JIM THOMPSON

THE RIP-OFF

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—The New Republic
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1985
I didn't hear her until she was actually inside the room, locking the door shut behind her. Because that kind of place, the better type of that kind of place—and this was the better type—has its taproot in quiet. Anonymity. So whatever is required for it is provided: thick walls, thick rugs, well-oiled hardware. Whatever is required, but no more. No bath, only a sink firmly anchored to the wall. No easy chairs, since you are not there to sit. No radio or television, since the most glorious of diversions is in yourself. Your two selves.

She was scowling agitatedly, literally dancing from foot to foot, as she flung off her clothes, tossing them onto the single wooden chair where mine were draped.

I laughed and sat up. "Have to pee?" I said. "Why do you always hold in until you're about to wet your pants?"

"I don't always! Just when I'm meeting you, and I don't want to take time to—oops! Whoops! Help me, darn it!" she said, trying to boost herself up on the sink. "Hall-up!"

I helped her, holding her on her porcelain perch until she had finished. Then I carried her to the bed, and lowered her to it. Looked wonderingly at the tiny immensity, the breathtaking miracle of her body.

She wasn't quite five feet tall. She weighed no more than ninety-five pounds, and I could almost encompass her waist with one hand. But somehow there was no skimpiness about her. Somehow her flesh flowed and curved and burgeoned. Extravagantly, deliciously lush.

"Manny," I said softly, marvelling. For as often as I had seen this miracle, it remained new to me. "Manuela Aloe."

"Present," she said. "Now, come to bed, you good-looking, darling son-of-a-bitch."

"You know something, Manny, my love? If I threw away your tits and your ass, God forbid, there wouldn't be anything left."

Her eyes flashed. Her hand darted and swung, slapping me smartly on the cheek.

"Don't you talk that way to me! Not ever!"

"What the hell?" I said. "You talk pretty rough yourself."

She didn't say anything. Simply stared at me, her eyes steady and unblinking. Telling me, without telling me, that how she talked had no bearing on how I should talk.

I lay down with her; kissed her, and held the kiss. And suddenly her arms tightened convulsively, and I was drawn onto and into her. And then there was a fierce muted sobbing, a delirious exulting, a frantic hysterical whispering . . .

"Oh, you dirty darling bastard! You sweet son-of-a-bitch! You dearest preciousest mother-loving sugar-pie . . ."

Manny.

Manuela Aloe.

I wondered how I could love her so deeply, and be so much afraid of her. So downright terrified.

And I damned well knew why.

After a while, and after we had rested awhile, she placed her hands against my chest and pushed me upward so that she could look into my face.

"That was good, Britt," she said. "Really wonderful. I've never enjoyed anything so much."

"Manny," I said. "You have just said the finest, the most exciting thing a woman can say to a man."

"I've never said it to anyone else. But, of course, there's never been anyone else."

"Except your husband, you mean."

"I never said it to him. You don't lie to people about things like this."

I shifted my gaze; afraid of the guilt she might read in my eyes. She laughed softly, on a submerged note of teasing.

"It bothers you, doesn't it, Britt? The fact that there was a man before you."

"Don't be silly. A girl like you would just about have to have other men in her life."
"Not men. Only the one man, my husband."

"Well, it doesn't bother me. He doesn't, I mean. Uh, just how did he die, anyway?"

"Suddenly," she said. "Very suddenly. Let me up now, will you please?"

I helped her to use the sink, and then I used it. It couldn't have taken more than a minute or two, but when I turned around she had finished dressing. I was startled, although I shouldn't have been. She had the quick, sure movements characteristic of so many small women. Acting and reacting with lightning-like swiftness. Getting things done while I was still thinking about them.

"Running off mad?" I said; and then, comprehending, or thinking that I did, "Well, don't fall in, honey. I've got some plans for you."

She frowned at me reprovingly, and, still playing it light, I said she couldn't be going to take a bath. I'd swear she didn't need a bath; and who would know better than I?

That got me another frown, so I knocked off the kidding. "I like your dress, Manny. Paris job, is it?"

"Dallas. Nieman-Marcus."

"Tsk, tsk, such extravagance," I said. "And you were right there in Italy, anyway, to pick up your shoes."

She laughed, relenting. "Close, but no cigar," she said, pirouetting in the tiny spike-heeled pumps. "I. Pinna. You like?"

"Like. Come here, and I'll show you how much."

"Gotta go now, but just wait," she said, sliding me a sultry glance. "And leave the door unlocked. You'll have some company very soon."

I said I wondered who the company could be, and she said archly that I should just wait and see; I'd really be surprised. Then, she was gone, down the hall to the bathroom I supposed. And I stretched out on the bed, pulling the sheet up over me, and waited for her to return.

The door was not only unlocked, but ever-so-slightly ajar. But that was all right, no problem in a place like this. The lurking terror sank deeper and deeper into my mind, and disappeared. And I yawned luxuriously, and closed my eyes. Apparently, I dozed, for I suddenly sat up to glance at my wristwatch. Automatically obeying a whispered command which had penetrated my subconscious. "Watch."

I said I sat up.

That's wrong.

I only started to, had barely lifted my head from the pillows, when there was a short snarling-growl. A threat and a warning, as unmistakable as it was deadly. And slowly, ever so slowly, I sank back on the bed.

There was a softer growl, a kind of gruff whimper. Approval. I lay perfectly still for a time, scarcely breathing—and it is easy to stop breathing when one is scared stiff. Then, without moving my head, I slanted my eyes to the side. Directly into the unblinking stare of a huge German shepherd.

His massive snout was only inches from my face. The grayish-black lips were curled back from his teeth. And I remember thinking peevishly that he had too many, that no dog could possibly have this many teeth. Our eyes met and held for a moment. But dogs, members of the wolf family, regard such an encounter as a challenge. And a rising growl jerked my gaze back to the ceiling.

There was that gruff whimper again. Approval. Then, nothing.

Nothing but the wild beating of my heart. That, and the dog's warm breath on my face as he stood poised so close to me. Ready to move—decisively—if I should move.

"Watch!" He had been given an order. And until that order was revoked, he would stay where he was. Which would force me to stay where I was . . . lying very, very still. As, of course, I would not be able to do much longer.

Any moment now, I would start yawning. Accumulated tension would force me to. At almost any moment, my legs would jerk; an involuntary and uncontrollable reaction to prolonged inactivity. And when that happened.

The dog growled again. Differently from any of his previous growls. With the sound was another, the brief thudthud of a tail against the carpet.

A friend—or perhaps an acquaintance—had come into the room. I was afraid to move my head, as the intruder was obviously aware, so she came around to the foot of the bed where I could see her without moving.

It was the mulatto slattern who sat behind the desk in the dimly lit lobby. The manager of the place, I had always
assumed. The mock concern on her face didn't quite conceal her malicious grin; and there was spiteful laughter in her normally servile voice.

"Well, jus' looky heah, now! Mistah Britton Rainstar with a doggy in his room! How you doin', Mistah Highan'-mighty Rainstar?"

"G-Goddam you—!" I choked with fear and fury. "Get that dog out of here! Call him off!"

She said, "Shuh, man." She wasn't tellin' that dog to do nothin'. "Ain't my houn'. Wouldn't pay no attention to me, 'ceptin' maybe to bite my fat ass."

"But goddam it—! I'm sorry," I said. "Please forgive me for being rude. If you'll get Manny—Miss Aloe, please. Tell her I'm very sorry, and I'm sure I can straighten everything out if she'll just—just—"

She broke in with another "Shuh" of disdain. "Where I get Miss Manny, anyways? Ain't seen Miss Manny since you-all come in t'day."

"I think she's in the bathroom, the one on this floor. She's got to be here somewhere. Now, please—!"

"Huh-uh! Sure ain't callin' her out of no bathroom. Not me, no, sir! Miss Manny wouldn't like that a-tall!"

"B-but—" I hesitated helplessly. "Call the police then. Please! And for God's sake, hurry!"

"Call the p'lice? Here? Not a chance, Mistah Rainstar. No, siree! Miss Manny sho' wouldn't like that!"

"To hell with what she likes! What's it to you, anyway? Why, goddam it to hell—"

"Jus' plenty t'me what she likes. Miss Manny my boss. That's right, Mistah Rainstar." She beamed at me falsely. "Miss Manny bought this place right after you-all started comin' here. Reckon she liked it real well."

She was lying. She had to be lying.

She wasn't lying.

She laughed softly, and turned to go. "You lookin' kinda peak-id, Mistah Rainstar. Reckon I better let you get some rest."

"Don't," I begged. "Don't do this to me. If you can't do anything else, at least stay with me. I can't move, and I can't lie still any longer, and—and that dog will kill me! He's trained to kill! S—So—so—please—" I gulped, swallowing an incipient sob, blinking the tears from my eyes. "Stay with me. Please stay until Miss Manny comes back."

My eyes cleared.

The woman was gone. Moved out of my line of vision. I started to turn my head, and the dog warned me to desist. Then, from somewhere near the door, the woman spoke again.

"Just stay until Miss Manny come back? That's what you said, Mistah Rainstar?"

"Yes, please. Just until then."

"But what if she don' come back? What about that, Mistah Rainstar?"

An ugly laugh, then. A laugh of mean merriment. And then she was gone. Closing the door firmly this time. And locking it.
The terror had begun three months before. It began at three o'clock in the morning with Mrs. Olmstead shaking me into wakefulness.

Mrs. Olmstead is my housekeeper, insofar as I have one. An old age pensioner, she occupies a downstairs bedroom in what, in better times, was called the Rainstar mansion. She does little else but occupy it, very little in the way of housekeeping. But, fortunately, I require little, and necessarily pay little. So one hand washes the other.

She wasn't a very bright woman at best, and she was far from her best at three in the morning. But I gathered from her gabbling and gesturing that there was an emergency somewhere below, so I pulled on some clothes over my pajamas and hurried downstairs.

A Mr. Jason was waiting for me, a stout apoplectic-looking man who was dressed pretty much as I was. He snapped out that he just couldn't have this sort of thing, y'know. It was a god damn imposition, and I had a hell of a lot of guts giving out his phone number. And so forth and so on.

"Now, look," I said, finally managing to break in on him. "Listen to me. I didn't give out your number to anyone. I don't know what the hell it is, for Christ's sake, and I don't want to know. And I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah? Y'don't, huh?" He seemed somewhat mollified. "Well. Better hurry up. Fellow said it was an emergency; matter of life and death."

He lived in an elaborate summer home about three miles from mine, in an area that was still very good. He stopped his car under the porte cochere, and preceded me into the entrance hall; then withdrew a few feet while I picked up the telephone.

I couldn't think who would be making a call to me under such circumstances. There just wasn't anyone. No one at the Foundation would do it. Except for the check which they sent me monthly, I had virtually no contact with the Hemisphere Foundation. As for Constance, my wife, now a resident, an apparently permanent one, at her father's home in the Midwest . . .

Constance had no reason to call. Except for being maimed and crippled, Constance was in quite good health. She would doubtless die in bed—thirty or forty years from now—sweetly smiling her forgiveness for the accident I had caused.

So she would not call, and her father would not. Conversation with me was something he did his best to avoid. Oh, he had been scrupulously fair, far more than I would have been in his place. He had publicly exonerated me of blame, stoutly maintaining to the authorities that there was no real evidence pointing to my culpability. But without saying so, he had let me know that he would be just as happy without my company or conversation.

"So . . .?"

"Yes?" I spoke into the phone. "Britton Rainstar, here."

"Rainstar"—a husky semi-whisper, a disguised voice. "Get this, you deadbeat fuck-off. Pay up or you'll die cryin'. Pay up or else."

"Huh! Wh—aat?" I almost dropped the phone. "What—Who is this?"

"I kid you not, Rainstar. Decorate the deck, or you'll be trailing turds from here to Texas."

I was still sputtering when the wire went dead.

Jason glanced at me, and looked away. "Bet you could use a drink. Always helps at a time like this."

"Thanks, but I guess not," I said. "If you'll be kind enough to drive me home . . ."

He did so, mumbling vague words of sympathy (for just what, he didn't know). At my house, with its crumbling veranda and untended lawn, he pressed a fifty dollar bill into my hand.

"Get your phone reconnected, okay? No, I insist! And I'm sorry things are so bad for you. Damned shame."

I thanked him humbly, assuring him that I would do as he said.

By the time Mrs. Olmstead arose and began preparing breakfast, I had had two more callers, both crankily sympathetic as, like Jason, they brought word of a dire emergency.

I went with them, of course. How could I refuse? Or explain? And what if there actually was an emergency?
There was always a chance, a million-to-one chance, that my caller might have a message of compelling importance. So it was simply impossible—impossible for me, at least—to ignore the summons.

The result was the same each time. An abusive demand to pay up or to suffer the ugly consequences.

I accepted some weak, lukewarm coffee from Mrs. Olmstead; I even ate a piece of her incredible toast and a bite or two of the scrambled eggs she prepared, which, preposterous as it seems, were half-raw but over-cooked.

Ignoring Mrs. Olmstead's inquiries about my "emergency" calls, I went up to my room and surrendered to a few hours of troubled rest. I came back downstairs shortly after noon, advised Mrs. Olmstead that I would fix my own lunch and that she should do as she pleased. She trudged down the road to the bus stop, going I knew not where nor cared. I cleaned myself up and dressed, not knowing what I was going to do either. And not caring much.

From the not-too-distant distance came a steady rumbling and clattering and rattling; the to-and-fro passage of an almost unbroken parade of trucks. Through the many gabled windows, their shutters opened to the spring breeze, came the sickly-pungent perfume of what the trucks were carrying.

I laughed. Softly, sadly, wonderingly. I jumped up, slamming a fist into my palm. I sat back down, and got up again. Aimlessly left the room to wander aimlessly through the house. Through the library with its threadbare carpet, and its long virtually empty bookshelves. Through the lofty drawing room, its faded tapestry peeling in tatters from the walls. The grand ballroom, its parquet floor inclining imperceptibly but ominously with the vast weight of its rust-ruined pipe organ.

I came out onto the rear veranda, where glass from shattered windows splattered over the few unsaleable items of furniture that remained. Expensively stained glass, bright with color.

I stood looking off into that previously mentioned not-too-distant distance. It was coming closer; it had come quite a bit closer since yesterday, it seemed to me. And why not, anyway, as rapidly as those trucks were dumping their burden?

At present, I was merely—merely!—in the environs of a garbage dump. But soon it would be right up to my back door. Soon, I would be right in the middle of the stinking, rat-infested horror.

And maybe that was as it should be, hmm? What better place for the unwanted, unneeded and worthless?

Jesus! I closed my eyes, shivering.

I went back through the house, and up to my bedroom. I glanced at myself in a floor-length mirror, and I doubt that I looked as bad as my warped and splotched reflection. But still I cursed and groaned out loud.

I flung off my clothes, and showered vigorously. I shaved again, doing it right instead of half-assed. And then I began rummaging through my closets, digging far back in them and uncovering items that I had forgotten.

An hour later, after some work with Mrs. Olmstead's steam iron, some shoe polish and a buffing brush, I again looked at myself. And warped as it was, the mirror told me my efforts were well-spent indeed!

The handmade shoes were eternally new, ever-magnificent despite their chronological age. The cambric shirt from Sulka, and the watered-silk Countess Mara tie, were new—long-ago Christmas presents which I had only glanced at, and returned to their gift box. And a decade had been wonderfully kind to the Bond Street suit, swinging full circle through fads and freakishness, and bringing it back in style again.

I frowned, studying my hair.

The shagginess was not too bad, not unacceptable, but a trim was certainly in order. The gray temples, and the gray streak down the center were also okay, a distinguished contrast for the jet blackness. However, that yellowish tinge which gray hair siltily acquires, was not all right. I needed to see a truly good hair man, a stylist, not the barber-college cruds that I customarily went to.

I examined my wallet—twelve dollars plus the fifty Jason had given me. So I could properly finish the job I had started, hair and all. And the wonders it would do for my frazzled morale to look decent again, the way Britton Rainstar had to look . . . having so little else but looks.

But if I did that, if I didn't make at least a token payment to Amicable Finance—!

The phone rang. It had not been disconnected, as Jason had assumed. Calling me at other numbers was simply part of the "treatment."

I picked up the phone, and identified myself.

A cheery man's voice said that he was Mr. Bradley, Amicable comptroller. "You have quite a large balance with us, Mr. Rainstar. I assume you'll be dropping in today to settle up?"
I started to say that I was sorry, that I simply couldn't pay the entire amount, as much as I desired to. "But I'll pay something; that's a promise, Mr. Bradley. And I'll have the rest within a week—I swear I will! J—just don't do anything. D—don't hurt me. Please, Mr. Bradley."

"Yes, Mr. Rainstar? What time can I expect you in today?"

"You can't," I said.

"How's that?" His voice crackled like a whip.

"Not today or any other day. You took my car. I repaid your loan in full, and you still took my car. Now—"

"Late charges, Rainstar. Interest penalties. Repossession costs. Nothing more than your contract called for."

I told him he could go fuck what the contract called for. He could blow it out his ass. "And if you bastards pull any more crap on me, any more of this calling me to the phone in the middle of the night . . ."

"Call you to the phone?" He was laughing at me. "Fake emergency calls? What makes you think we were responsible?"

I told him why I thought it; why I knew it. Because only Amicable Finance was lousy enough to pull such tricks. Others might screw their own mothers with syphilitic cocks, or pimp their sisters at a nickel a throw. But they weren't up to Amicable's stunts.

"So here's some advice for you, you liver-lipped asshole! You fuck with me any more, and it'll be shit in the fan! Before I'm through with you, you'll think lightning struck a crapper . . .!"

I continued a minute or two longer, growing more elaborate in my cursing. And not surprisingly, I had quite a vocabulary of curses. Nothing is sacred to children, just as anything unusual is an affront to them, a challenge which cannot be ignored. And when you have a name like Britton Rainstar, you are accepted only after much fighting and cursing.

I slammed up the phone. Frightened stiff by what I had done, yet somehow pleased with myself. I had struck back for a change. For once, in a very long time, I had faced up to the ominous instead of ignoring or running from it.

I fixed the one drink I had in the house, a large drink of vodka. Sipping it, feeling the dullness go out of my heart, I decided that I would by God get the needful done with my hair. I would look like a man, by God, not the Jolly Green Giant, when Amicable Finance started giving me hell.

Before I could weaken and change my mind, I made an appointment with a hair stylist. Then, I finished my drink, dragging it out as long as I could, and stood up.

And the phone rang.

I almost didn't answer it; certain that it would get me nothing but a bad time. But few men are strong enough to ignore a ringing telephone, and I am not one of them.

A booming, infectiously good-natured voice blasted into my ear.

"Mr. Rainstar, Britt? How the hell are you, kid?"

I said I was fine, and how the hell was he? He said he was just as fine as I was, laughing uproariously. And I found myself smiling in spite of myself.

"This is Pat Aloe, Britt. Patrick Xavier Aloe, if you're going to be fussy." Another roar of laughter. "Look, kid. I'd come out there, but I'm tied up tighter than a popcorn fart. So's how about you dropping by my office in about an hour? Well, two hours, then."

"But—well, why?" I said. "Why do you want to see me, Mr. uh, Pat?"

"Because I owe you, Britt, baby. Want to make it up to you for those pissants at Amicable. Don't know what's the matter with the stupid bastards, anyway."

"But . . . Amicable?" I hesitated. "You have something to do with them?"

A final roar of laughter. Apparently, I had said something hilariously funny. Then, good humor flooding his voice, he declared that he not only wanted to see me, but I also wanted to see him, even though I didn't know it yet. Thus, the vote for seeing each other was practically unanimous, by his account.

"So how about it, Britt, baby? See you in a couple of hours, okay?"

"Who am I to buck a majority vote?" I said. "I'll see you, Pat, uh, baby."
I got out of the car at a downtown office building. I entered its travertine-marble lobby, and studied the large office directory affixed to one wall. It was glassed-in, a long oblong of white plastic lettering against a black-felt background. The top line read:

PXA HOLDING CORPORATION

Beneath it, in substantially smaller letters, were the names of sixteen companies, including that of Amicable Finance. The final listing, in small red letters, read:

P. X. ALOE
—P. H.

M. FRANCESCA ALOE

'allo, Aloe, I thought, stepping into the elevator. Patrick Xavier and M. Francesca, and Britt, baby, makes three. Or something. But whereof and why, for God's sake?

I punched the button marked P.H., and was zoomed forty floors upward to the penthouse floor. As I debarked into its richly furnished reception area, a muscular young man with gleaming black hair stepped in front of me. He looked sharply into my face, then smiled and stepped back.

"How are you, Mr. Rainstar? Nice day."

"How are you?" I said, for I am nothing if not polite. "A nice day so far, at least."

A truly beautiful, beautifully dressed woman came forward, and urgently squeezed my hand.

"Such a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rainstar! Do come with me, please."

I followed her across a hundred feet or so of carpet (a foot deep, or so) to an unmarked door. She started to knock, then jerked her hand back. Turned to me still smiling, but rather whitishly.

"If you'll wait just a moment, please . . ."

She started to shoo me away, then froze at the sound from within the room. A sound that could only be made by a palm swung against a face. Swung hard, again, again. Like the stuttering, staccato crackling of an automatic rifle.

It went on for all of a minute, a very long time to get slapped. Abruptly, as though a gag had been removed, a woman screamed.

"N—No! D—don't, please! I'll never do—!"

The scream ended with the suddenness of its beginning. The slapping also. The beautiful, beautifully dressed young woman waited about ten seconds. (I counted them off silently.) Then, she knocked on the door and ushered me inside.

"Miss Manuela Aloe," she said. "Mr. Britton Rainstar."

A young woman came toward me smiling; rubbing her hand, her right hand, against her dress before extending it to me. "Thank you, Sydney," she said, dismissing the receptionist with a nod. "Mr. Rainstar, let's just sit here on the lounge."

We sat down on the long velour lounge. She crossed one leg over the other, rested an elbow on her knee, and looked at me smiling, her chin propped in the palm of her hand. I looked at her—the silver-blond hair, the startlingly black eyes and lashes, the flawlessly creamy complexion. I looked around and found it impossible to believe that such a delicious bon bon of a girl would do harm to anyone.

"You look just like him," Manuela was saying. "We-ell, almost just. You don't have your hair in braids."

I said, What? And then I said, Oh, for several questions in my mind had been answered. "You mean Chief Britton Rainstar," I said. "The Remington portrait of him in the Metropolitan."

She said, No, she'd missed that one, darn it. "I was talking about the one in the Royal Museum by James McNeill Whistler. But tell me. Isn't Britton a kind of funny name for an Indian chief?"

"Hilarious," I said. "I guess we got it from the nutty whites the Rainstars intermarried with, early and often. Now,
if you want a real honest to Hannah, jumpin' by Jesus Indian name—well, how does George strike you?"

"George?" she laughed. "George?"

"George Creekmore. Inventor of the Cherokee alphabet, and publisher of the first newspaper west of the Mississippi."

"And I guess that'll teach me," she smiled, coloring slightly. "But, anyway, you certainly bear a strong resemblance to the Chief. Of course, I'd heard that all the Rainstar men did, but—"

"We're hard to tell apart," I agreed. "The only significant difference is in the pockets of later generations."

"The pockets?"

"They're empty," I said, and tapped myself on the chest. "Meet Lo, the poor Indian."

"Hi, Lo," she said, laughing. And I said, Hi, and then we were silent for a time.

But it was not an uncomfortable silence. We smiled and looked at each other without self-consciousness, both of us liking what we saw. When she spoke it was to ask more questions about the Rainstar family; and while I didn't mind talking about it, having little else to be proud of, there were things I wanted to know, too. So, after rambling on awhile, I got down to them.

"Like when and why the heck," I said, "am I seeing P. X. Aloe?"

"I don't think you'll be able to see Uncle Pat today," she said. "Some last minute business came up. But there's nothing sinister afoot"—she gave me a reassuring little pat on the arm. "Now, unless you're in a hurry... ."

"Well, I am due in Washington to address the cabinet," I said. "I thought it was already addressed, but I guess someone left off the zone number."

"You dear!" she laughed delightedly. "You absolute dear! Let's go have some drinks and dinner, and talk and talk and talk. . ."

She got her hat and purse from a mahogany cabinet. The hat was a sailor with a turned-up brim, and she cocked it over one eye, giving me an impish look. Then, she grinned and righted it, and the last faint traces of apprehension washed out of my mind.

Give another woman a vicious slapping? This darling, diminutive child? Rainstar, you are nuts!

We took the elevator down to PXA's executive dining room, in a sub-basement of the building. A smiling maitre d', with a large menu under his arm, came out of the shadows and bowed to us graciously.

"A pleasure to see you, Miss Aloe. And you, too, sir, needless to say."

"Not at all," I said. "My pleasure."

He looked at me a little startled. I am inclined to gag it up and talk too much when I am uneasy or unsure of myself, which means that I am almost always gagging it up and talking too much.

"This is Mr. Britton Rainstai Albert (Albehr)," Manuela Aloe said. "I hope you'll be seeing him often."

"My own hope. Will you have a drink at the bar, while your table is being readied?"

She said we would, and we did. In fact, we had a couple, since the night employees were just arriving at this early hour, and there was some delay in preparing our table.

"Very nice," I said, taking an icy sip of martini. "A very nice place, Miss Aloe. Or is it Mrs.?"

"She said it was Miss—she had taken her own name after her husband died—and I could call her Manny if I liked. "But yes"—she glanced around casually. "It is nice, isn't it? Not that it shouldn't be, considering."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Or should I say ah-ha? I'm afraid I'm going to have to rush right off to Geneva, Manny."

"Wha-aat?"

"Just as soon as I pay for these drinks. Unless you insist on going dutch on them."

"Silly!" She wriggled deliciously. "You're with me, and everything's complimentary."

"But you said considering," I pointed out. "A word hinting at the dread unknown, in my case at least. To wit, money."

"Oh, well," she shrugged, dismissing the subject. "Money isn't everything."
With an operation as large and multifaceted as PXA, one with so many employees and interests, it was impossible to maintain supervision and surveillance in every place it might be required. It would have been impossible, even if PXA's activities were all utterly legitimate instead of borderline, with personnel which figuratively cried out to be spied upon. Pat Aloe had handed the problem to his niece Manny, a graduate student in psychology. After months of consultation with behaviorists and recording experts, she had come up with the bugging system used throughout the PXA complex.

It was activated by tones, and was uncannily accurate in deciding when a person's voice tone was not what it should be. Thus, Bradley, the man who had called me this morning, had been revealed as a "switcher," one who diverted business to competitors. So all of his calls were completely recorded, instead of receiving a sporadic spot check.

"I see," I nodded to Manny, as we dawdled over coffee and liqueurs, "about as clearly as I see through mud. Everything is completely opaque to me."

"Oh, now, why do you say that?" she said. "I'd seen that portrait when I was a little girl, and I'd never gotten it out of my mind. So when I found out that the last of the Rainstars was right here in town . . . !"

"Recalling part of the conversation," I said, "you must have felt that the last of the Rainstars needed his mouth washed out with soap."

She laughed and said, Nope, cursing out Bradley had been a plus. "That was just about the clincher for you with Pat. Someone of impeccable background and breeding, who could still get tough if he had to."

"Manny," I said, "exactly what is this all about, anyway? Why PXA's interest in me?"

"Well . . ."

"Before you answer, maybe I'd better set you straight on something. I've never been mixed up in anything shady, and PXA seems to be mixed up in nothing else but. Oh, I know you're not doing anything illegal, nothing you can go to prison for. But, still, well—"

"PXA is right out in the open," Manny said firmly. "Anyone that wants to try, can take a crack at us. We don't rewrite any laws, and we don't ask any to be written for us. We don't own any big politicians. I'd say that for every dollar we make with our so-called shady operations, there's a thousand being stolen by some highly respectable cartel."

"Well," I nodded uncomfortably, "there's no disputing that, of course. But I don't feel that one wrong justifies another, if you'll pardon an unpardonable cliche."

"Pardoned"—she grinned at me openly. "We don't try to justify it. No justifications, no apologies."

"And this bugging business." I shook my head. "It seems like something right out of Nineteen Eighty-four. It's sneaky and Big Brotherish, and it scares the hell out of me."

Manny shrugged, remarking that it was probably everything I said. But bugging wasn't an invention of PXA, and it didn't and wouldn't affect me. "We're on your side, Britt. We're against the people who've been against your people."

"My people?" I said, and I grimaced a little wryly. "I doubt that any of us can be bracketed so neatly any more. We may be more of one race than we are another, but I suspect we're all a little of everything. White, yellow, black and red."

"Oh, well"—she glanced at her wristwatch. "You're saying that there are no minorities?"

I said that I wasn't sure what I was saying, or, rather, what the point to it was. "But I don't believe that a man who's being pushed around has a right to push anyone but the person pushing him . . . if you can untangle that. His license to push is particular not general. If he starts lashing out at everyone and anyone, he's asking for it and he ought to get it."

It was all very high-sounding and noble, and it also had the virtue, fortunately or otherwise, of being what I believed. What I had been bred to believe. And now I was sorry I had said it. For I seemed to be hopelessly out of step with the only world I had, and again I was about to be left alone and afraid in that world, which I had had no hand in making. This lovely child, Manny, the one person to be kind to me or show interest in me for so very long, was getting ready to leave.
She was looking at me, brows raised quizzically. She was patting her mouth with her napkin, then crumpling it to the table. She was glancing at herself in the mirror in her purse. Then, snapping the purse shut, and starting to rise.

And then, praise be, glory to the Great Mixedblood Father, she sat back down.

"All right," she said crisply. "Let's say that PXA is interested in using the Rainstar name. Let's say that. It would be pretty stupid of us to dirty up that name, now, wouldn't it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it would," I said. "And look. I'm sorry if I said anything to offend you. I always kid around and talk a lot whenever I'm—"

"Forget it. How old are you?"

"Thirty-six."

"You're forty. Or so you stated on your loan-application blank. What do you do for a living, if you can call it that?"

I said, Why ask me something she already knew? "That information's also on the application. Along with practically everything else about me, except the number and location of my dimples."

"You mean you have some I can't see?" She smiled, her voice friendlier, almost tender. "But what I meant to ask was, what do you write for this Hemisphere Foundation?"

"Studies. In-depth monographs on this region from various aspects: ecological, etiological, ethnological. That sort of thing. Sometimes one of them is published in Hemisphere's Quarterly Reports. But they usually go in the file-and-forget department."

"Mmm-hmm," she said thoughtfully, musingly. "Very interesting. I think something could be worked out there. Something satisfactory to both of us."

"If you could tell me just what you have in mind. . ."

"Well, I'll have to clear it with Pat, of course, but . Thirty-five thousand a year?"

"That's not what I meant. I... What?" I gasped. "Did you say thirty-five thousand?"

"Plus expenses, and certain fringe benefits."

"Thirty-five thousand," I said, running a finger around my collar. "Uh, how much change do you want back?"

She threw back her head and laughed, hugging herself ecstatically. "Ah, Britt, Britt," she said, brushing mirth tears from her eyes. "Everything's going to be wonderful for you. I'll make it wonderful, you funny-sweet man. Now, do me a small favor, hmm?"

"Practically anything," I said, "if you'll laugh like that again."

"Please don't worry about silly things, like our bugging system. Everyone knows we have it. We're out in the open on that as we are with everything else. If someone thinks he can beat it, well, it isn't as if he hadn't been warned, is it?"

"I see what you mean," I said, although I actually didn't. I was just being agreeable. "What happens when someone is caught pulling a fast one?"

"Well, naturally," she said, "we have to remove him from the payroll."

"I see," I said again. Lying again when I said it. Because, of course, there are many ways to remove a man from the payroll. (Horizontal was one that occurred to me.) My immediate concern, however, as it so often is, was me. Specifically the details of my employment. But I was not allowed to inquire into them.

Before I could frame another question, she had moved with a kind of unhurried haste, with the quick little movements which typified her. Rising from her chair, tucking her purse under her arm, gesturing me back when I also started to rise; all in one swift-smooth uninterrupted action.

"Stay where you are, Britt," she smiled. "Have a drink or something. I'll have someone pick you up and drive you home."

"Well..." I settled back into my chair. "Shall I call you tomorrow?"

"I'll call you. Pat or I will. Good-night, now."

She left the table, her tinily full figure with its crown of thick blond hair quickly losing itself in the dining room's dimness.

I waited. I had another liqueur and more coffee. And continued to wait. An hour passed. A waiter brushed by the
table, and when he had gone, I saw a check lying in front of me.

I picked it up, a nervous lump clotting in my stomach. My eyes blurred, and I rubbed them, at last managing to read the total.

Sixty-three dollars and thirty cents.
Sixty-three dollars and—!

I don't know how you are in such situations, but I always feel guilty. The mere need to explain, that such and such is a mistake, et cetera, stiffens my smile exaggeratedly and sets me to sweating profusely, and causes my voice to go tremulous and shaky. So that I not only feel guilty as hell, but also look it.

It is really pretty terrible.

It is no wonder that I was suspected of the attempted murder of my wife. The wonder is that I wasn't lynched.

Albert, the maitre d', approached. As I always do, I over-explained, apologizing when I should have demanded apologies. Sweating and shaking and squeakily stammering, and acting like nine kinds of a damned fool.

When I was completely self-demolished, Albert cut me off with a knifing gesture of his hand.

"No," he said coldly, "Miss Aloe did not introduce you to me. If she had, I would have remembered it." And he said, "No, she made no arrangement about the check. Obviously, the check is to be paid by you."

Then, he leaned down and forward, resting his hands on the table, so that his face was only inches from mine. And I remember thinking that I had known this was going to happen, not exactly this, perhaps, but something that would clearly expose the vicious potential of PXA. A taste of what could happen if I incurred the Aloe displeasure.

For she had said—remember?—that they did not pretend or apologize. You were warned, you knew exactly what to expect if.

"You deadbeat bastard," Albert said. "Pay your check or we'll drag you back in the kitchen, and beat the shit out of you."
I was on an aimless tour of the country when I met my wife-to-be, Connie. I'd gotten together some money through borrowing and peddling the few remaining Rainstar valuables, so I'd bought a car and taken off. No particular, no clear objective in mind. I simply didn't like it where I was, and I wanted to find a place where I would like it. Which, of course, was impossible. Because the reason I disliked places I was in—and the disheartening knowledge was growing on me—was my being in them. I disliked me, me, myself and I, as kids used to say, and far and fast as I ran I could not escape the bastardly trio.

Late one afternoon, I strayed off the highway and wound up in a homely little town, nestled among rolling green hills. I also wound up with a broken spring, from a plunge into a deep rut, and a broken cylinder and corollary damage from getting out of the rut.

The town's only garage was the blacksmith shop. Or, to put it another way, the blacksmith did auto repairs, except for those who could drive a hundred-plus miles to the nearest city. The blacksmith-mechanic quoted a very reasonable price for repairing my car, but he would have to send away for parts, and what with one thing and another, he couldn't promise to have the work done in less than a week.

There was one small restaurant in the town, sharing space with the post office. But there was no hotel, motel or boarding house. The blacksmith-mechanic suggested that I check with the real estate dealer to see if some private family would take me in for a few days. Without much hope, I did so.

The sign on the window read LUTHER BANNERMAN—REAL ESTATE & INSURANCE. Inside, a young woman was disinterestedly pecking away at an ancient typewriter with a three-row keyboard. She was a little on the scareny side, with mouse-colored hair. But she laughed wildly when I asked if she was Luther Bannerman, and otherwise endeared herself to me by childish eagerness to be of help, smiling and bobbing her head sympathetically as I explained my situation. When I had finished, however, she seemed to draw back a bit, becoming cautiously reserved.

"Well, I just don't know. Mr. . . . Britton, is it?"

"Rainstar. Britt, for Britton, Rainstar."

"I was going to say, Mr.—oh, I'll make it Britt, okay? I was just going to say, Britt. We're kind of out of the mainstream here, and I'm afraid you'd find it hard to keep in touch and carry on your business affairs, and"—she bared her teeth in a smile—"and so forth and so on."

I explained that I had no pressing business affairs, not a single so forth let alone a so on. I was just travelling, seeing the country and gathering material for a book. I also explained, when she raised the question of accommodations for my wife and family, that I had none with me or elsewhere and that my needs were solely for myself.

At this, she insisted on pouring me coffee from the pot on a one-burner heater. Then, having made me "comfy"—also nauseous: the coffee was lousy—she hurried back to a small partitioned-off private office. After several minutes of closed-door conversation, she returned with her father, Luther Bannerman.

Of course, he and she collectively insisted that I stay at their house. (It would be no trouble at all, but I could pay a little something if I wanted to.)

Of course, I accepted their invitation. And, of course, I was in her pants the very first night. Or, rather, I was in what was in her pants. Or, to be absolutely accurate, she was in my pants. She charged into my room as soon as the light went out. And I did not resist her, despite her considerable resistibility.

I felt that it was the very least I could do for her, although quite a few others had obviously done as much. I doubt that they had fought for it either, since it simply wasn't the sort of thing for which men do battle. Frankly, if it had been tendered as inspiration for the launching of a thousand ships (or even a toy canoe), not a one would have hoisted anchor.

Ah, well. Who am I to kid around about poor Connie and her over-stretched snatch? Or to kid about anyone, for that matter. It is one of fate's saddest pranks to imbue the least sexually appetizing of us with the hugest sexual appetites. To atone for that joke, I feel, is the obligation of all who are better endowed. And in keeping that obligation, I have had many sorrier screws than Connie. I have received little gratitude for my efforts. On the contrary, I invariably wind up with a worse fucking than the fucking I got. For it is also one of fate's jokes to dower superiority complexes on girls with the worst fornicating furniture. And they seem to feel justified in figuratively
giving you something as bad as they have given you literally.

Of course, Connie's father discovered us in coitus before the week was out. And, of course, I agreed to do the "right thing" by his little girl. Which characteristically was the easiest thing for me to do. Or so it seemed at the time. I may struggle a little bit, but I almost always do the easiest thing. Or what seems to be and never is.

At the time I was born, promising was the word for Rainstar prospects. Thus, I was placed on the path of least resistance early in life, and I remained on it despite my growing awareness that promise was not synonymous with delivery. I had gathered too much speed to get off, and I could find no better path to be on anyway. I'm sure you've seen people like me.

If I stumbled over an occasional rock, I might curse and kick out at it. But only briefly, and not very often at all. I was so unused to having my course unimpeded, that, normally, I figuratively fell apart when it was. It was the only recourse for a man made defenseless by breeding and habit.

Both Connie and her father were provoked to find that my prosperousness was exactly one hundred per cent more apparent than real. They whined that I had deceived them, maintaining that since I was nothing but a well-dressed personable bum, I should have said so. Which, to me, seemed unreasonable. After all, why do your utmost not to look like a bum if you are going to announce that you are one?

Obviously, there were basic philosophical differences between me and the Bannermans. But they finally seemed resigned to me, if not to my way of thinking. In fact, I was given their rather grim assurance that I would come around to their viewpoint eventually, and be much the better man for it. Meanwhile, Mr. Bannerman would not only provide me with a job, but would give Connie and me $100,000 life insurance policies as a wedding present.

I felt that it was money wasted, since Connie, like all noxious growths, had a built-in resistance to scourge, and I had grown skilled in the art of self-preservation, having devoted a lifetime to it. However, it was Mr. Bannerman's money, and I doubted that it would amount to much, since he was in the insurance business as well as real estate. So he wrote the policies on Connie and me, with each of us the beneficiary of the other. Connie's policy was approved. Mine was rejected. Not on grounds of health, my father-in-law advised me. My health was excellent for a man wholly unaddicted to healthful hard work.

The reason for my rejection was not spelled out to Mr. Bannerman, but he had a pretty good idea as to its nature, and so did I. It was a matter of character. A man with a decidedly truncated work history—me, that is—who played around whenever he had the money for playing around—again me—was apt to come to an early end, and possibly a bad one. Or so statistics indicated. And the insurance company was not betting a potential $100,000—$200,000, double indemnity—on my longevity when their own statistics branded me a no-no.

With unusual generosity, Mr. Bannerman conceded that there were probably a great many decadent bums in the world, and that I was no worse than the worst of them. The best course for me was to re-apply for the policy, after I had "proved myself" with a few years of steady and diligent employment.

To this end, he hired me as a commission salesman. It proved nothing except what I already knew—that I was no more qualified to sell than I apparently was for any other gainful occupation.

I continued to be nagged by Papa and Daughter Bannerman, but I was given up on after a few weeks. Grimly allowed to "play around" with my typewriter while they—"other people"—worked for a living. Neither would hear of a divorce, or the suggestion that I get the hell out of their lives. I was to "come to my senses" and "be a man"—or do something! Surely, I could do something!

Well, though, the fact was that I couldn't do something. The something that I could do did not count as something with them. And they were keeping the score.

Thus matters stood at the time of the accident which left me unscathed but almost killed Connie. I, an unemployed bum living on my father-in-law's bounty, was driving the car when the accident happened. And while I carried no insurance, my wife was heavily insured in my favor.

ooo

"Dig this character." Albert, the maitre d', jerked a thumb at me, addressing the circle of onlooking diners. "These bums are getting fancier every day, but this one takes the brass ring. What did you say your name was, bum?"

"Rainstar." A reassuring hand dropped on my shoulder. "He said it was, and I say it is. Any other questions?"

"Oh, well, certainly not, sir! A stupid mistake on my part, sir, and I'm sure that—"

"Come on, Britt. Let's get out of here."
We stood waiting for the elevator, Albert and I and my friend, whoever he was. Albert was begging, seemingly almost on the point of tears.

"... a terrible mistake, believe me, gentlemen! I can't think how I could have been guilty of it. I recall Mr. Rainstar perfectly now. Everything was exactly as he says, but—"

"But it slipped your mind. You completely forgot."

"Exactly!"

"So you treated me like any other deadbeat. You were just following orders."

"Then you do understand, sir?"

"I understand," I said.

We took the elevator up to the street, my friend and I. I accompanied him to his car, trying to remember who he was, knowing that I had had far more than a passing acquaintance with him at one time. At last, as we passed under a streetlight, it came to me.

"Mr. Claggett, Jeff Claggett!" I wrung his hand. "How could I ever have forgotten?"

"Oh, well, it's been a long time." He grinned deprecatingly. "You're looking good, Britt."

"Not exactly a barometer of my true condition," I said. "But how about you? Still with the university?"

"Police Department, Detective Sergeant." He nodded toward the lighted window of a nearby restaurant. "Let's have some coffee, and a talk."

He was in his early sixties, a graying square-shouldered man with startlingly blue eyes. He had been chief of campus security when my father was on the university faculty. "I left shortly after your dad did," he said. "The coldblooded way they dumped him was a little more than I could stomach."

"It wasn't very nice," I admitted. "But what else could they do, Jeff? You know how he was drinking there at the last. You were always having to bring him home."

"I wish I could have done more. I would have drunk more than he did, if I'd had his problems."

"But he brought them all on himself," I pointed out. "He was slandered, sure. But if he'd just ignored it, instead of trying to get the UnAmerican Activities Committee abolished, it would all have been forgotten. As it was, well, what's the use talking?"

"Not much," Claggett said. "Not any more."

I said, Oh, for God's sake. It sounded like I was knocking the old man; and, of course, I didn't mean to. "I didn't mind his drinking, per se. It was just that it left him vulnerable to being kicked around by people who weren't fit to wipe his ass."

Jeff Claggett nodded, saying that a lot of nominally good people seemed to have a crappy streak in them. "Give them any sort of excuse, and they trot it out. Yeah, and they're virtuous as all hell about it. So-and-so drinks, so that cleans the slate. They don't even owe him common decency."

He put down his coffee cup with a bang, and signaled for a refill. He sipped from it, sighed and grimaced tiredly.

"Well, no use hashing over the past, I guess. How come you were in that place I got you out of tonight, Britt?"

"Through a misunderstanding," I said firmly. "A mistake that isn't going to be repeated."

"Yeah?" He waited a moment. "Well, you're smart to steer clear of 'em. We haven't been able to hang anything on them, but, by God, we will."

"With my blessings," I said. "You were on official business tonight?"

"Sort of. Just letting them know we were on the job. Well"—he glanced at his watch, and started to rise. "Guess I better run. Can I drop you someplace?"

I declined with thanks, saying that I had a little business to take care of. He said, Well, in that case...

"By the way, I drove past the old Rainstar place a while back, Britt. Looks like someone is still living there."

"Yes," I said. "I guess someone is."
"In a dump? The city garbage dump? But—" His voice trailed away, comprehension slowly dawning in his eyes. Finally, he said, "Hang around a minute, Britt. I've got to make a few phone calls, and then we'll have a good talk."

We sat in Claggett's car, in the driveway of the Rainstar mansion, and he frowned in the darkness, looking at me curiously. "I don't see how they can do this to you, Britt. Grab your property while you're out of the state."

"Well, they paid me for it," I said. "Around three thousand dollars after the bank loan was paid. And they gave me the privilege of staying in the house as long as I want to."

"Oh, shit!" Claggett snorted angrily. "How long is that going to be? You've been swindled, Britt, but you sure as hell don't have to hold still for it!"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't see that there's much I can do about it."

"Of course, there's something you can do! This place was deeded tax-free to the Rainstars in perpetuity, in recognition of the thousands of acres the family had given to the state. It's not subject to mortgage or the laws of eminent domain. Why, I'll tell you, Britt, you go into court with this deal, and . . ."

I listened to him, without really listening. There was nothing he could tell me that I hadn't told myself. I'd argued it all out with myself, visualizing the newspaper stories, the courtroom scenes, the endless questions. And I'd said to hell with it. I knew myself, and I knew I couldn't do it for any amount of money.

"I can't do it, Jeff . . ." I cut in on him at last. "I don't want to go into the details, but I have a wife in another state. An invalid wife. I was suspected of trying to kill her. I didn't, of course, but—"

"Of course, you didn't!" Jeff said warmly. "Murder just isn't in you. Anyway, you wouldn't be here if there was any real case against you."

"The case is still open," I said. "I'm not so sure I'm in the clear yet. At any rate, the story would be bound to come out if I made waves over this condemnation deal, so I'm not making any. I, the family and I, have had nothing but trouble as far back as I remember. I don't want any more."

"No one wants trouble, dammit," Claggett scowled. "But you don't avoid it by turning your back on it. The more you run, the more you have chasing you."

"I'm sure you're right," I said. "But just the same—"

"Your father would fight, Britt. He did fight! They didn't get away with piling garbage on him!"

"They didn't?" I said. "Well, well."

We said good-night.

He drove off, gravel spinning angrily from the wheels of his car.

I entered the house, catching up the phone on its first ring. I said, Hello, putting a lot of ice into the word. I started to say a lot more, believing that the caller was Manuela Aloe, but fortunately I didn't. Fortunately, since the call was from Connie, my wife.

"Britt? Where have you been?"

"Out trying to make some money," I said. "I wasn't successful, but I'm still trying."

She said that she certainly hoped so. All her terrible expenses were awfully hard on her daddy; and it did seem like a grown, healthy man like me, with a good education, should be able to do a little something. "If you could just send me a little money, Britt. Just a teensy-weensy bit—"

"Goddammit!" I yelled. "What's with this teensyweensy crap? I send you practically everything I get from the Foundation, and you know I do because you wrote them and found out how much they pay me! You had to embarrass me, like a goddamned two-bit shyster!"

She began to cry. She said it wasn't her fault that she was crippled, and that she was worried out of her mind about money. I should just be in the fix she was in for a while, and see how I liked it. And so forth and so on, ad infinitum, ad nauseum.

And I apologized and apologized and apologized. And I swore that I would somehow someway get more money to her than I had been sending. And then I apologized three or four hundred additional times, and, at last, when I was hoarse from apologies and promises, she wished me sweet dreams, and hung up.

Sweet dreams!

I was so soaked with sweat that you would have thought I'd had a wet dream.
Which was not the kind of dream one had about Connie.
Mrs. Olmstead set breakfast before me the next morning, remarking—doubtless by way of whetting my appetite—that we would probably have rat dew in the food before long.

"I seen some chasin' around the backyard yesterday, so they'll be in the house next. Can't be this close to a garbage dump without havin' rats."

"I see," I said absently. "Well, we'll face the problem when it comes."

"Time t'face it now," she asserted. "Be too late when the rats is facin' us."

I closed my ears to her gabbling, finishing what little breakfast I was able to eat. As I left the table, Mrs. Olmstead handed me a letter to mail when I went to town, if I didn't mind, o' course.

"But I was going to work at home today," I said. "I hadn't really planned on going to town."

"How come you're all fixed up, then?" she demanded. "You don't never fix yourself up unless you're going somewheres."

I promised to mail the letter, if and when. I tucked it into my pocket as I went into the living room, noting that it was addressed to the old-age pension bureau. More than a year ago her monthly check had been three dollars short—by her calculations, that is. She had been writing them ever since, sometimes three times a week, demanding reimbursement. I had pointed out that she had spent far more than three dollars in postage, but she still stubbornly persisted.

Without any notion of actually working, I went into the small room, at one time a serving pantry, which does duty as my study. I sat down at my typewriter, wrote a few exercise sentences, and various versions of my name. After about thirty minutes of such fiddling around, I jumped up and fled to my bedroom. Fretfully examined myself in the warped full-length mirror.

And I thought, All dressed up and no place to go.

There would be no call from PXA. If there was one, I couldn't respond to it. Not after the ordeal I had been put through last night. No one who was serious about giving me worthwhile employment would have done such a thing to me. And it had to have been done deliberately. An outfit as cruelly efficient as PXA didn't allow things like that to come about accidentally.

I closed my eyes, clenched my mind to the incident, unable to live through it again even in memory. Wondering why it was that I seemed constantly called upon to face things that I couldn't. I went back down to my study, but not to my typewriter. For what was there to write? Who would want anything written by me?

I sat down on a small loveseat. A spiny tuft of horsehair burst through the upholstery, and stabbed me in the butt. Something that seemed to typify the hysterically hilarious tragedy of my life. I was pining away of a broken heart or something. But instead of being allowed a little dignity and gravity, I got my ass tickled.

Determinedly, I stayed where I was and as I was. Bent forward with my head in my hands. Sourly resisting the urge to squirm or snicker.

Poor Lo . . .

"Poor Lo . . ."

I chuckled wryly, poking fun at myself.

"Well, screw it," I said. "They may kill me, but they can't eat me."

There was a light patter of applause. Hand clapping.

I sat up startled, and Manuela Aloe laughed and sat down at my side.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I spoke to you a couple of times, but you didn't hear me."

"B—but—but—" I began to get hold of myself. "What are you doing here?"

"Your housekeeper showed me in. I came out here, because I was afraid you wouldn't come to the office after the terrible time you must have had last night."

"You were right," I said. "I wouldn't have gone down to your office. And there really wasn't much point to your coming out here."

"I did send a car to pick you up last night, Britt. I don't blame you for being angry, but I did do it."
"Whatever you say," I said.

"I don't know what happened to the driver. No one's seen him since. Our people aren't ordinarily so irresponsible, but it's not unheard of. But, anyway, I am sorry."

"So much for the driver," I said. "Now what about Albert?"

"Albert," she grimaced. "I don't know whether it was booze or dope or just plain stupidity that made him do what he did. I don't care, either. But he's out of a job as of this morning, and he'll be a long time in getting another one."

She nodded to me earnestly, the dark eyes warm with concern. I hesitated, wanting to swallow my pride—how could I afford pride? Remembering Connie's demands for money.

"There was something else," I said. "Something that came to me when I was outside your office yesterday."

"Yes?" She smiled encouragingly. "What was that, Britt?"

I hesitated again, trying to find some amiable euphemism for what was virtually an accusation. And finding excuses instead. After all, her office would logically have sound equipment in it; devices for auditing the tapes. And why, when I was so strongly drawn to this girl, and when I needed money so badly, should I continue to squeeze her for apologies and explanations.

"Yes, Britt?"

"Nothing," I said. "No, I mean it. Thinking it over, I seem to have found the answer to my own question."

That wasn't true. Aside from the woman's being slapped, there was something else. The fact that PXA had milked me for all kinds of personal information as a condition for granting my loan. My likes and dislikes, my habits and weaknesses. Information that could be used to drive me up a figurative wall, should they take the notion.

But I meant to give them no cause to take such a notion. And I am an incurable optimist, always hoping for the best despite the many times I have gotten the worst.

Manny was studying me, her dark eyes boring into mine. Seemingly boring into my mind. And a sudden shadow blighted the room, and I was chilled with a sickening sense of premonition.

Then she laughed gaily, gave herself a little shake, and assumed a businesslike manner.

"Well, now," she said briskly. "I've had a long talk with Uncle Pat, and he's left everything to me. So how about a series of pamphlets on the kind of subjects you deal with for the Foundation?"

"It sounds fine," I said. "Just, well, fine."

"The pamphlets will be distributed free to schools, libraries and other institutions. They won't carry any advertising. Just a line to the effect that they are sponsored by PXA, as a public service."

I said that was fine, too. Just fine. She opened her blond leather purse, took out a check and handed it to me. A check for thirty-five hundred dollars. Approximately twenty-nine hundred for the first month's work, with the rest for expenses.

"Well?" She looked at me pertly. "All right? Any questions?"

I let out a deep breath. "My God!" I breathed fervently. "Of course, it's all right! And no, no questions."

She smiled and stood up, a lushly diminutive figure in her fawn-colored pantsuit. Her breasts and her bottom bulged deliciously against the material, seemed to strain for release. And I thought thoughts that brought a flush to my face.

"Come on." She wiggled her fingers. "Show me around, hmm? I've heard so much about this place I'm dying to see it."

"I'm afraid it's not much to see any more," I said. "But if you're really interested in ruins . . ."

I showed her through the house, or much of it. She murmured appreciatively over the decaying evidence of past grandeur, and regretfully at the ravages of time.

We finished our tour of the house, and Manny again became businesslike. "We'll have a lot of conferring to do to get this project operating, Britt. Do you want an office, or will you work here?"

"Here, if it's agreeable to you," I said. "I have a great deal of research material here, and I'm used to the place. Of course, if it's inconvenient for you . . ."

"Oh, we'll work it out," she promised. "Now, if you'll drive me back to town . . ."

The car she had driven out in was mine, she explained, pointing to the gleaming new vehicle which stood in the
driveway. Obviously, I would need a car, and PXA owed me one. And she did hope I wouldn't be stuffy about it.

I said I never got stuffy over girls or single cars. Only fleets of them, and not always then. Manny laughed, and gave me a playful punch on the arm.

"Silly! Now, come on, will you? We have a lot to do today."

We did have a lot to do, as it turned out. At least we did a lot—far more than I anticipated. But that's getting ahead of the story. To take events in their proper order:

I drove into town, Manny sitting carelessly close to me. I deposited the check in my bank, drew some cash and returned to the car—my car. It was lunchtime by then, so we lunched and talked. I talked mostly, since I have a knack for talk, if little else, and Manny seemed to enjoy listening to me.

We came out of the restaurant into mid-afternoon, and, talking, I drove around until sunset. By which time, needless to say, it was time for a drink. We had it, rather we had them, and eventually we had dinner. When twilight fell, we were far out on the outskirts of town; parked by the lake which formed the bulwark of the city's water system.

Manny's legs were tucked up in the seat. Her head rested on my shoulder, and my arm was around her. It was really a very nice way to be.

"Britt . . ." she murmured, breaking the drowsy, comfortable silence. "I've enjoyed myself so much, today. I think it's been the very best day in my life."

"You're a thief, Manuela Aloe," I said. "You've stolen the very speech I was going to make."

"Tell me something, Britt. How does anyone as nice as you are, as attractive and intelligent and bubbling over with charm—how does he, why does he... ?"

"Wind up as I have?" I said. "Because I never found a seller's market for those things until I met you."

It was a pretty blunt thing to say. She sat up with a start, glaring at me coldly. But I smiled at her determinedly, and said I meant no offense.

"But let's face it, Manny. The Rainstar name isn't worth much any more, and my talent never was. So the good looks and the charm etcetera is what I've sold, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't!" she snapped; and then, hesitating, biting her lip. "Well, not entirely. You wouldn't have got the job if you hadn't been like you are, but neither would you have got it if you hadn't been qualified."

"So it was half one, half the other," I said. "And what's wrong with fifty-fifty?"

"Nothing. And don't you act like there is either!"

"Not even a little bit?"

"No!"

"All right, I won't," I said. "Providing you smile real pretty for me, and then lie down with your head in my lap."

She did so, although the smile was just a trifle weak. I bent down and kissed her gently, and was kissed in return. I put a hand on her breast, gave it a gentle squeeze. She shivered delicately, eyes clouding.

"I'm not an easy lay, Britt. I don't sleep around."

"What am I to do with you, Manny?" I said. "You are now twice a thief."

"I guess I've been waiting for you. It had to be someone like you, and there wasn't anyone like that but you."

"I know," I said. "I also have been waiting."

You can see why I said it, why I just about had to say it. She was my munificent benefactor and she was gorgeous beyond my wildest dreams, and she obviously wanted to and needed to be screwed. So what the hell else could I do?

"Britt . . ." She wiggled restlessly. "I have a live-in maid at my apartment."

"Unfortunate," I said. "My housekeeper also lives in."

"Well? Well, Britt, dear?"

"Well, I know of a place . . ." I broke off, carefully amended the statement. "I mean, I've heard of one. It's nothing fancy, I understand. No private baths or similar niceties. But it's clean and comfortable and safe... or so I'm reliably told."
"Well?" she said.
"Well?" I said.
She didn't say anything. Simply reached out and turned on the ignition.
More than a month went by before I met Patrick Xavier Aloe. It was at a party at his house, and Manny and I went to it together.

Judging by his voice, the one telephone conversation I had had with him, I supposed him to be a towering giant of a man. But while he was broad shouldered and powerful looking, he was little taller than Manny.

"Glad to finally meet up with you, Britt, baby." He beamed at me out of his broad darkly Irish face. "What have you got under your arm there, one of Manny's pizzas?"

"He has the complete manuscript of a pamphlet," Manny said proudly. "And it's darned good, too!"

"It is, huh? What d'ya say, Britt? Is she telling the truth or not?"

"Well . . ." I hesitated modestly. "I'm sure there's room for improvement, but—"

"We'll see, we'll see," he broke in laughing. "You two grab a drink, and come on."

We followed him through the small crowd of guests, all polite and respectable appearing, but perhaps a little on the watchful side. We went into the library, and Pat Aloe waved us to chairs, then sat down behind the desk, carefully removed my manuscript from its envelope and began to read.

He read rapidly but intently, with no skimming or skipping. I could tell that by his occasional questions. In fact, he was so long in reading that Manny asked crossly if he was trying to memorize the script, adding that we didn't have the whole goddamned evening to spend at his stupid house. Pat Aloe told her mildly to shut her goddamned mouth, and went back to his reading.

I had long since become used to Manny's occasionally salty talk, and learned that I was not privileged to respond in kind. But Pat clearly was not taking orders from her. Despite his air of easygoing geniality, he was very much in command of Aloe activities. And, I was to find, he tolerated no violation of his authority.

When he had finished the last page of my manuscript, he put it with the others and returned them all to their envelope. Then, he removed his reading glasses, thoughtfully massaged the bridge of his nose, and at last turned to me with a sober nod.

"You're a good man, Britt. It's a good job."

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you, very much."

Manny said words were cheap. How about a bonus for me? But Pat winked at her, and waved her to silence.

"Y'know, Britt, I thought this deal would turn out the same kind of frammis that Manny's husband pulled. Banging the b'Jesus out of her, and pissing off the work. But I'm glad to admit I was wrong. You're A—OK, baby, and I'll swear to it on a stack of Bibles!"

Fortunately, I didn't have to acknowledge the compliment—such as it was—since Manny had begun cursing him luridly with his overripe appraisal of her late husband. Pat's booming laugh drowned out her protest.

"Ain't she a terror, though, Britt? Just like the rest of her family, when she had a family. Her folks didn't speak to mine for years, just because my pop married an Irisher."

"Just don't you forget that bonus," Manny said. "You do and it'll be your big red ass."

"Hell, take care of it yourself," Pat said. "Make her come across heavy, Britt, baby. Hear me?"

I mumbled that I would do it. Grinning stiffly, feeling awkward and embarrassed to a degree I had never known before. He walked out of the library between the two of us, a hand on each of our shoulders. Then, when we were at the door and had said our good-night, he laughingly roared that he expected me to collect heavy loot from Manny.

"Make her mind, Britt. 'S' only kind of wife to have. Tell her you won't marry her until she comes through with your bonus!"

Marry her?
Marry her!
Well, what did I expect?

I tottered out of the house, with Manny clinging possessively to my arm. And there was a coldish lump in my throat, a numbing chill in my spine.
We got in the car, and I drove away. Manny looked at me speculatively and asked why I was so quiet. And I said I wasn't being quiet, and then I said, What was wrong with being quiet? Did I have to talk every damned minute to keep her happy?

Ordinarily, popping-off to her like that would have gotten me a chewing out or maybe a sharp slap. But tonight she said soothingly that of course I could be silent whenever I chose, because whatever I chose was also her choice.

"After all we're a team, darling. Not two people, but a couple. Maybe we have out little spats, but there can't be any serious division between us."

I groaned. I said, "Oh, my God, Manny! Oh, Mary and Jesus, and his brother, James!"

"What's the matter, Britt? Isn't that the way you feel?"

What I felt was that I was about to do something wholly irrelevant and unconstructive. Like soiling my clothes. For I was being edged closer and closer to the impossible. I mumbled something indistinguishable—something noncommittally agreeable. Because I knew now that I had to keep talking. Only in talk, light talk, lay safety.

Luckily, Manny indirectly threw me a cue by pushing the stole back from her shoulders, and stretching her legs out in front of her. An action which tantalizingly exhibited her gold lame evening gown; very short, very low cut, very tight-seeming on her small, ultra-full body.

"It looks like it was painted on you," I said. "How in the world did you get into it?"

"Maybe you'll find out"—giving me a look. "After all, you have to take it off of me."

"We shall see," I said, desperate for words. For any kind of light talk. "We shall certainly see about this."

"Well, hurry up, for gosh sake! I've got to pee."

"Oh, my God," I said. "Why didn't you go before we left the house?"

"Because I needed help with my dress, darn it!"

I got her to the place. The place that had become our place. I got her up to the room and out of her clothes, and onto the sink.

With no time to spare, either.

She cut loose, and continued to let go at length. Sighing happily with the simple pleasure of relieving herself. She was such an earthy little thing, and I suppose few things are as good as a good leak when one has held it to the bursting point.

When she had finished, she reached a towel from the rack, and handed it to me. "Wipe, please."

"Wipe what?" I said.

"You know what—and where it is, too!"

"I will. If you'll promise to give me a tip . . . " Talking, talking. Even after we were in bed, and she was pressed tightly against me in epigrammatic surgings.

". . . what kind of tip are you giving me?"

"Guess."

"Something very soft and very firm?"

"Mmm."

"Possessing an elastic quality?"

"Mmm."

"Almost painfully but wonderfully tight?"

"Mmm."

"Self-lubricating?"

"Mmm."

"Mmm. Now, what in the world could it be?"
I was physically ill by the time I got home that night. Sick with fear that the subject of marriage would be raised again, that it would be tossed to me like a ball and that I would not be allowed to bat it aside or let it drop.

Repeatedly staggered out of my bed and went to the bathroom. Over and over, I went down on my knees and vomited into the bowl. Gagging up the bile of fear, as I shivered and sweated with its burning chill. I tried to blame it on an overactive imagination, but I couldn't lie to myself. I'd lied too often when I lied to Manny— about the one thing I should never have lied about. And the fact that the lie was one of omission, rather than commission, and that lying was more or less a way of life with me, would not lift me off the hook a fraction of an inch. Not with Manuela Aloe. She would regard my lie as inexcusable, as, of course, it was.

In saying that I was unmarried on my PXA loan application, I hadn't meant to harm anyone. (I have never meant to harm anyone with what I did and didn't do.) It was just a way of avoiding troublesome questions re the status of my marriage: were my wife and I living together; and if not, why not, and so on.

But I knew that Manny depended on that application for her information about me. And I could have and should have set her straight. For I knew—must have known—that I was not being treated with such extravagant generosity to buy Manny a passing relationship. One with good looks, good breeding and a good name —the kind not easily found in her world or any world. Then she had found me, and oh-so-clearly demonstrated the advantages of marriage to her, and I, tacitly, had agreed to the marriage. She had been completely honest with me, and I had been just as completely dishonest with her. And, now, by God—!

Now. . . ?

But a man can be afraid just so much. (I say that as an expert on being afraid.) When he reaches that limit, he can fear no more. And so, at last, my pajamas wet with cold sweat, I returned to bed and fell into restless sleep.

In the morning, Mrs. Olmstead brought me toast and coffee and asked suspiciously if I had mailed a letter she had given me yesterday. I said that I had, for she was always giving me letters to mail, and I always remembered to mail. Or almost always. She nagged me, with increasing vehemence, about the imminent peril of rats. And I swore I would do something about them, too; and mumbling and grumbling, she at last left me alone.

I lay back down and closed my eyes . . . and Manny came into my room, a deceptive smile on her lovely face. For naturally, although she had learned that I was married, she showed no sign of displeasure.

"But it's all right, darling, and I understand perfectly. You needed the money and you were dying to sleep with me. And—here, have a drink of this nice coffee I fixed for you."

"No! It's poisoned, and—yahh!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear! I wouldn't have spilled it on you for the world. Let me just wipe it off—"

"Yeeow! You're scratching my eyes out! Get away, go away . . ."

My eyes snapped open.

I sat up with a start.

Mrs. Olmstead was bent over me. "My goodness, goodness me!" she exclaimed. "What's the matter, Mr. Rainstar?"

"Nothing; must've been having a nightmare," I said sheepishly. "Was I making a lot of racket?"

"Were you ever! Sounded like you was scared to death." Shaking her head grumpily, she turned toward the door.

"Oh, yeah, your girlfriend wants you."

"What?" I said.

"Reckon she's your girlfriend, the way you're always pawing at each other."

"But—you mean, Miss Aloe?" I stammered. "She's here?"

"Course, she's not here. Don't see her, do you?" She gestured exasperatedly. "Answer the phone, a-fore she hangs up!"

I threw on a robe, and ran downstairs.

I grabbed up the phone, and said hello.

"Boo, you pretty man!" Manny laughed teasingly. "What's the matter with you anyway?"
"Matter?" I said. "Uh, what makes you think anything's the matter?"

"I thought you sounded gruff and strained. But never mind. I want to see you. Be at our place in about an hour, okay?"

I swallowed heavily. Had she decided that something was wrong? That I was hiding something?

"Britt . . . ?"

"Why?" I said. "What did you want to see me about?"

"What?" I could almost see her frown. "What did I want to see you about?"

I apologized hastily. I said I'd just gone to sleep after tossing and turning all night, and I seemed to be coming down with the flu. "I'd love to see you, Manny, child, but I think it would be bad for you. The way I'm feeling, the farther you keep away from me the better."

She said, Oh, disappointedly, but agreed that it was probably best not to see me. She was leaving town for a couple of weeks—some business for Uncle Pat. Naturally, she would have liked a session with me before departing. But since I seemed to be coming down with something, and it wouldn't do for her to catch it . . .

"You just take care of yourself, Britt. Get to feeling hale and hearty again, because you'll have to be when I get back."

"I'll look forward to it," I said. "Have a good trip, baby."

"And, Britt. I put a two-thousand-dollar bonus check in the mail to you."

"Oh, that's too much," I said. "I'm really overpaid as it is, and—"

"You just shut up!" she said sternly, then laughed. "Bye, now, darling. I gotta run."

"Bye to you," I said. And we hung up.

I had sent Connie three thousand dollars out of my first PXA check, and another three out of the second. Explaining that I'd gotten on to something good, though probably temporary, and that I'd send her all I could as long as it lasted. After all, I hadn't sent much before, lacking much to send, and it was sort of a conscience salve for my affair with Manny.

When my bonus arrived, I mailed Connie a check for the full two thousand. Then, after waiting a few days, until I was sure she had got it, I called her.

Britt Rainstar, stupe de luxe, figured that getting so much scratch—seven grand in less than two months—would put her in a fine mood. Bonehead Britt, sometimes known as the Peabrain Pollyanna, reasoned that all that loot would buy reasonableness and tolerance from Connie. Which just goes to show you. Yessir, that shows you, and it shows something about him, too. (And please stop laughing, dammit!)

For she was verbally leaping all over me, almost before I had asked her how she was feeling.

"I want to know where you got that money, Britt. I want to know how much more you got—a full and complete accounting, as Daddy says. And don't tell me that you got it from Hemisphere, because we've already talked to them and they said you didn't. They said that you had severed your association with them. So you tell me where you're getting the money, and exactly how much you're getting. Or, by golly, you'll wish you had."

"I see," I said numbly; surprised, though God knows I should not have been. I was always surprised, when being stupid, that people thought I was stupid. "I think I really see for the first time, namely that you and your daddy are a couple of miserable piles of shit."

"Who from and how much? I either find out from you, Mister Britton Rainstar, or—What? What did you say to me?"

"Never mind," I said. "I tell you the source of the money, and you check to see if I'm telling the truth—as to the quantity, that is. That's your plan, isn't it?"

"Well . . ." She hesitated. "But I have a right to know! I'm your wife."

"Do you and are you?" I said. "A wife usually trusts her husband, when he treats her as generously as I've been treating you."

"Well, all right," she said at last, grudgingly defensive. "I certainly don't want to make you lose your job, and—and—well, Hemisphere had no right to get huffy about it! Anyway, just look at what you did to me!"

"I didn't do anything to you, Connie. It was an accident."
"Well, anyway," she said. "Just the same!"

I didn't say anything. Simply waited. After a long silence, I heard her take a deep breath, and she spoke with an incipient sob.

"I s-suppose you want a divorce, now. You wouldn't talk to me this way, if you didn't."

"Divorce makes sense, Connie. You'll get just as much money, as if we were married, and I know you can't feel any great love for me."

"Then you do want a divorce?"

"Yes. It's the best thing for both of us, and—"

"WELL, YOU JUST TRY AND GET ONE!" she yelled. "I'll have you in jail for attempted murder so fast, it'll make your head swim! You arranged that accident that almost killed me, and the case isn't closed yet! They're ready to reopen it any time Daddy and I say the word. And golly, you try and get a divorce, and, by gosh—!"

"Connie," I said. "You surely can't mean that!"

"You'll see! You'll see if I don't. Just let me hear one more word out of you about a divorce, and—and—I'll show you who's a pile of shit!"

She slammed up the phone, completing any damage to my eardrum that had not been accomplished by her banshee scream. Of course, I'd hardly expected her to bedeck me with a crown of olive leaves, or to release a covey of white doves to flutter about my head. But a threat to have me prosecuted for attempted murder was considerably much more than I had expected.

At any rate, a divorce was impossible unless she agreed to it. Which mean that it was impossible period. Which meant that I could not marry Manny.

Which meant...?
She, Manny, was back in town two weeks later, and she called me immediately upon her arrival. She suggested that I pick her up at the airport, and go immediately to our place. I suggested that we have dinner and talk before we did anything else. So, a little puzzled and reluctant, she agreed to that.

The restaurant was near the lake I have mentioned earlier. The city waterworks lake. There was only a handful of patrons in it, this early evening hour, and they gradually drifted out as I talked to Manny, apologizing and explaining. Explaining the inexplicable and apologizing for the inexcusable.

Manny said not a word throughout my recital. Merely stared at me expressionlessly over her untouched dinner.

At last, I had nothing more to say, if I had ever had anything to say. And, then, finally, she spoke, pulling a fringed-silk shawl around her shoulders and rising to her feet.

"Pay the check, and get out of here."

"What? Oh, well, sure," I said, dropping bills on the table as I also stood up. "And, Manny, I want you to know that—"

"Get! March yourself out to the car!"

We got out of the restaurant, with Manny clinging to my arm, virtually propelling me by it. She helped me into the car, instead of vice versa. Then, she got in, into the rear, sitting immediately behind me.

I heard her purse snap open. She said, "I've got a gun on you, Britt. So you get out of line just a little bit, and you won't like what happens to you."

"M-Manny," I quavered. "P-please don't—"

"Do you know where I went while I was out of town?"

"N-no."

"Do you want to know what I did?"

"Uh, n-no," I said. "I don't think I do."

"Start driving. You know where."

"But—you mean, our place? W-why do you want to—"

"Drive!"

I drove.

We reached the place. She made me walk ahead of her, inside and up the stairs and into our room.

I heard the click of the door lock. And then Manny asked if I'd heard a woman being slapped on the first day I went to her office.

I said that I had—or, rather, a recording of same; I had grown calmer by now, with a sense of fatalism.

"You heard her, Britt. She left the office by my private elevator."

I nodded, without turning around. "You wanted me to hear her. It was arranged, like the scene with Albert after you'd left that night. I was being warned that I'd better fly straight or else."

"You admit you were warned, then?"

"Yes. I tried to kid myself that it was all an unfortunate accident. But I knew better."

"But you went right ahead and deceived and cheated me. Did you really think I'd let you get away with it?"

I shook my head miserably, said I wanted to make things right insofar as I could. I'd give the car back, and what little money I had left. And I'd sell everything I owned—clothes, typewriter, books, everything—to raise the rest. Anything she or PXA had given me, I'd give back, and—and—

"What about all the screwing I gave you? I suppose you'll give that back, too!"

"No," I said. "I'm afraid I can't do anything about that."

"Oh, sure you can," she said. "You can give me a good one right now."

And I whirled around, and she collapsed in my arms, laughing.

"Ahhh, Britt, darling! If you could have seen your face! You were really frightened, weren't you? You really
thought I was angry with you, didn't you?"

"Of course, I thought it!" I said, and, hugging her, kissing her, I swatted her bottom. "My God! The way you were talking, and waving that gun around—!"

"Gun? Look, no gun!" She held her purse open for examination. "I couldn't be angry with you, Britt. What reason would I have? You were married, and you couldn't get unmarried. But you just about had to have the job, and you wanted me. So you did the only thing you could. I understand perfectly, and don't you give it another thought, because nothing is changed. We'll go on just like we were; and everything's all right."

It was hard to believe that things would be all right. Knowing her as well as I did, I didn't see how they could be. As the weeks passed, however, my suspicions were lulled—almost, almost leaving me—for there was nothing whatsoever to justify them. I even found the courage to criticize her about her language, pointing out that it was hardly suitable to one with two college degrees. I can't say that it changed anything, but she acknowledged the criticism with seeming humility, and solemnly promised to mend her ways.

So everything was all right—ostensibly. The work went on, and went well. Ditto for my relationship with Manny. No one could have been more loving or understanding. Certainly, no one, no other woman, had ever been as exciting. Over and over, I told myself how lucky I was to have such a woman. A wildly sensuous, highly intelligent woman who also had money and was generous with it, thus freeing me from the niggling and nagging and guilt feelings which had heretofore hindered and inhibited me.

It is a fallacy that people who do not obtain the finer things in life have no appreciation for them. Actually, no one likes good things more than a bum—and I say this knowing whereof I speak. I truly appreciated Manny after all the sorry b-axes which had previously been my lot. I truly appreciated everything she gave me, all the creature comforts she made possible for me, in addition to herself.

Everything wasn't just all right, as she had promised. Hell, everything was beautiful.

Until today.

The Day of the Dog . . .

I lay on my back, bracing myself against any movement which would cause him to attack.

I ached hideously, then grew numb from lack of movement; and shadows fell on the blinded windows. It was late afternoon. The sun was going down, and now—my legs jerked convulsively. They jerked again, even as I was trying to brace them. And now I heard a faint rustling sound: The dog tensing himself, getting ready to spring.

"D-don't! Please don't!"

Laughter. Vicious, maliciously amused laughter.

I rubbed my eyes with a trembling hand. Brushed the blinding sweat from them.

The dog was gone. The manager of the place, the mulatto woman, stood at the foot of the bed. She jerked a thumb over her shoulder in a contemptuous gesture of dismissal.

"All right, prick. Beat it!"

I lay on my back, bracing myself against any movement which would cause him to attack.

"What did you say?"

"Get out. Grab your rags, and drag ass!"

"Now, listen, you—you can't—"

"I can't what?"

"Nothing," I said. "If you'll just leave, so that I can get dressed . . ."

She said I'd get dressed while she was there, by God, because she wanted to look at the bed before I left. She figured a yellow bastard like me had probably shit in it. (And where had I heard such talk before—the unnerving, egosmashing talk of terror?)

"Jus' so damned scared," she jeered. "Prob'ly shit the bed like a fucking baby. You did, I'm gonna make you clean it up."

I got dressed, with her watching.

I waited, head hanging like a whipped animal, while she jerked the sheets back, examined them, and then sniffed them.
"Okay," she said, at last. "Reckon you got all your shit in you. Still full of it, like always."
I turned, and started for the door.
"Don't you never come back, hear? I see your skinny ass again, I lays a belt on it!"
I got out of the place. So fast that I fell, rather than walked down the stairs; almost crashed through the street door, in attempting to open it the wrong way.

After the dog, I had thought nothing more could be done to me, that I was as demoralized as a man could get. But I was wrong. The vicious abuse of the mulatto woman had shaken me in a way that fear could not. Or perhaps it was the fear and the abuse together.

I drove blindly for several minutes, oblivious to the hysterical hornblasts of other cars. The outraged shouts of their drivers, and the squealing of brakes. Finally, however, when I barely escaped a head-on collision with a truck, I managed to pull myself together sufficiently to turn into the curb and park.

I was on an unfamiliar street, one that I could not remember. I was stopped in front of a small cocktail lounge. Wiping my face and hands dry of sweat, I combed my hair and went inside.
"Yes, sir?" The bartender beamed in greeting, pushing a bowl of pretzels toward me. "What'll it be, sir?"
"I think I'll have a—"
I broke off at the sudden insistent jangling from a rear telephone booth. The bartender nodded toward it apologetically, and said, "If you'll excuse me, sir—?" And I told him to go ahead.
He hurried from behind the bar, and back to the booth. He entered, and closed the door. He remained inside for some two or three minutes. Then he came back, again stood in front of me.
"Yes, sir?"
He mixed the drink, poured it with a flourish. He punched the numbers on the tabulating cash register, extended a check as he placed the glass before me.
"One-fifty, sir. You pay now."
"Well—" I hesitated; shrugged. "Why not?"
I handed him two dollar bills. He said, "Exact change, sir."
And he picked up the drink, and threw it in my face.
He was a lucky man. As I have said, my general easygoing attitude, an ah-to-hell-with-it attitude, is marred by an occasional brief but violent flareup. And if I had not been so completely beaten down by the dog and the mulatto woman, he would have gotten a broken arm.

But, of course, he had known I had nothing to strike back with. Manny, or the person who had made the call for her, had convinced him of the fact. Convinced him that he could pick up a nice piece of change without the slightest danger to himself.

I ran a sleeve across my face. I got up from my stool, turned and started to leave. Then, I stopped and turned back around, gave the bartender a long, hard stare. I wasn't capable of punching him, but there was something that I could do. I could make sure that there was a connection between the thrown drink, and the afternoon's other unpleasantries—that, briefly, his action was motivated and not mere coincidence.

"Well?" His eyes flickered nervously. "Want somethin'?"

"People shouldn't tell you to do things," I said, "that they're afraid to do themselves."

"Huh? What're you drivin' at?"

"You mean, that was your own idea? You weren't paid to do it?"

"Do what? I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"All right," I said. "I'll tell some friends of mine what a nice guy you are."

I nodded coldly, again turned toward the door.

"Wait!" he said. "Wait a minute—uh—sir?"

"It was a joke, see? Just a joke. I wasn't s'posed t'tell ya, an'—I can't tell ya nothin' else! I just can't! But—but—"

"It's all right," I said. "You don't need to."

I left the bar.

I drove home.

I parked in the driveway near the porch. Another car wheeled up behind mine, and Manny got out. Smiling gaily as she came trotting up to me, and hooked an arm through mine.

"Guess what I've got for you, darling. Give you three guesses!"

"A cobra," I said, "and two stink bombs."

"Silly! Let's go inside and I'll show you."

"Let's," I said grimly, "and I'll show you."

We went up the steps, and across the porch, Manny hugging my arm, smiling up into my face. The very picture of a woman with her love. Mrs. Olmstead heard us enter the house, and hurried in from the kitchen.

"My my!" she chortled, beaming at Manny. "I swear you get prettier every day, Miss Aloe."

"Oh, now," Manny laughed. "I couldn't look half as nice as your dinner smells. Were you inviting me to stay—I hope?"

"Course, I'm inviting you! You betcha!" Mrs. Olmstead nodded vigorously. "You an' Mr. Rainstar just set yourselves right down, an'—"

"I'm not sure I'll be here for dinner," I said. "I suspect that Miss Aloe won't be either. Please come upstairs, Manuela."

"But, looky here, now!" Mrs. Olmstead protested. "How come you ain't eatin' dinner? How come you let me go to all the trouble o' fixin' it if you wasn't going to eat?"

"I'll explain later. Kindly get up those stairs, Manuela."

I pointed sternly. Manny preceded me up the stairs, and I stood aside, waving her into my bedroom ahead of me. Then I closed and locked the door.

I was trembling a little. Shaking with the day's pentup fear and frustration, its fury and worry. Inwardly, I screamed to strike out at something, the most tempting target being Manny's plump little bottom.
So I wheeled around, my palm literally itching to connect with her flesh. But, instead, Manny's soft mouth connected with mine. She had been waiting on tiptoe, waiting for me to turn. And, now, having kissed me soundly, she urged me down on the bed and sat down at my side.

"I don't blame you for being miffed with me, honey. But I really couldn't help it. I honestly couldn't, Britt!"

"You couldn't, hmm?" I said. "You own the place, and that orange-colored bitch works for you, but you couldn't—"

"Wh-aat?" She stared at me incredulously. "Own it— our place, you mean? Why, that's crazy! Of course, I don't own it, and that woman certainly does not work for me!"

"But, dammit to hell—! Wait a minute," I said. "What did you mean when you said you didn't blame me for being miffed with you?"

"Well . . . I thought that was why you were angry. Because I didn't come back from the bathroom."

"Oh," I said. "Oh, yeah. Why didn't you, anyway?"

"Because I couldn't, that's why. I had a little problem, one of those girl things, and it had to be taken care of in a hurry . . ." So she'd hailed a cab, and headed for the nearest drugstore. But it didn't have what she needed and she'd had to visit two other stores before she found one that did. And by the time she'd returned to our place, and taken care of the problem . . .

"You might have waited, Britt. If you'd only waited, and given me a chance to explain—but never mind." She took a three-thousand-dollar check from her purse, and handed it to me. "Another bonus for you, dear"—she smiled placatingly. "Isn't that nice?"

"Very," I said, folding it and tucking it in my pocket. "I'm going to keep it."

"Keep it? Why, of course, you are. I—"

"I'm keeping the car, too," I said.

"Why not? It's your car."

"But my employment with PXA is finished as of right now. And if you want to know why—as if you didn't already know!—I'll tell you," I said. "And if I catch any more crap like I caught today, I'll tell you what I'll do about that, too!"

I told her in detail—the why and the what—with suitable embellishments and flourishes. I told her in more detail than I had planned, and with considerable oration. For a while she heard me out in silence and without change of expression. I had a strong hunch that she was laughing at me.

When I had at last finished, out of breath and vituperation, she looked at me silently for several moments. Then she shrugged, and stood up.

"I'll run along now. Good-bye and good luck."

I hadn't expected that. I don't know what I had expected, but not that.

"Well, look," I said. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"I said good-bye and good luck. I see no point in saying anything else."

"But, dammit—! Well, all right!" I said. "Good-bye and good luck to you. And take your stinking bonus check with you!"

I thrust it on her, shoved it into her hand and folded her fingers around it. She left the room, and I hesitated, feeling foolish and helpless, that I had made a botch of everything. Then I started after her, stopping short as I heard her talking with Mrs. Olmstead.

". . . loved to have dinner with you. Mrs. Olmstead. But in view of Mr. Rainstar's attitude . . ."

". . . just mean, he is! Accused me of bein' sloppy. Says I'm always sprinklin' rat poison on everything. 0' course, I don't do nothin' of the kind . . ."

"He should be grateful to you! Most women would leave at the sight of a rat."

"Well . . . Just a minute, Miss Aloe. I'll walk you to your car."

It was several minutes before Mrs. Olmstead came back into the house. I waited until I heard her banging around in the kitchen, then went cautiously down the stairs and moved on tiptoe toward the front door.

"Uh-hah!" Her voice arrested me. "Whatcha sneakin' out for? Ashamed because you was so nasty to Miss Aloe?"
She had been lurking at the side of the staircase, out of sight from upstairs. Apparently she had rushed in and
hidden here, after making the racket in the kitchen.

"Well?" She grinned at me with mocking accusation, hands on her skinny old hips. "Whatcha got to say for
yourself?"

"What am I sneaking Out for?" I said. "What have I got to say for myself? Why, goddammit—!" I stormed
toward the door, cursing and fuming. More shamed and furious at myself than I was with her. "And another thing!" I
yelled. "Another thing, Mrs. Olmstead! You'd better remember what your position is in this house, if you want to
keep it!"

"Now you're threatenin' me." She began to sob noisily. "Threatenin' a poor old woman! Just as mean as you can
be, that's what you are!"

"I'm not either mean!" I said. "I don't know how to be mean, and I wouldn't be, if I did know how. I don't like
mean people, and—Goddammit, will you stop that goddam bawling?"

"If you wasn't mean, you wouldn't always forget to mail my letters! I found another one this mornin' when I was
sending your clothes to the cleaners! I told you it was real important, an'—!"

"Oh, God, I am sorry," I said. "Please forgive me, Mrs. Olmstead."

I ran out the door and down the steps. But she was calling to me before I could get out of earshot.

"Your dinner, Mr. Rainstar. It's all ready and waiting."

"Thank you very much," I said. "I'm not hungry now, but I'll eat some later."

"It'll be all cold. You better eat now."

"I'm not hungry now. I've had a bad day, and I want to take a walk before I eat."

There was more argument, much more, but she finally slammed the door.

Not that I ever felt much like eating Mrs. Olmstead's cooking, but I certainly had no appetite for it tonight. And,
of course, I felt guilty for not wanting to eat, and having to tell her that I didn't. Regardless of whether something is
my fault—and why should I have to eat if I didn't want to?—I always feel that I am in the wrong.

Along with feeling guilty, I was worried. About what Manny had done or had arranged to have done, its
implications of shrewdness and power. And the fact that I had figuratively flung three thousand dollars in her face,
as well as cutting myself off from all further income. At the time, I had felt that I had to do it. But what about the
other categorical imperative which faced me? What about the absolute necessity to send money to Connie—to do it
or else?

Well, balls to it, I thought, mentally throwing up my hands. I had told Mrs. Olmstead that I wanted to take a
walk, so I had better be doing it.

I took a stroll up and down the road, a matter of a hundred yards or so. Then I walked around to the rear of the
house, and the weed-grown disarray of the backyard.

A couple of uprights of the gazebo had rotted away, allowing the roof to topple until it was standing almost on
dge. The striped awning of the lawn swing hung in faded tatters, and the seats of the swing lay splintered in the
weeds where the wind had tossed them. The statuary—the little that hadn't been sold—was now merely fragmented
trash, gleaming whitely in the night.

The fountain, at the extreme rear of the yard, had long since ceased to spout. But in the days when water poured
from it, the ever-thirsting weeds and other rank growths had flourished into a minuscule jungle. And the jungle still
endured, all but obscuring the elaborate masonry and piping of the fountain.

I walked toward it absently, somehow reminded of Goldsmith's The Deserted Village.

Reaching the periphery of the ugly overgrowth, I thought I heard the gurgling trickle of water. And, curiously, I
parted the dank and dying tangle with my hands, and peered through the opening.

Inches from my face, eyeless eyes peered back at me. The bleached skull of skeleton.

We stared at each other, each seemingly frozen in shock.

Then the skeleton raised a bony hand, and levelled a gun at me.
I suddenly came alive. I let out a yell, and flung myself to one side. The overgrowth closed in front of the skeleton, with my letting go of it. And as he pawed through it, I scrambled around to the rear of the fountain. There was cover that way, a shield from my frightful pursuer. But that way was also a trap.

The skeleton was between me and the house. Looming behind me, in the moonlit dimness, was the labyrinthine mass, the twisting hills and valleys, of the garbage dump.

I reached toward it, knowing that it was a bad move, that I was running away from possible help. But I continued to run. Running—fleeing—was a way of life with me. Buying temporary safety, regardless of its long-term cost.

Nearing the immediate environs of the garbage mounds, I began to trip and stumble over discarded bottles and cans and other refuse. Once my foot came down hard on a huge rat. And he leaped at me, screaming with pain and rage. Once, when I fell, a rat scampered inside of my coat, clawing and scratching as he raced over my chest and back. And I screamed and beat at myself, long after I was rid of him.

There was a deafening roar in my ears: the thunder of my over-exerted heart and lungs. I began to weep and sob wildly in fear-crazed hysteria, but the sound of it was lost to me.

I crawled-clawed-climbed up a small mountain of refuse, and fell tumbling and stumbling down the other side. Broken bottles and rotting newspapers and stinking blobs of food came down on top of me, along with the hideously bloated body of a dead rat. And I swarmed up out of the mess, and continued my staggering, wobble-legged run.

I ran down the littered lanes between the garbage hillocks. I ran back up the lanes. Up, down, down, up. Zigzagging, repeatedly falling and getting to my feet. And going on and on and on. Fleeing through this lonely stinking planet, this lost world of garbage.

I dared not stop. For I was pursued, and my pursuer was gaining on me. Getting closer and closer with every passing moment.

Thoroughly in the thrall of hysteria. I couldn't actually see or hear him. Not in the literal meaning of the words. It was more a matter of being made aware of certain things, of having them thrust upon my consciousness: a discarded bottle, rolling down a garbage heap. Or a heavy shadow falling over my own. Or hurrying footsteps splashing up a spray of filth.

At last, I tottered to the top of a long hummock, and down the other side.

And there. He—It—was. Grabbing me from behind. Wrapping strong arms around me, and holding me helpless. I screamed, screams that I could not hear.

I struggled violently, fear giving me superhuman strength. And I managed to break free. But for only a split second.

Then, an arm went around my head, holding it motionless—a target. And then a heavy fist came up, swung in a short, swift arc. And collided numbingly with my chin.

And I went down, down, down.

Into darkness.
At the time of the accident, Connie and I had been married about six months. I had been at work all day on an article for a teachers' magazine, and I came down into the kitchen that evening, tired and hungry, to find Connie clearing away the dirty dishes.

She said she and her father had already eaten, and he'd gone back to his office. She said there were some people in this world who had to work for a living, even if I didn't know it.

"I've been working," I said. "I've almost finished my article."

"Never mind," she said. "Do you want some pancakes or something? There isn't any of the stew left."

"I'm sorry I didn't hear you call me for dinner. I would have been glad to join you."

"Will you kindly tell me whether you want something to eat?" she yelled. "I'm worn out, and I don't feel like arguing. It's just been work, work, work from the time I got up this morning. Cooking and sewing and cleaning, and — and I even washed the car on top of everything else!"

I said that she should never wash a car on top of anything, let alone everything. Then, I said, "Sorry, I would have washed the car. I told you I would."

She said, Oh, sure, a lot I would do. "Just look at you! You can't even shine your shoes. You don't see my daddy going around without his shoes shined, and he works."

I looked at her. The spitefully glaring eyes, the shrewish thrust of her chin. And I thought, What the hell gives here, anyway? She and her papa had been increasingly nasty to me almost from the day we were married. But tonight's performance beat anything I had previously been subjected to.

"You and your daddy," I said, "are very, very lovely people. Strange as it may seem, however, your unfailing courtesy and consideration have not made a diet of pancakes and table scraps palatable to me. So I'll go into town and get something to eat, and you and your daddy can go burp in your bibs!"

I was heading for the door as I spoke, for Connie had a vile temper and was not above throwing things at me or striking me with them.

I flung the door open, and—and there was a sickening thud and a pained scream from Connie, a scream that ended almost as soon as it began. I turned around, suddenly numb with fear.

Connie lay crumpled on the floor. A deep crease, oozing slow drops of blackish blood, stretched jaggedly across her forehead.

She had been hit by the sharp edge of the door when I threw it open. She was very still, as pale as death.

I grabbed her up and raced out to the car with her. I placed her on the back seat, and slid under the wheel. And I sent the car roaring down the lane from the house, and into the road that ran in front of it. Or, rather, across the road. For I was going too fast to make the turn.

The turn was sharp, one that was dangerous even at relatively low speeds. I knew it was, as did everyone else in the area. And I could never satisfactorily explain why I was traveling as fast as I was.

I was unnerved, of course. And, of course, I had lost my head, as I habitually did when confronted with an emergency. But, still . . .

Kind of strange for a man to do something when he danged well knew he shouldn't. Kind of suspicious.

The road skirted a steep cliff. It was almost three hundred feet from the top of the cliff to the bottom. The car went over it, and down it.

I don't know why I didn't go over with it . . . as Connie did.

I couldn't explain, no more than I could explain why I was speeding when I hit the turn. Nor could I prove that I had hit Connie with the door accidentally instead of deliberately.

I was an outsider in a clannish little community, and it was known that I constantly bickered with my wife. And I was the beneficiary of her $100,000 life insurance policy—$200,000 double indemnity.

If Connie's father hadn't stoutly proclaimed me innocent—Connie also defending me as soon as she was able— I suspect that I would have been convicted of attempted murder.

As I still might be . . . unless I myself was murdered.
The night of the skeleton, of my chase through the garbage dump . . .

I was kept under sedation for the rest of that night, and much of the next day and night. I had to be, so great was the damage to my nervous system. Early the following afternoon, after I had gotten some thirty-six hours of rest and treatment, Detective Sergeant Jeff Claggett was admitted to my hospital room.

It was Jeff who had followed me into the garbage dump, subsequently knocking me out when I could not be reasoned with. He had taken up the chase after hearing my yell, and seeing my flight away from the house. But he had seen no one pursuing me.

"I suppose no one was," I admitted, a little sheepishly. "I know he started around the fountain after me. But I was so damned sure that he was right on my tail that I didn't turn around to see if he was."

"Can't say that I blame you," Claggett nodded. "Must've given you a hell of a shock to come up against something like that pointing a gun at you. Any idea who it was?"

"No way of telling." I shook my head. "Just someone in a skeleton costume. You've probably seen them—a luminous skeleton painted on black cloth."

"Not much of a lead. Could've been picked up anywhere in the country," Claggett said. "Tell me, Britt. Do you walk around in your backyard as a regular thing? I mean, could the guy have known you'd be there at about such and such a time?"

"No way," I said. "I haven't been in the backyard in the last five years."

"Then he was just hiding there in the weeds, don't you suppose? Keeping out of sight, say, until he could safely come into the house."

"Come into the house?" I laughed shakily. "Why would he want to do that?"

"Well . . ." Jeff Claggett gave me a deadpan look. "Possibly he was after your money and valuables. After all, everyone knows you're a very wealthy man."

"You're kidding!" I said. "Anyone who knows anything about me knows that I don't have a pot to—"

"Right." He cut me off. "So what the guy was after was you. He'd have you pinned down in the house. You'd probably wake up—he'd wake you, of course—to find him bending over your bed. A skeleton grinning at you in the dark. You couldn't get away from him, and—yes? Something wrong, Britt?"

"Something wrong!" I shuddered. "What are you trying to do to me, Jeff?"

"Who hates you that much, Britt? And don't tell me you don't know!"

"But—but I don't," I stammered. "I've probably rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, but . . ."

I broke off, for he was holding something in front of me, then dropping it on the bed with a grimace. A pamphlet bylined by me, with a line attributing sponsorship to PXA.

"That's why I came out to see you the other night, Britt. I ran across it in the library, and I was sure the use of your name was unauthorized. But I guess I was wrong, wasn't I?"

I hesitated, unable to meet his straightforward blue eyes, their uncompromising honesty. I took a sip of water through a glass straw, mumbled a kind of defiant apology for my employment with PXA.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, Jeff. It was a public service thing. Nothing to do with the company's other activities."

"No?" Claggett said wryly. "Those activities paid for your work, didn't they? A lot more than it was worth, too, unless my information is all wrong. Three thousand dollars a month, plus bonuses, plus a car, plus an expense account, plus—Let's see. What else was included in the deal? A very juicy—and willing—young widow?"

"Look," I said, red-faced. "What's this got to do with what happened to me?"

"Don't kid me, Britt. I've talked to her—her and her uncle both. It's normal procedure to inform a man's employers when he's had a mishap. So I had a nice little chat with them, and you know what I think?"

"I think you're going to tell me what you think."

"I think that Patrick Xavier Aloe had been expecting Manuela to visit some unpleasantness upon you, and is now sure that she did. I think he gave her plenty of hell, as soon as I left the office."
I thought the same, although I didn't say so. Claggett went on to reveal that he had talked with Mrs. Olmstead. Learning, of course, that we were much more than employer and employee.

"She put out a lot of money for you, my friend. Or arranged to have it put out. She also put out something far more important to a girl like that. I imagine she only did it in the belief that you were going to marry her . . ."

He waited, studying me. I nodded reluctantly.

"I should have known what was expected of me," I said. "Hell, maybe I did know, but wouldn't admit it. At any rate, it was a lousy thing to do, and I probably deserve whatever she hands out."

"Oh, well," Claggett shrugged. "You weren't very nice to your wife either."

"Probably not, but she's an entirely different case. Manny was good to me. I never got anything from Connie and her old man but a hard time."

"You say so, and I believe you," said Claggett warmly. "Any damage you do, I imagine, is the result of not doing; just letting things slide. You don't have the initiative to deliberately hurt anyone."

"Thanks," I said. "I guess."

He chuckled good-naturedly. "Tell me about Connie and her father. Tell me how you happened to marry her, since it obviously wasn't exactly a love match."

I gave him a brief history of my meeting and association with the Bannermans. Then, since he seemed genuinely interested, I gave him a quick rundown on Britton Rainstar, after fortune had ceased to smile upon him and he had become Lo, the Poor Indian.

Jeff Claggett listened attentively. Laughing, frowning, exclaiming, wincing and shaking his head, by turns. When I had finished, he said that I was obviously much tougher than he had supposed. I must be to survive the many messes I had got myself into.

"Just one damned thing after another!" he swore. "I don't know how the hell you could do it!"

"Join the crowd," I said. "Nobody has ever known how I did it. Including me."

"Well, getting back to the present. Miss Aloe expected you to marry her. How did she take the news that you couldn't?"

"A lot better than I had any right to expect," I said. "She was just too good about it to be true, if you know what I mean. Everything was beautiful for around six weeks, just as nice as it had been from the beginning. Then a couple of days ago, the day of the evening I jumped this character in the skeleton suit—"

"Hold it a minute. I want to write this down."

He took a notebook and pencil from his pocket, then nodded for me to proceed. I did so, telling him of the dog and the mulatto woman, and the bartender who had thrown the drink in my face.

Jeff made a few notations to his notes when I had finished, then returned the book and pencil to his coat. Leaning back in his chair, he stared up at the ceiling meditatively, hands locked behind his head.

"Three separate acts," he said, musingly. "Four counting the skeleton routine. But there's a connection between them. The tie-in is in the result of those acts. To give you a hard jolt when you least expect it."

"Yes," I said uneasily. "They certainly did that all right."

"I wonder. I just wonder if that's how her husband died."

"You know about him?" An icy nil tingled down my spine. "She told me he died very suddenly, but I just assumed it was from a heart attack."

Claggett said that all deaths were ultimately attributable to heart failure, adding that he had no very sound grounds for regarding the death of Manny's husband as murder.

"They were at this little seacoast when it was hit by a hurricane. Wiped out almost half the town. Her husband was one of the dead. Wait, now"—he held up his hand, as I started to speak. "Naturally, she couldn't have arranged the hurricane, but she could have used it to cover his murder. I'd say she had plenty of reason to want him out of the way."

"I gather that he wasn't much good," I said. "But—"

"She dropped out of sight right after the funeral. Disappeared without a trace, and she didn't show up again for about a year."
"Well?" I said. "I still don't see . . ."

"Well, neither do I," Claggett said easily, his manner suddenly changing. "What are you going to do now, Britt, that you've quit the pamphlet writing?"

I said that I wished to God I knew. I wouldn't have any money to live on, and none to send Connie, which would surely cause all hell to pop. I was beginning to regret that I'd quit the job, even though I'd had no choice in the matter.

Claggett said I didn't have one now either. I had to go back on the job. "You'll be safer than if you didn't, Britt. So far Miss Aloe's only given you a bad shaking up. But she might try for a knockout if she thinks you're getting away from her."

"We don't actually know that she's done anything," I said. "We think she's responsible, but we're certainly not sure."

"Right. And we never will be if you break completely with her. Not until it's too late."

"But I've already quit! And I made it pretty damned clear that I meant it!"

"But she didn't tell her uncle apparently. Probably afraid of catching more hell than he's already given her." He stood up, dusting at his trousers. "I'll be having a little chat with both of them today, and I'll tip her off privately first — let her know that you're keeping the job. You can bet she'll be tickled pink to hear it."

The door opened and a bright-faced young nurse came in. She gave me a quick smile, then said something to Jeff that was too low for me to hear.

He nodded, dismissing her, and turned back to me. "Have to run, I guess," he said. "Okay? Everything all right?"

"Absolutely perfect," I said bitterly. "How else could it be for a guy with a schizoid wife, and a paranoid girlfriend? If one of them can't send me to prison or the electric chair, the other will put me in the nuthouse or the morgue! Well, screw it"—I plopped back on the pillows. "What are you chatting with the Aloes about?"

"Oh, this and that," he shrugged. "About you mainly, I suppose. They're very concerned about you and anxious to see you, of course . . ."

"Of course!"

"So, if it's all right with you, I'll have them drop in around five."
There is something utterly unnerving about an absolutely honest man, a man like Sergeant Jeff Claggett. You rationalize and lie to him until your supply of deceit is exhausted; and his questions and comments are never brutal or blunt. He simply persists, when you have already had your say, looking at you when you can no longer look at him. And, finally, though nothing has been admitted, you know you have been in the fight of your life.

So I don't know what Jeff said that afternoon to Manuela and Patrick Xavier Aloe. It is likely that he was quite offhand and casual, that he said nothing at all of intrinsic significance. But they came into my room, a tinge of strain to their expressions, and Manny's lips seemed a little stiff as she stooped to kiss me.

I shook hands with Pat and stated that I was fine, just fine. They stated that that was fine, just fine, and that I was looking fine, just fine.

There was an awkward moment of silence after that, while I smiled at them and was smiled back at. Manny shattered the tension by bursting into giggles. They made her very nice to look at, shaking and shivering her in all her shakable, shivery parts.

Pulse pounding, I tentatively joined in her laughter. But Pat saw no cause for amusement.

"What's with you?" He glared at her. "We got a sick man here. He gets a damned stupid joke pulled on him, and it puts him in the hospital. You think that's funny?"

"Now, Uncle Pat..." Manny gestured placatingly.

"Britt lands in the hospital, and we get cops nosing all around! Maybe you like that, huh? You think cops are funny?"

"There was only one, Pat. Just Sergeant Claggett, and he's a family friend, isn't he, Britt?"

"A very old friend," I said. "Jeff—Sergeant Claggett, that is—would be concerned, regardless of why I was in the hospital."

"Well—" Pat Aloe was somewhat reassured. "Anything else happen to you recently, Britt? I mean, any little jokes like this last one?"

I hesitated, feeling Manny's eyes on me. Wondering what Jeff would consider the best answer. Pat's gaze moved from me to Manny, and she smiled at him sunnily.

"Of course, nothing else has happened to him, Pat. This is his first time in the hospital, isn't it?"

"That's right," I said; and gave him the qualified truth. "There's been nothing like this before."

He relaxed at that, his map-of-Ireland face creasing in a grin. He said he was damned glad to hear it, because they'd been getting A-OK reactions to the pamphlets, and he'd hate to see them loused up.

"And we'd hate to lose the tax write-off," Manny said. "Don't forget that, Uncle Pat."

"Shut up," Pat said, and to me: "Then everything's copacetic, right, Britt? You're gonna go right on working for us?"

"I'd like to," I said. "I understand that I'll be under medical supervision for a while, have to take things kind of easy. But if that's all right with you..."

He boomed that, of course, it was all right. "And don't you worry about the hospital and doctor bills. We got kind of a private insurance plan that takes care of everything in the medical line."

"That's great," I said. "I'm obliged to you."

"Forget it. Whatever makes you happy makes us happy, right, Manny? Anything that's jake with Britt—Britt and his friend, Sergeant Claggett—"

"—is jake with us," Manny said emphatically. "Right, Uncle Pat! Right on!"

And Pat shot her a warning look. "One more thing, Britt, baby. I was way out of line saying anything about you and Manny getting married. What the hell? That's your business not mine."

"Right!" said Manny.

"You want a bat in the chops?" He half-raised his hand. "Keep askin', and you're gonna get it."

I broke in to say quite truthfully that I would have been glad to marry Manny, if I had been free to do. Pat said,
Sure, sure, so who was kicking? "It's okay with me, and it's okay with her. She don't like it, she can shove it up her ass."

"Right back at you, you sawed-off son-of-a-bitch," said Manny, and she made an upward jabbing motion with one finger.

Pat leaped. He grabbed her by the shoulders; shook her so vigorously that he head seemed to oscillate, her hair flying Out from it in a golden blur. He released her with a shove that slammed her into the wall. And the noise of his angry breathing almost filled the room.

I felt a little sick. Savagery like this was something I had never seen before. As for Manny . . .

Something undefinable happened to her face. A flickering of expressions that wiped it free of expression, then caused it to crinkle joyously, to wreath itself in a cherubic smile.

Pat looked away, gruffly abashed. "Let's go"—he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Get out of here, and let Britt get some rest."

"You go ahead," she said. "I want to kiss Britt goodnight."

"Who's stopping you? You kissed him in front of me before."

"Hub-uh. Not this way I didn't."

He gave me an embarrassed glance, then shrugged and said he could stand it if I could. He told me to take it easy, and left. And Manny crossed to the door, locked it and came back to the bed. She looked down, then bent down so close that her breasts brushed against me.

"Go ahead," she whispered. "Grab a handful."

"Now, dammit, Manny. . . !" I tried to sit up. "Listen to me, Manny!"

"Look"—edging her blouse down. "Look how nice they are."

"I said, listen to me!"

"Oh, all right," she said poutingly. "I'm listening."

"You've got to stop it," I said. "We'll forget what's already happened. Just say I had it coming, and call it quits. But there can't be any more, understand? And don't ask me any more what!"

"Any more what?"

"Please," I said. "I'm trying to help you. If you'll just stop now. . . "

"But I really don't know what you mean, darling. If you'll just tell me what you want me to stop, what else I shouldn't do . . ."

"All right," I said. "I've done my best."

She studied me a moment, the tip of her finger in her mouth. Then, she nodded, became pseudo-businesslike. Declared that she knew just what I needed, and it so happened that she had brought a supply with her.

As I have noted previously, she moved very, very quickly when she chose. So she was on the bed, on top of me, before I knew what was happening. Smothering me with softness, moving against me sensuously.

There was an abrupt metallic squeal from the bed. Then a grating and a scraping, and a crash. Instinctively, I jerked my head up, so it did not smash against the hard hospital floor. But my neck snapped, painfully, and Manny helped me to my feet, murmuring apologies.

Someone was pounding on the door, noisily working at the lock. It opened suddenly and the nurse came in, almost at a run. It was the nurse I had seen earlier, the bright-faced young woman. None-too-gently she brushed Manny aside, and seated me comfortably in a chair. She felt my pulse and forehead, gave me a few fussy little pats.

Then, she turned on Manny, who was casually adjusting her clothes.

"Just what happened here, miss? Why was that door locked?"

Manny grinned at her impudently. "A broken-down bed and a locked door, and you ask me what happened? How long have you been a woman, dear?"

"Oh, all right," Manny said. "Unless I can do something else for Britt . . ."
She did so, lushly compact hips swinging provocatively. The nurse looked after her, a little downcast, I thought, as though doing some comparative weighing and finding herself sadly wanting.

An orderly removed the collapsed bed, and wheeled in another. I was put into it, and a doctor examined me and pronounced me indestructible.

"Just the same," he said, winking at me lewdly, "you lay off the double-sacking with types like that pocket Venus that was in here. I'd say she could spot you a tailwind, and still beat you into port."

"Oh, she could not," the nurse said, reddening gloriously the moment the words were out of her mouth. "How would you know, anyway?"

"We-ll . . ." He gave her a wisely laconic grin. "How would you?"

He slapped unsuccessfully at her bottom on the way out. She jerked away, greatly flustered, and darted a glance at me. And, of course, found nothing in my expression but earnest goodwill.

She was much prettier than I had thought at first glance. She had superb bone structure, and her hair, too austerely coiffed beneath her nurse's cap, was deep auburn.

"I don't believe I've seen you before today," I said. "Are you new on this floor?"

"Well . . ." She hesitated. "I guess I'm new on all of them. I mean, I'm a substitute nurse."

"I see," I said. "Well, I think you're a fine nurse, and I'm sure you'll have regular duty before long."

She twitched pleasurably, like a petted puppy. Then, her scrubbed-clean face fell, and she sighed heavily.

"I thought I was going to have steady work starting tomorrow," she said. "Steady for a while, anyway. But after what happened today—Well, I'll be held responsible. The bed wouldn't have been broken-down, if I hadn't allowed the door to be locked. You could have been seriously injured, and it's all my fault and—"

"Wait." I held up a hand. "Hold it a minute. It wasn't your fault, it was mine, and I won't allow the hospital to blame you for it. You just have your supervisor talk to me, and I'll straighten her out fast."

"Thank you, Mr. Rainstar, but the supervisor has already reported the matter to Sergeant Claggett. She had to, you know. Her orders were to report anything unusual that happened to you. So . . ."

I was the regular duty the nurse had hoped to have. The doctors felt that for a time at least, when I returned home, I should have a full-time nurse available, and she had seemed a likely candidate for the job. But Jeff Claggett would never approve of her now.

"I really blew it," she said, with unconscious humor. "I'll bet the sergeant is really disgusted with me."

I said loftily that she was to forget the sergeant. After all, I was the one who had to be satisfied, and she satisfied me in every respect, so she could consider herself hired.

"Oh, that's wonderful, just wonderful!" She wriggled delightedly. "You're sure Sergeant Claggett will approve?"

"If he doesn't, he'll have me to deal with," I said. "But I'm sure it'll be fine with him."

But I wasn't sure, of course. And, of course, it wasn't fine with him.
He returned to the hospital shortly after I had finished my dinner that evening. He had been busy since leaving me, checking at the cocktail lounge where I had gotten a drink in my face, and with the mulatto woman who managed the quiet little hotel. In neither case had his investigation come to aught but naught.

The bartender had quit his job, and departed town for parts unknown to the lounge owner. Or so, at least, the latter said. The hotel had the same owners it had always had—a large eastern realty company, which was the absentee landlord for literally hundreds of properties. The manageress owned no dog, denied any knowledge of one, also denying that she had done anything but rent me and "my wife" a room.

"So that's that," Claggett said. "If you like I can put out a John Doe warrant on the bartender, but I don't think it's worth the trouble. Assuming we could run him down, which I doubt, throwing a drink on you wouldn't add up to more than a misdemeanor."

"By itself," I nodded. "But when you add it onto the business with the dog, and—"

"How are you going to add it on? You're a married man, but you register into this hotel with another woman as Mr. and Mrs. Phoneyname. And you tied your hands right there. The manageress was lying, sure. But try to prove it, and you'll look like a jerk."

He seemed rather cross and out of sorts. I suggested as much, adding that I hoped I wasn't the cause of same.

He gave me a look, seemed on the point of saying something intemperate. Then he sighed wearily, and shook his head.

"I guess you just can't help it," he said tiredly. "You seem incapable of learning from experience. You know, or should know, that Miss Aloe is out to harm you. You don't know how far she intends to go, which makes her all the more dangerous to you. But you let her get rid of Pat, you let her lock the door, you let her come back to the bed and make certain adjustments to it—"

"Look," I protested. "She didn't do all those things separately with a time lapse between them. She's a very quickmoving little girl, and she did everything in a matter of seconds. Before I knew what was happening, she—" I broke off, "Uh, what do you mean, certain adjustments?" I said.

"The bed goes up and down, right? Depending on whether you want to sit up or sleep or whatever. And here, right here where I'm pointing"—he pointed. "Do you see it, that little lever?"

"I see it," I said.

"Well, that's the safety. It locks the bed into the position you put it in."

"I know," I said. "They explained that to me the first day I was here."

"That's good," Claggett said grimly. "That's real good. Well, if Miss Aloe was out to fracture your skull, she couldn't have had a more cooperative subject. You let her flip the safety, and use her weight to give you an extra-hard bang against the floor. You didn't let her tie a rocket to you, but I imagine you would if she'd asked you."

My mouth was suddenly very dry. I took a sip or two of water, then raised the glass and drained it.

"I thought it was just a silly accident," I said. "It never occurred to me that she'd try anything here in the hospital."

"Well, watch yourself from now on," Claggett said. "You're going to be thrown together a lot, I understand, in the course of doing these pamphlets. Or am I correct about that?"

"Well"—I shrugged. "That depends largely on Manny. She's calling the turns. The amount of time we spend together depends on her."

"Better count on more time with her than less, then," he said. "This little stunt she pulled today—well, I doubt that it was really a try for a knockout. Whenever she's ready for that, if she ever is ready, I think she'll stay in the background and have someone else do it."

I said, Yes, I supposed he was right. He made an impatient little gesture, as though I had said something annoying.

"But we can't be sure, Britt! We can't say what she might do since she probably doesn't know herself. Look at what's happened to you so far. She couldn't have planned those things. They've just been spur-of-the-moment—pulled out of her hat as she went along."
I made no comment this time. He went on to say that he'd done some heavy thinking about Manny's vanishing for a year after her husband's death. And there was only one logical answer as to where she had been, and why.

"A private sanitarium, Britt, a place where she could get psychiatric help. Her mind started bending with the trouble her husband gave her, and it finally broke when he died—or when she killed him. I'd say that your telling her you were married was more than she could take, and it's started her on another mental breakdown."


"You'll be all right as long as you're careful. Just watch yourself—and her. Think now. Everything that's happened to you so far has been at least partly your own fault. In a sense, you've set yourself up."

I gave that a moment's thought, and then I said, All right, he was right. I would be very, very careful from now on. Since I had but one life to live, I would do everything in my power to go on living it.

"You have my solemn promise, Jeff. I shall do everything in my power to keep myself alive and unmaimed. Now, just what are you doing along that line?"

"I've done certain things inside your house," he said. "If there's ever any trouble just let out a yell, and you'll have help within a minute."

"How?" I said. "You mean you have the place bugged?"

"Don't try to find out," he said. "If you don't know, Miss Aloe won't, and if you did she would. You're really pretty transparent, Britt."

"Oh, now, I don't know about that," I said. "I—"

"Well, I do know. You're not only just about incapable of deceiving anyone for any length of time, but you're also very easy to deceive. So take my word for it that you'll be all right. Just yell and you'll have help."

"I don't like it," I said. "Suppose I couldn't yell? That I didn't have time, or I wasn't allowed to?"

Claggett laughed, shook his head chidingly. "Now, Britt, be reasonable. You'll have a full-time nurse right in the house with you, and she'll be checking on you periodically. It's inconceivable that you could need help and be unable to get it."

It wasn't inconceivable to me. I could think of any number of situations in which I would need help and be unable to cry out for it. And, for the record, one of those situations did come about. It did happen, the spine-chilling, hair-raising occurrence I had most feared. And just when I was feeling safest, and most secure. And I could see no way of hollering for help without hastening my already imminent demise.

All I could do was lie quiet, as I was ordered to, and listen to my hair turn grayer still. Wondering, foolishly, if I could ever get an acceptable tint job on it, assuming that I lived long enough to need one.

But this is getting ahead of the story. It is something that was yet to happen. Tonight, the night of which I am writing, Claggett pointed out that he was only a detective sergeant and that as such there was a limit to what he could do for my protection.

"And I'm sure the arrangements I've made are enough, Britt. With you staying on the alert, and with a good reliable nurse on hand, I'm confident that—" He broke off, giving me a sudden sharp look. "Yes?" he said. "Something on your mind?"

"Well, uh, yes," I said uncomfortably. "About the nurse, I'd like to have the one who's on duty tonight. That kind of pretty reddish-haired one. I—I, uh—I mean, she needs the job, and—"

"Not a chance," Claggett said flatly. "Not in a thousand years. I've got another nurse in mind, an older woman. Used to be a matron at the jail a few years back. I'll have her come in right now, and you can be getting acquainted tonight."

He got up and started toward the door. I said, Wait a minute, and he paused and turned around.

"Well?"

"Well, I'd kind of like to have the reddish-haired girl. She wants the job, and I'm sure she'd be just fine."

"Fine for what?" Claggett said. "No, don't tell me. You just take care of golden-haired Miss Aloe, and forget about your pretty little redhead."

I said I didn't have anything like that in mind at all. Whatever it was he thought I had in mind. My God, with Connie and Manny to contend with, I'd be crazy to start anything up with another girl.

"So?" said Claggett, then cut me off with a knifing gesture of his hand as I began another protest. "I don't care if
you did promise her the job. You had no right to make such a promise, and she knows it as well as you do."

He turned, and stalked out of the room.

I expected him to be back almost immediately, bringing the ex-police matron with him. But he was gone for almost a half an hour, and he came back looking weary and resigned.

"You win," he said, dropping heavily into a chair. "You get your red-haired nurse."

"I do?" I said. "I mean, why?"

"Because she spread it all around that she had the job. She was so positive about it that even the nurse I had in mind was convinced and she got sore and quit."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really didn't mean to upset your plans, Jeff."

"I know." He shrugged. "I just wish I could feel better about the redhead."

"I'm sure she'll work out fine," I said. "She got off to a bad start today by letting Manny lock the door and pull the bed trick. But—"

"What?" said Claggett. "Oh, well, that didn't bother me. That could have happened, regardless of who was on duty. The thing that bothers me about Miss Redhead Scrubbed-Clean is that I can't check her out."

I said, Oh—not knowing quite why I said it. Or why the hair on the back of my neck had gone through the motions of attempting to rise.

"... raised on a farm," Jeff Claggett was saying. "No neighbors for miles around. No friends. Her parents were ex-teachers, and they gave her her schooling. They did a first-class job of it, too, judging by her entrance exams at nursing school. She scored an academic rating of highschool graduate plus two years of college. She was an honors graduate in nursing, and I can't turn up anything but good about her since she made RN. Still"—he shook his head troubledly. "I don't actually know anything about her for the first eighteen years of her life. There's nothing I can check on, not even a birth certificate, from the time she was born until she entered nurses' training."

A linen cart creaked noisily down the hallway. From somewhere came the crash of a dinner tray. (Probably the redhead pounding on a patient.)

"Look, Jeff," I said. "In view of what you've told me, and after much deliberation, I think I'd better have a different nurse."

"Not possible." Jeff shook his head firmly. "You promised her the job. I went along with your decision, when I found that my matron friend wasn't and wouldn't be available. Try to back down on the deal now, and we'd have the union on us."

"I'll tell you something," I said. "I find that I've undergone a very dramatic recovery. My condition has improved at least a thousand percent, and I'm not going to need a nurse at all."

Claggett complained that I hadn't been listening to him. I'd already engaged a nurse, the redhead, and the doctors said I did need one.

"I've probably got the wind up over nothing, anyway, Britt. After all, the fact that I can't check on her doesn't mean that she's hiding anything, now does it?"

"Yes," I said. "I think it's proof positive that she was up to no good during those lost years of her nonage, and that she is planning more of the same for me."

Claggett chuckled that I was kidding, that I was always kidding. I said, Not so, that I only kidded when I was nervous or in mortal fear for my life, as in the present instance.

"It's kind of a defense mechanism," I explained. "I reason that I can't be murdered or maimed while would-be evildoers are laughing."

Claggett said brusquely to knock off the nonsense. He was confident that the nurse would work out fine. If he'd had any serious doubts about her, he'd acted upon them.

"I'll have to go now, Britt. Have a good night, and I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Wait!" I said. "What if I'm murdered in my sleep?"

"Then I won't talk to you," he said, irritably. And he left the room before I could say anything else. I got up and went to the bathroom. The constant dryness of my mouth had caused me to drink an overabundance of water.

I came out of the bathroom, and climbed back into bed.
The hall door opened silently, and the reddish-haired nurse came in.
She was wheeling a medicine cart in front of her, a cart covered with a chaos of bottles and vials and hypodermic needles. Having gotten the job as my regular full-time nurse seemed to have given her self-confidence. And she smiled at me brilliantly, and introduced herself.

"I'm Miss Nolton, Mr. Rainstar. Full name, Kate Nolton, but I prefer to be called Kay."

"Well, all right, Kay," I said, smiling stiffly (and doubtless foolishly). "It seems like a logical preference."

"What?" she frowned curiously. "I don't understand."

"I mean, it's reasonable to call you Kay since your name is Kate. But it wouldn't seem right to call you Kate if your name was Kay. I mean— Oh, forget it," I groaned. "My God! Do you play tennis, Kay?"

"I love tennis! How about you?"

"Yeah, how about me?" I said.

"Well?"

"Not very," I said.

"I mean, do you play tennis?"

"No," I said. She sort of smile-frowned at me. She picked up my wrist, and tested my pulse. "Very fast. I thought so," she said. "Turn over on your side, please."

She took a hypodermic needle from the sterilizer, and began to draw liquid into it from a vial. Then she glanced at me, and gestured with light impatience.

"I said to turn on your side, Mr. Rainstar."

"I am on my side."

"I mean, the other side! Turn your back to me."

"But that wouldn't be polite."

"Mr. Rainstar!" She almost stamped her foot. "If you don't turn your back to me, right this minute—!"

I turned, as requested. She jerked the string on my pajamas, and started to lower them.

"Wait a minute!" I said. "What are you doing, anyway?"

She told me what she was doing, adding that I was the silliest man she had ever seen in her life. I told her I couldn't allow it. It was the complete reversal of the normal order of things.

"A girl doesn't take a man's pants down," I said. "Everyone knows that. The correct procedure is for the man to take the girl's—Ooowtch! WHAT THE GODDAM HELL ARE YOU TRYING TO DO, WOMAN?"

"Shh, hush! The very idea making all that fuss over a teensy little hypo! Sergeant Claggett told me you were just a big old baby."

"That's why he's only a sergeant," I said. "An upper echelon officer would have instructed you in the proper treatment of wounds, namely to kiss them and make them well."

That got her. Her face turned as red as her hair. "Why, you—you—! Are you suggesting that I kiss your a double s?"

I yawned prodigiously. "That's exactly what I'm suggesting," I said, and yawned again. "I might add that it's probably the best o double f offer you'll ever get in your career as an assassin."

"All right," she said. "I think I'll just take you up on it. Just push it up here where I can get at it good, and—"

"Get away from me, goddammit!" I said. "Go scrub out a bedpan or something."

"Let's see now. Ahh, there it is! Kitchy-coo!"

"Get! Go away, you crazy broad!"

"Kitchy-kitchy-coo . . . ."

"Dammit, if you don't get away from me, I'm going to . . . going to . . . going—"
My eyes snapped shut. I drifted into sleep. Or, rather, half-sleep.

I was asleep, but aware that she had dropped into a chair. That she was shaking silently, hugging herself; then rocking back and forth helplessly and shrieking with laughter. I was aware when other people came into the room to investigate. Other nurses, and some orderlies and a couple of doctors.

The silly bastards were practically packed into my room. A couple of them even sat down on my bed, jouncing me up and down on it as they laughed.

I thought, Now dammit—

My thought ended there.

I lost all awareness.

And I fell into deep unknowing sleep.

I slept so soundly that I felt hung over and somewhat grouchy the next morning when Kay Nolton awakened me. She looked positively ascetic, all bright-eyed and clean-scrubbed. It depressed me to see anyone look that good in the early morning, and it was particularly depressing in view of the way I looked, which, I'm sure, was ghastly. Or shitty, to use the polite term.

Kay secured the usual matchbook size bar of hospital soap—one wholly inadequate for lathering the ass of a sick gnat. She secured a tiny wedge of threadbare washcloth, suitable for scrubbing the aforementioned. She dumped soap and washcloth into one of those shiny hospital basins—which, I suspect, are used for puking in as well as sponge-bathing—and she carried it into the bathroom to fill with water.

I jumped out of bed, and flattened myself against the wall at one side of the bathroom door. When she came out, eyes fixed on the basin, I slipped into the bathroom and into the shower.

I heard her say, "Mr. Rainstar, Mr. Rainstar! Where in the world—"

Then, I turned on the shower full, and I heard no more.

I came back into my room with a towel wrapped around me. Kay popped a thermometer into my mouth.

"Now why did you do that anyway? I had everything all ready to—Don't talk! You'll drop the thermometer!—give you a sponge bath! You knew I did! So why in the world did you—I said, Don't talk, Mr. Rainstar! I know you probably don't feel well, and I appreciate your giving me a job. But is that any reason to—Mr. Rainstar!"

She relieved me of the thermometer at last. Frowned slightly as she examined it, then shrugged, apparently finding its verdict acceptable. She checked my pulse, and ditto, ditto. She asked if I needed any help in dressing, and I said I didn't. She said I should just go ahead then, and she would bring in my breakfast. And I said I would and I did and she did.

Since she was now officially my employee, rather than the hospital's, she brought coffee for herself on the breakfast tray. Sat sipping it, chatting companionably, as I ate.

"You know what I'm going to do for you today, Mr. Rainstar? I mean, I will if you want me to."

"All I want you to do," I said, "is shoot me with a silver bullet. Only thus will my tortured heart be at rest."

"Oh?" she said blankly. "I was going to say that I'd wash and tint your hair for you. If you wanted me to, that is."

I grinned, then laughed out loud. Not at her, but myself. Because how could anyone have behaved as idiotically as I had? And with no real reason whatsoever. I had stepped on Jeff Claggett's toes, making a commitment without first consulting him. He hadn't liked that naturally enough; I had already stretched his patience to the breaking point. So he had punished me—warned me against any further intrusions upon his authority—by expressing serious doubts about Kay Nolton. When I overreacted to this he had hastily back-watered, pointing out that he would not be leaving me in her care, if he had had any reservations about her. But I was off and running by then. Popping off every which way, carrying on like a damned nut, and getting wilder and wilder by the minute.

Kay was looking at me uncertainly, a lovely blush spreading over her face and neck and down into her cleavage. So I stopped laughing and said she must pay no attention to me, since I, sad to say, was a complete jackass.

"I'm sorry as hell about last night. I don't know why I get that way, but if I do it again, give me an enema in the ear or something. Okay?"

"Now, you were perfectly all right, Mr. Rainstar," she said sturdily. "I was pretty far out of line myself. I knew you were a highly nervous type, but I teased you and made jokes when I should have—"

"—when you should have given me that enema," I said. "How are you at ear enemas, anyway? The technique is
practically the same as if you were doing it you-know where. Just remember to start at the top instead of the bottom, and you'll have it made."

She had started giggling; rosy face glowing, eyes bright with mirth. I said I was giving her life tenure at the task of futzing with my hair. I said I would also give her a beating with a wet rope if she didn't start calling me Britt instead of Mr. Rainstar.

"Now that we have that settled," I said, "I want you to get up, back up and bend over."

"B-bend over—oh, ha, ha—W-why, Britt?"

"So that I can climb on your shoulders, of course. I assume you are carrying me out of this joint piggyback?"

She said, "Ooops!" and jumped up. "Be back in just a minute, Britt!"

She hurried out of the room, promptly hurrying back with a wheelchair. It was a rule, it seemed, that all patients, ambulatory or not, had to be wheeled out of the hospital. So I climbed into the conveyance, and Kay fastened the crossbar across my lap, locking me into it. She wheeled me down to and into the elevator, and, subsequently, out of the elevator and into the lobby.

She parked me there at a point near the admitting desk, Admitting also being the place where departing patients were checked out. While she crossed to the desk and conferred with the registrar—or un-registrar—I sat gazing out through the building's main entrance, musing that the hospital's bills could be reduced to a level the average patient could pay if so much money had not been spent on inexcusable nonsense.

A particularly execrable example of such nonsense was this so-called main entrance of the hospital, which was not so much an entrance—main or otherwise—as it was a purely decorative and downright silly integrant of the structure's facade.

Interiorly, it consisted of four double doors, electronically activated. The exterior approach was via some thirty steep steps, each some forty feet in length, mounting to a gin-mill Gothic quadruple archway. (It looked like a series of half-horseshoes doing a daisy chain.)

Hardly anyone used this multimillion-dollar monstrosity for entrance or egress. How the hell could they? People came and went by the completely plain, but absolutely utilitarian, side entrance, which was flush with the abutting pavement, and required neither stepping down from nor up to.

It was actually the only one the hospital needed. The other was not only extravagantly impractical, it also had a kind of vertigo-ish, acrophobic quality.

Staring out on its stupidly expensive expanse, one became a little dizzy, struck with the notion that he was being swept forward at a smoothly imperceptible but swiftly increasing speed. Even I, a level-headed unflappable guy like me, was beginning to feel that way.

I rubbed my eyes, looked away from the entrance toward Kay. But neither she nor the admitting desk were where I had left them. The desk was far, far behind me and so was Kay. She was sprinting toward me as fast as her lovely, long legs could carry her, and yet she was receding, like a character in one of those old-timey silent movies.

I waved at her, exaggeratedly mouthing the words, "What gives?"

She responded with a wild waving and flapping of both her arms, simultaneously jumping up and down as though taken by a fit of hysterics.

Ah-ha! I thought shrewdly. Something exceedingly strange is going on here!

There was a loud SWOOSH as one of the double doors launched open.

There was a loud "YIKE!" as I shot thought it.

There were mingled moans and groans, yells and screams (also from me), as I sped across the terrazzo esplanade to the dizzying brink of those steep, seemingly endless stone steps.

I had the feeling that those steps were much harder than they looked, and that they were even harder than they looked.

I had the feeling that I had no feeling.

Then, I shot over the brink, and went down the steps with the sound of a stuttering, off-key cannon—or a very large frog with laryngitis: BONK-BLONK-BRONK. And I rode the chair and the chair rode me, by turns.

About halfway down, one of the steps reared up, turned its sharp edge up and whacked me unconscious. So only God knows whether I or the chair did the riding from then on.
I was back in my hospital room. Except for being dead, I felt quite well. Oh, I was riddled with aches and twinges and bruises, but it is scientific fact that the dead cannot become so without having some pain. All things are relative, you know. And I knew I was dead, since no man could live—or want to live—with a nose the size of an eggplant.

I could barely see around it, but I got a glimpse of Kay sitting at the side of the door. Her attention was focused on the doctor and Claggett, who stood in the doorway talking quietly. So I focused on them also, relatively speaking, that is.

"... a hell of a kickback on the sedatives, Sergeant. A kind of cumulative kickback, I'd say, reoccurring over the last several days. You may have noticed a rambling, seriocomic speech pattern, a tendency to express alarm and worry through preposterous philosophizing?"

"Hmmm. He normally does a lot of that, Doctor."

"Yes. An inability to cope, I suspect. But the sedatives seem to have carried the thing full circle. Defense became offense, possibly in response to this morning's crisis. It could have kept him from being killed by the accident."

My head suddenly cleared. The gauzy fogginess which had hung over everyone and everything was ripped away. And despite the enormous burden of my nose, I sat up.

Kay, Claggett and the doctor immediately converged on my bed.

I held up my hand and said, "Please, gentlemen and lady. Please do not ask me how I feel."

"You might tell us?" the doctor chuckled. "And you don't want to see us cry."

"Second please," I said, and I again held up my hand. "Please don't joke with me. It might destroy the little sense of humor I have left. Also, and believe you me, I'm in no damned mood for jokes or kidding. I've had my moments of that, but that's passed. And I contemplate no more of it for the foreseeable future."

"I imagine you're in quite a bit of pain," the doctor said quietly. "Nurse, will you—"

"No," I said. "I can survive the pain. What I want right now is a large pot of coffee."

"Have it after you're rested. You really should rest, Mr. Rains." I said I was sure he was right. But I'd prefer rest that wasn't drug induced, and I felt well enough to wait for it. "I want to talk to Sergeant Claggett, too," I said, "and I can't do it if I'm doped."

The doctor glanced at Claggett, and Jeff nodded. "I won't let him overdo it, Doc."

"Good enough, then," the doctor said. "If he can make it on his own, I'm all for it."

He left, and Kay got the coffee for me. It did a little more for me than I needed doing, making my over-alerted nerves cry out for something to calm them. But I fought the desire down, indicating to Claggett that I was ready to talk.

"I don't think I can tell you anything, though," I said. "I didn't realize it at the time, but I think I was in a kind of dream state. I mean, everything seemed to be out of kilter, but not in a way that I couldn't accept."

"It didn't jar you when you were shoved forward? That seemed okay to you?"

"I wasn't aware that I had been shoved forward. My feeling was that things had been shoved away from me, not me from them. I didn't begin to straighten out until I shot through those doors, and I wasn't completely unfogged when I went down the steps."

"Damn!" Claggett frowned at me. "But people were passing all around you. You must—"

"No," I said, "they weren't. Almost no one comes and goes through that front entrance, and I'm sure that no one did during the time I was there . . ."

Kay said quickly, a little anxiously, that my recollection was right. I was out of the way of passersby, which was why she had left me there in the entrance area.

Claggett looked at her, and his look was extremely cold.

Kay seemed to wilt under it, and Claggett turned back to me. "Yes, Britt? Something else?"

"Nothing helpful, I'm afraid. I know that people passed behind me. I could hear them and occasionally see their shadows. But I never saw any of them."
Claggett grimaced, said that he apparently didn't live right. Or something.

"Everything points to the fact that someone tried to kill you, or made a damned good stab at it. But since no one saw anyone, maybe there wasn't anyone. Maybe it was just an evil spirit or a malignant force or something of the kind. Isn't that what you think, Nolton?"

"No, sir." Kay bit her lip. "What I think—I know—is that I should have taken Mr. Rainstar with me when I went to the admitting desk. You warned me not to leave him untended, and I shouldn't have done it, and I'm very sorry that I did."

"Did you see anyone go near Mr. Rainstar?"

"No, sir. Well, yes, I may have. That's a pretty busy place, the lobby and desk area, and people would just about have to pass in Mr. Rainstar's vicinity."

"But they made no impression on you? You wouldn't remember what they looked like?"

"No, I wouldn't," Kay said, just a wee bit snappishly. "How could I, anyway? They were just a lot of people like you see anywhere."

"One of 'em wasn't," said Claggett. "But let it go. I believe I told you—but I'll tell you again since you seem pretty forgetful—that Mr. Rainstar has been seriously harassed, and that an attempt might be made on his life. I also told you—but I'll tell you again—that Miss Aloe is not above suspicion in the matter. We do not believe she would be directly responsible, although she could be, but rather as an employer of others. Do you think you can remember that, Miss Nolton?"

"Yes, sir." Kay bobbed her head meekly. "I'll remember."

"I should hope so. I certainly hope so." Claggett allowed a little warmth to come into his frosty blue eyes. "Now, you do understand, Nolton, that you could get hurt on this job. You'd represent a danger or an obstacle to the people who are out to get him, and you could get hurt bad. You might even get killed."

"Yes, sir," said Kay. "I understand that."

"And you still want the job?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"Sir?"

"You heard me, Nolton!" Claggett leaned forward, his eyes stabbing into her like blue icicles. "Jobs aren't that hard to get for a registered nurse. They aren't hard to get period. So why are you so damned anxious to have this one? A first-class chance to screw yourself up? Well, what's the answer? Why—"

"I'm trying to tell you, Sergeant! If you'll just—"

"You some kind of a bum or something? A nut? Too dumb or shiftless to make out on a regular job? Or maybe you're working an angle, hmmm. You're a plant. You're going to do a job on Britt yourself."

Kay was trembling all over. Her face had turned from white to red to a mixture of the two, and now it was a beautiful combination flushed cream and reddish-streaked pastels.

Her mouth opened, and I braced myself for a yell. But she spoke very quietly, with only a slight shakiness hinting at the anger which she must have felt.

"I want the job, Sergeant Claggett, for two reasons. One is that I like Mr. Rainstar. I like him very much, and I want to help him."

"Thank you, Kay," I mumbled—I had to say something, didn't I?—stealing a glance at Claggett. "I, uh, like you, too."

"Thank you, Mr. Rainstar. The second reason I want the job, Sergeant Claggett, is because I'm not sure I belong in nursing. I want to find out whether I do or not before it's too late to change to another field. So . . ."

So she wanted to take what would probably be the toughest job she would ever encounter as a nurse. If she could measure up to it, fine. If not, well, that was also all right. She would either make or break quickly. Her mind would be made up for her, and without any prolonged wavering, any mental seesawing,

"Those are my reasons for wanting the job, Sergeant Claggett. I hope they're enough, because I can't give you any others."

Kay finished speaking, sat very straight and dignified in her chair, hands folded primly in her lap. I wanted to
take her in my arms and kiss her. But I had felt that way before, with results that were not always happy for me. Except for that pleasant weakness, I would not be where I was now, with a nose which I could barely see around.

Claggett scrubbed his jaw thoughtfully, then cocked a brow at me. I cocked one at him, making it tit for tat. He grinned at me narrowly, acknowledging my studiously equivocal position.

"Well, now, young woman," he said, "a fine speech like that must have taken a lot out of you. Suppose you take a relief or have lunch, and come back in about an hour?"

"Well"—Kay stood hesitantly. "I really don't mind waiting, Sergeant. In fact—"

"I want to talk to Mr. Rainstar privately. Some other business. We'll settle this job matter when you get back."

"I see. Well, whatever you say, sir."

Kay nodded to us, and left.

Claggett stretched his legs in front of him, and said he was glad to get that out of the way. "Now, to pick up on your accident—"

"Just a minute, Jeff," I said. "You said we had that out of the way. You're referring to Nurse Nolton's employment?"

"Let it ride, will you?" He gestured impatiently. "I was going to tell you that I dropped in on PXA this morning. Just a routine visit, you know, to tell them about the accident to their favorite employee?"

"Well?" I said.

"Pat was pretty shook up about it. Reacted about the same as he did on my first visit. Kind of worried and angry, you know, like he might get hurt by a mess he wasn't responsible for. Then he turned sort of foxy and clammed up. Because—as I read him—he knew we'd have a hell of time proving anything against his niece, even though she had ordered the hit."

"Yes?" I frowned. "How do you mean?"

"She's in the hospital, Britt. Saint Christopher's. She's been there since just before midnight last night. Two highly reputable doctors in attendance, and they're not giving out any information nor allowing any visitors."

I gulped, blinked at him stupidly. I moved my nose out of the way, and had a small drink of water.

"Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say, Britt." He winked at me narrowly. "Kind of an unusual alibi, but she's kind of an unusual girl."

"Maybe she really is sick," I said. "She could be."

"So she could," Claggett shrugged. "It's practically a cinch that she is, in that hospital with those doctors. But that doesn't keep it from being a very convenient time to be sick. She could set the deal up, then put herself well out of the way of it with a nice legitimate sickness."

"Oh, well, yeah." I nodded slowly. "A fake attempt at suicide. Or an appendicitis attack—acute but simulated."

"Possibly but not necessarily," Claggett said, and he pointed out that Manny had been under a great deal of nervous stress. She had concealed it, but this itself had added to the tension. Finally, after doing that which only she could do, she collapsed with exhaustion.

"It's my guess that she did pretty much the same thing, after her husband's death. About the only difference is that she needed more time to recuperate then, and she went into seclusion."

I said that killing her husband would certainly have put a lot of strain on her. But where was the evidence that she had killed him? He was only one of many who had died during the hurricane.

"Right," said Claggett, "but the other deaths were all from drowning or being buried under the wreckage. Her husband apparently was killed by flying timbers; in other words, he was out in the open at the time the hurricane struck. Of course, he could have been, and might have been. But . . ."

He broke off, spread his hands expressively. I wet my lips nervously, then brushed a hand against them.

"I see what you mean," I said. "She could have battered the hell out of him, beaten him to death. Then, dragged his body outside."

"That's what I mean," said Claggett.

From the hallway, there came the muted clatter of dishes, the faint aromas of the noon meal. They were not exactly appetite-stimulating; and I had to swallow down nausea as Claggett and I continued our conversation.
“Jeff,” I said at last. “I just don't see how I can go through with this. How the hell can I, under the circumstances?”

“You mean, seeing Miss Aloe?”

“Of course, that's what I mean! I can't do the pamphlets without seeing her. I'll have to confer with her more or less regularly.”

“Well . . .” Claggett sighed, then shrugged. "If you can't, you can't."

“Oh, hell,” I said miserably. "Naturally, I'll go through with it. I've got no choice."

“Good! Good,” he said. "Let's hope you can get out of here within the next few days. The doctors tell me that aside from your nose, and your nerves, and—"

“There's nothing they can do for me here that can't be done at home,” I said. "And I want to get out of here. No later than tomorrow morning. This place is dangerous. It makes me nervous. A lot of people die in hospitals."

Claggett chuckled knowingly. "Here we go again, hmm? You just take it easy, my friend. Calm down, and pull yourself together."

I said I wasn't being nutty, dammit. The hospital was dangerous, which had damn well been proved in my case. There were too many people around, and it was simply impossible to ward them off or to check on all of them.

"At home, I won't have more than two visitors at most. Manny, and possibly Pat Aloe. Only those two—only one of them, actually—will be all that have to be watched. I say that's a hell of a lot better than the way it is here."

Claggett deliberated briefly, and agreed with me. "If it's all right with the doctors, it's all right with me," he said, getting to his feet. "I'll be going now, but I'll be in touch."

"Wait a minute,” I said. "What about the nurse?"

"What? Oh, yes, she almost slipped my mind. Hadn't decided about her yet, had I?"

"No, you hadn't. You were going to talk to her when she came back from lunch."

"Uh-huh. Well”—he glanced at his watch. "I'm going to have to go now. I'll talk to her on the way out."

He left before I could ask what he was going to say to her. But when she came in a few minutes later, I learned that he had okayed her for the job—but not very pleasantly.

"The very idea!” she said indignantly. "Saying he'd go after my hide if anything happened to you! I'd just like to see him try, darn him!"

"Don't say that," I said. "Bite your tongue, Kay."

She looked blank, then caught my meaning and laughed. "I didn't think how that sounded, Britt. Naturally, he isn't going to try because nothing is going to happen to you."

My lunch tray was brought in. Consomme with toast, vanilla custard and tea. It looked reasonably good to me, but I ate almost none of it. I couldn't. After a couple of sips of tea, I suddenly went to sleep.

Claggett called me that night to say that I would be checking out of the hospital the next morning. He told me the conditions under which I would be checking out, and going from the hospital to my home. I listened stunned, then sputtered profane objections.

"But you just think about it, Britt. Think it over, and it doesn't sound so crazy, does it? Sure, it's his own idea, and I say it's a good one. You couldn't be any safer in your mother's arms."

I said that wasn't very safe. My mother, the first woman judge of the State Circuit Court, had taken to the sauce harder than Dad.

"The poor old biddy dropped me on my head more times than she was overturned, and, believe me, they didn't call her Reverse-Decision Rainstar for nothing."

"Aaah, she wasn't that bad,” Claggett chuckled. "But what do you think about this other? It's the safest way, right?"

"Right," I said.
Kay Nolton and I left the hospital next morning, in the company of Pat Aloe, and two very tough-looking guards. I don't know whether Pat was armed or not, but the guards carried shotguns.

A very large black limousine with a uniformed chauffeur was waiting at the side entrance for us. I got into the back seat between the two guards. Kay rode in front between Pat and the chauffeur. Pat jabbed a finger at him, and nodded to me.

"This is the character that was supposed to have picked you up at the restaurant that night two—three months ago, Britt. Too damned stupid to do what he's told, but who the hell ain't these days?"

The man grinned sheepishly. Pat scowled at him for a moment, then turned his gaze on Kay. Looked at her long and thoughtfully.

She jerked her head around suddenly, and looked at him.

"Yes?" she said. "Something wrong?"

"I've seen you before," he said. "Where was it?"

"Nowhere. You're mistaken."

"You guys back there! Where have I seen her?"

The guards leaned forward, examined Kay meticulously. They made a big business out of squinting at her, stroking their chins with pseudo-shrewdness, and the like—a pantomime of great minds at work. Pat put an end to the charade with a rude order to knock it off for Nellie's sake.

"What about you, Johnnie?"—to the chauffeur; and then, disgustedly, "Ahh, why do I ask? You're as stupid as these guys."

"Mis-ter Aloe!" Kay heaved a sigh of exaggerated exasperation. "We have not met before! I would certainly remember it if we had!"

I murmured for her to take it easy, also quietly suggesting to Pat that the subject was hardly worth pursuing. He glanced at me absently, not seeming to hear what I had said.

"I never forget a face, Britt, baby. Ask anyone that knows me."

"You sure don't, Mr. Aloe! Not never ever!"

"I don't know where or when it was. But I've seen her, and I'll remember."

He let it go at that, facing back around in the seat. Kay gave me a smile of thanks for my support in the rearview. I smiled back at her, then shifted my gaze. What difference did it make, whether he had or hadn't seen her? And why should I be again starting to feel that creeping uneasiness in my stomach?

Pat took an envelope from his pocket, and handed it to me. It was the bonus check I had so foolishly given back to Manny, and I accepted it gratefully. The money would keep Connie off my back indefinitely, relieving me of at least one of my major worries.

We arrived at the house. The guards and the chauffeur remained with the car while Pat accompanied Kay and me inside. As she preceded us up the steps, he told me sotto voce that I should have a salary check coming pretty soon, and that he would see to it and anything else that needed taking care of, in case Manny wasn't available.

I said that was very nice of him, and how was Manny getting along? "I hope she's not seriously ill?"

"Naah, nothing like it," he grunted. "Just been working too hard, I guess. Got herself run down, and picked up a touch of flu."

"Well, give her my best," I said. "And thanks very much for seeing me safely home."

I held out my hand tentatively. He said he'd go in the house with me if I didn't mind. "Reckon you'll want to check in with the sergeant, and let him know you got here all right."

"I'll do that," I said, "and you can let him know that you got here all right."

He gave me a puzzled look, and said, Huh? And I said, Never mind, to forget it; and rang the doorbell.

I rang it several times, but there was no response from Mrs. Olmstead. So, finally, I unlocked the door and we went in.
She was in the kitchen talking on the telephone. Hearing us enter the house, she hurriedly concluded her call and came into the living room, carrying the phone with her and almost becoming entangled in its long extension cord.

I took it from her, introducing her to Kay and Pat as I dialed Claggett's number. They grimaced briefly at one another, mumbling inconsequentialities, and I reported in to Jeff and then passed the phone to Pat. He did as I did, and hung up the receiver.

I walked Pat to the door. As we stood there for a moment, shaking hands and exchanging the usual polite pleasantries customary to departures and arrivals, he looked past me to Kay, eyes narrowing reflectively. He was obviously trying to remember where he had seen her before, and was, just as obviously, disturbed at his inability to do so. Fortunately, however, he left without giving voice to his thoughts; and I started back to the living room. I stopped short of it, in the entrance foyer, listening to the repartee between Kay Nolton and Mrs. Olmstead.

"Now, Mrs. Olmstead. All I said was that the house needs a good airing out, and it most certainly does!"

"Doesn't neither! Who're you to be giving me orders, anyway?"

"You know very well who I am—I've told you several times. My job is to help Mr. Rainstar recover his health, which means that he must have fresh air to breathe—"

"HE'S GOT FRESH AIR!"

"—clean, wholesome, well-prepared meals—"

"THAT'S THE ONLY KIND I FIX!"

"And plenty of peace and quiet."

"WHY DON'T YOU BUTT OUT, THEN?"

I turned quietly away, and went silently up the stairs. I went into my room, stretched out on the bed and closed my eyes. I kept them closed, too, breathing gently and otherwise simulating sleep, when they came noisily up the steps to secure my services as arbitrator.

They left grudgingly, without disturbing me, each noisily shushing the other. I got up, visited the bathroom to dab cold water on my nose, then stretched out on the bed again.

I suppose I should have known that there would be friction between any woman as stubbornly sloppy as Mrs. Olmstead and one who was not only red-haired but as patently hygienic as scrubbed-looking Kay Nolton. I suppose that I should also have known that I would be caught in the middle of the dispute, since, like the legendary hapless Pierre, unpleasantness was always catching me in the middle of it. What I should not have supposed, I suppose, was that I would have known what the crud to do about it. Because about all I ever had known to do about something inevitably turned out to be the wrong thing.

So there you were, and here I was, and the air did smell pretty foul, but then it never did smell very good. And I was rather worn out from too much exercise, following no exercise at all, so I went to sleep.
I went to work on a pamphlet the next morning. I kept at it, at first turning out nothing but pointless drivel. But, then, inspiration came to me, and my interest rose higher and higher, and the pages flowed from my typewriter.

It was a day over two weeks before I saw Manny. It was a Friday, her first day out of the hospital, and she came out to the house as soon as she had gone to Mass. She had lost weight, and it had been taken from her face. But she had good color, having sunned frequently in the hospital's solarium, and the thinning of her face gave a quality of spirituality to her beauty it had lacked before.

She—

But hold it! Hold it right there! I have gone way ahead of myself, skimming over events which should certainly deserve telling.

To take things in reasonably proper order (or as much as their frequent impropriety will allow):

I worked. I badly wanted to work, and I am a very hard guy to distract when I am that way. When I was distracted, as, of course, I soon was, I dealt with the distraction—Kay and Mrs. Olmstead—with exceptional shrewdness and diplomacy, thus keeping my time-waste minimal.

I explained to Mrs. Olmstead that it was only fair that Kay should take over the cooking and certain other chores since she, Mrs. Olmstead, was terribly overworked, and certain changes in household routine were necessary due to my illness.

"The doctors have forbidden me to leave the house, and Miss Nolton is required to stay in the house with me at all times. She can't order up a taxi, as you can, and go shopping and buy ice cream sodas and, oh, a lot of things, like you'll be doing for me. I doubt if she could do it, even if she was allowed to leave the house. But I trust you, Mrs. Olmstead. I know you'll do the job right. So I'm putting a supply of money in the telephone-stand drawer, and you can help yourself to whatever you need. And if any problems do arise I know you'll know how to handle them, without any advice from me."

That disposed of Mrs. Olmstead—almost. She could not quite accept what was a very good thing for her without a grumbled recital of complaints against me—principally, my occasional failure to mail her letters, or to "do something" about a possible invasion by rats. Still, I was sure she would cooperate, since she had no good reason to do otherwise, and I said as much to Kay.

She said flatly that I didn't know what I was talking about, then hastily apologized for the statement.

"I'm here to help you, Britt. To make things as easy for you as possible. And I'm afraid I've added to the strain you've been under by letting Mrs. Olmstead provoke me into quarreling with her. I—no, wait now, please!" She held up her hand as I started to interrupt. "I've been at least partly at fault, and I'm sorry, and I'll try to do better from now on. I'll humor Mrs. Olmstead. I'll consult her. I'll do what has to be done without being obtrusive about it—making it seem like a rebuke to her. But I don't think it'll do any good. I've seen too many other people like her. They have a very keen sense of their privileges and rights, but they're blind to their obligations. They're constantly criticizing others, but they never do anything wrong themselves. Not to hear them tell it. I think she spells trouble, Britt, regardless of what you do or I do. For your own good, I think you should fire her."

"But I need her," I said. "She has to do the shopping for us."

"You can order whatever we need. Have it delivered."

"Well, uh, there are other things besides shopping. Anyway—anyway—"

"Yes?"

"Well, it wouldn't seem quite right for us to be alone in the house. Just the two of us, I mean. It just wouldn't be right, now, would it?"

"Why not?" said Kay; and as I hesitated, fumbling for words, she said quietly, "All right, Britt. You're too softhearted to get rid of her, and I probably wouldn't like you as much as I do if you weren't that way. So I'll say no more about it. Mrs. Olmstead stays, and I just hope you're not sorry."

She left my office, leaving me greatly relieved as I returned to my work. Glad that I had not had to explain why I did not want to live alone in the house with her. I had no concrete reason to suspect her, or, rather, to be afraid of her. Nothing at all but the uneasy doubts planted in my mind by Claggett and Pat Aloe. Still, I knew I would be more comfortable with a third person present. And I was very happy to have managed it without a lot of fussing and
fuming.

The pamphlet I was doing was on soil erosion, a subject I had shied away from in the past. I was afraid I would be inadequate to such an important topic, with so many facets, i.e., flood, drought, wind and irresponsible agricultural practices. Somehow, however, I had found the courage to plunge into the job and persist at it, meeting its challenges instead of veering or backing away—my customary reaction when confronted with the difficult. And I had advanced to its approximate halfway point when I looked up one afternoon to find Kay smiling at me from the doorway.

I stood up automatically, and started to unbuckle my belt. But she laughed and said we could dispense with the vitamin shot today.

"Just let me get your pulse and your temperature," she said, and proceeded to get them. "You're doing very well, Britt. Working hard and apparently enjoying it."

I agreed that I was doing both, adding that I was going to be very irritated if I was finished off before the job was finished.

"Well, then, I do solemnly swear to keep you alive," she said piously. "Not that I know why it's so important, but . . ."

I told her to sit down, and I would give her a hint of its importance. Which she did, and I did.

It was as important as life itself, I said. In fact it was life. Yet we sat around on our butts, uncaring, while it was slowly being stolen from us.

"Do you know that three-fourths of this state's topsoil has been washed away, blown away, or just by-God pooped away? Do you know that an immeasurable but dangerously tragic amount of its subsoil has gone the same route? Given a millennium and enough million-millions you can replace the topsoil, but once the subsoil's gone it's gone forever. In other words, you've got nothing to grow crops on, and nothing"—I broke off; paused a moment. "In other words," I said, "it stinks. Thanks for being so graphic."

She looked at me absently, nose crinkled with distaste. Then, she suddenly came alive, stammering embarrassed apologies.

"Please forgive me, Britt. It sounds terribly interesting, and you must tell me more. But what is that awful smell? It stinks like, well I don't know what! It's worse than anything I've smelled before in this house, and that's really saying something!"

I said I had noticed nothing much worse than usual. I also said I had a lot of work to do, and that I was anxious to get back to it.

"Now, Britt—" She got to her feet. "I'm sorry, and I'll run right along. Can I do anything for you before I go?"

Mollified, I said that, as a matter of fact, she could do something. There were some USDA brochures in the top drawer of my topmost filing cabinet, and if she would hold a chair while I climbed up on it, I would dance at her wedding or render any other small favor to her.

"You just stay right where you are," she said firmly. "I'll do any climbing that's done around here!"

She dragged a chair over to the stack of files, hiked her skirt and stepped up on it. Standing on tiptoe, she edged out the top file drawer and reached inside. She fumbled blindly inside, trying to grasp the documents inside. And, then, suddenly, she gasped and her face went livid.

For a moment I thought she was going to topple from the chair, and I jumped up and started toward her. But she motioned me back with a grim jerk of her head, then jumped down from the chair, white-faced with anger.

She was holding a large dead rat by the tail. Without a word she marched out of the room, and, by the sound of things, disposed of it in the rear porch garbage can. She returned to my office, stopping on the way to scrub her hands at the kitchen sink.

"All right, Britt"—she confronted me again. "I hope you're going to do something now!"

"Yes, I am," I said. "I'm going to go up to my room, and lie down."

"Britt! What are you going to do about that awful woman?"

"Now, Kay," I said. "That rat could have crawled in there and died. You know it could! Why—"

Kay said she knew it could not. The rat's head had been smashed. It had been killed, then put in the file.

"The shock of finding it could have killed you, Britt. Or if you were standing on a chair, you could have fallen
and broken your neck! I just can't allow this kind of thing to go on, Britt. I'm responsible, and—you've got to fire her!"

I pointed out that I couldn't fire Mrs. Olmstead. Not, at least, until she returned from shopping. I pointed out—rather piteously—that I was not at all well. This in the opinion of medical experts.

"Now, please help me up to my bed. I implore you, Kay Nolton."

She did so, though irritably. Then, looking up at her from the counterpane, I smiled at her and took one of her hands in mine. I said that perhaps she would not mind discussing Mrs. Olmstead when I was feeling better—say, tomorrow or the next day or, perhaps, the day after that. And I gave her a small pinch on the thigh.

She drew back skittishly, but not without a certain coyness. Which was all right with me. I wanted only to avoid a problem—Mrs. Olmstead—not to walk into another one. But Kay had her wants as well as I. And to get one must give. So when she said that she had to go to her room for a moment but would be right back, I told her I would count on it.

"I'll hold your place for you," I promised. "I'll also move over on the bed, in case you want to sit down, in case you cannot think of a more comfortable position than sitting."

Well.

When we heard Mrs. Olmstead return an hour later, we were locked together as the blissful beast-with-two-heads. We sprang apart, and she trotted into the bathroom ahead of me, her white uniform drawn high upon her sweet nakedness. I used the sink, while she sat on the toilet, tinkling pleasantly. And then I went over to her and hugged her red head against my stomach, and she nuzzled and kissed its environs in unashamed womanliness.

I congratulated myself.

For once, Britton Rainstar, I thought, you bridged a puddle without putting your foot down in stinky stuff. You've closed the door to debates on Mrs. Olmstead. Without compromising yourself, you've had a nice time and given same to a very nice young lady.

That's what I thought—and why not?

I nourished that thought, while I returned to bed and Kay went downstairs to prepare my dinner. It began to glimmer away, due to a kind of bashful shyness of manner as she served said dinner to me. And at bedtime, when she came into my room in an old-fashioned, unrevealing flannel, lips trembling, eyes downcast, a pastel symphony of embarrassment—bingo. The sound was the sound of my comforting thought leaping out the window.

But I didn't think of that then. All I could think of was drawing her down into my arms and holding her tight and trying to pet away her sadness.

"You won't like me any more, now," she sobbed brokenheartedly. "You think I'm awful, now. You think I'm not a nice girl, now . . . " And so on, until I thought my heart was breaking, too.

"Please, please don't cry, darling," I pleaded. "Please don't, baby girl. Of course, I like you. Of course, I think you're a nice girl. Of course, I think—I don't think you're awful."

But she continued to weep and sob. Oh, she didn't blame me. Not for a moment! She knew I was married, so it was all her fault. But men never did like you afterwards. There was this intern and she'd liked him a lot and he'd kept after her, and finally she'd done it with him. And he'd told everyone in this hospital that she did it, and they'd all laughed and thought she was awful. Then there was this obstetrician she'd worked for, a wonderfully sweet, considerate man—but after she did it with him awhile, he must have thought she was awful (and not very nice, either) because he decided not to get a divorce after all. Then there was this—

"Well, pee on all of them!" I broke in. "Doing it is one of the very nicest things girls do, and any guy who wouldn't treat her nice afterwards would doubtless eat dog-hockey in Hammacher-Schlemmer's side window."

She giggled, then sniffled and giggled simultaneously. She asked if she could ask me something, and then she asked it.

"Would you—I know you can't, because you're already married—but would you, if you weren't? I mean, you wouldn't think I was too awful to marry, just because I did it?"

"You asked me something, my precious love-pot," I said, "so let me tell you something. If I was not married—and please note that I use the verb was, not were, since were connotes the wildly impractical or impossible, as in 'If I were you,' and no one but a pretentious damned fool would say, 'If I were not married' because that's not only possible but, in my case, a lousy actuality. But, uh, what was the question?"
"Would you marry me if you were not—I mean, was not—already married."

"The answer is absotively, and, look, dear. Were is proper when prefixed by the pronoun you. That's one of those exceptions—"

"You really would, Britt? Honestly? You wouldn't think I was too awful to marry?"

"Let me put it this way, my dearest dear," I said. "I would not only marry you, and consider myself the luckiest and most honored of men, but after God's blessing had been called down upon our union and the minister had given me permission to raise your bridal veil, I would raise your bridal gown instead, and I would shower kisses of gratitude all over your cute little butt."

She heaved a great shuddery sigh. Then, her head resting cozily against my chest, she asked if I had really meant what I had said.

"My God," I said indignantly, "would I make such a statement if I didn't mean it?"

"I mean, honest and truly."

"Oh," I said. "So that's what you mean."

"Uh-huh."

"I cannot tell a lie," I said. "Thus, my answer must be, yes: honest and truly, and a pail of wild honey with brown sugar on it."

She fell asleep in my arms, the untroubled sleep of an innocent child; and flights of angels must have guided her into it, for her smile was the smile of heaven's own.

I brushed my lips against her hair, thinking that everyone should know such peace and happiness. Wondering why they didn't when it was so easily managed. The ingredients were to be found in everyone's cupboard, or the cupboard which everyone is, and you could put them together as easily as you could button your britches. All that was necessary was to combine any good brand of kindness and any standard type of goodwill, plus a generous dab of love; then, shake well and serve. There you had peace and happiness—beautifully personified by this sleeping angel in my arms.

Without disturbing her, I shifted my position ever-so-slightly, and I took another look at her.

And I thought, I have seen Manny sleep like this, too. Manny who thus far has done everything but kill me, and doubtless plans to do just that.

Then, I thought, Connie looked thus also, for God's sake! The homeliest, scrawniest broad in the world has at least a moment of surpassing beauty, else a majority of the world's female population would go unscrewed and unmarried. And I thought that Connie would probably like to kill me, and quite likely would do so if she knew how to safely wangle it.

And I thought, And how about Kay, this lovely child? For all I know about her—or DON'T know about her—she too, could have my murder on her mind. Yeah, verily, even while screwing me, she could be plotting my slaughter. Perhaps she would see my death as atonement for her misuse by guys who had used her. Guys who thought she was awful and not a nice girl just because she did it.

Finally, in that prescient moment preceding sleep, I thought, Congratulations, Rainstar. You have done it again. A very small puddle was in your path, one that you could have walked through without dampening your shoe soles. Yet you shrank—you chronic shrinker!—from even that small hazard. You must spring over the literal wet spot in your walkway, and that mess you came down in on the other side was definitely not a beehive.
Manny came out to the house the next day.

She looked very beautiful. Her illness had left her even lovelier than she had been, and . . . but I believe we've already covered that. So let us move on.

I was naturally pretty wary, and she also was on guard. We exchanged greetings, stiffly, and moved on to a stilted exchange of conversational banalities. With that behind us, I think we were on the point of breaking the ice when Kay popped in with the coffee service. She declared brightly that she just knew that we two convalescents would feel better after a good cup of coffee, and she poured and passed a cup to each of us.

Manny barely tasted hers, and said it was very good.

I tasted mine, and also lied about it.

Kay said she would just wait until we finished it, by which time doubtless, since I was not feeling very well, Miss Aloe would want to leave. Manny promptly put her cup down, and stood up.

"I'll leave right now, Britt. It was thoughtless of me to come out so soon, so—"

"Sit down," I said. "I am quite well, and I'm sure that neither of us wants any more of this coffee. So please remove it, Miss Nolton, and leave Miss Aloe and me to conduct our business in private."

Manny said timidly that she would be glad to come back another time. But I told her again to sit down, and she sat. Kay snatched up the coffee things and clumped to the door. She turned around there, addressing me with sorrowful reproach.

"I was just doing my job, Mr. Rainstar. I'm responsible for your health, you know."

"I know," I said, "and I'm grateful."

"It would be easier for me if I wasn't so conscientious. My salary would be the same, and it would be a lot easier for me, if I didn't do—"

"I'd better leave," said Manny, picking up her purse.

"And I think you'd better not!" I said. "I think Miss Nolton had better leave—right this minute!"

Kay left, slamming the door behind her. I smiled apologetically at Manny.

"I'm sorry," I said. "She's a very nice young woman, and she's very good at her job. But sometimes . . ."

"Mmm. I'll just bet she is!" Manny said, and then, with a small diffident gesture, "I want to tell you something, and it's, well, not easy for me. Could you come a little closei please?"

"Of course," I said, and I moved over to her side on the love seat. I waited, and her lips parted, then closed again. And she looked at me helplessly, apparently unable to find the words for what she wanted to say.

I told her gently to take her time, we had all the time in the world; and then, by way of easing her tenseness, I asked her if she remembered the last time we had been in this room together.

"It was months ago, and I thought I'd lost the pamphletwriting job before I even had it. So I was sitting here with my head in my hands, feeling sorry as hell for myself. And I wasn't aware that you'd come into the room until—"

"Of course, I remember!" She clapped her hands delightedly. "You looked like this"—she puffed her cheeks out and rolled her eyes inward in a hilarious caricature of despair. "That's just the way you looked, darling. And then I said:

"Lo, the Poor Indian"

we said in unison.

"Lo, the Poor Indian"

We laughed, and smiled at each other. She took my month's retainer from her purse and gave it to me, and we went on smiling at one another. And she spoke to me in a voice as soft and tender as her smile.

"Poor Lo. How are you, my dearest darling?"

"Well, you know"—I shrugged. "For a guy who's been shot out of the saddle a few times, not bad, not bad at all."

"I'm sorry, Britt. Terribly, terribly sorry. That's what I was trying to tell you. I haven't been myself. At least, I hope the self I've been showing wasn't the real Manuela Aloe, but I'm going to be all right now. I—I—"
"Of course, you're going to be all right," I said. "I pulled a lousy trick on you, and you paid me off for it. So now we're all even-steven."

"Nothing more will happen to you, Britt! I swear it won't."

"Didn't I just say so?" I said. "Now, be a nice girl and say no more about it, and start reading these beautiful words I've written for you."

She said, All right, Britt, swallowing heavily, eyes shining too brightly. Then the tears brimmed over, and she began to weep silently and I hastily looked away. Because I'd never known what to do when a woman started crying, and I particularly didn't know what to do when the woman was Manny.

"Aah, Britt," she said tremulously. "How could I ever have been mean to anyone as nice as you?"

"Doggone it, everyone keeps asking me that!" I said. "And what the heck can I tell them?"

She laughed tearily. She said, "Britt, oh, Britt, my darling!" and then she broke down completely, great sobs tearing through her body.

I held her and patted her head, and that sort of thing. I took out my breast-pocket handkerchief and dabbed her eyes, and honked her nose in it. Conscious that there was something a little nutty about performing such chores for a girl who had almost killed me, even though she hadn't meant to. Conscious that I again might be playing the chump, and, at the moment, not really caring if I was.

I crossed to my desk, and began putting the pages I had written into an envelope. I took my time about it, giving her time to pull herself together. Rattling on with some backhanded kidding to brighten things up.

"Now, hear me," I said. "I don't want you looking at this bawling and honking your schnozzle, and being so disgustingly messy. Us Noble Redmen don't put up with such white-eye tricks, get me, you silly squaw?"


"Well, I just hope you're not speaking with a forked tongue," I said. "These are very precious words, lovingly typed on top grade erasable-bond paper, and God pity you if you louse them up."

"All right, Britt . . ."

She did sound like she was, so I turned back around. I helped her up from the love seat, gave her a small pat on the bottom and pressed the envelope into her hands. As I walked her to the front door, I told her a little about the manuscript and said that I would look forward to hearing from her. She said that I would, no later than the day after the morrow.

"No, wait a minute," she said. "Today's Friday, isn't it?"

"All day, I believe."

"Let's make it Monday, then. I'll see you Monday."

"No one should ever see anyone on Monday," I said. "Let's make it Tuesday."

We settled on a Tuesday P.M. meeting. Pausing at the front dooi she glanced out to where her own car stood in the driveway and asked what had happened to mine. "I hope the company hasn't pulled another booboo and come out and gotten it, Britt. After all the stupid mix-ups we've had in the past, that would be a little too much."

"No, no," I said. "Everything is as it should be. I believe that exposure to the elements is good for a car, helps it to grow strong and tough, you know. But since I haven't been using it these several weeks, I locked it up in the garage."

"Yes?" She looked up at me curiously. "But you get out a little bit, don't you? You don't stay in the house all the time?"


Again, she gave me a curious frown. "Very strange," she murmured, a slight chill coming into her voice. "I was certain that the doctors would want you to get a little fresh air and sunshine."

I said that, Oh, well, she knew how doctors were, knowing that it sounded pretty feeble. Actually, of course, it was not the doctors but Claggett who had absolutely forbidden me to leave the house.

Manny said, Yes, she did know how doctors were. "I'll say good-bye here, then. I wouldn't want you to go against orders by walking to my car with me."

"Oh, now, wait a minute," I said, taking a quick look over my shoulder. "Of course, I'll walk to the car with you."
I tucked her arm through mine, and we crossed the porch and started down the steps.

We descended to the driveway and sauntered the few steps to her car. I helped her into it, and closed the door quietly.

Mrs. Olmstead was out shopping per usual, so she could not reveal my sneaking out of the house. But I was fearful that Kay might spot me, and come storming out to yank me back inside again.

"Well, good-bye, darling," I said, and I stooped and hastily kissed Manny. "Take care, and I'll see you Tuesday."

"Wait, Britt. Please!"

"Yes?" I threw another quick glance over my shoulder. "I love being with you, dear, but I really shouldn't be standing out here."

"It's just me, isn't it? You're afraid of being here with me."

"Dammit, no," I said. "That isn't it at all. It's just that, I—"

"I told you nothing more would happen to you, Britt. I'm all right now, and there'll never be anything like that again, and—Don't you believe me?"

Her voice broke and she turned her head quickly, looking at the scantily populated countryside across the road. There were a few houses scattered over a wide area, and land had been graded for a number of others. But everything had come to a halt with the advent of the garbage dump on former Rainstar property.

"Manny," I said. "Listen to me. Please listen to me, Manny."

"Well?" She faced me again, but slowly, her gaze still lingering on the near-empty expanse beyond the road, seeming to search for something there. "Yes, Britt?"

"I'm not afraid of being here with you at all. You said that nothing more would happen to me, and I believe you. It's just that I'm supposed to stay in the house—not to come outside at all. And I'm afraid there'll be a hell of a brouhaha if—"

"But you've been going out." Manny smiled at me thinly. "You've been going out and staying out for hours."

"What?" I said. "Why do you say that?"

"Why?" she said. "Yes, why do I? I've certainly no right to make an issue of it."

And before I could say anything more, she nodded coldly and drove away.

I looked after her, as her car sped down the driveway and turned into the road, became lost in the dust of the ubiquitous dump trucks wending their way toward the garbage hummocks.

I turned away, vaguely troubled, and moved absently toward the porch.

I went up the steps, still discomfited and puzzled by Manny's attitude, but grateful that Kay had not discovered me in my fracture of a strict order. One of the few unhappy aspects of sex is that it places you much too close physically while you are still mentally poles apart. So that a categorical imperative is apt to be juxtaposed with a constitutional impossibility, for how can one kick someone—or part of someone—that he has laved with love.

I couldn't face up to the consequences of Kay Nolton's throwing her weight around with me again. No sadist I, I could not slug the provably and delightfully screwable.

I reached the top step, and—

There was a sudden angry sound at my ear, the buzz of a maddened hornet. The hornet zoomed in and stung me painfully on the forehead, the sting burning like acid.

I slapped at it, then rubbed the tortured flesh with my fingers. As a boy, growing up on the old place, I had been "hit" by hornets many times. But I could remember none having the effect of this one.

It was numbing, almost as if I had been hit by an instrument that was at once edged and blunt. I felt a little dizzy and faint, and—

I took my hand away from my head.

I stared at it stupidly.

It was red and wet, dripping with blood, and more blood was dripping down onto the age-faded wood of the porch.

My knees buckled slowly, and I sank down to them. My eyes closed, and I slowly toppled over and lay prone.
My last thought, before I lost consciousness, was of Manny. Her indirect insistence that I accompany her to her car. The hurt in her voice and her eyes when I had hesitated about leaving the safety of the house—hurt which I could only expunge by doing what I had been sternly ordered not to do.

So I had done as she wanted, because I loved her and believed in her.

And then, loving and trusting her, I had remained out in the open exposed to the danger which is always latent in loving and trusting.

I had lingered at the side of her car, pleading with her. And she had sat with her back turned to me, her gaze searching the landscape, apparently searching it for...? A signal? A rifle, say, with a telescopic sight.

I heard myself laugh, even as the very last of my consciousness glimmered away. Because, you see, it was really terribly funny. Almost as funny as it was sad.

I had always shunned guns, always maintaining that guns had been known to kill people and even defenseless animals, and that those who fooled around with guns had holes in their heads. And now, I... I... I had been... and I had a hole in my...
When I came back into my consciousness, I was lying on my own bed, and Kay was hunkered down at the bedside, staring anxiously into my face.

I started to rear up, but she pressed me back upon the pillows. I stammered nonsensically, "What why where how . . ." and then the jumble in my mind cleared, and I said, "How did I get up here? Who brought me up?"

"Shhh," said Kay. "I—we made it together, remember? With me steering you, and hanging onto you for dear life."

"Mrs. Olmstead helped you. I wouldn't have thought the old gal had it in her."

"Mrs. Olmstead isn't back yet. She's never around when you need her for anything. Now, will you just shut up for goodness sake, and tell me how—Doggone it, anyway!" Kay scowled, her voice rising angrily. "It's just too darned much! I have to follow that woman around, do everything over after she's done it! I have to watch you every minute, to keep you from doing something silly, and all I get is bawled out for it! I have to—"

"Oh, come on now," I said, "it really isn't that bad, is it?"

"Yes, it is! And now you've made me lose control of myself, and act as crazy as you are! Now, you listen to me, Britt Rainstar! Are you listening?"

She was trembling with fury, her face an unrelieved white against the contrasting red of her hair. I tried to take her hand, and she knocked it away. Then, she quickly recovered it and squeezed it, smiling at me determinedly through gritted teeth.

"I asked you if you were—oh, the heck with it," she said. "How are you feeling, honey?"

"Tol'able, ma'am," I said. "Tolerable. How are you?"

She said she was darned mad, that's how she was. Then she told me to hold still, darn it, and she tested the strip of adhesive bandage on my forehead. And then she leaned down and gently kissed it.

"Does it hurt very much, Britt?"

"You wouldn't ask that, if you were really a nurse."

"What? What do you mean by that?"

"Anyone with the slightest smattering of medical knowledge knows that when you kiss something you make it well."

"Ha!" She brushed her lips against mine. "You were told not to leave this house, Britt. Not under any circumstances. Why did you do it?"

"It wasn't really going out," I said. "I just saw Miss Aloe to her car."

"And you got shot."

"But there was no connection between the two events. She'd been gone for, oh, a couple of minutes when it happened."

"What does that prove?"

"I'm sure she had nothing to do with it," I said stubbornly. "She told me she was sorry for what she'd done, and she swore that there'd be no more trouble. And she was telling the truth! I know she was, Kay."

"And I know you got shot." Kay said. "I also know that I'll get blamed for it. It's not my fault. You practically threw me out of your office, and told me to leave you alone. I was only t-trying to look after you, b-but you—"

I cut in on her, telling her to listen to me and listen good. And when she persisted, obviously working herself up to a tear storm, I took her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Don't you pull that on me!" I said. "Don't pretend that that little stunt you pulled down in my office was an attempt to protect me. You were just being nosy. Acting like a jealous wife. Miss Aloe and I were discussing business, and—"

"Ha! I know her kind of business. She's got her business right in her—well, never mind. I won't say it."

She dropped her eyes, blushing, I stared at her grimly, and finally she looked up and asked me what I was looking at.
"At you," I said. "What's with this blushing bit? I think it's just about impossible for you to be embarrassed. I don't think you'd be embarrassed if you rode naked through Coventry on a Kiddy-Kar with a bull's-eye on each titty and a feather duster up your arse! You've repeatedly proved that you're shameless, goddammit, yet you go around kicking shit, and turning red as a billy goat's butt every time you see the letter p. You—"

"Oops!" said Kay. "Whoops!" And she lost her balance and went over backwards, sitting down on the floor with a thud. She sat thus, shaking and trembling, her hands covering her face; making rather strange and fearful sounds.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Are you throwing a fit? That's all I need, by God, a blushing fit-thrower!"

And her hands came away from her face, they were literally exploded, as she burst into wild peals of laughter. The force of it made me wince, but it was somehow contagious. I started laughing, too, laughing harder at each new blast from her. And the harder I laughed the harder she laughed.

That kind of laughter does something to some people, and it did it to her. She staggered to her feet, trying to get to the bathroom, but she just couldn't make it. Instead, she fell down across me, now crying from laughing so much, and I took her by her wet seat, and hauled her over to my other side.

"You dirty girl," I said. "Why don't you carry a cork with you?"

"D-don't," she begged. "P-please d-don't . . ."

I didn't; that is, I didn't say anything more. For practically anything will start a person up again when he has passed a certain point in laughing.

We lay quiet together, with the only sound the sound of our breathing.

After a long time, she sighed luxuriously and asked if I really minded her blushing, and I said I supposed there were worse things.

"I don't know why I do it, Britt, but I always have. I've tried not to, but it just makes it worse."

"I used to know a girl who was that way," I said. "But an old gypsy cured her of it."

I told her how it was done. Following the old gypsy's instructions, she sprinkled salt on a sparrow's tail when it was looking the other way. When the sparrow flew off, it took her blushes with her.

"Just like that?" Kay said. "She didn't blush any more?"

"No, but it started a blushing epidemic among the sparrows. For years, before they lost their shame by do-doing on people, the midnight sky was brilliant with their blushes, and—"

"Darn you!" An incipient trembling of the bed. "You shut up!"

I said quickly that we should both think of something unpleasant. Something that definitely was not a laughing matter. And it was no trouble at all to think of such a something.

"I'm gonna catch holy heck," Kay said solemnly. "Boy, oh boy, am I gonna catch it."

"You mean, I'm going to catch it," I said. "I was the one that got shot."

"But I let you. I didn't stop you from going outside."

"Stop me? How the hell could you stop me? I'm a grown man, and if I wanted to go outside I'd go, regardless of what you said or did."

"You'll see," Kay said. "Sergeant Claggett will hold me responsible. He's already said he would."

I couldn't talk her out of her qualms, nor did I try to very hard. I was the one who had goofed—and I would hear from Claggett about that!—but she would be held responsible. He would have her yanked off the job, possibly even fired.

"Look, Kay," I said. "We don't know that I was actually shot. We don't know anything of the kind, now, do we?"

Kay said that of course, we knew it. At least, she did. That crease across my temple had been put there by a bullet.

"Now, we don't know," she added thoughtfully, "that anyone was actually trying to hit you. That it was a professional, say, which it would just about have to be, wouldn't it, if the shooting was intentional?"

"Why, that's right!" I said. "And a pro wouldn't have just creased me. He'd have put one through my head. I'll bet it was an accident, Kay. Some character hunting rabbits across the road, or—or else—" I broke off, remembering the other things that had happened to me.

"Or else what, Britt?"
"He wasn't trying to kill me or seriously injure me. Just to give me a bad jolt."

"Oh," said Kay, slowly. "Oh, yes. I guess you're probably right, all right. I guess your darling little Miss Aloe was lying when she promised not to give you any more trouble."

I snapped that Manny hadn't been lying—something that I was by no means sure of, much as I wanted to be. Kay shrugged that, of course, I knew more about my business than she did. So who was responsible for the shooting, if Manny was not?

"I thought she was the only one you and Sergeant Claggett suspected. Of giving you such a bad time, I mean. I guess you did say that her uncle might be involved, but you really didn't seem to believe it."

"Didn't and don't," I said curtly. "That was just a farout possibility."

"Well, just don't you worry your sweet tinted-gray head about it," said Kay. "I imagine that Miss Aloe just forgot that she'd ordered someone to take a shot at you. I'll bet that now that she remembers doing it, she's just as sorry as she can be."

I said something that sounded like ship but wasn't. Kay said brightly that she'd just thought of another explanation for the shooting. Manny had ordered it, and then ordered it canceled. But the gunman had forgotten the cancellation.

"That's probably what happened, Britt, don't you think so? Of course, you'd think a professional gunman would be a little more careful, but, oh, well, that's life."

"That's life," I said, "and this is my hand. And if you don't stop needling me, dammit . . . !"

"I'm sorry, darling. It just about had to be an accident, didn't it? A stray bullet from a hunter's gun."

"Well . . ." I hesitated.

"Right," said Kay, "So there's no reason to tell Sergeant Claggett that you were ever outside the house. He'd just get all upset and mad, and maybe take me away from you, and oh, boy," sighed Kay. "Am I glad to get that settled! Let's go to the bathroom, shall we?"

We went to the bathroom.

We got out of our clothes and washed, and helped each other wash, and Kay carefully removed the adhesive strip and examined my head wound.

"Mmm-hmm. It doesn't look so bad, Britt. How does it feel?"

"No problem. A very slight itching and stinging occasionally."

"Well, we'll leave it unbandaged for the time being. Let the air get to it. Have you felt any more faintness?"

"Nope. Not the faintest."

She lowered the toilet seat, and told me to sit down on it. I did, and she took my pulse while resting a palm on my forehead. Then—

The bathroom suddenly began to shake. There was a sudden ominous creaking and cracking, slowly mounting in volume.

Kay pitched sideways, and her mouth opened to scream. I laughed, grabbed her and pulled her down on my lap.

"It's all right," I said, "don't be afraid. I've been through the same thing a dozen times. There's a lot of shaking and trembling, and some of the damnedest racket you ever heard, but . . ."

I tightened my grip on her, for the shaking was already pretty violent. And the noise was so bad that I was virtually yelling in her ear.

The house was "settling," I explained. Something it had done sporadically for decades. The phenomenon was due to aging and exceptionally heavy building materials, and, possibly, to deep subterranean springs which lay beneath the structure. But frightening as it was to anyone unaccustomed to it, there was absolutely no danger. In a few minutes it would be all over.

The few minutes were actually more than ten. Kay sat with her arms wound around my neck, hanging on so tightly at times that I was almost strangled. It was not a bad way to go, though, if one had to, being hugged to death by a girl who was not only very pretty but also very naked. And I held her nakedness to mine, as enthusiastically as she held mine to hers.

It was so pleasant, in fact, that neither of us was in any hurry to let go even after the noise and the trembling had ceased.
I patted her on the flank, and said she wiggled very good. She whispered naughtily in my ear—something which I shall not repeat—and then she blushed violently. And I even blushed a little myself.

I was trying to think of some suitable, or rather, unsuitable reply, when she let out a startled gasp.

"Oh, my God, Britt"—she pointed a trembling finger. "L-look!"

I looked. And laughed. "It's all right," I said, giving her another flank spank. "It always does that."

"B-but the doorknob turned! It's still turning."

"I know. I imagine every other doorknob in the place is doing the same thing. As I understand it, the house undergoes a kind of winding-up during the settling process. Then when the tension is relieved, there's a general relaxing or unwinding, and you see such things as doors flying open or their knobs turning."

Kay said, Whew, brushing imaginary perspiration from her brow.

"It scared me to death, Britt! Really!"

"No, it didn't Kay," I said. "Really!"

"Well, I sure wouldn't want to be alone when it happened. You see the knob turn, and—how do you know someone's not there?"

"Very simply," I said. "If someone's there, he just opens the door."

The door opened, and Sergeant Claggett came in.

He stood frozen in his tracks for a moment, blinking at us incredulously. Then he said, "Excuse me!" retreating across the threshold with a hasty back step.

"Excuse me for not getting up," I said.

"I want to see you downstairs, Britt!" He spoke with his head turned. "Immediately, understand?"

"Of course," I said. "Just as soon as I get something in—order."

"And you, too." He addressed Kay without looking at her. "I want to see you, too, Officer Nolton!"
I suppose I should have seen the truth from the start. Almost any fool would have, I am sure, so that should have qualified me for seeing it. I hadn't because I am a plain, garden-variety sort of fool, not the devious kind. I am a worshipper at the shrine of laissez faire, a devotee of the status quo. I accept things as they are, for what they are, without proof or documentation. I ask no more than a quid pro quo. And failing to get a fair exchange, I will normally accept the less that is offered. In a word, I am about as un-devious as one can be. And having no talent nor liking for deception, I am easily deceived. As per, the present instance.

Claggett wanted me to have round-the-clock protection. Which is not easily managed by a mere detective sergeant in an undermanned, tightly budgeted police department. He didn't want me to know that I had such protection, believing that I would inadvertently reveal it where it was best not revealed. So the cop he planted on me was also a nurse, someone whose presence in the house would be taken for granted. And since she was a nurse, he could have her wages paid by PXA's insurers, thus quieting any objections from the P.D.

Naive as I was I would still ask myself why a nurse would take such a potentially dangerous job. Claggett had provided the answer by making it appear that there was something wrong with her, or that there could be something wrong with her. That not only satisfied my curiosity as to why she was taking the job, but it would also—he hoped—make me wary of her. I would shy away from any personal involvement with her, and she would not be distracted from her duties as a cop.

Well, the deception had worked fine, up to a point. A cop had been planted on me, and I had no idea that she was a cop. Doubts about her good intentions had been planted in my mind, and I did my damnedest to hold her at a distance. Why then had I wound up in bed with her? How could she have been so outrageously derelict in her duty? Claggett swore savagely that it was too damned much for him.

"Everyone doesn't have a nut after him," snapped Claggett. "A screwed-up broad who's been snatching his scalp by bits and pieces, and just may decide she wants his life along with it!"

"Now, Jeff," I said. "I'm practically convinced that Manny—"

"Shut up," Claggett said, and turned coldly to Kay. "I don't believe you were wearing a gun when I arrived today. What do regulations say about that?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I—"

"Y-yes, sir. I'm thoroughly ashamed, sir, and I swear it won't happen again!"

"No, it won't. You're suspended from duty, as of this moment, and you'll be up before the disciplinary board just as soon as I can arrange it!"

Kay wasn't blushing any more. She was apparently fresh out of blushes, and she was very pale as she got to her feet. "Whatever you say, Sergeant. I'll start getting my things together."

Claggett brought her back to her chair with a roar. "You, Officer Nolton, will remain in this room until you are told to do otherwise. As for you, Britt"—he gave me a look of weary distaste, "I've been trying to help you, and I've gone to considerable lengths to do it. Much further than I should have, in fact. Do you think this was the right way to repay me?"

"Of course, I don't, since you obviously consider it wrong and it's caused problems for Miss Nolton. I myself don't feel that it was wrong per se but there's a variable factor involved. I mean, something is good only so long as it doesn't make others unhappy."

"Hmmm," he said, his blue eyes brooding. "Well! I do feel that you've let me down, but that doesn't excuse Officer Nolton. If—"

"It should. Let's face it, Jeff," I said. "I'm quite a bit older than Miss Nolton—also a lot more experienced. And I'm afraid I was persistent with her to a shameful degree. Please don't blame her, Jeff. It really was all my fault."
Claggett's brows went up. 
He grimaced, lips pursed, then turned an enigmatic gaze on Kay. "How about it, Nolton? Is that the way it was?"
"Well, I am much younger than—" She broke off, sat very erect and dignified. "I wouldn't care to say, sir!"

Claggett ran a hand over his mouth. He looked at Kay a moment or two longer, apparently seeing something in her of great interest, then faced back around to me. "You started to say something about Miss Aloe. Anything important?"

"I think so. She was out here to the house today, and she apologized for what she'd done. Implied that she hadn't been rational or responsible for her actions."

"And?"

"She promised not to make any more trouble—got pretty emotional about it. I'm convinced that she meant it, Jeff."

"Well, I'm not," said Kay; and here came that pretty blush again. "I'm sorry Sergeant. I didn't mean to butt in, but I've observed Miss Aloe very carefully and I thought you'd want my opinion as a police officer."

"I do," said Claggett. "In detail, please."

"She's just a snippy, snotty little wop, that's what! I'm sure there are a great many good people of her race, but she's not one of them."

Claggett's interest in her seemed to increase tremendously. He would shift his fascinated gaze away from her; then, as though against his will, it would slowly move back and fasten on her again. Meanwhile, he was saying that he had undergone a complete change of mind, and that she should by all means remain on her present duty.

"Oh, thank you, Sergeant!" She smiled on him brilliantly. "I know you were kind of disappointed about . . . but it won't happen again, sir!"

"Ah, well," said Claggett, easily. "A pretty young girl and a handsome, sophisticated older man—how could I blame you for succumbing? And what's to blame, anyway? Just don't forget you've got business here, too."

"Yes, sir! I won't get caught with my—I'll remember, sir!"

"Good," Claggett beamed. "I'm sure you mean that, and it wouldn't be practical to pull you off the job, anyway. Not with so short a time to go."

"Uh, sir?"

"I mean, we should know how things stand with Miss Aloe very soon. If she's going to pull anything, she'll do it within the next week or so, don't you think?"

"Well . . ." Kay hesitated doubtfully. "Why do you say that, sir?"

"Because she's a very pretty girl, too," Claggett said, "and pretty girls have a way of being jealous of other pretty girls. If she still cares enough for Mr. Rainstar to be mad at him, she'll try to stop him having fun with you. And she won't waste time about it."

Kay said, "Well, yes, sir. Maybe." But rather doubtfully. Not exactly sure that she had been complimented.

Claggett said he was glad she agreed with him. And he was glad to be glad, he said, because he was really pretty sad when he thought of her imminent resignation from the police department.

"Just as soon as you've finished this assignment. Of course," he went on, "I realize it's the smart thing for you to do, a girl who's shown an aptitude for so many things in such a short span of time. Let's see. You've been a nurse, a secretary, an airline stewardess, a—yes, Officer Nolton?"

"I said, you can have my resignation right now if you want it! And you know what you can do with it, too!"

"Well, sure, sure," Claggett said heartily. "For that matter, I could have you kicked out on your ass. For stated reasons that would make it hard for you to get a job washing towels in a whorehouse. Well?" He paused. "Do you want me to do that?"

Kay muttered something under her breath.

Claggett leaned forward. "I didn't hear you! Speak up!"

"I . . ." Kay wet her lips. "No, sir. I don't want you to."

"Don't want me to do what?"

"Don't!" I said. "For God's sake, drop it, Jeff."
He gestured curtly, ordering me to butt out. To mind my own business and let him mind his. I said I couldn't do that.

"You've made your point, Jeff. So let it go at that. You don't need to watch her bleed." I crossed over to Kay, spoke to her gently. "Want to go up to your room? It'll be all right with the sergeant, won't it, Jeff?"

"Yeah, hell, dammit!" he said sourly.

"Kay." I touched her on the shoulder. "Want me to help you?"

She shook off my hand.

She buried her face in her hands, and began to shake with silent weeping.

Claggett and I exchanged a glance. He stood up, jerked his head toward the door and went out. I took another glance at Kay, saw that her trembling had stopped and followed him.

We shook hands at the front door, and he apologized for coming down hard on Kay. But he seemed considerably less than overwhelmed with regret. The little lady had been under official scrutiny for a long time, he said, and her conduct today had simply triggered an already loaded gun.

"I'm not referring to catching her in the raw with you. I had to bawl her out for it, but that's as far as it would have gone—if there'd been nothing more than that. It was her attitude about it, her attitude in general, the things she said. If you know what I mean." He sighed, shook his head. "And if you don't know, to hell with you."

"I know," I said. "But she was pretty upset, Jeff. If you'll look at things from her viewpoint—"

"I won't," said Jeff. "You can be fair without seeing the other fellow's side of things, Britt. Keep doing that and you stop having a side of your own. You get so damned broadminded that you don't know right from wrong."

I said that I didn't always know now, and he said I should ask him whenever I was in doubt. "Incidentally, I spoke to a lawyer about the way you'd been gypped out of your property for that city dump, and he thinks you've got a hell of a good case. In fact, he's willing to take it on a contingency for a third of what he can recover."

"But I've told you," I said, "I just can't do it, Jeff. I'm simply not up to a courtroom battle."

"My lawyer friend thinks they'd go for an out-of-court settlement."

"Well, maybe," I said. "But Connie would be sure to find out about it, and I'd still be up the creek. She'd grab any money I got, and give me a good smearing besides."

"I don't see that." Claggett frowned. "You've been sending her quite a bit of money, haven't you?"

"Better than four thousand since I got out of the hospital."

"Then why should she want to give you a bad time? Why should she throw a wrench in a money machine? She hurts you, she hurts herself."

I nodded, said he was probably right. But still.

"I'm just afraid to do it, Jeff. I don't know why I am but I am."

He looked at me exasperatedly, and seemed on the point of saying something pointed. Instead, however, he sighed heavily and said he guessed I just couldn't help it.

"But think it over, anyway, won't you? You don't need to commit yourself, but you can at least think about it, can't you?"

"Oh, well, sure," I said. "Sure, I'll think about it."

"That's a promise?"

"Of course," I said.

He left. I returned to Kay who was well-prepared to receive me.

"I could simply kill you!" she exploded. "You made me lose my job, you stupid old boob you!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I'm sure you were much too good for it."

"I was not! I mean—why didn't you speak up for me? It was all your fault, anyway, but you didn't say a word to defend me!"

"I thought I did, but possibly I didn't say enough," I said. "I really don't think it would have changed anything, however, regardless of what I'd said."

"Oh, you! What do you know, you silly old fool?"
"Very little," I said. "And at the rate I'm aging, I'm afraid I won't be able to add much to my store of knowledge."

She glared at me, her face blotched and ugly like a soiled picture. She said angrily that I hadn't needed to act like a fool, had I? Well, had I?

"You didn't even give him time to open his mouth before you were cracking your silly jokes! Saying that I couldn't wear my gun because it didn't match my birthday suit, and a lot of other stupid silly stuff. Well, you weren't funny, not a doggone bit! Just a plain darned fool, that's all you were!"

"I know," I said.

"You know?"

"It's a protective device." I nodded. "The I-ain't-nothin'-but-a-hound-dawg syndrome. When a dog can't cope, he flops over on his back, thumps his tail, wiggles his paws and exposes his balls. Briefly, he demonstrates that he is a harmless and amusing fellow, so why the hell should anyone hurt him? And it works pretty well with other dogs, literal and figurative. The meanest mastiff has never masticated me, but I've taken some plumb awful stomplings from pussycats."

"Huh! You think you're so smart, don't you?"

"Meow, sppfft," I said.
It was a pretty grim weekend. Mrs. Olmstead decided to replace her usual grumbling and mumbling with silence—the kind in which conversation is omitted but not the clashing and crashing of pans, the smashing of dishes and the like.

Kay performed her nurse's duties with a vengeance, taking my pulse and temperature every hour on the hour or so it seemed to me, and generally interrupting me so often in doing her job that doing my own was virtually impossible.

Sunday night, after dinner, there was a respite in the turmoil. Kay had retired to her room for a time, and Mrs. Olmstead was apparently doing something that could not be done noisily. At any rate, it seemed to be a good time to do some writing, and I dragged a chair up to my typewriter and went to work. Or, rather, I tried to. The weekend's incessant clatter and interruptions had gotten me so keyed up that I couldn't write a word.

I got up and paced around my office, then went back to my typewriter. I squirmed and fidgeted, and stared helplessly at the paper. And, finally, I went out into the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

I shook the pot, discovering that there was still some in it. I put it on the stove to warm, and got a cup and saucer from the cupboard. Moving very quietly, to be sure. Keeping an eye on the door to Mrs. Olmstead's quarters, and listening for any sounds that might signal a resumption of her racket.

I poured my coffee and sipped it standing by the stove, then quietly washed and dried the cup and saucer and returned them to the cupboard. And suddenly I found myself grimacing with irritation at the preposterousness of my situation.

This was my house. Kay and Mrs. Olmstead were working for me. Yet they had made nothing but trouble for me throughout the weekend, and they had certainly not refrained from throwing their weight around before then—forcing me to cater to them. And just why the hell should things be this way?

Why had most of my life been like this, a constant giving-in and knuckling-under to people who didn't give a damn about my welfare, regardless of what they professed or pretended?

I was brooding over the matter, silently swearing that there were going to be some changes made, when I became aware of a very muted buzzing. So muted that I almost failed to hear it.

I looked around, listening, trying to locate the source of the sound. I looked down at the floor, saw the faint outline of the telephone cord extending along the baseboard of the cabinetwork. And I yanked open the door of the lower cupboard and snatched out the telephone.

Just as Manny was about to give up and hang up.

She asked me where in the world I'd been, and I said I'd been right there, and I'd explain the delay in answering when I saw her. "But I'm sorry I kept you waiting. I wasn't expecting any calls tonight."

"I know, but I just had to call you, Britt. I've been reading the manuscript you gave me on erosion, and I think it's wonderful, darling! Absolutely beautiful! The parallel you draw between the decline of the soil and the deterioration of the people—the lowering of life expectancy and the incidence of serious disease. Britt, I can't tell you when I've been so excited about something!"

"Well, thank you," I said, grinning from ear to ear. "I'm very pleased that you like it."

"Oh, I do! In its own way, I think it's every bit as good as Deserts on the March."

I mumbled, pleased, saying nothing that made any sense, I'm sure. Even to be mentioned in the same breath with Dr. Paul Sears' classic work was overwhelming. And I knew that Manny wasn't simply buttering me up to make me feel good.

"There's only one thing wrong with what you've done," she went on. "It's far too good for us. You've got to make it into a full-length book that will reach the kind of audience it deserves."

"But PXA is paying for it. Paying very well, too."

"I know. But I'm sure something can be worked out with Pat. I'll talk to him after I talk to you, let's see, the day after tomorrow, is it?"

"That's right," I said.

"Well, I haven't read all you've done, and I want to read back through the whole manuscript before our meeting.
"So. . ." She hesitated. "I'm not sure I can make it on Tuesday. Suppose I call you Wednesday, and see what we can set up?"

I said that was fine with me; I was glad to have the additional time to work. We talked a few minutes more, largely about the work and how well she liked it. Then we hung up, and I started to leave the kitchen. And Mrs. Olmstead's surly voice brought me to a halt.

"What's going on here, anyways? Wakin' folks up at this time o'night!"

Her face was sleep-puffed, her eyes streaked with threads of yellowish matter. She rubbed them with a grayish-looking fist, meanwhile surveying me sourly.

"Well," she grunted, "I ast you a question, Mis-ter Rainstar."

"Hold out your hands," I said.

"Huh?" She blinked stupidly. "What for?"

"Hold them out! Now!"

She held them out. I put the phone in them, took her by the elbow and hustled her out to the hallway writing desk. I took the phone out of her hands and placed it on the desk.

"Now that is where it belongs," I said, "and that is where I want it. Can you remember that, Mrs. Olmstead?"

She said surlily that she could. She could remember things a heck of a lot better than people who couldn't even remember to mail a letter.

"I tell you one thing, though. That phone's out here an' I'm back in the kitchen, I ain't sure I'm gonna hear it."

"All right," I said. "When you're actually in the kitchen working, you can keep the phone with you. But never put it away in a cupboard where I found it just now."

She shrugged, started to turn away without answering.

"One thing more," I said. "I've noticed that we're always running out of shopping money. No matter how much I leave for you, you use it. It's going to have to stop, Mrs. Olmstead!"

"Now you listen to me," she said, shaking a belligerent finger at me. "I can't help it that groceries is high! I don't spend a nickel more for 'em than I have to."

I said I knew groceries were high. I also knew that Jack Daniel's was high, and I'd noticed several bottles of it stowed in the bottom cupboard.

"You'll have to start drinking something cheaper," I said. "You apparently do a great deal of drinking in bars when you're supposedly out shopping, so I can't supply you with Jack Daniel's for your home consumption."

She looked pretty woebegone at that, so I told her not to worry about it, for God's sake, and to go to bed and get a good night's sleep. And watching her trudge away, shoulders slumped, in her dirty old robe, I felt like nine kinds of a heel. Because, really, why fuss about a little booze if it made her feel good? At her age, with all passion spent and the capacity for all other good things gone, she surely was entitled to good booze. Drinking was probably all that made life-become-existence tolerable for her as it probably is for all who drink.

I went to bed and to sleep. Thinking that the reason I hated getting tough with people was that it was too tough on me.

The next day went fairly well for me. There was practically no trouble from Mrs. Olmstead. I avoided any with Kay by simply submitting to her ministrations.

I got in a good day's work, and continued to work until after nine that night.

Around ten, while I was toweling myself off after a shower, Kay came into the bathroom bearing a thermometer. I took her by the shoulders, pushed her outside and locked the door.

When I had finished drying myself, I put on my pajamas, came out of the bathroom and climbed into bed. Nodding at Kay who stood waiting for me, prim-faced.

"Does that mean," she said icily, "that I now have your permission to take your temperature?"

"If you like," I said.

"Well, thank you so much!" she said.

She took my temperature. I held up my wrist, and she took my pulse, almost hurling my hand away from her when she had finished.
She left then, turning the light off and closing the door very gently. Some twenty minutes later, she tapped on the
door with her fingernails, pushed it open and came in. Through slitted eyes I watched her approach my bed. A soft,
sweet-smelling shadow in the dim glow of the hall light.

She stood looking down at me. Then her hands came out from behind her, and went up over her head. And they
were holding a long sharp knife.

I let out a wild yell, but the knife was already plunging downward.

It stabbed against my chest, then folded over as cardboard will. And Kay fell across me, shaking with laughter.

After a time, she crawled over into bed next to me, shedding her shorty nightgown en route. She nuzzled me and
whispered naughtily in my ear. I told her she wasn't funny, dammit; she'd damned near scared me to death. She said
she was terribly sorry, but she'd just had to snap me out of my stiffness some way. And I said, Oh, well.

We were about to take it from there when I remembered something, and sat up abruptly.

"My God!" I said. "You've got to get out of here! This place is going to be full of cops in about a minute!"

"What? What the heck are you talking about?"

"The walls are bugged! Any loud cry for help will bring the police."

"Britt, darling," she said soothingly, "you just lie right back down here by mama. You just shut your mouth so
mama can kiss it."

"But you don't understand, dammit! Jeff Claggett couldn't stake the place out, but I was afraid to come back here
without plenty of protection. So—"

"So he told you that story," said Kay, and determinedly pulled me back down at her side. "And he gave you me.
It's all the protection he could give you, and it's all you need. Take it from Officer Nolton, Britt. Soon-to-be-resigned
Officer Nolton, thanks to your dear friend, the sergeant."

"Knock it off," I said crossly. "I had an idea all along that I was being kidded."

"Why, of course, you did," Kay said smoothly. "And, now, you're sure."

And now, of course, I was, since my yell for help had brought no response. Jeff had deceived me about the house
being bugged, just as he had about Kay's status. He had done it in my own best interests, and I was hardly inclined to
chide or reproach him.

Still, I couldn't help feeling that uneasiness which comes to one whose welfare is almost totally dependent upon
another person, no matter how well-intentioned that person may be. Nor could I help wondering whether there were
other deceptions I didn't yet know about. Or whether something meant for my own good might turn out just the
opposite.
My sense of uneasiness increased rather than diminished. It became so aggravated under Kay's incessant inquiries as to what was bothering me that I blew up and told her she was.

"Everything about you is getting to me," I said. "That blushing trick, the prudish-sweet manner, the cute-kiddy way you talk, like you wouldn't say crap if you were up to your collar in it, the—Oh, crud to it!" I said. "You've got me so bollixed up I don't know what I'm saying anymore."

We were in my bedroom at the time—where else—and I was fully prepared to go to bed—by myself. Kay said she was sorry she got on my nerves, but I'd feel a lot better after I had something she had for me. She started to climb into bed with me. I put a leg up in the air, warding her off. She tried to come by the other way, and I stuck up an arm.

She frowned at me, hands on her hips. "Now, you see here, I have as much right to that bed as you have."

"Right to it?" I said. "You talk like a girl in a wooden hat, baby."

"You said you didn't think I was awful. Because I did it, I mean. You said you'd marry me if you weren't already married."

"Which I am," I said. "Don't forget that."

Kay said that part didn't matter. What was important was that I wanted to marry her, and that kind of made her my wife, and this was a community property state so half of the bed was hers. And while I was unraveling that one she hopped over me and into the bed.

I let her stay. For one thing, it is very hard to push a beautiful, well-built girl out of your bed. For another, while I knew she had skunked me again, that I had fallen for her act, it was a very good act. And what did one more fall matter to an incurable fall guy?

By the following day, Wednesday, my feelings of uneasiness had blossomed into a sense of foreboding. The feeling grew in me that things had gotten completely out of hand and were about to become worse, and that there was nothing I could do about it.

It wasn't helped much by the bitter look Mrs. Olmstead gave me, as she departed to do her shopping or drinking or whatever she did with my money. Nor was I cheered by a brief bit of sharpness which I had with Manny when she called to make an appointment with me. We finally made one for that afternoon, but I was still feeling quite down and a little irritated when Kay showed her into my office around four o'clock.

As it turned out, she also was not feeling her best, a fact she admitted as soon as our opening pleasantries were over.

"I don't want to argue with you, Britt," she said. "But you look quite well. I think you're probably in a lot better condition than I am. And as long as you've been going out anyway—it isn't as if you were bedridden—I don't see why you couldn't have come to the office."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Hold it right there. Regardless of how well I look or don't look, I'm under strict orders not to leave the house."

"But I called here several times when you were out. At last Mrs. Olmstead told me you were. Of course . . ."

Manny paused, frowning. "Of course, that could have been her way of saying that you just didn't want to talk to me . . ."

"There'd never be a time when I didn't want to talk to you. You should know that."

"I know. But . . ." she hesitated again. "Perhaps it wasn't Mrs. Olmstead. I thought it was, and she said it was but — Do you suppose it could have been what's-her-name, your nurse?"

"I'll find out," I said. "I know they've been feuding, and they just might have—one of them might have—tried to drag me into the quarrel." I pondered the matter a moment, then sighed and threw up my hands. "Hell, I'll never find out. Both of them are entirely capable of lying."

"Poor Britt," Manny laughed softly. "Well, it doesn't matter, dear. It doesn't bother me now that I know you haven't been going out at all."

"I haven't been. That's the truth, Manny."
"I believe you."
"The only time I've left the house was when I walked to your car with you last Friday."
"Well . . ." She smiled at me, her golden head tilted to one side. "Since it's been so long, maybe you should walk to my car with me again today."
"Well . . ."
"Well?" Her smile faded, began to draw in around the edges. "You're afraid to, is that it? You still don't trust me."
"I haven't said that," I said. "You gave me your word that I had nothing more to fear from you, and I'm more than anxious to believe you. I could probably say something more positive if I wasn't a little bewildered."
"Yes? About what?"
"About your visit here this afternoon. I thought you were here to discuss my manuscript. But we've talked about practically nothing except my mishandled telephone calls and my walking to your car with you."
Manny's expression cleared, and she apologized hastily. "I'm sorry, dear. You have every right to be puzzled. But I like the manuscript better than ever, and Pat thinks it's a fine job, too. He agrees that you should make a book out of it, and there won't be any problem about the money. We'll call it square for the right to do a digest."
"That's very generous of you," I said, "and I'm very grateful."
"We consider it a privilege to be associated with the project. I just wish I could be here to see it through to the end—not that you need my help, of course. But I can't be. Th-that's w-why?"—she averted her head suddenly. "That's why I made such a big thing of being outside the house with you. Even for a little while."
"I don't understand," I said. "What do you mean you can't be here until the work is finished?"
"I mean, this is the last time I'll see you. I'm leaving the company, and going back east."
"B-but—" I stared at her, stunned. "But, why?"
"I'm getting married."
I continued to stare at her. I shook my head incredulously, unable to believe what I had heard.
"You're the only person I've told, so please keep it to yourself. I don't want anyone else to know just yet."
Married! My Manny getting married?
"But you can't!" I suddenly exploded. "I won't let you!"
"Oh?" She smiled at me sadly. "Why not, Britt?"
"Well, all right," I said doggedly. "I can't marry you. Not now, anyway. Maybe never. But why the big hurry? We'd got everything straightened out between us, and I thought that—that—"
"That we could pick up where we left off? I'd've been willing to settle for that, at least until something better could be worked out. But it just isn't possible." She stood up and held out her hand. "Good-bye and good luck, Britt."
"Wait a minute." I also stood up, and I took her hand and held onto it. "Who is this guy anyway?"
"You wouldn't know him. I knew him in the east a long time ago."
"But why are you suddenly rushing into marriage with him?"
"Why do you think I'm rushing? But never mind. It's settled, Britt, so please let go of my hand."
I let go of it. She turned toward the door, and I started to accompany her. But she gestured for me to remain where I was.
"I'm afraid I'm pretty stupid darling. It's the police who've ordered you to stay in the house, isn't it? And your nurse is one of them?"
"Yes," I said. "To both questions."
"That's what Pat figured. He remembered her from somewhere, and it finally dawned on him that he'd seen her in uniform."
"All right," I said. "She's a cop, and I'm under orders not to leave the house. But I did it once, and since this is a pretty special occasion—the last time we'll see each other—"
"No!" she said sharply. "You'll stay inside as you've been told to!"
I said I'd at least walk to the front door with her, and I did. She held out her hand to me again, a firm little smile on her face, and I took it and pulled her into my arms. There was the briefest moment of resistance, then she came to me almost violently, as though swept on a wave of emotion. She embraced me, kissed me over and over, ran her soft, small hands through my hair.

And Kay Nolton cleared her throat noisily, and said, "Well, excuse me!"

Manny drew away from me, giving Kay an icy look. "How long were you watching us?" she demanded. "Or did you lose track of the time?"

"Never you mind, toots. I'm paid to watch people!"

"You should be paying," said Manny. "You get so much fun out of it."

And before Kay could come up with a retort, she was out of the house and slamming the door of the car. Kay said something obscene, then turned angrily on me. She said it was a darned good thing that Manny wasn't coming back to the house, and that she, Kay, would snatch her bald-headed if she ever did.

I accused her of snooping, listening outside the door while Manny and I were talking. She said I was doggone right she'd been listening, and if I didn't like it I could do the next best thing. I went into my office and closed the door, and at dinnertime she brought a tray to me, also bringing a cup of coffee for herself.

She sat down across from me, sipping from it, as I ate. I complimented her on the dinner, and made other small talk. In the midst of it, she broke in with a curt question.

"Why isn't Miss Aloe coming here to the house any more, Britt? I know she isn't, but I don't know why."

"You mean you missed part of our conversation?" I said.

"Answer me! I've got a right to know."

I lifted the tray from my lap, and set it on a chair. I shook out my napkin, and dropped it on top of the tray. Then I leaned back in my chair, and looked thoughtfully out the window.

"Well?" she said sullenly.

"I was just mulling over your remark," I said, "about your having a right to know. I don't feel that you have a right to know anything about my personal affairs. But I can see how you might, and I suppose it's my fault that you do. So, to answer your question: Miss Aloe is giving up her position here, and going back east. That's why I won't be seeing her again."

Kay said, Oh, in a rather timid tone. She said that she was sorry if she'd said or done anything that she shouldn't have.

I shook my head, brushing off her statement. Not trusting myself to speak. I was suddenly overwhelmed by my sense of loss, the knowledge of how much Manny had meant to me. And I jumped up and went over to the window. Stood there staring out into the gathering dusk.

Behind me, I heard Kay getting up quietly. I heard her pick up the dinner tray and leave the room, softly clicking the door shut behind her.

Several minutes passed. Then, she knocked and came in again, carrying the phone on its long extension cord. She handed it to me and started to leave, but I motioned for her to remain. She did so, taking the chair she had occupied before.

"Britt?" It was Jeff Claggett. "How was your visit with Miss Aloe?"

"All right," I said. "At least partly all right. She's leaving town, and going back east. Yes, within the next day or so, I believe."

"The hell!" He grunted with surprise. "Just like that, huh? She give you any reason?"

"Well"—I hesitated. "I don't need to consult with her anymore. I'm going ahead with the work on my own."

"Yes? Nothing else?"

"I couldn't say," I said carefully. "What else could there be, and what does it matter, anyway? I am sure that I have nothing more to fear from her. I'm positive of it, Jeff. And that's all I'm concerned about."

"So who said no?" He sounded amused. "Why so emphatic?"

"Let it go," I said. "The point is that there's no longer any reason to continue our present arrangement. If you'd like to make it official, Miss Nolton is right here and—"
"Hold it! Hold it, Britt!" Claggett snapped. "I think we can close things out there very soon. But you leave it to me to say when, okay?"

"Well, all right," I said. "I think it would be better to—"

"Why guess about something when you can be sure? Why not wait until Miss Aloe actually leaves town?" He paused, then lowered his voice. "Nolton throwing her weight around? Is that it, Britt?"

"Well"—I sidled a glance at Kay. "I imagine it would be difficult to make a change, wouldn't it?"

"It would."

"All right, then," I said. "I'll manage."

We hung up, and I passed the phone back to Kay. She took it silently, but at the door she turned and gave me a stricken look.

I faced around to my typewriter, and began pounding on the keys. And I kept at it until I was sure she had gone.

I had had enough of Kay Nolton. What had started out as a pleasant giving, something that we could both enjoy, had wound up as an attempt to take me over.

I wasn't ready to be taken over, and I never would be. Nor would I ever want to take anyone else over. Love isn't tantamount to ownership. Love is being part of someone else, while still remaining yourself.

That was the way it had been with me and Manny. And now that she was gone from my life . . .

Well. Kay could not fill the space Manny had left. It was too great for any other to fill.

Kay left me alone that night. Which was just as well for her. I had discovered that confronting people when they insisted on it was not nearly so fearful as I had thought, and I was all ready to do it again.

The mood was with me the next day, and when Mrs. Olmstead appeared in my office doorway and announced that she needed more money to go shopping, I flatly refused to give her any.

"You've had far too much already," I told her coldly. "You've constantly emptied that cash box in the telephone desk, and then come grumbling to me for more. You must have had over six hundred dollars in less than two weeks' time. The best thing you can do now is to pack up your belongings and clear out."

"That don't make me mad none!" She glared at me defiantly. "You just pay me my wages, an' I'll be out of here faster'n you can say scat!"

"I don't have to pay you," I said. "You've already paid yourself several times over."

If she had given me any kind of argument, I probably would have relented. But surprisingly she didn't argue at all. Oh, she did a little under-the-breath cursing on her way out of my office. In no more than ten minutes, however, she was packed and gone from the house.

Kay, who had been standing by during the proceedings, declared that I had done exactly the right thing. "You should have done it long ago, Britt. You were far too patient with that woman."

"I've been that way with a lot of people," I said. "But it's a fault I'm going to correct."

She dropped her eyes, toeing-in with one white-shod foot. A slow blush spreading up her cheeks to blend with the auburn of her hair. It was all beautifully calculated. I have never seen such control. She was saying, as clearly as if she had spoken, that she had been a naughty-naughty girl and she was truly sorry for it.

"Will you forgive your naughty girl, Britt?" She spoke in a cute-child's voice. "She's awfully sorry, and she promises never to be naughty again."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Forget it."

"Why, of course, it matters. But I'll be good from now on, honey. I swear I'll—"

"I don't care whether you are or not," I said. "I can hang by my thumbs a few days if I have to. If it takes any longer than that to wrap things up here, and if I still need a cop-nurse, you won't be her."

She gave me no more argument than Mrs. Olmstead had. I was amazed at how easy it was to tell people off—without being very proud of it—although, admittedly, my experience was pretty limited.

I didn't feel much like working; the thought of Manny, my Manny, being married to another was too much on my mind. But I worked, anyway, and I was still at it when Claggett arrived in mid-afternoon.

Manny was back in the hospital, he informed me. The same reputable hospital she had been in before with the same reputable doctors in attendance.
And, as before, she was in absolute seclusion, and no information about her condition or the nature of her illness was being given out.
I could probably get a court order and find out," Claggett said. "If I could show any reason why it was necessary for me to know. But I can't think what the hell it would be."

"Probably there isn't any," I said. "Nothing sinister, I mean. She told me yesterday that she wasn't feeling well. Possibly she got to feeling worse, and had to go to the hospital."

"Possibly. But why so secretive about it?"

"Well . . ."

"Tell you something," Claggett said. "Maybe I'm a little cynical, but I've never known anyone to pull a cover-up yet unless there was something to cover up."

"That's probably true. But this could hardly be called a cover-up, could it?"

"It's close enough. And the one thing I've found that's usually covered up with doctors is mental illness. It's my guess," said Claggett thoughtfully, "that Miss Aloe has had a nervous breakdown or something of the kind. The second one in less than a month. Either that or she's pretending to. So that leaves us with a couple of questions."

"Yes?" I said. "I mean, it does?"

"To take the last one first. If she's pretending, why is she? And, secondly, if she's actually had a nervous collapse, what brought it on?"

"I just hope she's all right," I said. "In any case, I don't see what her being in the hospital has to do with me."

"Well, it could be just a coincidence, but the last time she was hospitalized you had a pretty bad accident."

"It was a coincidence," I said, and wondered why I suddenly felt so uncomfortable and uneasy. "I'm positive that she's leveling with me, Jeff. I knew it when she wasn't, and I know it now that she is."

Claggett shrugged, and said that was good. He, himself, would never trust his own judgment where someone he loved was concerned. Because you could love someone who was completely no good and untrustworthy.

"But we'll see," he said, and stood up. "I have no basis for believing that she's not on the level with you, but we shouldn't be long in finding out."

I walked to the door with him, wondering whether I should tell him about Manny's impending marriage. But I had promised not to, and I could think of no reason why I should.

We shook hands, and he promised to keep me in touch. Then, just as he was leaving, he abruptly pulled me back from the door and moved back into the shadows himself.

I started to ask what was the matter, and he gestured me to silence. So we stood there tensely in silence, waiting. And there was the sound of footsteps mounting to the porch and crossing to the door.

My view was obscured by Jeff Claggett, and the heavy shadows of the porch. But I could see a little, see that a man was standing with his face pressed against the screen to peer inside.

Apparently he also was having a problem in seeing, for he reached down to the door handle, pulled it open and stepped uncertainly across the threshold.

Claggett grabbed him in a bone-crushing bear hug, pinning his arms to his sides. The man let out a startled gasp.

"W-what's going on here?"

"You tell me, you son-of-a-bitch!" rasped Claggett. "Let's see how fast you can talk."

"It's all right, Jeff," I said. "He's my father-in-law."
Connie's letters to me had gone unanswered. When she telephoned, Mrs. Olmstead told her I had moved, and that she had no idea where I was. And for the last ten days or so, the phone had simply gone unanswered. Luther Bannerman had determined to find out just what was what (to borrow his expression). And he'd driven all the way here from the Midwest to do it.

He was in the dining room now with Kay, stuffing himself with the impromptu meal she had prepared for him at my request. Rambling and rumbling on endlessly about my general worthlessness.

"... me an' daughter just couldn't support him any longer, so he comes back down here. An' he sent her a little money, but it was like pulling teeth to get it out of him. And this last month, more than a month, I guess, he didn't send nothing! No, sir, not one red cent! So I just up and decided—Pass me that coffee pot, will you, miss? Yes, and I believe I'll have some more of them beans an' potato salad, and a few of them . . ."

In the kitchen, Jeff Claggett unwrapped the strip of black tape from around the telephone cord, and held the two ends apart.

"A real sweet old lady," he laughed sourly. "Well, that takes care of any calls since she left today, if you had any since then. But I'm damned if I understand how she could head off the others."

I said it was easy, as easy as it was for her to see that I got no mail that would reveal what she was up to. "She kept the phone out in the kitchen when she was in the house, and when she was away she hid it where it couldn't be heard."

"And you never caught on?" Claggett frowned. "She pulls this for almost a month, and you never tipped?"

"Why should I?" I said. "If someone like you called, of course, she'd see that you got through to me. Anyone else would be inclined to take her at her word. She had a little luck, I'll admit. But it wasn't all that hard to pull off with someone who gets and makes as few calls as I do."

"Yeah, well, let's get on with the rest of it," Claggett sighed. "I hate to ask, but . . . ?"

The answer is yes to both questions," I said. "Mrs. Olmstead mailed the checks I sent to my wife—or rather she didn't mail them. And she made my bank deposits for me—or didn't make them."

Claggett asked me if I hadn't gotten deposit slips, and I said, no, but the amounts were noted in my bankbook. Claggett said he'd just bet they were, and he'd bet I hadn't written "for deposit only" on the back of the checks. I said I hadn't and couldn't.

"I needed some cash for household expenses," I explained, "and I'd run out of personal checks. I had some on order, but they never arrived."

"I wonder why." Claggett laughed shortly. "Well, I guess there's no way of knowing how much she's taken you for offhand, or how much if any we can recover—when and if we catch up with her. But Mr. Blabbermouth or Bannerman shapes up to me like a guy who means to get money out of you right now."

"I'm sure of it," I said. "I should have at least a few hundred left in the bank, but it wouldn't be enough to get him off my back."

"No," he said. "With a guy like him there's never enough. Well—" he drew a glass of water from the sink, drank it down thoughtfully. "Want me to handle him for you?"

"Well . . ." I hesitated. "How are you going to do it?"

"Yes or no, Britt."

I said, Yes. He said, All right, then. He would do it, and there was to be no interference from me.

We went to the dining room, and sat down across from Bannerman. He had stuffed his mouth so full that a slimy trickle streaked down from the corner of it. Claggett told him disgustedly to use his napkin, for God's sake. My father-in-law did so, but with a pious word of rebuke.

"Good men got good appetites, Mister Detective. Surest sign there is of a clean conscience. Like I was telling the young lady—"

"We heard what you told her," Claggett said coldly. "The kind of crap I'd expect from a peabrain loudmouth. No, stick around, Nolton"—he nodded to Kay, who resumed her chair. "I'd like to know what you think of this character."
"He already knows," Kay said. "I told him when he tried to give me a feel."

Bannerman spluttered red-faced that he'd done nothing of the kind. He'd just been tryin' to show his appreciation for all the trouble she'd gone to for him. But Kay had taken her cue from Claggett—that here was a guy who should have his ears pinned back. And she was more than ready to do the job.

"Are you calling me a liar, buster?" She gave him a pugnacious glare. "Well, are you?"

He said, "N-no, ma'am, 'course not. I was just—"

"Aah, shut up!" she said.

And Claggett said, Yes, shut up, Bannerman. "You've been talking ever since you stepped through the door today, and now it's time you did some listening. You want to, or do you want trouble?"

"He wants trouble," Kay said.

"I don't neither!" Bannerman waved his hands a little wildly. "Britt, make these people stop—"

"All right, listen and listen good," Claggett said. "Mr. Rainstar has already given your daughter a great deal of money. I imagine he'll probably provide her with a little more when he's able to, which he isn't at present. Meanwhile, you can pack up that rattletrap heap you drove down here in, and get the hell back where you came from."

Anger stained Luther Bannerman's face the color of eggplant. "I know what I can do all right!" he said hoarsely. "An' it's just what I'm gonna do! I'm gonna have Mr. Britton Rainstar in jail for the attempted murder of my daughter!"

"How are you going to do that?" Claggett asked. "You and your daughter are going to be in jail for the attempted murder of Mr. Rainstar."

"W-what?" Bannerman's mouth dropped open. "Why that's crazy!"

"You hated his guts," Claggett continued evenly. "You'd convinced yourselves that he was a very bad man. By being different than you were, by being poor instead of rich. So you tried to kill him, and here's how you went about it . . ."

He proceeded to explain, despite Bannerman's repeated attempts to interrupt. Increasingly fearful and frantic attempts. And his explanation was so cool and persuasive that it was as though he was reciting an actual chronicle of events.

The steering apparatus of my car had been tampered with; also, probably, the accelerator. Evidence of the tampering would be destroyed, of course, when my car went over the cliff. All that was necessary then was for me to be literally driven out of the house. So angered that I would jump into the car, and head for town.

But Connie had overdone the business of making me angry. She had pursued me to the kitchen door—and been knocked unconscious when I flung it open. And when I headed for town, she was in the car with me . . ."

"That's the way it was, wasn't it?" Claggett concluded. "You and your daughter tried to kill Mr. Rainstar, and your little plan backfired on you."

My father-in-law looked at Claggett helplessly. He looked at me, eyes welling piteously.

"Tell him, Britt. Tell him that Connie and me w-wouldn't, that we just ain't the kind of p-people to—to—"

He broke off, obviously—very obviously—overcome with emotion.

I wet my lips hesitantly. In spite of myself, I felt sorry for him. This man who had done so much to humiliate me, to make me feel small and worthless, now seemed very much that way himself. And I think I might have spoken up for him, despite a stern glance from Jeff Claggett. But my father-in-law compensated in blind doggedness for his considerable shortcomings in cerebral talents, and he was talking again before I had a chance to speak.

"I'll tell you what happened!" he said surly. "That fella right there, that half-breed Injun, Britt Rainstar, tried to kill my daughter for her insurance! He stood to collect a couple of hundred thousand dollars, and that was just plenty of motive for a no-account loafer like him!"

Claggett appeared astonished. "You mean to tell me that Mr. Rainstar was your daughter's beneficiary?"

"Yes, he was! I'm in the insurance business, and I wrote the policy myself!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Claggett said in a shocked voice. "Did you know about this, Britt?"

"I told you about it," I said, a little puzzled. "Don't you remember? Mr. Bannerman wrote up a similar policy on me with my wife as beneficiary, at the same time."
He nodded, and said, Oh, yes; it all came back to him now. "But the company rejected you, didn't they? They wouldn't approve of your policy."

"That's right. I don't know why exactly, but apparently I wasn't considered a very stable character or something of the kind."

"You were a danged poor risk, that's what!" Bannerman said grimly. "Just the kind of fella that would get himself in a fix with the law. Which is just what you went and done! Why, if I hadn't spoken up to the sheriff, after you tried to kill poor, little Connie—"

He chopped the sentence off suddenly. He gulped painfully, as though swallowing something which had turned out to be much larger than he had thought.

Kay gave him a cold, narrow-eyed grin. There was a snap to Claggett's voice like a trap being sprung.

"So Mr. Rainstar was a pretty disreputable character, was he? Was he, Bannerman?"

"I—I—I didn't say that! I didn't say nothin' like that, at all, an' don't you—"

"Sure, you did. And you told everyone in town what a no-goodnik he was. A blabbermouth like you would be bound to tell 'em, and don't think I won't dig up the witnesses who'll swear that you did!"

"But I didn't mean nothin' by it. I was just talkin'," Bannerman whined. "You know how it is, Britt. You say you wish someone was dead, or you'd like to kill 'em, but—"

"No," I said. "I've never said anything like that in my life."

"You didn't trust your son-in-law, Bannerman," Claggett persisted. "And you sure as hell didn't like him. But you allowed the policy on your daughter to stand—a policy that made him her beneficiary? Why didn't you cancel it?"

"I—Never you mind!" Bannerman said peevishly. "None of your doggoned business, that's why!"

Claggett asked me if I had ever seen the policy, and I said I hadn't. He turned back to Bannerman, his eyes like blue ice.

"There isn't any policy, is there? There never was. It was just a gimmick to squeeze Mr. Rainstar. Something to threaten him with when he tried to get a divorce."

"That ain't so! There is too a policy!"

"All right. What's the name of the insurance company?"

"I—I disremember, offhand," Bannerman stammered, and then blurted out, "I don't have to tell you, anyway!"

"Now, look you!" Claggett leaned forward, jaw jutting. "Maybe you can throw your weight around with your friendly hometown sheriff. Maybe he thinks the sun rises and sets in your ass. But with me, you're just a pimple on the ass of progress. So you tell me: what's the name of the insurance company?"

"But I—I really don't—"

"All right." Claggett made motions of rising. "Don't tell me. I'll just check it out with the Underwriters' Bureau."

And, at that, Bannerman gave up.

He admitted weakly that there was no policy, and that there never had been. But he brazenly denied that he and Connie had done wrong by lying about it.

Ol' Britt was tryin' to get a divorce, and she had a right to keep him from it, any way she could. And never mind why she was so dead set against a divorce. A woman didn't have to explain a thing like that. The fact that she didn't want one was reason enough.

"Anyways, Connie hasn't been at all well since the accident. Taken all kinds of money to pervide for her. If she hadn't had some way of scarin' money out o' Britt—"

"Apparently, she's able to take care of herself now," Claggett said. "Or do you have round-the-clock nurses? And just remember I'll check up on your story!"

"Well—" Bannerman hesitated. "Yeah, Connie's coming along pretty good right now. 'Course she's all jammed up inside, an' she's always gonna be an invalid—"

"What doctor told you that? What doctors? What hospital did her X-rays?"

"Well . . ." Bannerman said weakly. "Well . . ." And said no more.

"Jeff," I said. "Can't we wind this up? Just get this—this thing the hell out of here? If I have to look at him another minute, I'm going to throw up!"
Claggett said he felt the same way, and he jerked a thumb at Bannerman and told him to beat it. The latter said he'd like to, there was nothing he'd like to do more. But he just didn't see how he could do it.

"I used practically every cent I had comin' down here. And that ol' car of mine ain't gonna go much further, without some work bein' done on it. I want t'get back home, these here big cities ain't for me. But—"

"Save it," Claggett said curtly. "You've probably got half of the first nickel you ever made, but I'll give you a stake to get rid of you. Nolton"—he gestured to Kay—"get him in his car, and see that he stays in it till I come out."

"Yes, sir! Come on, you!"

She hustled my father-in-law out of the room, and the front door opened then closed behind them.

I gave Claggett my heartfelt thanks for the way he had handled things, and promised to pay back whatever money he gave my father-in-law.

"No problem"—he dismissed the matter. "But tell me, Britt. I was just bluffing, of course, trying to shake him up, but do you suppose he and your wife did try to kill you?"

"What for?" I said. "I was willing to get out of their lives. I still am. Why should they risk a murder rap just because they hated me?"

"Well. Hatred has been the motive for a lot of murders."

"Not with people like them," I said. "Not unless it would make them something. I'll tell you, Jeff. I don't see them risking a nickel to see the Holy Ghost do a skirt dance."

He grinned. Then, again becoming thoughtful, he raised another question.

"Why is your wife so opposed to divorce, d'you suppose? I know you'll give her money as long as you have it to give, but—"

"Money doesn't seem to have anything to do with it," I said. "She was that way right from the beginning, when I didn't have a cent and it didn't look like I ever would have. I just don't know." I shook my head. "There was a little physical attraction between us at one time, very little. But that didn't last, and we never had any other interests in common."

"Well," Claggett shrugged, "Bannerman was right about one thing. A woman doesn't have to give a reason for not wanting a divorce."

We talked about other matters for a few minutes, i.e., Mrs. Olmstead, my work for PXA, and the prospects for suing over the condemnation of my land. Then, he went back to Bannerman again, wondering why the latter had caved in so quickly when he, Claggett, had threatened to call the Underwriters' Bureau.

"Why didn't he try to bluff it out, Britt? Just tell me to go ahead and check? He had nothing to lose by it, and I might have backed down."

"I don't know," I said. "Is it important?"

"We-ell . . ." He hesitated, frowning. "Yes, I think it might be. And I think it bears on the reason for your wife's not giving you a divorce. Don't ask me why. It's just a hunch. But . . ."

His voice died away. I looked at his troubled face, and again I felt that icy tingling at my spine . . . a warning of impending doom. And even as he was rising to leave, a pall seemed to descend on the decaying elegance of the ancient Rainstar mansion.
Claggett drove off toward town to get some money for my father-in-law, Bannerman following him in his rattletrap old vehicle. Kay came back into the house.

While she prepared dinner for the two of us, I cleaned up the mess Luther Bannerman had left and carried the dishes out to the kitchen. She glanced at me as I took clean silver and plates from the cupboard; asked if I was still mad at her. I said I never had been—I'd simply tried to set her straight on where we stood. Moreover, I said, I was grateful to her for the several jolts she had given my fatherin-law.

She said that had been a pleasure. "But if you're not mad, why do you look so funny, Britt? So kind of down in the mouth?"

"Maybe it's because of seeing him," I said. "He always did depress me. On the other hand . . ."

I left the sentence hanging, unable to explain why I felt as I did. The all-pervading gloom that had settled over me. Kay said she was sort of down in the dumps herself, for some reason.

"Maybe it's this darn old house," she said. "Just staying inside here day after day. The ceilings are so high that you can hardly see them. The staircase goes up and up and it's always dark and shadowy. You feel like you're climbing one of those mountains that are always covered with clouds. There are always a lot of funny noises, like someone was sneaking up behind you. And . . ."

I laughed, cutting her off. The house was home to me, and it had never struck me as being gloomy or depressing.

"We both need a good stiff drink," I said. "Hold the dinner a few minutes, and I'll do the honors."

I couldn't find any booze; Mrs. Olmstead apparently had finished it all off. But I dug up a bottle of pretty fair wine, and we had some before dinner and with it.

We ate and drank, and Kay asked how much Mrs. Olmstead had stolen from me. I said I would have to wait until tomorrow morning to find out.

"It really doesn't bother me a hell of a lot," I added. "If she hadn't gotten it my wife would have."

"Oh, yes. She tore up the checks you sent your wife, didn't she?"

"That's right," I said.

"Well, uh, look, Britt . . ." She paused delicately. "I've got some money saved. Quite a bit, actually. So if you'd like to—"

I said, "Thanks, I appreciate the offer. But I can get by all right."

"Well, uh, yes. I suppose. But—"—another delicate pause. "How about your wife, Britt? How much do you think she'd want to give you a divorce?"

I told her to forget it. Connie had apparently made up her mind not to give me a divorce on any terms, and there was no use discussing it.

"I don't know why. Perhaps she has a reason, and I'm too stupid to see it. But"—I laughed suddenly, then quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, Kay. I just thought of a story my great-grandfather used to tell me. Would you care to hear it?"

"I'd love to," she said, in a tone that gave the lie to her statement. But I told it to her, anyway:

There was once a handsome young Indian chief, who married a maiden from a neighboring tribe.

She was neither fair of figure or face, and her disposition was truly ugly. Never did she have a kind word to say to her husband. Never was he able to do anything that pleased her. She was simply a homely shrew, through and through. And the tribe's other squaws and braves wondered why they remained together as husband and wife.

The days passed, and the months, and the years. Finally, when the chief was a very old man, he died. His wife laughed joyously at his funeral, having inherited his many ponies and buffalo hides, and other such wealth. And this, his wealth, was her reason, of course, for marrying him and remaining with him for so many years.

Kay stared at me, frowning. I looked at her deadpan, and she shook her head bewilderedly.

"That's the end of the story? What's the point?"

"I just told you," I said. "She married him and stuck with him for his dough. Or the Indian equivalent thereof."
"But—but, darn it! Why did he marry her?"

"Because he was stupid," I said. "His whole tribe was stupid."

"Wha-aat?"

"Why sure," I said. "A lot of Indians are stupid. That's why we wound up in the shape we're in today."

Kay jumped up and left the table.
I was sorry now that I had told her the story, but it hadn't been a rib. My great-grandfather actually had told it to me, a bit of bitter fun-poking at Indians, their decline and fall. But there was wisdom in it for any race.

We all overlook the obvious.
Danger is so commonplace that we have become atrophied to it.
We wring the hand of Evil, and are shocked at the loss of fingers.

I left the dining room, pausing in the hallway to glance into the kitchen. Kay was aware of me, I am sure, but she did not look up. So I went on down the hall to the vast reception area, crossed its gleaming parquet expanse and started up the stairs.

It hadn't occurred to me before, but what Kay had said was true. The upward climb was seemingly interminable, and as shadowed as it was long. There were those strange sounds, also, like stealthy footsteps in pursuit. Sounds where there should have been none. And, due to a trick of acoustics, no sounds where sounds should have been.

I reached the landing, breathing hard, almost leaping up the last several steps. I whirled around, tensed, heart pounding. But there was no one behind me. Nothing but shadows. Cautiously, I looked down over the brief balustrade, which joined the top of the staircase to the wall of the landing.

The parquet floor below me was so distant that I would not have known that it was there had I not known that it was. So distant, and so cloaked in darkness. I backed away hastily, feeling more than a little dizzy.

I went on to my room, cursing my runaway imagination. Calling down curses upon Kay for her unwitting planting of fear in my mind. Cops should know better than that, I thought. It didn't bother cops to talk about darkness and shadows and funny noises, and people sneaking up behind other people. Cops were brave—which was not an adjective that could be applied to Britton Rainstar.

I was, at least figuratively, a very yellow red man.

I had a streak of snowy gray right down the middle of my raven locks. And I had a streak of another color right down the middle of my tawny back.

I got out of my clothes, and took a shower.

I put on pajamas and a robe and carpet slippers.

My pulse was acting up, and there was a kind of jumpiness to my toes. They kept jerking and squirming of their own volition: my toes always do that when I am very nervous. I almost called out to Kay, when she came up the stairs. Because she was a nurse, wasn't she, and I certainly needed something to soothe my nerves.

But she was miffed at me, or she would have come to me without being summoned. And if I managed to un-miff her, I was sure, what I would get to soothe me was Kay herself. One of the best little soothers in the world, but one which I simply could not partake of.

I had screwed the lid on that jar, you should excuse the expression. She was forever forbidden fruit, even though I should become one, God forbid.

I tried to concentrate on non-scary things. To think of something nice. And the nicest thing I could think of was something I had just determined not to think of. And while I was doing my damnedest not to think of her, simultaneously doing my damnedest to think of something else, she came into my room.

Fully dressed, even to her blue cape. Carrying her small nurse's kit in one hand, her suitcase in the other.

"All right, Britt," she said. "I'm moving in here with you, or I'm moving out. Leaving! Right this minute."

"Oh, come off of it," I laughed. "You'd get a permanent black eye with the department. As big as your butt, baby! You'd never get a decent job anywhere."

"But you won't know about it, will you, Britt?" She gave me a spiteful grin. "After I leave, and you're all alone here in this big ol' house . . ."

She set her bags down, and did a pantomime of what would happen to me; clawing her hands and walking like a zombie. And it was ridiculous as hell, of course, but it was pretty damned scary, too.

". . . then the big Black Thing will come out of the darkness," she intoned, in ghostly tones, "and poor little Britt won't see it until it's too late. He'll hear it, but he'll think it's just one of those noises he's always hearing. So he won't
look around, and—"

"Now, knock it off, dammit!" I said. "You stop that, right now!"

"... and the big Black Thing will come closer and closer." (She came closer and closer.) "And closer and closer, and closer—GOTCHA!"

"Yeow!" I yelled, my hair standing on end. "Get away from me, you crazy broad!"

"Fraidy cat, fraidy cat!" she chanted. "B.R. has a yellow streak, running down his spine!"

I said I'd rather have a yellow streak running down it than pimples. She said angrily that she didn't have pimples running down hers. And I said she would have when my hex went to work.

"A pretty sight you'll be when you start blushing. Your back will look like peaches flambe in eruption. Ah, Kay, baby," I said, "enough of this clowning around. Just give me something to make me sleep, and then go back to your room and—"

"I won't go back to my room! But I'll give you a hypo if you really want it."

"If I want it?" I said. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, I won't be here. You'll be aww-ll all-alone, with the big Black Thing. I thought you might be afraid to go to sleep aww-ll all-alone in this big ol' house, but—"

"All right," I said grimly. "We wound up our little affair, and it's going to stay wound up. You know it's best for both of us. Why, goddammit!—I waved my arms wildly. "What kind of cop are you anyway? A cop is supposed to be something pretty special!"

She said she was something pretty special, wasn't she?—managing a demure blush. I said she could stay or get out, just as she damned pleased.

"It's strictly up to you, Miss Misbegotten! My car keys are there in the top dresser drawer!"

"Thank you but I'll walk, Mr. Mangy Mane. I'm a strong girl, and I'm not afraid of the dark."

She picked up her bags, and left.

I heard the prolonged creaking of the stairs as she descended them. A couple of moments later, I heard the loud slamming of the front door.

I settled back on the pillows, smugly grinning to myself. Dismissing the notion of going downstairs, and setting the bolts on the door. It would be a lot of bother for nothing. I would just have to go down and unbolt it, when Kay came back. As, of course, she would in a very few minutes. Probably she had never left the porch.

I closed my eyes, forcing myself to relax, ignoring the sibilant scratchings, the all-but-inaudible creakings and poppings, peculiar to very old houses.

I thought of the stupid Indian and his blindness to the obvious. I thought of Connie's senseless refusal to give me a divorce. I thought of Luther Bannerman, his quick admission that Connie had no insurance policy when he thought Claggett was going to check on it.

Why didn't Connie want a divorce? Why the fear of Claggett checking with the insurance company? What—

Oh, my God!

I sat up abruptly, slapping a hand to my forehead. Wondering how I could have missed something that an idiot child should have seen.

I was insured. That was what Claggett would have discovered. Bannerman had lied in saying that the insurance company had rejected me.

Why had he lied? Why else but to keep me from becoming wary, to allay any nasty suspicions I might entertain about his and Connie's plans for me.

Of course, the existence of the policy would have to be revealed in order to collect the death benefit. The double indemnity payoff of $200,000. But there was absolutely nothing to indicate that fraud and deception had been practiced to obtain the policy. Quite the contrary, in fact.

I myself had applied for it, and named Connie as my beneficiary. She had what is legally known as an insurable interest in me. And if I was the kind of guy—as I probably was—who might neglect or forget to keep up my premium payments, she had the right to make them for me. Moreover, she definitely was not obligated to make the fact known that I had the policy, an asset which could be cashiered in or encumbered to her disadvantage.
If her marital status should change, if, for example, we should be divorced, I would have to certify to the change. And, inevitably, I would actually know what I had only been assumed to know—that I was insured. So there could be no divorce.

Connie and her father couldn't risk another automobile accident by way of killing me. Two such accidents might make my insurers suspicious. An accident of any kind there on their home grounds might arouse suspicion, and so I had been allowed to clear out.

I returned to my home. After a time, I began remitting sizable sums of money to Connie, and as long as I did I was left alone. They could wait. Time enough to kill me when the flow of money to Connie stopped.

Now, it had stopped. So now—

A blast of cold air swept over me. The front door had opened. I sat up abruptly, the short hairs on my neck rising. I waited and listened. Nerves tensing. Face contorted into a stiffening mask of fear.

And then I grinned and relaxed. Lay back down again.

It would be Kay, of course, I hadn't expected her to stay away this long. To say that I was damned glad she had returned was a gross understatement. But I must be very careful not to show it. Now, more than ever, Kay had to be kept at a distance.

After all, I had promised to marry her—when and if I was free. And Connie's attempt to murder me was a felony, uncontestable grounds for divorce.

Kay would undoubtedly hold me to my promise. Kay was a very stubborn and determined young woman. Once Kay got an idea in her head, she would not let go of it, even when it was in her own interests to do so. Maybe it was a characteristic of all blushing redheads. Maybe that was why they blushed.

At any rate, there must be no gladsome welcomes between us. Noting that might develop into intimacy.

Perhaps I should pretend to be asleep, yes? But, yes. Definitely. It would show how little I was disturbed by her absence. It would throw figurative cold water on the hottest of hot-pantsed redheaded blushers.

I closed my eyes and composed myself. I folded my hands on my chest, began to breathe in even measured breaths. This should convince her, I thought. Lo, the Poor Indian, at rest after the day's travail. Poor Lo, sleeping the sleep of the just.

Kay finished her ascent of the stairs.

She came to the door of my room, and looked in at me.

I wondered how I looked. Whether my hair was combed properly, and whether any hair was sticking out of my nose. Nothing looks cruddier than protruding nose hairs. I didn't think I had any, but sometimes it shows when you are lying down when it would not show otherwise.

Kay crossed to my bed. Stood looking down at me. My nose twitched involuntarily.

She had apparently been running in her haste to get back to me. She had gotten herself all sweaty, anyway, and she stank like hell.

I am very sensitive about such things. I can endure the direst hardships; my Indian heritage I suppose. But I can't stand a stinky squaw.

I opened my eyes, and frowned up at her.

"Look, baby," I said. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, but—b-bbbbbbb-uht—"

It wasn't Kay.

It wasn't anyone I had ever seen before.
He was a young man. Younger than I was. I knew that without knowing exactly how I knew it. Perhaps it was due to cocksureness, the arrogance that emanated from him like the odor of sweat. He was also a pro—a professional killer.

No one but a pro could have had the incredible nervelessness and patience of this man. To loiter in a hospital lobby, say, until he could give me a murderous shove down its entrance steps. Or to wait in the fields adjacent to my house, until he could get me in the ‘scope of his highpowered rifle. Or, missing me, to go on waiting until the house was unguarded and I was unprotected.

The pro knows that there is always a time to kill, if he will wait for it. He knows that when necessity demands disguise it must be quickly and easily used, and readily disposed of. And this man was wearing make-up.

It was a dry kind, a sort of chalk. It could be applied with a few practiced touches, removed with a brush of the sleeve. I could detect it because he had overused it, making his face a shocking mask of hideousness.

Cavernous eyes. A goblin’s mouth. Repulsively exaggerated nostrils.

And why? Why the desire to scare me witless? Hatred? Why would he hate me?

There was a click. The gleam of a razor-sharp switchblade. He held it up for me to see—gingerly tested its murderous edge. Then looked at me grinning, relishing my stark terror.

Why? Who? Who could enjoy my torture, and why?

"Why, you son-of-a-bitch!" I exploded. "You’re Manny’s husband!" His eyes flickered acknowledgment, as I looked past him. "Get him, Manny! Get him good, this time!"

He turned his head. An impulse reaction.

The ruse bought me a split second. I vaulted over the end of the bed, and hurtled into the bathroom. Slammed and locked the door, just as he lunged against it.

A crack appeared in the inlaid paneling of the door. I called out to the guy shakily, foolishly. "I’m a historical monument, mister. This house is, I mean. You damage a historical monument, and—"

His shoulder hit the panel like a piledriver.

The crack became a split.

He swung viciously and his fist came through the wood. He fumbled blindly for the lock. I stooped, opened my mouth and chomped down on his fingers.

There was an anguished yell. He jerked his hand back so hard that I bumped my head against the door. I massaged it carefully, listening, straining my ears for some indication of what the bastard would try next.

I couldn't hear anything. Not a damned thing.

I continued to listen, and I still heard nothing.

Had he given up? No way! Not so soon. Not a professional killer with a personal interest in wasting me. Who hated me, was jealous of me, because of Manny.

"Look, you!" I called to him. "It’s all over between Manny and me. I mean it!"

I paused, listening.

"You hear me out there? It’s you and her from now on. She told me so herself. Maybe you think she’s stalling by going to the hospital, but . . ."

Maybe she was, too. Maybe her earlier hospitalization had also been a stall. Or maybe just the thought of being tied up with this guy again had driven her up the wall. Because he really had her on the spot, you know?

She had tried to kill him, had done such a job on him that she believed she had killed him. Thus, her long convalescence after his "death." Also, after his recent reappearance, he would have discovered her painful pestering of me in the course of casing her situation. So she was vulnerable to pressure—a girl who had not only tried to kill her husband, but who had also pulled some pretty raw stuff on her lover. And the fact that her husband, the guy who was pressuring her, was on pretty shaky grounds himself would not deter him for a moment.

For he was one of those bullish, dog-in-the-manger types. The kind who would pull the temple down on his head to get a fly on the ceiling. That was the way it was. Add up everything that had happened and that was the answer.
I called out to him again, making my voice stern. I said I would give him until I counted to ten, wondering what the hell I was talking about. Until I counted to ten, then what? But he didn't seem very bright, either, so I went right ahead.

"One-two-three-four—Do you hear me? I'm counting!—five-six-seven-eight—All right! Don't say I didn't warn you!—ni-un-ten!"

Silence.
Still silence.

Well, he could be gone, couldn't he? I'd chomped down on his fingers damned hard, and he could be seriously bitten. Maybe I'd even gotten an artery, and the bastard had beat it before he bled to death.

It just about had to be something like that. I would just about have to have heard him if he still remained there.

I unlocked the door. I hesitated, then suddenly flung it open. And—

I think he must have been standing against the far wall of the bedroom. Nursing his injured hand. Measuring the distance to the bathroom door, as he readied himself for the attack upon it.

Then, at last, hurtling himself forward. Head lowered, shoulders hunched, legs churning like pistons. Rapidly gaining momentum until he hit the door with the impact of a charging bull. Rather, he didn't hit the door, since the door was no longer there. I had flung it open. Instead, he rocketed through the opening and hit the wall on the opposite side. And he hit it so hard that several of its tiles were loosened.

There was an explosive spllaat! He bounded backward, and his head struck the floor with the sound of a bursting melon.

For a moment, I thought he must be dead. Then, a kind of twitching shudder ran through his body, and I knew he was only dead to the world. Very unconscious, but very much alive.

I got busy.
I yanked off my robe, and tied him up with its cord.
I grabbed up some towels, and tied him up with them.
I tied him up with the hose of the hot-water bottles.

I tied him up with the electric light cords from the reading lamps. And some pillow cases and bedsheets. And a large roll of adhesive bandage.

That was about all I could find to tie him up with, so I let it go at that. But I still wasn't sure that it was enough. With a guy like that, you could never be sure.

I backed out of the bathroom, keeping my eye on him. I backed across the bedroom, still watching him, and out into the hallway. And then I stopped stock-still, my breath sucking in with shock.

Connie stood flattened against the wall, immediately outside my door. And lurking in the shadows at the top of the stairs, was the hulking figure of my father-in-law, Luther Bannerman.
I looked from him to her, staring stupidly, momentarily paralyzed with shock. I thought, "How . . . why . . . what . . . ?" Immediately following it with the thought, "How silly can you get?"

She and Bannerman had journeyed from their homeplace together. Having a supposedly invalided daughter was a gimmick for chiseling money from me. So he had parked her before coming out to my house this afternoon, picking her up afterward. Since Kay wouldn't have volunteered any information, they assumed that she was no more than the nurse she appeared to be, one who went home at night. She had left. While they waited to make sure she would not return, they saw Manny's husband enter the house in a way that no legitimate guest would. So they followed him inside, and when he failed to do the job he had come to . . .

My confusion lasted only a moment. It could have taken no longer than that to sort things out, and put them in proper order. But Connie and Luther Bannerman were already edging toward me. Arms outspread to head off my escape.

I backed away. Back was the only way I could go.

"Get him, Papa!" Connie hissed. "Now!"

I saw a shadow upon the shadows—Bannerman poising to slug me. I threw up an arm, drew my own fist back.

"You hypocrite son-of-a-bitch! You come any closer, I'll—!"

Connie slugged me in the stomach. She stiff-armed me under the chin.

I staggered backwards, and fell over the rail of the balustrade.

I went over it and down, my vision moving in a dizzying arc from beamed ceiling to panelled walls to parquet floor. I did a swift back-and-forth re-view of the floor, and decided that I was in no hurry at all to get down to it.

I had never seen such a hard-looking floor.

I was only sixty-plus feet above it—only!—but it seemed like sixty miles.

I had hooked my feet through the balusters when I went over the rail.

Connie was alternately pounding on them and trying to pry them loose, meanwhile hollering to her father for help.

"Do something, damn it! Slug him!"

Bannerman moved down the stairs a step or two. He leaned over the rail, striking at me. I jabbed a finger in his eye.

He cursed, and let out a howl.

Connie cursed, howled for him to do something, goddamn it!

"Never mind your damn eye! Hit him, can't you?"

"Don't you cuss me, daughter!" He leaned over the rail again. "It ain't nice to cuss your papa!"

Connie yelled, "Oh, shit!" exasperatedly, and gave my foot an agonizing blow.

Her father took another swing at me, and my head seemed to explode. I heard him shout with triumph. Connie's maliciously delighted laugh.

"That almost got him, Papa. Just a little bit more, now."

"Don't you worry, daughter. Just you leave him to Papa."

He aimed another blow at me. She hit my sore foot again.

And I kicked her, and I grabbed him.

He was off-balance, leaning far out over the rail. I grabbed him by the ears, simultaneously kicking at Connie.

He came over the rail with a terrified howl, clutching my wrists for dear life. My foot went between Connie's legs, and she was propelled upward as Bannerman's weight yanked me downward.

She shrieked, one terror-filled shriek after another. Shrieking, she flattened herself against my leg and hung onto it.

She shrieked and screamed, and then yelled and howled. And one jerked one way, and the other pulled the other
way. And I thought, My God, they're going to deafen me and pull me apart at the same time.

They were really a couple of lousy would-be murderers. But they were amateurs, of course, and even a pro can goof up. As witness, Manny's husband.

I caught a glimpse of him as I was swung back and forth. Looking more like a mummy than a man, due to the variety and number of items with which I had bound him. He came hopping through my bedroom door, very dazed and wobbly-looking. He hopped out onto the landing, lost his balance and crashed heavily into the balustrade.

It creaked and scraped ominously. The distant floor of the reception hall seemed to jump up at me a few inches, and the terrified vocalizings of the Bannermans increased.

Somehow, the mummy got to his feet again, though why I don't know. I doubt that he knew what he was doing. He got to the head of the stairs, stood looking down at them dazedly. He executed another little hop—and, of course, he fell. Went down the steps in a series of bouncing somersaults. Hitting the leg which Bannerman had just managed to hook over the rail.

The jolt almost knocked Bannerman loose from me. Naturally, I was yanked downward also, simultaneously exerting a tremendous yank upon the balustrade.

It was too much. Too damned much. It tore loose from its ancient moorings, and dropped downward. Connie skidded down my body head-first, unable to stop her plunge until she was extended almost the length of her body. Clutching her father's legs, as she clung to me by her heels.

She screamed and cursed him, hysterically. He cursed and kicked at her.

A strange calm had settled over me—the calm of the doomed. I was at once a part of things and yet outside them, and my overall view was objective.

I didn't know how the few screws and spikes which still attached the balustrade to the landing managed to stay in place. Why it didn't plunge downward, bearing us with it, into the reception hall. Moreover, I didn't seem to care. Rather, I cared without caring. What concerned me, in a vaguely humorous way, was the preposterous picture we must make. Connie, Bannerman and I balled together in a kind of crazy bomb, which was about to be dropped at any moment.

I waited for the weight to go off of me, the signal that we were making the final plunge. I waited, and I kept my eyes closed tight. Knowing that if I opened them, if I looked down at that floor so far below me, it would be about the last time I looked at anything.

There was so much racket from the Bannermans and the grating and screeching of the balustrade that I could hear nothing else. But suddenly the weight did go off me in two gentle yanks. There was another wait then, and I expected to hit the floor at any moment. Then, I myself was yanked, and a couple of strong arms went around me. And I was hustled effortlessly upward.

I was set down on my feet. I received a gentle bearing-down shake, then a sharp slap. I opened my eyes. Found myself on the second-floor landing, with its ruined balustrade.

Connie and Bannerman were stretched out on the floor face down, with their hands behind their heads. Manny's husband lay at the foot of the stairs in a heap.

Kay peered at me anxiously. "I'm terribly, terribly sorry, darling. Are you all right?"

"Fine," I said. Because I was alive, wasn't I, and being alive was fine, wasn't it?

To show my gratitude, I would gladly have gone down on my knees and kissed her can.

"I would have been back sooner, Britt, but a truck driver tried to pick me up. I think I broke his darned jaw."

"Fine," I said.

"Britt, honey . . . we don't have to say anything to Sergeant Claggett about my leaving you alone, do we? Let's not, okay?"

"Fine," I said.

"I'll think of a good story to cover. Just leave it to me."

"Fine," I said.

"You do love me, don't you, Britt? You don't think I'm awful?"

"Fine," I said.

And then I put my arms around her, and sank slowly down to my knees.
No, not to kiss her can, although I really wouldn't have minded.
It was just that I'd waited as long as I could—and I couldn't wait any longer—for something soft to faint on.
Kay's story was that she had gone out of the house to investigate some suspicious noises, and had found a guy apparently trying to break in. During her pursuit of him (he had got away) Manny's husband, and subsequently, the Bannermans, had entered the house. But, fortunately, she was in time to overpower them and save me from death.

The story didn't go down very well with Jeff Claggett, but he couldn't call her a liar without calling me one, so he let it go. And Kay not only kept her job with the department, but she received a commendation and promotion. The increase in pay, she estimated, would pay for the all-white gown and accoutrements. Which, she advised me unblushingly, she intended to wear at our wedding.

To move on:

Connie and Luther Bannerman pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit murder, and attempted murder. They received ten years on each count, said sentences to run consecutively.

Manny's husband remained mute, and was convicted of attempted murder. But other charges were dug up against him before he could begin serving the sentence—he was a very bad guy, seemingly. The last I heard, he had accumulated two life sentences, pias fifty years, and he was still standing mute. Apparently, he saw nothing to gain by talking.

Manny was taken from her hospital to the criminal ward of the county hospital. Pat Aloe could have got her out, I am sure, since the charge against her of harboring a criminal—failing to report her husband to the police—was a purely technical one. But Pat had grimly washed his hands of Manny. He wanted nothing more to do with her. He had no further need for her, for that matter, having begun the swift closing out of PXA's affairs.

Manny cooperated fully with the authorities, and their attitude toward her was generally sympathetic. She had attacked her husband without intent to kill him. His abuse had driven her temporarily insane, and when she recovered her senses, she was holding a steam pressing-iron in her hand and he was sprawled on the ground at her feet. The storm was gathering by now, and she was forced to flee back inside her resort cabin. When the police came in the morning to investigate the storm's havoc, she was near death with shock and she was never questioned about her husband's supposed death.

Actually, he wasn't even seriously hurt, but there was a dead man nearby—one of several who had died in the storm—who resembled him in size and coloring. Manny's husband made the features of the dead man unrecognizable with a few brutal blows, switched clothes with him and planted his identification on him.

He disappeared into the night then, and no one ever questioned the fact that he was dead. Possibly because so many people were glad to have him that way. Rumors had been circulating for some time that he had irritated people who were not of a mind to put up with it, and only his apparent death saved him from the actuality.

There followed an extended period of hiding out, of keeping out of the way of former associates. Finally, however, believing that feeling about him had cooled down, and having sized up Manny's situation, he had paid her a covert visit.

She was terrified. Anyone who knew him well would be.

Also, she was vulnerable to his threats, thanks to the nominal attempt on his life and the malicious mischief she had made for me. She couldn't go to the police. She couldn't go to Pat, who was already furious with her. So she acceded to her husband's demands. She would go with him, if he would leave me alone.

She collapsed after his visit, and was forced to go to the hospital. His reaction was to try to kill me. She hoped to buy him off, and he accepted the money she gave him. But, of course, he could not stay bought. Again, he gave her an ultimatum: She would go back to him, or I would go, period. So she had agreed to go back to him, but the ugly prospect had brought on another nervous collapse with its resultant hospitalization.

Actually, he had no intention of leaving me alone, regardless of what she did. He was a handsome hood, and as vain and mean as he was handsome. And it was simply not tolerable to him to allow his wife's lover to live.

So he had tried to kill me for the third time. At the same time the Bannermons were attempting to kill me for the second time. And so much for them.

The charge against Manny was dismissed, with the urgent recommendation that she seek psychiatric help. She gladly promised to do so.

Mrs. Olmstead was caught up with in Las Vegas. She was drunk, thoroughly unremorseful and some twenty
thousand dollars ahead of the game. She returned most of my money, I think. I'm not sure, since I don't know exactly how much she got away with. Anyway, I declined to prosecute, and she was still in Vegas the last I heard.

Still drunk, still unremorseful and still a big winner.
I went to the hospital a few days after the Bannermans and Manny's husband tried to kill me. My house needed repairs to make it livable and it was kind of lonesome there by myself, so I went to the hospital. And I remained there while the courts dealt with my would-be killers, and certain other happy events came to pass.

The doctors hinted that I was malingering, and suggested that I do it elsewhere. Jeff Claggett gave me a stern scolding.

"You don't want to marry Nolton. You shouldn't marry her. Why not lay it on the line with her, instead of pulling the sick act?"

"Well . . . I do like her, Jeff," I said. "And she saved my life, you know."

"Oh, hell! She was goofing off when she should have been on the job, and we both know it."

"Well . . . But I promised to marry her. I didn't think I'd ever be free of Connie at the time, but—"

"That wasn't a promise, dammit! Anyway, you've got a right to change your mind. You shouldn't go ahead with something that's all wrong to keep a promise that should never have been made."

"I'm sure you're right," I said. "I'll have a talk with Kay as soon as I get some other things out of the way."

"What things?"

"Well . . ."

"You've got a go-ahead on your erosion book, and a hefty advance from the publisher. You're getting a good settlement on your condemnation suit; my lawyer friend says it will be coming through any day now. So what the hell are you waiting for?"

"Nothing," I said firmly. "And I won't wait any longer."

"Good! You'll settle with Nolton right away, then?"

"You bet I will," I said. "Maybe not right away, but . . ."

He cursed, and stamped out of the room.

The phone rang, and of course it was Kay.

"Just one question, Britt Rainstar," she said. "How much longer do you plan on staying in that hospital?"

"What's the difference?" I said. "My divorce hasn't come through yet."

"Hasn't it?" she said. "Hasn't it?"

"I, uh, well"—I laughed nervously. "I haven't received the papers yet, but I believe I did hear that, uh—my goodness, Kay," I said. "You surely don't think that I don't want to marry you."

"That's exactly what I think, Britt."

"Well, shame on you," I said. "The very ideal!"

"Then, when are you leaving the hospital?"

"Very soon," I said. "Practically any day now."

She slammed the phone down.

I lay back on the pillows, and closed my eyes.

I was thoroughly ashamed of myself. My shame increased, as the days drifted by and I stayed on in the hospital. The naive, evasive-child manner I maintained was evidence of my general feeling of hopeless unworthiness. The I-ain't-nothin'-but-a-hound-dawg routine set to different music.

Whatever I did, I was bound to make someone unhappy, and I have always shrunk from doing that. I am always terribly unhappy when I make others unhappy.

I wondered what in the name of God I could tell Manny. After all, I had told her that the only reason I didn't marry her was because I couldn't. I was married to Connie, and there was no way I could dissolve our marriage. Now, however, I was free of Connie, and Manny was free of her husband. So how could I possibly tell her that I was marrying Kay Nolton?

I was wrestling with the riddle the afternoon she came to see me, the first time I had seen her since that
seemingly long-ago day when she had come to the house.

I stalled on giving her the news about Kay, staving it off by complimenting her on how nice she looked. She thanked me and said she certainly hoped she looked nice.

"You see, I'm getting married, Britt," she said. "I thought you should be the first to know."

I gulped and said, "Oh," thinking that took me off the hook all right—or sank it into me. "Well, I hope you'll be very happy, Manny."

"Thank you," she said. "I'm sure I will be."

"Is it, uh, anyone I know?"

"We-ell, no . . ." She shook her head. "I don't believe you do. You're going to get acquainted with him, because I intend to see that you do. And I think that you'll like him—the real him—a lot better than the man you think you know."

"Uh, what?" I frowned. "I don't understand."

"Well, you'd just better!" Her voice rose, broke into joyous laughter. "You'd better, you nutty, mixed-up mixed blood, or I'll take your pretty gray-streaked scalp!"

She came to me at a run, flung herself down on the bed with me.

Naturally, the bed collapsed noisily.

We were picking ourselves up when the door slammed open, and a nurse came rushing in. She had red hair and beautiful long legs, and a scrubbed-clean look.

"Kay—" I stammered. "W-what are you doing here?"

She snapped that her name was Nolton, Miss Nolton, and she was there because she was a nurse, as I very well knew. "Now, what's going on here, miss?" she demanded, glaring at Manny. "Never mind! I want you out of here, right this minute! And for goodness sake—for goodness sake—do us all a favor and take him with you!"

"Oh, I intend to," Manny said sunnily. "I'm getting married, and he's the bridegroom."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," Kay said. "I'm g-glad that s-someone's willing to marry him. He said t-that—that I—"

She turned suddenly, and hurried out the door.

Manny came into my arms, and I did what you do when a very lovely girl comes into your arms. And then, over her shoulder, I saw the door ease open. And I saw that it was Kay who had opened it.

She stuck her tongue out at me.

She winked and grinned at me. And, then, just as she closed the door, she turned on a truly beautiful blush.

And when it comes time to close the door on someone or something I know of no nicer way to do it.

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