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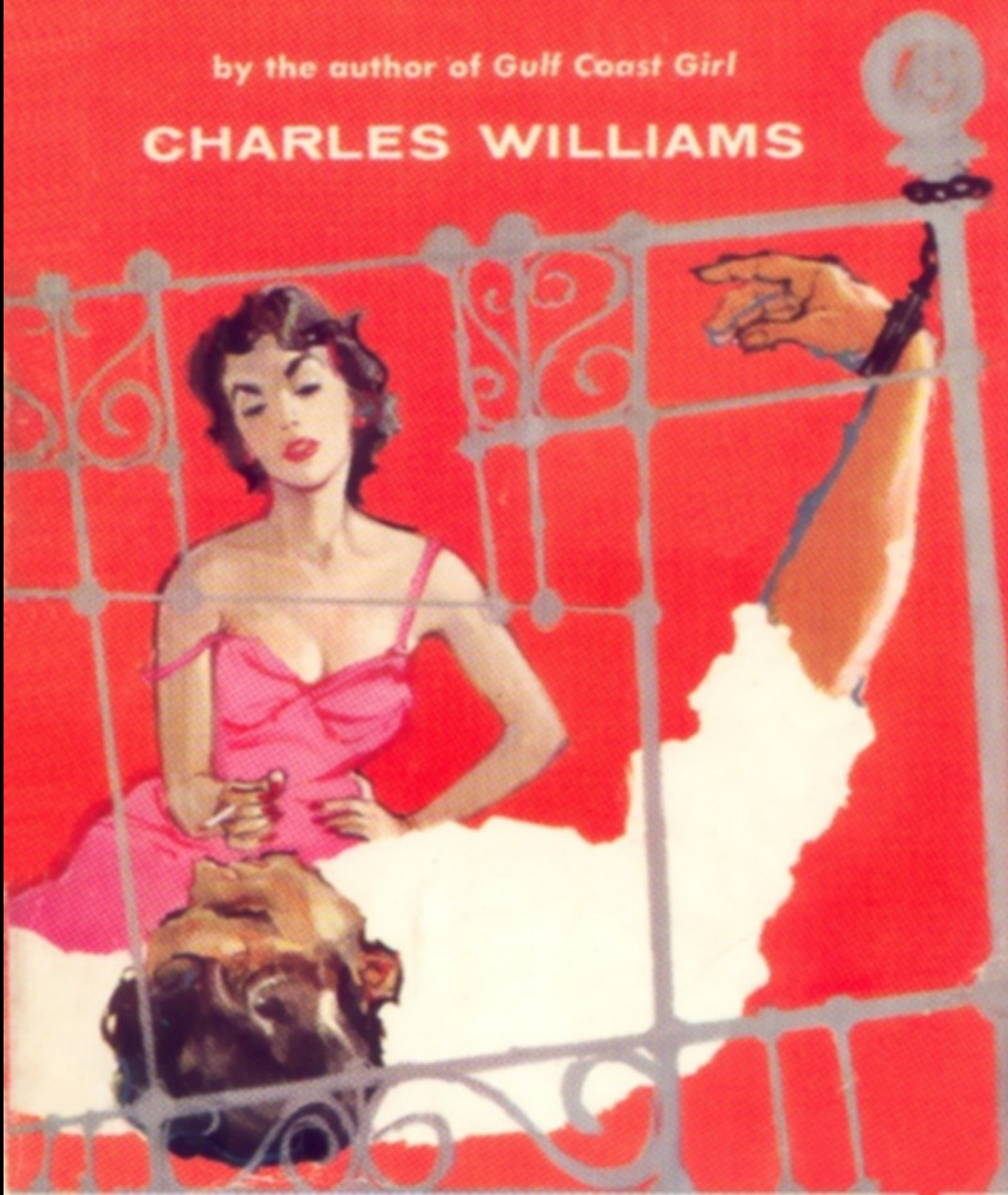
in a big-time world

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# THE BIG BITE

by the author of *Gulf Coast Girl*

**CHARLES WILLIAMS**



# The Big Bite

Charles Williams

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# 1

They said it was going to be as good as ever, but it wasn't. You could see that by the end of the first week of practice. They'd stuck it back on, all right, and it looked like a leg, but something was gone. McGilvray, who's probably the best T-formation quarterback that ever lived, was handing the ball off a half stride ahead of me. We'd played together two years in college and five in the pros, so he knew where I was supposed to be. I did too, but I wasn't getting there. About the tenth time they unpiled the beef off us after the fumble he spat out some topsoil and said, "We're just a little rusty yet, Harlan. Maybe I'm leading you too much."

"It could be, dear," I said. I knew better.

The next time he handed the ball off to me where I was, instead of where I was supposed to be, and two rookies smeared me back of the line. Not the Cleveland Browns; just rookies trying out. It went on that way. When they ran off the pictures looking for the missed blocking assignments, you could see it wasn't that at all. They open it up for you, but they don't guarantee to keep it dredged out all summer like a ship channel. When you're a half stride slow in the National Football League you're an old lady trying to walk up Niagara Falls with a crutch; they run down your throat faster than you can spit out your teeth. The old man gave me every chance in the world, and even tried me out in a defensive spot before he let me go, but it was no use. I couldn't pivot and swing fast enough to go with the play even when I saw it coming, and they ran through me like B-girls through a sailor's bankroll. I'd racked up a lot of yardage for him in five seasons and he didn't like it any better than I did, but in the pros when you haven't got it any more you're out of anything to sell. He came in when I was cleaning out my locker the last afternoon and even became emotional to the extent of lighting the cold cigar they said he'd had in his mouth since the flying wedge went out of style.

"Rough," he said. "Like a cob."

"Yeah," I said. "But cheer up. That colored boy can carry it for you. He runs pretty good."

"In three years he'll run pretty good. And then maybe some goddam drunk'll knock *his* leg off. But I meant you. You got any plans?"

"No," I said.

"Ever think of coaching?"

"I've already got a crock leg," I said. "What do I want with ulcers?"

"You'd have had five more years. At least."

"Yes," I said. "At fifteen thousand a year."

He grunted. "Maybe." He took the cigar out of his mouth and threw it fifteen feet across the room where it hit the wall and bounced into the urinal. "Dunks," he said.

I went back to the hotel to pack and check out. Four or five sports writers were hanging around the lobby. They slapped me on the back and told me how I'd be back next season and the leg would be fine and I'd rack up a six-yard average. I said, "Sure, sure," and after a while I got away from them and went up to the room. I undressed for a shower, and looked at it. It had knitted all right; I didn't even limp. It didn't feel awkward or look any different from the other one except for some scar tissue. It was just great, except that it wasn't worth a damn any more. The only thing I'd ever owned in my life was a mechanism that ran like something bathed in oil and now it had been smashed and when they put it back together something was gone. Maybe there isn't any name for it, actually. The medics will give you a song and dance about co-ordination and instantaneous response and frammis on the updike, but I don't think they know either. The nearest you can come to it is that it's a smooth surge of power from dead standstill to full speed in about three strides, and you either have it or you don't. If you have it, you can sell it—or at least you can until you get past thirty or thirty-two and it begins to slow down on you. I'd taken a short cut. A drunk sideswiped me and knocked me off the highway and when I quit rolling I was sitting in a ditch holding a Buick convertible in my lap. I thought of five more years and sixty to seventy thousand dollars doing the only thing I had ever liked or was any good at, and my hands knotted. I swung my fist at the leg and knocked it off the luggage stand where it was propped. The big lump of muscle on the calf ridged up and hurt as I walked into the shower. I stared bleakly at the white tile wall while the water poured over me. The dirty, sad, drunken, son— There wasn't even any use cursing him. He was dead. He'd been killed in the same wreck.

I checked out before the squad came in from practice, caught a bus into Los Angeles, and sat around the airport until I could get on a plane going east. I didn't really know where I was going, and didn't care. I got off in New Orleans and for one of the few times in my life I went on a binge myself. It was a honey and lasted a week; when I began to come out of it I was in a motel somewhere on U.S. 90 out toward the Mississippi line with a girl named Frances. I never did know her last name and couldn't figure out where she'd come from or how we'd got away out there unless they'd put us off a bus, but it didn't seem to matter. She knew nothing about football and cared less, and had never heard of me, which was fine, but she drank like somebody trying to finish a highball while a cab was waiting outside with the meter running. She seemed to think something terrible was going to happen to her if she ever sobered up. The third morning I got up while she was still asleep and caught a bus back to town. I didn't know what the answer was yet, but drinking wasn't it. I went over to Galveston and swam in the surf and lay in the sun on the beach until I'd cooked the booze out of my system. The fourth day I was there Purvis caught up with me.

I was staying at one of the beach hotels and was just coming in through the lobby in swim trunks and a terry cloth robe late in the afternoon when a man reading a paper in one of the chairs got up and came toward me. He caught me just as I stepped into the elevator.

"John Harlan?" he asked.

"That's right," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"Purvis," he said. "Old Colony Insurance."

"Save yourself a trip," I cut him off. "I don't need any." But the elevator boy had already closed the door and we were going up.

Purvis shook his head. "I don't sell it. I'd just like to talk to you a few minutes, if you don't mind."

I shrugged. "You an adjuster?" I couldn't see why they'd be pawing through it now. The whole thing had been settled five months ago.

"Investigator," he said.

I looked at him then, for the first time, and knew I'd seen him somewhere before. He was about five-ten, and slender, with a built-in slouch, and appeared to be around forty although the hair showing under the beat-up old felt hat was completely gray. His clothes looked as if he dressed by jumping into them from the top of a stepladder. You wouldn't have given him a second glance,

unless the first one had been at his face. It was thin and gray and a little tired, but there was a deadly efficiency about it you couldn't miss even if you were half asleep. The eyes were gray too, and as impersonal as outer space. I remembered then where I'd seen him before.

"You came to the hospital," I said.

He nodded.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. I led the way down the corridor, unlocked the door, and stood back for him to go in. The room was on the south side, with a window looking out over the Gulf, but there was little breeze and it was breathless and hot. It was just at sunset and the piled masses of cloud to seaward were fired with red and orange, some of which was reflected back into the room to give it a strange, wine-colored light. He sat down in the armchair near the door, took off his hat and dropped it on the carpet, and fished a pack of cigarettes from the side pocket of his coat. I tossed the robe over the bed and when I turned he was watching me. I walked over to the dresser beyond the foot of the bed and picked up my own cigarettes. As I lit one and dropped the match in a tray I caught sight of him again, in the mirror, and he was still staring at me. It was obvious and deliberate, and he didn't seem to care at all. I felt like a girl on a runway, and began to get hacked.

He blew out smoke and leaned back in the chair. "Stacked," he said. "Walk back here again."

"You that way?" I said. "Beat it."

He shook his head indifferently. "I'm not trying to make you. Just want to see how you walk."

"Why?" I asked.

"It's professional."

I came back and sat down on the bed with the cigarette. He watched me utterly without expression, and then he shook his head again. "You're a screwed duck."

"That's news?" I asked.

"No jury in the world would give you a nickel, even if you hadn't already signed a waiver. Take a look at yourself. You got any idea how far you'd get trying to look smashed-up and pathetic to twelve average Joes with pots and fallen arches? They'd laugh like it was the Berle show."

"You just came over to cheer me up, is that it?" I said. "I know all that. And I have signed the release, or waiver, or whatever you call it—"

"What did they give you?"

"Five thousand," I said. "And the hospital bills."

"You took the short end, pal."

"In another year or two I might have figured that out myself. Look. The leg had healed perfectly. I was up and walking. Not even a limp. The medics said it was as good as ever—"

"And when you reported for practice, it wasn't? You'd slowed down?"

"It's not measurable," I said. "The only way you can tell it is by trying to run through eleven pros who haven't slowed down. You can figure it out then while they're walking around on your face five yards back of where you should have been. It's nothing you could prove to anybody. X-rays wouldn't show it."

He nodded, and moved his hands. "Motion is a thousand signals, and a thousand movements, linked. One square corner anywhere, and you break it up and the flow is gone. You're not a professional athlete any more; you're just another taxpayer with two arms and legs. There's no shortage."

"So why keep kicking it around?" I asked. "The whole thing was settled months ago." Then I thought of something. "What's the name of your outfit again?"

"Old Colony Life."

"Hell, that wasn't the company—"

"No. Of course not. I thought you understood that. We didn't have anything to do with the liability he carried on the car. That was some California company."

"Then what's the angle? How'd you get in the act?"

"Life insurance. About a hundred thousand worth."

I stared at him, puzzled. "I don't get it."

He sighed. "Cannon was insured with Old Colony—"

"I read you," I said. "That far. But what about it? He was insured. He's dead. You pick up the tab. Looks cut and dried to me. I figure he cost me fifty to seventy-five thousand, depending on when and if I might have got hurt in the natural course of events, playing. And now he's cost you a hundred grand. That's a pretty good night's work for one souse, but I don't see what either of us can do about it now unless maybe we send out for a box of Kleenex and have a good cry."

"I'd just like to ask you a few questions. If you don't mind."

I shrugged. "Go ahead. But I don't see how there can be much room for doubt he's dead. He was buried while I was there in the hospital."

"I know. Just say we're still a little curious as to how he died."

I stared at him. "Don't you read the papers?"

"Only the funnies. And today's horoscope."

"Everybody knows how he died. He was killed in the wreck when he sideswiped me and knocked me off the road."

"Sure. I know. I read the Highway Patrol report. I talked to the officers. I talked to the doctor. I talked to the other witnesses that were there when they untangled him from the wreck. I talked to you in the hospital. Now I'm talking to you again. It's a living."

"You don't believe he was killed in the wreck?"

"I didn't say that, did I?"

"Why else?"

"Routine, Harlan. Any time a policy-holder dies violently, without witnesses right at the scene—"

"Bat sweat," I said. "Five months after it happened, and you're still poking around in it. Why?"

"We never close a case until we're sure."

"Well, look. He must have been alive when he passed me. I never heard of a corpse driving a car, even the way he was driving it. And when they took him out of it he was dead, with his head caved in. What, else do you want?"

"I don't know," he said. "Suppose you tell me the whole thing again, the way you did at the hospital?"

"Sure," I said. "You figure maybe I walked over and knocked his roof in while I was pinned down with a crushed leg under a four-thousand-pound convertible? I'll admit I was a little put out about it—"

He shook his head. "The whole thing, as nearly as you can remember it."

I sighed and lit another cigarette. "All right. It was just after dark. I was coming into town from that fishing cabin where I was camping, to see a movie. A mile or so after I got out on the pavement, from the dirt road coming out of the swamp, a car came up behind me, going very fast. I was doing fifty, so he must have been clipping it off around sixty-five. There was no other traffic on the road, nobody in sight at all, so he had all the room in the world to pass me and then pull back into the right-hand lane, but instead he cut right in across my left front fender and knocked me off into



the ditch. The car rolled a couple of times with me on the floorboards, but on the last one I fell out—the top was down—and then it teetered on two wheels-and fell back on top of me. He crashed, too. Just as I was going up and over the first time—while I was diving for the bottom—I saw his headlights swing in a big circle like somebody waving a flashlight around with his arm. Not that I was particularly interested in what happened to the sad bastard at the moment, but it's just one of those things that register on your mind in the middle of everything, for some reason. I don't know how long it was before they got there with the wrecker and pulled the car off me, but it seemed like about two average lifetimes. I was out cold, at least part of the time."

"But not all of it?"

"No."

"And his car had come to rest against a culvert about a hundred yards ahead of you?"

"So they told me later."

"Did you hear anything during the time you were conscious?"

"Such as what, for instance?"

"Cars going by, people talking, anybody moving—"

"No. Believe me, pal. I was never lonelier in my life."

"Nothing at all? You didn't hear anything?"

"Just night sounds. You know—frogs, things like that. And something dripping. I remember hoping it wasn't gasoline."

I could see the disappointment in his face. "That's all?"

"That's all I remem— No. Wait. Once I thought I heard him moaning or trying to call for help, from the other car."

He made a little gesture with his hand, and something in his eyes told me that was what he'd been fishing for all the time. "You said the same thing before. You really think you heard him moan, or cry out?"

"I think so."

"You can't be any more positive than that?"

"You ever been knocked out?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Then you know how it is. It's all fuzzy afterward, especially if you were in and out several times. You don't know how much of it you might have dreamed."

He nodded. "But there is a chance you did hear him? Remember, you've told me twice, just the same way."

"Sure," I said. "But what of it? What difference does it make if he did groan or something?"

"You see the pictures of his head?"

"I didn't want to see any pictures of his head. I had pictures of my own."

"I thought not," he said. "I saw them. He didn't make any noise, believe me."

"Then I must have imagined it."

He grunted. "Maybe."

I got it then, but before I could say anything he abruptly changed the subject. "You ever meet his wife? Widow, I mean."

"No."

"She never did come to see you in the hospital?"

"No. Her lawyer, and the insurance joker. That's all."

He looked thoughtful. "Did that ever strike you as a little odd? I mean, her husband crashes into you and lays you up in the hospital for weeks and she doesn't even bring you a bunch of violets. They established the fact the wreck was entirely Cannon's fault, she didn't know but what you might sue the estate for steen million dollars, and still she wouldn't waste half an hour going out to the hospital to butter you up a little."

"As I said, her lawyer did."

"Not the same thing at all. This babe's a looker." He moved his hands again. He could say a lot of things with his hands. "A dish like that can pour more oil on the troubled waters in five minutes than a lawyer can in a month. And they know it. All of them."

"Well, after all," I said, "her husband was killed in the wreck—"

"She didn't take to bed about it."

"What do you mean by that?"

He shrugged, "Nothing in particular. How long had you been out there at that cabin before the accident?"

"About six days, I think. Let's see, I got there on Saturday, and it was the following Thursday night he creamed me. Why?"

"I just wondered. How'd you happen to be there, anyway? You don't come from that part of the country."

"I like to fish. Do about a month of it each spring when I'm not working at some off-season job. A lot of bass in that lake, and the cabin belongs to an old friend, a guy I knew in college."

He nodded. "I see. Ever been there before this year?"

"Once. About three years ago. Just over the weekend."

"And you never did meet the Cannons? I thought maybe—that is, he had a camp out there too, not far from your friend's."

"Well, you might say I met *him*," I said wearily. "Or have we mentioned that? But as far as I know I've never seen her in my life. I don't even know what she looks like."

"One of those very rich brunettes, blue-black hair, brown eyes, fairly tall, around thirty. Lovely woman. Not classic, but what they call striking. Coloration—you know what I mean."

"Oh? Sure. I—" I started to say something else, but for some reason I bit it off and waited.

"If you'd ever seen her you'd remember her," he went on. "Here, I've got a picture of her." He took it out of the inside pocket of his coat and handed it to me. "What'd you say?"

I looked at it. "Nothing," I said.

She was a dream, all right, and she was the same one. I was almost positive of that. The light had been pretty poor, there under the trees, but as he said himself if you'd ever seen her once you'd remember her.

"Well?" he asked.

It was just a hunch, but I played it. "Toothsome," I said. "But I never saw her before."

## 2

He picked his hat off the floor and stood up. "Well, that's about it. Thanks for sparing the time."

"Not at all," I said.

When he was gone I took a quick shower and lay down on the bed with a cigarette. It burned down to the end and I lit another as the sun went down and twilight thickened inside the room. It was all crazy, but several things stood out like moles on a bubble-dancer. The first was that for some reason he didn't think Cannon had been killed in that wreck. Not in the wreck itself, or as a result of it. Why? A man goes off the road and crashes at sixty miles an hour and when they sift him out of the wreckage with his head knocked in you wonder if he died of gastric ulcers? No. Purvis believed he had been murdered after the crash. But still he wouldn't admit it.

Maybe, though, the latter was understandable, if you looked at it correctly. He had somebody in mind, but you didn't go around making irresponsible statements like that until you had some proof to back them up. The police had already written it off as a traffic fatality, so he'd have his neck out a mile. The slandered party could sue the insurance company.

The next thing that stuck out was that it wouldn't make any difference at all as far as the insurance company was concerned whether he'd died in the wreck or been murdered by somebody after the wreck—unless the beneficiary of the insurance policy was involved in the murder. If somebody else tagged him out they still had to pick up the tab, as far as I knew. The beneficiary would no doubt be his widow. Therefore, he had his eye on Mrs. Cannon. That tied in perfectly, because it was Mrs. Cannon he kept asking about. He couldn't understand why I'd never seen her the whole time I was there, why she'd never come to the hospital. I was one up on him in that department. After looking at the picture, I was pretty sure I knew why she hadn't. She didn't want to come anywhere near me because she was afraid I might recognize her.

No, I thought; at best it was just a guess. That might be it, or it might not. I'd never thought about it particularly while I was in the hospital, and just assumed she was overcome with grief and didn't want to be reminded of the wreck any more than she had to. It didn't matter to me; as far as I was concerned I'd already seen enough of the Cannon family. And there was no reason, actually, that she had to; she had no connection with the accident. She wasn't even in the car with him when he rode me off the pavement. Her lawyer and the insurance adjuster had taken care of smoothing down my hackles and working out a settlement that looked fair to me at the time. So why should she show up?

But then, again, when you thought about it, why shouldn't she? Purvis had intimated she wasn't grief-stricken quite to the point of throwing herself on the funeral pyre. And in five weeks she might have dropped around for a couple minutes some afternoon between the first and second cocktails and said, "I'm sorry my husband knocked your leg off. Here's a roll of Scotch tape."

So maybe she had avoided me deliberately. She knew I'd seen her out there near the lake less than fifteen minutes before the wreck and would probably recognize her if I saw her again. But I'd never mentioned the fact to anybody, so presumably I didn't know just who it was I'd seen. If it were just any woman, it was of no importance; if it were Mrs. Cannon maybe it became highly significant. Why? Was she supposed to have been somewhere else at the time? I didn't know, but one thing was certain as hell, if she *didn't* want anybody to know she'd been out there, she would have been very careful to stay away from me.

But why was Purvis digging into it after all this time? It had been five months. Surely they must have had to pay off on the insurance policy before this, and when they paid you'd think they would write it off and close it. It didn't make sense.

There was one more thing that didn't make a lot of sense, and that was why I'd told Purvis I'd never seen her. It was just a hunch, and I still wasn't sure why I'd done it. Well, I thought, I wasn't Purvis's mother, was I? Let him dig up his own information; he sure as hell hadn't dislocated his jaw telling me anything. There was another angle, too. Suppose something a little funny had been going on out there that evening; the chump on the side-lines that got run over wasn't Purvis. It was John Harlan.

I got up and dressed, and went out to dinner. It was a little after nine when I came back to the room with a copy of *Field & Stream* and tried to read. It was no use. I kept seeing a picture of a very lovely and very wealthy brunette who became widowed and even

richer while I lay there with a Buick in my lap. Toss that seal a fish, Jeeves, so he'll stop barking. Five thousand will do. The telephone rang. I reached over to the table beside the bed and picked it up.

"Harlan?" a man's voice said. "This is Purvis again—"

"You still in town?" I asked.

"No. At home. I work out of the Houston office, or did I tell you? But what I called about—there was something else I wanted to ask. you. That convertible top was down? Right?"

"Sure," I said, frowning. "Why?"

"You were alone, of course; but do you remember whether you had anything in the seat beside you?"

"On the seat? Not that I remember. But what difference—?"

"Just something I got to wondering about," he said easily. "Not important at all. But you know how it is; you get to working on one these things and you keep trying to get the whole picture—"

He went on. It was a pretty fair snow job, but it would take a better one to make you stop wondering why he'd asked a crazy question like that.

"—so the seat *was* empty?" he wound up.

"Of course," I said. "That is, except for some dirty clothes."

"Clothes?"

"A bag of laundry I was taking into town."

"Laundry?" There was the faintest hint of excitement in his voice. Then he said, "Wait a minute. I don't get it. I thought you said you were going to town to see a movie. It was after eight p.m., and all the laundries would be closed—"

I sighed. "You paying for this call?"

"Sure. But—"

"All right. As long as I'm not being nicked for the toll charges, I don't mind going into a long-winded song and dance about some goofy thing that doesn't amount to a damn. There's a kid, see, at a filling station there in town. Just finished high school, and has an athletic scholarship at S.M.U. Or T.C.U. Or one of those Southwestern Conference schools. He knows who I am. Or used to be, I should say. He's a football maniac, so if I asked him he'd wash the clothes himself with Lux flakes and dry 'em by blowing his breath on 'em. I intended to leave the bundle there at the station and have him call a laundry route man to pick it up the next morning. Save me a trip into town during the day when I could be fishing. That wrap it up?"

"Sure. I didn't quite catch his uncle's name, and when he was baptized, but you can call me collect from Omaha—"

"Well, you asked."

"So I did. It was a pretty good-sized bundle, huh?"

"I'm afraid I've lost the check list," I said wearily. "If it makes any difference how many dirty socks I had on hand in March—"

"I mean, it wasn't just a couple of shirts?"

"No. It was a whole bunch of stuff in a white laundry bag. Some sheets, blankets, and so on, from the cabin—"

"Uh-uh," he said slowly.

"I don't scan you," I said. "What difference—?"

"Just an angle," he. Said casually. "As you say, it doesn't amount to a damn. Thanks a lot, Harlan. See you—"

"Hey, hold it," I said. It was too late. I heard the phone click as he hung up.

I sat on the side of the bed and lit a cigarette. Reading was out of the question now, and sleep was impossible. A bundle of laundry on the seat beside me—why the hell had he been interested in a stupid thing like that? Something about the way he had said, "Uh-uh," told me that was exactly what he'd been hoping to learn.

*Try again*, I thought. *Go back over the whole thing*. Everybody's missed it so far—everybody but Purvis. Look. Secondary road, with practically no traffic on it, this joker comes up behind you going very fast, drunk as a skunk, passes, cuts in— Why? Well, obviously, because he was too drunk to drive. But if he was that drunk and driving that fast, why hadn't he crashed before? It would be thirty miles back to any place he could have got that kind of a bun on, unless he was carrying his supplies with him. No. That wasn't an answer. It was luck. Coincidence. A drunk can smash up anywhere. It was just the bounce of the ball that it happened to be me he'd leaned on.

*You're still missing it*, I told myself. That's exactly the way everybody else has figured it from the beginning, but Purvis is looking at it from a different angle altogether. He's got a bundle of laundry mixed up in it. Why? Because it was lying in the seat. It was in a white bag— I stopped then and sat very still on the side of the bed. Was that where we'd all gone off the track? Taking it for granted Cannon was drunk? Maybe he hadn't been. Suppose he'd crashed me deliberately? And then somebody had killed him, caved his head in while he was lying unconscious in the wreck?

*No, hell, I thought. It was too fantastic.* But was it? I knew something that even Purvis didn't know—but probably suspected. Mrs. Cannon was out there at the lake that evening. Suppose Cannon had been looking for her, believing she was out there with somebody. Maybe he came out of the swamp road behind me, trying to get a look at who was in the car. He caught up with me, with his headlights splashing against the back of the car, and saw I was alone. The top was down; it would be obvious there was nobody with me. Then, just as he was passing, for a fraction of a second he caught a glimpse of somebody bent over or crouched down in the seat beside me, hiding from the lights. So he blew his stack completely.

But nobody could be that crazy. He'd be taking a chance of crashing himself—which he did. A man would have to be absolutely berserk to do a thing like that. Well, how did I know he wasn't? I didn't even know him, to say nothing of having any idea of what was sloshing around in his mind as he came up behind me. Maybe he thought I was somebody else. Maybe he didn't care if he did kill himself along with her. Maybe— There were a dozen possibilities.

But still it was moonshine—unless you had more to go on than that. Purvis had, or he'd never have started digging into it. I had to talk to him again. But what good would that do? He wouldn't give you the time of day; he was too cagey. Yes, but he didn't have to tell me anything; I could find out a lot by watching the direction his questions took. That had worked pretty well so far. I could call him and tell him I'd just remembered some goofy thing that might have a bearing on it, and get him started again. Then I stopped. I couldn't call him tonight; I didn't even know his first name, and there were probably dozens of Purvises in the Houston telephone directory.

I threw some clothes on and went out to get a cup of coffee. When I came back it was hours before I got to sleep. It wasn't the coffee, however; coffee never bothers me that way. I was thinking of Mrs. Cannon again, and of a hundred thousand dollars, and a lot of things were growing clearer in my mind as I tossed and turned on the sweaty sheet. I was finished, wasn't I? Football was the only thing I knew or was any good at, and they'd taken that away from me. What was left? Coaching? High school character-building? Getting shoved around by Monday-morning quarterbacks for peanuts? The hell with that. Selling? Nuts. I liked violence and rough body contact and money and excitement and then money again, and I hated failure in the way you can hate it only if you grew up with it. I'd seen enough ineffectual futility by the time I was twelve to last me the rest of my life, and I was a pro making



them put it on the line when I was a junior in high school. I was big and fast and I was good—and I knew it. They called me a cold-blooded savage and Whore Harlan and What's-in-it-for-me Harlan, but they paid me. Not openly, and not the school itself, but I got it. In college I got more. So now it was all over. They'd stopped the train and put me off because some guy had crashed into me with a car. Maybe he'd even done it deliberately. I cursed and sat up in bed, groping for cigarettes in the hot darkness. I wanted to get my hands on something or somebody and have an accounting. He was dead and beyond reach. But she wasn't, and maybe she was at the bottom of the whole thing. I thought of the way she looked in that picture, and of the money she or somebody had cheated me of. I lit a cigarette and stared coldly at the match as I blew it out. *You should have done it to somebody else, baby*, I thought; *I don't like having it done to me. . . .*

In the morning, after I'd had some breakfast, I came back to the room and put in a call to Houston. In a moment a girl's voice thrilled, "Good-morning-Old-Colony-Life-Insurance-Company."

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Purvis," I said.

"I beg your pardon. What was the name again?"

"Purvis."

"I'm sorry, but there's no one here by that name. Are you sure you have the right number?"

"Of course," I said impatiently. "He's an investigator. Works out of the Houston office. *This is* Houston, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. But we have no Mr. Purvis. Just a moment, please—"

I waited irritably. What was the matter with her? Didn't she even know who worked there? She came back on. "Hello, I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I just checked with one of the other girls who's been here longer. There *used* to be a Mr. Purvis, but he left the company several months ago."

"Oh," I said. "I see—" It was a little fast, and it took me a moment to catch up. "Well, look," I went on hurriedly, before she could hang up, "could you give me his last telephone number or address, off the old personnel records?"

"Just a minute, please."

I dug up an old envelope and uncapped my pen. "Hello," she said when she came back on. "This is four months old, but he might still be there."

I wrote it down. "Thanks a million," I said.

I hung up and lit a cigarette. So that's the way it was. It explained a number of things, such as why the company was still pawing around in the mess months after they should have paid off on the policy. The company wasn't. They'd probably paid long ago and written it off as closed, but Purvis had gone into business for himself. Blackmail, extortion—call it whatever you liked. Something had made him suspicious when he'd gone up there to investigate, while he was still on the payroll. Maybe he'd never reported any of it, and now he was getting ready to put the squeeze on somebody. He'd hoped to get a little more ammunition, so he'd come down to pump me again. I was just the chump in the middle. Maybe I should rent myself out as a battleground so they could go on walking back and forth across my face with their tug-of-war for the rest of my life. If Cannon had crashed me deliberately, somebody in that mess had short-changed me about fifty thousand dollars, the way I saw it, and it was about time I found out who it was. Purvis knew, so what better place to start? I reached for the telephone again and put in a call to the number the girl had given me.

There was no answer. "Shall I try again in about ten minutes?" the operator asked.

"Please," I said.

There was still no answer then, and I came up with the same empty ringing when I tried twice more during the morning. Well, maybe he had another job; he wouldn't be home perhaps until around five or six in the afternoon. I went out on the beach and tried to swim, but I was wild with impatience and kept thinking of Purvis. At a few minutes of six I came back to the room and tried the number again.

A man's voice answered, a tired and irritable voice.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Purvis," I said. "Is he there?"

"Mr. Who?" he rasped.

"Purvis. P-u-r-v-i-s. Does he live there?"

"Nah. Yah got the wrong nummer, mate. He moved away from here a long time ago."

"Well, do you know where I can get hold of him? Did he leave a forwarding—?"

"Nah, nah. Got no idea where he is."

He hung up.

I stood looking at the phone. What now? Get hold of a Houston directory and start calling all the Purvises until I found him? Not on toll charges, anyway; if I were going to do that I'd better go up

there. And what if he lived in a boarding house? The phone wouldn't even be listed under his name. Well, hell, I had to do something; sitting here wondering about it would drive me crazy. I grabbed my clothes and started dressing. Just as I was buttoning down the tabs on my shirt collar the telephone rang stridently. I reached it in one leap.

"Hello."

"Harlan?"

My pulse quickened as I recognized the smooth, persuasive, wise-guy voice. "Oh, hello, is that you again?" I asked casually; "What is it now?"

"Been having any trouble trying to get hold of me?" he asked innocently.

"Trying to get hold of you? What the hell would I be trying to call you for?"

"Oh, I didn't know," he replied easily. "It just occurred to me that if you'd called Old Colony they would give you an address, but I've moved from there. But since you didn't—"

He let it trail off almost derisively and I knew he was fully aware I had talked to the girl at Old Colony. He probably still had a pipeline in there. So now he'd got in touch with me again even though he knew I was wise to the fact he no longer worked there and that any investigating he was doing now was strictly off the record and probably for the purposes of blackmail. As a way of sounding me out, it was pretty smooth. I wouldn't have tried to call him if I hadn't been interested in the thing myself.

"Not bad," I said.

'He chuckled. "I didn't think it would take you over twenty-four hours to decide that five grand settlement was a bag of peanuts you'd toss to a squirrel. You did recognize the babe, didn't you? You covered pretty well with the picture, but you'd already given it away when I described her."

"Well, it might be pretty hard to remember just where I saw her before," I said. "You know how it is. Babes here. Babes there—"

"Oh, sure," he replied. "I didn't think it would be any cinch."

"But you might know of some way of making it easier?"

"I wouldn't have called you if I didn't. I've got a little proposition in mind, if you think you'd be interested."

"I wouldn't know until I've heard it, would I? Suppose you come down and we look into it."

He hesitated. "I'm expecting a phone call; if I go out I might miss it. Would you mind coming up here?"

"No," I said. "Give me your address."

He told me and I wrote it down. "See you in a couple of hours," I said, and hung up.

### 3

I had to wait for a bus, so it was after nine when I arrived in Houston. The night was still and darkly overcast above the lights of the city, and a scattering of fat raindrops splashed against the walk as I came out of the bus station to hail a cab. I read off the address Purvis had given me. The ride took about ten minutes; I sat impatiently on the edge of the seat, smoking and trying to think. I had no plan of action and wasn't sure of anything except that this time Purvis was going to do some talking himself. He was committed now; it was understood he knew something specific about what had happened that night, and he'd put a few facts on the line or wish he had.

It was a narrow street in an older section given over to second-hand stores and hole-in-the-wall markets and a few old apartment buildings. The driver pulled up before a three-story brick with a small vestibule in which a light was burning. I got out and paid him. The street was deserted except for two men talking beneath a bar sign down at the other end of the block. Purvis's apartment was on the third floor. I pressed the buzzer. In a moment the door clicked and I went in.

It was a walk-up. I went up two steps at a time, meeting no one in the halls or on the stairs, but hearing snatches of what sounded like the same television program on all three floors. Number 303 was the first one on the right at the head of the stairs. I touched the bell and Purvis opened the door almost immediately. He nodded, but said nothing until I had come inside and the door was closed.

It was a small living-room. Directly across from the door was a window which presumably looked out on the street, but the blind was drawn all the way down. At the left was an open door going into the bedroom, while on the right, just opposite it, another opened into a small dinette. The living-room was fitted with the usual landlord-tan wallpaper and the beat-up odds and ends of shabby furniture that would come with a furnished deadfall in this neighborhood, so dreary and like a thousand others that Purvis's things stood out and hit you right in the eye the moment you

walked in. There were five or six framed copies of paintings of girls in ballet costumes, the same pictures you sometimes see in the anterooms of doctors' offices. Some arty, horse-faced girl I got stuck with once at a party told me who the painter was that did them, but I couldn't remember now. Dago was all I could think of, but that wasn't it. There were some more pictures in one big frame over a desk at the right, beside the doorway going into the dinette, but these were photographs. They were all signed, and they were, all of ballet dancers. There must have been a dozen of them. An *aficionado*, I thought, remembering that way he had of describing things with his hands and what he had said about motion. In a corner across the room near the window was a high-fidelity sound system that blended into the other furnishings like a thousand-dollar bill among the nickels on a Salvation Army tambourine. It was playing something longhair.

"Sit down, Harlan," he said, nodding to the old sofa at my left. He went over and turned off the music, and then folded his lank frame into a chair near the desk. "*Les Sylphides*," he murmured.

"Meyer," I said.

His eyebrows raised. "How's that?"

"A gag," I said. "Skip it. You had something to tell me."

He was dressed in a pair of gray slacks and a dark sports shirt with long sleeves. It was hot in the room in spite of the little fan whirring away on top of the desk, but he didn't sweat. The cynical, young-old face was fine-boned and pale and very tired, but that deadly efficiency was still there in the eyes. There wasn't much to him inside the clothes; you felt that if you put a hand on his chest and pushed he'd fold up around your arm like a wet towel. He lit a cigarette and regarded me through the smoke.

"Her husband crashed you deliberately," he said casually. "But I suppose you know that by now."

"Yes," I said. "Or maybe I was just supposed to be a by-product. He could have been trying to kill her."

"Both of you, I think."

I remembered what she had done when I saw her out there by the lake and knew he was probably right, but I didn't say anything. He was going to do the talking this time.

"What was it tipped you in the first place?" I asked. "There's nothing suspicious about a guy being found dead in a bad car smash-up."

He shrugged. "Be corny, and call it a sixth sense. I don't know what it is, but you get it after a while if you keep going to these

things long enough. You pull a hundred packages out of the file and they're all just about alike, but one of 'em will start you ringing like a burglar alarm. The first thing was the way his head was pushed in—"

"Well," I interrupted, "he did roll a car at sixty-five miles an hour. He figured to get bruised a little—"

"Sure," he said. "But when reliable witnesses got there he was still under the wheel. He had four broken ribs to prove it. His skull had been crushed by some terrific blow, and the wound was a little to the rear and slightly to the right of the top of his head. So what did he hit it on? The dash? That was in his lap. Granted the top of the car was caved in until it was practically sitting on his haircut, but what he was hit with wasn't flat—"

"Freaks happen all the time in bad wrecks. Nobody's ever explained just how you can get knocked out of a pair of shoes that are laced up tight, but it's been done."

He nodded. "That's right. But there were too many freaks in this one. For one thing, he wasn't drunk. At least, not nearly as drunk as everybody thought. So the only other alternative theory is that he deliberately tried to kill you. And if the people he really meant to kill were still out there at the lake—" He stopped and gave me a cold grin. "That's where you saw her, of course. Anyway, if they were still out there, which way would they have to go to get back to town?"

"Right past where we crashed," I said.

He spread his hands. "You see?"

"What makes you so sure he wasn't drunk?"

"I didn't say that. I said I didn't think he was that drunk. Nobody ever established it. No laboratory tests were made. Look at it this way. He was a prominent citizen; he was dead; there was a smell of alcohol about his body, and a pint bottle, about one-third full, in the glove compartment of the car—which didn't break, incidentally, because the highway maps and papers in it cushioned the shock of the crash. But still the real reason he was assumed to be blotto, drunk was the fact that *only a blotto drunk would have cut in like that*. You see? They just reversed cause and effect, and didn't even bother to look for any other explanation."

"Why didn't they make the lab tests?" I asked.

"To prove what? Liability for the accident? It was his, from-start to finish. They told you that as soon as you came around. The skid marks and the positions of the cars proved that, and what you told them only confirmed it. And what's the percentage in building a

drunk-driving case against a dead man? You going to take him to court?"

"What about your outfit?"

"What difference did proof of drunkenness make to us? He was dead. We had to pay off on his life insurance, whether he was crooked or sober. By the time I got up there it would have been impossible, anyway. They'd already buried him. I was just making a routine investigation, until I began to see there could have been another reason for his driving you off the road. I backtracked down the, highway until I found the place he bought the bottle—"

"The same one? How do you know?"

He shrugged wearily. "Jesus. I *don't* know. All that's certain is that it was a pint, and that it was the same brand. Sure, he could have had three more in the meantime and thrown the bottles out. But in the insurance business you get in the habit of playing the percentages, and the percentages say that was the same bottle. He appeared to be sober when he bought it, and I doubt very much that two-thirds of it would have made him so drunk he couldn't see something as big as a Buick convertible. Now, can we drop that for the moment?"

"Sure." I said. "Go on."

He leaned back in his chair and studied me thoughtfully. "I gather from the fact you're here you might be interested in renegotiating your settlement with Mrs. Gannon?"

"Right," I said.

"It'll be a little extra-legal, if you follow me."

"So it's extra-legal. It's money. Did she collect the insurance?"

He nodded. "And she's loaded, besides. Cannon left an estate that'll add up to somewhere around three hundred thousand, after taxes. No other heirs."

I leaned forward on the sofa. "All right. Go on."

"Say a hundred grand. Split seventy-five, twenty-five."

"Seventy-five for me?"

He shook his head with a pained kind of smile on his face. "Seventy-five for me, chum."

"Back off and look again," I said. "The wind's whistling through your head."

"How's that?"

"Who got run over out there that night? You, or me?"



He shrugged. "That doesn't enter into it. Who dug up the evidence, after everybody else had sloughed it off as a traffic fatality?"

"You've got more?"

"More what?"

"Evidence."

"Some," he said. "But maybe not quite enough. That's where you come in."

"Where I come in is when somebody says sixty grand. That's my cue line."

He sighed. "Fifty."

I knew that was what he'd planned on from the first. Try to chisel me, would he?

"Sixty," I said. "Take it or leave it. You wouldn't have called me in if you hadn't needed me."

"I need you like I need the gon. It just happens you're in a very good position to put on the pressure. It's a psychological twist that'd make it easy, but I can do it alone if I have to."

I grinned at him very coldly. "Then do it alone."

"You think I can't?"

"That's right. You need somebody who was right there when he was murdered and who might or might not have been completely unconscious all the time under that other car. It's a highly specialized field, and not many applicants could qualify."

He exhaled a lungful of smoke and watched it moodily. I knew I'd hit him where it hurt. "Well, let's table that discussion for the moment," he said. "How about a cold beer?"

"Sure," I said. I had him on the run now and all I had to do was keep the heat on him. Let him drop his guard and then jump him again. And I'd let him have it, but good.

We went out through the door at the right. It led into the dinette and kitchen, which were divided by the refrigerator and a serving bar about chest high. You had to go around the end of the bar to reach the refrigerator, which opened from the kitchen side. He flicked on the light. The kitchen part was just a cubbyhole with a sink and a two-burner gas stove next to the wall. You couldn't see into the living-room from here. He opened the reefer and took out two bottles of imported beer. I think it was Danish. He uncapped them and set them on the drainboard of the sink. There was no window, and it was very hot under the light.

"You had more to go on than what you've told me so far, didn't you?" I asked casually. "I mean, beside that hole in his head and the fact he wasn't drunk."

"What makes you think so?"

"You must have."

He stared at me very coolly. "So? So maybe there is more."

"Such as?" I asked. Now was as good a time as any.

"Such as nothing, at the moment."

I reached out with my left and caught the front of his shirt. Pulling him to me, I gave him the open right hand across the side of the face. "Let's have it now," I said. It was a mistake.

There was no resistance in him at all. He came right on up against me like a couple of old inner tubes hanging off my arm, and when he got there he exploded. I had Purvis all over me. Fragments of flying Purvis hit me in the solar plexus and Adam's apple at the same time, and then something chopped me just under the left ear and I was through. I didn't even fall; he eased me to the floor like somebody putting down an old mattress he'd been carrying around. I was sick and I couldn't get my breath. My whole body felt paralyzed. I tried to turn over. It was no use.

A convention of Purvises stood in a circle, looking down at me. "I wouldn't try that again," they said, all speaking at once. They sounded a long way off.

I retched and gagged, trying to get air through my throat again. The kitchen tilted and went on spinings slowly like a carousel. I opened my mouth and tried to bite a mouthful of air before I died of suffocation. Just before the room went completely black I started breathing again, but I still couldn't move.

There was a sound somewhere like that of a buzzer, and I thought it was just another of the ringing noises in my head until he stepped over me and started around the serving bar. "Don't go away," he said, and flicked off the light. I lay in darkness and in agony.

If I could hit him just once I'd break him in two. The next time I'd have better sense than to pull him toward me. I'd take him apart. But I had to get up first. I tried again, and this time I managed to roll over. Sweat ran off my face and I had to fight against vomiting on the floor. I heard a door chime and then the door opening, and voices. The door closed. Purvis had company. It was a man. I could hear snatches of what he was saying.

"Federal radio inspector . . . complaints of television interference . . . amateur transmitter in the neighborhood . . ."

"No, I haven't got a television set," Purvis said.

"Oh. Well, thanks."

"Not at—" Purvis began. His voice cut off with a shaky inward sucking of breath as if he had started to pull it in to scream, and then I heard the impact itself as if somebody had hurled a green watermelon against the wall. It was sickening. I froze up tight, forgetting my pain, and waited. Something slid softly to the floor, as if being helped, the way Purvis had eased me down. Then nothing happened at all. There was no sound. I slowly exhaled, beginning to feel the pain in my throat again. He moved. I heard footsteps coming toward the dinette. Something blocked off the light coming in from the living-room, and I knew he was standing in the doorway. He seemed to fill it. I couldn't see him, because I was lying behind the serving bar and refrigerator. I waited, sweating with suspense. Would he come on in and look around into the kitchen side? I was helpless; he'd kick my head in like someone killing a snake. He stood there for a moment, and then I heard him turn and go away. It sounded as if he was going into the bedroom. He came out again and I heard the desk drawer being pulled open. There was a rustling of papers. I tried to breathe quietly, but air seemed to gasp and hiss through the agony in my throat like steam through old radiator pipes.

I could move a little now, and managed to push myself up to my hands and knees. If he did come out here and find me I wanted at least to be on my feet. I heard him shut the desk drawer and then the sound of his footsteps again. They appeared to be going toward the front door. He was leaving. I crawled silently around the end of the bar and came forward until I could see most of the living-room. Purvis's feet and legs were in view, near the sofa. I slipped along the linoleum another two or three feet and peered around the edge of the doorway. He was standing in the front door. I saw his feet and legs first and then my glance went on up, and up. He was as big as a house. His back was turned toward me as he peered out into the hall, and he seemed to fill the doorway. He was bareheaded, and his hair was dark and brush-cut. He went out softly, pulling the door shut. I never had seen his face. I sighed weakly and pushed myself to my feet. I had to hold onto the refrigerator. My clothes were soaked with sweat.

I didn't know whether I'd ever be able to speak again. My throat felt as if I had a logging chain doubled around it with a tractor pulling on each end. I wheezed as I staggered into the living-room and stood looking down at Purvis. He lay on his back with his eyes open, staring blankly up at the ceiling. His left forearm was broken, bent grotesquely across the rug as if he had another elbow

inside the dark blue sleeve. He'd shoved it up instinctively, in that last thousandth of a second he was alive, trying to ward off the blow, and the impact had been so terrible it had broken it and then had enough power left over to make that kind of a mess of his head. I looked around to see what he had been hit with. There was nothing. The big guy must have brought it with him and then taken it away.

The whole thing had happened so suddenly I was having a little trouble catching up. The only thing I was sure of was that I had to get out of there, and fast. I was still groggy from that judo manhandling Purvis had given me, but this didn't look like the safest place in the world to lie around and recover. Somebody else might come up. I'd have a sweet time explaining what I was doing here alone in the apartment with a man who was spilling the contents of his head onto a threadbare rug. "I was just sitting in the kitchen having a beer, officer. Sure, I heard this guy kill him, but I didn't think anything about it; you know how it is, just figured it was some friend of his . . ." *Cut it out*, I thought. *Get the hell out of here*.

I walked softly to the door and had sense enough to take my handkerchief in my hand as I turned the knob. I looked out. The corridor was deserted. Slipping out, I transferred the handkerchief to the outer knob, turned it, and silently closed the door. I put the handkerchief back in my pocket and went down the stairs. The hallway on the second floor was empty. I could hear snatches of a television program and someone laughing. Then I was out in the street, weak and shaking a little as I turned the corner and went on. Nobody had seen me. *But what about that taxi driver?* I thought uneasily. He'd remember bringing me here. He'd recall he picked me up at the bus station. But, hell, he'd never actually looked at me. He couldn't describe me, except to say that I was pretty big. It didn't mean anything.

I started walking. It was a block before I met anyone, and then it was a colored girl who went on past without looking at me. When she was gone and I was alone again I felt my throat and tried to say something. I made a croaking noise. I cleared it painfully and tried again. "Mrs. Cannon," I said hoarsely. It sounded like gravel being forced through a pipe. "Rich bitch. Testing. Rich bitch." My voice cleared up slightly, but I wondered if I wasn't still a little punchy.

When I was out of the area, a good ten blocks away, I ducked into a dimly lit bar where a jukebox was wailing and ordered a bottle of beer. Sitting on a stool between a big blonde who was yakking six thousand feet to the mile to her escort and a pint-sized

redhead who was crooked to the eyeballs and singing something under her breath, I sipped the beer and tried to sort it, out. If that taxi driver remembered me, or if the police happened to think of looking into Purvis's long-distance calls, I was in a bad spot. I hadn't been seen leaving the building, but maybe the other guy had. We were about the same size, and the cops could probably make out with whichever of us they caught first. But assume I never was even connected with it? What next? Where did I go from here? Purvis was dead; I'd never find out anything from him now. Was I going to have to give it up, just because some big ox had knocked his roof in?

Who was the big joker, anyway? Purvis had obviously gone into the shakedown racket on a full-time basis, so maybe the guy was one of his victims or intended victims—but in that case, why hadn't Purvis recognized him? Wouldn't he know him? He obviously hadn't, because he'd been sucked out of position by that wheeze about investigating complaints of something lousing up television reception in the neighborhood. He hadn't been expecting trouble, because if he had the guy wouldn't have been able to hit him with a handful of rice. I knew that from what had happened to me. He could move faster than any human being I'd ever seen in my life. But maybe that big guy was a little fast too. He'd probably had the pipe or loaded club up his sleeve. I sure as hell wouldn't want to tangle with him in a dark alley. He was about my size, and if he could match speed with Purvis—I stopped.

I'd had to say it twice before it soaked in. I got it now, and it all matched perfectly. I was in business, if I didn't let him get behind me with that piece of pipe.

## 4

I called a cab and went on into town and caught the next bus to Galveston. It was a little after midnight when I got back to my room in the hotel. I stripped off my sweat-soaked clothing, took a shower, and lay down on the bed with a cigarette.

There were a lot of angles to figure, and it was going to be dangerous as hell. Assuming I was right so far, he had already killed two men; there was no reason to believe he'd be bashful about running up his score if he suspected I was moving in on him. Of course, I had an idea now of what he looked like, which cut his chances of being able to catch me off guard as he had Purvis and brain me with that club, but I still had to sleep sometime, and there was nothing in the by-laws said he couldn't switch to a gun if he wanted. Once I knew his name and was sure I had the right man I knew how to tie his hands so he couldn't do anything to me, but until I did I was wide open for the same kind of pay-off Purvis had got. And I had to go back there to be sure.

It was odd Purvis hadn't recognized him; he was the first to grasp the fact Mrs. Cannon must have a boy friend and that he should be a big man somewhere around my size, but still he'd goofed off and let the big joker walk right in on him. That indicated the guy had been keeping himself as well covered as she had. Purvis must have been up there several times, snooping around trying to find out who he was, and all he'd accomplished was to set himself up like a duck in a shooting gallery. There were a couple of factors in my favor, however. The first, of course, was that I had seen him once, even if only from the back. And the second was that he might come out a little more into the open now that—as far as he knew—the only person left who suspected him was dead. The police had written the thing off as a traffic fatality, so he had nothing to fear from them. Purvis had been the only killjoy spoiling his fun, and now that Purvis had been eliminated he could relax. Unless—

I lit another cigarette off the old one and thought about that. He'd had his eye on Purvis, obviously. So maybe he knew Purvis had been to see me. There wouldn't be much doubt as to what

we'd talked about, and when I showed up around there a couple of days later there'd be even less. My name would go right onto his list. Dangerous? Dangerous was hardly the word.

Bat sweat. Since when was I this impressed by a thug with a piece of pipe? Let him scare me off? This was big. This was once-in-a-lifetime stuff. So maybe I could just tell the police about it and they'd give me a cigar and a parking ticket, and I could go to work selling aluminum pots to housewives. I could be a big shot like my old man and live in a stinking dark apartment over a dry-cleaning shop, lying in bed with a bottle of muscatel while the termites ate the frilling place out from under him a two-by-four at a time and the crazy short-order cook in the next apartment chased cockroaches up the walls with a cleaver. Sure. Be a big operator like that just because some meatball drives a Cadillac up your leg trying to kill his wife and her boy friend and you don't like to send them a bill. This is Whore Harlan! The boy who can see a loose buck farther than most people can see the Washington Monument? Turn the knob, children; you must have the wrong channel.

Of course, the whole thing could still be only a pipe dream, just a bunch of coincidences strung together. The big guy who killed Purvis might be a visiting brother from some other lodge altogether; Purvis probably had more than one iron in the fire. But it looked good this way, no matter how you shook it up; there were too many interlocking pieces that matched.

Cannon was doing about sixty-five. At best, all he had was a brief glimpse of the silhouette of some big guy in his headlights and then an even briefer glimpse of somebody else apparently trying to hide from the lights by crouching down in the seat. To make up his mind that fast, provided he did crash me deliberately, he must have had a preconceived idea of who those people were. The chances were he was actually looking for them. I knew Mrs. Cannon was out there by the lake; so maybe the big guy was out there too. She had been waiting beside the swamp road for somebody in a car, because when she saw me coming she stepped out into the road for an instant, and then realized her mistake and stepped back. It was still only twilight and I didn't have my lights on, so she could see the car all right. Therefore, the car she was waiting for could have looked something like mine. She couldn't have been expecting Cannon, because his was a gray Cadillac sedan. So suppose it was a convertible with the top down. That tied in with the theory Cannon had smashed me deliberately; I was the same size as this big joker and presumably even our cars were similar.

Say they *were* both out there. To get back to town they had to come right past where we had crashed. They stopped and investigated when they saw Cannon's car. He was in it, unconscious or helpless. He'd wanted to kill them, apparently; maybe the feeling was mutual. At any rate, they'd never have a better opportunity. Nobody would ever suspect. And nobody had, except Purvis. He kept getting in their hair, sniffing around, so they stepped on him too. They'd also step on me in a minute if they suspected me, but I should have seen enough of the game by this time to know how it was played. Swing first and never turn your back on anybody.

So far, I didn't have any actual proof of this, except that I knew Mrs. Cannon had been out there at the lake and I'd been in the next room when Purvis was killed, but I didn't need too much in the way of evidence. The threat was enough if I backed it up with some real pressure, and I was beginning to have an idea about that.

I crushed out the cigarette and lay back on the pillow, it was a little while before I got to sleep because the thought of that taxi driver began to nag me again. A lot depended on how much publicity there was when Purvis's body was found. If he came forward, a little heads-up police work would put the finger on me without too much trouble. They'd know he picked me up at the bus station, and the approximate time. Check that against bus arrivals and Galveston wouldn't be too difficult to arrive at. A record of his telephone calls would show he had talked to somebody down here twice in the past two days, to somebody in this hotel. From then on a kid could do it. Of course, I hadn't killed Purvis and I was pretty sure I could tell then where to find the guy who had if they started leaning on me too hard, but it would be a damned expensive speech if I did have to tell them.

When I awoke the next morning my throat still felt as if a horse had stepped on it. *That judo*, I thought, *they could keep it*. Just give me good, clean, bone-crunching professional football where you could tell by looking at a guy about how hard he'd be able to hit you. I thought of Purvis before I got out of bed, but there was no particular feeling about him one way or another aside from the fact I'd just as soon forget what his head had looked like if it was all right with everybody. It was something about the combination of dark blood and gray hair. He was an odd-ball, all right. I wondered what he would have done with the money if he'd got it. Probably spent the rest of his life following a ballet troupe around like a baseball filbert following the Giants. He must have been dreaming of that one big score for years, and then when he was



near enough to put out his hand and touch it he wound up looking like something somebody had stepped on.

I turned Purvis off like closing a tap and rolled out of bed. There was a lot to be done to get the show on the road, and if I didn't want *my* head pushed in, it had to be planned and executed with a hell of a lot of precision. I shaved, took a hurried shower, and went down to the coffee shop for breakfast, picking up a *Houston Post* on the way. There was nothing in it about Purvis's murder. I hadn't expected there would be, this soon. This edition probably went to press about the time he was killed. It wouldn't break before the afternoon papers at the earliest, and maybe not until tomorrow morning. Hell, it might be days before anybody found him. The longer the better, I thought; let that hackie forget the address.

I stopped at the cashier's desk on the way back up to the room and asked them to get my bill ready, saying there would be one more long-distance call they'd have to get the charges on. It was to George Gray in Fort Worth. I was lucky and caught him just as he was coming into his office in the oilwell supply outfit he and his father owned.

"Who is calling?" his secretary asked.

"John Harlan," I said.

He came on. "Hey, you big ape, why haven't you been to see us? Where are you?"

"Galveston," I said, "right at the moment."

"Well, look—" He hesitated slightly. "I mean, I read about it in the papers. It's a rotten shame. What are you planning to do, John?"

"I haven't decided yet," I said. "But that's what I called about—"

"Well, come on up and let's talk it over. I think we can use you. We need another salesman, and you worked in the fields a couple of summers, long enough to know something about the business. That is, unless you figure on trying it again next year."

"No," I said. "I'm washed up for good. That next year stuff is newspaper talk. I haven't settled on anything yet, and want to get off by myself for a couple of weeks and sort it out a little. I thought I'd go back and finish that fishing trip, provided nobody's using the cabin."

"Say, that's fine. You're as welcome as the flowers in May, boy. Nobody up there at all, and the way it looks now I won't be able to get away till duck season. Have yourself a trip, and keep what I told you in mind. You got a key to the place?"

"No," I replied. "I mailed it back to you. Or rather, one of the nurses did, while I was in the hospital."

"Sure. I remember now. Well, get a hacksaw and saw the lock off. You can buy a new one and send me the keys when you leave. No. Wait— That'd mean I'd have to replace all the duplicates I've got scattered around among my friends. Why don't I just mail you a key?"

"That's what I was going to suggest," I said. "Mail it up there to Wayles, care of General Delivery. I can pick it up when I get in town."

"I'll get it off today. Jesus, I wish I was going with you. Catch a four-pounder for me. Guess all your duffle and tackle is still up there, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"Well, I hope you have better luck this time than you did the other. That was rugged."

"It's the breaks," I said. I stared at the cigarette burning in the ash tray. "By the way, did you ever meet this Cannon? The drunk that clobbered me?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I did, once. Why?"

"Just wondering," I said. "I thought somebody said he had a camp out there too."

"He did. However, that wasn't where I met him. Just happened to run into him clear over in Mississippi one time, huntin' quail. Struck me as something of a creep; I didn't care much for him."

"How's that?" I asked.

"A lush, for one thing. Wonder he didn't kill himself long before he did. And he had a highly specialized sense of humor; the things he'd do for kicks. Liked to shoot birds to watch 'em blow up, or something."

"Quail?"

"Not quail. Sparrows, cardinals, anything that was handy. You ever seen a cardinal shot from twenty feet with the full-choke side of a twelve-gauge double?"

"I don't think so," I said. "But it sounds like something that would have to grow on you."

We yakked a minute or two about old times in school. I wanted to ask him if he knew anything about Mrs. Cannon, but decided against it. I was supposed to be merely going fishing; there was no use starting anyone wondering. When I had hung up I took an inventory of the money situation. I'd cashed a draft in New

Orleans, and still had a little over nine hundred dollars in traveler's checks. That would have to do. I could get by with making a down payment on a car. I had sold the Buick after it was repaired following the wreck, and deposited the money along with the insurance company settlement in the bank in Oklahoma City, but it would take too long to cash another draft now. I was in a hurry. I packed the two bags and checked out and caught the next bus to Houston.

It was a little after eleven when I arrived. I left the bags in two lockers in the station and went out. White sunlight blasted into the streets and traffic fumes and the stink of diesel buses hung heavy in the air. Early editions of the afternoon papers were on the street now. I bought one and ducked into an air-conditioned coffee shop to order a hamburger and a glass of iced tea. There was no mention of Purvis. I went through the paper from front to back, hurrying up one column and down the next, scanning the leads. Somebody had been run over by a loaded ten-ton truck. A man was dead of knife wounds in a brawl out near the turning basin. The body of a young girl had been found in some weeds on a vacant lot. All of a city's twenty-four-hour output of violence had been run down and checked out and put into print, but Purvis was still waiting. I thought of him lying there in the hot living-room with his head smashed open like a dropped piggy-bank and the blood dried now and black, with all the poised and graceful ballet girls looking down at his body from the walls. I shrugged irritably and pushed the hamburger away. It was tasteless. So Purvis had leaned out too far after the brass ring and fallen off. They wouldn't get me. By the time they realized I was moving in on them they'd already be in the cage and all I had to do was drop the lid on them.

*Maybe*, I thought uneasily. Then I brushed it aside. There was too much to do and I was itching to get started. Turning hurriedly to the back of the paper, I took a quick look at the used car ads. The nearest lot was only a few blocks away. I walked. The place was overflowing with cars; salesmen climbed into my arms and made little cooing sounds in my ears, but the tune changed after I'd picked out a '54 Olds and we started to make out the papers for financing. The out-of-state address was bad, and so was the fact I didn't have a job at the moment, here or anywhere else. I cursed, thinking of the delay in cashing a draft. It would take another whole day, anyway. All the bright salesmen cried a little and assured me if things were different they would like nothing better than to adopt me and let me dribble leopard-upholstered Cadillacs through my fingers all day and lie naked among Lincoln Capris all

night, but you knew how those nasty bastards in the finance companies were.

I said, "Sure, sure," and on the way out I saw a 1950 Chevrolet tagged at \$595. I looked at it once, kicked the right front tire, and went on toward the sidewalk. They hauled me back, rubbed the Chevy up against me with a lingering, hot-bellied caress and said we could do business for five and a quarter. I fumbled in my pockets and dropped the folder of hundred-dollar traveler's checks on the ground, and said I guessed I'd look around. I got almost to the sidewalk again. I drove the Chevy around the block while a salesman pointed out how they'd just refurbished the frammistan and put new whirtles in the springerwarp, and I said sure, but maybe his sister was diseased. Very young, he said; first time piecee, she don't catch nothing from sailors. It was a one-owner car used by an elderly clergyman just to go back and forth from the parsonage to the church on Sundays when it was raining. I said, sure, you could see that; he'd only rung up 76,000 miles on it and had the fenders ironed out so often you could read Braille through them. But, hell. It ran, and the motor sounded all right. I offered \$425. They said \$500. We all cried some more. I came in on the second chorus with an offer of \$450, and started for the street again. We closed at \$475, with a free tankful of gas and an offer to clean the windshield.

"Never mind," I said. "Just kiss me, and help me up."

I drove it around to a parking lot not too far from the bus station, and put the bags in. It was one-thirty. The next stop was a pawnshop. I picked up a second-hand portable typewriter, a pair of 7-by-50 binoculars, and a Colt .45 automatic. Then I stopped at a sporting goods store, after thinking it over, and bought a box of ammunition for the gun. I didn't like the idea, but this wasn't a child's garde now: Stowing all this in the car, I looked up the biggest store in town that specialized in sound and recording equipment. I was there nearly two hours getting a thorough fill-in on tape recorders and trying out the different models. When I left I had a good one with a sensitive microphone designed for wide-angle pickup. I caught a cab and went back to the lot with it. After putting it in the trunk of the Chevy I walked out to the corner again. A boy was calling the final edition of one of the afternoon papers. I bought one and sat behind the wheel as I shuffled through it. They had found Purvis.

*"Private Investigator Slain," the second page story led off. "The body of Winton L. Purvis, 38, private detective and former insurance investigator, was discovered early this afternoon in his apartment at 10325 Can line Street. He was apparently struck on*

*the head with terrific force by some heavy object, though no trace of the murder weapon was found at the scene. Police are as yet without clue as to the identity of the assailant, but are convinced he is a large man of great physical strength."*

There wasn't much more. Apparently it had broken just in time to get the bare essential facts in the last edition; there'd be more tomorrow. But there was enough here to start it rolling—the address and the fact they were looking for a big man. I hoped that cabby wasn't sitting behind his wheel somewhere in the city as I was, leafing through the paper.

Well, the ball had to bounce—one way or the other. But I couldn't sit here and waste time. I switched on the ignition and rolled out into the river of traffic. Mrs. Cannon, here I come.

## 5

Wayles . . .

I tried to remember it as I drove. It was a small town, a county seat, built in the old style around a square and a brick courthouse where pigeons cooed in the early mornings and made a mess of the red walls with bird lime at all times of the day. I'd lived, in several just like it when I was a kid growing up; there are a thousand of them in the south. Just driving through, you wouldn't think there'd be anybody in one of there who'd be worth \$300,000, but it would fool you. There are always a few, the second and third generations, the business families who made it in cotton and timber and sometimes in oil or banks or real estate. I shook my head impatiently, watching the headlights bore a tunnel in the darkness. That didn't matter. I knew she had it. I was trying to remember something about the town. I thought there was a hotel at one end of the square. I hoped there was, for it was important.

It was odd now, to think I had been there for near five weeks and was still this vague about the actual layout of the square, but I hadn't lingered after I got out of the hospital. As soon as I was able to drive I just got into the repaired Buick and shoved for Oklahoma City. Wayles? I've had Wayles, buster, and I give it to you. In Oklahoma City I'd had some more medics proofread the leg for typographical errors and they said the local talent had done a good job and that was as good as ever. It was there I'd finally signed clear with the insurance company.

There were two or three likely-looking motels with vacancy signs out in the edge of town, but I passed them up. If I had to, I could come back, but I wanted that hotel if it was where I thought it was. The highway from Houston came in the southwest corner of the square, ran along the south side, and then went on straight east. It was after ten p.m. and few cars were on the street. I passed the courthouse and slowed, and then I saw it on the east side of the square, just where I vaguely remembered it and hoped it would be. The sign said Hotel Enders.

It was near the middle of the block. I turned and went up the east side and slid into the loading zone. The entrance was through a screen door between a dress shop and a jewelry store, both closed now but throwing light out onto the walk from their display windows. I went down a narrow corridor on cocoa matting. There was a small lobby at the end and some stairs beyond the desk. A bridge lamp was burning near the cigarette machine and to the left was a wire rack of paperback books. An airplane type fan on a standard was droning away in a corner, keeping the stale air in circulation even if it didn't cool anything. A fat woman with short gray hair and jowls like a bulldog was reading a magazine at the desk. A colored boy about eight feet long was folded up and stacked in one of the armchairs against the other wall, asleep, with sections of arms and legs dangling out onto the floor. He wore an old maroon jacket with an ROTC type collar, and shoes like overnight bags. The woman looked up at me from her magazine with the unwinking stare of one of the more haughty types of turtles.

"Yes?" she asked.

"You got a single with bath?" I asked. "In front?"

She nodded. I signed the register. She looked around the edge of me," and snapped, "Raymond!"

Nothing happened. I put the pen back in the hold and turned just as she let him have the other barell, "*Ray-mond!*"

He whimpered a little, and moved one of his feet which was a neat trick in itself without a dolly. "Don't get him up," I said. "He might fall on somebody. I'll bring in the bags."

"Parking behind the hotel," she said. "Turn in at the alley two doors down." She nodded her head toward the corridor going on through to the rear of the building. "Just bring your bags in through the back."

I drove the car around and unloaded. It was very dark. Two other cars were parked in the area. I had already put the gun and binoculars in one of the bags. Locking the typewriter in the trunk because I didnt need it tonight, I took the two bags and the recorder, which was in a case that looked like any other piece of luggage when it was closed—and walked toward the oblong of light where the rear door of the hotel had opened. Raymond shuffled out and took the bags; I held onto the recorder. He led the way through the lobby and up a flight of stairs. The room was near the end of the corridor on the second floor. He unlocked the door and we went in. He snapped on the light. It was any third-rate hotel room anywhere, iron bedstead, dingy spread, worn carpet,

and a dresser covered with a pane of glass under which was the card that would tell you about the Bonton Cleaners and the Black Cat Café. The only thing I actually saw in it was the window. The blind was pulled all the way down so I couldn't see out now, but I had a hunch the location was just right. Raymond goofed around, opening the closet and then the bathroom door as if he half expected bats to fly out of them. Maybe he'd leave in the next day or two and I could get a look out that window.

"Anything else, Cap'n?" he asked.

"No," I said. I handed him a dollar. "Go buy your feet a bowl of chili."

He drifted out and closed the door. I threw the bolt, snapped off the light, and stepped quickly across to the window. Raising the blind, I looked out. It was good. It was like a sniper's nest, covering a pass. The whole square was spread out in front of and below me. I could see everything except the area directly beyond the courthouse and the section of the sidewalk just under me. If he lived in Wayles, I'd see him. Even if he worked in one of the outlying side streets and lived in the edge of town he'd come around the square sooner or later because all the principal business section was here.

People were coming out of a movie on the north side. Some more were stooging around the front of a drugstore on the corner beyond it. A few went past along the sidewalks on the south side, mostly couples with the women looking in the lighted store windows. I stepped back and unsnapped one of the bags, groping in it for the binoculars. Sliding them out of the case, hunkered down by the window and adjusted the focus. Their faces leaped up at me. Pretty girls, teenagers, housewives, men of all sizes and ages. I saw no one who looked anything like Mrs. Cannon, but there I were several men well over six feet. It wasn't going to be easy. The population of the town would probably be between six and eight thousand, and this was Texas, where they grew tall. There'd be a lot of men the size of the one I was looking for. I could see a little of what Purvis had been up against and why that big goon had been able to move in on him like that. He couldn't have remembered the faces and descriptions of all the oversized men in a town this size.

I swept the glasses on around the square. On the west side, partly cut off by the dark bulk of the courthouse, a sign caught my eye. —NNON MOTORS. That would be it. I knew that—in addition to other things—he had owned an automobile agency. Most of the showroom was in view behind its plate glass window. I readjusted



the focus slightly and it all leaped into hard, sharp detail. I could see the white sidewalls of the tires on the display models, the door opening off the showroom floor which presumably led into an office, and the counter further to the right where the parts department was. I could even see some gaskets hanging on hooks behind the counter. This was luck. There was always good chance he was somebody who worked there, and if he were he had as much privacy now as a goldfish.

There was no use looking any more tonight. I pulled the blind down and switched on the light. It was fine so far. The success of the whole thing depended on my finding him before he knew I was here looking for him, and I was in a good spot to do it. *Success, hell*, I thought, lighting a cigarette. It was more than that. If I didn't find out who he was before he found out who I was, I'd wind up where Purvis had. I had to spot him fast, or he'd be stalking me from behind while I was still looking.

I put the glasses back in their case and opened the recorder. I hadn't been able to try it out thoroughly and test it under operating conditions in the store because naturally I couldn't explain what I wanted to do with it. Finding a wall outlet behind the writing desk, I plugged it in, turned it on, and cranked up the gain. There was a long cord on the microphone. Putting back the sheet and bedspread, I shoved the mike under them and then threw my jacket over it, covering it completely. It wouldn't have to be that muffled under actual operating conditions, but the room would probably be larger. Going into the bathroom, I turned on one of the taps in the wash basin. I turned it off. I whistled a few bars of some popular tune, very softly. Coming back into the room, I picked up the telephone.

When the lady bulldog at the desk answered, I said, "I'd like to leave a call for six o'clock."

"Six o'clock. Thank you," she said.

"Thank *you*," I said.

I took the change out of my pocket and placed it on the glass top of the dresser. Through the open window floated the sounds on the street below. A car went past, its tires squealing a little as it made the turn at the corner. A horn beeped, and a kid's voice said, "Hi, beautiful."

1. That was enough, I thought. I wondered how much I of it I'd got. Rerolling the tape, I switched in on play back and cut the gain way down. Water ran out of the tap and I could even hear my shoes squeaking on the linoleum in the bathroom. I whistled. The telephone knocked against its

cradle. It all came through. I let it run out to the end. "Hi, beautiful," the speaker said softly, just above the level of the tube hiss and background noise. Perfect, I thought. I coiled the power cord and mike cable and put them back in the case and I locked it.

I undressed and turned out the light. It was very hot and the sheet stuck to me with sweat. I got up and I turned on the overhead fan, which helped a little. Fifty thousand. Seventy-five. A hundred thousand. After taxes, I thought, grinning coldly. The gasoline tax, driving up here. But the figures were too big to have any actual meaning. You couldn't imagine that much. Sure, over a period of five years, or ten, working for it. But not in an afternoon. Not by just walking in and telling her, "I'll take a hundred grand off the top. Slip it in my I hip pocket, honey." It was a dream. It was too simple and easy to be real.

The hell it was. She had it, didn't she? She had it and plenty more, and where was the percentage in being rich in Death Row? She'd be able to see that, without any trouble. There was plenty for both of us. Hell, at a hundred thousand I was the biggest bargain since free lunch and the nickel beer.

I awoke before six and almost by the time my eyes, were open excitement began to take hold of me. This was the day. I could feel it. I rolled out of bed and stepped to the window. Pulling the blind back a little, I peered out. The square lay peaceful and almost deserted in the growing light. There was no breeze, but the air was faintly cool and there was a fresh early-morning-in-summer look about the scene that reminded me of when I was a boy in other towns like this, of riding my bike out in the dawn to go fishing for crappies and goggle-eyes in some creek in the country where everything would still be wet with the dew. *Jesus, you're a lyrical bastard*, I thought. Go ahead and remember the rest of it, like how it was stepping over the old man where he'd passed out in his own vomit in the middle of the bedroom floor. And don't forget that old sow he used to bring home with him when he was crocked to the eyeballs. There was a dewy sight in the dawn.

On the north side of the square, a few doors this side of the movie house, an all night café was open. The only cars in evidence in the whole square were parked in front of it. While I was watching, two men wearing hard hats and carrying lunch boxes came out, got in one of the cars, and drove off. Pipeline workers, probably: Get in gear, I thought. If I wanted any coffee or breakfast, I'd better get it now. I took a quick shower. While I was

rubbing down with the towel, the telephone rang. It was the six-o'clock call, a man's voice. I dressed and went downstairs. The gray-haired woman and Raymond were gone. The man behind the desk was pleasant looking and middle-aged, with brown eyes and steel-rimmed glasses. I dropped the key on the desk.

"Good morning," he said. "Are you staying over?"

"I may," I said. "I'm headed for a fishing trip out at Swanson Lake, but I might wait over and go tomorrow. Don't feel too well, for some reason. Something I ate last night, I guess."

"Stomach cramps?" he asked sympathetically.

I shook my head. "Just a little upset. Think I'll try some coffee and orange juice, and maybe a couple of aspirin, and see what happens."

I cut across the corner of the square. There were five or six people in the restaurant, mostly hard hats and a truck driver or two. A blonde with a Georgia accent brought me some toast and a cup of coffee. I bought two packs of cigarettes and came back to the hotel. The square was still quiet except for the pigeons flapping around under the eaves of the courthouse.

"Any better?" the brown-eyed man asked.

"Not much," I replied. I grabbed a couple of the paperbacked books off the stand and dropped fifty cents on the desk as I picked up the key. "Think I'll stay in the sack for a while. Tell the maid just to pass up my room."

"Sure thing," he said. Then he added, "We can get you a doctor, if you'd like."

"It's not that bad," I said. "Thanks just the same."

I went up to the room. Stripping down to my shorts because it was going to be hot, I slid the binoculars out of their case and put them on the carpet under the window. I placed an ash tray beside them, and a pack of cigarettes and some matches. I sat down on the floor and raised the blind about three inches. By putting my face up close I could see nearly all the square. There was practically no chance anybody down there would notice me; this side of the building would be shadow until noon. Who ever looked up at the second floor anyway?

Hardly anything was moving yet. A bakery truck stopped before the café on the north side and a man went in carrying a tray of rolls. About halfway down the block on the south side a man on a stepladder was cleaning the windows of the J. C. Penney store. Yellow sunlight hit the gables of the courthouse, inched down the slopes of the red tile roof, and began to shatter in hot sprays of

color against the third floor windows. The cool freshness of early morning was wilting a little. It was going to be a scorcher. I got up and turned on the fan, and brought a towel from the bathroom to mop the sweat from my face.

I lit a cigarette, smoked it out to the end, and fired up another. Time went on. Sunlight was hitting the big plate glass window of the Cannon Motors showroom on the west side of the square now. A few cars were beginning to slide into the rows of angle parking spaces. I studied the drivers carefully as they got out and fished in their pockets for nickels for the meter and if they were big men I put the glasses on them. None of them resembled him at all. If they were tall enough they were thin, or if heavily built they were shorter or had sandy hair or long hair or damned little hair of any kind.

I was growing uncomfortable. I shifted around, trying to stretch my legs. The gimp one ached a little; I looked at the scar tissue around the knee and cursed under my breath. The meat-headed, punchdrunk bastard— Who? Cannon? Mrs. Cannon? Or this big goon I thought I was looking for? I must have gravel in I head. What did I think I was proving with this Grade B movie routine? Just because some big guy had killed Purvis I'd strung together a chain of improbable coincidences and come up with a pearl necklace. What the hell—the chances were he'd never heard of Mrs. Cannon. He might be from Kokomo or Tucson, Arizona. He could be anybody. Maybe people were standing in line to kill Purvis. Maybe he'd won a contest, or something, to get first crack at him. Send in six new subscriptions and kill Purvis at our expense.

I grabbed suddenly for the glasses and trained them on the doorway of the Cannon Motors showroom. A girl had stopped there, her hand on the knob. It wasn't Mrs. Cannon, however. This was a blonde. She was wearing a blue dress and white shoes, carrying a white handbag with long straps. She seemed to be waiting for somebody to open the door for her. I swung the glasses the way she was looking and sucked in my breath sharply, but then let it ease out again in disappointment. The man coming along the walk was the right size, but his hair was longer and it was the color of cotton. He unlocked the door and they went in. I watched her trip across the floor of the showroom and go into the office. She had nice legs.

Well, there'd be others working in the place. I turned the glasses oh it every few minutes, in the meantime keeping a sharp lookout over the nearer end of the square. Most of the stores were open

now. More people were on the walks, and it was becoming more difficult to look them all over as they moved along.

My sweeping gaze stopped abruptly, and I came to sharp attention. What I had seen was a Chevrolet convertible coming along the street on the south side of the square. There was a man in it, a man who had wide shoulders and was bareheaded. His hair was dark, or so it seemed in the brief instant he was in view. I snatched at the glasses, but in the time I was putting them up to my eyes he swung into an alley and disappeared. I watched the mouth of the alley, very alert now. No one came out. He could have been the one, I thought. The convertible was significant. I waited while minutes dragged by, but there was no sign of him.

Maybe there was parking back there for employees of the stores along that side of the square. I studied the area. The alley was in the middle of the block, with the J. C. Penney store on one side of it and a shoe repair shop on the other. Adjoining the Penney store on the east, toward me, was a barbershop and then a small jewelry store. On the west side of the alley, beyond the shoe place, was a sporting goods store and next to that a dry-cleaners. I went up the line, glancing at the doorways. They were all open now except the dry-cleaning place and the sporting goods store. I couldn't see anybody inside, however, except some girls in Penney's. I swung back, watching the sidewalk. Then I stopped suddenly. The door of the sporting goods store was open now. Somebody must have come in from the rear. I grabbed the glasses and focused on it.

There was no one visible, but I could see for several feet back inside the doorway with every detail hard and clear. There was a showcase on the right and I could even make out the rows of bass plugs on a glass shelf inside it. The glasses shook a little. I steadied them on the window sill and looked again. Behind the showcase were some shelves of stock, among which I could make out boxes that probably contained reels and some flatter ones which looked like the type flylines came in. Nobody came in sight.

I muttered impatiently and looked away. I couldn't waste all day on a wild guess; I had the rest of the square to cover. I gave it a good going-over and saw no likely-looking prospects. In a moment I was back staring at the front of the sporting goods store again. Something on the glass showcase caught my eye. It was rounded and black, and partly cut off by the door frame. I looked at it again and grunted softly to myself. It was the end of a telephone handset.

Well, I could eliminate this bird and quit worrying about him. Taking the glasses down, I looked at the sign above the door.

*Tallant's*, it said. I stood up and reached for the telephone book on the little stand in the corner. Looking up the number, I lifted the telephone down and got into position again with the glasses propped across the window sill. The phone cord was just long enough to reach.

"Would you get me 2279?" I said, when the man at the desk answered.

"Just a minute, please."

I heard him dialing, and then the phone ringing at the other end. I waited, keeping the glasses zeroed in on the area above the showcase. He came into view and lifted the handset. He was a tall man with tremendous shoulders, and he had short-cropped dark hair. I exhaled softly.

"Hello. Tallant's Sporting Goods," he said.

It was an odd sensation, watching his lips move at the same time I was listening to his voice on the receiver.

"Hope you weren't busy," I said. "I just wondered if you had any reports on how the bass are hitting out at Swanson Lake."

"Been pretty good the last few days, I hear," he replied. "But mostly on live bait. Who's calling?"

"You wouldn't know me," I said. "I just came up from Beaumont. A friend of mine down there said I could probably get a report on the lake at your place. George Tallant, I think he said. That's you, isn't it?"

"*Dan* Tallant," he corrected.

"Oh, sure. That's right. So it's been pretty good, huh?" I was staring intently, very excited now. He was the one, all right. I was almost positive of it, in spite of the fact he was leaning over the showcase, foreshortened, as he talked, and it was hard to fit him into the pose as I'd seen him before, erect and facing the other way.

He said something else, just as the idea hit me. "By the way," I broke in, "you don't happen to have a GBF torpedo-head flyline, do you? For a six-ounce rod—"

"No-o, I don't, think so," he replied. "I don't carry much of a selection, because nearly everybody around here uses spinning gear. But just a minute; I'll look—"

I saw him straighten and turn, looking at that section of stock right in back of the phone where I thought I had seen the flyline boxes. I got him dead to rights in the glasses, the same picture exactly as before, the height and the tremendous spread of

shoulders, the small ears in close to the head, the short, crisp black hair, and that impression he was young and as strong as a fighting bull. There was no doubt of it at all. I was talking to the man who had killed Purvis.

## 6

When he had hung up he moved back to the rear of the store again and I couldn't see him any more. I lowered the glasses, dropped the phone back on its cradle, and sat for a moment staring at it. Right into the end zone on the first play; this was better than I'd even dared hope for. I'd proved I was right, located him, and identified him—all in the first two or three hours. Improbable, was it? A dream? Hell, it was turning into reality faster than I could keep up with it.

*All right, all right*, I warned myself, *don't dislocate your shoulder patting yourself on the back*. There was plenty to do yet, and the tricky and dangerous part was just beginning. Mrs. Cannon was next. I stood up and went into the bathroom to shave. Here I come, you brown-eyed Fort Knox.

Nine-thirty was a little early to go calling on a woman, especially unannounced, but that's the way it had to be. If I waited until later she might not be home, and if I phoned first I never would see her. I was the last person in the world she wanted to meet face to face. I grinned at my reflection in the mirror, a little coldly. That was all right. So maybe she wouldn't like me. I was going to be a hell of a lot more unpopular with her in about twenty-four hours if things went off as scheduled.

I dressed in a fresh pair of gray-slacks and a subdued sports shirt, combed my hair, and took a last gander at myself in the mirror. I'd do. I looked as scrubbed and wholesome as a freshly-laundered moose, and about half as subtle. She'd never suspect me of anything.

I looked up her address in the telephone book. Three-twenty-four Cherrywood Drive, it said. Putting the binoculars in the bag with the gun, I locked it, and then checked the recorder to be sure its case was locked too. I went downstairs, did the how-you-feeling-now-much-better-thanks routine with the solicitous type at the desk, and on out the rear door to the car. Coming out of the alley, I turned north, avoiding the square. At the first filling station I



pulled in and gassed up. The attendant told me how to find Cherrywood Drive.

It was southwest of the square, near the crest of a sloping hill overlooking the town. Near the bottom the bungalows had a housing-development look about them, but further up they were bigger, on large, landscaped lots. Cherrywood Drive was only four blocks long and there were just three houses in the last block, two of them on the left, or downhill side. I slowed, looking at the numbers. The Cannon place would be the second one on the left, the last house on the street. It was near the corner where Cherrywood terminated in an intersecting street going downhill. Beyond the intersecting street was a wooded area, still undeveloped. I liked the whole layout but I didn't want to take too much time now in looking it over. If I goofed around out here until she got a look at me out the window she probably wouldn't be "in" when I rang the buzzer.

The other two houses were white Colonial types with columns and wide lawns and driveways. Directly across from the Cannon house was a vacant lot, grown up with pines, however, rather than weeds. I pulled the old Chevy to the curb on that side and walked across the street. The Cannon house was newer, a long, low ranch style built of light-colored brick with a sweeping, low-angled white roof covered with broken quartz. It looked very western and a little out of place among all these pines. It sat back from the street in a large expanse of well-tended lawn, but there was no circular drive. A flagstone walk bordered with some kind of low shrubs led to the front door, and beyond it a wide concrete driveway went straight back to the two-car garage adjoining the house on the far end. Both doors of the garage were closed. That should mean she was home.

It was hot now and I could feel perspiration beginning to break out on my face. I went quickly up the walk. A colored man in a straw hat was digging in the flower bed under the big picture window in front. His shirt was plastered to his back with sweat. Drapes were drawn across the window and I couldn't see in. Remember, I told myself, *you've never seen her before in your life. Sell her on it.*

I rang the bell. The gardener straightened and brushed his wet face with a hand, looking up at me. "You know if Mrs. Cannon's home?" I asked.

"Yassuh, I think so," he said. He went back to his work. I'd just started to reach for the bell again when the door opened. A young

colored girl looked out at me indifferently. She was chewing gum and held a broom in her left hand.

"Is Mrs. Cannon in?" I asked.

"I'll find out," she said. "Who I say it is?"

"Mr. Warren," I said, mumbling a little.

"Just a minute."

She disappeared, leaving the door ajar. It opened into a small entry hall. There was a door at the left of that, going into the living-room apparently, but I couldn't see much of it. I waited. Maybe I shouldn't have said Warren, I thought. It might still sound too much like Harlan. O'Toole or Schutzbank or something would have done better. But still it had to be within shooting distance; I didn't want her to get the idea I was aware I might have to pitch her a phony name to get in. That would ruin it all. *Oh, hell*, I thought; *it's been five months and she doesn't know I'm within two thousand miles.*

The girl came back. Mrs. Cannon was in. I could wait in the parlor. I followed her in through the entry hall and stood in the living-room. "She'll be heah in a minute," she said, and went on out through a door at the right rear, which seemed to lead into the dining-room. As soon as she was gone, I looked swiftly around, trying to get as good a picture of the layout as I could before Mrs. Cannon got here.

Apparently there was no dog. That had been worrying me, but I didn't see any signs of one. Certainly there wasn't one in the house, or he'd have been around to investigate by this time, and I couldn't see any kennel in the patio behind the house. There was another plate glass window at the rear of the living-room, fitted with a gauzy drape which was closed now but was fairly transparent with the bright sunlight behind it. The patio was enclosed with a white-painted cinder block wall about four feet high. Below it down the hillside was another wooded vacant lot. Approaching the house from the rear would be a cinch. Getting in, however, was going to be another matter.

I'd noticed something when I first stepped into the entry hall, but it hadn't actually registered until now. The house was air-conditioned. I could feel the coolness penetrating my sweaty shirt. It was fine after the sticky heat outside, but there was another angle to it I didn't like at all. The doors and windows would be tightly closed all the time it was turned on, so it wasn't going to be merely a matter of unlatching a screen. It wasn't good. I glanced swiftly around, studying the room.

It was a long one. At the far end was a raised fireplace with a copper hood. To the left of it was an open doorway which apparently led into a study or library because I could see rows of books along the wall and the front end of a mounted sailfish. At the right was the hallway which went on through to the rest of the house. Some chairs and a small sectional sofa were scattered about that end, before the fireplace, but the focal point of the room was nearer the center where a long custom-built sofa was backed up against the drapes of the front window. A coffee table and three large chairs faced it in a rough semicircle, and it was probable this was the part of the room generally used when only a few people were present because it faced the large rear window overlooking the patio. It looked good to me. At each end of the sofa there was a table with a big, red-shaded lamp on it. The lamp cords disappeared behind the sofa. I made a mental note I'd probably need a three-way outlet plug. There was a whispering sound like that of slippers on carpet. I turned just as Mrs. Cannon came into the room from the hallway.

When she saw me, she stopped. Her eyes widened a little, and I knew she recognized me. I didn't care now, because I was in, and I was too busy anyway trying to keep from staring at her to worry about it.

Striking, Purvis had said. She was, but he hadn't scratched the surface.

The other time had been just a flashing glimpse at dusk, and that photograph hadn't amounted to much more than an inventory. She was wearing bullfighter's pants and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up; the blue-black hair was cut rather short and it swirled carelessly about a slender oval face the color of honey or good pale vermouth. She was a construction job from the ground up without being overdone about it anywhere—just medium height and rather slim and with only a touch of that overblown calendar-girl effect above the sucked-in waist—but if you had to look twice to be sure that wasn't Manolete inside those pants you were in bad shape and ought to see an optometrist or psychiatrist before you got any worse. The pants themselves were black and very smooth, and what they did to her thighs—or vice versa—should happen more often. Below them her legs were bare and honey-colored and she wore bullfighter's slippers. *Break it up*, I thought; *in another two seconds you won't know whether to say hello or charge*.

It was her eyes, however, that could throw the match in the gasoline. They were large and very lovely, fringed with long dark lashes, and they were brown—not soft or fawn-like, but self-possessed and cool with a hint of the devil in them, a devil not too

well tied up and only half asleep. You had an impression that if she ever really turned them on you with that sidelong come-hither out of the corners and from under the lashes she could roll your shirt up your back like a window-blind. Mrs. Cannon was a large order of girl; she may have killed her husband, but I was willing to bet he'd never been bored when he was alive.

She recognized me; she was off guard for just an instant and I saw the sudden wariness in her eyes. Then she recovered and murmured politely, "Good morning, Mr.—ah—"

"Harlan," I said. "John Harlan."

"Oh," she said. "I thought Geraldine said a Mr. Warren. I couldn't imagine— Won't you sit down, Mr. Harlan?"

She flowed forward like warm honey poured out of a jug and took one of the big chairs facing the sofa. I remained standing until she was seated and then sat down on the sofa. She leaned forward to take a cigarette from the box on the coffee table. I sprang up again to light it for her. She looked up at me over the flame of the match, smiling a little, and said, "Thank you."

I lit one for myself and sat down again. "I want to apologize for coming so early in the morning," I said, "but I'm on my way out to the lake to go fishing and didn't want to miss you."

"That's quite all right," she replied smoothly. "I've been up for hours."

I had to hand it to her; she was as cool as they come. I knew she was raging inside at that maid for not getting my name straight and at the same time she was probably going crazy trying to figure out—now that I had got in—whether I recognized her as the woman I'd seen out there at the lake, but none of it showed on her face.

"You know, I expected somebody much older," I said. "I don't know where I got the impression, but I thought you'd be thirty or thirty-five." It was an old gag, of course, and she'd recognize it as such, but still it was the truth in a way. Purvis'd said she was thirty, but she didn't look it.

She gave me a faint smile and nodded. "You're very flattering, Mr. Harlan," she murmured. "And so early in the morning, too."

I wasn't sure, but I thought I could see that amused devil looking out of her eyes for just a second. It was beginning to appear to her that I didn't know I'd ever seen her before, and the tension was easing: Two-hundred-and-thirty pounds of ham-handed athlete trying to be a smoothie probably tickled her, too. She'd heard all the compliments, by experts; and with those eyes, she'd probably

been using men for throw-rugs since she was three. Well, that was all right. I'd be something new for her; I'd be the first one that ever cost her a hundred thousand dollars. She'd probably sleep with a lock of my hair under her pillow.

I pitched my voice down a little and looked at my hands. "I—uh —" I said. Then I glanced up at her, ill at ease and awkward, but sincere as hell, "There isn't anything, really, that I can say, is there?" I asked.

"I don't think there's anything that *has* to be said," she replied quietly. "It wasn't your fault."

"Well—it isn't a question of blame," I said haltingly, "It's just that—well, there *was* a wreck, and I was involved in it. I wanted to come and see you after I got out of the hospital, but didn't know what there was I could say if I did come. I knew how badly you were torn up about it, too, and realized you didn't want to see me and be reminded of it—"

*That ought to get her off the hook, I thought, so she could relax.* I was just a big simple muscle-head who didn't have the faintest idea why she'd avoided me. There was nothing for her to be afraid of any more. All I had to do now was ease her mind as to why I'd come back here, and I'd be in.

It was as if we were working off the same script. "It's quite all right," she said. "I'm glad you came. And I'm very sorry I didn't come to see you in the hospital, but it's nice to know that you understood. However, I'll admit I was a little surprised at seeing you now. I didn't know you were back in this part of the country."

"I came back to finish that fishing trip," I explained. "Going to work on a new job in September. I won't get a vacation for a year, so I thought I'd better do my fishing now while I could."

The big eyes became very grave and sympathetic. This baby was good. "I was so very sorry to read that you had been—I mean, that you weren't going to play any more. Do you think the accident had anything to do with it?"

I shrugged. No way to tell, actually. It was just one of those things."

She ran the rheostats up a little and brushed my face with a lingering glance that would melt butter at fifteen-feet. "I hated to hear it," she said simply.

*Not half as much as you're going to hate it this time tomorrow, baby,* I thought. I took my eyes away from her face. Looking at her was too damned distracting, and I still had plenty to do. Part of what I'd come for had been accomplished but the big item still

remained. How was I going to get in? The front door was out of the question; that was probably locked all the time. How about windows? They'd all be closed because of the air-conditioning. But maybe they wouldn't be latched. There weren't any windows in the living-room, however, except the big plate glass ones, and of course they didn't open at all. I couldn't think of any excuse to get into another part of the house to look for some. Maybe I'd been too optimistic.

Then I saw two windows, and knew I was worse off than ever. Looking out through that filmy drape, I could see a little of the two wings of the house that formed the sides of the U plan. On both sides there were windows, smaller ones, looking out over the patio. They were the casement type. I'd never tried it, but I knew they couldn't be opened from outside except by stripping and wrecking the gear and crank mechanism that operated them. It was a worm type gear, which can be driven from only one end. They'd all be the same. Windows were out; it had to be a door.

Suddenly I was conscious she was saying something. I "Oh?" I asked. "I beg your pardon?"

She smiled. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure," I said. "Uh-thanks."

"Geraldine!" she called.

There was no answer. She looked at me and lifted her shoulders with a graceful shrugging motion, spreading her hands. "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

"Surely," I said. I stood up. She went out toward the dining-room. I watched the rear of those bullfighter pants out of sight, and then turned, and while I was still turning and saying, "*Holy hell!*" very softly under my breath I saw the answer to the thing I was looking for. It was a glass door opening onto the patio. I'd been looking at it all the time but hadn't noticed because it was behind that semi-transparent drape. I was just to the left of the end of the big picture window and I'd thought it was a part of it. The drape had been made wide enough to cover the door in addition to the window when it was closed, apparently so as to give an unbroken line clear across that side of the room.

I could hear her talking to Esmerelda or whatever her name was out in the kitchen. I stepped swiftly across to the door and pulled back the end of the drape. Opening it, I tried the knob from the outside. It didn't turn; the night latch was on. Looking quickly around to be sure I was still alone, I reversed the push-button plungers in the edge of the door to unlatch it, closed it softly, and let the drape fall back in position. The door apparently wasn't used

much, so the chances were she didn't bother to check it every night.

I walked back and sat down. In a moment she came in from the dining-room with two cups of coffee and some cream and sugar on a tray. I did some more of the earnest young man about how sorry I was for the accident, even if it wasn't my fault, and while I talked I tried to keep my eyes off her long enough to get the exact layout of that patio. She regretted some more that I was washed up in football. I shoved the silken weight of her off the edge of my mind and told her how brave she was. She told me I was nice and that it was considerate of me to call this way, and I knew she was just waiting for me to get the hell out of here so she could call Tallant. They were going to have one hot conference about this, but I thought I had her fooled. I was just a goof who'd come back to go fishing. I wondered if the maid slept in, and decided she probably didn't. They'd had to stay under cover all this time, so Tallant was probably coming here late at night. They were too cagey to be seen together for probably another six months, even with Purvis out of the way. So that's the way it was. She'd be waiting for him—waiting— *Damn it, I thought. Cut it out, and attend to business. I Get that look off your pan; don't think she won't recognize it—she's been seeing it since she was twelve. Be sorry about something.*

About what?

Hell, anything.

"Are you going to be here very long, Mr. Harlan?" 'she asked. "Two weeks," I replied. "Maybe a little less."

"And you're out at that same cabin where you were before?"

"I will be," I said. "Right now I'm at the Enders Hotel. The friend of mine that owns the shack is mailing me a key. It'll probably be here today."

"Well, I do hope I'll see you again while you're here," she said.

I stood up on cue. "It's been nice meeting you," I said earnestly. "I probably won't come to town much, but if you're out that way drop in and go fishing with me. Heh, heh."

She smiled, the way you would at a meat-head who wasn't too bright, and came to the door with me. She held out her hand very graciously. I took it. The brown eyes looked up at me from about the level of my shoulder. *Brother!* I thought. I simpered like a clown and said good-by three times, standing on one foot; then the other, gave her another poor-but-honest pitch about how nice it was of her to let me call, and finally backed out the door like a

high school kid escaping from the stage after winning a scholarship in the essay contest. She'd call Tallant all right the minute the door was closed, but they'd just have a good laugh. was utterly harmless.

I drove on around the corner and down the hill, casing the terrain, and went back to the hotel. I parked car behind it and went shopping. I bought a small pencil flashlight in a drugstore, and in Woolworth's picked up a three-way outlet plug for a wall receptacle, some typewriter paper, a pad of yellow second sheets and a few sheets of carbon paper. What else? I already had the cardboard box. Oh, yes. Wrapping paper twine, and some address stickers.

I walked back to the hotel, avoiding the south side of the square and keeping a lookout for Tallant. I didn't see him anywhere.



## 7

It was almost noon now; blazing sunlight fell straight into the square, and it was very hot inside the room. I put down all the stuff I'd bought, turned on the fan, and lit a cigarette. The minute I stopped moving and planning I started thinking about her again. I could see the sleeping devil inside those cool brown eyes and that slender figure packed into those bullfighter pants and the way she moved. I became uncomfortable, and cursed her, trying to drive her out of my mind. The hell with Mrs. Cannon. Stick to business. There'd be plenty of that later. With a hundred thousand dollars I'd be using types like Mrs. Cannon to strike matches on.

I pushed her off me and got back on the track. Now. The typewriter was down in the car, the recorder was up here, and for the next two moves I had to switch them. But I didn't want to go lugging stuff back and forth past that desk down there like an ant at a picnic; there was no use starting people wondering what I was doing. I was supposed to be on my way to a fishing camp. Then why not go on out there now? But maybe the key hadn't arrived. Everything had broken so smoothly and so fast I was way ahead of schedule. Still, it could be. If George had mailed it yesterday—

Well, hell, one way of finding out would be to go around there and ask. I went down in the street again and one of the locals told me how to find the post-office. It was on a side street north of the square.

"Harlan?" The man at the General Delivery window looked in his pigeonholes and shook his head at me, "Nothing today."

"Any more mail coming in from the west in the next few hours?" I asked. "From Fort Worth?"

"Putting up some now," he said. "Try in half an hour."

I went over to the coffee shop that's across the street from every Federal office building in the country and ordered a coke. There was a wire rack near the entrance with a stack of Houston *Posts* on it. I grabbed one off and shuffled through it while I drank the coke. Purvis was there, near the bottom of the second page but it was about the same story as last night with no new developments.

Then I remembered this was the out-of-town edition and probably went to press about the time I left Houston last evening. It was still hard to realize I'd accomplished so much in such a short time. God, this time tomorrow— Easy, pal, easy. It's long time till tomorrow, and a thousand things could happen.

A whistle blew somewhere and it was twelve o'clock. The coffee shop began to fill up with government stenographer types, Honey Chile division, wearing cotton prints and ordering lettuce and tomato sandwiches. I ordered a sandwich myself but got to thinking of Mrs. Cannon and choked on it. I paid the check, went back across the street, and stooged around the postoffice for another ten minutes, looking at the mug-shots of the wanted men stuck up on the wall next to last year duck hunting regulations. Then suddenly while I was staring at them and thinking of what some psychology prof had told a class of us in college about there being no such thing as a criminal type of face, a little chill ran up my back. I was breaking the law, and they could blow the whistle on me. But, hell, who'd tell them? Mrs. Cannon? She'd go to the chair just to get me sent up for a couple of years? That was a yak. But still—

I shrugged it off impatiently. What the hell, it wouldn't be the Federals, anyway. It was nothing to them. Then I stopped suddenly. Wasn't it? The way I had it planned I had to send something through the I mail, didn't I? The fact I was sending it in the other direction and to nobody in particular didn't make any difference; I was still using Uncle Sugar's mails for something illegal and there was hardly anything that'd cause him any quicker to take a good, long look down your throat. No, I'd have to fake that part. Uncle I'd just as soon leave alone.

Well, that could be done easily enough, I thought. All I had to do was mail something else, something legitimate that looked like the same package. No sweat there.

I went back to the General Delivery window again. This time the key was there. It was stuck to a piece of cardboard with Scotch tape and mailed in a brown Manila envelope. On the way back to the hotel I went past a hardware store that had a display of sporting goods in the window. One of the items was a big card full of cork-bodied bass bugs, the kind you use with a flyrod. I went in and bought six of them. George would appreciate them, and I had to mail something to somebody.

I packed everything, checked out of the hotel, and loaded the car. On the way out of town I stopped at a small grocery store and bought some eggs, bacon, bread, and coffee. The road going out

toward the lake ran south from the square, a little-traveled secondary road that connected with an east-west highway about thirty miles beyond at a town named Breward. Some people contended it was a short cut in coming up from Houston, or had been until they'd widened and speeded-up the other highway, and that Cannon had been coming from Houston when he'd hit me. He'd been down there on a business trip. Purvis, apparently, had found out he had come into town on the main highway and then gone out to the lake. How, I didn't know, but it didn't matter now because I was using a different approach to the matter of proving the whole thing.

It was a narrow blacktop pavement not too well kept up, winding over rolling, red clay hills with rural mailboxes here and there and ramshackle farmhouses sitting back from the road behind them. The road shimmered with heat and the fields looked withered and brown as if it hadn't rained for a long time. Eight miles out I came down into the river bottom where he had wrecked me. The road went straight across on a long fill about six feet high. I crossed the bridge over the river first, steel girders with wooden planking that rattled under the tires. About two hundred yards beyond it was the concrete culvert where he had crashed. There were no other cars in sight. I slowed, looking at it.

They had repaired the place where he'd knocked a chunk off the wing of the culvert, and the weeds and shredded bushes were beginning to grow back again. I looked ahead to where I had spun in myself. The scars were still visible on the side of the fill where the wrecker had dragged the Buick back onto the road. It wasn't as far from Cannon's car as I had thought. I'd said a hundred yards, but I could see now it was considerably less, not much more than a good booming punt. Call it sixty. Mrs. Cannon and Tallant were bound to have seen it; it hadn't gone any further off the road than Cannon's had. So they must have come back to have a look at me and be sure I was unconscious or dead before they slugged him. Maybe they'd even checked again, before they shoved off, to make certain I was still out. A little chill chased itself up my back. Suppose I'd come around about that time and said something to them, or groaned. I'd have probably got the same treatment. These two characters played a rough brand of ball, and they made up their own rules as they went along. I thought of what I had to do tonight and tomorrow morning. For a little while it was going to be like juggling dynamite caps, and if I didn't have control of the situation every second it could blow up right in my face.

I drove on. The road in to the lake turned off to the right about two miles ahead. An arrow-shaped sign that read *Pete's Live Bait*

*Skiffs*, had fallen down and was propped against a stump in some dead grass. The road itself was just a pair of ruts wandering over a sandhill through some cut-over pine. A mile or so ahead there were some fields and an abandoned farmhouse, and then it dropped back into the river bottom again. The air was a little cooler under the big timber, but the sloughs were mostly dried up now in late summer and the mud had dried and cracked in geometric patterns. In about fifteen minutes I came to a fork in the road with Pete's sign pointing to the left. I'd never been down there, and presumably the Cannon camp was in that direction. The other fork was just a dim trace. It went nowhere except to George's camp, around the upper end of another narrow arm of the lake.

In another few minutes I came abruptly into the clearing. The gray, weather-beaten little two-room shack with its shake roof stood under a couple of big oaks near the water. Beyond it I could see the inlet extending straight ahead, the water flat and glaring in the sun like a sheet metal between the dark walls of timber. I stopped the car in the shade before the front porch and got out. It was intensely silent; there was a feeling of isolation about the place as if it were a thousand miles to the nearest road instead of only six.

I unlocked the door and went in. Everything was just as I had left it. A deputy sheriff had come out and locked it after the wreck. The front room held a cook stove and a homemade pine table covered with oil cloth. Cooking utensils hung from nails in the wall behind the stove and there were some shelves of staple groceries. I unlatched and opened the small window at each end of the room and went into the back one. It was a little larger and held two single beds and an army cot. Some more cots were folded and stacked in a corner and my two flyrods in their aluminum cases lay on one of the beds. Hunting and fishing clothes hung on nails all around the room. The trapped, dead air was stiflingly hot. I opened the windows, feeling my shirt sticking to me with sweat.

I looked at my watch. It was a little after two. Leaving the recorder in the car, I brought in the bags and the typewriter. Putting the bags in the back room, I set the typewriter on the table in the front and took the cover off. I opened one of the bags and got out the yellow typing paper and carbons. Then I remembered I hadn't bought an eraser. Must have had a lot of confidence in myself, I thought sourly; I hadn't used a typewriter since I'd got out of college. I scouted around the cabin and finally scared up the stub of a pencil that had a little eraser left on the end of it.

It was still intensely hot in the cabin and I was thirsty. I stripped off my shirt and slacks, hung them draped over hangers on the front porch so the perspiration would dry, took the water pail, and walked up the trail to the spring in my shorts. I dipped up a pail full with the small aluminum saucepan hanging from a nail driven into a sweetgum tree beside the spring, took a good, long drink of it, and came back.

I arranged the paper beside the typewriter, got a pad of cigarettes and some matches out of one of the bags, and located an ash tray. I dragged up a chair and sat down before the typewriter. It was deathly silent. I had this whole end of the world to myself and I was about to put down on paper the highest-priced short piece of prose ever written. I grinned. All it took to be a successful writer was a guaranteed audience; Hitler had proved that.

*Never mind the gags*, I thought impatiently; *get to work*. I rolled a sheet of the yellow paper into the machine for a rough first draft and began. I made a lot of mistakes at first because I wasn't familiar with the machine and hadn't used one for a long time. I didn't like the way it began, and after I'd wadded it up I didn't like the next version either. The pile of discarded yellow pages grew higher on the floor beside me. Sweat ran down my body and I got a towel to mop it off. It was an hour and a half before I had it all down the way I wanted, a little more than a full page, single spaced.

I read it over:

*To the District Attorneys at Houston, Texas, and "Wayles, Texas, it began.*

*My name is John Gallagher Harlan. I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1927, the son of Patrick and Marianne Harlan, both now deceased. I am a graduate of \_\_\_\_\_ University, class of 1949, and former professional football player. I am six feet, three inches tall, and weigh two hundred and thirty pounds. There is a hirsute mole under my left shoulder-blade, and considerable scar tissue around and below my left knee. An examination of the bones of my left leg will show it was badly broken in two places, not very long ago. The bridgework, the result of teeth lost in football scrimmages, was done by Paul J. Scarff, DDS, Medical-Dental Building, San Francisco, California.*

*The above data is unimportant except for purposes of possible identification and verification of the fact I actually existed, because if you receive this at all it will only be because I am dead. I will have been killed by Daniel R. Tallant and/or Mrs. Howard L. Cannon, both of Wayles, Texas.*

*I do not know whether you will be able to find my body, or, in the event that you do, whether you will ever be able to gather sufficient evidence to convict them, but this will assist you to the extent of explaining their motive. I was killed to prevent my disclosure of the following information:*

*Both Mrs. Cannon and Mr. Tallant are already guilty of murder. Mrs. Cannon's husband did not die as the result of an automobile accident on the night of March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1956, as was believed, but was bludgeoned to death by Mr. Tallant, with Mrs. Cannon's connivance and/or assistance, shortly afterward as he lay unconscious in the wreckage of his car. I was present at the time, pinned under the side of my own automobile some sixty yards away. I heard voices, followed by the sound of a blow, but feigned unconsciousness to keep from being killed myself.*

I went on to explain how I had seen her out there near the lake a few minutes before and how Cannon had driven me off the road because he believed I was Tallant and that she was in the car with me.

I wound it up:

*This will also clear up the death of Mr. Wilton L. Purvis of 10325 Caroline Street, Houston, Texas, on the night of August 8, 1956. He was attempting to blackmail the aforesaid two murderers on the strength of the evidence he had collected against them, and was himself killed by a single powerful blow on the head delivered by Mr. Tallant. I was present in the apartment at the time, in the kitchen where I could not be seen from the living-room or the doorway to the dining-room. Mr. Tallant gained access to the Purvis apartment by posing as a Federal radio inspector investigating complaints of neighborhood television interference. In corroboration of the fact that I was there, I offer the following: Mr. Purvis was wearing a dark blue sports*

*shirt and gray flannel slacks. His left arm was broken by the blow. There were two bottles of imported beer on the drainboard in the kitchen, opened but untouched.*

*I am aware that none of the above is acceptable as evidence in a court of law, but I believe that, given the facts, you can eventually get a confession from them or enough evidence of your own to convict.*

*Your inference, as to why I withheld this information is correct. I am using it for extortion, to the extent of \$100,000. This disclosure, I realize, will tend greatly to discredit my story on the ground that I am a criminal myself, even if a first offender. There is another, and slightly more subtle, side to this, however, if you will consider it closely. I freely admit the attempted extortion; the mere fact that you are reading this guarantees I am dead. Therefore it is, in effect, a deathbed confession, and should carry some weight.*

Signed: JOHN GALLAGHER HARLAN.

I rolled in two fresh sheets of paper with a carbon between; and copied it very neatly, going slowly and making no mistakes. When I had finished I tore the originals into strips, wadded them up with all the discarded versions and the carbon paper, and burned them in the cookstove, later using the poker to reduce the ashes to powder. The two pages of the carbon copy I folded and left on the table. I closed the typewriter and put it away. So much for that.

There were two rolls of spare recorder tape in one of the bags. Removing them from the flat cardboard boxes they were packed in, I took them down to the edge of the lake and threw them far out into the water. They sank. Coming back to the kitchen, I put the six bass bugs I'd bought in one of the boxes, wrapped it with some of the brown paper, tied it with twine, and put on an address sticker. The other box was identical, and would look just the same when it was wrapped. I took both of them out to the car and put them in the glove compartment, along with the wrapping paper, address labels, twine, and a book of stamps.

I took the .45 automatic out of the bag, loaded the clip and inserted it, and put it in the car. It was late in the afternoon now. I walked out on the little pier where the skiff was tied up with a padlock and chain and went for a swim. When I came out I built up a fire in the stove, made some coffee, and fried a couple of eggs. Afterward I washed the dishes and sat on the front porch in the gathering dusk, smoking a cigarette. This time tomorrow I'd be well on my way to becoming rich, or any one or all three of us

might be dead. I wasn't too nervous. I felt about the same way I always did standing in my own end zone on opening kickoff while I watched the ball come sailing down toward me.

When it was completely dark I dressed in a charcoal flannel suit, crepe-soled shoes, and a blue shirt. I made sure I had the pencil flashlight and my pen, locked the windows and doors, and went out and got in the car. I was as ready now as I was ever going to be.



## 8

Just before I came out on the highway I pulled off the road among the pines far enough to be out of range of any passing headlights, and waited. No car came out behind me. I lit a cigarette, and looked at my watch. It was a little after eight. I still had lots of time to put in, and this was a good place to find out if he was checking up on me. An hour dragged by, and then another. Mosquitoes buzzed around my ears and an owl went *who-who-who-ah-who* somewhere out in the timber. Now and then a car went past on the pavement beyond but none of them turned in. I pulled back onto the road and went on. About halfway to town, headlights showed up behind me. I slowed deliberately to see if he would pass. He did. It was an old pickup truck. It went on and out of sight.

When I came into town I turned left, taking to the side streets. There were big trees on both sides, with street lights only at the intersections. It was after eleven now and few cars were about. Some six blocks over I turned north again until I hit the street that went up the hill past the Cannon house. I followed it for several blocks, until I came to the playing field which was on the left. The street began to rise here, going up the hill. There were four or five houses on the right. I pulled to the curb in dense shadow under the streetside trees and cut the lights. There was no one in sight; no cars went past. I waited a few minutes, letting my eyes become accustomed to the darkness. There was no sound except a radio playing faintly somewhere inside one of the houses. I got out and lifted out the recorder, checking to be sure I had the three-way outlet plug, the ball of twine, and my pocketknife.

Stars shone brilliantly in a clear sky, but there was no moon. I crossed the street and went up past the playing field. There were no street lights ahead now. The sidewalk stopped and I stayed near the edge of the pavement, ready to fade into the darkness away from the road if a car appeared. None did. I went on up the hill. When I reached the wooded area behind and below the Cannon house I crossed the street again and stepped in among the pines. The dense shadows were like velvet. I stepped softly on pine

needles, moving on up toward the light I could see briefly at intervals through the trees. I came out at last in a narrow open strip just behind the patio wall, the easement where the utility poles went through in back of the lots. Standing beside one of the poles, I looked at the rear of the house.

Lights were on in the living-room. The drape was still drawn across the big plate glass window, but I could see through it well enough to make out four people seated around a card table. It looked like two men and two women. I wondered if one of them could be Tallant but didn't see any silhouette that appeared to be large enough. It was going to be a long wait, though, because even after these people went home I had to be sure he wasn't going to show.

A half hour crept past. I began to want a cigarette very badly, but I couldn't light one here in the open. I put the recorder down near the pole and walked back among the pines. When I was screened by them on all sides I hunkered down and lit one with a brief flare of a match. I smoked it slowly and ground the stub out against the ground. When I came back up in the easement the bridge game was breaking up. They all disappeared into the hallway at the left end of the living-room, and in a moment one person came back. Presumably that was Mrs. Cannon. I could hear two cars driving away from the front of the house. Lights began to go out in the room. Then one came on at the rear of the right wing of the house. That would be her bedroom. The curtains over the windows were opaque here, but I could see the glow of illumination around the edges. In about twenty minutes these lights clicked off too and the whole house was in darkness. She had gone to bed. Alone? So far, I thought. If Tallant had been one of the bridge players, he would have left to come back later. I looked at the luminous hands of my watch again. It was ten minutes past midnight.

I settled down for the monotonous wait. Mosquitoes swarmed about my ears and bit me on the backs of the hands. Then suddenly a light came on behind a small ground-glass window just forward of the bedroom. Bath, I thought. Did that mean Tallant was there? No. It went off again almost immediately. She was probably after a sleeping pill or glass of water. If Cannon's head had looked anything like Purvis's after they hit him, I thought, she probably bought sleeping pills by the quart.

The minutes dragged on: It was one o'clock. Then one-thirty. There were no signs of Tallant. He must not be coming, or he'd have been here by this time. Some Tallant, I thought. I'd have been in there before the light bulb got cold. I thought of her in that

room alone and wondered if she slept in one of those shortie nightgowns or maybe just in the raw. Then I wrenched my mind away from her and cursed under my breath. Thinking about her always made me uncomfortable. Well, maybe she'd told him not to come. That happened, too.

The house was dark and silent and the others in the neighborhood had long since put out their lights. I began to grow impatient, and a little nervous, wanting to get it over with, but I made myself wait. Being caught in there would ruin everything. Give her until three o'clock, anyway. She should be asleep then if she was going to sleep at all. I began to worry about the door again. Suppose she had discovered the night latch was off? But I'd seen her leave the living-room to go to bed, and she hadn't checked it. Stop stewing about it. Mosquitoes sang about my face. I flailed at them with my hands. It was a long, long hour.

When the hands of the watch came up to three I was tense and eager. I set the recorder on top of the wall and climbed over, landing softly on the grass on the other side. Going slowly and avoiding the lawn furniture from memory, I eased up to the flagstone terrace outside the living-room door. The soft-soled shoes made no sound on it. I located the door and reached for the screen. It didn't open.

I stood for a moment, cursing silently. I'd been right there at the door and hadn't had brains enough to check the screen to see if it was unlatched. But maybe it had been latched since then. That would mean the door was locked again. Well, there was no way to tell until I got the screen open. I set down the recorder and took out my pocketknife.

Switching on the little flashlight, I ran the beam along the edge of the frame inside until I located the hook. It took only a few seconds to work the knife blade through the mesh, place it under the hook, and pry upward. It came free with a little rattle as it bounced up and fell back against the wood. I switched off the light and waited, holding my breath. The night was silent all around me. It was all right, I thought; she couldn't have heard it inside with all the doors and windows closed. The door, damn it, the door! I eased the screen open and took hold of the knob. It turned. I breathed softly.

I stepped inside, gently closed the door, and pushed around the end of the drape. It was cool after the heat outside. The blackness was impenetrable. I stood motionless for a long minute, listening intently. There was utter silence except for a faint whirring noise somewhere in the house from the blower mechanism of the air-

conditioner. I switched on the flashlight and stepped across the room to the long, custom-built sofa. Lifting the red-shaded lamp off the end table, I placed it on the sofa and moved the table out of the way. Nothing made any sound on the carpet. Squatting, I looked behind the sofa. It was fine. There was plenty of room for the recorder, between the back of the sofa and the wall. I set the light down on the table, picked up the end of the sofa, and moved it out from the wall until I could get behind it.

I was working fast now, and silently, with all the moves worked out and memorized in advance. Taking out my knife, I cut away a section of the fabric of the sofa back, near the center, and stuffed it in one of the pockets of my coat. I could see the coil springs now, and the padding in front of them. I opened the case of the recorder, took out the microphone, and put it in position between two of the springs, facing the front. I lashed it securely in place with some of the twine. Feeling around with my fingers, I was satisfied. It wasn't quite touching the padding.

I turned and located the electrical outlet in the baseboard under the drapery of the window. Just as I had thought, it was a dual receptacle with both circuits in use by the big lamps at each end of the sofa. I pulled out one of the lamp cords, inserted the multiple plug in its place, and then plugged in the lamp and the recorder in two of its outlets. I put the recorder on the floor against the wall and set the controls, all except the on-off switch. Moving the sofa back to its original position very carefully, I replaced the end table, and put the lamp back on it. Sitting on the end of the sofa, I reached back with my right hand. I could just touch the switch. I turned it on and brushed my fingertip against one of the spools. It was turning. The drape wasn't fouling it anywhere; everything should be all right. I turned it off again and stood up. Moving away a little, I swung the light around the end of the sofa to see if there was anything visible that would give it away. It was all right. The end table cut off any view behind the sofa.

I straightened and wiped my face with my handkerchief, suddenly conscious that in spite of the air-conditioning I was soaked with sweat. I had been oblivious to everything, working under pressure with tremendous concentration. It was all set now; the only thing that remained was getting out of here. I swept the light around once more to be sure I hadn't left anything, and eased over to the door. Pulling back the drape, I slipped out, closed the door gently, eased the screen back into position, and was outside on the terrace. I exhaled a long breath and felt the tension unwind inside me. I went back down the hill and looked at my watch as I

unlocked the door and got in the car. It was twenty minutes past three.

I rolled down the windows and lit a cigarette. I had four and a half hours to wait, and then came the tricky and dangerous part of it. I wondered if I'd be able to sleep if I sacked out somewhere. No. There wasn't a chance. I was still keyed too high. It would be better not to go back to the cabin, anyway. I didn't know where Tallant was, and as long as I didn't it would be a good idea to stay away from anywhere he could find me. The best thing to do right now was stay out of sight and keep moving. I drove back through the quiet streets and hit the road going south, but when I came to the turnoff I went on past. It was twenty miles down to Breward. I drove slowly. When I got down there I found an all-night café open on the highway and had some breakfast.

I took my time eating it and read yesterday's paper as if I hadn't heard any news since Hitler marched into Poland. Dawn was breaking when I started back. A few miles out of Breward I found a place to pull off the road at an old abandoned sawmill. There was a huge pile of sawdust and a pond with pads growing in it. I got out of the car and sat on a big timber, smoking cigarettes and thinking while it grew light and the sun came up. The air was intensely still. I looked at my watch every few minutes, growing tighter now.

Timing was very important. I wanted to hit them early in the morning while they still had sleep in their eyes, and it was vital I get there before the maid showed up and started work. But it also had to be within shooting distance of 8:30 so the postoffice would be open when I was ready for it.

It was time to go. I flipped the last cigarette into the pond and stood up. I took the .45 out of the glove compartment and slid it into the right-hand pocket of my jacket, wondering how easily people bluffed who had already committed two murders. Probably not too readily, I thought. I wheeled the car onto the road and started back to town.

It was ten minutes of eight when I pulled to the curb in front of the Cannon house. The sun was higher now and growing hot; nothing stirred along the street except a dog making his morning rounds. I hurried up the walk. A rolled newspaper lay on the concrete slab of the porch. I picked it up and leaned on the buzzer. I could hear it somewhere inside the house. I waited a moment and jabbed it again, long and impatiently. Standing there in the sun, I was roasting inside the flannel suit. Somewhere down the block I heard

a garage door fall, and a car backed out into the street I was just reaching for the buzzer again when the door opened.

I'd got her out of bed, all right. The dark hair was tousled and she was wearing a blue, robe tied tightly about the slender waist. The big eyes were still a little, sleepy and the irritation in them came into focus as she looked out and saw me. She made a half-hearted attempt to mask it, but it didn't quite come off.

"Oh. It's you, Mr. Harlan. Aren't you up a little early?"

"I've got to talk to you," I said curtly. I pushed on in. She stepped back, a little startled. I reached back to close the door behind me, and as I did I slid my fingers down the edge, found the two push-buttons of the night latch and reversed them. She was watching my face and didn't see it.

You could see she thought all this was a little highhanded. "*I beg your, pardon—*"

"Shut up," I said.

She took another step backward and her eyes went round with amazement. In another second she recovered, and the surprise gave way to blazing anger. "Would you mind telling me—"

I cut her off. "Is the maid here yet?"

"Mr. Harlan, will you please leave this house? Before I call the police."

I caught the front of her robe. "Shut up. And listen. If the maid's here, get rid of her. If she's due within the next half hour, call her and tell her not to come. You wouldn't want her to hear this."

She was scared now, but trying not to show it.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm not a sex maniac that's flipped his lid, if that's bothering you. This is strictly business. Now, how about that maid?"

She moistened her lips. "She comes at nine."

"Good," I said. I let go her robe and grinned at her a little coldly. "Let's go into the living-room, shall we? What kind of hostess are you, anyway?"

She was still having a little trouble trying to catch up. She'd typed me yesterday as a harmless yokel with two left feet, and now I'd crossed her up. I had to give her credit, though; by the time we'd walked on into the living-room and sat down facing each other across the coffee table she had recovered. I was just something she had to endure until I decided to leave.

"Cigarette?" I asked, holding out the pack.

She shook her head.

"Better have one," I said. "Good for the nerves. This is going to be a little rugged."

"Would you mind just saying whatever it was you forced your way in here to say—"

"Right," I answered. "I've got something here I'd like you to read."

She stared at me as I took the folded yellow pages of the carbon copy from the breast pocket of my jacket. I held them while I finished lighting the cigarette and dropped the match in a tray. "Here," I said.

She unfolded them. I studied her face as she started to read. There was a hint of shock right at first, and I knew that, was when she saw the thing was addressed to the two District Attorneys. From then on her face was a mask—a very lovely honey-colored mask dominated by two brown eyes that were completely inscrutable. She finished, folded it up, and dropped it on the coffee table.

I leaned back on the sofa with my hands behind my head and the cigarette hanging out of the side of my mouth. "Well?" I asked.

She took one of the cigarettes from the pack I had left lying on the table. She lit it with the table lighter. Her hands were steady. "Mr. Harlan," she asked quietly, "do you mind if I ask a rather personal question? Have you ever been confined in a mental institution?"

"Pretty good act," I said. "But you're wasting time."

"I mean it."

I sighed. "This is a nice routine, but we can skip the rest of it, if it's all right with you, and get on with the negotiations. I want a hundred thousand dollars. Do I get it?"

She stared at me. "You couldn't be serious."

I nodded toward the letter. "You read that, didn't you?"

"Yes. And a more fantastic—"

I cut her off. "Save the arguments for the jury. If this goes to trial you're going to need them. The two of you killed your husband while he was unconscious, and if you think you can get that reduced from murder in the first degree, you're crazy as hell. The jury wouldn't be out long enough to finish their cigarettes. Now, listen—"

"Of all the utterly fantastic, insane—"

I leaned forward across the table. "Shut up, and I'll read the score to you. You and Tallant and your husband can go around

killing each other every day of the week and twice on Sundays, and I couldn't care less. But when you rope me in on it it's a different story. Your husband deliberately tried to kill me because he thought I was Tallant, and he wound up by putting a permanent wave in one of my legs. They may not look like much, compared to Grable's, but I made a damn good living with them, and now I don't any more. He left you a hundred thousand dollars in insurance, but that was just a clerical error. He should have left it to me. I've come after it. Do I get it, or don't I?"

She stared at me. "You have a wonderful imagination, Mr. Harlan, even if it is slightly deranged. My husband was drinking. He lost control of his car—"

I cut her off; "We've wasted enough time. Get Tallant on the phone. I'll tell you what to say."

"You mean the Mr. Tallant who runs the sporting goods shop?"

"Among other things, that's the Mr. Tallant. Now get with it."

Her eyebrows raised. "And if I don't?"

I reached across the table, caught her by the front of the robe, and hauled her to her feet. "You're not big enough to tell me whether you will or won't. Where's the phone?"

The brown eyes were full of contempt. "You're looking right at it." She half turned her head and nodded. The telephone was on a stand in the corner of the room between the rear window and the dining-room door.

"Come on," I said. I took her arm and propelled her ahead of me. The directory was on a shelf under the instrument. I handed it to her opened to the first page inside the cover.

"There are the numbers," I said. "The local police, and the Sheriff's office. If you think I'm bluffing, or crazy, here's your chance to call me. Dial either one. Tell them a man has forced his way into your house and is threatening you. They'll have a car here in less than three minutes."

She eyed me coolly. "And in less than two I would be disfigured for life."

"I won't touch you. I've got a gun, but I won't resist arrest, either. I'm not that silly. Add it up. Carrying a gun widiout a permit, illegal entry, assault, attempted extortion—say five to ten years for a package deal. Go ahead."

She looked at me and then at the telephone. I picked up the instrument and held it out toward her. "Call the police. Or call Tallant. It's up to you."



She tried to bluff it out. For an instant her eyes locked with mine, but then they dropped. She lifted the receiver and dialed.

It wasn't one of the emergency numbers. She was calling Tallant.

## 9

"Just say something's come up," I ordered, "and that he's to get over here as fast as he can. Not another word."

She stared coldly. In the dead silence of the room I could hear the phone ringing at the other end. It stopped.

"Mr. Tallant?" she asked. "This is Mrs. Cannon. Something has come up, and I wonder if you could drive over here right away—"

I pressed down the plunger on the cradle to break the connection and took the receiver away from her, but the damage was already done.

"Smart," I said. "But that's all right. He can't do anything."

"What do you mean?" she asked coldly.

"Skip it," I said. I put the phone back on the stand. This girl was sharp. If Tallant had come on cold, without knowing how much she might have already said, I'd have had the advantage. But she'd outfoxed me, and tipped him. She'd told him as plainly as if she'd drawn him a picture that I was here—or somebody was here putting the pressure on her, but that she hadn't admitted a thing. Mr. Tallant— Hah.

But suppose? For just a moment uncertainty took hold of me. Maybe she really didn't know him. I knew he had killed Purvis, all right, because I'd seen him, but the rest of it was just a lot of logical surmises strung together. And if she *hadn't* had anything to do with Cannon's death, I was as far up the creek as you could get without a helicopter.

No, I thought suddenly. *The hell she wasn't implicated. Use your head.* She's given herself away twice in the past three minutes. She chickened out when you threw that bluff at her about calling the police. And she made an even bigger boo-boo.

"You're pretty smooth," I said, "but you goofed on that one."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's *Mister* Tallant and *Mrs.* Cannon, but you dialed his number without looking it up."

We were still facing each other by the telephone. "Really?" she said, raising her eyebrows. "Is that so remarkable? We happen to be on a committee together."

"What kind of committee?"

"We're trying to form a Little Theatre group."

"Very interesting," I said. I went back and sat down on the end of the sofa. He'd be here any minute now, and I was beginning to grow tense again. The two of them together were going to be something to handle. She remained across the room looking at me as if I were something that had crawled out of a shower drain. We waited. Nobody said anything. The silence went on building up so that when the door chime tinkled out in the kitchen it was like a hand-grenade going off.

She turned and started toward the entrance hallway. The instant she was through the door I reached down behind the sofa and flipped the switch of the recorder. Then I sprang up and followed her. I was leaning against the door frame between the living-room and the entry hall when she opened the outer door. Tallant was standing on the porch.

We were almost the same size exactly, but he could have been a year or so younger and you had to admit he was a handsome devil. It was obvious he'd never plowed up as many stadiums with his face as I had, but nobody except a chump would have ever called his good looks girlish. The eyes were blue-gray and rather hard, and the cleft chin didn't detract at all from the tough competence of the jaw. The short-cropped dark hair had a tendency to be curly. *A smooth hunk of cookie*, I thought. Whether you were after the same girl or the same fumble, he'd give you a bad time either way.

"Come in, Mr. Tallant," she said. I didn't have any idea what kind of messages she was passing along to him with her eyes, but I watched his. I also cased him for a gun, but didn't see any place he could be carrying one. He was wearing a sports shirt and no jacket.

He stepped inside the entry hall. As she closed the door he inclined his head a little in my direction and said, "Who's this?" It wasn't too convincing. He knew who I was, all right.

I lounged against the door frame and watched his face. "I'm a Federal radio inspector," I said. "Checking up on television interference in the neighborhood."

He was good, all right, and he'd been prepared, but that was a little too hot to field without showing it. I saw it hit him for a fraction of a second before he covered.

He frowned then. "What's this?" he asked quietly. "A gag?"

"Never mind," I said. "You've already answered your own question. Come on in and sit down. I've got something I want you to read."

I stepped aside and let them come through the doorway. I was careful not to let him get too near, and he was just as careful not to turn his back, though it was all too well covered to be obvious. Nobody said anything for a moment, but tension was like smoke in the room.

I'd left the letter on the coffee table intentionally. He'd have to go there to pick it up, so the logical place to sit down would be the handiest—the sofa or one of the chairs facing it. I nodded in that direction. "Mrs. Cannon's already read the good news," I said. "I think she missed one angle of it, but you'll probably catch on. If you'll notice, it's a carbon copy."

"Say, what the hell is this?" he asked roughly. "Who are you? And what do you want?"

I waved a hand. "The letter, Tallant. Why don't you just pick it up and read it? It'll explain everything."

He shrugged indifferently and walked over to the coffee table, picked up the folded yellow sheets, and sat down on the end of the sofa where I'd been. She lit a cigarette with studied arrogance and perched on the arm of one of the big chairs. I watched his face as he read. The mouth grew ugly. When he finished he looked up at me, his eyes hard.

I stood back out of reach and gave them the pitch, straight down the middle and smoking. "All right. I told you it was a carbon copy. You can see that for yourselves. A friend of mine has two originals, both signed. If anything happens to me, they go in the mail, one to the District Attorney at Houston and the other to the D.A. here. They'll have three murders to work on, and you can figure out for yourselves what the odds are that they'll be able to burn you for at least one. Don't think you can hide me well enough, either. If they don't find me for ten years they'll still be able to identify what's left with that dope on the broken leg and the dental work.

"Everybody knows I was under my own car there at the wreck, and if the police get this letter they'll know I was in the next room when Purvis was killed because there's never been anything in the papers about those two bottles of beer. You haven't got a chance in the world.

"Hold still and you won't get hurt. All I want is a hundred thousand dollars, which is exactly what you collected from the

insurance company. There's plenty more, and none of it would do you any good in Death Row. So how's it going to be?"

While I was talking Tallant had got hold of himself again, and now there was only a nasty smile on his face as he looked at me. "You mean you've got the guts to try to shake Mrs. Cannon down with a pipe dream like this?"

"Come off it, Jocko," I said. "I was standing in the next room when you killed Purvis. You want to deny it on the stand?"

He picked up the letter again and made a big deal of looking for something in it. "Here it is. '*—in the kitchen, where I could not be seen from the living-room—*' I assume from the way you put it that Purvis—whoever he was—was killed in the living-room. Now, this man couldn't see you, but you could see him. You have X-ray eyes, or something?"

"I didn't say I saw you kill him," I replied. "I said I was in the next room. But you were the only person in there with him, and I don't think he could hit himself over the head hard enough to break his own arm and split his head open at the same time. Little far-fetched, wouldn't you think?"

He snorted. "So you didn't *see* the man, but you say it was me. It just came to you, like that? A revelation, or something?"

"I saw you go out," I said wearily.

"Oh, you saw the man go out the door? He backed out, is that it?"

"No, he didn't back out."

"Then you saw him from the rear?"

"That's right."

"You never did see his face?"

"No," I said. I was beginning to get a little tired of it, but if it made him feel any better to think he was making a monkey of me it was all right.

"Did this man have his name stenciled on his clothes somewhere in back?"

"Oh, knock it off, Tallant. You can play Mr. District Attorney some other time."

He looked at Mrs. Cannon and spread his hands. He smiled. "The defense rests."

"Never mind the hokum," I said. "The question is do you want the police to have this? So far, you're covered from every angle. Nobody suspects you. But they get one look at this, and everything hits the fan. They'll come at you from a thousand angles at once."

They'll question you separately for thirty-six hours at a time and it's going to be hard to remember what the other one's supposed to be saying and what you're supposed to be saying and what you *did* say fourteen hours ago when you had your last cigarette, and then they'll tell you the other one has cracked wide open and is trying to turn State's evidence to get off with life. You want to try it and see how you hold up?"

He lit a cigarette and shrugged. "If you think the police will take the word of a blackmailing creep like you against a woman of her standing, go ahead and stick your neck out. They'll make it plenty rough for you."

"When you get tired of bluffing," I said, "we'll start to talk business."

"We've already talked it. She's not going to pay you a nickel for any framed-up mess of lies like this, and I'd advise you to fade while you still can."

"How about letting her answer for herself, chum? It's her neck."

I turned and glanced at her; she was still perched on the arm of the chair, smoking. Her eyes met mine coolly. "I never heard anything as fantastic in my life."

He gestured with the hand holding the cigarette. "So, scram."

"That's your answer, is it?" I said, making it come up tough.

"That's our answer."

It was time for a little bluster. "All right, friend, I see you want to do it the hard way. Go ahead and stew about it for a while. Start wondering just where Purvis got his information. Purvis was a cop, and a good one, and he didn't look in a crystal ball to find out she had a boy friend and that Cannon learned about it and that Cannon wasn't that drunk when he drove me off the road. You want to know where he got this information? He got it the same way the police'll get it when they start checking—by talking to people, a little bit here and a little bit there. Purvis did it alone; so go ahead and start wondering just how much a dozen men working on it can dig up.

"Just simmer for a while. I'll be around, and when you start making sense you can get in touch with me. I'm a bargain, but you'd better hurry and make up your minds before the price starts going up."

I picked up the letter and let myself out the front door. As I got in the car and pulled away from the curb I saw the drapes over the front window twitch just slightly. They were making sure I was gone. I went straight ahead for three blocks and then turned

downhill. At the corner I turned right again and was on the parallel street behind the Cannon house. I pulled to the curb and stopped. It was 8:25.

*So far, so good*, I thought. It had gone off about as I had expected. It had hit him hard at first, until he'd had time to recover and think a little. That friend-with-a-copy gag was so old it had whiskers, and he knew it, but there was just enough possibility I might be telling the truth to make him hold off and bluff while he stalled for time. When he finally convinced himself I was working alone he'd come out there to the cabin and blow my head off while I was asleep. I lit a cigarette and took a couple of puffs on it. Everything depended on the next few minutes.

Suppose they had moved, gone into the bedroom or somewhere? *Oh, hell*, I thought; *quit stewing about it. You set them up like Arruza putting a bull into position; there's no reason they should move.* I looked at my watch again. It was time.

I pulled away from the curb and drove straight ahead until I hit the street going uphill past the side of the Cannon house. I turned and went up. When I swung around the next corner I saw Tallant's convertible still parked at the curb. I cut the motor and eased to a stop. There was no movement at the front window drapes; they wouldn't be expecting me now. I went silently up the walk, carefully turned the knob on the front door, pulled it open, and went in fast.

I could hear Tallant's voice sounding angry in the living-room. It chopped off abruptly, and I knew they had heard the front door open. As I came striding through the doorway from the entry hall they whirled and stared at me. He was lighting a cigarette by the coffee table and she was across by the rear window as if she had been staring out into the patio.

Tallant recovered first. His face hardened and he took a step toward me. "We told you once, Harlan—"

I took the .45 out of my pocket and pointed it at him, "Turn around," I ordered. "Go to the other end of the room and sit down on that hearth."

He stopped, cautious but not too scared. You could almost read his thought. I couldn't be very sure of my ground if I had to resort to throwing my weight around and trying to scare them with a gun. He turned and shot a glance at her. *Get a load of this character*, it seemed to say.

"Move," I snapped at him.

"Knock it off, you silly bastard—"

*"Move!"*

He moved then. Maybe he thought I'd gone crazy and it would be a good thing to humor me. He backed across the room and sat down on the hearth, smiled wearily at her, and shrugged. I shot a quick glance at her myself. She had remained where she was, near the window. She was still outwardly cool and arrogant, but I thought I saw the beginnings of apprehension in her eyes. Maybe she was quicker than he was, and was already beginning to wonder if something hadn't gone wrong with the script.

I stepped forward, still holding the gun in my right hand. With the left I picked up the red-shaded lamp on the end table and dropped it on the sofa. Sliding the table out of the way, I pushed the end of the sofa away from the wall and reached behind it. They froze dead still now and stared as if hypnotized. I watched them as I lifted the recorder into view.

She gasped, and I thought for a second she was going to fall. In the sudden, taut silence that followed, he began to get up slowly from the hearth with deadliness quite naked in his eyes. I had them. I had them, that is, if I got out of here alive with that tape.

I pointed the gun at him. "Sit down," I said.

He stopped, just half erect; and hesitated. For a second it hung in the balance, ready to go either way. I hoped he didn't have sense enough at the moment to realize I couldn't shoot without ruining it all. A bullet through the leg would stop him without killing him, but anything that brought the police into it now would put me right up the creek with them.

I had sense enough myself not to keep talking and making threats. I just held the gun and waited while the silence stretched out. He sat back down, very slowly, his face white and greasy with sweat. I sighed, but didn't relax too much. The whole situation was still explosive, and it would take only one bad move to set it off.

"Stand over there near him," I told her.

She moved like someone in a trance.

"Just stay where you are, both of you, and nobody'll get hurt," I said. "What the hell, relax. It's only money."

I set the recorder on the end table and flipped the controls to rewind. When I had most of the tape back on the spool I set it for playback and adjusted the gain. They stared while that tense silence fell over the room again.

The first voice issuing from the loudspeaker was my own. "—wondering where Eurvis got his information. Purvis was a cop—" I'd rolled it back a little too far, but it didn't matter. I let it run.



The voices came through fine. I did the threatening act, and then there was the sound of the front door opening and closing. A moment of silence followed. They would be watching out the front window to be sure I was gone.

I waited, holding the gun ready. It was coming now.

# 10

There was tension in the room like an electric charge.

The first voice to come out of the loudspeaker was Tallant's:

"He's gone!"

MRS. CANNON: "Dan! I'm scared! What are we going to do?"

TALLANT: "Julia, for Christ's sake, relax! There's nothing to get excited about. He's just bluffing—"

MRS. CANNON: "*I told you!* I told you to go back and see if he was still unconscious under that other car. Why didn't you listen—?"

TALLANT: "Will you shut up for a minute? I tell you, he was out the whole time. He's guessing, and making it up. He got the idea from Purvis. Purvis must have described you, and he realized it was you he saw out there on the road in the swamp—"

MRS. CANNON: "And why in the name of God didn't you make sure there was nobody else in the apartment before—?"

TALLANT: "Listen! He has to be lying about that too. I tell you I looked. There wasn't anybody in that kitchen."

MRS. CANNON: "What about those two bottles of beer?"

TALLANT: "I didn't see any bottles of beer."

MRS. CANNON: "Can't you see, you fool, he has to be telling the truth? The police would know. And there hasn't been anything about them in the paper. And where did he get that thing about the radio inspector, if he wasn't there?"

TALLANT: "All right! All right! Maybe he was there. But it's just his word against mine—"

MRS. CANNON: "*Word!* For the love of heaven, can't you see that if the police even suspect for a minute you were there they'll see the whole thing?"

TALLANT: "Look, he won't go to the police. How can he?"

MRS. CANNON: "Of course he's not going to the police, because we're going to pay him off. There's no other way. If there's even a hint that it wasn't an accident, we haven't a chance in the world."

TALLANT: "Are you crazy? Pay him off? Don't you know any better than to give in to a blackmailer? Once you give him a nickel, he'll bleed you for the rest of your life."

MRS. CANNON: "Maybe you have a better suggestion."

TALLANT: "You're damn right I do."

MRS. CANNON: "*No!* We can't!"

TALLANT: "The hell we can't. He's asking for it, the same as Purvis."

MRS. CANNON: "But suppose he's telling the truth about the other copy of that letter?"

TALLANT: "He's not. It's an old dodge.""

MRS. CANNON: "But Dan! We don't *know*. We can't take the chance."

TALLANT: "There's no other way, I tell you! The thing to do is bluff him and stall for time until we're sure. Then get rid of him. We're in this too deep to be squeamish or turn chicken now. Jesus Christ, I wish we'd never been out there that day! If only— Oh, hell, there's no use crying about it now. We've got to go ahead."

MRS. CANNON: "Purvis. And now this one. Will we ever be able to stop?"

TALLANT: "We'll never be safe as long as he's alive. You know that."

MRS. CANNON: "Yes. You're right. But we've got to be sure, first. I mean, that he's the only one. And we've got to be careful. We can't let anything go wrong this time."

TALLANT: "Don't worry. If he's stupid enough to think we'd fall for an old gag like that, he's too stupid to worry us. Let him think we believe it."

MRS. CANNON: "But suppose he is telling the truth?"

TALLANT: "He's not! Good God, can't you see that? Do you think a pig like Harlan would divide anything with anybody? He's in it alone. He wouldn't trust anybody else."

MRS. CANNON: "It's so dangerous. If we guess wrong—"

TALLANT: "Stop it! Stop it! Leave it to me. I can outguess a thug like that— Shhhhhh!"

There was the sound of the front door opening and closing, and then Tallant's voice saying, "We told you once, Harlan—"

That was all of it.

*Brother*, I thought, *it's enough*. Once that was out of their reach I could write my own ticket.

Tallant had started to get up. He stared at her, his eyes hard. "How did he get that in here? Don't you even know what goes on in your own house?"

"Sit down," I said. "I planted it last night after she'd gone to bed. Now. Both of you stay right where you are. This is not going to cost you anything but money, and you've got plenty of that, so play it safe, and don't take any chances."

"I'll get you, Harlan," he said.

I nodded toward the machine. "I heard you the first time."

He remained crouched, estimating his chances.

"Sit down," I said again. He slowly settled back on the hearth.

The room fell silent again. I flipped the machine onto rewind and put all the tape back on one spool. Lifting it off, I backed across to the opposite end of the room, near the doorway to the entrance hall. There was a big chair here, with a table beside it. I slid the table around a little so I could sit on the arm of the chair, facing them, with its surface in front of me. They were twenty-five feet away, at least. I put the gun down on the table, still watching them, and pulled the empty cardboard box from my pocket. Slipping the roll of tape inside it, I took out the wrapping paper and what was left of the ball of twine and made a shipping parcel of it. They continued to watch me like two big cats. I stuck on an address label, but left it blank. Finally I put on some stamps and shoved it into the breast pocket of my jacket alongside the other package containing the bass bugs. They were identical except for weight I stood up with the gun in my hand again. "Toss me your car keys," I said to Tallant.

He shook his head. "You'll have to. Take 'em away from me."

I wondered if he thought I was that stupid. "Doesn't matter," I said. "I'll just rip the ignition wiring out of your car."

He slowly drew the keys from his pocket and threw them across the room near my feet. I picked them up.

I switched my gaze to her. "Where're yours?"

She made no answer.

"Come on," I said. "A little co-operation."

"They're in the dining-room. On the sideboard."

"Get 'em," I ordered.

"Get them yourself, if you want them. They're behind you."

I motioned with the gun like somebody in a western movie. "The keys, honey. You're driving me to town."

Her face was white as chalk, but she defied me. "Do you think I'd go out of the house dressed this way?"

*Women*, I thought. "Never mind the way you're dressed. You won't have to get out of the car. Is there a door from the kitchen into the garage?"

She nodded.

"All right. Lead the way."

She hesitated. I stared at her without saying anything. In a moment the defiance wilted and she came toward me. I stepped aside to let her go through the doorway. They ganged me then, but I had been expecting it and was ready.

As she passed me she swayed slightly and then fell, as if she had fainted. She came over against me and tried to get her arms around my neck. I peeled her off with one arm and dropped her across the chair, turning at the same time to meet him. He had come too far and was moving too fast to stop or change direction by the time he saw I'd got rid of her. I sidestepped and gave him the stiff-arm with the flat side of the gun just above his ear. He plowed on into the table and chair and came to rest with the wreckage of the table settling down on top of him.

She opened her eyes and began pushing herself out of the chair. "*You ape—*"

"Sure, sure," I said.

"You've killed him!"

"He's all right," I said. "Just take your feet out of his face and he'll get up."

He climbed unsteadily to his knees with a trickle of blood running down the side of his neck, too groggy to stand yet. All the fight was gone out of both of them for the moment. I jerked my head for her to go ahead into the dining-room. She went through the doorway. "We'll be back in a few minutes," I said to Tallant. "Make yourself at home. Go ahead and call the police if you want me to be picked up with this roll of tape on me."

He put a hand up to the side of his head and stared at the blood on his fingers as he brought it away. "Someday," he said softly.

I said nothing. I went on into the dining-room and motioned for her to pick up the keys. She led the way. The kitchen door opened

into a two-car garage. The stall next to the kitchen was vacant; a new Buick sedan stood in the other. I stepped out and stood where I could watch her and the doorway at the same time.

"Open the garage door and get in the car," I told her.

She pressed a button on the wall and there was a whirring sound of an electric motor. The door behind the Buick came up. She got in behind the wheel. I crossed over and climbed into the rear seat.

"Postoffice," I said.

There was no sign of Tallant. We backed out into the street. I put the gun on safety and shoved it into the right-hand pocket of my jacket, breathing softly in relief now that the pressure was off. We rolled down the hill, saying nothing. I looked at her face in the mirror. It was white and still, the brown eyes enormous but devoid of any expression at all, as if she were beyond caring.

We were several blocks from the house now. "Pull to the curb for a minute," I said.

We stopped. I took out the box containing the bass bugs. It was much lighter than the other, so there was no chance of mixing them up. When I'd packed it I had put wadded paper inside so they wouldn't rattle around. Taking out my pen, I printed George Gray's address on the sticker. She could see what I was doing by glancing into the mirror, but she couldn't see the address. I placed it upside down in my lap and recapped the pen.

"All right," I said.

We went on. I leaned back in the seat and lit a cigarette. Traffic was fairly heavy this time of the morning. "There's a drive-in box in front," I said. "Just pull up at that and we won't have to go inside."

We came into the square and across the west side, past the Cannon Motors showroom. I could see the new models shining beyond the glass. "Nice," I said.

She made no reply.

We turned right at the next corner. When we got to the postoffice there was another car in front of the drive-in box and we had to wait a minute. I held the parcel so she couldn't see the address. The other car pulled away and she moved up. She turned her head a little and watched without expression as I reached out and dropped it into the slot sticking out over the curb.

"There it goes, honey," I said. "You've had it."

She said nothing. We pulled away from the curb and went on. When we came up the hill and made the turn into the street before

the house, I told her, "Pull back into the garage." Tallant's car was still standing at the curb. Apparently he hadn't felt up to bridging the ignition switch and taking it on the lam. Or maybe he'd wanted to hear just what had become of the tape. It would be understandable, I thought.

She closed the garage door and we went in through the kitchen. Tallant was on the sofa in the living-room holding a towel to the cut place over his ear. His face was savage as he looked up at us. I left the gun in my pocket and leaned against the doorway.

"Tell him, honey," I said.

"He mailed it," she said woodenly. She walked across to one of the big chairs by the coffee table, sat down, and reached wearily for a cigarette.

"You see?" I asked.

He stared and said nothing.

I lit a cigarette and waved the match at them. "Anybody want me to draw him a picture? If not, let's get on with the business."

He started to open his mouth, but was interrupted by the sound of the door chime. I motioned for them to remain where they were, and went to the front door. No one was there. When I came back she nodded coldly in the direction of the dining-room. I went through and opened the rear door, which opened on the patio. It was the colored girl. She was chewing gum.

I dug a dollar out of my pocket. "How's to duck over to the store and buy a dozen eggs? Mrs. Cannon needs them for breakfast."

She dropped the gum into neutral and considered this. "Long way to the sto'."

"Well, be sure they're fresh, then," I said, and closed the door. I started back into the living-room, but heard it open again behind me. She stuck her head inside.

"Miz Cannon all right?" she asked. "She don't nevah eat eggs."

"She does now," I said. "She's on a diet."

Her eyes grew big. "You a doctah?"

"Yes," I said.

"She ain't got nothin' bad, is she?"

"No. Just a touch of caisson disease," I said. "All she needs is rest. And eggs, if she ever gets any."

"Oh." She pulled her head back out of the door.

I went back into the living-room. They hadn't moved. Tallant looked up at me. "You don't think you're going to get away with this?"

I sighed, and went over by them to crush out the cigarette. "You're a hard man to convince, pal. But if you insist, I'll make the spiel. Here goes.

"You're dead, both of you. You had two ways out; you could pay me off, or if you were sure there wasn't anybody else with another copy of that letter you could kill me. That last has just been answered for you. The whole thing is on the tape, in your own words, and she just now saw me put it in the mail. If anything happens to me, it goes to the police, along with a copy of the letter. There's no way you can get it back except by buying it. The man I sent it to has orders to pay no attention to a telephone call from me asking to have it mailed back or given to some other person. He'll give it to me only, in person, and he names the place and time. So you can see jumping up and down in my face isn't going to do you any good. If you did force me to call him, he'd only tell me where to meet him. And if I didn't show up alone and in one piece he wouldn't show at all. So you can scratch that.

"Which just leaves the easy way. I can't see what the hell you're crying about. He left over a quarter of a million, plus the insurance. What do you want, anyway? Give me mine, I kiss you both for luck, and fade. Nobody else knows about it, so you settle down, join the PTA, and spend the rest of your lives bitching about what the younger generation's coming to. Looks simple to me. How about it?"

She was recovering faster than he was. "And what guarantee do we have you'll keep your word?" she asked coldly.

"None," I said. "But what else can you do?"

"I see what you mean. We're completely at the mercy of a conscienceless thug who'd betray his own mother."

"Sure, sure," I said.

"And you wouldn't even return the tape—"

"Of course I'd return it. What the hell, you think I want it for a souvenir? Look, use your head. This is a simple business proposition. I don't give a damn what you do or what becomes of you, or whether you kill everybody in this end of the state, as long as I get paid for being run over out there that night. Why get hot under the collar like a bunch of emotional types? You're a couple of tough cookies looking out for yourselves; I'm another cookie



looking out for John Harlan. What's to blow your stack about? It's just merchandise—"

Tallant leaned forward with his fingers gripping the edge of the coffee table so tightly the knuckles were white. "You dirty bastard —"

I walked over and dropped his car keys on the table. "Why don't you get lost? I'm talking to the chairman of the board, and we can probably work out a deal without any static from you. You're getting a free ride, so what are you kicking about anyway?"

He stared up at me. "You think I'm going to hold still for this?"

"You kidding? What the hell are you holding still for? She's paying the freight, isn't she?"

"Who said she was?"

"She did, as I recall. But we can ask her again." I turned and looked at her. "How about it, baby?"

She stared coldly for an instant, but then she nodded. She was a realist, that girl.

"You'll get it," she said.

It was as easy as that.

"That's using the old head," I told her. I sat down on the chair at the end of the coffee table, between them. "You and I are going to get along fine, honey."

"I *am* flattered," she said.

"Now, let's work it out."

"What do you mean?" ,

"Julia, I tell you—" Tallant interrupted.

I waved a hand at him. "Shut up. I'm talking to one of the men."

He started to rise, his face ugly. For an instant I was afraid I'd pushed him too far; after all, I still had that tape on me, even if they didn't suspect it. If he went crazy and lost his head enough to jump me they might find it. I had to be more careful.

But I couldn't let him know he had me worried. "Why don't you scram, Tallant? You're just getting in the way."

"And leave her here alone with you?"

"Cut it out, will you? I'm not going to hurt her. We're just talking business, and we need you like we need a fourth for bridge."

"You might as well go, Dan," she said. "There's no use starting a fight."

"But, damn it, Julia—"

"Let me handle it, please."

"Don't you understand? Listen, if you give in to him, you'll never get him off your back—"

"Do you have any other suggestion?" she asked coldly. "It would seem to me you've bungled enough already."

"*Bungled!* Listen, who let him plant that recorder in here?"

"Will you go?" she asked.

"Make up your minds, will you?" I said. "That maid will be back here in a few minutes."

"All right! All right!" Tallant stood up, his face dark with rage. "If you're going to let yourself be pushed around by this thug—"

"You don't catch on very fast, do you?" I asked. "There's nothing else you can do."

"He's right," she said wearily. "Can't you see it?"

"I'd never pay blackmail—"

"Who's asking you to?" I said. "Hell, you couldn't pay for a drink. Beat it."

He stared down at me for an instant, and then turned silently and went out. The front door slammed. I breathed a little easier. He'd been on the ragged edge of losing his head.

She picked up a cigarette from the box on the table. I held a match across to her, and then lit one for myself. She stood up, walked slowly across to the rear window, and then came back to perch on the arm of the sofa, diagonally across the table from me. She was a smooth-looking dish.

I leaned back in the chair. "With your looks you could have done better."

She raised her eyebrows and said coldly, "I beg your pardon?"

"You're a tough number, and a smooth one. A realist, and you've got a head on you. But why'd you go for that character? He's acting like an overgrown kid."

She regarded me coolly. "I believe you wanted to discuss something with me. Would you mind coming to the point?"

"Sure," I said. "Money."

"Precisely. And what about it?"

"Just this. We've been tossing a lot of big words around, but let's take a closer look. A hundred thousand dollars in cash makes a nice musical sound when you say it, but when you start to break it down it gets complicated. First, nobody keeps anything like that in a checking account, no matter how much he has. Second, even if he did he'd still cause a hell of a lot of talk when he started drawing it out in cash. So let's hear something specific. How, where, when, and so on."

She leaned forward and knocked ash into a tray. "I can raise it."

"Fill me in."

"Is it any of your business, as long as I do it?"

"Sure. Take a look. I can get in the wringer, too, if we're not careful. I've been here to see you a couple of times. Then you go to your bank and say you want to raise a hundred grand in cash. What for? To pay the light bill, you say. This is a small town. Talk gets started."

The brown eyes regarded me with level speculation. "Well, perhaps if you named some more reasonable figure, say ten thousand, it might be easier—"

I shook my head. "Unh-unh."

"Twenty?"

"Come off it, baby. I've been around, too. We understand each other better than that."

She shrugged. "I was afraid we did."

"Well, nice try, anyway. But now, let's get on. How are you going to raise it, and how long will it take?"

She thought for a moment. Then she said, "It'll take about a week, and it can all be handled in Houston, which should be safe enough as far as gossip is concerned. I have securities—mostly common stocks and railroad bonds—sufficient to cover it. They can be converted easily. I'll place a sell order with the brokerage firm down there, and they'll give me a check for the proceeds. I deposit the check in a Houston bank, and when it clears, draw out the cash and give it to you. They may wonder at it, but not seriously. Banks deal with eccentrics all the time."

I had to admire her coolness. She could have been merely figuring out her share of a luncheon tab. "You're an unflustered tomato," I said.

She shrugged again. "What would you like? Hysterics? I learned to face facts very early in life. If there were any way out I'd fight you right down to the ground, but when there isn't, why not accept it?"

"Good for you." I stood up. "It's a pleasure doing business with you."

"I can assure you it's no pleasure as far as I'm concerned. I wish you'd never been born."

"It's just the breaks, Brown Eyes. Some days you can't murder a soul without getting caught at it." I yanked the microphone cord out of the back of the sofa and pulled out the power plug. She watched me.

"You unlatched one of the doors when you were here yesterday?" It was more a statement than a question.

I nodded toward the door in back of the drape. "That one."

"Clever. And I thought you were an utter idiot."

"Well, better luck next time, honey." I closed the recorder. "Just so we don't start anybody thinking, I won't come around here any

more, but I'll be in touch with you by phone to see how you're coming along raising the geetus."

"Where will you be? Here in town?"

"No. Out there at the fishing camp. It'll look better that way. Now, let's see. This is Thursday, right?"

She nodded.

"Well, how about a week from today, in Houston? Think you can do it by then?"

"Yes. And can you have the tape back from your fellow thug by that time?"

"I think so." I started for the door, and then turned. "Anyway, we'll be in touch. And just one more thing. Better caution Tallant about flipping his lid and trying something silly. Remember, if anything happens to me you'll both land in Death Row."

She said nothing. I went on out and got in the car. On the way out of town I stopped at a small grocery and bought a dozen cans of beer and some more supplies for the kitchen. I picked up a roll of the plastic film they use to wrap things in a refrigerator with, and two rolls of Scotch tape. I bought fifty pounds of ice, wrapped it in an old blanket, and shoved off for the lake.

It was a little before ten when I swung off onto the road going into the swamp. I met no one. About four miles in, where the road wound through a heavy stand of pine on a hillside dropping away to the bottom, I slowed. In a moment I found it, a faint trace of an old logging road leading off to the left. It had been unused for years and the ruts were sifted over with dead pine needles. I pulled off onto it and went ahead until the car was out of sight of anyone going by. When I stopped and cut the engine there was dead silence except for a faint whisper of breeze dirough the tops of the pines. I took the roll of tape out of my pocket and began wrapping it in the plastic, stretching the film tightly for a good waterproof seal. I used the whole roll, and then bound it solidly with the Scotch tape. When I had finished I got out, took the jack handle from the trunk, and looked about for a likely spot. Off to the left some fifteen or twenty yards, vines grew around an old stump. I parted them, scooped out a hole with the jack handle, and buried the package, tamping the soil down neatly and carefully rearranging the pine needles and leaves over it. Nobody would ever find it. I turned the car about and drove back on the road. After I was back in the ruts, I backed up and then came forward again to erase the tracks leading in.

The cabin lay in mottled shade from the big oaks around it as I drove into the clearing. I unlocked the front door and went inside. Starting a fire in the cook-stove, I burned the carbon copy of the letter and the rest of the typing paper, along with the carton the plastic wrap had come in. Then I took the typewriter outside and locked it in the trunk of the car with the recorder.

I brought in the ice and put it in the box, and piled the beer cans on it. After I had arranged the groceries on the shelves, I opened some pork and beans and ate them out of the can to save dishwashing. Punching one of the cans of beer, I took it out on the porch and lit a cigarette. I was tired from being up all night, but too excited to be sleepy. It was wonderful. I had it made; in one stroke I'd tied them up and left them with no way out except to pay me. A week from today I'd meet her in Houston, she'd hand me a fortune in good, hard cash, and I'd be on my way. Nobody would ever know.

After I had finished the beer I put on swim trunks and went down to the pier. The skiff, moored to it with a padlock and chain, was half full of rainwater. I bailed it out and then went for a swim. The water was warm and fairly clear now in late summer. I climbed out and lay down on the pier in the shade of the big oaks overhanging it, conscious of the drowsy hush of midday. Four days' tension unwound inside me like a breaking clock spring, and I went to sleep.

I didn't know what waked me. I opened my eyes and Julia Cannon was standing beside my legs looking down at me.

"Hello," I said.

She nodded. "Hello."

I rubbed a hand across my face. "How long have you been here?"

"Just a few minutes."

I couldn't see anyone else, either here on the pier or up by her car in front of the cabin. "Where's the moose?"

"Moose?"

"Tallant."

"I don't know," she said.

It was late afternoon, and shadows were reaching out across the clearing. She wore a dark pleated skirt and a soft, white, long-sleeved blouse with French cuffs. I turned my head slightly and completed the survey. She had on nylons in that area, and sling pumps.

"Nice," I said.

She made no reply.

"Don't mind me," I said. "I always wake up this way."

She was carrying a pack of cigarettes in her hand, and a paper book of matches, because women never have pockets in anything. She fumbled with them now, lighting one.

I reached up a hand for it. "Thanks," I said. She lit another for herself.

"Quite neat," she said. "An entire philosophy in one gesture."

I propped myself on an elbow. "Don't be an egghead, honey. You're stacked all wrong."

She shrugged.

"What's on your mind?" I asked.

"Nothing." She sat down with her back against one of the upright poles to which the pier was secured. Raising her legs, she tucked the skirt in under them.

"What progress with the money?" I asked.

"I called the broker in Houston and gave him a list of securities to sell. The proceeds will be deposited to my account in the bank down there next Tuesday."

"Nice going," I said. "I'll meet you Thursday morning. Right?"

She nodded. "I'll be at the Rice Hotel."

"Alone?"

"Is that your concern?"

I took a drag on the cigarette. "You can bet it is. I don't want Tallant around when I give that tape back to you. I've seen some of his work."

"You think of everything, don't you?"

"Take a look at the hole you're in and you can answer your own question. We work it this way. Tallant is to be up here in his store on Thursday morning. Just before I meet you with the tape, I call him long distance. If I don't hear his voice, I don't show."

She nodded coolly. "That sounds all right. You'll have the recorder with you? I shall want to hear the tape, naturally."

"Of course. I'll come to your room at the hotel. We play it back, you put the money in my warm little hand, and I fade."

"Very well," she said. She looked musingly at my face. "Tough, aren't you?"

"I try to get along."

"You should go far. Is blackmail a new field for you?"

"Maiden voyage."

"I must say you have a masterly grasp of its intricacies, for a beginner."

"Thank you. I like your legs."

"You don't have any trouble with the moral aspects?"

"Why should I? I'm just a press agent in reverse. You're paying me to keep you off the front page."

The brown eyes met mine probingly. "Never mind the comic rationalization. It doesn't bother you in the slightest, does it?"

"No. I'm a bastard. I admit it."

"Frank, to say the least."

"Look. It's a jungle. They throw you into it naked, and sixty years later they carry you off in a box. You just do the best you can."

She smiled a little mockingly. "Ah. The beginnings of thought. You're a nihilist."

"That's out of style," I said. "Nobody's been one for years."

"You *are* surprising. I didn't think you'd know what it meant."

"Duh," I said. "I saw it in a comic book."

She shrugged. "Never mind." Her glance crawled up me from toes to shoulders and back again. "Just don't be an egg-head. You're stacked all wrong."

I looked at her face. It was completely expressionless. "How about a beer?" I asked. "I've got some on ice."

"Love one," she said. "How about helping me up? These high heels—"

I stood up and reached a hand down for her. She took it and I lifted. She came erect, teetered a little, and braced herself with a hand on my shoulder. I took her arm as she walked ahead of me down the pier.

"Thank you," she said when we were on solid ground, and pulled her arm away. I was listening for something in her voice, and thought I heard it.

She led the way toward the car instead of the front porch of the cabin. I stood behind her as she opened the right front door. "Something I wanted to get," she said, reaching into the glove compartment.

There was an overnight bag on the floor in back. She turned and saw me looking at it.



"I was—I mean, I'm going to Dallas to visit friends over the weekend," she said.

"Hot there, this time of year," I said.

"Yes. Isn't it?"

The sun was far down now, below the wall of timber around the clearing, and there was something about the light that played up her flamboyant coloring—warm red, honey, deep brown, and the jet shadow of her hair. She had taken something from the glove compartment, but at the moment I wouldn't have noticed if she'd been carrying a lighted neon sign in each hand.

"You promised me a beer," she said.

"Sure," I replied. We went up on the porch. "Make yourself at home. I'll change out of these trunks and open a couple of cans."

I went through into the back room, took off the swim trunks, and put on shorts and a pair of flannel slacks. Just as I was shoving my feet into sandals she came in. She leaned against the door frame, holding a cigarette in her fingers, and swept an amused glance around the room at the beds and the duck-hunting clothes hanging along the walls.

"Very cozy," she said. "A little crude—but masculine."

I tossed the trunks across a chair and stepped toward her. She didn't move out of the doorway. I leaned an arm against the frame above her head and stood looking down at her.

"Long drive," I said.

She tilted her head back. "Yes. Isn't it?"

She put a hand up on my arm. "No shirt. Characteristic."

I said nothing.

"Like oak."

"Yes," I said. "Isn't it?"

She stared musingly at the gold cuff link on her wrist as the hand slid downward, across my shoulder. The cigarette slipped from the fingers of her other hand and fell to the floor. She didn't appear to notice it.

"You dropped your cigarette," I said.

She glanced down. "Oh. So I did."

It was lying near her feet. She placed the toe of one of the pumps on it and ground it slowly into the floor.

She looked back up at my face.

"I was finished with it," she said.

# 12

It was dark in the room. She stirred languidly beside me on the narrow bed and sat up, groping on the table for a cigarette. The big match flared, revealing her nakedness. She couldn't have cared less. She was a cool devil in most ways, but when she was after fun she took it fervently and unbuttoned.

"Oh," she said. The hand carrying the match stopped its movement a little short of the end of the cigarette.

"What is it?" I asked. ?

"I almost forgot the thing I came out here for."

"Like hell you did," I said.

She turned her head slightly and smiled at me in the light of the match. It was a large assortment of smile wanton and go-to-hell at the same time, with just a trace of well-fed cat. "No," she said. "I brought you something."

"Not really?"

"Shut up." She lit the cigarette and waved the match to put it out. "It's on the table in the other room."

"What is?" Then I remembered she had taken something from the glove compartment of the car.

"The envelope. With the money in it."

"Money?"

"Really. I'm not that distracting, am I?"

"How much money?"

"That's more like it. You should stay in character."

"The hell with that. How much?"

"Eight thousand." :

"Why?"

"Partial payment. What else? I happened to have that much available, and since I had to give it to you. Sooner or later—"

"You're a relaxed type."

"Not relaxed. Realistic. Don't misunderstand me; I'm not soft. If you'd left yourself open anywhere, you'd never have extorted a nickel from me. But you didn't—so what's the use stalling or crying about it?"

"How about this? Not that I'm kicking, you understand, but you did surprise me a little—"

"Women can surprise you? At your age?"

"So I'm stupid."

"Just say you intrigued me."

"That's good."

"You're quite interesting. You have daring, imagination, and no more moral restraint than a cobra. I don't like dull men."

"So you like me. Crap."

"I didn't say I liked you. I said you interested me."

"That's nice," I said. I got up and went into the other room. Striking a match, I located the envelope on the table and opened it. It was a big nine by twelve Manila type, and inside were a lot of loose bills plus two blocks of fifties. The match burned down and scorched my fingers while I stared. I tried to imagine what a hundred thousand would look like. It would be a little over twelve times as much. I struck another match and carried it into the back room. When I put the envelope on the table beside the bed some of the money slid out. I looked from it to her in the flickering light.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Color scheme," I said. "Make a great painting. *Nude brunette with eight thousand dollars.*"

She smiled mockingly. "Ah, your esthetic side."

"I'm a sensitive type," I said. "I live for beauty."

"But, really, you're more complex than that. Shouldn't your great painting also include a broiled T-bone steak and a bottle of cheap bourbon?"

"Leave out the bourbon," I said. "I don't drink." The match went out and I dropped it on the floor. I sat on the side of the bed and struck another to light a cigarette.

"You see now why you interest me?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"You're an odd mixture. All your tastes are elemental; you operate right at the instinctive level. And yet you demonstrate great imagination and some intelligence in your campaigns to satisfy these primitive urges."

"Sure, sure," I said. "Why don't you write a book?"

"You're a magnificent brute."

The match went out and I tried to remember in the dark what the money looked like.

"You just take what you want."

"Sure, sure," I said.

Her voice went on. "I think we're a lot more alike in some ways than either of us would care to admit."

*Women*, I thought. They yakked all the time except when they were being laid or asleep. They could make a federal case out of as simple a thing as a jump in the hay, and then afterward they had to analyze it like a bridge hand. Well, what the hell, maybe she wasn't as bad as a lot of them, at that. At least she didn't require three days' conversation to get into bed; all she had to do was see one handy and have room to throw her clothes. She had talent, too, once she got there. I began to think about that again, stretched out beside her, and shut her up with the old classic method of turning off the yak. It was all right with her.

We stooged around the cabin all the next day, and late in the afternoon we went for a swim. She didn't have a suit in her overnight bag, but that didn't bother her to any extent. Afterward she dressed in white shorts and a knit pullover thing with short sleeves and we sat on the front porch drinking beer. She was something to see, even after nearly twenty-four hours of her.

"You're a good-looking dish," I said.

She smiled lazily and stretched out a leg, looking at her red toenails. "Why, thank you, Cyrano. You overwhelm me."

"What about Tallant?" I asked.

"Very well. What about Tallant?"

"Does he think you're in Dallas?"

"I suppose so. But does it matter?"

"No. Except he might blow his stack if he found put where you really were."

"Well,, he can't do anything."

I lit a cigarette. "No. Of course not—as long as he's in his right mind. But I don't think he's as tough as you are, and he might flip. He's close enough to the edge now; why push him over the line?"

She smiled mockingly. "Ah, there speaks the ardent lover—"

"Nuts. This thing is tricky enough now without getting it loused up with a lot of personal angles. If you want to put the harpoon in Tallant, do it after I get out of the country."

"He doesn't own me."

"Well, he's tried hard enough," I said, thinking of Cannon and Purvis. "Aren't you going to get married?"

"I don't know."

"Wasn't that the idea?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You were running around with him but Cannon got wise to it. He'd have divorced you, but the property settlement wouldn't have been very big, with the evidence he had. So when he came uncorked and tried to drive you off the road and left himself set up like a duck in a shooting gallery, you blew the whistle on him."

"I see no point in discussing it. Emotion of any kind would be beyond your comprehension."

"Hell, it's nothing to me. But what'd you do—get tired of him? Tallant, I mean."

She leaned back on her elbows and regarded me thoughtfully. "He does tend to get a little intense and possessive. And maybe I could like you better."

"Sure, sure," I said. "Have all the fun you want, but let's don't get too careless, shall we? Not till I get mine and get out of here. This is a big deal, and I don't want it screwed up by some jealous type going off his rocker. One false move and we'll have cops around here like cats at a fish fry."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" she asked coldly.

"Of course not. I'm just trying to use common sense."

"Use all you want. But I'm going to stay."

"Sure, sure. Stick around. What the hell."

She smiled. "After all, I'm supposed to have gone somewhere for the weekend. And I like it here."

"That's an old gag," I said.

She laughed.

I gave up. Women never made any sense, anyway. And there really wasn't any reason Tallant would come out here and find her; I was just jittery because there was so much at stake. *Relax*, I thought; *quit worrying and join the party*.

That was Friday afternoon. Saturday morning at ten, while we were drinking coffee in the front room, he walked in on us. He was carrying a gun in his right hand, and he was wired and set to go off.

For some reason—probably just dumb luck—she was dressed, for a change. For the best part of two days she'd been lying around like an oyster on the half shell, but this morning when she climbed out of the sack she'd put the pleated skirt and the blouse back on. Maybe that helped; I didn't know. On the face of it, it wouldn't seem to make a great deal of difference; there couldn't be much chance she'd been out here two days and nights just to give me her recipe for pineapple fritters, but you can never tell for sure about a joker who's beginning to lose his marbles. If he'd happened to walk in on us in the sack or while she was lying around in nothing but her nail polish he might have killed us both before we could open our mouths. As it was, it was bad enough.

She was sitting at the table facing the open front door and I was at the stove pouring another cup of coffee when I heard her say, "Well!" I wheeled, and he was standing in the door. He was so big it looked as if it had been stretched around him. His mouth twitched, he hadn't shaved for two or three days, and his eyes had the wild, staring look of a man who was going to swing at the next cockroach that laughed at him.

My gun was in the back room in a duffle bag and I was ten feet from him, at least, with nothing in my hand but a coffee pot. Gooseflesh prickled across my shoulders. She was all right, though. He didn't scare her a nickel's worth, and she was just the girl to show him. She smiled at him with exactly the right shade of contempt to push him over the line, and said, "My, aren't we dramatic?" I couldn't think of anything helpful except to pray he'd use the whole clip on her before he remembered me.

He took a slow step into the room and turned just enough to watch us both. He was wearing dark slacks and a white shirt with the cuffs rolled halfway up his rope-muscle forearms. The shirt was stained down the front with something he'd spilled on it, and he looked like a man on the wrong end of a two-day binge. If he'd been drunk, though, he wasn't now. He was just unstable and dangerous as hell.

"So you went to Dallas," he said harshly.

She rested her chin in one cupped palm and regarded him with faint amusement. "Are you asking me, dear?"

"Why did you even bother to lie about it, you lousy little chippy?"

She shrugged. "I didn't. I started to Dallas, but you might say I changed my mind. It looked as if it might be more fun to stay here." She smiled sweetly. "And do you know, it was. I've been having a wonderful time."

I took a chance and breathed, hoping he wouldn't notice I was still alive. Maybe he'd just kill her and go away. I wanted to kill her myself.

He walked slowly over to the table and stood looking down at her with the veins standing out on his temples. The gun lined up with her face. "Look up here," he said. "Look up at me, you roundheeled bitch—"

She glanced up calmly. "Yes, dear? And what are you going to do?"

If she'd only shut up— He was still talking, so maybe there was a chance. But, oh, for the love of God, couldn't she keep her stupid mouth shut for a minute?

I was careful not to move. "Tallant," I said softly.

He didn't even hear me. His face twitched. "I wish to God I'd never seen you. Or even heard of you. Why couldn't you have died when you were born? Look at you! You're what I went through it for—"

"Tallant," I said again, a little louder this time.

He turned then. "Don't get in a hurry," he said. "I'm coming to you."

"Listen," I said. "Don't be a fool, Tallant. You haven't got a chance in the world. If you kill us the police will get that tape. You want to commit suicide?"

"Shut up!" he shouted. "I don't care! It'll be worth it—"

"Cut it out," I went on, trying to keep my voice calm. "Use your head. Go on and get out of here, and you're in the clear. Nobody'll ever know, and she's the one who has to pick up the tab. She's paying off for you. Stop acting like, a kid."

"I'll kill both of you!"

*Gently*, I thought. *Don't move. Don't set him off.* He was making threats, having to prime himself to keep going. He was beginning to waver, and the moment to use the gun was slipping away. We might make it—if she didn't open her fat mouth again.

She did. And she put both feet in it this time. "You haven't been following me, have you, dear? You know I don't like that."

He started to turn. *Throw the coffee pot*, I thought bitterly; *that always works fine in the movies.* Then, without any warning, he

cracked. He looked around helplessly, like some big, tortured kid, and said, "Why? Why did you do it?"

"Get out," she said contemptuously.

"Julia—" He dropped the gun to the floor and stood with his chin on his chest. "Julia—" Turning, he ran out the door.

I picked up the gun and went out on the porch. He was stumbling along the road and in a moment he entered the wall of timber at the edge of the clearing and was out of sight. His car would be back up there somewhere.

She came up beside me and put an arm across my shoulders. I turned, caught the front of her blouse, and slapped her across the face with the back of my hand. It made a sharp sound in the stillness. She cried out and stepped back.

I wiped the sweat off my face with a hand that was still shaking, and walked past her into the back room. Throwing the big suitcase on the bed, I began tossing clothes into it. She came back and stood in the doorway. Her face was white except for the angry red splotch on her cheek, and she stared at me with amazement.

"What did you do that for?" she asked.

"For being an idiot."

"What do you mean?"

I straightened with a shirt in my hand. "Go ahead. Get yourself killed. But you can leave me out of it."

She shrugged. "He's harmless."

"Sure, sure," I said. He was harmless. He'd only killed two men so far.

"What's the matter?" she asked, with just a shade of the same contempt she'd used on him. "Are you afraid of him?"

"Don't try to ride me," I said. "I'll slap your face around under your ear."

She sniffed. "What's wrong with you, anyway? He can't do anything to you, and you know it."

I walked over and stood looking down at her. "Try to get this through your fat head. Maybe you can't, but try it, anyway. He can't do anything to me as long as he cares what happens to him. That's what the whole thing was based on. The minute he quits caring, threatening him with that tape is about as bright as trying to put out hell with a water pistol. He's half nuts, and you're pushing him over the line. He's already killed two men because of you—God knows why, when he could have laid you for a bar of soap—but he did, and now that he's got himself into a jam that can



put him in the electric chair, you start giving him the treatment. You don't think he'll be back. I do. And the next time he probably won't do so much talking first; he'll be smoking up the place when he comes through the door—"

"You have his gun."

"I've got news for you," I said. "They made two guns last year."

"Well, what are you going to do?" she asked, leaning against the door frame.

"I'm going to get the hell out of here while I'm in one piece. I don't want any punchy maniac blowing my head off from behind, or while I'm asleep."

Her eyebrows arched. "*Well!* And what about me?"

"The hell with what about you. You meet me in Houston Thursday at noon with that money, the way you're supposed to. In the meantime, try the Marine Corps."

She flared up. "Don't talk to me that way!"

"Beat it," I said. I turned back to my packing.

"Why, you arrogant muscle-brain—"

I collected my shacking gear off a shelf and dropped it in the bag.

"John—"

There was something plaintive about it. I turned. She leaned her head back against the door frame and the big eyes were contrite. "I'm sorry," she said.

It was a smooth routine, from blazing hellcat to appealing little girl in one breath, and I was about to tell her what she could do with it when something else occurred to me. Tallant might flip his lid and kill her, even after she'd gone back home. What was I thinking about, going off and leaving her? That was stupid; the thing to do was take her with me so I'd know damn well she would still be alive Thursday morning.

I walked over to her. "I'm sorry, too," I said. "I guess he scared me a little."

She looked up at me with an eager smile. "Why don't we go away somewhere, if you don't want to stay here?"

*You're reading my mail*, I thought. I put my hand under her chin, tilted her face up, and kissed her.

"That's the ticket. Just the two of us, like a honeymoon."

Her eyes were shining. "Wonderful. Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere, baby."

"Houston?"

"We'll go there Thursday." I didn't want to be around Houston any longer than I had to. There was always a chance that taxi driver had spilled my description to the cops.

She laughed. "Well, what does it matter? Who cares where he is, on a honeymoon?"

"Sure," I said. I put the envelope with the eight thousand on top of the other stuff in the bag, and after she'd packed hers I carried the two of them outside and locked the cabin.

"There's no use taking both cars," she said. "Why don't we go in mine?"

"No," I said. "You go ahead. Turn right when you get out on the highway. I'll follow you and leave my car in Breward. I can pick it up again when we start down to Houston."

She frowned slightly. "But why not just leave it here? Nobody'll bother it."

"Save having to come back in and get it," I replied. Naturally, I couldn't tell her I wanted her to go out first so I could stop and dig up that tape. I'd leave it in the car, of course, and she'd never know. When we came back through Breward and I drove it on down to Houston I could leave it on a lot and while she was at the bank I'd go get the tape out of it, still carrying out the illusion somebody else had it all the time.

She shrugged. "All right."

I put the bags in her Buick and got in my car. When I stepped on the starter, nothing happened. I tried again. The battery was dead.

That was odd. The generator had been charging all right. Maybe it was just a bad connection. I tried the lights. They came on dimly, and then died. Well, so you buy an old clunk—

She got out of the Buick. "What's the matter?"

"Dead battery," I said.

"Why do you suppose that is? Did you leave the radio on?"

"It hasn't got a radio. Well, you can push me to get it started."

"Oh, let's go," she said impatiently. "Leave it here."

"Push it," I said. I climbed back in. She maneuvered up behind me and came up against the bumper. I managed to swing around and we started out the road. After a quarter of a mile there still hadn't been a cough out of the motor. She stopped and got out. "What do you suppose is the matter?"

"Maybe the battery's shorted out inside; not enough juice even for the ignition."

"Well, leave the silly thing here, John. Let's go."

"I can't leave it here in the road."

"Oh, all right."

She got back in the Buick, went past me, and turned around. We maneuvered the Chevy back to the cabin and left it in the yard. I started to lift the hood to have a look under it, but shrugged. All it needed was another battery. We could bring one in when we came back. I didn't like the idea of coming back in here, but it would be safe enough. All I'd have to do would be call Tallant's shop beforehand and make sure he was there instead of down here looking for us.

I got in the car with her and we drove out of the bottom. Before we came out on the highway it occurred to me it was damned strange the car hadn't started.

With her pushing it, there should have been enough spark from the generator to fire it.

*Oh, well*, I thought, and dropped it. It was a mistake, but I was making them one after another by that time.'

# 13

We drove to Shreveport. When we checked in at the hotel, she waited impatiently until the bellhop got his tip and left; then she came close to me, put her hands up behind my neck, smiled delightfully, and said, "Isn't this nice?"

"Sure, sure," I said. I'd intended to ask the desk to send up the Houston papers, but I'd forgotten.

She leaned against me a little, "Riding in a car always does something funny to me. Maybe it's the vibration."

"Could be," I said.

"Being on a ship does the same thing."

*So does breathing*, I thought.

She brushed her hand through my hair, whirled away I from me, and spun herself onto the bed. She doubled up her legs and lit a cigarette, smiling roguishly at me above the match. "Air-conditioning, no mosquitoes, tiled bath, clean sheets—this is much better, don't you I think?"

"Who's got a one-track mind?" I asked.

She made a face. "All right. But is that so bad?"

"It's fine with me," I said.

"Well! Couldn't you be just a *little* more ardent?"

I lit a cigarette and sat down on the other bed, facing her. "I don't always get your message," I said. "Seems to me you should be sore as a boil."

"So I should."

"But you're not?"

She shrugged. "What good would it do?"

"I see what you mean. If you can't whip 'em, join 'em."

"That's part of it. But maybe I like you."

"Sure, sure."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "It's odd, I know. But there's something fascinating about you. You're exciting."

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know, really. It's a lot of things, I guess. You're big, and hard, and utterly ruthless. You're so completely a male animal from every angle—"

"And you like 'em male?"

She glanced up at me from under those long lashes. "Haven't you formed any opinion about that yet?"

We didn't leave the room for twenty-four hours. We had our meals sent up, and I got hold of all the Houston papers. There was nothing in them about Purvis, which could mean anything. The police would still be actively working on it, even if it didn't rate any space. There was no love-nest angle and no way they could work in some pictures of a half-dressed babe; he was just another sleazy character with his roof shoved in. They're a dime a dozen in any large city and have to have a real homey angle somewhere to stay in the papers more than a couple of days. That taxi driver could have come forward and given my description to the cops without anyone's bothering to get out an extra about it. That was the scary part of it; I wouldn't know, and I had to go back down there.

I thought about it. Why go down there at all? She could go draw out the money and meet me in San Antonio or Dallas or somewhere else. No. That wasn't so hot. She'd be wandering around over the state alone with over ninety thousand in cash, and there was no telling what'd happen. The way she was bothered, she was just as likely to take off up an alley after a telephone lineman. I wasn't so sure now but what she might be a little whacky, at least when she was troubled with ants in the pants, which seemed to be most of the time. There was no doubt she was one of the smoothest-looking dishes I'd ever seen, but she was beginning to strike me as a character. They both were, as a matter of fact, and they didn't look half as dangerous as they had at first. It was just dumb luck they'd fooled the police the way they had, and Purvis had been merely stupid. Hell, I'd made them look silly, right from the start.

We went to a movie Sunday afternoon and out to dinner afterward. Men turned and looked at her everywhere she went. She was in a good mood when we came back, and didn't seem to mind whether I listened to her yakking or not. When you've reached the saturation point in love-making, there's nothing you can get as sick of as being shut up for any length of time in a hotel room with a woman, but I had to hand it to her. She was good-

natured all the time, and if I just grunted occasionally when she was beating her gums fourteen to the dozen while brushing her hair or washing out her stockings with the bathroom door open it was all right with her. She just didn't want me to be out of reach for a minute.

On Monday she wanted to go shopping, and nothing would do but that I go with her. She had three or four hundred dollars beside what she'd given me, and I wandered through shops and sat around bored stiff while she bought stockings and another nightgown and some perfume and looked at ten times as much more she didn't buy.

"You don't mind, do you, John?" she said, smiling happily at me. "After all, I'm doing it for you."

"Sure, go ahead," I said. What the hell, I had to keep her pacified and contented until Thursday morning, and wandering around in stores was as easy a way to do it as any. She was beginning to wear me out.

She kept me up most of the night, yakking and being very sweet and chummy and giving me the old buildup, so it was late when I awoke on Tuesday morning, some time after ten o'clock. She was still asleep beside me, wearing the new shortie nightgown she'd bought. I raised up on one elbow and looked at her, and all sorts of bells began to go off in my mind. She was beautiful as hell, and even asleep she didn't look stupid. What kind of an act was she putting on, and why was she doing it?

So maybe she did need men the way an alcoholic needs booze—she still had too much in the way of equipment to have to knock herself out chasing them. They'd be falling all over her. Why break a leg trying to scramble into the sack with a guy who was putting the bite on her for a hundred grand? I wasn't that good. I'd never had any illusions about anything since I was eleven, and that included myself. I was no particular great-lover type. In two hours on any public beach she could pick up a half dozen big hard-shouldered jokers who'd give her just as good a run for her money in the hay and even throw in the old moonlight-and-roses pitch at no extra charge. So what was the gag?

Was it a stall? But why? What did she hope to gain by it? It didn't make any sense. I had the goods on them, and there was no way on earth they could squirm out of it. But this whole thing was too easy; it didn't ring true. My first impression of the two of them was that they were sharp, brainy, and dangerous as hell. Then he'd acted like some punchy adolescent out there at the cabin. And now she was a happy-go-lucky round-heel with nothing on her mind but

a place to fall. Was the whole thing an act for my benefit? Did they think they could con me, string me along with a measly eight thousand and a lot of empty promises? Well, we'd see about that. I reached over and shook her.

Her eyes opened. She looked at me rather coldly for an instant until she was fully awake, and then she smiled. "What is it, John?"

"I just wanted some information," I said shortly. "What's the name of that brokerage firm in Houston? The one that's selling the stocks for you?"

With no hesitation at all, she replied, "Harley and Bryson. Why?"

"And who handles your account?"

"George Harley, Jr." She looked puzzled. "But why, John?"

I ignored her. Picking up the phone from the table beside the bed, I told the operator, "I want to put in a long-distance call to Houston. Person-to-person to Mr. George Harley, Jr., at the brokerage firm of Harley and Bryson. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. "Just a moment, please."

I passed the phone over to her. She stared. "Ask Harley how he's coming along unloading your stocks. Hold the receiver out a little from your ear, and pray you've been telling me the truth."

She took it and held it as I told her. I slid over, holding her tightly with my cheek against her head and my own ear touching the outer rim of the receiver. I could hear the long-lines operators talking:

The receptionist answered. "Just a moment, please."

After a short pause, a man came on. "Harley speaking."

I squeezed her arm. If she'd been lying, she was in a bad spot."

"Oh, Mr. Harley," she said calmly. "Julia Cannon."

"Oh, good morning, Mrs. Cannon."

"I just called to ask if you had executed the order I phoned in the other day—"

"Oh, yes. I was just about to send through a statement. Let's see. . . . Have It right here somewhere, I think . . . Just a moment . . . Yes . . . Here it is. . . . Hmhmhmhm. General Motors. . . . Boeing . . . Anaconda . . . Hmhmhmhm . . . yesterday's market . . . check . . . be deposited your account bank here as instructed . . . total proceeds, less commission, ninety-seven thousand, six hundred, forty-four dollars, eighty-one cents . . . apparently all in order . . . hmhm . . ."

I sat up on the bed and reached for a cigarette. She looked at me. I nodded and waved a hand. She said, "Thank you, Mr. Harley. Good-by." She hung up.

I handed her a lighted cigarette.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Just checking, honey. Just checking."

"You thought I was lying?"

"It just occurred to me I didn't have anybody's word for it but yours."

"You think I'd dare? Under the circumstances?"

"Relax," I said. I felt like a million.

Of course she hadn't been trying anything funny. How could she? They were absolutely helpless, and their staying alive depended on their doing exactly what I told them. Of course she was knocking herself out to be nice to me. If anybody had me where the wool was that short I'd be an eager beaver myself. I thought about it. The stocks were already sold; I'd heard the man say so myself. All I had to do now was go down there Thursday and pick up that big, fat bundle of folding money.

"You must think I'm insane," she said petulantly.

"Honey, I think you're terrific."

"Do you like me? Just a little?"

"Sure, sure," I said. Like her? She was Fort Knox, with legs. I was just reaching for a cigarette when the bells began to ring again.

My hand hung there halfway to the cigarette pack while the whole thing raced through my mind at once. Was that it? Was that the angle? Sure. It figured from every direction. Look at it, you fool. You underestimated them and got yourself sucked out of position, but good. They almost had you.

I grinned coldly. Almost. But not quite. There was still time.

It had been close, though, if I were right. This was Tuesday. I had been with her since Thursday afternoon, been with her every minute. She'd seen to that. She knew every move I'd made and she knew definitely I hadn't been in contact with anybody. So suppose they were feeling me out, stretching out the time I was incommunicado, testing me a little at a time? That would account for the fact the car wouldn't start—he'd butched it some way that first night to make sure that if I went anywhere it would only be with her—and it would explain this whole lovey-dovey routine on her part. They simply didn't believe there was anybody else in this



thing with me, and when they had finally proved it to their own satisfaction they'd knock me off. Like that.

I hadn't quite sold them with that piece of razzle-dazzle that morning. They weren't sure I had mailed the tape, or if I had, that I had mailed it to an accomplice. And every hour that went by without my getting in contact with *somebody* to assure him I was still alive was making my position more dangerous. The deadly efficiency of it made me shiver.

*Well, we'll see about it, I thought. Thank God I'd caught it in time.*

She gave me a provocative, sidelong glance and then made a face at me. "Well, if *that's* all you woke me up for—" She sat up in bed, stripped off the nightgown with casual unconcern and strode naked into the bathroom. She left the door just partly open, as she always did, and started yakking as she turned on the shower.

I lit the cigarette.

"—don't you think so, John?"

*Smart baby*, I thought. I didn't say anything.

"John?"

"Yes," I said. "What is it?"

"You brute," she protested above the noise of the shower, "you're not even listening to me. I said, aren't we having a good time?"

"Sure, sure," I said. "A wonderful time."

She went on chattering. I reached out for the telephone, lifting it carefully off the cradle. When the operator answered, I said quietly, "I want to make another long-distance call."

"Yes, sir," she replied. "Just one moment."

The yakking went on from the shower. It paused momentarily on a questioning note.

"Sure, sure," I answered, holding my hand over the mouthpiece.

"Well, that's better. I think you're sweet, too."

"Aren't we both," I said. That'll hold you for a minute, you sweet, deadly bitch. It did. She started humming in the shower.

"All right, sir," the operator said.

I took my hand off the transmitter and spoke directly into it, very quietly. "Fort Worth. Person-to-person to George Gray at the Gray Midcontinent Equipment Company."

"Yes, sir. Will you hold on, please?"

The humming continued from the bathroom. I breathed softly; she couldn't possibly have heard me. *All right baby*, I thought; *I've got you*.

I could hear Information in Fort Worth giving the number, and then the telephone ringing.

The humming stopped. "Oh, John?"

I grinned coldly. Putting my hand back over the transmitter, I said, "Stop the yakking for a minute, will you. I'm trying to make a telephone call. And turn off that shower."

The shower stopped abruptly. The door opened and she came out, naked, beautiful, and dripping, with a big towel in her hand. "A telephone call?" she asked with big-eyed innocence. "To whom, John?"

I smiled. "Long distance. To a friend of mine. You may have heard me speak of him."

"Oh," she said, with no surprise in her voice and no change of expression. The world lost a great actress, I thought. After six days she must have figured they about had it made, but no disappointment showed on her face at all.

Just then George's voice sounded in the receiver. "Hello? Gray speaking."

"John," I said. "How are you, boy?"

I held the receiver tightly against my ear. She'd be able to hear there was a voice on the other end and to recognize it as a man's, probably, but unable to catch a word of what it said.

"Well, you old son-of-a-gun," George said. "It's good to hear from you. How's fishing?"

I looked at her. "Fine," I said. "It's been very good. I just thought I'd let you know everything's under control here, and that the trip has been very successful. We've made ourselves a deal, boy."

"Then you will go to work for us—?"

"Sure," I said. "Right away. Next Thursday, in fact. Oh, say, you got the package all right, I guess?"

"Sure. Thanks a lot, John. You say—"

"I knew you'd appreciate it." I chuckled. "Thought they were tied up pretty neatly, myself. And hooked, what I mean. Well, I just didn't want to let too much time go by without letting you know I was okay and that the deal was set. Here's the scoop. I'm going down to Houston Thursday morning and I'll be at the Rice Hotel by about eleven. I'll get in touch with you from there about the details

of the deal. I won't take up any more of your time right now. See you, George."

"Fine," he replied. "Good-by."

I hung up and looked at her again. She merely glanced at me questioningly and went on drying herself. Her breasts swung gently under the towel. "Then he'll have the tape there by Thursday morning?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone. "That *was* your fellow thug, wasn't it?"

I stared at her, partly in admiration and partly in amazement at her coolness, and then I caught on and just managed to restrain the impulse to laugh. She wasn't acting at all. I'd just put on all that show for nothing; it had never occurred to her to doubt I was telling the truth about an accomplice.

I grinned at her. "Honey," I said. "You're cute. And you're stacked."

She smiled, and dropped the towel across the back of a chair as she looked down at herself. "How did you ever guess?" she asked.

We checked out of the hotel late Wednesday afternoon and started back. I drove. She sat rather quietly beside me for a long time. "I've had a wonderful time, John," she said after a while.

"Good," I said. "So have I." I felt wonderful. We were on the last lap. The whole thing had been so easy it was ridiculous and now all that remained was picking up the money.

"After we've finished the business in Houston, wouldn't you like to go down to Galveston?" she asked. "For just a few days?"

Women never seemed to realize they defeat their own purpose. There's nothing on earth you can need worse when you do and need less when you don't. I was caught up. I started to open my mouth to tell her to get herself a new boy when it occurred to me there was no sense antagonizing her at this stage of the game.

"Sure," I said. "That would be wonderful. We'll spend the weekend down there." After all, as soon as I got my hands on that money I could fade and there was nothing she could do about it. I'd drive the car as far as Dallas, sell it, and take a plane to the Coast. I was already making plans.

Mazatlan, on the west coast of Mexico, had been buzzing around in my head for a long time. A couple of years ago I'd made a trip down there with another guy on the squad after the season was over. We'd had a fine time, catching sails, and I could see the place was going to grow. They were putting a highway through all the way from the border and the tourists and fishermen were

going to flock in. It might never be another Acapulco, but if an operator with a bankroll and a good eye for a buck moved in now he could get in on the ground floor. The thing to do was drift down there, shack up with some babe to learn the language, and keep an eye open all the time for the good thing.

She was saying something again. "What?" I asked. I pulled out to pass a truck, and came back in the lane again.

"I said I'll have to stop at the house when we go through town and pack another bag. I'll need beach things."

"Oh." I thought about it. Well, why not? It'd be dark; nobody would see me with her if she pulled right into the garage. And while we were at the house she could use the phone to get a line on Tallant's whereabouts before we went out to the camp to get my car started with the new battery I'd picked up. I didn't like the idea of going out there at night without knowing where he was. He'd realize I was coming back sooner or later to get the car, and if he'd gone completely off his rocker by this time he might be waiting for me with a gun.

"Sure," I said.

We stopped to have dinner on the way, and it was a little after nine p.m. When we came into Wayles. She was driving then. She skirted the Square, keeping to the darker streets. When we came up past the side of the Cannon house it was dark and the whole area was quiet except for the sound of a radio or television set coming from a house farther up the street. She stopped in front of the garage door, and got out to open it herself just in case one of the neighbors might be watching. She got back in and drove inside. I waited until she'd shut the door before I got out. We stood in the hot, airless garage with the headlights glaring against a white concrete wall. When she unlocked the door going into the kitchen, I cut the car lights and felt my way along after her.

When we were inside the kitchen, I closed the door and latched it. She clicked on a light and smiled at me. "You know, we could stay here and go on down to Houston early in the morning. Nobody knows you're in here."

I shook my head. "Let's get going."

"All right," she said.

"Wait," I told her, "Don't turn on a light in the living-room. You can see through that drape if there's enough light behind it."

"There's nothing back of the house but a vacant lot," she protested. Then she shrugged. "But you already know that, don't you?"

"That's right. So just turn on one in the dining-room. That'll give you enough to use the phone. I want you to call Tallant's number."

She frowned. "Why?"

"I want to know for sure where he is before we go out there to pick up my car."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, John. Are you still making a fuss about him?"

"Never mind," I said. I took her arm and shoved her through the door ahead of me. "Call him."

There was enough illumination in this end of the room for her to dial. I sat on the arm of the big chair on the other side of the doorway. The air-conditioning was turned off and it was hot in the room and intensely silent. When she finished dialing I could hear the telephone ringing at the other end. *No, it's not really the phone ringing*, I thought. *It's just an illusion the telephone company throws in to keep the subscribers pacified.* It went on. There was no answer. She dropped the instrument back in its cradle and looked around at me.

I didn't like it at all. "Try his shop."

"He closes at six."

I took a cigarette from my pocket. "Never mind. Try it."

She shrugged. "All right, but he wouldn't be there this time of night."

"Don't give me so much static. What the hell, he does gunsmithing, doesn't he? And keeps his books."

She dialed the number. "Is there any particular message you'd like me to give him?"

"No. As soon as you hear his voice, hang up."

There was no answer.

I lit the cigarette while she hung up and stood looking at me. "You know his habits. You got any idea where he could be?"

"No."

"How about lodges? Pool halls? Where does he hang out when he's not pawing up the shrubbery after somebody's wife?"

She shrugged. "He's an amateur astronomer, he plays chess with a number of other men around town, and he goes away on two and three day fishing trips. He could be anywhere. What does it matter?"

I waved a hand at her to cut out the yakking. I still didn't like the idea of going out there at night not knowing where he was. Still,

there were a lot of other places he could be. Maybe his nerve had broken and he'd left the country. *Hell*, I thought, *it had been four days. He couldn't have been out there waiting for us all that time.* We'd take a chance on it.

"Pack your bag," I said. "Let's get rolling."

"Are we going by to pick up your car?"

"Sure. Shake it up, will you?"

"I'd like to change before we go."

"All right, all right. Just don't take all night."

"You sound nervous—"

"Get the lead out, will you?"

She started across the living-room toward the hallway leading to the other wing of the house. Then she stopped and turned. "You'll have to reach down the bag for me," she said. "It's on a shelf in one of the bedroom closets."

"Okay," I said. I followed her.

The hallway turned at right angles. Beyond that it was very dark. I stayed close behind her, holding her arm so I wouldn't bump into the walls. "Where's the light?" I asked impatiently.

We went through a doorway. I felt it brush my arm. "Here by the bed," she said. "Just a minute."

She was standing close in front of me and I could tell she was groping around for the lamp. Suddenly she turned and put her hand on my arm. It slid upward, along my shoulder.

"John," she said softly, "let's stay here tonight. We could go out there early in the morning and still be in Houston by noon."

"No."

"Please!" Her arms came up around my neck. She pulled my head down and her lips were against mine.

I suppose it's pure reflex. You're whipped, but never completely defeated; if you were dying on your feet your reaction to that piece of business would always be the same. My arms tightened around her.

"Don't let me fall," she whispered. All her weight seemed to be hanging around my neck.

A light switch clicked and the room was full of sudden light. I whirled, taking her with me part of the way until she pushed hard against my chest, spun outward, and fell. Tallant was sitting crosswise in an overstuffed chair near the door we'd come in. His

legs were hanging over the arm, and a pump shotgun was balanced across his knees.

His eyes didn't look crazy at all; they were just cold and very hard. He gestured slightly with one hand. "Nice work, Julia. Move to your left and stay down."

She moved across the shaggy white rug on her hands and knees, toward the dressing table beyond the foot of the bed.

"Sit down, Harlan," he ordered.

"Look—"

"This is a twelve-gauge, loaded with fours. It'll cut you in two."

I sat down on the side of the bed. It was a big king-sized affair with a blond oak headboard and green chenille spread. There were three windows in the room, their drapes all tightly closed.

It had all happened a little too suddenly for me. One thing was obvious, though. He wasn't crazy; the whole thing had been planned by both of them, and that business out at the cabin was an act.

I was careful not to make any abrupt moves. "Listen, Tallant, I don't know what you're trying to prove, but haven't you forgotten something?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so." His gaze shifted just slightly toward her, still keeping me in his field of vision. "We're all right, I'm pretty sure," he told her. "Checks out fine, so far."

She got off the rug and sat down on the upholstered bench before the dressing table. She sighed as she reached around for a pack of cigarettes lying among the cosmetics, and shook her head. "Believe me. I was glad to get your message."

I stared at her.. Message? For a moment I even forgot him and his gun.

She glanced at him and smiled. "Mr. Harlan appears to be a little at sea about it all."

He shrugged. "He'll catch on pretty soon."

"What the hell is all this?" I asked roughly.

She lit the cigarette and regarded me coolly. "A simple enough message, Mr. Harlan. Merely a lone coffee cup sitting on the drainboard of the sink, out I in the kitchen. Would you care for a translation?"



"Look," I said. "I'm getting a little tired of this—"

"It said, quite simply: bring the gentleman on back to the bedroom; everything is as planned."

"So we're here," I said. "So what of it?"

I reached in my pocket for a cigarette, not remembering until I'd already started the movement that it could be a dangerous thing to do if he was at all trigger-happy with that shotgun. He merely watched me boredly. So she'd already given him the high-sign I didn't have the gun with me. They were cute. They were just full of cloak-and-dagger routines.

"You ought to be on television," I said.

They merely stared at me, saying nothing.

I lit the cigarette. None of this business made any sense, but I wasn't scared, even as deadly as he looked with that shotgun. Nothing could change the fact I still had them where I wanted them and they couldn't touch me. I'd only been afraid of him when I thought he was about to flip his lid.

"You were with him every minute he was out of the hotel room?" Tallant asked her.

"Every second," she replied. "He was never out of my sight. But he made one call from the room."

"Two," he said.

She nodded. "That's what I meant. One beside the call to Harley and Bryson." She paused, and then went on, "I gather, from the fact we're all here, that you think it's all right."

"I think so," he said.

"What's all this flap about telephone calls?" I asked.

"We're trying to find out something," Tallant replied coolly.

"What? Or is it any of my business?" I asked. Then a little feeling of uneasiness took hold of me. How had he known I'd made two calls from the room?

"We'll get to it in a minute," Tallant replied. "You came here to sell us a story. We're just looking it over before we buy it. You don't mind?"

"No. It's all right with me," I said. "But suppose you fill me in. I gather that cuddly routine of hers and that punchy act of yours was supposed to get me out of there so you could shake down the cabin?"

He nodded. "Partly."

I didn't catch exactly what he meant by that, but I let it pass. "So what were you looking for? Maybe I could help you."

"A roll of recorder tape."

I glanced across at her. "Maybe you'd better tell him again."

"Why?" she asked.

"Apparently he didn't get the word. You saw me drop it in the mailbox."

She shrugged. "I saw you drop *something* in the box. Let's put it that way."

"Are you crazy—?"

Tallant broke in on me. He shifted a little in his chair, and said, "It's hot in here, Julia. How about turning on the air-conditioner?"

"Excuse me," she said, and went out the doorway into the hall. In a moment I heard the unit begin humming. She came back.

"I don't know but what I've acquired an aversion to air-conditioned bedrooms that may stay with me for the rest of my life," she said calmly as she sat down. "Four days and nights of Mr. Harlan's lordly condescension could leave their mark on any girl."

There was a passing shadow of expression on Tallant's face for the first time. His mouth grew hard, but he said nothing.

"Look, what the hell is this?" I asked. "You saw me mail that roll of tape—"

She leaned forward a little with her chin in the palm of her hand. "Of course you mailed something. I saw you, as you so obviously intended. It might or might not have been the roll of tape. My impression of it afterward was that when it fell into the box it didn't sound heavy enough to be the real package. That's just an impression, of course, and I'll admit I could be wrong. However, whether you mailed it or not still isn't the major consideration. You could very easily have put it in the mail addressed to yourself somewhere, or addressed to nowhere in particular. Illusion was your object, naturally, and it was quite effective, at least from a short range point of view. In football I believe you call it a fake handoff—" She broke off and studied me thoughtfully. "You're still with me, Mr. Harlan?"

I was with her, all right. I felt the uneasiness again. I was sunk, though, if I let them see it. "Cut it out," I said curtly. "You mean you think I've still got it?"

She smiled. "You're following the wrong rabbit, Mr. Harlan." "What do you mean?"

"Frankly, there's no way we could know whether you still have it or not. There are too many places you could have hidden it. But that's not the issue at hand. What we've been trying to establish is that *no one else has it*. There's a subtle and, very important difference. You see?"

"Look! Have you gone crazy? You heard me talking to the man I mailed it to—"

"Did I?" she asked softly. She glanced at Tallant then, and said, "Or perhaps I should ask Dan."

I stared at one and then the other. "What in hell are you talking about?"

She smiled. "I think perhaps we are confusing Mr. Harlan, He may not be able to keep up."

"You'll have to judge that," Tallant replied. "Appraising him was your job and, naturally, I haven't had your opportunities."

I shot a quick look at him. On the outside, he was as calm and efficient as ever, but this was the second time I'd had the impression he was being ridden hard by something he was trying to keep under control.

She caught it too. "Really, Dan." Then she went on coolly. "Of course appraising him was my job, and I think I've done it. Mr. Harlan is what he himself would call a tough guy, but he's not an utter fool. He's almost completely insulated against every human emotion except greed, and he mistakes insensitivity for courage. He has imagination and daring of a sort, enough to conceive a plan like this and to attempt to carry it through alone, but not enough to recognize the flaws in it, and subtlety is not his dish of tea."

He grunted. "Well, maybe we'd better bring him up to date." He shifted the gun just slightly and went on in a level, cold voice, "You'll recall, Harlan, you, told us we had two possible ways out. We could pay you, or, if we were convinced you were working alone, we could kill you. It was nice of you to point that out, even if a little unnecessary. So then you proceeded to prove to us that you were not working alone. The only trouble with it is we're still not convinced you proved your point. And since neither of us is stupid enough to place himself at the mercy of a blackmailer for the rest of his life if there's any other way out, we're going to insist on a little more proof before we buy—"

I broke in on him. "Skip the diagram," I said. "You think I'm bluffing, so you're going to call me. But have you stopped to think that could be just a little dangerous? You'd never know you were wrong until the police knocked on the door."

He nodded. "We know that. Or rather, let's say we realize we're supposed to be aware of it, as part of the rules. But there's another and slightly more subtle angle to it I don't think you've considered yet.

"However, let's take all the aspects in their proper order so we're sure we understand each other. First, if something happens to you, your accomplice is going to turn that tape and your letter over to the police.

Right?"

"Of course."

"Very well. Now. That raises an interesting question. Just *how* does he know something has happened to you?"

I grinned coldly. So that was their angle, all along. Catching it back there in the hotel room that morning had saved my life.

"How does he know?" I asked. "Why, when he quits hearing from me, of course."

He nodded. "I see. And just when was the last time he did hear from you?"

I looked at her and grinned. "Tell him, honey."

She returned my glance with an enigmatic smile, and said, "No. You tell him."

I shrugged. "Sure, if you insist. Don't you want him to know you were standing there at the foot of the bed, naked, while you listened to me talking to him?" I turned to Tallant. "It was around ten-fifteen yesterday morning."

His eyebrows raised. "You're sure of this?"

"Ask your lady friend," I said. "That was what she was there for, wasn't it?"

"Oh, we know you made the call, all right. The thing I'm questioning is whether the man you talked to even knew anything about this."

I felt the little shiver go up my back again. It was unaccountable, because I knew there was no way on earth they could have checked the call. She couldn't have heard me give the name to the operator, and I'd kept my eye on her from then on, to be sure she hadn't tried to get it out of the hotel operator. She had never been out of my sight a minute.

"Nuts," I said. "Now you're beginning to talk like an idiot. Why don't you ask her to repeat the conversation?"

He shook his head. "I don't have to. I know who the man was you talked to, and I don't think he's in the blackmail business, or about

to go in it. His name is George Gray. He's vice president and second largest stockholder in the Gray Midcontinent Equipment Company of Fort Worth, son of the founder, worth around three-quarters of a million dollars, married, has two children, member of the Chamber of Commerce, and the best country club, and he's quite active in his church, in Community Chest and hospital drives, and in several civic organizations. That sound like a blackmailer to you?"

My mouth dropped open. I could only stare at him.

"Now, Harlan," he went on coldly, "what we're interested in finding out from you is whether you're going to insist Gray is your accomplice, which is ridiculous, or if not, why you called him instead of the real accomplice—if you even have one."

I couldn't say anything. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth.

He smiled coldly. Still holding the gun across his knees with his right hand, he reached into his jacket pocket with his left and brought something out. I stared. It was a roll of recorder tape.

"Great machine, the recorder," he said. "Private detectives use them, too. Your telephone in that hotel room was bugged after the first day."

Then he had *both* sides of the conversation.

He must have seen it in my face. "You're so right, Harlan. Gray didn't even know what you were talking about, as near as I can gather. He thought you were referring to the job he offered you. I don't know what was actually in the package you sent him, but obviously it wasn't recorder tape. So let's hear your story, and you'd better make it good."

I tried to pull myself together and get my mind to work. They were deadly as hell, and they were closing in on me. Only one thing was clear, and that was the moment they were absolutely certain I was alone in this thing they'd kill me like erasing a mistake in a letter. Maybe I was done for now, but the only thing left was to go on bluffing. They hadn't quite made up their minds yet, or I wouldn't be alive now.

I leaned forward and tried to make my voice sound tough. "My story? It's exactly the same thing I told you from the first. You know that roll of recorder tape will hang you. She saw me put it in the mail. You know I haven't got it, because you searched the cabin and the car. Therefore, somebody else's got it. You don't know who, and there's no way you can find out. Now, if you want to take a chance I'm lying about it, go ahead. There's only one way

you can lose, and that's to lose all the way. The first time you'll know you were wrong is when the cops knock on the door. You're tough, but | not that tough. Nobody is."

"Why not?" she asked innocently. "Look at it yourself. You can see what the odds are. And if you're wrong you go to the chair. That's a rough dose."

She turned toward him and smiled fleetingly. "You see, Dan? Psychological fine points are not Mr. Harlan's forte."

"Put it away," I said. "You're not even making sense."

"I think we are," he said. "Remember, I told you there was another angle you hadn't considered?"

"Sure. More double-talk."

"Not at all. It's quite real, and it has a definite bearing on the validity of the threat. We're not in as much immediate danger as you think."

"Bat sweat."

"I'm serious. Just listen for a moment. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you're telling the truth. We grant you an accomplice."

"That's nice of you."

"Let's be very original and call him X. And now we stipulate further that you've come up here to do something that could be highly dangerous, and that you have vanished."

"Go on," I said.

"The specified time has run out with no word from you. He assumes, correctly enough, that something has happened to you. So what does he do?"

"Now, that's a bright question. What do you think he does? He turns the tape and the letter over to the police."

Tallant shook his head with a faint smile. "No."

"Don't be stupid. Of course he does."

"I don't think so, and right there is the point you overlooked. Your whole threat is just a threat on paper, an arbitrary rule set up in an imaginary game. He doesn't turn it over to the police, for the simple reason that he would have everything to lose and nothing whatever to gain."

"Oh, for Christ's sake—"

The smile became a little colder. "You don't see it yet? What, specifically, does he stand to gain? Revenge? Don't be stupid

yourself. What the hell does he care about you, or what happened to you? He's not a relative, because you have none. We checked."

"He's a friend of mine—"

"Don't be ridiculous. In your business, friends are expendable."

"So what does he stand to lose? Eight cents worth of stamps."

They exchanged glances. "What does he stand to lose?" he asked. "Really, Harlan. He stands to lose a hundred thousand dollars."

I saw what he was driving at, and I could feel the walls move a little closer around me.

He went on like a professor giving a lecture. "This tape you have is worth nothing in itself. It has only what we will call potential value, or value solely as a threat. The minute you carry out the threat, its value drops to zero. You understand that, I suppose? The police would give him nothing for it, obviously. All they'd do, if they found out who he was, would be to put him in jail for not giving it to them sooner. So there we come right to the heart of the matter.

"X has something that has a potential value of—to use your own figure—a hundred thousand dollars. That is, as long as he hangs onto it and threatens us with it. So why would he turn it over to an ungrateful bunch of slobs like the police and have its value drop to zero when he can retain it himself and keep the value alive? Is he insane?"

I tried to say something. I couldn't.

He continued. "So what happens? Nothing, in our opinion. Except that sometime in the future, after you have disappeared completely, friend X comes sidling up to us with the same old sad story."

I got myself started at last. "So what have you accomplished? You have to pay him off."

He shrugged. "Perhaps. If you do have an accomplice, we're probably ruined, because the thing becomes an endless chain and could go on forever. You'd bleed us white, or we'd have to try to escape. But we're almost certain now you haven't; got one."

He stopped, and the room was silent except for the faint humming of the air-conditioner somewhere in the house. I tried to estimate my chances of getting to him without being cut in two by that shotgun, and came up with an even zero.

He apparently read my thoughts. He shook his head "Not now. We're going to wait you out."

"What do you mean?"

"We're going to see if X does show up. We don't think he will, but if he does we haven't got any more to lose by waiting for him than we have by being suckers and paying you now. We're going to keep you here. Nobody saw you come in. Nobody knows where you are. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, you've already disappeared, and could be dead."

I felt cold all over. "You can't get away with it."

"I think so," he replied calmly. "Do you know what a trial balloon is?"

I just stared at him.

"It's a political dodge. A politician deliberately lets something leak to sample public reaction before he commits himself. If he gets the wrong reaction, he can deny the whole thing. That's your status at the moment. You're a trial balloon."

The room was silent. Nobody moved. "You see?" he went on. "It's an unusual sort of thing. We're going to find out exactly what would happen if you turned up missing. Before you actually do, that is."



# 15

I didn't have a chance; they had me cut off from every direction. Now that it was too late I could see why Purvis had approached me. He'd had sense enough to know he couldn't bluff it through alone; they were too hard and dangerous for that. They had to know positively there were two people in it—and one of them forever out of reach—before they could be handled. He'd studied Cannon's death for a long time and he'd studied her; even without knowing for sure who the man was in the case he'd been aware of the kind of people he was up against. And still they'd managed to kill him.

They'd kill me the same way. It wasn't a mere matter of getting that tape back; as long as anybody on earth knew they'd killed Cannon they were in danger. They were pretty sure right now I was the only one, and as soon as they were convinced of it they'd get rid of me. Every hour that passed without someone else's showing up was making them more certain. And nobody else was going to show up.

The cold voice went on, "Your car has been abandoned in New Orleans. The cabin is closed; your gear and fishing tackle are gone —"

I leaned forward. "Listen. Somebody's bound to I know she was out there. Or that you were out there. You've been seen driving my car. Maybe driving it out. You say there's been nobody there looking for me, but you were gone long enough to drive the car to New Orleans. I was seen in Shreveport by God knows how many people. I was registered at a hotel there—" I stopped.

He smiled. "As Mr. John Abernathy, of Kansas City."

"Listen! I called George Gray from there—"

"Gray didn't know where you were calling from. He probably just assumed it was from here." He paused for a moment, and then went on. "Nobody knew she was down there at that cabin. Nobody saw you leave there with her. That end of the lake is the most isolated place in the county. I drove your car out at night—after I'd searched, it and put it in running order again. As far as knowing

nobody had come out there while I was gone to New Orleans with your heap—that was easy. I piled up a little mound of dirt in each rut near the edge of the clearing. When I came back they were still there; no car had been across them. They're there yet, or were four hours ago. Harlan, you've disappeared. You didn't even leave a ripple. And nobody gives a damn."

"George Gray—"

"So you won't call him Thursday. He'll ask the Governor to order out the National Guard, won't he? He offered you a job; you accepted it, and then changed your mind. He's going to get excited about that?"

The room fell silent again as they glanced at each other. I tried to think. I couldn't come up with anything. There had to be a way out. But where was it?

"You can't get away with it," I said. "Look. You were gone from town long enough to drive a car to New Orleans. They're going to wonder why your shop's closed. The whole thing's screwy. You give yourself away in a dozen places—"

He shook his head. "I drove your car to New Orleans Saturday night and came back Sunday on a bus, while I was supposed to be on a fishing trip to Caddo Lake and when the shop was closed anyway. I've checked this cabin out there at night, coming in from a different road farther down the lake and walking up about two miles. I'm in the shop every day; I come in through the back way here at night. Everything's perfectly normal on the surface; there's nothing suspicious at all. Nobody saw you come in here, and nobody'll ever see you go out. The maid has a week off to visit her family in Louisiana."

A week. Sometime within a week.

I fought down an impulse to cry out at him. "Good God," I said, "do you mean you'd go through all this just to keep from paying me off and getting the tape back?"

"It isn't merely a question of the tape. We think you hid that somewhere. I've looked for it, and can't find it. The chances are, nobody'll ever find it. It's you. We're in this too deep to have anyone running around loose who knows about it. You must have realized the chances you were taking when you walked into it; I don't see that you've got any kick coming now that it's backfired on you. Get up."

There was nothing else to do. I stood up. He got out of the chair, holding the gun, and began backing out the doorway into the hall. "Follow me, and don't get any closer."

In the hallway he clicked on a light switch. I passed the open door to the bath and came abreast another door on the left. He stopped and nodded curtly. "Open that."

I opened it.

"Turn around and stand in the doorway. Don't try to jump in and slam it, because I'll cut you in two. That's right. Go on in slowly."

They both followed me in, Tallant first with the shotgun in my back. The light was already on in here. It was another bedroom, smaller than the other. It had one window opposite the door, facing the patio, but there were heavy drapes over it and they were drawn. There was a single bed with its head up against the wall under the window, and a night table stood beside it. The floor was covered with a gray carpet, and there was an armchair and a bridge lamp against the wall to the left.

"Lie down on the bed," he commanded.

I turned and looked at him. He was near the door, at least eight feet away, with the gun pointing right at my chest.

"Go on," he said flatly. "I won't take any chances with you."

I lay down. She came past him and around to my left side. Reaching down, she picked up something dangling from the side of the bed. I saw what it was. It was a pair of handcuffs made fast to the steel frame of the bed with a short length of chain.

"Don't try to grab her," he warned me.

She caught my left hand and snapped the cuff over the wrist. Then she came around to the other side of the bed and made my right hand fast with another on that side. I could move my hands, but there wasn't enough slack in the chains to bring them together. He put down the gun, tied my feet together with a piece of rope that had been lying in the chair, and then secured them to the foot of the bed. Forcing my mouth open, he shoved a wadded handkerchief in it and plastered adhesive tape across my face to keep it in. She had gone back to the doorway and was silently watching. There was no expression on her face at all—no pity, no regret, not even any hate. It was just something that had to be done, and they did it. They'd kill me the same way.

No, I thought. *She would, perhaps, but he'd make it a personal thing.* He wasn't quite as tough, and he had the spurs in him. That business of her having to shack up with me for the past six days was riding him hard, and every time he thought about it it dug him a little more. They'd had to do it that way, and it had meant nothing to her, but he wasn't liking it a bit. I'd seen it twice in the past half hour, and wondered about it. He was going to make it

rough on me, as rough as he could, but there was another side to it, too. If you get emotional you can always lose your head, and if you do you're never quite as dangerous as a cold type who's just doing a job.

He stepped back, took out a handkerchief, and wiped the sweat from his face. He'd been under a strain too, in spite of the calm way he looked outside. Suddenly he caught her in his arms. "Julia—!"

She broke it up after the first wild clinch. "Please, Dan. Not in front of this vermin."

He turned his face and looked at me for an instant, his eyes savage. They went out and closed the door. *It was an act out there at the cabin*, I thought, *but it wasn't quite all an act.*

They didn't come back; there was dead silence in the house. They were probably in her bedroom. I thought about it, trying to keep from getting panicky. It couldn't happen, not here in the quiet upper-middle-class residential district of a small town where a dented fender in the Cadillac was a big deal. Next door they'd be playing bridge; up the street they were watching television or waiting for a daughter to get home from a date. Murder? *Here?* That was a pipe dream. Murder never happened in a place like this.

I was simply being erased. I'd tried to move in on them without having a good look at them first, and now I was lying here watching myself disappear like a ripple dying out on a pond. Nobody would ever know it. Who'd miss me? Who'd raise an alarm? The police would impound my car in New Orleans, and after a long time they'd sell it for storage charges. George Gray would mutter into his soft-boiled eggs some morning that he couldn't see why that sad bastard of a Harlan couldn't at least have mailed back the key to the cabin. You wouldn't expect the big moose to tell anybody he'd changed his mind about the job, but, by God, he could have sent back the key. The bank would keep sending statements to my apartment in Oklahoma City until the landlord closed it and sold my stuff for the rent. Three years from now some sports writer covering the pro football circuit would say to somebody in a bar that that guy out there this afternoon reminded him a little of Harlan. Wonder what ever happened to him; make mine a Martini on-the rocks—

That was it. That was the thing that scared you till you felt cold right down in the guts. They could get away with it so easily. They'd done it before, and they'd do it again. One traffic fatality, one unsolved and forgotten murder two hundred miles away, and

one disappearance nobody ever even noticed, and not once did they slip up. Six months from now there'd be a blurb in the local paper: *Mrs. Julia Cannon and Mr. Daniel R. Tallant were married today in a simple ceremony at the bride's lovely home on Cherrywood Drive. Mrs. Cannon, widow of the late Howard L. Cannon, Wayles automobile dealer, is prominent in social and civic activities, being vice president of the Women's Club and one of the founders of the local Little Theatre group.*

I lay there looking up at the ceiling and watching myself disappear. Sweat collected on my forehead. The only way I could get it off was by turning my head and rubbing my face against the pillow.

Sometime just before dawn he came in again, unshackled me, and let me go to the john. The gun was covering me every second. They fastened me down again and left. It grew light in the room. I knew he was gone for the day. She'd probably turned in again. I could hear cars out in the street once in a while, very faintly because with the air-conditioning turned on all the doors and windows were closed. I lay staring at nothing trying not to think. After a while I must have gone to sleep. It didn't seem possible, but the next thing I knew she was standing beside the bed yanking the adhesive tape off my mouth.

She was wearing a cotton house dress and had a handkerchief tied around her hair. A vacuum sweeper was whirring behind her and she had the hose and one of the brush attachments in her hand. She smiled, looking like any very attractive housewife in the world. *Maybe it's deliberate*, I thought, trying to keep my stomach from turning over. The whole thing was calculated, in an attempt to break me down.

The tape gave way, bringing the handkerchief out of my mouth. A power lawn mower was making a racket in the patio and I realized that was the reason she felt it was safe enough to remove the gag. There was hardly any chance I'd be heard if I yelled my head off anyway, even without the mower. There was nothing on the east side of the house but a deserted street and some woods.

"Housework!" she said. She shrugged good-naturedly, and reached out with the toe of one shoe to press down the switch of the vacuum sweeper. It stopped whining. She sat down in the armchair near the bed and took a cigarette from a pocket of the dress.

I said nothing.

She lit the cigarette. "Do you want one?"

"Keep it," I said.

"Very well, if you're going to be surly. Oh, incidentally, just in case you should manage to grab me with one of those brutal looking hands, the keys to these handcuffs are in another room."

"Your luck's going to run out on you some day," I said.

She blew out some smoke and looked at it thoughtfully. "It already has," she replied quietly. "But I wouldn't expect you to see that."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"About one p.m."

I thought about it. This was Thursday; if I hadn't let them booby-trap me I'd have been on my way out of Houston right this minute with a fortune in my luggage and nothing to worry about. And now I was lying here waiting for the two of them to get around to murdering me.

It must have shown on my face. Her eyebrows raised. "Really, where's the treasured toughness?"

"Shut up," I said.

She leaned back in the chair and studied me reflectively. "You're not really hard, you know. You're merely insulated. And you're a fool, in spite of that bit of sleight of hand the other day. You walked into this thing without even taking the trouble to learn something about the people you were going to try to blackmail. I wonder how long that veneer of toughness would have lasted if you'd ever had the intelligence to see, just once, how many ways there are in this world you can be utterly destroyed by random little sequences of events that look as harmless as marshmallows. If I hadn't stepped out of the shadows in front of your car on a road down there in the swamp that evening five months ago, neither of us would be here in this position. That's obvious, isn't it? Dan Tallant's car was down there too, and I thought you were Dan. But that's also obvious. Even you saw it, so it must be, because you never see anything but the obvious."

"Why don't you write it down?" I said. "Maybe some-body'll publish, it."

She went on as if she hadn't even heard me. "I don't think you even know what I'm talking about. I don't mean you alone. I mean all of us. We're all destroyed, destroyed for wanting too many things and not caring how we get them. If you really want to preen yourself as a tough guy, Mr. Harlan, you should wait and be tough after there's no longer any hope of winning. It's easy till then. It's also very bad to have any intelligence along with it but, fortunately, I think you have been spared that."

"Turn it off," I said. "You're not even making sense. I don't read you at all."

"Oh, I'm aware of that. Perhaps I just felt like talking. And there is some satisfaction in the spectacle of the lordly Mr. Harlan in the role of captive audience. Imagine your having to listen to the inane babblings of a woman, and not only that but to the babblings of a woman you don't even have any hope of bedding with—which is obviously the only thing women are any good for.

"But to get back to the harmless little chains of events—where should we begin? With a boy going fishing, and liking it? Or a girl encountering cruelty for the first time, being laughed at at a children's party because her shoes were half-soled? Ridiculous? Certainly. Thousands of children have been skewered by their contemporaries at parties, millions of men like to go on fishing trips. You have to fit in a horde of other harmless little things and match them up to get the right combination. But there are so many of them and so many combinations that will pay off in annihilation, sooner or later you can almost count on blowing yourself up. Add the fact that nowadays Chevrolet and Buicks look considerably alike, at least in the dusk and seen only in one quick glance. Add a man deciding to take a bag of laundry into town. Not any time, you understand, but this particular time."

She paused and smiled faintly, as if she were thinking of something a long way off. "Try this on your toughness, Mr. Harlan. None of this could have happened if those three cars had come out of that bottom in any other sequence at all. Mathematically, there are six possibilities, of course, if you merely shook them up in a dice cup. Consider that. On top of all the other interlocking little events that fell into their pattern to set up disaster, the odds were still six to one that they'd remain harmless and pass unnoticed. And yet the right number came up, and here we are."

"We are?"

She nodded. "I realize the futility of trying to make you understand, Mr. Harlan. I'm merely talking. I don't usually rattle on this way, but this afternoon for some reason I just felt in the mood. Here we are, as I say. Destroyed. And yet never once have you even stopped to wonder why those cars came out of the bottom in that particular sequence. Even aside from the laws of chance, there was every reason in the world my husband's should have been the last. But it wasn't. It was next to last, and that set up the disaster."

I couldn't see what difference it made, now that it had happened and I was as good as dead, but I asked anyway. I could see she was going to go on talking, and there was no way I could shut her up.

"Why should he have been last?"

She shook her head. "You surprise me at times. You show flashes of intelligence, and then you go dead again. Purvis knew, and he didn't even see me out there. He did it by sheer deduction. I was unfaithful to my husband. I realize you have already grasped this, at least as far as its surface aspects are concerned, and there would be no point in attempting to explore it to any depth because eventually we'd run into language connected with emotion, which obviously would have no meaning to you. How would you describe a sunset to a blind mole living on the dark side of the moon?"

"But I'm digressing. To get back to why the three cars came out of the bottom in that particular sequence—my husband, as you probably guessed, came out there to the Cannon summer cottage looking for us. He had been in Houston, but had returned ahead of schedule, probably for that very reason. And he found us. Or rather, I should say, he found Dan. I had wanted to be alone for a little while to think, and I'd taken a walk a short distance around the lake. Mr. Cannon, while he was not drunk, had had enough to be ugly. He became very abusive—he could be quite violent on occasion. Dan denied that I was with him. Of course, it was more or less obvious somebody must have been with him for he would hardly have come out there alone, and there was a good chance I was the one because Dan had no key to the place. Dan did the best he could, however, and insisted he had borrowed a key—several hunting and fishing cronies of Mr. Cannon's had duplicates. This was a flimsy thing at best, because it could be easily checked, but Dan was desperate and was hoping I would hear the row and stay out of sight. I did. I circled the clearing the cabin was in and started out the road, knowing Dan would come along and pick me up. It is a little over a quarter mile out to where the two roads join—that one and the one going on around to George Gray's cabin, where you were staying. I passed this juncture—you will recall the place where you saw me was about two hundred yards this side of it. I was waiting there for Dan to drive by. When I saw your car coming, of course, I thought it was he. When I realized my mistake, I stepped back off the road again. Then it occurred to me Dan might have some difficulty picking me up. Obviously, Mr. Cannon, being suspicious, would not leave first. Dan would have to. And Mr. Cannon would be following him very closely to see if he did meet someone along the road. This is precisely what happened. When Dan came by, only a few minutes after you did,



he caught sight of me but did not stop. He motioned for me to stay out of sight. My husband's Cadillac was right behind him. Surely it must have occurred to you there was something strange in the fact my husband's car wasn't the last one in the procession?"

I hadn't even thought about it. And I didn't care. What difference did it make now?

"Turn it off," I said. "I knew the two of you'd killed him, and that was all I was interested in."

"Really?"

"Of course."

"I told you I felt like talking, so even at the risk of boring you I'll proceed. What happened, naturally, was that Dan speeded up going around some turns in the road, and got far enough ahead to pull off and out of sight. My husband went on past, and when he caught up with you just after you got out on the highway, it was perfectly natural that he thought you were Dan. Dan came back and got me. So there you have the marching order for disaster. What you didn't know, and what I don't think Purvis even guessed, was that we actually saw the crash."

"You did? I didn't think you were that close behind."

"We were about a mile back, but if you'll recall the road drops off a long hill into that river bottom where you crashed. It isn't straightaway, but from the brow of the hill you can see the road going across that straight section of fill and the bridge itself. We happened to be right there when it happened. Of course you both had your headlights on then and we didn't know for sure it was your car my husband had driven off the road—not until we got there, that is—but it was perfectly obvious the whole thing was deliberate. He had at least another mile of straight road ahead of him, and there were no other cars in sight at all. The inference was inescapable."

"So you're going to get away with it?" I said.

Her eyes were moody as she studied the end of her cigarette and it was a moment before she answered. "Do you ever?" she asked.

# 16

"What do you mean?"

"Getting away with it, as you put it, is perhaps only an illusion. You go on delaying the ultimate disaster, but you never eliminate it."

I jumped at this. "Well, get wise to yourself. Turn me loose—"

She smiled coldly. "Really you are a child. I assure you we have every intention of going on. We began it, and now we can't ever go back. Neither, I might add, can you."

"Then why do it? Why get yourself in any deeper?"

Her eyebrows raised. "Deeper?"

"Certainly."

"Really. Don't be absurd. There's only one depth, and that's absolute. You wouldn't say something was more dead, would you, or more pregnant?"

"So you'd do it just because you've got nothing more to lose?"

"Not at all. We'll do it because we have to. Removing you and your threat is another bulkhead shored up, another ringer in the dike, another postponing of the inevitable. Futile? Perhaps. But what do you do when you see the bulkhead crumpling? You shore it up, even while you're watching the next one start to buckle. But perhaps I'm tiring you."

I stared at her. "Well, what in the name of God did you do it for if you didn't think you could win?"

"Well, obviously, because we thought we could—then. Five months have changed that—for me, at least. You have too much time to think. Too much time to—as you put it—look at the odds. Incidentally, that is a very good parallel. Imagine a roulette wheel that ran for five months, or a year, or ten years, before it stopped. With all your money bet on just one number and with that much time to examine the laws of probability, you must inevitably come to doubt the wisdom of it. Add to that the fact that you never really know for sure when the roulette wheel *has* stopped. It may be an

illusion, a very deliberate illusion fostered by the people who are operating it, if you follow me.

"There are too many possibilities inherent in any situation like this, too many factors completely out of your control and utterly unpredictable. Purvis shouldn't have become suspicious, but he did. The possibility of your paths ever crossing again was mathematically negligible, but it happened. The odds were astronomical against your being in Purvis's apartment at the precise moment he was killed, and even laughably impossible that you could have been there without being seen, and yet—" She shrugged and crushed out the cigarette.

"You think the police will catch up with you some day, then?"

"I think it quite likely," she said.

"Then I don't see why you keep on." Her eyebrows raised. "You don't? I thought I had just told you." She stood up and looked down at me. "But there is another facet to it which you may be able to understand. I should hate very much to be defeated by you. I underestimated you once and let you make a fool of me. It won't happen again."

I started to say something. She shoved the handkerchief back in my mouth and plastered the tape over it. She started out, but turned in the doorway. "Oh, I forgot to ask if you wanted anything to eat."

I stared at her, not even bothering to shake my head.

She went out. I lay there thinking about her and trying to think of something. I was as good as dead unless I could get to one of them, and you didn't have to be very bright to see she wasn't the one. I didn't read her too well, but she was undoubtedly the smoothest, hardest specimen I'd ever run into. She didn't think they had a chance of winning any more, but she was going right on as calmly as a woman picking up a bridge hand. There was no use looking for the soft spot in her, because she was armor all the way through.

What about him? He wasn't what you would call one of the softer types of citizens, but at least he looked a little more promising than she did. For one thing, he was badly gone on her, and intensely jealous. Maybe I could make him lose his head by giving him the needle, but what good would that do as long as he had the gun? He'd just kill me that much quicker. It was hopeless.

As soon as it was dark he came in. He had another gun with him this time, a hand gun that looked like a Luger. He held it and watched with deadly efficiency while she unlocked the handcuffs

and untied my feet I went to the bathroom with him right behind me. There wasn't a flaw in his procedure anywhere. One false move, and I'd have my spine shattered. They fastened me down again.

He stood looking at me. "Nobody's shown up yet," he said.

I stared at him. I still had the gag in my mouth and couldn't have spoken if there'd been anything to say.

"I'm going out to see if anybody's been to the cabin," he said. "Better hope so, pal." They went out and closed the door.

After a while I began to hear voices very faintly, coming from the direction of the living-room. I tried to see what time it was, but my watch had stopped because I hadn't been able to wind it. The sound of voices increased and I could hear laughter now and then, and music. She was giving a party. *Mrs. Julia Cannon entertained a small group of her friends last night at an informal gathering at her lovely home on Cherrywood Drive—* The cold-blooded deadliness of it got to me for a moment and I felt sick. The only thing she'd forgotten was to use me for a cloak room. She should have brought the mink stoles and evening wraps in and thrown them on my face.

It went on for hours, or so it seemed. It must have been after midnight when it began to quiet down. I wondered if he had been at the party. Apparently he had, for when he came back his face was slightly flushed as if he had been drinking. The house had been silent for about an hour then, so I supposed he had left with the other guests and then sneaked back. They played a smooth game, and they never made a mistake or left themselves open anywhere.

She was still dressed in an evening gown and he had I on a dark suit. She stood in the doorway behind him as he came in.

"Your friend must have forgotten you," he said. "Nobody's been out there."

I looked at him. He was feeling his drinks, all right, and he was looking for trouble.

He stepped forward and ripped the adhesive off my mouth. It was stuck to the beard stubble on my face and made a tearing sound as it came away. He looked over his shoulder at her. "Maybe this would be a good time to find out where he hid that tape."

"Somebody might hear him if he shouts," she warned.

He took the gun out of his pocket again. "If he makes any noise he'll get this across his face."

I hadn't had any water for twenty-four hours. My mouth was so dry I couldn't speak even after the handkerchief was gone from it. I tried to moisten it with saliva. It wasn't too successful.

"How about it?" he asked roughly.

My jaw felt as if it had been broken when I tried to move it. My voice cracked. "I told you, you simple bastard. I mailed it."

"Funny he hasn't shown up around here, isn't it?"

I didn't care any more what he did. If I had to go through another twenty-four hours of lying here I'd go crazy. It was better to provoke something now and take my chances than to go out of my mind.

"Well, why worry about him?" I asked. "When he does show up she can always lay him for you. She doesn't mind."

It got to him so fast he didn't even think to swing at me with the gun. He dropped it into his left hand and smashed me on the jaw with the right. It made my head ring, but I thought I heard a finger break.

"Don't be a fool, Dan," she said with exasperation. "Can't you see he's deliberately trying to make you lose your head?"

"Maybe he's in a hurry. Why keep him waiting?"

She shook her head. "It's been only one day."

"Seven altogether."

"I liked the first six," I said. "Fun, wasn't it, honey?"

He looked down at me with the veins beginning to stand out on his temples. He was half drunk, half crazy from thinking about just that, and wide open for the needle.

"Dan! Don't be juvenile. Are you going to let this stupid thug make a fool of you?"

He didn't even hear her. He was just staring at me, his eyes going wilder and more savage every second. He shifted the gun back to his right hand and started to chop at my face with it. She sprang forward and caught his arm.

"Not in here, you fool!" she said in a furious whisper. "Do you want to have to carry him two blocks to your car?" She didn't say anything about making a sloppy mess in her beautiful home, but the thought was there.

"Maybe you'd just like me to turn him loose?" he asked savagely.

"Oh, don't be an idiot! But if you're going to do it tonight, at least—for the love of heaven—do it right. Don't start behaving like

a madman. You've got to get him out of here, the way we planned it."

"You want to be sure you don't have anything to do with it? Is that it?"

"Of course not! Listen, Dan!" she said urgently. "Please don't lose your head now. This is dangerous."

He appeared to be getting a grip on himself and becoming rational enough again to realize she was right. He straightened and backed away a step.

"You just don't know how to handle her," I said. "When she starts throwing her weight around, get rough with her. She loves it."

He wheeled and lunged at me, his hands reaching for my throat as he fell across the bed. She sprang forward and began tugging at his arm. "Stop it! Dan, stop it!"

He sat up. His face was white and glistening with sweat. "All right, all right," he said, fighting for breath. He swung around and began tearing at the rope holding my legs. "I'll take the precious son of a bitch out there where you won't have to see it, if that's what's worrying you. I'll take care of it. Just keep out of my way—"

The rope came free. He hurried around to the left side of the bed, groping in the pocket of his trousers. His hand came out, holding a pair of small keys tied together with twine. I watched him, hardly daring to breathe now. If I didn't get a chance within, the next few seconds I'd never have one again. He unlocked the handcuff on the left side and slid the loop of the chain out of the other half of it. I saw what he was going to do. He'd shackle my hands together with that pair before he broke the other one loose.

She was standing below the foot of the bed, silently watching. Suddenly she gestured impatiently. "Put the gag back in his mouth. You can't take him out of here that way."

"All right!" he said furiously. He grabbed the handkerchief and began wadding it back in my mouth. He stuck the tape back over it. Most of the adhesive was gone from it now and it didn't hold very well. I lay perfectly still, as if I had forgotten as well as he had that my left wrist was free now and that the handcuff was lying beside my hand.

He pushed down hard against my mouth with his hand to fasten the tape. "'There, you son of a bitch."

I drew the left arm back a little. My fingers closed over one loop of the handcuffs.

"Dan!" she shrieked. "Look out!"

I swung it as hard as I could. The cuff hit him over the right temple, but even as it landed I knew I hadn't had enough swing on it to knock him out. He jerked and grunted and fell over on top of me. I tried to pull the arm free to swing again, but I could get only the forearm out. He was across my upper arm and shoulder. I put the hand against his throat and strained, trying to pull him to the right so I could reach him with that one too. His body rolled a little. I could get my right hand on his shirt collar. I locked my fingers on it and pulled, but he was coming around now and beginning to struggle. I let go with the left and shoved it downward, toward his right-hand coat pocket where the gun was.

Then she was on us both. He rolled back a little when she landed, and all his weight was on my left arm. I was still short of the pocket a good six inches when her hand flashed into it and came out with the gun. She tried to back off us. I grabbed for her and caught the upper edge of the strapless gown. A seam ripped. She slashed downward at my arm with the gun, and it went numb up to the shoulder.

She slid back and stood up, still holding the gun. Her hair was disheveled and her eyes wild, and the torn gown was threatening to slide down onto her hips. She looked deadly enough to give you nightmares for the rest of your life. He put a hand on my chest and pushed upward, swinging the other one at my face. I turned, heaving my shoulders, and he lost his balance and fell on me again. I got both hands on his throat once more. There was no strength at all in the left one, but I managed to hold on. He was still weak from the blow on the head and I was cutting off his wind now. In all the wildness I looked at her again and saw her trying to find the safety on the gun. It was pointed right at my face.

He gave one last effort and jerked free and then the gun went off. It was like a hand-grenade exploding in a cistern. The wave of sound rolled over me, reverberated around the walls, and then rolled back like thunder. He jerked and went limp in my arms and his face dropped onto my chest. The sound chopped off, and there was dead silence except for the ringing in my ears.

I looked at her, still too numb to move. She was standing very still, staring with horror at the back of his head. The gun slipped from her fingers and thudded gently on the carpet. Her mouth opened and she put the flat side of three closed fingers up over it, like some genteel type patting back a yawn, while her eyes went wider and wider with shock. There was a greenish tinge to the pallor of her face just as she collapsed slowly to her knees and then fell forward, out of sight below the foot of the bed. She had killed him. He was lying across me, I was still handcuffed to the

bed, and everybody in this end of town would have heard, the shot. And then she had capped everything by fainting.

What had he done with the keys? He'd had them. Were they in the bed, or had he put them back in one of his pockets? I couldn't get my mind to work at all. It was as if it had been shocked into numbness by all the violence and sound and now that they were gone I was lying here in utter silence trying to kick it awake. Somebody would call the police. If they didn't get any answer when they came they'd break in. I had to get her awake so she could go to the door if they did come, and I couldn't even reach her.

I rolled him off me and sat up. The keys were nowhere in sight on the bed. Where were they? Where? Hurry, I thought. For the love of God, find them before they start pounding on the door. I slid off the bed. I couldn't stand erect because of the shortness of the chain between the handcuff and the bed frame. I couldn't reach the foot of the bed, where she was. Wildness began to take possession of me. *Stop it, for Christ's sake*, I said aloud, like a man in delirium. *Get hold of yourself. He had the keys here; he hasn't been anywhere else, so they're still here.*

I caught him by a shoulder and pushed. He moved over a little. The keys weren't under him. He was lying on his back now. I plunged my left hand into his right-hand trousers pocket, and yanked it wrong side out. There was nothing in it but some change and a pocket-knife. I reached across and turned the left one out. There was a folded handkerchief in it. I threw it aside, and then stared. The keys dropped out, falling onto the sheet right at the far edge of the bed. I lunged for them and my fingertips brushed them off onto the floor on the other side.

It was a nightmare now. I reached across as far as I could, and then downward. My extended fingertips just brushed the carpet. There was no telling where they had landed. I pushed backward and slid off the bed again on the near side, sprawling on the floor. There they were. They were lying on the carpet just under the far side of the bed, near the foot. Rolling onto my back, I slid under as far as my shackled right arm would let me. In this position I couldn't see them any more because my body was cutting off too much of the light, but I remembered about where they had been. My left hand frenziedly patted the carpet. Nothing. They *had* to be I there. I was pawing like a madman and lunging against the restraining chain. How long had it been now? *Stop it*, I thought wildly. If you go to pieces now you're dead. Suppose it was just a parlor game; you'd figure out the answer to it in five seconds.



They had to be further down toward the foot, but I was reaching as far as I could now. Move the bed, you fool. *Move the bed.* I caught the under side of it with my left hand, and heaved. Nothing happened except that I slid myself along the carpet. He was on it and he was too heavy. Moving it without something to brace myself against was impossible. I swung my legs around wildly, reversing my position so my feet were against the wall under the headboard. Grabbing the underside of the board with the fingers of my left hand, I heaved backward. The bed slid a couple of inches and then stopped. I heaved again. Nothing gave. The foot of it had come up against her. That was where she had fallen. In this awkward position I couldn't move it against the weight of both of them.

Well, maybe it was far enough. I swung back the way I had been at first and began wildly sweeping my left hand around. There they were! My outstretched fingertips touched metal. They slid off. I strained, pulling against the chain. The end of the middle finger brushed against them again. I tried to press down and pull them toward me. The finger slid off. They were a fraction of an inch out of reach.

Maybe I was already going crazy. I could hear myself cursing endlessly and idiotically in a kind of chant like a phonograph somebody had turned on and then forgotten. I clamped my mouth shut, wondering if I would explode from the pressure inside me.

There was absolute silence for a second or two, and then the telephone began ringing.

They had left the bedroom door open when they came, in and I could hear it quite plainly out in the living-room. It went on and on with that insistent and angry sound an unanswered telephone has. It was probably one of the neighborhood busybodies, who had , heard the shot. *"Oh, Mrs, Cannon, I'm sorry I disturbed you, but I thought I heard something that sounded like a gun and it seemed to come from over there and I wondered if you were all right—"* Stop it, I thought. For Christ's sake, turn it off! You're beginning to gibber. Do something. When the old biddy doesn't raise somebody she's going to call the cops. They'll get an answer. They'll push the door in. I lunged against the chain like aa animal in a steel trap. I couldn't even touch the keys now. I stopped and lay perfectly still in the calm that is beyond frenzy.

Then suddenly the perfectly obvious answer to the whole thing occurred to me. I could reach them with my foot. Cursing myself for a fool, I slid my body around until I was lying crosswise under the bed. I could see them, now that I wasn't cutting off the light. They were lying almost under the foot of the bed. I shoved my left foot forward and got the toe of the shoe behind them. I dragged them slowly toward me. They pressed down into the nap of the carpet once and I had to go back and pick them up again. In a moment I could reach them with my hand.

The telephone stopped ringing just as I picked them up.

Now whoever it was would call the cops. Maybe somebody already had. I was sweating, and my hands shook. She hadn't stirred. I juggled the keys frantically in my hand and slid out from under the bed. The first one was right. The handcuffs clicked open and I came erect, lunging toward her. She lay on her back behind the footboard of the bed, her eyes closed and one arm stretched out beyond her head. Her face was dead white and the long lashes made shadows on her cheek. I fell to the floor beside her and grabbed her bare shoulder, shaking it furiously. There was no response.

I sprang up and ran through the hallway to the bath. Wetting the end of a towel in the wash basin, I hurried back. Kneeling beside her, I began rubbing her face roughly with the wet cloth. She made a little gasping sound but did not move. Her eyes remained closed. The house was utterly silent now that the telephone had stopped. I could feel time rushing past me like water over the spillway of a dam.

Why didn't I run and leave her here? Get out, before the police came. No, I thought savagely; there was still a chance. God, if I could only get her awake. She moved her head a little and her eyes opened. She stared blankly up at me. Her mouth started to open. I put a hand over it.

I put my face down close to hers and whispered furiously, "Listen. Can you hear me?"

There was no response, nothing but that same blank stare.

I grabbed her shoulder with my other hand and , shook her. "Don't scream! Don't make any noise at all. Understand?"

Comprehension began to dawn in her eyes. She was Still in shock, but maybe I could get through to her. I took my hand away from her mouth. "Listen! You've got to snap but of it. Somebody may have called the cops."

The telephone began ringing again.

Tires screamed out on the street somewhere as a car slid to a stop.

Her lips moved. "*Dan—*"

The doorbell chimed.

*Oh, Jesus!*

I grabbed her by both shoulders. "They're here. The cops. You've got to go to the door or they'll break in. Somebody reported the shot."

"Dan! I killed him—"

I hauled her up to a sitting position and put my mouth against her ear. "Shut up! You've got to go to that door. Can you stand up?"

She stared at me. "There's nothing we can do now."

I fought down a crazy impulse to scream at her. "Listen, you little fool—" I broke off, staring at the torn evening gown. She couldn't go to the door in that. She was supposed to have been asleep. "Where is your robe?"

The doorbell chimed again. The telephone went on ringing.

I shook her. "Get out of that dress!"

There must be a robe of some kind in the clothes closet of her bedroom. I sprang up and ran in there. A blue dressing gown was thrown across the back of a chair and some slippers were on the floor beside it. When I got back in the other room she was still sitting in the same place with her hands up against her temples.

I knelt beside her and slapped her across the side of the face. "Get out of that dress! Look! They're going to break in here in about one more minute, and when they do you're going to the chair for murder."

She seemed to understand me at last. She began fumbling with the top of the dress. It would take her an hour the way she was going at it. I grabbed it and tried to help. We weren't getting anywhere. How did they get in the goddamned things—from the top or bottom? I caught it and tried to rip it. It was some kind of strong net material that was stiff to the touch and didn't tear straight. It bunched up and was strong as screen wire. I cursed. Snatching my pocketknife from the pocket of my trousers, I put the blade inside the dress, petticoat, and everything, and sawed it all the way to the hem. I hauled her erect in nothing but her pants and bra and garter belt, and grabbed the robe. Somehow she manage to stand. We got the robe about her shoulders and belted it.

"Lean on me," I snapped. I knelt and yanked off the high-heeled shoes one at a time and slid her feet into the mules.

I shoved her ahead of me toward the door into the hall. "All right," I hissed at her. "You're on your own. Answer the door, and the hell with the telephone. You've been asleep. Something waked you, but you don't know what it was. Make it good, or they've got you."

She swayed once and put out a hand to free herself. Then she was gone down the hall. I eased along after her until I reached the L, and flattened myself against the wall still out of sight of the living-room. Her mules made no sound against the carpet, so I couldn't tell whether she was still going or not. At least, I hadn't heard her fall. Then the front door opened. I breathed a ragged sigh of relief.

I could hear them. "Mrs. Cannon?" It was a man's voice.

"Yes," she said. "What is it?"

"Sorry to trouble you. I'm Charlie Lane, from the Sheriff's office. Somebody reported a disturbance of some sort in the neighborhood. Thought it was a gunshot—"

She said just what I'd told her, and she said it correctly, with just the right amount of sleepiness in her voice. She was good.

"You didn't hear a shot, then?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm not sure what waked me.

"Probably the telephone," he answered. "Mrs. Ives said she tried to call you before she phoned us. Said the sound seemed to come from over here."

"Probably a car backfiring," she said wearily. It sounded as if she had yawned. *What an actress*, I thought.

"Could have been," he agreed. "But she insisted it was a gun. Said she was awake, reading, and she never did hear any car. Well, sorry I troubled you, Mrs. Cannon. We'll look around the neighborhood. Don't worry about it."

"Thank you," she said. The door closed. The telephone had already stopped ringing. My knees felt rubbery as I leaned against the wall and wiped sweat from my face.

She was returning. I hurried down the hall and into the room where he was. Scooping up the gun, I put it on safety and shoved it in my pocket. I looked at him and came back out into the hall.

"You'd better come on down to your own bedroom," I said, taking her arm.

She stopped and looked at me. Her face was intensely still and her eyes were cold as ice. "Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you so very much for everything, Mr. Harlan."

She brushed past me and walked as erect as a ramrod into her own room and collapsed slowly across the bed. Her face was in her arms, but there was no sound of crying.

I went back in and stood looking down at him, trying to think. We'd thrown them off the track for the moment, but what now? I could still save it if we could get him out of here. But how? They were still prowling the neighborhood; a car leaving here now would make them suspicious as hell.

Well, I could walk out and get away. Leave her here and keep going. The hell with her. It was her problem, wasn't it?

No. The hell it was. I was tied to her. If they caught her she'd talk. I was implicated in murder now as well as blackmail. There was something else too. I wasn't going to quit and just throw it away after I was in it this far. I wanted that money, and I was going to get it. There had to be a way. All we had to do was get him out of here—

Sure. It started to come to me. He'd set the whole thing up himself. Nobody knew I was here, and nobody knew he was here. It was made to order. As far as any one was aware, she was the only one in the house; the police had just been here and had seen she was all right. She'd been asleep. If they were still suspicious about that shot, at least they had to assume it hadn't come from here. And if her car were to leave here—not tonight, but tomorrow, in a perfectly routine manner with nobody in it except her, what could possibly be suspicious about that? Hell, it was perfect.

But how much time did we have? I had to be out of here before daybreak, and there was a lot to do. I glanced at my watch, and then remembered it was stopped. Stepping hurriedly over to the bed, I looked at his. 2:55. It was going to be close.

I heard a sound in the bathroom next door. She was beginning to snap out of it. That was fine, because she was going to have to come out of her spin and give me a hand if she wanted to save her neck. I started into the bath to give her the word.

The door was open. She was standing before the medicine cabinet shaking capsules out of a brown bottle. There were at least a dozen of them in the palm of her left hand and a tumbler of water was standing on the back rim of the basin, I jumped for her. She heard me and whirled. I caught her wrist, forced her hand open, and dropped the capsules into the John. Taking the bottle from her other hand, I shook the remaining ones out, threw them into the can, and flushed it.

"Look, you little fool!" I hissed at her. "Have you gone crazy? There's nothing to it. All we have to do is get him out of here. I know a way to do it—"

She held herself erect with both hands on the wash basin. Her face was white as chalk, and she spoke as if all the breath had been squeezed out of her. "Aren't you ever going to be through with me and leave me alone? Couldn't you even let me die with a little dignity?"

"Die, hell. Who wants to die?"

"I've had those for months. I've been saving them, because I knew there was a good chance I'd have to use them some day—"

"Shut up!"

"—I won't be taken alive. I have no intention of becoming the feature attraction at a Roman carnival—"

I caught her shoulders, "Listen," I whispered furiously. "They won't catch you. Use your head, you little idiot. Nobody knows he's

even been here. All we have to do is get him out, and you'll never be suspected."

She stared with hopeless bitterness. "Shore up another bulkhead. Plug another leak in the dike. Keep watching the roulette wheel to see if it's really stopped or whether they're just pretending it has, to fool you. Why? I've had enough. I'm through."

I shook her. "I thought you were tough. Why, you little punk, are you going to fold up and quit now? Stand there like a nitwit and let 'em burn you?"

"Are you suggesting" there is anything else to do?"

"Of course. Shut up for a minute and listen to me." I told her the idea. "It'll work fine."

"Will it?" she asked.

"What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Don't you see?" she said wearily. "You never win in the end. You can't. You merely postpone defeat."

"You won't even make an effort to save yourself?"

"What good would it do?"

I wanted to swing at her. I was beginning to feel crazy. Catching her by both shoulders again, I put my face right down in hers and snarled at her. "Tough? Why, you runny-nosed little crybaby, you haven't got the guts of a louse. Go ahead. Quit. Stand here and let 'em take you. Have your picture all over the front page of every paper in the country. Have sob-sisters pawing over you, photographers flashing bulbs in your face every time they take you from the jail to the courtroom, people staring at you. Look, by the second day they'll have a name for you. The Black Widow."

"What do you think I was saving those pills for?"

"They're gone now. I doubt if you'd have had the guts to swallow 'em, anyway. You're a punk. Why don't you face it?"

Anger was beginning to show in her eyes now. That was what I wanted to see.

"And just what do you want?" she asked coldly.

"The same thing I've been after all the time. I can save your neck, but you haven't got brains enough to see it. Look. You can't bring Tallant back, but at least you can keep from having your name smeared all over every paper in the country and winding up in the chair for killing him. How do you want it?"

"What makes you think you can do it?"

"I'll show you if you'll stop acting like a crippled chicken."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, right now. Just give me your car keys and go lie down."

Her eyes widened. "Are you going to try to—to take him away?"

"Not tonight. Of course not. If they saw your car leaving here now they might stop it. Even if the police didn't see it, one of the old busybodies around here'd notice. Just get out of my way, and I'll tell you everything to do before I shove off."

She went in her bedroom and gave me the car keys out of her purse and lay down on the bed. I went back and looked at him. The top of his head was a mess, but he hadn't bled too much. The bullet had entered just at the base of his skull and come out on top. That was bad; I had to find it. It took me about five minutes. All that was necessary was to stand about where she had been and line it up. It had gone into the pillow my own head had been on, not more than about three inches from my face, and was still inside. I could feel it with my fingers. There'd be a lot of bloodstained-feathers inside; it wouldn't do to leave it around here even if I got the bullet out. I took it out through the kitchen, opened the trunk of the car, and put it inside. That was the beauty of the whole thing. It wasn't necessary to go outside at all. I went back.

The other pillow was all right. There was no blood on it. The sheet was badly bloodstained, and the top of the mattress pad, but the mattress itself was all right. I rolled the sheet and pad around him and then wrapped a folded blanket around the upper half of his body and tied him up with the rope he'd had around my legs. This was the hard part now.

He was heavy. I was puffing and wet with sweat by the time I dragged and carried him as far as the garage. I had to rest before I could boost him up into the trunk. When I had him folded into it I went back to her bedroom.

"What'd you do with my suitcase?" I asked.

"It's in the closet there," she replied without looking up.

"What about the money? I guess you took that out?"

"No. It's still in there."

"Good, " I said. I had bloodstains on the sports shirt I was wearing. I brought the suitcase out, shaved, and changed into a new one. The one I had taken off I rolled into a newspaper and stuck in the car trunk, first cutting out the laundry mark with a razor blade and flushing it down the John. The whole thing was beginning to make me sick now, and I was glad it was about over. I



took the two handcuffs and the chains off the bed and threw them in the suitcase and put it in her car. That was it.

I went back. "All right," I told her. "Everything's set except for remaking that bed. You can do that."

She got up without saying anything, took some fresh sheets out of a closet, and made the bed. She put the spread over it. I looked around. The cops could paw through here a week and never find anything to indicate I'd ever been here, or Tallant either. We went back in her bedroom. I looked at her watch on the dresser and wound and reset my own. It was 4:15.

"Sit down," I said.

She sat down on the bed, staring at me without any expression at all. I tossed her the keys and lit a cigarette.

"You've got it made," I said. "It's a cinch from here on. Here's what you do, and be sure you get it all straight. Call any one of the local biddies on some excuse in the morning and just mention you're going to Galveston to visit friends over the weekend. Back the car out of the garage and leave it at the curb while you come back and get your suitcase. Throw it in back. Stop at some service station where you're known—or even at Cannon Motors—and have the car gassed up. Everything perfectly natural and aboveboard, see? You might even let them sweep out the car, but for Christ's sake if they start checking the tires be sure you don't let go your keys. If anybody ever opens that trunk, you're dead.

"Drive on out that road to Breward. Time it so you get to that road turning off to the lake at about a quarter of ten. I'll be waiting for you in the trees just off the road, and I'll have that tape with me—"

She interrupted me. Her eyes were very. Cold. "So you did have it all the time?"

"Of course. But that's a dead issue now. I don't even have to give it to you, but I might as well. I don't want it. Anyway, get to that turnoff about a quarter of ten, the way I told you. If there are any other cars in sight, just pull off and pretend to be looking at a road map. I don't want anybody to see me. When it's clear, I'll hop in.

"This is Friday, and I'm not sure the banks down there are open tomorrow, but we can make it in three hours. I'll drop you off at the Carson Hotel. You get a room, and then take a taxi to the bank. Draw out ninety-two thousand in cash. Have you got a briefcase?"

She nodded.

"All right. Bring it." I looked at my watch again and stood up. "But never mind now. I'd better get going. I can tell you the rest of it after you pick me up."

"What about—?"

"I'll take care of him. All you do is drive the car from here to the turnoff, and from then on the whole thing is my baby. You're paying me; I'll do it."

"All right," she said.

"You're convinced now it can be done, and that it's easy?" I asked. "No more of this flipping your lid and trying to kill yourself?"

"I'm all right now," she said coldly. "I'll meet you."

"Fine," I said. I went in the bath and drew a big drink of water from the tap and then threw the cigarette in the John. "I'll see you. Put your light out in here as if you'd gone back to bed." I waved a hand and went down the hall.

I let myself out into the patio through the door behind the drape and stood for a moment letting my eyes become accustomed to the darkness. When I could see a little I eased back to the wall and climbed it. The whole neighborhood was silent and the houses were dark. I slipped along the easement and stood for a minute looking up and down the street before I crossed it. When I was in the woods on the other side I breathed more freely and walked faster.

I circled downhill and came out on a deserted street four blocks away. In another ten minutes I was on the Breward road going out of town. Twice I met cars, but I saw their lights a long way ahead and got off the road until they had gone by. By daybreak I had passed the river bottom where we had crashed, and was going up the hill on the other side. I left the road then and cut across. In about fifteen minutes I came out on the dirt road going in to the lake. Just at sunrise I was digging up the tape where I had buried it under the old stump. I slipped it in a pocket and sat down to rest while I smoked a cigarette. There was plenty of time. It was still a few minutes of nine when I got back out to the Breward road again. I sat down out of sight in the timber and waited. I was tired and hungry and almost numb now from this rat-race that seemed to have been going on forever, but excitement was strong inside me. In just a few more hours it would all be over and I'd have it made for good. They'd almost beaten me, but I had whipped them in the end.

By nine-thirty I was beginning to stare anxiously down the road, starting to worry again. A thousand things could have gone wrong. Suppose she had flipped again and killed herself? Suppose the police had come back and searched the place? She could be right; they could still be working on the case, keeping it under cover until they had the evidence they needed. Suppose they picked her up? My bag was in the car with Tallant's body. Probably a half dozen things in it had my name on them.

Right on the button at 9:45 she came by and picked me up. Everything was going beautifully.

## 18

I pushed it hard, but took no chances, remembering the cargo we had in the trunk and what would happen if we had a wreck. It was a little before one when we came into downtown Houston.

"I'll drop you at the hotel," I said. "Register, and then grab a cab for the bank. Draw out the money, come back to the hotel, and wait for me to call. I'll register at the Magill Hotel. It'll be sometime after midnight by the time I get back, and when I do the car'll be empty and you won't have anything to worry about. I'll turn the tape over to you when I meet you, and you've got it made."

"Simple, isn't it?" she said coldly.

"Like shooting fish," I said.

I pulled up in front of the hotel loading zone. Some uniformed types helped her out and took her luggage. I wheeled it on out and caught the Galveston highway. When I got down there I bought a shovel at a hardware store and put it in the car. There were several hours to kill. When it was dark I started out west beach. I drove for miles, until I was all alone along a vast stretch of empty dunes and scrub, salt cedars. Parking the car well off the road, I went back in the edge of the cedars, found a sandy spot, and started to dig. It took over an hour to scoop out a place long enough and a little over four feet deep. A few cars went past, down near the edge of the water, but they could only see the car.

When I had finished I lit a cigarette and waited until there were no headlights in sight anywhere before I opened the trunk and dragged him out. I dropped him in the hole, threw in the pillow, the bloodstained clothes, and the handcuffs, and began pushing the sand back in with the shovel. When it was pretty well smoothed off I threw loose sand across the whole area with a swinging motion of the shovel, and turned on the headlights for an instant to see how it looked. It was fine. It might be a year before anybody even happened to stop at this particular spot. Nobody would ever see Tallant again.

I drove back toward town. After two or three miles I stopped and threw the shovel back among some cedars. It was 12:30 a.m. When I came into the outskirts of Houston, hot, tired, and thirsty. I pulled into the white glare of light of a drive-in and ordered a lemonade. While I was drinking it in the car I saw the telephone booth inside. The urge to know, to hear her say she had it and was waiting for me, became overpowering. I could even go right to the Carson and get it, take a cab to the airport, and be on my way tonight if I could catch a no-show on some plane going west. I didn't want to sleep; I wanted to be on a plane with that money under my arm at last. I went into the booth, looked up the number of the Carson, and dialed.

It was very hot inside the booth. The little fan whirled. When the girl at the switchboard answered, I said, "Mrs. Cannon, please."

"One moment, sir."

I could hear her ringing the room. It went on. There was no answer.

"I'm sorry, sir," the girl said. "She doesn't answer, but perhaps she is asleep. I'll keep trying."

"If you would," I said. "It's very important."

She rang some more. Nothing happened. I began to worry. What the hell was the matter with her, anyway? She surely couldn't have gone out.

"She must not be in her room," the girl said. "Just a moment and I'll have her paged in the lobby and in the restaurant."

"Never mind," I said. "I'll call back."

"Oh, it'll be no trouble," she interrupted. "It will take only a minute—"

"I'll try later," I said. I started to hang up.

"Is there any message?" she asked quickly. "Would you like to leave a number? Uh—I could try her room again, also, if you would like. It's just possible she might have taken a sleeping pill and be a little slow waking—"

I put the receiver back on the hook and went back outside, thinking about sleeping pills. She was crazy—there was no telling. But I had thrown them away. That didn't mean anything; she could have had a trunkful of the damned things. I paid for the lemonade and drove off.

The streets were almost deserted now. I heard a siren wailing somewhere in the distance behind me. When I was downtown I parked the car about a block away from the Carson, took my bag

out, and walked around to the Magill. I was tight now with worry and uneasiness. *Oh, hell*, I thought; *she just went out somewhere; I'll call again after I register*. But the picture persisted; suppose she had drawn out the money and it was *lying there beside her in a locked hotel room while she drifted down and down into sleep with a bottle-full of those capsules inside her*? I shook my head and walked on. No, I told myself. That was too whacky even for her.

The small lobby pf the Magill was deserted except for the clerk half asleep behind his desk. I registered. He turned the card around and glanced at the name.

"Oh. Mr. Harlan," he said. "Just a minute. Someone left a message." He reached for a pad lying on a shelf beside the small switchboard, and studied it for a moment with his lips pursed.

Maybe it's in Sanskrit, I thought, and he has to translate it. I wanted to strangle him. "Yes?" I asked.

"Hmmm. It was a lady. She didn't leave any name. She called twice. Said she would be out until late, but that she would call you again and try to catch you as soon as you checked in."

I breathed softly. "Thanks," I said.

He clanged the bell on the desk and a colored boy appeared from somewhere in back. When I was up in the room and he had departed with his tip I took off my coat and stared at the telephone. Should I try the Carson again? No. She was probably still out, and she'd said she would call again. She already had, twice, so she apparently wasn't trying to run out on me or anything. I unpacked my bag, and checked the envelope containing the eight thousand. Just for something to do, I counted it again. It was all there, to the last five-dollar bill. I forced myself to sit down, and lit a cigarette. I stared at the telephone, trying to force it to ring. Five minutes went by. Ten minutes.

It rang. I grabbed it.

"Mr. Harlan?" It was her voice, all right. I could hear music in the background. Where in the name of God was she? In some honkytonk?

"Yes," I said. "Where are you? Have you got it?"

"I'm in a bar on Fannin," she replied.

I took a slow breath and drew my left hand across my face. "*Have—you—got—it?*"

"Of course," she replied coolly. "It's right here in the booth with me."

I could feel nerves uncoiling all over my body. "All right. Good. Do you want me to meet you at the Carson?"

"No. I'll come there."

"For God's sake, hurry it up. You're sober, aren't you?"

"Of course." She hung up.

They never made any sense, I thought. Wandering around in bars at one in the morning with \$92,000 in cash. I got up and began pacing up and down the room. I'd have gone crazy trying to sit still. I thought of all I had gone through for that money. It seemed like a lifetime since that afternoon Purvis had walked up to me in the lobby of the hotel in Galveston. And now in a few minutes I'd get my hands on it at last. She had it. She was bringing it here. I lit a cigarette, took two puffs on it, and crushed it out. It suddenly occurred to me I hadn't eaten anything in over two days. Who cared? I wanted to sing, or shout, or climb up the walls.

There was a light tap on the door. I sprang forward to open it.

She was very smooth looking in a light skirt and straw-colored blouse with a bunch of violets pinned to one shoulder. She was carrying the briefcase and her purse, and she had a folded newspaper under her arm.

"Come in," I said. "Come in."

I closed the door and started to reach for the briefcase. She tossed it carelessly on the bed and sat down in the armchair near the desk and telephone stand. I forgot her. I sat down on the bed and sliced open the zipper of the briefcase. My hands shook a little. God, it was wonderful. It was in bundles, tied with paper bands with the denomination stamped on them. I let them fall out on the bed. They fell in little stacks.

"Quite an interesting sight," she said.

I turned. She wasn't looking at the money. The brown eyes were on my face with a cool and faintly mocking expression in them.

"You're satisfied now?" she asked.

"Sure, sure," I said.

She reached out a hand and knocked cigarette ash into a tray. The sleeves of the straw-colored blouse were long and full, tapering in closely at her wrists. "Everything is all right? The roulette wheel has stopped at last, and you've won? You're happy?"

"What do you think?" I said. "This is what I started out to get, and I got it."

"You're a success story. You are to be congratulated, Mr. Harlan. I assume you have carried out your end of the bargain?"

"Sure," I said.

"You are a man of honor. Knowing you has been one of the high points of my life."

"Write me about it," I said. "Every other Christmas."

"Sure, sure. Call me up. I'm in the book. So who has to like it? So write me about it. So what else is new? Learn the patter of the insulated and be a real tough guy. It's easy."

"Excuse me for living."

"I'm sorry. I forgot that one."

I said nothing. She was silent for a moment.

Then without looking at me, she asked, "I won't ask any of the details, but—it was on Galveston Island?"

"Yes," I said. "Does it matter?"

She shook her head slowly, still looking down at the end of her cigarette. "I guess not."

"The tape's there on the dresser," I said.

"Thank you." She looked toward it without interest, and made no move to pick it up.

"Don't ypu want it?"

"Not particularly."

I stared at her "I don't get you."

"It isn't important, is it? I mean, it has no actual value except as a hockey puck or a ball has value as long as a game of some kind is in progress. The game is over, so it is no longer something to be pursued. And, obviously, you could have made twenty copies of it by this time."

"You're an odd-ball," I said.

"No doubt. You make a great effort to understand people, don't you?"

"Not often."

"Couldn't that be a little dangerous, in your profession?"

"I don't know," I said. "But, listen. Why were you wandering around in bars with all that money on you? I thought you'd be at the hotel."

"Oh. I haven't been back to the hotel since the morning papers hit the street."

I stared at her puzzled. "Why not?"



The paper she had brought in was lying folded in her lap. She tossed it to me. "Perhaps that will clear it up for you."

I unfolded it. In the center of the front page a two-column picture of Julia Cannon hit me right in the eye. SOUGHT, the caption read.

I stared, feeling cold in the center of my back. There were two columns of the story. Headlines and subheads sprang up at me. WIDOW SOUGHT IN. "PERFECT-CRIME" SLAYING . . . REPORTED IN HOUSTON . . .TIE-UP WITH PURVIS SLAYING HINTED . . . NEW MYSTERY ADDED . . .

*"A story of five months' dogged but unpublicized police work was revealed today in the announcement by the Lucerne County Sheriff's office that it is believed to be almost certain now that Howard L. Cannon, Wayles automobile dealer, was murdered last March instead of meeting death in an automobile crash as was supposed. The dead man's widow, Mrs. Julia Cannon, is being sought for questioning in connection with the crime, as is Daniel R. Tallant, Wayles sporting goods dealer. Both are missing. It is further suspected that Tallant himself may have met with foul play.*

*"Both new light and fresh mystery were added to the case in the past 24 hours with the announcement that Tallant is wanted for questioning in connection with the death of Wilton L. Purvis, former insurance investigator of Houston, who figured prominently in the investigation of the supposedly accidental death of Cannon last March, and by the announcement that Tallant has disappeared, following a mysterious gunshot heard in the vicinity of the Cannon home last night and that his car was later found parked near a wooded area some two blocks way.*

*"Following a search of the Cannon home by police yesterday, it was announced that definite traces of blood were found on the floor of the garage—"*

That was where I had put him down.

*"—and that an empty cartridge case was found in one of the bedrooms of the house—"*

Oh, Jesus, I hadn't even thought of that.

She was saying something.

"Shut up!" I said. I felt as if my head would fly off. "I've got to see what it says—"

She shook her head. "It's not really necessary. I can tell you what it says. It says, quite simply and beautifully, that the roulette wheel has stopped at last. They have been working on it for five

months, and since Purvis's death they have been working with the Houston police. A picture of Dan has been identified by three people as the man they saw in the vicinity of Purvis's apartment house that night. You see? They don't stop the wheel; they just let you think it's stopped. I tried to tell you that.

"They know I'm in Houston. The bank has reported I cashed that check for ninety-two thousand this afternoon. They think I'm trying to escape, using the money, and every exit has been blocked off. I shall be picked up in a matter of hours, if not minutes. If I had stayed in the hotel I would be in custody now—"

"Shut up!" I fought to keep my voice down. I wanted to scream at her. "Let me read—"

She shook her head. "You are so obvious. There is no mention of you anywhere in the story. Apparently nobody has any idea you have been connected with it at all."

I sighed weakly. I was all right. I was still free. They'd been there at the Carson when I called, and all the time the girl had been stalling me so they could trace it. I shuddered, thinking of how it would have been if I'd called from here instead of that pay phone. I was in the clear. They couldn't do anything to me because they didn't even know about me. Nobody did. Except—

She smiled. "Nobody except me, Mr. Harlan."

I stared at her.

She shook her head. "You can't kill me. You are registered in this room, under your own name. And you might have some difficulty in getting my body out of here."

"Wh—what are you going to do? Why did you come here?"

She took a puff of the cigarette and slowly tapped the ash into a tray. "I'm not going to do anything. In another half hour I shall be dead. I told you I have no taste for Roman carnival."

"Where-?"

"Not here. Obviously, that would be in very bad taste because it would embarrass you. I shall check in at some other hotel, under another name. By the time my description registers, I shall be beyond their reach. Naturally, I had the prescription refilled before I left town yesterday."

I shook my head helplessly. "I don't dig you."

"Is that surprising? You never make any effort to understand anybody. You never even listen. And I've told you it could be dangerous in a profession such as yours."

I leaned forward. "Look. You mean you're going to walk out of here, and say nothing to anybody? And you'll be dead when they find you?"

"Precisely."

"How about the room clerk? Did you ask him the number of this room?"

She shook her head. "He gave it to me when I called you from the bar. I didn't stop at the desk on the way up, and he barely glanced at me. He probably thinks I'm a call girl somebody ordered."

I went on staring at her. "It throws me. What did you come here for?"

"Why, to say good-by. And to give you that money."

She would never make sense to me. "Why? I—I mean, why the money?"

Her eyebrows raised. "I promised it to you, didn't I?" And what else could I do with it? I had already cashed the check before I learned I was trapped with no further place to run,"

I shook my head. It was unbelievable. But there it was. I had the money, and as soon as she walked out of this hotel I was free to run and nobody would even be looking for me.

"As a matter of fact," she said, "I offered part of it to an old friend of mine tonight, but she didn't want it. She doesn't expect to live much longer, and she said it was of no value to her. Another odd-ball, no doubt. So what remained but to bring it to you?"

I sighed, feeling weak all over. "Thanks," I said. "Thanks a million."

"Not at all, Mr. Harlan." She smiled, and stirred as if to get up. "You are entirely welcome. I thought you would appreciate it."

I looked at my watch. I could probably catch one of the early flights to the Coast. "Well, I won't keep you. And hadn't you better shove right along? You wouldn't want to stooge around too long and let them pick you up."

She smiled again. "And certainly not in your room? I was wondering if you would actually say that."

"So I've said it."

"The so beautifully consistent Mr. Harlan." She gathered up her purse. "But there was one other thing."

"What's that?"

"The good-by," she said quietly.

"All right. So good-by."

She studied me thoughtfully. "The farewell carries a legacy with it."

"What?"

"I wanted to leave you something."

Without thinking, I glanced around at the money piled on the bed.

She shook her head. "Not that. That's yours, free and clear, to enjoy as you wish. You might even say you earned it; at least you worked hard enough for it. No. The legacy is something else entirely."

She still had the purse in her hands. I lunged forward and grabbed it. I opened it and looked inside.

She smiled. "There is no weapon in it. Unless a bottle of capsules is a weapon."

I shook my head. She reached out and retrieved the purse.

I began to get it then. She had blown her stack completely. She was crazy.

"So what is this big deal you're going to leave me?" I asked. Maybe I'd better humor her so she'd shove before the cops found her here.

"It's quite simple, Mr. Harlan," she said. "What I am going to bequeath to you is an emotion."

I was right. She had flipped.

"You lead a very barren life, insulated as you are against everything. I have just done what I could to rectify that, by arranging for you to have one with you rather consistently in the future, the only emotion—besides greed—that I believe you are capable of feeling. Fear."

*"What?"*

She leaned back in her chair. "I'm not very fond of you, Mr. Harlan. That may have escaped your attention up to this time, since hypersensitivity to the feelings of others is not a weakness of yours, but I assure you it is quite true. But I have studied you. And one of the things I found intriguing was your predilection for the letter-to-be-opened-after-my-death sort of threat you like to hold over people. So I thought you might appreciate this thing I have arranged for you."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

She stood up and crushed out her cigarette. "I have a friend here in town who is a very old woman in very ill health. She is the one I just spoke of as refusing the money because she doesn't expect to live much longer. She used to be one of my teachers years ago. I am quite fond of her, and I am glad to be able to say that for some perverse reason she likes me. Like a great many very old women she has grown to be unimpressed by lots of things and she has a somewhat irreverent sense of humor. She also happens to have a notary's commission.

"I spent about two hours out at her home today, after the morning papers came out. I wrote out a rather full account of all this thing, particularly in reference to your participation in it, and signed it in her presence. She put her seal on it. She doesn't know what is in the document, but she witnessed the signature. It has been sealed, and will be placed in her lawyer's safe, to be opened when she dies. That may be next month, next year, or three years from now—"

I stared at her. I couldn't even open my mouth to speak.

"There is no statute of limitations on murder, Mr. Harlan," she went on. "You are guilty of withholding evidence of two murders,

and of being not only an accessory but an active participant in a third."

I finally got my mouth open. Nothing came out.

She turned and started toward the door. Then she paused with her hand on the knob.

"Of course, I could have merely had it notarized and then left it beside me tonight so the police would find it in the morning, but that seemed to me to lack finesse. That way, you wouldn't have time to enjoy your wealth, or to savor your emotion to its fullest. Emotion can grow, you see. Or at least, that particular one can. The passage of time and the night-and-day uncertainty somehow mature it and give it a certain poignant quality I am sure you will appreciate."

I grabbed her arm. "You can't do it! No—"

She smiled and opened the door. Gently disengaging her arm, she said, "Good night, Mr. Harlan. And think of me from time to time, will you?"

She lifted her hand in a little gesture of farewell and went down the hall toward the stairs. I leaned against the door and watched her. It was an erect and unhurried walk, as if she didn't have a care in the world.

I went back inside and closed the door. A month ... a year ... three years.... I sat down on the bed. It was lumpy and uncomfortable. I looked around and saw I was sitting on the pile of money. I pushed it off onto the floor. I'd never know. The first inkling I'd ever have of it was when, they came knocking on the door to pick me up. Run? Run where? They always found you.

I tried to light a cigarette. My hands shook so badly I let it fall to the floor. I didn't even try to pick it up. I went on staring at the wall.

That was the horrible part of it.

I'd never know when—

*Mr. Harlan?*

*A Mr. John Harlan. He live here?*

A fat man, a thin man, a man with one gold tooth, a tall man, a man with tufts of hair in his ears, a smiling man, a man with one drooping eyelid—

A man with a Panama hat pushed back on his head, a man with a cigar in his mouth—

A man with spring sunlight in his face, a man wearing a raincoat against the November rain—

*Mr. Harlan?*

*Is this Mr. Joseph N. Carraday, whose real name is John Harlan?*

A man sweating in the Florida sun, a man with Chicago snow on the shoulders of his overcoat—

He looks at you through the narrow opening of the doorway.

*Mr. Harlan?*

I've come to read the water meter. To collect for the Times-Picayune-Mirror-Sun-Post-Dispatch-Examiner-Herald-Tribune. To sell you an aluminum pot. To tell you about our new hospitalization plan.

To arrest you for murder.

No!

I lunged to my feet. It was here. Here in this city. Look. All I had to do was find her so I could get it away from her and destroy it. Hell, finding her would be easy. She was a Notary Public. She was an old woman. She was ill. How many old-women-ill-Notaries-Public were there in a city of maybe less than a million?

I grabbed up the telephone directory and flipped wildly through the yellow pages.

Naturopathic Physicians . . . Newspaper Dealers . . . Night Clubs ...

Notaries Public . . .

Column after column of Notaries Public.

Most of them weren't even listed by name. They were listed by the places they worked: insurance agencies, attorneys' offices, banks, real estate offices.

I was shaking. I stared at the yellow columns. Hell, I could do it. Hire private detectives. That was it. Look. I had lots of money. Hire all the private detectives in town. They'd find her. They'd find her before—

Before what?

Why, before she died, of course.

And so what was I going to find her for? To kill her? If she wouldn't tell me where the statement was, I'd have to threaten to kill her to make her talk, and if I killed her they would get me just that much quicker—

And she didn't have it, anyway. Her attorney had it.

So I had to find her, and then find out who her attorney was. And if she wouldn't tell me who her attorney was, I had to threaten to kill her to make her talk, and if I killed her—

How many attorneys were there in a city of maybe less than a million? The yellow pages flew by in a blur.

*Attorneys. (See Lawyers.)*

Lapidaries . . . Lawn Mowers . . . Lawn Mowers, Rental. . .

Lawyers.

I stared. Page after page of lawyers.. Entire races of lawyers. A torrent of lawyers, a waterfall of lawyers, a whole river of lawyers overflowing from the bottomless springs of a thousand law schools and spreading across the pages faster than I could turn them. I put my head down in my hands.

No. Don't go to pieces. You can do it. You've got money. Look at all the money you've got. Hire detectives. Find her. Find her lawyer. Find her lawyer's safe. Open the safe. How? Hire somebody to open the safe. A safe-cracker.

Safe-crackers . . .

Saddlery . . . Safe Depositories . . . Safes . . . Safety Equipment. . . Scales. . . *What?*

*Get hold of yourself.* Look, it doesn't mean anything.

It was just a momentary aberration. You'd been looking for all those other things in the yellow pages, so naturally—

I sat down then, and picked up the cigarette. It was all right. It's just a problem, see. Find her, find the attorney—lawyer, that is—get somebody to open the safe. She'll live that long. Sure she will.

Hell, it's nothing, compared to what they were up against.

Suddenly, I thought of Tallant. He was dead. And by now she was probably dropping off to sleep, for the last time. The roulette wheel had stopped for them and they were at peace. They were resting.

And why shouldn't they be? They had got up and given me their seats in front of the wheel.

*No, by God, I thought. I'll beat 'em. I'll show 'em. All I have to do is find her, and then find the lawyer—* But first I'd better get out of here. This place wasn't safe any more. Maybe the clerk had recognized her. Maybe he had called the police. That was it; pack up and move somewhere else, and then I would be able to think.

Hurry.