

364

**MONARCH
BOOKS**
40c

WILD TO POSSESS

She Lit A Fuse
Inside Men

GIL BREWER

Wild to Possess

Gil Brewer

1959

Chapter One

It was an August night. It had just stopped raining. Lew Brookbank turned off the ignition of his six-year-old Ford sedan and climbed out. He stood for a moment on the soggy shoulder of the road, sighed bitterly, reached in across the seat and drew out a wooden road-sign with a four foot stake, and tossed it into the grass. This was the last of them.

He had foolishly promised Jay Redmen he would have all the signs placed for his barbecue drive-in here on the Oolachi River road, so Jay could see how they looked when he came to work at seven a.m. It was one o'clock now, and a very lousy, wet morning, if anyone asked.

It was dark. There was very little traffic. Even the crickets, katydids and bull frogs seemed to have died.

Lew stood there a moment, musing—a tall, rangy, heavy-shouldered man, with a grimly cynical strong-featured face like a large carved block of gray stone on which the sculptor's chisel had slipped to gouge extra deeply here and there. There was an impression of tremendous, careless strength about him and his bigness suggested noise and tumult. Yet, he always spoke softly and he walked as lightly as a cat. His hands were enormous; the antithesis of what anyone might imagine a sign-painter's hands should be. Lew was a sign-painter, of sorts, with his own small business. Right now, he wore sagging dark trousers, and a light baggy red woolen sweater with no shirt.

Well, he thought, standing there, a drink is probably in order. A drink is always in order.

The bottle was on the floor of the car. He reached in, brought it out, uncapped it, and read the label. *Gordon's Gin*. He took a short quick one, snapping it off the neck, and turned to stare at the wall of Florida jungle-growth beyond the road shoulder.

Florida, he thought. Why can't I get away from it? Shove it—every last flat wet stinking acre.

He knew why he couldn't leave the state. It was a little matter of curiosity—with some guilt thrown in.

He took another longer drink, capped the bottle and placed it back on the floor of the car, then lit a cigarette. This Florida he knew now was one hell of a lot different from the Florida he'd

known down around Miami with Janice, when Janice had been alive... but—the hell with that.

A sudden wave of nausea assailed him and his features altered, taking on strain. He snapped the half-smoked cigarette into a ditch, picked up the sign, and jammed it savagely into the soft ground. Then he yanked it out and walked over closer to the wall of undergrowth, kicking the ground with his foot. He located a good spot and thrust the stake into the ground again. He leaned on it and the stake slid into the earth. He stepped back, looked at it, nodded, then walked back to the car, got in and started the motor.

He drove sullenly now, feeling the rotten core of what was always with him, down inside his vitals, squeezing and tugging at his heart. Sometimes he would lie there on the army cot in the back room off the paint shop, and want to cry. But the tears never came. Not any more. The grief was with him all the time but it was gone, too. Kind of complex. A psychiatrist would claim he was trying to punish himself for what he'd done; that he would likely go on punishing himself for the rest of his life, looking for ways to be hurt. Well, eff those head-shrinkers, he thought. Slap them down here in Florida and shove the whole caboodle.

He reached for the fifth of gin, got it uncapped, and took three long swallows, as if it were water. He put the bottle back, and gunned the Ford along the hump-backed asphalt river road.

Resolutely he shoved thoughts of the past out of his mind. Memories could wait for the near-dawn hours; lying there on the cot drinking until he passed out filled with hate and remorse—remembering the mistake of blind panic which had led to the inevitable, slow creation of fear.

He traveled a mile down the road, then made a vicious U-turn, and started back, driving at a normal speed in the right hand lane, trying to keep his mind off the one thing he sought above everything else—a way to escape outrageous memory... the material means to help him flee crazily into a blind fog of oblivion.

You poor self-pitying bastard, he thought You can afford cheap gin, and that's what it's going to be. Why don't you go cut your throat? Because you haven't got the guts to cut your throat that's why.

Time erases all things, soothes the worried brow. Now, what stupe said that?

He began checking the placement of the signs. They were merely jammed by hand into the ground. He still had to set them with a sledge.

One Mile To Redmen's Bar-B-Q. That one was okay, luminous paint he'd used on the lettering showing up nicely for hungry night drivers, so they wouldn't miss *The Best Bar-B-Q In The Southland,*

any more than daytime drivers. *Bar-B-Q! Watch Out! 5,000 Ft. Ahead!*

Lew stopped the car, got out and turned the last sign a bit because the light hadn't reflected the way he wanted. Redmen was getting a lot for his money. But Jay was a good joker, as good as they came in Gulfville.

The gin was taking hold fine now. For a minute Lew felt like singing. The feeling passed as quickly as it came and he drove on.

4,500 Ft. Redmen's Bar-B-Q. ALL FINE EATS!

He continued along the quiet night road, checking the signs, sometimes turning one slightly, sometimes resetting one in a new spot. Five cars passed him coming from the other direction—probably late drunks heading home from Tampa, he figured. He crossed the low bridge over the Oolachi, thought he saw a car parked back there, hidden among the pines, then kept driving and checking until he reached the dark unlighted shadows of Redmen's restaurant and the last sign: *YOU'RE HERE! REJOICE! TURN IN NOW AND EAT!*

The poor bastard, Lew thought. Those signs would scare half the customers away. But that's what Jay wanted.

He made another U-turn, drove the entire mile back, stopped the car and got out with the bottle of gin and a small five-pound sledge hammer.

He set the first sign firmly, ramming the stake about two-and-a-half feet into the ground. It wouldn't entirely discourage lads from yanking them out, but it might help.

In the car once more, he drove to the next sign and used the sledge on that. Mosquitoes were out in force now, and the night was slowly beginning to heat up after the rain. Trees still dripped. The ceiling was low and the air was close and humid. There might be more rain before morning.

By the time he reached the third sign, the gin bottle was three-quarters empty. He missed hitting the stake, and began to use special care with the sledge. No use spending the whole night out here, he told himself, repairing signs and smashing them all at the same time.

He had five signs to go when he decided to walk the rest of the way. He argued with himself that it was a waste of time, starting the car, driving it, stopping it, getting out. Actually he knew he was pretty well tanked up and figured the walk would clear his head.

It was very quiet now. Only an occasional, distant cricket's chirp disturbed the heavy stillness. Everybody was asleep except old Brookbank, out setting signs in the middle of the night. Drunk as a coot, too. There was no noise at all. Walking on the asphalt in his old tennis shoes, he made no sound. He had been more or less

drunk for more than four months now—ever since the trouble in Miami. He felt ill tonight Maybe he was hitting the bottle a bit too hard in an effort to keep himself going long enough to finish the Redmen job. He felt as if he were floating through space.

If Sheriff Clanty spots you now, he warned himself, he'll toss you in clink, man. Watch it! Sheriff Clanty and Lew didn't get along well. Lew didn't take to the law with any degree of love, and the law knew this. If they didn't, Lew told them.

Close to the bridge over the Oolachi River. Lew paused, uncapped the bottle and started to take another drink. He had walked two hundred yards from the last sign.

Suddenly a woman's voice reached him from down to the left someplace, not far away. It was an exclamation. Then a man said something, and the woman spoke again, her words hurried and unintelligible.

Lew stood there with the bottle poised to his lips. For a moment the humid night was entirely still. No hint of breeze stirred the trees.

Then the voices came again. Lew strained, listening intently.

It sounded as if they were arguing, but he still couldn't make out the words.

Then it was quiet again, with only subdued insect noises quivering in the air.

Lew laid the sledge down, set the bottle on the ground at the shoulder of the road, and moved unsteadily, but very silently, down toward the pines along the riverbank.

Suddenly he ducked low A car was parked not more than a dozen feet away. Somebody was sitting in the front seat.

Chapter Two

For a long moment Lew crouched, trying not to breathe. The world teetered and reeled in front of his blood-shot eyes, and his head began to ache with an abruptness that was more than painful. He held his mouth open, breathing that way.

The woman said, "It frightens me. Suppose when you tell the old lady what's happened, she won't pay?"

The man replied, "I *know* that old witch. She'll pay."

The woman: "Why didn't you get any of it, then?"

Lew did not catch the man's reply. He had thought, at first, that the woman was in trouble. She wasn't, apparently. But there had been a slight undertone of fretfulness in their voices. Now, abruptly, their talk reached him again.

The woman: "Will there be any chance of the old lady ever suspecting you—when they find her body?"

The man: "How many times do I have to tell you? I've got that worked out. I won't do it till we have the money. It's going to look right."

Lew knew he might be able to identify them, if he heard them again. He wanted to know who the two people were. Curiosity nagged at him—he had to know.

He let himself slowly down into the knee-high, damp grass, kneeling on the soggy ground, feeling the wetness penetrate the cloth of his trousers. He cursed himself for getting so drunk as he sprawled out on the ground, eavesdropping. So far he had no real idea what they were talking about. They had spoken of killing someone—and of getting money from some woman.

Lew waited, drenched with sweat now, his head aching furiously, trying to make no sound with his breathing, conscious of the slam-bang of his heart. He tried to make out what kind of car it was, but could not tell. He couldn't see the license plate. Whoever it was had searched pretty hard for a lonely place to park, where nobody would be likely to pop up. There was a cow-path of sorts leading out to the highway, but that was all. The path hadn't been used by any cows for some time.

Because of the amount of gin he'd drunk, and the way his heart was ramming around, he wanted to breathe in large gulps of air. He didn't dare. They would hear him. And so he lay there,

suffering, feeling sicker by the minute, sipping at the air as if it were some precious liquid being sucked up through a fine straw.

The man: "I keep going over and over the plan—"

The woman: "Don't talk so loud."

They spoke softly, then gradually louder again.

The man: "Holding her—I wish we could just—"

The woman: "Weakening?"

The man: "You know better."

The woman: "We've got to be strong. We can't weaken."

The man: "It's a lot of money. We won't have a chance to touch it for a long while. We'll have to work up to it. After a while it won't matter. It'll seem perfectly regular. I'll start dropping around at the store, maybe buy a cuckoo clock, or an old bed-warmer, or something. Take you out in broad daylight. It'll look perfectly regular."

The woman: "A bed-warmer?"

The man: "Here."

The woman: "No, now—please, we'd better—"

The man: "Here."

The woman: "No, ah. No—please, oh, Jesus. Wait—"

Lew lay there, sweating, sensing the rising frenzy in the woman's voice, then hearing a gasp and sighing moan issue from her throat. There was a thrashing movement inside the car, the squeak of a spring. Lew ached to work himself closer to the car, but in his drunken condition he couldn't risk shifting his position. If he were going to move, now was the time. Yet he couldn't force himself to do it. Each time he so much as tensed a muscle, grass shimmied, and the earth beneath him crackled wetly.

Somehow he had to find out who these people were. He thought of returning to his car, and waiting for them to leave, then following them. But he was so close to their car now that he was certain they would hear him if he tried to get back to the highway.

He felt completely frustrated. Maybe they had been discussing a movie, or something. Maybe he'd heard them all wrong. After all, he was plastered. For a moment he felt a little like laughing. He restrained the impulse with an effort. Damn that gin!

The woman: "Oh, yes..." A faint, ecstatic cry died in her throat.

Lew got to wondering what she looked like. It was hard to tell with only a whisper to go by. She sounded good, though, and he began to feel a faint quivering in his loins, the way things were.

What could they have meant? If he had heard right, what was it they were planning? Regular ghouls, they were, plotting murder and mayhem.

The woman: "Oh, Jesus—give it to me—!"

Lew lay there, his senses reeling, his inflamed imagination conjuring up wild, erotic images of what they were doing. The thoughts nearly drove him crazy. In desperation he tried to concentrate on the report of the evil plan they had been discussing.

Suddenly the noises from the car increased and the woman sounded as if she were laughing and choking. After a time, it was still again, and then the woman's vibrant, satiated voice reached him.

"I wanted to scream. God, I nearly died, trying not to scream."

They spoke for a moment in unintelligible whispers. Then a car door opened and Lew plastered himself against the ground. The man climbed out. In a minute, he got back in again.

The woman: "We'd better go. She'll wonder where you are."

The man: "The hell with her. She'll find out soon enough—her birthday, too. I love you, baby—Christ, how I love you."

The woman: "We'd better go. I mean it. It feels creepy out here now."

The car started abruptly, the engine purring. It began to back up immediately, the driver gunning it in reverse out toward the road.

Lew saw it coming. He wanted a look at the license plate, at the car, at them—anything. The car was headed straight for him. He rolled frantically, not caring for the moment whether or not they saw him, and the car slammed by him. He smelled the rubber of the tires, felt the bright heat of the exhaust, it was that close.

The right rear bumper was mangled.

He peered at the retreating car. It looked blue.

It was a new Plymouth, but he could tell nothing else. The lights weren't turned on until the car was on the road. He was unable to see the license.

He came to his feet, running violently toward a copse of trees that shielded him from the road. He didn't make it. He heard a light clinking noise, and a bottle rolled on the shoulder of the road. They had knocked over his fifth of gin.

The car was moving slowly off toward the outskirts of Gulfville, two miles away. Lew ran stumbling up to the shoulder of the road and began sprinting toward his car. He ran very fast for such a large man. As he ran, he wondered if seeing his car would mean anything to them. Perhaps they wouldn't see it. He had drawn it far over on the shoulder, close to dense undergrowth.

He kept running. He could still see the taillights of the Plymouth, and they weren't moving very fast. The car moved sedately along the humped asphalt through the silent, damp night.

A stitch formed in his side, under his heart. It began to raise hell. He was out of condition. He hadn't had a stitch since early college

days. But he hadn't run like this for years, either. He had to reach his car and somehow catch them, see where they went. He should be going to the cops. But he didn't want to do that, he just wanted to see where they were going. It was an overwhelming obsession.

When he heard the car coming from behind him, he stopped running. He was legitimately out here, but anyone seeing him dashing along the road would wonder what was up. He cursed the car, walking as fast as he dared, without showing any undue haste as the headlights caught him in their bright white path.

He saw his Ford parked only twenty-five yards away.

The glowing taillights of the Plymouth were still in sight on the long, straight road, but growing rapidly dimmer now. He knew they would be taking a curve soon. If he didn't hightail it right after them, he might lose them. For some reason, losing them now maddened him.

The car coming from behind slowed, then stopped beside him.

"Hey, you?"

Goddam it! Lew turned and stared at the car. It was a Florida State Highway Patrol car. He drew a long breath, and let it soak around his heart feeding the blood for a moment, exhaled and stepped over toward the car. The officer was already out, coming around in front of the headlights. He stood by the right headlight, waiting for Lew. The engine turned over softly.

"Yes?" Lew said.

The patrolman was medium-sized, lean-looking in uniform, with a calm, steady-eyed face.

Lew was plenty drunk. He kept himself as steady as possible. He was sweating badly. If the patrolman smelled the gin, it might play hell. He cursed the man under his breath and stood just out of the full swath of the headlights' glare. He could no longer see the taillights down the road; they had vanished around the curve. It was like being trapped. Lew didn't like it and he had a hard time controlling himself. There was still a chance he could catch the car, but it was thin.

"What are you doing out here?" the patrolman asked.

Lew forced a grin. He wanted to tell the man to take a flying leap at the moon. "Putting up some road-signs." He quietly explained who he was, and how he had this job for Jay Redmen. He talked slowly, but not too slowly. He watched how he talked. "Just finishing up. That's my car down there."

"Let's see your license."

The son-of-a-bitch was going to stand here and hold him up! Lew could only think now of the new Plymouth, creeping along the road with those two inside, planning something nobody else knew

about. Creeping away from him. So he could maybe never find them again, never know what it was about.

He took out his wallet, opened it. The long accorded glassine card cases unfolded in a ripple. He held out the part with his license showing.

"Take it out and hand it to me," the patrolman said.

Lew took the card out. The patrolman looked at it holding it down in the glare from the headlight but standing so he could watch Lew perfectly well.

"What was all the running about?"

"Hell," Lew said. "Just seeing if I could run anymore, I guess. Felt like a fool, running like that, when I heard your car coming along. Got a hell of a stitch, too." He rubbed his chest. The pain was bad inside, there.

"Okay," the patrolman said, handing Lew his license. "You'd better head for home now And drive easy. You've been hitting the bottle a little."

"Felt kind of low tonight."

"All right," the patrolman said. "I have to check. You never know. Somebody gets the idea he can do something, sneak out in the middle of the night—middle of nowhere—pull something. Somebody always sees him. Never fails."

"I guess you're right"

"I'm right." The patrolman moved back in front of the car, and around to the door, and climbed under the wheel.

"Thanks," Lew called. "Thanks, officer."

The patrolman waved a hand, and drove off. He headed sharply for the shoulder, made, a U-turn, and roared off in the other direction, fast.

Now, why had the guy been forced to say that?

Lew started walking for his car. Then he ran, putting away his driver's license and wallet. He reached the Ford, got behind the wheel, and sent the car flying off the road shoulder in a shower of wet sand, toward town.

He drove hard, with the gas-pedal against the floor, sliding through the curve on the wet road, trying to urge the car along faster.

There was no sign of the Plymouth. The streets were wet and silent.

Store-fronts gleamed in his headlights. Streetlights were dim. Stop-lights had been turned to yellow warning, to blink intermittantly for the rest of the night.

He drove up and down street after street, looking, hoping against chance. He looked everywhere, but finally decided it was senseless.

When he thoroughly realized he had missed them, he became angry with himself. Then he felt let down.

There was an urgency inside him that was out of control. He knew he should go straight to the police. He told himself he might have, if he hadn't been stopped by that highway patrol car. Yet he admitted to himself that this was a lie.

He could have easily told the highway patrolman. It had been his chance and he had ignored it.

Losing the Plymouth was really raising hell with him.

He drove home.

Chapter Three

Lew thrust the gas pedal carelessly against the floor. He treated the car viciously. He did not want to head for home, but there was nowhere else to go. The business tonight had renewed the black frustration that cloaked his mind.

The quarters where he lived were part of the paint shop, to the rear. The building had been a filling station years ago. No one had ever been able to make it go. The pumps were gone but the large marquee, the cement columns, and the cement-enclosed area where the cars used to park for gas, still existed. The various people who had tried to run the gas station had lived here. Lew rented the place for fifty dollars a month. It was cheap and satisfied his needs.

He whipped the car in close to the front of the shop, got out, slammed the door, and stood there a moment, quietly swearing. Why had that damned highway patrolman come along right then?

It was quiet out here. Just the sound of a cricket or two. The place was located beyond the last residential section, outside of town, on a seldom-traveled road. The city-limits sign was just past his driveway. Actually, he lived in the country, under county jurisdiction, but ten minutes' driving would put him in the downtown business center of Gulfville. He had often wished he could find a place in town, so he could improve his business, but rents there were much too high.

It was a kind of contradiction, though, because he knew this was not what he really wanted.

After a moment he went inside. He had left the lights glowing in the shop after finishing the signs for Jay Redmen. It was a fairly large room; probably once used as a small grocery store along with the gas station.

Lew had the one back wall from the house doorway fixed with a sloping desk on which he worked. A tall stool stood at the desk. There were sheets of paper with rough layouts on them tacked to the desk, and on shelves around the room were paints and supplies of all kinds. Two sawhorses and a saw and several remnants of wood and sawdust littered the floor where he had worked on Redmen's signs.

He took the three short steps to the house door, reached across on the wall beneath a nail where a large T-square hung, and flicked off the shop lights. A strong odor of turpentine and paint permeated the shop. He went through the door and turned on the house lights.

Stopping in the narrow kitchen, he stared disconsolately at the clutter of dishes in the sink. A half-filled coffee cup sat on the scarred white table top, close to an overfilled ash-tray. He walked past the stove and refrigerator, peeling off the sweat-soaked red woolen sweater and entered the living room. He switched on another light, tossed the sweater to the floor and sprawled into a battered armchair, breathing heavily.

The living room was small, furnished with a newspaper-littered couch, two other chairs, a card table with a half-completed solitaire layout on the oilcloth-covered top.

Lew sat there smearing his hands around on his sweaty chest, rubbing his face, staring at the far wall over a kerosene stove where a railroad calendar hung. The calendar was a year old, open to the month of April. It had been here when he rented the place three months ago.

He stared moodily at the calendar and recalled that it was exactly four months ago, down in Miami, when he had swum out to Clarkson's yacht, *The Bayou Belle*, and found his wife, Janice, and that pop-eyed Louisiana on one of the bunks in the deck cabin.

Thinking of it again, remembering the everlasting pain, his heart seemed to squeeze dry like a sponge. Like a scream.

Not just lying there. Not that simple. No.

Still warm. Locked closely together. Twined in the ultimate sexual embrace... Janice's half-lidded eyes staring blindly over Clarkson's shoulder, her red-mauled lips still openly mouthing his neck.

And whether or not Death changed things, Janice's face was frozen in the throes of her lust. Whether or not Death changed things, her eyes were glazed with that wild, wanton, uncaring passion. Was it the passion of the Little Death? Or of the Big Death. Yet, what difference did it make now?

But that was not all. It was what he did, too.

He ran his fingers through his coarse dark hair, then held his hands over his face and sat there not moving at all, with the memory of it burning inside him.

It would never cease.

And now, crowding in on his tortured mind, was the memory of their last few months together—the steady deterioration of their marriage, the frightening coldness that had moved in upon them. All at once the warmth, the wonderful intimacy of their relationship dissolved. From a woman who had been warm and

giving, full of zest and fire, Janice had turned strange and remote. It was as if a wall had grown up between them.

They had always been good in bed together. Janice had never ceased to amaze him with the ardor and wildness she had brought to their love-making. She was eager and reckless—almost like a wanton. Greedy and insatiable. Matching her passion with his in a frenzied sort of abandon. Then, suddenly, Janice had changed, turning remote and unapproachable. Her willingness to bed with him turned to evasion, to a cold, stiff yielding of her body in which he sensed an innate withdrawal.

She had taken to going out nights—with girl friends, she'd said—but he came to know otherwise and the knowledge was like a knife tearing at his vitals. She had begun to drink a lot, too. Inevitably they argued. As the weeks drifted by, the arguments and recriminations increased and all the magic of their marriage turned bitter as gall.

But the bleakest memory of all was the night Janice asked him for a divorce. She had returned to the motel late. It was obvious that she had been drinking heavily. But that didn't matter to him. He could forgive her that. He could forgive her anything—just so long as he didn't lose her.

"Lew?"

He hadn't been asleep. He was in his pajamas, seated on the edge of the bed, waiting. When she came into the room, he saw the slightly veiled look she gave him, with the faint shade of guilt lying behind it. But she looked fresh and clean and wonderful, as she always looked. She had been wearing the white frock-dress that always looked so well on her, and her wealth of dark hair was a freshly-brushed cloud around her shoulders.

"Lew? I want to talk with you."

He watched her cross the room, and put her purse and a light tan jacket on the dressing table. He waited, watching her as she touched her hair with both hands, thinking to himself how it was an unnecessary gesture. A worm of worry crawled inside him, but he never expected what was to come. Or maybe he had expected it; but had just kept praying inside that it would never come. Because he loved her.

She turned, almost as if the whole scene had been practiced beforehand, looked at him, clasped both hands in front of her and walked over to him.

"What is it, Janice?"

He could see the sharp rise of her breasts as she took a deep preparatory breath. He saw the tightly twined fingers. And then the abrupt relaxation.

"I want a divorce. Right away, Lew. That's all there is to it I'll pick up my things and get out. Tonight."

He had sat there, stunned, unable to speak for a moment. She didn't wait. She went directly back across the room to the closet, and slung down her two pieces of luggage and laid them on the bed.

He came to his feet "How about a reason?"

He moved over toward her and she turned to him, tilting her head and gave him that same sweet old partial smile that had been a part of their love, a part of what had kept them warm.

"You're kidding," he said. "What's got into you, Janice?" He rose and moved close and took her in his arms, experiencing the fright just as deeply, but telling himself that she wasn't serious. He kissed her warmly, desperately, but she was still and cold and unresponsive. "Baby," he said. "Why do you come in like this, and knock me for a loop?"

She looked at him remotely, her face untouched by any emotion that he could discern. It was an expression that shut him out of her thinking. He stared into her eyes and saw that they were empty of feeling for him.

"You've been drinking," he said, grinning a little.

"Have I?"

"Come on, now You want to go out for a while—have a few with me?"

"No, Lew. I just want to pack."

He dropped his hands. She smiled lightly again, turned and opened the two suitcases on the bed. She was turning off their love, their marriage, like turning off a faucet Just like that. With no fanfare, no shouting, no explanation.

As she swung away toward the closet he reached for her. She whirled from his grasp, then turned on him. He thought he saw some expression of care or concern, then realized it was almost disdain.

"Janice. For Christ's sake. Please—what is this?"

"I told you, Lew. I'm sorry to be—so abrupt I tried to think of a way to say it casually, but you just don't, that's all. I want out, Lew. I've had it This is the end of the line for us. You've seen it coming—we both have." She paused, rubbing her hands lightly up and down her thighs, then finally looking him in the eye. "I don't love you any more, Lew. I haven't loved you for quite some time. Isn't that clear enough?"

Lew felt the heat coming into him. He began to lose control. He tried to hang on, but it was no use.

"You've been gone all day," he accused.

"Have I?"

"Don't say it like that"

"Like what, darling?" Her voice was flat, uncaring. It was as if she were talking to a stranger.

He stood there and his world collapsed all around him, and there was no feeling whatever for him in her eyes. He could tell. You could always tell when they pulled down the shades—it was so clean, so neat, and so complete. One minute it was all warmth and wonder, and the next moment you faced a blank wall that you could never penetrate. When they closed up shop, it was so perfectly done.

He still didn't know what to say. He just stood there. Then he saw something like pity in her glance, and she turned quickly toward the closet again.

He took her arm and brought her steadily around.

"Please, you're hurting me."

He released her.

"Thank you."

"Who is it?"

"Oh, Lew—please." Her lips quirked in irritation.

"Don't think I don't know."

She sighed.

"You've been sleeping with Deke Clarkson, haven't you?"

"I wish you wouldn't, Lew. There's no need for this. Can't you understand, when love dies, there's nothing?" She watched him. She was so wondrously beautiful, the full red lips, the voluptuous body, he knew so intimately as nobody else could ever possibly know: The firm, high breasts with their pert nipples, the flat, enticing slope of her belly as it curved into the dark mystery of her loins, the supple curve of her long thighs. They had belonged to him wholly and completely, yielding without reservation to the will of his hands and his long, hard body.

"Janice. I'll never give you a divorce. I can't"

She said nothing. Her lower lip pouted, not with self-pity, but in a curiously thoughtful manner that he knew so well. Sometimes that was the way she shrugged things off.

"Don't you see?" he said. "I don't care what you've done. But don't ask me for a divorce. I need you."

He turned suddenly and strode back across the room, realizing that he still couldn't quite believe she had asked him. He was remembering all the warmth and ecstasy they had shared and now he admitted to a desperate fear of losing her.

"Lew?" She placed her palms together, took two steps toward him, then stopped, rocking slightly on her high heels. "Lew, don't be such a child."

"You really want a divorce?"

"Yes, Lew." Her voice was firm, unyielding.

"What about all we've had?" he asked. "You just want to throw it all away? Everything we've tried to build for?"

She put one hand over her mouth, stared at the floor, then took her hand away and looked at him. "I wish you weren't so weak, Lew."

"I'm not weak!" he shouted it at her. "I love you. I don't want you to go away. I know you've been playing around, but I thought you'd get it out of your system. You think you've fooled me? Going downtown, spending all day, half the night—sometimes all night. You think I'm blind?"

"Of course not." She spoke without emotion, adding casually, "If it's all right, I'll just leave my things and go now. Perhaps that will be simpler." Suddenly she crossed the room and stood in front of him. He could smell her perfume, and see down into the clear eyes, and he wondered what it was that made them able to be like this.

"Look," she said. "There's—there's nothing left of what we had. I don't think we really had too much to begin with." She motioned with one hand. "I just don't care to live this way. It's a measly, hand-to-mouth existence. You speak of plans—can you eat plans, darling?" She ceased talking, and a taut resignation came into her tone. "All right," she said. "Maybe I did love you once. We had a lot of good things together. But they're all gone. There's nothing left in it for me, Lew. Nothing. I'm bare bones with you." She moved her head from side to side, with the first real show of emotion she'd yet revealed. Then even that was gone, and, seeing it vanish, he wanted to bring it back, but knew he never could.

"I'm not giving you a divorce," he said slowly. "I don't give a goddam what you do, who you muck around with. You'll come to your senses."

She looked at him and slung it in his face with a deadly bitterness he never knew she possessed. "All right! Have it that way, then. You don't care what I do. That's fine with me." She turned and went over to the dressing table, picked up her purse and the light tan jacket.

"Where are you going?"

"Out, honey. I'm going out." Her lips made a strong, bitter curve against her ivory skin.

He tried to stop her. She fought him, and the expression on her face showed distaste.

"Please, Janice."

She laughed at him. Just a short soft laugh. He released her.

"May I go now?" she asked politely.

"Janice!" He was shaking inside.

For an instant he saw the old wondrous expression in her eyes, then it went away forever.

“Good-by, Lew. I won’t be back.”

“Janice.”

They looked at each other like that for another moment.

“Lew—”

He waited.

“I did love you once. Honest. It was real and it was good for a while. But I don’t love you any more.”

And then she was gone.

Lew remembered standing there, not believing any particle of what had happened. And then he had looked toward her bed, and there were the two suitcases, and the elusive fragrance of her perfume was still in the room.

He ran out of the room. He ran out just in time to see a long gleaming sedan move out of the parking lot, with Janice at the wheel.

He dashed after the car, shouting her name. “Janice! Wait—Janice!”

He raced across the parking lot, shouting.

People came out of the rooms to stare at him. The manager came out and watched him for a moment, then scratched his head and went back inside the office.

He stood on the road, watching the bright red taillights of the sedan as it vanished into Miami traffic.

She was gone...

And now she was dead.

He sat there in the chair, shaken with remembering, covered with perspiration. Oh, she had come back. Yes, to ask him, time and again. And he always refused.

Until the night he found her dead in Deke Clarkson’s arms.

Finding them he had stood there in a kind of violent disbelief. A savage rage had slowly pumped through him until he burst with it.

Janice was dead.

They had been shot through the sides of their heads. There was very little blood. There was no sign of a gun. And Lew had not from that moment cared who killed them. They were dead. Janice was dead, so it did not matter who had done it. Clarkson’s wife, if he had one? Another of Janice’s unknown lovers? What did it matter?

It did not matter to Lew. Then or now.

Except that slowly, standing there, he knew that he was the obvious killer. He could very easily be suspect.

And, standing there, looking at them, the rage burst loose from the bonds of his restraint.

His fingers clamped on his face now as the horrible memories took hold of him.

He had been drunk. He had seized Clarkson's body in a terrible frenzy and hurled it off Janice. For a brief instant Clarkson's face leered at him, and he struck out at it, smashing it with his fists. The body crashed back, and sprawled loosely on the deck.

He grabbed Janice. He held her in his arms, speaking to her, trying to bring her back to life, torn with the immense futility of Death, but disbelieving it.

The cabin of *The Bayou Belle* became a swirling havoc in his mind, if he'd had his gun with him, he would have pumped slugs into Clarkson's body.

Janice had told him several times that she wanted a divorce. She no longer wanted to live with him. Only he could never let her go.

He refused to believe she no longer loved him.

He loved her. He wanted her. He needed her.

They had met Clarkson several weeks before, gone deep sea fishing with him. Lew had never suspected Clarkson was her lover. Clarkson had asked them out to his boat on this night Janice had left the house that afternoon and didn't return. Waiting for her, Lew got drunk. He finally walked to the basin in his swimming trunks, went out on the pier, dived in and swam out to *The Bayou Belle*.

Janice was dead now.

Who had killed her did not matter. In his mind, Clarkson had killed her.

Perhaps it had been Clarkson's wife? Lew didn't care. It was done and over with.

And now, months later, everything was as raw and hurting as ever; as if it were yesterday, or even tonight. An hour ago. It would always be yesterday and an hour ago. He knew time would never wear it out. Eventually the moment would arrive when he could no longer stand it—then he would go to the authorities and tell them all.

He didn't give a damn about Clarkson. But Janice was a cancer, eating away at his insides.

That night on the boat he had suddenly experienced a touch of fear. Purposely or not, whoever was responsible for the killings had cast suspicion on him—if anyone found the bodies. He decided he would have to remedy that. If he left them here, it would only be a matter of hours before the police came to him. If this had

been going on, others would know. Wasn't the husband always the last to find out?

Drinking incessantly, hopelessly despondent he used the auxiliary engine on Clarkson's yacht headed out of the basin and down off the keys, to make it look good. Fishing, perhaps? Yes. He lashed Janice and her lover together with stout line, weighed them down with diving lead, and dropped them over the side. Then he lashed the wheel and set a course for the mid-Atlantic, with the engines of *The Bayou Belle* throttled just under cruising. He set out teasers, baited lines, and three rods. He didn't have to make things look as if there'd been a party, that had been done for him.

He checked for blood. There was none.

He dived overboard and swam and floated and swam, until he came ashore on Lower Matecumbe Key, exhausted, but all too sober. By that time he realized he had done the wrong thing, but it was too late.

Stealing some clothes from a line behind a small cottage, he walked through the night to Islamorada There he caught a ride to Coral Gables with a truck driver.

Janice and he had been living at a motel north of Miami. He packed up, with no questions asked, paid the bill, said Janice and he were moving on, and drove up through Florida. He sold the car in Fort Lauderdale, bought a Chevrolet and headed up the Atlantic coast for Jacksonville, drinking steadily along the way. Thinking, too. Strangely void of bitterness toward whoever had killed them. He knew he should feel an urgency to know who had killed them but he didn't. He felt nothing but slow wonder. Somebody had been driven to despair and hate by Clarkson, or Janice—more likely both—and murdered them.

There was one thing, though. His gun, a pre-World War I Luger, with a fully loaded clip of 9mm shells, had been missing from the bureau at the motel. He discovered this when he packed to leave.

The fact was faintly comic.

If someone had tried to point guilt at him, they must certainly be puzzled by now. The identity of that person remained a mystery. And drinking, musing on Janice with a sick, aching hunger that was gradually twisting into an obsession of loss, he came not to care at all who had killed them.

Whoever it was, he had fouled him up.

Lew reached Jacksonville, remained there for a week then sold his car and bought an old Dodge. He realized he was consciously covering his trail. He realized that in the eyes of anyone, including the Law, he would be the obvious guilty one in the scheme. Accordingly, he headed across the state, and began slowly working his way down the Gulf Coast. For some odd reason he felt compelled to stay within the borders of Florida.

He looked at no newspapers, listened to no radio, watched no TV. But always he gorged himself with liquor. During his few hours of sobriety he found himself plagued almost to the point of madness by his grief over Janice. He couldn't get her out of his mind. There she lived on and on though, in reality, she was dead. This could be a bad thing, and he knew it, yet he could not help it. He did not want to hear any news about Janice and Clarkson, least of all whether the bodies had turned up, or if someone had spotted *The Bayou Belle*.

He tore up every last shred of paper that had anything to do with Janice or their dreams and plans for the future. They had been married two years. Janice had no living relatives and neither had he. His father had died a week before they married, leaving him the garage and bodyshop in Akron. Lew sold the business, and he and Janice had been living high on the last of that in Miami.

He had once been pretty fair at lettering, so he sold the Dodge in Tarpon Springs, planning to set up business there, but that proved too small a town to stay in. Instead, he took a Greyhound to Gulfville, had a look around and started working there as a sign painter.

During recent weeks he had come to believe that he had caused her death by not giving her a divorce, by not understanding, by being blindly selfish.

He was not really hiding. He hadn't changed his name. Someday they would get him, and he no longer cared. He just didn't give a damn about anything.

But he went on dying a little with each passing hour.

Lew got up out of the chair and went into the kitchen. He found a half bottle of gin in the cupboard, poured himself a glass, then wandered through the living room into the bedroom, switched on the light, and stood there staring at the army cot.

Something creaked overhead. He looked up. Probably rats in the attic. He set down the glass of gin, moved over to the swing-ladder, yanked it down, switched on another light, and scrambled up. He stuck his head through the attic trap. It was clean up here, with no sign of anything.

He came down, got the gin, and wandered back to the living room.

He might as well be broke. He had seventy dollars in the bank. There was no indication he'd ever have more than that.

Putting the gin down, he took off his trousers and tossed them over a chair. Then he sat on the edge of the cot in his shorts, and held the glass of gin on his knee and stared at it. He took a long swallow. If he could get Rita to come over, maybe it would help. But Rita would be asleep. If he went over there, her folks would raise hell. He'd had that happen before. Rita was a hell of a good

kid. He wished he could be entirely truthful with her. She probably expected him to marry her, the way things were going. Their affair had been a rapid thing. When he was with her, he sometimes forgot. Moments only. He would look back at those moments, but by that time they were gone.

Rita worked as a receptionist in the Timothy, Wayford and Horn Real Estate Offices downtown. He had met her when she phoned and asked him to come in for a job, making up some signs for a new subdivision. A slim, brown-haired, lovely girl of twenty-two, with a sharp sense of humor, she had appeared to like him immediately. They had started dating and within a short time had become lovers.

When he slept with her, he could forget his troubles, for she was an eager match for his lust. But later, the haunting, torturing memories always come back. She loved him and was obviously ready to marry him. He would never do that to her, however, because sooner or later....

It was getting later. Always getting later.

He was suddenly very drunk. Standing up, he hurled the glass of gin across the room. It struck the door-jamb of the bathroom, splattered and smashed, shards of glass cascading to the floor.

Each small thing was a defeat. Even losing the Plymouth tonight.

This thing tonight. Why avoid it? It was in the back of his mind all the time. What had those two been scheming?

He walked into the living room, then back to the bedroom again, and sat on the cot. Finding some cigarettes, he lit one.

Who in hell were those two? What were they doing out there?

All right, they were planning to kill a woman. Face it, the main reason they were there was to talk that over, not to tear off a piece. They had said they were going to kill a woman. What woman?

Lew stretched out on the cot, the room swimming and jumping before his eyes, and tried to think.

You are a cold bastard, he told himself. A woman is going to be murdered and you lie here thinking about it. Why don't you go tell the cops?

Well, maybe he was calloused. Because... he got off that tack quickly, thinking and concentrating on what the man and woman had said out there.

The man's wife. That's who they were going to kill. It was pretty obvious. What next?

The next thing was finding out who they were.

A lot of money was involved. The man spoke as if there would be a real bundle of dough. The man had said... said what? They would

have to wait before they spent the money. Why? Hot? Marked? No, it wasn't that So what was it?

Face it Brookbank, he thought You overheard something and you want that money and you're thinking maybe there's a way to get it.

You're crazy as hell, he told himself. You don't know what you're thinking.

He got up off the cot still smoking, swept up the broken glass, took another from the cupboard in the kitchen and filled it to the brim with gin. He returned to the bedroom, his foot nudging the telephone on the floor by the cot. He sat down again, kicked the phone under the cot, pried off his tennis shoes, yanked off his damp socks, and tried to figure some more angles.

The germ of the idea was taking over. The straw you grab at when you're going under for the last time. You may still drown, but you hang onto the straw.

All right. The guy had said he would go see the dame after everything cooled down, or something like that—in broad daylight yet. Some deal. Maybe he would buy a cuckoo clock, or a bed pan. No, you yap. It wasn't a bed pan. It was a bed warmer. There's a difference? Sure there is.

What the hell was a bed warmer? An electrical heating pad? A hot water bottle? What a stupid thing to buy. No, the guy had said something else—an old bed warmer.

Where would you find an old bed warmer? At a second-hand store, naturally.

Lew stretched out on the cot again, reached over to the floor, and ground out the cigarette in a saucer.

He balanced the glass of gin on his chest. The beating of his heart nearly upset it.

Antique store....

Elementary. Cuckoo clocks and old bed warmers. Hot bricks, maybe. Hot something. So the babe worked in an antique store. In Gulfville? It was likely. She had said, "Let's go," or "We'd better go," in such a way that you knew they both lived in town. Otherwise, she might have alluded to the fact that he would have to take her to some other town.

Sprawled there on the cot he realized how good it was to be thinking about something other than Janice. He veered steadily away from thoughts of Janice, concentrating, and worked his way resolutely back to the antique store.

This was what he needed. Something to think about, to help him get to sleep. A sort of lullaby.

He tried to hold his head up, to drink some of the gin. He felt himself going away, like the last smoky tendrils of a nightmare. He

reached quickly with the glass, setting it carefully on the floor, and passed out.

Almost immediately the phone began to ring. He awoke, his mind swirling in fog, and plunged sickeningly into the chilling nausea of a hangover. It was past dawn. The jangling telephone crashed against his over-punished nerves.

Chapter Four

Rita's voice was bright and cheerful, but Lew detected a note of anxiety. It irritated him, her calling so early. His hand trembled faintly and he felt ill.

"Just wanted to talk to you before I went off to work," she said. "Hope I didn't wake you."

"Yeah. I mean, no, of course. What's up?"

Maybe he was getting old. He felt much worse than usual. Then, suddenly, he remembered what had happened last night. It seemed as if every nerve in his body abruptly focused on those two people and what they were doing. His heart beat rapidly, and he was overwhelmed by a straining sense of urgency. He would have to find out—today. He couldn't waste any time. Rita was talking on the phone, and he hadn't caught what she said. He pawed for a cigarette, lit one, and grimaced with distaste.

"...waited from ten-thirty till a quarter to twelve for you at your place." She paused and he said nothing, trying to orient his thoughts. She said, "You promised to phone, remember?"

He felt honest and sorry. He told her so. "I meant to call you, honey. I got working, and decided to finish the job." He explained about the signs for Jay Redmen. "After I got home, it was too late. You would have been asleep."

She spoke softly. "I wasn't asleep, Lew. I was awake—waiting."

He didn't like the way she affected him. Damn it to hell. She was just a good lay. She could never be anything more to him than that. Didn't she understand?

"Suppose I'd called you from someplace else—while you were waiting for me here?" he said. "You'd never have known I tried to get you."

"I thought of that. I wanted to see you."

"I said I'm sorry."

"Okay, Lew."

A long pause followed. He didn't know what to say. He had hurt her again, not meaning to, and he felt contrite.

"You'll probably be busy all day today, too," she said, which meant she was leaving him an opening, to ask her to lunch. "Well, I'd better get going, Lew."

Look, honey. I'll work hard all day, then see you tonight. How's that?"

"All right. Did the man reach you all right?"

"What man?"

The one who was looking for you last night He stopped by twice while I was waiting for you."

Lew's heart beat faster. He sat up on the bed and said carefully, "What did he look like? What did he want?"

"I don't know what he wanted, Lew. He asked for Mr. Brookbank, and I told him you weren't home just then. He wore a suit and a hat and he drove a nice new car. Very pleasant He said he wanted to talk to you about something."

"Did he say what?"

"No. Look, Lew—I'll have to run. I'm late now."

Suddenly she was gone. Lew sat there staring at the dead phone. Phones could be very dead things, sometimes. He hung up, and sat there dismally while fear quaked in his vitals. Then he laughed harshly. Hell, it was nothing.

He forced thoughts of the stranger from his mind, reflecting on the couple in the car, once again absorbed in the urgency of what he had to do today. He got up and headed for the bathroom. The morning felt suddenly very hot and silent, and he was very much alone.

Later, Lew visited three antique stores, prying and searching, without luck. It was hopeless. Thirty-three stores were listed in the yellow pages of the telephone directory. It was eight forty-five, an ungodly hour, and some weren't open. Meanwhile, he had to run out to Jay Redmen's and collect for the signs.

Out in the street sunlight winked in the puddles left from last night's rain. Traffic boomed past. Lew took out a handkerchief and wiped his face, his spirits weighted down by a strong feeling of frustration. Thirty stores left. What if he didn't find the woman in any one of them?

He lit a cigarette. People moved past him, early morning weariness dulling their eyes. Suddenly he thought of the sledgehammer, remembering that he had set it on the shoulder of the road beside the bottle of gin and left it there. He also recalled that he hadn't finished setting the signs.

He decided to go out there. Aside from that, he wanted the money due him from Redmen. He also wanted to inspect the area where the Plymouth had parked to determine if they had been there more than once. Also, they might have dropped something that would help identify them.

He started for the Ford sedan, parked at the curb. As he opened the door and slid behind the wheel it occurred to him that it was silly to go around asking in antique stores for a woman he couldn't even describe.

"Do you have a girl working for you who is planning to murder some woman with the help of a guy who drives a new Plymouth?"

Ridiculous! Lew cursed and mopped at his face with a handkerchief.

He felt ill. It was nothing new. All mornings were the same. He always awoke around dawn, rose immediately, and stumbled blindly in circles, shaking and nauseous, until he'd forced down two or three cups of coffee.

Most mornings, he started with a healthy slug of whatever liquor was handy. This morning he had refrained from the ritualistic drink, yet he knew he had to have some alcohol or he'd pass out. He started the engine, pulled away from the curb, and was hit by another idea.

Suppose they were already carrying out their plan of murder?

He twisted the wheel brutally, driving down Sunrise, the street that paralleled the main street of Gulfville.

The town had a population of some thirty or forty thousand. It seemed as if there were more sometimes. Traffic was rough. The town was spread out along the Gulf of Mexico, wandering inland among small lakes. It was sunny and modern for the most part, but he now found himself cruising through what was left of Old Town, where the last antique store had been. Gradually he entered the more up-to-date section which swarmed with typical Florida business buildings, all with sunny pastel facades, and headed for Redmen's place.

The country immediately outside town was seared from the sun, splotched with green in woods of slash pine, freckled with palmetto, and occasional Spanish Bayonet, or bedraggled cabbage palms. He passed two fruit stands, and several large signs proclaiming the BEST pecans, the BEST oranges, the BEST grapefruit

He reached the signs he had placed. They looked all right. Approaching the Oolachi River bridge, he stopped the car, got out and found the sledge. He tossed it in on the seat.

The gin bottle was smashed.

He checked the spot where the Plymouth had parked. It looked as if some car had been here before, but he couldn't be certain. There was the thin chance they might return to the same spot again, but no way of counting on it.

Finding no hint or clue to the strange couple's identity, he drove on to Redmen's, setting the last of the signs as he did so. It

occurred to him that if he married Rita, this was what he would be doing for the rest of his life.

He paused in his thinking as he abruptly remembered what Rita had said about a man asking for him. Deliberately now he focused his mind on Rita in an effort to rid himself of thoughts of the stranger.

Rita would make somebody a good wife. Him? Yeah but what would she say if she knew what he was doing now? He couldn't expect her to understand. He could never tell her—never tell anybody.

Rita had a typical small town background. There was nothing outstanding about it. Her father was an engineer with the Atlantic Coast Line Railway. Her mother was pleasant and friendly and without distinction. Both Parents merely endured Lew without particularly liking him, he sensed they were, perhaps, even sad about the possibility of their daughter marrying him. Being “carried off” by him. They were not unpleasant to him, but they were a little stand-offish.

“They’re my parents, Lew, after all,” she once told him. “I wouldn’t want to hurt them. I’ll do what I like, but let them *think* they’re guiding me.”

She was that kind of girl.

She had graduated from high school, and taken a business course at Howardson’s. The real estate office was her second job, and she did next to nothing for a good salary, but they were grooming her, they had said. There was plenty to learn about the activities of Florida real estate. She’d had several boyfriends. She had not been a virgin. She had even explained to Lew about that—about the boy across the street when she was a sophomore in high school... about the boy at summer camp in Georgia... about the lad at the beach party in St. Petersburg.

After a few dates she had confessed to Lew that she loved him. In an effort not to hurt her feelings he had lied and claimed to love her, too. He had hated every word of that lie. But it was no longer possible to take back the words. And the hell of it was that now she wouldn’t look at another guy.

He pocketed the fifty dollars from Jay Redmen for the job, and nodded his thanks at Jay’s praise. Jay was a stocky man, who wore loud, colorful sports shirts. He consumed too much beer and too much of his own barbecue.

“Give me a beer, Jay.”

He caught up the icy beer in one hand, and drank it out of the bottle. It was a sedative. He wanted more, but settled for the one bottle and cleared out .

He had mapped a course in pencil in the yellow section of the telephone directory, checking off every antique store in Gulfville. His imagination rode high now. *Lenny's Old Furniture. Amberwild Antiques. Ye Olde Antique Shoppe.* He visualized himself confronting the woman and man who had been in the Plymouth.

But suppose it wasn't an antique store?

This thought made him nervous. He tried to remain calm. He wanted just to go along with this thing and not allow it to ride him. But it was already riding him. It was a damned compulsion he couldn't control.

Chapter Five

Lew drove fast across town, headed for Crown's Antique Furnishings.

In the back of his mind, there was always the haunting image of Janice, and the look in her dead eyes across Clarkson's shoulder. And the rest of it would return to torture during the long, endless night—the frenetic curiosity, the wondering if the bodies had turned up, come floating to the surface. Things happened that way. The fishes ate, the rope strands parted, and if that occurred the bodies would come floating to the surface with stiff fingers pointed right at him.

Because there was always something you missed.

Whenever Lew began to sober up, like now, it was that much sharper in his mind. Because some day there would be a knock on the door.

Get off that! he told himself. You'll go psycho!

He drew into the curb by a parking meter with some time left on it, in front of Crown's Antique Furnishings. He was halfway out of the car, when he climbed back under the wheel. He lit a cigarette, thinking, his mind troubled and uneasy.

He was hot, perspiring heavily. He had showered and shaved this morning, then dressed in a lightweight blue suit. Without his normal ration of alcohol, he felt bad.

Suddenly a new idea hit him. The man might not have been driving his car. Chances were it had been the girl's car. They had sounded like a fairly educated pair. Possibly the guy was well known in Gulfville. If so, you could bet he wouldn't use his personal car to wheel a babe around and park for business. He might be recognized.

Lew was certain the color of the Plymouth had been light blue, a two-door hardtop. This year's model. Then there was the mangled chrome bumper on the right rear which could easily have been repaired by now.

If the car were the dame's, then all Lew had to do was check antique stores and see if he could spot it. Swiftly he drove around the block into the alley behind Crown's. There was a pick-up truck loaded with picture frames, and a two-year-old Dodge back there. He hadn't noticed a blue car out in the street.

In front again, he parked the sedan where he'd been. He was very tight inside, stolidly anxious.

He would have to check inside the stores. If a babe showed who looked the type, he would try to get her to talk, try to recognize the voices he'd heard last night. Only they seldom looked the type. He got out and went into Crown's. An old shriveled guy was perched on top of an aged Victrola, reading a comic book. He looked blearily at Lew.

"What can I do you for, Son?"

"Thought there was a girl working here who knows a friend of mine. Must be the wrong store."

Stringy gray brows waggled. "Wish to hellfire there was!" He thumbed the comic book. "Work here alone."

Lew turned sourly away. She wouldn't be working in a beat-up antique trap like this.

He tried several stores in town, giving various excuses, with no results. Finally, he headed for the Gulf beaches.

He had just left Delarno's Antiques, a layout of highly-polished brass and glass knurls, situated on the corner of a wealthy residential district and a main highway in Treasure Beach. There was a small hammered-copper sign in the window, with a neatly lettered message in Chinese black enamel: *"Left just before you arrived. Back before you leave. Better wait, 'cause I have just what you want!"*

A block down on the Gulf side, he spotted a Plymouth hardtop parked in front of an imitation adobe building with two tiny windows, a plank door, and a small red neon sign reading: *Maria's Hut*. He'd been here once. It was one of these alcoholic nesting places where you need a flashlight to find your way around. Dim ice-blue lights gleamed in stray splinters of brilliance off the edges of highly polished glassware.

He wheeled into the parking area out front, pulled alongside the Plymouth, and stared down at the mangled right rear bumper. He backed out and pulled in again about fifteen feet off to the side, feeling tense and numb, his mind a frenzy of conflicting impressions.

At that instant the door of Maria's Hut creaked open and a girl in her mid-twenties stepped, blinking, into the sunlight. He told himself to relax, but his nerves kept jumping.

The girl glanced at her watch, looked up and down the road, then hurried to the Plymouth and slid across the seat with a careless revelation of well-filled stocking.

The Plymouth shot out into the highway. Lew drove after her, smoking up the front of Maria's Hut with fresh dust. On the highway, he saw her turn in and park by Delarno's Antiques.

His heart rocked. By the time he was beside her car, she was in the store, taking down the hammered-copper sign.

It was like heat rash. You knew when you had it.

He lit a cigarette and walked inside, his heart hammering.

"Yes?"

She stepped from behind a white-and-gold Japanese screen decorated with red dragons.

He took a chance. "Miss Delarno?"

"Yes?"

"My name's Brookbank." He plunged. "Lew Brookbank. I'd like to talk with you."

"Weren't you just down the street?"

He nodded. "I missed you here when I came by. Thought I'd have a drink and wait. Then I saw you."

"I am rather busy."

"I have something that'll interest you, Miss Delarno."

"Do I smell a pitch coming?"

"You do."

Her lips curled in a tiny smile, but her large brown eyes were chilly. Somehow she didn't appear to be the type of dame who would plot murder. Her face was faintly heart-shaped under a dark blonde mass of rich ringlets, swept up around her head. She wore large golden earrings. Her white blouse had one of these collars resembling an oxyoke, and puffed sleeves pushed tightly up on round, smooth forearms. Her skirt was dark blue, neatly tight over richly curved hips and thighs, and she wore white high-heeled pumps.

Lew explained his business. "You need my kind of advertising," he said. "I know, because I've watched your place for several days. It's how I work."

That one caught her where she lived and it hurt. She was quick, however. He saw the flicker in her eyes and if there had been any doubt that she was the girl, it vanished. Though the shop was air-conditioned, Lew felt perspiration ooze out of his chest to dampen his shirt.

She was thinking fast and it showed.

He dove in hard and sold her the goods in such a manner that she would be forced to go along with him, or look ridiculous. He caught an idea in mid-air about a treasure trail leading to Treasure Beach, and her shop as X. "Your business will double in six

months, Miss Delarno. Before long you'll be buying up those two vacant lots next door."

"All done with signs," she said.

"Yes."

"I have all the business I can possibly handle."

He smiled mockingly and waited.

She turned and moved across the store. She walked a shade on the balls of her feet, her behind bouncing, her skirt clinging tightly to her hips and thighs. It wasn't overdone, but it had tremendous sock and she knew it. "I hope I haven't wasted my time," he said carefully.

The girl checked herself beside a large glass counter displaying duelling pistols of gleaming wrought silver, each brace in its separate velvet-lined leather case. She turned and faced him. A heavy gold chain bracelet jangled on her right wrist, and there was something reticent and secret about her. Lew imagined she'd been very good in the car out there last night. She would be good any place. Her skin was lightly flushed.

"Well?" he said, moving closer to her, grinning.

She started to tuck her blouse in more smoothly under the taut waist of her skirt, caught his eye watching, and refrained with a jerk.

She couldn't make up her mind.

He had recognized her voice. He pushed, now, with just the proper hint of grimness. "I've gone to considerable trouble for you, Miss Delarno. I wouldn't have done it for a dingy store with no possibilities. I've completed several sketches—old English script—early settler motif. They're at the shop. The expense, of course, doesn't count."

He'd tried to be as objective as he could, to see things as they must look through her eyes—from the position of a possible murderess and extortionist.

The "extortionist" bit was what got him.

How much? The question drummed at his senses.

Fear was his gimmick now, but it had to be employed with delicacy. Miss Delarno was no dope. He was already planning the next step. Find out her full name, where she lived, who the guy was, where he lived and worked, and who the wife was.

Time, places, amounts.

Who was going to come across with the money?

"Mr. Brookbank," she said. "You interest me, darned if you don't. I think you really have something here."

You're so very sweet, he thought. "That so?"

She nodded, smiling easily now, her mind made up. She tucked her blouse tightly under the waistband of her skirt. A touch too boldly, perhaps. The nipples of her large, firm breasts peaked through the taut cloth. She was a chiseler and a cold-hearted bitch, and he was wise to her. Knowing what went on behind those smiling brown eyes faintly scared him.

“You really *do* have some surprisingly excellent ideas,” she said. “I believe I’ll buy.”

“Glad you see it that way, Miss Delarno.”

She was a smart girl. This was a small particle of insurance. She had foresight. She would make a good chess-player—because she looked far ahead for tiny loopholes. If she and her guy goofed somehow, and there was any hint of suspicion upon them, Lew would be around to mention that she hadn’t been interested in improving her business with an obviously excellent deal. He hadn’t lied about that. It was a natural and she knew it, so she was buying insurance. At the prices he planned to quote her, she would have to be crooked, or insane not to grab at the chance.

Chapter Six

Lew wasted no time. He made a fast stop at Grove's lumber yard, talked with the desk man at the mill, and set up dimensions for twelve signs to be cut from carefully selected cypress in a specified manner and sent to his shop.

Miss Isobel Delarno had acquiesced to his plans, agreeing to a final meeting the following morning.

Now he had to discover who the guy was and where he lived. He found Isobel Delarno's address in the telephone directory. She lived in a Gulf beach cottage, a couple of miles from the antique store.

This seemed the fastest way. There was bound to be something at her place that would tell who the man was, perhaps even more. He could have hidden near the store, waiting, and followed her on the chance she might meet the guy. That would take too long, however, and time was important.

Even so, it was late afternoon before Lew parked the car down the street, shielded from the cottage. He approached from the beach, careful about being seen from the nearest house, a duplex two or three hundred paces from the cottage.

Orange sunlight bathed the place. The door leading from the garage to the house was more secure than the patio door, so he slipped out front again, entered the screen door of the patio and faced the house door.

He was taking a long chance, he realized. If he were spotted, it would tear things straight down the middle. But the job had to be done.

The door would have to be forced. It was a flimsy panel with a spring lock. Lew grasped the glass knob, braced his thigh against the jamb, set himself and lifted up and out with a steady, brutal pull. It cracked, and the lock gave with a sharp snap. White lath on the jamb tore loose. A finishing nail skittered across the floor.

The door opened. He stepped inside, closed it as well as he could, and stood in the living room.

Sunlight burned across white shag rugs, the walls seething with bright pre-sunset colors, the furnishings taking fire.

Outside, water swished monotonously against white sands. An electric clock hummed. Lew breathed raggedly as he walked into

the kitchen, feeling the further kindling of anxiety at entering someone's home, unknown. The kitchen's cleanliness was disrupted only by Isobel Delarno's breakfast dishes which stood unwashed on the pearl-green drainboard.

She may have had a love for old, gleaming, expensive things which she sold at a profit. But there were no antiques in her room. There was nothing here, so far as Lew could see, that gave any real hint about Isobel Delarno's character.

Lew circled the living room, feeling more nervous by the minute. The silence was hot, oppressive and nerve-wracking. The slightest noise—a creak, the whisper of a breeze, brought perspiration crawling from the pores of his skin.

Ash trays revealed that she smoked filter-tips. There were a few bestsellers in a small bookcase, unread and gathering dust. He spotted a small triangular-shaped limed-oak desk, checked the drawers and found nothing.

Driven by a growing sense of desperation, he moved to the bedroom.

And it was here that Isobel Delarno came subtly to life. You felt it the moment you stepped across the threshold. The elusive perfumes. The even more remote silences. Blinds drawn from the previous night, one of the windows housing a silent air-conditioner. Bed rumped. Pink sheets. Pink pillows on the hardwood floor.

There were vari-colored filmy underthings tossed carelessly on a chair. Nylons webbed across the towel rack in the bathroom. Nylons hanging over the backs of chairs. A white garter-belt dangling from a doorknob. An almost empty glass of stale whiskey on the nightstand.

Abruptly he noticed the book on the floor beside the bed. Excitement touched him as he picked it up. It was a receipt book for the antique shop. Three letters were jammed between the pages, still in their envelopes. They were addressed to her. He started opening one, when his nerves went on fire with panic.

A car whisked to a stop in the garage. A car door slammed. Footfalls scraped along the cement walk outside.

Lew snapped the book shut on the letters, dropped it, and hurried toward the living room. The patio door had swung open in the breeze. If that was spotted he'd be all washed up. Accordingly, he leaped across the room, hoping to get outside and close the door.

A key grated in the kitchen door. Standing up, he could be seen by anyone entering. There was a small breakfast bar that might hide him if he stayed flat. He grabbed the patio door, pushed it shut praying it would stay that way, then turned and scrabbled on hands and knees back to the bedroom.

The kitchen door opened.

“Hurry, Ralph!”

It was Isobel Delarno. The door closed. Afterward, Lew heard furtive rustling and breathings.

All he could think was: What if the patio door blows open again? What if Isobel checks it for some reason and finds it ripped loose? He'd been crazy to try this—he should have figured they might show.

He whirled, looking wildly around the bedroom. There was no way out. The window in the bathroom was over the tub and was probably locked. Anyway, it would make too much noise. If they found him or the smashed door, it would blow everything.

“Suppose somebody saw you when we drove in,” Isobel Delarno said nervously. “I wish we hadn't come here like this.”

“I ducked way down,” the guy said. “Nobody saw me. We came through the garage so quit stewing.”

Lew didn't know where to go. They would head for the bedroom, for sure. It was as if he were suddenly dead, standing there.

The entire far wall of the bedroom was a closet. The grooved cedar doors were on long rollers. It was a third open and he saw her clothes hanging inside. Moving silently to the closet he thought — She'll want to change her dress. The one she'll want will be at the back and she'll grab my face.

He thrust himself inside amid streams of fluffy dresses, hearing them talking. He hadn't imagined for an instant they would return here. He'd counted on the fact that they wouldn't take a chance being seen together, least of all near their homes. He'd been wrong.

They were in heat for each other. That was obvious from the sounds coming from the kitchen. Such heat nullified their fears to an extent—and he hoped their other senses.

Lew moved to the end of the closet careful not to rattle metal hangers. They wouldn't stay long.

“Let's go into the bedroom,” the guy said hoarsely. Isobel didn't reply. *Stay away from that door!* Their footsteps approached.

“Jesus, Ralph—I'm *glad* we came!”

That's my Isobel, Lew thought Here we go again! He heard the bed sink beneath their bodies.

“Lie down, honey.”

“Oh—” There was silence for a moment then she said, “Take your glasses off, Ralph.”

“Now, you don't like my glasses. I knew you never liked my glasses.” His tone was petulant spoiled.

“I love your damned glasses, but take 'em off.”

The glasses clinked on the nightstand.

The guy's voice panted. "You'll drive me nuts."

"It scared me," she said. "Bringing you here. If anybody saw us, we're *cooked*."

"Quit worrying."

"I *want* to talk about it"

"After—"

He's got her again, Lew thought He stood with his back against the far wall of the closet It was utterly dark. He couldn't see the shapes of hanging clothes. The air was hot and suffocating. He gently took hold of a dress hanging in front of him and began mopping his face. A metal hanger scraped gratingly against steel, but at the same instant the guy spoke.

"Take off your skirt, Isobel."

Lew stood rigidly. He released the dress as carefully as possible. He was already saturated with perspiration. His crotch itched. His back itched. His legs itched. His face began to itch.

He wished he didn't have to listen to them, but he had to catch every word. There were muted sounds of lovemaking now, each movement recognizable to him—the protesting squeak of springs, a suppressed giggle, the playful slap of a hand on bare flesh, followed by a deep-throated moan. They were the sounds of blind, urgent demanding ecstasy... of utter abandonment, of wantonness.

Lew plugged his ears with his fingers, but he still heard them clearly through aroused pounding of his own blood. "I love you—oh—baby..."

"Let's have a drink," the guy said after a while.

"Wait'll I turn on the air-conditioner." Isobel's feet pattered. The air-conditioning unit boomed to life, then quieted. Feet pattered again. A toilet flushed. Water ran. One of them coughed.

"We'll have to get right out of here," she called from what must have been the kitchen. "We can't take any more chances. We were crazy, coming here."

A refrigerator door slammed. The guy cleared his throat *The patio door*—don't let her see it open. She returned to the bedroom and ice clinked in glasses.

"Move over, pig," she murmured.

"Comfortable?"

There was a long silence punctuated by clinks and gurglings.

"Tomorrow night," the guy said.

Lew strained, listening tensely.

"Look," Isobel Delarno said. "When you mentioned that I felt goose-pimples come out on my skin."

"Maybe you're not happy yet?"

"Stop—we've got to get out of here."

"Lie still. We'd better talk it over."

"Keep your hands away, Ralph. You know how I am!"

The man laughed while Lew stood in a sweat bath, listening.

"Are you sure about the cabin, Ralph? Nobody will come near the cabin? We've got to be *absolutely certain* of that. There's no telling how long we'll have to keep her there."

"I'm sure. During the hunting season, there might be a chance somebody'd stop by, but not now." More sounds of drinking followed. Then: "Isobel remember. Keep emotion out of it It's got to be that way."

"Don't worry about me."

"Then don't go thinking about her."

"You're thinking about her. That's why you say that."

"Okay. But *emotionless*, Isobel. I hate her!"

"That's emotion."

"You worry too much. Don't. Here, baby—oh, you baby—what you do to me..."

"Cut it out Ralph! I mean it. Listen—could she possibly suspect anything? Has there been any sign—anything?"

"None. She's a dope."

"I've told you never to say that Ralph. She's no dope. You'll worry me to death, talking like that All I want to know is, has she acted perfectly natural?"

"Completely. Here, look—"

"*Ralph!* Oh, you bastard! Ouch!" There were sounds of harsh scuffings on the bed, fast breathing, a low, ecstatic moan. Then: "Oh, Ralph!"

This'll be the last time for a while. Come on!"

"Oh, darling—my darling—I love you so much I don't know what I'd do." Isobel moaned again. This time their love-making was wild and savage and frantic. They were noisy and violent. The man grunted now and again and Isobel cried out once in frenzied ecstasy. Then the tumult between them ebbed and they lay silently in the bed for several minutes before Isobel spoke.

"Did you sleep with her last night?"

"You know better. What's the matter with you?"

"It's only natural. She's your wife."

"I didn't sleep with her. I couldn't"

She snickered. "Maybe you ought to."

"Forget it will you." He cleared his throat "Hail and farewell to Hagan's shoe store."

Lew tensed. It was what he'd been waiting for—some hint. This could be where the guy worked. There was the chance he might even own the store.

"Hail and farewell to the damned antiques."

They both laughed nervously.

Sweat streamed from every pore in Lew's body. His skin blossomed with itches like fiery pin-heads.

"Ralph, we mustn't talk like that," Isobel said. "It won't be any 'hail and farewell' to anything—not for months, maybe a year."

"Waiting's going to play hell."

We've got to wait That much money's worth waiting for. I'll keep on with the antiques, and you'll keep on running that shoe store."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I can only keep on so long, honey. They're after me from every side. A warehouse supply company in Jersey's on my neck. It's a big bill, and they claim they're going to court. I can only stall 'em for so long. They're not the only ones. When I close shop, everything'll have to be paid. For sure."

"We'll work out a way. I'm just breaking even. Before Sis died and left me with the ruddy antiques, she had the place really playing. I haven't done so well with antiques, have I?"

Nervous laughter followed.

The guy's voice changed, becoming as earnest as any voice Lew had ever heard. "Isobel."

"Hm-m-m-m?"

"We've covered every angle. It's as simple as hell. That's what makes it good. After tonight, I won't see you till we pull it tomorrow night After now, that is. I got the chloroform, so that's set"

"God."

"Why'd you say that? It was your idea."

"I know."

"Well?"

"You'll have to sleep with her, Ralph—tomorrow night I mean, so it looks right"

He sighed. "The second she dozes off, I'll fix her."

"Funny how we can talk this way. But honestly, Ralph—I have no feeling at all for Florence. It just doesn't mean a thing."

"It's queer, I know. I think it's because we've discussed it for so long. Remember how it was when we first started kidding about it? Then how we knew we weren't kidding? We felt it then, all right"

"Not for long."

"Listen, Isobel. Be sure to be out back with the car. If you don't see me, remember, drive away. Then come back. Keep doing it all night if you have to, till you see me. Now, what's the matter?"

"I can't stand thinking of you with her—awake all night—"

"I'll put her to sleep if she doesn't drop off."

"Ah, Ralphy."

"Be sure to drive away if you don't see me. We can't have a slip-up. If anybody sees a car idling, waiting out there, they'll remember it. Somebody might describe it." He cleared his throat. "I'll tie her and gag her at the cabin. When I get back you go some place and phone the house and wait till I answer. Then go home and to bed and don't do anything till I contact you."

"Why should I call? I can't see that?"

He sighed. "Just do it. I'm trying to make every damned thing in the picture as real as possible."

"I get you, Ralph."

"So if anybody *does* chance to hear the phone ring, a neighbor—it's all to the good, see? Not that they will. But they might. If every detail is true, then when you tell about it, it'll seem true."

Lew was ill. The air in the closet had become foul and he was on the verge of actual sickness. He knew that in a few moments he would collapse—have to lie down, move, do something. Yet he had to hear everything. It was his only chance.

Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars! Money would solve all of his problems. He really began to appreciate this factor now. Previously there'd been no angles—but the thought of that much money nearly drove him crazy. Meanwhile, he felt as if he were suffocating in the humid depths of the closet. He kept imagining himself leaping out, gasping for air. He could picture their faces, then. Not a single breath of cool air from the air-conditioner reached him. He began to think of Janice. Then he remembered the man Rita had mentioned.

Suddenly, bitingly, Lew did not want to be involved in the killings of Clarkson and Janice. It was a bright harsh fact. The fears that had been with him abruptly culminated, became tangible. Why hadn't he changed his name? Why hadn't he really tried to vanish? He realized that up to this moment, he hadn't really cared. He'd had no goal—only burning, aching memories of Janice.

Now he cared. He wanted to beat these two out of this money. Get it for himself. Beyond that he didn't know. The money would buy him the kind of freedom he desperately wanted, needed, because he would never forget Janice. His life was shot. This was

his chance. Yet he couldn't risk becoming involved in those murders—this was a cold and factual fear now.

He decided he would get the money and beat them at their own lousy game.

"...and after you call, and after I take Florence out to the cabin, I'll phone her mother," Ralph's voice droned on. "Remember, she'll have been over to dinner, seen us happy, and everything. The old witch. I'll tell her we went on celebrating Flo's birthday—the two of us, drinking. She knows damned well Flo often drinks too much. Then we went to bed. I woke up hearing the phone. Florence is gone—my head ached—there was a strange smell—that's the chloroform again. I'll use some on myself, just in case...."

"Be careful," Isobel cautioned.

"Don't want me knocked off, eh?" Ralph uttered a short laugh. "Don't worry. I'll call her mother, like I say—tell her somebody's got Florence and that they want two hundred and fifty thousand for her return, or they'll kill her—and they've warned me not to go to the cops."

"God!" exclaimed Isobel.

Stop it, will you? Everything's going to be all right"

"I know."

"She's got the damned money. For once in her goddam life she's going to come across with a wad. She'll maybe want to go to the cops—I know her. I'll try to scare her about that, but even if she insists, it will still be okay. Because you'll be the one who picks up the money—and I'll deliver it, see? Christ, it's perfect! The cops can't do a thing. They spread a net, or whatever the hell they call it—stake out to catch us—but then don't know it's us. I can say a car stopped me some other place and took the money, see? It's perfect—they can't possibly do anything. They're stopped before they begin. And we'll have the money, Isobel. Think of it. Ours—all ours. With no Florence to foul things up any more."

"We'd better go, Ralph. I'm a little frightened here. I have the funniest feeling—as if—"

"As if what?"

"Oh, nothing, I guess. I just want to get out of here. If we were ever seen together, that'd be the end."

"Yeah. Well, as soon as we have the money I'll do what I have to do."

"Don't say it," Isobel pleaded. "I don't want to talk about that, either. I can't see what difference it makes, though, whether you do it before or after we get the money."

"I want to be certain we're clear."

"You'd never let her go again, anyway. We'd both be behind bars for the rest of our lives. You think she wouldn't talk?"

"I know that. But at least, we wouldn't have—killed her. We won't talk about it. It's something we've got to do."

"Let's get out of here."

"Get dressed then."

Lew heard Isobel move across the floor toward the closet. He froze in the darkness. She'll reach right in and touch me, he thought. Then she'll damned well know about her "funny" feelings.

"I'll slip into another dress," Isobel said.

One of the closet doors rolled smoothly away and light crept in across the clothes. Lew plastered himself against the wall, his mind anxiously concerned with another problem. Neither of them had mentioned where they would meet to exchange the money, if the thing went through. This was damned important.

Lew saw Isobel's hand and held his breath. It was less than six inches from his face, pawing among the clothes. He could hear her breathe. Her long, bare thigh and hip parted the dresses on the rack, then he saw the round full thrust of a large, pink-nippled bare breast. The hand flipped a dress and hanger off the rod and vanished.

"Ralph?"

"Huh?"

"Remember how you said 'act normal under all conditions?' Well, something happened today. I had to go along with it. Some damned fool named Brookbank came in trying to sell me on the idea that I needed signs."

"Signs?"

"Yes. To advertise the shop. He looked to be the persistent type. You know, if I told him I didn't want any, he'd argue and keep coming back again and again."

"What did you do?"

Lew listened as she explained. The guy seemed a shade argumentative, but finally agreed she'd done right. They discussed nothing else. He wished they would. He swore to himself sweating, in an agony of suspension.

Then they hurried outside and he was alone in the cottage. He heard the car rolling out of the drive, then it was gone.

Stumbling blindly from the closet, Lew experienced a long moment of violent vertigo; the pressures of holding himself in one silent position, barely breathing, precipitated worse momentary effects than he'd expected. The cool air of the room was like an icy arctic blast. He made the bathroom, splashed water on his face, carefully used one of her towels that had already been used to avoid detection, then went in and stood by the still-running air-conditioner, soaking up the coolness.

Bright, fresh urgencies began to overwhelm him. He had to work very fast. Only he didn't like the way things looked.

Ralph Hagan. That was the guy's name, he was sure.

He should go to the police. But how could he explain overhearing them? Or breaking into her house? These were excuses. He knew he wouldn't go to the police. Large parts of his personal scheme were already in mind, solved. The money—that seemed easy. But what about the woman, Florence Hagan? They planned to kill her. It must have been something they had discussed freely over a long period of time, to be able to treat it as consciencelessly as they did.

He stepped away from the air-conditioner, his head throbbing, then halted. Ralph Hagan's horn-rimmed glasses twinkled on the nightstand, forgotten. Isobel Delarno might return for them.

Lew hurried through the house. He hastily checked the phone book. Sure enough, Ralph Hagan owned a shoe store. Hagan's Shoe Store, on Sunrise Avenue. His residence was at 713 Darrigan Circle, in Gulfville.

Lew repaired the patio door as best he could, pounding the finishing nails back into the loosened lath. The door was nearly as good as before, though it wouldn't bear close inspection.

Outside, the sun was a half-sphere of deep red flame, dipped into the vast watery horizon of the Gulf of Mexico, slowly vanishing. Lew ran through the bright sunset colors down to the beach, and finally turned up through heat-browned grass to the place where he had parked his car.

He made it without being seen, as far as he could tell.

His clothes were still drenched with sweat when he slipped under the wheel and drove toward home. It was growing rapidly darker now.

The one thing that really bothered him was the fact that he didn't know where Isobel Delarno was supposed to meet Hagan for the money pick-up.

This he had to know. But one thing was clear. He would find out where they planned to meet. He would go through with this thing. He was a machine now, built and put into operation to perform a single and somewhat unique task.

If he got his hands on that money, what could those two ever do about it?

Nothing—absolutely nothing.

They were working for him now!

He began to feel a shade better. He turned down the country road, toward his place. There was plenty to do now. Get home, eat something, have a few drinks, then check the Hagan residence.

It was dark. The old filling station where he lived looked deserted as he turned in. It wasn't. He didn't have a chance to

change his mind, as he pulled to a stop behind a large, gleaming sedan, parked in the shadows.

“Hello, there!”

Lew looked across at a tall, heavy-set man, wearing a Panama hat. He was leaning against one of the cement columns, smoking. He flipped his cigarette away, and moved toward Lew’s car.

“You Lewis Brookbank?” the man queried.

Chapter Seven

Lew did not move. He tried to get control of himself, but it was difficult because he knew something was up. This guy had to want something more important than some sign painting. He would never hang around, waiting like this, otherwise.

"Yes," Lew said. "My name's Brookbank."

He gripped the steering wheel, sitting there. A lone cricket started off with a rattling series of chirps, then slowed to a monotonous song. A car drifted past slowly on the highway, the shadows moving, stirred by the dash of headlights. Lew switched his own lights off.

"I've certainly had one devil of a time reaching you," the man said. His voice was educated, mild. Almost too mild, as if it were deliberately held back. "I tried calling. I stopped by last night, and several times today. I wonder if you could spare me a few minutes, Mr. Brookbank?" He made a motion with one hand. "I'm on a kind of quest. My name's Clarkson—Herbert Clarkson."

Lew stared at him. If he had tried to speak right then, it would have been a strange vomiting of words. It was as if everything he'd ever feared had suddenly closed in around him. He was grateful for the darkness.

"Clarkson?" he finally managed.

"Yes. I, uh—couldn't we go some place? I mean—or are you busy, Mr. Brookbank?"

There was no point in lying. The man would return.

"No."

He opened the door and got out of the car. He felt weak, drawn, and very old. He closed the car door, just to be doing something, then faced the man.

"What was it you wanted to see me about?"

In the dim shadows Clarkson's face took on a frown. He was close to being fat. He wore a dark suit, and a tie, and a large-brimmed Panama. Lew could not see much of his face.

"Well," Clarkson said. "It might take a little while. You live here?"

Lew nodded. "We'll go inside."

He turned and walked to the door, opened it, and lit the inside shop light. He felt numb in mind and body.

"I believe you knew my brother, Deke," the man said, stepping through the doorway. "That's what this is all about." As he passed Lew, he looked closely at him, then went into the shop and stood there, glancing around. Lew had the sudden suspicion that the man had been here before.

I knew somebody by that name," Lew admitted cautiously.

Well, he thought. They've found the bodies and the boat, and everything's blown to hell. He was utterly resigned. There were three straight-backed chairs in the shop. He motioned to one of them, and sat in another. He didn't want to look at the man yet his fear drew his eyes to the heavy-set face.

"Thanks," Clarkson said. He sat down heavily. His suit was dark blue, lightweight. The tie was light blue, the shirt white. He took off the hat, batted it against his knee. His face was large, doughy, round, with small dark eyes watching from between meaty slits. His mouth was lipless, and small. He was well-padded. His hair was straw-colored, and close-cropped. Lew saw some resemblance to the other Clarkson, but very little. Deke had been an athletic type.

"I'm afraid the man I knew was from New Orleans."

Clarkson nodded. "Yes. That's right." He was staring at Lew, blinking slowly. When he blinked, it reminded Lew of the translucent skin that cats pull over their eyeballs. He began to be still more afraid. "I said I was on a kind of quest, Mr. Brookbank. I'm hoping against hope that you'll be able to help me."

Some of the fear chipped off. He watched Clarkson. He began not to like the man any more than he had his brother. There was something about him that was veiled and consciously secretive.

"Yes?"

"I don't know just how to start. I mean, something's happened. The fact is—" he hesitated, banged his hat against his knee, glanced at the floor, then dropped it. Wood shavings rose and fell. "I'm afraid something's happened to my brother," Clarkson said. "The fact is—" Again he paused. "You really did know Deke?"

"His name was Deke."

"He owned a yacht *The Bayou Belle*—down in Miami. I was pretty sure I had the right Brookbank. Forgive me, I had you traced. No simple job, either."

Lew waited. Clarkson's features seldom changed expression. He did not smile. There appeared to be no smile in the man. The heavy, creaseless face stared. There was the impression the flesh was so thick it could not stretch, or alter expression.

"Deke's disappeared," Clarkson said.

"I see."

Some of Lew's fear ebbed, but he still felt trapped. He nodded, waiting.

"Nobody seems to know anything of Deke. But a bartender mentioned your name. I finally got a lead on you through a motel owner." He glanced around the shop. "You married, Mr. Brookbank?"

Lew's dread returned with a rush.

"No," he said, immediately realizing it was the wrong answer. "Not, now," he added.

"But you were?"

"Once, yes."

"When you lived in Miami?"

"Yes." The word came out like spitting a pebble. He was on the defensive. Clarkson had neatly placed him in a bad position. He fought to recover a sense of balance.

"Then I can speak plainly?"

"By all means."

"Where is your wife?"

"We split up."

The words kept coming out. It was almost as if Clarkson held something hypnotic in his questions. "When did this happen, Mr. Brookbank?"

"A while ago."

"Before you left Miami?"

"Not exactly."

"After you left, then?"

"Yes. After we left, we split up." Lew fought harshly to stop, trying to think of something to turn the barb of questioning, but Clarkson was like a feisty dog on the trail of a maimed rodent. Lew said, "It had been coming for a long time. The marriage didn't work out. But we're talking about me—I thought you were interested in your brother."

"I am. That's why we're talking about you. Where did your wife go, Mr. Brookbank?"

"I have no idea."

"Come, now"

Lew was glad the man had said that. He began to get angry. He was already very tense.

"Brookbank," Clarkson said. "I know damned well your wife was running around with Deke down in Miami. You know it, too. A lot

of people knew it. You think people are blind? They're not, Brookbank—especially the people who hung around with Deke."

"You're telling this."

Clarkson leaned forward. His face was close to being bloated and it was a thickly pale face, with the bitter eyes probing between the slits, as if they wanted to jump out. "Even my sister-in-law knew about Deke and your wife, Brookbank, and she's been living in New York more than a year."

"His wife?"

"Celia."

"So what?"

So this, Brookbank. He vanished somewhere around four months ago. His boat, too. His boat's been found. It ran aground at Mayaguana, in the Bahamas. There was nobody aboard."

Lew said nothing.

That wasn't like Deke," Clarkson said. "If he was nothing else, he was a sailor. The very best there is. Nobody's been aboard *The Bayou Belle* for a long time. It was pretty well battered up."

"He's probably on the island."

"Stow it, Brookbank. You know better. You met Deke. What in hell would he be doing on an island like that?"

"What he did every place."

"How's that?"

"Get drunk and try to lay other men's wives."

He knew he shouldn't have said that Clarkson's face tightened into what might have been a grin. He came out of the chair, reaching quickly inside his coat. His hand held a gun. It was a Luger.

"Hold it," Lew said. "You must have known your own brother."

"I'm not going to shoot you," Clarkson said. "Not yet, anyway. But you shot Deke, didn't you?"

"You're crazy, man." Lew stood up slowly, his nerves twanging. The gun hung in Clarkson's hand. There was no way to read Clarkson's expression.

"Have you ever seen this gun before?" Clarkson said. "No, just look at it—don't reach for it."

"No. I've never seen it before."

"You're a liar, Brookbank. This is your gun. You bought it in Miami, you son-of-a-bitch. You think you're going to kid me? You signed for this gun when you bought it in a pawn shop, you son-of-a-bitch. You killed Deke because he was diddling your wife."

Lew spoke slowly. "Gun or no gun, you're shooting off your mouth."

Clarkson breathed heavily. He put the Luger away and sat down, and stared at Lew.

"Now," Clarkson said. "Even you can figure how it's going to be, can't you?"

Lew said nothing. It was all he could do to keep from jumping the man. It would be the wrong thing. This one was prepared. No telling what he had packed up his fat little sleeves.

"If you had no idea what I'm talking about," Clarkson said. "You'd have already called the cops."

"I damned well may."

"Don't make me laugh." Clarkson shook his head mildly. "You won't call anybody. Because you know this is your gun. I have proof of that I found it myself on board *The Bayou Belle*."

Lew stood there. He felt the savage surge of it inside him, parts of the old hell, this prim reminder of yesterday. And he could see the kind of man Clarkson was. A goddam avenger—or, was he?

"You seem to have a hell of a lot of love for your cruddy brother. What did he ever do for you?"

Clarkson gusted a short burst of air through his nostrils. "Love? For Deke?" He leaned forward again, the jumpy dark eyes turned up at Lew, glistening. "I'm glad he's dead. All I want to do is prove it. I don't give a damn about Deke, or what happened to him. He's better off dead, for all concerned."

"Loot, eh?"

Clarkson stared. "All I've got to do is prove he's dead, Brookbank. I know you killed him. I know he's dead. And you're my proof. Where's your wife?"

"I think you'd better get the hell out of here."

"Getting too tight for you?" Clarkson nodded. "I'm going to get you, Brookbank. I'm going to get you—keep thinking about that. You're a gone duck. I've been in Gulfville over a week. I know plenty about you. I've talked with Rita, too, Brookbank. And I've been here before."

He motioned with his arm, indicating the shop. "I spent most of today here, just looking around, trying to make up my mind."

Lew could not speak now. Panic stirred in his stomach. He was sweating, yet he felt cold.

"You're a worried man, Brookbank. You're all fouled up. You've turned into a drunk. Six months ago you were a clean-living guy. A guy who drank two or three beers, no more. Now you swill cheap gin like water. You don't eat right. You don't sleep. You pace the floors. What's happened, Brookbank? What did you do? I'll tell you! You killed a man—my brother. It's on your conscience. You can't take it much more, can you? And now you're up to something else, aren't you?"

Lew leaped at the man. The gun came up fast, the muzzle quite steady. Clarkson got to his feet squatted hugely, picked up his Panama and clamped it on his head.

"You're my pigeon," Clarkson said. "Go ahead and try something. I'll plug you in the knees. I won't kill you. Just let you suffer—because you won't say anything, and whatever you say to me won't change things—until you tell me what you did with Deke. I could really make it raw for you, Brookbank. I could shoot you and call the cops—and tell them I came here to talk with you because you knew Deke, and you came at me with this gun—your gun. I got it away from you and plugged you in the kneecap. Come on, Brookbank—I'd love it."

They watched each other, the tension building between them.

"One thing troubles me," Clarkson said. "I can't get it out of my mind. Of course, I'll have the answer eventually. Your wife, I believe her name is Janice? Whatever happened to *her*? She seems to have vanished just like Deke."

Lew moved a half step. Clarkson turned suddenly and walked out of the shop.

"I'll see you around, Brookbank."

Lew stood there in the room, listening to the man's feet pounding across the cement. A car door opened, then slammed. The big sedan's engine came to life with a roar. Clarkson drove out onto the highway, and headed toward town.

For another long moment Lew stood there. Finally, he couldn't hold back his frenzied rage and panic any longer; it burst inside him. He reached out, grabbed the chair Clarkson had been seated in, lifted it overhead and smashed it viciously against the floor. Then he stared at the shattered rungs clutched in his hands, thinking with bright suddenness about Ralph Hagan and Isobel Delarno. Tomorrow night!

"Lew?"

He whirled. Rita was standing in the shop doorway.

Chapter Eight

Lew dropped the smashed rungs of the chair. What else could happen? What else was left?

"I'm sorry," Rita said. She took a step into the shop, then hesitated, frowning.

"You heard?"

"Yes."

Her eyes were large and dark and puzzled. She was a tall girl with a striking shape, her movements quick, yet graceful. She wore a smooth-fitting white linen dress, drawn tightly at her slim waist. The dress contrasted sharply with her thick dark brown hair, and sun-warmed skin. She was a very lovely girl, but right now her broad, full-lipped mouth revealed a degree of confusion.

They watched each other. Lew turned and took the steps from the shop into the kitchen in one bound. He flipped the light switch, found the fifth of gin, and poured a glass full. He drank it off.

He turned. Rita stood in the kitchen doorway.

"Wring your hands," he said.

"You wouldn't do such a thing," she said. Her voice was soft, hesitant. "You don't have to explain. I know there has to be a reason."

He said nothing.

"I'm sorry I came when I did. I shouldn't have come. He looked me up this afternoon, kept asking things about you. I knew something was wrong. He's not right, Lew—there's something the matter with him. I felt uneasy about him so I decided to come over. I saw his car, and stopped down the road, and walked over. I should never have done it."

"Sure as hell!"

Lew realized he was about to take his anger out on her. He banged the glass down, moved quickly into the small living room, sprawled in a chair. Dim saffron light from the kitchen palmed the floor. He heard her come through the kitchen. He stared at the floor, hunched over his knees, trying to think.

It was in his mind, and it was a strong compulsion. He had to beat Hagan and Isobel out of that money. Tonight he had to go check on the Hagans. Forget Clarkson—forget him....

"Lew?"

He looked dismally at Rita. There was the sudden, overwhelming urge to tell her. He had never been able to tell anybody.

Suddenly, while his eyes remained cast down at the floor, he told her the whole story, of Janice and himself, and of Deke Clarkson, and of *The Bayou Belle*. He spoke monotonously, in an emotionless voice, the words a steady purge that brought no relief at all. It was as if he had not told her. "Now you know," he said. "I was crazy to do what I did, but I did it. There's no way to change that."

"What will you do now?"

He couldn't answer that. If he had felt trapped before, it was nothing to how he felt now. He knew he had to act. His mind was full of it; swimming with what he had to do. Clarkson already had enough evidence to swing an investigation into action. But the man was playing God—only for how long? That he had not killed Clarkson's brother did not matter a whit. The guilt was on him. Whoever had done it was far from suspect. Clarkson probably knew more than he was telling, saving precious facts to drop like slugs of fear. The man had it in his head that there was something strange about the disappearance of Janice, too. If the bodies were ever recovered... but even that didn't matter. If it ever came to a full investigation, Lew knew he was done.

So there was the one escape—get the money and clear out, fast. It was one thing Clarkson didn't know about. Tomorrow night the scheme would fall into action. How long before they would try for the money? He had to know.

"Lew," whispered Rita.

"Go away."

"I'm not going to go away."

He came close to shouting at her, cursing her. It was a side of Rita he hadn't previously seen. He detected the stolidness in her tone. She was going to be the helpful type. That was all he needed.

"Listen, honey," he said, controlling himself. "I'm all jammed up. It's a mess. I don't want to bring you into it."

"I am in it, don't you see?"

"Don't be crazy!"

"You're the crazy one. That man's trying to pull something. Otherwise he'd go to the police."

"He knows what he's doing. Be sure of that."

"Lew, you've got to go to the police. Everybody makes mistakes. You were drunk, you said...."

He was on his feet before she finished speaking. He took her by the shoulders, staring at her.

"Go home," he said flatly. "This is my mess."

"No." She moved her head from side to side. "I believe what you told me. The law would believe it, too."

He started to laugh, then cut it off. He held himself down. He was conscious of time fleeing.

"You should have told me about Janice, Lew."

He thrust her away. "I'm busy. Will you go home?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know!"

She turned abruptly and walked out through the kitchen. He stood, listening.

"Rita?" He went into the kitchen. She was leaving the shop. "Rita!"

She kept going. For a moment, he did not move. Turning to the sink, he gripped the edge, his hands knotting, feeling the intense strain of the muscles in his arms.

Clarkson would move fast. He was working according to a plan. There was money in it somewhere for Clarkson. That was why he was doing this. He didn't give a damn about his brother, Deke, or what had happened. Maybe Deke had been left money by his family, and his brother had to prove him dead to make that money his own.

Lew let go of the sink. He heard a car start up down the road, and move off toward town. Rita. Christ, he'd had to tell her, what else could he do?

The whole business had turned into a crazy gamble.

His stakes were meager and he was going to be forced to spend some hellish time at the spinning wheel. There was only one way out. He had to take it. He left the place, hurrying for his car.

Chapter Nine

The Hagan home was a thirty-thousand dollar spread of typical Florida upper middle-class brick and white-clapboard architecture. Unimaginatively landscaped with shrubbery, oak and pine, it was situated on an expensive lot at the end of a quiet street, fronting Tampa Bay. The nearby lots were also large, so neighboring homes weren't close. Walls and hedges had been employed.

Lew saw no reason why he shouldn't park the car, and see what he could see.

He left the Ford in the shadows of a thick clump of aged bamboo, and made his way to the beach. Strong odors of sulphur added pungency to the heavily humid, early evening breeze. The tide was out fiddler crabs scabbled ahead of him as he neared the pier thrusting from the sea-wall on one side of the Hagan house.

It would take a large, thriving shoe store to build and retain the home. Lew knew the shoe store hadn't done anything like that. Solution: Florence Hagan's mother.

He had to find her name.

A gigantic picture window fronted the bayside. It was lighted dimly, but drapes seemed to cover most of it.

Lew leaped silently up onto the sea wall, and closed in fast on the house across springy, turf-like grass. There was an odor of jasmine, mingling with the salt and sulphur.

He came around the corner of the house, edged by six foot trimmed cedars, and dropped flat against the ground.

Another immense window opened into what was probably the main room. The coloring in the room was gold. Subdued lighting flowed from drape valances.

A woman stood in the center of the room.

She was naked. She held a cigarette in one hand, a large red Turkish towel in the other. The towel hung down, dragging against the pale sand-colored carpet on the floor.

She was speaking to a man who lay on a long studio couch against the wall. The man had his right arm flung across his forehead, covering his eyes.

The woman smoked lazily, steadily. She would bring the cigarette up, take a drag, then move it sharply away from her lips and talk through the smoke.

Lew snaked closer, listening, his heart rocking.

She was a knock-out in jet and cream. An abundance of ink-black hair foamed about her head, falling down over her shoulders and back to just above her shoulder blades. Her body was long-limbed and lush, her movements languid and allusive. There was the feeling that she enjoyed standing there nude, not exactly posturing—more faintly moving, but receiving a kind of intense inner pleasure from the movements. Her waist was very narrow, her hips and thighs slimly lush and round, her breasts firmly molded spheres, high peaked and red-nippled. She had a heavily sullen face, the lips faintly petulant, and very red.

As Lew watched, she draped the towel, over her left shoulder, put her left hand on her hip, and smoked. Then she said, "It will be a damned bore, having her over here. You know that, Ralph. She'll sit and sit. Since when have you enjoyed having her over here?"

Lew realized she had been drinking. It could be detected only slightly, from the way she spoke. He kept staring at her, remembering Janice, the blood pounding through him. She looked terribly like Janice. It was painful to stare at her lovely, exciting breasts. They were made for a man's caressing hands. Despairingly, Lew pressed his face into the damp grass, then looked up again.

"For Christ's sake, Ralph! Can't you speak to me?"

"Oh, can it, Flo!"

"Can it. Is that all you can say?"

The man did not speak. Lew thought of the things that must be going through Hagan's mind. Yet, how had he come to be driven to this? The Delarno babe was something, for sure. But she could never match this woman's sensual, breath-taking beauty. How had Hagan rated it? Hagan must be driven crazy with money worries. Either that, or Florence Hagan was a bitch. She would have to be one hell of an awful bitch, though, to ever warrant...

"Goddam you!" Hagan snapped.

She had whipped the towel out, cracking it against his side, under his upflung arm. He whirled toward her, then fell back on the couch again, in the same indolent position. It was a revealing gesture on both their parts, more so to Lew because he knew what was in Ralph Hagan's mind.

His wife had not moved. She dragged the towel on the floor again. She had not changed expression. She smoked, then half-turned and flicked the cigarette at a large white fireplace. It bounced off the fire screen in on the hearth, showering red sparks. She looked at her husband again.

"I called the store this afternoon around four," she said. "You weren't there. Doesn't it worry you, leaving it in charge of that new clerk?"

"No. It doesn't worry me."

"Where were you?"

He lifted his arm, then dropped it. His words were bitter. "Out trying to get my hands on some goddam money, that's where I was."

"Any luck, Ralph, dear?" She was sarcastic.

"No."

"So," she said. "Now, I know why you want to have mother over tomorrow night. So you can try to pry some loot out of her. Right? There's always method behind your stupidity, isn't there?"

He said nothing.

"Or, should I say, stupidity behind your methods?"

He groaned.

"Certainly it's not because it's my birthday. My, that would be something. Thinking of someone besides yourself, for a change. Why are we here, Ralph? Why ever in hell did we get married? You think I don't know? You thought you could fasten your claws onto mother's money, didn't you? Fat chance. Really, Ralph you're such a child."

He did not move, did not speak.

She hung the towel over her shoulder, and began slapping her creamy, tapering thighs casually with both hands. It was a fleshy, sensual sound. Hagan lifted his arm, turned his head, peered at her with round eyes. She stuck her tongue out at him, pressed her palms against the rounded hills of her buttocks, spread her legs apart and gave a short snappy roll, bump and grind at him.

He groaned and covered his eyes again.

"Oh, hell," she said. She turned and walked swiftly across the room toward a hall doorway that showed faint yellow light. "I'll run over to mother's and tell her, then."

"Why not phone?"

She halted in the doorway, turned and smiled unpleasantly across at him. "Because I need the air, darling. It's rather thick in here."

She vanished. Hagan lay there a moment, then moved his arm. He was staring at the ceiling. Suddenly he began to gnaw his thumb knuckle, scowling with a kind of strange desperation.

Lew watched, waiting. His heart was beating so hard, with his chest pressed against the ground, that it was actually commencing to hurt. My God, she was a gorgeous woman, and so very much like Janice—at least in looks.

He thought that over. Maybe it was more than looks, even. He pressed his face into the turf, then looked up again. Suddenly a feeling of rich exuberance swelled within him. This was a terrific thing, really. If he could only keep everything running smoothly, without hitches, and get his hands on the money.

If Florence Hagan's mother thought enough of her daughter to come across it would be all right. She had to come across. Yes. Hagan probably knew she would. Maybe he was stupid in some ways, but it took a certain kind of bright stupidity to think of, and reach out, and take the chance of pulling a crazy stunt like this.

The one thing that stuck in Lew's craw was killing Florence. There had to be a way to avoid that. Already, something was forming in the back of his mind. It held ironically humorous overtones.

Hagan sat up on the couch. He was watching the hall doorway where Florence had vanished. He came to his feet, walked swiftly and with care across the room to a small alcove. Lew saw the phone there. Hagan leaned back, took a quick glance toward the hall doorway, then reached for the phone. At that same instant, Florence came out of the hall, zipping up the side of a tight, pink dress. It was obvious that all she had on was the dress and a pair of black pumps.

Hagan leaped away from the phone.

"Want me to run over with you?" he said.

She walked toward him, finished zipping the dress.

"No."

"Flo? I'm sorry, the way I act. It's just—I'm all screwed up with the way things have been going. They'll be straightened out soon, I hope. I've figured an angle."

What a son of a bitch, Lew thought

"You'd better," Florence Hagan told him.

"Ah, Flo." Hagan stepped over to her, grasped her waist, and drew her to him, holding her against him.

"What do you want?" she said.

He began rubbing her buttocks, sliding the dress up the backs of her bare legs. She wriggled in his arms, pulling away from him. He held onto her.

"It'll have to wait," she said. "I don't feel like it now."

"Ah, Jesus Christ!"

She broke free of him. They stood there, glaring at each other. He massaged his jaw, staring at her. She turned and stalked into another hallway that was dark.

Lew came to his feet and turned, running in a crouch, toward the sea wall. He leaped to the sand, crunching on fiddler crabs, and

ran hard around a corner of the wall. He cut across lawns to the spot where he had parked the Ford, and slid behind the wheel. Down the block, a car was backing swiftly from the Hagan driveway. Headlights glared, and it started forward with a roar in the street, tires screaming against the gritty gravel-and-tar surfaced roadway. It swept past Lew, doing a good fifty-five, and careened around the nearest corner.

Lew followed as fast as he could. Florence was mad. She had a lot of spirit, that one. She had a good lot of everything.

Darrigan Circle, the street on which the Hagans lived, wound through a large area before the street itself joined the main road toward the center of town.

Florence Hagan was driving very fast. Suddenly Lew saw the car come to a swift, grinding halt. The rear end fish-tailed faintly. It drew to the curb under a street light. Lew did not have time to stop without making a big production out of it so he drove past her.

She was weeping. He caught a glimpse of her face, bowed over the steering wheel, her fingers anchored to the wheel. Her eyes were clenched shut, and though he couldn't hear her sobs, it was obvious she was crying like hell.

He drove on, swung around a corner, went down a way, turned in a drive, then came back and parked, facing the street she was on. After a time, he heard her car start up. She drove past, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, and Lew followed immediately. Her car was a cream-colored Buick hardtop. He tagged her as close as he dared in a fast, direct ride across town to Palm Isle. She turned down a tree-lined street, and whipped the Buick into a gravel drive beside a house. Lew parked across the street in a deeply shadowed lane, and cut his lights.

The house was old Spanish style, a raggy remnant of the boom days in the twenties. It was kept up, located among big oaks where the big money lived here on Palm Isle, which was a hand of land thrust into a large lake. The house was yellow stucco, with balconies and wings and parapets and bastions and gargoyles on the corners that resembled wart-hogs stonily overlooking their prey, and flying buttresses. Too much stray architecture had somehow gotten mixed in with the Spanish. The lot was more woods than anything, the grass a thick carpet of St. Augustine.

Lew didn't see how he could approach the house. Spot lights were set out around the yards, focused against the sides of the house.

He watched Florence Hagan hurry from her car, across the lawn to the front entrance. She had an amazing walk, tightly clutching her skirt against her legs as she picked her way across the dampening grass.

The door opened as she set foot on the front steps.

“Flossy?”

“Yes, mother.”

Their voices echoed in the night.

The woman at the door was distinguishable only as a blob of color with a white face, and hair as dark as her daughter’s.

“Whatever are you doing here, dear?”

Florence Hagan moved past her mother into the house and the door closed. Lew sat there staring at the house for a time. There was no need of hanging around here. He felt the urge to, though. He wanted to know where Florence Hagan might go after leaving her mother’s.

He remembered Rita. He knew he should go see her, talk with her, try to tame her down. He was beginning to feel better. There was plenty he had to do.

Suddenly he thought about the signs—the meeting with Isobel Delarno in the morning, the sketches he had promised to show her. He would have to knock something together, get some stuff on paper, so it would look all right. He wished he had approached it differently. Damn it, he could have simply gone to the antique store and bought something. He didn’t have to set himself all loused up. However, it was too late to change things, now.

He wanted a cigarette, but was all out, so he staged a search of the ash trays. Not even a decent-sized butt.

He watched the house. Several downstairs lights were on. He realized he still did not know the mother’s name.

Getting out of the car, he moved along the same side of the street, till he was opposite the driveway. A tall mailbox stood at the curb, in deep shadow Lew crossed the street fast, went up to the box. The name was stenciled on the aluminum, in black letters, above the house number. Ida DeCroix.

He returned to the car, and drove home, thinking about Herbert Clarkson, and wishing it was tomorrow night.

It would be a bad time. But he began to know exactly what he was going to do.

Chapter Ten

Waking, he lay on the cot, immediately conscious of what day it was, knowing what was to come tonight, awake to all the agony. He had stayed up until nearly three-thirty, completing a series of sketches for the Delarno signs. He also finished off two complete signs, and felt satisfied that they were among the very best he had ever done. He wanted to see Isobel Delarno, and get that over with as quickly as possible. His mind swarmed with the plan. He knew it would be taking one hell of a chance. Yet, it couldn't be helped.

He lay there going over and over the plan, seeking loopholes. There were plenty of them. But with any luck at all, he would carry it off. He had to carry it off. He had no choice.

Unless he dropped the whole matter. He could do that.

He could go ahead with the publicity deal with Isobel Delarno, and collect for that, and call it quits.

Sure. And let Herbert Clarkson march in on him and sit him in the electric chair for something he hadn't done. Or rap him behind the bars at Raiford for the rest of his life. He could go to the police, level with them, tell them everything.

That was a laugh. He knew how that would end.

Lew's hands cramped against the blankets, and he closed his eyes, perspiring. It was a hot morning. He saw Janice's face; the glazed eyes staring over Deke Clarkson's shoulder. He lay flat on his back, with his eyes closed, seeing that stark picture in his mind. He turned his mind toward Florence Hagan, concentrating on her, sinking back toward the dark envelope of sleep, thinking how he would follow Hagan when he took his wife wherever he was going to take her, and then after Hagan left, he would take her away, and hold her. Florence would know the score by then. Leave it to Hagan to tell her, to gloat over it. She would know she was going to die.

He must not let Florence see him. That would tear it. He wouldn't have an out. Blindfold her, and hold her—in the attic—right overhead.

Christ, it was perfect.

Never let Hagan or Isobel Delarno know who he was. Contact Hagan by phone, and threaten him. Then explain the situation. Good Christ, he had them. They were sewed up.

Only don't go off half-cocked, now, he thought. Think it out. They're one hell of a lot more desperate than you. Or, are they?

He became fevered, thinking about it.

He did not change position, lying there, strained, perspiring, going over it, again and again.

Contact Hagan and tell him he knew everything, and to go through with the plan—only how was he going to get the money from Hagan without revealing his identity? It would have to be done the way they did it in the newspapers and the movies and the books—have Hagan leave it somewhere. Warn him about slipping up. Have him leave the whole two hundred and fifty thousand—then he would make a date to return Florence to Hagan.

Lew didn't like that part. It was one of the bad things. Florence Hagan was a human being, not a sack of grain, some commodity you sold back and forth, for the right price. He didn't like it at all.

Only the bargain would have to be just that.

Florence Hagan.

Christ There was the chance of failure all along the line. One slip by anybody and he was done, along with them.

Suppose Ida DeCroix refused to buy her daughter back? Suppose she didn't really have that kind of money?

Lew figured he could discount both of those worries.

No. It looked all right. Because Hagan and Isobel would have to go through with their sweet little scheme. He would explain that carefully, just in case they missed the obvious fact that he had Florence. By that time Florence would know the score about Isobel and Ralph, and what was going to happen.

He'd tell Hagan to either get the money, and deliver it to a stated place, or he would turn Florence loose to tell Gulfville and the whole world.

That was another thing.

An offense of this sort was probably the ultimate gesture of crime on books of law throughout the civilized world.

Was he desperate enough to go through with it? Desperate enough to be a part of what he knew would end in murder?

Or would he go through with it to a point, then cross them, and turn her loose anyway? So long as she didn't know who he was, he was safe. He would have the money. Isobel and Ralph were sitting ducks.

He sighed, sinking back toward sleep. He was desperate enough. What was there left for him? Put on your rose-colored glasses, he thought. Even with rose-colored glasses, your life is shot to hell. There's nothing left.

Because Clarkson will get you, and there's not much you can do about that.

He may get you anyway. But it will be a fight.

The footstep beside the cot shot him to a sitting position, every muscle and nerve in his body steaming. Sweat streamed from him. He damned near yelled aloud.

"Lew."

It was Rita.

He fell back on the bed and lay there, holding himself rigid, trying to get his breath. His heart was beating like a drum in his chest. She had scared the hell out of him, and he began to know still more where he was heading. And he would go there anyway. He knew it for a fact now. Maybe he was insane. What the hell did it matter?

He sucked long breaths of air, and mopped his face with the sheet. He looked at her. She was taking off her clothes.

"What are you doing?"

She did not speak. She was wearing a light tan skirt, fresh from the cleaners, a white blouse, and sheer nylons. Her shoes were already off, lying on the floor.

"I said, what are you doing?"

Still Rita did not answer. She unzipped her skirt and let it drop around her feet, snapped it up, and draped it carefully over a chair. Her hands trembled. She wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Damn it, Rita!"

She unbuttoned the white blouse and took it off, placed it on top of the skirt. She wore tight white panties, and a bra. She stood by the cot, above him, and took off the brassiere, baring her full breasts, then quickly stepped out of her pants.

Lew threw off the covers and started to get off the cot. Rita pushed him back and sat down on the edge and lay against him, her hands sliding around his neck. "Please, Lew—don't talk. I didn't sleep all night. Please, Lew."

"Anything you say."

Her mouth was warm. He kissed her and her soft, yielding body stirred against him, her hair folding around his face. Abruptly, he wanted her. He crushed her close, bruising her flesh with his bony hardness. He kissed her throat, feeling the pulse beat there. Then his mouth slid around to her lips and took possession of them. It was a long, fiercely demanding kiss and it stirred a fresh new tumult in his rioting blood.

"I love you, Lew—I love you—so much—" Rita's soft whisper was at one a plea and an invitation.

Suddenly they were locked in primitive lust. He couldn't get to her fast enough. He was momentarily afraid he would hurt her. Then he sensed by her frenzied action that it was what she wanted, and he took her, brutally.

In the midst of the wildness, the high screaming ecstasy, he remembered yesterday, in the closet, how it was with Isobel and Hagan in her bedroom. He cursed violently, loudly.

Breathing heavily, they lay twisted and satiated in each other's arms. He told himself that even Janice had never been like this. No woman had ever been like this.

"I love you, Lew."

"All right"

"I was afraid."

"Don't be afraid."

"I thought the cot would break."

"It did. The canvas ripped."

"Oh, your poor cot, darling. Your poor cot"

"Rita—"

She pressed her face against his throat.

"You surprised the hell out of me."

"I surprised myself, darling. I was awake all night. I wanted to call you. I wanted you so bad—it was awful."

He moved his hand up and down along her thigh. "You're something," he said.

"We're both something."

"Yeah. You could say that."

"Why did you swear, like that?"

"I don't know."

He felt a plunge of guilt. It went away. "It just came out, like that, I guess."

"Sometimes it does. You can't help saying things. I think lots of things I don't say. Sometimes I can't help saying them." She snuggled her face against his chest, nibbling at his flesh with her lips. "Real dirty things, darling."

"Don't you have to go to work?" His hand slid from her thigh, across the flat stretch of her belly and up to her quivering breasts.

She shivered, holding his hand with her own. "It's still early. I didn't eat any breakfast."

"You'll be hungry now."

"Hold me."

"I am."

"I mean, tighter—tighter. It's still there—press harder."

"I'll press you right through to the floor."

She burst out laughing and, after a moment, he joined in.

After a while, Rita rose from the cot, took a shower, and dressed. They didn't kiss. Lew remained on the cot She looked at him.

"Phone me," she said.

"All right."

She went away. Neither of them had mentioned Clarkson. He listened to her leave, and lay there, feeling the long tear in the canvas with his hand, thinking, *Why did she have to come here? Why did this have to happen now?*

Chapter Eleven

Lew finished putting the sketches and signs in the Ford, and had just slid under the wheel, when he heard a car stop out front on the road. It was as if he had eyes in the side of his head. He didn't have to look to know it was Clarkson.

He was jammed up enough as it was this morning. Rita was in his mind, clogging up the works, when he should have been thinking of tonight, and now this.

He looked across at Clarkson. The other man sat there, staring at him, the Panama hat tilting and glaring in the slash of sunlight through his car windows. He kept his engine running.

Lew got out and went over to Clarkson's car.

"What the hell do you want?"

Clarkson watched him, smoking with harsh drags at his cigarette. The man's face was puffy, as if he hadn't been up long, or had had too little sleep. But there was sharp accusation and a curious brightness in his eyes.

"I'm going to tell you something," Lew said. He stood on the opposite side of the car from Clarkson, leaning against the window-ledge. The muscles in his arms faintly trembled, close to the bone. Anger was beginning to get the best of him, and it was all he could do to keep his voice down.

Clarkson watched, smoking harshly.

"I had nothing to do with your brother's death, if he is dead," Lew said. "It seems to me you're surmising one hell of a lot. What makes you so damned certain Deke is dead?"

Clarkson eyed his smouldering cigarette, then snapped it savagely out the car window, close to Lew's face. "A lot of reasons," Clarkson said. "I knew my brother—oh, Christ, yes—I did know my brother."

Lew heard a shade of angry desperation in the other man's voice. "Maybe you only thought you knew him."

"Deke is dead. You killed him." Clarkson hunched slightly toward Lew's side of the car. "I'll get you for that"

"I tell you, I didn't!"

"Talk all you want Brookbank. It doesn't change a thing."

"You lousy bastard. You don't have a body—you don't have a damned thing. Why don't you bring the cops in here if you're so positive."

Clarkson's lips spread across his teeth. "Why don't you call the cops, Brookbank?"

They watched each other. Lew could hear the other man's tight breathing, as if he were confining it holding it in.

"Listen," Clarkson said, biting the words off cleanly. "I know you killed Deke. Nothing you say will change that." He hunched closer to Lew, somehow more burly and porcine, his voice menacing now. "Listen," he said. "I didn't like him. Don't get me wrong. I hated him—maybe worse than you, see? All my life, I had reason to hate Deke. Our family had money. Deke got to my mother on her death bed, Brookbank—and he talked her into something. It left me out—entirely out."

Clarkson paused, obviously trying to hold himself under control, his breathing short and fast. Then he said with a terrible bitterness, "I've worked like a son-of-a-bitch all my life while he played! For six years I've had lawyers trying to break the will Deke talked my mother into setting up. Things were finally fixed so I'd get my share. I went to find Deke because he had to be told about it. I ran into this thing. Actually, it's a hell of a lot better, because in the event of Deke's death, I get what he had." Clarkson's tone lowered, tightened.

"Listen, Brookbank, it's a lot of money. I can't touch it unless I can prove Deke's dead. His wife isn't in it. She's already completed divorce proceedings. She has money of her own. She doesn't want any part of Deke. But I do. I want what I want—and I'll get it. It's taken every cent I had, to come this far—to locate you and to know goddam well you killed him. I hand it to you, for killing him. I'm hilarious over it." He didn't sound hilarious. His voice leveled off and became deadly. "But you've got to stand for it and I'm going to get you. It's you or me, Brookbank—understand? And you want to know something else? I think you killed your wife, too."

Lew ignored that Clarkson was set on a trigger, ready to explode at any time. Lew sensed the power behind the man's bulk, realized the brutal savagery of the man's mind. Lew said, "Wouldn't the money naturally revert to you—nearest of kin—if he is really dead?"

Clarkson laughed. It was a kind of wild choking, close to crying. The meaty slits enclosing his eyes, filled with water. He wiped them dry with the back of a large, beefy hand.

"I've got to prove he's dead—see?"

Lew gripped the window ledge. "I didn't do it."

"Everything points to you, man," Clarkson said. "Everything!" Again he hunched in the seat, and spoke with rapid viciousness.

"Deke was laying your wife—everybody knew it. They were like dogs, Brookbank. Screwing behind every bush. They were watched—actually seen doing it! It was nothing new with Deke. I've seen him try to make dames at parties, in bar:s—that's the kind he was. You've seen them. Pull a dame's skirt up in public and grab a feel. Think not? Listen, he got away with it. If somebody else tried that, they'd get clipped. Not Deke. He did something to them—hypnotized them.

Listen, his crowd knew she had asked you for a divorce and that you wouldn't give it to her. You loved her even though she was playing around with Deke. Are you crazy? Sure, you're crazy—or you were. You killed Deke, and you probably killed her, too. Where is she? You think I haven't tried to find her? I've spent over three thousand dollars trying to find her." His voice rose. "Don't kid me!"

"Shut up!"

"They said something had happened to Deke, though. They said he wouldn't look at another dame once he got her. Maybe they were really in love, eh?"

Lew wrenched the door open and reached savagely across the seat. Clarkson brought the Luger up from the seat fast, lashed out with the barrel, then held it steady. "Christ, yes," he said. "I'll shoot you. I'll shoot you right here and now. It doesn't matter. Keep coming!"

Lew turned away, his fists clenched.

Clarkson shouted at him. "You've got forty-eight hours to tell me what you know, Brookbank, or I go to the cops with what I've got."

Lew walked fast back to the Ford, climbed behind the wheel and sat there. Deep down inside, he strangled and wept.

"Let's see *you* go to the cops," Clarkson called.

Lew started the engine.

"You're dead," Clarkson shouted. "Can't you understand? You're dead, Brookbank. I've got you on the line, and I'm going to haul you in."

Chapter Twelve

It took Lew nearly an hour to lose Clarkson. The instant he drove off, the gleaming sedan was after him. He had been right in figuring Clarkson as a leech. Every time he glanced up, Clarkson was there in the rear view mirror. The Ford could not out-run Clarkson's powerful sedan.

Lew desperately took to the back roads, knowing he had to lose the man, and finally gave him the slip. It was a bad time. He knew Clarkson would show again. Time was closing in. He knew Clarkson could not go to the law yet, because he didn't have enough evidence. It was all circumstantial. Clarkson was most likely enough of a leech, to want everything obvious when and if he did consult the authorities.

Lew went out to Isobel Delarno's shop, and talked with her, wondering how in hell she could be so sweet, and at the same time be planning murder. She was nervous, but only he would have recognized that because of what he knew. She was wearing tight gold lame shorts, and a matching jersey of material so thin every contour of flesh showed. Her legs were firm, round, and pale, and she had a habit of rubbing her thighs with her palms, when she was thinking, and it drove Lew crazy.

She was very bold with her body. Once, leaning close over a desk, looking at the sketches, they touched. She did not move away, talking steadily, her bare thigh pressed against his leg. He suddenly realized anyone could have Isobel Delarno. This could mean a lot. Was Ralph Hagan blind? She had ceased talking, and was looking at him deliberately, her lips parted, her leg still pressed sensuously against him. She was very nervous. He knew that all he had to do was put his hand on her, and she would be his.

"I guess that's it," he said. Neither moved.

"Yes," she said.

"I guess I'd better get to work on this."

"I should think so."

There was nobody else in the shop.

"Anything further, Mr. Brookbank?"

She moved her leg away and turned to face him.

He grinned and reached for her. He grasped her hips just below the tight rims of her shorts. He did not see or feel her move. Her hand just exploded violently against the side of his face. Her own face was pink and hot. He released her.

"I guess we all have our little foibles," he said.

The color in her face receded. Guess I got the signs mixed up," he said, picking up the sketches from the desk. "Huh?"

"Obviously."

He offered his hand. "Shake?"

She smiled and took his hand. A real jazzer, this one, he thought.

"It was my fault," she said.

"Want to argue about it?"

She started to get red again. Her eyes were hot.

"Maybe we could get together some time," he said.

She pressed his hand and released it.

"Maybe," she said.

"Friends?"

She nodded, watching him. For one instant she was very human. What was going to happen tonight was gone from her mind. He could tell. She was just Isobel Delarno, a very pretty girl who ran an antique shop and who could not always keep the damper on her libido.

He was glad it had happened. He didn't think she would be so likely to discuss him with Hagan now. Hagan looked to be the jealous type. It was best he was discussed between them as little as possible.

He saw the veil drop over her eyes, then. She was thinking the same thing as himself.

It was a devoted enterprise now...

More than that there was the unknown factor behind it that generated a force Lew couldn't deny. Like the monomaniac, the fanatic, obsessed with his goal, meeting each obstacle in his path and groping furiously beyond it with the barest acknowledgement of its existence, Lew was swept up in something intangible and desperate that as yet had not quite developed into a catastrophic nightmare.

The problem promised something very real.

Even heroin could be a real blast the first few times, until that strange, darkly bloody moment when all hell broke loose...

Lew parked in the shadows down the block from the Hagan home and began to wait.

It was a curiously warm night. There was no wind at all. Strange twin-engined insects with cumbersome fuselages and loosely-bolted wings crashed out of control through the tepid, misting air. Thickly floured moths caromed against a distant streetlight. Mullet jumped in the bay. Various smells hovered, trapped in the air—burnt steak, freshly ovened cake, salt sulphur, cigar smoke, a motorboat's exhaust, the suffocating odor of night-blooming jasmine. Trees dripped lethargically. A TV set chuckled.

The Hagan home was still. Dim saffron light blossomed through the street side picture window, lighting up the front lawn.

The birthday party was over. Things would happen—and suddenly Lew considered a very obvious fact.

Hagan naturally would not use his car. Any neighbor might see him drive his own car from the garage, and remember it later on. Hagan would not miss this point.

Lew had twice driven by the house earlier in the evening. Both times Florence Hagan's mother had been present. The Hagan car had been parked in the drive. Now it was in the garage. Ida DeCroix had obviously gone home.

Lew stiffened abruptly as a car moved through the alley behind the Hagan house. In a flash between trees, Lew knew it was Isobel Delarno, driving past the rear of the house according to plan. Apparently she didn't see Ralph because the Plymouth moved on, turned off into the unseen street and purred quietly away.

Ralph had told Isobel to keep driving past until she saw him. The alley behind the house was broad and macadam, more street than alley. It was dark back there.

He sat there perspiring, understanding their plan. When Isobel saw Hagan she would leave her car, and remain somewhere close to his house. He would take her car, and use it to carry Florence to the cabin. Then when he returned, she would drive away in her car, and they would be able to compare notes. She would stick close enough to the house, probably in the shrubbery, so she could hear what had happened at his place while he was gone. This, in case anything ever did come up, or if he had to face if the telephone rang. In that way, Hagan would know of any suspicion.

It was a neat plan.

Lew waited. Every car he heard from the distance could be Clarkson; he had been extremely careful all evening, watchfully anxious.

The light at the front of the Hagan home went out.

The street was dead quiet. It was late, the air seemingly cooler, yet heavy with moisture. There was no wind.

It was all he could do to keep himself from trying to sneak up to Hagan's, and listen at one of the windows. He had to know what was going on.

It would be a close thing. He began to see, for the first time, the chance he was taking. He had been over it a hundred times, but it was clearly there now.

It was after midnight.

The Plymouth had stopped in a thick copse of trees at the edge of Hagan's rear yard bordering the alley, before Lew realized it. He saw Isobel Delarno move among shrubbery toward the house. He had been right.

At the same moment, he saw someone else move through the yard toward the Plymouth. He tried to make out who it was. Isobel Delarno was against the side of the house, in shadow.

Then Lew saw who it was going toward the car. It was Ralph Hagan, moving slowly, carrying his wife—Florence. Neither Isobel Delarno nor Hagan signalled to each other. They moved according to their plan.

It was very dark out there, but the night light showed Hagan clearly enough to Lew.

He heard the soft click of a car door. Afterward, the car moved softly up through the alley. Hagan must have been driving on the idling power alone, so there would be absolutely no sound of a revving engine. The headlights were off. The car was hardly noticeable, and the sound impossibly minute. A television set still playing from some nearby house adequately drowned out all noise.

For a long moment, Lew sat there, tense. If he started the Ford now, Isobel Delarno might hear it. Yet, she would be unable to alarm Hagan, so it wouldn't alter Lew's plans.

He had to start the Ford. Already Hagan had reached the main street of Darrigan Circle.

He tried to make out the shape of Isobel Delarno. He saw the faint outline of her body against the side of the house, standing motionless in deep shrubbery.

If the phone rang or anybody came to the door, Hagan would be completely covered. He could make some excuse for not answering the phone, or going to the door. He was thorough, if it ever came up that someone had called, he could claim he was indisposed and unable to answer.

He could even mention it before anyone else did.

Lew still hadn't started the engine of the Ford.

Hagan would have reached the street by now, and was probably heading for the main highway. If he lost Hagan now, it would be all over. He could never find the cabin.

He quickly got out of the car. It was parked in a narrow dirt alley, with towering hedges on either side.

He pushed with all his might against the Ford, finally got it rolling backward through the alley. He cursed, sweating heavily

now. The car veered off toward the hedge and he no longer could see Hagan's home, and he couldn't hear the sound of any car. Only the muted laughter from the television set. He reached the steering wheel, and guided the car as it rolled backward through the alley, and finally into the street.

Leaping behind the wheel, Lew quickly started the engine, and sped up the street, turning right around the circle.

He was breathless. His heart pumped so hard, it was beginning to pain again in his chest. There was no sign of the Plymouth. Desperately he pushed the car up to fifty, then sixty-five, tearing around the circle without making the engine roar loudly.

By the time he reached the end of Darrigan Circle and slid to a stop at the edge of the main highway, Lew was wild with anxiety. There was no sign of the Plymouth on the highway, yet it had to come out this way.

He took the chance and turned left, away from Gulfville, tramping the accelerator to the floor now.

It had to be this way. If Hagan had taken some other route, he would miss out.

He suddenly saw the Plymouth's taillights ahead. It was unmistakably the right car.

Lew slowed the Ford. His hands were soaking wet, slimy on the wheel, and he was actually trembling. He wiped his hands on his thighs, re-grasped the wheel.

The blue Plymouth moved steadily away from town, traveling well within the speed limit Lew stayed far, back, trying to regain his breath.

They had changed plans, all right. It had damned near thrown him off all the way. Now, everything was all right again.

Lew had never before tailed a car and he began to appreciate how difficult it was, especially since Ralph Hagan's nerves would be on edge and would be watching every damned thing. Headlights glowing through his rear window would immediately alert him to danger.

Staying far back, Lew drove carefully, trying to think of something that would take his mind off what he was doing. He didn't like it at all. But he had to do it; there was something inside him, driving him on.

In desperation he thought of Rita. Of the way she had been this morning. It was suddenly very easy to think of Rita.

Chapter Thirteen

The Plymouth took a sharp right hand turn on a bisecting county road. It was narrow, humped blacktop, and led toward the denser lakes country.

Lew eased the Ford up to the intersection, nosed halfway around the curve, looking up ahead. He made out the taillights of the Plymouth as they blinked around the curve, then grimly followed.

His throat was dry. He kept trying to swallow, still thinking of Rita, wondering at her, and at himself, too—how he had begun to feel about her. He swore softly, but it didn't change things.

He had purchased a fifth of gin, but so far had not touched it. He opened it now, holding it between his legs, peeling the plastic, then unscrewing the metal cap. He needed it now—needed it badly.

Gulping greedily at the gin, he waited for something to happen. Nothing did. He drank a third of the bottle, recapped it, and tossed it on the seat.

He waited, following the distant taillights of the Plymouth. Nothing happened inside him. He could taste the gin in his mouth, and there was a slight sensation in his stomach, but that was all.

He was too damned keyed up for it to take effect. Right at a time when he needed it.

Finding cigarettes, he clapped one to his mouth, and lit it. He inhaled the smoke fiercely, trying to drown the ugly thing inside him that was slowly growing larger.

The Plymouth turned left, speeding up now. Again, Lew took it slow at the turn, then followed.

They traveled some forty-five miles through backwoods country into the midland district, then the Plymouth turned off on a narrow dirt road which angled through thick pine woods, among rolling hills. The hills were low. Air flowing into the car through the open windows was tepid and moist.

The Plymouth traveled fast now Lew knew what was going on in Hagan's mind. He would be slightly desperate by now, wanting to get back home, thinking of all the things that could go wrong.

Lew drank again from the bottle of gin, choking it down in long swallows.

Suddenly the Plymouth vanished. Lew slapped the brake pedal. The Ford halted, and he craned his neck, trying to see through the darkness. There was no sign of the other car's taillights.

Slowly Lew drove ahead. He passed a turn-off, a rutted lane, knee-high with grass at the center. Looking up along this trail, he saw the brighter red lights of the Plymouth as brakes were put on, then the lights went out. Lew rolled the Ford ahead, guided it off the road into a copse of pine, and switched off the ignition.

This had to be it.

Again, Lew quickly drank from the bottle, thinking, *It's bothering you, isn't it? You think you're going to be able to stay drunk from now on?*

He felt a little dizzy now and realized the gin was taking effect. Pushing through undergrowth into a grassy clearing, he made his way slowly up toward the spot where he had seen the Plymouth stop.

The Plymouth began to move again, gears grinding, and headed slowly into deeper woods. Lew followed and noted that the car was making a trail of its own now.

Lew stayed in the woods, to one side of the car, easily able to keep up with it. The car climbed knolls, thumping and sliding in soft grassy earth. When he saw the cabin he stopped.

The car gunned into the tiny area near the cabin, and the engine ceased. A door slammed. Lew could hear Hagan talking, but the words were unintelligible. Hagan was excited, though, he could tell that. He was speaking to his wife. She must be conscious, yet she did not reply.

Lew crouched, watching the cabin. After a moment a door creaked open. He could barely see two struggling figures, could still hear the endless excited words coming from the man.

Mosquitoes found Lew. One by one they sought him from the darkness. He swiped at them with his hands, felt them brush through his fingers, searching wildly for his blood. The gin bottle rested at his feet in the grass. He picked it up, looked at it, sloshed it.

You're going to need more than gin, he thought.

He drank again, recapped the bottle, set it down, waiting. He could hear Hagan ranting and railing inside the cabin. There was something crazily urgent in the sound of the man's voice.

What a terrible thing this guy was doing! Lew sat there, thinking this, watching the cabin, feeling the gin swarming through his blood now.



The Plymouth backed three times, turning by the cabin, then headed down between the trees, with its headlights turned off. It sped faster and faster.

Lew remained immobile, hearing the Plymouth strike the trail. The engine whined as Hagan gunned it, Lew heard it brake, and make the turn onto the first road, and the engine roared in the night, the sound slowly diminishing until it was gone and the night was silent save for the bitter crescendo of the mosquitoes.

Lew stood, picked up the bottle of gin, patted his hip pocket, and started for the cabin.

You've got to do it, he thought. Don't go soft now! If you don't do it, you're done. A man's got to look out after himself. Don't think about it—just do it.

He moved steadily toward the cabin, carrying the fifth of gin, stumbling only slightly.

You're saving her, he thought. Hagan would kill her. Leaving her up here all alone, to wait to die. Hurry up and get in there and get it over with.

He reached the cabin. There was no sound from inside—no sound at all.

Maybe he's killed her already, Lew thought. They changed their plans, didn't they?

Something very bad surged through his vitals. He dropped the fifth of gin and grabbed the door. It was locked. He lurched back, then charged against it with his shoulder. He struck it a crushing blow. The door whipped open and he sprawled across the floor, immediately conscious of the woman on the bed.

Chapter Fourteen

The woman lay quietly on the bed. He could see her faintly in the shadows. She was making a series of high, keening sounds in her throat.

“Stay quiet,” he said.

He kept his face away from her, even in the darkness, and crawled along the floor toward the head of the bed. He came to his knees over against a wall that felt as if it were book shelves. Along the floor was a gray path of dim light, coming from outside through the open door.

He could see a chair, a section of rug, and the bed, with the woman lying on it.

In the half-light, the woman lay in the center of the bed. Her legs were there, and from what he could see, her feet were tied at the ankles. Her hands were apparently tied behind her. He could not see her face, and she still hadn't moved.

She continued making the muffled shrieks in her throat. They were hellish to listen to. It reminded Lew of a wounded animal or a jungle bird.

“I'm not going to harm you,” he said.

He wondered if he should talk at all. But as long as she didn't see his face, everything would be all right. He knew he should get a move on. There was the chance that Hagan might return. It wasn't probable, but it could happen.

Delving into his hip pocket, he drew out the sugar sack he had prepared before leaving the shop. It was open at one end, fixed with a draw string, to keep it from slipping. He felt suddenly crazy as all hell, holding the sugar sack in his hands, knowing what he was going to use it for.

The big problem was to get the damned sugar sack over her head without her seeing him. If once she saw him... he didn't dare think about that.

He was behind her now, and she had not moved.

“Listen, Mrs. Hagan. You don't know me—you'll never know me. I'm going to have to do something—it'll be uncomfortable for a while, maybe—but it's not going to hurt you. I'll have to cover your eyes. I'm taking you away from here.”

She loosed a series of those muffled shrieks.

‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘Don’t, please. It sounds like hell—there’s no point in it I’m not going to hurt you.’

Lew felt mad and macabre. It was like something out of a Frankenstein movie.

He came to his feet and moved softly toward her, speaking to her, and feeling the craziness all through him, as if he weren’t here at all—as if he were watching this scene.

What in God’s name am I doing? he thought. Only he kept right on doing it; walking softly toward the bed, speaking to her. ‘What I’m going to do—my mind’s made up, see. Nothing can change it. I know all about everything. All about your husband, Ralph, and what he planned to do. He isn’t going to do it. You aren’t going to die, Mrs. Hagan. I’ll see to that.’

He cursed himself inwardly for saying that. He was a fine one to say anything like that. He was blubbering all over the place. He was drunk now, and he knew it. It was a good thing. Just the same, what he was doing was reaching him so badly, he could almost feel himself tremble inside. Having a conscience was a goddam bore.

He stood at the head of the bed, behind her, where she could not see him. Hearing somebody gasping for breath, he was startled to discover it was himself.

She strained, arching her back, trying to see who he was. Her full breasts strained upwards, the nipples darkly peaking through the sheer fabric of the shorty nightgown she wore. Her hair was spread lushly all around her head in a dark swath, and he saw that her mouth had been heavily taped.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘Lie still, will you? Don’t try to talk, or anything. It’ll choke off your air.’

She really let loose with a series of throat noises then, speaking against her taped lips, the words muffled grunts against his ears.

‘No use,’ he said. ‘Can’t understand a thing you’re saying.’

She swore. He knew that. He got that much.

He lunged, caught the lower open lip of the sack under the back of her head, yanked it down over her face. She writhed, tossing on the bed, flailing her bound legs. The sounds that came from her hurt him, and made him afraid for what he was doing. But the fear spurred his momentum. He struggled with the sugar sack.

‘Easy!’ he said. ‘Take it easy!’

Her hair was very thick. It was soft, silken to the touch, and snarled in bunches. It was very difficult jamming the sugar sack down to her chin. He finally managed it then slipped around to the side of the bed, sat down, and found the draw-strings and pulled them. He did not pull them tight just secure enough so they would hold, and then he tied the ends. She was making horrible noises

now, arching her back, her body writhing against itself. His hands kept touching the exciting fullness of her breasts, his arms against her warm body. He could sense the fear in her and her body felt hotly naked against him under the soft nightgown.

She quit making the noises. He could hear the air whistle through her nostrils, and her breasts swelled, trembling, in the half light.

“Easy, now, Mrs. Hagan—easy. Don’t worry.”

She made a sound like strangled laughter.

The thick black hair curled in snarled strands all around the edge of the sugar sack. He felt of her face through the sack, making sure there was no hair matted around her nose.

Then he laid his palm just beneath her breasts. He felt her fright, her labored breathing. He kept his palm there a moment, trying to make her understand that he wasn’t going to hurt her.

He probed underneath her, then, rolling her on her side, testing the manner in which her hands were bound. They were secure, but not too tight. Then he inspected her legs. The ankles were bound tightly, but not tight enough to halt circulation.

“You’re a beautiful woman,” he said.

He heard himself say that.

She had suddenly ceased moving, when he said that, and even her breathing was subdued.

“It’s all right,” he said quickly. “I didn’t mean it the way you think. You are a beautiful woman, though, damn it.”

He sat there, feeling the gin working inside him. Standing up, he went outside and found the fifth of gin. He was lucky that it hadn’t broken. Returning to the bed, Lew sat beside her again, and uncapped the bottle.

“Wish I could offer you a slug of gin,” he said. “You probably need it worse than I do. I need it bad enough, Christ knows.”

She was calming down now. Suddenly he realized she might not be able to breathe right. He started to say something, immediately saw that if he mentioned it, she might try to trick him some way. He bent his ear close and listened. She was breathing evenly, deeply.

Right away, he was conscious of the fact that time was fleeing. He had to get her out of here. He would have to carry her down to the car. He should have brought the car up here, but it would waste too much time, doing that now.

He stood up, reeling slightly. My God, he thought I’m drunk as hell, what’s getting into me?

He shoved the bottle of gin into his pocket, working it down, then turned to her.

"It'll be a bit rough for a time," he said. "Think you can stand it? It won't be too bad. I'll take it easy as I can."

She grunted something.

He began to laugh, then choked it off, and said, "Excuse me—I know it's not funny. I wasn't laughing that way."

He inspected her bonds again, to make sure they wouldn't work loose, his eyes accustomed to the gloom now. She was wearing a wrist-watch. He slid the watch on its expansion band up her arm a little, so the ropes wouldn't bind it.

"Okay," he said. "Here we go."

He reached under her and slid her to the edge of the bed, then sat her up. My God, she was beautifully built. He put his arms around her, bending over, with her head a grotesque oblong of bunched sugar sack, rubbing against the side of his face. He let go. It was too much. He gripped his face with one hand, and squeezed, then reached for her again, and slung her over his shoulder. Her behind stuck out in front, and he had to hold onto her bare thighs.

"Won't take too long," he said. "Just rest real easy, now."

She said nothing. She was going along with it.

Lew had a bad time, carrying her down through the woods and across a field, before he reached the Ford. She was heavy, and he was drunker than he'd figured. He perspired heavily. Five times, he carefully laid her down, and rested. During all the time he carried her from the cabin to the car, she neither moved nor grunted.

By the time he reached the Ford, and dumped Florence across the back seat, he was a trembling wreck, gasping, sweating, staggering drunk, with a headache such as he'd never known. He was nearly blind from the pain of his head.

Sliding under the wheel, he slammed the door and sat there trying to get his breath.

"You okay?" he said.

She did not make any sound.

"God damn it!" he turned, and reached for her, feeling her. "You all right, Mrs. Hagan?"

She made a sound of resignation.

"Okay," he said. "Thanks for small favors."

He started the engine.

He circled around Gulfville, and approached his place from the opposite direction. Parking the Ford in a lane out behind the shop, he checked his place to make sure nobody was around. Clarkson was in his mind all the time. There was no sign of anyone, so he

returned to the Ford, brought it around and up to the side entrance of the shop.

He knew this was taking another big chance, but he couldn't see any other way. Already a feeling of disaster was swelling and growing inside him. He wanted to get Florence Hagan hidden quickly. He would have to keep her near him, so he would know how things were with her. He couldn't leave her any place else.

He got the side door open, went to her, carried her in and sat her on the couch in the living room.

"Be right back," he said. He felt foolish, speaking to her like this, but something forced him to.

Going outside, he took the Ford out behind the shop, and parked it up against some bushes. He didn't want to turn on any lights yet.

Inside, he found Florence on the floor by the couch. She had apparently slipped to the floor.

"You okay?"

She said nothing.

A car creaked to a stop out front. For an instant he just stood there, unable to stir. Then he moved fast. He couldn't remember whether the front door to the shop was open or closed. He ran through the darkness, and out through the shop. The door wasn't locked. He opened it and stepped outside.

"Lew?"

It was Rita. Lew went a little crazy, standing there. He closed the door fast and walked over toward her. She was coming from her car, parked at the roadside. He was thankful for the darkness. His nerves were jumping and he was afraid to trust his voice.

"Where's your car, darling?"

"Out back."

"I just couldn't sleep," she said. "I called, but you weren't here. I've been driving up and down, waiting for you." She stepped close to him. She was wearing some sort of a smock and she smelled very good. He was breathing hard, wondering if their voices carried inside. He didn't want Florence Hagan to ever hear his name, even—and especially he didn't want her to hear anything that she could possibly piece together. Rita said, "I drove past a few moments ago—thought I saw a car at the side door, there. Thought I'd better come back—that man, Clarkson, and all. Lew, what are you going to do about him? He'll cause trouble."

"I don't know." He took her arm, and tried to move Rita nonchalantly out toward the road, away from the shop. She seemed to balk, without showing it. He had to be very careful. Rita wasn't stupid. She would know something was up, as sure as hell.

"It's late," he said. "You should be sleeping."

"How come you parked out back? I've never known you to park out back."

"Car tools are out there. Plugs were fouled. I had to change them."

"At this time of night?"

"I've got to use the car."

"Tonight?"

"Well, I have to check some signs I put out. You know, for night driving. Wanted to get to them earlier, but I couldn't make it."

"Oh."

He didn't know what to do.

"Lew."

"Yeah?" She worried the hell out of him. He kept trying to edge her away from the shop.

"Can't we go inside, honey?" she asked, snuggling against him. Her fingers ran up and down the inside of his arm, her eyes blinking up at him. "It's so damp and muggy out here."

He took her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth. She clung to him and he held her very tightly, feeling the warm, insidious pressure of her breasts against his chest. She apparently had very little on under the smock and she was very obvious about the whole thing.

"I'm going to call you Rabbit," he said.

She laughed quietly, nuzzling his chest "Can't we go inside?"

"I haven't time, now," he said, wanting her more than he had ever wanted her, more even than this morning. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to make her suspicious. He didn't want to hurt her. Tonight of all nights, this had to happen.

Because the only thing that counted was getting that money. After that, maybe he could think about other things. Right now, every minute had to go toward that—and he'd have to watch himself. What was going into him? Clarkson was on his back, and there was no telling what the guy would do. He had to get rid of Rita.

"Lew," she whispered. "I feel like it—I can't help it. I want you—Lew. Hold me tight." She surged wantonly against him, fitting her breasts and hips and loins tightly against his long hard body.

"Listen," he said, his senses reeling hating himself for refusing her. "Tell you what You run on home, okay? I've got to do what I've got to do, see? It's got to be done tonight. Then I'll stop by. You wait for me. All right?"

"Darling, you make me feel awful!"

"It won't take long."

"I'm scared," Rita said.

Lew said nothing, standing there, feeling utterly trapped and helpless. He didn't know what the hell to do. Above all, he didn't want to hurt her.

He held her away. "I've got to," he said.

"I'm scared about that man," she said. "He's the kind who'll try anything. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Lew, I think you should go to the police."

It jarred him.

"I've been thinking about it," Rita said. "It's the only way. Drinking won't help, Lew"

"I haven't been drinking much."

"Don't kid me."

He began to worry about Florence Hagan, sitting inside in the darkness on the couch, bound and gagged, and with a sugar sack over her head. He had to get her settled. He had to contact Ralph Hagan. Hagan probably had already got in touch with Ida DeCroix, and for all he knew, the police were on it by now. His breath began to come faster, just standing there. He felt anxious and worried. He began to see how wonderful Rita was being about what she knew about him and Clarkson. Everything was beginning to pile up inside him.

He had to get rid of Rita. Somehow. Quickly.

The telephone began to ring inside the shop. He didn't move.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" Rita asked.

"No."

He couldn't. He didn't really want to. It frightened him. It might be Clarkson. He didn't want to go in there, because Rita would follow him. He wouldn't be able to stop her. Why in God's name had he brought Florence Hagan here? Yet where else could he take her?

The phone continued to ring cutting through the night like disdainful laughter, like well-aimed guns, like knives slitting the flesh.

"It's probably Clarkson," he said. "I don't want to talk with him."

"Oh, Lew, what are we going to do?"

Now it was "we." He wasn't sure whether or not he liked it that way. Then he decided he did like it that way.

When the phone ceased ringing, the silence became hot and uneasy.

"You worry me, Lew. You act so—so—I don't know. I can't explain it. Something's got you all mixed up."

"Just that guy, is all."

She said nothing.

"You run along now, okay? I'll see you in a while."

"It's awfully late."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"I've got to see you tonight," she said. "I just want to talk with you."

He kissed her briefly, then led her toward her car. She went along with it this time. He got her behind the wheel and slammed the door.

"I'll come by," he said. "If you're not out on the porch, then I'll know you went to bed."

"I'll be there."

She drove away.

Turning, Lew ran for the shop.

Florence Hagan still lay on the floor by the couch. He thought he had picked her up and put her on the couch.

Memory gaps, yet. It was all he needed.

"Sorry," he said.

He picked her up, thinking about the telephone, thinking of the possibility of Clarkson coming out here now. Carrying her into the bedroom, he laid her on the cot.

Now," he said quietly. "Just take it easy, Mrs. Hagan. Everything's going to be fine."

The phone began to ring again. Lew stood there and cursed it. He waited. It didn't stop. It went on and on, like incessant, derisive laughter.

Florence Hagan did not move, lying on the cot.

Finally the phone ceased ringing again. The night was still. He turned toward the attic, and yanked down the swing ladder, then went over to the cot.

It sounded like muffled laughter coming from Florence Hagan, under the sugar sack.

"God damn it!" he muttered bitterly.

He stared at her. The gin bottle was still in his pocket; he'd been standing out there with Rita, with the bottle in his pocket. Great. He yanked it out, uncapped it, and took a long drink. It tasted like hell. He set the bottle down, coughed, then said, "Okay, once more—then I'll make you comfortable."

Oh, good Christ, he thought.

He found blankets and two pillows, and went up to the attic. There were no windows up here. He turned on the light, and laid

newspapers down, then made a pallet on the attic floor. If she were here very long, he would have to get a mattress of some kind. The roof was well insulated, so it wouldn't be too hot up here.

He came back down, and finally managed to get Florence over his shoulder. She squirmed, then lay still. He started up the ladder with her. It was a bad time, worse than he'd figured. The trap was too small. She was heavy and he was drunk. He clung to the ladder, gasping, trying to work through the trap without hurting her. She wasn't making a sound.

Finally, he hooked one leg through the ladder, braced himself, his arms getting weaker, the place spinning, and forced her up through the trap. He laid her gently on the attic floor, then clutched the ladder and clung there, fighting for breath, fagged out. Then he came on up, and fixed her as comfortably as possible on the blankets.

He checked her bonds again, but she didn't seem to care about any discomfort there. She lay on the blankets, with her head on the pillows in the sugar sack, under the attic light. The nearly transparent gown was stretched taut around her body, twisted across her full burgeoning breasts. He loosened the gown for her. He tried not to think about what he was doing. It was getting to him more and more, because she was so completely helpless. He had a sudden, horrible feeling, remembering photographs in newspapers of bodies of women, like this—caught up in some degrading, abnormal crime.

"Just lie still," he said quickly, forced to say something. "I'll be around."

He stared down at her. She sure did have a terrific shape. The sight of her lush breasts and full, curving thighs hit him right where he lived. He went over to the trap, turned off the attic light, closed the trap, and went down the ladder into the bedroom again. The cot was nearly under the trap. He started for the bathroom and stopped. A sudden thought had struck him harshly.

She was human. She would have to go to the bathroom. It had never occurred to him. He stood there, staring bleakly into the dimness, feeling drowned and lost and bitter with new anxieties. How in hell was he going to work this?

Turning, he went back, pulled down the swing ladder, scrambled up and opened the trap.

He shoved his head through, his eyes on a level with the floor, peering into the dark.

He couldn't say anything about the bathroom yet.

"I've got to do this," he said. "Nothing's going to change my mind, remember that. I can't help what I'm doing, if I don't do it, I'm sunk—but I won't hurt you. Get me?"

He waited. She made no sound.

“Jesus Christ,” he said. “I’m just trying to tell you. I’ve got to do it. If I don’t, it’s my neck. Try and understand.”

She didn’t make a sound.

Lew stood on the ladder for a long moment, then suddenly let the trap slam shut. He came down into the bedroom again.

Frustration was a snake with fangs.

Chapter Fifteen

Lew stood over the phone in the darkness, thinking how it had become a curiously living thing. He had to phone Ralph Hagan, yet he was reluctant to do so. It was as if the phone might bite him. Still he knew he had to take the chance that things were moving as they should. He felt certain Hagan had contacted Ida DeCroix by now—and perhaps the police.

Perched on the edge of the cot, he dialed.

Things were happening with Hagan. He could tell. The phone hardly finished ringing the first time before it was snapped up.

“Yes? Mother? Have you—?”

Lew changed his voice as much as possible. He spoke harshly. He hardly knew what he was saying. He was drunk, and he felt very nervous. The gin hadn’t taken away the sensation of fear that was with him now, nor the knowledge of what he was doing, and of how many things could go wrong.

“This ain’t your mother,” he said. Then he plunged straight into it, socking it to Hagan as hard as he could. He told him flatly that he had Florence. That she didn’t know who he was and had not seen him. That she was very anxious to tell the law about her husband and Isobel Delarno. That he knew the score about everything. Then he waited.

He could hear Hagan breathing jerkily. Hagan was suddenly a fish on a stout line with a barbed hook imbedded in his heart.

“Take your time, Ralph,” Lew said. “But save some of your time, too. Don’t try figuring a way out. There’s no way out for you except to go through with your plans, get the money—and deliver it to me.”

Hagan’s voice was remarkably level.

“I don’t know who you are. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Okay,” Lew said. He hung up and sat there. He lit a cigarette, took a few drags, listening to the silence of the night. His heart was beating very fast.

Five minutes later he dialed again.

“Hello, Ralph. Feel differently, now? Listen, it makes no difference to me. I’m not out anything, not really. All I have to do is

take Florence down to the police building and drop her off. Don't you get it?"

Hagan sounded like a sick animal.

Lew said, "Time's about up, Ralph. Be a man and talk straight. Don't be stupid."

Hagan still couldn't seem to manage words. Lew waited, smoking. He dropped the cigarette on the floor and crushed it with his heel. It was one hell of a shock to Hagan.

"Where are you?" Hagan said.

Lew didn't answer.

"How do I know you're got Florence?"

"Run out to the cabin, Ralph. Have a look."

"How did you find—?"

"I followed you."

Hagan's voice was tinged with hysteria. "How did you know?"

"I know everything, Ralph. Right now, as far as you're concerned, I'm as close to God as a man can get. Or, should I say, it's the Devil in me. Anyway, you've been a bad boy, Ralph. You've fouled up. Did you ask Ida for two-fifty?"

Hagan spoke loudly. "How did you know?"

"Let's not go into that again."

"You son-of-a-bitch."

Lew hung up.

He sat there. He felt like hell. He would make Hagan sweat again, but he hadn't done it to be funny. He hadn't done it to make Hagan sweat. He had done it because he was sweating, deep inside. He dialed again.

"All right," Hagan said. "All right. What should I do? Oh, Christ, please—you've got to understand."

"Now you're talking like a woman," Lew said. "Get hold of yourself."

"Tell me what you want me to do."

"Did you ask Ida for the money?"

"Yes."

"What'd she say?"

"She wants to call in the police. I've been stalling her. She's on her way over here."

"Have you told anybody else yet?"

"No—nobody."

"Where's Isobel?"

"Home in bed."

"You hope."

"Cut it out."

"All right," Lew said. "You just stick to your guns, if the police come in on it, go along with your plans. They're okay."

"You know all about them, I suppose?"

"Yeah. Everything. You think you're dealing with a two-bit operator?"

'Goddam her. Goddam Isobel—I should've known."

You're being stupid, Ralph. Only a two-bit operator would take that kind of approach. Grow up."

Hagan said nothing. He moaned faintly. You wanted to be rid of your wife. You're rid of her."

Hagan groaned.

"When do you figure you'll get the money?"

"How do I know?"

"Okay. You get it, you hang onto it. Now, get this, and get it straight, Ralph. I won't phone your place again. There's a good chance the line will be tapped if the cops get in on this thing. You just have that money ready. I'll contact Isobel. I'll phone her shop. Got that? So it's up to you to get in touch with Isobel and keep everything clear. We'll work out a delivery point—if you know what I mean."

"But—she's—"

"But me no buts," Lew said. "That's how it's going to be."

"I suppose you want it all."

"That's right—all of it. You should feel good."

Hagan was deflated to a painful degree. He seemed to be close to tears.

"Who are you?" Hagan demanded suddenly.

Lew forced a soft laugh.

"What about Flo?" Hagan said. "If she ever—"

"You'll have her back, chum. Don't worry about that, either. Won't it be nice and comfy?"

"Christ, please! You know I can't take her back!"

"She's your wife. I don't want her. I got a notion she's a little on the bitchy side, anyway. Right?"

Hagan sounded as if he were becoming ill.

"It's up to you," Lew said. "Actually, you're buying her back with two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Interesting, isn't it?"

Hagan said nothing.

"Now, get this. One slip on your part and you're cooked, proper. Along with Isobel. You'll rot behind bars, if you're lucky. Flo's real troubled over what you've done."

“Please.”

“Please me no pleases,” Lew said. “I’ll be in touch with Isobel. Ida better snap it up. You have two days. You can quote me on that.”

He hung up, and walked fast out into the kitchen, opened the cupboard and pawed around. It was dark. He found a bottle, held it up against the light through the dim window. About two fingers of whiskey were left.

He emptied the bottle quickly, then leaned against the kitchen sink, deeply shaken at what he had done.

Suddenly he wanted to see Rita very badly.

The house was on a quiet residential street. There was a street light on the corner, shining a pale path of illumination across the front gallery. The yard was small. Bushes surrounded the house, and trailing vines climbed trellises on either side of the front steps.

Lew parked the car out front, and moved quickly up the walk. As he stepped onto the grass mat on the gallery, he saw her. She was sleeping, curled up on the swing, still wearing the light-colored smock.

He moved softly over to the swing.

For a time he stood there, looking down at her, feeling an overwhelming sense of loneliness, of hopelessness and regret—and, finally, a sense of feathering panic because he realized that there was nothing left for him here now. There was no backing out now. He had done the thing, and he had to go through with it. He was traveling a one-way road now. Rita couldn’t be in it; she couldn’t travel the road with him. He would have to go all the way alone.

His shadow lay across her.

She breathed lightly, regularly, light from the street light palely shone across her face, the soft hair, the upflung arm, the curled fingers.

It had to be worth it. The money would take him where he wanted to go. There would be a lot of forgetting to do, and that would be a twenty-four hour job.

Bitterness assailed him. He couldn’t seem to recall any time in his past life when he had been at peace. Now there would never be any. It was what he had wanted, wasn’t it? He’d fallen into this thing, dreamed up the angles, and followed it through. The hard core of rebellion that had fed him for so long would finally atrophy, and he wouldn’t have to stew about that. It would take a little time, perhaps.

Watching her, he wished he weren’t drawn to her like this. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. It hadn’t been, until the morning

she came to him, proving to him how much she loved him with action and without questioning... when she must have seethed with questions.

"Rita."

He spoke softly.

She opened her eyes and lay there blinking up at him, smiling. Then the smile went away.

"I won't stay," he said. "You'd better get inside. It's very late."

"I don't care, Lew."

"I care."

And he forced himself to control the grimace that threatened to turn his expression grim and saturnine. Because there was the sudden, undeniable pulse shouting at him to get back to the shop, to see that everything was all right. He should never have left. Maybe Florence Hagan would somehow get free. What then?

The touch of panic grew. He had to get back to the shop immediately. Christ, why had he come here?

"I was scared you weren't coming. I decided to stay right here till morning."

"Won't be long till daylight"

"Lew—what are you going to do?"

He sat down on the edge of the swing. It squeaked faintly, moving. He steadied it, and sat there staring at his fists, doubled on his knees. It was very still.

"I don't know. I guess—nothing."

"You've got to do something. You've got to go to the police."

He spoke harshly. "I can't go to the police. Don't keep saying that."

Her hand reached out and her fingers grasped his arm. He lay his hand over hers. They watched each other. He felt ill, stupified from all the drinking. Hangover had started. His head throbbed with dull aches, and his throat and mouth felt dry.

They spoke in quiet whispers.

"You think that man will go to the police?" she said.

"He said he would. There's nothing I can do." He held his hand over hers, and looked at her, and said, "Rita, I'll probably leave town. There's nothing else left to do. He'll go to the cops. He's trying to swing this himself, but he'll go to the cops for help. They'll hold me—he has enough for them to hold me. There'll be an investigation. I won't have a chance."

She turned her head away "Why did you ever do it? No, never mind—I understand."

"I began to regret doing it right after it was done," he said. "Only it was too late then."

"That's when you should've gone to the police."

The way she was talking had begun to worry him. She was right, of course. But right didn't much matter now. Nobody wanted to live out an existence behind bars if he could help it. No man was crazy enough to turn himself in and admit a thing like this, even when he wasn't guilty of anything more than stupid, drunken blundering—because who would believe him? Nobody. The prisons in the country were liberally sprinkled with guys whose bum raps actually were bum raps.

So, now you're thinking like a crook, he told himself. You're developing the philosophy. Keep it up. You'll need it. It's going to be all you'll have. A little more self-pity and you'll have it made.

"You must have loved her awfully," Rita said.

"Yeah."

"She must have been something."

"Sure was—something, all right."

"I mean, before it all happened."

"She didn't change. She was always the same. I know that now I didn't know it then."

"She was beautiful?"

"Yeah."

"Terrific in bed, I suppose?"

"Yeah."

"You don't love her any more, Lew."

He looked at her, frowning abruptly. "What?"

"You've been loving a dead woman, Lew. Only it's all gone now."

"Don't talk like that!"

"I've got to. Don't you see it?"

He said nothing.

"It's all gone. You did all that because you loved her, or something. Because you couldn't take what you knew was true. Maybe you knew it all along, Lew—then when you saw her like that, maybe you went a little crazy. It can happen."

"It did," he said. "That's enough, Rita."

"It's not enough. For God's sake, Lew—she's dead. She obviously didn't give a damn about you. Don't you see that?"

"Yeah. All right."

"Then, go to the police, and tell them. Tell them about Clarkson. Tell them everything. Once you've done that, you'll be free."

He couldn't control the laughter. It boiled blackly inside him, burst cruelly past his lips. He choked it off, straining against it.

"There's something else, isn't there, Lew? I can feel it. I can tell, the way you've been acting. What is it?"

He had to get back to the shop. Things were getting too close. Goddam her, why didn't she lay off?

Her voice was very soft. "Tell me, Lew."

He said nothing. He squeezed her hand, then stood up, looking down at her. "I've got to go," he said.

She didn't look at him now. "All right."

"I've got to do it my way," he said.

"When are you leaving? Where are you going to run to?"

"Damn it, Rita!"

She lay there, staring off across the gallery, toward the street light on the corner. He watched her for a long moment. Then he leaned down, touched her hair, and kissed her lightly on the lips. She did not move.

"G'night," he said. "I'll see you."

She did not speak.

Lew turned, feeling bad, now, and walked away, down the steps and along the walk to the car. In the car, he looked up. The door leading to the house was just closing. He heard a distinct click.

Back home again, he locked all doors and windows. He checked the attic, and Florence Hagan seemed to be all right. Maybe sleeping. Lew was thankful for that. He felt as exhausted as she probably was. He felt sorry or ner. He wished there were something he could do, now. The main thing was that he'd get that money. It was all that mattered. It would solve everything—or almost everything.

He closed the trap, trying to think all around what he was doing, and stretched out on the cot. He sprawled down into thick black sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Lew came awake slowly, thickly, feeling ill. He lay on the cot, perspiring, feeling the heat of morning, with his eyes closed, wishing he could fight his way back into the depths of sleep. His mind slowly roused and all that had happened last night dropped back into place. It was fierce punishment. He snapped his eyes open, and nearly yelled at what he saw.

"Yes," Florence Hagan said. "I see you. I'll never forget you—never."

He was staring straight up into her eyes. Her head and part of one shoulder showed through the attic trap. The door itself rested on top of her head. Somehow she had uncovered her face and wormed through. The adhesive tape across her mouth was torn half off, dangling down her chin. Her face was slightly skinned and dirty. Her eyes were red-rimmed and tiredly angry.

"Say something," she said. "Go ahead."

He couldn't speak. He could only stare. He knew what this meant and it was like being shot-gunned in the face. Somebody began pounding loudly on the shop door.

Lew came off the cot as if flung, still dressed from the night before. He fell to his hands and knees, coughing, his head bright with sick pain.

"Second time somebody's been out there," Florence Hagan said. "I haven't yelled because it might be my husband."

He had to act fast. There wasn't time to think. A kind of wild instinct took over, and he functioned on a level of desperation that sent him fleeing soft-footed to the kitchen. He snatched up a roll of brown twine, and rushed back to the bedroom, starting up the swing ladder to the attic.

The pounding on the door continued.

"I'll scream!" Florence Hagan said.

He was on her before she could move. Flinging the trap door back, he clapped his hand savagely across her mouth and shoved her back into the attic. He managed to flip on the attic light. He held her on the floor, straddling her. He saw the sugar sack, snatched it up, and at the same time plastered the adhesive tape back across her mouth. She writhed beneath him.

I don't want to hurt you," he said. "For Christ's sake, take it easy! I've got to do this. I can't take chances."

She grunted with anger, trying to fight him. She had apparently been unable to loosen the bonds. He yanked the sugar sack down over her head again, and saw that it was frayed faintly on one side where she had obviously dragged her head against the attic floor in an effort to remove it. He had to hand it to her. She was quite a gal. He drew it tighter this time, then bound it around her throat, under her chin with the twine.

"Now, lie still," he said.

She began bumping her feet against the floor.

"You know goddam well what can happen to you," he said harshly, dropping through the trap. "Use your head." He closed the trap. She had quieted. He went on down the ladder, shoved it up against the ceiling and headed for the front shop door.

It was Clarkson.

For a moment they stood peering at each other through the small window panes in the door. Then Lew flung it open. Clarkson stepped forward. Lew pushed him backwards, snapped the door shut and kept moving toward him, getting him as far away from the door as possible.

Clarkson looked the same. He wore the same Panama hat, but a gray suit this time, single-breasted, lightweight, with a white shirt and blue tie. His eyes were angrier than Lew had seen them.

He tried to keep down the beating of his heart. It was all inside him, rising like a kind of bitter vomit now; fear and a kind of anxiousness he'd never known before. The whole business was a horrible, frightening nightmare that now threatened to destroy him.

Clarkson stared at him.

"What's the matter with you?" Lew said.

Clarkson shook his head, still staring.

Lew didn't trust Florence Hagan. He couldn't leave her the way she was for long. If she had learned how to free herself of the tape across her mouth once, she could do it again—and she would. She was probably working on it now. He would have to tie her up better. All she had to do was scream. Wouldn't it be fine if Clarkson wised up to what was going on, or became suspicious. It would be his chance.

If he ever learned Lew was holding Florence Hagan, the law would believe anything he told them. A man who would pull such a crime as this could easily be guilty of murdering his wife and her lover. With the evidence Clarkson already had, it would be a cinch. Lew half expected to hear her screams. But he wasn't resigned yet. He still could make it—with a little luck.

"Why are you standing there?" he said. "What do you want?" His voice was ragged. His breathing was all wrong. He was soaked with sweat. He couldn't think straight—at a time when everything depended on it. And all the while an urgent voice inside him said, *Get rid of Clarkson, fast.*

There was something strange in the way Clarkson looked at him. It wasn't anything definite. Perhaps, it was the inert impression of the man's eyes, the meaty folds of flesh with the dark wet eyes poking through.

"My patience is running thin," Clarkson said, his voice was layered with anger. "You don't have much time. You'd damned well better tell me what you know, or I'm going to the cops.

Clarkson was watching him closely, and something curious touched the man's expression. Lew frowned, unable to figure the man now. He had to get rid of him, yet Clarkson just stared at him. He seemed uneasy.

"I'll see you," Clarkson said, still staring at Lew curiously. "I'm watching you, Brookbank."

The man turned and walked heavily over to his car, got in and slammed the door, started the engine. Then, without looking toward Lew, he drove off.

It was damned strange. A great worm of fear crawled on Lew's belly. He stood there, trying to decide what to make of Clarkson's actions. Why in hell had Clarkson taken off like that? And why had he kept staring so strangely at him?

Hell, he thought. It just looks to you like everything's going sour because everything is going sour.

He went back inside the shop and locked the door.

He listened. There was no sound in the house. Propped against the door, he tried to think. It was as if his mind were swarming with ten million random reflections, all of them of the wrong kind. He couldn't seem to think properly. He found himself unable to constructively decipher his next move.

Florence Hagan had seen him. Since that moment, it was as if the whole world was blown to hell. He couldn't get hold of himself. There was Rita, and Clarkson—and the police—and Ralph Hagan and Isobel Delarno. And himself—above all himself. Wasn't that right? He had to think about himself, consider every angle calmly.

Only he wasn't calm. He was sick and nervous and frustrated and anxious and desperate and horribly hung over.

He held his hands up and stared at them. The fingers were like the legs of a tarantula, moving nervously, seeking escape. His whole being was leaning toward escape—only in the wrong direction, like a man fighting a hurricane.

Run, now, he thought. Turn and run. Don't fight this thing through. You're crazy if you try.

Yet he had to try, for he had already gone too far to turn back.

He stumbled through the shop into the kitchen and momentarily stood there with the crazed emotional tension streaming through him until he thought he would scream with it. No matter what approach to the problem he made he found himself blocked on all sides. Yet somehow he had to reach a solution.

He stood absolutely still in the kitchen. Slowly, now, he told himself. Think it out, Brookbank.

But how in hell could he? It was insane!

He turned quietly and brought his fist down atop the kitchen table with a smash that nearly snapped his wrist. White pain speared his arm. He stood there cursing savagely.

You're caught, Brookbank!

Slowly he moved through the living room into the bedroom, paused there a moment, then stepped into the bathroom and looked at himself in the medicine chest mirror. He recoiled.

This explained it—why Clarkson had acted as he had, why the man had left suddenly. He would return, Lew knew that now.

His hair was a vicious snarl. His eyes stared from round darkly shadowed cavities. He badly needed a shave. Blood was smeared all over his face.

Where had the blood come from? He was covered with it. The collar of his shirt was stained rust-dark with blood. It was on his forehead, flaked drying on his chin; his face was covered with it.

He checked himself closely in the mirror. There was a deep cut across the bridge of his nose and along the side of his cheek. Christ when had that happened?

He methodically washed his face, letting water flow across his head from the tap. It made him feel slightly better. He dried himself, then checked the cut. It was deep. It had started bleeding again. He got out a bottle of iodine and doused some on, then covered the gash with a Band-Aid, and went into the bedroom, and looked at the attic trap.

There was blood on the fascia board. He must have jabbed his nose against the side of the trap somehow when he went up after Florence Hagan. He would have to watch it. Insensible to pain, yet. Great! He knew he wasn't completely crazy. He'd been hung over. Seeing her had scared the hell out of him. Clarkson had pounded on the door. He'd been acting in a fog of desperation when it had happened and so he couldn't recall it now. No wonder Clarkson had acted so strangely.

He came to, finally realizing he had to act fast. The cold water on his face had helped. Turning, he went through the living room into

the kitchen, out to the shop, and checked the door. He remembered locking it then. He came back to the kitchen, found the last bottle of gin in the cupboard and removed the cap.

He smelled it. His stomach rolled sickeningly.

He drank, choking the stuff down, then stood shaking by the sink, swallowing harshly, trying to hold it down. Sweat began oozing from all his pores and a series of shudders convulsed his body. His eyes watered. His head snapped back with the effect of half-retching and fighting to hold the gin down. Suddenly the spasm passed. It was like a quieting hand. He took another long gurgling drink, with no trouble this time, capped the bottle, sat it down and sucked in a long breath.

Better watch it Brookbank, he told himself. You'll get to be a goddam lush, next thing you know.

He found a large glass, filled it with water from the refrigerator, and returned to the bedroom. He brought down the swing ladder, went up, flipping on the attic light. He pushed through the trap and stepped over to Florence Hagan's side, setting the water down. He untied the sugar sack and took it off, then looked at her.

"I'll have to ask you to be quiet," he said. "One peep—and, well, you understand?"

Her eyes widened with understanding.

He tugged tenderly at the tape. Her eyes watered.

"Hurts," he said. "I'll have to put it back in a little while, anyway. Rather have me leave it?"

"She shook her head.

"Only one way to do it," he said.

She nodded.

He got a grip on the edge of the tape and snapped it sharply away from her mouth. It came neatly off with a quick whisper.

Tears sprang to her eyes. Her large dark-tipped breasts filled, tightening against the sheer gown. He avoided looking at her, rolled her onto her side, unfastened the bonds on her hands.

"I—I can't move them."

"You'll have to do better than that, honey," he said. "They weren't cutting circulation. I checked."

"You think of everything?"

For a moment he thought she might cry. Then, looking at her, he realized Florence Hagan would never cry. He sat on the floor beside her, took her hands and wrists, and rubbed them. She watched, brooding, not speaking.

He reached over and handed her the glass of water.

Her hair was the thickest, richest, blackest hair he'd ever seen. He remembered how soft it was when he had last touched it. He

quickly averted his mind, trying to think of something else, then caught himself staring at her bare thighs. He looked quickly away.

"I'm in no position for bargaining, I guess," she said.

"What does that mean?"

"I saw you looking at me. We may as well be frank with each other." She had finished half the glass of water. She set it down, then looked at him, unsmiling. "Of course, my legs are tied together, which isn't very handy."

He stared at her, a faint pulse beating deep down inside him.

You've done everything else," she said. "I don't suppose I could stop you from doing that, too. She lay back on the blankets, her head on the pillows. "I don't give a damn," she said. "Go ahead, if you want to."

She rubbed her lips gently with the fingers of one hand, watching him with round, calculating eyes.

"I might even enjoy it," she said. "I haven't had any for quite a while, and, after all, I'm a married woman. I thought I'd get some last night. It was the least Ralph could do, on my birthday and all. She must be some gal—Ralph's no slouch."

Lew said nothing, faintly astonished. But he felt a rising tumult of feeling creep through him.

She eyed him. "Well? It's free, for hell's sake. Certainly you can see that? You want to?"

Take it easy," he said.

"I want to," she said. "What else is there left?"

He said nothing.

"Doesn't it look good?"

He still said nothing.

She reached down and pulled the gown up over her breasts, baring them, and lay back, still without smiling. She wet her lips with her tongue. Her lips glistened. Despite himself, Lew couldn't take his eyes off her magnificent breasts. They were round and full, creamy and soft—waiting for the touch of his mouth and hands.

"Well?" she said.

"You want me to untie the ropes on your ankles, so you can rest your legs a little?" he asked, his voice husky and unrecognizable.

"That's a subtle way to go about it, darling. But there's no need, don't you see? I told you, I wouldn't mind. In fact, I'd like it. Who in hell cares? Sure, untie my legs."

He untied her ankles, then sat back. She leaned down and rubbed her ankles for a time, then lay back again.

"Shall I take my pants off?" she said.

“Shut up.

“I’m plenty hot,” she said. “Lots of men have told me so. Not just Ralph, you know. Why don’t you take a crack at it? Come on, who’ll ever know?”

Christ, she was bitter. She had it in her head that she was done. Lew tried to think around that, too. Because any way he looked at it, she was done.

“Honey,” she said. “Can’t you give me that much? I want it—I mean it!”

She sat up, leaning toward him on one arm, her lips parted.

“I don’t look bad, do I?” she whispered. “I mean even after all I’ve been through?”

“You look fine.”

“I feel raw,” she said. “Nothing matters, don’t you see? I don’t give a damn, because it wouldn’t matter if I did give a damn.” She leaned closer. “Come on. What’ve you got to lose?”

She was a beautiful woman. She was asking something that certainly wouldn’t be unpleasant. How in hell could he refuse? A knot formed in Lew’s belly and he felt a great wildness blooming inside him.

She reached down and started sliding her pants off, writhing her hips. Her body was long and lush, her waist very slim.

“Come on,” she whispered.

Suddenly Lew reached for her and drew her into his arms. Their mouths came together, and she pulled him back half on top of her, moving her body against him with a slow, provocative urgency.

“That’s it,” she said. That’s what I want.”

She kept moving, urging him on. And then, suddenly his head exploded, and she yelled something. The pain was horrible, blinding, and he fell back away from her. Dizzily, he saw her kneeling, swinging something at him. He swung his arms up and whatever it was crashed against them.

“Damn you! Damn you!” she gasped. “I’ll kill you, so help me! I’ll kill you!”

Again whatever it was smashed against his head. His mind cleared for a brief instant. She was gripping a length of two-by-four with both hands, swinging it at him with wild might. He could see the savage exertion rippling the muscles of her naked body. He could see the frenzy in her eyes.

Once more the block of wood struck his head and he came close to going out. He made a wild, frantic stab with one hand and caught hold of the two-by-four. She was crying now, fighting him desperately, agonizingly.

They fought briefly, kneeling, facing each other, Lew's reeling senses slowly clearing. He gave a strong wrench and tore the heavy length of wood from her hands and hurled it rattling across the attic. She fell back on the blankets, covering her face with her hands.

He knelt there for another long moment, looking down at her, trying to get his breath. His head ached furiously. Her pants were draped around her knees. He grabbed them and yanked them up.

"I ought to rape you for that"

"Go ahead you dirty son-of-a-bitch!"

Lew retrieved the rope and caught her ankles. She kicked with everything she had. He held them together and bound them tightly, knotting the rope securely.

"You dirty son-of-a-bitch!" she panted. "You lousy bastard!"

He found the other rope and bound her wrists. Florence lay there watching him, with venom in her eyes, her lips, twisted crazily.

"I almost had you, you filthy bastard!" she said.

Lew said nothing. He was searching for the adhesive tape he had taken off her mouth. He hoped to hell she didn't start screaming. The minute she thought of it, she would. And right now he couldn't find the damned tape. He would have to get fresh tape from the medicine chest, but he couldn't leave her up here without a gag of some kind. He would have to use the old tape, while he got some other.

His head was a mess. He carefully probed with his fingers, felt swollen, pulpy spots. His fingers were covered with blood.

"If I'd only waited," she said bitterly. "Just another few seconds. I couldn't make myself wait."

She had him scared plenty. He'd been fool enough, drunk enough, not to see the obvious fact that she was scheming, that naturally she would scheme. He had fallen for the oldest ruse in the world.

He found the tape, at last, stuck to the heel of his shoe. Catching her by the hair, he held her head back, and slapped the tape across her mouth. Her eyes cursed him savagely. The adhering qualities of the tape were fast wearing off.

He went downstairs, found a fresh roll in the bathroom, came back up and taped her mouth good. She wouldn't get it off easily this time.

He was mad as hell; angry with himself, bitter toward her. She had fouled everything up. He couldn't think right. She had seen him.

She was making those damned sounds in her throat again.

Abruptly, he realized he was wasting time up here. Time was fleeing, and he was standing still. What was going on out there?

He looked at her.

“I wish to Christ you hadn’t done that,” he said. “I wish to Christ you hadn’t seen me.”

There was a black thought in his mind, and he kept pushing it brutally away, refusing it.

He went over to the trap, dropped through on the ladder, than looked across at her. He felt sure she could not get the tape off this time. He didn’t feel the sugar sack necessary any longer.

What in God’s name was he going to do?

Go through with it. Get the money and run. What else?

He closed the trap, went down into the bedroom, slung the ladder up out of the way. Stepping into the bathroom, he carefully bathed the spots on his head where she had bashed him. It was damned painful. She had wriggled around up there in the dark, discovered that damned hunk of two-by-four, hidden it under her pillows, and schemed like crazy.

He had to hand it to her. She was quite a woman. A real hell-cat.

In the bedroom, he changed his shirt, slipped on a jacket. He knew he had to eat something. He couldn’t recall when he had eaten last.

Then a new thought hit him. What about the police? Had Ida DeCroix forced Ralph Hagan to call on the Law? What about the newspapers?

Already, the clean shirt was patched with perspiration.

Lew left the place. He checked all the doors and windows, making sure they were locked tightly. He picked up the car, and headed fast for the center of town.

He couldn’t get Florence out of his head. Lying up there on the attic floor, waiting—just waiting.

Chapter Seventeen

HOUSEWIFE KIDNAPED

(City)—Mrs. Florence Hagan, 30, last night was abducted from her home at 713 Darrigan Circle, in Gulfville, while her husband, Ralph Hagan, well-known proprietor of The Hagan Shoe Store on Sunrise Avenue, lay unconscious in bed. Chloroformed by the same unknown persons who took his wife away, Mr. Hogan, 28, upon regaining consciousness was unable to aid the police in any way.

“She had no enemies, my Flo.”

A telephone call was received at the Hagan residence by Mr. Ralph Hagan, just before he called the local authorities. An unknown male voice, speaking in obviously strained attempts to disguise himself, demanded ransom of Mr. Hagan for his wife’s safe return. Mr. Hagan then telephoned his mother-in-law, Ida DeCroix, this city, and she quickly rallied to his aid, impressing upon him the urgency of calling in the police, though the unknown telephoner had particularly specified that Mr. Hagan must not contact law enforcement authorities.

Mr. Hagan said, bewildered, “I can’t help but think it must be some prank. I can’t believe anyone would ever harm my wife. However, no matter what the police think or want, I will certainly go through with whatever these terrible persons demand. I want Florence back I want her back unharmed, as I remember her. My God, I cannot believe it She had no enemies, my Flo!”

Groggy

Upon further questioning by this reporter, Mr. Hagan dazedly admitted he had not known what he was doing for some time after he awakened with a fierce headache, and feeling nauseous, after a late birthday celebration for his pretty wife, Florence, at their own home. Mr. Hagan said, “I was groggy—I’m still groggy—I feel sure that if I hadn’t been so groggy, I would never have been so quick to phone the police. It frightens me—there are

so many things I have heard." Mr. Hagan privately told this reporter, his face pale with emotion, the words stumbling across one another, "Whatever they, those unknown persons, ask, I will do. Please write this in your newspaper, if any of this sees print."

Ransom figure withheld

Though every effort was made by the police, and other authorities, to make Mr. Ralph Hagan disclose the amount of the ransom, the time, the place, demanded of him, he was adamant. Mr. Hagan was obviously regaining his senses from the ordeal.

Brusque

"I have nothing more to say," Mr. Hagan brusquely told this reporter. "My one and only concern is getting Florence safely back to me, where she belongs. I will do whatever they ask, and I will say no more."

Sheriff's Department stern

Sheriff Orville Clanty spoke with venom. "This sort of thing has got to be curbed. Crimes of this kind are a tidal wave across our country. We are deeply disturbed that such a thing should take place in our town. We will certainly do everything in our power to..."

There was a lot more, but Lew couldn't read it

No need to. This was enough, of itself. He stood on the corner, hearing traffic, feeling the morning rush of people, feeling the hot blast of the sun across his head and shoulders.

He dropped the newspaper.

He was on the main street of Gulfville. It was a brilliantly hot morning, but to the northwest, he saw a cumbersome blanket of gray-black pall, slowly folding across the skies. A light, warm wind soughed through the streets.

Turning, he walked along the sidewalk. He knew he had to act fast. There was nothing left to go wrong.

He moved into a restaurant, sat at the counter, and ordered coffee, ham and eggs, and toast. He sat there in a kind of dazed stupor, unable to think. All around him he heard people talking. They were discussing Florence Hagan. He heard the sizzling of his breakfast on the grille behind the counter.

He felt curiously apart. Again, it was as if he weren't even here; as if he were really watching from some other place. Knowing things nobody else knew. Nobody but Florence Hagan.

It occurred to him as he ate mechanically that she must be very hungry, lying bound, up there in his attic, waiting.

He knew he had to get in touch with Hagan as soon as possible.

He looked through the restaurant windows, seeing the name of the place backwards on the plate glass, and beyond the glass the people of the town, moving through the white sunlight. Cars drifted up and down. An awning across the street flapped gently. A plane droned along overhead, mingling faintly with the clatter of dishes, and the steady talk.

The food took hold quickly. He had needed it. He could actually feel strength seeping back into him. His mind cleared somewhat, and for an instant there was the question: What am I doing here?

Drinking a second cup of coffee, he deliberately turned his mind to thoughts of the money. But his reflections on this score were muddy and obscure. He couldn't figure out a safe way to get hold of the money without placing himself in grave peril.

At the same time he found that Rita was very much in his mind. He also thought back to Janice, and set his coffee cup down, staring at the cup. Something was happening to him. It was the first time he'd ever thought of Janice without a deep pang, a cutting of nerves and emotion. Nothing was there for Janice. Janice was suddenly a dead issue.

Only she wasn't. There was Clarkson.

He looked up to order another cup of coffee and realized that he was sober for the first time in a very long while. Peering around the restaurant, he discovered that people and objects were strangely clear cut, sharply defined. Even the smell of food was clean and good.

After a while he thought of a drink, and he was surprised to find that he didn't want one. His hands were fastened white-knuckled on the edge, of the counter. He could hear himself breathing heavily and the counterman was staring at him.

"You okay, Jack?"

"Sure, yes—I'm fine. Here."

He laid a dollar bill on the counter, turned on the stool and walked outside. The black blanket of cloud was very slowly surging in from the northwest. It was stifling hot in the street, the wind drifting between the buildings warm and damp.

He started toward the curb and stopped. Everything seemed different. He couldn't understand it, couldn't grasp its meaning. He searched for a cigarette, lit it. It tasted very good, and he stared at the cigarette with a kind of deep amazement.

It was as if he really didn't know what he was doing here. Good Christ, he had been sick—drunk, drowned in his own horrors. For how long? An aging time.

The sunlight was brilliant.

He suddenly started walking fast. He cut sharply across the main avenue, took a side street, turned right, almost running now. He

saw the sign, down two blocks. Timothy, Wayford & Horn—Real Estate.

No, sir. Rita didn't come to work this morning. She'll probably be along, though. I phoned her home, and she's not there, either. Her mother says she started for work."

Lew thanked the girl at the reception desk and went outside again.

He wanted to see Rita badly and now he didn't know where to look for her. Also, he couldn't remember where he had left his car. For a moment, his mind was a blank. He tried to recall where he had parked, but to no avail. He started back for the restaurant. Crossing the main avenue, he saw the Ford, parked half a block down from the restaurant. He remembered now that he had parked there to pick up a newspaper at the corner newsstand.

The paper had blown down along the curb, flapped up against his front wheel, the headlines blaring at him. He kicked it aside, and climbed under the wheel, and knew without thinking about it, without hesitating as he started the engine, that he wasn't going through with it—that he would return to the shop, pick up Florence Hagan, take her to the police, and tell them about the whole thing.

It was that simple.

He drove off into traffic. He felt no particular concern about himself. He knew this was what he had to do. Thoughts of the ransom money left him cold. There was only an eagerness to return, release Florence Hagan, and head for the Police Building.

There came a sudden sense of release and relief, and Lew burst out sweating. He laughed softly. He thought momentarily of the consequences he would face, but they were insignificant compared to what he'd figured going through up to this moment. They had, in fact, almost reversed themselves into a degree of pleasantness.

He was done. He was through. This thing had built up inside him until he had nearly gone insane. Thinking straight again, he didn't try to fathom how he'd come to act as he had.

It was just a wild nightmare.

He parked the car beside the shop, unlocked the side entrance and went inside. In the kitchen he hesitated a moment, feeling a sense of near unfamiliarity with the surroundings.

Then he strode into the bedroom.

Florence Hagan hung halfway through the attic trap door. The tape was torn from her mouth. Two bullet holes showed in her throat, blood stringing down toward the floor in purling ropes. The floor was puddled and splattered with blood. Blood soaked the blankets and sheets on the cot, splotched in streaks across the wall.

Florence Hagan was dead.

Chapter Eighteen

Lew couldn't stop looking at her.

There was something in it beyond horror.

The abrupt and complete reversal of emotion turned him numb. He stood staring, quaking in the pregnant stillness, sanctioning Florence Hagan's death as a part of his own resignation, as a piece of what was proving to be necessity. There would be no end for him. It would go on and on, getting a little bit worse each time he thought he was personally accomplishing something, crowding him a little more, socking him just a little bit harder in vulnerable spots, until at last he would just contain it all, and finally blow apart, explode—disintegrate, like an ant swatted on the head with a sledge hammer.

Black laughter balled inside him. It burst past his lips painfully, shaking him up. His heart hurt, his lungs bellowed as his hysterical peals of laughter shook the rooms. He tried to stop and couldn't. He leaned back against the door jamb, utterly unable to control it, dark rings forming around his eyes as the knife-like laughter tore at his throat. There was nothing of humor in the laughter. It was black, macabre and painful. It was raw hell.

Lurching drunkenly away from the door, he made his way to the bathroom, his eyes shot with blood, and was violently sick.

Shuddering, he splashed water on his face, rinsing his mouth, and fell back, sitting on the edge of the shower stall. He hunched above his knees.

The horrible laughter had died now and he felt wrung out and debilitated. He stared dismally at his hands and contemplated the emptiness, the harrowing finality of Florence's violent demise.

Death, today, was a lost breath. Death was the slim, crawling red-brown rope of frozen blood spinning from Florence Hagan's throat.

Death was the dark silence of Lew's mind.

Death lay profoundly formless in gathering shadow, musing in the sunless forenoon, puddled and stiffening on the cot gleaming dully on the walls, feeding contentedly on the lost echoes of Lew's unnatural laughter.

After a long moment he rose, staggering a little, and walked into the bedroom. The room was close and gray, the sun was gone. The dull light of late morning was like metal.

If he were caught now, no matter what he said, nobody would ever believe him. It was his word against Ralph Hagan's, and here Lew Brookbank ended. He knew this. Yet who could have killed her? If Hagan had done it how had he contrived to find her?

Lew's tortured mind refused to function beyond the cold realization of his own dire predicament now.

His only chance was to somehow catch Hagan with the money, and make him admit to everything. But how? It was a dream—as mad a dream as the eerie days and nights he'd been living through.

Very slowly panic began to develop inside him, priming and loading toward another blast-off.

He realized he had to do something. But where should he begin?

For one thing, it was imperative that he get Florence out of the house. Yet where could he take the body? It was daytime and almost any move he made would be open to observation. The pressure of time lay heavily upon him, too, for whoever had killed her would probably contact the police.

Moving dazedly toward the cot, a kind of cold frenzy took hold. He had been a fool to wait this long, acting like a damned kid. So she was dead and past help—now he had himself to look out for.

He snatched the blankets and sheets off the cot, turned and started out of the shop, then stopped. He dropped the blankets. The body was what counted—nothing else. Leave the rest until he'd done something with the body.

Scrambling up the swing ladder, he flipped the trap door off Florence Hagan's head, then crawled into the attic. Once again she had apparently pulled the same stunt with the tape, rubbing it on the floor until she managed to peel it off. Resolutely he closed his mind to her appearance. He grabbed the body brutally and, without thinking, went down the ladder with it. He reached the bedroom, panting, feeling a newborn helplessness that plunged him into a dark well of absolute fear.

He had to get hold of himself. If he gave up now he was done. In the back of his mind, he couldn't control the thought that he was washed up, anyway.

He started out of the bedroom, through the living room, heading toward the side door with the body, dragging it, the thick black hair foaming across his hands and wrists.

Herbert Clarkson stood in the kitchen, staring at him. Clarkson held the Luger in one hand. The gun was steady, but there was fear in Clarkson's eyes.

“Don’t move,” Clarkson said.

Lew dropped the body. It struck the floor with a dull thumping. He stood over it, not wanting to believe this, either.

“You killed her,” Clarkson said. “My God.”

Lew couldn’t speak. There was a dry, choking sensation in his throat.

Clarkson stared at him, his eyes dark and shocked under the shadow cast by the broad brim of the Panama hat.

Chapter Nineteen

Clarkson's feet were close to the bloody pile of blankets and sheets that Lew had left on the floor. They stood there that way for a long moment, watching each other. Lew came close to breaking. It was as if he were in the unrelenting hands of some Devil, whose horrifying game was to make each capping moment that much worse than the previous moment, until the final demolition.

Turning himself in to the police with a living Florence Hagan as testimony to his right thinking recovery, was one thing. Florence Hagan dead, was quite another thing... and now this. Clarkson.

"I didn't kill her," Lew said, his voice thick.

It was an insane statement. Beyond that, there was nothing he had to prove or explain to Clarkson. Clarkson was still another part of his fear. Brooding, waiting.

It was all so goddam hopeless. The odds were too great. From every direction, walls hovered, bleak, spiked and invincible, crowding in upon him.

"She was here all the time, wasn't she?" Clarkson said. "Florence Hagan. I might've known."

There was something in Clarkson's statement, in his furtive manner, that made Lew frown. He couldn't put his finger on it. But it was there.

Clarkson suddenly spat out tiny peals of laughter. "It's really rich," he said.

Lew edged away from the body.

"Don't move!"

Lew stopped, watching Clarkson, more worried now. The laughter continued to beep past Clarkson's edged lips. It came unbidden in dribs and drabs, as if he were spitting out grape seeds. His stomach jerked up and down, a separate entity. But Clarkson's expressionless face remained unchanged.

Lew found himself still forced to explain. "I was out for breakfast. When I got back I found her."

"Yeah."

"It's the truth, goddam it!"

I suppose you were taking her out to breakfast, now?"

Lew watched the man.

"Oh, yes, it's rich," Clarkson said. "But how did she get here in the first place?"

Lew did not speak.

Clarkson faintly cocked his head, as if listening.

"You haven't a chance in the world," Clarkson said. "I'm going to kill you, Brookbank. It's the only way."

"What?" Lew's heart lurched sickeningly.

"That's right You're as good as dead. I knew something was the matter this morning, when I came. You had blood all over you and you were so nervous you could hardly stand still. Of course, I never connected it up with this snatch job. So I went away and returned after you left You went out all right—I saw you. I was going to wait for you, Brookbank, and I'll tell you why in a minute."

"You're talking an awful lot of words."

"That's right" Laughter gusted past Clarkson's heavy lips once more. "I found something. Something you missed. The police will be here any minute. And you'll be dead. It's all over for you, Brookbank."

"Found something?"

Clarkson nodded. The Luger was quite steady in his pudgy fist. "Under the couch, over there. Just at the edge of the rug."

"What was it?"

"A woman's wrist watch. The band was broken—forcibly broken, I might add. As if the woman ripped it—tore the metal in desperation."

Lew experienced a curious sensation that he should know what Clarkson was getting at. But his mind was momentarily blank.

Then, suddenly, he knew. He stared down at Florence Hagan's wrists and understood what Clarkson meant. Her wrist watch was gone. He recalled that she had been wearing one, and he recalled how she had been lying on the floor by the couch when he was outside talking with Rita.

"Yes," Clarkson said. "It strikes a certain glow, I'll bet. You remember, don't you?"

"I don't remember any damned thing."

"Sure, you do. Maybe you didn't see the back of the watch. It was brand-new. A birthday present—and an expensive one, taking everything into consideration. Know what it said on the back of the watch?"

Lew waited.

"It was a real delicate inscription. It said, *'To Florence Hagan, a Wife among Wives... from her ever-lovin' husband, Ralph.'* It was dated yesterday, her birthday." Clarkson laughed again. "Can you

imagine how I felt? Having read the morning papers, heard the radio, and all?"

"I see."

"Damn well, you see."

"So you took it to the police?"

"Hell, no. Was she already dead, then, Brookbank?"

Lew didn't answer.

"Probably not—probably right here, some place. Bound and gagged. It never occurred to me that she'd be here." He paused. "It's pleasant for me that I didn't think of that. In my haste, I would have freed her—taken her downtown. I didn't even bother looking. I went straight to her husband."

"You what?"

"I went to Ralph Hagan."

Lew knew then. This made everything worse than ever. Clarkson had gone to Hagan.

"Did anyone else hear you tell Hagan?"

"No."

Lew glanced quickly at the gun in Clarkson's hand. It was still quite steady. Somehow he had to get away from here. Time was running out, and he had no idea what was on Clarkson's mind. This was so perfect for Ralph Hagan. He'd come here and killed Florence after Clarkson told him where he'd found the watch. No matter what Lew said now, it was a closed case and he was guilty. He saw no way out. He didn't want to let himself panic, but he couldn't stop his rioting emotions.

"Hagan killed her," Lew said. "You've fixed it."

"Come off it. He's gone to the police. They'll be here any minute."

"No. Not for a time, yet. He has things to take care of first. He can stall a little, then he'll tell about you finding the watch, maybe." Abruptly, he told the whole thing to Clarkson, watching the man's expression. And he saw that Clarkson believed. He would be the only one who would believe, Lew realized.

"It's perfect," Clarkson said softly. "I knew this morning I'd have to do away with you. The cops will be here anytime, now. They'll have to find you dead. They'll believe what I tell them."

Everything was suddenly quite clear to Lew. He had thought of it before, but had rejected the idea. Now the obviousness of the whole pattern of events was completely apparent. The strange thing was that he felt no emotion about it.

"You murdered Deke and Janice," Lew said.

"Certainly. You must have known. What else? Now I've got to do the same for you so I can explain to the law about the whole thing. They'll believe it, knowing what you've done to her."

Clarkson gestured toward the body. "I didn't kill her."

"What difference does that make?"

What difference? Clarkson was right. The police would believe anything Clarkson said. There was enough circumstantial evidence on the Miami deaths to roast him. There would be witnesses to Deke Clarkson's and Janice's behavior, witnesses to his—Lew's—jealousy. The truck driver who had picked him up in the Keys would remember. Clarkson didn't have to know anything else. All he had to do was open his lousy mouth and talk.

"It was the only way," Clarkson said. "It was a natural until you blundered in and drunkenly fouled me up, getting rid of *The Bayou Belle*, and the bodies. I figured this was my only way out. You've made it perfect for me now. I had you framed to the teeth, Brookbank. And you damned near wriggled off the hook. I've been half nuts, figuring what to do with you. Now I know."

The Law might show here any time, Lew realized. His only chance was to somehow reach Ralph Hagan. Hagan would be working fast because he was playing things very close. Hagan would be as desperate as himself.

It was make or break. In another moment, Clarkson would shoot him down. It could all be explained so easily.

Desperately Lew lunged straight at the man. He heard the crashing roar of the Luger and in the midst of the blast felt the fist-like tug at his side, and knew he was hit. Again the gun blasted. This time he was on Clarkson and the pain was in his side, but the pain directed his energies, too.

He swung hard. He felt his fist sink to the wrist in the deep flabbiness of Clarkson's middle. At the same time, he grabbed for Clarkson's gun arm. They struggled together for a long moment, and Lew felt the man's crazed strength as he fought to get his hands on the gun. He caught Clarkson's wrist. It was a large meaty wrist, hard to hold, and Clarkson was much stronger than he looked. His strength matched his weight and size.

Clarkson bulled in close and clubbed at Lew with his gun, tearing Lew's grip loose. Again for a bleak moment, the gun muzzle covered Lew's chest. Lew drove in close, catching Clarkson's wrist again, but Clarkson chopped at the back of his neck.

Lew brought the gun arm down, slammed it against his leg, and the gun spun from Clarkson's hand and skittered across the floor.

"Now, you bastard!" Lew said.

The pain in his side came in strong smarting waves. But he thrust it aside in his wild frenzy to smash and maim the other man.

Clarkson said nothing. He was fast and light on his feet when he needed to be, as some heavy men are, and he came plowing forward, slugging with both fists, and there was something ugly and maniacal in his eyes.

Lew tried to dodge under the flailing fists, but one of them caught him along the side of the head. He felt the hard crack of bone against bone, and for an interminable second spun toward a darkening void. Reeling dizzily, he kept his arms windmilling, and his head cleared just as Clarkson lunged at him with a powerful roundhouse right. Lew caught the savage blow on his shoulder, and felt the stunning bright pain drive into his chest and arm. If Clarkson managed to land just one of those blows properly, he was done, and he knew it. The man was a powerhouse of strength, culminating in a kind of frenzy now, but somehow under a strange control.

Lew was weakening. His arms felt heavy and the pain in his side was bad. It was all he could do to keep himself covered for a brief moment while Clarkson rained smashing fists against him. Then from somewhere came a second strength, and Lew crouched low, swinging with everything he had for Clarkson's breadbasket, hoping it was vulnerable as it looked.

It wasn't. It was as solid as an oak door, and the big man laughed gustily. Lew couldn't get past the man's arms now. They sprawled against the wall, still slugging, and he could sense the other man's strength building and building as they fought while his own stamina waned.

Abruptly, he drove in with everything he had, made a savage grab for Clarkson's head, and made it. For an instant the other was off balance. Lew gripped the head with all his strength, his thumbs caught in Clarkson's ears, and brought the man's face down violently against his upflung knee.

He heard the sound of smashed bone. Clarkson twisted in his grasp, panting like an animal now, hurt, and gouged Lew's groin with both fists.

The pain was suddenly an insane thing. It sent Lew to his knees, doubled over. Instantly Clarkson was upon him. He fell on him with all his tremendous weight, slashing at him with welt-knuckled fists. Lew couldn't move. A kind of paralysis had stabbed him when Clarkson stuck. He still writhed in an agony of hurting. Clarkson was on top of him with his whole massive weight, crashing his fists down, grunting with each blow, and Lew looked up into a strangely passive face now, sweat shining on the blurred features. He struggled against the pain, but he was too weak to help himself. Clarkson was out to kill now. The cold black eyes were filled with the deadly fury inside him.

A gun rocked the place thunderously.

Lew stared up into Clarkson's face.

He saw the awed and astonished expression subtly change the smooth fat features. Clarkson pitched backwards, coming halfway to his feet. Then he began to crumble. He fell forward on Lew, and Lew heard the man groan in mortal agony.

He writhed beneath the weight, trying to free himself from the sudden trap.

"Lew?"

He looked around. Rita stood across the kitchen with the Luger in her hand, her features white and shaken, her mouth trembling.

Chapter Twenty

Rita turned away from Lew. She stared at the sprawled body of Florence Hagan.

"I had to shoot him," she said.

Lew came to his feet. Clarkson lay on his side, breathing weakly, his eyes filmed with pain.

Lew heard himself talking. He told Rita everything, and there was haste in his voice. He stated it as briefly as he could, trying to make her understand though it was something he couldn't quite understand himself. "There's not much time," he said. "You'll have to believe that's the way it is. I want you to contact the police, Rita —"

He paused, feeling the slow creeping of warm blood down his side, where Clarkson had shot him. He wondered briefly if Clarkson would die. If the man lived, would he still be believed? There was no telling. "I've got to get out of here. You telephone the police, tell them I've gone to Isobel Delarno's antique store, out on the beaches. Tell them anything you like—but I have a notion that's where I'll catch Hagan."

"You're running away, aren't you?" Rita said. "You don't have to lie to me, Lew I just shot a man for you. I won't give you away."

She stood there. The gun was still in her hand. Her face was expressionless. He didn't like the look in her eyes, the way her lips were set. She stared at him now, with that strange appeal.

"I didn't kill her," Lew said. He stepped toward her. She didn't move. "It's taken me a long while to know what I've felt for you. You'll have to trust me. I've got to go. Will you please do as I say."

Rita wore a white sweater and skirt. Her dark hair richly folded around her shoulders. "Lew," she said, "You've got to run—don't you see? Nobody will ever believe you. Why should they? I heard what you said to him from outside. You've done a crazy thing. I came here wanting to talk you into going to the police, explaining everything to them. Not now, Lew. Don't you see?"

He took her by the shoulder.

"I've got to. If I don't I'm sunk. I may be sunk, anyway. I've got to take the chance."

She slowly moved her head from side to side.

"You don't believe me!"

Her voice lashed at him. "I don't know what to believe. How can I know—with—" She ceased, glancing mutely toward Florence Hagan's body.

Lew reached out, grabbed for the gun in Rita's hand. She snapped her hand away, backed into the kitchen. He went for her, got hold of the gun and tore it from her fingers.

"Do as I say," he said harshly. "I've told you the truth. I don't have any time."

"Lew!"

He turned, running. He hit the side door and dashed outside. He ran for the Ford, got behind the wheel, dropped the gun on the seat beside him. Starting the engine, he gunned the car away from the shop.

Rita stood in the doorway, silently watching him, her face white and stiff and mask-like.

Lew drove as fast as he dared, taking side roads that led toward the causeway to the beaches. He knew now that there was only one slim chance. If Rita couldn't believe him, nobody would. He hoped she would believe him later on. But right now was when he needed her help.

There was no certainty that Ralph Hagan would be with Isobel. Yet, it was the one place to head for. If Hagan had already been there and had left, somehow continuing with a new direction to his scheme, there was no telling how it would work out. But if he could beat Hagan there, and locate Isobel, he could wait for them to make contact.

Hagan wouldn't hesitate to visit her now. Things were too close to blowing up for him. It wouldn't matter that much.

Yet Lew felt sure the police would be watching Hagan. Then he thought of Clarkson, lying back there on the floor, dying. Or was he dying?

The gray morning was turning darker. Rain was in the air. Yet as Lew came nearer the Gulf, he saw long stretches of blue skies beyond the thick dark formations of clouds.

Traffic was thick on the road. There might already be an alarm out for him. The police might have shown at the shop by now, alerted by Hagan.

Driving carefully, he tore his shirt open, and inspected his wounded side. It was bad enough. The bleeding was beginning to taper off. He had lost a lot of blood. His shirt and trousers were soaked with it. The slug had grooved his hide. Another inch to the right and he would have been in really bad shape.

He desperately wanted Rita to believe. Yet how could he expect anyone to understand? As for his own chances, they remained dim and remote.

If he could reach Hagan and make the man talk, break him down, this would be the end. It would be the end, either way. He knew that.

Either way, he doubted that he would ever see Rita again. He hadn't had a chance to tell her all the things he wanted to tell her.

He found a cigarette, lit it, and pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

Delarno Antiques was closed.

Lew stood by the door a moment. The trapped feeling was back inside him. He couldn't return to town. The police would pick him up. He couldn't go near Hagan's home. The Law would be there. Hagan had surely tipped them by now to Clarkson's discovery. It was only a matter of time before they caught up with him. Unless he could somehow reach Hagan first.

But was he going to locate the man? He couldn't telephone his home. It wouldn't do any good. It was a question of catching Ralph Hagan and making him tell truth.

Even then, things would not be too easy. But, at least, he had killed nobody. So Hagan *had* to talk.

Lew turned away from the antique store and moved back to the Ford. There was no sign of the Plymouth.

Thinking about it, he decided it was strange that Isobel wasn't at the store. Maybe she was home. Maybe she and Hagan had worked out a solution for themselves.

He drove away, headed down the beach highway.

A stiff breeze came in off the Gulf now, bringing the clean odor of salt with it. The dark blanket of clouds drove steadily across the heavens. In the West, the sky was blue. It was just a little past noon.

He approached the area where Isobel Delarno lived, parked the car in the same spot he had used that first afternoon which now seemed so long ago, and ran along the beach. He felt his wound pop and the blood began to flow again, warmly. Drifting along the beach, he moved up toward the cottage. It looked quiet. He skirted bushes, reached the side, and looked out back.

The blue Plymouth was parked behind the house.

Eagerness crept through him, with it came a fierce urgency beyond anything he had ever known. He started for the patio entrance to the cottage, then stopped, cursing softly to himself.

He had left the Luger on the car seat.

He couldn't go back now. He might be seen. He might miss her. She was his only chance at Hagan now. Hagan might even be inside the cottage with her.

Calamity walked with him. Remembering Rita and how she had shot Clarkson. Was the man dead? Had she contacted the police? He realized he shouldn't have asked her to do that. It had seemed the right thing at the time, but now—they might locate him before he had an opportunity to work on Hagan.

One thing in his favor was that Hagan had never seen him—only knew of him.

He had only seen Hagan once. And that one instance at night, through the windows of his home.

Lew reached the patio. There was no sound from inside. He had to make it fast. Surprise was the only element he had on his side. He rushed the patio screen door, burst through, and crashed against the inside door lead-ins to the living room. It gave with a violent snap, and swung smashing back against the wall.

Isobel Delarno paused, startled, in the bedroom doorway. She opened her mouth to scream.

"Don't do it," Lew said.

He came across the room toward her.

"Don't even move," he said. "I'll crown you, sure as hell."

She closed her mouth, standing there, watching him. He shoved her aside, holding her arm, and looked into the bedroom. There was no sign of Hagan. He turned to her.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

She still couldn't seem to speak. She just watched him. Then she said, "I live here."

"Waiting for Ralph?"

There was no sign in her eyes. She was a cold fish. He let go of her and moved back into the living room, keeping his eyes on her. He knew she would do damned near anything. His side pained badly. He sat on the edge of a chair, watching her, then leaned back carefully.

"Come into the room," he said, "and sit on that couch across from me."

Without averting her gaze, she did as he asked. She had on the gold lame shorts again, and a thin jersey sweater that was drawn tightly across the swell of her breasts. Her dark blonde hair was perfection, and she wore tiny black earrings that somehow reminded Lew of Clarkson's eyes. She sat stiffly, looking at him, her knees together, her hands folded on her knees.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"It won't do any good," he said. "I know everything. Hasn't Ralph contacted you yet?"

"What do you mean, everything?"

"Everything. It's all blown to hell."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"His wife? She's dead, honey. The police know, too. He killed her not so long ago. It's all blown to hell."

She didn't even blink.

"I see," she said.

"Yeah. Is he due?"

Isobel didn't answer. Her eyes roved the room now. He could detect the nervous fright in her, but she didn't reveal it much. She sat on the edge of the couch, her rich, supple body oddly composed and quiet.

Lew watched her for a time. He could see a lot. She was something, for a fact. If you didn't make any errors in the play, she would go a long way with you, and for you. But if you fouled up, you were done. It was all there to read now. She knew what was happening, but you could never tell from checking her features for outward signs. She was controlled, only he knew damned well her mind was working in a vicious flurry, thumbing through the idea file, wondering desperately which one would work.

"You're waiting here for him, aren't you?"

"So?"

"Are you?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"I wonder how much he really loves you?"

She shrugged again. Otherwise, she didn't move.

"The cops are on it," he said. "They'll be out here."

That brought a faint flicker of expression to her tightly controlled face. She was beginning to believe certain things.

"You're quite a guy, Brookbank," she murmured.

"You're quite a gal."

He thought for an instant she was going to make the standard play; the polite bargain. Then he saw that it wasn't going to happen. Not with her. She was still thinking and figuring. Lew knew she must be aware of the spot he was in. Hagan doubtless had told her everything.

For his own part, Lew wasn't revealing a number of things to her. Primarily, the fact that he was straining every nerve, listening, anxiously awaiting the sound of sirens, or some tip-off that the police were around. If Rita had done as he asked, they would damned soon show. And that would smash everything.

He wanted to approach Isobel in some way, startle her, get her to tell him where Hagan was. He didn't know how. Best to play it cozy.

"Well, then," he said. "We'll wait and see."

"Fine with me."

"I'll bet."

She gave a tiny sniff through her nose. Christ, she was a cool one. She was watching him now. The quiet of the house was ominous. He knew everything she was thinking, and none of it could possibly be comfortable.

She lightly cleared her throat, withdrew her hands from her knees, and put them at her side. "Care for a drink?"

She was all prepared to jump up and mix something drastic. He did want a drink. He wanted one badly. However a good share of the hell that was on his back right now, was there because he'd been drunk for so long—jumping at chances, blundering, unable to reason properly. For damned sure, gin had done him foul play.

"No, thanks," he said.

She let out a short breath.

"You're a character, Brookbank."

"Same to you."

"I mean it. You must be off your rocker."

He watched her. She sounded serious. Her eyes were round and speculative. "Maybe not now I don't know about now—but—listen, how *did* you get onto us?"

"You coming around?"

"What's the use of kidding, eh?"

"Yeah."

"How did you get onto us?"

"Ralph called you."

"Yes. He told me about the wrist-watch. I was surprised to learn it was you.

Tell me about it"

She was wasting time. Why? He decided to go along with it. There was nothing to lose now.

"I was out there the other night—overheard you in the car. You were parked out by the river, near the bridge."

She stared at him. "You overheard us?"

"Yeah. And so forth."

He thought she colored faintly.

"That's the so forth," he said.

"We didn't talk much," she said, coloring more heartily. "I mean, we didn't go into enough detail for you to catch on so thoroughly, Brookbank."

That's right, Delarno."

She hesitated, debated, looked away, then toward him again "What then?"

"Well, I overheard you again. I'm a great overhearer. I was in the closet when you and Ralph were playing house in the bedroom."

The blood shot past the collar of Isobel's tight black jersey. Her rich, opulent breasts rose and fell sharply, the hard nipples pressing boldly against the stricture of the cloth that held them in.

"You don't expect me to believe any such thing as that?"

"Did Ralph pick up his glasses yet?"

Isobel remembered with a sharp pang. The blood in her face ebbed now, and she became slightly pale. Her expression did not alter, but she relaxed her arms now, and leaned indolently back on the couch, no longer so careful about keeping her knees firmly together.

"I was scared every minute," she said.

"Not every minute."

"You have a filthy mouth."

"Thanks."

"I knew—I felt something. I just knew—I was worried about something just like that."

Lew's side was very painful. He tried to stay in the one position, without moving. Otherwise, the wound would break open and keep breaking open, freely bleeding. He wondered how much blood he had lost so far.

Now Isobel spoke again, her words hard and insistent. "You located me through the bed-warmer, didn't you."

"That's right. You have a fine memory."

"Really much better than you'll ever know."

He began to feel wary. She was pulling something, but he hadn't the foggiest notion what it was. By every count she should be in a real dither right now. She should be really frightened and worried. If she was, she didn't show it.

She lifted her hips slightly, and adjusted her shorts.

"Are they creeping up on you?" he asked.

"Yes. They're extra tight"

"So I see."

She was going to use the old ruse after all. What else was there for her to do? When it came down to brass tacks, or steel bedsprings, or whatever, women always resorted to the last and

most obvious escape mechanism. Lew watched it formulate in her mind. She didn't want to employ it. But she was sure as hell going to try, one way or another.

Suddenly he discerned her desperation. It was revealed in her very complete control, in the absolute and positive adjustment to the situation. That was the answer. It had to be.

"So, Ralph killed her," she said.

"You know damned well he did. He'd let you know about that He's not that much of a hero."

"He did. He figured he had you set up just right."

She had no idea he was wounded. He didn't want her to know. His jacket covered the bloodstains, but for how long? Christ, how she was burning to ask him the burning question in her mind. Me and you—for freedom—how about it? He almost laughed aloud. She wanted to try but she was afraid. Because if she once did, the whole business she'd built up would tumble in her lap.

Go ahead, he thought Ask me to run away with you. Tell me you have a nice roll stashed away, a roll Ralph has no idea exists, just in case he buttered the bun on the wrong side and got his fingers sticky.

"You say the police are coming out here?"

"Yes," he told her. "It shouldn't be long now. They may be here already, for all we know."

"I don't think so. Brookbank, you're in it as deep as we are—as far as they're concerned. Don't try to kid me. Maybe it's worse for you."

He said nothing.

Here it comes, he thought. The pitch.

"Brookbank."

"Yes, Delarno?"

"You know what I'm thinking."

"Uh-huh. And it's no good. There's too much at stake. A while back, I might have gone for it. Not any more."

A white rim suddenly formed around her lips and her eyes grew very bright. She sat forward. "You're a damned fool!" she snapped. "Don't you see? They'll get us all."

"Not me."

She lowered her voice and came out of the chair, moving toward him, the long lush thighs, the undulant swaying of the hips, the abundant breasts all exhibited for his appraisal and delectation. "Don't be a fool," she said. "You've been out of your head to ever think you could win with a thing like this."

"I was drunk."

"You're not drunk now. Don't you realize the mess you're in?"

"Yeah. And I want out. I admit it would be nice with you. Damned nice—but not now."

She stood straight glaring at him, then cursed him and herself. She let go with a bubbling string of profanity and filth that would have rattled the manhole covers at a sewage disposal maintenance crew picnic. "You lousy, stupid, blind son-of-a-bitch," she said, breathing heavily. She turned and swung her hips back to the couch. She paused there a moment, then turned and came back to him again.

"Ralph is coming out here, isn't he?" Lew demanded.

Suddenly she knelt beside his chair. She put both hands on his knees. Her face turned up to him, the lips damply parted, the eyes very earnest

"Brookbank, you've got to use your head. We could make it together if we get out now. You could even just let me go."

He shook his head. "No dice, either way."

"Brookbank, you've got to do it"

She was figuring like merry hell. She knew things had clouded up to the extent where there would be a complete investigation, and she and Hagan would be in it up to their ears.

She whispered rapidly, "Yes, Ralph is coming out here. He thinks he's in the clear. He's not really." She was making it look too easy, trying to squeeze it now. She clutched at his knees with her fingers, and thrust her slim, enticing body up against his legs. She had become deliberately intimate and wanton. "When everybody gets talking now," she said, "they'll get suspicious of him. They'll smell a rat..."

"They sure as hell will," Lew agreed.

"What have you got to lose—really?"

"What's there to gain?"

"Brookbank, Ralph's coming here with the money."

Her voice was tense. She wasn't sure whether she should have said that. She continued to clutch his legs, leaning tightly against him. Her breasts lifted, their fullness and warmth arched toward him like a sacrificial offering.

"You're not so damned goody-goody," she said, "Look all you've done. And now you've screwed us all up. Can't you see? They don't know about me, yet. Please, listen and see it my way, will you?"

She was digging her nails into his legs now. He took her hands and lifted them away. She grabbed him again, her facial expression half sexy and half pleading at the same time. Her eyes were hot and abandoned.

She swallowed. "Ralph's coming out here with the money. The ransom's supposed to be delivered today. Daylight angle. That's how he's working it. He has two separate packages for the money,

only one's a fake. His mother-in-law came across without even blinking. We could have asked for twice the amount. He's told the police where he's supposed to leave it for the pick-up. They're going to be posted around that spot to catch the kidnaper, see?"

"What happens when they learn it's a fake?"

"Not a damned thing. When they find it's a fake and go to Ralph, he'll tell them—'Sure, it's a fake—' He'll say he went to the real spot with the right package of money and delivered it. Because that was the only way he could be sure the cops wouldn't interfere—because he wanted Florence back unharmed. Don't you see?"

"Yeah. I see."

"Soon as he does that, he's going to call them about the wrist watch. He figures you're maybe home, or going home, and they'll catch you. With Florence's dead body in your place you wouldn't have a prayer. Ralph held off so he'd be completely in the clear. By now they know." She stood up. "He's on his way out here now. He's bringing the money so we can leave."

"He trusts you? He's really nuts."

"Damn you!" Isobel's words lashed at him.

"The cops will pick him up, Isobel, because they've been tipped to investigate. Maybe they've got him already."

That hit her hard. She came close to screaming it. "They can't have him yet! He's got to get here." She fought for control. "You don't have to kill him, Brookbank. We'll just take him some place and drop him. Then, we'll get out of the country with the money. You and me. They're after you. If they aren't, they will be. In their eyes, you're guilty as hell." She moved close to him. "We'll have the money. Maybe you don't think I could give you a good time?"

"It's too late. The police maybe have Ralph already. Don't you realize that? Once they get him and start snooping, the whole business will break wide open. I'm not the only one who can tell some things. There's a girl—and a guy who maybe isn't dead yet—and it's going to make a stink, and Ralph's in the middle. You, too. Me, too—sure—they maybe have Ralph right now"

"They can't!"

A man cleared his throat in the kitchen.

"She's right, Brookbank. They haven't got me yet. But I'm glad to learn these things."

It was Ralph Hagan. He hurried into the living room, carrying a small suitcase in one hand, and a revolver in the other. He didn't look weak or small behind his glasses—he looked plenty hard. There was something woodenly grim about the way he smiled.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lew sat there stunned. It had happened a little too fast. He hadn't been prepared. He had wanted to jump Hagan. Instead, Hagan had jumped him, and Hagan had a gun.

Isobel turned and flung herself into Hagan's arms. He gave her a brutal shove, and kept the gun on Lew.

"Ralph, don't be that way."

"Calm down! Now, what's all this about?"

"I was working on him. Trying to find out things."

"I heard a little of it," he snapped.

"Ralph—he says the police are coming. He says they've been tipped to investigate."

Hagan did not change expression. He slowly set the small suitcase on the floor and began biting his upper lip. His glasses gleamed and glinted. He was hatless. He wore a dark suit and a pale blue shirt with no tie. He was thinking and his eyes did not look dull.

"What's this all about?" he asked Lew.

"You're cooked," Lew said.

"Ralph," Isobel said. "He was in the closet the other afternoon—when we—when we were here, in the bedroom."

Hagan didn't change expression at that, either. He didn't look toward the girl.

"Nice," he said to Lew.

"You'll have to move fast, Ralph," Isobel said.

"I'll have to move fast?"

"Yes—I mean—"

He turned to her and spoke quickly, softly. "Go outside, take your car down the road and park it some place. Then get the hell back here on the run."

"Ralph. This is no way to—"

"Move it, honey," Hagan said. "Let's see what kind of time you can make."

She sensed something, turned and ran from the house. Lew watched Hagan. The man did not move, and he said nothing. He

rubbed his forehead and stood there, waiting. The Plymouth started up and gunned out of the drive.

"They'll see *your* car," Lew said.

"You think I'm a sucker, Brookbank? I bought a used car for the ransom switch. I could have told the cops that, and it would've been all right. See?"

"You bought a car."

Hagan frowned at the white shag rug on the floor. The curtains gusted and the Venetian blinds on the windows rattled softly with the breeze coming in off the Gulf.

"Hell," Hagan said. He spoke softly, to himself. "This tears it. Up, down, and crosswise."

"Looks that way."

"Okay. We'll get out of here. You'll come along."

Lew watched the man for an opening, Hagan was watching himself just as carefully. He was ready.

"She tried to bargain," Hagan said.

Lew made no reply.

"Never mind. I know her. She would. A wonder she didn't tear her pants off and leap at you, the state she's in. She's a cool cooky, most of the time. But she's sure goofed up now. Too bad. I thought I could trust her. I'll have to keep a watch on you two for a while."

"What do you mean by that?"

Hagan looked at him. "I loved her," he said simply. "Does that answer your question?"

Lew said nothing.

Hagan meant it. He was hurt plenty. He was holding it back. He had a lot to hold back, but it could break loose any time.

Just then Isobel came running back through the kitchen. She halted by the breakfast bar, staring at Hagan. "Ralph. What'll we do?"

"We're leaving. Now. On your feet, Brookbank."

"Where're we going?" Isobel asked.

"Away, sweetheart—just away. We're going over and get the boat and head for Cuba."

"Ralph!"

"Move. Outside."

"I'll have to get some things together."

"No time. Outside."

Lew stood up. He could feel the tug on his side. Hagan didn't wait. He prodded Lew with the gun, reached down and picked up the suitcase, and they went on outside.

“Car’s in the street. It’s the Ford.”

They went out to the street and Hagan told Lew to drive. He climbed in the back seat, and Isobel sat in front beside Lew.

“Head for route nineteen,” Hagan said. “Into St. Pete. When you get there, drive over by Salt Creek. Know where it is?”

Lew didn’t answer. He started the car. It would be about a twenty-minute drive from where they were. The way things looked now, he would have no chance at Hagan. He couldn’t trust the man not to shoot the gun. He would shoot, sooner or later.

Isobel was playing it careful now. She knew Hagan had heard her talking when he came into the cottage kitchen. She didn’t know how much he had heard, but she would be figuring some way to find out

“You’ve had to change plans awfully quick,” she said, turning to Hagan.

“Yes, I certainly have, haven’t I?”

Lew knew he had underestimated Hagan. Never underestimate your enemy. He had made a grave mistake in doing exactly that. Obviously, any man who would dream of executing a scheme such as Hagan had worked out was no fool. He would be wily, and he would be desperate, and willing to take a chance, and no weakling at heart. The hardness of Ralph Hagan was already beginning to show. There didn’t seem to be much show of emotion in him. He could see how Isobel Delarno had appealed to the man. And he could see how Hagan felt now. He had very likely heard everything Isobel said from outside the house when she was propositioning him.

“Seems like a long haul for that amount of money,” Lew said.

“Shut up.”

“Just thinking. Was it worth it?”

“It’ll be worth it”

Lew drove. He kept watching for a police car. He saw none. There was no alarm. Where had Rita gone? What had she done?

Then something occurred to him. It was a brutal thing, and for an instant he felt a bitter sorrow. Suppose Clarkson had somehow gotten to Rita, harmed her, taken her some place? Prevented her from getting to the police.

Or, maybe she just hadn’t wanted to go to the police. Maybe she’d just gone off to work. It could happen. Everything else had happened.

He didn’t see any way out now except to turn the tables on Hagan, somehow. But how?



Salt Creek was a broad, deep stream that wound through the city of St Petersburg. It emptied into Tampa Bay. During hurricane season many people kept their boats in the creek for safety. Others moored their boats there all the time. Apparently Hagan had one there. It was a long, winding creek, overshadowed with water oaks and Australian pine. It meandered through parks and lakes, and under picturesque bridges, and past boat houses of varied colors. It was a peaceful creek. Sometimes someone spotted an alligator snoozing along the banks. Gulls swooped in from the bay. Occasionally a fisherman hoping for little else than a stray catfish, hauled in a lonesome tarpon.

Hagan had Lew park the car close in beneath a clump of wild oleander, reaching some twenty-five feet upward. There was nobody about. They got out of the car and hurried across a soft mud bank, and out onto a rickety wooden pier.

"It won't be like usual," Isobel said.

"No," Hagan said. "It won't be like usual, darling. Too bad."

She turned and looked at him. He walked past her. There was only one boat moored at the end of the pier.

"Get aboard," Hagan ordered, holding the gun.

The boat was a forty-six foot cabin cruiser, with an open stern of some six or seven feet, a deck cabin, and a cabin below decks. The foredeck was broad and long, to the bow, slightly humped beyond the windshield. The helm was in under the windshield. There was a lot of mahogany and brass.

She would easily make Cuba. Lew knew she could be sailed to Europe, if they wanted. It was a fine boat. The name was on the stern.

Florence. In neat large black letters.

"Don't worry about it" Hagan said. "I'll paint it out soon enough. Get aboard."

"It isn't going to work," Lew said, looking at him.

"Yes, it is."

Lew shook his head. "They'll get you."

Hagan took a step forward and rammed the gun into Lew's stomach. The barrel struck the edge of the wound, tearing it. Lew jumped backward with the pain, doubled over. "You bastard!"

"Get aboard."

Isobel was already standing in the stern. She moved quickly into the cabin. Lew stepped down into the stern carefully, favoring his injured side. Hagan had been prepared for this in case anything went wrong.

"You hurt?" Hagan said, leaping lightly aboard.

"You bastard. Stay away from me."

"Then, get inside."

Lew went through the small door leading into the well furnished deck cabin. Hagan moved quickly up around the outside deck, casting off. He held the gun ready, and he watched them through the cabin windows. Venetian blinds on the windows were open.

"What are you going to do?" Lew said to Isobel.

She didn't answer.

"Maybe he'll get rid of you," Lew said. "Does that make any sense?"

"I'm not worried."

"Not much." He grinned tauntingly.

"Shut up down there."

Hagan returned. He entered the cabin, moved over to the wheel, got out a key and switched on the engine. "Nice of Florence to have this tub, isn't it?" he said.

Isobel looked at Lew. "We used it a lot," she said. She went over by Hagan. Just then the engines caught. The throbbing was directly beneath Lew's feet in the center of the deck cabin. It would be a lot of engine.

Almost immediately Hagan had the boat turned out into the creek, pulling fast downstream.

Isobel smoothed her hand across Hagan's back. He shoved her away, then turned so he could see Lew. She again ran her hand up his arm, her eyes warm and inviting.

"Where's the money, Ralph?" she asked.

"In the suitcase. Take a look. It's green."

She picked up the suitcase and flopped it open on a locker covered with pillows. There was a lot of money inside. She touched it with one finger as if it were hot, glanced quickly at Lew with something spiteful in the corners of her lips.

"What are you going to do, Ralph?" she said.

"Run for it."

"You know what I mean."

"Just run for it, that's all. You want to be caught?"

"No. I just mean—what will you do with him?"

"I'll think of something, with your help."

"There aren't many boats in the creek today."

"No. Damned few."

Lew listened to them. He sat on the lockers. They passed piers and many places where boats had obviously been moored, but there were very few in the creek. Only some skiffs, a battered sailboat or two, old hulls, half-built skeletons.

Lew sat there, nursing his wound, thinking how things had gone their last wrong way. There wasn't anything left now. Rita hadn't reached the police for some reason, and in a few more minutes they would be in the Gulf of Mexico, and that would be that as far as he was concerned. It would probably happen quickly.

He wondered if Hagan would kill her, too.

She was wondering the same thing.

"Ralph. What'll we do when we get to Cuba?"

"Don't talk to me." His eyes were dark and forbidding behind his glasses.

She stayed away from him. Finally, she sat down on the far end of the locker near the companionway that went down below decks into the other cabin and the galley. She looked at him. "I know what you think, Ralph. You're mad. Everything's shot. Only it isn't, Ralph. Think. What was I supposed to do? Suppose it had been you? Suppose you'd been me? Wouldn't you have tried every damned way possible? How was I to know you'd make it?"

Hagan was propped on a small high bench behind the wheel. He held his hard, emotionless gaze on Lew. Now and again, he snapped a look through the windshield, guiding the boat expertly through the channel of the creek. The engines throbbed resoundingly and the boat moved very fast.

"Just don't talk," Hagan said to her.

"I've got to talk. What do you want me to do? Ralph, I haven't been cheating. I'm with you on this."

He said nothing. He looked quietly toward her once, then back at Lew again. He muttered something that Lew didn't catch. The boat had been ready if anything went wrong. Hagan was wise and ready, too. Yet Lew knew he had to stop him, somehow. Disarm him, and stop him. But Hagan was primed. And the girl would come to his aid like a wildcat.

Hagan was obviously thinking, sorting out ways and means of disposing of their prisoner. He held the gun resting on the back of the bench, pointed in the general direction of Lew's stomach.

"Ralph, are you listening?" Isobel inquired.

"Yes."

"Still mad?"

He turned to her. Lew started to move a hand. Hagan whirled with a snarl. "Don't do it," he said softly. "I don't want to gun you here. But I will."

"Ralph," Isobel said.

"Yes?"

"I don't feel any different toward you. Why should you feel different toward me?"

She stood up, and she was really something to look at, standing there, fighting for what she knew was her life.

"Are you going to listen to her?" Lew said. "She's a bitch. I made a date with her the second time I was in the store. She's a lay. To anybody who comes along."

Isobel turned, stepped over to him, and her hand crashed against his face. He caught her wrist, twisting her toward him. Hagan left the wheel fast, stepped between them with the gun. He shoved the gun into Lew's face. "Cut it or I'll finish you here and now," he warned and returned to the wheel.

Isobel wrinkled her eyes at Lew.

"Does it matter, now?" she said to Ralph.

"No," he said. "It doesn't matter now. The hell with it. Why should it matter?" He grinned. She went over and snuggled against his far side, and kissed him wetly on the side of the mouth, then whispered something into his ear.

"Yeah," Hagan said. "That's right." He reached down and squeezed her thigh with one hand. "It's okay. It just teed me off to know I couldn't trust you, that's all. But you can't trust any woman, so what the hell?"

She stepped away, rocking her hips, glanced at Lew, then sat down on the lockers.

"We're coming into the bay," Hagan said.

They swept past the mouth of Salt Creek, and headed out into Tampa Bay. The water was choppy, topped with white caps. The boat began to wallow a little with the swell. Hagan kept her straight out, then began to bear to the right toward the Gulf.

"What a time we'll have!" Isobel said. Suddenly, she got up and kneeled on the lockers, looking out the long cabin windows. "Ralph, what's going on out there?"

Lew turned and looked out across the bay.

"Jesus Christ," Hagan said. "It's a goddam regatta, or something. Look at the boats!"

Lew turned, studied Hagan, then transferred his attention back to the bay. The entire area was choked with boats. He had never seen so many in his life. They were everywhere, and Ralph Hagan had the *Florence* headed straight into them. There were schooners, and cruisers and yachts, small and large. Ships and boats of every possible description were out there. Lew glanced up and saw a helicopter, a yellow one, flying low across the water.

"I don't like it," Hagan said.

"It's just a regatta," Isobel said.

"I still don't like it."

"They're as far as you can see. They're clear out to the Gulf. We'll have to get past them."

"Just keep going, Ralph."

"That explains why there weren't any boats in Salt Creek," Hagan said.

Lew knew he had to do something, and whatever it was going to be, it had to be done soon. Once to the Gulf, he would be finished. Hagan would probably shoot him and shove him overboard.

He felt weak. He knew it was because of the loss of blood. If the wound had been any worse, he would have been finished by now. He saw no way to overpower Hagan, and it kept getting to him more and more that he was reaching the end of his rope.

He had to stop the man. All the rest of it was done. He forced himself to dismiss thoughts of Rita. She had dismissed him, hadn't she? It was best. She was better off. So what did matter? Only the one thing—getting clear of this now. He knew there was plenty in store for him, but he couldn't tolerate the image of himself floating dead and white as fish bait out there in the Gulf of Mexico. And that's what would happen.

Turning now, he peered out the windows of the cabin and noted that they already were among the first of the many boats in the bay. Boats from all the ports surrounding the bay must have been there—Tampa, Sarasota, Bradenton, St. Petersburg and Safety Harbor. On both sides of them, large sails ballooned in the winds, glinting in the sunlight, decks heeled on beams ends, people swarming on the decks. The sound of the 'copter was sweeping overhead, clacking and buzzing and throbbing past. The water was much rougher now. The deck of the *Florence* heeled limberly.

Far out beyond the streaming gesture of myriad sails and hulls, Lew saw the opening of Tampa Bay, leading into the Gulf. The green keys. Shell Island. Shark Key. And beyond them sunlight twinkled on Egmont light.

"Turn on the radio," Hagan said to Isobel.

She moved to a shelf under the windshield and flipped the dial of a small radio.

Hagan might not want to shoot the gun here. It would be heard and attract other boats. They might even at this moment be watched through somebody's glass.

Lew looked out there and stiffened. He saw large sails, and they seemed to be coming toward them. He glanced toward Hagan, but the man was musing to himself. Lew looked back out there. He felt sure of it. They were in some lane. There was a race on.

If Hagan spotted what was happening now, he would turn the *Florence* away, and make good his escape. But if he didn't spot it in time, it would be a different story—and Lew noticed now that the boats were winging closer, directly at them.

Lew caught a sudden dark motion from the side of his eye. He turned and saw a large gleaming white cabin cruiser bearing down on them. A voice bellowed, crackling through the PA megaphone.

“YO, FLORENCE! GET THE HELL OUT OF THE WAY! YOU’RE OBSTRUCTING TRAFFIC! THERE’S A RACE IN PROGRESS! YOU STUPID ASS, YOU’RE IN THE LANE! MOVE IT, YOU FOOL!”

The cruiser was very close, wallowing and frothing not fifteen feet from the Florence’s starboard beam.

Hagan leaped to his feet.

The radio crackled to life with some dance music. Then the music was interrupted by an announcer. At the same instant, the voice from the cruiser boomed even louder than before.

“ARE YOU DEAF! FLORENCE—MOVE OUT OF THE LANE!”

“Do something, Ralph!” Isobel said.

The cruiser started pulling away with a violent roar, leaving a swirling, frothing wake. Lew saw four huge-looking racing yachts beaming down upon them, flying jibs ballooned like white monsters, bows careening up and up, then rushing down.

Hagan grabbed for the wheel, began fighting it. The deck heeled savagely.

Lew turned and leaped. He went straight through the air, the deck gone. Hagan saw him coming, let go the wheel and fumbled for the gun. Lew made a stab for the weapon as he struck Hagan and they both crashed over against the side, tangling with the bench. The wheel spun crazily and the revolver exploded in Lew’s hands.

Isobel’s scream knifed through all the odier sounds.

Lew hung on, twisting, slugging at Hagan. The *Florence* was suddenly a wild, roaring thing. He heard the insane shuddering pound of the engines, felt the thundering vibrating rise up through the deck. Hagan had turned to full throttle when he tried to swing the wheel hard over. The *Florence* churned one way, then rolled, heaving, and wheeled back in the other direction. The wheel spun in a vicious blur. Lew saw the white sails like the sides of houses all around the windows, with snatches of foaming water, and the booming challenge of the megaphone, and through it all the radio announcer speaking with turgid and steady monotony in the distance.

Hagan had turned savage. He fought silently, ruthlessly, giving everything he had. All the marbles were up on this one. Lew caught Hagan’s arm, managed to swing him around. The gun was gone. Lew swung a hard right and caught Hagan in the chest. The man sprawled backward across the tilting deck, and smashed against the lockers. He tried to get up. Lew leaped at him, gripped the front of his shirt, and smashed his fist again and again into Hagan’s face, feeling the hard crunch of bone and meat, and the

wet crackle of things breaking beneath the skin. Hagan yelled and caught at Lew's hand.

"Stop!" Isobel yelled. "Ralph—they're after us. It said so on the radio. The Coast Guard's out after us. They'll all be after us!"

Snatches of booming shouts came from the megaphone: "...REPORT TO OFFICIALS... HAVE YOUR LICENSE! DAMNED FOOL... SINKING... WHAT IN HELL KIND OF A... AUTHORITIES, BY GOD!..."

Hagan's eyes were wild with pain, his face in very bad shape. Lew couldn't stop hitting the man. Everything that had happened during the past few days, the long horror of remorse and grief that had filled all his waking hours, the sick dreams—all came rushing through him and he savagely lashed out at Hagan, wanting to destroy him, beat him into absolute submission.

Suddenly he realized Isobel was sobbing, yanking at him, struggling to make him stop. He found that he was kneeling on the deck, beating an unconscious man. Even then, it took all his will to cease. Dragging long wet breaths, he saw Isobel go for the gun as it slid rattling across the deck. He sprang at her and knocked the gun from her reach, then pushed her back till she was seated on the lockers again.

At the wheel, he cut the throttle dead, then turned off the engines. The *Florence* slowed and began to wallow, and a great silence settled down upon them.

"They're coming," Isobel whispered. "The Coast Guard's coming. It was on the radio."

Hagan, lying on the deck, moved his head.

Looking out across the bay, Lew saw a circle of boats forming around them. The guy on the megaphone was shouting his lungs out about how they had obstructed the race, a boat was stove in and sinking, and the other yachts had been forced off course to avoid a collision.

Lew heard the throbbing sound of another large engine. Turning, he saw the Coast Guard launch working its way through the probing circle of other boats.

He looked at Isobel. "Stay put," he said.

He moved across the deck and into the stern, and waved. The launch pulled toward them under full power. He saw sailors and police thronging the decks of the launch.

Suddenly he felt very tired.

Chapter Twenty-Two

They took Lew aboard the launch. There were a couple newspapermen trying to work in some questions, but officials kept them clear. A middle-aged police captain with white hair questioned him briefly as they stood on the deck. Lew told him what he could.

"Where's the money?" a young cop asked.

The police captain told him to be quiet.

The eyes of everyone he saw around him were bitter. The voices were loud and cutting. All but the voice of the white-haired captain.

Lew tried to turn away from them. A thick-set, big-handed cop with a sad face took him in tow.

A young cop over on the stern deck of the Florence held up the small suitcase and waved it through the air.

"Found it—here it is!"

"Go ahead and drop it," somebody called.

The cop grinned and caught the suitcase with both arms.

"All mine," he called

"Like hell."

The newspapermen tried to break through again. They didn't make it. The captain kept staring at him, gnawing the inside of his cheek.

Then he saw Rita. She was standing amidships, by the rail, looking toward him. She moved along the deck. She looked very wonderful to him.

He started toward her. The sad-faced cop held him back.

"Could I have a word with her?"

The cop said nothing. Rita came up to them.

"Hello, Lew"

He watched her, studying her face intently.

"You notified them?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I followed you. I didn't notify them till after you started down Salt Creek." She hesitated, her eyes very steady. "I couldn't be sure, Lew. I just couldn't be sure, that's all."

"I know. It's easy to understand. Where's Clarkson?"

"He died, Lew"

"You feel sure about anything, now?"

She nodded quickly, her eyes very bright, her lips quivering in a faint smile. "Yes, Lew."

"Me, too, Rita."

The cop's face was very stern.

Lew knew what he had to face. It wouldn't be easy, any of it. There were some tough days ahead of him. He'd have to pay a penalty for his part in the whole mess. But some day it would all equalize, because there was hope and promise in the future now. He felt sure of a lot of things and he experienced an odd sensation of peace. He reached out and took Rita's hands. The cop continued to hold onto his arm.

"I've told them everything," Rita said. "I've been telling them ever since we left the dock. I told them about Clarkson, too. They said there was something about an All Points Bulletin out of Miami to pick up Clarkson. Some fisherman saw him around *The Bayou Belle*, and heard shots the night all that happened. He'd been afraid to go to the police."

"I'm sorry," Lew told her. "It won't do any good to say it. But I want you to know. Know what I mean?"

"You've been awful crazy, Lew. But—I know what you mean. I'm sorry, too."

"You're a couple of real sorry onions, if you ask me," the cop said gruffly. "Would you mind coming along now, Brookbank? The captain's calling."

They stood that way for another moment. Lew liked what he saw in Rita's eyes. He felt the cop tug at his arm, and turned away.

THE END