truly see. Because that's where a man counted. No place else.

All Krueger had been trying to do was get away from wherever it was he was, the same as Felice and I wanted to get away. like anybody.

I looked down at him. A hip character with a yen for fun and living it up and having a ball, a blast money and girls and cars and what-the-hell, and now he lay there, a nothing. And yet something. Only what?

You're going poetic, Phalen. Face it He's a corpse, that's what.

What a corpse though. That's what I was trying to get at in my mind. He'd been on his back with his face toward the sky. Maybe looking at the night thinking how his arm was broken, and he'd stared straight into the end of the night too, in the shape of a ball and peen hammer driven smash into his face, gouged into his eyes and nose and mouth and cheeks and chin and forehead—*thunk*—until all that remained was a bowl of dark pudding and nary a drop spilled.

His eyes and teeth and nose and everything were all stirred together, and just a few moments ago he'd laughed in my face with a knife in his hand.

A real hefty sock, that girl had.

So what had been in what was now pudding? Who cared?

Nobody.

I turned and looked at Felice. She sat there. I caught hold of Krueger's feet and dragged him over to the snappy 190-SL. I checked behind the seats and the blanket I'd figured was there was there. I wrapped his head in the blanket tied the blanket tightly, then shoved him into the Mercedes with his head on the floor. He was cramped.

I stood there and tried to sense a feeling about his death. There was none. This itself made me feel ill. The one feeling I had was of being caught, tabbed for this. Then it swept over me; a realization of what had happened.

I said, "Remember where we were the other night? Up in the rock quarry?"

"Yes."

I pulled her to her feet. We stared at each other. A curious numbness was in the air. She didn't look changed.

"You had to do what you had to do," I said.

She said nothing.

I found the hammer, picked it up, and threw it. It splashed lightly out there someplace in the dark.

"Car coming," I said. "We've been lucky. Get in your car and drive up there."

"All right. Jim—your hand!"

I'd forgotten about my hand. It still bled some. But it would be all right, though I might have to check with a doctor.

"Hurry up," I said. "Drive. Don't tell me blood scares you."

She gave me a look.

She parked the Chrysler up there well back from the edge. I turned off the lights of the 190-SL.

"Suppose somebody's around," she said, coming up.

"Nobody's around. You can see." You could. Winds sliced across the top of the canyon, moaned through the rocks. It was like the top of the world, up here.

"What you going to do?"

I started the white sports car, put it in gear, got it going and stepped outside. I pulled out the throttle, walked beside the car, then ran as it picked up speed, the engine sounding fine. I

touched the wheel just a nudge to the right, then stopped and walked back to Felice. I didn't even bother to look.

I had ears.

It went over the lip. The engine roared and echoed up into the night and that was the end. It hit water.

"Let's go," I said.

She stood there like a statue. I took her arm and led her back to the Chrysler. My hand felt bad. It was covered with blood. I took off my jacket and wrapped my hand in that. She got in the car and drove. We went down to the road again, through the towering rocks and darkness, and back toward Allayne.

"Everything's all right again, now," she said.

"Yeah. Everything's fine."

"We couldn't count on a thing like that."

Sometimes she was very young, with this diabolical business inside her that made her so ancient with ruthlessness it frightened you.

"No," I said. "We couldn't."

"I'll go home now," she said.

"Me, too. I'm dead tired. I can hardly see."

"Poor Jim."

How about poor Krueger?

I took my car, went over and woke Doc Bucksly and he looked at my hand, patched it up, and told me I'd lose a vein.

"How'd you do a thing like this?"

"Slicing bread."

He looked at me and sighed. I went home, drove into the parking lot, and saw the tan two door Ford standing there.

Sergeant Elmer Bliss leaned against it, smoking.

Seventeen...

Bliss just stood there, staring through the darkness toward the river. I turned off the ignition and got out of the car. He didn't move.

The cigarette end glowed, revealing his features and I could see the pock marks and the smile. He didn't speak.

I had to walk over to him.

Then he spoke. "Well, we meet again."

"Looks like it. Kind of late for you to be around."

"Well, Mr. Phalen, something came up. Came by, figured I'd talk to you. Mr. Webster said you went to Davenport, there. Hope—well, sorry to hear about your mother."

"She's all right," I said. "She pulled through. That's why I'm back. But how did...?"

He broke in. "I had to run out to the airport. Saw your car there—couldn't miss it, back seat gone, and all. Then I had to go out again, and it wasn't there. So I figured you must've gone home. I stopped by a while ago."

He fumbled as he spoke and seemed embarrassed. He flipped his cigarette away, leaning against the Ford, and smiled. He was the most innocuous smiling son of a bitch I'd ever met.

"What is it? Something more about that robbery? Thought I was through with that."

"Well, it's nothing, really," he said, smiling, talking brightly. "Just something I want to ask you. Look," he said. "Any chance you know a guy named Krueger? Sy Krueger?"

I said, "No," fast. "No, I don't."

He scratched his head and smoothed his thin pale hair back with his palm. He massaged his jaw, and leaned against the car. "Damn," he said. "Well, you got to check everything. You never know."

I sensed there was something else he wanted to say. I was tight as a drumhead. "What's this bird Krueger got to do with it? What d'you mean?"

"It's kind of involved. It's his girl friend. It's this car, really
—"

"Well, what is it?" I was getting mad, now.

"His girl, Betty Summers, is her name. She has this Mercedes sports car, a white convertible. A real beauty of a car, maybe you've seen them."

"Yeah."

"Well, Miss Summers is really mad."

The drunk blonde at the liquor store. I felt sweat inside my shirt.

"Well, it's nothing really. She got mad, you know. This Krueger, according to her, has been pulling a lot of shady deals. She claims he dealt with some liquor thief to stock his boss, a guy named Solengren, he worked for, a rich fellow."

It was like getting a series of rabbit punches.

I said, "You talk with this Solengren?"

"Oh, sure. But—" he shrugged—"you can't get anyplace with a guy like that."

"You try the other liquor stores?"

"Oh, sure. I'm on this. I tried everywhere."

I shook my head. "Wish I could help you."

Then he dropped it, slowly, smiling, "Well, the thing is, this blonde, this Miss Summers claims Krueger mentioned the name Phalen, or something like that. Y'know? That's how come I came to you."

"Now, that's a hell of a thing," I said. "I don't know him and I never heard of him." I started to say I'd sure as hell like to see this "Miss Summers," then thought better of it. "I don't like this, at all," I said. "You can tell this Miss Summers to get her goddam names straight."

"Yeah." He smiled. "She probably got mixed up."

I didn't like how he looked at me.

"Thing is," Bliss said. "I can't find Krueger. She said he's had her car for two, three days now, and she's worried. You can understand that. She wants it back. She seems to know what kind of guy he is. Kind of a—well, you know—one of those things?"

"You try where he lives?"

"Yeah. Hasn't been seen."

Felice had called him. What was up?

Abruptly he said, very sharp and bright, "Level with me, Phalen—you know anything about this?"

"No."

"Well, you know how it is."

He flagged his arm, and got into his car. I walked toward the house, just to be doing something. As I reached the door, I saw him turn and drive slowly out of the parking lot. That bastard was bucking for something.

It had me plenty worried. I didn't like it at all.

The phone woke me in the middle of the night.

"You didn't even kiss me," she said.

"Felice. You shouldn't call here. We've got to be careful." I thought of Bliss, then said, "Where's George?"

"Asleep. It's after four." She whispered. "How's your hand?"

I told her.

She said, "I've been thinking. There has to be a set time, right Jim. You've got to know when he'll be there. I won't be able to keep tabs if I'm not even living with him."

"Make it short." She was right, though, of course.

"Well the last day of every month he invariably stays overtime at night with the books. He's always the last to leave. It always happens. He calls it posting the last month's business on the general ledger, or something. He's very finicky and he takes care of it."

"Felice, we've got to stop, now."

"He's always there at night on that night. In this case, the night of the thirty-first of May. And get this—the general ledger is kept in the cash vault. You clearly see? That's why it's open."

"You're drinking."

"I'm excited. Anyway, it doesn't change it. And I wanted you to know." I was all wound up again. I visualized the vault, open, George sitting over his books, us standing there—and remembered something that had to be done. A gun.

"Felice. Go to bed."

"I'm excited. If I were only there with you, I'd show you how exciting it can be."

"It won't be long," I said. "Tomorrow's the fourteenth. The eighteenth is the beginning."

"I'd better go. I just wanted you to know about the thirty-first of May."

She made kissing sounds and hung up.

I got to thinking about the money and then the way she was, that look of her, the feel of her, how crazy she could get flat on her back with the black hair spread out...

I felt something in the bed. Bumps. The bags of tools; vise, files, and stuff. Dandy. Forget them and Gloria would pick tomorrow to turn the mattress over.

I got the stuff out and stared at it I dug out *How To Make Keys*. In the kitchenette I opened a new bottle of absinthe, fixed a drink, and sat on the bed. Everything started to swim in my head; all mixed in with Krueger and Bliss and blood. And it didn't give me a good feeling.

I drank some more absinthe, carted the paraphernalia into the kitchenette. There was an edge projecting from a small bar beyond the refrigerator, I fastened the vise to that. I laid everything out neatly, thinking, Five days. Those birth certificates have got to get here fast, because that doesn't leave much time till the thirty-first.

Then I'd see Krueger's face, his head. I took a drink.

Time could run out. All of a sudden it had to be the thirty-first of May. Bliss and his damned Miss Summers.

So then I thought of what a terrific thing Felice and I were doing. It could get you. The thing was, that much money, a million dollars. Any large bank haul was planned by so-called professionals, with split-second timing, and a fairly large gang working. Yes. And big splitups, too.

But this way. The big haul. Clean all the way.

They made it hard on themselves. It was a fact. Find a bank where the insurance policy didn't insist guards work nights. Get an impression of the front door key; that was the one problem, really, and it could be solved in a hundred different ways. Then wait, and go to work. Christ. All it took was nerve, guts—and the absolute knowledge that you absolutely had to kill one man, IF you wanted to be completely clean.

I stood like a tree, rooted to the floor. Murder.

Then I snapped out of that.

I started to work making keys. My right hand was bandaged and in the way, but I had to use it painful and clumsy.

Well, I made keys. I worked till my hands were so cramped I couldn't go on. Then I'd rest. Daylight came on. I had the wax and clay out I measured, scraped, measured, filed, chiseled, measured, filed, scraped till I was near nuts.

First I made a key to fit the lock on the door of my room. For practice. I found the work had to be close even on that cheap lock, so what would the front door of a bank be like?

My hands slipped. I gouged my fingers, drank absinthe and sobbed to myself and cursed and everything blanked out but The Key. Ol Rémy was a son for thoroughness. I finally ended with my own system, copying the key, measuring, scraping,

cutting, chiseling, filing... it was nine o'clock in the morning. Webster. The top of the bar was ripped and gouged. Flecks of blood lay around among chips and brass filings, but I had a key.

The key had to be tested before The Night.

I was high from the absinthe and not at all sleepy. I cleaned things up, put the tools in the vegetable bin of the refrigerator, wrapped with scallions and old lettuce leaves.

I put the one good key in my pocket fixed some eggs, and washed them down with absinthe. They say it can drive you nuts, you hit it too hard.

Webster thought I was in Davenport; no, Bliss might have seen him again. Damn that smiling bastard.

I had to get to the store because Webster would take this time out of my vacation if I didn't. I wanted that vacation. It worked exactly right. It would give us two weeks, and two weeks would find us long gone... I saw a 190-SL hurtle down into the darkness, engine rumbling, and splash... It sickened me.

Jesus. I had to think of something else.

I began to wonder how the key would fit the bank door. Maybe... No maybes. It had to.

The whole world was nuts.

My suit was hopeless now. Mud splotched, blood splashed. I'd have to get rid of it and buy another.

I saw Webster at ten. "I'm back."

"You didn't stay for the funeral?"

"She pulled through the crisis." I looked and felt bad. "Knew you needed me here, so I came back."

"You didn't have to, Jim. I told you you had your vacation time. Glad to hear about your mother."

"She's not good, by any means. The doc said he'd let me know. She has nobody but me, see?"

"She's alone out there?"

"Has a little room of her own. Not much money in our family. I send her what I can."

Webster chewed his lips, embarrassed. "What'd you do to your hand?"

"Slicing bread. One of those things."

After that, Roy Taft bugged me a little about his horoscope, but I managed to get away.

"Let him alone," Webster said. "He has enough on his mind."

You are so right, I thought.

At noon I went out and bought a suit, a cheap one in a cheap department store. On the way out I bought a pair of shoes and a small valise. I thought about large suitcases and knew we'd have to get them. It deserved thought.

Coming out of the store there was a large platform with a white shield around it and signs in red letters: *Make your own keys! Watch it work. 25 cents.* Sure. All you needed was a key to make your key from. If you had a key, what the hell did you need with another.

I put the stuff in the car, and walked down to the bank.

I went in the front door. It was busy. It suddenly felt gigantic and I felt like a rather meek and insignificant ant. I glanced at the door. It was big and highly polished. I had a feeling. It looked as if you didn't need a key, what you had to have was the word. I sure as hell didn't have the word. There was a sense of eyes watching. I felt guilty, just standing there.

I kept moving and saw the vault. It had to be the cash vault, down at the end through gratings and above people's heads, twinkling and steely and huge-looking and utterly invulnerable. There was a large central area. An archway led off to another room. People thronged back and forth. Guards were posted here and there, guns glinting, buttons shining.

All right. She was mad. I was mad. And neither of us knew that the other was mad.

"Well, well."

I turned. It was George Anderson. He wore a light gray suit, a dim red tie, and glasses, and he looked more like a heavyweight than before. I nodded.

"Don't be that way," he said. "Don't hold a grudge." He carried a sheaf of papers. "I saw you come in. I had to act the way I did when you were at the house. Seen you before, work right across the street, don't you? Certainly, for old Ned. Good old Ned Webster. Known Ned a long time. He banks here. Where do you bank, sir?"

"I was considering coming here."

"Now?"

"No. Not now."

"You know, confidentially, women are strange creatures. Take Doll, my wife, for example. I had to act kind of rough. She expects it."

"I know."

"Well, good day. Got to run. Bank business, you understand? It never fails." He laughed heartily. It was a joke. He slapped my shoulder. His hand was as hard as his head.

He moved off buzzing between his teeth. I got out of there.

It was right outside the bank in the scalding sunlight with people passing to and fro that what we'd done to Sy Krueger really hit me. I hadn't really understood what we'd done, till now We had killed a man. I was as guilty as she. I hadn't used the hammer but that didn't change things. He was dead. We had killed him. I stood there. It was bad. Only there was nothing to do.

I was still bad off from the absinthe, beginning to feel hungover, and Krueger was there in the middle with his head bashed in.

I went down the street and drank five Pernods. It didn't help. I wanted to see Felice and couldn't. I began to think of Jinny. Felice wouldn't be home. No telling where she was.

Back at the store it was late. I kept thinking how the key would fit the bank door. All the things that had to be done yet. It had me a little crazy. I kept thinking how somebody might have seen us out there last night, running the 190-SL over the edge, down, down... they could get Felice first. It was her car we'd been in. Somebody would report it. They'd put out a trace. Maybe they had it right now.

I couldn't stand it. I walked out of the store and down to the corner phone booth and called her house.

"I had to call you," I said.

"It's all right I was just going out, Jim. Can't we make it any sooner?"

"No. But we're not waiting for the eighteenth. Tomorrow afternoon you draw the rest of the money out of the bank."

"But—Jim—!"

"I mean it. We've got so much to do it's driving me bats. You buy some platinum blonde hair dye and bring scissors and comb. Get the dye at a dime store. You draw out the money, you drive around, and don't pick up George. Wait till eight-thirty, then meet me at the Bridgedale fork. Got it? And you don't phone and I don't phone. I'll see you, then."

I could hear her breathing.

I said, "If you knew everything I had to do, you'd flip," I said. "I'm beat to death. Going to try and get some pep pills."

Somebody was approaching the booth.

"Tomorrow night," I said fast. "Got to go."

"All right Jim. I'll be there."

You just want to go on talking, talking; what good does it do?

I cut along the tracks back to the store, where I'd parked the Chev. I went in the side door, found a bottle of whisky, returned to the car and sat there, drinking.

A million dollars and Felice and a dead man already, and I sit here like a fool still trying to figure out how to save George. The hell with it. He has to die, get that through your head, Phalen.

I drank and smoked and thought.

"Jim?"

"Go to hell," I said.

It was Webster.

"I'm sorry, Ned. Sorry."

"You may be sorry, but you're drunk."

"Have one?" I said.

"I hate to do this, Jim. But I'll have to let you go."

I turned on the seat "What?"

"Sorry, for your mother's sake. But I've been watching you. You're not doing me any good and I can't have a drunk around this liquor store."

I laughed in his face, thinking of Joe Yeates, his brother-in-law.

"I owe you some money, Jim. You wait right here. I'll bring it to you."

I sat there. I was sixteen kinds of fool. But it didn't matter. It was done. And now it was done, I felt halfway sober.

Webster returned, grim and embarrassed. "Here." He handed me some bills. "That covers last week, too. You didn't pick up last week's salary. When you sober up and feel right you decide you want to come back, come and talk with me. I'm always more than willing to discuss things. You have troubles, maybe I can help."

I peeled off a ten and tossed it at him. "This is for the bottle. Keep the change."

He turned and went back into the store. He didn't bother to pick up the ten. I drove off. He would come out and get it when I was gone.

I worked on the key all afternoon, polishing, sharpening the edges, trying to get it exact. I drank absinthe. You can go a long time and you don't fumble if you watch out.

I was nervous. Finally, I went out and got some change and called the moving company in Riverport and told them I'd changed my mind, wanted the furniture delivered Friday morning.

They would be there at nine.

Bliss might be after me now, wondering why I got drunk and fired. But I wouldn't be tripped up. It could only be a fumble on my part and I wasn't going to fumble.

I checked with a doctor and asked for some kind of pep pills; told him I was feeling low, no energy, hadn't been able to sleep and had a lot of work to do. I explained I needed as potent stuff as I could get. He came through with a prescription after some argument I filled it at the nearest drugstore. It said take one every four hours. I took two immediately. Then I remembered the gun.

When I thought of the gun, I knew we'd have to have a silencer. What was a silencer really like? I'd seen them in movies, on TV, read about them, but what were they really like?

I returned to my room and drank and thought some more. I wasn't hungry. Then I took my key, drove downtown, parked a block from the bank, and walked up Main past the bank toward the Happytime. The store was open there across the street well-lighted. As I passed the bank, lights were on in there, too. I couldn't be sure anyone was inside. I walked on all the way around the block, feeling plenty nervous. In a bar I drank two Pernods and kept going. Coming up toward the bank again, I realized this could go on all night. There were few people on the street. I walked slowly. I hesitated by the bank doors and checked with the clock on the corner. At that moment no people were nearby. Cars passed. I backed against the bank door. If anyone was in there, they'd hear the key. I thought of burglar alarms, but did it anyway. I juggled and dug and scratched and couldn't find the hole, then made it. The key grated in. I twisted.

Nothing happened.

I began to sweat. It had to fit. Next thing I knew, there was an oily click of tumblers. The lock was open. The door started swinging away from me. I quickly yanked it back, but I couldn't turn the key to lock the door again.

It was bound.

Frustration hit me hard. I twisted with all my might hands behind me, people coming, cars going past. I was abruptly wild with it. The key handle began to bend. I saw somebody coming up the street. I left the door, prayed it wouldn't swing open, and walked around the corner. People came along laughing and talking. They turned toward me. I walked fast around the block again. As I came up toward the bank, two beat cops strolled down the sidewalk. I quickly checked

supplies in the window of a photographic store. When they passed, I moved to the bank again.

I was dazed and fear was a small bright-eyed rodent in my bowels. I reached the door, backed to it stuck a cigarette in my mouth and made believe I was searching for my lighter with one hand while I twisted the goddamned key with the other. If I couldn't get it out, we were done. This was the end. They would post a night guard, and he'd be here for eternity.

Sweat streamed inside my clothes. I worked at the key but it wouldn't turn. It was bound tight. I slammed the door with my fist, dying inside. I turned the key brutally. Suddenly it gritted, worked. The lock snapped to. I yanked the key. It struck and grated, but I got it. It worked. It needed more filing and polishing, but it worked.

I returned to the car, keeping hysterical laughter behind my teeth, then remembered Krueger. The laughter went away like smoke in a wind.

I drove away cursing quietly to myself.

Jesus.

At the nearest bar, I drank three gin and tonics, bought a pint of gin, and drove to Bridgedale. I drove with the gas to the floor.

Eighteen...

I had to have a gun. I stole one from a store in a shopping plaza at Bridgedale; they kept them in a locked glass case, but I knew about the shelves behind the sliding doors under the counter. I simply leaned down, opened the door, selected a .38 Special, and rammed it into my belt, yanked my shirt out to cover it.

On the way back to Allayne, I thought about silencers. Only a gunsmith could make one, unless you bought one. I would have to make one.

In Allayne, I picked up my suit at the department store, went to the sporting goods department, and again worked the sliding doors, and found a box of .38 ammunition.

Home again, I made what seemed to me would work as a silencer, out of an off-brand can of consommé, using the tools I'd purchased to make the bank key. I taped the can heavily, and made air-vents, then drove to the country and tried it. It worked. Maybe not as well as a patented silencer, but good enough. It looked like Buck Rogers in a pinch.

Home, I sat on the bed and admired my work. Then I stretched out smoking nervously. I remembered the passports. That meant shots, medications of some kind. What kind?

Next morning I was at a doctor's office in Mountville. I told him I was going to Europe, France, Switzerland, maybe, knowing Felice would require the same shots. But she'd have more time. The doctor gave me a signed paper, proving I'd had the medications needed. I drove back to Allayne.

I knew as soon as Felice left town, she'd have to be careful because George would go to the Missing Persons. It would doubtless make the papers. Then again, maybe he'd be glad to get rid of her.

Don't kid yourself, Phalen.

I got through the rest of the day somehow. It was rough. But it was Thursday. Tonight we'd roll.

I prayed Felice would call, for any damned reason. She didn't.

I had to get out of the house. I rolled off the bed, knocked cigarettes and my Zippo lighter off the nightstand. The lighter rattled under the bed.

I went after it and stared at the back seat of the car, still stuck under there.

I had to get rid of it—now. I couldn't wait till tonight. I couldn't just carry it downstairs. Gloria would sure as hell stick her head out of the door and make some crack.

I decided to drop it out the window, checked and saw nobody outside.

With the window open, I managed to jam the seat through the window. I let it hang and was just about to drop it behind some large shrubs when I looked down and saw Gloria Fisher trimming the shrubs.

I hung there, clinging to the back seat of the car, directly over her head. All she had to do was look up. I couldn't pull it back; it was off balance and heavy and would scrape against the house. It had only been luck she'd heard nothing before.

Snip—snip—snip, with her damned snippers. She was just futzing around, lackadaisically clipping at the shrubs. It began to slide through my fingers. Then I heard her husband, Tom, call to her from in the house. She dropped the clippers, and toddled off, lurching a little.

I dropped the seat cushion. It crashed into the shrubs.

I went downstairs fast, snagged it out of the shrubs, and practically ran to the car. I tossed it in the back seat, and was just driving out when Gloria came around the house again, waving to me.

"Jim? Jim—your phone's ringing!"

I waved and kept driving.

Driving into the country, I couldn't be sure, but thought I glimpsed that tan two door Ford, of Bliss's. I didn't try to make sure, either. I took country roads as fast as I dared. The minute I was alone, I dumped the back car seat.

I stayed away from my place, drove around, waiting for dark; time to meet Felice. I parked at the Bridgedale fork. She didn't show. She was a half hour overdue, and I didn't like waiting here. There was very little traffic on this road, but nevertheless. It had me troubled plenty. I imagined all sorts of things. I knew I should tell her about Elmer Bliss, and the way he was probing around, but decided against it. No point bothering her. I'd just have to handle it somehow. Maybe he'd lay off now.

Suddenly she was there in the big white Chrysler. She parked and ran up to me.

I was so glad to see her I almost broke her back. She was gorgeous, all in black, a tight skirt, sweater, and that thick black hair, and those snapping marvelous eyes. I held her so tight she began to squirm. I let her loose.

"Wow," she said, looking at me. Then she was excited. "I snatched the hair dye and stuff off a counter. Been a long time since I snatched anything—better than buying it. Somebody might remember. You've got me acting like you—no chances."

"Good."

We kissed again. It was breathless and hot and loaded with promise.

"Let's move," I said. "We've got to get rid of your car. The quicker, the better. Everything's been running without a hitch. We don't want any trouble, now."

"I'm afraid of that place."

Well, we drove up there any way, up into the rock quarry, and stood with the winds cutting across the canyon. I unloaded the valises she'd brought along, packed; they were unmarked. I put them in the Chev.

Then we drove the Chrysler over the edge and it vanished. It was a big car. It was raining a little, now, misting. I hung over the edge of the cliff of rock and looked down there. Not a sign of anything. I saw the water, and there were some waves where the big car had hit, but that was all. It was gone. So was Krueger and the 190-SL.

Nobody was around the quarry at all.

All the stuff we threw down there into the darkness. like making a big stew of steel and dead bodies. Then that hit me hard.

I looked at Felice. My tonic. She was beautiful.

"I got the money," she said. "I know George'll be furious."

"He'll miss you."

"That, too. He'll call the police, and it'll be in the papers. Wow."

Wow. Who had said that? Uncle Manual.

We drove to Bridgedale in the Chev. I parked on a side street, locked the car, and took the Buick out of the garage. Then I picked up Felice. I took another look at that thick rich black hair. We couldn't afford to have it seen.

"Back in a sec." I stopped the car, ran into a five and ten, and bought a large yellow bandanna. In the car, I told her, "Tie this over your head—over every speck of hair."

"I'm beginning to think you don't like the real me."

"You wait—I'll prove I do."

We went to a motel called *The Elmbrook*. We registered as Mr. & Mrs. Roy Taft, from Newark. She wanted to play the minute we were in the room, but I made her sit on the toilet with the top down and I trimmed her hair.

"You always wanted to be blonde and have one of these Italian cuts, anyway, didn't you?"

"Sure, darling."

We dyed the hair. It came out spotty. "This is terrible, Jim."

We dyed it again until it was real blonde. It looked good and changed her appearance, but it was nothing like her own black hair. It didn't bother her at all. She yanked her black skirt up to her waist and did a little dance, wiggling her rump, singing, "I'm the blonde bitch witch with a terrible itch!" She flung herself on the bed and called to me. "Hey, Jim—you got a new woman in the house." She called again. "Come an' get it."

It was hot furious and full of pent up emotions, and the wild craziness that was inside me poured out. We stayed a while resting and fooling around.

Then we both got silent. But she had the money and that's what counted.

"George'll be phoning everywhere," she said.

"Habit's tough. Even when you don't want it."

At three-thirty, we left Bridgedale, and ate breakfast in a restaurant in Riverport, then drove to the house on Old River Road. All the time I kept thinking, Somebody will find Krueger some day, his bones, and the 190-SL, and the Chrysler, too. Maybe they'll think Kreuger and Felice had a suicide pact I told her about that.

"You're just a scream, Jim."

The furniture hadn't arrived yet. But it showed in about fifteen minutes. After they'd unloaded and gone, she looked at me.

"What a bunch of crap, Jim."

"Listen, you can get used to anything when you're jumping for the gold ring, and know you'll get it."

I thought of the mail, checked the mailbox out by the road, certain there'd be nothing there. I was wrong. My heart really socked. Two letters; the birth certificates. One from Spokane, the other from Charleston. I rushed back to the house, tearing them open. The County Clerks in both places had been perfection, and said they'd been "extremely glad to be of service."

"This means we can get the passports," I said. "We'll leave right now, Felice."

"Let me get my breath, will you?"

She was sitting in a chair.

"You want that money?"

She uncrossed her legs and stood up. "We've got lots of time till the thirty-first."

"That's just it, we haven't—no time at all. We may not even make it."

"We could wait till next month."

"Not on your life."

She came over and eased her belly and thighs against me and rubbed it around. "We could have fun, Jim." She put her arms around me and ran her tongue across my lips.

"Look," I said. "We've got a million things to do."

I'd have to go back to Allayne, and we'd have to have a phone if I wanted to call Felice. I'd already half decided to go back to the liquor store and ask Webster for my job, because then it would look right.

We drove downtown and checked with the phone company. I explained to the manager it was necessary. My wife was ill and she had a bad heart and I was on the road; so we had to have a phone and it should be a private line. Again, the breaks were with us. The phone men followed us out and put the phone in.

Then Felice had me arrange furniture, so it would look right. I kept tapping the bottle. Then I took two of those pep pills the doctor'd given me. Pretty soon I was flying.

We couldn't take out the passports in Riverport. She started rubbing around again. It drove me nuts.

"Listen," I said. "We're going right now, to Buffalo."

She pouted. But we left.

Driving along, though, it didn't work. She kept on rubbing against me and we both got horny. She kept fooling around till I couldn't drive the car. She had her skirt up to her waist, those plump thighs spread out, and the next thing I knew she'd wriggled out of her panties.

"You damned well better stop this car," she said.

Well, we drove up behind some bushes in back of a billboard advertising some kind of shampoo, and she got a kick out of it.

"I sure as hell do," she said.

We went at each other like a couple of tigers. I wondered if this fire between us would ever stop. I didn't think so, not the way I felt about Felice.

In Buffalo, Felice got her shots for the passport, and we each had two photographs taken. On her photo, Felice sure

looked like Gertrude. No getting around it. She applied her lipstick differently, used a different shade, and sported large dangling earrings. She was another girl, except she was Felice. We applied at the bureau and everything went off okay. We got separate passports, instead of just one for husband and wife, explaining we'd be apart some of the time in Europe.

The clerk promised we'd have them by Wednesday. I told him it was business, and we had to have them immediately.

He said it wasn't unusual and dealing air-mail special delivery, would hasten them. They had to go to the Department of State, in Washington, D. C. I tried not to think about those government babies, because they played rough.

Outside, Felice said:

"I wish we were really married."

"We will be—but not yet"

"Good. Mr. and Mrs. Roy Taft"

"That's not the name it'll be," I said. "This is just a side road we're on at the moment."

The main thing was the birth certificates had passed. All the other worries, I kept shoved into the back of my mind.

"You've even got me mixed up," Felice said.

"Yeah." And when I thought of the labyrinth behind us, I couldn't even concentrate. So much had been done, I could hardly remember it all. Complexity was the answer. Only you had to watch out you didn't trip over one of your own tangles of wires.

Wednesday, I kept thinking. Wednesday.

The thirty-first would be here before we knew it, and I had forty thousand things to do before then. One thing entailed the use of the passport.

We drove back to Riverport I kept worrying, now.

At the house, I told Felice, "I've got to go back to Allayne. So it'll look right. I'll call you, but only from a pay station, and that means it might have to be cut short, sometimes."

She really pouted now. She didn't like this at all. She didn't want to be alone. I didn't want her to be, but there was nothing to do. It had to look right, and I knew that.

"I want you to stay," she said. "We could have a ball." Her eyes got funny. "I bought special clothes, and everything. I bought them, just for this. All kinds of—nice stuff, you know I don't want to be alone, out here."

"I'm supposed to be on the road. Anyway, I've got to try and get my job back—so it'll look right. We don't want one single thing wrong."

"You could lie about being on the road. And I can't see how the other matters. Not really."

"Well, it does. Now, listen. Tomorrow's Saturday. I want you to see about taking a driving test, get a license in the name of Gertrude Taft, my wife. Okay?"

"Yeah. It's something to do." It was the flattest tone I'd ever heard her use.

"You think I want to go?"

"How do I know? Well, all right—go. Only, there's something else I'm going to get, too."

"What?"

"A nice big mirror. A dressing table and a mirror. You forgot that, Jim."

"Got to have it, eh?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

Well, I didn't like the way she pouted about my going but I went, anyway. She would get over it. I took the Buick, which left her without a car. I garaged that in Bridgedale, and picked up the Chev, and drove to Allayne.

Coming home, I took it easy, when I turned in toward the parking lot at the Fishers' place. I half expected Sergeant Elmer Bliss to be there, waiting. It was a lousy feeling.

He wasn't.

But somehow, my room seemed strange.

The next morning, I saw Webster.

Nineteen...

"Well, I don't know, Jim."

"Well, I do know," I said. "Listen, I was disturbed over my mother. I need this job. For Christ's sake, look back. For over six months, I've been working for you. Did I ever get drunk on the job?"

"No."

"Well, then?"

"All right, Jim." He grinned and poked me on the arm with his No. 2 pencil. "Fact is, I just wanted to teach you a lesson. Didn't want you ending up like some other people around here." He meant his brother-in-law, of course; Joe Yeates.

Then I sprung it on him. "Look, I had a wire, my mother's really bad. But the doc said I don't have to come right away. So I'll work today, rest Sunday and pack, then I'll work Monday and Tuesday, and take off Tuesday night. That's how I've got it figured. Unless I hear word before then."

Webster started to splutter.

"My vacation," I said. "Remember? I'll take the time out as my vacation."

"Oh, I see."

"It'll be a rotten vacation, but I can't expect any more time off, what with being sick, and all."

That two weeks would work out exactly. Wednesday was the twentieth. We would hit the bank the night of the thirty-first., it was like walking on hot coals, hoping you wouldn't catch fire.

Webster said, "Jim. There's a Sergeant Bliss, from the police. He's been around, asking a lot about you. Has something to do with the robbery. Asks a lot of questions."

"It's nothing," I said. "I've seen him. He's still messing with that robbery, because he's bucking for something, I guess."

"He's sure busy."

Damn that Bliss. Yet, I saw nothing of him. Why didn't he contact me? It began to chew at me bad, now. It got so I began to want to see him, talk to him.

Somehow I got through Saturday.

I called her Saturday night, five times. No answer. She was probably out shopping for her mirror. It worried me, her on the loose in Riverport. But I should have thought of that before, and bought her some cross-word puzzle books, or something.

It worried me all Sunday, because I couldn't get her on the phone then, either. I thought of running to Riverport, but decided against it.

I kept expecting Bliss to show. No sign of him either.

I spent the time cleaning every last shred of stuff out of the room; anything that might mean something. I got rid of all the tools, the files, vise and that junk, pitched it out in the country. The key would fit, now, it had to. It had worked once, and I'd gone over it carefully since. I gave some of the bottles to Gloria Fisher and threw some away, kept a couple for looks. I even put in some new masonite where I'd gouged up the top of the bar in my room.

Everywhere I went now, I kept imagining I saw a tan two door Ford. It was becoming an obsession.

Sunday night I called her again. She came on. "You all right?"

"Why haven't you called? I've been crazy."

I told her about not being able to get her.

"I'll have the phone checked. I only went out Saturday morning for my driver's test."

"Get your license?"

"Some time this week. I want to see you so bad I'm crazy."

"You buy the mirror?"

"Yes. When will I see you?" I could hear her breathe. "I'm jumping up and down, honest."

"Me, too. Tuesday night. Only thing's I'll need help."

"Why?"

"You'll take a bus to Bridgedale. I'll pick you up at the station at nine, or as near as you can make it with the schedule."

"But why?"

"My car. It's got to go for a swim. You know?"

"What?"

I waited.

"Oh, Jesus. Another."

"So, be there. I'm not ambi-automotive."

"Tuesday night," she said. "I can't wait. I'll lay out some clothes."

"You just take it easy," I said.

Leaving the drugstore, I saw a calendar. I'd miscalculated. Wednesday was the twenty-first. Not that it mattered.

She would lay out special clothes.

There was an item in the morning paper, Monday. Not much. A picture of her and word that she was apparently missing. Her husband had notified authorities. There was a description of the car and of Felice, and people were asked to notify authorities if they spotted her. The photo of her didn't do her justice

I started to throw down the paper and noticed something else. Krueger. He was married. I'd never figured that and it struck home hard. His wife had worried because he stayed away longer than usual. Jack Solengren was quoted as knowing him. I didn't like any of it, but maybe that settled it.

Two cars missing. Two people missing.

Roy Taft bugged me continuously about the Astrology bit He obviously was reading a lot. He already knew more than I did, and it was embarrassing.

All I wanted was Tuesday night.

It finally came. But a lot more came with it than I'd hoped for.

I said, "So long," to Webster and everybody, and the Fishers, and knew I wouldn't see Allayne again till the night of the thirty-first and then for only a short period.

The phone rang just as I was snapping a grip shut.

I hurried downstairs without answering it. Absolutely nuts.

I drove to Bridgedale. I was eager to see Felice. My hands were sweating on the wheel.

I parked the Chev on a dark side street again, in the shadows, figuring to walk to the bus depot where Felice would be waiting. It was just nine.

I got out and was locking the door and a car pulled up behind mine. The door opened quickly. A man got out.

It was Elmer Bliss.

"Just hold it Phalen," he said. "I want to talk with you."

He walked up to me.

I stared at him. All kinds of hell broke loose inside me.

"Mind telling me what you're doing over here?" he said. He was smiling, but he was deadly serious now. The smile was that natural turn of his lips. He wore a dark suit, and his face was pale in the shadows.

"Nothing," I said. "I was, just—" I couldn't think.

"You just what?" he said. "You mind stepping back to my car a minute?"

We walked to his car. I tried vainly to think and came up with nothing. He did not have the police car.

"Hear you're going on vacation," he said. "Well, I'm on mine. I been on it four days, now. Been having some fun, too. I'm like the old postman on his holiday, see?" He opened the door of the Ford, yanked the seat forward, and said, "Have a look, Phalen."

The dome light was on. I looked in.

He had the back seat to my Chev, lying there.

He pushed the seat back and closed the door.

"Okay, Phalen. Start talking."

His voice was sure different now.

"What about?" I said.

"I've got you, Phalen. You're it for that liquor store robbery. I've got you straight down the line. I knew it all along."

"You're flipped."

"I talked with Solengren again. He admitted he got rid of Krueger, because the guy was pulling some shady stunts. I'll tell you something else, you were seen out there, your car, the night of the robbery. I questioned every damned soul at that party—everybody who was there—except for one person."

Felice.

"Three people saw your car and described it exactly. One person saw Krueger and whoever was driving your car, which was you—unloading and carrying it into one of the garages. All I've got to do is find Krueger, Phalen. Even so, you're it. Very much it. I talked to your landlady, Mrs. Fisher, again. And I've been doing a lot of checking. Why'd you lie about the back seat of your car, Phalen? You think I didn't see you that day you went out and dumped it? I'm a cop, Phalen. I always wanted to be a cop, and I'm a good one. I won't be a sergeant forever. Now, what you doing over here? Where you going?"

"No place—nothing."

I felt it all come up inside me like hot vomit.

"Well, we'll just run back to Allayne in my car. I've got enough to hold you. Y'know? I doubt you got a mother in Davenport, Phalen. You think I'm a dope?"

I went crazy.

Twenty...

I went at him fast and hard.

He didn't have a chance. He was strong and wiry, but there was too much anger inside me, seething. I caught his throat and slammed his head against the door frame of his car. I slammed and cracked till he was a rag doll.

He was out cold before I even took a breath.

I stood there shaking, holding him up. I didn't know what to do. It was a dark street. I reached in and turned off the headlights to his car. I searched him, then, and came up with a gun and handcuffs.

I handcuffed his hands behind him, trembling, and still not sure what I was doing. I threw him in across the front seat of his car, then went and checked in the trunk of the Chev. Nothing. I checked his trunk. I found a dirty tow rope. I got in the Ford beside him, shoving him across the seat, hoping to hell nobody came along. I tied his feet, and threw him over the back, on the floor, pushing the back seat to the Chev out of the way. Then I tied him to the backs of the front seats of the Ford.

I was panting like hell.

He began to moan. All he had to do was yell.

Inside I was a wreck. And all the time, my mind worked fast. Even though he was on vacation, he'd probably notified his superior what he was working on. A slim chance he hadn't. But something had to be done.

I found his handkerchief, wadded it, and rammed it into his mouth. He tried to bite my hand. I got his tie off, and bound that around his mouth and jaws, around the back of his head, tightly, so it couldn't possibly work loose.

He was conscious now. But he wouldn't make any noise. He watched me.

"You damned fool," I said.

He just watched me, lying there in the back seat on the floor. I made sure he couldn't kick, couldn't make any sound in the car. He made throat noises, but they didn't carry. I felt kind of nuts with this. I knew what had to be done, though.

One thing for sure. I wasn't going to kill Elmer Bliss.

Only thing to do was take him with us.

He knew nothing of the bank. All he was interested in was the liquor store robbery. So long as it stayed that way, things would be all right.

I remembered Felice waiting at the bus depot. Well, there was nothing for it. We had to make a trip tonight anyway.

I took Bliss's keys. I took the back seat of the Chev out of the Ford, and tossed it in my car. I locked the Ford after rolling up the windows.

I stood outside and listened quietly for a couple of minutes. No sound.

I half ran, half walked to the bus depot, after tossing his gun into the Chev.

First I stopped by the garage and picked up the Buick, then drove to the depot. Felice had been waiting over an hour. She looked fine, dressed fit to kill, as they say.

She had on sheer black stockings, red high heels, a red dress that was a knock-out on her with the blonde hair. But I was plenty nervous.

As she slid into the Buick, she said, "I've got a little surprise for you. A kind of fun surprise."

"What is it?"

"You'll see when we get home"

"Well. I've got a surprise for you, too."

"What you mean?"

I started driving. I told her everything; all about Bliss, from the beginning. I let her have it flat.

She sat there like a rock. Her voice was almost dead, when she spoke. "Why didn't you tell me before, Jim?"

"I didn't want to bother you. I was bothered enough. Now we've really got a mess on our hands. But we can handle it."

"What're we going to do?"

"We're going to keep him with us. We've got to."

"We can't do that"

"We're going to. He's not going to die."

I knew that in my mind. There'd been one death already. Like as not there'd be another. But goddam, I wasn't going to let Bliss die. There was no reason for him to die. I told her that. "He doesn't know one damned thing about this bank deal," I said. "And he's not going to know anything. It'll be rough—but that's how it is."

"But—Jim! It's a terrible chance."

"A chance we're going to take. Now, you wait here—I want to stop at a store."

I went into a five and ten and bought yards and yards of heavy dog chain. Then at another counter, I bought six padlocks. I bought five rolls of tape, big ones, then went to the Buick and drove to a drugstore. She didn't even speak.

In the drugstore, I bought a box of wax and cotton ear plugs, and some gauze bandage, and a large-sized woman's swim-cap, a good strong expensive one. I returned to the car.

"Now," I said. "It's going to be rough, but we've got to do it."

She said nothing, but I knew what she was thinking.

We went back to the spot where the Ford and Chev were parked. I told her, "You drive the Chev I'll follow. You know where to go."

"Jim—it'll take all night, and I had other things..."

"I can't help it." I reached over and touched her, then said, "All right. We've got to do everything. Now, keep absolutely quiet. I don't want him to hear you talking. Eventually, he's bound to hear a woman's voice. But the way I'll fix it, it won't be much. Get in the Chev. When I blink the Ford lights, you take off."

I unlocked the Chev, and she got in. I got in the Ford and checked Bliss. He was wide awake, now, making noises. His eyes stared at me, grimly. I said nothing, took some of the wax and fibre ear plugs, worked two of them in my hands and jammed them in his ears. I packed them in tightly.

Then I thought of something. I did the same with my own ears, went to Felice. "Say something."

"Don't shout."

"Talk in a normal voice."

She did. I could hear her, but it was muffled, and faint.

I went back and put hunks of thick gauze over his ears, then taped that tightly on his head. Then I yanked on the bathing cap, pulling it tightly over his head, and strapped it harshly under his chin. If he heard anything at all, it wouldn't be much. His eyes glared at me, his face very pale with the pock marks showing. His Adam's apple worked as he swallowed. I put gauze over his eyes, and taped them, so he couldn't see.

I started the car, and we took off. I followed her all the way to the rock quarry, clear to the top of the canyon again. We parked and switched off the car's lights.

There was no sign of anybody.

I dragged him out of the Ford and put him in the back seat of the Chev, on the floor again. I tied him down there.

Right then a jet passed by overhead, roaring like hell. I'd been afraid of sending another car down there, for some reason. There was no wind. Not a sound. The moon was bright. When the jet passed, low overhead, I pushed the Ford over the edge and damned near went with it.

Felice watched.

"Now," I said. "We've got to go back to Bridgedale, and do the same thing with the Chev."

Well, we did it. It was getting late, and I wanted to reach the house in Riverport before dawn. She kept arguing we had to do something with him. I told her we were.

"What you going to do with all that chain? Those locks?"

"You'll see."

Well, she drove the Buick and I drove the Chev. She followed me this time. We came back to the canyon. It was desolate and a wind was rising now. All the time, he was back of me, on the floor.

What was down there in that pit of water was really something. This was the last time.

I dragged Bliss out and put him in the Buick, then we sent the Chev over the edge.

"My God, Jim," she said as we started back toward the Buick. "Jim—I can't wait. Let's work it like that first night."

"No."

"You brute."

We took out of there. I couldn't get it out of my mind what was down there in the deep water in the canyon. Four cars and a dead man. And she'd insisted robbing a bank was easy.

We didn't get back to Riverport till about five.

I'd had her talk very softly and was sure Bliss couldn't hear much. But there was something macabre about the whole thing, and especially about how it would be from now on.

If he did know there was a woman, he wouldn't know who it was. I never used her name.

I got him inside the house. Felice watched with a kind of new bright horror in her eyes. There were two bathrooms. The small attic had been converted into a room, and a bath adjoined it. Possibly the house had originally been used for two rentals, or something. Anyway, I took him up there into that bathroom. There was a solid door on it with a lock. I took some pillows she'd bought, from the couch downstairs, and put them on the floor by the tub. I got all the dog chain and padlocks, and I chained Elmer Bliss. I chained him to the toilet and the water pipes. He could move to the pillows and that was all.

I'd told Felice to make no noise and stay downstairs. His eyes were still covered, and his mouth and ears. I fixed the chains so he could just hop, then another chain around his neck, padlocked to his ankle-chains. Then more chains around the toilet and the pipes. He couldn't possibly get loose.

I unfastened one side of the bathing cap. He was sure some looking specimen. Then I took the tape and gauze off his eyes.

"All right, Bliss," I said. "There's a toilet right here. I'll unfasten your hands. You'll get to use the toilet once a day, and you'll get fed once a day, so you better adjust yourself fast."

He grunted and moaned and rolled his eyes. I knew he wanted to say something, but I didn't want to hear what it was right then.

"Your gag'll be pulled when you eat," I said. I took off the handcuffs and he thrashed around, but it did no good. I handcuffed him again, showed him where the pillows were, and he sat down. He stared at me, blinking, his eyes bloodshot and loaded with bitter accusation. I knew he was in pain. It was tough, but better than being dead.

I fixed his ear again, and the rubber bathing cap. Then I went out and locked the door and went downstairs. I was really bushed. I kept thinking about him up there. Like a dog.

She got me going, finally.

It was devilish, what with everything else. She got me to chasing her around the house. I was supposed to hit her, and tear the clothes off her piece by piece, and she fought every minute. She had a blouse on under the red dress jacket, and the tight skirt and a black halfslip, and tight scanties and stockings, and a garter-belt, and a bra—she wanted every stitch torn off.

"Be like an ape—rape me! I mean it—really rape me!"

It got mad. A woman asks you to do this, you start going along to amuse her. "Hit me." I had her skirt pulled up and she'd fight it down. Then she just fought with her eyes rolling in her head. I grabbed her and poured it on. I stripped her naked and dragged her into the bedroom, because I could tell she was worried about that. The dressing table was all set up with the mirror and the pink light and the bed.

So I raped her. And this time she passed out cold.

We lay there. "I told you I had a surprise. You didn't even notice anything."

"Like hell."

She laughed softly. "You didn't really. I'm really a blonde, now—nobody can say I'm not You didn't even notice."

Well, she'd done another little dye job, or not so little, not really. "You're something," I said.

"Am I?" She lay back in my arms. The sun shone in the windows. It was Wednesday. The passports.

Well, I went out and checked the mailbox. But the passports didn't come.

The mail car went by and there was nothing for Mr. and Mrs. Roy Taft.

I sat there, thinking about him, up there, with his chains.

It got to me, plenty. But there was nothing I could do.

Twenty-One...

I sat there.

She went around the house picking up torn shreds of the red dress, pieces of panties and the rest of the stuff. It was everywhere. She'd really led me a chase.

I thought about this going on forever. Chasing her. Tearing her clothes off

Then I thought some more about him, up there.

He had to be fed.

Those chains. It was like a movie on the Late-Late Show.

She cooked a delicious meal and we ate together. It seemed strange, somehow, but good, too.

I fixed him a plate of food, thinking, must feed the dog, and hating myself. I took it upstairs. It was creepy. I tried not to dwell on what was really happening. If anybody saw us, they'd really have a picture, for sure. It would make some story in the papers, with pix.

This is the mirror.

These are remnants of the torn clothing taken from the bedroom in the house of lust and evil.

This is the house where Satan ruled with lewd laughter.

The hapless Sergeant of police was held here.

This is the table where the sadistic fiends ate, building up energy for further wild orgies.

These are the chains and padlocks that bound Elmer Bliss.

Here is the beautiful, evil, sex-starved woman. Here is the woman's ravenous mate in lust and crime.

Felice hardly mentioned him now, though. It was as if he wasn't there. I'd told her to forget him, and it seemed she had.

I went into the bathroom. He was hunched on the floor by the bathtub, among the pillows, tugging at his chains. He looked at me, blinking those damned eyes. I put the food on the floor, went over and untied the necktie and took the gag out of his mouth. He sat there. He said nothing. His mouth

was probably a mess. I opened one side of the bathing cap, and loosened the tape so he could hear me good.

"Now, listen, Bliss. I know you don't feel so hot, but it's a hell of a lot better than being dead. Here's food. I'll unfasten your hands, so don't try anything."

His lips moved. "Goddamn you, Phalen!" It was a croak.

I handed him water. He drank the water in gulps. He looked at the food.

"You can't get away with this," he said hoarsely.

"You damned well better eat," I said. "You won't be eating again till tomorrow."

He really looked a mess.

"Phalen. We'll make a deal."

"No deals. You had to snoop—you snooped. Look what it got you."

I waited. He began to realize. He began to eat and he cleaned the plate. He was a game son of a bitch. Then I fixed his ears again. He wanted to use the toilet. So he did that, then I taped him up again. This time, I used gauze in his mouth and plenty of tape. It was better than the necktie. I leaned by his ear.

"Now, look. You maybe can rub that tape off. But you do, and you make a sound—you're a dead man. Because I'm right close by. Understand?"

He looked at me and nodded. I finished chaining him, then left him there. I went downstairs and smoked and drank and sat.

She wandered around the house.

Finally she said she'd try to take my mind off things. She got some sleepy music on the transistor radio, and put on a fashion show. She modeled all her clothes. Underwear, maybe just a pair of nylons; pink, blue, black. A skirt, a blouse, dresses, sweaters. It was really something to see her jouncing around in just a sweater, black or white. Swim suits. Bikinis. It wasn't tiresome. It went on and on.

Finally, somehow, it was Thursday.

With him still up there, chained in the bathroom. Like a dog.

I waited for the mail. Those passports had to come through. It had me half crazy.

They came.

"Well," I told her. "I'll be saying good-by for a while."

"You'll be so far away."

"Switzerland," I said.

"It's so far."

"That's how it's planned. You got things to do. You get your license, buy a car, get a real cheap one—a clunker, okay? You'll have to, anyway. Not much money left. And something else. You stay around the house, but you don't go near him. Get that?"

"When'll you be back?"

"Maybe less than three days. A quick trip."

"It's where we'll go after?"

"Only for a little while."

I fixed food, plenty of it, and took it up to Bliss. I explained to him carefully. "Now, listen," I said. "Due to circumstances, I won't see you for at least two days. So eat hearty," I said. "You won't have anything to eat till I come in this room. Get that."

"Phalen, you know I'll get you for this."

He looked like hell.

"Just don't waste your breath," I said.

He finally ate. Then I chained him good, and taped him better than usual, and left him. He'd have to work out toilet facilities himself. I locked the door.

I told Felice, "Don't you go near that room, and keep as quiet as possible. Just leave him there. Of course, if he works loose, or starts shouting, you'll have to go in. I don't think he will."

"But, Jim—three days. What's he going to do?"

"I don't know. It's got to be that way."

I was half crazy thinking about it. I finally managed to say good-bye to her, and drove to Buffalo. I caught a plane to Idlewild, and then a jet, and we landed in Orly, France, Friday morning.

I carried a light bag with me, an extra shirt and some socks. I had a thousand American dollars in my shoes. I caught a plane from Orly to Zurich. Wanted to spend some time there, but couldn't.

I kept thinking about Bliss, chained.

And Felice. All alone. In the house.

Switzerland looked great and I tried not to think of what had to come. The thing that got you was the remarkable cleanliness. From Zurich, I went to Lucerne in one of their clean electric trains.

Europe was the place for me, I knew that. There was an excitement I'd felt the moment we landed in France. The same excitement wasn't in Switzerland, it was different, but it was

good just the same. Everywhere you looked the women were terrific.

Lucerne was beautiful. The cleanliness again, but much more, too. You didn't want to drop a cigarette butt. They probably got down on their hands and knees and scrubbed the streets. I know they scrubbed thresholds, because I saw them. I stopped in a bar and had a glass of delicious beer and talked with a guy. They seemed to speak English everywhere.

"You have a beautiful country," I said.

He shrugged. "Yes."

"The people seem fine."

He shrugged again. "*Ja*." He looked at me. "But they have forgotten one thing."

"What's that?"

"They have forgotten how to play."

He went back to his beer.

I started searching outside. Well, I came along and there was the lake. It was a dark mirror, with trees and buildings nearby, a fine sight; the water still and so darkly gleaming.

I came along and there was a green treed park near the water. Everything looked as though it had been very carefully fashioned. A street was next to the park, and houses shoulder to shoulder, colorful, overlooked the lake. I began to inquire about a room to rent.

It seemed strange. Felice so far away, and the thirty-first of May coming up, and Bliss there in that bathroom, chained. And here I was in Switzerland, Lucerne, overcome with the beauty of the place, the serenity.

It took time, but I found what I wanted. Somebody had passed the word. A crazy American was searching for a room. It had to be just such a room. They were right. I didn't want a large rooming house. I didn't want a house, or a hotel. The people I rented from would have to live there, and they'd have to look right.

The house was just across from the park where the lake took a little dip in toward the street. There was a wall, a garden and a gate. Not a large place.

A kind looking old woman stopped me. Her name was Mrs. Martha Swartzer.

"You are looking for a room?"

"Yes."

"Would you please to see what I have?"

"Yes."

"Come, then."

Mrs. Swartzer wore a pinkish dress with an apron of white frilled cloth and her gray hair was in a bun, with black-headed pins stuck in it. We went through the gate and along a little walk and up to the house. There were shutters on the windows, and they were open. Flowers bloomed everywhere. Wisteria grew over the small porch. We went inside, into the gloom.

"Franz?"

Franz came out. A tall man, carrying a newspaper, smoking a clay pipe, frowning above glasses with an adhesive tape patch at the temple. I knew this had to be it.

"Franz. This young man is looking for a room."

She beamed at me and dry-washed her hands happily.

"This man, he is my husband. Good, eh?"

"Yes. Fine."

We went to the room. It was a small room with a big bed and a mattress about four feet thick. I sat down and sank almost to the floor, fighting to recover myself. They stood in the doorway and laughed.

"Feathers," she explained. "You did not know?"

I said I would take the room. They were kindly old folk and I liked them, the Swartzers. "But I won't be here for a while yet. Then my wife and I will come."

"Oh, your wife." They nodded knowingly at each other.

"Before we come, we'll be mailing some things here, from the United States."

"Oh?"

"That's all right, isn't it? Mostly packages. The thing is, I must be certain you'll receive them and put them here in my room, for us. Okay?"

"Okay." They beamed and chuckled again.

Frank patted Martha's shoulder, puffing wildly on his pipe, which looked much too hot to touch.

"I must make certain," I said.

I thought how absolutely certain it must be.

"We'd better go to the post office and tell them, all right?" I said.

Franz and I went to the post office and everything was arranged. Packages would be mailed to me, Howard Stevens, in care of the Swartzers. Then we came back to the house, and they insisted I stay for coffee. I did. Then I asked how much the rent was and told them I'd take the room for six months. "You never can tell," I said. "We might be delayed. I have business everywhere. And we want to live in Lucerne for

a time, and just rest when we get here. Want to be sure of having a place, just like this."

They nodded understandingly.

"Which would you rather have?" I said. "Francs, or American dollars?"

I knew the answer. There was always a market for the All American buck, anywhere in Europe. A good market. I took off my shoes, and paid them. They were excited and they liked me.

As I started to leave, a young woman came in. She was maybe thirty-five.

"Our daughter, she comes but seldom." She smiled. "Jeanette," Mrs. Swartzter said. "This is Mr. Stevens, from the United States."

Jeanette was something, all right. She had heavy blonde hair and excellent clothes and a hard wise eye. I was leery of her right away. I knew what she was and wondered what she charged. She'd just come in from Basle and she was tired. But she couldn't stay long. She was pleased to meet me.

"You stay?" she said. She had a nice voice. "Tonight, we go dancing."

"Mr. Stevens has a wife," Mrs. Swartzter said.

Jeanette winked at me and patted her mother's arm. "And I have a husband in Marseilles," she said. "Does this mean I can't go dancing?"

I managed to leave.

At the gate Mrs. Swartzter said, "Jeanette, she's a lovely girl but—" she shrugged—"troubles, troubles, all the time."

"She spend a lot of time with you?"

She made a sound like a Bronx cheer. "We haven't seen her for three months. We had a call this morning. This afternoon she leaves for Paris. She made a big amount of money in Basle."

"That's good."

"No, that's bad."

"You'll be sure to take good care of all mail, now," I said.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Stevens."

I left. I'd given them twenty-five dollars extra, just to make certain. It doesn't hurt to pay your way.

It was a beautiful little old house and they were a nice couple, Mr. and Mrs. Swartzter. Just the people to take care of a million dollars mailed to them in small packages. They would probably pile the packages on the bed.

I wanted to stay in Lucerne. It became suddenly the most beautiful, the most peaceful spot I'd ever been in, or maybe even ever would be in. Entire sides of buildings were hand painted. Pretty girls walked in the park, with bright bold eyes, along the lake. They nodded and smiled on the streets.

But I had a date with a bank vault.

Twenty-Two...

"It's tonight," Felice said.

"Yes."

"I can hardly stand it."

"Me, too. All I can see is that vault."

"I've stood in it, Jim. I told you, you can smell the money. I mean it. Like something cooking."

We were lying on the bed, waiting for time to leave.

Everything was ready. All I had to do was get Bliss downstairs into the car. He had survived my trip to Switzerland, all right. As soon as I'd got back, I went to see him, and fed him. The animal. But he was really mad and raging now. With his clanking chains and his beard. He'd bumped and knocked himself plenty, reeling around the bathroom tripping.

I tried to ignore what was in my mind, the pictures that thronged.

We figured to make it exactly eight-thirty at the bank. It would be dark.

"I know you said George will be there," I said. "But suppose he's not. It worries me."

"It's worried you ever since you came back. Don't. And listen, I don't see why you had to take another name—this Howard Stevens, to rent that room from those Swartzer people. You could've used Roy Taft. It would've been better. Suppose you'd had to show your passport."

"Not going to be a single link," I told her. "Not one. Don't you see? We're going to vanish. Absolutely and for good and forever. When we get to Switzerland, we'll pick up the money." The excitement had me again. I got up and paced the room, smoking. "Then we'll go to Paris, or Marseilles. Marseilles, I think. And on the way, those Roy and Gertrude Taft passports will be burned. We'll become somebody else, because believe me, we'll be able to get false passports, don't you worry."

"Jesus."

I made endless lists.



I made more lists. I checked everything. I could only find one loophole and I'd taken care of that. I'd told Ned Webster I'd be in Davenport, Iowa. If I never showed up after my vacation, there was the almost invisible chance that he would try to contact me in Davenport. Of course, Bliss might check that. But I took care of it, anyway. I called Webster, said I was in Davenport, and was taking my mother someplace else. "Where?"

"I'm not sure. Let you know, Ned. Anyway, see you in about a week and a half."

"How's she doing?"

"Well, she's far from doing even the low hurdles."

"Give her my best, Jim. Tell her she has a fine son."

"Thanks. I will."

That should screw everyone up, once Bliss got his finger in things.

We had four large suitcases for the money. I hadn't been able to sleep, or eat, but Felice slept fine and ate like a horse. I was keyed up, ready to fly apart. Felice bought an old car, a Stude.

We spent days going through everything.

Neither of us had a single item that could be traced to either Felice Anderson, or James Phalen. Absolutely everything, we went over. We put everything we owned in one pile, stripped to the bare skin, then carried each piece to another pile and you'd be surprised the number of things that point directly at you. Initialed rings, or a belt buckle. Old cards in a wallet. Letters. Initials inside a ring. Charm bracelets. Laundry marks. We burned everything down by the river, every label on clothes from Allayne came off, shoes were torn apart. When we were finished, there was nothing. We even checked the cars.

So now we were ready.

"We'll take the Buick. It's a good car and it'll stand up."

She had the Buck Rogers gun in her basket purse. I had a kit I'd made up of an ordinary hammer, a small sledge, chisels, jimmies; everything we could possibly need for the tellers' vaults. She kept insisting all I'd need was my fingernail, but I knew different.

She would hold the gun since I'd be busy, and George had to be kept quiet. I was nervous.

"We'll get in," I said. "I'll put the gun on him, and get that back door open. You park the car out back—no, we'll park

there to begin with, then walk around. Then, you're going to have to somehow get the suitcases in the bank."

"Don't you worry. I can do it."

"It's better, working back there, than from the front."

"It's a big steel door, the back door."

"We'll have to be careful. But it's got to work."

I went up and unfastened Bliss from the toilet. I had him really wrapped in those chains. He grunted, but I didn't give him a chance to say anything. I fastened the bathing cap on him good and tight, saw that his ears were plugged, his mouth gagged, and his eyes covered. Then I loosened his feet enough so I could lead him downstairs to the car. He kept moaning softly, now. It was a hell of a sound. When I got him in the car, I tied him securely again.

I told Felice, "Now, don't talk much, till we get rid of him. If you do, talk quiet—and close to my ear. We'll dump him in the country someplace between Riverport and Bridgedale. I'll leave him tied, everything but his feet. He'll be able to get someplace. I'll take the covering off his eyes. And don't worry, he'll never find us."

"It worries me, Jim."

"Don't let it."

We took off. Felice wore a black dress and carried the big basket purse in her lap with the gun inside. We left Riverport at three in the afternoon, which should put us in Allayne almost on the dot of eight-thirty. I wanted no standing around.

"Listen," I said quietly. "Any chance he's not there, we just drop it till next time."

"He's got to be there, you fool! What about *him*!"

"Yeah."

George would have to be there. Because Bliss would be wandering around the country. Still, he knew nothing of the bank.

"Anyway," she said. "He'll be there. I know my George."

"If he happens to be by the door, you signal him. He'll open up fast enough. If he's back by his desk, like we figure, then we unlock the door and go in. Then you call him, right off, before he sets off an alarm, or flips, or something. This is ticklish. It's got to work."

I began to shake. I had to stop the car. I began to realize for the first time, the bad shape I was in. I'd been drawing on resources until I was overdrawn. There was very little left. Just nerve, that was all. I sat there. She was calm.

"Easy, Jim."

"I'll be all right."

I finally drove on.

"When we make it when we get to the car," I said. "We drive straight back here. We've got all the wrapping paper, the boxes, the stamps, the twine, the labels, everything."

"Yes, Jim."

"Did we get those labels that read *Books*?"

"Certainly."

"Getting so I can't remember. The twine. Air-mail stamps. Regular stamps. Thick wrapping paper, various sized boxes. Small magazines. Light books. Labels. The weighing machine. The rubber stamp."

"Take it easy, Jim. Don't go and blow up now." She snuggled close to me, rested one hand on my thigh, and put her head on my shoulder. "You don't see me all tight and crazy, do you."

"I'll be okay."

"I've always known everything would go okay. This is a natural. It's simple. I've known it for over a year. I'm excited." She squeezed next to me, her leg pressing mine. "But, oh-h-h-h-hhhh. When we get that money."

"Easy."

"We'll leave the country tomorrow?"

"Yes, right after we wrap and mail everything. And that's not going to be easy, Felice. We'll have to travel around some—one post office to another. We can't mail it all at one place. Some goes by boat, some by plane. All wrapped differently. No return address, see? Just in care of Mrs. Franz Swartzer, then we can't possibly lose any of it. Not possibly."

"Suppose they want to check a package at a post office?"

"They won't. I already tried one the other day. They just ask what's in it. Some'll be labeled books and stamped. Others, we'll take to the window."

I pounded my head with my fist. "Is there anything I forgot? Anything?"

"Honey," she said. "You've been so thorough, it drives me crazy, just thinking of it."

"Got to be. Hasn't taken long, but it's taken a lot out of me. I'll tell you."

"We'll put it all back. Your little Spanish bitch will fix you up."

Well, I didn't even smile. I took a long side road cut-off midway between Riverport and Bridgedale, drove into the country. I dragged Bliss out of the car, into some deep brush, and loosened the chains on his feet. I locked them so he could

take about a two and a half foot stride. Then I took the bandages off his eyes, and talked loudly, next to his ear.

"Now," I said. "You're free. You're not far from a road. Somehow, you'll get out of here, I know. You'll never see me again, Bliss. And I'll be glad of that. Good luck. Maybe next time you'll stay the hell out of people's business."

He grunted and moaned and lurched and tried to take a step and fell down. I stood by to see if he could get on his feet all right, without help. He could. He stood up.

"So long, Bliss."

I hurried back through the brush to the car and we drove off. He couldn't see the car.

"Makes me shiver to think of him there all alone," she said.

"Yeah, well that's how it's got to be."

I didn't want to think about him. I was glad to get rid of him. But I knew the world must appear one hell of a lousy place from where he stood.

Out there in the middle of nowhere.

We parked behind the bank by the rear door, down a way from the door, turned the lights off and sat there a long moment. I saw no one on the street. Finally, we got out and walked around the block.

We came by the curb, near the front door.

"He's there," she whispered. "I see him."

"Ready?"

"Yes, Jim—look. You can see the vault. It's open."

We walked to the bank door. There wasn't a soul nearby. The Happytime liquor Store was booming with business. I got the key out.

"Listen," I said quickly. "The minute we're through the door, you give me the gun. I'll lock the door and calm George down. Got it straight? And keep out of line of the front door, and in the shadows. Got that?"

"You told me a million times."

The key went in as if the lock were butter.

The door opened like a heavy breath.

We slid inside.

George Anderson was at his desk behind a low railing. He didn't even look up. The door was locked, wasn't it?

I closed the door gently and locked it with my key from the inside. I was proud of that key, right then.

I took the gun as she handed it to me, and he looked up, just as she spoke.

“George, honey? I’m back.”

We moved fast past a gate and behind some desks. He stood up like a shot and stared. It was her hair, probably.

Then he came to.

“Felice.”

He saw the gun and his hand moved and I knew he reached for the alarm that would mean the end.

“You do,” I said. “And you’re dead. Right there.”

He turned to very hard stone.

Twenty-Three...

I didn't take my eyes off him.

"Felice," I said. "Get to the back door. Get the suitcases, all four. And that kit of mine."

"All right."

"And be careful."

She went, skimming down through the shadows toward the far rear of the bank building. I heard a light snick of metal.

George Anderson still hadn't moved. I felt like a rock, myself.

"Now, you, George. Go around by the wall, over to your right. Slow. Past those desks, in back of the cages, and over to the cash vault."

"No."

"You want to die?"

"You can't get away with this."

"Be more original. Sure. Only we can."

"You've got Doll. My Doll."

I was close to him now. The gun in my hand looked crazy. It made me feel crazy. I must have looked as crazy as the gun, because he stared at me as if I were from Mars.

"Move, Anderson."

A whisper came from back there.

"I got two in."

George Anderson put both hands over his face and gave a sob. It was a hell of a sound. He had on a pair of black trousers and a white shirt, and he'd been working. The jacket to his suit hung over the chair by the desk. He had his collar and tie unfastened. The tie was blue. His shirtsleeves were rolled to above his wrists and he still held a pen in his hand, and when he put his hands on his face the pen-point left ink on his forehead.

"I know what you're thinking," I said. "You think you're brave enough?" I suddenly knew for certain he wasn't. "All you have to do is press the alarm button. Then you'll be dead."

We won't get the money, will we? No. Which is more important? You, or the bank. Big decision. Make it."

He took his hands down. He couldn't do it. It gave me a funny feeling, let me tell you.

"Now, move."

He began to move. He went over by the right wall, and down behind the cages in the dark shadows. I heard the door snick down there. Then she tiptoed over behind me.

"I got them."

"Good."

"You bitch!" George said. "You awful bitch." He said it like he was crying. "You terrible bitch! You bitch!"

He kept moving, and said this, walking, without turning.

She laughed softly. That's what Jim's always called me. I love it Maybe if you'd called me that, long ago, all this wouldn't've happened."

"Oh, you bitch."

"I guess it would've happened, anyway," she said. "On you it sounds different."

"Shut up," I said.

"It's so easy. You see, now?"

"Yeah."

My voice, even the whisper, echoed slightly in the enormous, vaulted bank. It was kind of like a cathedral.

We reached the cash vault. It looked very large, and it was round in front, and it gleamed. The door stood almost halfway open.

"Inside," I said to George.

"In the vault?"

He went inside.

"You bring the suitcases," I said to her. "And the tool kit."

She went away and came back with two suitcases and the tool kit and set them down. She straightened and looked at George. Then she went away again, on tip-toe.

Where we stood, we couldn't be seen from the front door. I went into the vault with George, and we stood there looking at each other. At the back of the vault about fifteen feet from the door, were the rows of tellers' vaults. The cash vault itself was about ten feet wide by eight and a half feet high.

"Nobody ever gets away, robbing a bank," he said.

"Except for now."

He looked as if he'd been shot in the face. He looked old and desperate, only not desperate enough. I kept thinking the one thing. He had to die.

He would look at the gun. Then at me. Then at the gun.

"All the time," he said. "You two, planning this."

"Yeah."

She returned. "Yes," she whispered, looking into the door of the vault. "And we've been screwing like wildcats, too!"

He didn't even look at her.

"Come on. Bring in the tool kit and the suitcases, hurry up."

She did that. I handed her the gun, walked past George. "Get over against that wall," I said.

He did.

"And quit stewing," I said. "The money's insured. That's all you're worrying about isn't it?"

"I've worked here all my life."

She laughed quietly. I checked the tellers' vaults. She'd been partly right. Even I could see they shouldn't be too difficult to open.

"Make it fast, Jim," she said. "Fast as you can. He's supposed to be out of here by nine."

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Didn't want to worry you. They always check, around nine."

I got to work, fast I took the sledge, and knocked off a combination. It snapped right off.

She laughed again, and that's when she began to lay into him. I didn't want to hear any of it, the things she said. But I couldn't plug my ears. I worked hard and fast.

"You're stupid, George," she said. "I've been planning this for over a year. I had to find the right person, somebody who would really help me... somebody who cared about me—me—me, see? Not just a damned bank."

"Doll."

"Doll, my back."

"Go to hell," he said.

She laughed. "You're rich, honey. Really, you are." Then she began to whale away at him in earnest. She called him everything in the book, and then some.

I got the first safe open. She stopped then.

It was like a box, a tray, and it was loaded. I got a suitcase, and began packing the currency in it.

"Don't look at it, now," I said. "Save it for later."

"You're right, darling."

My heart socked like a trip-hammer, and perspiration dripped off me onto the money. I tried not to think. I just worked like a robot. Every now and then I'd look at her, standing there, but nothing meant anything. It all sort of blanked out, and there was just that money and the haze I worked in.

"How much you got in here tonight?" she asked him.

He didn't answer. He was scheming.

Then he said, "You going to leave me in the vault all night?"

"Yes, hon. That's right," she said.

I had another safe open. Time was running short. You had to really use that jimmy, then the heavier bar. But they weren't so much to open. You needed weight, was all.

Money.

I worked and worked in this haze. I was knocked out. I didn't think. You never saw so much money. I filled one suitcase level, then another, and then another. Three of them. And there was still more.

All the time, she kept cursing him. She seemed to really enjoy it. And he stood there. Then he began to tremble, then shake, and a tear ran down his cheek. I didn't want to look at him, but I did. Fat tears welled and trickled down his cheeks. He would lick his lips, licking the tears. His shoulders shook, just faintly.

"Look at him," Felice said. "Just look at my great big husband."

"Cut it out," I said. I was getting sick of it

"Where you going?" George said, between soundless sobs. "What are you going to do?"

She told him everything. And there went my last hope. It was tough. Like a swift right to the gut. Because I realized then that I'd still hoped we wouldn't have to kill him. But she told him everything. "And then we go and we pick up the money, see? In Switzerland—a million dollars."

"Doll. Doll."

I was done. There were three big suitcases loaded to the brim, and so heavy they'd be a mess, getting them out. The fourth was about half full.

"How much you think there is, Jim?" she said.

George said, "There's well over a million dollars, there."

"We've got to move," I said. "And fast. It's getting late."

It was quiet for a long moment.

"I'm going to do this, Jim," she said. "Do you mind, awfully?"

"No,"

I didn't look at him.

"Do what?" he said.

"Kill you," she said.

He screamed. I turned. She shot him. The gun went *blat!... blat!... blat!* with the home-made silencer, and three red splotches appeared on George Anderson's shirt front. He said, "Hell," clearly, and fell down dead.

She was a picture. That tight black dress, her legs apart, her hips pivoted forward a bit and her breasts stuck out, and that Buck Rogers gun.

The gun hadn't made much noise, but I wanted to get out of there, fast.

"Let's go."

"Wait. Jim."

"No. We've got to go. Now We've got everything."

"I haven't quite got everything, Jim."

I looked at her and she began to laugh. I'd never seen her face look that way, except for the time she beat in Sy Krueger's head with the hammer.

"Don't you see, Jim?"

Her mouth was a slash of red, and you could see the nipples on her breasts were hard under the thin cloth of the black dress.

"No," I said. "I don't see."

"Well, I don't need you, either, Jim. Isn't that the way it goes?"

I looked at the gun.

"You've been swell," she said. "I love the way you rip my clothes off. But I have to have variety, too—that's the part I didn't tell you about. Jack Solengren, he used to rip them off for me. Lots of guys ripped them off and raped me good. But it has to be different guys, all the time—see? That's right, Jim. Now, I can buy them—I can buy the best. You planned this wonderfully, and you make a swell rape job, but—" She shrugged.

"Felice."

"Good-by, Jim."

I went at her. She shot me. The gun moved in her hand. I stopped in mid-stride. I saw the flashes and heard the sounds and saw her face—the eyes like jet, the red lips drawn back across the teeth....

Twenty-Four...

Silence.

Darkness.

Not even memory for a long time.

The absolute dead silence of nowhere.

Then I remembered and finished a scream I'd begun a long time before.

"Felice!"

She didn't answer.

How could she. I was alone, inside a bank vault.

There was pain all through me. I was lost in the complete darkness of the vault. I lay without moving, and tried hard to remember. I knew I'd been shot three times. I could recall every impact. One of those shots had been in the head. The last. The other two had hit me in the body. I was one mass of pain. My guts were on fire.

I felt my head.

It was my left ear.

It was gone. All that was left was a sticky mass of torn flesh. I knew that's what had knocked me out.

But I wasn't dead. And somehow I knew I wouldn't die.

I lay there. The air was bad.

I began to remember in snatches. A strange thing. It didn't come all at once. Just Felice, standing there, and that look on her face. Then the gun moving in her hand.

She'd shot me. She thought she'd killed me.

She was gone.

I tried to move, painfully. Then I lay still again. I felt of myself carefully, down my sides. My ear was gone, but that wasn't bleeding badly. I felt weak, dizzy and blind. Probably lost a lot of blood.

Maybe I would die.

Where was the blood coming from? The pain was everywhere.

Absolute darkness was something I'd never experienced.

I was bleeding from the left side. A slug had torn through the flesh. Blood slowly seeped out. Also, my left thigh. The bullet apparently had passed straight through the inside of the thigh, without striking anything too vulnerable. I was alive, wasn't I?

I lay back and laughed. I quit that, fast.

The pain in my side doubled me up, gasping.

I had to be careful. I'd lost a lot of blood. It seemed to be all over the floor in a sticky puddle, no matter where I felt.

I lay back and tried to think.

Then I remembered George Anderson. The slug had done something to my head. I knew that now. In the darkness, the utter stillness, you weren't at first conscious of things. You had to dwell on them.

I rolled over and came to my knees and struck something. It dug sharply into my head and pain spiked down through me. I collapsed and lay there.

The edge of a door to one of the tellers' safes.

I got on my knees, and moved in the direction where I thought George Anderson was.

I was wrong. I hit steel.

I turned and crawled the other way, and found George Anderson. He was stiffening already. I obviously had been in the vault a long time, out cold. He was very dead and I panted, one hand resting in coagulated blood.

It all came back in a monstrous rush of light.

I fell on the cold, sticky floor of the vault and couldn't stop laughing. It hurt like hell. But I couldn't stop. I felt drunk. It was the violent black laughter of release. It vomited up out of me, and I laughed and wept, and bled, and maybe even went insane there for a time.

Because... *all that planning*. All those endless details upon details—the hours and days and endless days of checking off item after item, erasing every flaw, searching for and finding every little loophole—the tireless planning—knocking myself out, going straight down the line like a horse with blinders... it had all paid off., every last drop of energy... right to the very last.

And here I was.

Felice had the money.

I roared with it. It was like laughing in a whale's belly. There was no echo. Just the black coughing laughter surging around my head in the darkness. Maybe I was mad. Maybe I was blind.

I could see her. The gun moving in her hand as she shot George. And then me.

And then—then what?

Jesus. Dragging each one of those goddamned suitcases weighing nearly as much as she did, out of the bank to the car. One at a time. Out the back door, across the sidewalk, and into the car.

They were heavy. She would have had to drag them.

I could see her in my mind's eye, trying to get them into the car. All four of them. Boosting them with her knee.

Maybe some poor son of a bitch had come along, and she'd asked him to help her.

I'd been good for a rape job. For ripping her clothes off. I was fine for planning the robbery of a bank.

Now I was fine dead.

What time was it?

I checked George's watch, since I didn't have one. Eleven forty-five.

I'd been out, since maybe five to nine. Going on three hours. She was nearly to Riverport, by now. She would get home and sit up till after dawn—wrapping that money.

I lay there and beat my fist weakly against the steel floor of the vault. I got to my feet and staggered and slipped on blood and fell sprawling. I yelled and screamed at her. I called her every filthy name I could think of.

Then I just lay there, bleeding.

Like as not I wouldn't live through the rest of the night. They would swing open the vault door at seven-thirty in the morning, and there we would be. George Anderson and James Phalen.

James Nightmare Phalen.

Because it all came back, right then. It was all around me. The nightmare. It hadn't gone away.

"Jinny!"

I yelled her name till I was hoarse. Then I just lay there.

Finally I moved. The air was very bad.

Felice. Jinny.

I knew then that you live with your nightmare. You don't try to obliterate it. That's what I found out. And the moment I saw that, it ceased to bother me any more. Jinny would always be there. Only now she was really gone.

That was when I began to plan to get out and get to Felice...

I thought it through. I had planned the perfect bank robbery. Look at it any way you wanted, it was perfect. And she would carry it through. She would wrap the money in separate packages. They would be very carefully wrapped. In the morning, she would load the car and start traveling. She would go to different towns, and mail them to Lucerne, to *Mr. & Mrs. Howard Stevens*, in care of *Mrs. Franz Swartzer, Lucerne, Switzerland*.

I had lots of time to find a flaw. There was none.

She would mail them. Then she would fly over and wait for them, probably. Pick them up. Any sort of excuse would work, about my not being there.

"Oh, Felice," I said. "You black-eyed Spanish bitch."

I had to get to her. There was one chance.

She wouldn't be hurried.

Because I was dead. There was nothing in the world to link her with what had happened here in Allayne. Nothing.

Not even Bliss.

Absolutely clean.

She would hurry to mail the money. Then she would return to the house in Riverport, and get ready to leave.

Could I get there?

Phalen, I thought You've lost your mind.

All right The vault opened at seven-thirty. Not many people there then. Not till later. Only a couple. Supposed to be two on hand to open up, according to Felice. Usually, a few present.

I had to get out of the vault when they opened it.

Then out of the bank.

What about a car? They'd be after me right away. But I had to make it, somehow. Otherwise, why was I alive?

Reach her and kill her and somehow get to Switzerland myself? No. But reach her... somehow.

I drifted far away and when I came around again, and checked George's watch, it was quarter to four. I couldn't breathe well. Fine. Die of suffocation.

I began to think carefully, slyly, madly—how to beat her.

First Air.

I recalled her telling me once about there being an air-vent in this vault and it was operated by some kind of a wheel. In case somebody got stuck in here. Laughable.

I started the search. The air was very bad, now. Maybe it was my imagination. But your imagination can kill you.

It took me a solid hour. At ten to five, I found the wheel, turned it, and breathed fresh air.

I lay down again, resting, panting, bleeding slightly. I pained all over. I schemed.

It didn't take a scheme now. What it took was strength. I had hardly any left. I had to break out of here, find a car, drive to Riverport, find Felice, and...

I began to sob, my face against the steel floor.

I tried to recall everything I'd ever read about resting your body. Then I thought of something else. My wounds. With any violent exertion, they would start bleeding badly again. I wouldn't last long.

I took off my shirt, lay there and carefully tore it into strips, and bound my side as tight as I could stand it, and tied it. Then I bound my head, so it would soak up the blood.

No more shirt.

I went over to George Anderson again, unbuttoned his shirt, dragged it off. It caught on his arms, because rigor-mortis had set in. I had to tear the sleeves out.

I crossed the vault again, found exactly where the door was. The gun was on the floor. I brushed it away, and felt the tool kit I lay down by the vault floor, slid my trousers down to my knees, and bound my thigh. I did a good tight job; not enough to cut circulation, but enough to stop blood, if I ran, and it began to bleed. The slug had passed straight through.

The pain was very bad all this time. I pulled my pants up, buckled my belt, and lay there, waiting. Finally, I made one more trip to George, took his watch, then crept back by the vault door.

I lay there and thought of Felice.

That money. Maybe there was a chance. A thin one. Because nobody knew anything. Even Bliss. He didn't know anything. He didn't know he'd been in Riverport. Where was he now?

Just Felice. And James Phalen.

I had to find her, reach her.

I felt for a cigarette. My lighter. I could've had light, all this time. My hand struck something else, suddenly much more important. The bottle of pep pills that doctor had given me.

I brought them out and held them in my hand. I checked my watch. I lit a cigarette, took a few drags, put it out I kept my eyes shut when I lit the cigarette. I didn't want to see anything in that vault.

I waited.

The clock hand slid around very slowly. I thought about the steel sides of the vault. It began to get to me a little. I forced myself to think of something else.

Felice... the money... Felice...

Seven o'clock.

I started eating the pills. I ate all of them.

I moved slowly, rousing myself. The second hand on the watch ticked around and around. It was bad. Then it was seven-fifteen.

Seven-twenty...

Seven-twenty-eight..

I stood up by the door, by the crack where it would open.

The gun.

I grabbed it up, and tore the tin can silencer off. My jacket. There were cartridges in my jacket, and the gun was empty. I couldn't find my jacket I turned my lighter on, and looked around, but the light was blinding.

And right then the door began to open. I heard voices and gentle laughter, like somebody slowly tuning in a radio program.

I blinked my eyes rapidly, but the light was fierce.

Still, that moment with the cigarette lighter had helped.

"...said the darnedest thing. I mean, after all," this girl said. "I've seen that silly movie twice already."

"I think he's an awful square."

"Who's that?" a guy said.

"You know. Dorothy's boyfriend—that one from Utica."

"Let me just—"

A girl screamed. I came out of there running. I ran with everything I had.

I came around the side by the teller's cages, and ran like a madman for the front door.

"It's Anderson!" somebody yelled back there. "He's dead!"

"Call the police."

Somebody shot at me. A guard, doubtless. But I didn't stop. I vaulted the railing and ran like hell toward the front door. Then I knew that door would be locked.

But a woman was entering the bank, unlocking the door. She saw me and tried to close the door. They were well-trained. Whoever it was, shot at me again, and the pane on the front door shattered. I grabbed the door and ran out onto the street.

The woman stood there, wrathful, shocked, mouth open.

Traffic was busy this early. Everybody going to work. I turned to the right, running, with the gun. There was a stop light on the corner. Traffic was held up on Lewis Street.

I raced into the intersection, saw a young girl at the wheel of a yellow Cadillac. I grabbed the door open.

“Get over!”

She stared at me. She saw the gun.

“You want to die?”

She scrambled across the seat.

I slid under the wheel and we went out of there. I put the accelerator to the floor and held it

I heard a siren.

But all I could think of was Felice getting away with all that money.

Twenty-Five...

I could remember, when I was very young, running down a long steep hill. The hill was so steep you had to keep running, faster and faster, because if you slowed or made one false step it could be bad. So you ran down the long steep bill, faster, faster...

"Where're you taking me?"

She was about sixteen.

I said nothing. Sooner or later a police cruiser would pop out of a street. Somebody would have seen me get in this car. A yellow Cadillac.

Her voice was faintly shrill. "What're you doing?"

"Just be quiet. I'd like to let you out but I can't stop."

She was badly frightened. I shot a glance at her, then threw the gun on the floor of the car. It was empty.

I saw the police car. They had radioed ahead. Then I realized they could radio ahead everywhere. The only thing was, they didn't know where I was going.

I didn't hurt so much now. I felt better all the time. More and more excited, and the more excited I became, the less I cared about things. It was like flying an airplane, high in the clouds, with a brilliant calculating eye, as I calmly surveyed things below.

"Please," the girl said.

"Shut up."

The police car was a block back. I took a fast turn to the right tires screaming, and laid it to the floor again, then slapped the brakes and went left. They didn't know where I was headed. It was like a song. I shot through an alley, hit a main drag, and headed Northwest out of town toward Bridgedale.

Felice.

I would take whatever back roads I could find.

Another police car spotted me, slowed, came toward me. They were really using their radios, now. I went past like a bird, and one of the cops leaned out with a gun in his hand, but didn't fire.

The girl. By now they knew who she was and that she was with me.

"Please," she said.

I hit the brakes lightly, turned right. I came into a residential street and turned left and went straight north. I put the accelerator to the floor.

No sign of anything. We passed a few cars, and some people on lawns stopped and gaped. I went through stop streets, stop lights, everything, with the gas pedal flat on the floor. Then I slowed and cut left again, got on a street I knew would carry me toward Bridgedale.

"Please?"

"You're insurance," I said. "I can't let you out."

"What did you do?"

I snapped a look at her, long enough to see what she was like. About sixteen, wearing a black play-suit. She was plump, with long raggy pale blonde hair, and bright dark purple lips. Her eyes were dark. Her flesh was very pale against the black of the play-suit

A siren whined, cut immediately. Accidental.

Somebody'd get a cursing for that. I touched the brakes and made a left, flattened out, and after three blocks went right again.

A police car was straight ahead. I was almost on it, and it slowed fast. I turned up an alley, and the girl smashed over against me. She sprang back across the seat.

"You!" she said. "You—look awful! You look dead! All that blood!"

"Don't look, then."

We came out of town and hit the county highway toward Bridgedale. Now it meant something.

I had to keep going. Behind me, I saw a police car. Still another cruiser nosed behind the other. They would radio ahead.

"I'm sorry, I can't let you out," I said.

"My father's going to be mad." She talked as if somebody had hit her over the head. She was that frightened. "You're getting blood all over his car."

Well, it was those pills. I'd eaten an awful lot of them. I had no idea what they were, but I felt as if I could last through about anything, right then.

We traveled at well over a hundred miles an hour now. The needle said one-twenty, but I wasn't sure it meant anything. Maybe it did. The car held to the road.

"Please," she said. "Let me out—let me out."

"I can't."

The police cars stuck back there.

I made the turn to Bridgedale, thinking of this fork, and all that had happened here. I checked the gas. The gauge read nearly full.

"How're the tires on this car?" I said.

"Brand-brand new. Du—du—du—daddy—"

"Okay. Thanks."

She began to sob a little, over there. I thought how Felice was only maybe a year older than this girl beside me. A year's difference. In age. A thousand in experience.

"Please—let me out."

The police car was creeping up. It seemed impossible. But it was true. I turned careening off the road to Bridgedale on a dirt road, that I knew looped back. Then I thought, Phalen—they'll goof you.

I took the first cut back toward the main road. We jounced and it was slower going. But when I hit the main road again, there was no sign of the patrol car.

In my mind it rang. Felice. I had to reach her, had to... somehow. Had to...

"What's your name?"

Her voice was different now.

"Jim. What's yours?"

"Sue."

I glanced at her. Tears rolled down her face.

"Sorry about this, Sue."

She stared at me. "The blood," she said. "You're bleeding all over du—daddy's car!" Then she screamed. She screamed and slammed around on the seat, and it was something to hear. Then she quit.

My leg was bleeding, and my side, and my head, too.

Suddenly, she knelt on the floor, with her hands clasped on the seat. She looked up at me, wild, the hair streaming, the tears. And she begged, "Please, let me out—you don't need me, please let me out."

"I can't."

She was quiet.

Suddenly, she said it "I'll do anything. Anything you want—ju—just let me out. I'll let you—honest." She gulped and swallowed. "Please—anything—anything..."

"Shut up!"

I saw the road block.

They had two police cars across the road, nose to nose, just this side of Bridgedale. I barreled right on along, and didn't slow at all. They saw I wasn't going to stop and things happened fast. One of the cars backed with smoking tires and we went by, the cops looking, holding guns and not firing.

Both cars came after us, then.

"Sue? Come on. Get up on the seat and cut that out."

She stared at me. "I mean it" she said. "Anything."

I reached over and tried to slap her. "Sue!" The car slid, tires wailing and I gradually straightened it out again. I was soaked with sweat, now.

"Get up on the seat"

She did.

We came into Bridgedale and it seemed as if the entire police force from every town in the state was after me. I'd never imagined anything could be like this.

I tried to get lost in Bridgedale, but it was too small a town. I circled around, but no matter where I went, there were police cars and State Patrol cars.

We slammed past a police cruiser.

They shouted. One guy fired his gun in the air.

I came out of Bridgedale on the road for Riverport. I knew I was done. There was no way to escape them. I had to keep going, though.

Sue was huddled up in the corner of the seat now, gently sobbing. Finally she began to cease and just sat there.

I drove. Felice.

Suddenly, I saw something on the road. It was in the middle of the road. We came down on it with a rush, and it looked like a monster. It staggered around in the middle of the road, and suddenly I saw the chains rattling out around the feet, and blood, the bathing cap half off.

Bliss.

In the middle of the road. He reeled and lurched like a zombie, those chains trailing out behind him. We roared past and he screamed and I saw he had the tape torn and hanging from his mouth, blood on his face, the rubber cap hanging down—and those chains and padlocks clanking. The scream trailed off behind and I looked in the rear view mirror. He lay across the middle of the road. For a moment I thought I'd struck him. Then I saw him get up again and reel around in the middle of the highway, facing that oncoming swell of police cars.

Christ. Something out of hell.

I really drove then. And Sue sobbed now and again, all the way to Riverport. They had cars along the road now, but it didn't matter. Sue would plaster herself against the window and we'd fly by. They never fired a shot. But they had me under their eye all the way, now.

I switched on the radio, and it was all I could get. Me. They knew who I was. The whole state was after me, and 'copters were being called out. One announcer pleaded with me for the sake of Sue Prentice, and her family, to let her out safely. Because, they were going to run me down—follow me to the end.

There was nothing I could do. Every road was covered.

I turned the radio off.

I drove into Riverport and straight through town, as fast as I dared, so the car wouldn't crack up. Finally I hit Old River Road and it was like coming home.

I was getting the pain again now. I felt dizzy, exhausted, and my clothes were soaked with sweat and blood.

We were almost there. Then we were.

I saw the Buick out front in the drive, with the trunk open. She was here. Then I saw her—Felice, on the front steps of the house. She carried two valises, and was starting toward the Buick. I knew then. She had packaged the money, mailed it, and returned to the house. She was probably just getting ready to leave for the airport, with her clothes.

I slammed the Cadillac up across the yard, hit the brakes, and came in sort of broadside.

"Felice."

She saw me.

She still had on that black dress she'd worn the night before. She dropped the suitcases, turned and ran into the house.

I got out of the car, reeling. Down the road, police cars were coming.

Felice appeared on the porch. She had a gun.

"Felice—don't."

A police car swerved off the road into the yard.

"Felice!"

She said something, yelling it, as she fired the gun. She fired at the police car. Then she turned and fired at me. The slug ripped into my right leg and I went down. I tried to get up.

I saw her run for the Buick yanking at her skirt. It was so tight, she couldn't run right. She shot at the police car. She had her skirt yanked up over her thighs, running, those long legs scissoring.

She cried out

They shot her. She ran straight into the side of the Buick, and the gun slid across the top, rattling. She tried to cling to the side of the car, and everything was quiet and I heard her nails scratching at the steel. I tried to get up, but my right leg buckled strangely, and I fell flat and lay there. I didn't want to move any more.

I saw her slowly fall. She rolled over and lay on her back with her knees in the air. Then they flopped apart, and I knew she was dead.

People milled around through the haze. I tried to speak but I couldn't.

Finally, a man came over and knelt beside me.

"How you feel?" he said.

"Rough." I said it but nothing much came out.

I kept staring toward Felice. She lay there.

The man went over me.

A State cop came over. "Doc? He going to pull through?"

"Yes. He's shot up bad, but he'll pull through."

I grinned at the doctor.

I lay there.

"The ambulance'll be along. Where the hell is it?"

"You know how they are. You want 'em, they're never around. You don't want 'em, you got six."

"Is she dead? That blonde?"

"Aye-yuh. She's dead's hell. Pretty, too."

Everybody seemed to go away. Then I heard somebody.

"Phalen?"

I was thinking about that money. At the Swartzer's, in Lucerne. It would end up there. At Lucerne, that quiet clean town. It would keep coming to them in that little house with all the flowers. Day after day. By plane, and by regular mail. They would wonder what it was. All those packages. I could see Franz Swartzer picking up a package, and shaking his head, smoking that clay pipe. Then shaking the package a little.

"What you think, Martha?"

The months would go slowly, slowly by.

The police would question me. They would ask where the money was. And I would think, It's in Lucerne. And the Swartzers have it, piled on the bed, in their home. Such nice people. Honest as the day is long. Except, maybe their daughter. But even the most honest people... someday... they would say, "Martha?" Or, "Franz? We'd better have just a little peek—don't you think?"

"Phalen," somebody said. "They've got a man—his name's Bliss. You'd better start talking."

I writhed on the lawn.

I knew I'd never tell them about the money. Because there was always the chance I might not get too many years. And if I didn't tell them... well, there was always the chance the Swartzers might wait. Who knows?

The doctor leaned over me. "You lost a lot of blood, Phalen, but you've got a good chance."

Sure. Not a hell of a very big one though.

I heard the squeal of sirens in the distance. Then the ambulance came and they lifted me onto the stretcher.

All I could see was that room in Lucerne, with the packages piled all around.

Then the pain began to hit me.

THE END