Blood Risk

by

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BLOOD RISK

Brian Coffey is the pen name for a young American writer whose fiction has sold throughout the world to the tune of over two million copies. 'Blood Risk' should add considerably to those figures.
They had decided that only four men were required to stop the big car on the narrow mountain road, hold the occupants at bay and remove the cash that was stuffed into the suitcases on the floor behind the front seat. At first Merle Bachman—who would be driving away, alone, in the blue Chevrolet with the money locked safely in the trunk—had insisted on a fifth man. Number five would have been stationed at the bottom of the private lane to work an intercept routine in the event that someone turned off from the main highway while the robbery was in progress. The others argued against Bachman, because the private road to the Baglio estate supported very little traffic, especially on the morning of a biweekly cash transfer. Also, no one wanted his share knocked to hell by a fifth cut. Bachman clearly saw the economic sense of using a spare crew, though he insisted there was no other wisdom behind this detail of the plan, and he reluctantly agreed to go ahead with the job as a foursome. Now, the darkly dressed men waited in their prearranged positions as the time for action drew near.

Upslope, the macadam roadway on which the robbery would transpire made an abrupt appearance around a limestone outcropping, ran a hundred yards past a lay-by on the outside where two cars could pass if they should meet coming in opposite directions, went down for another four hundred yards before turning a second limestone corner and continuing out of sight to the main highway. The two sharp twists beyond which nothing was visible, and the still morning air, generated the feeling that all the rest of the world had vanished in some unexplained catastrophe.

If you faced upslope, the left side of the roadway was edged by a sheer stone wall slightly higher than a man and, above that, by a thick pine forest and underbrush as green as new money. Though the long grass at the brink of the woods stirred gently in the morning breeze, it made no sound at all, bending down and unfolding back up again in a graceful, mute ballet. Lying at the high corner above the first turn in the road, stretched out in the carbon-paper shadows of the big trees, oblivious of the dew-dampened grass and the quiet way it seemed to be reaching for him, Jimmy Shirillo watched the Baglio mansion through a pair of high-power field glasses. The long blades of grass had brushed Shirillo's face, leaving bright droplets of dew suspended on his fair skin, his only blemishes, giving him a vulnerable look that pointed up his youth. On the other hand, his own professional stillness, his economy of movement and the intensity with which he watched the mansion indicated the experienced professional beneath the tender exterior.

The binocular lenses were all that might have given Shirillo away to someone looking down from the great house, but they had been tinted to eliminate any telltale glare. Michael Tucker had thought of that, for he thought of everything.

A hundred yards below Shirillo, on the left, sitting in the brush along the top of the stone wall, Pete Harris cradled an old Thompson submachine gun, a souvenir from World War II. Harris had broken it down, oiled it, packed it in cloth and mailed it from Paris in five packages to his home address in the States. Back then, at the end of the war, that sort of thing was still quite possible. He had not contemplated putting the gun to any illegal use, or indeed to any use at all, for he thought he was finished with war. A civilian again, he had to face his inability to hold a nine-to-five job, and in desperation he launched his own war against the system, against boredom and respectability and enduring poverty. His inability to fit that system did not arise out of any great sensitivity or intelligence. Harris was only averagely perceptive. However, he was also stubborn, very much his own man, with expensive tastes. This would have led him into crime eventually, because he was only fit to be a clerk in any other field. He was the oldest of the four men here. At forty-eight he had ten years on Bachman, twenty on Mike Tucker, twenty-five on the Shirillo boy, though he didn't use his age and experience to usurp power within the group as others might have done. All he cared about was making the hit and getting the money, and he knew Tucker was a damn fine operator.

Thinking about the money, he grew uncomfortable and shifted in the brush, stretching his long legs and working a cramp out of his thick, muscular thighs. When the vigil first began, he occupied himself by pulling burrs out of his clothes, his heavily callused fingers uninjured by the sharp points. Now, though his calluses remained inviolate, he was too nervous to fool with such minutiae, and he longed to be on the move.

On the right-hand side of the roadway, across from Harris, the gravel berm dropped abruptly into a rock-strewn ravine that bottomed out more than three hundred feet below. The only safe place on that side was the fifty-yard-long lay-by where the Dodge and Chevrolet, both stolen, were now parked facing slightly downhill. Tucker and Bachman waited there, the older man behind the wheel of the Chevy, Tucker shielded from the lane by the bulk of the Dodge.

Bachman carried a .32-caliber pistol in a chamois shoulder holster, as did Tucker. Unlike Tucker, however, he kept touching it, like a savage with his talisman. With damp fingertips he traced the Crosshatch pattern on the solid
butt, lifting the whole weapon slightly out of the holster, testing the way it fit, looking for potential snags—though he had worn this same piece for years and knew that it wouldn't snag, ever.

Though Bachman had only the one gun, Tucker held an additional shotgun with only seven inches of barrel; both chambers were loaded, and six spare cartridges were distributed in his jacket pockets. If Bachman had been carrying the shotgun, he would have been constantly patting his pockets to be sure the cartridges were there. Tucker, however, stood quietly, moving as little as he had to, waiting.

"They should be here by now," Bachman called through the open window of the Chevy. He wiped a slender hand across his face, more than covering his small, compressed features, pulled off something invisible—maybe his own impatience—and shook that off his fingertips. Right now he was jumpy, and he was talking too much, but when the time came for the job he would be all grease and oil, as Tucker had discovered on the other three jobs they'd worked on together.

Tucker said, "Patience, Merle." He was known for his serenity, for maintaining a cool facade that never cracked under pressure. Inside, though, he was all knotted up and bleeding. His stomach twisted this way and that, as if it were an animal trapped inside of him; perspiration gathered over his whole body, a symbolic film of his repressed terror.

He had not been born and raised to make his living this way, had never understood the criminal social stratum. That he was now a success at what he did was a testament to an almost fanatical determination to achieve what he set out to achieve, and he was usually the undisputed leader of any group simply because others saw and admired his single-mindedness.

At the top of the slope, Jimmy Shirillo dropped the field glasses and rolled onto his back, cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Here they come!" His voice cracked on the last word, but everyone understood what he had said.

"Go!" Tucker shouted, slamming a flat palm down on the hood of the stolen Dodge.

Bachman stopped fiddling with the pistol cradled under his armpit and switched on the Chevrolet's engine, revved it a few times and drove forward, blocking the road diagonally. Without wasting a second, smooth and fluid, he put the car in park, pulled on the handbrake, opened his door and jumped out. He took cover at the very end of the rear fender, where, if he saw there was going to be a collision, he could leap to safety easily enough. As an afterthought he grasped the grotesque Halloween mask that dangled from an elastic band around his neck and slipped it over his head.

Halloween in June, he thought. It was the wrong time to wear a rubber mask, in this heat and humidity.

On the hilltop Jimmy had crept to the edge of the limestone outcropping, ready to jump into the lane behind the Cadillac the moment the big car had gone by. He fumbled with his goblin's face a moment, felt the dew on it and thought—inexplicably—that the water was blood. Fear. Green fear, pure and simple. Angry with himself, he got the mask in place.

Down at the lay-by, behind the Dodge, Tucker became a scarred old witch with one quick movement of his hand, grimaced at the odor of latex that he now drew with every breath, then looked across the road at the brush above the stone wall. Where was Harris? There. Maintaining good cover for a city boy, blending right in with the weeds. Cradling his Thompson, his face that of a grotesque monster, he seemed twice as big and dangerous as he had ever looked before.

Tucker raised his shotgun and propped the barrel on the fender of the Dodge, cautioning himself to stay loose. His stomach burned; gall stung the back of his throat. Behind the mask he could allow himself a wince, for none of the others would see it.

The roar of the Cadillac's engine was audible now. Tucker wondered if it was moving too fast to stop in time, and he tried to calculate all the possible moves he could make if it slammed into the barricade. Although the shock of the collision would delay Baglio's men's reaction time and ease the strain of getting them firmly under control, there was also the danger of jammed doors. And of fire. Baglio's men could burn—but what about the money, then? The building roar of the car's engine sounded in that moment like flames devouring stacks of crisp dollar bills.

The Cadillac came into sight.

The driver was quick. He hit the brakes, slewed the big chrome machine sideways, then let up so that he could correct a dangerous plunge toward the precipice, brought the car to a jerking halt six feet away from the Chevy's passenger door.

Clouds of blue smoke caught up with the Cadillac and swept past it.

As planned, Pete Harris let go with a burst of machine-gun fire, aimed well above everyone's head, before any of the others could move toward the limousine. The shots glanced around the hillsides like a series of hammer blows on an iron forge bed. The racket was almost certain to be audible the length of the slopes and would draw reinforcements from the mansion. In five minutes the site would be swarming with Baglio's gunmen. Still, this was
the quickest, simplest way to let those inside the limousine know that this was serious business, rough business, and that they were hopelessly outgunned.

When the echo died, Tucker was at the driver's window, the stubby shotgun leveled at the old man's neck. A blast from the first barrel alone would shatter the window and fragment the chauffeur's skull before he could complete any dive for the floorboards. The old bastard knew it; he sat where he was, motionless.

The other man in the front seat was Vito Chaka, Baglio's trusted "accountant," forty years old, slim and almost feminine, graying at the temples. He cultivated a tiny mustache that covered a third of his upper lip like a smudge of paint. In the 1930s he would have driven the women wild, Tucker thought. And perhaps he still did, with the help of his position and his bankroll. Chaka looked at him, sizing him up, then nodded and slowly placed both hands on the padded dash in front of him, palms turned up, everything in the open, in recognition of their professionalism.

"Get out!" Tucker said. His voice sounded thick and mean through the slit of the rubber mouth.

The chauffeur and Chaka obeyed at once. When the two muscle types in the back seat hesitated, Jimmy Shirillo tapped on the rear window with the barrel of his pistol. He had climbed onto the trunk of the Caddy without making a sound, and his goblin mask seemed to grin at the gunmen when they jumped in surprise.

Shirillo was feeling good, better than he had anticipated he would feel, less afraid than he had been before things got moving. He was sweating, and the full-head mask made his neck itch; but those were minor troubles.

Thirty seconds later Baglio's men were all lined up along the driver's side of the limousine, their hands flattened on the roof or hood, legs spread wide, leaning forward so they were off balance, heads tucked between shoulderblades, all very neat, very classic. Only Chaka looked sure of himself, dapper even in this humiliating pose.

Bachman quickly opened the rear door on the far side. "Three cases," he said. No trace of his previous anxiety remained in his voice.

Jimmy Shirillo laughed triumphantly.

"Hold the celebrations," Tucker said. "Go help him."

Bachman lifted the heaviest suitcase and walked off toward the Chevy, severely bent by the dragging weight. He wouldn't have been content to pick up one of the smaller cases, of course-for the same reason that he wore high-waisted trousers: he didn't like anyone to think of him as a small man, even though he was a small man.

Jimmy went around and got the last two bags, carried them with little trouble, dropped them into the open trunk of the stolen Chevrolet and slammed the lid while Bach-man scurried for the front door.

"Relax," Tucker told the men lined against the car, though none of them had moved.

No one responded.

Bachman started the Chevy, raced the engine once, shifted into reverse, squealed backward, angling the car downhill.

"Easy!" Tucker shouted.

But he didn't need to caution Merle Bachman, for the small man always gauged the situation properly and performed at the optimum safe speed. He was a good driver.

Harris came off the stone wall, grunting, the sound of his heavy breathing magnified by the mask. While Bachman was backing the Chevy, Harris came around to Tucker and said, "Smooth."

Again Tucker said, "Hold the celebrations."

Bachman put the Chevy in gear, touched the gas lightly and started downhill toward the second curve, shimmering curtains of heat rising from the roof and trunk of the car.

"Get the Dodge," Tucker ordered Shirillo.

The boy went after it.

Pete Harris was the only one still watching the Chevy, thinking about all that money in the trunk, thinking about retirement, and he was the first to see that it was going to go sour. "Oh, shit!" he said.

He had not even finished the exclamation when Tucker heard the hot cry of the Chevrolet's brakes and whirled around to see what had gone wrong.

Everything had gone wrong.

Before Bachman had covered little more than half the distance to the bottom curve, a Cadillac had rounded the limestone down there, coming up. It was a match for the Caddy they had just hit, and it was moving too fast, much too fast for these road conditions. The driver pulled the wheel hard to the left and tried to run the bank; that was hopeless, because the shoulder of the road down there turned swiftly into the stone wall that continued unbroken to the top of the rise. A tire blew with the force of a cannon shot. The car jolted, bucked up and down like an enraged animal. Metal whined as a fender was compressed into half the space it had formerly occupied.

Still braking, the Chevrolet wobbled crazily back and forth as Bachman fought to regain control, veered suddenly and purposefully toward the outside.

"He can't get around a car as big as the Caddy!" Harris said.
Bachman tried it anyway. He was still in the middle of a job, still calm and greased, quick and calculating. He realized that he had only one chance of pulling this off successfully, and no matter how infinitesimal that chance was, he took it. The Cadillac had come to a complete halt now, pretty badly crumpled on the one side, and the Chevy plowed into its rear door like a pig nosing in the turf, reared up and caught its front axle on the top of the ruined door, simultaneously sliding to the left toward the three-hundred-foot chasm. The back wheels jolted off the berm and swung over empty air, spinning up clouds of yellow dust. For a second Tucker was sure the Chevy would break loose and fall, but then he saw it would hold, halfway up the other, larger car like a dog mounting a bitch. Bachman had tried it; he'd lost.

Completely undamaged on the passenger's side, the front door of the Cadillac opened and a tall, dark-haired man got out, dazed. He shook his head to clear it, turned and stared at the demolished Chevy angled crazily over him, bent forward with his hands on both knees to be sick. He seemed to think of something more important than that natural urge, for he straightened abruptly and looked into the front seat, reached inside and helped a young woman climb out. She appeared to be as uninjured as he, and she did not share his sickening intimation of mortality. She wore a white blouse and a very short yellow skirt: a big, lovely blonde. Her long hair flapped like a pennant in the breeze as she looked up the road at Tucker and the others.

"Here!" Jimmy Shirillo shouted. He had turned the Dodge around and was facing uphill.

"Get in the car," Tucker told Harris.

The big man obliged, the Thompson held in both hands tenderly.

"Don't force me to shoot any of you in the back," Tucker said, backing to the open rear door of the Dodge.

Baglio's men remained silent.

He slid into the car, still facing them, raised the shotgun and fired at the sky as Jimmy tore rubber getting out of there, slammed the door after they were moving and dropped onto the seat below window level until he felt the car swinging around the upper curve.

"Are we just leaving Bachman there?" Harris asked.

Tucker peeled off his mask and pushed his sweat-slicked hair out of his face. His stomach was bothering him worse than ever. He said, "We don't have the means to get him out and hold off Baglio's whole army at the same time." He belched and tasted the orange juice that had been his entire breakfast.

"Still" Harris began.

Tucker interrupted him, his voice tense and bitter. "Bachman was right—we did need a fifth man."
same end of the log, spaced three feet apart, one foot on each side of the tree. Heaving together, stepping sideways
in an awkward little dance, they managed to swing it around about a yard.

"Not enough," Shirillo said.

Harris said, "Where's the Mustang?"

"It can't move as fast on these bad roads as our heavy car can," Tucker said. He sucked in his breath and said,
"Again!"

This time they moved the barrier almost far enough to squeeze the Dodge past, but when they stood to catch their
breaths, their backs cracking with a pain like fire, Harris said, "I hear the other car."

Tucker listened, heard it too, wiped his bruised hands against his slacks to make them stop stinging. "Take your
Thompson and get ready to meet the gentlemen, Pete."

Harris smiled, picked up the machine gun and trotted to the rear of the Dodge, where he sprawled in the middle of
the dusty road. He was a large man, over six feet, more than two hundred and forty pounds; when he went down, the
dust rose around him in a cloud. He raised the black barrel and centered it where the Mustang would be when it
rounded the bend below. The large circular cannister of ammunition that rose out of the machine gun gave the
impression of something insectoid, something that was somehow using instead of being used, an enormous leech
draining Harris's body of its blood.

Tucker bent and slipped his hands around the log again, found as good a hold as he was going to get on the
surprisingly smooth, round pine trunk. Perspiration ran from his armpits down his sides; his shirt soaked that up.
"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," Shirillo said.

They heaved, gasped as all their stomach muscles tightened painfully. Tucker felt his back pop like a glass bottle
full of pressurized soft drink, perspiration fizzing out of him. But he did not let go, no matter what the cost in
strained muscles, raised the log a few inches, scraped sideways a frustratingly short distance before they had to drop
it. This time Shirillo sat down on the log to regain his breath, panting like a dog that has run a long way in mid-June
heat.

"No loafing," Tucker said immediately.

He felt as bad as the boy did, perhaps even worse-he was, after all, five years older than Shirillo, five years softer;
and he had twenty-eight years of easy living to put up against the boy's twenty-three years of rough ghetto
upbringing-but he knew that he was the one who had to keep the others moving, had to generate the drive, share
some of his fanatical determination to see them through. It was not the getting killed that Tucker feared so much.
More than that he feared failure. He said, "Come on, Jimmy, for Christ's sake!"

Shirillo sighed, got to his feet and straddled the pine once more. As he bent to get a grip on it, Harris opened up
with his Thompson, filling the woods about them with a manic chatter. Shirillo looked up, could not see anything
because of the Dodge and the angle of the trail beyond that, bent again and took hold of the log, put everything he
had into one final, frantic heave. Together they muscled the tree farther around than they had the last time before
they were forced to let it go. Dropped, the tree landed in the baked roadway with a soft, dusty thump.

"Far enough?" Shirillo asked.

"Yes," Tucker said. "Move ass now!"

They ran back to the car. Shirillo slid behind the wheel and started the engine. That was enough of an alert for
Harris, who had not used the Thompson for almost a full minute. The big man jumped up and got into the back of
the Dodge again. Tucker was sitting up front with Shirillo and was fumbling with his seat belt. He clicked it together
as Jimmy pulled out, turned to Harris and said, "Get any tires?"

"No," Harris said. The admission bothered him, for he respected Tucker and wanted the young man to return his
respect. If this job had gone right, it would have been his last; now, because they'd botched it, he would need to
work again, and he preferred to work with Tucker more than with anyone else, even after this fiasco. "The bastards
caught on too quick, shifted into reverse before I'd nailed any tires." He cursed softly and wiped at his grimy neck,
his voice too soft for Tucker to hear the individual words.

"They coming?" Shirillo asked.

"Like a cop with a broomstick up his ass," Harris said.

Shirillo laughed and said, "Hold on." He tramped the accelerator hard, pinning them back against their seats for a
moment, cutting into a long, shadow-dappled section of road.

"Why don't they let us alone?" Harris asked, facing front, the Thompson across his lap. His face matched his
body: all hard lines. His forehead was massive, the black eyes sunk deep under it and filled with cold, solid
intelligence. His nose, broken more than once, was bulbous but not silly, his mouth a lipless line that creased the top
of a big square chin. All those harsh angles crashed together in a look of bitter disappointment. "We didn't get their
money."
"We tried, though," Tucker said.
"We even lost Bachman. Isn't that enough?"
"Not for them," Tucker said.
"The Iron Hand," Shirillo said. He took a turn in the road too far on the outside: pine boughs scraped the roof like long, polished fingernails, and the springs sang like a bad alto.
"Iron Hand?" Harris asked.
"That's what my father used to call them," Shirillo said, never taking his eyes off the road ahead.
"Melodramatic, isn't it?" Tucker asked.

Shirillo shrugged. "The Mafia itself isn't a staid and sober organization; it's as melodramatic as an afternoon soap opera. It's all the time playing scenes straight out of cheap movies: bumping off rivals, beating up store owners who don't want to pay for protection, fire-bombing, blackmailing, peddling dope to kids in junior high school. The melodrama doesn't make it any less real."

"Yeah," Harris said, glancing uneasily out the rear window, "but could we go a little faster, do you think?"

The road curved gradually eastward now and narrowed as the huge pines and occasional elms and birches crowded closer-like patrons at a play getting restless for the last act and the climax of the action. Abruptly, the trail slid downward again, and the dust dampened and became a thin film of mud.

"Underground stream somewhere nearby," Tucker said.

At the foot of the hill, the land bottomed for a hundred yards before tipping over another slope. Here, shrouded by overhanging trees and flanked by thousand-layer shale walls, the Dodge choked, coughed, rattled like Demosthenes talking around his mouthful of pebbles and expired with very little grace.

"What's the matter?" Harris asked.

Shirillo was not at all surprised, for he'd been expecting this for some time now. He was surprised, though, by his own serenity. "The gas tank was holed when we turned onto the dirt track," he told them. "I've been watching the indicator drop little by little the last half hour-must be a small hole-but I didn't see any sense in putting everyone on edge until we were actually empty."

They got out and stood in the small glen where a trace of early-morning fog still drifted lazily through the trees, a ghost without a house.

Harris slung his machine gun over his left shoulder, by the black leather strap, and he said, "Well, the road's too damn narrow for them to get around the Dodge. If we have to walk, so do they."

Tucker said, "We're not going to walk so long as they're right behind us with a good car." His tone left no room for debate. "We'll take that Mustang away from them."

"How?" Shirillo asked.

"You'll see in a minute." He ran around the nose of the Dodge, opened the driver's door and threw the shotgun on the seat. He tossed their rubber masks into the road. Unspringing the handbrake, he put the gear shift in neutral. "The two of you get behind and push," he said.

They braced opposite ends of the rear bumper, while Tucker put his shoulder to the doorframe and walked slowly forward, keeping one hand on the wheel to prevent the car from wedging against the shale that loomed close on both sides. At the point where the road began to dip, Tucker picked up the shotgun and leaped out of the way. "Let her go!"

Shirillo and Harris stood back and watched the black car rumble clumsily down the first few yards of the descending trail. As the slope grew steeper, the car gathered speed, veered to the left. It struck the shale wall, sparks flying, screeching, went toward the right like an animal seeking shelter, slammed into the other stone bank, skidded as the trail abruptly angled down, jolted in a rut they couldn't see from the top of the run. It started to turn around as if it had had enough and would come back up the hill, then it gracefully rolled onto its side with a resounding crash that slapped over them like a wave. It slid another two hundred feet before it stopped, its undercarriage facing them.

"The conservationists would love us," Shirillo said. "We've started our own war on the automobile today- three down in less than an hour."

"You want them to think we wrecked?" Harris asked. When Tucker nodded he said, "What about our footprints here in the mud?"

"We'll have to hope they don't notice them." Half a mile behind them, the steady drone of the Mustang engine became audible. Tucker picked up the masks and distributed them, slipped on his own. "Move ass," he said. "Stay to the side of the road, by the wall, so the prints going down won't be conspicuous. By the bank, there should be enough loose shale to hide our trail." He took off, the others close behind, the fallen shale shifting under them, damp and slick. Twice Tucker thought he would fall, but he kept his balance by running faster. They made it behind the shelter of the overturned Dodge only a moment before the Mustang appeared at the top of the hill.

"What now?" Harris asked. He had unslung the machine gun.
Tucker looked farther down the hill, behind them, saw that the shale diminished considerably on both sides only a short distance ahead. "Stay down and follow me," he said, moving off in a fast duck walk.

When they reached a point where they could get atop the banks that had hedged the trail all the way down the slope, Tucker looked back to see how visible they were from above. He couldn't see any of the road beyond the overturned Dodge; good, it was safe to assume they couldn't be seen, either. He sent Pete Harris to the left, took Shirillo with him on the right, climbed the now diminutive bank, slipping once, scraping his knee on loose shale, ignoring the flash of pain When they were in the woodlands that lay above the road, he looked across and waved at Harris, who signaled with his machine gun in response. Cautiously, they made their way back to the spot where the Dodge had flipped on its side, edged to the brink of the shale walls and looked down.

The Mustang was parked twenty feet above the wreck, doors open. The two men who had been in it moved warily in on the Dodge, pistols drawn.

"Don't move at all," Tucker told them.
They were good, if surprised, and they listened.

"Remove the clips from your pistols-but keep them pointed at the ground. You're covered from both sides of the road."

The two men did as they were told, reluctantly but with the evident resignation of professionals who knew they were cornered. Both were large in the shoulders, dressed in lightweight summer suits that didn't seem to belong on them. Gorillas. Figuratively and almost literally. They would look much more at home in a zoo, railing at visitors through iron bars.

"Now," Tucker said, "look up at me."

They looked up, shielded their eyes from the bright sky, grimaced at the shotgun.

"Now look across the road."

They turned as if connected, stared up at the Thompson in Pete Harris's hands. Tucker couldn't see their faces, but he knew they were properly impressed, for he could see their shoulders draw up in an instinctive urge to crouch and run.

"Now throw your guns up here," he told them. When he had both pistols tucked into his belt, he pointed at the dirt-streaked Mustang and said, "Who was driving?"

"Me," the taller of the gorillas said. He jammed both hands into his pants pockets like a sulking child and looked up at Tucker from under his brow, waiting to see what came next.

"You a good driver?"

"I do okay."

"Which of you is better?"

The man who had not been driving pointed at the man who had and said, "He is. He drives for Mr. Baglio when-"

"Enough!" the driver snapped.

The smaller man blanched and shut up. He looked at Tucker, then at his partner. He rubbed at his mouth as if he could scrub out what he had already said.

"Get back in the Mustang," Tucker told the driver, "and bring it right up to the Dodge."

"Why?" the driver asked.

"Because, if you don't, I'll kill you," Tucker said. He smiled. "Good enough for you?"

"Good enough," the driver said, starting for the Mustang.

Tucker said, "Don't try backing out of range. That gentleman over there could blow the car apart before you'd gone ten feet." To the second gorilla Tucker said, "Stand over against the wall. Stay out of the way and be good."

"You won't get away with this," the gorilla said. Clearly, though, he expected that they would. His grainy, broad-nosed face was covered with more than a patina of defeat; the expression was deeply rooted. He was one of those who hadn't any faith in himself unless he could get his hands on his adversary. At this distance he was feeling exceedingly inferior.

"Let's get this moving," Tucker said.

The driver stopped the Mustang when its front bumper was a foot from the underside of the overturned Dodge. His window was rolled down, and he leaned out and said, "Now what?"

"Move it ahead until you feel it make contact."

The driver didn't ask questions. When a solid thunk proved he'd obeyed, he leaned out his window again and waited to hear the next part of it. While the man standing against the wall across the road seemed unable to comprehend what was happening, the driver knew what Tucker wanted. He was going to wait for Tucker to say it just the same.

Tucker hunkered down at the top of the bank, brushed away a swarm of gnats that rose out of the grass at his feet, pointed the shotgun at the driver's face. "I want you to put the gas to it, slowly, build up the pressure until something
happens. The Dodge isn't wedged tight. It should slide loose. The moment it's moved enough for you to squeeze your heap past it, do just that."

"And if I keep going?" the driver asked. He smiled as if this were a joke between them, and he had very nice teeth.

"We'll shoot out your tires, blow out the back window, very likely put half a dozen slugs in the back of your head-and possibly blow up your gas tank." He smiled back; his own teeth weren't bad, either.

"I thought so," the driver said. He eased his foot down on the accelerator.

For a moment nothing much happened. As the engine noise built into a scream, a ring-necked pheasant took off from the brush behind Tucker and Shirillo, startling the boy but not the older man. The Mustang's bumper popped a bolt and crunched back onto the grill. Still, the engine noise climbed. The driver was gritting his good teeth, aware that the Dodge might tilt the wrong way, that he might slip off it and careen into the shale wall himself.

Then the Dodge began to creak and give. A section of the shale broke loose from the wall and crashed down over the ruined automobile, rained on the Mustang, cluttered at the feet of the gorilla who stood against the far wall, above the, wreck. Then the big car twisted sideways, its roof coming around flat against the shale wall across the road. The driver of the Mustang pulled his car through the opening, badly scraping the whole length of his side against the rock. He stopped where he was supposed to, opened his door and got out.

"Come back up here," Tucker said. He hadn't been sure that the Dodge would move, but now he showed no surprise. Tucker was never surprised. It would have damaged his reputation if he had been.

The driver came back, stood beside his companion and looked very disgusted with himself. He had a right. However, unlike the other gorilla, he didn't try to tell them that they wouldn't get away with it. He looked at his dusty shoes, wiped each of them against the back of a trouser leg and did a good job of pretending boredom.

"Where's this road go?" Tucker asked. While he held the shotgun on them, Harris went downslope to the place where he'd climbed the bank, gained the road again and walked back up toward them.

"Nowhere," the driver said.

"It's a dead end?"

"Yeah."

The smaller of Baglio's men, the one who hadn't had enough sense to keep quiet before, looked at the driver quizzically, then smiled and looked up at Tucker. His face might as well be a blackboard with a huge, chalked message on it. "You're never going to get out of here. Mr. Baglio will get you sooner or later, 'cause this is a dead end."

The driver looked scornfully at the other man, spat on the road and sighed, leaned back against the shale wall, "Is he Baglio's son-in-law, or something?" Tucker asked the driver.

"No," the driver said. "But help's not easy to get these days."

The smaller gorilla blinked stupidly, looked from one to the other. "Son-in-law?" he asked.

When they were all in the Mustang and Jimmy Shirillo had pulled away from the wreck and the two gunmen, Harris said, "Obviously, it's not a dead end at all."

"Go to the front of the class," Tucker said.

Harris's goblin mask hung below his chin like a second face in the middle of his chest, bobbing when he talked. "A dead end would be bad, but this is something worse, so why go on?"

"Because we can't go back," Tucker said. "Obviously Baglio knows we're on this road and has the other end sealed up. But we might come to something else before we run into the roadblock."

"Like what?"

"I couldn't say, but I'll know it when I see it."

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At the beginning of May, when the trees were just greening and the summer ahead seemed devoid of any job possibilities, a letter had arrived at Tucker's midtown Manhattan mail drop, sealed in a white envelope with no return address. He had known that it was from Clitus Felton before he opened it, since he was accustomed to receiving letters like it on the average of ten times a year. Half that often they contained something worthwhile. Clitus Felton, despite his unlikely name, earned his way as a contact point between freelancers on the East Coast, operating out of a small specialty bookshop in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Once he had been in the business himself, expertly planning and executing two or three substantial jobs a year. But age had gotten to him-as had his wife, Dotty, who was afraid that the amazing Felton luck was soon going to be stopped by a cop's bullet or a long stretch behind walls. However, a bookshop wasn't enough to keep Felton interested in life. He was only six months behind the counter when he began to contact old friends and offer his middle-man service. He kept names, aliases and
addresses all in his head, and when someone contacted him about a perfect job with a need for the proper partners, Felton considered the possibilities, wrote a few letters and tried to help out. For a percentage. Usually five, if the job worked out as expected. Vicarious crime. He lived for it.

This latest letter had intrigued Tucker. He placed a couple of telephone calls, got the information that couldn't be trusted to the mails and flew to Pittsburgh, from Kennedy International, to meet with Jimmy Shirillo.

When Shirillo welcomed him at the airport, Tucker almost said thanks-but-no-thanks, almost got right the hell out of there before he had heard anything more about the job. Shirillo looked far too young, seventeen at the most, and he didn't look any better to Tucker when he said he was actually six years older than that. Despite the Italian surname, he was fair-complexioned, blue-eyed, with sandy brown hair. He was only about five feet four, perhaps a hundred and thirty pounds. A well-placed bullet wouldn't just kill him; it would knock him a couple of blocks if there was any breeze moving at all.

Tucker wasn't such a big man himself, standing five feet nine and weighing a hundred and forty-odd pounds. He supposed, too, that he didn't look the way a man in his profession should look. He was dark-haired and dark-eyed, with high cheekbones, a thin-boned nose, an air of the aristocrat, and he had been told, at different times, that he was somewhat fey. However, he looked like a bruiser compared to the kid; he looked a thousand times more experienced and cautious and capable. The kid inspired no confidence at all, and he made Tucker feel like a father meeting his son.

Shirillo, smiling, reached out and took Tucker's single suitcase with one hand while he offered the other to be shaken. His handshake was surprisingly firm, though unforced, the handshake of a man who was certain of himself. It was enough to make Tucker hold his initial judgment in check.

As Shirillo drove them into and then across the city during the first wave of morning rush-hour traffic, handling his new Corvette with caution but with no restraint whatsoever, making better time than Tucker would have thought possible, he was forced to junk his first evaluation of the boy and come up with a different one altogether. Beneath that somewhat fragile exterior was a man of competence and—as he proved again and again in that freeway war—not just a little daring.

"Why you?" Shirillo had asked, weaving around a large beer truck, squeaking back into the proper lane with no more than a thickness of paint to spare.

"Excuse me?"

The boy grinned. "You've been sizing me up ever since I took your suitcase in the arrivals lounge, and you seem to have decided to trust me."

Tucker said nothing.

"Now," Shirillo said, "I'd like to size you up. Why did Felton think you were especially right for this job?"

Tucker leaned back in the bucket seat, found the roll of lime-flavored Life Savers he usually carried in a pocket, offered one to Shirillo, took one for himself and sucked on it. He said, "I only steal from institutions. I guess that's why Felton thought of me."

"Institutions?"

"Yes. Banks, insurance companies, department stores, diamond brokers, that sort of thing. I've never taken anything from an individual, from anyone who could be hurt by the loss."

Shirillo mulled that over for a moment, then said, "You call the Mafia an institution?"

"One of the oldest," Tucker said.

"But there are differences between the Mafia and-and a bank or an insurance company."

"A few," Tucker admitted. Already he felt at ease with the kid, despite the brief time he'd known him, despite the glittering cars that they sailed past and dueled with, despite the angry honking of horns, squeal of brakes. "Though there are fewer differences than you might think."

"One difference," Shirillo said, tramping hard on the accelerator to take advantage of an opening in traffic, "is that a bank, if it catches up with you, will have you tossed in jail—while these boys we're talking about will simply weight you down and drop you off a bridge somewhere."

Tucker smiled, sucked his lime Life Saver, watched the hurtling death machines around him as if they were playful animals. "They still do things like that?"

"Worse," Shirillo said. "I don't want anyone in this who doesn't understand the risks."

"Do you?" Tucker asked.

"I was raised in the Hill section of Pittsburgh," Shirillo said. His manner was no longer childlike. It was grim. His face set into tight lines, pinched up by bad memories. "That's mostly a black neighborhood-substandard housing, bad garbage pickup so you get rats running in the streets like dogs, hardly any police patrols, streets that haven't been paved in my lifetime, no family counseling or city services like in the white neighborhoods. It's the kind of place where pressures build up and up until, one summer night every couple of years, they just rip out through the top."
"Riots?"

"You been keeping up with the news," Shirillo said. "But I prefer to think of them as nervous collapses; it's not a physical thing but a psychological one. Everyone clucks about it for a few days; all the upstanding white citizens rush out and buy a lot of guns they don't know how to use; in a month it's forgotten, and nothing's changed. Nothing at all. If you're not black or Spanish, you've got to be shit-poor to live in the Hill section. And that's why we were there. My father tried to keep ends together with a shoe-repair store, and did, too, until he kicked off at fifty-six from too much damn work. My father has had to pay Rossario Baglio's collectors for the last fifteen years, simply for the privilege of remaining in business. An old Italian custom." He snorted, but wasn't amused by his own joke. "Before Baglio, it was someone else who got the weekly installments. I've seen what they do to people who miss a week or who come flat out and say no to extortion. One of the rebels was a brother of mine, and ever since he said 'No' he limps. Badly. He's lucky that he walks at all."

"So you know the risks," Tucker said.

"Too well."

"I know them too. But I also know that, in a job like this one, you gain advantages along with the risks. For my part, I think the advantages outweigh the additional risks."

"For instance?"

"For instance, you don't have to worry about organized police, the state or federal apparatus, fingerprint experts or any of the rest of it."

"That too," Shirillo admitted.

Out of the city, moving east on the superhighway, the traffic thinned out considerably. Shirillo put the Corvette up around seventy and held it there. Neither of them spoke again until he braked, slowed and drove off into a roadside picnic area fifteen minutes later.

"On foot from here," Shirillo said. He looked at his watch. "And we'll have to make it fast." He picked up two pairs of field glasses from the back seat, handed one to Tucker and got out of the car.

Twenty minutes later, having tramped a considerable distance through a pine woods, moving silently most of the time, they reached the vantage point Shirillo had chosen, in the trees to the side of the private road, halfway down the mile-long straightaway that fed into Baglio's driveway. They stood well back in the shadows under the pines, watching the big white mansion.

"Some house," Tucker said.

"Twenty-nine rooms," Shirillo said.

"Been inside?"

"Once," the boy said. "When I was eighteen, I was a numbers runner for one of Baglio's Hill operatives, a man named Guita. Guita thought I was a smart kid destined for big things in the organization, and he brought me here with him once to meet Mr. Baglio."

"What happened to your big career in the underworld?" Tucker asked.

"Guita got himself killed."

"Police?"

"No-Baglio."

"What for?"

"I never knew."

Tucker said, "Some action up there at the house. Is this it?"

Shirillo had not been using his binoculars for a few minutes, but he lifted them and peered up the slope. "Yes," he said. "That's Henry Deffer, Baglio's personal driver, that old bastard there. Walking beside Deffer, the dandified one, is Chaka, Baglio's accountant and trouble-shooter. He's the second most powerful man in the local organization."

"The other two?"

"Just hoods."

"That the money, in those suitcases?"

"Yes."

"How much, do you think?"

"I've asked around. No one could say for sure except Baglio and Chaka. But it's likely to be somewhere between two hundred and five hundred thousand, depending on what kind of two weeks it's been."

"Where's it come from?" Tucker asked.

"Baglio's suburban gambling operations, the small stuff -punchboards in a couple of hundred gas stations, small numbers operations out of laundromats and newsstands and beauty parlors, small sports betting from maybe sixty or seventy barrooms. Each one of them's a tiny situation in itself. Multiply a small stake by two thousand situations, and it turns into big money."
"Why only a twice-a-month collection?"

"Because it is so little compared to inner-city numbers running, organization hookers, protection money, the dope take from both suburbs and inner city. It isn't enough to warrant all those rounds every week. Besides, these situations with the punchboards and the dollar bets are mostly legitimate businesses copping a little dirty money on the side that they don't have to report on the income-tax returns. They like holding onto Baglio's share, interest free, for a couple of weeks; occasionally, it might help a guy make a payment he'd otherwise be a few days late on. Baglio doesn't mind that so long as they turn in an honest percentage and don't get behind."

A black Cadillac limousine had pulled out of the driveway and was on its way toward them down the narrow lane. They stepped even deeper into the shadows and watched it go past.

Shirillo said, "Baglio has about fifty collectors for the suburbs. Every second and fourth Monday of every month they hit the road, picking up the small change from these situations. They deliver it here starting midafternoon, until dinner. Monday night it's counted, packaged and put in suitcases for the trip into town Tuesday morning."

"What's done with it then?"

"Baglio owns a good piece of a bank in town, one of the big ones on Forbes. Deffer parks the Caddy in the garage under the bank, while Chaka and one of the bodyguards use the bank president's private elevator to take the suitcases to the president's sixteenth-floor office. What happens to it then, I don't know. I imagine that it's all very cleverly laundered and made clean again."

"Do you have a spot picked out to stop the car?"

"Yes," Shirillo said. "Let's go look at it."

They spent that afternoon tramping the woods along the private lane, scouting prospective sites for the execution of the robbery. That done, they drove into the city again, where Tucker took a room in the hotel at Chatham Center. In his room, for the rest of the afternoon and evening, they discussed the fine points of the plan, argued alternatives and got it worked out to their mutual satisfaction. It looked good.

Back in Manhattan, Tucker needed only two weeks to locate and interest Bachman and Harris. The four of them had met in Pittsburgh this past Sunday, had gone over the details until they were exhausted. They monitored the delivery of the cash on Monday, went over everything one last time on Monday night in Tucker's hotel room, pulled the job off well. Quite well. Except for that damned woman in the Cadillac. Tucker hated failure more than he hated losing the money, more than the possibility of violence and death. He meant to see that the job did not end here.

"If Baglio's men are in front of us and behind us," Jimmy Shirillo said, "what do we do next?" He'd slowed the Mustang to a crawl, and he felt like stopping it altogether. If he could freeze them here, stop time, fix this instant for eternity, they'd not have to face Baglio at all; nothing bad could happen to them. For his first major job he'd held up quite well, in the face of almost total failure, but he had his limits. He remembered his brother, the weeks in the hospital, the limp, and he didn't want to go on with this. Tucker traced circles on the shotgun stock with his index finger and wondered how to answer the kid's question. His own reaction to failure was different from Shirillo's; his resourcefulness was increased, his determination magnified. He said, "I've noticed branch roads leading from this main track. We must have passed a dozen of them since we turned off the macadam."

Shirillo nodded quickly. "I saw them too. They were narrower than this, more rutted than this, grown full of weeds, and absolute disaster for anything less formidable than a Land Rover."

"I didn't pretend to mean we'd get all that far on one of them," Tucker said patiently. He didn't like this dawning note of pessimism in the kid, but he didn't comment on it. The best way to bring Shirillo around was to be calm, lead him by example. He said, "At least we ought to make a mile or so before we have to start walking."

"I don't like it," Shirillo said.

"You like facing Baglio's roadblocks any better?"

Shirillo didn't answer.

Tucker said, "By now they know that we have a man with a machine gun, and they won't be overpowered again."

Shirillo thought a moment and said, "Why don't we just abandon the car here and go into the woods, away from any trails they might watch?"

"Because we'd never find our way overland; we'd be lost in ten minutes. Unless we can find that macadam road again, we won't know where we are. None of us is a woodsman."

"That's damn straight," Harris said, clutching his Thompson tighter than before, his own pessimism bottled up inside of him, behind a mask of stoic indifference that was not as good as Tucker's own carefully maintained facade. Harris's gloom was not based on inexperience, as was Shirillo's, but on a growing certainty that he had been too long
in this business and that he was nearer than ever to a big payment of dues. He remembered his short time behind bars, and he knew he wouldn't go that route here—this would be worse, much worse, and painful. Baglio wouldn't send him to a cell but to a grave.

"Okay, then," Shirillo said, resigned to the worst. "But you pick the road, okay?"

A thousand feet farther along, Tucker pointed to a narrow gap in the almost solid wall of thick pine trunks, said, "That one, on the right, ought to lead in the general direction of the mansion."

Shirillo drove into the weed-choked track with all the caution of a man who fully expected it to be generously laced with land mines. The Mustang sighed, sank down in the damp earth with its thick carpet of pine needles, the springs singing unpleasantly. It trembled coltishly, bounced into and out of a muddy hole, making a grinding noise as it pressed brambles, grass and milkweed plants out of the way, moving slowly but deliberately forward.

They rode in silence for more than a mile and a half before the compact car settled abruptly into a pool of black muck and refused to come out of it again, even though Tucker and Harris assisted with a push.

Shirillo finally shut off the engine and got out of the car. He said, "She's wedged in there until someone brings a wrecker after her."

"We'll walk now," Tucker said.

Actually, Shirillo was feeling better than he had fifteen minutes before, because he had never expected a Mustang to get this far over that kind of terrain. That it had lasted as long as this seemed to be some sort of omen that the job wouldn't turn out so bad after all.

Tucker took the lead as they followed the overgrown trail into the woods, Shirillo second and Harris bringing up the rear with his heavy artillery. The older man carried the Thompson snout forward, at the hip, like a wary infantryman going through a suspected enemy position. That was, in fact, pretty much the case.

Although Tucker was aware of the woods around him and was on the lookout for Baglio's gunmen, the greatest part of his attention was on the problem of the botched robbery. In the past three years he had pulled off thirteen perfect operations, a couple of which were already legend in the business. Each job had its hitches, of course, but each had turned put right in the end. At twenty-eight he'd begun to build the kind of reputation among other freelancers that Clitus Felton had retired on. Reliable Mike Tucker. He liked the sound of that, even though the Tucker part of it was not his real name. It had been his alias for three years, and he felt that, given another five years of continued success, he wouldn't give a damn about any name except his assumed one; he would be Tucker then. Already, he was more concerned about upholding Tucker's reputation than about what was said against his real name and family. There was nothing to be proud of in his real name, nothing at all. Tucker, however, was a name to be reckoned with. A botched-up job Remember Tucker's first disaster, the Baglio robbery? After that, it was all downhill for him, right on to that job when he No. Not failure. He wouldn't permit it to remain a failure, because that would be playing right into his father's hands—not Tucker's father, of course; the real father. He refused. He would not provide anyone with a reference point for the beginning of his decline. Before he was finished he would have those damned suitcases, or three others exactly like them, filled with money.

He looked at his watch as he walked along the rutted, unused track, was surprised to see that despite all that had happened this morning it was still only a few minutes past eleven o'clock. A great deal could be done yet today—if they were lucky enough to find their way off the mountain unobserved.

Ten minutes after they abandoned the Mustang, the woods began to thin out around them. The trees were smaller, farther apart, the underbrush thicker. Tucker gave all of his attention to the landscape now; the planning could wait until later. The woods seemed deserted except for them, but Baglio might have men stationed along the perimeter. Whether they had a chance or not was all dependent on how many gunmen he kept in the mansion on the day of a cash transfer.

Spread out side by side now, rather than strung out in one line, they slowly approached the edge of the trees, circumspect, increasingly certain that they were alone. At the edge of the forest, still in the darkness beneath the pines, they stopped and looked down the long manicured slope of a contoured hillside. The mansion rested at the bottom, a white flare in the middle of all that green grass.
Sprawled on the ground at the edge of the woods, the three men watched the activity down at the Baglio mansion. On the long flagstone promenade that fronted the great house, two gunmen had taken up positions, one at either end, leaning against white wooden pillars from which they could survey the circular drive and both the east and west lawns. Tucker imagined that, in the back of the house which he could not see from here, other hoods had also settled in for the duration. Otherwise, the picture was serene, the windows of the house taking the bright sunlight and casting it back in doubled brilliance, a willow tree lazily waving whiplike branches, a bird crying somewhere close by.

Tucker put down the binoculars and said, "The white Thunderbird parked in the driveway has MD plates."
"A doctor for Bachman?" Shirillo asked.
"Most likely."
Harris said, "Then they got him out of the wreck, you think?"
Tucker nodded. "And they aren't likely to send him to the local hospital, where someone might wonder how and where he got so banged up."
"How bad do you think Bachman is?" Shirillo asked.
"It has got to be more than a bruise or two."
Harris seemed to be remembering the Chevy angled up onto the mangled Cadillac, and he grimaced sourly. "Why didn't they just kill him? Why go to the trouble of bringing a doctor in for him? This Baglio doesn't sound like any humanitarian, from what I've heard."
Tucker brushed away a determined ant that had crept onto his coat sleeve, and he said, "Bachman must either be unconscious or in too much pain to talk coherently. Baglio sent for the doctor to help get Bachman back in shape so he can ask him a few pointed questions."
"About the job," Harris said.
"Yes," Tucker said. "About the job, about us."
"Bachman won't say anything."
"Bullshit," Shirillo said.
Harris looked at the boy, his square face reddening again. He said, "I've worked with Merle Bachman half a dozen times before, and I can vouch for him."
"If the police had him, I wouldn't be the least bit worried," Shirillo said. "I'm sure he's able to withstand any number of late-night question-and-answer sessions in the squad room with those boys, but I also know that no one is going to make it through much of Baglio's questioning. They'll sew him back together from the wreck, ask him a few questions, and break every bone in his body, one at a time, until he spills. They aren't as limited in their choice of techniques as the police are."
Tucker picked up the glasses again, trained them on the front doors which opened on the promenade, followed two men as they came out of the house and walked toward the white Thunderbird. One was in a business suit and carried a black satchel, obviously the physician. The other man was tall, dark and distinguished, with full sideburns and a mane of gray-white hair. Twenty pounds too thick around the middle but otherwise in good condition, he might have been a Congressman or successful oilman. He had to be Baglio, and Shirillo confirmed that he was.
"What's going on, friend?" Harris asked.
Tucker said, "They're arguing, but not heatedly. I'd guess the doctor wants Bachman moved to a hospital, while Baglio disagrees. Right now he's probably telling the doc that he pays these exorbitant medical fees to be able to disregard his advice whenever it's convenient."
A moment later the doctor got into the Thunderbird and drove away, with Baglio waving at him in a friendly fashion. A third person came out of the house then and stood beside Baglio: the rangy blonde who'd been driving the Cadillac which had cut off Bachman's escape route. She wore shorts and a halter, and everything about her was zaftig, so ripe she would already have begun to decline by the age of thirty, when many women were reaching the fullest bloom. Right now, though, at twenty-two or twenty-three she was perfect, and she knew it; that was clear in the way she carried herself, the conscious provocative tilt to her hips when she stood beside Baglio. Tucker watched her as, with her arm around the old man, she went back into the mansion.
"You know the girl?" he asked Shirillo. "The one driving the Cadillac?"
"No, but she's probably the latest in Baglio's string of women."
"Lives in?"
"His women usually do."
Tucker watched the house, though no one moved down there and the guards had slumped back into attitudes of boredom. "Is there any way we can find out for certain how many people are in that place at night, besides Baglio
and this woman?"

Shirillo considered that for a moment and said, "I guess I could ask around, carefully, but I'm already sure that there's going to be at least four bodyguards. Outside of that, I just don't know."

"Why does it matter?" Harris asked.

Tucker brushed the ant off his sleeve again, flicked it gently away with his fingernail. "We're going to have to go into that house and get Bachman away from them."

"Are you crazy?" Harris's face, for once, was not even pink but the color of a mild yellow cheese. All the lines showed in it now, and he looked as old and tired as he was. He reached out and touched the Thompson lying in the grass beside him, but that did not do any good this time.

"Name me an alternative."

Harris said, "We split and go quiet for a while."

"That's good," Tucker said, a bit sarcastically. "That would be fine if these were the cops out looking for us. Cops have so damn much to do, they can't keep after you for long; no leads for a couple of months, and they put you in the back files and go on to something else. But these people, Pete, have the time and the resources. Baglio looks and sounds like the kind of man who could hold a grudge and nurture it. He's going to pump Bachman for our names, for Felton's name. He'll lean on Felton until he gets a mail-drop address for each of us. Then he just has to wait for us to pick up the mail."

"When do we go in?" Shirillo asked. "Tonight?"

"Tomorrow night, I think."

Harris said, "You're both nuts! Bachman will have spilled it all by then, anyway."

"Maybe not," Tucker said. "From the way the doctor was pushing Baglio, I'd guess Bachman's in a bad way right now. He's probably coked to the hairline and will be until tomorrow morning. Even if he comes out of it then, he won't be a good subject for interrogation. Especially not for Baglio's type of interrogation. What good is it to threaten a man with torture when he's already in too much pain to think straight?"

"And if he isn't as racked up as you think?" Harris asked. "What if we go in there and find out Bachman's talked, that he's dead and ready for planting in the woods?"

"Then we're no further behind than if we walk away now. Either way, Baglio will be after us then."

"Tucker's right," Jimmy Shirillo said.

Harris shook his burly head, some color back in his face now. "I just don't know. I'm used to operating on common sense. If a man takes a fall, you let him. That's his business; we all take the same risk."

"With the cops, yes," Tucker said. "If Bachman was being held by the cops, I'd walk off." That was not entirely true, for there was still the money they hadn't gotten, the failure he had to erase from the record. "I know he wouldn't name any of us. But these aren't cops, Pete. With these boys, you have to throw out the old rules and adapt to the circumstances."

Harris looked at the house, still dubious. "How can we do it?"

"I'm working out a few angles right now," Tucker said, tapping the side of his head. "But I don't want to lay them out until I've thought everything through." He got up and brushed off his clothes. "Right now, we've got to get off this damn mountain before they shift the search away from the interior and back toward the macadam road."

"Down at the highway, do we just hitchhike back to the city, friend?" Harris asked. "With a shotgun and a Thompson in hand?"

"We can still use Shirillo's Corvette, as planned, though it'll have to seat three of us instead of two. It's parked in the picnic area three quarters of a mile from Baglio's lane. Shirillo can drive east, take the first exit, get on coming west again, take another exit after passing us, get on coming east again and pick us up at a prearranged spot along the berm."

"That'll be fast enough," Shirillo said. "The exits are still pretty close together this near the city."

"Let's hope you're right, friend," Harris said.

Tucker was bothered by a sudden emergence of the "friend" tag on Harris's speech. The big man was not new to this business, and his nervousness was far more dangerous than that of the inexperienced apprentice, since its roots went deeper. Tucker knew that, when he was disturbed, the odd means of address punctuated a lot of Harris's conversation. That he should be this upset already, before much of anything had happened, was not a good sign. "Let's move ass, then," Tucker said. "I've got a hell of a lot of arrangements to make."
The suitcase in which Harris carried the machine gun in its less conspicuous, fragmented form was in Shirillo's Corvette. If the job had gone well, Shirillo and Harris would have left the stolen Dodge for the sportscar and driven back to the city in that, while Tucker would have used the big car and disposed of it on some quiet residential street where it might not be noticed for a couple of days. Now, jammed in the tiny, low-slung machine, Shirillo and Harris in the seats, Tucker sitting sideways in the shallow storage compartment behind them, they suffered Harris's elbows as he broke the large weapon down and fitted the pieces into the Styrofoam cups that were firmly glued to the bottom of the suitcase. He took three times longer than usual to complete the chore, but at least he was calmed by it. When he was done he smiled at Tucker, patted the suitcase and said, "It's a beautiful tool, isn't it?"

"Beautiful," Tucker agreed. "I see why you never got married and had children."

Harris didn't catch the sarcasm but took that as a compliment for the gun.

They dropped Harris in front of his hotel after he promised to stay low and keep to his room starting tomorrow morning when Tucker might be expected to phone.

"I still don't see how we can get in there," he said.

"I'll work it out," Tucker said.

Harris closed the door and walked off, carrying the suitcase full of submachine gun as if it were only underwear and shirts.

When Tucker got out of the Corvette in front of his Chatham Center hotel feeling as if he had been folded into someone's pocket, he left the shotgun with Shirillo, told him to wait for a telephone call and sent him home. He went upstairs to his room, showered, dressed, packed his single suitcase and checked out. He called the airport from the lobby, reserved a place on the earliest flight to New York, got a cab and left the city.

At 4:36 that afternoon he landed at Kennedy, not at all happy to be home again, since it was a temporary failure that had driven him back.

In the main airport lounge, which was static-filled by hundreds of chattering travelers, he took his suitcase into a telephone booth and drew the door shut. He dialed the office number of his family's banker on the off chance that the man might still be at work. President of the bank, he was still at his desk. Tucker licked dry lips, cleared his throat, wondered if there was any other way to handle this, decided there was not and identified himself, though not with the Tucker name.

"Michael! What can I do for you?" Mr. Mellio asked. He was warm, sincere, concerned. Bullshit. In truth, he was an icy bastard and completely in the old man's tow. When he hung up in a couple of minutes, he would immediately dial Tucker's father and report, verbatim, what had been said. When you were a depositor of the position of the old man, bankers broke their professional codes and extended you certain extra services.

"How long will you be in your office this afternoon, Mr. Mellio?"

"I was just preparing to leave."

"How early can you be there in the morning?"

"A quarter past eight?"

"Will you see me then?" Tucker asked.

"What did you have in mind, Michael?"

"I'd like to borrow against my inheritance." The statement was simple enough, though it was difficult to make. His father would be pleased to hear Mellio's report; Tucker's financial need, his first in more than three years, would make the old man's whole day.

"Borrow?" Mellio asked, a banker who seemed never to have heard of such a thing. "Michael, need I remind you that by signing one small paper you may pick up your accrued allowances from the trust and-"

"You needn't remind me," Tucker said sharply. "May I see you at a quarter past eight in the morning for a loan?"

"Of course," Mellio said. "I'll leave word with the guards to admit you then."

"Thank you, Mr. Mellio," Tucker said. He hung up. His forehead was dotted with perspiration, though he felt cold clear through. He wiped his face with a paper tissue, then opened the booth door, stepped out, picked up his suitcase and went outside to catch a taxi.

The doorman at Tucker's building-Park Avenue in the eighties; he had a nine-room apartment complete with his own sauna; his father wondered most about his ability to maintain that-greeted him with a smile and his name, turned him over to the hallman inside, who inquired after the success of his business trip.

"Well enough," Tucker said, though the words tasted bitter.

He knew as soon as he entered his tenth-floor apartment that Elise was home, because the stereo system was carrying Rimski-Korsakov as interpreted by Ormandy's Philadelphia Orchestra, her favorite composer by her favorite orchestra. He controlled an urge to go looking for her and attended to important details first. At the wall safe
in the living-room closet he put away the billfold that contained the Tucker papers, took out his own wallet and
slipped that into his pocket. He closed the safe again and spun the dial. Then he went looking for Elise.

On his way down the main hall, he stopped before the fragment of an early fifth-century Edo shield which had
come into his possession only two months ago but which already seemed an integral part of the apartment. He and
Elise had spent hours finding the right place for it and bracing it on the wall, and he had spent even longer
examining it in detail, wishing that more than a ragged half of the beaten copper piece had survived. Of course, if
the shield had come through the ages intact, it would have been far too valuable for him to afford it. As it was, he
had paid close to forty thousand dollars for it and felt that the money was well spent. The oval shield, of well-
worked copper trimmed in silver, inlaid with small pieces of hand-carved purest ivory, was the product of a nation
of African dreamers who had lived on the east bank of the Niger River, constructing elaborate shields but rarely
going to war, and it was exquisitely beautiful.

Besides, the acquisition helped substantiate his cover as a freelance dealer in primitive art objects, a front which
satisfied Elise and which his father found hard to crack. He really made little money from his dealing, but his
records were a private matter between him and the IRS, and his father's investigators could never be sure what he
cleared as an art dealer.

He had paused before the shield as much to absorb some of its innate peace as to admire its beauty; now, having
shifted out of the higher gear that his Tucker persona demanded, he felt in a better state of mind to meet Elise.

She was sitting in a black leather chair in the den, a drink on the table beside her, a book open on her lap. Even in
a comfortable old quilted housecoat a size too large for her, she radiated sensuality. She was a big girl, with a
showgirl's body, an inch shorter than Tucker at five feet eight, with high round breasts, a narrow waist, slim but not
boyish hips, and legs that went on forever. To date, however, her breaks in show business had been because of her
face, not the body under it. She was a natural blonde with green eyes, a complexion as flawless as good china. Oddly
enough, she was in demand for two kinds of television commercials: those that required a sexy, come-hither chickee
to peer at the home audience and solicit men for cigars, beer and sportscars-and those that needed a stunning but
innocent ingenue to push makeups, soda pop, junior fashions and shampoo. With different makeups and a change in
hair styles, and with her not unimpressive acting ability, she could be two different ages and temperaments before a
camera, in the same session.

He sat down at the foot of her chair on the thick shag carpet, kissed her knees and then went to work on the drink
that he'd built. He said, "How about you and Madison Avenue?"

"I got a call," she said, grinning. "You're never going to guess what I'm selling this time."

"They're allowing that to be pushed on television now?" he asked.

"Gutter mind," she said.

"I apologize. What are you selling?"

"Pickles."
"Pickles?"
"Peter Piper Pickles," she said, chuckling. He was always delighted with that chuckle, almost a giggle, because it was so out of place in a woman as big as Elise, as sophisticated as Elise, and it gave her another dimension altogether.

"I thought pickles were-what do you call things like that?"
"Family goods," she said.
"That's it. You always say you can't get jobs pushing family goods even in your breathless teenager role."

Elise had once explained, in detail, that housewives were the purchasers of family goods-foodstuffs, kitchen utensils, waxes, soaps and the like. Housewives didn't want to see a stunningly attractive woman or precocious, budding teenager selling them products, because they were reminded of their own spreading behinds and gradually bulging middles. They didn't want to feel as if they were competing with the women in the commercials; therefore, family goods were sold by cutesy women or plain types. Bombshells like Elise were reserved for pitches aimed at men: cigars, automobiles, beer and hair-grooming preparations.

"They've come up with a different approach for this one," she said.
"Who has?"
"Marcus, Marcus, Pliney and Plunket," she said.
To Tucker the name of the ad agency always sounded like the first line of a children's nonsense rhyme.
"What's the approach?"
"Fellatio," she said.
Tucker almost spat out a mouthful of good Scotch. When he did at last manage to swallow it, he coughed and cleared his throat. "Beg pardon?"

"It's another one of Plunket's brainstorms. My agent's gotten work for me with Plunket before, both times for crazy things. Plunket's convinced the Peter Piper Pickle people to try something different in hopes of boosting sales. He's cooked up quite an argument for making a sexy pickle commercial, family goods or not."

"I'd like to hear it."

"Plunket says, with the new wave of female awareness, modern housewives are more and more dissatisfied with their husbands as bed partners and, more and more, have sex on the mind, either subconsciously or consciously, and he uses polls, sociological studies and tons of other data to make his point. He's sold the pickle people on the idea; he says they can't go wrong by showing a sexy girl, full-face, slowly devouring a nice big Peter Piper dill while the voice-over announcer gives the regular sort of pitch." She chuckled again, finished her drink and put down the glass.

"Plunket says that it'll implant, in the woman's mind, the notion that pickles from Piper are a sensual experience. A pickle is very phallic, you know."

"I never noticed."
"Oh, yes, indeed."

He said, "Will the average housewife really go for this, though?"
She shrugged. "It's to be a limited approach, just one commercial, playing only in a few selected test areas. No national exposure unless it proves workable. So, I don't get any residuals, but a pretty good flat fee for a day's work."

Tucker recalled the night that, watching a two-hour network special sponsored by a soap company, they saw three commercials featuring Elise, played three times each, which had earned her an additional five hundred and forty dollars under the residuals clause in her contract. Most weeks, she averaged between a thousand and two thousand dollars as one of the most popular current commercial faces, all of it from work already finished and on the air weeks before; and when she worked on a new one, she doubled that particular week's take with her initial payment. It almost seemed to Tucker that he should give up a life of crime and start hawking toothpaste.

He finished his Scotch, stood up and put the glass on the stand. He looked at her and said, "Do you feel like practicing?"

"Practicing what?" she asked.
"The pickle commercial, of course."

Much later, finished with that practice and a number of others, having eaten a late dinner and practiced some more and having fallen asleep together in the big bed in the front room, Tucker woke, his heart beating like a sledge driven against an iron block, the rhythm ringing along his bones. He had been frightened by some nightmare that he could not recall, and he reached out and touched Elise's warm, bare buttocks, concentrated on her until he could see her lines draped across with sheeting. As her nearness sank in, as he realized he was not alone, his heart slowed and his mouth grew moist again, the fear subsiding. In a moment he was even able to remember what the nightmare had been about: his father.
Even for the president of a Fifth Avenue bank, Mr. Mellio's office was too rich, paneled in too much teak, carpeted in too deep a pile, furnished in much too luxurious a style. The painting behind his desk was clearly an original Klee, and even though it was surely on loan from the bank's investment art collection and had not been purchased solely for Mr. Mellio, it gave you the feeling that these people were not managing your money very properly and were, in fact, almost throwing it away on personal aggrandizement, baubles and unnecessary luxuries.

Mr. Mellio himself, however, countered this impression so completely that you could almost forget entirely about the riches of the room and about the fate of your fortune. He radiated confidence and ability. He was a tall, wide-shouldered man, and he would have fit right into an early John Wayne movie as one of those non-speaking cowpokes who step forward to stand behind the Duke, grim-lipped and resolute in the name of good and honor. At fifty his hair was more white than brown, full enough to be combed over the tips of his ears but certainly not mod. His face was blocky, with a slab of a forehead, rocky cheekbones, a stiff straight nose, a chin like an expertly carved piece of granite. He thrust that chin forward and offered Tucker his hand. The hand was enormous and applied just enough pressure to avoid the extremes of a fish shake and a bone crusher. Like the handshake, everything that Mr. Mellio did seemed planned; you had the feeling he didn't take a breath until he had assessed the need for it. Despite the decor of the room he worked in, such a man would handle money as a priest handled the Eucharist.

"How have you been?" Mr. Mellio asked, taking his seat behind the huge, dark, uncluttered desk. "I haven't seen you in-let's see-"

"Eight and a half months," Tucker said. "Not since the last time I had you and my father in court."

Mr. Mellio grimaced, smiled through capped teeth and said, "Yes, of course, an unfortunate afternoon."

"For me," Tucker agreed.

"For all of us, especially your father," Mellio said. "You know, Michael, he doesn't want to fight with you over this thing. It grieves him terribly to-"

"My father never grieved over anything, Mr. Mellio, least of all his son." He tried to say it without emotion, calm and easy as if he were merely reading something from a textbook, something indisputable. He thought that he succeeded.

"Your father does care about you, Michael, cares more than you-"

Tucker raised a hand and waved the words away. He said, "If he cares so goddamned much, why doesn't he turn over my inheritance? It would make things a good deal easier for me."

Mr. Mellio looked pained, like a loving father who has to teach an unpleasant lesson to a child. He leaned back in his chair, Klee looming behind him, and said, "Your mother's will specifically stated that your father was to remain the director of your trust until such a time as you matured to the point where you could handle the funds yourself."

"Until such a time as he felt I had matured," Tucker corrected. "He weaseled that out of my mother when she was sick, very sick, two weeks before she died."

"You pretend as if your father attempted to gain control of your inheritance to enrich his own estate. In the face of his own considerable wealth, that's absurd."

"I pretend no such thing," Tucker said. "He gained control of my inheritance in an attempt to gain control of me, but he lost the bet."

"Michael," Mellio said, leaning forward now, propping both elbows on the top of the desk, putting his chin in his hands, trying to look somewhat pixie-like, failing miserably in that, "you could see your father. You could make amends. I'm sure that, if you tried to work things out between the two of you, he'd soon turn the estate over into your hands."

"Fat chance," Tucker said. "Perhaps after I'd been a faithful toady for eight or ten years, he'd give me what I want. I don't wish to give up that much time to a corrupt, selfish old man."

"Michael, he is your father!"

Tucker leaned forward in his own chair now, his face slightly flushed. "Mr. Mellio, when I was a child I saw my father on the average of twice a week, for an hour each time. Once was at Sunday dinner when I was permitted to dine with the adults, the other was on Wednesday night when he quizzed me on my previous week's lessons. I was learning French and German before grade school, from a nanny who doubled as my instructor, and my father wanted to be certain that he was getting his money's worth. For a period of eighteen months, when I was twelve and thirteen, I saw my father not at all, because he was consolidating his European ventures then. My secondary schooling was at a boarding school considerably farther away from home than my first military academy had been. I saw my father at Christmas for a couple of hours. By the time I was in college, I stayed away from home on purpose. That's how much he's my father. Christ, Mr. Mellio, I don't even know the man."

Mellio said nothing.
Tucker said, "I early decided that the last thing I wanted to be was like my father. If having money meant you had
to spend all of your time shepherding it and none of your time enjoying life, then money wasn't for me at all." He
leaned back in his chair now, the intensity of his voice sliding away. "Money, to me, is to be spent. That appalled the
old man, and it was because he found that I was unamenable that he got that clause in my mother's will. He wanted
me to be an empire builder like himself. Life's too short, however, to waste in a series of boardrooms."

"To have money you must make money," Mr. Mellio said, as if he were reading the sentence from a lacquered
wall plaque. "A fortune can be squandered quickly, Michael. Even one the size of your inheritance-or the much
greater size of your father's estate."

"My mother left three million dollars, give or take a few thousand in small change. Even invested at a paltry six
percent in tax-free bonds, that earns back a hundred and eighty thousand a year. I could live with that very nicely,
Mr. Mellio."

"Your father believes you couldn't, that you'd start nibbling away at the principal."

"My father doesn't give a damn about that," Tucker said. "He simply wants me under hand so he can mold another
省级的 mastermind. In the next step of the court tests, or the step after that, a judge is going to agree with me. He
can't continue to pay off every court official who comes up. One of them is going to be honest, especially the higher
the courts get."

Mellio dropped the pixie pose and picked up the role of the shocked banker taken aback by irresponsible
accusations. He was even worse at that than at playing pixie, about as believable as Elise would be if she tried to
play a sexless, weary housewife in a television commercial. "You can't be seriously implying that-"

Tucker cut him short. "Can we talk about the loan, please?"

Mellio moved his lips up and down, like a man with something caught in his throat, finally closed his mouth and
ordered his thoughts. He said, "Michael, there is an account in this bank composed solely of the monthly allowance
checks from your trust-which you have not picked up or cashed in more than three years. I believe there are now
thirty-seven deposits in the account, each in the amount of ten thousand dollars. I cannot see why you would wish to
make a loan when you have these funds available."

"Credit me with at least a modicum of intelligence, Mr. Mellio," Tucker said. He sounded tired, and he was tired.
This sort of fencing was something he was no good at and was, to boot, completely out of practice for. He was
anxious to be done with Mellio, the bank and the city so that he could get back to the most pressing problem of all-
getting Merle Bachman out of Baglio's mountain estate before the driver was forced to spill everything about the rest
of them. "I am aware that my father has conditioned the delivery of those checks, and I am thoroughly acquainted
with what I would be losing by meeting his conditions. I have a good lawyer. He and I have talked a great deal about
all of this, all of you."

Mellio looked shocked again, apparently decided that this was not one of his better roles, gave up on it and got
very businesslike. "Okay, by signing the waiver to get your allowance checks, you'd be endorsing your father's
control of the inheritance. But what does that matter, Michael? It's nothing more than a formality, anyway. Your
father, by virtue of your mother's will, already has control."

Tucker sighed again, slumped down in his chair, looked at his watch: a quarter of nine. The Klee was beginning to
strain his eyes, and the dark teak paneling seemed to be closing in on him. "Signifying the allowance checks, I'd be
signing away my right to carry on with the suit we now have in federal court. I'd be limiting myself to the position of
a minor for the rest of my life-or for the rest of my father's life, anyway."

"But you've said you only care about having money to spend," Mellio argued quietly. "This way, you would have
that nice monthly check."

"I said that I could get along on a hundred and eighty thousand a year, but I can't possibly make it on a hundred
and twenty. One thing I did acquire from my father was expensive tastes."

"The allowances could be raised, naturally," Mellio said.

Tucker shook his head. "No. It's not just that. Once I'd signed the waiver and no longer had a lever to use against
my father, he'd have more control over me than I want him to have. He could even cut back the allowances until I
had to knuckle under and go through the charade of learning the business from him."

"He wouldn't do that," Mellio said.

"You're full of it," Tucker said politely, smiling.

Mellio said, "You must hate him."

"Not merely that; I loathe him."

"But why?"

"I have my reasons."

He thought of many things, but most of all he thought of the women his father had kept, a string of mistresses
which, cruelly, he hadn't hidden from his wife. In fact, he seemed to take some strange pleasure in flaunting his
adultery in front of her. Tucker remembered sitting with her, once when he had come home over the holidays from
the boarding school, listening to her as, hating herself, she told him about his father's women. She had been a strong
family-oriented woman, and this was an attack at her base, her sacred foundation. She had huddled in upon herself
and cried, silently, shaking, her face cold to his touch. If only his mother had had a bit of Elise in her, less of an old-
fashioned outlook and more modern fire, she would have stood up to the old man; she would have left him. Instead,
she had stayed on, unable to admit it all had gone bad. Then the cancer, the long slow hospital death, when the old
man was too busy to visit her for more than an hour or two a week, her knowing that it wasn't only his financial
affairs that took so much of his time.

"Your father is a fascinating man and one of the kindest that I've ever known," Mr. Mellio said. "I can't imagine
what reasons he would have given you to loathe him."
"Then you don't know him well."
"Perhaps I know him better than you do."
Tucker smiled frostily. "Considering that you're a banker and that my father was always more interested in money
than in his son, perhaps you do."

For the first time the banker seemed to see beyond Tucker's facade and to catch a glimpse of the man behind it.
He looked quickly down at the bare top of his massive desk, as if that single glimpse had frightened him, and he
said, "What size loan were you considering?"
"Only ten thousand," Tucker said. "I've suddenly found myself short of operating cash."
"Collateral?" Mellio asked, looking up as his courage flooded back in the course of a conversation he must have
gone through a thousand times before with a thousand different customers. Familiarity always breeds confidence,
especially in men of finance.
"My trust," Tucker said.
"But you do not, strictly speaking, have the right to put up the trust-fund monies as collateral. Only the trust
administrator can do that."
"My father."
"Yes."
"Then I can put up that account full of uncollected allowances."
"The same holds true there," Mellio said. "Until you sign for the checks, they aren't legally yours."
Tucker sat up straight in his chair, sensing a battle of wills that he had to win. "What would you suggest I use as
collateral, then?"

"Well, you seem to be running a very profitable business," Mr. Mellio said. "You live in the style you like,
without touching your inheritance, so you must have other assets."
"Forget that," Tucker said.
Mellio leaned back in his chair, testing the hinged backrest to its limits, looking at Michael across the curious
perspective of his raised knee. It was evident that he felt in command of the situation once more. "Now, Michael,
there isn't any sense in your attitude. If you'd give me a full picture of this art business of yours, initial capital and
estimated income, sources and projections, we could get you a loan. We could make it a sweat loan on the power of
your success thus far. And, I might add, if you'd tell your father exactly what you've been doing, he might very well
be so impressed with your business acumen that he'd free your inheritance."

"No chance," Tucker said. "My business isn't in the empire-building mold, but erratic and highly chancy. I don't
attend board meetings, float stock options or employ thousands of people. My father wouldn't be impressed the way
he'd have to be to give me a free hand with my inheritance."

Mellio's voice softened into a patently false sentimentality. "You might at least let him know the nature of your art
dealings, inform him of your more notable triumphs, as a son extending the minimal courtesy to a father. He's
proud of your evident success, believe me. But he's much too proud to come and ask you how you've achieved
it."

Tucker grinned and shook his head. "You're still full of it, Mr. Mellio. I'm sure you know how many times my
father's had me followed by private detectives, trying to learn what dealers I work with, what prices have been paid
for certain objects and what profits other sales have brought me. Unfortunately for him, I've been cleverer than any
of them; I've spotted each new tail from the start."

Mellio sighed, still looking across his knees. He said, "Your father wouldn't have you followed, Michael. But,
very well, forget about your work. Is there any other collateral that you can offer the bank against this ten thousand
you need?"
"My furniture, automobile, some art objects."
"Inadequate, I'm afraid."
"I have some very good artwork."
"Art may be worth a fortune today, nothing tomorrow. The critics and the connoisseurs are fickle in their approval of any talent." "And the bank is involved in such unsound investments?" Tucker asked, feigning innocence, pointing at the Klee. Mellio said nothing. Tucker said, "These aren't paintings but primitive artifacts, valuable as antiquities and as art." "I'd have to have them appraised," Mellio said. "That would take a week, maybe longer." "I can send you to a reputable appraiser who would verify their value in half an hour." "We'd prefer to use our own man, and we'd need a week." "God," Tucker said, "I can't wait for the next stockholders' meeting so I can point out how you people are throwing money away on Klee paintings and other such claptrap. By your own admission-" "You're being childish," Mellio said. "And you are being dishonest, Mr. Mellio. I'm sure my father directed you to take every step to deny me this loan and to force me into signing the waiver. But you must see that if I don't get the ten thousand now, right now, I've got excellent grounds to level yet another suit against you, the bank and the administrator of the trust. No judge is going to believe that you seriously fear losing what you loan to me. It will be quite evident that your refusal is a spiteful tactic and nothing more." Mellio sat up and reached for his intercom controls. To Tucker he said, "I'll want a signed note from you, at least." Tucker said, "If I approve of the note's wording." "Of course." Mellio called for his secretary to bring the proper loan papers, though he was clearly unhappy about being forced into this.' "I'll want it in cash," Tucker said. "I'll tell you the denominations of the bills." "Cash?" Mellio asked, raising his eyebrows. "Yes," Tucker said. "I'm afraid your check might bounce."
At the main workbench, Imrie showed Tucker what he had for him. "Three Portuguese National Guard contract
throat. He sounded as though he were looking for someone to spit on.

hands and slipped them onto the shelf again. "Makes me feel like a criminal," he said, grunting in the back of his
room again. He put the box down, closed and locked the bookcase door, took the poetry volumes from Tucker's

that lighted a forty-watt bulb, located a cardboard box he wanted, turned out the light and stepped into the main

aside and swung the bookcase out of the way, walked into a closet about four times his own size, pulled on a chain

back of his throat, located the lock previously covered by the books, used a key on his chain to open it. He stepped

I going to sell to special customers like you? Thirty? Forty? No more than that." He made a sound of disgust in the

sleepy, I'd leave it on the workbench while I caught a few winks, you know?" Tucker said he knew. "But now you

store, were wide, bright and shifted quickly from one thing to another—not ignoring, either, Tucker's reaction to

fringe of hair, a little sleazy but not sleazy enough to be colorful. Here, among his weapons, he came alive like a

puppet jerked up on strings and touched, magically, by some good fairy. His eyes, hooded and dull in the antique

style of dress was no style at all except comfort, he was a tidy man when it came to his specialty. His specialty was
guns.

"Upstairs," he said, passing Tucker on his way back into the maze of tarnished, tottering furnishings.

At the back of the store, through a yellow cloth curtain, they went up a set of narrow wooden stairs, passed the
second floor where Imrie lived, climbed to the third and last level where he kept his gun collection. Here, as on the
first floor, the partitions had been knocked out-to make one large room. Racked on the walls, shelved against
wooden display lifts, nestled in velvet-lined cases and-in the case of new acquisitions not yet touched by Imrie-
dumped unceremoniously in cardboard boxes, were more than two thousand rifles, shotguns and handguns, with the
overwhelming emphasis on the last category. Also in the room, against the far wall, were a number of metal-
working machines, including a complete miniature gas-fired forge and cooling pot where metals could be melted
and shaped.

"I think I have exactly what you want," Imrie said. "In the store downstairs he'd seemed bland, as gray as his
fringe of hair, a little sleazy but not sleazy enough to be colorful. Here, among his weapons, he came alive like a

They stopped at a bookcase that filled half the wall to the right of the door, and Imrie looked up over the bushy
gray thatch of his eyebrows, embarrassed. He said, "Mr. Tucker, I hope you'll excuse the television dramatics here."

"Of course," Tucker said. He had been in contact with Imrie nine times before. Three times Imrie had opened the
hidden closet in Tucker's presence-the sign of trust and respect he gave few customers-and every time he apologized
for the melodrama.

"You can't be too careful these days," Imrie said, using both hands to remove several volumes of poetry from the
fifth shelf. He handed the books to Tucker, who took them and waited patiently. "There was a time, not so many
years ago, you could leave everything out in the open. If I was working on a gun-making special changes-and I got
sleepy, I'd leave it on the workbench while I caught a few winks, you know?" Tucker said he knew. "But now you
can't take any chances. All this public uproar about guns puts pressure on the cops and, directly, pressure on me too.
You'd think, listening to these anti-gun nuts, that every handgun in existence is used in crime of some sort. Take a
look around this workshop, though. I got maybe twelve hundred, thirteen hundred handguns. How many of them am
I going to sell to special customers like you? Thirty? Forty? No more than that." He made a sound of disgust in the
back of his throat, located the lock previously covered by the books, used a key on his chain to open it. He stepped
aside and swung the bookcase out of the way, walked into a closet about four times his own size, pulled on a chain
that lighted a forty-watt bulb, located a card-board box he wanted, turned out the light and stepped into the main
room again. He put the box down, closed and locked the bookcase door, took the poetry volumes from Tucker's
hands and slipped them onto the shelf again. "Makes me feel like a criminal," he said, grunting in the back of his
throat. He sounded as though he were looking for someone to spit on.

At the main workbench, Imrie showed Tucker what he had for him. "Three Portuguese National Guard contract
Lügers, all in excellent shape."

"Fakes?"

Imrie looked hurt. "Genuine, I assure you. A good fake, of course, would be sufficient for anything you'd want to use it for. But these are the real article, 1906-type with four-and-three-quarter-inch barrels."

"In 7.65 mm?"

"Yes."

Tucker worked the unloaded pistol.

"See?" Imrie asked.

"What about the silencers?" Tucker ran his thumb over the threads that had been cut into the outer circumference of the Lüger's barrel.

Imrie lifted three bright tubes from the box, handed one of them over. "I guarantee the continuity of the barrel."

"Of course."

Tucker fitted the silencer to the Lüger and had almost eleven inches of barrel. The effect was at once silly and deadly.

"Ammunition? Clips?"

Imrie took those out of the box and placed them neatly on the table. He watched while Tucker fitted the silencers to each of the weapons, loaded them, held them, did everything but shoot them. He was not offended by the thoroughness of the examination, for he knew that Tucker was making no comment on his own trustworthiness but was merely taking as many precautions as he could. Indeed, he admired the other man's professionalism.

Tucker broke the guns down and said, "How much?"

"You understand that a genuine Portuguese National Guard Lüger is a collector's item?"

"Even modified with a silencer?" Tucker asked.

"Still, yes."

"How much?"

"I paid four hundred and fifty dollars for each gun, thirteen hundred and fifty altogether, the going market price."

Tucker knew that Imrie had not purchased the weapons from another collector but from various uninformed sources, probably for as little as fifty or a hundred dollars each. He did not say anything. Imrie was good enough to be permitted as much chiseling as he could reasonably expect was his due. "I restored them to full functional status, supplied the ammunition-considerable ammunition-machined the silencers, a delicate operation that takes no little amount of time."

"How much?" Tucker interrupted.

Bright eyes flickering over his face, down at the guns, up at his face again, Imrie realized Tucker was in a hurry, perhaps pushed the price up a little because of that. "Twenty-two hundred for the three."

"Two thousand," Tucker said.

"There is the added problem that these particular weapons were originally prepared for another gentleman, as an advance order. He'll be around to collect them in two days. To fill that order, I'm going to have to close the store and stay up eighteen hours a day."

"Hardly likely," he said. "We both know that you always keep a bit ahead of the demand. That's one reason you keep the hidden closet. You've probably got two more like this-maybe not Lügers but something as sufficient-ready to hand behind the bookcase."

"Really?" Imrie began.

"Two thousand."

"You'll want a case to carry them out of here?" Imrie asked, folding thick fingers together.

"Yes."

"Two thousand for the guns, twenty-five dollars for the attaché case."

Tucker smiled. "You're unbelievable."

"The antique business has suffered through a recent economic recession you might have read about in the papers," Imrie said. He took his hands apart and put them palms up as if to ask, "What can I do?"

Tucker counted out the money while Imrie put the guns, silencers and ammunition into a pearl-gray attaché case with a silvery stainless-steel handle. He snapped it shut, locked it and gave two keys to Tucker, in exchange for the proper cash compensation.

"I think you'll be pleased," Imrie said.

"I hope I will be."

"Goodbye, then."

"Goodbye, Tucker said.

The fat man led him down the stairs again, into the darkened furniture store, past a row of old floor cabinet radios
and a Gramophone on a maple stand. The Gramophone trumpet, once gilded and now tarnished, made Tucker think of Elise Ramsey. She had appeared in a cigar commercial seated on a divan beside an ancient Gramophone. That was one of his favorite commercials, perhaps because she had been wearing a plunging, lacy-necked dressing gown; he had always had the feeling that, as in a cartoon, the Gramophone trumpet was alive and that its gaping mouth was opened in awe of her formidable cleavage.

Imrie unlocked the front door.
Tucker went out and away without saying anything more.
The time was 11:06 on Wednesday morning.
The small Long Island airport out of which Paul Norton and Nick Simonsen operated their catch-all air service had two macadam runways, one new and even, the other cracked and eroding and hove up at the center like the back of an angry cat. Both runways were in use. Three buildings—one a warehouse, the second a hangar and the third a combination office suite and three-plane berth—had all seen better days. The corrugated roofing was badly rusted, and the wooden walls needed painting. Tucker paid the taxi driver, tipped him well for running out to such an unlikely spot from which he'd hardly obtain a return fare, and went inside the nearest structure, which contained Norton's office.

Norton was there, behind a scarred desk that looked ready to collapse, leaning way back in a rickety spring-backed chair, his booted feet propped on the stained, notation-cluttered blotter. He was a big man, five inches taller and sixty pounds heavier than Tucker. His face was broad and flat, since his nose had been squashed and his cheeks scarred during his tour in Vietnam. He'd never told Tucker how or why that had happened, or even if the two injuries were from the same source. Perhaps, with unlimited resources and several major operations, a very good plastic surgeon could have rebuilt that ruined nose so it would look as good as new, though no improvement in his appearance would have been noticeable until something was done with the white scars on both cheeks. Looking at him, Tucker had the eerie feeling that some enormous cat had sneaked up behind Norton, dug its claws into his face and shredded the flesh backward in one powerful jerk. Despite the disfiguration, he was not a particularly ugly man—just damned mean-looking.

When he spoke, however, your impression of him shifted like the colored glass in the bottom of a kaleidoscope. The voice was soft, the tone even, the words measured and warm. His was the voice of a man who had seen too much and gone through more than his share of agony, the voice of a man who never wanted to have to kill or hurt anything again. "A beer?" he asked.

"This time of day?"

"It's after noon," Norton observed, taking his feet off the desk and rising. He moved smoothly, gracefully. From an old refrigerator in the corner of the room he got two chilled beers, opened them and put them on the desk without offering any glasses.

Tucker sat down in the client's chair, both briefcases beside him.

Norton did not give either of the satchels a glance. He knew that if they were any of his business, Tucker would tell him so. Vietnam had not only made him a gentle man but an extraordinarily wary one as well.

"Ballantine's India Pale Ale," Norton said, lifting his own bottle. "I've tried everything, and this is the only one that makes me happy." He drank a third of his beer in one long swallow that set his Adam's apple bobbing like a dinghy in a typhoon.

Tucker sipped his beer, agreed with the judgment and said, "I need a chauffeur."

"So you said on the phone."

"You have the copter ready?"

"It only took a few minutes."

"Efficiency."

"My trademark."

Tucker swallowed some beer, sighed, put the bottle down, lifted the lighter of the two briefcases, unsnapped the latches and opened the top. He said, "All you have to know to set your price is the destination. Pittsburgh. And the length of time I'll need you—perhaps it'll be as late as tomorrow noon before we get back here. Maybe it'll be some time tonight. Your own complicity involves nothing more than the alteration of the markings on the copter. It's damn unlikely that the FAA will find out about that, and, besides, you're accustomed to risking as much."

"Quite accustomed," Norton agreed. "But you forget that, according to the law, I'll be aiding and abetting you with whatever you have in mind. Understand me, Mike, I don't want to know what that is. I just want to point out that I'll be liable for criminal charges."

"This operation isn't directed against anyone the law would rush to defend," Tucker said.

Norton raised his eyebrows, picked up his beer and took another third of it in one swallow.

"That's the last factor you have to consider. We're going up against a man named Baglio, against his entire machine."

"Organized?"

"Let's call him an entrepreneur."

"Successful?"

"Very."

Norton considered the angles for a moment, scratching unconsciously at the three long white marks on his right
cheek. "Three thousand sound all right to you?"

Tucker paid without any argument, closed his briefcase again. It was a fair enough price for everything that he was going to ask of Norton and his machine.

The big man put the money in the lockbox in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet behind his desk, locked both the box and the drawer, pocketed the keys and came back to his desk.

"Someone could carry the whole cabinet away," Tucker said.

"It's bolted to the floor."

They drank the remainder of their beer in silence, and when they were finished Norton said, "You ready?"

"Yes."

They left the office and walked to the third berth in the same building, where a gray helicopter sat on a wheeled towing platform. It was the same four-seater quadra-prop that Norton had used twice before when Tucker had required his services, though its own markings had been expertly masked with colored tape. New numbers, also formed with tape, decorated the proper plates on the nose and both sides. The Pennsylvania state seal, with its two rearing horses, was firmly attached to both doors of the craft; below the seal, in white letters, were the words pennsylvania state police. It all looked very genuine. It should have, since the insignia were exact copies of those in use by the authorities, rendered by a friend of Norton's who worked in an ad agency during the day and moonlighted however he could. He had drawn Norton nine sets of state seals so far, though Tucker had not had the opportunity, thus far, to operate in so many different colonies. Norton had other customers.

"Good?" Norton asked.

"Fine," Tucker said.

A golf cart was already hooked up to the platform on which the copter stood, and Norton hopped into this. He started it and drove slowly outside. Out of the hangar, he stopped, detached the cart from the platform, drove it back inside and parked it. They boarded the helicopter.

"You've got a change of clothes?" Tucker asked.

"I packed as soon as you called."

"Good."

"Even before I went out to doctor the copter."

"Fine."

A few minutes later, they drifted onto the cracked macadam runway. Both Tucker and Norton sat in the forward seats; behind them was a pair of seats that folded down to form a large cargo area. Most of Paulnik Air's freight work was handled with one of the two twin-engine Apaches that they maintained, though the dense, built-up New York area often required a helicopter to land where there was no runway. Besides, the copter was the most lucrative of the three Paulnik craft, thanks to Tucker and to others like him.

As they lifted into the early-afternoon sky, Tucker wondered where Simonsen would be hiding. Simonsen professed to know absolutely nothing about Norton's willingness to bend the law for a buck. He handled none of the illegitimate work, though Norton knew his partner always stood at a window and watched proceedings such as these, as if he secretly envied what he supposed was a glamorous mission. He would be down there now, watching and a little jealous, a little frightened.

Then the airfield and the hangars were out of sight as they banked west toward the city.

The time was 2:12 as the copter, laden with auxiliary fuel tanks, began the longest leg of the journey.

Tucker wondered if Baglio had had an opportunity to question Merle Bachman. The driver had been in the mansion more than a full day. If he was not badly injured, that was plenty of time for Baglio to break him, enough time for Bachman to spill everything he knew about Tucker and the others.

Norton had said something which Tucker, lost in the reverie, had not heard.

"What?" Tucker asked.

"I said, 'The pollution sure is nice today, isn't it?''"

Norton waved one burly arm at the vista of yellow-white mist that rose up from all quarters of the city, meshed high overhead and roiled like a ball of snakes, smoke snakes. He indicated the awful scenery much as a legitimate guide might gesture grandly at the undeniable splendor of Niagara Falls.

"Beautiful."

"It'll make a grand sunset."

"Lovely."

"Too bad we can't see it."

"Too bad."

But Tucker could not bring himself to think very long about sunsets and atmospheric pollution.

Perhaps Baglio's people wouldn't be able to trace the Tucker name any farther than the downtown mail drop. They
had contacts, yes, of course they had, but they were not omniscient.

Yet, even if they got that far and no farther, he would have to forget the Tucker identity altogether, assume a new name, purchase all new credentials in that name, and strictly avoid everyone who had, to date, known him only as Tucker.

That would require an outlay of cash and a period of relative inactivity, and it would be, in the vulgate, a pain in the ass.

And he could not expect an identity change to provide safety for very long. Sooner or later, when one of them was using a new name himself, he would encounter an old acquaintance who’d remember the Tucker identity. Then a second name change would be necessary—and after that, a third and a fourth.

He could see no end to it.

Much better to think the driver had not talked yet. If Baglio didn’t get through to Bachman in the next twelve hours, they were all home safe.
Tucker looked at the map spread out on his knees, glanced through the front window of the copter as Norton flew at an angle to the roadway below them, and shouted, "There! That's the highway that runs past the turn-off for Baglio's estate—and I think the house is over that way, in those slopes. If I'm right, the turn-off should be just ahead."

"It was.

"Good work!" he shouted at Norton, grinning.

Perhaps he wouldn't have had to shout quite so loudly, for the cabin was fairly well insulated against the roar of the overhead rotors. But after several hours in the air, listening to that thumping racket, his ears buzzed like the core of a beehive on a busy spring morning, and he shouted mostly to hear himself.

Norton nodded and said, "Is that a likely place to put down?" He pointed across the highway, almost directly opposite the entrance to the Baglio drive. A thousand yards from the road's edge, the woodlands broke for several hundred feet, providing a clean, grassy, somewhat sloped expanse of land between arms of the forest.

"Good enough," Tucker said.

They went that way and, five minutes later, were on the ground. Norton cut the engines, let the blades stutter down. The bees began to fly out of Tucker's ears, until the numbed ringing was gone and he could hear once more.

"Now what?" Norton asked.

"Now, you'll wait here while I go telephone a colleague," Tucker said, working loose of the seat belt and the shoulder harness which had bitten deep into his flesh.

Norton stretched his long legs as well as he could in the recess below the control dash and looked around at the pine trees. "I know you're clever at organizing operations, Mike. God knows, I've been in the thick of two of them, and I could tell as much about your expertise without knowing just what in the hell was going on. But I can't believe that you've had a branch line run into these woods just on the off chance that you might have to telephone someone from here."

Tucker smiled. "No branch line. But there's a picnic area not too far from here, along the main highway, with a phone booth at the end of it. Sit tight until I get back."

He pushed open the heavy copter door, jumped out, reached up and slammed the door shut. Fifteen minutes later he made his call from the booth in the picnic area. An hour after that, Jimmy Shirillo drove into the parking lot in his red Corvette, cut the engine and climbed out, smiling.

Another man got out of the low-slung car. He was at least twenty years older than Tucker, about Pete Harris's age, though he was slim and almost delicate-looking, like Shirillo, quite unlike the bearish Harris. He wore heavy-rimmed glasses with thick lenses, combed his hair back from his forehead and looked, from the neck up, much like a turn-of-the-century schoolmaster. From the neck down he looked not unlike a hippie, in bellbottom blue jeans and a rumpled blue work shirt with the cuffs rolled up. He looked at Tucker, smiled slightly, bent back into the Corvette to get his equipment which he had packed into a shoulder-slung leather satchel and a small metal suitcase.

Shirillo introduced them—Ken Willis, photographer—and let them shake hands. Willis's handshake was indifferent, as if he felt formalities of this sort were a waste of time. Close up, Tucker saw in him an impatience, a need to keep moving, a quality that was unsettlingly like his own.

"You know what we want?" he asked Willis.

"Jimmy told me the most of it."

To Shirillo Tucker said, "Are you sure of him?"

"Of course. He's my uncle, on my mother's side, by marriage."

"For one thing," Willis explained, "even if I were willing to sell out on you, I wouldn't know where the hell to go to do it. My line is mostly weddings and freelance nude photography for men's magazines."

"Good enough," Tucker said. "It's a fifteen-minute walk to the helicopter. Jimmy, you'll stay here with the car until we come back. You can pretend you got sleepy driving and pulled off for a nap—that is, if a cop stops and wants to know if you're just loitering. We'll be back before dark, I hope."

Shirillo returned to the car.

Tucker picked up Willis's heavy metal suitcase and said, "Across the highway. We'll wait until there aren't any cars coming before we try it. We don't want to stir up anyone's curiosity."

The big red summer sun had already touched the peak of the mountain on which the Baglio mansion rested, caressed the gentle ridgeline with bright fingers and slowly began to settle out of sight. Full darkness was still more than an hour away, the true sunset obscured by the mountainside, but even so they were going to have to scramble to get done everything they had come here for.

Norton took them over the roof of the huge white house, a dozen yards above the television antennae, peeled to
the right when they had reached the end of the lawn and circled back, swept over the house from the opposite
direction, even closer this time.

"Can you get it like that?" Norton shouted.

Willis shook his head vehemently, negatively. "I'll either have to hang out of the door or shoot through the nose
glass here." He reached across the narrow dash and thumped his knuckles on the windshield. They made a hollow
tok, tok, tok sound.

"I can stand her on end a little," Norton said.

"And do it going away from the sun," Willis said, "so there's no glare against the glass."

Tucker sat in the seat directly behind Norton, watching the mansion closely, waiting for the first sign of Baglio's
bodyguards. He wondered what they'd think when they came dashing out and found a police helicopter buzzing their
retreat.

Norton stood the helicopter on its nose at a thirty-five-degree angle, slanted enough so that they all slid forward
on their seats, testing the belts that bound them in.

"Good," Willis said.

The photographer had loaded his camera, unfastened his seat belt and was now out of his bucket-form chair,
leaning across the dash, his face pressed close to the window as he focused and shot one frame after another.

Paul Norton didn't like the fact that Willis wasn't strapped down, but he didn't say much about it. He concentrated
on keeping the copter's flight path as even and steady as possible so that there was little chance of Willis being
thrown around.

Below, two men came out of the front door of the white house and looked up at the circling craft, raised flattened
hands to shield their eyes from the last direct glints of sunlight that touched the polished framework and the
windshield of the copter as it fluttered in a tight little turn. They were, Tucker saw, the next thing to nonentities, two
husky muscle types, their sports coats hanging open so that guns would be more quickly at hand.

Tucker leaned forward and said, almost in Norton's ear, "The glass isn't bulletproof, is it?"

"Plexiglass," Norton said. "It'll deflect a pistol shot pretty well, even if we were close enough for them to use
handguns. Even when it cracks under rifle fire, it can throw the slug away first."

Tucker remained forward in his seat, bracing himself against the back of Norton's seat, staring down through the
tilted nose window. "I think we have enough front-to-back shots. Let's try cruising it from end to end."

Norton obliged, brought the copter around in a whine of engine noise, coasted the length of the mansion while
Willis busily used his camera.

Baglio himself had come out of the house and stood in front of the pillared promenade in the circular driveway,
looking up at the copter. Right now he would be wondering whether they knew that Bachman was in the house or
whether this was only routine police harassment. He would be wondering, too, how he could get Bachman out of the
mansion under their noses if they should land with a search warrant. Tucker hoped that, when Norton took them
away from here without landing, Baglio didn't panic and have Bachman killed and buried. It would be so easy for
him to have the driver tucked away in a grave beneath the pine trees upslope of the house. Of course, Bachman
might already be dead. He might have talked and been put to sleep without the proper honors.

Tucker said, "Can you take her down and parallel the house so Willis can get some ground shots of all four
sides?"

"Sure," Norton said.

He leveled the machine and, when they were behind the mansion, took it down within five feet of the lawn while
the photographer took his shots through the side window. When they came around in front of the house, where
Baglio and his two men were standing, the hoods danced quickly back out of the way of the chopping blades that
were still much too high to reach them but which must have looked sobering anyway. They were too busy, then, to
notice the copter's occupants.

"Now up," Tucker said. "Let's get some shots of the house in perspective, the entire lawn and the perimeter of the
forest."

When that was done, Norton said, "Next?"

"That's it," Tucker said. "Let's get back to home base."

By the time they landed on the grassy floor of the forest clearing nearly two miles from Baglio's mansion, Willis
had packed away all of his gear and was ready to go. The moment the chattering rotors began to stutter down into
silence, he pushed open his door and jumped out, reached back inside and dragged his two cases of equipment after
him.

"Wait a moment," Norton said as Tucker pushed Willis's seat forward and made to follow the photographer.

"Yeah?"

Norton said, "Obviously, you're going in there. Since you told me to be ready for four passengers-and since I've
only heard about three of you so far—it seems likely you're going in to get back a man of yours."

Tucker said nothing.

Norton continued: "Wouldn't they be expecting something like this—the copter and all?"

"No," Tucker said. "They're expecting small-time tactics, if they're expecting anything at all. They're very secure
up there, or think they are. Besides, I'm sure they were altogether misled by the police insignia on the copter."

"That's another thing," Norton said. "Wouldn't they think it's pretty odd to be harassed like this? Wouldn't they be
making regular payoffs to eliminate just this kind of hassle?"

"Not to state police," Tucker said. "There are rotten apples in every police force, and they probably do carry a
couple of the state boys on their payroll, but they can't buy off one of the toughest and best forces in the country.
The price would be too high."

Norton said, "Okay. I wasn't being nosey. I just wanted to know what to expect the next time I have to take this
crate in there. If they're going to have me figured out and be waiting for me, then I want to know about it." He
stretched again, arched his back and pressed upward against his seat belt.

"They won't be expecting you," Tucker said. "A flat guarantee."

"I'll be here when you need me."

Tucker jumped out, took the two briefcases that Norton handed to him, one with less than five thousand cash
packed into it, the other containing the guns. He also handed down a soft khaki tote bag with a heavy load in the
bottom, special equipment that Tucker had asked him to supply when he had originally called him from the
department-store phone that morning. Tucker carried the briefcases in one hand, since they were both slim, the tote
bag in the other, led Willis back into the woods and, fifteen minutes later, to the red Corvette where Jimmy Shirillo
was still feigning sleep.

By a quarter of ten they were in the city again. Merle Bachman had been in Baglio's hands slightly over thirty-six
hours.
In the dream he lay upon a soft bed, the covers drawn away from him, a feather pillow propping his head up. The room was almost completely dark, though swaths of soft blue light striped the thick carpeting and made odd shadows on the walls; the source of the light, though he looked for it, was not apparent. Elise Ramsey appeared on the far side of the room, held for a moment in a band of blue light, like a specimen in a collection, on display, then stepped forward into shadow. She was nude, striding toward him with the confidence of a lioness. She came out of shadow into light again, cupping her heavy breasts in her hands, making him an offering, one that he was instantly willing to accept. She stepped into shadow again, reappeared in light, all slickly moving, sinuous curves. He would have been aroused to full ability in another moment—except that he saw the incredible hand rising up behind her, the hand that she was clearly unaware of and which, even had he warned her, was moving too fast for her to avoid. It was large enough to cup Elise in its palm, a giant's hand that faded away into the darkness of the ceiling just beyond the thick wrist. The fingers were spread to encircle her, the flesh gray and cold and rigid in appearance. It was an iron fist, and it would crush her in another moment. What made the dream metamorphose into a nightmare was not the fact that she would be squashed like an insect, or even the understanding that the hand would come after Tucker when it was finished with the girl, but the certainty that the hand did not belong to Baglio this time. This time, the iron hand was his father's. Shadow and blue light, bare breasts, stiffened nipples and the convulsing grasp of iron digits.

"Hey!"

Tucker blinked.

"You all right?" Pete Harris asked, shaking his shoulder gently but insistently. "You okay, friend?"

"Yeah," Tucker said, not opening his eyes.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

Tucker sat up and rubbed his eyes, massaged the back of his neck and tried to decide what had crawled into his mouth and died during his nap in Harris's hotel bed. He flicked his tongue around and didn't find any corpse, decided that he must have swallowed it and that he would have to scrub his teeth well to get rid of the last traces of its demise.

"Jimmy's here," Harris said. "He's got everything you told him to bring back."

Tucker looked up, saw Shirillo across the bed, sitting in a chair by the standard-model hotel writing desk. Several paper bags with store names on them rested on the floor near his feet. "What kind of job did your uncle do on the photographs?"

"Great," Shirillo said. "Wait till you see them."

"Have them ready for me," Tucker said. He got up and went into the bathroom, closed the door behind him. He felt like hell, stiff and weary, though he had been asleep for only an hour and a half. He looked at his watch. One o'clock in the morning. Make it a two-hour nap. Still and all, he should not feel as bad as this. He splashed water in his face, dried off, found Harris's toothpaste and squeezed a worm of it onto his index finger, then scrubbed his teeth without benefit of a genuine brush. It didn't do much good for the tartar that had built up since this morning, but it freshened his breath and made him feel somewhat more human than he had when he woke up.

Back in the main room, he found that they had positioned the three chairs at the writing desk and had a stack of 8 x 10 glossies lying there for his inspection. He took the middle chair which they had left for him and picked up the stack of pictures, went through them carefully, selected a dozen and gave the rest to Shirillo. The boy put them in a plain brown envelope and put the envelope out of their way.

"We'll be ready to go in half an hour," Tucker told them, "if you pay attention the whole way through."

"You have it all figured out?" Harris asked.

"Not all of it," Tucker said, aware of Harris's streak of stubbornness. The big man had gone along with everything Tucker ordered up to now, but he would have his limits. It was best to make him think he played an equal role in at least part of the planning. "I'll want your comments and suggestions so we can hammer out the fine points."

"What if Bachman's dead?" Harris asked.

"Then we're wasting our time, but we don't lose anything."

"We could get killed," Harris said.

"Look at the photographs, please," Tucker said. "They cost me nearly three hundred dollars."

Harris shrugged and settled back in his chair, quiet. He looked at the photographs, listened to what Tucker had to say, looked as though he wanted to put his Thompson together and caress it for a while, began to make a few suggestions and finally regained his nerve. He was getting old, with twenty-five years in the business; no one blamed him for being a little more on edge than his colleagues. They'd be the same way in two more decades, if they
On the drive out of the city, Shirillo behind the wheel of a stolen Buick that Tucker had picked up only a few blocks from the hotel, Harris in back with his Thompson across his lap, Tucker hungrily devoured two Hershey chocolate bars and watched the occasional headlights of other cars blur by them. He had not eaten since breakfast, but the candy stopped his stomach growling and steadied his hands, which had become slightly palsied. The food did not, however, do anything about the shakes that had hold of his insides, and he resisted an urge to hug himself for warmth.

Eventually, they pulled off onto the familiar picnic area three quarters of a mile beyond Baglio's private road and stopped behind another car.

"It's empty," Shirillo said.

Harris had leaned forward, and he said, "Couple of kids parking."

Shirillo grinned and shook his head. "If it was that, the windows would be all steamed."

"What do we do?" Harris asked.

Wishing he had another Hershey bar, Tucker said, "We sit here and wait, that's all."

"What if nobody shows up, my friend?"

"We'll see," Tucker said.

A minute later two tall, well-dressed black men walked out of the woods behind the picnic area, making casually for the parked car, one of them still zipping up his fly.

"The call of nature," Shirillo said. "You'd think the state could afford a few comfort stations along a highway like this."

The black men gave the Buick only a cursory glance, not at all afraid of whom they might encounter in a lonely spot like this, got into their own car, started up and drove away.

"Okay,' Tucker said, getting out of the car.

Harris rolled down his window and called to Tucker, "Maybe we ought to hide it better than we planned-in case there's anyone else with a bad bladder problem."

"You're right," Tucker said.

Using a flashlight, Tucker inspected the edge of the woods, found a place between the trees where the Buick could squeeze through, motioned to Shirillo. The kid drove the big car into the woods, following Tucker as he cautiously picked out a route that led deeper and deeper into the underbrush. Fifteen minutes later he signaled Shirillo to stop. They were more than a hundred yards from the last picnic table, two hundred from the road, screened by several clumps of thickly grown mountain laurel.

Getting out of the car, Harris said, "Anybody who's prude enough to walk all this way from the road just to take a piss deserves to be shot in the head."

Shirillo and Tucker quickly unloaded all the gear from the Buick and put it on the car roof where everyone could get at it. Quickly they undressed and changed into the clothes which Shirillo had purchased earlier in the evening according to the sizes they had given him. Each man wore his own black socks and shoes, dark jeans that fitted loosely enough to be comfortable in almost any circumstance, midnight-blue shirt and dark windbreaker with large pockets and a hood that could be pulled over the head. Each man drew up his hood and fastened it beneath his chin, tied the drawstrings in a double knot to keep them from loosening.

"You sure have rotten taste, Jimmy."

"Oh?"

"What's the alligator patch on the windbreakers?"

Shirillo reached down and fingered the embroidered alligator on his left breast. "I couldn't find any wind-breakers without them," he said.

"I feel like a kid," Harris said.

Tucker said, "Relax. It could have been worse than an alligator. It might have been a kitten or a canary or something."

"They had kittens," Shirillo said. "But I ruled those out. They also had elephants and tigers, and I couldn't make up my mind between those and the alligators. If you don't like the alligators, Pete, we'll wait here while you exchange your jacket for another one."

"Maybe I'd have liked the tiger," Harris said reflectively, letting the idea roll around in his mind while he spoke.

Tucker said, "What's wrong with elephants?"

"Oh, elephants," Harris said. "Well, elephants always look a little stupid, don't you think? They certainly aren't ferocious; they don't instill fear in anyone. Baglio saw me coming in an elephant-decorated windbreaker, he might think I was the local Good Humor man or someone selling diaper service, something like that. Besides, I've been a
lifelong Democrat, and elephants aren't my insignia."

"You vote?" Shirillo asked, surprised.

"Sure, I vote."

Both Shirillo and Tucker laughed.

Harris looked perplexed, rubbed at the alligator on his chest and said, "What's wrong with that?"

"It just seems strange," Tucker explained, "that a wanted criminal is a registered voter."

"I'm not wanted yet," Harris said. "I was wanted twice before, but I served less than two years both times. I'm a clean citizen now. I feel it's my duty to vote in every election." He looked at them, at what he could see of them in the dark. "Don't you two vote?"

"No," Shirillo said. "I've only been eligible a few years, and I just never got around to it. I don't see what good it does."

"You?" Harris asked Tucker.

Tucker said, "Politics never interested me. I know people who spend half their lives worrying about how everything's going to hell in a basket-and it all goes to hell in a basket anyway. I figure I'll survive no matter what nincompoop the public puts in office next."

"That's just terrible," Harris said, clearly taken aback at their unpatriotic sloth. "It's a good thing neither one of you has any kids. You'd be the kind of parents who'd set rotten examples."

Tucker and Shirillo laughed again.

"Come on," Tucker said, prying the lid off a small can of greasepaint, "Let me blacken your face."

"What for?" Harris asked.

"For one thing," Tucker said, "it'll make it harder for anyone to see you in the dark. More important, with a hood over your hair and black paint covering your face, it's going to be difficult for Baglio or any of them to make a positive identification of you later. Change a man's facial color, and you alter him almost as thoroughly as if he'd donned a mask. And in the close work we'll be doing tonight, a mask wouldn't be good; it would just get in the way. The greasepaint will conceal you and give you the optimum in mobility, the use of your eyes."

Grunting unhappily, Harris submitted to this indignity, all the while fingering the outline of the raised green alligator on his breast.

Ten minutes later they had all been black-faced, the paint put aside with the clothes they had taken off.

"Now?" Harris asked, plainly expecting yet another indignity.

"I'll show you the guns," Tucker said.

"I always use the Thompson," Harris said, lifting it away from the car where he had leaned it.

"You'll take it along," Tucker agreed. "But you'll use it only if you have to. If at all possible, you'll keep it shoulder-slung and you'll use this." He got out the three Lügers and three silencers, fitted the parts and distributed the weapons. He divided up the clips of ammunition, four each, and supervised the loading.

"Very nice," Harris said.

Tucker relaxed as the big man strapped the submachine gun over his shoulder and tested the pistol in his hand.

"Keep the ammunition zipped into the right-hand pocket of your windbreaker."

Harris said, "Holsters?"

"None," Tucker said.

"Gun goes in left-hand pocket?"

"No. Keep the pistol out at all times."

"Sometimes you need both hands for other things," Harris said.

"Not tonight, I think. We've got to keep a gun ready. For one thing, getting that damn long silenced barrel out of a holster could be tricky in a pinch. For another, once we're in the house, we could be come upon and shot before we had time to draw. Remember, Baglio keeps at least four armed men in that place, four professionals. And it's their home ground, not ours."

Shirillo had been unable to learn exactly how many people lived in the Baglio mansion.

Tucker took out a special belt from which hung a number of tools in thin plastic pouches. He pulled up his windbreaker, buckled the belt around his waist, drew the jacket down again.

"Shirillo get you that?" Harris asked.

"Yes."

"Looks like a nice set."

"It is," Shirillo said. "I picked each piece myself, spent a couple of weeks honing them where that was necessary, made up the belt and the pouches in my brother's shoe-repair shop."

Harris scratched his blackened chin, looked at the tips of his fingers, said, "You think we'll have to break in, then?"
"If all the main doors and unlocked windows look too damn inviting," Tucker said, "we'll make our own entrance."

Harris nodded.

"One more thing," Tucker said. He got the khaki tote bag that Paul Norton had given him that afternoon, opened it and took out two compact walkie-talkies. He gave one to Shirillo and took one himself, strapped it to his shoulder and let it hang down against his right biceps. He explained the operation of the radios to Shirillo, insisted that they test them, was finally satisfied that the boy knew what he was doing.

"I don't get one?" Harris asked.

"You're already carrying the machine gun," Tucker pointed out. "It may be necessary to split up and be out of each other's sight. I won't, however, have us cut into three separate units. You'll always be with either Jimmy or me, and when we've gone two different ways, we can keep in contact with these. Later on, of course, we'll need them to get in touch with Paul."

"The copter jockey?" Harris asked.

"Yes."

"I'm anxious to meet him."

"You will before long."

They gathered up everything that had not been in the Buick when they stole the car—the clothes they had taken off, the attaché case in which the three pistols had lain, the bags the clothes they were now wearing had come in, the black greasepaint, all the sales slips-stuffed everything into the tote bag that the walkie-talkies had been in. The bag was filled to bulging.

"Back in a jiffy," Tucker said.

He took a five-minute walk into the woods, much deeper than the car had gone, and, when he felt he was far enough away from the Buick, he heaved the tote bag away into the dark trees. It glanced off a pine trunk, struck something else, landed with a crash in deep greenery and was still. Good enough, then. He went back to the others.

They took ten minutes to wipe down the Buick, inside and out, until they were sure no one would pick up any prints from it. They had not worried about prints on the stolen Chevy and Dodge that had been wrecked up in Baglio's estate the day before, because they knew that Baglio would have those wrecks tucked away and that the police would never have a chance to go over them. This was different, for the Buick would be abandoned here and would eventually be returned to its proper owner. Though Harris's fingerprints were on file, neither Shirillo nor Tucker had been inked into public records yet. Shirillo was too young to have been caught yet; Tucker was simply too careful. Also, Tucker had never been printed in his real identity as the man with the penthouse apartment on Park Avenue, and he most likely never would be; the rich are seldom subjected to that kind of humiliation unless the case against them is as tight as an angry fist, and Tucker intended to be perfectly law-abiding in his real identity. Printed as Tucker, then, his true name and background could be kept a secret, even if he was arrested and had to serve time—although, once out on bail, he could ditch the Tucker name forever and slip back into the Park Avenue world without much worry about being traced and apprehended. As Tucker, however, having his prints on file would severely limit his mobility.

Tucker shut the last open door of the Buick, using his handkerchief to keep it clean. He put the handkerchief in his pocket and turned to Shirillo. "Time?"

Shirillo looked at his watch in the pale yellow glow of the flashlight, and he said, "A quarter to three."

"Plenty of time," Tucker said.

Around them, the darkness was complete when Shirillo flicked off the light. The thickly criss-crossed boughs of the pines even held back the dim brightness of the stars.

Tucker said, "Have we forgotten anything?" He knew that they had not, but he wanted to give Pete Harris the feeling that he was helping to guide the operation.

No one responded.

Checking the flimsy rubber surgical gloves which they'd all put on when they'd changed clothes, Tucker said, "Let's go, then. We've got a good piece of walking to do, and we can use the flashlight for only about half of it."

They struck out for Baglio's mansion, while the night closed in around them, and the silenced crickets near the Buick, alone again, took up their chirruping.
Their line of march paralleled the main highway, though they remained out of sight of it. In a while they came across Baglio's private macadam lane. Moving back into the woods again, still guided by the flashlight beam, they followed the twisting lane as it cut inland, and they began to move upward into worn limestone foothills. The trees were thick, as was the brambled underbrush. But deer, smaller animals and the run-off from rainstorms had pressed paths through the weaker vegetation. These natural trails often wandered considerably between two points, but they afforded an easier way than any of the men could have chosen with the jumble of bushes, rocks, gullies and brambles on all sides. To make up for the extra distance they had to cover, they jogged thirty paces for every ten they walked, running as far as they could for three minutes, cutting back to a walk for one, running another three, walking again. Tucker wanted to be within sight of the mansion by three-thirty and inside of it no later than a quarter to four. That still gave them plenty of time before dawn to do everything they would need to do.

Running through the darkness with the crazily bobbing light picking out the narrow trail ahead of him, Tucker was reminded of the nightmare that he had experienced in Harris's hotel room: the hand descending suddenly out of shadows, moving stealthily through bands of darkness and blue light, stalking the nude Elise.

He could not shake off the insane conviction that the same hand was behind him now, that it had already disposed of Harris in a most brutal fashion, that it was wrapping around Shirillo at that very moment and would be gripping him in cold iron fingers any time now.

He ran, then walked, then ran some more, listening to the matching steps of the two men behind him.

Twice they stopped to rest for exactly two minutes at a stretch, but they did not speak to each other. Drawing breath was all they cared about. They stared at the ground, wiped sweat out of their eyes and, when their time was up, moved on again. Harris's breathing was the most labored, whether from exhaustion alone or from fear as much as weariness Tucker couldn't say. A life of crime wasn't meant for any but young men.

Fifteen minutes after they had started out, Tucker flicked off the flashlight and slowed their pace considerably. At 3:35 in the morning they came to the perimeter of the forest and the beginning of Baglio's immaculately cared-for lawn.

In the forest, as they were on the way up from the picnic area where they had changed clothes, a thin layer of ground fog had clung to the bottoms of the trees and twined through the undergrowth like a tangle of wispy rags, now and again obscured the way ahead, cold and wet and clinging. Here in the open the aisles of trees funneled the fog between them, poured it onto the shrub-dotted lawn where it lay like piles and piles of heavy quilts. The lights on the front promenade, under the pillars, were diffused by it, as were the dimmer lights that shone through a few downstairs windows. The result was an eerie wash of yellow light that filled the immediate lawn about the house but illuminated nothing, lay upon the dense shadows but did not disperse them.

Tucker, Harris and Shirillo lay in the woods at the edge of the mowed grass and studied the stillness of the early-morning scene, not wanting to find any movement up there but more or less resigned to it. Apparently there were no guards prowling the grounds, though one or more of them might be stationed at fixed points from which they could scan the entire lawn. Tucker knew that was a strong possibility, but he pretty much rejected it anyway. Baglio would not be expecting them to return. There was no reason for him to mount an extraordinary guard tonight unless he had been especially impressed with the state-police helicopter during the day. That was possible, Tucker supposed, but not very likely. Baglio's sort did not like policemen much, but they were not as paranoid about them as a lesser criminal-say, a common burglar or mugger-might have been. For Ross Baglio, there were always payoffs that could be made, influence that could be bought; or, failing that, there were always top-notch lawyers, bail bonds and an eventual dismissal of the charges on one ground or another.

"Probably inside the house this early in the morning, this kind of weather," Harris whispered.

"Of course," Tucker said.

"As planned, then?"

"As planned."

Harris went first. He crouched so that he was only half his normal height, and he ran toward a line of shrubbery that ringed the inside of the circular driveway and provided a well-concealed vantage point from which they could safely gauge the presence of sentries at any of the front windows. For a moment there was the sound of his receding footsteps, soft, wet hissing as he disturbed the dewy grass. Then there was nothing at all. The fog swallowed him completely.

"He'll be in place now," Tucker whispered.

"Right," Shirillo said.

The boy ran now, making even less noise than Harris had, bent even lower. The heavy fog opened up and swallowed him too, in one gulp, leaving Tucker completely alone.
And alone, Tucker remembered the nightmare more vividly than ever: the shadows and the light, the reaching hand. He felt an itch between his shoulder blades, a dull cold ache of expectancy in the back of his neck.

He rose and, crouching, ran to join the others.

They lay on their stomachs behind the evenly trimmed hedge on the inside of the driveway fifty yards from the front doors of the mansion. Through breaks in the foliage they had a good view. The fog was not thick enough to shroud the house altogether at such a short distance, but it did dull the outlines of the roof and softened the joints between slabs of siding so that the place appeared to be made of a single piece of expertly carved alabaster. From their position they could see all the windows on the front of the house: four of them backed by dull yellow light, six of them perfectly dark on the first level; all ten windows on the second floor were dark.

"Been watching," Harris said.
"And?"
"I don't think anyone's at the windows."
"That's unlikely."
"Just the same Watch them and see."
Five minutes later Shirillo said, "I don't see anyone, either."
"Four windows are lighted," Tucker said.

Harris said, "I didn't say there wasn't anyone inside there, awake. I just don't think there's anyone watching the windows. Probably that's because of the fog; they figure they wouldn't see much of anything even if there was something to see."

In a few minutes Tucker was willing to agree that they were not being watched. If one of Baglio's men were standing at any of the front windows, on either floor, in a darkened room, he would most certainly be visible as a lighter gray blur against the deeper blackness of the room behind him. There was only half a moon, and the light from that was considerably diluted by the fog; still, a man's face positioned only inches from the glass ought to reflect enough light to stand out plainly to any knowledgeable observer. The lighted windows, of course, would have clearly revealed any posted guard; those windows were empty, the rooms beyond them apparently quiet and still.

"Well?" Harris asked.

Nerves. A case of nerves. After all, he was twenty-five years in this business, with two tours of a federal prison already behind him. He was too old and had weathered too much to risk getting shot down by a Mafia gunman in the pursuit of something as quixotic as tonight's goal; they would bury him above the house, in the woods, where his body would decompose, the component minerals washing down the slope to fertilize a hood's landscaped estate. In the grave, the only things that would survive the flesh were his bones-and the vinyl windbreaker with its alligator insignia. So Harris had a case of nerves. Of course, everyone had nerves; that definition of his condition was imprecise. Still, one day Tucker would be the same as Harris, tensed to the breaking point, promising himself he would retire, taking that "one last job" over and over again, until his case of nerves led to one final misjudgment.

No. It would not be that way for Tucker, because he would have his inheritance by then. His father would be dead, his problems solved. It was, he thought, a sad way to have to live: waiting for your father to croak.

Tucker studied the house one last time to make sure he knew what he was doing. All four of the ground-floor windows which had light behind them were to the left; the six dark windows on that level were all on the right of the huge white double doors. Tucker nodded toward the un-lighted glass and said, "One of those."

"Not the doors?" Harris asked.
"Bound to be locked," Tucker said. "Try for the next to the last window. The telephone wires feed in there, too."

The submachine gun held at hip level in one hand, his finger on the trigger, clutching the silenced Lüger in the other hand, Harris got up and ran lightly, quickly, to a place along the front wall to the left of the second window. No one cried out.

"Go," Tucker said.

Shirillo followed Harris without incident.

Tucker brought up the rear, used a small set of shears that he carried in his windbreaker to cut the telephone wires as planned. He had stopped directly before the window which he was going to open, but he saw no use in shielding himself from it. If anyone was in the room beyond, he was going to know about Tucker soon enough when he cut the glass.

Move ass.

Tucker unbuckled his belt of tools and handed it to Shirillo. He'd intended to break into the house himself, because he trusted his own ability to make the entrance in silence. Now, he belatedly realized that Shirillo must be good at this (why else would he own a custom-made set of tools?) and that the boy would get them in faster since the instruments and the pouch were his and were more familiar to him than to Tucker. "Ever done this?" Tucker asked unnecessarily, in as low a voice as he could use and still be heard.
"Often."
Tucker nodded, stepped back, took Shirillo's pistol and watched him as he knelt before the dark glass.

Pete Harris turned and faced the longest length of the mansion, waiting for someone to appear at the far end of the promenade or to step out of the front doors. If they came through the doors, they'd be near enough to be taken out with the pistol; if they came from the far end of the house, however, a pistol shot wouldn't be accurate, and the Thompson would come in handy. He held both weapons slack in his hands, parallel with his legs, so that they would not unduly tire his arms but so he could bring them up fast in an emergency.

There very well might be one, too.

Tucker wished the place were less well lighted. Directly above his head, in the promenade ceiling, a hundred-watt bulb burned inside a protective wire cage.

Tucker faced away from Harris, in the opposite direction, and thought it might be a good idea to step to the corner of the house where he could command a view of the side lawn as well as of the driveway. He took a single step in that direction just before one of Baglio's men appeared.

He was tall and lean and broad across the shoulders, not at all stupid-looking but stamped by the same die as the gunmen who had been riding in the back of the Cadillac when Tucker and the others had forced it to stop on the mountain road only two days ago. Perhaps he was one of them. He was strolling along, distracted by his thoughts, slouched into himself as if he had been folded at the middle. He was looking at the ground in front of his feet. He didn't suspect a thing. Abruptly, however, as if he had been warned by some extrasensory perception, a sudden clairvoyance, he snapped his head up, his eyes wide, hand moving beneath his jacket with the oiled sureness and the economy of movement that signified a trained professional.

No, Tucker wanted to say. Don't make me. Relax. You haven't got a chance, and you know it.

The gunman had his pistol half in the open when Tucker put a shot into him, high in the chest, by the right shoulder.

The gunman dropped his pistol.

It clattered softly on the concrete promenade floor.

The shot had pushed him half around, so that he leaned back against the wall and, just now beginning to reach for his shoulder, fell forward and lay still.
Despite the high risk associated with his profession, Tucker had only twice been pressed into a position where he had no choice but to kill a man. Once, it had been a crooked cop who tried to force his point with a handgun; the second time it was a man who'd been working with Tucker on a job and who'd decided there was really no sense in splitting the proceeds when one shot from his miniature pearl-handled revolver would eliminate that economic unpleasantness and make him twice as rich. The cop was fat and slow. The partner with the pearl-handled revolver was as affected in every habit as he was in his choice of handguns. He didn't choose to shoot Tucker in the back, which would have been the smartest move, but wanted instead to explain to Tucker, in the course of a melodramatic scene, in very theatrical terms what he intended to do. He wanted to see Tucker's face as death approached, he said. He'd been very surprised when Tucker took the revolver away from him, and even more surprised when, during the brief struggle, he was shot.

Both kills had been clean and quick, on the surface; but both of them had left an ugly residue long after the bodies had been buried and begun to rot. For months after each murder Tucker was bothered by hideous nightmares in which the dead men appeared to him in a wide variety of guises, sometimes in funeral shrouds, sometimes cloaked in the rot of the grave, sometimes as part animal-goat, bull, horse, vulture, always with a human head-sometimes as they looked when they were alive, sometimes as children with the heads of adults, sometimes as voluptuous women with the heads of men and as balls of light and clouds of vapor and nameless things that he was nonetheless able to identify as the men he had killed. In the few months immediately following each kill, he woke nearly every night, a scream caught in the back of his throat, his hands full of damp sheets.

Elise was always there to comfort him.

He couldn't tell her what had caused the dreams, and he would pretend that he didn't understand them or, sometimes, that he didn't even remember what they had been.

She didn't believe him.

He was sure of her disbelief, though she never showed it in her manner or in her face and never probed with the traditional questions. She could not know and could hardly suspect the real cause of them, but she simply didn't care about that. All she was interested in was helping him get over them.

Some nights, when she cradled him against her breasts, he could take one of her nipples in his mouth as a child might, and he would be, in time, pacified in the manner of a child. He wasn't ashamed of this, only welcomed it as a source of relief, and he did not feel any less a man for having clung to her in this manner. Often, when the fear had subsided, his lips would rove outward from the nipple, changing the form of comfort she offered, now offering her a comfort of his own.

He wondered how other people who had killed handled the aftermath, the residue of shame and guilt, the deep sickness in the soul.

How, for instance, did Pete Harris handle it? He'd killed, by his own admission, six men during the last twenty-five years, not without cause-and countless others before that, during the war when he had carried the Thompson and used it indiscriminately. Did Harris wake up at night pursued by demons? Dead men? Minotaurs and harpies with familiar human faces? If he did, how did he comfort himself, or who comforted him? It was difficult to imagine that lumbering, red-faced, bull-necked man in the arms of someone like Elise. Perhaps he never had been consoled and nursed out of his nightmares. Perhaps he still carried them all inside him, a pool of that dark, syrupy residue of death. That would explain the bad nerves as well as anything.

"I think his shoulder's broken," Shirillo said, looking up from the wounded gunman.

"He's not dead?"

"You didn't mean him to be, did you?" the kid asked.

"No," Tucker said. "But a silenced pistol can kick off the mark, even if it's been well machined."

"He's bleeding," Shirillo said. "But it's not arterial blood, and it won't kill him."

"What now?" Harris asked.

Tucker knelt and looked at the gunman's wound, peeled back his eyelids, felt for and found the rapid beat of his heart. "He'll come to before long, but he'll be in shock. He won't be any threat if we leave him behind."

"He could sound a warning," Harris said.

Shirillo said, "He's not going to have the strength for that, even if he's thinking clearly enough to try it."

"We could gag him."

"And maybe kill him if the gag triggers convulsions," Tucker said. "No. We'll just take him inside with us and tuck him in a closet and hope for the best."

Shirillo nodded, still cool, much cooler than Tucker would have expected him to be at a time like this, and he went back to the window, finished applying the masking tape to the center pane, cut a circle of glass, lifted that out
of the way, reached in and carefully felt around with his fingers. "Wires," he said. "An alarm."

"Know the type?" Tucker whispered.

"Maybe. Flashlight, please."

Tucker took that out of his windbreaker pocket and handed it over.

Shirillo flicked the light on and directed it through the hole he had cut in the window glass, angled the beam left and right, grunted softly as if confirming something he already thought to be true, flicked the light off and returned it to Tucker.

"Well?"

"I know it."

"Built in?"

"No. The wire loops through two brass guide rings screwed into the base of the window. When I lift the window, I stretch the wire and trip the alarm—if I'm stupid."

"You aren't stupid," Harris said.

"Thanks. I needed your reassurance."

Tucker said, "How long to finish with it—two or three minutes?"

"Less."

"Go on, then."

Working more quickly than Tucker himself would have been able to, Shirillo taped and cut another pane in the bottom row of the window segments, lifted that out of the way and, using the special tools in his pouch, reached inside and worked the guide rings free of the wood. That done, the wire would lie in place on the sill no matter how high the window was lifted. Finished, he returned the tools to his pouch, belted that around his waist beneath his jacket. Reaching through the window with both hands, he freed the latch and carefully slid the whole works up high enough for a man to pass under it. The frame was a tight fit, and the window remained open.

"You first," Tucker said.

Shirillo hunched and went inside.

"Help me with him," Tucker said, indicating the wounded man who was still unconscious on the promenade floor.

He and Harris put their guns down and lifted the guard, worked the man through the window and into the darkened room, where Shirillo helped settle him gently to the floor. They had to work more carefully and take more time with the man than they would have if he'd been dead. But that was okay. That was fine. At least there wouldn't be any nightmares this way.

"Now you," Tucker said.

Harris handed his Thompson through the open window and went in quickly after it, as if he would be unable to function if the weapon were out of his hands and out of sight for more than a brief moment. He had to twist himself around painfully to force his bulk through that narrow frame, but he didn't protest, made no sound at all.

Tucker picked up the circles of glass that had been cut from the window panes, peeled the tape off the window around the holes and passed these through to Shirillo, then looked around to see if they'd left any other trace of their work here.

Blood.

He studied the pattern of the blood on the promenade floor where the wounded man had lain. There was not much of it, because the blood had come in a thick trickle rather than a spurt, and the guard's clothes had absorbed most of it. Already, what little blood there was had begun to darken and dry. Even if someone passed this way—and that seemed unlikely if this was the wounded man's patrol sector—he might not properly interpret the stain. In any case, there was nothing to be done about it.

He looked around the fog-shrouded front lawn one last time, at the hoary shrubbery, the mist that laced the big trees, the grass made colorless by the dim house lights.

Nothing.

He listened to the night.

Silence.

Except for the wounded man, no one else had discovered them. Now their chances were pretty good. They would finish the job properly. He felt it, beyond intellect, beyond reason. Success was theirs. Almost. Unless Merle Bachman had talked, in which case they were all blown.

He followed Harris through the window and into the house, closed the window behind himself.
"It's a library, friends," Pete Harris said as Tucker let the flashlight play across the big, comfortable reading chairs, an outsized oak desk and hundreds of shelved books.

"A cultured crook," Shirillo said.

Tucker moved cautiously about the room until he was sure that it was clear. He located a closet and helped Shirillo move the unconscious wounded guard into it.

"No turning back from here on out," Harris said.

"Too right," Tucker said.

Cautiously they opened the main library door and filed into the dimly lighted first-floor corridor, closed the door after them. Across the hall another door opened on steps that led down into darkness.

"Basement," Shirillo explained.

"What's there?"

"Swimming pool, sauna, gymnasium."

"This the only entrance?"

"Yeah. Nobody down there at this hour anyway, not in the dark. It's safe enough."

Tucker stared down into the blackness, then shook his head. "Check it anyway," he said.

Shirillo didn't argue. He took the flashlight and went down to the basement, out of sight.

The silence in the house was oppressive, deep and still enough to touch and, in their present state of mind, subtly false, as if they were being witched every moment and had been prepared for.

Not three minutes after Shirillo reached the bottom of the cellar steps, Harris deserted his post from which he had been covering the corridor, went to the open cellar door and looked down into the inkiness. His face was red, beaded with perspiration, and he was trembling slightly. He said, "Come on, friend."

"Take it easy."

"Where is he?"

"Give him a few more minutes."

Harris turned back to the open corridor, obviously unhappy with the waiting, both the machine gun and the pistol raised from his sides. Tucker hoped no one would come upon them accidentally, because Harris couldn't be trusted to use the silenced pistol first. He'd open with the big Thompson, out of habit, out of need, out of fear. He'd ruin any element of surprise.

Two minutes later, as Shirillo had promised, he returned. "No one down there," he said.

Harris smiled and used the back of his pistol hand to wipe the perspiration from his face. He wondered if he was sweating only because he was scared, or because he was rapidly becoming physically exhausted as well. God, he felt old. He felt much older than he really was. This wouldn't be the last job now, with the money gone, but the next one would have to be.

"Let's hustle," Tucker said. He was afraid that if they remained still for much longer, he'd be unable to maintain the composure he was known for. All they needed to louse up this operation was both he and Harris quaking in their boots and only the green kid with any nerve left.

Quickly they opened doors on both sides of the corridor and ascertained that all the rooms beyond were deserted. Past the front entrance to the house and the main staircase, past the foyer with its eagle-print wallpaper, in the other ground-floor wing where the lighted rooms lay, they were almost certain to find things more difficult than this.

Harris watched the closed doors to the two lighted rooms, his Lüger and the machine gun raised into firing position. He was running with sweat and breathing harder and faster than either Tucker or Shirillo. While he stood guard, the other two men opened each of the four doors at the back of the house and examined the rooms there: a small art room, windowless, the walls tastefully hung with original oils; the ultramodern kitchen; a storage room full of canned goods, racked wine and whiskey still in cardboard cases; a full bathroom carpeted in white shag. No one was in any of these rooms. They closed the last two doors almost as one and turned to Harris, who looked as if he were being pulled apart: neck strained so veins and arteries stood out like thick strings, head thrust forward, shoulders drawn up tight toward his ears, feet spread and legs tensed, legs bent at the knees, arms out from his sides with white knuckles bent around the weapons in each hand.

Tucker motioned for Shirillo to accompany him to the end door and directed Harris to take the first. At a signal from Tucker, Shirillo and Harris stepped forward and opened the doors on the lighted rooms, throwing them wide without banging them against the walls.

Tucker saw Harris move quickly into the room on the left as if he had seen someone in there who would need settling down, but he did not wait to see what happened. As the door of the end room began to swing slowly shut again of its own momentum, he preceded Shirillo into the room, where he found a pudgy, mustached, bald-headed
little man sitting up in a Hollywood-style bed, a book open in his hands. "Who are you?" the pudgy man asked.

Tucker leveled the silenced Lüger at the shiny forehead and said, "Shut up."

The stranger shut up.

He turned back to Shirillo and said, "I can handle this one. Go see if everything's all right with our friend."

Shirillo vanished through the open doorway.

Tucker pulled up a chair, facing the man on the Hollywood bed. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" the stranger asked. The book he was reading was a popular sociological study of the criminal mentality, and it had recently reached the best-seller lists. Tucker supposed that was funny, though he didn't laugh.

"Who are you?" he repeated, pushing the gun closer.

The pudgy man blinked. "Keesey. I'm the cook."

"Sit still, Keesey, and don't try to sound an alarm. If you open your mouth once when I don't tell you to, you'll never open it again."

Keesey understood. He sat stiff, still, quiet, blinking at Tucker until Shirillo and Harris entered the room a couple of minutes later.

"Well?" Tucker asked.

"It's all taken care of, my friend," Harris said. "Next door's a big room that two of Baglio's men share. One of them was in there drinking coffee when I opened the door. He looked like he'd just swallowed a frog when he saw me."

"And?"

"I caught him under the chin with the Thompson's butt. I don't think I broke his jaw, but he won't be up and around for a while. Jimmy tied him with his own bed sheets, just to be sure."

"His roomie?" Tucker asked.

Harris said, "Must be the one you got outside." He turned directly to Keesey. "What've we got here?" He was smiling without humor. It was clear to Tucker that Harris was moving closer to the edge, now growing antagonistic without reason.

"The cook," Tucker said.

"What's he say?"

Tucker turned back to Keesey. "How many gunmen does Baglio keep in the house?"

"None," Keesey said.

Tucker reached across the bed, gently lifted the book out of the cook's hands, marked the man's place with a leaf of the dust jacket, put the book down, leaned forward and slammed the barrel of the Lüger alongside the pudgy man's head.

Just in time Keesey remembered not to yelp. He slid down in the bed and rubbed at his bruised skull, drawing deep and trembling breaths.

"How many gunmen does Baglio keep in the house?" Tucker repeated.

The cook said, "Just two."

"The two in the room next to this one?"

"Yes."

"They mount the night watch?"

"Yes."

Tucker said, "No day shift?"

The cook rubbed his bald head, looked at his hand as if he expected to find it covered with fresh blood, said, "We don't need a day guard most of the time. Mr. Baglio has those only on Mondays and Tuesdays every other week."

"What do you think?" Shirillo asked. He was leaning against the wall by the foot of the bed, and he looked twice as thin and as ineffectual as ever.

Tucker shrugged. "If he's lying, I can't tell."

"I wouldn't lie!" the cook said, raising a hand to touch his tender scalp.

Tucker said, "Who's upstairs right now?"

The cook stopped rubbing his head and said, "Mr. Baglio, Henry Deffer, Louise and Martin Halverson-and Miss Loraine."

"Deffer is the chauffeur?"

"Yes."

"Who are the Halversons?"

"Maid and handyman."

"How old?"
"Fifties?" the cook asked, questioning himself. He nodded, grabbed his neck as the pain forced him to stop nodding, said, "Yes, in their fifties somewhere."
"He pack a gun?"
"Halverson?" the cook asked, incredulous.
"Yes, Halverson."
"Of course not!" The cook chuckled. "Did you ever see Halverson?"
"No."
"Well, then-"
"Who is this Miss Loraine?" Tucker asked.

The cook actually blushed and, for a moment, forgot about his wounds. The blush carried over from his face and stained the top of his gleaming skull. He said, "She is a very nice young lady, a very pleasant girl. She's Mr. Baglio's-uh, his-well, his lady."
"They sleep together?"
"Yes."
"Is she a big blonde, well built, tall?" Tucker asked, remembering the girl who had climbed out of the demolished Cadillac.

The cook continued to blush and looked at the other two men as if they might tell him he didn't have to answer that. He looked as if he had never heard much about sex and had certainly never tried it himself. Neither Harris nor Shirillo, of course, told him he was free not to answer. Reluctantly he said, "That's her."
"Now, if you'd tell me the location of each of their rooms, I'd appreciate it immensely."
Keesey said, "What are you going to do with them?"
"That's not your concern."
"It is. I might find myself without a job." He put one hand on his stomach, as if to illustrate the deprivations he might have to face if he were out of his job. "Will you kill Mr. Baglio?"
"No. Not unless he forces us into it."

Keesey looked at them again, one at a time, reached some sort of judgment about them, nodded and, briefly, explained the layout of the rooms on the second floor. Deffer and Halverson and Halverson's wife were all directly overhead, while Baglio and his woman were all alone in the largest wing of the house, on the far side of the main staircase.
"Now, what about the man who was hurt in the wreck?" Tucker said, still smiling, not smiling inwardly, the Lüger ready for another slash at Keesey's head. This time he would use the side of the barrel with the sight on it and tear a little of the cook's skin.
"I don't know anything about him," Keesey said.
"Sure you do."
"No."
"You cooked for him?"
Keesey shook his head back and forth. "He's only been allowed to take liquids."
"He's upstairs?"
"No."
"You just implied he was when you mentioned his restricted diet."
"They moved him this morning," the cook said.
"Alive?"
Keesey squirmed and looked as if he had been insulted. "Well, of course," he said. "Alive, of course."
"Where did they take him?"
More rubbing of his head. Scratching of his mustache. "I don't know anything about that."
"You didn't ask?"
"I never ask Mr. Baglio anything."
Tucker nodded, watched the pudgy man for a moment, sighed and motioned to Shirillo. "Tie and gag him."

Shirillo completed the job in less than five minutes and joined Harris and Tucker where they waited in the corridor. He said, "Do we still go upstairs?"
"Why not?"
"If Bachman isn't there-"
"He's there. I'm sure he is," Tucker said. "That little sonofabitch Keesey was lying."
Shirillo said, "You sure?"
Tucker's smile was broad, visible even in that dim light. "Don't you think Keesey's capable of trying to mislead us?"
"Truthfully, no."

"Why? Because he's fat and he blushes easily?" Tucker shook his head, looked Shirillo up and down. "In that case, I'd say you're too thin and too young to be worth a damn on a job like this. But here you are, and you're holding up your end well enough."

"Okay," Shirillo said. "Then Bachman's upstairs. That's a good sign, isn't it? It must mean he hasn't talked yet."

"Maybe."

Harris said, "Friends, we're wasting time."

"Too right," Tucker said. "Let's go up and say hello to Mr. Baglio."
They climbed to the second floor by way of the back stairs and came out in the wing where Deffer and the Halversons had their quarters. Tucker listened to the stilled corridor, squinted at the deep shadows that lay the length of it, then motioned for Harris and Shirillo to take the door on the left, where, according to Keesey, the maid and the handyman would be sleeping, while he went to the first door on the right and leaned against it, listening. He couldn't hear even the slightest sound behind it. If Henry Deffer had been alerted by their muffled voices in Keesey's room just below his own, he was playing it very cool indeed. Tucker slowly twisted the knob as far around as it would go and eased the bedroom door inward. As if that were a signal, Harris and Shirillo went into the Halversons' room across the hall, flicked on the light there and, briefly, backlighted Tucker until he could locate the switch just inside the door of Deffer's room.

In the sudden burst of bright light the old man sat up as if he'd been given a jolt of electricity, slid quickly to the edge of the bed, jammed his white feet into a tattered pair of slippers and started to stand up.

"Sit down," Tucker said.

Deffer looked like a plucked turkey, his scrawny neck bright red, the stubble of his beard like the pinfeathers that the plucker had missed. He scowled at Tucker and smacked his lips as if he were considering pecking out his adversary's eyes.

"Sit down and be quiet," Tucker said again.

Deffer looked longingly at the top dresser drawer only three steps away. He raised his arms like wings, let them drop to his sides when he realized he couldn't fly, caught himself staring, looked away from the dresser and back at Tucker again. "Punk," he said. He evidently liked the sound of it. He wrinkled up his gray face and said it again: "Punk!" Satisfied that he hadn't been completely cowed, he sat down on the bed as directed.

Tucker went to the dresser and pulled open the top drawer, lifted out a Marley.38 that lay on top of two piles of neatly folded underwear. It was a beautiful gun, well cared for, and it was also fully loaded.

"That's mine!" the chauffeur snapped.

Tucker turned to face him and raised the barrel of the Lüger to his lips, like a long finger, to signal the need for silence. In a thin whisper he said, "Be quiet, or I'll have to kill you with it."

Deffer tried not to look upset.

Tucker unloaded the Marley, admiring the craftsmanship and design even now when the situation would seem to rule out consideration of anything but the job. He put the empty gun and the bullets in the unused pocket of his windbreaker, zipped the pocket shut.

"You don't got a chance-punk," Deffer said.

Smiling falsely, Tucker stepped up to the chauffeur and put the cold end of the silenced barrel against Deffer's forehead. He said, "I asked you to whisper."

Deffer scowled. His teeth were in a glass of water on the night stand, smiling at Tucker like a fragment of the Cheshire cat. Without his dentures he looked older than before. "What do you want?" he asked in a whisper.

"Why don't you relax, just stretch out there on the bed," Tucker directed.

"Cause I don't feel like it," the turkey said, fluffing his wings again, smacking his lips.

"That wasn't a question," Tucker said wearily, motioning with the barrel of the Lüger.

Deffer stretched out on his back.

Tucker got a chair and dragged it to the bed, sat down. He felt less nervous sitting down, because he couldn't feel the weakness in his legs that way. He said, "I'm going to ask questions, and you're going to provide answers. If you lie to me, I'll make sure you don't get a chance to collect your pension from the organization."

Deffer said nothing at all. He simply glared at Tucker with malevolent red-rimmed eyes, lying as stiff and straight as if he were on a plank bed.

Tucker said, "Where's Baglio keeping the man who wrecked the Chevrolet Tuesday morning?"

Deffer's eyes brightened. Clearly he had not connected this affair with the events of Tuesday morning. That was all Tucker had to see to understand why Baglio, a much younger man, was in the driver's seat figuratively, while Deffer was there literally.

The chauffeur cleared his throat and smiled broadly. He said, "You can't get away with this. You punks. Nice bunch of punks. There's guards all over this place."

"You're lying," Tucker said.

"See if I am."

"I've already talked to Keesey. Two guards. One gagged and tied downstairs, the other knocked out by a bullet wound."

"Dead?" the turkey asked, his grin fading.
"Not yet." Tucker asked about Bachman again.
"They moved him," Deffer said.

He had lost all expression in his wizened, gray face. He only looked old and tired now. But that wasn't genuine; it was a poker face, and there was no way to tell what all it concealed. Deffer might not be exceptionally bright, but he had a lot of guts for an old man and a canniness that was not going to be easy to break down.
"Killed him?" Tucker asked.

Deffer looked at the silenced Lüger with more respect than he had shown to this point, though that might be as much pretense as was his expression of weariness. He said, "No."

"Where'd they take him?"
"Don't know."
"Bullshit. You're the chauffeur."
"They didn't move him by car."
"How?"
"Ambulance."

"That's a lie. The last thing that Baglio wants is a public record of that man's injuries. The police come nosing around a hospital, our man might find it to his advantage to spill the beans about Tuesday's caper. Baglio doesn't want anyone to know about those biweekly shipments of cash."
"It was a private ambulance," the turkey squawked. He looked, just a little, as if he were beginning to be afraid, a patently manufactured fear.

"What's that got to do with anything?"
"They didn't necessarily take him to a hospital."
"Where, then?"
"I don't know."

"The whole story's a lie," Harris said. He had entered the room without Tucker hearing him, and he stood beside Tucker's chair, the machine gun pointed directly at Deffer.

Deffer swallowed hard. Maybe he really did respect something as heavy as the Thompson. It was impossible to be certain.

"You questioned the Halversons?" Tucker asked.
"Not yet." Harris jabbed the gun toward Deffer. "But, friend, this old crock would lie to God and the angels. A whole life working for the organization, for Baglio? He'd have long ago forgot what truth is."
"I think you're right," Tucker said. "Our man's still in the house—or dead."
"I want to talk to you about that possibility," Harris said. He was still red-faced, still sweating.
"In a minute," Tucker said. "First, I have to make Grandpa secure."

"Takes much less than a minute," Harris said. He stepped forward, shifting his grip on the Thompson, and slammed the heavy metal hip rest of the gun into the underside of Deffer's chin. The old man gagged, flopped once and lay still. A light foam of blood frosted his wrinkled lips, and a spreading bruise the color of grape juice seeped out from his chin, sent stains down his thin neck.
"That wasn't necessary," Tucker said.

"He didn't have any teeth to lose, friend," Harris said. He was using the "friend" much too often, further on the edge than he had ever been before.
"I was going to tie and gag him."

Harris looked at the old man, prodded him with the barrel of the machine gun and said, "He's only unconscious. He'll stay completely out of the way and this saved us time."

Tucker got out of his chair and felt the quivering weakness behind his knees again. "You said you wanted to talk."
"I do," Harris said. He crossed to the window, looked out, turned, sidestepped and leaned against the wall. Still in a whisper, he said, "What if Bachman talked? What if they killed him?"

"Then we get out of here and go to ground for a while, until they've given up on us."

Harris shook his head violently. "No. I can't afford that. I've got nothing to show for this job, and I needed the cash. I have another idea altogether."

Tucker knew what it was, but he asked anyway.
"If they got it out of Bachman, got anything at all out of him, we'll have to kill Baglio, maybe Deffer—maybe the guard downstairs."

"What about the girl, Miss Loraine?"

Harris looked genuinely perplexed. "What about her?"

"Baglio's sleeping with her," Tucker explained patiently. "He's a fifty-year-old man, and she isn't half that. She's one hell of a looker, the kind of chick who sometimes engenders gratitude in a man that old. It's possible that he
could think of her as more than just another lay—that he might be telling her more about his affairs than he should. Other men have been known to make fools of themselves in the same manner."

Harris thought about it a moment, his deep-set eyes sinking even deeper. He said, "I don't like it—but we kill her too if we have to."

"The Halversons?"

"They wouldn't know anything," Harris said confidently. "A man like Baglio wouldn't be blabbing his business to the maid and butler."

"Handyman."

"Whatever."

Tucker shook his head sadly and went to the bed, took Deffer's pulse and checked his breathing. He began to tear the pillowcase apart to make strips of binding. He said, "Pete, you're in a bad way. I recommend retirement as soon as possible."

"You do, huh?"

Tucker nodded, not bothering to look at him, hoping to avoid a show of temper that way. He began to tie Deffer's ankles together. "If you kill Baglio and the others, this becomes a police affair. This greasepaint doesn't make us invisible. It would have been enough to thwart any search that Baglio might be able to mount; but the police, when they get the descriptions from the Halversons and from Keesey, are going to be able to match those to your photograph where it appears in about a million' mug books. That's a small chance of discovery, admittedly, but large enough to worry about. You want to kill everyone in the house, then, even the maid and the handyman?"

Harris softly cleared his throat and stood away from the wall, though he couldn't think of anything to say. He had made a fool of himself in front of Tucker. He couldn't afford that.

Tucker flopped Deffer onto his stomach, got his hands behind him and tied them in place, rolled him onto his back again. Even if the old man's throat permitted him to speak in more than a whisper when he regained consciousness, there did not seem to be any need to gag him. By the time he came to, everyone in the house would already know the place had been breached.

"Still" Harris said at last, trying to break the silence.

"Even if you kill everyone in the house," Tucker interrupted, "how do you know Baglio hasn't communicated what Bachman told him to others, maybe to that dandified accountant, Chaka? If he did, all your killing's for nothing."

"A flaw in your reasoning," Harris said. "This is already a police affair. The guard you shot makes it that."

"Bullshit, and you know it," Tucker said. "Baglio will get his own doctor to fix his boy up."

Harris knew that, but he still wouldn't let go of it. "I can't afford to go to ground for a year, dammit."

Because he had to get Harris off the subject, Tucker said, "Maybe by the time we leave here you'll have a bankroll to last you for a year or even longer."

"How?"

"Wait," Tucker said, because he had no real answer.

They left Deffer's room, turning off the lights and closing the door behind them.

Jimmy Shirillo was waiting with the Halversons. He was standing just inside their door, while they were sitting up against the brass headboard of their bed, bound and gagged, their hands tied to the brass bars behind them. She was thin and somewhat pretty, though with the sagging look about the eyes that indicated a woman wearied and almost beaten by life. Her husband, a tall, thin, sallow-faced man with bushy eyebrows and ears that looked as if they had been grafted from a hound, had been weathered even worse by the years, servile and eager to please. And terrified.

"Questions?" Shirillo asked.

Tucker looked at the Halversons again and saw exactly what Keesey had meant. "No questions. If they even know what Baglio is, I'd be amazed. I have a feeling our man could have been kept in this house for the last month without these two ever being aware of it."

Shirillo nodded. "They were so obliging. I thought they were going to tie each other up."

"Let's check out the rest of the rooms on this side," Tucker said. "Just to be safe."

In the last two rooms in that smaller of the mansion's two wings, they found proof that both Keesey and Deffer had lied to them: two used bedrooms with full closets. A cursory examination of each was enough to convince Tucker that two more gunmen were up and about and currently unaccounted for.

"I wouldn't have guessed the cook would lie to us," Harris said. He had pocketed his Lüger and was using his free hand to caress the sleek lines of the machine gun.

"He did, though," Tucker said. "And when Deffer mentioned more than two guards, I thought he was lying."

"But where are they?" Harris asked. Anxiously he turned to face the unlighted stairwell, the long arm of the corridor, then the short one.
Shirillo said, “They have to be outside yet.” He wasn’t ruffled at all. He had surprised himself, and Tucker, with
the degree of his adaptability. If Harris became unreliable, Tucker would still be able to count on Shirillo.

“They must have seen us,” Harris insisted. His voice was coarse, unsteady. “The way we’ve been turning the lights
off and on in this place, anyone outside would—”

“We haven’t, really,” Shirillo said. “We’ve mostly used the flashlight, and the draperies would block that much
from a man outside. The only places we used ceiling lights were the art room, storage room and the Halversons’
bedroom. The first two don’t have any windows, and the third alone wouldn’t necessarily arouse suspicion. I think
the guards must be behind the house; that’s why I’m eliminating what lights we turned on in the front rooms.”

Good. Clean, reasoned thought. Tucker knew, if they got out of here, he’d use Shirillo again, on another job. To
Harris, whom he knew he would never use again, he said, “I agree with Jimmy.”

“Well, friends, even if this is true, it doesn’t change anything. Even if those two loose guards don’t know we’re in
the house, they’re still down there, below us. Any time now they might go off duty or step inside for a cup of coffee,
and when they do it’s over.” The last couple of words came out of his throat like juice squeezed through a fine-web
strainer.

“On the other hand,” Tucker said, “we might get finished before they know anything at all.”

“unlikely,” Harris said. He revised that opinion: “Impossible.”

Tucker said, “Just the same, our best chance is to be quick, to get this done and call in the copter. Let’s go see Mr.
Baglio.”

They turned off the lights in the Halversons’ room and closed the door, went quickly to the main stairs, where
Tucker stopped and turned to Harris. “Stay here with the Thompson. You’re in a good position to guard the stairs—
even the back stairs if anyone enters the corridor from those.”

“Give me a walkie-talkie?”

“You won’t need one,” Tucker said. “Not if there’s trouble. We’ll hear the Thompson chatter no matter where we
are.”

“Okay,” Harris said.

He stepped back into the shadows. For such a big man he was able to conceal himself well, was all but invisible.

Quickly, then, Tucker and Shirillo split up and explored all of the remaining rooms except the one in which -
according to Keesey-Baglio and Miss Loraine were sleeping. Finding nothing worthwhile in any of those rooms-
certainly not a sign of Merle Bachman—they met before the last door, tried the knob, twisted it, pushed the door
inward and clicked on the flash of the flashlight.
For a long moment Tucker thought that the bedroom was uninhabited and that Keesey had been lying to them again, for everything there remained in sepulchral silence. Then the mound of jumbled bedclothes, cut across with an intricate lacework of shadows, convulsed and was flung outward from the huge bed as the woman reacted to the light, rolled, bounced onto her feet, her face taut, not unlike a groggy fighter coming out of a delirium with the sudden realization that he's on the verge of unconsciousness and may lose the match.

"What the hell's this?" she asked.

She was wearing a floor-length flannel nightgown, rumpled and worn and obviously comfortable. It was a sign that her relationship with Baglio was more than a temporary one. If she'd merely been a bed partner, she'd have slept nude or in a frilly bikini outfit calculated to make a man like Baglio keep her around awhile longer. The flannel nightgown was a symbol of her independence and her security within the Baglio household. She didn't need to advertise her sexuality. She was confident that Baglio was always aware of it and that something more than that was what made her interesting to him.

Her hands were out at her sides, as if she were trying to gauge her position and the chance she had of running past them.

"No chance at all," Tucker said.

Shirillo said, "Watch Baglio!"

The strongman had gotten out of bed on the far side and was reaching into the top drawer of the night stand. As he came up with a small, heavy pistol, Tucker placed a shot in the general direction of his hand. He didn't care if he ruined Baglio's golf grip for life; but as it happened, he didn't hit flesh. The silenced shot snapped off the pistol case. Baglio cried out and dropped the gun.

The woman was still unconvinced and took a couple of steps toward the door. When Tucker put two more bullets in the floor a foot in front of her, she stopped cold, having more fully assessed the situation, and she satisfied herself with glaring at him.

Even in the yellow flannel she was a spectacularly lovely woman, and she reminded him of Elise Ramsey. The resemblance wasn't really one of looks or measurements; but Miss Loraine had Elise's way of standing, her attitude of self-control, an air of confidence and competence that was undeniably attractive. It was this about her which had temporarily mesmerized him so that he hadn't noticed Baglio going for the gun.

On the other side of the bed, Baglio, dressed in only a pair of blue shorts, was rubbing his numbed hand. He said, "You could have hit me, you idiot." He sounded like a schoolteacher reprimanding a thoughtless and irresponsible child.

"No chance," Tucker said. "I'm an excellent shot." He did not know if Baglio would believe that anyone could have planned to hit the gun in that dark room, with that much space between them, with a silenced pistol, but he didn't think it would hurt to puff himself. "Don't get the idea I'm shy about putting one through your hand if you reach for anything else."

"I don't know what you're after," Baglio said, unaffected by Tucker's bravura. "But you've made a mistake breaking into my house. Have you any idea who I am?" A real schoolteacher.

"The famous Rossario Baglio," Tucker said. "Now, come along with us."

Baglio was responding to the situation with admirable aplomb, not at all frightened by the hooded, greasepainted specters carrying silenced pistols and not the least humiliated at being caught in his shorts. He'd already figured out who they were, in a general sense, and knew the threat they posed wasn't mortal. And he had less to be ashamed of about his body than most men fifteen years his junior: from his wide shoulders to his loose-skinned but relatively flat stomach he was in good shape; evidently he made use of the swimming pool, sauna and gymnasium in the basement. Too, the Loraine woman would give him a strong motivation for staying fit. It was also the woman, Tucker decided, who helped Baglio meet the situation with so much cool: a man hated to be made a fool of in front of a woman he'd been bedding.

Baglio said, "Come along with you-where?"

"Across the hall."

"As soon as I dress," Baglio said, starting for the closet. He carried himself well, his back straight, head high. If he had had time to drag a comb through his silvery hair, he would almost have been presentable enough for a stint on nationwide television—perhaps as a Presidential candidate.

"No time for that," Tucker said.

In the study across the hall, Shirillo pulled out two sturdy straight-backed chairs and placed them side by side in the middle of the room, indicated them with the barrel of his Lüger and stood out of the way as the couple sat down.

"You still haven't explained yourselves," Baglio said. He continued to be the schoolteacher: lips tight, eyes grim,
"We're looking for a friend," Tucker said.
"I don't understand."
Miss Loraine laughed slightly, though Tucker couldn't tell whether the laugh was directed at him or Baglio. Or at herself.
"He was in the car Tuesday morning," Tucker said. "The driver."
Miss Loraine looked up and smiled, not nastily, not as a friend either but as if in remembered pleasure of that collision, as if the excitement still lingered and still touched all the right pleasure centers in the brain.
"I'm sorry you came this far for so little," Baglio said.
"Oh?"
"Yes. The driver's dead."
Tucker smiled. "Of old age?"
Baglio said, "He was banged up pretty badly." His voice had a note, almost, of indifference. "He died yesterday."
"The body?"
"Buried."
"Where?"
"I've a whole graveyard here," Baglio said. His diction was excellent. Either he had gone to the best schools as a boy or he had hired private tutors in his middle age. The last was far more likely than the first. He seemed to take pride in his word choices, his conscious wit, his clear pronunciation, much in the same way a college boy might.
"The pine trees are the markers, suitably engraved." He looked at the woman and grinned winningly, elicited a chuckle from her.
Though he forced himself to react emotionally, Tucker's next move was guided solely by intellect. It was clear that neither Baglio nor the woman expected any harm to come to them and that neither of them would make a good subject for interrogation so long as he was comforted by this assumption. Grunting, then, Tucker leaned in and raked the barrel of the Lüger across Baglio's face, using the sight point, gouging him from temple to chin. Blood popped up in a bright line.
"It's time to stop playing games to impress the lady," Tucker said. "It's time to come to grips with your decidedly disadvantageous position." He wondered if Baglio understood, by his choice of words and tone, that Tucker was mimicking him.
Baglio touched his bleeding face, stared at his carminded fingers in disbelief. A long minute later he looked at Tucker, the humor in his face metamorphosed into hatred. "You've just bought yourself one of those pine-marked graves," he said. His voice had not deteriorated. Schoolmaster meting out punishment to the bad boy.
Distasteful as he found this, Tucker swung the Lüger again and scored a red ribbon on Baglio's undamaged cheek.
The strongman started out of his chair, head lowered like a bull ready to ram, yelped and crumpled backward as Shirillo delivered another brutal blow from behind with his own pistol on Baglio's right shoulder. He clutched at the bruised and spasming muscles, hunched forward as if he might be sick. Gradually he'd begun to look his age.
The girl looked older too.
She licked her lips and shifted her gaze around the room as if she thought she'd see something that would unexpectedly turn the tables. That fantasy lasted a brief moment, because she realized, as she must have done often before, that her best weapon was herself—her body and her wits. She looked up, aware of Tucker's eyes on her, and without being obvious about it she shifted inside her tentish yellow gown to mold it at strategic points to her. An offering. But poisoned.
He smiled at her, for he had the vague idea that he might need her cooperation later, then turned back to Baglio.
"We were talking about a friend of mine."
"Go to hell," Baglio said.
Shirillo, unbidden, stepped forward and, judging the position of Baglio's kidneys through the slatted back of the chair, jammed the barrel of his Lüger hard into the man's left side. Ordinarily this sort of tactic was beyond him. Now, he kept thinking of his father. And his brother. The shoe shop. His brother's limp.
Baglio grunted, sucked breath, reared up, then crumpled under Shirillo's second, swift chop to his shoulder. He fell off the chair, to the floor.
"My friend?" Tucker asked.
Baglio got his hands under himself and, feigning more weakness than he felt, started up, shifted toward Tucker's feet. That was a stupid move for a man in his situation, the first indication that he'd been frightened and that he was acting on a gut level. Tucker back-stepped and kicked him alongside the head. When he went down this time he stayed down, unconscious.
"Get a glass of water," Tucker told Shirillo.
The kid went after it.
Miss Loraine smiled at Tucker.
He smiled back.
Neither spoke.
Shirillo returned with the water, but before he could throw it in Baglio's face Tucker said, "No vendetta, kid. We can't afford it." He had remembered Shirillo's monologue when they'd first met several weeks ago, remembered the worn-out father and the brother who'd been badly beaten.
"I'm finished," Shirillo said. "I thought at first I wanted to kill him. But I've decided I don't want to pay him back in his own coin; I don't want to be like he is."
"Good," Tucker said. "Think he'll recognize you?"
"No. He saw me once for five minutes, a year and a half ago."
"Wake him, then."
Shirillo tossed the water into the bruised and bloody face, went around behind the two chairs again. Baglio blinked, looked up.
"We were talking about my friend," Tucker said.
Baglio's lips were swollen, but that could not account for the change in his voice. Behind the slurred words there was a different tone, no more haughtiness, the tone of a man suddenly brought down from a high place and made to see his own mortality. "I told you, he's dead."
"Why does your cook tell a different story?"
"I wouldn't know."
"And Deffer?"
Baglio looked up. The hate was still in his eyes, though it had been veiled now, as if he knew it would be dangerous to show any sort of resolve. "What did they say?"
"An ambulance came and took him away."
"It did. To a grave in the woods."
"Bullshit."
"Again on the shoulder?" Shirillo asked from behind Baglio. "Or another kidney punch?"
"Wait," Tucker said, smiling. He apologized pleasantly to Baglio for his partner's overeager attitude. He said, "I'm sure our friend's in this house. Otherwise everyone's story would match. Otherwise-a lot of things. Now, where is he?"
"No," Baglio said.
Tucker nodded, looked at Shirillo. "Tie him to the chair, then go keep our friend company at the stairwell. You could cover the back stairs while he watches the main ones."
"Expecting trouble?" Shirillo asked.
"It's going to take longer than I thought," Tucker said. "And Mr. Baglio may be screaming loud enough to attract his boys outside before I'm done with him."
Shirillo nodded, used a letter opener to cut down the cords of the draw drapes and expertly lashed Baglio to the straight-backed chair. The older man offered no resistance.
"What about her?" Shirillo asked.
"I can handle her."
"Sure?"
"Positive."
Shirillo left to join Harris at the stairs.
Tucker looked at his watch: 5:10 in the morning. Shortly the dawn would come. Would the two men stationed outside the house leave their posts when the sun had fully risen?
Tucker shook off the thought and directed the woman to move her chair away from Baglio, which she did, putting it down so that it faced him from the side. When she was seated again, like a spectator at a sporting event, Tucker stood behind her, watching Baglio, tracing his fingertips along her warm neck.
Baglio laughed out loud, even though that must have hurt his face.
"Something funny?" Tucker asked. He let his hand become more sure, lying full against her throat, feeling her pulse. He hated himself for trying to get to Baglio through whatever relationship he enjoyed with the woman. He kept thinking how it would be if things were reversed, if he were in the chair and Baglio were caressing Elise.
"That won't work," Baglio said.
Tucker moved his hand, traced the edge of her jaw-line, tenderly tilted her head up. She responded to his touch, or he imagined that she did.
Baglio said, "I've always got a different woman around. Women are nothing to me, nothing at all. I've got nothing
special with her. I wasn't the first with her, and I know I'm not going to be the last, so go ahead, be my guest." All that talking made a tiny stream of thick blood run from the corner of his mouth, down his blackening chin. He made no attempt to lick it away, perhaps because his tongue was cut and swollen—perhaps because he didn't notice it, his entire attention riveted on Tucker's proprietary hand.

"I think you're lying," Tucker said.

"Think what you want."

"It would get to a man like you if a stranger walked into his house and made him watch, powerless, while—"

"Powerless" was the word that did it. Baglio flared up again, inwardly, hatred rising in his eyes and burning brightly a moment before he veiled it again. "See if I care."

Tucker turned her face toward him, tilted it higher, looked into her green-blue eyes. "If I were to pistol-whip her?" he asked Baglio. "Put a couple of scars on her face—say, from the hairline straight down to the chin—break a few of those perfect teeth?" If Elise could hear him now, what would she say? It wouldn't be good.

But Baglio laughed again, more genuinely this time, or with his act more under control.

The girl stiffened, looked worriedly up at Tucker, shifted her eyes sideways, straining to see Baglio. She hadn't expected this. And in her eyes was a hatred more intense than Baglio's, not for Tucker but for her lover. Her former lover. She'd been made aware, in one brutal instant, that though there might be more between them than just sex, the old man found her expendable. Watching her now, as her face set into grim lines, Tucker knew she would perform a vendetta far better than any Sicilian ever could.

Now that her circumstances were clear, she adjusted quickly, recovered her composure; and decided what she must do. Earlier, Tucker had imagined that she reacted favorably to his caress, but now the reaction was real and not imagined at all. His hand slid down her throat until it lay just above her heavy breasts; and she sat up straighter, leaning into his hand, trying to accommodate him, tempting.

Baglio noticed.

She smiled at Tucker, turned to Baglio and smiled at him too, though differently.

Something was building here, maybe something quite useful, though Tucker didn't see how it could help him just yet.

His watch read 5:20. Time was passing too swiftly.

What next? How could Baglio be broken? Or how could the woman be persuaded to tell him what he wanted to know? She was on the verge of that, he knew, and she needed only the slightest push to His concentration was broken by the bark of an unsilenced revolver shot echoing in the confines of the second-floor corridor. That single explosion was answered by the furious chatter of Pete Harris's Thompson submachine gun. A man screamed, but not for long, his voice fading out into an unintelligible gasp of meaningless words, and that into silence. Pete Harris mouthed a string of obscenities; they were all blown.
Down at the far end of the corridor, by the rear stairs, Jimmy Shirillo located a panel of switches and flooded the second-floor hallway with startlingly white light. That didn't matter any longer, because there was no hope of keeping their presence a secret from the men who were standing guard outside the house. Harris's burst of machine-gun fire had tossed the cards into the air, and the only way to be sure the cards landed in the right suits was to move fast and cover all the contingencies.

Tucker pushed the woman ahead of him, not rudely but firmly, as he hurried toward the main stairwell. He didn't bother to keep the pistol trained on her. Alone, she had nothing to gain by a grandstand play for escape, and she knew it.

Pete Harris sat against the wall, just this side of the entrance to the stairs, the Thompson lying on the carpet beside him. He was trying to work the trouser leg up over his right knee without touching the wound he'd suffered. His greasepainted face glistened with sweat that had popped through the black cover and had streaked it.

Shirillo waited at the back stairs, on guard for attack from that direction.

"You okay?" Tucker shouted.

"Yeah!" Shirillo called back.

Halfway between Shirillo and Harris, against the rear wall, lay a dead man. He was stretched out on his back, one leg twisted up under his buttocks, his arms thrown above his head, nearly cut in half by the burst of machine-gun fire. A lot of blood decorated the walls and spread darkly over the expensive carpet.

"How is it?" Tucker asked Harris.

Harris looked up as he finally rolled the trouser leg above his knee. "He got me in the calf. It hurts like hell, but I don't think it's really too bad."

Tucker bent and looked at the wound, squeezed it to force blood out of it, peered intently into the jagged slash before it could fill with new blood. "It seems to be just a graze," he said. "Just a crease. You'll live, I believe."

"Thanks, friend," Harris said. "Christ, the shit has hit the fan, has it not?" He didn't seem to notice Miss Loraine.

"We've still got the advantage," Tucker said.

Too much white showed around the irises of Harris's eyes, giving him an expression of shocked horror, no matter what his lips were doing. "Sure, friend," he said, none too enthusiastically.

"Where'd he come from?"

Harris looked at the dead man, cleared his throat, spat on the rug. "I can't figure that one."

"Up the steps?"

"No," Harris said. "And he couldn't have come up the back way without knocking Jimmy down to get a shot at me. My friend, he simply popped up like a ghost between the two of us. I was hit before I saw him. When I caught his outline, I didn't waste time." He was upset. He had mentioned Shirillo's first name in front of the girl- as he had mentioned it in front of Keesey, the cook- and he looked on the edge of hysteria. He patted the Thompson, though, and forced a weak grin.

"Who?"

"Don't be funny. The dead man."

"I wouldn't know."

He moved quickly, grabbed her arm, twisted it, levered it up behind her back, forcing her to bend and grunt in pain. "Remember what I told Baglio about your face?"

"You wouldn't do that to me."

She was right, but he couldn't afford to strengthen her certainty, so he pushed harder on her arm.

"I don't know where the hell he was!" she snapped, jerking straight up and breaking his hold. He hadn't applied full pressure, not what he would have used against a man. The ease with which she'd pulled away from him was a warning not to misjudge her again.

"Keep her covered," Tucker told Harris. "You feel up to it?"

"Sure, friend," he said, lifting the machine gun.
Tucker went to talk with Shirillo and found that the kid didn't know where the gunman had come from. "I didn't know he was here until he shot Pete. Then I fell flat and stayed flat to keep out of the way of ricochets from the Thompson."

Tucker looked at his watch. He examined the corridor again, stared at the corpse, tried to imagine where he'd come from. He said, "Did you look in the closets in the Halversons' room?"

"You know I did."

"What about those rooms you checked out on your own, down there in the other wing?"

"Give me some credit."

"Dammit, he came from somewhere."

Shirillo grimaced and said, "He came from the same place they're holding Bachman."

Tucker wiped at his face as if there were cobwebs over it. The greasepaint made his skin feel sticky. His vision was blurry, his mouth hot and dry. He said, "How do you get that notion?"

"It's logical."

"The attic?" Tucker said.

"We can go look. But I doubt that's it, because I seem to be standing under the attic door." He pointed to a trap in the ceiling directly overhead, reached up and gripped the chromed handle, pulled down a set of folding metal steps that led up into darkness.

Tucker went up and came back in less than five minutes. "Empty," he told Shirillo. "And this is the only door in or out." He left the stairs unfolded because, according to the plan, they'd need to use them later.

"Now?" Shirillo asked. He was in complete control of himself, holding it all together.

Tucker took a roll of lime-flavored Life Savers from the pocket of his windbreaker, offered one to Shirillo, popped one into his own mouth when the kid declined, sucked on the candy. He said, "How do you go about finding a hidden room?"

Shirillo blinked, wiped a hand over his hooded head as if he wanted to run fingers through his hair, said, "Isn't that a bit much?"

"You're the one who sold me on the idea that the Mafia is melodramatic, remember?"

"But a hidden room?"

"Bachman's in this house somewhere. I know it. But we've looked in every room and closet from the basement to the attic." He jammed his hands into his trouser pockets and worked at the ring of sweetness in his mouth. "A man like Baglio might find a hidden room very useful. For one thing, he could store the money there every other Monday night-and anything else he might think is too hot to leave out in the open or put into a safe-deposit vault that federal agents could get a court order to open." He cracked the Life Saver in two.

Shirillo said, "But a safe would do it. A hidden room is a grandiose way of-"

"A safe wouldn't do, say, for a large drug shipment. And if cops showed up at the door with a warrant, they'd be empowered to open a safe, whereas they'd bypass a hidden room altogether."

"Maybe."

"So how would you go about looking for a hidden room?"

Shirillo considered it awhile and finally said, "I guess you'd have to compare partitions from the corridor and from inside the rooms, try to find a discrepancy somewhere."

Tucker nodded, looked at his watch.
"I better get moving then," he said.
Shirillo nodded.
"Our missing guard is either in the hidden room, somewhere between you and Pete, or he was outside the house when he heard the shots."
"If he was outside," Shirillo said, "we would have heard from him by this time."
"Unless he decided not to come in here after us."
"Why wouldn't he?"
"Maybe he knows he's outnumbered."
"He couldn't know."
Tucker finished the candy. An unpleasant possibility had occurred to him, and he didn't want to have to talk about it, though he knew that Shirillo had a right to hear what he was thinking. Of course Harris had the same right, though he'd never tell Harris. The kid, he felt sure, would be able to think about it without panicking. Harris might break.
"Maybe he was outside, heard the shots, knew he wouldn't do any good rushing in here alone. Maybe he opened the garage door, got out the limousine, managed to drift it down the drive and out of earshot, started it and went after help."
"Christ." For the first time during those long evening hours Shirillo looked scared.
"Don't worry about it," Tucker said. "It's just a thing I thought we should keep in mind."
"Sure."
"We'll be a long time gone before he beats it back here with the reinforcements." He smiled and slapped Shirillo's shoulder, feeling like an older brother. "If he went away after anyone."
"He did."
"We can't be sure."
"Yes, we can. It's the worst thing that could happen- and that's been par for this whole operation." Despite his sincere pessimism, the kid wasn't ready to run for it.
Tucker knew what Shirillo said was true, and he felt the hard, emotional intolerance of failure that had driven him this far. He thought of his old man, of Mr. Mellio at the bank, of the trust monies held up in the long court battles, and he knew he wouldn't louse this up. He couldn't fail like that.
"Anyway," he said, "who's going to shoot at a state-police helicopter?"
"If they fall for it," Shirillo qualified.
"They did before."
"That's why they might not fall for it a second time. Familiarity breeds suspicion."
"Contempt, I believe it is."
"Not with these guys."
"The old Iron Hand, huh?"
Shirillo smiled.
Shirillo was correct, of course, no matter how much Tucker might attempt to minimize their problems. Still, Tucker couldn't see any good in standing together, depressing each other with speculations on the nature of their imminent demise. Soon they'd be in as bad a way as Pete Harris, jumping at the slightest noise, overreacting to every imagined movement in the shadows.
"Got to go," Tucker said.
He turned away from the kid and began to check the partitions between the rooms, searching for any obvious disparity.
The time was 5:41 in the morning, well after dawn of a new day.
Five minutes later Tucker knew where the hidden room lay and where, by extension, Merle Bachman was being kept. He entered the back room in the short wing where a guard—either the dead man, the wounded man or the missing gunman—slept, and he removed the clothes from the closet. He wasn't worried about wrinkling what he tossed out of the way, and he'd begun to examine the closet walls with the beam of his flashlight when he heard the Thompson start to chatter again in the corridor.

He went to see what was wrong, went to Harris, who stood at the head of the stairs with the big weapon aimed down at the landing wall.

"Tried to come up," Harris said. His wounded leg didn't seem to be bothering him as much as before. That could be good or bad; it might mean the wound was as shallow as it looked and had stopped bleeding, or it might mean that Harris was too afraid to register pain. "It was the same bastard we tied up downstairs. I thought I put him out for a good long while."

"Get him?"

"No."

At least the missing guard hadn't high-tailed it off the estate, as he'd feared. Instead, the man had come inside and revived his workmate and was probably now trying to figure a way to get upstairs.

Down at the end of the hall Shirillo shouted something unintelligible. When Tucker turned he saw the kid shooting into the narrow confines of the rear stairs' shaft, though his silenced Lüger made very little sound.

"Any luck?"

"No!" Shirillo called.

"There are only two of them," Tucker said. "They can keep harassing us, but they can't very well rush us."

"There's the cook," Harris said.

"Keesey may lie, but he doesn't fight," Tucker said. "Besides, one more man isn't enough to put us on the defensive. We could stand off a dozen from here."

Harris stepped away from the head of the stairs so he could not see or be seen by anyone coming up. He remained facing the steps, though, with the machine gun at his hip, but his attention was on Tucker. His face was a mess of sweat, greasepaint, deeply carved lines of fatigue, and when he spoke he didn't have to whisper: his voice was hoarse with fear. "Let's get the hell out of here. Bachman isn't here. There's nothing here we want."

"Bachman's here," Tucker corrected him.

"Yeah?"

"Definitely."

"I don't see him," Harris said, grinning. The grin was malicious, and it threatened a further breakdown, one that would permit him to disregard Tucker's orders and call his own shots.

Harris was no longer trustworthy. Tucker did not let him see that he'd reached that conclusion, and he said, "Bachman's in a concealed room." He took two large steps to the back wall and rapped on the plaster with his knuckles. "Doesn't it seem odd there's all this wall space and no rooms behind it?"

Harris squinted, thought about it. He would have preferred to get out of there; he didn't want to have to think about anything besides running, hiding, staying alive. However, he said, "Okay. How do we get him?"

"Make it fast," Harris said.

He turned back to the stairwell, waiting for something to happen, for something to shoot at.

"Hold the fort," Tucker said, turning back toward the room from which the stuttering Thompson had called him.

The walls of the closet were featureless plaster, too smooth to contain a secret doorway. He got down on his hands and knees and gave the quarter round a careful inspection to see if any of it was loose or movable. None of it was. Satisfied that the entrance was in the other room in the long wing, he went to raid a second closet.

Passing Harris and the woman, he said, "We'll have him out in a couple of minutes."

"Wait," Miss Loraine said.

He almost didn't hear her. When she called again he turned and said, "Yeah?"

"I want to talk to you."

"No time," Tucker said.

"I want to make a deal." She spoke softly, but her voice carried well. "I can help you."
"Too late for that."

"No, it isn't."

"Sorry."

"I could save you half an hour finding Bachman."

He said. "I doubt that. The entrance to that hidden space has to be in the closet in that room. I'll have it worked out in."

He suddenly realized that she'd used Bachman's name, that both he and Harris had given it to her. What the hell. Was he losing his edge? He said, "Christ!"

She walked toward him and held out her hand as if to take his. "You can buy Bachman, and my silence, if you want to."

"It'd be easier for Bachman to change his name," he said.

"Untrue. Besides, Ross would find him sometime."

That was right enough. But he said, "Buy your silence? With what?"

"Money."

"We haven't any." He sounded angry and bitter, but he couldn't help it. He'd had to keep up his renowned facade too long already.

"You will if you deal with me," the girl said. She dropped the offered hand, waiting. She looked even more like Elise now, a secret smile of self-satisfaction tinting her lovely face.

Tucker said, "What's the deal?"

She pursed her lips, licked them. She said, "Okay, you're going to find this Bachman on your own, I see that. You're going to make a fool out of Ross like no one's ever done before. He won't want me around once I've seen him humiliated, so I haven't any reason to stick around here. The deal is-I get twenty percent of whatever's in those three suitcases, plus a free ride out of here."

Tucker blinked, felt his legs grow momentarily weaker, then smiled. "I'll be damned," he said. "The Tuesday shipment?"

"That's it."

"The cash?"

"Yes."

"I didn't think it'd be here yet."

"It wasn't sent out a second time, for reasons I'll explain if you'll deal."

He shook his head ruefully. "Now that I know it's here, why do I need to deal at all?"

"Because you could waste hours hunting for it. There are a thousand places in a house this size that three suitcases could be hidden. And from the way you've been acting, you can't spend much more time in here-you've got someone coming to pick you up."

He admired her despite the fact that she'd started out on the other side of the fence. When she saw that the circumstances had gotten beyond her control, she maneuvered to increase the range of her power. He could see why Baglio had respected her. The old man's only mistake was in not respecting her even more than he had. He was also pleased with her demands. They were eminently reasonable if she could supply what she boasted.

"Okay," he said.

"Deal?"

"Deal."

She frowned and said, "It's not as easy as that, though. We'll have to talk some more."

"Talk," he said. He reached into his pocket and took out the roll of Life Savers, popped one into his mouth.

"Not here."

"Where?"

"In the room you're on your way to."

Tucker looked at his watch: 6:06. He didn't feel much like finishing the operation in broad daylight, though it appeared as if they were going to have to do just that. He said, "We can't take long bargaining. It's getting damn late."

"I'll need two minutes," she said.

"Come on, then."

She stepped over the corpse on the corridor floor, her pretty bare toes squishing in the damp carpet, went with Tucker to the guard's bedroom. Behind them, Harris fared another burst down the main stairwell.
In the bedroom she sat down on the corner of the mattress and tucked her long legs under her, now very demure and innocent in the flannel gown. She said, "How do you expect to get out of here?"

He hesitated, then said, "A helicopter."

She made a face. "I'm serious."

"So am I."

She said, "I don't want to make a deal if you're really a bunch of clowns who didn't think this thing through."

He explained, in detail but as rapidly as possible, about Norton and the helicopter with the state-police markings.

"I'm impressed," she said.

"Now," he said, "impress me. Do you know what happens to people who upset Ross Baglio?"

"I know."

"But you're willing to risk it?"

"A girl has to provide for herself," she said. She sounded like an earnest, homely high-school freshman deciding to take the sensible secretarial program to prepare to meet the bills four years hence. She was delightful.

"Baglio knows your name. It'll be easy to track you down."

"A name can be changed," She was implying that Loraine wasn't her real name anyway.

"You can't change the way you look. Every man who sees you is going to remember you."

"You're exaggerating my appeal," she said. "Besides, I know something about makeup and disguise." She got off the bed and said, "Are you trying to talk me out of helping you?"

"No," he said. "I just want to understand exactly why you're doing this so I have a better idea of what's going to happen later. For instance, I wouldn't want you to go through with this with the idea of bringing your twenty percent back to Baglio and telling him all you learned about us while you were counted as a friend."

"I'd have to be a fool," she said.

"I know."

"But I'm not."

He sighed. So much like Elise. "I know that too."

"Well?"

"Deal," he said again.

She went to the closet and started tossing out suits, trousers and dress shirts. When everything was cleaned out of the way, she asked him to step back and to direct the flashlight on the floor between them. Kneeling, she studied the floorboards a moment, got her nails into the cracks on both sides of one of them, tugged at it, let it go. She tried the one beside it, which looked identical to the first, sighed when it rattled and came away in her hands, a two-inch-wide and four-foot-long strip of wood. She put it out of the way, revealing a lever that lay under the tightly fitted but unnailed board.

"I'd have found that in no time," he said.

"Of course," she said. "And you'd have gotten Bachman too. But I'm along to help you get the money, which you didn't even know was here."

"Go on," he said.

She pressed the lever down with the heel of her hand. On Tucker's right the entire back wall of the closet swung inward, a feature that negated the need for a telltale seam in the middle of the wall where an ordinary secret door might have been.

He said, "Is Baglio a chronic paranoid?"

"Among other things."

The wall swung wider open.

"Don't feel you have to catalogue them."

The room beyond the closet was nearly as large as the guard's bedroom on the other side, lighted by fluorescent ceiling strips, windowless. Merle Bachman was strapped in the bed against the far wall, looking their way and trying to grin.
Tucker saw at once why Bachman had not been forced to tell Baglio what he knew, why he was still alive and why they still had a chance to keep their identities intact. The crash in the Chevrolet had ruined the small man's lovely smile by breaking loose eighty percent of his teeth and splitting both his lips. The upper lip was split clear to his septum and swollen four or five times larger than it should have been. He had to breathe through his mouth, since the lip closed off his nostrils, and his breathing was so noisy Tucker wondered why that hadn't been audible even through all these walls.

Bachman made a gagging sound that was apparently some sort of greeting, though it didn't succeed any better than his smile.

"You can't talk?" Tucker asked.
Bachman made chortling sounds.
"Then don't try," Tucker said. "You sound disgusting. And while you're at it, wipe that-smile?-off your face."
Bachman didn't try to speak again, but he kept smiling. His left eye was puffed shut and his right was blackened, though not swollen like the other. Several fingers on both hands had been splinted and bandaged by Baglio's doctor. Otherwise, he looked well enough.

"No broken legs or arms?" Tucker asked, kneeling at the bed. "Just shake your head."
Bachman shook his head no.
"Can you walk?"
Bachman shook: no.
"Why not?"
It was a badly phrased question. Bachman looked earnest and began to make gagging noises again, trying to explain.
"Forget it," Tucker said. "You're drugged, aren't you?"
Bachman sighed and nodded yes.
Miss Loraine said, "Shall we get on with the second part of it-the money?"
"It's here?" Tucker asked.
"Yes. But he doesn't know it," she added, nodding to Bachman.
"Get it, then."
She walked away from the bed to the back of the room, where she opened the door of a white metal storage cabinet bolted to the wall.
He stepped up beside her and said, "What gives?"
"The wall." She slid away the metal back of the cabinet, revealing another lever exactly like the one in the closet floor, pressed it down. The cabinet which was bolted to the wall beside this one swung into the room, revealing a narrow storage space large enough for a few suitcases, or for a body. Right now it contained just suitcases.
"A hidden room inside a hidden room," Tucker said, amazed.
"He's a clever man," she said.
Tucker said, "Then why didn't he take this into town? Why'd he leave it here?"
"Ross didn't know who'd hit him," she explained. "He thought it might be someone inside his own organization, and he left the cash here because he didn't trust sending it into town again-not until he could get Bachman to talk."
"A careful man."
"This time he was too careful," she said. "Let's get it out of here." She hefted the smallest suitcase and carried it back to Bachman, while Tucker muscled the other two out of the niche and followed her.
They put the cases on the low table next to the bed and opened them one at a time. The two largest were packed with tightly wrapped bills, while the smaller was half full and padded out with butcher's paper.
"Ahhh," Merle Bachman said. He seemed surprised that the cash had been in the room with him; apparently Miss Loraine was telling the truth when she said he hadn't known about it.
Tucker said, "We scored after all."
While Miss Loraine went to find suitable clothes to wear for an airborne escape, Tucker explained the situation to Shirillo and Harris. The kid accepted it, trusting Tucker, but Harris, more agitated than ever, had some questions. "She's a woman," he said. "Can she keep her mouth shut when we get out of this?"

"As well as you can," Tucker said. Then, to soften that, he added, "Or as well as I can."

Harris said, "She'll run out of money fast. She'll squander it, and then she'll start making plans."

"I don't think so."

"If she does, though, she'll come back to one of us, some way, and want more."

"She won't."

"Okay, she'll run back to Baglio."

"He'd kill her."

"Maybe she's too dumb to know that."

"She's not. She knows the risks, and she knows how to handle herself. We can trust her; we have to."

"Not necessarily," Harris said. He looked ugly. Maybe his wound was hurting him again—or maybe it had nothing to do with that look.

Tucker said, "We can't kill her, if that's what you mean."

"Why not?"

"I made a deal with her."

"So?"

Tucker said, "Is that the way you'd have me do business? Remember, I've made a deal with you, too. If I can give my word to her, then kill her, what's to keep me from working the same thing with you?" Before Harris could answer, he said, "No, we can't do business that way. Besides, killing her would make the whole caper too hot. Baglio can cover up the death of one of his gunmen easily enough. But that woman's got a family somewhere, a life outside of the organization, and her death would probably mean the police getting into the act sooner or later."

Harris wiped at his face. His gloved hand came away black, and some of his disguise was gone. "I hope you're right about her," he said.

"I am. And cheer up. Now you can retire, like you want."

Tucker went back to the hidden room, leaving Harris and Shirillo to guard the stairs, and unstrapped Merle Bachman, helped him out of the bed, tried to get him to stand on his own feet. As Bachman had warned with a shake of his head, that proved impossible. Evidently he hadn't been permitted on his feet during the last couple of days, hadn't eaten anything in all that time—could've have because of his ruined mouth—and had only drunk what he was forced to drink to keep from dehydrating. His weakened condition, magnified by the pain killers that the doctor had prescribed, had turned his legs to rubber which bent and twisted under him. Finally, though, Tucker got him to the end of the corridor under the attic door and left him with Shirillo.

Five minutes after that he’d transferred all three of the money-stuffed suitcases to the same spot. "Anything happening here?" he asked Shirillo.

"No. They're too quiet down there."

Before Tucker could respond, Miss Loraine came up behind him and said, "I'm ready."

She was wearing white levis and a dark-blue sweater, all of it cut to fit like second skin, both functional and sensual. Tucker remembered how she’d looked the day of the robbery in the miniskirt and tight sweater, and he wondered why, with that canny head of hers, she still was so careful to keep her sex honed as a bargaining tool.

As if reading his mind, she said, "It always pays to be prepared for anything."

"It does," he agreed. He looked at his watch: 7:02.

It was full daylight outside.

He’d told Norton that the operation would be concluded by dawn at the very latest. Paul would be chewing his nails and wondering how much longer he should hold on. Tucker hoped he’d wait another ten minutes, until they could put a call through on the walkie-talkie. No, he wasn’t just hoping for that—he knew Norton would wait. He would wait. He was sure of it. Damn, damn, damn.

He slipped a new clip into his Lüger, pocketed the depleted clip and relieved Shirillo of his watch over the pear stairs.

"Get the suitcases up first," he said.

The kid nodded, picked up the largest piece of luggage and struggled with it to the top of the metal steps, muscled it overhead and slid it onto the attic floor. He didn't have the physique for heavy work, but he wasn't complaining. By the time he'd taken the second case from Miss Loraine and worked it through the trap door overhead, his face glistened, his black makeup streaked. When he shoved the third bag into place above, he leaned into the steps and let
out a long wheeze of exhaustion.

"Want me to get Bachman up?" Tucker asked.

"No. I will."

The time was 7:10.

Norton would be waiting.

Shirillo examined Bachman, helped the battered man to his feet, found an acceptable hold on him and went sideways up the narrow collapsible steps. Near the top he had to let go of his burden. Bachman gripped the top steps, his weakened hands clumsy with the splinted and bandaged fingers. Shirillo scrambled quickly into the attic, turned, reached down, took Bachman by the wrist and, with a little help from Merle himself, got him through the trap door and into the upper chamber.

"Ready up here," Shirillo called down.

"Good work."

"Just plenty of motivation," Shirillo said, grinning.
"Move," Tucker told the woman. 
She went up the ladder fast, took Jimmy's hand and was gathered into the overhead room.

Harris looked up the hall, saw that most of the work was done, nodded in response to Tucker's hand signal. 
We're going to make it, Tucker thought. He'd done it. He'd made a botched job into a success; he'd persevered. 
Turning, he started up the steps—but got no farther than the third rung as the window shattered beside him and two closely spaced slugs struck him hard on the left side.
He fell and struck his head on the last rung of the metal ladder before he rolled up against the corridor wall. Strangely, the moment he'd been hit, he thought: Iron Hand, recalling the nightmare. Then he was too numbed from the shock of being wounded to think of anything. When pain began to replace the paralysis, seconds later, he thought the man at the bottom of the back steps had shot him, but then he realized, as he sat up in the middle of all that broken glass, that the shots had come from outside the house.

The shots were a signal to the man downstairs to try to come up now that their attention was diverted. Harris was prepared for that strategy, and he let out a long chatter of machine-gun fire down the main stairwell.

Shirillo came off the attic steps fast, drawing another shot from outside as he moved quickly past the window.

"How is it?"

"The nerves are still mostly deadened from the impact, but it's starting to hurt pretty badly. I got it twice, I think, close together. Damn hard punch."

"Rifle," Shirillo said. "The garage roof connects with this end of the house. I saw him standing out there when I went by the window just now." As he spoke he removed the shattered walkie-talkie from Tucker's arm and threw it into the middle of the hallway. "I was going to tell you that you'd overprepared by bringing two of these, since we never needed to use them between us. Now I'm glad I kept my mouth shut."

"The damn thing didn't take both shots, did it?"

"No," Shirillo said. "There's blood." He probed the wound with a finger until Tucker was sweating with pain. "You only stopped one bullet," he said. "It passed through the back of your arm and out the top of your shoulder, right through the meaty part, then out again. At least, by the way your jacket's all ripped up, I'd say that's how it is. But I wouldn't want to swear to it until we have you in the copter and can get your clothes off. There's a good bit of blood."

Tucker winced at the pain, which, having held off for several minutes, now throbbed relentlessly, and he said, "It's easy enough to come down that ladder fast. But going up again is another thing altogether. He'll have enough time to pick us off like painted targets."

"Clearly true," Shirillo said. Even now he did not appear to be shaken. Tucker thought he could see in the kid's manner, however, his own kind of bottled-up terror below a facade of calm maintained at only the greatest expenditure of nervous energy.

Tucker said, "Now don't shout for him, but get Pete. Walk down there and ask him to come up here. I think, as long as there's one man on the garage roof, there isn't anyone else down there to come up the steps. Not unless they untied Keesey, which I seriously doubt."

"Be right back," Shirillo said.

He returned with Harris, who listened to Tucker explain the situation, which he had figured out on his own anyway. He assured them that he could use the rapid-firing Thompson to clear the garage roof while running little risk of getting hit himself.

"Just be damned careful," Tucker said. "You deserve your share after making it this far."

"Don't worry your ass, friend," Harris said, grinning. He got up and flattened himself against the wall next to the shattered window. He let a long minute pass, as if one unknown moment were better than another, then suddenly wheeled around, facing the open window, the Thompson up before him, chattering away at the rifleman. No one screamed, but a moment later Harris turned to them and said, "He's finished. But one thing: it wasn't one of the gunmen. It was Keesey."

"The cook?"

"The cook."

"Shit," Tucker said. "Then there's still one of them downstairs, and he knows you're no longer guarding the stairs."

He got to his feet despite the thumping invisible stick that seemed to be trying to drive him down again. The pain in his arm lanced outward, crossed his entire back, over to his other shoulder, down to his kidneys.

"You make the stairs yourself?" Harris asked.

"I can. But Jimmy has to go first."

Shirillo began to protest, realized he was the one carrying the last walkie-talkie, nodded and scrambled upward into the attic.

"Follow me closely," Tucker said.

"Don't worry about that, friend."

Tucker gripped the stair railing with his good hand and climbed toward the square of darkness overhead which framed Jimmy Shirillo's anxious face. He felt as if he were with some Swedish mountaineering 'team, but he finally made it, with the kid's help.
"Move ass!" he called down to Harris.
The big man started up the steps.
Tucker looked at his watch.
Norton would be waiting. He would.
After Harris drew up the attic steps, made certain the bottom plate was closed firmly over the trap opening and threw the bolt back to keep it that way, Jimmy Shirillo got out his walkie-talkie and, following Tucker's instructions, attempted to call up Paul Norton, the copter pilot.

The open frequency hummed distantly, an eerie sound in the warm confines of the attic.

Shirillo repeated the call signal.

"Why doesn't he answer?" the woman asked.

Tucker felt the future seeping away from him. He began to think of Elise, of the peace and quiet of the Park Avenue apartment.

Abruptly, Norton's voice crackled over the walkie-talkie, strange and yet familiar, acknowledging the summons.

"Thank God!" Harris said, his voice weak.

"How long will it take him to get here?" Miss Loraine wanted to know. She was sitting between the two largest suitcases, one arm draped over each of them, as if she were daring Tucker, or any of them, to leave her behind.

Tucker said, "Less than five minutes."

She laughed and said, "Hell, then we're home free." Despite her good humor, she hung onto the pair of suitcases.

"Hold the celebrations," Tucker said.

"You okay?" Shirillo asked.

"Fine," Tucker said. In reality, he felt as if he'd been dragged several miles from the back of a horse, aching in every muscle, the pain in his arm spreading out until it was no longer localized but hard and hot throughout his body. To get his mind off the pain, he considered their situation and decided what must be done next.

"You better go find the door that leads onto the roof," he told Shirillo. "According to those photographs your uncle took, it's down at the other end of the house."

Shirillo nodded, got up, hunched down somewhat to keep from cracking his head against the bare rafters and went down that way to have a look around. In a couple of moments he located the overhead door, worked it loose of its pinnings, shoved it out of the way and called back to the others.

"Let's go," Tucker said.

He felt as if he were always telling someone to move, in one way or another. It would be good to get home again, to pay back the ten-thousand-dollar loan and to relax, to take a couple of months off before seriously considering any proposals that were forwarded to him by Clitus Felton out of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Maybe if he could set up a few good deals on some of his artwork he could take as much as half a year off, and he'd hardly have to move at all.

Pete Harris helped Merle Bachman the length of the low-ceilinged attic, while Tucker was able to make it on his own. He had a strong urge to grip his wounded arm and to stop the rapidly vibrating pain that made his bones sing, but he knew that would only make the pain worse. He let his arm hang at his side, and he tried not to think about anything but getting out of there.

The woman carried the smallest suitcase, while Harris went back to fetch the last two after depositing Merle Bachman under the door to the mansion roof.

Tucker stood over Bachman, swaying, needing to sit, refusing to allow himself that much. They were close, too close to stop being alert and prepared.

In the distance the sound of a helicopter rattled through the still morning air.

"Got to hurry," Tucker said.

It had occurred to him that the gunman downstairs would hear the copter and might go outside where he could, at such close range, make an attempt to kill the pilot.

Shirillo was the first onto the roof, making the move with little trouble, and, with Harris assisting him from below, managed to get Merle Bachman outside just as Norton brought the chopper in low over the house. The girl went next, looking back only once at the three bags full of money, and she did not require any aid. Tucker followed her, his shoulder blazing with pain as he bumped it on the beveled rim of the trap door, requiring Shirillo's help to make the last part of the trip. Pete Harris handed out the suitcases one at a time, almost as if they were filled with nitroglycerin, then followed them.

The time was 7:38.

"Fantastic!" the girl said, looking up at the chopper.

"You okay?" Tucker asked.

"I'm fine," the girl said, looking up at the chopper.
"Who first?" Shirillo asked, grasping the ladder and turning to look at the others. He wasn't having any trouble keeping his balance on the gently slanted roof, though to Tucker the angle seemed precipitous and the shingles seemed to move under them.

Harris said, "I'll take Merle up first. I don't think any of the rest of you can manage him on that ladder."

"Go," Tucker said.

He longed to sit down and rest, even to sleep, but he knew that sleep was a dangerous desire right now. Harris gave Shirillo his Thompson submachine gun and said, "If you need it, do you know how to use it?"

The kid checked it out, nodded, said, "Yes."

Harris turned, gathered up Merle Bachman as if the smaller man were a child, slung him over his shoulder and held onto him with his left hand. He wasn't even bowed by the weight. Now, Tucker realized, despite the danger he'd posed throughout the operation, Harris was doing his share and had become as valuable as any man on the team. He gripped the rope ladder with his right hand, stepped onto the bottom rung and held tight as Norton drew them up toward the open copter door.

A gentle wind swept over the mansion and, in conjunction with the copter's wallowing motion, caused the ladder to swing back and forth in a wide arc that threatened to dump both of the men clinging to it. However, Harris held on, and the sway declined as the ladder shortened. Then the ladder stopped; Harris climbed the last few steps, worked Bachman into the open door and followed the wounded man.

The ladder raveled downward once again.

"You next," Tucker told the woman.

She was on the ladder the instant it fell before her, and she didn't wait to ride it while it retracted. As it pulled up into its mechanism, she climbed and gained the copter door in short order. Tucker wondered what Norton would think, whether he'd be nonplused by her unexpected appearance. He was relieved when, after she'd been inside the craft a moment, the ladder dropped swiftly again.

The copter bobbed but stayed pretty much in one spot, riding the back of the wind.

Shirillo shouted, "What about the suitcases?"

"Give me the 'Thompson. You take the bags up one at a time."

Shirillo handed over the gun, lifted the smallest case, gripped the ladder and rode upward as it retracted. Harris, who was waiting for him, took the suitcase out of his hands. Shirillo started back down.

A rifle cracked from below, the sharp noise muffled by the heavy thumping of the chopper's blades but nonetheless frightening and recognizable, like an ax splitting wood.

Tucker edged farther down the sloping roof until he could see the gunman on the lawn. Bracing the Thompson between his knees, weaker than ever now, his head swimming back and forth and his vision too blurred to take good aim, he clenched his teeth and let go a long, rattling burst of fire.

Down there, where bullets were plowing up the grass like rain, the gunman turned and ran, dived for cover behind a cement flower planter a hundred yards out from the house.

Tucker looked at Shirillo, saw the kid was just stepping onto the ladder with the second suitcase in hand.

"Move!"

Shirillo couldn't make the ladder operate any faster than it was doing now, and he couldn't very well climb it while carrying the luggage, but Tucker couldn't repress the shout. His calm facade was cracking, his carefully cultured composure slipping away. It had been one hell of an operation, and it mustn't go bad now because of one gorilla with a rifle, one punk out to impress the boss with his bravery.

The man behind the concrete planter stood up long enough to aim and take a shot at Tucker. The bullet tore across the shingle two feet on Tucker's right, spraying chips of tarry fabric. He loosened a chatter of machine-gun fire, chipping the cement all to hell.

Shirillo picked up the third suitcase and started up the ladder again, jerked as the man behind the planter got him in the thigh.

Son of a bitch, Tucker thought. His weariness and dizziness flopped over and were anger on the other side, anger enough to bring him into sharp, fast movement. He pulled hard on the Thompson's trigger and was rewarded with the sight of the gunman stepping frantically backward out of the way of a line of dancing bullets.

The man turned and ran, the rifle on the lawn where he'd dropped it, darting this way and that, seeking the shelter of shrubbery.

You dumb bastard, Tucker thought. I could have killed you, and what percentage would have been in that?

Everyone seemed anxious to die, as if they couldn't wait for it, like this man and the man he'd wounded on the promenade earlier in the evening. And like Baglio, ready to take a beating rather than tell where Bachman was. Of course, in this business you took a blood risk, because you worked with dangerous men at dangerous times. But a risk should be reasonable, the chances of success greater than the chances for failure. Otherwise you were no better
than a fool.

"Hey!" Shirillo called down, breaking Tucker's reverie. He'd gotten the last suitcase into the chopper and had followed close behind it.

Strapping the Thompson around his chest, Tucker got to his feet, almost fell, almost lost it all right there, grabbed desperately for the rope ladder, caught it, jerked as the device began to draw up into the hovering aircraft.

A blood risk: he'd taken it, and he'd won.

Harris leaned out of the open door, reaching for him, grinning broadly. He said, "Been waiting for you," and he took Tucker's hands to pull him the rest of the way. Tucker noted that Harris hadn't added "friend."
Dr. Walter Andrion was a tall, slim, white-haired gentleman who wore tailored suits and fifty-dollar shirts, drove a new Cadillac and traveled in the fastest social circles. He was married to Evanne Andrion, a black-haired, blue-eyed lovely thirty years his junior, a young lady with incredibly expensive tastes. When Junior called him, he dropped everything and came out to the airfield right away, carrying two heavy bags instead of one, for he had long ago learned that he should meet any such call as fully prepared as he could be. This was not orthodox medicine by any means. He worked fast and was clean, bored out wounds, flushed away clotted blood and dirt, stitched the men up as well as they could have been in a hospital. He didn't speak, and no one spoke to him as he worked. He had made it abundantly clear to Tucker three years ago that he did not want to have to hear anything about the origins of such wounds and that he wanted these sessions to be terminated as rapidly as possible. When he was done, he insisted on taking Merle Bachman back to his clinic for a couple of weeks' rest and recuperation, enough time to have his entire mouth rebuilt as well. He accepted two thousand dollars from Tucker in fifties and hundreds, tucked this into an already fat wallet, helped Bachman into his Cadillac and drove away.

"We'll take the doctor's fees from the suitcases," Tucker said. "Before we decide on a split."

Everyone was in agreement on that, except Miss Loraine, who didn't like it but didn't argue either.

While Simonsen, Paul Norton's partner in the airfreight business, was conveniently out having supper, they opened the three suitcases in Norton's office and counted the money, which they found totaled $341,890. Estimating Bachman's additional medical bills at more than four thousand dollars, they settled on splitting $335,000.

Which wasn't bad, either.

Miss Loraine looked at her $67,000, frowned and said "I thought it was going to be a lot more than this."

"It'll keep you," Tucker said.

"Not for long."

"A girl of your talents? You'll build it into a fortune before the year is out."

"Does anyone have something I can put this in?" she asked.

Norton said, "Paper bag do?"

She took the brown paper bag from him and tucked her cash away inside it, not having bothered to respond to Tucker.

Harris said, "I want to know what you're going to do, what your plans are."

"That's my business," she said.

"It's all of our business," Harris said.

She looked around, saw them watching her, set her lips tighter and said, "Will each of you tell me what you intend to do when we split?"

"Of course not," Harris said. "You're the intruder. You're the one we've got to be sure about."

Paul Norton, sitting behind his dilapidated desk, tilted back in his chair and drinking a bottle of India Pale Ale, had thus far maintained a low profile. Now, however, he said, "You could stay here with me for a while, Miss."

She looked at him, her face unreadable, her eyes cold, and she said, "I don't even know you."

Norton blushed, his face reddening except for the white scars on his cheeks, and he said, "Well, I sure didn't mean there were any conditions on the offer, if that's what you mean. I've got a nice apartment here on the field with two bedrooms, and the guest room has its own private bath, real snug. You wouldn't have to see me at all for days if you didn't want to."

Tucker said, "I thought you never wanted to know anything about my business or the people I deal with."

"I don't," Norton said, raising both hands, his big palms flat, and pushing them off. "I wouldn't listen to her even if she tried to tell me, and I'd throw her out the first time she got in a talkative mood. I'm just trying to help her, that's it, that's all."

Tucker said, "I thought you never wanted to know anything about my business or the people I deal with."

She stared hard at the pilot, obviously on the verge of turning him down, then seemed to catch a glimpse of the shyness behind his tough-man front, knew that he hadn't anything in mind but helping her. She said, "Well, I guess that'd be all right. I need to go to ground for a while and think."

"It still doesn't answer my question," Harris said impatiently. "What will you do when you leave here?"

The woman turned, her face tight, anger boiling up.

Before she could say anything Norton said, "Well, Mr. Harris, that's a long way off, don't you think? She'll need time to consider that. You can't expect an answer this instant."

Pete looked at the pilot and knew there would be no arguing with him. He shrugged and said, "The hell with it. I'm going to use my split to buy into a little business, and I'm retiring. What do I care what she does?" He turned and walked out of the office.

It was 5:29 p.m. on Thursday.
At 9:04 that same evening, his arm in a sling, carrying a small, cheap suitcase and slightly whoozy from pain killers, Tucker entered his tenth-floor Park Avenue apartment. He was dressed in a new black suit which didn't exactly fit him, in a new shirt, new tie, new shoes. Despite his wounds he was feeling well.

He went directly to the closet, opened it, stepped inside, opened the small wall safe. He tossed his Tucker credentials inside and took out his real papers, pocketed those. He opened the cheap suitcase and lifted out a large number of money bricks, depositing them one at a time in the safe. When that was done, he closed the safe, spun the dial, shut the suitcase and shelved that.

In the hallway he stopped and looked at his Edo shield, touched the beaten copper, the flared silver rim, the hand-carved ivory inlays, and the coolness of the materials, their worn edges, calmed him.

In the bedroom he found Elise sitting up watching television, dressed in her favorite old quilted robe, ravishing. She said, "How'd it go with the bells?"

"I got the seller a price he was satisfied with and the buyer a price he could accept. But it wasn't easy. How'd your pickle commercial go with Plunket?"

"Marvelous," she said. "I seemed to have this fantastic talent for it." Then, as he shrugged out of his suit jacket, she said, "What's that? What happened to your arm?"

He had already gone over, to himself, the story he would have to tell her. He said, "I was shot." When she started up from the bed, he motioned her back and said, "Don't make me feel like an invalid, because it's only a flesh wound."

"But how, why?" she asked.

He said, "It was nothing more serious than an average all-American mugging, when I was on my way to my hotel."

"A mugging? In Denver?"

"What's so strange about a mugging in Denver?" he asked. "We're living in dangerous times, honey. The world's full of dangerous men."