



RICHARD MATHESON'S

TERRIFIC SUSPENSE NOVEL IN WHICH  
STARK TERROR BECOMES A TOTAL REALITY

# RIDE THE NIGHTMARE



2/6

# Ride The Nightmare

by

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# Wednesday Night

# Chapter One

In the hall, the telephone rang.

"Now who's that at this hour?" Helen said, straightening up from the dishwasher.

"I'll bite—who?" asked Chris.

Helen made a face at him. "You," she said, "'are just the funniest."

"I try"

"Sure you do."

Smiling, Helen left the kitchen and walked across the living room, her slippers making a muffled sound on the rug. In the hall, the telephone jangled stridently. They should have had it installed in the kitchen, she thought. It was an old thought; one which recurred every time the telephone rang after Connie had been put to bed.

Helen's fingers closed over the coolness of the phone and cut off its ringing. Pushing back a lock of hair with the receiver, she held it to her ear.

"Hello," she said.

"I want to talk to Chris Phillips," said a man's voice.

Helen felt herself bristle. The voice was so sharp, so demanding.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You have the wrong number."

Was that a laugh? It sounded more like a viscid clearing of the throat.

"I don't think so." said the man.

A look of irritation tightened Helen's face.

"I'm sorry but our name is Martin," she said.

"Never mind that," the man said, and Helen got a vision of teeth clenching, of lips drawn back. "Put Chris on the phone I said."

Helen shivered. "I'm afraid—" she started.

"I said put Chris on!"

Helen stared blankly at the receiver.

"You his wife?" the man asked.

"Yes. Now would you—?"

"So old Chris is married," said the man.

*"You have the wrong number,"* said Helen.

"You just put Chris on." said the man. "You just put him on."

Impulsively, Helen clumped the receiver onto the table and headed back toward the kitchen, wondering why she hadn't hung up. Obviously, the man had a wrong number. It was just that he sounded so certain of himself. He'd intimidated her with his rude assurance.

"Who was it?" asked Chris

"Some man," she told him, frowning. "He wants to talk to Chris."

"So what's the mystery?" he asked. "I'm Chris."

"Chris Phillips." she said before he'd finished.

He made a scoffing sound. "So what are we talking about?"

"He's—still on the line," she told him.

Chris looked surprised "How come? Didn't you tell him he had a wrong number?"

"Yes, but—" She shrugged and looked exasperated. "He wouldn't listen. He just said—put Chris on."

He looked at her, a faint smile edging up the corners of his mouth.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"What's our name, lady?"

She shrugged. "So all right." she said. "You tell him."

"Yes, my love." Chris got up and walked out of the kitchen. Helen stood motionless beside the dishwasher listening to his stockinged feet thud across the living room. For some reason her heartbeat was unnaturally fast.

In the hall, Chris said: "Hello."

Helen found herself straining to hear the man's reply as if his voice were audible.

"I'm sorry," she heard Chris say. "You've made a mistake. My name is—"

There was a pause.

"I'm sorry," said Chris. "My name is Martin." His voice was louder now. Helen moved toward the living room.

"Now, listen," said Chris. "I'm telling you you're making a mistake."

Helen stood in the doorway looking toward the shadowy figure of her husband in the hall.

"My name is Martin, I tell you!"

Helen took an involuntary step into the living room, her heart beating even faster. She could feel it pummeling beneath her breast.

Chris shouted: "*What?!*"

When she reached him, he was trembling in the semi-darkness of the hall, staring into the receiver. She could hear the sharp buzzing of the dial tone.

"Chris, what is it?" she asked

His face was blank as he turned to her. Slowly, he lowered the receiver, feeling for its cradle. The dial tone stopped.

"Who was it? Did you know him?"

He shook his head.

"What did he *say*?"

"He said he was going to kill me," he told her.

"*He said—*" She couldn't finish. A vacuum of dread swept across her and, for a moment, she thought she was going to faint. "Chris," she murmured, clutching his arm.

He looked at her dazedly. "Chris, it was a wrong number."

"Of course it was," he said, hollowly.

"Well . . . who was he? Why should he—"

"I don't know."

"But that doesn't make—" She broke off, hearing a shrill quality in her voice. Taking in a deep breath, she tried to calm herself. "What did he say, Chris? Just that—"

"Just that he was going to kill me."

"But that doesn't make sense!"

"I know," he muttered.

"Maybe it's a joke," she said.

Chris didn't answer.

"You know how your friends at the club are always—"

"No." He shook his head. "It's not a joke."

"Call the police," she said.

"But what if—"

"What?"

"What if it is a—joke?"

"You just said it *wasn't*."

"I know but—"

"Honey, whether it is or not—" Abruptly, she turned for the hall. "I'll call them," she said.

"No, I'll do it," he told her. "Go finish the dishes." He walked past her into the hall, then turned and looked back. "Go on," he said.

"*Call* them, Chris," she said.

He turned to the table and lifted the receiver from its cradle. After a moment, she heard the clicking of the dial as he spun it once. There was a pause.

"Give me the police," he said

He glanced across his shoulder at her, then looked away. "It's all right," he said, but there was no conviction in his voice.

"Why don't they answer?' she asked.

"Hello," he said. She heard him swallow dryly. "Could you—send a patrol car to my house right away? I—I've been threatened."

He stood silent for a moment

"Yes," he said. "My name is—Christopher Martin I live at 1204 Twelfth Street" He repeated the address. "Yes," he said. "He threatened me and I—I need protection. Or—"

He stood quietly for several seconds, then said "Thank you" and put down the receiver,

"What did they say?" she asked

"They'll come over."

"Why didn't you tell them what the man said?" she asked. "All you told them was that he threatened you. You didn't say he said he was going to kill you."

"Honey, they're coming," he said.

Helen walked over to him and put her hand on his arm

"I'm sorry," she said. "It'll be all right." But, even as she spoke, she knew she was doing it more to comfort herself than him; hoping that he'd put his arms around her and verify her words, tell her: "Yes, of course it will be all right."

He didn't. He stood beside her, wordless.

"How long did they say it would take them to get here?" she asked.

"Honey, I don't know."

"All right," she said. "I'm sure it will be—"

Her voice choked off abruptly as, beneath her fingers, she felt his arm go rigid.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"What if he was phoning from the drugstore at the corner?"

\* \* \*

He turned and hurried to the front door, locked it. He lowered the Venetian blinds across the casement windows and drew them. Then, whirling, he turned off the floor lamp, a pocket of shadows enveloping him. In an instant, he emerged from it and half ran across the room to the table lamp beside the sofa.

"Lock the kitchen door," he told her.

She hesitated, watching him crank the front windows shut.

"*Helen, move!*" he snapped. Twitching, she turned and hurried across the rug.

"And turn out the light!" he called as she pushed at the kitchen door to make certain that the latch caught.

"All right," she answered. She turned the lock on the knob and tested the door with shaking fingers. It held. Hurriedly, she pulled the shade down over the window on the door, then, almost lurching for the wall switch, pushed it down.



The house was now completely dark. Helen stood restively in the kitchen doorway, watching Chris draw the blinds and drapes across the picture window that faced the backyard. The living room grew even darker, blocked from the faint illumination of the moon and the street light on the next block. Chris's body became a formless shadow.

"Draw the kitchen blinds," he told her. "And the shade over the sink."

Helen turned back into the kitchen and drew the blinds, wondering what she'd do if the man were to appear outside. She cranked the windows shut, wincing at the grating sound they made. That done, she turned for the sink, her slippers scuffing across the linoleum. She bumped into the dishwasher, crying out faintly at the clank of crockery and silverware inside it.

"What is it?" Chris called urgently.

"Nothing," she answered. She pulled the shade down and leaned heavily against the sink, eyes shut.

When she came back into the living room, she could hear the furtive sound of Chris cranking shut the two windows in Connie's room and pulling down the shades. She hurried across the rug and into her and Chris's room to close the windows and draw the blinds.

This part alone was a nightmare; the two of them rushing through the darkness from room to room, shutting window after window, drawing blind after blind, lowering shade after shade. What if this were a twenty room house? she thought. Before the windows were all shut and covered it would be dawn. The sob that trembled in her throat, under other circumstances, would have been a laugh. When all the blinds were drawn in their room, Helen pulled one back and looked out at the street.

It was quiet except for a slight wind which stirred the bushes just outside the window. Under the street lamp, a pool of pale light flooded up across the curb, immersing a segment of the lawn. On the parkway, the skeletal limbs of the small Chinese elm were shaking.

Helen could see directly into Bill Albert's house across the street. In the darkness of their living room, the television flickered. She knew that Bill and his wife were in there and it gave her an eerie feeling. They knew nothing of the terror

across the street from them. Engrossed, perhaps even laughing, they were completely separated.

Nearby, there was a sound and Helen whirled, her hands retracting spasmodically.

"You locked the kitchen door?" Chris asked.

She swallowed. "Yes."

"Then he can't get in."

"Chris."

"What?"

"Do you think that, maybe we should—leave? I mean, go across to Bill's house or—?"

"No, we can't."

She stared at his outline in the darkness.

"Chris, what if the police don't get here in time?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said after a moment. Helen felt a weight of terror pressing at her. Suddenly a sob forced back her lips and Chris put his arms around her. But what good were his arms if he couldn't do anything? She tried to push the thought aside but couldn't. In a moment of fear, she turned, naturally, to Chris. If he acted unafraid—seemed to know what he was doing, then she wasn't so distressed. Even if he pretended and she sensed it, it still gave her assurance.

But when he was as lost and frightened as she was . . .

"It's all right," he murmured. "It's all right, Helen."

"But what are we going to do?" She had the premonition that, once more, he was going to say he didn't know.

"You're going to stay in here," he told her.

"What?"

"Come here," he said. "Here. Sit down on the bed."

"Chris, what are you—?"

"I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"Outside."

"No!" She lurched up from the bed and caught his arm. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Honey, I'm not going to just stand here and risk your life and Connie's," he said. "He has a gun and—"

"A *gun*?"

"Of course he has a gun. What do you—?"

"But the police will be here any second now."

"*Wait* here," he ordered.

"Chris, don't!"

As he moved across the hall, she caught his arm again. "Chris, you mustn't!"

"Honey, let me go," he said.

Helpless, she followed as he pulled away and walked into the kitchen. There, in the darkness, she heard him pulling out a drawer. She shivered violently at the sound of knife blades sliding against each other.

"Oh . . . God, why don't we have a gun?" Chris muttered savagely.

Helen shivered again; this time not from fear but from something in his voice—a tone she'd never heard before. It was as if, abruptly, he had been transformed into a man she didn't know. She drew back, staring at the dark shadow of him turning from the cupboard with something long and pointed in his right hand.

"Chris, no," she said.

Then, suddenly, both of them had stopped moving and were standing frozenly, their heads turned toward the living room as they listened to the sound of the front door knob being turned from side to side.

## Chapter Two

A dry gasp tensed her throat as Chris's fingers closed on her wrist and pulled her into the kitchen.

"Don't make a sound," he told her. His voice was the stranger's voice again.

"Chris, we—"

"Shhhh!"

She bit her lower lip.

"Stay in here," he whispered. "Don't move." He pushed her against the wall, one hand pressing at her shoulder.

"What are you going to do?"

"Never mind," he said. "Just stay here."

He stepped into the living room and stood there looking toward the front porch. The man had stepped in front of the windows now, his body framed against the light of the street lamp. Helen thought that he had his face pressed against one of the windows as though he was trying to see through the blinds. She had the hideous sensation that he was watching Chris.

"Chris," she whispered.

As he stepped back into the kitchen, the shadow of the man stepped off the porch and disappeared.

"I told you to be quiet!" Chris said.

"But I have an idea."

"What?"

"If the man saw you he'd know he made a mistake."

"What?" The sharpness of his whisper made her flinch.

"Well, isn't it true?" she asked. "If we turned on the light and—"

"Helen, he has a gun!" Chris said. "He's not here to look at me!"

She bumped against the door jamb as he spoke.

His voice was so harsh and alien. "Now stay here," he said, "and—"

He stopped instantly, his right hand clamping on her wrist. Helen felt a crawling on her scalp at the sound of fingernails scraping on the back living room screens.

*"Don't move,"* Chris said.

Outside, she heard heels clicking on the patio, moving, it seemed, quite casually. I'm going to scream, she thought, and frantically pressed her lips together.

The clicking of the heels stopped and she felt Chris's grip loosen. "Go in our bedroom," he told her.

He pushed her from the kitchen and she found herself walking across the living room. She wanted to stay with Chris. Yet, at the same time, his remoteness seemed to drive her from him. She stumbled into the hall and stopped there, looking back toward the kitchen. Chris was not in sight.

Instinctively, she started back. Then she saw a movement by the kitchen door and knew that he was still inside.

She whirled at a sound. The man was trying to open a window in Connie's room. She went in, recoiled against the wall, gaze fastening to the shadow at the back window. No, her mind begged, no, he can't get in. He can't.

On the bed, Connie muttered in her sleep. Helen dug every nail into her palms until the biting pain drove away the blackness that threatened to envelop her. Bracing herself, she pushed off from the wall and edged across the room, her eyes never leaving the window. She saw the man's arms reach up, heard him tugging at the frame. Connie started fussing again. Oh, God, don't wake up! She almost cried the words aloud. If only Chris would come, if only she could call him.

The man turned and walked away from the window.

Breath rushed from Helen's lungs and she became conscious of a cold sweat trickling down her back and sides. Hurriedly, she leaned over the bed and, drawing a Kleenex from her bathrobe pocket, patted gently at the dew of perspiration across Connie's forehead. Her trembling fingers brushed aside the soft hairs, then drew back the

spread so that Connie had only a sheet and blanket over her.

Straightening up, she turned quickly toward the hall. She'd call the police again. What was the matter with them? Chris had told them he'd been threatened. Didn't that mean anything to—?

In the kitchen, a window was broken in.

There was a cry of pain, then the sound of the door banging violently against the cupboard. As Helen rushed across the living room, there was another cry, then a scuffle of shoes on the linoleum. Her left slipper flew off but she kept on running.

*"God damn—!"* She heard the fury of the man's voice. Another cry of pain, a rushing sound, then a loud crash as someone, colliding with the dishwasher, knocked it over. Helen lurched into the kitchen doorway and saw a figure near the doorway.

*"Chris?"* she gasped.

The figure recoiled a step. The man's harsh voice surrounded her. "Put on the light," he ordered.

*"Don't shoot!"*

*"The light!"*

Her shaking hand felt along the wall until it touched the switch, then pushed it up.

He was short, lean. Helen stared at his white face, at the tangled black hair across his forehead. She looked at the revolver he was holding in his hand. As the man leaned back against the kitchen door to close it, she saw blood running across the hand and dripping to the linoleum in bright spots.

Chris's groan made her glance over to where he was struggling up from the floor in a debris of broken dishes and silverware. She saw a red welt rising on the side of his jaw and a ragged scratch across his cheek as if he'd been struck with the pistol barrel.

She looked back at the man. He was standing by the booth now; a man dressed in a stained serge suit that had been sewn together in places; a man who had a young face yet something old and terrible in his eyes.

"So." He panted as he spoke. "I found you, Chris. I found you."

"You're making a mistake!" said Helen. "Can't you see he's not the one you're after! Our name is Martin!"

She shivered as the man's pale blue eyes turned on her. His lips flexed back from yellowish teeth in what was more a grimace than a smile.

"Martin, hanh?" he said.

The burst of hope she felt lasted only a second, vanishing as hatred returned to the man's expression. He looked over at Chris who was on his feet now, holding on to the sink.

"Thought you could change your name," he said. "Thought that was all you had to do. Just change your name and we'd never find you."

Chris caught his breath and Helen started at the shocked expression on his face.

"Yeah, that's right," said the man, still breathing hard, we. You thought you saw the last of us, didn't you? Thought you really pulled a fast one."

"You've made a mistake," Helen told him. "Don't you—?"

"Shut up!"

Helen shrank back and the man forced the thin, mirthless smile back to his lips.

"Thought you'd never see us again, didn't you, Chrissie boy? Thought you were safe and sound."

"Chris—" said Helen.

Now the man leaned back against the booth. Holding the revolver loosely, he pushed himself up onto the table and let his legs swing idly above the floor.

"I been waiting a long time for this, Chrissie boy," he said. "For a long time I figured you got away from us. Then I saw that picture in *Life* magazine, you know? That was a lucky break for me. wasn't it?"

The photograph in *Life* had shown Chris with the Santa Monica Wildcats, the boy's baseball team he sponsored. In an exhibition game, they had managed to beat the Hollywood Stars 7-5. Helen recalled that Chris hadn't wanted to be in that picture.

"We're going to Mexico but I had to stop and see you first, didn't I, Chrissie boy?" said the man. "I been waiting a long time for this."

"You better go," said Helen. The police are coming and—"

She broke off as the man's face hardened and he raised his gun.

"No!" she gasped, one hand reaching out as though to stop him.

The man relaxed and the smile returned to his lips. He didn't even look at Helen.

"Now you didn't call the police, did you, Chrissie boy?" he said. "I know you wouldn't do that because, if you did, you'd go to jail, wouldn't you? And you don't want to go to jail, do you?"

Helen looked over at Chris with sickened eyes. The room seemed to waver around her. "Chris, you *did* call the—"

All of it fell into a pattern then. Chris's strange reaction to the call, his refusal to let her telephone the police, his telling her that they couldn't go over to Bill Albert's house, his plan to go outside with a knife and stop the man before she could find out that . . .

Helen felt herself trembling with a sickness of despair which welled up in her before she could control it. With a body-wracking sob, she turned away, one hand thrown across her eyes.

"*Stay right here,*" the man's voice ordered and she stopped, leaning against the door jamb.

"Helen—" She heard Chris's pleading voice.

"You mean you haven't told her?" the man asked.

"Leave her alone." Chris muttered.

"But I think she should know all about it, don't you, Chrissie boy?" said the man. "I think every wife should know all about her husband. That wasn't nice of you, not telling her about your wicked past." He clucked mockingly. "Shame on you, Chrissie boy."

Helen barely heard him. It was as if the shock of discovery had drained the powers of her senses. Through a blur of tears she saw the living room stir gelatinously. The sound of the man's voice faltered, one moment fading into silence,



the next, flaring in her eardrums. Of smell and taste there was nothing and her flesh seemed numb as she leaned against the door frame.

Now the man seemed to notice, for the first time, that he was bleeding

"Stuck me in the arm, didn't you, Chrissie boy?" he said, almost amusedly. "Well, we'll make up for that, won't we?"

Abruptly, Helen turned, her heart jolting in slow, heavy beats, remembering that the man had come to kill Chris. "Maybe my husband didn't call the police," she said, "but I did."

The man glanced over. "Good try, lady," he said. "Just shut your mouth and maybe you won't get hurt."

"I tell you the police are—"

"Helen, don't." The sound of Chris's defeated voice made her stop.

Chris turned to the man.

"Listen," he said. "I'll go with you. Just leave my wife alone."

"Now what's the hurry, Chrissie boy?" asked the man. "We got plenty of time to chat—" his voice lowered.

"Before I kill you."

"No."

The man turned again and looked at Helen. "Lady, I told you to keep your mouth shut," he said.

"Why do you want to kill him?" she asked in a shaking voice. "You—"

"Hold it."

Helen stopped. Then, hearing what the man did, she began to tremble. The man looked past her into the living room. "You know," he said, "that sounds just like a little girl."

The sound of Connie's crying seemed to fill the house.

"So you got a little girl," the man said. Chris seemed to lean forward.

"A little girl," said the man. "Now that's real sweet."

"I said I'd go with you," said Chris.

"Yeah, that's what you said. Isn't it?"

The man's amiable tone degraded in an instant, his face became a mask of animosity And what if I don't want you to come with me?" he said.

Helen glanced across her shoulder automatically. Please, may I—?" she began, then broke off as the man slid off the table edge.

"Cliff. I'm warning you," said Chris.

The man seemed to snarl but there was no sound. "You're warning me." he said. "That's funny, Chrissie boy." He glanced over toward the living room. "All these years," he said, "I been trying to figure out a way to pay you back." His frail chest shuddered with breath. "But I never could till now."

"Cliff. I'm warning you—!" said Chris, his face whitening.

"Shut up!" flared the man. "You're not warning anybody!"

Helen remained in the doorway as he edged toward her. She stared at him with unbelieving eyes.

"You're not—?" she started faintly.

"Get out of my way." said the man.

Chris took a step away from the sink. "You're not going to touch my girl," he said.

"I'm not, hanh?" The man's voice broke stridently. "I'll show you whether I am or not!" He bumped against Helen and turned quickly, his dark eyes probing at her. She smelled the sweetish odor of whiskey on his breath and shrank back with a grimace.

"Look out," he muttered and tried to pass her. Helen lost her balance and fell toward him, hands clutching out for support.

"Get away—!" His voice exploded in her ear as he shoved at her.

It happened so quickly that the man had no chance to raise his gun before Chris was charging into him, clamping rigid fingers over his wrist. Helen went stumbling back into the living room, collided with the edge of the sofa and fell across its arm.

As she pushed up, she saw Chris and the man struggling in the kitchen. Chris was holding the man's wrist away from himself, the man was trying to push the barrel end against

Chris's stomach. They slipped and twisted on the smooth linoleum, teeth clenched, lips drawn back in frozen grimaces. Helen stood watching them, torn between her instinct to help Chris and her need to get Connie out of the house.

Suddenly, the man's right foot kicked out and Chris lost balance. He started falling and lurched his trunk forward to regain equilibrium. The two of them went thudding against the booth. The table shifted on its pivot and Chris dropped off heavily onto the yellow booth, the man bent over him.

Helen ran at him but his left shoe, kicking out, glanced off her shoulder stunningly and she reeled back against the stove, gasping as her side rammed against one of the control knobs.

In her bedroom, Connie called, "Mommy?" in a frightened voice. Helen aimed instinctively toward her, then back again.

The man was forcing down the grip that Chris still had on his wrist. He had the advantage of gravity, his right leg pinning Chris against the booth, the weight of his body adding to his strength. As Helen pushed away from the stove, she saw Chris throw a pleading look across the man's shoulder.

She rushed at the man again, catching at his suit, but he twisted away from her. The pistol was only inches from Chris's forehead now. Desperately, he tried to free himself, his body lurching spasmodically, but the man's leg held him pinned. Again, Helen grabbed the man's arm, again his left foot shot out, almost knocking her legs from under her. She staggered backward with a gasp.

"Helen, the knife!"

She stiffened, looking blankly at Chris's straining face.

Her eyes fled down across the floor and picked out the white-handled carving knife he'd held before. Mechanically, she started for it, hardly aware of the glass splinter that gouged into the sole of her bare foot.

"No, you don't!" cried the man.

Whirling, Helen was just in time to see his body flung backward from the booth as Chris, one knee raised, shoved him away. The man went flailing across the floor. He

crashed against the toppled dishwasher and fell across it, the revolver flying from his fingers and sliding underneath the stove. Helen shrank against the wall as Chris came running at the man.

The man shot out his hand and grabbed the carving knife. Lunging upward, he tried to drive it into Chris's chest. Chris flung up his arm and deflected the stab. The man drew back his arm again and Chris jumped forward, grabbing at his wrist with both hands. For a few seconds, the two of them stood immobile, trembling. Then, abruptly, the man's arm seemed to crumple, the knife was arcing downward, the blade tip turning in, and all sound had disappeared in the man's choking gasp.

For a moment he looked at Chris in dumb astonishment. Then he lowered his eyes and gaped down at his own hand still clutching the handle of the knife that was buried in his chest.

"You goddam—" he started in a dull, flat voice.

Then he twisted around and his white face came falling toward Helen. She felt his bony fingers clutching at her breasts, her stomach, sliding down her legs. She heard his chin thud on the floor, his forehead pressing on the hem of her robe.

She couldn't move. She stared down at the motionless figure, her mouth open, watching the scarlet thread that was beginning to extend itself across the floor.

Chris fell on his knees beside the man, rolling him onto his side so that one pale blue eye stared upward. His hand slid under the man's coat and held a moment. Then his face was raised to Helen, his voice faint against the crying of their child.

*Dead*, he whispered.

## Chapter Three

The sound of his voice seemed to release her. Gagging, she stumbled toward the sink, almost falling as the weight of the man's head held back the bottom of her robe. She jerked herself free and heard the man's head thump on the door.

She lost her supper then. Chris came over and put his hand against her forehead but she twisted away. He stood beside her helplessly.

When it was over, Helen leaned against the sink panting weakly. Her hand reached automatically for the faucet and the rush of water began to clean the sink.

In the bedroom, Connie was screaming. Chris said, "I'll go to her," and turned away.

"No." Pulling down a dish towel, Helen dried herself, not even looking at him as she started for the door. Her stomach muscles tensed again as she saw the man's blood running across the linoleum. She walked past the body quickly, drying her eyes with the towel. She tried not to think. Her baby was crying, that was all that mattered.

Connie was sitting up in bed.

"What's the matter, darling?" Helen asked, hardly recognizing her voice.

"Mommy!"

As she sank down on the bed, Helen realized how exhausted she felt. She put her arms around Connie and kissed her cheek.

"It's all right, baby" she murmured. She smoothed back the hair from Connie's forehead. "It's all right. Mommy's here."

"Mommy—Mommy.

"Yes, sweetheart."

She held her child in the darkness and whispered comfort to her even though she knew that she was living in a comfortless world.

When Connie had gone back to sleep, Helen went into the bathroom to wash. The face she saw in the mirror was not a pleasant one.

As she was drying herself, she became conscious of her bare foot and remembered the sliver of glass she'd stepped on. Sitting down on the edge of the bathtub, she looked at the bottom of her foot

The sliver was a small one. She had to get a pair of tweezers from the medicine cabinet before she could remove it. Pressing out the blood, she cleaned the tiny gash with alcohol. She didn't bother to bandage it.

She sat there with her eyes shut, knowing that she'd have to go back to the kitchen. All she wanted to do was get into bed and stay there. She'd never felt so tired in her life.

She tried to visualize performing as a wife and mother the next day but it was impossible. The continuity of her life seemed to have ceased in that moment when she realized that, for more than seven years, she'd loved only part of a man.

Helen stood and left the bathroom. In the living room, she found her slipper and eased her foot into it. She noticed that the kitchen light was out and wondered if Chris had gone. As she did, he came in by the front door, shut it behind himself and locked it

"No one seems to have heard anything," he said. "It's lucky Grace and Jack are gone." Grace and Jack were their neighbors on the left.

"Yes," she said. "That's lucky "

"I didn't mean it that way," he said.

Helen let herself down onto the sofa and leaned back heavily. It was so quiet in the house she could hear the humming of the electric clock in the kitchen. Chris stayed by the door, watching her.

"Well . . . ?" she finally asked.

His shoulders slumped, "It's up to you," he said.

"Why me?"

He made no reply.

"No, it isn't up to me," she said, "I don't fit in anywhere."

"Helen, that isn't so!"

"Isn't it?"

"Do you think I enjoyed keeping it from you all these years?"

"I'm sure it doesn't matter."

"But it does!" he cried. "It made me miserable to—!"

"You'll wake up Connie."

Chris stopped.

"If it made you so miserable," she said, "why did you do it"?

He sank down on one of the arm chairs. He put a hand across his eyes. "I was afraid to tell you," he said. "Afraid I might lose you. Afraid I might—"

"—have to go to prison?"

"Thank you," he murmured.

"Well, what do you expect?" Helen turned her head and looked away from him. Suddenly, it occurred to her that she'd never been married. To the world, she was Mrs. Helen Martin; but there was no such person. There was no Christopher Martin and no Connie Martin either. All of them were illusions.

"I thought I'd never have to tell you," Chris said. "I never thought he'd find me. Then that—picture had to be taken. It's fantastic," he went on. "A secret I've kept for almost fifteen years. Ended in a second because some kids won a baseball game!" His laugh was closer to a sob. "It's practically hilarious," he said.

Helen closed her eyes. Now it was as if the other end of the balance—his end—were being weighted. He had risked his life for Connie. He had planned to intercept the man. Wasn't it possible that he'd been less motivated by a desire to hide his secret than by a wish to protect his wife and child? That Chris loved them was beyond denial

*No!* Helen sat back stiffly. That he was suffering was his own doing, not hers. He had lied to her. All these years, he had trusted her so little that, rather than speak a simple truth, he had constructed a world of falsehoods around himself. A world which was now at an end.

Chris got up and headed for the hall.

"Where are you going?" she asked, suddenly frightened.

He turned in the hall doorway. "To call the police," he said.

She stared at him. "And then?" she asked.

"I'll be arrested."

She couldn't stop the cold knotting in her throat and upper chest.

His hands closed slowly into fists.

"I'll go to prison. Helen," he said.

"No, *Chris!*" She didn't realize how anguished her expression had become.

He stood motionless for a few seconds. Then he walked over to the sofa and sat down beside her. "Do you mean that?" he asked.

"What?"

"That you don't want me to go to prison?"

"That you're willing to—to consider doing something else besides call the police?"

Abruptly she was thrust back into nightmare again. Now it was a penny thriller, absurd and ghastly. A murdered man sprawled in the kitchen, her husband sitting beside her, asking her if she was willing to consider— "I don't know," she said, unable to keep her voice from breaking, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Listen to me," he said. "If the body isn't found, there'll be no way for anyone to know what happened."

Helen stared at him blankly. She didn't understand.

Christ looked down at his clenching hands.

"I could take him into the hills," he said in a voice that sounded hideously calm to her. "I could bury him. No one would ever find out."

He looked at her.

"It's either that," he said, "or call the police."

She couldn't answer him. "Well?"

"Chris, I—"

"Do you want me to go to prison, Helen?" he asked. "I've lived a decent life ever since it happened. You know that. I've done everything I could to atone for my past. Is that all to end because of—*him?*"



"No. She grasped his hand impulsively.

"Helen." His fingers tightened in hers. "Thank you."

"Don't."

"What?"

"I mean—" She shuddered fitfully. "Oh, God, let's get it over with." she said.

\* \* \*

The folded newspaper page fell from the man's pocket as Chris was lifting him. Helen picked it up and was about to throw it in the wastebasket when she noticed the story outlined in pencil.

LIFERS ESCAPE PRISON!  
LEAVE DEATH TRAIL!

Three convicts sentenced to life  
imprisonment for a 1943 murder  
escaped last night from—

Helen looked up, shocked. "*Murder?*"

When Chris saw the expression on her face, he put the body down. Helen handed him the paper and he looked at it.

"Helen, I had nothing to do with it," he said.

She stared at him.

"I had nothing to do with it."

She lowered her gaze from his. 'All right, Chris.'

"Helen, if you don't believe me—"

"All *right*, Chris."

He stood quietly for a moment, then put down the paper and went back to the body. Helen heard the man's heels scraping slightly on the linoleum, then the door bumping against him as Chris opened it.

She listened to the sound of the body being dragged down the alley and into the garage through the side door. When the door was closed, she lifted the dishwasher again and reloaded it. Then, turning to the sink, she opened one of the doors beneath it. Taking out the pail, she poured in a mound

of soap powder, then ran hot water over it, watching it billow into cloud-like suds.

When Chris came back, she was running the mop back and forth across the puddle of blood on the linoleum, her lips pressed together, her eyes looking straight ahead.

"Here, I'll do it," Chris took the mop from her.

"What about—?"

"What, Helen?"

She cleared her throat. "The—knife," she said.

"I left it in him."

"Oh."

She heard Chris wringing out the mop and found herself imagining how the water in the pail looked. Teeth on edge, she moved past Chris and walked into the living room. She sat until she heard the pail being emptied and rinsed out.

She stood as Chris came in.

"I'll be back as soon as possible," he said.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"What about Connie?"

"We can take her."

"I'd rather you stayed," he said. "It's not going to be pretty."

"What about the other two?" she asked.

"Cliff couldn't have shown them that photograph," he said. "If he had they wouldn't have let him come. They're hunted men. They haven't got the lime for vendettas."

She didn't look convinced.

"What if Connie woke up and saw him," he asked.

Helen shuddered. "All right," she said, "but what do I do?"

"Lock up. turn the lights out. I won't be long."

"All right," she said.

She watched him walk across the kitchen and move out onto the back porch. He turned to close the door.

Then, with a lunge, he regained the house and shut the door behind him as quickly as he could without slamming it.

Someone was ringing the front door bell.

## Chapter Four

Helen's instinct was to scream in fury at this monstrous piling of shock on shock. Then in an instant new terror had wiped her mind clean.

She glanced into the kitchen. Chris couldn't seem to get away from the door. He leaned against it heavily, looking trapped and dazed. The bell rang again with a coarse buzzing noise.

Now Chris moved away from the door and she heard him pull a drawer open. The bell rang again, a jarring burst of sound.

*"Chris,"* she said.

He appeared holding the revolver.

*"Answer the door."* he said. *"If it's them, tell them I'm in the—the bedroom. Then go in Connie's room and lock the door."*

She couldn't take her eyes off the revolver. *"But you can't—"* she started.

*"Honey, she's going to wake up again,"* he said.

*"Chris, no."*

*"Do what I say."*

Turning, she headed for the door, a sense of hideous inevitability crowding away all feeling. Her fingers closed over the knob and she tried to turn it. It's broken, she thought in dull surprise and tried again. Abruptly, then, she realized that it was locked.

The bell rang again. Helen was about to unlock the door when an idea pierced her terror. Reaching over, she switched on the porch light. Then, holding her breath, she drew aside the blinds. It was like a weight falling from her. *"It's Bill,"* she called out hollowly.

As she opened the door, she heard Chris moving in the kitchen, the sound of the drawer being shut again.

*"Hi,"* she said.

"Say. I'm sorry to be a pest. Helen." Bill Albert said, "but we're all out of ice cubes."

"Of course." Helen forced a smile back to her lips.

"Come on in. We have plenty." She wondered if her voice sounded as bad to Bill as it did to her. Chris came out of the kitchen and smiled at Bill.

"Hi," he said. "What's up?"

"They're out of ice cubes," she explained.

"Oh." Chris nodded. "Come on in the kitchen and we'll get you some."

"I sure hate to bother you like this," said Bill.

"Not at all," Chris told him.

Helen followed them toward the kitchen, her mind leaping ahead to investigate: the floor mopped, the sink clean, the newspaper page in the wastebasket, the pistol in the drawer, the dishwasher standing and loaded again.

The broken window!

"I hope I didn't wake up Connie," said Bill.

"No, not her," said Chris. "She sleeps like the dead."

Helen shivered, stopping in the kitchen doorway. Chris had pulled down the door shade again so the broken window was hidden. *Like the dead*, her mind repeated.

"Naturally Mary had to pick this afternoon to defrost," said Bill. "I keep telling her to do it overnight. She keeps telling me to buy one that defrosts itself."

"Know what you mean," said Chris. He pulled open the refrigerator door and opened the freezer compartment.

Helen looked around the kitchen nervously. One of the plates in the washer had been lying in the blood. Moving to the washer, she pushed its top down quickly. As she turned, she saw Bill looking at her and smiled.

"How are you tonight?" he asked her.

"I'm fine."

Bill smiled politely and Helen turned to watch Chris tugging at the ice cube tray. It was stuck to the surface of the freezer. "Can I help?" Bill asked.

"I'll get it," said Chris. He didn't sound very cheerful now. In a second, he'd wrenched the tray loose.

Now Bill had the tray wrapped in a towel and was apologizing once more for having disturbed them. Now Helen heard herself telling him not to worry about it and to take his time returning the tray. Now she was walking into the living room with the two men and listening to them say something about television which they decided to pretend was worth laughing at. Now they were saying good night and the front door was closing and Chris was leaning against it, breathing slowly, heavily.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"What about—?"

"I'll hold her on my lap," she said. "She'll be all right."  
"But—"

*"I won't stay here,"* she said.

He stared at her a few seconds. Then he sighed.

"All right," he said. "All right," he said again.

\* \* \*

Chris turned the Ford onto the hill that led to the coast highway. On the floor in back, there was a sound of something shifting and Helen felt her skin crawl.

Chris braked beside the red light at the foot of the hill. He sat, wordless, his hands clenched over the rim of the steering wheel. Then the light changed and he turned the Ford around the corner, heading north. Helen closed her eyes as the car picked up speed. Maybe she could sleep, she thought.

After a while, she opened her eyes again and looked at the highway. The headbeams hurried on ahead, picking out a path of light for the car. She tried to shift Connie a little.

"She too heavy?" Chris asked. He sounded almost grateful for the excuse to speak to her.

"It's all right," Helen answered.

He stopped for the light at Santa Monica Canyon and Helen looked around the deserted intersection, at the steep hill angling off the highway, leading to the Palisades, the silent cafes and stores. The light changed and the car moved forward.

"Helen?"

"What?"

"I'd like to tell you about it."

He waited as if expecting her to answer. Helen swallowed.

"If you want," she said.

"I know you think I lied to you because I was afraid of going to prison," he said. "That isn't true. It was you I was afraid of. You were so young when we married, so unprepared for anything like that."

"That was seven years ago, Chris."

"I know, I know," he said. "It's just that I never knew how to tell you."

The Ford started along the stretch of highway that led toward Sunset Boulevard.

"I was living in New Mexico when it happened," he said. "I told you about it. That part wasn't a lie. I was working for a bank. I picked up deposits from the big stores and factories in the area. It wasn't much—"

He broke off as Connie made a restless noise in her throat. Then, after several moments, he began again.

"I was living with my mother," he said. "We didn't get along. I was seventeen but, to her, I was still a baby. So more to defy her than for any other reason I started going to the skid row section of the city. I bowled there, played pool, just sat around sometimes. I didn't belong there and I knew it. I would have preferred going to a concert or reading a book. But music and books I associated with my mother. I didn't want to have anything to do with them."

He clenched his teeth and blew out breath. "That's how I met Adam and Steve," he said. "Later on, Cliff. The four of us sort of stuck together."

The thought of Chris associating with the dead man gave Helen a restless, uncomfortable sensation. It made her wonder if Chris was really what he'd always seemed to be.

"We saw a lot of each other," Chris was saying. "I don't know if they worked except for Adam. He was an accountant at the Coca Cola Bottling Plant; a sort of pseudo-intellectual I guess you'd call him."

For a few moments, there was only the sound of the Ford pulling quickly around the dark curve of highway that ran beside the ocean-fronting restaurants and houses.

"Why we decided to do what we did I'll never know," Chris said. "I can't explain why four supposedly sane human beings should decide to commit a robbery."

Helen closed her eyes and shuddered. There it was. They'd robbed someone and, during the robbery, that someone had been killed. And Chris had been there. Her Chris.

"We decided to rob one of the bank's depositors," Chris went on. "He owned a jewelry store. I'd told them how much money he deposited and—Adam picked him."

They drove past the entrance to Topanga Canyon and Helen wondered why he didn't turn in, deciding that it was because there were too many people living there. There was no safe place for burying things

"We were to use Adam's car," Chris was saying. "I was supposed to knock on the back door of the jewelry store the way I usually did. When the man opened it, they were going in to get the money while I waited in the car."

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel and beneath his foot, the Ford accelerated steadily.

"I was supposed to warn them if anything went wrong," he said.

He was silent for such a long time that Helen thought his story was finished. "Something went wrong, all right," he finally said. "The old man who owned the store had an alarm system. It didn't make any noise in the store itself though, only outside. I heard it. I was going to warn the others when I heard a police car coming."

His foot pressed down harder on the accelerator and the speedometer needle quivered past sixty.

"I lost my nerve," he said bitterly. "I didn't warn them. I just drove way as fast as I could, ditched the car when it ran out of gas. I hitchhiked out of the state. Later on, I read that they'd been caught and that the old man had been killed."

He sank back against the seat as if, suddenly, exhausted. "That's it," he said. "I came to California. I changed my

name. I managed to keep it all a secret. I thought I'd beaten it. Now . . ."

He gestured defeatedly with his right hand.

Neither one of them had noticed the red light blinking behind them. The first thing they were aware of was a harsh, metallic voice ringing out above the wind and engine noises.

"Blue Ford, pull over!"



## Chapter Five

A hundred yards back, the turning roof light of another car was just disappearing behind a curve.

"Put Connie in the back seat!" Chris told her.

"What is it?"

"A police car! Hurry!"

Breath choked in Helen's throat. She tried to lift Connie and felt a painful drawing in her back and shoulder muscles.

"She's too heavy!" she said.

"Grab the wheel then!"

Her left hand clutched at the wheel. Raising himself quickly, Chris grabbed Connie under the shoulders and legs and lifted her. For a second, Connie's leg was in front of her face and Helen couldn't see the highway. The Ford veered toward the opposite lane and she twisted the wheel sharply. Connie whimpered as she was dumped onto the plastic covering of the back seat. With desperate haste, Chris tucked the blanket around her. Before the police car had reappeared, he was steering the car again.

"Why did you do that?" Helen asked.

"They'll probably look in back," he said. "If they see Connie they may not look at the floor." He pulled the car to the side of the road and braked.

"But is he—?"

"He's covered," said Chris.

Helen sat there woodenly, staring straight ahead, as the black and white police car angled to a halt in front of them. The red light on top of the car revolved slowly, glaring into their eyes. Two policemen got out and Helen listened to their shoes crunching over the roadside gravel. They were carrying something in their hands. Helen shuddered, realizing that they had flashlights.

"I'll talk to them," said Chris.

The policemen separated now, one to each side of the car. The one on Chris's side directed the flashlight beam into his face.

"Don't you read traffic signs?" the policeman asked.

"Yes. I—"

"You were doing seventy in a thirty-five-mile zone, did you know that?" the policeman interrupted.

"I'm sorry." Chris said. "I—I wasn't looking. We were—"

"License, please," said the policeman.

Chris reached forward nervously and switched off the engine. He pulled out the key ring with the plastic-faced license holder attached to it and handed it out. The policeman took it and pointed his flashlight at it.

"You're Christopher Martin?" he asked.

Helen felt something like an electric shock in her body as the other policeman pointed his flashlight beam at the back seat.

"Who's that?" he asked.

She swallowed quickly. "My daughter," she said. She was startled at the aloofness of her voice.

"You still live at twelve-o-four, Twelfth Street?" the other policeman was asking Chris.

"Yes."

The policeman lowered the license and looked at Chris again.

"Why were you going so fast, Martin?" he asked. His voice was less stiff now.

"Well." Chris said, "we were going home and—"

Helen had stiffened even before the policeman said, "You were driving away from Santa Monica, Martin."

Chris drew in a shaky breath.

"I mean my mother-in-law's house," he said. "She lives in Malibu. To tell you the truth, we've been—arguing and I'm taking my wife to her mother's house. I'm very upset. That's why I was going so fast. I wasn't paying attention."

The policeman looked at Chris another moment, then at Helen. "Is that right?" he asked.

If I told him now. it would be over, she thought. But, even as she thought it. she was nodding "Yes," she said.

"Well." said the policeman, "I'll have to give you a ticket, I'm afraid. You were going pretty fast. But I won't put down your actual speed. That way you won't have to appear in court."

"Thank you," said Chris.

They sat there quietly while the two policemen returned to their car. Helen sat staring at the light on the roof of the police car. It glared hypnotically into her eyes, then was gone, glared, was gone. In the back seat, Connie snored gently. After a few minutes, the policeman returned and handed Chris the license and the ticket book. Chris signed his name and wrote his address. Then the policeman tore out the ticket and handed it in through the window.

"Take it slower now," he said.

Chris nodded. "I will."

The policeman cleared his throat.

"Look, it's none of my business," he said, "but—well, I'm an old married man myself. I have four kids and the missus and I have been through a lot together."

He smiled at them. "What I mean is, these things seem a lot worse at night than they really are. I'm not trying to interfere but—well, why not wait till tomorrow before you decide anything? Go home, sleep on it. You'll find it's not half so bad in the morning."

Helen braced herself.

"Thank you," she said. "We will."

The policeman smiled again. "Good," he said. "Take it easy now."

When he'd left, Chris said, "Now what are we going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"We'll have to turn back and I was going to Latigo Canyon."

"Oh."

Chris started the engine. When the police car had pulled off the shoulder and disappeared around a bend ahead, he made a U-turn and started back toward Santa Monica. He

kept looking up at the rear-view mirror to see if the police car were following.

"Where are we going to put him?" she asked.

"I guess it'll have to be Topanga," he said.

Helen twisted around and looked at Connie to see if she was all right. Then, unable to stop herself, she looked down at the floor. As the car turned into a curve, the body shifted and bumped against the seat. Helen turned back quickly.

All along the first five miles of the canyon, Chris had kept slowing down as if he meant to stop. Then his teeth had set on edge and he'd picked up speed again as he saw that the spot was unsuitable. Now he had turned onto the old Topanga Road.

Helen looked at the dashboard clock. It was twenty minutes after twelve. She drew in a long breath and let it seep out between her lips as she stared at the road ahead, glancing at the occasional houses they passed. Once they had discussed the possibility of buying a house in this area. She'd never want to live here now.

Finally they stopped and the rasping click of the hand brake made her twitch. Chris pushed in the light knob and darkness blotted away everything around them. He sat motionless for a moment, his eyes staring ahead. Then, with a brusque motion, he pulled up the door handle and slid out of the car.

"Could I have the flashlight, please?" he asked.

Reaching forward. Helen pushed in the button on the glove compartment door. After a few seconds of fumbling, she found the flashlight and held it out. Chris took it from her and pushed forward the seat back on his side. It fell on the steering wheel and they both gasped as the horn sounded once in the heavy silence. Chris grabbed the seat back and held it.

Then, abruptly, he shoved it back into place. Helen looked over at him as he sat down, his back to her.

"Oh, what's the use?" he said. He sat there turning the flashlight restlessly in his hands.

Helen swallowed.

"Chris, if you're expecting me to encourage you." she said. "I can't."

"I don't want encouragement," he answered. "I want—to *end* this, to get you out of it." Abruptly, he drew his legs in and closed the door.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Going to the police."

"Chris, *please*." Helen closed her hands into rigid fists. "I love you. I don't want you to go to prison. If you think you can put him here without him being found, then do it. *Do it!* But, for God's sake, get it over with!"

"All right. Helen," he said. "I'm sorry."

Hastily, he slid out of the car and unlocked the back trunk to get the shovel he always kept inside. Helen wondered why he hadn't put the man in the trunk too, then remembered that the trunk door wouldn't open when the garage door was down. Chris would have had to open the garage, but then someone might have seen. He had done the only thing possible.

*The only thing possible.* That was what made it all a nightmare. Everything seemed so inevitable. The phone call, the locking of the house, the man's violent entrance and death, the placing of his body in the car, the drive along the ocean, the policemen stopping them, the burial now. Nothing could have happened in any other way. It was as if they were trapped in some inexorable plan which had determined their past and their present and would also determine their future.

Still it seemed impossible to accept. Such things did not happen really. Melodrama was confined to bad motion pictures. And now, melodrama had engulfed her so quickly and violently that it seemed beyond belief. If there had been something in the past to signal its coming she might be able to accept. But there had been nothing. She thought about it as carefully as she could. There had been nothing.

She'd met Chris at a concert—that was the start. The Santa Monica Music Guild sponsored a series of concerts every year to which she and her mother subscribed. That particular night, Helen remembered, Wallenstein had been conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

During intermission, she walked downstairs with her mother to get a drink of water and stretch her legs. Her

mother had gone into the ladies' room and Helen out onto the porch for some air. Only later did she realize that Chris was out there at the same time. If either of them had stayed outside until the intermission was over, they might never have met. The ironies of coincidence, however, were far from her mind that night and for years of nights to come.

When she decided that her mother had probably left the ladies' room and was wondering where she was, Helen went back inside. She didn't see her mother at first. Then, after several moments, she caught sight of her standing near the center aisle entrance, talking with Mrs. Saxton who owned the Melody Music Shop. She went over and they chatted a few minutes about how wonderfully the orchestra had played the Brahms Third, how marvelously adept Wallenstein was in drawing such a performance from them.

Then a figure stepped up beside Helen and Chris was in her life.

"Marjorie, Helen," said Mrs. Saxton, "I'd like you to meet Mr. Martin."

There were the usual amenities, the usual small talk about the concert, about Mrs. Saxton's shop. Mrs. Saxton told them that Chris was working for her and that the way he was going at it, she'd be working for him before long. The laughter was polite, casual. Then the buzzer sounded and they were all returning to their seats.

"He seems like a nice young man," her mother commented as they went up the stairs.

"Yes, Mrs. Cupid." Helen answered.

The concert ended, they left the auditorium and, in walking to their car, were briefly joined by Chris and Mrs. Saxton. Again, the conversation was vague. There was no impression on either side, Helen felt. She experienced none in particular and, later on, Chris told her that he repressed what interest he had felt because he didn't feel he had a right to become involved. He'd said it was because he didn't have the time to spare from his work. Now, Helen knew why he had repressed it.

So the matter might have ended. Helen thought of that as she sat, her cheek pressed to Connie's head, listening to the shovel strokes outside in the darkness. It might have ended, they might not have married, Connie might never have been

born. And how did one decide if their life would have been better if things had happened differently?

They happened as they did—without intention, in the normal pattern of events. Her mother's birthday was coming in a few weeks, her mother loved the Beethoven piano sonatas. Helen went to Mrs. Saxton's shop to order the record.

There were, of course, larger, more complete music stores in Santa Monica. Still, Mrs. Saxton was a friend of mother's and she could, certainly, order a record as well as anyone else. Helen was positive that a record with such a limited audience appeal would not be in stock in any of the local stores.

She was wrong—and amazed. Amazed at the change that had taken place in Mrs. Saxton's shop. As she entered, she saw how the decor had been brightened, the arrangement of counter and shelving changed to lend an air of pleasant informality to the shop rather than its previous one of rather unimaginative drabness.

And there, in the center of this impressive alteration, was Chris—a smiling, affable Chris; a well-informed and literate Chris; a charming and amusing Chris. Helen had been completely won over by him. He was far more than the man she'd shaken hands with at the concert. He seemed larger here, more imposing. It was as if, at the concert, he had been some sort of deposed monarch—polite as reared, dignified as bred but, deprived of his kingdom, without the stature of ego. The shop was his kingdom then. Within its boundaries, he ruled benevolently, imparting interest, bestowing humor and cordiality, making the experience of visiting the shop uniquely nice one.

Not only had the sonata record been in stock, there had been three different ones to choose from. Moreover, Chris had initiated a practice which, only later, other record stores began to utilize—that of offering unplayed records to customers. Until that time, Helen had always found what she was looking for on the shelves—the records, unsheathed, inserted directly into their cardboard jackets. Chris had taken the records out of the jackets and placed them alphabetically behind the counter in plastic envelopes. He had, in addition, moved the turntable behind the counter

and connected it to the one booth so that the record might be heard without the danger of a customer injuring it.

Had it been a coincidence that no customers were in the store that afternoon? Sometimes, Helen thought so. Sometimes, contrariwise, she had the feeling that, in any case, they would have seen each other again. As it was, the absence of customers enabled him to ask her if she'd like to have a cup of coffee and she'd accepted.

Only now did she wonder if he had realized what she was beginning to feel, if he knew as clearly as she did, what was starting between them. Had he fought the desire to ask her out for that cup of coffee? Or had it seemed the thing to do; had he been lulled into ignoring or forgetting his past?

There seemed no answer to that. It had been done and everything had commenced which, now, had ended in a dead man being buried in the night.

The cup of coffee had led to an invitation to dinner by Helen; ostensibly to listen to some records Chris had mentioned, actually as an excuse to see him again. Chris had been hesitant about accepting—she remembered that now. (It seemed as if, now, a hundred different incidents were clarified.) He had only accepted when he'd seen that his apparent attempt to back out was embarrassing her.

Again, who was to blame? Would it have been better if he had ignored that embarrassment and not accepted anyway? At least, then, this horror might not have occurred. Had he been kind to accept that invitation—or weak, thinking more of her opinion of him than of the pain to which he might be exposing her?

None of which she was aware of at the time, of course. There was, at the time, only that sweetly uncomfortable sensation of allowing an attraction to become fatal. That burgeoning struggle between the impulse to love and the desire to remain unharmed. Not that she bore the scars of any past romantic wounds. Far from it. Men had not existed in her life to any degree. Her mother had tried, often enough, to change this. But men seemed to Helen, if not frightening, somehow uninviting. The only man she had ever given her heart to had left her mother for another woman. This had not enhanced, for Helen, the attractions of men.



This plus an undefined fear of sex through her teen years had always kept her to herself or with a group of girls. Occasionally, there had been dates, some of them enjoyable. Still, at those moments when conversation ended and dates expected physical affection. Helen was half-frightened, half repelled by the artificiality of the moment. Love, when she thought of it, seemed to her an emotion that needed size and scope, one which should envelop and beautifully so—not a feeling which one could forcibly arouse on the back seat of a car, a beer-can cluttered blanket on the sands.

Maybe it was Chris's love and knowledge of music, Helen thought. His quiet refinement. Maybe it was his reticence bringing out what aggressiveness Helen had not completely repressed in herself. Something had to explain her asking him to dinner. More amazingly, something had to explain her anxiety for him to like her, for something more than friendship to develop between them.

Sometimes, she convinced herself that she was one of those females who never loved until the right man came along. At other times, with more logic, she decided it was probably closer to the truth that she was getting older and the desire for companionship was outdistancing timidity. It was not, she admitted to herself on those occasions, a union consummated in heaven. It was, under the circumstances of her life, simply a desirable and sensible relationship.

Whatever the explanation, her falling in love with Chris had been continuous and certain—to her, remarkably devoid of complications. Chris's holding back she accepted as faint heart; she overlooked it. She loved him and was, soon, convinced that he loved her in return. It seemed a very positive enterprise.

Still, there had been little things—things she'd chosen to ignore or, worse, to rationalize. Things like Chris's unwillingness to discuss his background. She tried, occasionally, to find out about his family but, outside of an infrequent comment about his mother, he was unwilling to talk about it.

One day, in talking with her mother about Chris, she had to admit that, not only did she not know where his relatives were, she didn't even know who they were or if they existed at all. A few nights later, at dinner, her mother tried to get

Chris to answer specific questions about this. He was uncomfortably reluctant about it and said little. Strangely (it seemed now), Helen didn't question his reluctance but only felt a startled irritation with her mother. Later that night, she told her mother so. Her mother only shrugged and smiled.

"Well, if it's a mystery man you want," was all she said.

How fantastic that, until this moment, she had completely forgot about that incident. Forgotten that Chris always questioned, never answered. His past had all been unknown to her. She had accepted this lack of knowledge, feeling, in the security of her love, that she knew him just as well as if she were apprised of the statistical data of his past. These formed the surface of a man, she decided, not the core. The core, she felt, she understood. Had she been right? Did she really understand Chris? Was this revelation, for all its hideousness, only a belated filling in of really unimportant details? Was he still the man she'd believed she knew? Or had the filling in of his background revealed basic differences in him? In short, must she allow that she had been living with a stranger for all these years? This was the thought that tortured her in the dark silence of—

Silence.

She was chilled with the sudden awareness. That meant that Chris had finished digging the grave. Now he was lowering the body into it. In a moment or two, he would be .

..

She shuddered as the first shovelful of dirt was thrown. She sat there rigidly, listening, all the past swallowed in the black pain of the present. All she could think of now was that Helen Martin was lying in that grave too. She tried to think of something else but she couldn't. There was only the one thought.

Helen Martin was dead.

# Thursday Morning

## Chapter Six

Chris opened his eyes.

Overhead, a DC-7 was circling for International Airport. He listened to the burring stridency of its engines until the noise had faded. It was a dream, he told himself, but the thought did not deceive him.

Sluggishly, he turned his head and looked over at the clock on his bedside table. It was a little after eight. He stared at the second hand as it pointed at the numbers—eleven, twelve, one.

Exhaling, Chris turned his head and looked at the ceiling. He didn't have to get up yet. For that matter he didn't have to go to the store at all. Jimmy could handle it well enough without him. Maybe he wouldn't go. Maybe he'd just—

Abruptly, he realized that Helen wasn't in bed with him.

He pushed up on one elbow and looked around the room. Hastily, he threw the blankets back and dropped his legs across the edge of the mattress.

The floorboards were chilly beneath his feet. He shivered as he hurried across the room and opened the door. Stepping out into the hall, he looked into Connie's room. The tension faded instantly.

She was still asleep, lying on her back, her lips parted, a curl of hair twisted across her forehead. On any other day she'd be up by now, out with the neighborhood children.

Chris turned and walked across the living room. In the kitchen, he could hear the dishwasher operating. It clicked once and there was a sibilant rush of water from its nozzle.

He found Helen in the alley, scrubbing blood spots from the sidewalk. She didn't see him at first. He stood on the porch and watched her, twitching at the sound the wire brush made on the concrete. He remembered dragging Cliffs lifeless body down the alley. Apparently, it had bled all the way.

He remembered, too, the druglike horror of the burial, the long drive home, the painfully silent preparation for bed. The sleepless lying in darkness, wanting to move close to Helen, to put his arms around her, to feel her body pressing close. Lying there in wordless agony, filled with thoughts about the years passed by. Fearing that she lay beside him wondering how many lies there'd been in the seven years of their relationship; knowing that there had only been the one. Listening to hear if she were still awake. Lying tortured by indecision until the only sleep that could come came at last—the hollow, uncleansing sleep of exhaustion.

Helen turned her head and saw him. Chris stepped down off the porch, feeling the chill of the morning air through his pajamas.

"I'll do it," he said.

"I'm almost done."

Helen looked back at her work and he saw how her fingers tensed on the wooden handle of the brush.

"I should have done it last night," he said. "I didn't think."

He stood awkwardly, watching her scrub. Then he glanced around. There was a lot of dampness in the air. A whitish mist hovered above the rooftops of the houses.

She had finished now. Chris extended his hand to help her up but she acted as if she didn't see it. Pushing to her feet, she dropped the brush into the pail of red-tinged water. Chris picked up the pail.

"I'll empty it," he said.

Helen nodded once and went into the house. Chris watched her until she'd closed the door behind herself.

As he started for the garage, he glanced at Grace and Jack's house. What if they had come home, he thought. He swallowed nervously as he opened and shut the side garage door and edged past the bumper of the Ford, heading for the laundry tub. He hadn't felt this for years: this guilty apprehension of the criminal.

The thought sent such a wave of sickened revelation through him that he almost cried aloud. It had taken him so long to overcome his attitude of constant wariness. Now, in one night, it had returned.

"No!"

Chris spoke the word angrily as he emptied the pail and ran cold water into it. He wouldn't let it degrade him to the pettish animal he'd been in those early years. He *wouldn't*.

Chris put down the pail and opened the car door. Picking up the flashlight from the seat he searched the back floor. There were several dark stains where the blood had soaked through the blanket. He'd clean them today. Otherwise someone might see them sometime. No point in taking the risk. Getting out of the car, Chris began checking the floor of the garage. There were blood spots all around. He gritted his teeth seeing them. There was evidence everywhere.

That was the most nightmarish aspect of killing. Even after the shock of taking life had passed and the offensive dead had been put away, there were so many details to be taken care of: spots to remove, objects to dispose of, hours to account for, movements to be explained. Lies and lies mounting like girders for some hideous skyscraper which you built in detail, then hoped no one would ever see.

He began cleaning up the blood.

Helen was in the kitchen booth staring at her hands clasped on the table.

"Why don't you go back to bed?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly. Chris stood looking down at her, wishing he could thrust their lives six months forward. When this worst part would be over and the strengths of their relationship would be returning.

Helen glanced up at him, then down at her hands again. "I've been thinking," she said, "about those men."

"What about them?"

"What if they come here?" she asked.

"They won't."

"What if they do?"

"They're wanted by the law, Helen," he told her.

"So was—he."

"He was out of his mind."

"Maybe they are too."

Chris tried to smile. "What do you want me to say, honey?" he asked.

"It's not a question of wanting you to say anything," she said. "It's question of safety. We have Connie to think of."

"All right." He nodded. "I'm willing to do anything you say."

"I think we should go to my mother's for a while," she said.

"All right," he said. "When do you want to go?"

For a moment, he felt that she was planning to leave him and he fought the idea. This was only temporary; he'd make certain of that.

"Well," she said, "if they're going to come, it might be at any time."

"You want to go now." he said quietly.

She closed her eyes. "Chris, please," she begged.

"Have I said anything?"

"Honey, I'm doing it for Connie's sake," she said. "I'm not trying to run out on you."

"I know," he said.

"I need a little time, Chris," she said. "I'm trying to be loyal but—please don't expect too much at first."

He put his hand on her shoulder and she pressed it once. "I'll drive you there." he said.

She nodded. Then, pushing to her feet, she walked over to the dishwasher which had stopped. She turned off the hot water and unclipped the faucet attachment, sliding the double hose into place. Unplugging the wire, she rolled the dishwasher against the wall. Chris watched her for a moment, then turned and walked out of the kitchen.

In the hall, he began dialing the store before he realized it wasn't open yet. He dumped the receiver onto its cradle and walked into the bedroom. It would be all right, he told himself. It was just a matter of time.

When he'd finished dressing, he went into the bathroom to shave.

"Daddy, can I get up?" Connie asked.

"Of course," he answered.

He heard her scramble out of bed. In a moment, she came padding into the bathroom in her striped pajamas, blond hair hanging tousled across her cheeks.

"I slept good, Daddy," she told him.

"Good." He leaned over to kiss her.

"Did you sleep good?"

"Yes, little troll. Very good."

Connie smiled at the name he gave her. "I slept good and you slept good," she said.

She watched intently as he finished shaving. "Will I shave someday?" she asked.

"I hope not," he asked.

"When I'm six and a half?" she asked.

"Girls don't shave their faces. You'd better get dressed now."

"I have to eat my breakfast first," she said.

"Oh. All right, Mommy will give it to you."

"Is she in the kitchen?"

"Yes."

"I'll see you then," said Connie, leaving.

"All right."

As he combed his hair, he heard Helen telling Connie that they were going to Grandma's house for a while.

"How long while?" Connie asked.

"I don't know, honey," Helen told her. Chris felt a tremor in his stomach muscles. Just a little while, he thought.

"You and me and Daddy?"

"Daddy has to stay and watch the store," said Helen.

"Oh, *foo*," said Connie.

"One or two eggs?" Helen asked him as he sat down at the kitchen table.

"Just coffee, please."

"You'll get—" she began, then broke off.

He glanced at her as she turned back to the stove. *You'll get sick*. That was what she'd almost said. She always said it when he wouldn't eat breakfast. Except for today. Chris reached out and picked up his glass of orange juice.



"We're going to Grandma's house," said Connie.

"I know, baby," he answered.

"Will you visit us when we're at Grandma's house?"

He hid the convulsive movement of his throat by drinking.  
"I don't know, sweetheart," he said.

"Why, Daddy?"

"Eat your cereal," Helen told her. "I told you Daddy has to watch the store."

"Can't Jimmy?"

Chris got up, mumbling his excuse. As he walked across the living room he heard Connie persisting. "Can't somebody else, Mommy?"

"Connie, please eat your cereal."

In the hall, he dialed with quick, jerking movements.

"Martin Music," he heard Jimmy's amiable voice through the earpiece.

"Chris Martin, Jimmy. I won't be in till later today."

"Oh. Okay, Mr. Martin."

"Leave that case from Schirmer unpacked till tomorrow," Chris told him. "You can go on re-sorting the LP albums today."

"Yes, sir. Will do."

"And If Mrs. Anthony calls about Sunday's concert, tell her I'll phone her first thing this afternoon, will you?"

"I will, Mr. Martin."

"Fine. I'll see you later then."

"Okay. Oh, say—"

Chris had hung up before Jimmy could finish. Well, it didn't matter. If it was anything important, Jimmy could phone back. Chris stood beside the telephone table looking into the living room. He saw the pad and pencil lying on the sofa where he'd left it the night before, thinking that after he'd helped Helen load the dishwasher, he'd return to his planning for a children's creative workshop.

Creative workshop. He closed his eyes. It seemed a million years ago.

He started as the telephone rang. Picking it up, he murmured. "Yes?" thinking it was Jimmy.

"Hello, Chris."

His fingers clamped on the receiver.

"How are you, boy?" said the voice. "This is Adam."

## Chapter Seven

Chris glanced across his shoulder and saw Helen in the kitchen doorway looking at him. He covered the mouthpiece.

"It's Jimmy," he said, appalled at how easily the lie was spoken.

"Oh." Helen went back into the kitchen. Quickly, Chris stepped off from the doorway and pressed against the wall.

*"What do you want?"* he whispered.

"To see you," said Adam.

"Why?"

"You want to meet us or shall we drop by?" asked Adam.

"Stay away from here!"

"Then meet us at Broadway and Twelfth in fifteen minutes."

"Listen—!"

"Fifteen minutes, Chris."

"How do you know I won't bring the police?" Chris asked.

Adam only snickered and then the receiver was buzzing in Chris's ear. Slowly, he put it down on its cradle.

Abruptly, he picked it up again and dialed once. "Operator." said the voice.

*Give me the police,* he thought. He stared at the mouthpiece, feeling his heart beat thicken. He was this close now.

*"Operator,"* said the voice.

Chris put down the receiver and stood there trembling. What was the point in going on, with Steve and Adam to contend with now? What good was such a loaded freedom?

Still, as if helpless before some hideous command, he walked across the living room and into the kitchen.

"I have to go over to the store for a few minutes," he said.

Helen looked up from her coffee.

"I'll be back before you're ready," he said.

"We'll be ready in less than a half hour."

"All right, I'll be back," he said.

He turned and left the kitchen. All right, he told himself, *all right*. It's impossibly complicated now but it will clear up in time.

"G'bye, Daddy," Connie called after him.

He cleared his throat. "I'll be right back," he said.

He pulled his topcoat from the front closet and left the house. The street was quiet and chilly. He'd left the Ford outside all night and it was coated with dew.

Chris walked in choppy strides toward Broadway, his heels clicking on the sidewalk. What was it they wanted? he wondered.

His stride suddenly faltered. Was it possible they, too, were after revenge? He almost stopped walking, his movement becoming slow and aimless. Maybe he should have taken the gun with him. It seemed an absurdly melodramatic idea and yet—

*Or shall we drop by the house?* Chris started walking again. Whatever happened they had to be kept from the house. Helen had been through enough. Besides, if revenge was what they had in mind, why would they warn him ahead of time by phoning?

He didn't notice the grime-streaked sedan moving up behind him. The first thing he was aware of was the sudden roar of its engine, the rush of its dark bulk to the curb beside him, the squeal of badly lined brakes, the shoved-out back door.

Chris stood there gaping into the car at the revolver Adam Burrik was pointing at him.

"Get in," said Adam.

Chris felt his legs shaking. He glanced over at the front seat and saw the hard, dispassionate face of Steve Coulter.

"He said get in," Steve ordered,

Chris stumbled across the parkway grass and onto the street. Numbly, he bent over and stepped into the back of the car. He sat down gingerly, looking over at Adam who was smiling at him without humor.

"You can close the door now," Adam said.

Chris extended a trembling hand and pulled the door shut. The old, unoled lock didn't catch the first time and he had to do it again. As he did, Steve threw the car into first and gunned away from the curb. Chris fell back against the seat.

"Well, here we are," said Adam; a fleshier more coarse-looking Adam.

Chris tried to think of something to say but his brain felt clogged.

"It's been a long time," Adam said as the car was cornered onto Broadway and headed toward the ocean.

Chris stared at him, his heart beating slowly and heavily against the wall of his chest. "What do you want?" he asked.

Adam smiled contemptuously. "A little charity," he said.

"We ought to kill him," Steve broke in.

Chris glanced forward instinctively and saw Steve's dark eyes watching him in the mirror.

"Relax," said Adam.

He still sounded the same, Chris noticed—aloof and calculating. Years and prison had not changed that. It was the deep lining around his eyes and mouth that was different; a strained look of humor retained at the cost of nerves.

"We want money, Chris," said Adam.

"You—"

"No arguments," Adam interrupted. His only betrayal of tension was the tightening of his grip on the revolver. "You'll get us the money. Period."

Chris pressed his lips together to keep them from shaking.

"I need hardly remind you," said Adam, "if we're caught, you'll be dragged down with us. And now that you've killed Cliff—"

It came too unexpectedly. Chris couldn't stop the twitching of his legs. A smile loosened Adam's thick lips.

"I wasn't sure you had, till now," he said. "Forget it. It doesn't matter. Cliff always was a bungler. Too emotional."

Adam grunted amusedly. "Steve is like that too. If I wasn't here you'd have a bullet in your brain by now."

Chris labored for breath

"How much do you want?" he asked.

"How much have you got?"

"I can—"

"Never mind answering. It'll be a lie. We want two thousand in small bills."

"Two thousand—"

"You're getting off cheap," said Adam, the amusement stripped from his voice. "You're lucky we don't leave you in a ditch somewhere."

Adam blew out breath.

"Banks open at ten," he said. "You'll get the money and bring it to us by eleven. You know where Latigo Canyon is?"

Chris shuddered, recalling his idea to bury Cliff in Latigo Canyon.

"Yes," he said.

"Bring it there."

"Where in Latigo Canyon?"

"You'll find us," Adam said. He looked at Chris appraisingly. "You can send the police there of course," he said, "but I don't think you will. You have too much to lose."

Chris didn't reply.

"Let's make that three thousand," said Adam.

"Three—!"

"Shut up."

Chris's throat felt as if it were lined with dust. He coughed to ease the sensation.

"Well?" asked Adam.

"All right." Chris's voice was almost a whisper. "All right, damn you."

"Splendid," said Adam lightly. "If you fail you'll receive a visit either from the police or from us. Neither of which will be very pleasant."

"I said all right." said Chris.

Adam looked at him another moment. Then he said, "Pull over."

Steve drew the dark sedan to the curb.

"Remove him," said Adam.

Chris stiffened as Steve jumped from the car and ran around the front of it. He pressed back tensely as Steve jerked open the back door and reached in for him.

I can—" he started, breaking off as Steve's fingers clamped over his wrist. He tried to pull free but was powerless against the stronger man's grip. His cheek grazed the door jamb as Steve dragged him out.

"If I had my way—" Steve snapped. As Chris stared at his beard-blackened face, he felt a violent blow to his stomach that jack-knifed him over, cutting off breath.

*"Bastard!"* he heard Steve's savage oath. Another clublike blow struck him on the side of the head and he went flailing forward onto the paving. As he fell, he heard Adam's voice through the blackening cloud around him.

"Be there."

Then he was on one knee, gagging, hands pressed against his stomach, hearing the car door slam and the roar of the engine as Steve and Adam left. He struggled to his feet. Dazedly, he stumbled over to a palm tree and leaned against it, tears trickling down his cheeks. Breath did not seem to come. He kept gasping for it.

Across the street, an old man opened the front door of his house and looked at him curiously. Gritting his teeth, Chris pushed away from the tree and started walking. He couldn't take a chance on the man talking to him.

Abruptly, a sob broke in his throat. Dear God, was he still thinking in terms of escape? He walked more quickly, bent over to ease the pain. What kept him going? Obviously, there was to be no end to it.

He braced himself. No, it was only temporary. He'd give them the money, they'd go to Mexico—and mail a letter from there demanding more money?

Chris stopped walking and stood staring at the sidewalk. One more complication. One more turn in the maze leading to a blank wall.

At the corner, he entered a drugstore and walked to the rear. Sliding into a phone booth, he sank down on the seat and pulled the door shut, grimacing at the pain in his stomach muscles. The sound of his breathing was harsh and labored as he pushed a dime into the slot and began to dial.

"Operator," said the voice.

"Give me the police, please," he said.

"One moment."

There was a sound of dialing, a single buzz before Chris hung up.

He leaned forward, suddenly breathless, pressing his forehead against the cold metal of the telephone. He couldn't, he just couldn't. No matter what risks it entailed, he had to take them. To lose everything at his age; family, work, hopes; it wasn't worth it.

Quickly, blanking his mind, he re-inserted the coin and dialed.

"Hello?" she said.

"Honey—"

She couldn't disguise her exhalation of relief. "What?" she asked.

"I have to stay at the store a while. You'd better take the car."

"Oh?"

"I'll phone you there later," he said, "and we'll—discuss it."

She didn't answer. Chris winced as the pain in his stomach flared again.

"All right?" he asked. If only he could tell her to leave immediately without making her suspicious.

Another moment she was silent.

Then, softly, she said, "Good-bye, Chris," and hung up.

"Helen—!" He'd realized, too late, what was wrong. She thought he was avoiding her.

He put the receiver back onto its hook and sat there heavily. It's just for now, he told himself. She'll understand later. I'll make it up to her and everything will be all right.



Chris stood motionless in front of the store window looking in. It was a good display: neat, well-balanced, imaginative. He and Jimmy had worked it out between them two weeks before—Jimmy with his brief training in visual arts, Chris with his instinct for effective order.

He remembered how proud he'd felt of the display when it was completed. How he'd stood in front of the window for a long time looking at it. His store and its operation was an endless source of pleasure to him. At least it had been.

Chris looked at the wall clock inside the store. It was twenty-five minutes to ten. His eyes focused on the lettering—DENIS SCHOOL OF MUSIC—across its face. He remembered the day the head of the school had come into his store and offered the clock. Chris had taken it gladly. He'd just borrowed enough money to buy the store from Mrs. Saxton and he was in no position to turn down a free clock, advertising or no advertising.

A melancholy smile raised Chris's lips as he recalled those first days of ownership.

Mrs., Saxton was old and tired, anxious to retire. That was why she sold out so cheaply; that plus the fact that she liked and trusted Chris. He'd been with her for almost five years and, during that time, the store had expanded markedly. When he'd started, it had been a run-down place with a few racks of sheet music, outmoded record albums, a modicum of instruments for rent or sale. Nothing like what it became after Chris began working there.

After the purchase, he expanded it further. He took out a lease on the adjoining store which had been vacant for almost two years and had the wall removed. He had racks built for a complete line of records, three listening booths installed as well as a counter with stools where all kinds of music were sold, from orchestral scores to children's piano primers and including all the current sheet music. He had a new tile floor put in with a motif of bass and treble clefs and notes in the design. He enlarged his line of instruments and made an exchange agreement with the Denis School and others.

All this put him considerably into debt. He was unable, in the beginning, to afford help. He and Helen ran the store

until Connie's growth made working too difficult for Helen. Then Chris managed on his own. It was exhausting but joyous work. The weariness he felt at night was a wholesome one.

Little by little, his venture paid off. People from the area began patronizing his store to the exclusion of others. It was a pleasant place and Chris was a pleasant host. His reputation as a man who understood children no less than music broadened. He was asked, by the Chamber of Commerce, to take over the operation of the Junior Orchestra; invited to join the Chamber.

As business increased, so did the scope of his work. He began to arrange neighborhood square dances, organizing the local mothers into an entertainment committee. Gradually, he helped convert the Junior Orchestra into a polished group which gave well-received concerts all over the Los Angeles area. He sponsored and coached the Santa Monica Wildcats who played baseball in spring and summer, football in fall and winter. Life became more and more rewarding. The store did more business and he did more for the community. His idea for the creative workshop had come only a few weeks before and it was, already, halfway to fruition. All this, ended by a phone call in the night.

Jimmy looked up from behind the counter as Chris entered. "Hi Mr. Martin," he said.

"Hello, Jimmy," Chris smiled at him. "How's it going?"

"Up to the B's," said Jimmy, grinning. "I just put Brahms in his place." Then he added, concerned, "Gee, Mr. Martin, you okay?"

"Sure." Chris stopped by the counter and hesitated a moment before speaking. "Oh, uh, my wife has the car this morning, Jimmy. Going to her mother's."

Jimmy nodded. "Uh-huh."

"I'll be needing a car for a while though," Chris said.

"And you wanna borrow mine?" said Jimmy. "Sure thing, Mr. Martin. Any time."

"I'd appreciate it," said Chris. "Any time at all," said Jimmy. "Well, I'll get back to Britten and Bruckner now."

Chris managed another smile. "Has Mrs. Anthony called?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I gave her the message."

"Good. Thanks."

Chris shut the door of his office and drew off his top coat. As he dropped it on a chair, he noticed the smudges on it. He must have gotten them when Steve knocked him down. He checked his trousers and found dirt streaks on the knees, a small rip. If he'd gone home. Helen would have seen them. He'd have had to tell her what happened.

He wondered what she'd say when she found out about the money. They'd been saving for a bigger house; this would reduce their account to almost nothing. Well, there was no help for it. It had to be done. After all these years, three thousand was a cheap enough price for continued freedom.

Suddenly, it occurred, to Chris that after bringing the money he would no longer be of any value to Adam and Steve. He heard repeated in his mind what Adam had said: *You're lucky we don't leave you in a ditch somewhere.*

Chris sank down heavily before his desk. Dear God, what was he to do? If he gave Adam and Steve the money, he'd always be subject to their blackmail. If he went to the police, he'd be put in prison—and he had no romantic illusions about "getting a fresh start" after that. If he were twenty, perhaps. Not now.

It was in that moment that the idea came with a flash of hideous logic. An idea that had to do with Cliff's loaded gun and Chris's two enemies waiting in Latigo Canyon, with the hills around and the unlikelihood of anyone hearing a shot.

His fingers jerked suddenly into blood-drained fists. No! He was not that kind of man and never would be!

Abruptly, the false defenses seemed to fall away like scales. He'd been wrong. It might entail a kind of courage to go on in the face of pressure but to face the obligation of honesty was the only true courage.

Chris sighed. Strange that, after all his indecision, the solution should prove so simple. He could feel the simple lightness of it in his very flesh. He pulled the telephone

across his desk and, lifting the receiver, dialed quickly Helen's mother answered. "This is Chris, Mom," he said.

"Yes, Chris."

"Could I speak to Helen for a moment?"

"Helen? Is she supposed to be here?"

"Yes." Chris felt a sinking of disappointment. "I guess she hasn't had time to get there yet."

"I didn't know she was coming."

"Yes. She planned to pay you a visit, with Connie."

"Well, how lovely," said Mrs. Shaw, "I'll be looking for them."

"Would you ask her to phone me when she gets there?" he asked.

"All right. At the store?"

"Yes. Please."

"I will, Chris."

"Thanks, Mom. See you soon then."

After he'd hung up, Chris sat restively, tapping on his desk. He was anxious to talk with Helen, to let her know what he was planning to do. He wanted to hear her shocked yet—he felt sure—proud reaction. He needed it before he could call the police.

For a moment, he wondered if what he really wanted was for her to talk him out of it. He thought about that, trying to decide what he'd do if she tried to dissuade him. Somehow, it seemed no problem. He couldn't believe that he'd change his mind now.

Sighing, he rotated his swivel chair and looked through the glass partition at the store. Jimmy was still hard at work relocating the LP albums. He was a good kid, Chris thought. With Helen's assistance, Jimmy could manage the store very well while he was gone. Gone.

Chris shuddered. The store had never looked more wonderful to him; his life with Helen and Connie had never seemed more perfect. Yet he'd be throwing it all away by calling the police.

Involuntarily, he glanced at the wall clock. It was almost ten. there was still time. He could go to the bank, withdraw the money, drive to—

*No.* He closed his eyes, furious at the temptation. The choice was made. He wouldn't weaken now.

When he opened his eyes, Helen was just entering the store.

Chris stood without knowing it. He stared at her expressionless face as she came walking down the length of the store with slow, unbalanced strides. Faintly, he heard Jimmy say good morning to her. She didn't turn or answer. She kept walking toward the office, eyes fixed straight ahead, features tensely set. Chris stepped to the door on suddenly trembling legs and pulled it open.

"Honey, what is it?" he heard himself mutter.

Her voice was hoarse, shaking.

"She's gone," she said.

"What?"

*"They took her!"* she gasped, *"They took my baby!"*

## Chapter Eight

Behind the counter, Jimmy glanced away embarrassedly. Chris looked back at Helen's stricken face. He could feel his hands twitch, feel a thickened pulsing at his temples. Still, there was no horror. Numbly, he reached for her arm.

"Come in the office," he said.

She jerked back. "Get away!" she whispered vehemently.

"Helen." He sucked in breath. "Helen, please come in the office," he begged, "Jimmy can hear us."

"Oh, that matters," she said, brokenly. "That really matters."

She stumbled past him and he followed dizzily, shutting the door behind himself.

"What happened?" he asked.

She whirled on him. "I told you!" she cried. "Are you deaf? They took Connie!" A sob tore at her throat. "They took my baby!"

Again, instinctively, he reached for her. Again, she shrank away.

*"Don't touch me,"* she said.

"Helen, do you think I—?"

"Yes, I think it's your fault! You were so careful to protect yourself! So *careful*."

"Helen, what happened?"

She caught herself, forcing down the rage and anguish. Chris stared at her, waiting. His heartbeat was a slow, painful jolting.

"They came to the house," she said, quietly, measuredly. "You knew they were coming, didn't you?"

"Why didn't you leave when I phoned?"

"You knew they were coming."

"Helen, for God's sake!" It was there now, the shock, the horror, all of it.

"They took her away, Chris. Just took her away. They said they'd—" her teeth clenched "—they'd *kill* her if you didn't bring the money."

She stared at him balefully. "Now tell me you didn't know," she said.

"Helen, I swear—"

"Yes, swear, swear! I'm sure it'll bring her back!"

Chris glanced out at the store in time to see Jimmy look away again. He raised his eyes to the clock. It was after ten.

"I'll get the money," he said. "I'll bring her back."

"You'll bring her back." Abruptly, Helen began to cry, both hands pressed shakingly across her face. "*You'll bring her back.*"

"Helen, you didn't call the police?"

She turned again, jerking down her hands, a near deranged look on her face. "The police!" she said. "Is that what you're worried about?"

He grabbed her shoulders. "Now, listen to me," he started "Is that all you're—?"

"*Listen to me!*" Her head snapped as he jerked her shoulders violently.

"Go on," she said, "Tell me your troubles."

"Did you call the police?"

"No! Are you happy now? Are you relieved?"

His voice shook as he answered her.

"Helen, if the police come into this, Connie hasn't got a chance and you know it."

"*Oh God.*" she whimpered. She almost fell as a spasm of grief wrenched her. "I want my baby."

"Helen, I'll get her."

She pulled away from him and, stumbling to the wall, leaned against it, crying helplessly.

"My baby," she said. "I want her now. I want her."

"I'll get the money," he said.

"Yes, get the money, get the money," she echoed hollowly, "Save yourself."

He started to say something, then checked himself. There was no sense in trying to reason with her now.

"We'll never see her again," said Helen.

"Yes, we will, Helen. I'll get her back."

"No, no, no." She almost crooned the word, shaking her head.

"We *will*."

She turned abruptly, pale with fury.

"How many kidnapped children ever live!" she cried, "*Tell me!*"

He caught her hands and held them so tightly that she winced.

"She'll be all right," he said, "They won't hurt her because they're planning to ask me for money again. Can't you see that? They figure I'll go on paying to protect myself and they're not going to—"

"And you will," she said.

He looked at her for a few moments before dropping her hands. "No," he said, "I won't."

He picked up his topcoat and put it on.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To the bank."

"I'm going with you."

He started to speak, then changed his mind. There was no time.

"Come on then," he said.

\* \* \*

He could remember joking about it to Bill Albert. "You know which line in the bank moves the slowest?" he'd said, the one I'm in."

Chris's gaze moved for the seventh time to the clock over the vault entrance. Ten twenty-one. He watched the long second-hand turning. Swallowing dryly, he turned back to the line. The man at the counter was pushing rolls of change into his cloth sack. Chris glanced at the other lines. One of them was shorter but he didn't dare take a chance on changing. He'd done it once already and lost time.



He drew in a quick breath. Come on! his mind cried. He thought of Connie being held by Adam and Steve, he thought about Adam's gun. He twitched as a drop of sweat trickled down his side. Hurry, he thought. Please hurry.

He looked around and saw Helen still sitting on the bench by the wall. She looked as if she were hypnotized the way she stared ahead with dull, blank eyes. He knew what she was feeling and it was a hideous sensation—one of incredulous terror. It was impossible to believe that they might never see Connie again, yet impossible to disbelieve it.

God, let it be true! Chris thought in sudden anguish, recalling what he'd said to Helen. Let them be planning to bleed him dry. Right now, he'd sign away everything he owned or ever would own just to hold Connie in his arms again.

"Good morning. Mr. Martin."

Chris started at the voice, jerking his head around so fast it hurt his neck.

"Did I startle you?" she asked.

"Oh Mrs. Anthony. I'm—I'm sorry. I—"

"Didn't see me coming. I apologize." Mrs. Anthony smiled, "I wanted to talk to you about the concert Sunday."

Chris stared at her. "Yes," he said. The line moved forward as the man left the counter. Chris stepped off compulsively. Mrs. Anthony smile faltering, moved with him.

"What the committee was wondering," she said, "is if it might not be feasible to combine the concert with our Spring Fund Drive."

Chris nodded jerkily. "Uh-huh." He felt a tremor in his stomach muscles. Please get out of here, begged his mind.

"Now," said Mrs. Anthony briskly, "we discussed the possibilities at some length at our meeting last Friday afternoon and, after weighing the pros and cons, we reached the decision that it could be effected quite readily."

Chris ran a hand across his upper lip and drew it away dripping sweat. "I see," he muttered. He rubbed the hand on his coat distractedly.

"If, *before* the concert," Mrs. Anthony continued, "we could have, say, five to ten minutes for a short announcement about the opening of the Drive, we could easily . . ."

Her voice seemed to drift off into an unintelligible murmur as Chris watched her. The nightmare was back again, endless and insane as nightmares were. To stand here listening to Mrs. Anthony talk about the start of a Spring Fund Drive for The Ladies' Horticultural Society while, somewhere, Connie was—

"Does that aspect of it seem reasonable?" she asked.

Chris swallowed.

"I—I—what was that?" He smiled mechanically. "I'm afraid I—"

"I *said*," said Mrs. Anthony, "does the setting up of a cake booth in back of the auditorium seem to you—"

The line moved and Chris stepped closer to the window. He felt the urge to shove away the two people in front of him, to push Mrs. Anthony away violently, to grab the money from the cashier's drawer and run to his car, drive to Latigo Canyon at a hundred miles an hour.

"Yes," he said, "Yes. I—I think that would be fine."

"Are you feeling well, Mr. Martin?"

"Hmmm?" Chris's smile was more of a grimace.

"You're perspiring quite heavily."

"Oh. No, I—it's rather . . ." he sucked in breath, "—hot in here."

"Yes." Mrs. Anthony cleared her throat. "Well, then, I can tell the committee that you approve?"

"Yes, yes, certainly," Chris blurted, "I—think it's a fine idea."

Mrs. Anthony nodded once, looking at him curiously. "Well, then," she said.

Chris looked over at Helen as Mrs. Anthony walked away. She was watching him fixedly. Chris turned back quickly. There was just the woman in front of him now although the cashier was gone. He glanced aside and saw Mrs. Anthony wave to Helen. God, don't talk to her! he begged silently. He blew out ragged breath as Mrs. Anthony left the bank.

I beg your pardon," he said, impulsively. The woman in front of him turned.

"I wonder if I could trouble you to—to let me ahead of—"

"I'm *sorry*," she said. "I've been waiting here for a long time and I'm in just as much of a hurry as you are."

Are you? Chris thought.

She turned away. "I never," she was muttering.

Chris closed his eyes a moment. Please, please, *please*, he thought.

A minute later he was sliding the pass book across the counter. The teller picked it up and opened it, looked at the withdrawal slip.

"I'd like to have it in tens and twenties," Chris said.

"Yes, sir," said the teller. He turned away and walked over to the row of file cabinets behind him. Chris watched him, his hands resting limply on the edge of the counter. He saw the teller pull out a drawer and start thumbing through the files.

"I'm in a hurry," Chris said. The man didn't hear him.

In a moment, the man pulled out a file and looked at it. Chris waited impatiently.

The man walked past the window toward the front of the bank.

"What are you—?" Chris started.

"Just a moment, sir," said the teller, politely.

Dazedly, Chris watched him walk away. What in God's name was happening? For a second, he almost believed that he *was* dreaming, that this was a nightmare. It was too incredible to be real.

He saw the teller speak to Mr. Finder in front. Mr. Finder looked over at Chris and, smiling, gestured for him to come down to his desk. Chris couldn't repress the groan. Clenching his teeth, he strode quickly along the counter and pushed at the gate with shaking fingers. It didn't open.

"It's *locked*," he said, startled at the loudness of his voice.

The girl at a nearby desk looked up, startled; and gaped at him.

"Miss Grey," called Mr. Finder. She glanced back and Mr. Finder nodded at her. She pushed a button and Chris went through. *We'll never see her again.* Helen's words echoed terribly in his mind.

"What is it?" he asked.

"This withdrawal, Mr. Martin," said Finder, "It will leave your account with less than a hundred dollars."

*"I know that."*

Was the man insane?

"Well—" Mr. Finder coughed embarrassedly. "You see, this note—"

"Note?"

"It states that a three thousand dollar loan extended to you last October would be made on the condition that the amount in your savings account serve as collateral."

Chris looked at him dumbly. He'd forgotten.

"You see," said Mr. Finder. "You signed it."

Chris held the paper and stared down at it without being able to read it.

"Naturally, if you withdraw three thousand dollars at this time," said Mr. Finder, "the conditions of the loan are no longer met."

Chris had difficulty keeping his voice steady.

"Mr. Finder, I've been doing business with this bank for the past seven years. My credit rating is beyond reproach. I need this money now. My mother is in financial trouble and needs it immediately. It will be replaced as soon as possible."

"Mr. Martin, please understand. It's not as if—"

"Mr. Finder, I have a good business," Chris said, agitatedly. "I pay my debts. I'm a member of the Chamber of Commerce. For God's sake, let's not haggle! I *need* the money. I've met every obligation to this bank in the past. Now, for pity's sake!" If I had a gun, he thought suddenly, I'd take the money.

Mr. Finder pursed his lips and looked at Chris dispassionately.

"Well?"

Mr. Finder sighed. "Very well. Mr. Martin," he said, "I really see no reason why we can't. It's somewhat irregular but—"

Less than a minute later, the doors of the Ford slammed behind them and Chris twisted the ignition key. He backed out of place and drove out of the parking lot so fast he almost hit another car. He headed down Wilshire as fast as he could and turned right onto Ocean Avenue. A few minutes later the Ford was speeding along the coast highway toward Malibu.

"Chris," she said as they went past an orange caution light at Channel Road.

"Yes."

"Do you really believe what you said before?" Her voice was spent of anger now, almost lifeless.

"Yes," he said, "I'm convinced they plan to use me as long as they can."

"Oh . . ."

Chris looked into the rear view mirror, then pressed down on the accelerator. They should make Latigo Canyon in fifteen minutes, he calculated. Surely, Adam and Steve would wait. He cleared his throat. They'd wait. He was right, he had to be. They *were* planning to use him. Hurting Connie would end that and they knew it. At least Adam must know it.

"Before you came to the store," he said, "I phoned your mother." From the corner of his eye, he saw her looking at him. "I was going to tell you that I'd decided to call the police."

She didn't answer.

"I know it seems pointless now," he said, "but I was going to." His hands clenched on the rim of the wheel. "And, after we get Connie," he said, "I'll call them."

Still she said nothing. Chris felt himself tightening, wanting her to speak. Then he realized that she could think only of Connie. After Connie was safe, she'd respond. Chris pressed his lips together. After Connie was safe. He fixed that in his mind.

Eighteen and a half minutes later, he was turning the car into the entrance of Latigo Canyon.

Automatically, he reached up and pressed a hand over his inside coat pocket. He could feel the rubber-banded clump of bills. Three thousand dollars. The result of almost four years' saving. Chris clenched his teeth. If only he'd phoned the police the night before, not only would Connie be safe, but Helen would have this money while he was gone. He felt a sudden stab of contempt for himself. It was true, what she'd said. For his own protection, he'd allowed this situation to occur.

There were no sounds of traffic now, only those of the Ford as he guided it up the tortuously curving road: the laboring mutter of its engine, the squeak of its constantly twisted tires. Behind them, the highway sank into the low-hanging fog. Ahead, the mountains loomed grey and green. Somewhere among them was Connie.

"He didn't say any more about where he'd meet us?" he asked.

"No," she said, "He just said bring the money."

Chris pressed down on the accelerator as they reached a length of straight road. His gaze jumped ahead, looking for a sign of the black sedan. What if they missed each other? He fought off the terror of the thought. Adam wouldn't miss them. He needed the money too much.

The ocean had disappeared from view now. The car was surrounded by the silent mountains. Los Angeles *was* a strange city, Chris thought distractedly. Fifteen minutes from the most populated places were spots of absolute wilderness. Spots where a person could disappear within minutes of his home and never be found again.

"Chris."

He started from his thoughts and glanced at her. "There's a car following us," she said. His gaze jerked up to the rear view mirror. "Is it them?"

Chris swallowed. "Yes," he said.

The sedan was about fifty yards behind them, following unhurriedly. Bracing himself, Chris guided the Ford to the side of the road and braked it. Suddenly, he wished he'd brought Cliff's gun; and, suddenly, remembered the clipping that had fallen out of Cliff's pocket. Adam and Steve had already killed during their escape. They had nothing to lose

by killing again. The avoidance of capture was all that mattered now. He shuddered. Had he made another blind mistake? Was he endangering Helen's life now?

The sedan moved past them.

"What!" Chris stared at it incredulously. Adam was driving.

"What's he doing?" Helen asked, her voice shrill.

"I don't—" Chris broke off and shot his hand out for the ignition key. Twisting it, he started the motor, then, releasing the hand brake, put the transmission into drive and gunned off the shoulder so quickly that the wheels spun once before catching. Gravel rasped beneath the car, spattering off the underframe. Then the car was jolting forward onto the road, starting after the sedan which was just disappearing around a curve.

The Ford wheeled creakingly around the curve, then leveled off. Ahead, the sedan moved on leisurely. Chris blew out breath through gritting teeth. Was Adam playing with them? He shuddered with rage. So help me God, he thought, if you've done anything to Connie.

Three minutes later, Adam turned into a side road and stopped. Chris pulled up behind him and braked hard. Switching off the engine, he jerked on the hand brake.

"Stay here," he said. He got out of the car and started toward the sedan. Adam made no motion to get out. He sat with his back turned to Chris. Chris looked into the car anxiously. As he'd expected, Steve and Connie weren't in it. He stopped by the front window and looked in at Adam. The revolver was on Adam's lap, close to his right hand,

"I didn't think it was a very good idea to stop on the main road," Adam said, smiling.

"Where is she?"

Adam extended his left hand, palm up.

"Where is she, Adam?"

"The money."

Reaching into his pocket shakily, Chris jerked out the clump of bills and tossed it on Adam's lap.

"Where *is* she?" he demanded.

Adam removed the rubber band from the bills and started counting the money.

"Adam, for God's sake!"

"She's well, she's well," said Adam, casually, his eyes on the money. "Steve's taking care of her."

"Where?"

Adam wet his finger and continued counting. Chris stood watching him, his heart thudding slowly and heavily. "It's all there," he said.

"We'll see."

"Adam—"

"Shh-shh-shh" Adam gestured impatiently.

It took another minute for him to finish. Then he nodded. "Very good," he said. He looked at Chris in amusement. "Contract fulfilled," he said, sliding the bills into his pocket.

"Now where is she?"

Adam reached out and pushed the starter button. The sedan's engine ground over twice, then caught. Chris looked at Adam, startled. "What are you—?"

Adam reached for the gear shift.

"What are you doing?"

Adam smiled at him. "We'll be seeing you," he said. The car started moving.

"No!"



## Chapter Nine

Chris acted without thinking. As the sedan rolled forward, he jerked open the front door and reached in.

Adam grunted in surprise, snatching downward at his gun. Before he could reach it though, Chris had grabbed his coat and started dragging him off the seat. Adam swung out wildly with his left hand and missed. Abruptly, moving with the car, Chris stumbled on a rock. As he fell, his fingers clamped on Adam's coat and, in an instant, the two men were sprawled on the road, the pistol landing near them.

The sedan kept rolling.

Chris got an instant's view of Helen pushing out of the Ford as he straightened up. Then Adam's fist was clubbing at the side of his head, Adam was pushing to his knees, a dirty scrape across his left cheek. He was looking for the pistol, seeing it, lunging for it.

Before he could reach it, Chris was on him. The two men rolled and tumbled in the dirt, dust scaling up around them. Chris's foot kicked out at the pistol and sent it bouncing away. Adam reached for it but Chris pulled him around and slammed a fist into his jaw. Adam, half standing, reeled backward, stumbled and fell down heavily on his side.

He was starting up when they heard the grating sound. Instinctively, both men looked down the road in time to see the sedan going over the edge of the canyon rim, its back end flipping up, hanging suspended for a moment, then disappearing.

"Son of a bitch!"

Chris went flailing back as Adam dove at him. They went crashing into the road again, Chris gasping as he landed on a small rock. He flung up his arms as Adam began hitting his face. He tried to roll the heavier man off but couldn't. He grabbed at Adam's right hand but the left struck on his upper cheek, driving jagged streaks of pain into his eye. Hissing, he lurched his body upward, shifting Adam to one side. He pushed at Adam violently, Adam lost his balance

and had to reach to the side for support. As he did, Chris jerked in his left leg, got the foot against Adam's side and shoved as hard as he could. Adam thrashed over onto the road. He was barely on his feet when Chris hit him. His face went blank for a second, then he was swinging back, his blow glancing off Chris's temple. Chris swung again, his left fist driving into Adam's stomach. Adam sucked in gagging breath, his swing missed Chris entirely.

Chris grabbed the pistol from the ground.

"Now," he gasped.

Adam shrank back, wincing, as he saw the pistol pointed at him.

"Chris!"

Chris's finger loosened on the trigger and he drew in a long, body-shaking breath.

Helen ran over to him. "Chris, don't—" she said. "Where is she?" he asked Adam.

Adam looked at him, one hand pressed across his stomach, the other leaning on the ground.

"Well?"

Adam spit into the dirt.

"I'll *kill* you. Adam."

"No, you won't." Adam stood up slowly, an expression of baleful contempt on his face. "You haven't got it, Chris."

Chris stepped forward and slammed the pistol barrel across Adam's forehead. With a surprised grunt, Adam stumbled back and fell.

"Where is she, I said!"

The contempt was gone from Adam's features now. Only hatred remained.

"I'll kill you for that." he said.

Before he'd finished the sentence, Chris had stepped forward and driven the barrel across his head again. Adam went crashing onto his back and pushed up, gasping, feeling at the welted scrape on his forehead.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Chris spoke in a low, trembling voice. "Well, you'd better. Adam. You'd *better*."

What freedom means to you, my kid means to me. You'd kill for freedom, I'd kill for her."

"Go to hell, you son of a—"

Chris hit him again, then fell on one knee beside the dazed man. Hauling him up by his jacket, he shoved the pistol underneath his jaw, the barrel end pressing at his throat.

"You tell me now," he said, *"You tell me where she is or get your filthy head blown off."*

Adam's face went pale. "No, don't," he said.

"Where is she?"

"In the canyon. A shack."

"Where?"

"Down the road. Not far. There's a dirt lane."

"You'll take us there."

Adam swallowed with effort and pushed the pistol away from his throat. "All right," he muttered.

Chris shoved him back and stood. "Get up," he said. Adam got up slowly.

"I guess I underestimated you," he said. There was no admiration in his voice, only self-criticism.

"Yes, I guess you did," said Chris. He gestured toward the Ford. "Go on," he said.

Adam turned and started walking unsteadily, brushing at his clothes.

"Chris." She came up beside him and took his arm.

"We'll get her now," he said.

As they started walking, Chris was conscious of her looking at him. He glanced aside and managed a smile.

"It'll be all right now," he said.

"What happened, Chris? Why did you—?"

"He was going to leave with the money."

"You mean he wasn't going to—?"

"No." He glanced at her as she caught her breath.

"It's all right, Helen. We'll get her now."

"Chris, shouldn't we get the police first?"

"There's no time. Steve is probably wondering already what happened to Adam. We have to go there right away."

She looked at him and he thought he knew what she was thinking.

"I'll call them afterward," he said. "I didn't mean that."

As they walked past the canyon edge, Chris could see the sedan at the bottom. It was lying on its side, its upper wheels still turning slowly, it was fortunate it hadn't caught fire.

"Toss back the money," he told Adam.

Adam took the bills out of his jacket pocket and tossed it back without a word. Chris pointed at it and Helen stooped to pick it up. She slipped it into her coat pocket.

Adam was waiting by the car. "Get in the back," Chris told him.

Adam opened the front door and pushed the seat forward. Bending over, he stepped into the back of the car and sat down. Chris waited until he was settled, then, slowly, cautiously, sat down in the front seat, half-turned around so he could watch Adam.

"You drive," he told Helen.

"All right." She got in quickly and shut the door. Leaning over, she switched on the engine.

"Well?" asked Chris when they were back to the main road.

"Keep going inland," Adam said.

Chris heard Helen draw in a quick breath.

"Is she all right?" she asked in a stiffly controlled voice.

Chris looked at Adam. "She asked you a question," he said.

"She's all right."

"She'd better be," Chris told him.

Adam had regained his poise by now. He smiled thinly at Chris. "Quite the hero, aren't we?" he said.

Chris was silent.

"Planning to turn us over to the police?" asked Adam. Chris only looked at him.

Adam smiled. "You, of course, realize what will happen when you do."

Chris said nothing and the smile faded from Adam's face.

"You'll go to prison," he said, coldly.

"And you'll go to the gas chamber," said Chris.

Adam seemed to tense forward and Chris raised the pistol. The sight of it seemed to relax Adam rather than caution. He leaned back, smiling again.

"Don't worry," he said, casually, "I won't give you cause to shoot me. I plan to live for a long time."

"Good luck." said Chris.

"The turn is just around this bend ahead," said Adam.

They all sat quietly until the car had turned off the road onto a narrow, rutted lane.

"Stop," said Chris. Helen pushed in the brake and the Ford came to a halt.

"How far down is it?" asked Chris.

"A hundred yards or so," said Adam.

Chris looked at him a moment, then, abruptly, pulled up the door handle and pushed outside.

"We'll walk." he said.

Adam shrugged. "Up to you," he said.

"Come out slowly," Chris told him.

"Very slowly," said Adam. He sounded as if he were almost enjoying the situation now. He pushed the seat forward and leaned over to get out of the car.

"Be seeing you," he said to Helen. He sounded very confident.

Chris held the gun on him and leaned over to speak into the car.

"You stay here," he said, "I'll send Connie out to you. Then you go get the police."

"What are you—?"

"I'll stay with them," Chris interrupted. "Just get the police as fast as you can. There's a station at Malibu."

"Chris—"

"Do what I say, honey." Chris straightened up. "Let's go," he ordered.

"Chris."

He glanced at Helen.

"Darling, please be careful," she begged.

Despite the tension, Chris felt a rush of happiness at the sound in her voice. "I will," he said.

He and Adam started walking down the road.

"Nice day," said Adam. "Just remember what I said."

"Oh, I will, I will," said Adam.

Their shoes crunched along the hard-packed dirt. Chris glanced ahead but saw nothing. "For your sake, that shack better be there."

"For your daughter's sake," said Adam. There was mockery in his voice now. Chris stiffened.

"She'd better be all right too," he said.

Adam chuckled. "The trouble with you would-be heroes," he said, "is you don't know what you're up against. Sooner or later, you make a mistake. You'll make yours."

"You—"

"There's the shack," said Adam.

Chris's stride faltered as he caught sight of a battered shingle roof rising above the bushes ahead.

"Hold it," he said.

Adam stopped and looked over at him. "What now, little hero?" he asked.

Chris hesitated. This part had to be right. If Steve knew, for a moment, what was going on, he might kill Connie—of that Chris had no doubt. This part had to be exactly right.

"Well?" asked Adam.

Chris's grip tightened on the revolver.

"You're going to call him out," he said.

"Am I?"

"I'm not fooling, Adam."

"Shall I call him now?"

"Walk down further," Chris told him. "I'll be right behind you. As soon as you're in front of the shack, call him—and, by God, you'd better make it casual."

Adam looked at him a moment, a detached smile on his lips. Then he turned. "Watch your step," he said as if to a casual chess opponent. He started toward the shack.

"Remember—I'll shoot if I have to."

"Don't worry, I'll remember everything," said Adam.

Chris walked after him, the gun tightly readied in his hand. He drank in a mouthful of air and exhaled it—then shivered, realizing how cold it was, how heavily still. So still it seemed as if his footsteps must be audible inside the shack.

Up ahead, Adam stopped, glanced back. Chris nodded. He was just out of sight of the cabin doorway, a mass of bushes hiding it from him.

Adam called out. "Steve!"

Chris felt his heartbeat jolt at the loudness of it. Was he wrong to try it like this? he wondered. Was there a better way?

"Hey, Steve!" Adam called again. He sounded very casual.

Chris stiffened as he heard the cabin door squeak open.

"Where the hell have you been?" Steve asked.

Abruptly, Chris lunged out from behind the bushes, gun raised. "Hold it!" he ordered.

Steve twitched in surprise. Then, suddenly, he was grabbing for the gun in his pocket.

"Keep your—!" Chris started before reflexes, quicker than thought, had pulled the trigger and a blast of thunder surrounded him. At the top of the rise, Steve hitched around, one hand clutching at his shoulder. He fell back against the cabin, a gush of blood drenching his fingers.

Chris threw a glance at Adam, who was still standing in the same place. Then he looked toward the cabin again. Steve was writhing on the ground, teeth set in a grimace of agony.

"Don't try it again," Chris warned him.

"Sonofabitch," gasped Steve. Suddenly, he whined, biting at his lower lip.

Chris looked at the doorway.

"Connie!" he called.

The cabin was silent. Chris felt a chilling tremor in his loins. "No," he murmured.

"Connie!" he shouted again. "It's Daddy!"

"Daddy!"

Inside the cabin, there was a sound of bare feet running. Abruptly, Connie appeared in the doorway, still wearing her pajamas. When she saw Chris she cried out convulsively and ran out of the cabin. Without looking, she rushed down the steeply sloping ground toward him.

She'd almost reached him when she slipped. Instinctively, Chris jumped forward to grab her. The next instant, flailing down the slope to keep from falling, she crashed into him, knocking him off balance. He struggled to keep his footing but couldn't. His right foot twisted under him, pitching him sideways onto the road, the impact breaking his grip.

The revolver went sliding away from him.

"Honey, look out! " he gasped, lunging for it desperately.

Adam got there first. Chris saw him looming overhead, his lips pulled back in a brutal smile. Then everything was blotted out by Adam's hurtling shoe. For a split second Chris tried to fling up his hands, tried to twist away. There was no time. The shoe tip crashed against his temple, stabbing a wedge of agony into his brain. Chris toppled over backward with a cry. Somewhere Connie screamed. Chris tried to move.

The next kick sent him spinning into blackness.



# Thursday Afternoon

## Chapter Ten

Helen was standing by the Ford when the explosion of the shot reached her.

For an instant, she stood transfixed, the rocking waves of sound breaking over her. Then, with a gasp, she broke into a hobbling run, her sandals slapping at the dirt. She ran heedlessly, her gaze held straight ahead on the road turn where Chris had disappeared. "No, please," she kept on murmuring. "Please." As if she were entreating someone.

Up ahead, Connie screamed.

"No!" Helen tried to run faster and felt a sting of pain on her sole where the sliver of glass had gone in the night before. She winced but kept on running.

Suddenly, Connie appeared, fleeing around the bend of the road.

"Connie!"

Connie rushed across the uneven ground and flung herself against her mother's legs. She couldn't speak. She clung tightly to Helen, her body trembling. Before Helen could say a word to her, Adam came racing around the curve, the revolver in his hand. When he saw them, he skidded to a halt.

"All right," he said. He gestured toward the shack with his gun. "Go on."

His lips flared back in a grimace of fury as Helen stared at him. "I said go on!" he ordered.

"Mommy, no," begged Connie, her face buried in Helen's skirt.

"It's all right, baby," Helen told her. She leaned over hastily and kissed the top of Connie's head. "Please. We have to go. Mommy will stay with you. I promise."

"No, Mommy."

Helen shuddered at the look on Adam's face. "So help me God, lady," he muttered, pointing the revolver at Connie's head.

*"Baby, walk with me,"* Helen said. She tightened her arm around Connie's shoulders. "You have to come with Mommy now. You have to, Connie."

"No." Connie stumbled beside her, her face still pressed against Helen's body.

"It's all right, sweetie." Helen said in a hollow, shaking voice. "Just walk with Mommy. That's a good girl." She held Connie's head against her side with rigid fingers as they walked past Adam.

"Don't hurt her," she whispered.

Adam said nothing. He gestured jerkily with his head and Helen tried to quicken her step. Connie stumbled and had to be pulled erect. She started to whimper again.

"It's all right, baby." Helen felt a spill of tears down her cheeks. "It's all right," she said, faintly. She glanced across her shoulder and saw Adam getting the keys out of the Ford.

When she saw Chris lying in the road, she stiffened in her tracks, eyes widening. She stared at his body, a thin wavering sound starting in her throat. She could barely feel Connie against herself.

"Come on."

She twitched as Adam pushed the barrel end against her back. Involuntarily, she started forward, drawing Connie with her. She couldn't take her eyes off Chris. He was so still, his body sprawled on the rutted ground, one leg twisted beneath the other, his hands above his shoulders as if, in falling, he had flung them up to ward off the blow that had put him there.

"Chris," she murmured.

*In the shack.* Adam's hand was clamping suddenly on her right arm, redirecting her instinctive move toward Chris. Helen gasped, twisting around so quickly that it sent a prickling shock along the muscles of her neck. Connie cried out and she had to pull her close again, stopping to hold her. Adam cursed and shoved her back, almost knocking her over.

"Get in the shack!" he ordered.

She started up the steep incline, drawing Connie beside her, conscious of her own voice soft and trembling as she

comforted Connie, not hearing a single word of it. She kept glancing back across her shoulder at Chris and saw Adam lean over, reach under Chris's coat.

He straightened up angrily "You have the money?" he called up after her.

She turned and stared at him. "*The money.*"

She remembered then and reached into her coat pocket. It was empty.

"I—I can't—" she started, standing there awkwardly on the steep, rutted ground. Abruptly, she recalled that the clump of bills was in her other pocket. She tried to ease Connie away, but Connie held on with talon-like fingers.

"Baby, let me get—" Helen bit her lip and tried not to cry. She forced her left hand in between her own and Connie's body and slipped it into the pocket of her coat.

"Come on!" snarled Adam.

Her fingers closed over the money and started to pull it out. As she did, the rubber band slipped off and several of the bills went fluttering to the ground. She tried to stoop and pick them up but couldn't because Connie was holding on to her so tightly. She heard Adam curse again, then shrank back as he clambered up the rise and snatched the pack of money from her shaking hand.

"Get in the shack," he told her.

"Don't hurt her," she said instinctively.

He jerked her around and shoved her toward the door. Helen felt a rush of dizzying shock as she found herself looking at the other man who was leaning against the shack, his left hand pressed against his shoulder, blood running between his fingers and down his wrist.

"*Shut her up,*" she heard Adam order from behind her and she was suddenly conscious of Connie's terrified crying.

"Connie, don't—" she pleaded. She pulled her daughter against her, shielding Connie's eyes from the sight of the bleeding man. She almost carried her past him into the fetid chill of the shack. Pulling her to a chair, she sat down and lifted Connie onto her lap, pressing her close, brushing at her hair with short, trembling strokes. "Shhh, baby, shhh. It's all right."

Outside, she heard the two men talking and she raised her face from where she'd had it buried in Connie's hair,

"—doctor," she heard the wounded man finish.

"Use your head," Adam answered stiffly and the wounded man said something she didn't hear except for the curse of pain.

Suddenly, there was a sliding, scraping sound.

Unaware of it, Helen pressed back slowly against the chair, the old wood creaking in the silence of the shack. She hardly heard Connie's sobbing. All she could hear was the raking noise outside that was drawing closer and closer. She felt a chilling tingle up the back of her neck and her gaze, unblinking, held on the doorway.

Abruptly, Adam appeared dragging Chris into the cabin, one hand twisted around the collar of Chris's jacket. Her mouth opened as if to breathe but there was no breath in her. Air seemed to stifle in her lungs and in the heavy length of her body. It seemed the only thing that lived was her heart.

"Is he dead?" she heard the other man ask as he stumbled into the shack after Adam.

"I don't know," Adam answered carelessly. He released his fingers and Chris's head and shoulders thumped down on the floor. Helen couldn't restrain the faint gagging sound in her throat. Adam glanced over at her, then turned to the wounded man.

"Let's see," he said, drawing Steve's hand off the wound. Helen twisted her gaze from the sight of the man's blood-pulsing shoulder. She pressed her eyes to Connie's head again, her arms tightening convulsively around her daughter's body.

"I gotta have a doctor," she heard Steve insist.

"And end up in the gas chamber?" Adam snapped.

"I'm bleeding, damn it!"

"Hold still."

There was a moment's silence, then the sound of cloth being torn. Blotted out, in an instant, by Steve's hoarse cry of pain. Helen glanced up instinctively and saw the torn, blood-pumping hole in his shoulder.

"I need a doctor," said Steve. There was a shakiness beneath the hard sound of his voice. Helen looked at Chris again. He didn't move.

"Come here. Sit down while I bandage it," said Adam.

Helen looked up, startled, and saw him leading Steve toward her. She shuddered as his eyes met hers and, hastily, she struggled to her feet, holding Connie against her. Connie started to look around but Helen pressed her head down to keep her from seeing.

"It's all right, baby," she said. She edged away, watching Steve sink down heavily onto the chair, his face ashen, his teeth clenched together so rabidly she could see the bulge of his jawbone beneath his ears.

"For Christ's sake, hurry up," he said.

Turning, Helen moved over to where Chris was lying. She felt numb, almost dreamlike. The entire situation had such an air of unreality about it that, somehow, the dread in her could rise no higher. Simply, the mind would not accept more. She looked down intently at Chris's pain-twisted face. There was an ugly, purplish welt across his forehead. She bit her lip and looked at his chest. At first she couldn't see any movement and the horror she had repressed seemed to flood through her body like a cold slime.

Then she saw a hitching rise to his chest and heard a faint, liquid groaning in his throat. Catching her breath, she put Connie down.

"Mommy."

"I have to help Daddy, sweetheart."

Connie turned and looked down at her father. Her breath seemed to stop. She stood motionless, lips parted, staring at him. Helen kneeled beside him quickly and ran a trembling hand over his cheek.

"Chris?" she murmured.

He didn't move. Helen looked around and saw a bottle of water on the table. She pushed up and started for it. Connie caught onto her.

"I have to get some water," Helen told her, "Daddy needs —"

"Mommy, don't—"

*"Stand by Daddy,"* Helen told her. "Be my brave girl now." She backed off slowly, raising her hand as Connie started after her. "Just stay there," she said. She glanced across her shoulder at Adam who was pressing a handkerchief against Steve's shoulder.

"Your slip," he said.

Helen twitched and stared at him.

"Your *slip*," he repeated. He started to turn and she drew back. Connie made a frightened sound.

"All right, all right," Helen said. Shivering, she turned away and bent over. Drawing up her skirt, she pulled quickly at her half slip until it fell around her ankles. She stepped out of it and picked it up. Adam grabbed it from her outstretched fingers and, turning back, started tearing it into strips. Quickly, Helen moved to the table and picked up the bottle of water. She carried it back to Chris and knelt beside him again. Opening the bottle, she pulled a handkerchief from her skirt pocket and poured some water over it. She began patting it against Chris's temples and cheeks.

"That'll hold it," she heard Adam say behind her.

"No, it's still bleeding too much." Steve sounded a little frightened. "I gotta have a doctor, Adam."

"Damn it, use your head!" snapped Adam, "We've wasted enough time. We have money now. We've got to clear out."

"You wouldn't be so damn sure if it was you," said Steve. There was almost a whining in his voice now.

"Look you want a doctor, go get one. I'm going to Mexico."

Helen glanced across her shoulder and saw the two men looking at each other.

"What about—?" She saw Steve's head jerk slightly toward her and she felt a sudden, cold depression in her stomach.

"There's no room," said Adam, flatly.

Helen stared at him, her heartbeat suddenly jolting. She couldn't take her eyes off Adam's expressionless face. When he turned to look at her, she kept gaping at him.

"No," she whispered. She couldn't hear herself. She reached out and pulled Connie against her. "No, please." Her fingers clamped on Connie's arm. *"Please."*

Steve groaned. "I've gotta have a doctor," he muttered.

"Later." said Adam, his eyes on Helen. He reached into his coat pocket. Helen felt a scream rising in her throat. The room seemed to wheel around her.



## Chapter Eleven

"No, not later!"

It was as if Steve's voice came from miles away. Cringing back, Connie tight against her, Helen looked dumbly at him, at the pistol he was pointing at Adam's back.

Adam looked around. "What are you—?" He stared at Steve incredulously.

"Get your hand out of your pocket," Steve told him.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"I'm getting a doctor."

"Sure you'll get a doctor—but later!" said Adam, "We have to get out of here! Don't you understand? We've been —"

"I want him now!" Steve's chest rose and fell unsteadily. He blinked and leaned back dizzily against the chair. "Don't move," he ordered, "Don't move or I'll—"

"You're a fool," Adam said.

Steve pressed his lips together and tried to push himself up. His legs vibrated beneath the weight and he fell back with a muffled grunt.

He glanced at Helen. "Get over here," he said.

"What do you want?"

"Get over here."

Helen stood up and pushed Connie away from herself. "Stay by Daddy," she said. Connie started to object but Helen cut her off sharply. "*You have to stay by Daddy,*" she said.

"*Get over here, lady.*" There was a half-mindless drone in Steve's voice now.

Helen moved toward him. He swallowed and grunted.

"Take the rod out of his pocket."

"You're out of your mind!" Adam shouted at him.

"Take his rod."

"His—?"

"Gun, gun! Take it!"

"Yes." Helen edged over slowly until she was standing behind Adam. Carefully, her hand trembling, she reached toward his side coat pocket.

"Hurry up!"

Her hand twitched and bumped against Adam's side. Swallowing, she pressed her lips together and slid her hand into the pocket. He stirred a little and Steve muttered, "*Watch it.*"

Helen's fingers touched the cool, oily surface of the revolver. A sudden tension filled her. Did she dare try to shoot at Steve? She inhaled quickly, raggedly. What if she missed? She'd never fired a gun in her life. Was it possible that she could fire it while it was still inside the pocket? Otherwise, in trying to jerk it free, it might catch on the pocket lining.

"Get it out, damn it!"

There was no time, no time! With a faint, hopeless sob, Helen drew the revolver out of the pocket and stepped back. For a moment, Adam's body stood between her and Steve. *Now!* Cried her mind—but her muscles would not obey. Nervously, she moved over to the table and put down the gun. She couldn't take the chance. If she missed, Connie would be killed in seconds, Chris would be killed.

"You're gonna get me a doctor," Steve said.

At first she didn't realize he was talking to her and she started back toward Connie.

"I said you're getting me a doctor!"

She stopped and looked back at him. "*Me?*"

"Get in your car and—"

"For Christ's sake, will you—?" Adam started.

"Shut up!" Steve shrilled. "I'm not dyin' on the road for you!"

"You won't die on the road, damn it! We'll stop as soon as —"

"I said shut up!" The gun shook in his grip as he pointed it at Adam.

"Oh . . . *Christ*," said Adam, tightly.

"Go, get a doctor," Steve said to Helen.

Helen backed off toward Connie. She felt her daughter move up into the shelter of her arm.

"How?" she asked, "I can't—"

"I don't care how!" Steve interrupted, "Just get him here!" As Helen stared at him, his lips flared back abruptly from yellowish teeth and he extended the pistol shakily.

"Go on!" he said.

She nodded jerkily and began leading Connie toward the doorway.

"She stays," said Steve.

Helen looked at him with unbelieving eyes. "No," she murmured.

"Let go of her."

Helen found herself shaking her head fitfully. "No," she said, "I won't."

"Maybe you'd like her killed right now!" he threatened.

Helen pushed Connie behind her. "I won't leave her," she said in a low, shaking voice, if you're going to kill us you'll have to do it now." She drew in a rasping breath. "*I won't leave her*," she said.

Steve's fingers tensed on the trigger, then eased. He stared at Helen with a dull, almost animal-like confusion.

"Kill her!" snapped Adam. "You're wasting time! She'll never get you a doctor!"

"By God, then *he* will," muttered Steve. He pushed up with a groan and stumbled away from the table. Abruptly, he whirled and pulled Adam's revolver off the table, sliding it into his trouser pocket. He walked erratically across the room, eyes almost slitted from the pain, his lips drawn back, breath hissing from his mouth. He brushed by Helen and staggered over to Chris. He jabbed the tip of his right shoe against Chris's side.

"Get up," he said.

"*You're wasting time*," said Adam, tensely.

"Then I'll waste it!" snapped Steve. He rammed his shoe tip against Chris's side. "Get up!" he said. Helen winced and closed her eyes a moment.

"Get up, damn you!" With a rasping whine, he bent over and picked up the water bottle. He tilted it over and the water poured down heavily, splattering off Chris's face. Chris twitched and grunted, his arms and legs retracting spasmodically.

"Look, we'll stop at a doctor's, then," Adam said.

"Sure," sneered Steve. "We'll just walk into his waiting room and sit down with the other patients."

Adam's face tightened angrily. He looked around as if seeking some escape. When he saw that there wasn't any, his expression grew angrier yet, color pulsed into his cheeks.

Now Chris was breathing more rapidly. His eyes still closed, he reached up one hand and pressed it to the bruise on his head.

"Get up!" Steve told him.

Chris opened his eyes. They closed a moment, then fluttered open once more. He stared up dazedly at Steve. Then he pushed up on one elbow and looked around. "Honey . . ." he mumbled.

"Chris." Helen spoke his name automatically as their eyes met. He looked, with alarm, at her and Connie.

"Get up, get up." Steve nudged him fiercely with his shoe. Chris gasped and his gaze jumped around. He sat up dizzily, then pulled his legs in slowly and stood. He wavered there, blinking his eyes, trying to focus them properly. He started to move toward Helen but Steve pushed the gun against his side and stopped him.

*"By God, you better move right or I'll blow you guts out,"* he said, thickly.

Chris looked at him without expression, still not fully conscious.

"You're gonna get me a doctor," Steve told him.

"Doctor?"

Steve glanced at Adam. "Where are the car keys?" he asked.

"At the bottom of the canyon with the car."

"*Their* car," growled Steve.

Adam stared at him coldly for several seconds. Then he reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out the ring of keys. He tossed it so they fell on the floor at Steve's feet. "You're going to regret this," he said.

Steve ignored him and stepped back from the keys. "Pick 'em up," he told Chris.

Chris bent over slowly and picked them up, almost falling as he did.

"Now listen to me," Steve told him, wheezingly, "I killed two men already, see? And I'd kill your wife and kid in a minute too. You understand me?"

Chris glanced over at Helen involuntarily. Connie was shivering against her.

"You bring the cops and you don't have a wife and kid anymore." said Steve, "You have a couple o' corpses. *Understand?*"

"How—how do I—?" Chris began.

"How do ya know I won't kill 'em anyway?" Steve broke in. "You don't know. But if ya don't get me that doctor, you're all dead right now. *Understand?*"

Steve suddenly closed his eyes and there was clicking sound in his throat. Adam tensed and seemed to lean forward. Then Steve's eyes opened again, his body twitching as if he were starting out of a doze.

"Go on," he told Chris.

Helen braced herself. "Let him take my girl." she said. Steve looked at her as if he were drugged.

"Sure, why not?" said Adam, "Let 'em all go. We'll just sit here and wait for the cops to—"

"He goes alone," said Steve, stumbling back toward the chair.

"Isn't it enough I stay?" Helen asked, "Please. I'll be—"

"*He goes alone.*" Steve waved Adam back and sank down on the chair with a groan. He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and looked at Chris who was still standing in the same place, looking at his wife and child.

"Get out o' here," he said, "You have 45 minutes."

Chris's face tightened. Then, slowly, he moved over to Helen and Connie and put his arms around them.

"I'll come back," he murmured.

Helen shook her head. "They won't let us go," she said, "Not now."

His fingers tightened convulsively on her arm. "Please don't give up," he begged, "For Connie's sake—"

"You'd better go," she interrupted.

Chris swallowed and looked at her helplessly. Then he leaned over and kissed Connie's forehead.

"I'll be back for you," he whispered to her, "Don't be afraid, baby. Daddy will come for you. Do what Mommy says and—"

"*Get out!*" raged Steve.

"Please let him take her!" Helen begged.

"I said get out!"

Chris turned hurriedly and headed for the door.

"Steve, for Christ's sake, don't do it!" said Adam. "We can stop at a doctor's place but if you let him go we'll never get out of here!"

Steve looked at him unsteadily. "I'm not goin' anywhere like this," he said.

"He's the one that shot you! Are you going to—?"

"Shut up!"

"I'll get you a doctor then!"

Steve laughed breathlessly. "Sure, I'll let you leave me here," he said.

"Damn it!" Adam clenched his teeth and started forward, then stopped as Steve pointed the gun at his chest.

"You're putting us right in the gas chamber," he said.

"He'll be back," said Steve. He looked at Helen and Connie and his grip tightened slowly on the pistol.

"He'll be back," he said again.

## Chapter Twelve

Chris stopped walking and looked back at the cabin, a wave of premonition passing over him. Suddenly, there seemed no escape, no answer. Go back, he thought; stay with them. Nothing he did could change the situation now except that one more human being might die if he brought a doctor.

He shuddered violently. And it was his doing. Because of him. Connie was in there facing death, because of him Helen was in there. And he was free. The irony was perfect. He drove nails into his palms until the pain made him wince. *His doing.*

He looked around desperately, somewhere, deep in his mind, a wild idea gathering. He saw himself brandishing a heavy stick charging into the cabin, swinging wildly, getting Steve before he could fire his revolver, getting Adam. Before the thought had reached even the periphery of decision, he had discarded it bitterly. Anything like that would only destroy his wife and child that much sooner. There was only one thing he could do. What he'd been told.

Forty-five minutes.

Chris whirled and started running toward the car. How much time had elapsed? Five minutes, six? How could he possibly get to a doctor and bring him back in a little over half an hour? Again, he stopped and looked back, his head throbbing painfully. Could he call back, plead for more time? No, Steve would never give it to him. He should be in the car now, speeding off. Chris turned and sprinted around the curve, every jolting stride like a spiked club against his brain.

He jerked open the door of the Ford and slid in, pulled the door shut again. Hastily, he slid the key into its socket and twisted it. The motor coughed, failed. Chris turned the key again, jerking out the choke, then shoving it in as the engine turned over. He pumped at the gas pedal until the engine sound flared. Quickly, he knocked the shift into *Drive* and the car jolted forward.

He glanced up into the rear-view mirror. He couldn't see the shack; it was beyond that clump of trees. He felt an uncontrollable tensing in his stomach and chest—as if invisible elastic cords were binding him to his wife and child and, as he drove, the cords were growing more and more taut until they threatened to tear his insides loose, leaving the better part of him behind. It seemed impossible to drive away like this knowing where they were—to leave them alone with men who would kill without hesitation. Yet there was nothing else to do—or, if there were, his tortured mind could not discover it. Rescue was beyond his means; he knew that. He was just a fallible man. Only blinding fury had enabled him to fight successfully with Adam before. There was no such life-giving strength in the fear that gripped him now.

He turned the car onto the canyon road and accelerated as much as he could. Thirty-five miles an hour was the limit because of the sharply narrow curves. Chris glanced at the dashboard clock. It was twenty after twelve. How much time was left?

His mind raced ahead. There was no chance at all of getting to their own doctor in Santa Monica. He'd have to stop at the first one he came to. That would be in Malibu; far enough as it was. Chris pressed down instinctively on the gas pedal and the Ford tilted squeakingly around a curve. To his left was only space, far below, a rock-strewn valley. Chris tried to go faster but it was not possible. On the next curve the wheels of the car left the concrete and skidded onto the shoulder, casting up gouts of sandy earth.

Nine minutes later he was braking at the canyon entrance, waiting for a truck to pass on the highway, then shooting across to the southbound lane and turning in. He drove the pedal to the floor and the Ford started gaining speed, the dashboard needle quivering past forty, fifty, sixty. Wind hissed and whistled past the windows as he drove. If I'm stopped, he thought, it's over.

*You don't have a wife and kid, Steve's words echoed in his mind. You have a couple o' corpses.*

Chris looked up at the mirror automatically—and suddenly tightened.



Behind, in the distance, a motorcyclist was following him. Chris pressed his lips together and eased his foot from the pedal. If it was a state patrolman, there was no chance of slowing down enough to fool him.

Chris couldn't take his eyes from the mirror as the figure came closer and closer. He felt his heartbeat like a piston at his chest wall. The figure on motorcycle was dressed in black, he stayed in the same lane, coming closer. Chris felt a heavy sinking in his stomach. I'll have to tell him, he thought. The officer would call in, the police would come, they'd surround the cabin and Connie and Helen would be shot to death. A vision of the entire sequence flashed across Chris's mind. He sat frozenly, waiting for it to begin.

Abruptly, the motorcyclist roared out into the outside lane and put on speed. In another few seconds, he was pulling by the Ford and Chris could see the expression on his face. He was a teen-ager wearing a black jacket and a black, goggled helmet.

With an indrawn hiss, Chris jammed down the pedal and the Ford surged forward again. Lost: one precious minute.

He was just speeding into the Malibu area when he remembered the doctor Helen's mother went to. They'd taken her to him once when she'd cut herself badly on a piece of glass. The doctor was close by. Chris's gaze leaped ahead, searching for the turn-off. Just a little way now.

It was almost twenty-five minutes to one as he pulled into the small parking lot beside Dr. Arthur Willoughby's office. He was out of the car before the fan blades had stopped turning. He raced across the lot, jumped onto the one-step porch and pulled open the door, lunged inside.

The waiting room was at the end of a short hallway. Chris's footsteps sounded muffled on the carpeting as he half ran along it. Steve had to wait. He *had* to.

There were four people in the waiting room: an old lady, a workman in overalls, a mother and her small boy. They were sitting around the walls of the small room, the old lady on a couch, looking at a *National Geographic Magazine*, the workman playing with the cap in his hands, the little boy sitting on the edge of a chair swinging his feet back and forth, kicking the metal legs. When Chris came in, the boy looked up and stared. He watched Chris move across the

room toward the partition of opaque glass that opened on the nurse's anteroom.

"Stop kicking," said the boy's mother. She did not look up from her movie magazine,

Chris tapped on the partition with the nail of a forefinger. From the corner of his eye, he saw the old lady glance up at him. He drew in a quick breath and looked intently at the moving patch of shadow behind the glass. *Come on*, he thought. *Come on!* He bit his teeth together, reached forward to tap the glass again.

The shadow darkened, the partition was drawn aside.

"Yes?" asked the nurse. She was young, bleached blonde, her face so darkly tanned it made her lipstick color dull,

"Could I see Dr. Willoughby?" Chris asked her.

"About your head?" she asked.

"What?" Chris started. He'd forgotten. "No," he said, "No."

"Did you phone for an appointment?" asked the nurse.

"There was no time. I have to see him right away. Please . . . can I—?"

"I'm afraid there are several people ahead of you," she told him.

"You don't understand." Chris was suddenly conscious of the fact that every patient in the waiting room was looking at him. He leaned in close, not noticing the way the nurse edged back a little.

"This is an emergency," he said, "I've got to see him immediately."

"I'm afraid I can't—" the nurse began.

"*Now*," he said, his voice flaring strickenly. "Look. Tell him that Mrs. Shaw's son-in-law wants to see him."

"Oh. Are you—?"

"Please! There's no time!"

The nurse looked at him blankly, her lips twitching. Then, with a brief nod, she turned away. Abruptly, she turned back and reached forward to slide shut the partition. Chris stood there watching it move until it had thumped shut. He closed his eyes for a second. Helen. Connie. He thought

about them in the shack with Steve. *Forty-five minutes.* He looked around the room with panicked eyes but there was no clock on the wall.

"What time is it?" he blurted to the man in overalls.

"What?" The man started, blinked up at Chris. "I—I don't have a watch," he said.

The old lady put down the *National Geographic Magazine* and, slowly, drew out the extending chain of her lapel watch. She picked at the face until she had opened the tiny round door on it. She squinted down. "It is just past twenty minutes until two o'clock," she told him.

Chris felt a sudden traction in his stomach muscles. He made a faint, dazed sound.

"I beg your pardon," said the old lady, "It is just past twenty minutes until *one* o'clock."

"Thank you," muttered Chris. He glanced at the little boy who was staring at him with a vacant expression, his shoes still thumping on the legs of the chair.

"Stop kicking," said his mother, reading. There was no inflection in her voice.

Chris turned back and stared at the glass partition again. Inside, he heard a faint murmuring of voices. He recognized Dr. Willoughby's voice. Oh, God, hurry up! he thought. He looked over at the door, his hand twitching empathically with his need to grab the knob, turn it, push inside. He rubbed a hand across his forehead, hissing a little as he touched the bruise. What was he going to tell the doctor, how could he get him away from the office? It was true, there *was* no answer. Everything was insanely impossible. And yet he had to make it possible—and in twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes!

He couldn't help the indrawn sob in his breath. He stiffened reactively, then, on an impulse, grabbed the knob of the door and turned it.

Dr. Willoughby was just coming down the hall when Chris entered. He jerked up his head abruptly, an expression of stern surprise on his face.

"What is it Mr.—?"

"Martin. I'm—I'm Mrs. Shaw's son-in-law if you—"

"Yes. Yes. I recall," said Willoughby, "What's the trouble. Your head?"

Chris swallowed quickly and glanced across Willoughby's shoulder at the nurse. She was staring at him. "No," he said, "It's my wife."

"Helen?"

"Yes." For a second, Chris was startled that Willoughby knew her name. Then, he realized, Willoughby had been Helen's doctor too before they were married.

"What's wrong with her?" asked the doctor.

"She—fell," said Chris, "We were out hiking in Latigo Canyon. And she fell."

"Where is she?" asked Willoughby, quickly.

Chris cleared his throat. "She's still out there," he said.

"What?"

Chris felt the waves of dizziness coming over him again, the sense of nightmarish unreality. How could he possibly be standing here lying to this man, attempting to lure him to his possible death? Was he insane?

"She—I couldn't move her," Chris heard himself going on despite the horror he felt, "I was afraid to. She had a bad fall."

Willoughby turned abruptly to the nurse's desk and grabbed the telephone. He picked up the receiver and started to dial.

"Who are you calling?" asked Chris, unaware of the frightened thinness of his voice.

"Hospital," said Willoughby. "We'll get an ambulance out there right away." He finished dialing and listened. "You should have done this," he said grimly.

"No, you can't," Chris said. Everything was going wrong. Every second brought Helen and Connie closer to death.

Willoughby looked at him in surprise.

"You have to come with me," said Chris.

"My dear man—"

"I said you—" Chris broke off as there was a clicking on the telephone, a faint voice.

"Emergency, please," said Willoughby,

"No." Chris hand shot out and depressed the cradle. He held it down frozenly as if he were afraid that, if he released it, the connection would be re-established.

"What in God's name are you doing?" Willoughby stared at him incredulously.

"She doesn't want an ambulance," said Chris in a trembling voice. "She wants you. You have to come with me."

Willoughby looked at the welted, blood-caked bruise on Chris's temple, then met Chris's gaze again.

"Come in my office, Mr. Martin," he said.

"It's not my head!" Chris snapped.

He glanced up at the wall clock and, saw that, it was almost quarter to one. A sob broke in his chest and, suddenly his right hand was clutching at the doctor's wrist.

"*You're coming with me,*" he said. He tried to sound authoritative but his voice was too ridden with terror.

Willoughby pulled back. "Let go of me, Mr. Martin," he said.

The nurse caught at Chris's arm and held him. "You'd better sit down," she said, sounding coolly, maddeningly unruffled.

"No!" Chris jerked free of her and grabbed at Willoughby's white jacket. "You've got to come with me!" he said.

"Mr. Martin!"

With a violent effort, Chris forced himself quiet. He clenched his teeth and let go of Willoughby's jacket.

"Please," he said, "Will you come with me? It's a matter of life and death."

Willoughby took his arm with a strength surprising for his age and build.

"Now, sit down," he said, firmly, "We'll take care of this. But there's no time to—"

"Are you coming with me?"

"Your wife will be taken care of," said Willoughby, "Just sit down and—"

"You've got to come with me now!" All the terror billowed up in Chris as he visualized Steve pointing the revolver at Helen, pulling the trigger, pointing it at Connie—

"Give me your gun," he demanded, "Quickly."

Willoughby and the nurse gaped at him.

"*Oh, God!*" With a sobbing cry, Chris whirled and jerked open the door. He lunged across the waiting room without seeing any of the patients. Behind him, Willoughby shouted, "Mr. Martin!" Then Chris was skidding to a halt at the end of the hall, pulling the door open, racing out into the parking lot.

Willoughby came running out and raised his arm.

"Mr. Martin!" he shouted, "Wait!"

Chris gunned the Ford across the parking lot and roared onto the street, only one thought left in his fear-crazed mind. The gun at home.

## Chapter Thirteen

Steve's sounds of pain came regularly now. Every few seconds, he would make a throaty noise which was partially a grunt, more an involuntary whine. He slumped tensely in the chair, shoulders forward, eyes staring, apparently sightlessly, across the dim room of the shack. Whenever Adam made any kind of movement, however, the eyes shifted instantly, Steve's fingers flexed on the revolver stock. Adam leaned against the opposite wall, watching him—waiting.

Helen and Connie were against another wall, sitting on the floor. Connie, her head in Helen's lap, had fallen into a heavy, emotion-spent sleep. Helen kept stroking gently at her hair, her eyes fixed on Steve. If he lost consciousness, Adam would grab his gun, kill them and leave—probably steal a car or stop one on the road, kill the motorist, then head for Mexico.

She kept telling herself that she should be on her feet, ready to rush for Steve's revolver in the event he fainted. She felt so tired though, so strengthless. If only she could rest; it seemed as if days had passed without rest. Her eyelids felt weighted.

Worse, it was impossible to retain specific dread any longer. It was so quiet in the shack except for the faint sounds Steve was making, the occasional squeak of the chair. Her mind could not hold on to tension, could not keep her muscles prepared to act in defense of her life and Connie's. She was exhausted by fear, depleted by the savage pattern of shocks she'd been exposed to since the telephone first rang not even sixteen hours before. The realization of how little time had passed was startling.

Where was Chris now? she wondered almost with a sensation of not caring. Had he reached a doctor yet? Which doctor would he go to? Somehow, she could not believe that what he did was important any more. No matter what it was she felt that nothing could be changed. Finally, it appeared,

she had accepted the nightmare. She had given up resisting it.

Then, suddenly, she looked up, her heartbeat jolting, as Steve's body twitched, his shoes thumping on the floor. She felt her body-go taut, readying itself to jump up. She stared at him intently. He was looking around the room in the manner of a man who has just started from unwanted sleep. The revolver was raised from his lap, the barrel of it wavering uncertainly in his grip.

"You're going to die if you stay here," Adam told him. After the long period of silence, his voice sounded unnaturally loud.

"Shut up." Steve spoke without emphasis, slurring the words together. He swallowed and grimaced, licked his lips. Breath faltered in him. "Damn . . ." he muttered.

Abruptly, he made a half-angered, half-agonized sound. Helen couldn't take her eyes off him. She sat woodenly, her gaze unmoving on his pain-twisted features. He looked over at her and her eyes fell, closed momentarily. *God, please help us*, she thought, the words flaring in her mind without volition.

She knew then that she hadn't given up, that she couldn't give up as long as Connie was alive. There had to be a way out. It was too impossibly monstrous that Connie should die in this horrible place, in this horrible way. There were sudden words in Helen's mind again—terrible, heart-chilling words.

*The sins of the fathers*, they began.

No! Helen sat rigidly, her lips trembling in the midst of fear, a great outraged fury. Connie would not die. She would not!

She glanced up and saw Steve trying to look at the watch on his wrist. He couldn't seem to focus his eyes properly. He kept blinking them, his teeth clenched. He was close to the edge now, she realized.

"Do you want me to read it for you?" she asked, almost awed by the brittle presence of her voice.

Steve looked up at her. From the corner of her eye, Helen noticed Adam watching her.



"Do you want me to tell you what time it is?" she asked. This time there was a little bass tremble to her voice. She spoke more consciously now, more aware of what instinct had driven her to speak.

"Do you?" she asked.

"It's ten minutes to one," said Adam.

Helen felt a sudden coiling in her stomach, part of it hatred. Adam knew what she'd had in mind—to get beside Steve, try to wrest the revolver from him.

"If we don't leave now," Adam said, coldly, "You're going to die."

"I said—"

"All right, die!" Adam interrupted, "What the hell do I care?"

"That's right, you don't care," mumbled Steve, "Nobody cares."

Helen realized, then, that, within the sight of death, what small sensitivity remained in Steve was piercing his shell of brutality. He was frightened, terrified and he had so long repressed these feelings that he was incapable of responding to them, of even recognizing them.

"He's got ten minutes," said Adam, scornfully, "Think he'll make it?"

There was a dry clicking sound in Steve's throat. "He'll be back," he said; but there was more desperate hope in his voice than assurance.

"Wrong," said Adam, "He won't. He's probably out of the county by now."

Helen started and looked over at Adam's malign face. It isn't true, she thought.

"He won't be back," said Adam, "Why should he? For *them*?" he asked, gesturing toward Helen with his head. "Don't be a fool. He never told her what he'd done. Even after he murdered Cliff, he talked her into not telling the cops. Was he worrying about them then?" Adam snickered contemptuously. "The hell he was," he said.

"Shut up," said Steve; but it was closer to a request than a demand.

Helen felt a cold tremor pass through her body. *No*, she thought but there was no conviction in her. She didn't know whether Adam was right or not. She really wasn't sure—and, in a way, it was a more terrible feeling than the fear of death.

"And you gave him the car," said Adam, "You let him go." He shook his head slowly. "I always knew I should have left you and Cliff. Well I'll be rid of you soon."

"Will ya?" Steve shoved his arm out and pointed the revolver at him.

"Go on!" snapped Adam, "Shoot me! Then you're all alone. Then you *really* haven't got a prayer, you ignorant bastard."

Steve drew in a harsh, shaking breath. "He's coming back," he said.

"Sure, sure, he's coming back," said Adam, "He's bringing Florence Nightingale and your sainted mother and the first girl you ever kissed and a box of candy with a ribbon on it. *You—moron*. I should—"

He broke off suddenly as Steve pressed back against the chair, his mouth yawning in a sucking gasp of pain, "*Oh, God*," he whimpered, "*Don't, don't . . .*"

In an instant, Adam was alert, his body straightened from the wall, his legs slightly bent as if he were getting ready to rush across the room at Steve who was twisting his head from side to side, tiny noises of fear and agony and disbelief hovering in his throat. Helen's fingers tensed on Connie, she began to shift her to the side so she could put her on the floor and stand—get ready to rush for the gun.

"Get over here," said Steve, hoarsely. He looked at Helen with glazed, watering eyes. He said something else but it was too garbled for her to understand. Hastily, she lowered Connie's head to the floor and stood up.

"You let her over there, she'll grab your gun!" Adam warned.

"And you won't?" muttered Steve. There was a glitter in his eyes now. He spoke through teeth continually on edge. Helen moved toward him very slowly.

"Come on!" he snapped.

Bracing herself, she walked over to where he sat. He looked up at her groggily. "You wanna die?" he asked.

Helen bit her lower lip and shook her head.

"No," she said.

"Then keep me awake."

Up close, she could see the waxy pallor of his skin, hear the laboring of his breath. The bandage on his shoulder was dripping with blood.

"How?" she murmured.

"I don't—" He broke off suddenly and pressed his teeth together so hard that she could hear them grinding. The whine in his throat was like the high note of a song. It would have sounded funny under other circumstances.

"Just keep me awake!" he told her, "Your kid'll be the first one to get it if I feel myself—"

He gritted his teeth and stared at Adam with baleful eyes.

"And if I don't kill her," he said, "*He* will. So you better keep me—"

Steve shut his eyes, his head slumped forward. Helen caught her breath and glanced over at Adam. He wasn't moving. She looked back at Steve and saw that his head was raised again, his feverish eyes were open. He said something to her.

"What did you—?"

"*Don't try t' get my gun,*" he warned.

"I won't." Helen looked down at the revolver with a revulsive fascination. It looked huge. She saw how Steve's index finger kept twitching against the curved edge of the trigger. Her insides seemed to turn to stone as she watched. She could never get it away from him, she knew. Even if he began to lose consciousness, his hand would still grip the stock. In trying to get it away from him, she would only arouse him.

She shuddered and looked over at Connie. She was lying motionless, still asleep. Adam was leaning against the wall again, motionless. The only thing that moved was time.

"*Five minutes,*" Adam said.

## Chapter Fourteen

Five minutes!

Chris twisted the wheel sharply and the Ford spun onto Wilshire Boulevard with a grating of tire rubber. He straightened it and drove to Twelfth Street trying not to think. If he thought, it would be about the hopelessness of getting the gun and returning to Latigo Canyon in five minutes. Resolution would fail him then, nerves would desert him. Steve would wait; he had made up his mind to that. He wouldn't let himself consider anything else.

Still, braking in front of the house, his eyes moving instinctively to the dashboard clock and seeing that it was one o'clock, he couldn't check the sob that broke in his chest. All he could do was cut it off and push out of the car. He raced across the lawn and jumped onto the porch.

The door was still open. Chris pushed inside and hurried across the living room, skidded around the corner of the doorway and entered the kitchen. Charging to the drawer, he jerked it open.

The gun was gone.

"No!" A spasm of demented anguish drove through him and he pulled the drawer out all the way, shoved his fingers wildly through its contents. Pads, pencils, tacks, rubber bands, stamps, envelopes, pennies, clips—no gun. A wave of dizziness flooded across him and he fell against the edge of the cupboard, gasping for breath.

Clenching his teeth then, he lunged for the other drawers and pulled them out one by one, plunging his hand into each, clattering berserkly through silverware, pulling out dishtowels, knocking over jars and cups and boxes. "*Oh, God—Oh, God—Oh, God.*" The horror was back again, he couldn't stop it. Helen and Connie were going to die.

"No." Chris spoke the word softly, as a man speaks just before the end—with one last surge of resisting will. Whirling, he ran out of the kitchen and across the living

room rug. Helen could have put in their room, fearing that Connie might come across it in the kitchen drawer.

Skidding into their room, Chris ran to the bureau and hauled out the top drawer. He rummaged frantically through Helen's things, a shearing pain in his heart as he touched the smoothness of her lingerie, the crackling sheerness of her stockings. The gun wasn't there.

On an impulse. Chris dropped to one knee and pulled out the bottom drawer. He drove his hand beneath the neat pile of skins and sweaters. At first, his fingers only rubbed along the lining of the drawer. Then, abruptly, they were bumping against the barrel of the gun. He jerked it out and stood, breaking into a run for the door. As he rushed across the living room, he shoved the pistol into his jacket. He pulled open the front door.

"Oh!" Helen's mother twitched back, startled, on the porch.

Chris couldn't speak. He stood, petrified in the doorway, staring at her, feeling as if his body were rocking with the violence of his heartbeats.

"Chris, where have you been?" asked Mrs. Shaw, "I've been phoning you all morning. Where are Helen and Connie?"

Chris shivered. "I'm going to them now," he said.

"I thought she was coming to the house. I've been frantic, Chris! Why didn't you phone?"

"I'm sorry, Mom. I have to go now. I'll—I'll be back in a while."

"Where are they?"

"In . . . downtown."

"Downtown?"

"She had to go shopping. I'm going to get her now."

"But you said she was going to—"

"I know!" He couldn't keep the sharpness from his voice. "I'll get her, I'll bring her over. Now—" He started past her.

"Chris, what's wrong?"

He had to press his lips together they shook so badly. "Nothing," he muttered.

Mrs. Shaw looked at him, frightened. "Chris, don't lie to me!" she said, She gasped and caught at his sleeve. "Has something happened to them? Are they hurt?"

"No, Mom. I—"

"Your head . . ."

"Mom, I have to go!" He started across the porch but she held on.

"There's been an accident." she said in a forcibly calm voice. "You can tell me, Chris. Are they—?"

"They're all right!" Chris tried to jerk free and the movement jarred the pistol from his pocket. He caught it as it fell.

Helen's mother shrank away from him. "*Chris,*" she whispered.

"Mom . . . Mom, please," he begged. "They're all right. Just let me go. Wait here. I'll bring them back."

"Where are they?" Mrs. Shaw's voice was barely audible.

"Mom, they're all right! Just stay here!" Abruptly, Chris jumped off the porch and sprinted for the car. Steve would wait. He was badly hurt, he had to take the chance that Chris would return with a doctor. Chris pulled open the car door and slid onto the seat, glancing toward the porch. Helen's mother had gone inside. With a quick movement, Chris turned the ignition key and started the motor.

He was just pulling away from the curb when it struck him. Jamming in the brake pedal, he slapped the gear shift into neutral and pushed out of the car. He ran around the front of it and across the lawn. The door flew open before the impact of his body.

In the hallway, he heard Helen's mother gasp; then suddenly, cry out, "Give me the police! Quickly!"

Chris ran across the room and into the hall. Helen's mother caught her breath and pressed back against the wall, the telephone revive clenched in her hand. Without a word, Chris grabbed it.

"No!" Mrs. Shaw raised her arm as if he were about to strike her.

"Mom, for—!" Chris pulled the receiver from her and slammed it back on the cradle.

"Don't . . ." she pleaded.

"*Mom . . .*" Chris stared at her in anguish, trying to decide what to do. If he left her, she'd only call police again. "Come with me," he said.

"No."

"I'll take you to them, for God's sake!"

"Chris, what have you done with them?"

I haven't done anything! Come on!" He grabbed her wrist. "*Please, Mom!*"

"You killed them!"

"*Oh, God . . .*" Chris pulled her toward the living room. "They're all right," he heard himself telling her, "They're all right, Mom. Just come with me. I'll take you to them."

She stopped and pulled free.

"Chris, we've got to tell the police," she said in trembling voice.

Rage billowed up in Chris. Even though he sensed that it was only subverted guilt, he couldn't stop it. With a gasp, he pulled the gun out of his pocket.

"You're coming with me," he ordered.

Helen's mother stared at him as if she'd never seen him before. Then, without a word, she turned and walked through the doorway

"Mom, I . . ." He couldn't finish. He followed her across the lawn and opened the door of the car for her. He hurried around it and got in beside her, gunned the engine. He made a quick U turn and headed back toward Wilshire Boulevard.

As he drove, he began to tell her exactly what had happened.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Look out!"

Steve's head jerked up, the revolver bucked explosively in his hand. Across the room, Adam dove to one side as a jagged hole appeared in the wall beside him. Helen stood frozen, her ears ringing. Steve looked around as if trying to remember where he was. His gaze fell on Adam, who was scrambling to his feet.

Then they were all looking over at Connie as she sat up with a shrill cry. The sound seemed to free Helen. Ignoring the gun, she ran across the room and knelt by her daughter, embraced her tightly.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" she heard Adam raging. "It's quarter after one! You gave him till one!"

"Son of a bitch," muttered Steve.

"All right, listen, damn it!" Adam said, hastily, "We can still get out of here. We'll flag a car, get started for Mexico. On the way, we'll stop at a doctor's. What do you say? Let's get *out* of here! We're pushing our luck. He could have called the cops a dozen times over since he left."

"Bastard," mumbled Steve,

"For Christ's sake, use your head! Do you *want* to die?"

Steve didn't speak. He looked at Adam with glazed, unblinking eyes. "Sonofabitch," he muttered.

Adam stared at him. "Steve?" he said.

Steve coughed. He made a gagging sound and tried to speak. The saliva rolled across his chin. "*Bastard*," he said under his breath as if it weren't even a word. He raised the pistol shakily and rubbed the barrel end across his chin. Adam kept staring at him. Helen glanced cross her shoulder and saw how Steve was weaving on the chair, his head wobbling as if imperfectly attached. He's *going*, she thought. She started to get up but Connie clung to her desperately.



Steve muttered something. Helen didn't hear him. She held on to Connie. It's all right, baby, prompted her mind but she couldn't peak the words aloud.

"Coffee, damn you!" snarled Steve, hoarsely.

Helen looked around. He was staring at her vacantly, his mouth hanging open. "Coffee," he muttered.

Helen swallowed. "Wh-where?" she asked.

His head hitched around slowly and he looked across the room toward a small alcove. Helen followed his gaze and saw a rusty kerosene stove standing on a shelf, a coffee pot on top of it.

"All right," she said. She straightened up, pulling Connie with her.

"Come with Mommy," she said.

Connie walked beside her shakily, silent except for the gasping sobs that shook her body. They moved between the two men and entered the alcove. Helen glanced back. Now she was twice as far from the wounded man as Adam was. If Steve fell there was no possible way she could reach the gun in time.

Biting her lip, she turned back to the stove. She had to heat the coffee quickly, get it to Steve before it was too late. He'd lost so much blood though. There was a dark patch of it on the floor around him; the cloth of his shirt and trousers was saturated with it.

Hastily, she picked up the book of matches beside the stove, then froze as Steve gasped with pain. Stooping hurriedly, she looked over and saw him gaping at Adam, his mouth almost wide open. She glanced at Adam. He was almost coiled against the wall, ready to leap. Helen stood with the matches, one arm still tensed around Connie.

"Mommy, let's go," said Connie.

"Yes, yes." Hands shaking, Helen tore one of the matches loose and struck it. It didn't light. She dropped it quickly, tore another one free, glancing toward Steve.

He was leaning to one side; it seemed as if he had to fall from the chair at any second. His eyes were almost closed, the revolver was in his lap as if he hadn't the strength to lift it anymore. With a faint, shaking murmur, Helen struck the

match once, twice. A tiny flame seared up, she leaned forward and touched it to the burner. It wouldn't light.

Helen made a frightened sound and looked back once again at Steve. His eyes were almost shut. He sagged off balance. She started to turn, the match still in her hand. He grunted and sat up a little, a look of dread on his face. He looked over at her and she turned back to the stove, dropping the match with a hiss as it burned her fingers. Shaking helplessly, she lit a third match, then noticed that the tiny cock hadn't been opened on the stove. She twisted it, touched the match flame to the burner. In a moment, it ignited with a faint, puffing sound, burning blue. Helen leaned over automatically and looked into the pot. She had to—

There was a crashing sound behind her. Helen whirled. Across the room, Steve was sprawled on his side, trying to struggle up. Helen saw him raise the gun to fire at Adam who was rushing at him. Before he could pull the trigger, Adam's shoe was kicking the revolver from his hand, it was clattering across the floor. Adam started for it but Steve, with a final effort, lunged out and grabbed at his ankle. Adam lost balance and went crashing down heavily on his chest.

Helen didn't wait to see anymore. In an instant, her fingers had clamped down on Connie's wrist and she was rushing for the doorway, half dragging her daughter with her. Running, she glanced over at the two men and saw Adam kick his right foot against Steve's bandaged shoulder. The wounded man fell back, screaming.

Then she and Connie were out the doorway. *Which way?* Muscles seemed to answer before her mind, driving her along the front of the shack and around its side. There could be no doubt about the result inside. In a matter of moments, Adam would be coming after them with the gun. His first instinct, she sensed, would be to go toward the road, assuming that it had, also, been her first instinct. There was not enough time to make the road though. Their only chance was to hide in the brush until—

Reason ended there. There was no until. She pulled Connie across the dry, eroded ground, past the back edge of

the shack and toward a tangle of bushes. Suddenly, in the shack, there was a shot, another. It was over!

"Hurry, baby!" she gasped. Her grip tightened on Connie's wrist as her daughter started to fall. She pulled Connie up almost brutally. "Run!" she said, "*Run fast!*"

Then the only sound was that of their feet and of their straining breath. Helen looked back across her shoulder. No sign of Adam yet.

Abruptly, they were in the bushes, their bodies thrashing past the dry-leaved branches. Connie cried out as one of the branches whipped across her forehead. Helen glanced down at her and saw a long, red scratch across her brow.

"Keep your head down!" she ordered, "I'll lead you!"

She grunted as a razor-edged twig sliced across her arm. She glanced back again. Had he heard them yet? They were making so much noise! She tried to run faster but Connie tripped and fell and, for several yards, Helen was almost dragging her. She stopped an instant to haul her erect, then started running again.

"Hurry, baby!" she whispered.

Now they were out of the bushes, struggling through long, brownish grass. Helen felt the dry blades scouring at her legs and skirt. Connie started to fall again and she pulled her up, a painful shooting in her back and shoulder. Breath was hot and stinging now, burning her throat. Abruptly, a stitch needled at her side. She bit her lip to cut off the gasp of pain. They couldn't stop! With a lunge, she started up the hill, her sandals slipping on the hard, flaking ground. Again, she looked behind. Where was he now?

"Mommy, I can't!"

"You can!" She dug her fingers into Connie's wrist. "You have to!"

Once more, Connie, unable to match her mother's stride, was pulled from her feet. Once more, Helen jerked her forward and up. The slope was so steep now that she was unable to run. She could only climb with short, desperate strides, pulling Connie with her.

They reached the top of the hill. The heat which had clung to the hollows was gone now, replaced by a damp coldness. Helen looked back, for an instant, her eyes catching sight of

the broad hills in the distance, the curving ribbon of the Latigo Canyon Road. Then her gaze had dropped, she saw the shack below, the dirt lane, the—

Breath caught. Adam was just charging from the bushes. He was stopping, looking around.

“No.” Helen spun around and lunged over the crest of the hill, dragging Connie with her.

Suddenly, they were plunging down a grass-thick slope, their legs pumping frantically to keep themselves from falling. Helen felt herself losing balance and, twisting, pressed the sides of her sandals against the ground, leaning in heavily toward the slope. She fell on her hip and slid on the ground, wincing as it raked skin from her calf, then from her thigh as her skirt pulled up. Connie cried out faintly and fell against her. They were skidding downward, jolting violently against the bottom of the narrow draw. Pain lanced along Helen’s right ankle as it twisted beneath her. They stayed there for a second, gasping at the warm, heavy air. Helen tried to hold her breath and listen. It seemed as if she heard, in the distance, a thrashing noise, a sound of thudding shoes.

“Hurry!” she said, and suddenly, they were running again, rushing along the foot of the draw, unable to climb because the wall on its other side was too steep.

Helen clenched her teeth against the shooting pains in her ankle, her side. She mustn’t stop! Eyes straight ahead, her face a mask of dread, she kept on running. In front of them, the draw turned gradually toward the east.

“I can’t, Mommy!” Connie cried out shrilly.

“You can!” Helen almost sobbed the words. She pulled Connie up again, then, hastily, lifted her. She thudded along the rock-strewn base of the draw. Something exploded up above. There was a piercing whistle and earth erupted nearby. Connie shrieked. Dirt specks stung into Helen’s cheek and she jerked her head around.

Adam was running along the crest of the draw, pointing the revolver at them. With a desperate lunge, Helen ran around the beetling wall. They were out of sight of Adam now. Helen dropped Connie to her feet.

“Run!” she commanded.

Ahead, the draw widened into a grass-covered slope. The two of them ran onto it, frightening off a flock of birds which scattered darkly into the air. Helen's gaze kept jumping around as they fled, searching for a place to hide. They couldn't go much farther. Connie was dragging at her arm so much that she was virtually carrying her. Her own legs were exhausted, her ankle threatened to give at any second. Still there was no place to stop, to hide. There was nothing in sight but open space and knee-high grasses.

"Mommy—" It was a weak, breathless plea.

"Little further!" Helen gasped, looking back.

In the distance, Adam was scuffing down the wall of the draw, raising a cloud of dust. Helen turned back with a faint sob. They had to go on!

Ahead, the open slope was closing in again to form another draw. Helen headed for the entrance to it, lips pressed together bloodlessly as she fought the burning pains in her ankle. She looked back once more. Adam was just emerging from the draw, running hard, the revolver lowered in his hand. He wouldn't fire until he caught them, Helen realized. He'd already used three of six bullets. He wouldn't waste the three remaining.

*"You've got to run!"* she cried frantically.

*"I can't."*

Impulsively, Helen snatched her daughter up and kept on running, almost blindly now, as if she ran on some fantastic treadmill in limbo, unable to stop, her body afire with pain, wanting to collapse, unable to collapse. She had to save Connie!

What if she stopped, the thought burst wildly in her mind — stopped, put Connie down and ran back? Could she force him to use all three bullets on her?

No! She sobbed and bit her lip, unable to meet Connie's panic-dazed look. Even if she made him use the three bullets, Connie still wasn't safe. Adam could kill her with his hands. He could—

She was so involved in terrified thought that she almost ran into the canyon wall in front of her. She staggered to a halt, put Connie down and looked with stark,

uncomprehending eyes at the steep walls rising on three sides.

The only exit was in back of them.

Helen turned on shaking legs. A hundred and twenty yards away, Burrik was coming at them. She stood trembling, watching him approach. No, her mind protested; No, it can't be. She stumbled back slowly, against the canyon wall, Connie half-behind, little arms clamped desperately around Helen's thigh.

"It's all right, baby," she whispered hoarsely, "Mommy's with you."

Suddenly, Helen was conscious of something hard and thin pressing against the pain of her thigh where the small hands clutched. Instinctively, she reached down. In her pocket was the book of matches, thrust there by habit, and forgotten.

She pushed the child away and, ignoring her cries, knelt on the grass. Fingers trembling, she pulled open the cover and struck a match, held it to the grass. For a moment, nothing happened. It's too wet! she thought in horror. Then there was a faint crackle and, abruptly, the grass was burning, the bright flame rising, smoking whitely. Helen lurched back from it and looked up.

Adam was less than seventy yards away.

Desperately, Helen lunged to the right, fell to one knee and struck another match. More grass ignited, crackling. She pulled away from it. ran to the left and set fire to more. This time when she straightened up and looked toward Adam, she could barely see him through the mounting barrier of flame. She set fire to another patch, another—then ran to Connie and pulled her to the canyon wall. She stood there numbly, waiting, expecting to see Adam come charging through the fire. There were open patches in it wide enough to pass a running man. She held Connie to herself and waited, staring.

Seconds passed, a minute finally and Helen realized that Adam wasn't going to come through. She glanced up. He might climb the walls and fire down at them but there wasn't too much chance of hitting them from such a height. They were—

Helen froze. *Safe?* She shrank back, flinching, against the hard, rocky face of the canyon wall and almost stupidly, watched the bright flames moving at them.

## Chapter Sixteen

Chris jerked out the hand brake and straightened up.

"Take the car back to the canyon road," he said quickly, "If we're not back in ten minutes, drive to the nearest phone and call the police."

"Chris—!"

Without waiting to hear what she was going to say, Chris pushed out of the car and started running down the dirt lane, blanking his mind to the fact that he was thirty minutes late. He sprinted around the curve, drawing the gun from his pocket. There was a broken window on the west side of the shack, he remembered. He'd fire through it at Steve, then at Adam if he had to.

He left the lane and clambered up the slope as quietly as he could, eyes on the doorway to the shack. It was so still. *It's over*, his mind persisted but Chris wouldn't listen. He gritted his teeth and edged over to the window, looked in.

Steve was lying on the floor, his face in a pool of blood. Chris's startled gaze fled around the shadowy interior. There was no one else.

He whirled from the window and looked around. Where were they? Had Adam taken them with him? Were they in some stolen car, headed for Mexico? It had a frightening logic.

He was just turning back toward the road when he heard the screaming. Twisting around, he looked up at the hill behind the shack. It was up there! Abruptly, he broke into a run, plunging into the clump of bushes that barred his way, tearing through it, then lurching up the steep rise. The screaming was closer now, so highly pitched that it was impossible for him to tell whether it was a man or woman. Chris lunged the rest of the way to the top of the hill and looked around.

He gasped.

Running across the hilltop, a torch on legs, was Adam Burrik. Chris felt his muscles clamping in as he stared at



the burning man. Adam's shrill, brainless screaming pierced the air. He saw Chris and started rushing toward him, the flames whipping backward from his clothes like bright pennants. Chris stood impotently a moment longer, then, with a shudder, dashed forward to help Adam put out the flames, to find out where Helen and Connie were.

Before he could reach the burning man, however, Adam had tripped and fallen, he was rolling down the hillside, screaming with agony. Chris started after him as he bounced and slithered down the slope but, at the bottom, Adam plunged into a thick patch of grass which, immediately, caught fire. In a second, he was swallowed by the rising flames. The last Chris saw of him was a waving arm, the last he heard was one long shriek of horror. Then there was only the spreading fire.

Chris whirled and headed for the top of the hill again, escaping the flames. There was no time to try and put out the fire. He had to find Helen and Connie. Where were they? How had they escaped Adam? How had he caught fire? Questions pounded through his mind as he ran.

Then he saw the scaling pall of smoke in the distance and started running toward it, throwing down the heavy gun. It was of no use any longer.

Seconds later, he heard Connie's scream.

With a frightened grunt, he jolted forward, running as fast as he could. Below, the fire was contained within an open draw, Chris's gaze leaped around the blazing hollow of it, searching for them.

"Helen!" he shouted.

There was no answer. He rushed along the edge, looking downward but the smoke was too thick to see through. He stopped near the foot of the draw and squinted down, the smoke burning his eyes, making them water. He moved again, edging restlessly along the cliff-like drop. He shouted, "Helen!"

There was another scream—almost directly below, it seemed, "*Helen!*" he called.

"Chris!"

He fell to his knees and looked down into the smoke-obscured draw.

"Where are you?" he cried. "Here! Help us!"

Sucking in breath, Chris looked around and saw a narrow ledge about four feet below. Hastily, he lowered himself across the edge and slid down onto it. For a second, losing balance, he almost pitched backward into the smoke, only at the last second catching hold of a bush that grew on the ledge. Turning around, he looked down, brushing the tears out of his eyes, blinking hard.

"Helen!"

"Chris, hurry!"

"Where are you?"

"Here! *Here!*"

Suddenly, Chris caught sight of them through a rift in the heavy smoke. They were about twelve feet below on a wider ledge, pressed against the wall of the draw, ringed in by leaping flame. He saw Helen looking up frantically, trying to see him.

"Hold on!" he shouted. He looked around desperately. Four feet down and to the right was another bush. Quickly, Chris lowered himself over the side of the ledge and put his feet down until they settled on the bush. Holding on to the ledge with talon-like fingers, he put more and more weight on the bush until he was standing on it. Then he let go and ducked downward, grabbing hold of the bush.

"I'm almost there!" he called. He looked down and saw Helen gazing up at him with frightened eyes.

"Hurry, Chris!" she begged.

Chris jumped the rest of the way, sprawling down beside them on the ledge.

"Daddy!"

"Yes, baby." He held her for a moment, turning to Helen.

"Get on my shoulders," he said, "I'll hold you while you climb to that bush up there."

"All right." As Chris leaned against the wall, she clambered shakily to his shoulders. He held onto her calves while she reached up gingerly and caught onto the bush.

"Can you pull yourself up?"

"I'll try . . ."

In a few moments, her weight had left his shoulders and he heard the scrambling noise her sandals made as she climbed. "Are you there?" he called up.

"Yes!"

"All right, I'm passing up Connie!"

Chris grabbed his shaking daughter and raised her to his shoulders.

"Grab her!" he said. "I can't reach her!"

"Connie, stand up!" he ordered.

"I can't!"

"Yes!"

Her clutching hands left his head, he felt her trying to stand on his shoulders.

"Daddy, I'm falling!"

"You're not! I've got you. Reach up and take Mommy's hands!" A wave of dizziness passed over him. The heat seemed about to swallow him. He heard Connie's labored gasping above, heard Helen telling her to reach up a little further.

"Hurry, baby!" he shouted hoarsely.

Abruptly, Connie was off his shoulders, being drawn up. Chris fell, gasping, against the wall. Suddenly, he threw his arm up as a wind-driven burst of flame flashed toward him. He felt the searing heat on his flesh. Then the wind had sucked it back. Turning, he looked up. He could just make out their forms clinging to the side of the wall, their feet on the bush.

"Can't you reach the ledge?" he called.

"I can't, Chris! Not holding her!"

Gritting his teeth, Chris leaped up and caught onto the bush. For a moment it seemed as if he hadn't the strength to pull himself up. Teeth clenched, he strained upward inch by inch. He couldn't break now, not when they were so close to safety.

Another few seconds and he was on the bush beside them. He pulled himself up onto the narrow ledge, drew Connie up, then Helen. Then, too easily it seemed after all these horrible hours, all of them were on the rim of the draw and he was holding Connie, they were running from the fire and,

though it seemed impossible to believe, he knew they were safe and that the nightmare was ended.

## Chapter Seventeen

Chris stood by the living room window, staring out at the surf. In the back bedroom, Connie had just fallen asleep in Helen's arms. In the kitchen, Helen's mother was preparing some lunch. It was almost two-thirty.

None of them had spoken since the first few moments of hysterical relief that followed their escape. They had gotten into the car and Chris had driven them out of the canyon, stopping at a telephone booth to report the fire. Helen's mother had suggested that they go to her house for a while and, without comment, Chris had driven them there.

He glanced down at his left arm. There was a slow crawling of pain on it. He drew up his sleeve and saw that the skin was red. He let the sleeve fall. He'd take care of it later.

"Are you hungry?"

Chris looked around and saw Helen's mother standing in the kitchen doorway, looking at him. There was no expression on her face.

He shook his head a little. "No, thank you," he said. For a second, he tried to remember when it was he'd last eaten. Then, turning back to the window, he forgot about it. It didn't matter.

A few minutes later, Helen came out of the bedroom. Chris turned at the sound of her footsteps.

"How is she?" he asked.

"All right."

He swallowed dryly.

"Is she—burned?" he asked.

"A little on her hands," she answered. "I put some salve on them."

He nodded and watched her move into the kitchen. He saw her mother embrace her and he turned back to the window.

In a minute, Helen came back in with two steaming cups. "Coffee?" she asked.

"Thank you." He took one of the cups and sat down on the sofa. It wasn't until his weight had settled on the cushion that he realized how tired he was.

Helen sat across from him on an armchair. She didn't meet his eyes.

"Does your head hurt?" she asked.

"No." It did hurt but he didn't want to talk about it.

"Helen?"

She looked up.

"Are you—?" He swallowed. "Do you want to know what I'm— going to do?"

Her lips flexed together tensely and Chris felt a flare of pain in his head. *She doesn't care*, he thought "Yes," she said, quietly.

"I'm going to the police."

"I see."

*Is that all?* asked his mind Then he realized that it seemed a small thing now after what had happened.

He put down the cup and stared at his hands for several moments. Then, with a sigh, he got up.

"I'll go now," he said.

They looked at each other in silence. Her lips moved as if she couldn't find the proper words to speak.

"It—can't be the same," she said.

"I know." He kept looking at her, hoping that something could be said or done to end this pain. "I—know," he repeated, turning away.

"Do you—?"

He turned back. "What?"

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"If you want to."

She nodded slowly. "You're still my husband," she said. It sounded more like a reluctant admission than a statement, though.

*You don't have to*, bristled his mind. Then he knew that he had no privileges of resentment any more.

"Let's go then," he said.

"I'll tell Mom."

Chris stood by the front door while Helen spoke to her mother in the kitchen. He couldn't hear what they said. In several minutes. Helen came out and they left the house. They got into the car and Chris started driving toward Santa Monica.

"What do you—?" she started after they'd been driving for a while in silence. "What do you think will happen?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Oh . . ."

Helen glanced over at him. He had never looked so grave. She felt an urge to touch his hand, to comfort him. She repressed it. Things could *not* be the same. Thoughtless emotion had no point now.

Still, she thought, Connie was safe. She would not be if it hadn't been for Chris. Nor would she have ever been exposed to such horrible danger if it hadn't been for Chris, her mind reacted.

*Nor would she have ever been born if it hadn't been for Chris*, it reacted once again.

Things whirled in a circle. Every moment was the result of those before it, the foundation of those that followed. You could not divorce one from the other and find separate meaning in the parts. It existed as one flow—good and bad together—which you accepted or did not. Chris was in her life. She had accepted the good of that for many years. Now she was being asked to accept the bad of it. Right or wrong, could she turn her back on him?

Impulsively. Helen reached out and laid her hand on his arm. *Don't!* cried her mind but it was still a relief to be committed.

Chris was looking at her now. She had to speak and what she said had to be just right—not cruel yet not unquestioning

"Just—give me a chance, Chris," she said.

He caught at her hand and held it tightly. And they said no more.

THE END