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NOIR MASTER SERIES

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JUST WINDOW SHOPPING by LAWRENCE BLOCK, writing as SHELDON LORD, appeared in Man's Magazine, December 1962.

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Her regular cleaning woman had not appeared that morning, and by the time Mrs. Belding decided she was not coming, and had called the employment agency to send over another to her apartment, it was nearly ten o'clock.

The woman the agency sent was a big creature. She was so tall that she stooped, giving her broad, harsh face a rather ridiculous look as it peered out from under a crazy, flopping little hat set on a mass of straggly gray hair. Her blood-shot gray eyes lighted up, blazing, upon seeing Mrs. Belding, as if in fierce anticipation at working for so lovely a lady.

She was so formidable in appearance that Mrs. Belding was a little disturbed at the idea of having her in the apartment all day. She had heard stories of how strange servants had robbed their employers. She hesitated as she looked at the woman. But when she thought of the reputation of the employment agency and saw again the woman's funny hat, she asked the woman if she were willing, considering how late she had come, to work until six instead of five.

The woman boomed out readily, in a deep and husky voice, “Sure, Ma'm, sure am.” She didn't smile, but seemed deathly serious, as if sincerity might be a passion with her. Her name, she said, was Hattie.

Mrs. Belding regretted her decision a little when Hattie had prepared herself for work by simply setting her hat on a chair in the hall. Without her crazy hat perched on her frizzly head, the woman no longer seemed amusing. She was now almost threatening. But when Mrs. Belding explained what was to be done, and Hattie had started, attacking the tasks with a surprising willingness and speed, Mrs. Belding decided that her fears were groundless.

At the same time, it occurred to her, for the first time, that she would have to stay in the apartment all day. It wouldn't do to leave it in charge of an unknown cleaning woman. Mrs. Belding had meant to shop for some new stockings to go with the evening dress she would wear that night when she dined out with friends. She considered doing her shopping anyway, wondering if she could trust Hattie.

She thought of calling up the employment agency and asking about Hattie. But agencies couldn't know everything about the people they sent, and besides she couldn't very well make the inquiry with Hattie listening. She saw Hattie moving the piano to clean in back of it, thrusting the heavy instrument aside as if it were little more than a heavy chair. She decided that the old stockings, mended, would have to do.

Mrs. Belding watched Hattie closely, but the only thing she saw was the woman's strength. She had difficulty composing herself, or finding a comfortable place to sit, as Hattie bustled about, doing work in a few minutes that ordinarily took the better part of an hour to accomplish. It rather alarmed Mrs. Belding. It made her feel nervous. But she reflected that ability, speed, willingness, and strength were no qualities to complain about in a cleaning woman. She had been accustomed to laziness and sometimes downright shirking—such as the regular woman not coming at all today and sending no message.

She felt angry with the regular woman, and friendly toward Hattie, resolving to keep Hattie permanently if she turned out to be all right in other respects. She examined the work that had already been done, and was pleased.

If Mrs. Belding watched Hattie, and contrived to stay much in the same room with her, Hattie followed the same tactics herself. She didn't seem to mind being supervised at all, but appeared to like having Mrs. Belding with her, and several times followed her about. She kept looking at Mrs. Belding, as if in deep admiration, but this did not interfere with her work. She went steadily about it all that morning, almost grimly, and silently—except when an especially energetic outburst made her pant a little.

At noon, when Mrs. Belding began preparing lunch, Hattie suggested, “You let me fix it, Mrs. Belding.” And when she was told she could do so if she wished, she said with serious gratitude, “Yes, Ma'm.”

Hattie's meal was dainty and delicious. She served it to Mrs. Belding as if she had been long a retainer in the household. She was highly solicitous, several times interrupting her own lunch, which she was having in the kitchen, to come in and inquire if everything were satisfactory. She hovered about anxiously wanting to please. Mrs. Belding
had never before experienced such attention and devotion in the short course of a meal.

Hattie was almost loving in her service. Mrs. Belding complimented her and the woman replied, from a voice choked with emotion, "Sure, Ma'm."

By this time Mrs. Belding was assured that Hattie did not mean to rob her. If the woman meant to, she would certainly have attempted it before this, instead of working so hard and efficiently all the time. She looked at Hattie's face and found it drawn. Trying to make a good impression and overdoing the effort, thought Mrs. Belding. Poor thing.

Mrs. Belding did not object when, in the afternoon, Hattie slowed down considerably and became talkative. The woman had started on the closets. And when she came to the one in Mrs. Belding's bedroom, she spent some time in it. She busied herself at examining the clothes there, sometimes touching them, as with envious hands.

"You got fine clothes, Mrs. Belding," she announced.

Her voice went through the room, through the whole apartment, resounding against the walls. “All women's clothes, too. No man's clothes here. You don't have a man, Mrs. Belding?"

Mrs. Belding smiled at this inquisitiveness that had been so long in coming out, and replied, “No, Hattie.”

A little later, Hattie observed the things that had been laid out on the bed and said, “You got your evening dress ready. I'll bet you got a man coming to call for you tonight, ain't you, Mrs. Belding?” And Hattie touched the dress softly.

"No, I ... “

Something in the way Hattie asked this made Mrs. Belding check herself. This was no business of Hattie's. Even if Hattie seemed all right, possibly it was not a good plan to admit that there was no man about the place. She tried to cover up her admission. “Yes,” she said, “there is a gentleman calling for me later.”

Hattie laughed. It was a long, throaty laugh, full and unrestrained. Caressing the clothes with big, affectionate hands, and stooping over them, she said, “I like to imagine how you'll look in that dress, Mrs. Belding. I sure like to work for a beautiful woman like you, Mrs. Belding.”

Hattie's laugh remained in the room, echoing, for minutes after she left it.

Mrs. Belding had been disturbed by the whole thing. But she, finally, decided that Hattie's comments on the clothes had simply been in the nature of a hint that she be given some old clothes, either those of a woman, or of a man. Cleaning women were always wanting clothes, and asking for them by admiring those of the people for whom they worked. That was the way they obtained much of their clothing.

Mrs. Belding laughed herself when she pictured Hattie in any of her cast-off things; they wouldn't cover half the woman. But then, maybe she wanted them for a sister—or a friend.

Late in the afternoon, Mrs. Belding was sitting on the stool before her dressing-table mending a run in the top of one of the stockings she was to wear that evening. She had not heard Hattie at her work for some time. She listened, and when a number of minutes went by and there was still no noise, she rose and went out to see what Hattie was doing.

Hattie was not in the living room. She was not in the hall nor in the kitchen. Mystified, Mrs. Belding glanced at the closed bathroom door. The woman must be there. She called her name.

From behind the door, muffled, but still booming, came Hattie's voice. “Yes, Ma'm, you want me, Mrs. Belding?”

"I didn't know where you were,” Mrs. Belding said, speaking in the direction of the bathroom.

"I'll be ready in a minute, Mrs. Belding," Hattie said from behind the door.
Mrs. Belding went back to her bedroom. Something about Hattie's reply bothered her, but she didn't know what it was. She thought Hattie had finished in the bathroom, but evidently she hadn't.

Mrs. Belding took up the mending of her stocking again. She listened for Hattie, but heard nothing. When a longer time than before went by without any noise being made, she called out as she had before, but this time from where she sat.

There was no answer. She called again. Still there was no reply. She wondered what Hattie could be doing. Whatever it was, she was taking a long time about it. Mrs. Belding wanted her to get through, for she meant to take a bath in a few minutes. Surely the woman must have heard her. She put down her mending, got up, and went out into the hall.

"Hattie!" she called. There was no reply. "Hattie!" Her call was nearly a cry this time. But no answer came from the bathroom. Nor was there any sound of movement.

What had happened to the woman? She must still be in the bathroom. Or had she sneaked out, perhaps to let someone else in the apartment?

Mrs. Belding turned quickly about, looking. There was no one to be seen. There was no sound in the apartment.

She took a step toward the bathroom door, then stopped, cautiously. It was indeed strange.

"Hattie!" she called again.

Only silence answered her.

Mrs. Belding stood there, her heart beating fast. The thought came to her that Hattie had left without saying anything, without collecting her wages. While trying to figure out why the woman would do such a thing, she looked for Hattie's hat.

The crazy little thing was still on the chair. Hattie was still in the apartment.

Mrs. Belding wanted to call in a neighbor, or the building superintendent, or a policeman, to help her investigate. But she hesitated at the prospect of raising a hue and cry over what might be nothing.

In her irresolution at deciding what to do, another thought, a more logical solution, came to her. She remembered the drawn look on Hattie's face, and how Hattie had slowed down at the work, as though tired. The woman had probably gone beyond the capacity of her strength and fainted in the bathroom. That was it, of course. That was why she hadn't answered.

Concerned, and a little irritated, Mrs. Belding went to the door and opened it. Hattie was not to be seen. Mrs. Belding stepped into the bathroom.

As soon as she was well into the room, the door swung closed behind her, snapping shut with a sharp click. There was a movement there, and she whirled around quickly to see what it was.

An utterly naked man, who looked gigantic, stood against the door.

In the confusion and shock of her first horror, Mrs. Belding looked about for Hattie. All that was to be seen of her were a heap of clothing and a wig of straggly gray hair lying on the floor. Other than that, there was only the man standing there starkly nude, exposed and horribly ready, staring down at her from his blood-shot eyes which were now wide and burning.

Mrs. Belding's lips parted to emit a scream that her terror had so far denied her, but, before she could get it out a firn, large hot hand was placed over her mouth, twisting her about so that the back of her head was pressed against a hard sweaty chest that was breathing fast, and another hand began to tear viciously at the clothing on her shoulder.

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The night was hot and humid. I lay in my room on a sheet sodden with the seepage from my pores, and suspended above me in the dark like a design in ectoplasm was the face of the man named Marilla, and the hate within me stirred and flowed and seeped with the sweat from my pores, and the color of my hate was yellow.

I got off the bed and walked on bare feet across the warm floor to the window, but there was no air moving at the window or outside the window, and the adherent heat had saturated my flesh and soaked through my eyes into the cavity of my skull to lie like a thick, smothering fog over the contours of my brain. I could hear, across the narrow interval that separated houses, the whirr of blades beating the air, and because my eyes were like cat's eyes, I could see behind the blades into the black, gasping room, and it was the bedroom of Mrs. Willkins, and she was lying nude on her bed under the contrived breeze, and her body was gross and ugly with flesh loose on its bones, and I hated her, just as I hated the ectoplasmic face of the man named Marilla, with all the force of my yellow hate.

Turning away from the window, I found in the darkness a pint of gin on a chest and poured two fingers into a tumbler. I sat on the edge of the bed and drank the gin and then lay down again, and the face of Marilla was still suspended above me, and in a moment the face of Freda was there too, and I began to think deliberately about Marilla and Freda, and the reason I hated Marilla.

I stood with Freda in front of the shining glass window, and she pointed out the coat to me on the arrogant blonde dummy. I could see Freda's reflected face in the glass from my angle of vision, and her lips were slightly open in excitement and desire, and I felt happy and a little sad at the same time to see her that way, because it wasn't, after all, much of a coat, not mink or ermine or any kind of fur at all, but just a plain cloth coat that was a kind of pink color and looked like it would be as soft as down to the touch.

"It's beautiful," Freda said. "It's, oh, so beautiful," and I said, "You like it? You like to have it?" and she said, "Oh, yes," in a kind of expiring, incredulous whisper that was like the expression of a child who just can't believe the wonderful thing that's about to happen.

We went into the store and up to the floor where the coats were sold, and Freda tried on the coat, turning around and around in front of the mirror and stroking the cloth as if it were a kitten and making a soft little purring sound as if she were the kitten she was stroking. I teased her a little, saying that, well, it was rather expensive and would raise hell with the budget, but I knew all the time that I was going to buy it for her, because she wanted it so much and because it made her look even more beautiful than before, and after a while I went up to the credit department and made arrangements for monthly payments, because I didn't have the price. When I came back down, she was still standing in front of the mirror in the coat, and I said, "You going to wear it?" and she said, "Oh, yes, I'm going to wear it and sleep in it and never take it off," and I kept remembering afterward that it wasn't after all, so much of a coat, not fur or anything, but just pink cloth.

We went down in the elevator, and she clung to my arm and kissed me over and over with her eyes, and I thought it was the best buy I'd ever made and cheap at the price, even if I had had to arrange monthly payments. We went out onto the street through the revolving door, walking close together in the same section of the door because Freda wouldn't let loose of my arm, and the street was bright and soft and cool with the cool, bright softness of April, and it was just the kind of day and street for a new pink coat. We walked down the street toward the drug store on the corner, and I was thinking that I'd take Freda into the store for some of the peppermint ice cream with chunks of stick peppermint in it that she liked so much, and it occurred to me that the ice cream was just about the color of the pink coat, and then there were a couple of explosions inside the drug store, and after a second or two a woman began to scream in a high, ragged voice that went on and on, and the door of the store flew open, and a man ran out with a gun in his hand, and the man was Marilla, the man they were later to call a psychopathic killer.

He ran toward us along the sidewalk waving the gun, and he ran with a queer, lurching gait, as if he were crippled, or one leg were shorter than the other, and as he ran he made a sound that was something like a whimper and something like a cry. Between us and him was a kid carrying a shoe shine box, and the kid stopped and stood stiffly with the box hanging at his side, and then the gun in Marilla's hand began to explode again, and the kid set the box down on the sidewalk and fell over sideways across it. I stood looking at the kid, and I realized suddenly that Freda
had let go of my arm, and I turned to see if she was still there, but she wasn't, and I couldn't see her anywhere. Marilla ran past me, and I could see directly into his big eyes that were like black puddles of liquid terror, and he pointed the gun at my face and pulled the trigger, and I could hear the dull click of the hammer on a dead shell. I could have tackled him and brought him down, but I didn't, because just then I saw that Freda was lying on the sidewalk like the kid up ahead, but in a different position, on her back with the new coat spread open around her like something that had been put there in advance for her to lie on. I knelt down beside her on the sidewalk and lifted her head and began to say her name, and at first I thought she'd fainted, but then I saw the small black hole that was about three inches in a straight line below the hollow of her throat, and I knew that she was dead.

They caught Marilla in a blind alley. He was sitting in a corner with his knees drawn up and his head resting on his knees, and he was whimpering and crying, and his voice would rise now and then to a thin scream of terror, and the men who found him first almost beat him to death before the police came and took him away. Right after that, the next day or so, they began to say he was crazy, that he was just a crazy kid only twenty years old, and the psychiatrists had big words for the kind of craziness it was supposed to be, but I knew that nothing they could say would do him any good at all, because he had killed a man and a woman in the drug store and the shoe shine kid on the street, and above all he had killed Freda in her new pink coat.

They asked him why he had killed all those people, and they didn't even make any distinction between Freda and the others, and he said he hadn't hated any of them or anything like that, hadn't even wanted to kill them at all, but had killed them anyhow because he'd been told time and again to do it and finally had to do as he was told. They asked him who had told him to kill the people, just any people, and he said it was a thin little man with a pointed nose and a pointed chin who wore yellow pointed shoes. The man had appeared in all sorts of odd places and told him to go out and kill some people.

It was part of the big lie, of course, that ridiculous part about the man coming and telling him to kill some people, it was part of the plan to keep him from paying for killing Freda, and anyone could see right through it, it was so transparent. You can buy some psychiatrist to verify something like that any time you've got the price, and I knew they'd hang him in spite of what any psychiatrist said, because God wanted him to hang just as much as I did, God and I hated him equally for what he'd done to Freda right when she was so happy.

I waited for them to try him, and finally they did, and I went and sat in the court room every day to watch him and to feel the yellow hate like pus inside me. He sat at the long table with the lawyers who defended him, and he always sat with his head bowed and his hands folded on top of the table in a posture of prayer, but once in a while he would look up briefly into the crowd, and the light of terror and inner cowering were there in his great liquid eyes, and I felt a fierce exaltation that he was suffering, and that the suffering he now felt was only the beginning of the suffering he would feel before he was through. He looked very small in the chair by the big table, hardly larger than a child, with narrow shoulders slumped forward and a slender neck supporting a head that was too big for his body, and the head looking even bigger than it really was because of the thick black shining curls that covered it. I kept watching him sit there like he was praying, and I kept thinking that he could pray all he wanted to, but God wouldn't hear him, and that he could plead and lie and try all the tricks he could think of, but no one would believe him or pity him or do anything to help him, no one at all.

They put him on the stand at last to tell about the man who had come to tell him to kill, and he described the man again, just as he had to the psychiatrists, his pointed nose and pointed chin and yellow pointed shoes, and he spoke in a very soft voice that could barely be heard but contained all the time, somehow, the threat of rising abruptly to a shrill scream. It was all put on, part of the plan, but he was very clever, a great actor, and he told how the man had appeared the first time while he was standing on a bridge looking down at the water, and had sat down beside him another time in a movie theater, and had met him another time while he was walking along a path in the town park, and had then begun coming to his room late at night to knock softly on the door. No one was supposed to believe that the little man had actually come to him in those ways, or in any way at all, but everyone was supposed to believe that it had happened in his mind, that the little man was an hallucination of insanity, but I knew it hadn't happened that way either, that the man hadn't even appeared in Marilla's mind, and that it was all a story made up to get him out of it. I knew they'd hang him, and I tried to feel within myself the way he'd feel while he was waiting, and walking out to the scaffold, and standing there in the last instant with the black hood over his head and the rope around his neck.

But in the end they didn't hang him at all.
They let him out of it.

They said he wasn't guilty because he wasn't in his right mind and wasn't responsible for his acts, and they sent him off somewhere to a place with cool white rooms and a cool green lawn and doctors to look after him and nurses to wait on him.

I thought a lot about the twelve people on the jury who let him out of it, and I began to hate them the same as Marilla, and I wished they were all dead, dead as Freda, but the more I thought about them the more they seemed like all other people, and after a long time I realized it was because they really were like all other people on earth.

Freda was dead, and no one cared, all the people on earth had said it was all right because of a ridiculous story about a little man with a pointed nose and a pointed chin and yellow pointed shoes who had told a man named Marilla to kill her. Always I saw the face of Marilla and the face of Freda, and they seemed to get mixed up with other faces that I'd never seen before, and I wondered if I was insane myself, but I wasn't, of course, any more than Marilla was.

And now I lay in my room in the hot and humid night, and across the interval between houses, behind the futile beating of blades, Mrs. Willkins’ gross body stirred in her black and gasping room.

And there was something else. Something new.

A man was walking the dark and airless streets of town beneath layers of lifeless leaves.

He walked with mincing steps, and he was far away in the beginning, when I first saw him, and I lay on my bed in my room and followed his progress with cat's eyes through light and shadow across the pattern of the town. At times he was swallowed completely by darkness, and then no eyes could see him but mine, but the people who stirred in wakefulness in the houses he passed could hear the echo of his mincing steps, and he moved with surety of purpose and a pace that never varied through the silent, dappled streets until he came at last to the corner above my house and down the street to the house itself. Without moving from my bed, I could see him standing on the sidewalk below with his face lifted into the milky light of the moon, and then he came up across the porch into the house and up the stairs into the hall and stood outside my door.

I waited in the hot stillness, and after a while he knocked softly, and I got up in the dark, and my hand, swinging out, struck the tumbler on the table by the bed and knocked it to the floor with a sound of brittle thunder that rocked the room. I waited until the reverberations had diminished and died and the soft knock was repeated, and then I crossed to the door and opened it.

The warm fog inside my skull pressed closely on my brain, and though my head didn't ache exactly, it felt very light and queer. The man in the hall looked at me and bowed in a peculiar, old-fashioned way from the waist and smiled politely.

"Excuse me for disturbing you at this hour," he said, “but I must talk with you about a number of people. About Mrs. Willkins first of all, I think. May I come in?"

He was a little man with a long pointed nose and a pointed chin. He wore yellow pointed shoes.

I saw Marilla from my window. He was walking in the yard below with the same man in white who comes now and then to my room, and he sat for a while on a bench under a tree, and I could see him quite clearly. The queer thing is, there was no hate, no longer any hate, and I'm thinking that perhaps I will be allowed to walk in the yard soon, and that Marilla and I may meet and sit together under the tree and talk about these things that happened. It will be pleasant to talk with someone who knows and understands....
THE KILLERS by JOHN D. MACDONALD

1.

We certainly got sick of John Lash. A lot of the guys stopped coming after he started to attend every meeting. It's a skin diving club—you know, just a few guys who like to swim under water in masks and all, shoot fish with those spear guns, all that. We started originally with six guys and we called ourselves The Deep Six. Even when it got up to about fifteen, we kept the name.

When it started we just had masks and fins and crude rigs. We live and work on the Florida Keys. I work in a garage in Marathon. Dusty has a bait and boat rental business in Craig. Lew manages a motel down on Ramrod. That's just to give you an idea of the kind of jokers we are. Just guys who got bitten by this skin diving bug. We tried to meet once a week. Dusty had an old tub that's ideal for it. We meet and pick a spot and head for it and anchor and go down and see what's there. You never know what you'll find. There are holes down there that are crawling with fish.

Once the bug gets you, you're hooked. There are a lot of little clubs like ours. Guys that get along. Guys who like to slant down through that green country, kicking yourself along with your fins, hunting those big fish right down in their own backyard.

We got better equipment as we went along. We bought snorkel tubes when those came out. But the Aqua-lungs were beyond our price range. I think it was Lew who had the idea of everybody chipping in, and of putting in the money we got from selling the catches. When we had enough we bought a lung and two tanks, and then another. In between meetings somebody would run the four tanks up and get them refilled. There was enough time on the tanks so that during a full day everybody got a crack at using one of the lungs.

It was fine there for quite a while. We'd usually get ten or twelve, and some of the wives would come along. We'd have food and beer out there in the sun on that old tub and we had some excitement, some danger, and a lot of fish.

Croy Danton was about the best. A little guy with big shoulders, who didn't have much to say. Not a gloomy guy. He just didn't talk much. His wife, Betty, would usually come along when she could. They've got some rental units at Marathon. He did a lot of the building himself, with the help of a G.I. loan. Betty is what I would call a beautiful girl. She's a blonde and almost the same height as Croy, and you can look at her all day without finding anything wrong with her. She dives a little.

Like I said, it was fine there for a while, until Lew brought this John Lash along one day. Afterward Lew said he was sorry, that Lash had seemed like a nice guy. In all fairness to Lew, I will admit that the first time John Lash joined us he seemed okay. We let him pay his dues. He was new to the Keys. He said he had a temporary job tending bar.

One thing about him, he was certainly built. One of those guys who looks as if he was fat when you see him in clothes. But in his swimming trunks he looked like one of those advertisements. He had a sort of smallish round head and round face and not much neck. He was blonde and beginning to go a little bald. The head didn't seem to fit the rest of him, all that tough brown bulge of muscle. He looked as if a meat axe would bounce right off him. He'd come over from California and he had belonged to a couple of clubs out there and had two West Coast records. He said he had those records and we didn't check, but I guess he did. He certainly knew his way around in the water.

This part is hard to explain. Maybe you have had it happen to you. Like at a party. You're having a good time, a lot of laughs, and then somebody joins the party and it changes everything. You still laugh, but it isn't the same kind of laugh. Everything is different. Like one of those days when the sun is out and then before you know it there is a little haze across the sun and everything looks sort of funny. The water looks oily and the colors are different. That is what John Lash did to The Deep Six. It makes you wonder what happened to a guy like that when he was a kid. It isn't exactly a competitive instinct. They seem to be able to guess just how to rub everybody the wrong way. But you can't put your finger on it. Any of us could tell Dusty his old tub needed a paint job and the bottom scraped and Dusty would say we should come around and help if we were so particular. But John Lash could say it in such a way that it would make Dusty feel ashamed and make the rest of us feel ashamed, as though we were all second rate, and John Lash was used to things being first rate.
When he kidded you he rubbed you raw. When he talked about himself it wasn't bragging because he could always follow it up. He liked horseplay. He was always roughing somebody around, laughing to show it was all in fun, but you had the feeling he was right on the edge of going crazy mad and trying to kill you. We had been a close group, but after he joined we started to give each other a bad time, too. There were arguments and quarrels that John Lash wasn't even in. But they happened because he was there. It was spoiling the way it used to be, and there just wasn't anything we could do about it because it wasn't the sort of club where you can vote people out.

Without the lung, with just the mask, he could stay downstairs longer than anybody. Longer than Croy Danton even, and Croy had been the best until John Lash showed up. We had all tried to outdo Croy, but it had been sort of a gag competition. When we tried to outdo John Lash some of the guys stayed down so long that they were pretty sick when they came back up. But nobody beat him.

Another thing about him I didn't like. Suppose we'd try a place and find nothing worth shooting. For John Lash there wasn't anything that wasn't worth shooting. He had to come up with a fish. I've seen him down there, waving the shiny barb slowly back and forth. The fish come up to take a look at it. A thing like that attracts them. An angel fish or a parrot fish or a lookdown would come up and hang right in front of the barb, studying this strange shiny thing. Then John Lash would pull the trigger. There would be a big gout of bubbles and sometimes the spear would go completely through the fish so that it was threaded on the line like a big bright bead. He'd come up grinning and pull it off and toss it over the side and say, "Let's try another spot, children."

The group shrunk until we were practically down to the original six. Some of the other guys were going out on their own, just to stay away from John Lash. Croy Danton kept coming, and most of the time he would bring Betty. John Lash never horsed around with Croy. Croy, being so quiet, never gave anybody much of an opening. John Lash never paid any special attention to Betty. But I saw it happen. Betty wasn't going to dive after fish. She was just going to take a dip to cool off. John Lash had just taken a can of beer out of the ice chest. He had opened it and it was a little bit warm. I saw him glance up to the bow where Betty was poised to dive. She stood there and then dived off cleanly. John Lash sat there without moving, just staring at the place where she had been. And the too-warm beer foamed out of the can and ran down his fingers and dropped onto his thigh, darkening and matting the coarse blonde hair that had been sundried since his last dive. I saw him drain the can and saw him close his big hand on it, crumpling it, before throwing it over the side. And I saw him watch Betty climb back aboard, sleek and wet, smiling at Croy, her hair waterpasted down across one eye so that as soon as she stood up in the boat, she thumbed it back behind her ear.

I saw all that and it gave me a funny feeling in my stomach. It made me think of the way he would lure the lookdowns close to the barb, and it made me think of the way blood spreads in the water.

After that, John Lash began to move in on Betty with all the grace and tact of a bulldozer. He tried to dab at her with a towel when she came out of the water. If she brought anything up, he had to hustle over to take it off her spear. He found reasons to touch her. Imaginary bugs. Helping her in or out of the boat. Things like that. And all the time his eyes burning in his head.

At first you could see that Croy and Betty had talked about it between meetings, and they had agreed, I guess, to think of it as being sort of amusing. At least they exchanged quick smiles when John Lash was around her. But a thing like that cannot stay amusing very long when the guy on the make keeps going just a little bit further each time. It got pretty tense and, after the worst day, Croy started leaving Betty home. He left her home for two weeks in a row.

Croy left her home the third week and John Lash didn't show up either. We sat on the dock waiting for latecomers. We waited longer than usual. Dusty said, "I saw Lash at the bar yesterday and he said today he was off."

There were only five of us. The smallest in a long, long time. We waited. Croy finally said, "Well, let's go." As we took the boat out I saw Croy watching the receding dock, no expression on his face. It was a funny strained day. I guess we were all thinking the same thing. We had good luck, but it didn't seem to matter. We left earlier than usual. Croy sat in the bow all the way back, as if in that way he'd be nearer shore, and the first one home.

2.
Croy came around to see me at the garage the next morning. I was trying to find a short in an old Willys. When I turned around he was standing there behind me with a funny look on his face. Like a man who's just heard a funny sound in the distance and can't figure out just what it was. He looked right over my left shoulder, and said, "You can tell him for me, Dobey, that I'm going to kill him."

"What do you mean?"

"He came around yesterday. He was a little drunk. He scared Betty. He knew I wouldn't be there. He came around and he scared her. The Sandersons were there. She got loose of him and went over where they were. He kept hanging around. She had to stay with them most of the day. He's got her nervous now. You tell him for me if he makes one more little bit of a move toward her at any time, I'll sure kill him stone dead." He turned around and walked out with that funny look still on his face. It was the most I ever heard him say all at one time.

At noon I went over to the bar where John Lash was working. He'd just come on. I got a beer and he rung it up and slapped my change down. He seemed a little nervous.

"Get anything yesterday?"

"Lew got a big 'cuda. Croy got some nice grouper. Where were you?"

"Oh, I had things to do."

"You better not have any more things like that to do."

He looked at me and put his big hands on the bar and put his face closer to mine. "What kind of a crack is that?"

"Don't try to get tough with me. You messed around Betty Danton yesterday. You scared her. She told Croy. Croy came in this morning and gave me a message to give you. He says you bother her in any other kind of way at any time and he's going to kill you." It sounded funny to say it like that. As if I was in a movie.

John Lash just stared at me out of those little hot eyes of his. "What kind of talk is that? Kill me? With all the come-on that blonde of his has been giving me? Why don't he come here and tell me that? You know damn well why he didn't come here. By God, I'd have thrown him halfway out to the road."

"He told me to tell you. It sounded like he meant it."

"I'm scared to death. Look at me shake."

I finished my beer and put the glass down. "See you," I said.

"I'll be along the next time."

I walked out. One thing about that Lash, he didn't scare worth a damn. I would have been scared. One of those fellows who do a lot of talking wouldn't scare me much. But the quiet ones, like Croy, they bottle things up.

It was nearly three o'clock when Betty came into the garage. She had on a white dress and when she stood there it made the old garage with all the grease and dirt look darker than ever before. She is a girl who looks right at you. Her eyes were worried. I wiped my hands and lit a cigarette and went over to her.

"Dobey, did Croy talk to you?"

"He was in."

"What did he say?"

"Wouldn't he tell you what he said?"

"He just said he gave you a message for John Lash. What was it, Dobey? He won't tell me. He acts so funny. I'm scared, Dobey."
"He told me to tell Lash if he messed around you he was going to kill him. He said Lash scared you."

"Well, he did scare me, sort of. Because he was drunk. But the Sandersons were there. So it was all right. Croy says I have to come along with you next time. What did Lash say?"

"What do you think he said? You can't scare him off that way. I don't think anybody ought to go out next time, Betty. I think we ought to call it off. I think it's going to be a mess."

"Croy says we're going. He's acting funny. We'll have to go. You've got to come along too, Dobey. Please."

3.

That's the way it was. It was something you couldn't stop. Like one of those runaway trains in the old movie serials. Picking up speed as it went. I had time during the week to get hold of the other guys and tell them what was up. I don't know now why we didn't form a sort of delegation and go see John Lash and tell him to move along, off the Keys. There would have been enough of us. But there was something about Lash. Something wild and close to the surface. You could have done all that to a normal guy, but he wasn't normal. I'm not saying he was crazy.

Anyway, I loaded the little Jap automatic I had brought back from Saipan and put it in the paper sack with my lunch. That's the way I felt about the day.

Dusty and Lew and I were the first ones to arrive. We put the gear in the old tub. Lew had gotten his new Arbalete gun with the double sling and we hefted it and admired it and then we talked about maybe getting our own compressor some time for the two double-tank lungs. I crushed a damp cigarette and rubbed the glass on my face mask. Two more of the regulars arrived. There was the feel of trouble in that day. A different shimmer in the water. A different blue in the sky. A car door slammed and pretty soon Croy and Betty came around the corner of the fish house and down to the dock, laden with gear. For a time I guess we were all hoping that John Lash wouldn't show. It would have been a good day then, like the days before he came along and joined us.

But as hope grew stronger and Dusty started to fool with the old engine, John Lash came down to the dock, walking cat-light, carrying his sack of gear and lunch and beer, his personal Saetta gun in his other hand, looking slimmer and frailer than it was because it was John Lash who carried it, walking toward us, sun picking sweat-lights off his brown shoulders.

I expected it right then and there. I saw Betty hunch herself a little closer to Croy and start to put her hand on his arm and then change her mind. But John Lash came aboard, saying a lot of loud hellos, banging his gear down, opening the ice chest to pile his cans of beer in there.

He didn't seem to pay any special attention to Betty, or Croy either. He sat on the rail back near Dusty at the wheel while we headed out and down the coast. It was enough to make you want to relax, but you couldn't. The water had a greased look. We had agreed to try Gilman's Reef. There is good coral there, and rock holes. I don't know whether we were trying to keep a lid on trouble, but the other five of us did more talking than usual, more kidding around. But laughter had a flat sound across the water. Lew checked the Aqualungs. I had me a beer.

When we got close I went up and stood on the bow and had Dusty bring it up to a place that looked right. I let the anchor line slide through my hands. It hit bottom in twenty-five feet, which was about right. We drifted back and it caught and we swung and steadied there, about twenty feet off the reef shallows. No trouble had started and it didn't look like there would be any. Croy and Lew went down first, Lew with a lung and Croy with a mask only, just to take a look around. I noticed that when Croy lowered himself easily into the water he glanced at Betty and then back to where John Lash was working his feet into the fins. He ducked under and one fin swirled the water as he went down.

John Lash got his fins on and flapped forward to where Betty sat on the rail. He laughed out loud and wrapped a big brown fist in that blonde hair of hers and turned her face upward and kissed her hard on the mouth. She struggled and clawed at him and fell to her hands and knees when he released her.

"Hard to get, aren't you, blondie?" he asked.
Dusty said, “Cut it out, Lash. Cut it out!”

"This is nothing to you, Dusty. Keep out of it! This is me and Betty."

"Get away from me," she said. Her eyes were funny and her mouth had a broken look. I picked up the paper sack and put my hand inside and got hold of the automatic. I couldn't tell what he was going to try to do. He stood spread-legged on the deck watching the water. Betty moved away from him toward the stern, beyond me and Dusty.

Croy broke water and shoved his mask up. He was a dozen feet from the boat.

John Lash stood there and laughed down at him and said, "I just kissed your woman, Danton. I understand you got ideas of making something out of it. I got a message from you."

Croy took one glance at Betty. He brought the Arbalete spear gun up almost off-hand and fired it directly at John Lash's middle. I heard the zing and slap of the rubber slings, heard Betty's scream, heard John Lash's hard grunt of surprise as he threw himself violently to one side. I don't know how he got away from it. But he did. The spear hit the end of the nylon and fell to the water on the far side of the boat. John Lash recovered his balance. He stared at Croy as though he were shocked. He roared then and went off the side in a long fiat dive, hurling himself at Croy. There was a splash of water, a flash of brown arms and then they were both gone. I got a glimpse of them under the water as they sank out of sight. Betty screamed again, not as loud.

4.

Nobody was set to go down. We all started grabbing gear at once. I went off the side about the same moment as Dusty, and at the last moment I had snatched up John Lash's Saetta gun. It was cocked and I don't know what I expected to do with it but I took it. I went down through the deepening shades of green, looking for them. I saw movement and cut over toward it, but it was Lew wearing the lung. He saw me and spread his arms in a gesture that meant he hadn't spotted anything worth shooting. He didn't know what was going on. I motioned him to go up. I guess I looked as though I meant it. He shrugged and headed up.

I looked hard, but I couldn't find them and I could tell by the way my chest felt that it was nearly time to head up. I took it as long as I could. I thought I saw movement below me and to the right but I was close to blacking out and I went up. Dusty was hanging on the side of the boat. Betty stood staring down into the water. I knew from her face that they hadn't come up. I took deep breaths and turned and went down again and got part way down when I saw them. John Lash with a look of agony on his face, was working his way up, kicking hard, one hand holding Croy by the waistband of his trunks. Croy was loose in the water. I went over and got hold of Croy by the wrist. I fired the spear off to the side so the gun would float up. Lash was having a hard time of it. I got Croy up and we got him over the side and put him face down on the bottom and Lew, who had the lung and tanks off, began to work on him. Somebody behind me helped John Lash aboard. Dusty had to grab Betty and pull her away from Croy so Les could use the artificial respiration without her getting in his way.

She turned against Dusty and she was crying. Those were the sounds. The small noises she made, and John Lash's labored breathing, and the rhythmic slap and creak of the respiration.

"Tried ... to kill me," Lash said. "You ... you saw it. Then ... tried to drown me. Tried to hold me even ... after he'd passed out."

Nobody answered him. The boat moved in the offshore swell. Loose gear rattled. Croy retched and coughed. Les continued until Croy began to struggle weakly. Les moved back then and Croy rolled over, closing his eyes against the sun.

Betty dropped to her knees beside him saving words that did not make sentences. Croy raised his head. He looked at her and then pushed her aside, gently. He got to his knees. I tried to help him up but he refused the help. He got to his feet with an enormous effort. He stood unsteadily and looked around until he saw John Lash. As soon as he saw Lash he bent and picked up a loose spear. He held it by the middle, the muscles of his arm bunching.

John Lash moved quickly. He got, up and said, “Wait! Hold it! Croy, wait ... “ Dusty tried to grab Croy but he moved quickly. The spear tip gashed John Lash's arm as he tried to fend it off, and as Croy drew back to thrust
again, John Lash hit him flush in the face with one of those big brown fists. Croy bounced back and hit the engine hatch and rebounded to fall heavily and awkwardly, unconscious.

Betty reached him and turned him and sat, his head in her lap, arm curled protectively around his head, murmuring to him. Lew wet the end of a towel and gave it to her. She wiped the blood from his mouth and looked at John Lash and then the rest of us with cold hate. “Why didn't you stop him? Why are you letting him do this to Croy?”

"I had to hit him!” John Lash said, his voice a half-octave higher than usual. “You saw what he was trying to do. Why didn't you guys stop him?"

Croy's mouth puffed rapidly. He mumbled something. Dusty started the engine. “We better get back. You want to get the anchor up, Dobey?"

I broke it free and hauled it in, coiling the line. When I moved back I saw that Croy was sitting up. Betty was holding onto his arm. She was saying, with a gradually increasing edge in her voice, “No, darling. No. No please, darling.”

But Croy was looking beyond her, looking at John Lash. Lash was trying to grin. It wasn't a grin as much as it was just a sort of twist he was wearing on his mouth. He'd look at Croy and then look away. Croy got up then with Betty holding onto him. He lurched over toward the rail and grabbed one of the gaffs. Lash came back up onto his feet quickly and said, “Grab him!”

Croy shook Betty loose. Lew and I grabbed Croy. It was like grabbing hard rubber. He lowered his head and butted Lew over the rail. Dusty swung the boat to keep the prop clear of Lew. It made me lose my balance. As I staggered Croy rapped me across my shins with the handle end of the gaff and hot stars went off behind my eyes from the sudden pain of it. When I could see again I saw him going for Lash with the gaff. They were poised for a moment, muscles like they were cut out of stone, both holding onto the long gaff. Then John Lash, with his greater strength, hurled Croy back toward the stern again. Croy fell, harder than before, but he hadn't been hit.

"Keep him off me!” Lash yelled. “Keep him off me!”

Croy got slowly and clumsily back to his feet and started back toward Lash. I was set to take another grab at Croy. Lew was climbing aboard. The other two guys were having no part of it. They were plain scared. Just as I was about to grab Croy he put his weight on his left foot and went down. I could see the ankle puffing visibly. He never took his eyes off John Lash. He had fallen near his gear. He fumbled and came out with a fish knife with a cork handle. Holding it in his hand he began to crawl toward the bow, toward John Lash again, the handle thumping against the cockpit boards every time he put his right hand down. I fell on his arm. I could hear Lash yelling. I couldn't make out what he was saying. I got Croy's wrist and managed to twist the knife out of his hand. Lew had him around the middle. We hauled him over and tried to sit on him. He kept struggling with stubborn, single-minded strength. Once he broke free and started crawling again toward Lash, puffed lips pulled back from bloody teeth, but we got him again.

Dusty helped that time and one of the other guys and we held him and tried to talk sense into him, but he kept on struggling. We finally got heavy nylon line around his wrists and tied his arms behind him. We thought that was going to be enough, but even with his hands like that he managed to get on his feet and, limping badly, try to get at Lash. Dusty put a length of the anchor line around the engine hatch and we tied him there around his chest, sitting on the litter of gear and water and smashed sandwiches and cans of beer, staring at John Lash and fighting the heavy line constantly.

Once he was tied up, Betty kneeling beside him, trying to soothe him, John Lash lighted a cigarette. His hands shook. “He get like that often?” he asked “Look at him. He still wants to get at me."

Croy's shoulders bulged as he fought the rope. Lash kept glancing at him. We were all breathing hard. Dusty examined skinned knuckles. “I never see him like that, not that bad. Old Croy he gets an idea in his head, you can't get it out. No sir.”
"He'll get over this, won't he? When he cools off."

"He's not going to cool off at all," Dusty said. "Not one little bit. Tomorrow, the next day, it'll be just the same."

"What am I supposed to do then?" Lash asked.

"I don't know. I really don't know," Dusty said. "You got to either kill him or he's got it in his mind he's going to kill you. Known him twenty years and he's never gone back on his word one time. Or his daddy before him."

Lash licked his lips. I watched him. I saw him sitting there, nervous. It was something he'd never run into. It was something I guess few men ever run into in their lifetime. I could see him wishing he'd never made any sort of a pass at Betty.

Croy fought the rope, doggedly, constantly, sweat running down his face.

John Lash lighted another cigarette. "He'll get over it," he said unconvincingly.

"I wouldn't want to bet much on that," I said.

There was that big John Lash sitting there in the sun, a whole head and forty-fifty pounds bigger than little Croy Danton. And without the faintest idea in the world as to what to do about it. Either way, there didn't seem to be any kind of an out for John Lash.

"He's nuts. You people are all nuts down here." Lash said.

I sensed what was forming in his mind. I said, "When we dock we'll see if we can hold him right here for about an hour. You ought to pack up and take off."

"Run from a character like him?" Lash said.

Croy's arms came free suddenly and he tried to shove the line up off his chest. His wrists were bloody where the nylon had punished them. Three of us jumped him and got his wrists tied again. He didn't make a sound. But he fought hard. Betty kept trying to quiet him down, talking gentle, her lips close to his ear. But you could see that for Croy there were two people left in the world. Him and John Lash.

It took about forty minutes to get back in. Nobody talked. I didn't like to watch Croy. It was a sort of thing I have seen in Havana at the cock fights. I hear it is like that, too, at the bull fights. A distillation, I guess you would call it, of violence. The will to kill. Something that comes from a sort of crazy pride, a primitive pride, and once you have started it, you can't turn it off.

It was easy to see that John Lash didn't want to look at him either. But he had to keep glancing at him to make sure he wasn't getting loose. During that forty minutes John Lash slowly unraveled. He came apart way down in the middle of himself where it counted. I don't think any of us would say he was a coward. He wasn't yellow. But this was something he couldn't understand. He'd never faced it before and few men ever face it in their lifetime. To Lash I guess Croy wasn't a man any more. He was a thing that wanted to kill him. A thing that lusted to kill him so badly that even defenseless it would still keep coming at him.

By the time we got in, John Lash wasn't even able to edge by Croy to pick up his gear. We had to get it and pass it up to him where he stood on the dock. John Lash looked down and he looked older in the face. Maybe it was the first time he had seriously thought about his own death. It shrunk him a little.

"Hold him for an hour. I'll go away," he said. He didn't say goodbye. There wasn't any room in him to think of things like that. He walked away quickly and a bit unsteadily. He went around the corner of the fish house. We've never seen him since.

Croy kept watching the place where John Lash had disappeared. Betty kept whispering to him. But in about ten minutes Croy stopped struggling.
"There, baby. There," I heard Betty whisper.

He gave a big convulsive shudder and looked around, first at her and then at the rest of us, frowning a little as if he had forgotten something.

"Sorry," he said huskily. "Real sorry." And that is all he ever said about it. He promised that he was all right. I carried his stuff to their car. Betty bound his ankle with a strip of towel. He leaned heavily on her to the car.

6.

That's almost all, except the part I don't understand. The Deep Six is back up to about fifteen again. We have a compressor now, and new spots to go, and we did fine in the inter-club competitions this year. We're easy with each other, and have some laughs.

But Croy never came back. He and Betty, they go out by themselves in a kicker boat when the weather is right. I don't see any reason why he didn't come back. He says hello when we see him around. Maybe he's ashamed we saw him like that, saw that wildness.

One morning not long ago I went out alone on the Gulf side. I got out there early and mist hung heavy on the water. I tilted my old outboard up and rowed silently. It was kind of eerie there in the mist in the early morning. All of a sudden I began to hear voices. It was hard to tell direction but they kept getting louder. There was a deep voice, a man's voice, talking and talking and talking, and every so often a woman would say one or two words, soft and soothing.

All of a sudden I recognized the voices as Croy's and Betty's. I couldn't catch any of the words. I rested on the oars. It made me feel strange. I figured I could get closer and find out what in the world Croy could talk about for so long.

But then understanding came to me suddenly, and it wasn't necessary to listen. I understood suddenly that there was only one subject on which a quiet guy like Croy could talk and talk and talk, and that the situation wasn't over and maybe would never be over. And I realized that embarrassment was only part of the reason Croy didn't come skin-diving with us any more; the rest of the reason was that the sight of us reminded him too strongly of John Lash. I turned the dinghy and headed off the other way until their voices faded and were gone.

Later in the morning after the sun had burned the mist off, I was spin casting with a dude and monofilament line over a weed bed when they went by, heading in, their big outboard roaring, the bow wave breaking the glassy look of the morning Gulf.

Croy was at the motor, Betty up in the bow.

Betty waved at me and Croy gave me a sort of little nod as they went by. I waved back. Their swell rocked me and then they were gone in the distance.

She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. You could look at her all day and not find anything wrong.
They had eighteen thousand dollars, they couldn't spend a nickel. Davy Wyatt spread the money on the kitchen table, in neat piles, according to their various denominations, and just sat there, looking. After awhile this got on Phil Pennick's nerves.

"Cut it out, kid," the older man said. "You're just eatin' your heart out."

"Don't I know it."

Davy sighed, and swept the bills back into the neat leather briefcase. He tossed it carelessly onto his bunk, and joined it there a minute later, lying down with his fingers locked behind his head.

"I'm goin' out," Phil said suddenly.

"Where to?"

"Pick tip some sandwiches, maybe a newspaper. Take a little walk."

The kid's face paled. "Think it's a good idea?"

"You got a better one? Listen, we can rot in this crummy joint."

"It's your neck," the kid said. "Don't blame me if you get picked up. With that dame playin' footsie with the cops—"

"Shut up! If they get me, they'll have your neck in the chopper ten minutes later. So don't wish me any bad luck, pal."

Davy sat up quickly. "Hey, no kidding. Think you ought to take the chance?"

The older man smiled. The smile did nothing for the grim set of his features, merely shifted the frozen blankness, which was the result of three prison terms. He put a soft fedora on his gray head and adjusted it carefully.

"We took our chance already," he said as he opened the door. "And as far as the dame goes—you leave that up to me."

He hoisted the .38 out of his shoulder holster, checked the cartridges, and slipped it back. The gesture was so casual, so relaxed, that the kid realized once again that he was working with a pro.

Davy swallowed hard, and said, "Sure, Phil. I'll leave it up to you."

The street was full of children. Phil Pennick liked children, especially around a hideout. They discouraged rash action by the police. He walked along like a man out to get the morning paper, or a pack of cigarettes, or to shoot a game of pool. Nobody looked at him twice, even though his clothes were a shade better than anybody else's in that slum area.

Davy's last words were stuck in his thoughts. "I'll leave it up to you ... " It was easy enough to reassure the kid that the old pro would work them out of trouble. Only this time, the old pro wasn't so sure.

They had planned a pretty sound caper. Something simple, without elaborate preparations. It involved one small bank messenger, from a little colonial-style bank in Brooklyn, the kind of messenger who never seemed to tote more than a few grand around. Only they had been doubly surprised. The bank messenger had turned out to be a scrapper, and the loot had turned out to be bigger than they had ever dreamed. Now they had the money, and the little bonded errand boy had two bullets in his chest. Was he dead or alive? Phil didn't know, and hardly cared. One more arrest
and conviction, and he was as good as dead anyway. He wasn't made to be a lifer; he'd rather be a corpse.

But they had the money. That was the important thing. In twenty years of trying, Phil Pennick had never come up with the big one. It would have been a truly great triumph, if the cops hadn't found their witness. They hadn't seen the woman until it was too late. She was standing in a doorway of the side street where they had made their play. She was a honey blonde, with a figure out of 52nd Street, and a pair of sharp eyes. Her face didn't change a bit when Phil spotted her. She just looked back, coldly, and watched the bank messenger sink to the sidewalk with his hands trying to back the blood. Then she had slammed the front door behind her.

The kid had wanted to go in after her, but Phil said no. The shots had been loud, and he wasn't going to take any more chances. They had rushed into the waiting auto, and headed for the pre-arranged hideout.

Phil stopped by a newsstand. He bought some cigarettes, a couple of candy bars, and the Journal. He was reading the headlines as he walked into the tiny delicatessen adjoining. The holdup story was boxed at the bottom of the page. It didn't tell him anything he didn't already know. The honey blonde had talked all right. And she was ready to identify the two men who had shot and killed the bank's errand boy. Shot and killed ... Phil shook his head. The poor slob, he thought.

In the delicatessen, he bought four roast beef sandwiches and a half dozen cans of cold beer. Then he walked back to the apartment, thinking hard.

As soon as he came in, the kid grabbed for the newspaper. He found the story and read it avidly. When he looked up, his round young face was frightened.

"What'll we do, Phil? This dame can hang us!"

"Take it easy." He opened a beer.

"Are you kidding? Listen, one of the first things the cops'll do is go looking for you. I mean—let's face it, Phil—this is your kind of caper."

The older man frowned. "So what?"

"So what? So they'll parade you in front of this dame, and she'll scream bloody murder. Then what happens to me?"

Phil took his gun out and began cleaning it. "I'll stop her," he promised.

"How? They probably got a million cops surrounding her. They won't take any chances. Hell no. So how can you stop her?"

"I got a plan," Phil said. "You're just going to have to trust me, kid. Okay?"

"Yeah, but—"

"I said trust me. Don't forget, Davy." He looked at his partner hard. "This wouldn't have happened at all—if you didn't have a jerky trigger finger."

They ate the sandwiches, drank the beer, and then the older man went to the leather brief case and opened it. He lifted out a thin packet of bills and put it into his wallet.

"Hey," Davy said.

"Don't get in an uproar. I'm goin' to need a few bucks, for what I've got in mind. Until I come back, I'll trust you to take care of the rest." Phil put on his jacket again. "Don't get wild ideas, kid. Remember, you don't leave the room until I get back. And if we have any visitors—watch that itchy finger."

"Sure, Phil," the kid said.
Phil had a hard time getting a taxi. When he did, he gave the driver the Manhattan address of a garment house on lower Seventh Avenue.

There was a girl behind the frosted glass cage on the fifth floor, and she was pretty snippy.

"I want to see Marty Hirsch," Phil said.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hirsch is in conference—"

"Don't give me that conference junk. Just pick up your little phone and tell him a good friend from Brooklyn Heights is here. He'll know who it is."

The girl's nose tilted up, but she made the call.

The man who hurried out to see Phil was short and paunchy. He was in shirtsleeves, and his sunset-colored tie was hanging loosely around his neck.

"Er, hello," he said nervously, looking towards the switchboard. "Look, Phil, suppose we can talk in the hallway? I got a customer inside."

"What's the matter, Marty? Ashamed of your friends?"

"Please, Phil!"

In the hallway, the garment man said: "Look, I told you never to come here." He wiped sweat from his face. "It doesn't look good, for both of us. We should do all our business by phone."

"You don't understand," Phil said. "I ain't got nothin' hot for you to buy. I'm out of that business, Marty."

"Oh? So what is it then?"

"I just want a little favor, Marty. For an old pal."

The small eyes narrowed. "What kind of favor?"

"You got a big uniform department. Right?"

"Yeah. So what? Army and Navy stuff. Things like that. So what do you want?"

"A uniform," Phil said easily. "That's all. A cop uniform. Only it's gotta be good."

"Now look, Phil—"

"Don't give me a hard time, Marty. We got too long a friendship. I want to play a joke on a friend of mine. You can fix me up with something, can't you?"

The garment man frowned. "I'll tell you what. I got here some stock models. Only they're not so new, and they ain't got no badges. And no gun, you understand."

"Don't worry about that. I got the potsy. Will this uniform pass? I mean, if another cop saw it?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. It'll pass. I'm telling you."

"Swell. Then trot it out, Marty." The man looked doubtful, so Phil added: "For the sake of a friend, huh?"

Phil walked out into the street with the large flat box under his arm, feeling that he was getting somewhere. Then he waved a cab up to the curb, and gave him the cross streets where Davy Wyatt had killed the bank messenger.

It was chancey, but worth it. He didn't know whether the blonde was cooling her high heels in a police station, or
just knee-deep in cops guarding her at her own apartment house.

He knew the answer the minute he stepped out of the cab. There was a police car parked at the opposite curb, and two uniformed patrolmen were gabbing near the front entrance of the blonde's residence.

He looked up and down the street until he found what he was looking for. There was a small restaurant with a red-striped awning. He walked up to it briskly, and saw it was called: ANGIE'S. He glanced at the menu pasted to the window, then pushed the door open.

He surveyed the room, and it looked good. The men's john was in a hallway out of the main dining room, and there was a side exit that would come in handy when he made the switch in clothing.

There weren't many customers. Phil took a table near the hall, and placed his package on the opposite chair. A bored waiter took his order. After being served, Phil chewed patiently on a dish of tired spaghetti. Then he paid his check and went into the john.

He changed swiftly, in a booth. Then he put the clothes he'd taken off inside the box and tied the string tight. He pinned the badge to his shirt, and dropped the .38 into the police holster.

Leaving by the side door, he dropped the box into one of the trash cans near the exit.

Then he crossed the street nonchalantly, headed straight for the apartment house.

"Hi," he said, to the two cops out front. "You guys seen Weber?" Weber was a precinct lieutenant that Phil knew only too well.

"Weber? Hell, no. Was he supposed to be here?"

"I thought so. I'm from the Fourth Precinct. We got a call from him awhile ago. We picked up somebody last night, on a B and E; might be one of the guys you're looking for."

"Search me," one of the cops said. "What do you want us to do about it?"

Phil swore. "I don't know what to do myself. Sendin' me on a wild goose chase. He was supposed to be here by now."

"Can't help you, pal." The other cop yawned widely.

"Dame in her apartment?" Phil asked casually.

"Yeah," the second cop answered. "Lying down." He snickered. "I wouldn't mind sharing the bunk."

"Maybe I better talk to her. I got the guy's picture. Maybe she can tell me something."

"I donno." The first cop scratched his cheek. "We ain't heard nothing about that."

"What the hell," the second one said. He turned to Phil. "She's in Four E."

"Okay," Phil said. He started into the house. "If Weber shows up, you tell him I'm upstairs. Right?"

"Right."

He shut the door behind him, stood there long enough to let out a relieved sigh. Then he stepped into the automatic elevator, punched the button marked Four.

On the fourth floor, he rapped gently on the door marked E. "Yeah?" The woman's voice sounded tired, but not scared. "Who is it?"

"Police," Phil said crisply. "Got a picture for you lady."
"What kind of a picture?" Her voice was close to the doorframe.

"Guy we picked up last night. Maybe the one we're lookin' for."

He could hear the chain being lifted; the door was opened. Close up, the blonde wasn't as young or as lush as he had imagined. She was wearing a faded housecoat of some shiny material, clutching it around her waist without too much concern for the white flesh that was still revealed.

Phil stepped inside and took off his cap. "This won't take long, lady." He closed the door.

She turned her back on him and walked into the room. He unbuttoned the holster without hurry, and lifted the gun out. When she turned around, the gun was pointed dead center. She opened her mouth, but not a sound came out.

"One word and I shoot," Phil said evenly. He backed her against a sofa, and shot a look towards the other room. "What's in there?"

"Bedroom," she said.

"Move."

She cooperated nicely. She stretched out on the bed at his command—and smiled coyly. She must have figured he wanted something else besides her death. Then he picked up a pillow and shoved it into her stomach.

"Hold that," he said.

She held it. Then he shoved the gun up against it and squeezed the trigger. She looked surprised and angry and deceived, and then she was dead.

The sound had been well muffled, but Phil wanted to be sure. He went to the window that faced the street and looked down. The two cops were still out front, chewing the fat complacently. He smiled, slipped the gun into the holster, and went out.

The cops looked at him without too much interest.

"Well?" the first one said.

"Dames," Phil grinned. "Says she knows from nothing. Weber's gonna be awfully disappointed." He waved his hand. "I'm goin' back to the precinct. So long, guys."

They said, "So long," and resumed their gabbing.

Phil rounded the corner. There was a cab at the hack stand. He climbed into the back.

"What's up, officer?" the hackie grinned. "Lost your prowl car?"

"Don't be a wise guy." He gave him the address and settled back into a contented silence, thinking about the money.

It was dusk by the time he reached the neighborhood. He got off some four blocks from the tenement, and walked the rest of the distance. Some of the kids on the block hooted at him because of the uniform, and he grinned.

He went up the stairs feeling good. When he pushed open the door, Davy shot him once in the stomach. Phil didn't have time to make him realize the mistake he was making before the second bullet struck him in the center of his forehead.

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I stood in the open door of the cabana, the sullen swish of the waves on the beach behind me. The moonlight filtered in through the louvered windows, throwing long, grasping bars on the floor and on the bed. I stared at the bed, and for a second I thought it was the moonlight playing tricks with my eyes.

She lay there like a crooked stick, her long blond hair fanned out on the pillow behind her. I recognized the hair, and that was all. The rest of her was a broken travesty of Eileen, not the Eileen I'd left ten minutes ago. Ten minutes. A short time. Barely time enough to pull the speedboat up onto the beach into the protection of the cove. Just time enough to do that and then hurry back to the cabana.

Just time enough for a murder.

I didn't look at her again. I walked straight past the bed, stopping beside the dresser. I moved quickly, like a man in a dream, my body performing actions while my mind raced far ahead. The .38 was in the top drawer where I'd left it. I took it out now and felt the strong feel of the Walnut grip in my palm. Then I left the cabana.

He'd left a clear track in the wet sand. His footprints were large, and they ploughed deep into the sand. I tried to picture him as I followed the prints. A big guy. Muscular, maybe. Wild-eyed. Crazy enough to have beaten Eileen's face into ...

I felt my fingers tighten around the grip of the gun. A fresh breeze was blowing off the ocean, and it played with my hair, flirted with the back of my neck. My feet whispered in the sand as I followed the tracks. Far off, down near the shelter of the rocks, I saw the red and white speedboat bobbing gently on the swells, her bow up on the sand, her stern squatting in the water.

I looked down at the footprints, suddenly realizing where they were heading. The sweat broke out on my forehead in a fine, gritty film. The speedboat!

I saw him then.

The moon suddenly popped from behind a cloud, spilling onto the beach like molten silver, spreading over the silent dunes, catching the man in a noose of glittering moonlight.

He was as big as I thought he'd be. He wore white flannels that flapped in the wind as he ran heavily up the beach. He almost looked comical, a big balloon of a man with his clothes flapping around him like a circus clown's. He looked funny except for the glint of gun-metal in his right hand.

Except for that, and the fact that it wasn't funny at all. None of it. Not one bit of it.

He turned abruptly, glanced nervously at the water, and then looked back at me. I stood where I was, crossing my left arm in front of my chest, resting my gun hand on it and taking careful aim. I pressed the safety catch, and then I squeezed the trigger. An orange lance of flame licked out at the darkness. The explosion was loud
in my ears, and I smelled the stench of cordite, heard the slug as it whistled across the beach. A little burst of sand ploughed up about two feet away from his heels. He dropped to the sand and whirled, the gun glinting in the light of the moon.

I saw a sudden streak of fire, and then I heard the loud bellow as the gun thundered in his fist. I dropped down, my cheek against the cold moistness. I thought fleetingly of Eileen, of the warmth of her, the way I had drowned myself in the softness of her mouth. The thought sent a hard knot to my stomach, and I got to my knees and began crawling forward.

I heard a faint scraping, and then the sound of an engine coughing into life. The man laughed shrilly as I jumped to my feet and started running toward the speedboat. I heard the motor catch and then hum as he pulled the throttle wide. I had crossed the beach now, and I plunged into the icy water, the waves springing up around my knees in a numbing embrace. I leaped forward, the gun in the waistband of my trousers, both hands clawing for the stern of the boat. The boat seemed to fight me. It pulled away in a sudden spurt of energy, tearing skin from the palms of my hands. I reached out again, getting a good grip this time, pulling myself over the fantail as the boat headed out from the shore, moving at an oblique angle toward the breakwater.

I dropped down into the stern-sheets and reached for the .38 at my waist.

"No," his voice said.

I looked up. He was holding a .32 on me, a small gun in a fat fist. He held the fist steady, his fat forefinger barely squeezing into the trigger guard. The moon came out then, slipping from behind the cloud, lighting his face. He had practically no chin. His face seemed to end with flabby lips that were tilted now in a vacuous smile. Above his lips, his nose sat like a steel rivet, compact, hard.

I looked at his eyes, then, and they gleamed dully in the moonlight, the pupils wide and staring. A shudder ran down my spine like a drop of ice water. I looked down at the gun again, and then up to his eyes. He was hopped to his hairline. That crazy little light danced in his eyes, the dream-light, the gleam that spelled drug addict. He was snow blind, and I could see the puncture marks on the layers of fat that hung from his arms now.

He kept smiling, his mind toying with a half-remembered idea, his eyes staring at me with a false look of concentration.

"What now?" I asked. He was half-turned away from me, one huge paw clutching the wheel of the boat.

"Don't talk," he said. He said it quickly, as if I'd stepped on a dream he was having.

"Why'd you kill her, you lousy bastard?"

"Her? Kill? Oh, yes ... yes ... " He kept smiling, and I wanted to reach out and wrap my fingers around the folded fat on his throat.

"I saw her through the window," he said. "I was walking by and I saw her through the window." His eyebrows lifted slightly, and he grinned, as if he were sharing an obscene joke with me. "She was undressing. She took off her clothes and hung them on the chair, and I watched her and ... "

"Shut up!" I said. In a minute, I was going to jump him and tear out his throat. One minute. One min....

"She was nice. A piece, you know? She was standing there without a stitch, and that's when I went in. Man, she was nice. I grabbed her, and I began feeling her and ... "

"Shut up!" I screamed. "You lousy filthy bastard!" My fingers itched, and I wanted to pound my fists into his face. I took a step forward, and the gun came up, leveling on my chest.

I looked at the gun, and then I looked out over the bow of the boat, saw the rocks ahead. I backed away, not saying anything. I shifted my eyes back to his face, and they didn't change position as he went on speaking.
"She fought me. You dig that? She fought me!" He acted surprised, and I thought of Eileen under his clutching fingers and the hate boiled up inside me. The bow sliced through the waves, heading toward the rocks on the breakwater. He didn't turn around. He kept looking at me and smiling, the gun pointed at my chest.

We hit the rocks with a splintering crash, and my gun was out of the waistband almost before we struck. He screamed and tried to turn the wheel, and then he remembered he had a passenger aboard. He whirled rapidly as the boat tossed to starboard, the .32 coming up automatically, the crazy light still in his eyes. The smile had vanished from his face now, and his lips were drawn tight across his teeth. I let him bring the .32 all the way up.

I fired then, and the gun flew out of his hand as the bullet struck it. I saw bone splinters pierce his skin, saw the blood suddenly appear in the palm of his hand like a squashed tomato.

I was breathing hard. I took a step closer to him, and he backed up against the wheel, terror in his eyes. “All right,” I said. “All right.”

I fired again, right at his face. He brought his hands up an instant after the bullet smashed the bridge of his nose. I kept saying, “All right, you bastard, all right,” and I kept yanking on the trigger, the .38 bucking in my hand, the blood bursting out of his eyes, spilling from his mouth. I kept firing until the gun was empty, and his face was a wet sponge that splashed against the deck as he toppled forward.

He was lying in the bottom of the boat when I left him, his white flannels dripping with red. I walked back on top of the breakwater, finally reaching the beach, and padding across the wet sand to the cabana.

She lay on the bed while I packed. She lay very still.

I put the .38 back into its holster, and then I took my police shield from the drawer and shoved it into the suitcase beside the gun. The boys would be surprised to see me back so soon. I was supposed to have two weeks. They'd be surprised.

I didn't bother taking any of my things out of the drawer. I just snapped the lid of the suitcase shut and looked at the writing scrawled across the top.

*Just Married,* it said.

I stared at it until it began to blur. I looked over at Eileen just once more, and then I left the cabana.

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SIX FINGERS by HAL ELLSON

"Which one?"

"That one on the right, the blonde."

Six Fingers had just lit a cigarette. He threw it away and stared, eyes thoughtful, mouth slightly open.

"Like her?" said Joey, nudging with his elbow.

"She's pretty," Six Fingers admitted. "But there's lots of pretty ones."

"Yeah, but ... " Joey leaned toward his friend and his voice dropped as he told what he knew. It was a legend that had traveled the length and breath of the neighborhood.

"That's true?" Six Fingers asked. There was doubt in his voice.

"Like to meet her?" Joey asked. "I know her good."

"What for?" said Six Fingers.

"What for? Are you dumb, or what?"

"Well, I don't know if I like her."

"What's that got to do with it?" Joey looked at Six Fingers as if he thought him mad.

"Well, I got to like them," Six Fingers explained awkwardly.

"That don't make sense," Joey answered, and for him it didn't.

"Well, I don't like girls."

Joey squinted at Six Fingers. He was small for his age, thin, with sharp eyes and a weasel face, smart in the ways of his own world, quicker-thinking than Six Fingers.

"Aw, you're nuts. You better go home to your mother."

Six Fingers ignored these remarks and lit another cigarette.

Later, he lay in his room. Night had fallen; the dark blue of the summer sky seemed to shimmer in the room. Six Fingers’ mother called him and he heard but refused to answer. Finally she opened the door and said, "Are you going to eat, or do I have to throw your supper in the garbage pail?"

"Throw it in the garbage pail," he answered, and the door slammed. He was glad to be alone again with his thoughts, wanting to lie there, but the street sounds stabbed like pins and a restlessness had entered his body, a kind he'd never known before.

Finally he got up. It was darker now, the house quiet. His mother sat in the living room. Avoiding her, he made his way out of the house and went down the stairs. Cissie was on his mind. All afternoon he'd retained the image of her, a new and provocative one made so by Joey's tale. All afternoon his mind had woven fantasies of a new kind. And yet he didn't like Cissie herself, which was something he couldn't understand.
No one on the street; his friends had gone off somewhere but he didn't mind now. He was even glad that they weren't about. His mind was blank as he moved down the block, he didn't know where he was going. But he had to walk, the unease that afflicted him more acute.

He paused at the corner and looked toward the ice-cream parlor. About to pass it, he stopped and looked in. Someone had laughed.

It was Cissie and he saw her smiling at him; he had no doubt of that. Smiling in a way that made him shiver. He thought of Joey's words and the way he had laughed at him. Well, he'd show Joey, he thought, and he wanted to go to Cissie but didn't have the nerve.

Cissie herself made the move. She came out of the store moving languidly, pretending sophistication, a pretty girl with a keen face and eyes. Immediately, she sensed Six Fingers' shyness and smiled to herself.

"You're Six Fingers, aren't you?" she said, close to him now.

He nodded, regarding her with a puzzled frown. Close up, she was prettier, exciting, yet he didn't like her.

"How'd you know my name?" he finally asked.

"Joey told me. You're new around."

"That's right."

"How'd you get the funny nickname?"

As soon as he'd moved into the neighborhood his new companions, in the direct and unthinking cruelty of youth, had given him this name upon noticing his right hand with the extra finger. That hadn't bothered him at all. In fact, it was expected, for the name had followed him from the old neighborhood and he'd grown used to it. Besides, there was a certain distinction in possessing an extra finger.

But Cissie's question he resented. Nevertheless he showed her his hand. He expected her to be shocked but, instead, she appeared delighted.

"Oh, then it is true," she exclaimed. "I didn't believe Joey when he told me. He's such a liar, you know."

The last made Six Fingers wonder. Had Joey lied about her too?

"You doing anything?" Cissie asked.

He shook his head, studying her.

"Then do you want to go for a walk?"

"I don't care," he answered, wondering how he'd gotten the words out. For sometimes they wouldn't come, and with girls in particular.

They began to walk, no destination in mind. A cool wind lifted off the river. The noises of the city pulsed louder, the lights began to blind Six Fingers. Cissie's closeness made pins and needles go through him. She was talking, babbling nothings. Once her hand touched his and he felt flame shoot up his arm. Anger almost overwhelmed him and he wanted to strike her, wanted to flee. Both sensations coming instantaneously only served to hold him there.

They walked to the park, came back to the candy store and drank a coke.

"I'm going home," Cissie said, dropping her straw in her glass and looking at him oddly.

Six Fingers nodded, thinking of Joey's taunts. He had to go along with Cissie but didn't want to. He had to like a girl, and Cissie made him angry.
They left the candy store and conversation died. Cissie's chatter had been better than this silence; he felt uneasier now, frightened, yet didn't realize the source of his fear.

They turned into a dark block. Subdued voices came through the silence, the clink of a glass, but Six Fingers saw no one. Cissie had moved close. Her hand brushed his again and lightning seemed to flash across his brain. She took his hand then and he wanted to pull away but couldn't, wanted to run yet his legs refused to obey.

At last they stood at her doorway; close now, she faced him and he could feel the warmth of her body, a strange delicate odor drifted toward him. Her face was blurred by the shadows but her eyes shone. He thought she was smiling but wasn't sure.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, what?"

"I do have to go up, you know."

He nodded his head yet he realized that her words held another meaning. She was not merely telling him she was leaving. The phrase meant much more but he didn't know how to answer.

Cissie moved closer then and, with their bodies almost touching, looked into his eyes, waiting as she had done with all the others. But Six Fingers didn't respond, though he wanted to kiss her. He was filled with a wild desire to grab her, but swiftly countering this came the other feeling, a mixture of fear and anger. Without meaning to, he took a backward step.

"Come here," Cissie said, reaching for him, and back another step he went.

Cissie appeared puzzled now.

"You're not afraid of me?" she asked.

"No."

"Then come here," she said and, this time as she reached for him, he suddenly turned and ran.

It was early when he came home, an unusual hour for him to return. More unusual for him to go to his room and remain there.

This puzzled his mother and she finally went to his room. The light was out and he lay on his bed, still dressed.

"Are you sick?" she asked.

No answer. When she asked again, he snapped at her and, thinking he was in one of his moods, she left him to himself.

Not till midnight, when the house was totally quiet, did he come from his room. Straight to the refrigerator he went and whatever he could lay hands on he piled on the table. Then he ate ravenously.

Next morning he appeared to be his ordinary self at breakfast, neither talkative or moody. Yesterday was like a bad dream laid aside. First thing after leaving the house, he went for a ride on his bike. When he returned, he chained the bike to the iron fence outside the house, walked to the corner and there was Joey and some other friends. As he greeted them he saw that they appeared amused. They exchanged glances and didn't answer him.

"What's wrong with you guys?" he asked.

"Hah!" said Joey. "So you were with Cissie last night."

"So what?"
"Yeah, what happened?"

"You couldn't guess," Six Fingers answered with a knowing air.

"We don't have to. We know," said Joey.

"Know what?"

"Cissie told us all about it. You were scared of her. You ran."

Six Fingers wanted to answer but words wouldn't come. His ears were filled with the taunts of his friends and the sound of their laughter. Worse yet was what Cissie had done to him, made of him a fool. More than anything he was angry with her and finally he managed to say, “She's a liar. I didn't run, she did.”

"That wasn't how we heard it," Joey answered.

Six Fingers had lied of course, but immediately the lie had become the truth to him, why, he didn't know, but he believed it now. She had run from him and he insisted that this was so, raising his voice in a way that almost convinced his tormentors.

Nevertheless, Joey refused to accept this and kept taunting him. Then the others joined in again.

"Yeah, I'm going to show her," Six Fingers said. “I made her run.”

"Just how are you going to show her?" Joey wanted to know.

The threat uttered in anger was no more than that but soon as Six Fingers uttered it, he realized he'd said too much. He didn't know what to do to regain his status. But no more were the words out of his mouth when he realized that he'd meant what he'd said.

"Well, how?" Joey asked again.

"You'll see," said Six Fingers and, unable to explain, he turned on his heel and walked away.

He remained in his room all that day. Most of the time his mind was utterly blank, but there were moments of anger when he thought of what Cissie had done. He had to get back at her, yet the only real way to do this frightened him. Even to approach her now would take more courage than he possessed.

By evening he had no plan in mind. He didn't eat but went out of the house and wandered through the hot streets. At last, as if he had planned it, he found himself at Cissie's door. She was nowhere in sight but he waited. An hour later he saw her turn the corner, hesitate, then come on.

Frightened now, he almost took to his heels. It was like last evening again, and he felt as if he were beginning once more.

Meantime Cissie approached, uncertain of his reason for waiting here. But she couldn't retreat now. She came on, brazenly. When close, she smiled and, as if in surprise, said, “Imagine you here.”

Six Fingers stared. That unnerved her but he didn't know it.

"Waiting for me?" she asked.

"That's right."

"But you ran away last night."

He nodded this time. The same feeling possessed him. He wanted to run, the feeling was almost overwhelming, but he held his ground and at last heard himself say, “You thought I was afraid last night.”
"Not exactly."

"Well, I'm not, I'm not afraid of any girl."

"That's good to hear. I suppose that means you like me?"

He nodded but this wasn't the truth. He didn't like her. More, he was still afraid and his whole body was trembling.

Cissie was at ease now, for he didn't appear angry and he hadn't been waiting to strike her. She smiled; it was obvious to her why he'd returned and she moved closer, as she had the previous evening, then closer still.

Frightened, Six Fingers stood his guard, though he wanted to run. Yet he had to prove himself. Even in this moment he could see Joey's face and hear his taunts. Well, he'd show him and all the others. It wouldn't be long now, either.

Cissie meanwhile had moved as close as possible without touching him and her eyes held his. This time it would happen, he knew, and he waited. Then Cissie spoke, the invitation innocent enough, but he knew what it meant. "It's cooler on the roof," she said, and paused, perhaps expecting a reply from him, but he couldn't answer, much as he wanted to.

"Want to go up?" she asked him casually, and he nodded. That was enough.

As they stepped onto the roof, Six Fingers was breathing hard. The darkness was striking, the sky vast. A cooling wind swept round them.

"Want to look down at the street?" Cissie asked and before he could answer, she moved away from him.

Moments later he followed. It was exactly as Joey had said, first the invitation to the roof, then to see the street—so he was prepared for her next move and not surprised. A step from her and she suddenly turned and faced him.

"Are you still afraid of me?" Cissie asked. "Are you?" And she moved closer, as if to throw herself around him, then touched his arms. He would have run but she seized him now and fear petrified him. What her intentions were he didn't know, for he felt enveloped by an implacable enemy, a satanic creature in the shape of a girl who seemed bent on devouring him. A final terrifying image and he shoved her away, backward with violence.

Moments later he looked down at the street. Voices came up from below. People were scurrying toward what appeared like a shadow on the sidewalk. Far in the distance a siren sounded, but Six Fingers didn't run, nor was he afraid any longer—only puzzled by what he had done.

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I climbed over the back fence and hurried down the driveway. They probably hadn't seen me at the window, but I couldn't afford to take chances. The police had caught me once. I certainly did not want to be picked up again.

It was horrible when the police caught me. I admitted everything but that wasn't enough for them. They put me in a chair with the light shining in my eyes so that I could barely see. Then they started hitting me. They used rubber hoses so there wouldn't be any marks. They hit me so much I nearly fainted.

The beating wasn't the worst of it, though. They called me names. They called me a sex fiend and a pervert. That hurt me more than the beatings.

Because I'm not a pervert, you see. All I want to do is watch people. There's no harm in that, is there? I don't hurt anyone, and I never really bother anybody. Sometimes someone sees me watching them, and they get frightened or angry, but that's only once in a great while. I've been very careful lately, ever since they caught me.

And if they think I am a pervert, you should see some of the things I've seen. You wouldn't believe the things some of these normal people do. It's enough to make you sick to your stomach. Yet they are normal, and they call me a pervert, a Peeping Tom. I can't quite understand it. All I do is watch.

Ever since they caught me I have been very careful. That is why I left the window when the man looked at me. I'm almost sure he didn't see me, but he glanced toward the window and I hopped the fence and got away from there. Besides, it wasn't much fun watching at his window. The woman with him was old and fat and I was getting bored with the whole thing. There was no sense in taking chances for that.

When I got out to the street I didn't know where to go. I used to have a perfect spot. A pretty young prostitute over on Tremont Avenue who saw at least ten men a night. I could spend night after night watching her. The backyard was dark and I had a perfect view. But one night she saw me watching.

She was nice about it and sensible, too. She didn't call me a pervert. But she said the men might notice me, that they wouldn't like it. She told me to stay away. It was a shame that I had to give up the spot, but at least she didn't call the police or anything.

But I couldn't watch there anymore, and I had to find a new spot. I walked down the street looking for a lighted window. I stopped at several places, but there was nothing much to see. There were just people sitting or reading or watching television.

Finally I found a house with a light on that looked promising. The backyard was dark, too, which was important. It's harder to see out from a lighted room when there is no light in the backyard.

I stood close to the window and watched. A man and woman were sitting on the bed, taking their clothes off. I watched them. The man wasn't bad looking but my attention was confined to the woman. I'm not queer, you understand.

She certainly wasn't beautiful. Better than average, though. Her face was nothing to write home about, her breasts were rather small, but she had beautiful legs and a generally nice shape all in all. I watched her undress and began to get excited. This was going to be a good night after all.

They undressed quickly, which is not the way I like it. It's better when they take a good long time about it. But they just pulled off their clothes and turned down the bedcovers. I guess they had been married for some time.

I was really excited by this time, and my eyes were practically glued to the window. Then the man stood up and walked over to the wall. He touched a switch, and the room was suddenly plunged into complete darkness. I was so mad I could have killed him. Why did he have to do a thing like that?

I stared through the window, but it was no use. The room was black as pitch. I couldn't understand it. How could he...
enjoy it with the lights out? He wouldn't be able to see a thing.

I was mad, and just about ready to go home and call it a night. But the little I had seen left me so excited that I could not stop there. I walked around looking for another window.

By this time it was late and I had no idea where to go. Most of the people in the neighborhood were asleep by now. But I continued walking around, hoping against hope that something would turn up.

I was just about ready to quit when I saw a lighted window on Bushnell Road. Never having been to that house before I decided to give it a try.

I approached the window and looked in. It was a bedroom window, with a woman reading there. She had her back to me, reading a magazine. She was all alone.

Ordinarily I would not have waited. Sometimes a woman will sit like that all night, just reading. But it was late and, having nowhere else to go, I waited. Besides, I had the feeling I would get a real show for my money.

As it turned out, I was right. She put down the magazine in less than five minutes, stood up, and turned toward me. I was stunned when I got a good look at her. She was beautiful.

She was wearing a flower-print dress that made her look like a schoolgirl, but one good look at her would tell you she was nothing of the sort. Her body was far too mature for a schoolgirl's with proud, full breasts that nearly ripped the dress apart. Her face was as pretty as a model's, and her hair was that soft reddish-brown that drives me crazy. I was ready to watch her forever.

She started to undress. I stared at her greedily. There was no one else around, and my eyes studied every detail of her body. She undressed slowly, tantalizingly, slithering out of her dress and hanging it up in the closet. Finally she stood there nude, and it was worth all the waiting, worth all the walking that I had done that night. She was like a vision, the most perfect woman I had ever seen.

I thought I would have to go home then. I expected she would turn off the light and go to bed, and if she had I would have been satisfied. It was enough for one night. Instead she walked to her mirror and began to examine herself.

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It was the perfect view for me. I could see both her back and the mirror image of her front. She looked at herself, and I watched her. Then she began to dance.

It was not exactly a dance. She moved like a burlesque dancer, but there was nothing crude about it. She knew how beautiful she was, and she moved in rhythm, making a symphony of her body and watching herself as she did. It was something to watch.

Finally she stopped dancing. She slipped on a housecoat and stepped through a door. I guessed she was going to the bathroom, which meant it was the end of the show. I could have left then, but didn't. I wanted to get another glimpse of her. She had to come back.

I stood silently at the window, waiting for her.

Suddenly a door opened. I whirled around to find her standing there, in the doorway, pointing a gun at me. “Don't move,” she said. “Don't move or I'll shoot.”

I froze in terror, staring down the mouth of the gun, which looked like a cannon to me. “I wasn't doing anything,” I stammered. “Just watching you. I didn't hurt you.”

She didn't say a word.

"Look,” I pleaded, “just let me go. I won't bother you anymore. I promise I'll stay away from here."

She ignored me. “I saw you in the mirror,” she said. “Saw you watching me. I danced for you. Did you like the way I danced?”
I nodded dumbly, unable to speak.

"It was for you," she said. "I liked your eyes on me. I liked the way you looked at me."

She smiled. "Come inside."

I hesitated. Was this a trap? Had she called the police?

"Come here," she said. "Come inside. Don't be afraid."

I followed her into the house, into the bedroom. "I want you," she said. "I want you." She slipped out of the housecoat and tossed it over a chair.

"Come on," she said. "I know you want me. I could tell from the way you looked at me. Come here."

She set the gun on the dresser and motioned for me to step closer. "I want you to make love to me," she said.

I walked over to her, and she threw her arms around me. "Take me," she moaned.

I pushed her away. "No," I said. "I don't want that. I just wanted to watch you. I wouldn't do that."

She pressed against me again. "I want you," she insisted. She opened her arms and I felt her hot breath on my face.

There was only one way to stop her. I picked up the gun from the dresser. "Don't come any closer," I warned. "Leave me alone."

"Don't be silly." She smiled. "You want me and I want you." She kept coming closer as I retreated.

That's when it happened—when the gun went off. The noise resounded in the small bedroom, and she crumpled and fell. "Why?" she moaned. Then she died.

The police beat me. They beat me harder than last time, and they called me a pervert. They think I tried to rape her, but that's not true. I wouldn't do a thing like that.
When you're alone in a graveyard, you have many thoughts. When you're alone in a graveyard, that is, and you're not dead.

And I was not dead.

I was, in fact—if one can be said to be—too much alive. Nervous. Jumpy. Prickles ridged along the back of my neck like the risen hackles of a fighting cock. Nerve-ends jagged, and every fibre taut. And why not, at one o'clock in the morning of a silent fog-wisped night, alone in a stone-infested graveyard out at the eerie edge of Long Island?

And what was I doing there?

Have a laugh.

I was there on business.

I had a flashlight in my left hand, and a brown-paper package in my right, and I was glued, like a peeping-Tom at an inviting aperture, to a flavorsome tombstone, enticingly inscribed, in curlicues yet: J. J. J. Tompkins, Rest In Peace.

Tompkins, I hoped, was resting more peacefully than I.

I shrugged, scratched, grimaced and clicked the flashlight again. It was five after one. I had been there, at Mr. Tompkins’ tombstone—as directed—since twelve-thirty. I stiffened, stretched and returned to the whirligig of random thinking; but my unconscious mind must have sought succor, because it presented a picture of Trina Greco.

Ah, that Trina Greco. Tall, dark, lithe and graceful, she had the longest, shapeliest legs in New York, and they were legs that stood up against the staunchest of competition—Trina was a ballet dancer. This very afternoon—before I had returned to the office, and before the call from Mrs. Florence Fleetwood Reed—I had attended a rehearsal with Trina. Legs, legs, legs ... legs and leotards ... but my Trina won hands down (or is it legs down?). Afterward, we had sat about sipping peaceful afternoon cocktails in a peaceful afternoon tavern, and she had looked off wistfully—Trina, the unusual: with a brain to match the legs—and she had said, apropos of nothing:

"A fragment of time in connection with a fragment of space ... creates the precise moment."

"Wow," I had said. “In the middle of the afternoon. Just like that."

"It's from the Greek philosophers."

"Trina, my Greek."

"I am of Greek extraction. You know that, Pete."

"Sure. Sure." I had pondered it. “Fragment of time ... fragment of space ... precise moment."

"And that precise moment ... can be ecstatic or catastrophic."

"Wow. Again with the words. Slow down, my lady love. I'm only a detective taking off part of an afternoon."

"Even here ... “ Her dark eyes crinkled in a grin. “You and I ... this might be ... a precise moment."

My grin had answered hers. “No, ma'am, and that's for sure. I can think of a better time and a more appropriate space for our precise moment. But I do believe I know what you mean, big words or little words."

"Do you, Peter?"

"Sure. Something like this, let's say. Deciding game of the World Series. Last half of the ninth, home team at bat,
one run behind. Bases full, two out. Third baseman moves a little to his left for some reason, just as the batter hits a
screaming line drive. Third baseman lifts his glove, practically to protect himself ... and he's made a sensational
catch. At the right fragment of time he was in the right fragment of space ... and for him, it was the precise moment.
Ecstatic for his team, catastrophic for the other."

"Very good, Peter. Very good, indeed."

The way she had said it, the way her dark eyes had narrowed down, the promise in the soft-sweet smile—right here
in the fog-tipped graveyard, a pleasant little shiver ran through me. Everything else was forgotten—even Johnny
Hays, small-time hood with big-ideas, good-looking lad with a smooth blue jaw—Johnny Hays, who had come up to
me just after I had put Trina into her cab—Johnny Hays, talking through stiff lips:

"You just beg for trouble, don't you, Mr. Chambers?"

"Like how, little man?"

"Like making with the pitch for this Trina Greco."

"That have any effect on you, little man?"

"It figures to have an effect on you, big man."

"Like how?"

"Like Nick Darrow."

"Darrow, huh?"

"Friendly warning, big man. When Nick don't like, Nick cuts you down to size. Then you're a little man, very little,
and very dead. So smarten up. There's a million dames. Skip this one."

I forgot about Johnny Hays, thinking of the expression on Trina's face, of her dark eyes, of that secret little smile,
and, as I clicked the flashlight, the pleasant little shiver went through me again—but then the shiver remained and all
the pleasantness went out of it.

A quiet voice said, "Put that light out."

I put the light out. I was back in the graveyard working at my trade. I stood still and I said nothing. I saw nobody.

The quiet voice said, "You Peter Chambers?"

"I ain't J. J. J. Tompkins."

"Never mind the jokes. Turn around, and stay turned around."

"Yes, sir." I turned and stayed turned.

"Now reach your arm back and hand me that package."

"You're a little premature, pal."

"What?"

"You're supposed to give me the word, pal. This is a real eccentric bit, but my client is a real eccentric lady, and
she's rich enough to afford her eccentricities. You're supposed to say a name. So, say it."

"Abner Reed."

"That's the jackpot answer. Reach, and grab your prize."
There were soft footsteps, then somebody reached, and somebody grabbed.

"Very good," somebody said. "Now stay the way you are. Stay like that for the next five minutes."

But I didn't "stay the way you are" for the next five minutes. Fast count, I'd say there were two reasons for that. First, five minutes in a graveyard, in the middle of the night, after your business is finished, is like, say, five years on the French Riviera. And second, I'm blessed, or is it cursed, with a large lump of curiosity. I turned, and I didn't turn a second too soon, because I ran right smack up against Trina's "precise moment." Somewhere through the faint fog there was enough light to put a glint on metal—and I dropped—as five shots poured over me, and then nothing.

Running feet ... and nothing.

I got up, but I didn't even try going after him. The guy was gone. Go search for a needle in a haystack. You go—but at least you've got a chance. The needle is inanimate, and it is in the haystack. But searching for a gunman in a graveyard ... no, sir. I'll take the needle-in-the-haystack deal.

Anyway, I brushed at my clothes, and I got out of there, and I was damn glad to get out of there. My car was parked about a quarter of a mile down, and when I slammed the door behind me and pushed down the buttons, I permitted myself the luxury of a couple of real deep-down shudders, and then I turned over the motor and went away from there, fast. When the clustered lights of civilization finally rose up before me, I visited the most civilized place I could think of—a bar—where I had three quick constituents of resuscitation and a slow chaser. Then I went back to the car and my progress to Manhattan was less precipitate and more thoughtful.

2.

Names ran through my mind like tape running through a clinking cash register. Trina Greco, Johnny Hays, Nick Darrow, Florence Fleetwood Reed. I gave the first three a quick-think, so I'd have time to concentrate on the last, and then, perhaps, hash them all up together. I was relaxed now, and moving without hurry. I was heading for the Reed mansion at Gramercy Park, and it figured for about an hour.

Trina Greco. A dish for a king, and I make no pretense at royalty. I had seen her once, about six months back, dancing at the Copa (and had admired her from afar), but I'd met her at a party about two weeks ago (admiring her from very near), and had commenced a small but concentrated campaign. She had quit the night-club job (which was bread and butter) and was rehearsing now with a ballet company, for which she had been trained most of her life. I knew very little about her, but was eagerly trying to learn much more.

Johnny Hays. A good-looking kid who had been inoculated by slick-type movie heavies in his early youth. A no-brains young man who would wind up, one day, neatly dressed, but grotesquely sprawled in a gutter with a generous portion of his intestines splattered beside him. Meanwhile, he was a killer-diller with the ladies, and drew his pay within one of the varied echelons which went to make up the intricate empire of Nick Darrow.

Nick Darrow, very much more important. Brains, cunning and the conscience of a crawling lobster. Neat, young enough, and at the height of his ambition. Politically well-connected, reasonably cautious, and one of the top ten narcotics outlets in the United States. Owner of the Club Trippa, on Madison Avenue.

Florence Fleetwood Reed, completely removed from any of the others. Until late this past afternoon, unknown to me, except through legend. Cafe society, real society, and snob-rich to the tune of a hundred million dollars inherited from a five-and-dime pappy who had passed away leaving little Florence as his sole and avaricious beneficiary. Reputed to be inordinately shrewd in business, stuffily stingy, and weirdly eccentric. Young, beautiful, headstrong, imperious, commanding. Married once, a long time ago, to a movie actor, divorced, and recently, about six months ago, re-married.

Late in the afternoon, I'd had a call at the office ... from Florence Fleetwood Reed. I'd been summoned to her home, and I had answered the summons. I had met her alone, at her Gramercy Park home, a firm-hipped blonde with a lot of control and hard grey eyes within an almost imperceptible network of crepe-like wrinkles. I had been informed that I had been selected as a final cog in a peculiar business transaction. I was told that I was not to ask questions,
was to return at eleven o'clock, was to pick up a package, was to go to a cemetery on Long Island, find a tombstone marked "J. J. J. Tompkins," wait until somebody came there who asked for me by name, and then mentioned the name Abner Reed. I was then to turn the package over to him, and return to Gramercy Park and collect my fee. Said fee, one thousand dollars. Time of appointment at said J. J. J. Tompkins' resting place, twelve-thirty, and wait if the caller is late.

In case you haven't heard, I'm a private detective, which is synonymous with anything confidential, including cockeyed-type messenger boy (if the fee is large enough). In my business, if the client is right, you ask no questions, you give not whit nor wisdom (unless requested); you take it, leave it and forget about it unless an acute or wildly unforeseeable incident occurs.

Gunplay in a graveyard, when your client is the esteemed Florence Fleetwood Reed, is both acute and wildly unforeseeable.

Was the gunplay, then, connected with your client, or was it mixed up with Trina, Hays and Darrow? True enough, it was a vastly populated cemetery, but just as truly you were the only one present upon whom bullets could have even the slightest effect, so, as you turned into the driveway of the Reed home, you were grimly determined to breach the canons of your profession and fling questions until a couple of appropriate answers bounced back.

3.

A sleepy-eyed maid ushered me into the downstairs living room and vanished. Uncomfortably, I waited alone, and then a door opened and Florence Fleetwood Reed strode in. And, striding behind her, in measured steps, like a couple of pallbearers—a tall silver-haired man and a tall silver-haired woman.

"All right, Mr. Chambers?"

"Yes, Mrs. Reed."

"You made your delivery?"

"Yes, Mrs. Reed."

She had blue eyes and blonde hair and a patrician nose with easily quivering nostrils. She was in her young thirties, thin-lipped and severe, but plenty good-looking, with a firm full figure, ramrod-straight, but a little bulgy in spots if you're inclined to be critical. She flung a hand over a shoulder and introduced me to the pallbearers. "My uncle and my aunt. Mr. Harry Fleetwood and Mrs. Ethel Fleetwood."

The man smiled and said, "Uncle Harry."

The lady smiled and said, "Aunt Ethel."

I smiled and said, "How do you do?"

The guy was about sixty, hawk-nosed and yellow-toothed, with a deep gruff voice slightly British in accent. The lady had a round smooth face and a porcelain smile and more flirtatious sparkle to her eyes than double the girls half her age.

Mrs. Reed snapped her fingers at Uncle Harry and Uncle Harry drew an envelope from his jacket pocket.

"Uh, excuse me," Mrs. Reed said. "That was a one-sided introduction. This is Mr. Chambers, Peter Chambers, and that envelope, Uncle Harry, is for him."

Uncle Harry came to me, bowed somewhat, and handed it to me.

Mrs. Reed said, "As per agreement. One thousand dollars."

I took it and I said, "Thank you, ma'am," and then I said, "For what?"
"I beg your pardon?"

"What's this all about, Mrs. Reed?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Look, lady, after I completed your cockeyed business transaction, somebody took a couple of pot-shots at me. Could be part of your business, or could be some business of my own. Before I go to the cops with it ... I'm asking."

"Cops?" Uncle Harry brought bushy eyebrows down over the hawk-nose.

"No," Mrs. Reed said. "No." The nostrils quivered and for the first time the eyes betrayed agitation.

Right then I knew I was in on a deal and some of the flop-sweat shook off me. High society or low-society, thousand-dollar fee or more, mansion on Gramercy Park and a lady reputed to be worth a hundred million bucks ... suddenly I shook it all off and I was treading on familiar ground. Because something around here stank. Out loud.

"The bullets," I said. "Were they part of your business?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Then what's all the objection to my going to the cops?"

"Well, because ... " She turned and looked at her uncle and aunt.

Aunt Ethel continued to smile pleasantly, but Uncle Harry pursed his lips, coughed, grunted, hoisted the eyebrows, then said, "I think you ought to tell him, Florence. Since he was selected for so delicate a mission, he must be a man of character."

"Tell me what?"

Aunt Ethel said, "Why you shouldn't, young man, at this particular time, take your troubles to the police."

"My troubles," I said, "seem to be your troubles." I looked at Mrs. Reed. "Then the bullets were your business, weren't they?"

"No. I'm certain they weren't. There wouldn't be any purpose ... "

"Look. What the hell is ... ? Pardon me."

"Time," Aunt Ethel said, "for a drink. Brandy for me. What will it be, please? I'm serving."

Nothing for Florence Fleetwood Reed and nothing for Peter Chambers but Aunt Ethel and Uncle Harry buried their noses unto the bouquet of over-sized snifter-glasses into which Aunt Ethel had poured as though she were a bartender who hated the boss.

Florence Reed said, "Have you any idea, Mr. Chambers, what was in that package?"

"Goulash," I said. "For ghosts."

Very funny. Mrs. Reed looked blank, not even contemptuous. Uncle Harry gazed at me sadly over his brandy. But Aunt Ethel winked slyly and smiled. There was plenty of life in that old dame, too much life for Uncle Harry, no question about that.

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars," Mrs. Reed said.

It went by me the first time. Mildly I said, "Pardon?"

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars."
"What?"

"Three quarters of a million." Uncle Harry wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "In thousand dollar bills."

I came back to Mrs. Reed. I said, “Look. You've got a reputation for being, well ... two things ... stingy and eccentric. Stingy, that's none of my business. Eccentric, that fits in with this. You're also supposed to have a lot of good practical horse-sense. So, business transactions in the middle of the night, even in a graveyard, nobody'd put it past you, nobody'd think twice about it, you're supposed to have pulled a couple of real wing-dings in your time, but —"

"That wasn't exactly a business transaction, Mr. Chambers?"

"What then—"

"It was a delivery of ransom money."

"What? What the hell is going on around here? You mean to tell me that I'm involved in some kind of cockeyed kidnapping?"

Aunt Ethel didn't stop smiling. “That's what she means to tell you, young man."

"Not exactly involved,” Mrs. Reed said. “You were an instrument of delivery. An instrument, period."

"Instrument, huh? The police know about this?"

"No, they don't."

"Don't, huh?” Sarcasm blurred my voice. “Expect to inform them?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning."

I headed for the brandy bottle. I poured and I drank brandy like it was a chaser for bourbon. Then I smacked down the glass, turned, said, “Look. What happened here? Let's have it, huh? Let's stop with this casual deal. Let's have the story."

Florence Reed went to a divan, sat wearily, lowered her head and touched fingers to her temples. “Last night. It seems a year ago. Last night, he went out, my husband, he went out for a newspaper."

"What time?"

"About ten o'clock. He ... didn't return. It's happened before. He'd step into a tavern, become involved in a discussion, or just drink in the company of others. Anyway, I went up to bed, fell asleep, and when I awoke, suddenly ... it was two o'clock, two in the morning. He wasn't back yet and I became ... apprehensive. Just then, the downstairs bell rang. I thought it was he ... that he had left his keys. I slipped into a dressing gown quickly, I hoped the servants hadn't awakened ... and I opened the door myself. It was Uncle Harry."

"I think,” Uncle Harry said, “I ought to take over at this point."

I said, “Okay with me."

"Well, sir, I live nearby, on lower Fifth Avenue. At about one-thirty last night, I received a phone call: It was from Abner ... my niece's husband, Abner Reed. His voice sounded somewhat muffled, and for a moment, if you'll forgive me, I had an idea that he was inebriated. But that idea was quickly dispelled. He informed me that he was talking to me with a gun pointed at his head. He told me that he'd been slugged, rendered unconscious, and kidnapped. Naturally, I was frightfully perturbed."
"Naturally."

"He said that he didn't know where he was, that he was blindfolded, that this phone call had been made for him, and then he was put on, and that he was merely repeating what he'd been told to say."

"And what was that?"

"That I was to come here and inform Florence, and that there would be another call, here, in the morning. And, that if the police were notified, he'd be killed. Then there was a click, and the wire was dead."

"Then?"

"I came here—I told my wife to follow in half an hour, which she did—and the three of us sat up until morning. At eight o'clock in the morning, the second call came."

"Abner again?"

Mrs. Reed said, "Yes."

"You sure it was he?"

"No question. He sounded tired and ... and beaten ... physically beaten ... but it was he. Anyway, to make a long story short, the arrangements were made, and ... you must have quite a reputation, Mr. Chambers ... because your name was given to him to give to me as ... I believe the word is intermediary. You know the rest."

"That all?"

She stood up. She tried to control it, but I saw she was trembling. Uncle Harry put his glass away and went near her, holding her lightly at the elbow. She sighed, said, "It was promised that he'd be returned to us during this night."

I shook my head and softly I said, "Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"I ... I'm regarded as, well, a rather frugal person." Tears brimmed over and spoiled her face, but it didn't break up, there was no grimace, the face remained haughty and expressionless. "But ... this is different. I love my husband. We've only been married six months ... "

Uncle Harry said, "I think you ought to go upstairs now."

I said, "But you are going to notify the cops about this, aren't you?"

"Yes." She leaned heavily on Uncle Harry. "Tomorrow morning. Whether he's returned to me or not. I've got to give it a chance ... and then I'll go to the police, either way." She shivered once, violently. "I was warned ... we were being watched ... that even the phones were tapped ... that if we went to the police ... they'd ... kill him."

"I understand, Mrs. Reed. I'll keep my nose clean. It's your affair, entirely. Now, easy does it, ma'am."

Uncle Harry led her toward the door. He said, "Ethel, you'll show Mr. Chambers out," and then they were gone.

Aunt Ethel came to me, still smiling and smelling of brandy. Aunt Ethel's silver hair was deceptive. Aunt Ethel was no youngster but she wasn't senile. Aunt Ethel was a beautiful woman, mature but not aged. Aunt Ethel wore a blue dress which matched her eyes. Aunt Ethel's blue dress was cut deep in front and a good deal of firm cream-skinned bosom was exposed. She took me out to the small dim vestibule. Aunt Ethel wasn't smiling now and her lips were full and red and glistening. Aunt Ethel said, "I'm drunk."

"So?"

"So ... this."

She slid her arms under my arms and hooked her hands over my shoulders. She drew me close and opened her
mouth on mine. Oh, Aunt Ethel. She smelled of brandy but she smelled too of a vague and attractive perfume. She moved her mouth away and I made one last small attempt at trying to keep the track clear. I said, “You people could have gone to the cops. There are ways. Who advised her?”

At my ear she said, “Nobody advises Florence. She supports us, just as she supports her husband, not too liberal with any of us, so ... nobody advises Florence ... except Florence. You're sweet.” The hands on my shoulders tightened and her warm body was close. “I'm drunk, but I've wanted to do this from the moment I came into that room. Drunk. Anyway, it's an excuse.”

Then her mouth came back to mine.

4.

It was late, but I tried the Club Trippa anyway. There was a bar in front and a cocktail lounge in the rear. It was done in maroon and silver and had a glow that was warmer than a bachelor-girl on vacation. The bar was crowded three deep and the inside room was jumping. The bartender winked and waved and said, “Hi.”

"Nick around? Or Johnny Hays?"

"Don't know myself, Mr. Chambers. Try Upstairs."

Upstairs, up a maroon-carpeted flight of stairs, was the floor show, the band, the dance floor, and the heavy spenders. Upstairs, too, were a couple of choice back rooms, one of which was Nick Darrow's office, if a studio fitted out like a sultan's reception room can be termed “office.” The merry-makers were engaged in watching a stripper called Bonnie Laurie so I strolled along the periphery of dimness and opened the office door without knocking.

Nick Darrow wasn't there.

But Johnny Hays was.

He unfurled off a couch, black-eyed and contemptuous, and lounged toward me.

"Still looking for trouble, my dear shamus?"

"Where's Nickie?"

"None of your business. Any message?"

"Yes."

"I'll take it."

I gave it to him. High, hard and handsome with a lot of shoulder behind it. It splattered blood from his mouth and sat him down with his toes pointed at the ceiling. I didn't wait for him to get up. I went downstairs and had a Scotch highball and my palms were wet with expectancy. But nothing happened. Johnny Hays didn't show, nor did Nickie Darrow. Johnny was still sitting there, or he didn't want to come down, or he'd gone down the back exit and was out front waiting. I paid and went out. Nobody was there. I walked along a couple of quiet streets but nobody sprang at me. So I gave it up and went back to the lights. I had ham and eggs in a cafeteria, with coffee, ketchup, and well-buttered English muffins. Then I went home.

I showered, dried down, slipped into a pair of shorts. I bought myself a Scotch and chased it with more Scotch and I was ready to wrap this day up and put it to bed. I thought about Florence Reed and felt a little sorry for her, as sorry as you can feel for a dame with a hundred million bucks, and then I thought about Aunt Ethel and I got a belt out of that. So ... my door-buzzer buzzed.

In the middle of the night, the door-buzzer buzzes.
Each to his own. Poets sleep in the daytime. Tramps work at night. Charwomen come home at dawn. Editors read in bed. Actors awake at the crack of noon. Atom experts ponder through the night. Doctors are always on call. And a private richard ... there is no reason why business should not be buzzing the door-buzzer in the dead of night. Private richard. He has about as much privacy as a parakeet in a kindergarten.

I opened the door to darkness. Somebody'd switched off the corridor lights. When lights are out that should be on, you drop, you learn that early when you're in my business. But I didn't drop in time. Blazes of light punctuated the blackness, and when I dropped, it wasn't because I wanted to drop, it was because I was knocked down by the force of the bullets. I heard the pound of feet in the corridor, but right then I wasn't interested. I felt blood on my naked body, and I heard the labor of my breathing. My one interest was reaching the phone. I tried to get up, but I couldn't make it. So I crawled, and I lifted the receiver, and dialed o, and heard my whisper: “Operator ... hospital ... hospital ... emergency ... “

I was under sedatives for a day, while they probed for bullets, and then I was sitting up in the hospital bed, ready to go, but they told me five days, five days before they'd let me out of there, and then I got a caller, amiable but worried-looking, Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, Homicide, good cop and good friend.

"Hi, Detective,” he said. “I hear you're coming around real good.”

"Hi, Lieutenant. What brings you?"

"Well, when a friend is sick ... “

"What else brings you?"

"That Abner Reed shindig. I hear tell you were an innocent bystander ... in a cemetery. You well enough to chat?"

"I'm well enough to get the hell out of here. Did they return that bird?"

"Yah." He sighed and sat down. Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, squat, thick, ruddy and black-haired, stump of an unlit cigar in his mouth. “And none the worse for his experience. Got hit in the throat a couple of times, a little damage to the windpipe. Had to do the questions and answers by writing, but it's a condition that figures to clear up quick enough.”

"Has it broken in the newspapers?"

"Nope. Not a word. We're trying to work it through before it gets any publicity. Now, let's hear your story."

I gave him the story without frill or furbelow. When I was finished he said, “Any ideas?"

"About what?"

"About what makes you a shooting-gallery target?"

"Yeah, I've got a couple of ideas, but I'd rather not talk about them."

"Why not?"

"Because they're personal, and I'd like to give them some personal attention, as soon as they let me out of here."

"Okay, Peter Pan, if that's the way you want it.” The cigar rolled around in his mouth and stopped. “What about the snatch? Want to discuss that?"

"Love to."

"Any ideas on that?"
"Not a one. You, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing."

"That's a good basis for discussion. Okay, what have you got on it?"

"Nothing more than you have. The guy showed up at his house about seven o'clock yesterday morning, period. Tired, a little banged up, and his throat on the blink. Had a doctor in, who couldn't find anything really wrong. Cold compresses and rest, that's the treatment."

"Get his story?"

"Got it the best possible way. Complete statement in writing, then questions and answers in writing. Sum total ... nothing."

"Well, let's hear, anyway."

"Went out of his house for a paper. Got jumped in the dark and figured it for a mugging. But then he was sluged, and when he came to, he was in a car, bound and gagged and under a blanket. Also blindfolded. There was a stop, where he was put on the phone to that Uncle Harry; then he was riding again. Then there was another stop, where they roughed him up a little; then the call in the morning to the wife for the ransom dough, where you were suggested as go-between, and he transmitted that suggestion to the wife. You know what happened in between. Then, yesterday morning, about six o'clock, he had another car ride. He was dropped out near the bridge on First Avenue and a Hundred and Twenty-fifth, and the car roared off. He wandered around a little dazed until he got a cab, and went home. That's his story, sum and total."

"License plate of the car?"

" Couldn't get it. It was still dark, and they had their lights out. Nice, huh? A lot to work on."

"Yeah."

Silence. Of the heavy type. The kind of silence you can only get in a hospital room. Then he said, "Can I smoke?"

"Sure you can smoke."

He lit up. "Well ... ?"

"What about the background of the guy himself? Abner Reed. What kind of a guy?"

"Nice enough young fella. Tall, rangy, young, good-looking. Used to be a dancing instructor. That's how he met the lady with the bucks. She came for lessons and she fell for the teacher."

"How they get along?"

"Swell, from what they tell me."

"How long married?"

"Going on seven months."

"She been liberal with him?"

"Liberal as can be expected. Rich, but plenty tightwad, that one."

"What about his background?"

"What's that got to do with it?"
"Well, he's only married six-seven months. If it was hard guys he was playing around with before that, they'd know just what a set-up he was for a snatch. Maybe he even blabbed after he was married."


"Nice selection of zeroes we're coming up with, aren't we, Lieutenant? What about that aunt and uncle?"

"Harry Fleetwood was the brother of Florence's father, pappy with all the bucks. Pappy supported him and Aunt Ethel. When Pappy died, he left his all to lady Florence. Florence continued the support, but was somewhat more firm on the purse-strings. You met that Aunt Ethel, huh?"

"Yes."

"Something, eh?"

"Quite."

"Twenty years younger than Uncle Harry, and Harry's fifty-nine."

"She looks older."

"It's the white hair, which she dyes that color. Now that's a switch, isn't it? I've heard them go from grey to blonde, but that one's a natural blonde who goes to grey. Quite a dame, Aunt Ethel. Used to be married to a British peer. Gave that up because she thought Harry had the kind of dough the Fleetwood name conjured up. Wound up being a ward of Pappy's. Nice."

I lay back and I said, "Yeah." Then I said, "I'm in it, Louie."

"So?"

"Mind if I stay in it?"

"Real polite. As if I could keep you out." He stood up. "But, at least you remember what too many private eyes forget."

Sweetly I said, "And what's that, Lieutenant?"

"That it's not a solo performance. That we work together."

"Sho nuf, Lieutenant."

"Real spry, for a guy that recently harbored bullets."

"Spry enough to ask a favor."

"Shoot."

"There's a girl by name Trina Greco—"

"Isn't there always?"

"Lives on Christopher Street."

"So?"

"Would you get in touch with her—don't scare her—just get in touch. Tell her where I am, and that I'd like a visitor. Okay?"
"Okay, pal. You'll get your visitor."

I got her the next afternoon, Trina Greco, tall in a green suit shaped to her figure, black hair a shining Italian whirl on her head, black eyes enormous and a little frightened.

"Easy does it," I told her. "A little virus. I'll be out in a few days."

"Reluctant hero."

"There she goes again, my Greek philosopher."

"It's not virus. It's bullets. I inquired, and I was told. Something I can do, Peter?"

"Lots of things you can do, Trina. But for now, just sit down, cross those lovely legs, and prattle. Make with the small talk."

She told me about the ballet rehearsals, she told me about how much she liked me, she told me about the fact that she was in the process of moving to a new apartment and how excited she was about that. I lay back and I looked at her and you could tell that I was sick, because it was soothing. Once I asked her to kiss me, which she did, lightly, and next thing I knew, I was asleep. When I woke up, she was gone.

6.

Anger and well-being seem to run hand in hand, and as your health improves, so your anger mounts. By the time I was out of the hospital, I was as tense as a piano-wire and fit to bust wide open. First visit was to the Reed mansion where the maid informed me that Mr. and Mrs. Reed weren't home, they were downtown, passports, something like that. I asked her for Uncle Harry's address and she gave it to me.

Uncle Harry lived in an apartment house on Fifth Avenue and Twelfth Street and Uncle Harry was wearing a monocle this trip: purple lounging pajamas, purple slippers, purple dressing gown, and a monocle. His greeting was cool. I asked about developments and he said there were none. Then he said, "Anything else?" And he said it curtly.

"How's Mrs. Reed?"

"She's fine."

"How's she taking the loss of all that dough?"

"She hopes it will be recovered. If it isn't—" he shrugged— "then she writes it down as a loss and it's over. She has had losses before."

"And how's Aunt Ethel?"

"Very well. Now ... is there anything else?"

"Don't you like me, Uncle Harry?"

"I neither like you nor dislike you, Mr. Chambers. You are, I trust, a fine young man. But your calling on me is, in essence, an intrusion. We are not friends, and we have nothing in common. You were hired for a purpose, and you served your purpose. Now ... is there anything else?"

"Nothing else."

"Then good afternoon, Mr. Chambers."

I went back to the office and sat on my hands. I was wearing a gun now, and turning to look behind me wherever I went. I sat on my hands and waited for a call, but no call came. It burnt me, but there was nothing I could do about it. I'd put in a couple of phone calls to Nickie Darrow but Nickie-boy didn't seem to think I was important enough to call back. I got off my hands and attended to routine but routine was duller than a one-horse race, so I kissed it off.
Finally, at six o'clock, I was back at the Reed place on Gramercy Park and this time the maid showed me in. The living room was dimly lit by a couple of lamps and first thing Florence Reed did was raise a finger to her lips; then she pointed. I followed the point to a long lean lad snoozing softly on a couch.

"Abner?" I whispered.

She said, "Yes."

She crooked the finger and I followed her into a smaller room. "He's napping," she said.

"How is he?"

"Very well."

"How's his throat?"

"Coming along fine. Now, is it anything special, Mr. Chambers? Maid tells me you were here earlier in the afternoon."

"No. Nothing special."

Her thin lips grew thinner. "Uncle tells me that you called on him too. I don't quite understand, Mr. Chambers. Is it something about your fee?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

In a sense, she had me there. I said, "I was just wondering if I could be of any help ... "

"Help? Oh. Perhaps you don't know. We've been to the police, just as I told you that night. He was returned to us in the morning, and within an hour we were in touch with the police. They say they're working on it, and we're doing our utmost to co-operate. There's just no help needed."

Once more she had me. I said, "I thought perhaps I could be of some assistance."

"None whatever, Mr. Chambers. The matter is in the hands of the proper authorities. I do wish to thank you for not going to the police with your private troubles that night, and if you feel there should be some added recompense for that ... "

"No ma'am. No added recompense."

Then I was out of there and I knew I wasn't coming back. And I knew that even that would be right because I had no business coming back there. So I had dinner in a quiet restaurant and I longed for Trina Greco but I wouldn't call her because I was a target for somebody and there was no sense pulling her in as innocent bystander. I called Nickie Darrow again but he wasn't in. I asked for Johnny Hays but he wasn't in either. A good deal of hate was being dammed up inside of me and it had no outlet. I went down to Parker and chewed the fat. He didn't have a thing on the Reed snatch, and it was growing stale. It's a big city and there are a lot of crimes and they overlap and Parker was a busy man. So, since it was nighttime, I got on my broom and made for the Club Trippa.

I was hardly past the door when I realized I was persona non grata. The word was in. The bartender's glare was colder than frigidity in an igloo, and almost at once a bouncer with heft bellied up to me.

Softly he said, "Out."

Petie-boy was innocent-eyed. "But why, sweetie?"

"Because them's orders. And don't call me sweetie."
"You're big, but I got a hunch I can take you."

"Try."

"I would if it made sense, but after I get past you, there'd be too many others."

"Smart. But you wouldn't get past me."

"That's one man's opinion. Can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Who gave the orders?"

"Johnny Hays."

"That little prig?"

"Yeah, that little prig."

"Nickie know about these orders?"

"Look, pal, I only work here. Johnny's one of my bosses. I don't ask my boss no questions. You going out nice and quiet? It's better for business if you go out nice and quiet. But just between you and me, I wish you wouldn't, because I'd love to shove a fist through you. You're one of them dressed-up wise guys that thinks he's a muscle. Get a little fresh, pal. I would love it."

It didn't make sense, but it's the same old story. Business is business, and in my business, you've got to keep them respecting you or you lose face. I lifted my knee, and his face hung out, and he caught a tennis-racket right, and then a straight left to the point of the chin. It was neat and it was quick and before the commotion even started I was out in the night.

And thereafter I was out many nights, night after night, milking the underworld, trying to coax a tip on the Reed snatch, but it was locked up tight, and nothing wanted to happen. I kept making calls to Nickie Darrow but no call came back to me. I didn't see Trina, I didn't see Johnny, I didn't see Nickie, I didn't see Florence, I didn't see Abner, I didn't see Aunt Ethel, and I didn't see Uncle Harry. I saw Parker, and between the two of us we had accumulated a great big bunch of nothing. The holster I was wearing was growing heavy, and the flesh beneath it was growing red, yet ... nothing. And then, late one sunny afternoon, I was sitting in the office thinking about my next move, when the next move was made for me. The phone rang and the husky female voice said, "Mr. Chambers?"

"This is Chambers."

"Good." She spoke quickly. "My name is Sandra Mantell. I live at Fifty-two West Forty-ninth, Apartment Two, downstairs."

"Yes, Miss Mantell?"

"I want to talk to you. Personally."

"I'm a little busy, Miss Mantell." It wasn't true, but you always say that to a new client. It helps with the fee.

"It's important, Mr. Chambers." The voice dropped a note. "It's about a kidnapping."

Crinkles commenced on my scalp. "Pardon?" I said.

"The kidnapping of Abner Reed."

I sat bolt upright. "What? What's that?"
"Listen, please. I ... I'm involved in it. It was my idea, really. I dreamed it up. I was supposed to get a third. One third." The voice got harsh now. "But ... I'm not getting it. So ... I want to talk. Understand? I want to talk."

"Yes," I prompted. "Yes, Miss Mantell."

"Look. I want you to make a deal for me. If I spill ... I want to be able to cop a plea. If I give them the evidence, worst I want is a suspended sentence."

Now I tried the crafty approach. "Why you calling me, Miss Mantell?"

"Because I know you're mixed up in it. Because I want you to feel out the cops for me. You tell them I'll spill if they guarantee me a plea. I'm ready to talk, Mr. Chambers. Nobody is going to cross me and get away with it ... oh! ... "

The raps over the wire were gunshots.

Could have been backfire, could have been explosions, could have been firecrackers—but they weren't—none of that—not with the quick cry from her, and then the sigh, and then the thud of the receiver to the floor. The connection was open but I broke it. I hung up and I ran. Fifty-two West Forty-ninth was near enough to my office and I ran most of the way ... and then I was there ... in the presence of death ... Apartment Two ... a blonde on the floor with blood on her face ... and standing above her ... a sobbing brunette ... and that one I knew.

Her name was Trina Greco.

"What the hell?" I said. "What's going on here?"

Sobs.

"Trina!"

"Yes?"

"You didn't kill her?"

"No."

I closed the door and I prowled. The receiver was still off the hook, a discordant insistent buzz pouring through it. The blonde was in a sheer housecoat, a tall blonde with a fine figure, shot through the head. A revolver lay near her. I came back to Trina and shook her. I said, "Did you kill her?"

"No."

"Did you call the cops?"

"No."

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here."

"Look. Talk it up. Talk it up fast. We've got to report this. Now come on. Let's have it."

She was trying to pull herself together, but she wasn't too successful. "Let me tell you," she gasped. "Let me tell you what happened ... "

But then the sobs came again.

I said, "I'll ask questions, and you try to answer them. And get hold of yourself, will you please?"

"Yes. Yes."
"You say you live here. Is this the new apartment you moved to?"

"Yes."

"And this girl. She Sandra Mantell?"

"Yes."

"She live here too?"

"Yes. My room-mate."

"You know her well?"

"I met her a couple of months ago. I was introduced to her."

"By whom?"

"A man. Johnny Hays."

"Johnny Hays, huh? That guy mean anything to you?"

"Nothing. An acquaintance. I went out with him a few times."

"And this Sandra Mantell. Was she a friend of his too?"

"No. She was a friend of a friend of his. Nick Darrow."

"How well do you know this Nick Darrow?"

"I don't know him at all."

"You mean you just met a girl, and you became room-mates?"

"No. She lived in Jersey. She was a dancer, working in Union City."

"Doing what?"

"A burlesque turn. But she was a trained ballet dancer. We were short a girl for our show, and I brought her in, and she qualified. We became better acquainted, and she suggested taking this apartment."

"How'd you get along?"

"I didn't like her. She was tough, hard, unpleasant. I told her I was going to move out after the first month, for which my rent was paid."

"How'd she take that?"

"She said she didn't care. She said if things worked out for her, she'd be living in a penthouse, and very soon."

"Yet she attended rehearsals as a ballet dancer?"

"Attended them faithfully. She wanted that, terribly. I think she was trying to prove something to herself. She made much more money in burlesque. She did a specialty."

I went away from her and looked over the apartment. It was clean, neat and nicely furnished. When I came back, I said, “Okay. I think you're in shape now. I want to know what happened here, and I want it coherent.”

She wiped her palms with a handkerchief and laid it away. She said, “We'd both been at rehearsal. She said she had
a date, and a very important one, a business date."

"Did she say where?"

"At a restaurant. She didn't tell me which restaurant. She said she was going to talk business. She said she was going to give somebody a last chance to make her rich. That's what she said."

"Where'd you go?"

"I went to a movie."

"Then?"

"I came home. As I entered the hallway, I heard the shots. Our door opened and a man came running out. We collided, and that's when the gun dropped to the floor."

"What gun?"

"The gun right there." She pointed at it, on the floor.

"Wait a minute," I said. "If you and the guy collided in the hall, what's the gun doing here?"

"Well, when I looked in here, and I saw her, like that, I went to her, saw she was dead. Then I went back into the hall for the gun. I remembered about not touching things ... fingerprints. I kicked it ... with my foot ... kicked it along until I worked it into the apartment."

"Good enough. Now, what did the guy look like?"

"I don't know."

"Honey, you just told me you collided with him, out there in the hallway. You must have seen what he looked like."

"No. Remember I was coming in from a sunny street into a dim hallway. And he was running. And we collided. And then he ran out. I just have no idea what he looked like."

"Okay," I said. "That's it. Now we go call cops."

"Can't we call from here?"

"I don't want to touch that receiver. You're supposed to leave things as close to what they were as is possible. Sometimes it helps. Come on."

On the way to a phone booth, I asked her for a favor. I asked her to tell her story exactly as she told it to me, but to leave out one thing. Nickie Darrow. Not to mention him. Nothing else. Just omit Nickie Darrow.

"Why?" she said.

"It's a personal thing, my little Greek philosopher. I've been trying to get through to him, and this gives me a wedge. Don't worry. You won't be breaking any law, and if there's any trouble, I'll take full responsibility."

She was hesitant but she was cooperative. "All right, if you say so, Peter."

"I say so."

I called down to Headquarters and then we went back to the apartment and pretty soon there were cops, lots of cops, tons of cops, and they were in the charge of Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, and Parker was in a gruff mood. "Never fails, does it? How come whenever there's a corpse ... there's you?"

"It's mixed up with the other thing, Lieutenant?"
"What other thing?"

"The Abner Reed snatch."

"You kiddin'?"

You straighten him out on current events, from the phone call in your office from Sandra Mantell to right now (omitting friend Darrow) and now his mood is ameliorated and he's on your side again. "Go home, Pete. Go home and stay home."

"Why?"

"Because you're a good kid."

"That's why you want me to go home?"

"Listen. For once will you listen? There's nothing you can do here, and there may be a lot I can do. But I'll come up and see you, Pete, as soon as I can get loose from all of this. You've played ball with me—I'll play ball with you. I'll come up and see you and we'll kick it around some more. Okay?"

"About Trina Greco, Lieutenant."

"Yes?"

"She's a friend of mine."

"So?"

"Treat her nice."

"Okay. She's a friend of yours. I'll treat her nice. Now, will you please go home?"

7.

So you go home. You're a good little boy and you've listened to Papa. You sit around like an old lady with lumbago ... but you sit. You do some home cooking, and some home eating, and some home drinking ... but you sit. You get sick and tired of sitting ... but you sit. Day melts into night, and night is getting wearisome, and you're still sitting. Finally, at twelve-thirty in the morning, Parker shows up, perspired and tired-looking.

"Hi," he said. "How you doing?"

"Been sitting. Been sitting real good. How you doing?"

"Pretty bad."

I went to the liquor cabinet. "A bit of the potables, Lieutenant?"

"Thanks. I can use a drink."

He used a couple.

I said, "Let's get down to cases, Lieutenant."

"That's my boy. Always in there pitching."

"Cases, Lieutenant."

"Well, sir, that gun on the floor was the murder gun. And we were able to garner a gorgeous set of fingerprints off it. Only prints on it, as a matter of fact. Gun's an old one. Couldn't do any tracing from the serial number. Dead end on
"That phase."

"How much luck do you want, pal? Gorgeous fingerprints, you said."

"There's a catch."

"As my Greek philosopher would say—isn't there always?"

"Who's your Greek philosopher?"

"Skip it. Where's the catch?"

"Gorgeous set of prints, but they match nothing we've got on file. And don't match anything out of Washington either. Where's that leave us?"

"Way out in left field on a rainy day, and there is no ball game."

"Very aptly put, me lad. I'll have another drink."

I served him another drink. I said, "You check her friends?"

"I've got forty men working on this. We've checked everybody that's ever had the remotest connection with her. No prints fit the prints on that gun."

"You couldn't know everybody ... that had the remotest connection."

"We're only human, pal. We've run down every single possible lead, and we're no place. We've got fingerprints, but they match nothing. Stinks pretty good, eh, pal?"

My conscience reared up on its hind legs and pawed at me. Nickie Darrow was a careful guy and he rarely left traces of his friendships. Casually I said, "You guys got Nickie Darrow's prints on file?"

"Nickie Darrow? He got any connection with this?"

"I'm not saying he has, Lieutenant. Let's say I got a personal hate for the guy, and I'm trying to implicate him. All I'm asking—have you got his prints on file?"

"You bet we have."

"Then routine would have put him on the spot if the prints on the gun were his."

"Definitely."

"Okay, Lieutenant. Don't glare at me like that. You get anything special on that Sandra Mantell?"

"Nothing, except she was a looker with a real upholstered torso. Knew a lot of the best people, and a lot of the worst. A burlesque dancer, and a top-notcher. Used to live in New York, then moved to Jersey when she got work permanent in Union City. Played in New York though, and played plenty. There's a lot we don't know about her, that's for sure, and there's a lot of people that knew her that we don't know a thing about." He stood up and sighed. "But we keep plugging. We're cops and we keep plugging. We're not brilliant private eyes that sneak around, and fast-talk all the girls, and slug a few people, and come up with all the right answers. We're only cops, and we plug, and a good deal of the time we solve our cases. Without fanfare, and without getting paid by publishers and TV sponsors to tell our stories. Good night, sonny. I'm tired. I'm going to sleep. You ought to do the same."

8.

You close the door behind him and you hit the horn. You dial the Club Trippa, and you ask for Nick Darrow, and they ask who's calling, and you tell them, and you get the same old answer: not in. This time you leave a message. You say that Sandra Mantell has been murdered, and that you've been investigating it, and that you left out the name
of Nickie Darrow when you made your report to the police. You say you'll be home the rest of the night and you
give them your phone number. Then you hang up and make yourself some frozen blintzes out of the freezer, with
sugar and sour cream, a dish you learned from one of Lindy's chefs, and you're in the midst of enjoying it, when the
phone tinkles, and guess who ... ?

Nickie Darrow's voice, over the phone, was smoother than my sour cream. "How are you, Pete? Where you been
keeping yourself? My club too lowdown for a high-hat guy like yourself?"

"Been busy, Nickie. Haven't had time for night clubs. Haven't even had time to call you on the phone, a nice old
friend like you."

"You really ought to call sometime."

"Yeah, I really ought."

"Why don't you drop in tonight, Pete? You free tonight?"

"Matter of fact, I am. It's a good night for slumming. Thanks for the invitation, Nickie."

"Come up to the office, Pete. Say ... two o'clock, eh? Love to see you. How's two o'clock? I'll clear the decks for
you, pal."

"Two o'clock. That's fine."

"See you, pal."

I showered and dressed and looked at the gun and holster and decided to leave them behind. You could get killed
like that, but Nickie wasn't one to molest people, not when he's invited them. The people might leave word as to
where they were going and then Nickie would be involved, and Nickie was averse to being involved. In anything.
Nickie had said two o'clock, so you were there at one-thirty, just for the hell of it.

The word was in again. In reverse.

The bartender winked and waved and said, "Long time no see."

The bouncer with the belly said, "How are you, Mr. Chambers?"

I patted the belly and I said, "What the hell. Business is business. No hard feelings?"

"Not me, Mr. Chambers. I work for a living. I dish it out, and I take it. I got no complaints. How's for a handshake?"

"Why not, pal?"

We shook and he squeezed my hand and then he said softly, "Tell you this, pal, off the record. When I got business,
I bring it to you. And so do my friends. You're a quick one, and I like a quick one. And you don't take no guff, and I
like a guy don't take no guff."

"Thanks, sweetie."

He grinned a grin that was more gum than teeth. "Don't mention it, sweetie."

I went upstairs. Bonnie Laurie was on again and the customers' eyes were riveted. I repeated my dimness-and-
periphery bit, and I opened the door to Nickie Darrow's office. I was early. Nickie Darrow wasn't there. But the
room wasn't empty. Aunt Ethel came toward me, swaying slightly. Ethel Fleetwood, in a tight black off-the-shoulder
gown that emphasized every curve and protuberance of her hour-glass figure, and let me state, once and for all, Aunt
Ethel had what it takes, and more. Haul off that Bonnie Laurie, haul her off that floor, and substitute Aunt Ethel, and
the customers' eyes would remain just as riveted. Aunt Ethel leaned on me, and I enjoyed every inch of her. She
said, "You too? I might have known."
"Living it up, Aunt Ethel?"

"That Nick Darrow. He's a terrible man. No compassion, no soul, nothing. Want to kiss me now, honey? You're the cutest."

"Take a rain-check, Auntie-love."

"I'm in the mood." She wasn't drunk, but her eyes had more glare than a windshield on a desert.

Then the door opened and Nick Darrow came in. Quietly he said, "What the hell is going on here?"

Nick Darrow always spoke quietly. He was, as always, perfectly dressed. He was tall and lean and broad-shouldered. His hair was black, faintly tinged with grey at the temples. He had blue eyes rimmed within long black lashes. He was always serene, always composed, but always, a muscle in his jaw kept jumping. He said, "Mrs. Fleetwood, I've told you time and again—stay out of here."

"I'm with a party, dearie, outside."

"Then stay with your party."

"Nickie dear, all I want is a small favor."

"No favors from me, Mrs. Fleetwood. Now ... out. Or I'll have you thrown out."

I clucked my tongue at him. "Is that the way to talk to a lady, Nickie dear?"

"Look, Petie dear. You keep your nose out of my affairs." He went to her and took her arm. "Out. You're a gorgeous dame, but out. Go join your party."

"Will you help me, Nickie?"

"You mean you can't find your way?"

"That's not what I mean, Nickie."

His voice roughened. "Out, Mrs. Fleetwood." He opened the door, gently shoved her through, closed the door, and locked it. Then he turned to me. "You know what she wants?"

"I've got my figure."

"Horse. Nose-candy. Heroin."

"Well, for Horse, she's come to the horse's mouth."

"Very funny, and very stupid. I run a night club here, period. Sit down, eyeball. We got talking to do."

I sat.

He sat.

He said, "Where's it tickling you, pal?"

"That kind of tickling, Nickie, I almost died laughing."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He sounded convincing. I said, "You on my back, Nickie?"

"Like how?"
"Somebody's been blowing spitballs at me, Nickie. Any idea who?"

"No. Period."

"Know a girl by name Trina Greco?"

"I've heard the name."

"Got any interest?"

"I've never even seen her."

"Has Johnny Hays ever seen her?"

"Yes. He's seen her."

"It's beginning to add up, Nickie."

"What's beginning to add up?"

"Listen. Your Johnny buttonholed me a time back, while I was out with this Greco, and he told me to lay off that, and he told it to me—as a message from you."

Darrow stood up and walked. "That ain't the first time, the little punk. When he wants to scare a guy off ... on his personal business ... he uses my name. This on the level?"

"You ever know me not to be?"

"Okay. Thanks. That little punk is scratched from here on in. I'll put him to work in a tank town. Don't worry no more about Johnny Hays."

"I never was worried about Johnny Hays. I was worried about you. That boy wouldn't do any serious shooting unless you knew about it, would he, Nickie?"

"No."

"Then who the hell's on my back, and why?"

He walked some more, then he turned to me and smiled. "You got your headaches, kid, and I got mine. Let's get to Sandra Mantell. I hear you covered up for me, and I checked that, and you did. Thanks."

"You mixed up in a snatch, Nickie?"

"No."

"Abner Reed?"

"He get heisted?"

"Yes."

"I know him. Been a customer here. Married money-bags. She's been a customer here. So's her aunt and uncle."

"Big heist, Nickie. This is off the record."

"How much?"

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand. Big ones."
The corners of his mouth turned down and his head nodded. “Big enough. I should have heard something. I didn't. Was it paid?”

“All of it.”

“You sure?”

“I paid it.”

Now his glance held admiration. “You're a hip guy. You're always in on the big action. You have a piece?”

“I had nothing. But your Sandra thought she did.”

“What are you talking about?”

I told him. I told him a good deal of it. I stressed her phone call, and I brought it up to date.

He was very serious when he said, “Look, kid, for guys like me, the snatch racket is out. There are easier ways to turn a buck. Plus I had nothing to do with that Sandra Mantell killing. On that, I'm on your side. You covered for me, and I appreciate it, but it was a cover I didn't want. After your call, I went down to Headquarters. Guy by the name of Parker is in charge, but he'd gone home. I talked to a Captain Weaver. I offered full co-operation. That's that, and you can check it. On that Johnny Hays bit, I'll take care of that. Now ... is there anything else you want?”

“No, sir, Nickie, don't want a thing.”

“Fine. Now go on outside and enjoy yourself. It's on the house.”

“Thanks, Nickie. For tonight, I'll pass.”

9.

I went home and I went to sleep. I had my usual nightmares, but they didn't waken me. I slept through most of the day. I heard the phone ring in my dreams, many times, but I let it ring. I stayed with my nightmares. When I awoke at four in the afternoon, I was cradled in perspiration. I bathed and I had breakfast and I read a book. A mystery. I hate them. But I stayed in. I didn't want to go to the office. I wanted a clean day. One clean day. I didn't want to mix in filth, and thievery, and murder. I wanted to be a small boy, and I wanted to believe that all men are good and all women are pure. I have those moments—even as you—and I wanted to live in my preposterous illusions for one solitary day. But the phone rang and I couldn't resist it and I was glad because it was Trina.

“How are you?” she said.

“Just dandy.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Why? Why should anything be the matter?

“You sound ... somehow ... like a little boy.”

“That's bad?”

“I like it.”

“I'm thrilled. To the marrow.”

“Now you don't sound like a little boy any more.”

“Look. Let's get off that pitch. You're my Greek philosopher, and I love you, but—”
"Wanna go to a show tonight?"
"With you?"
"Yes."
"I'd love it."
"My coach gave me a couple of tickets to *Dead Of Night*."
"A mystery?"
"Yes. I'm crazy about them. Aren't you?"
"Just love 'em to extinction. But they frighten me. Will you hold my hand?"
"Yes."
"Promise?"
"Yes."
"And no Greek philosophy?"
"I'll just hold your hand."
"You talked yourself into an escort, plus dinner. Do I call for you, or do you call for me?"
"I moved out, Peter. I couldn't stand it there. I'm at a hotel. It's barren, dreadful."
"Okay. You call for me. We'll have cocktails here, dinner out, your play, and after that ... you're the boss."
"What time?"
"Suppose you be here at seven."
"Let me think." There was a pause. "I've one hour of rehearsal, and then ... okay, fine. I'll see you at seven."
But she saw me at six. She came to me breathless and excited, and I had to restrain myself from kissing her. She had a little black book in her hand. She said, "I think ... I think this might be important."
"What is it?"
"A little black book."
"Well, thanks. I wouldn't have known that. Unless I was blind. Yours?"
"No."
"Whose?"
"Sandra Mantell's."
"What are you talking about?"
"It was in my bag, in my locker, at rehearsal hall. It was a bag I don't use much. She must have put it into my bag, at our apartment, by mistake. And I took it to rehearsal hall. And I hadn't looked into it ... until today."
"Gimme," I said.
But all my anticipatory tremors went for nothing. There wasn't a name in that book that meant a thing to me. I said, “You stay here, honey. Make yourself a couple of drinks, and get real high for Peter.”

"Where you going?"

"Downtown to friend Parker. This little book doesn't mean a thing to me, but it might to him. Enjoy. I'll be back in time for dinner."

I took a cab downtown to Headquarters, and the elevator took me up to Parker's floor, and I was excited, so I barged in without knocking, but Parker had company. Company was a tall guy, with a Bruiser's shoulders, a dancer's figure, and an angel's face—Abner Reed. I started backing out, when Parker called:

"Come in, come in, Peter."

When Parker's busy and he's that congenial, watch yourself, but it turns out, this time, he means it.

"You know Abner Reed, don't you, Pete?"

"Yes. Saw him once, when he was asleep. How do you do?"

Reed nodded.

"This is Peter Chambers," Parker said.

Reed said, “How do?"

Parker said, “Mr. Reed is going to Europe. He and Mrs. Reed. Going away for a year's stay. Making a ship tonight, at eight o'clock. Dropped in for a last goodbye. What brings you, Pete?"

I showed him. “Wouldn't be legit without a little black book."

"Black book?"

"It belonged to Sandra Mantel."

"Mantell?"

"Yes. Seems she slipped it into her room-mate's bag, by mistake. Room-mate took bag to rehearsal hall, and didn't look into it until today. Today, she did. There are names in it, which don't mean a thing to me, but they might to you. So grab a look, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant grabbed.

I turned to Reed. “You've heard about Miss Mantell?"

"Yes."

"Mixed up with your kidnapping."

"Yes, so the Lieutenant told me."

Suddenly I couldn't hear too well. I said, “Pardon?"

"Yes," he said. “So the Lieutenant told me."

I tightened my face at him. “I beg your pardon?"

"What's the matter with you?"
"Little hard of hearing."

"I said, ‘So the Lieutenant told me.’ “

I'd heard about as much as I wanted to hear. I jumped him. I didn't wait. He was big, and I wanted the first punch, and I got the first punch, but he took it standing up, and then he let loose a few of his own. From the corner of my eye, I saw Parker jump up, and I heard him roar: “Here. Stop it. Break it up. What the hell is going on here?”

By then we were mixing it like a couple of wild preliminary pugs. I slipped by a couple of lefts, but he punched too hard on one of them, and he was wide open, and I was in perfect position, and I came up with one off the floor, with all of my weight behind it, and it caught him clean on the button. His feet left the floor going up, and his head caught a corner of Parker's desk coming down, and he went into a deep freeze, and he was going to stay frozen until someone warmed him up.

"Man, you're nuts,” Parker roared. “This time, you've really gone and done it."

"Precise moment,” I said.

"That's assault and battery, and this guy's important. You've popped your cork this trip, fella."

"Precise moment,” I said.

Parker bent to him. “Here. Help me get him up. You've flipped your wig, pal."

"Stay away from him, Louie."

Parker peered up at me. “What are you talking about?"

"Precise moment,” I said.

"What the hell is this mumble you've gone into?"

"Greek philosophy. I'll come to it. In due time."

"What'll you come to first?"

"A couple of answers to a lot of questions that you and I have been throwing about, Lieutenant."

He straightened up. “Like which?"

"Like ... why I was shot at in that graveyard ... and shot up in my apartment. Like ... why Sandra Mantell was killed. Like ... why she called me in the first place. Like ... why that gun had fingerprints ... “

"Okay. Okay. One at a time.” Parker had lost interest in the stiffened Abner Reed.

"Let's take the last one first, Lieutenant. Fingerprint on a gun. A guy dropping it when he collides with a dame. Does that sound like a professional?"

"No."

"If it rules out a professional ... what does it rule in?"

"An amateur."

"Very good, Lieutenant?"

"So ... ?

"Let's do it right side up now. Here's a guy, Abner Reed—married himself a large hunk of dough—but he can't reach
too much of it ... because she's ... frugal, that's the word ... frugal."

"So ... ?"

"So ... on the suggestion of a friend of his—Miss Sandra Mantell—and you'll find, I'm sure, with a good deal of
digging—that those two had a close sub rosa association—"

"Never mind what I'll find out. Let's get this over with first."

"On her suggestion—for a hunk of the proceeds—they figured out a beauty. The guy would kidnap himself.
Remember Uncle Harry? The first call? Whom did he talk to? Abner Reed, nobody else. Remember the wife,
Florence Reed? Whom did she talk to the next morning? Abner Reed, nobody else."

It was beginning to come to Parker. “Yeah,” he said, “Yeah ... “

"He knew his wife. He knew how much in love she was. He knew she'd pay, and play ball. Which she did."

"Which explains the shooting at the cemetery too."

"Of course. He played it alone. And I had heard his voice. I was a loose remnant. So he brought a gun with him.
Knock me off, and it's all clear. He missed, so he tried again, at my apartment, and that time, he almost made it."

"Yeah,” Parker said. “And then, when he had this appointment with Sandra, and he wouldn't pay ... “

"She called me, and she knew whom to call, because she was in it from the beginning, and they had picked me. She
called me ... “

"But he'd followed her home, and when he heard what she was up to, he finished her off. Cleared the last loose
remnant."

I shook it off. “Precise moment,” I said.

"What the devil is this ‘precise moment’ pitch you're on?"

"A fragment of time in connection with a fragment of space ... creates the precise moment."

Parker scratched a stubby finger against his crew-cut. “How's that?"

"I came here with the little black book. It undoubtedly contains nothing more than the names of her boyfriends, but
that doesn't matter now. I came at that fragment of time that Abner Reed was here, occupying this fragment of
space."

"Meaning?"

"If both wouldn't have coincided, perfectly, this guy'd be off for a year in Europe, and by then, that voice would no
longer be fresh in my memory, and your Abner Reed snatch would have gone down in the books as another
unsolved crime. Ecstatic and catastrophic."

"Wha’ ... ? What's that last?"

"From my Greek philosopher. Ecstatic for us, catastrophic for him. Bye, now. I've got a date."

"That good, huh? Who's the date?"

"The Greek philosopher."

His forehead creased into many wrinkles. “Greek philosopher? Not you. You're a guy for dames."

"Bye, Lieutenant."
As I went for the door, and he bent to the stricken Abner Reed, I could hear him mumble: “Oh, that Peter Chambers, go figure that guy, unpredictable Peter ...”
Dozing in front of the microphone in the radio dispatcher's office, Joe Crestone blinked groggily when one of the heavy side doors downstairs whushed open and then started rocking back to center. Since midnight the building had been dead still.

The footsteps swung out briskly on the tiles of the lobby. They made quick taps on the steel steps leading up towards the dispatcher's room. Crestone was wide awake. The clock on the radio reeled up another minute. It was 2:17. He swung his chair to face the counter.

She was close to six feet. Her hair was dark, her eyes soft brown: She wore a fur jacket and under that a green woolen dress caught high at her neck with a silver clasp. Her smile was timid. "I—I thought Mr. Walters would be here again." She studied the work schedule of the Midway police department on the board.

"He's got the flu. It was my day off so I'm sitting in for him."

"I see." She stared at the maps on the wall. "I—I just don't know exactly how to start it."

She was white and scared. Crestone let her make up her mind. On the model side, he thought, the kind who pose in two thousand dollar dresses. Plenty of neck above the silver clasp, more gauntness in her face than he had observed at first.

"Hit and run deal?" he asked, eyeing her sharply.

Before she could answer, state patrol car 55 checked in from Middleton, eighteen miles north on Highway 315. A woman dispatcher in Steel City read a CAA flight plan to Bristol for relay to Cossett. Webster came in with a pickup-and-hold on a 1949 blue Chev with three men. Crestone sent out the information on the pickup-and-hold.

When he swung to the log sheet in the typewriter at his left, she asked, "Do the state cars patrol the old highway from the boarded-up brick works east toward Steel City?"

"State 7? No, not unless there's a crash out there." He wrote a line on the log. "Did you have a wreck?"

She hesitated. "In a way."

He turned back to the desk and pulled a pad to him. "Name?"

"Judith Barrows."

"Address?"

When she did not answer he twisted his head to look at her. He looked into a snub-nosed .38. For one fractured moment the bore was big enough to shoot a golf ball. Crestone sucked in his breath.

"Give me the log sheet," she said. "Don't even brush your arm near the mike or you'll get it in the liver."

He stripped the log sheet from the machine and put it up on the counter. She drew it to her with long, thin fingers that bent into carmine-tipped hooks. "Now, a copy of the code sheet, and not the old one with blanks behind some of the numbers."

Crestone took a code sheet from a folder. When he put it on the counter he saw that she had shrugged out of her fur jacket. He heard the power hum and then Bud Moore said in his bored after-midnight voice, "Seven fifty." Crestone started to reach toward the microphone and then he stopped.

"Acknowledge it," she said softly.

He stared at the .38. She was resting her hand on the counter. The gun looked down at his midsection. He gripped
the long bar of the mike switch on the stem of the instrument. Under Transmit on the face of the radio a purple button lit up like an evil eye glaring at him. “Seven fifty,” he said, then automatically released his grip on the switch.

"Going 10-10 at Circle 7365,” Moore said, which meant that he and Jerry Windoff were going out of service temporarily to get a cup of coffee at the Mowhawk Diner out on Sterling Pike.

Crestone's mind froze on 10-10: report back to this office. But then she would read it on the code sheet and— His head rocked sidewise. His left elbow jammed against the typewriter. There was a thin crack of tension in her voice when she said, “Answer the car, Buster.”

He was still half stunned from the crack on his head when he said, “Seven fifty, 10-4.” Okay, 750.

"Give me the local code sheet now, Crestone."

He gave that to her. It held sixteen messages for local use, and then there were four blanks. She said, “Don’t get any ideas about using Code 17 or any other blank.”

Code 17 was unlisted, strictly a private deal between Bill Walters and all cruiser cops: bring me a hamburger and a jug of coffee. She had found out plenty from old Bill, a friendly, trusting guy who liked to talk about his work.

"Face the radio, Crestone. Don’t worry about me."

He turned around, staring at a transmitter which controlled all law enforcement in the area. It was worthless unless he had the brains and guts to figure out something.

"Where's state patrol 54?” she asked.

"After a 10-47 on State 219.” It was on the log; there was no use to lie. He heard papers rustle.

"That's right,” she said. “Chasing a possible drunk. Keep everything you say right, Crestone, especially when you talk into that microphone."

The right-hand reel of the clock put up three more minutes. Now it was 2:25. She made no sound behind him. After another minute he could not stand it any longer. He had to look around. She was still there. The gun was still there too, slanted over the edge of the counter.

"Face the radio."

He hesitated, and then while he was turning, the gun bounced off his head again. He sucked air between his teeth and cursed. For a tick of time his anger was almost enough to make him try to lunge up and reach her; but his sanity was greater. She struck him again, sweeping the barrel of the gun on the slope of his skull.

"Don't curse me!” she said.

After a foggy interval Crestone was aware of the messages coming from both channels. Two stolen cars from Bristol. He added them to a list of twenty others stolen that day. Steel City sent a car to investigate a prowler complaint. Seventy miles away state patrol car 86 stopped to pull a dead pig off the highway. The dispatcher in Shannon sent a car to a disturbance at Puddler's Casino. York asked Webster for a weather report on Highway 27.

Then there was just the hum of the radio and the silence at his back. Where was it, one of the banks? No, blowing vaults was a worn-out racket. A payroll at one of the mills or at the automobile assembling plant? Wrong time of week. Besides, that stuff went from the banks by armored cars in daytime.

At the other end of the narrow slot where he was trapped there was a desk, a big steel filing cabinet, and a rack with four sawed-off shotguns. The shells were in a drawer in the bottom of the rack. In another steel cabinet that he could almost reach with his right hand were five pistols and enough ammunition to last a year.

The whole works was as useless now as the radio.
Car 54 asked Shannon for an ambulance at the cloverleaf on State 219. “Two dead, two injured. Didn't catch up with the dk soon enough.”

"What's dk?" Judith Barrows asked quickly.

"Drunk." Crestone's head was aching. “Car 54 will be back here in about an hour. He'll come in to write a report.” That was not so, but Crestone wanted to judge her reaction to the time. He leaned toward the radio and twisted his neck to look at her. The one-hour statement had not bothered her.

When he straightened up, he ducked quickly. She laughed. When he raised his head again the gun banged against it. He rolled his head, grinding curses under his breath.

Car 751 came in. Sam Kurowski said, “Any traffic? We've been out of the car a few minutes.”

"Where are they?" the woman asked.

Crestone pressed the mike switch.

"10-20, 751?"

"Alley between Franklin and Madison on Tenth Avenue."

When the transmitting light was off she said, “Code 6 them to the corner—the southeast corner—of River and Pitt.”

Code 6 was boy trouble, kids yelling, throwing rocks—any of a hundred things. They could spot a cruiser a mile away. When Kurowski and Corky Genselman got way out north on River and Pitt and found nothing, they would think nothing of it. Crestone followed the woman's orders.

Car 752 came alive. Dewey Purcell said, “Going east on Washington at Sixth Street after dk. Give me a 10-28 on K6532.”

That does it, Crestone thought. Purcell was hell on drunken drivers. He and Old McGlone would be coming in with a prisoner in about five minutes.

"Give him the registration he asked for, Crestone."

He pulled the vehicle registration book to him. K6532, 1953 Cadillac cpe., maroon, J. J. Britton, 60 Parkway. Jimmy Britton, the Hill itself. Damnation! You didn't dump guys like him in the tank overnight; but he took hope from knowing that Purcell was in 752 tonight.

"Give him the 10-28, Buster."

"When they stop. Old McGlone can hardly write, let alone in a car doing eighty after a stinking dk."

Purcell called again from Washington and Trinity. “We got him.” A woman's shrill voice came from the background before the car mike was closed. Crestone gave Purcell the registration information.

Crestone stared at the radio. Jimmy Britton would be drunk, affable, mildly surprised at being picked up. Among other things, when he fumbled out his driver's license, he would show his honorary membership in the Midway Police Department. Old McGlone would say, “Ah now, Dewey, let's take the lad home, shall we? No harm's been done, has it?"

But Purcell was tough and he did not give a damn for the social register and he hated drunken drivers. Crestone had been the same way too, and now he was working for a year as a dispatcher.

It was Old McGlone who spoke the next time. “We'll be going up the hill now to 60 Parkway."

No lucky breaks tonight, Crestone thought. Tomorrow he would think of a dozen things he could have done, and every man out there in the cars would do the same. That was tomorrow. The gun was behind him now. She could
reach him when he swung, and she could not miss if she shot.

There was a drawer in the desk full of stories of tough private-eyes who took bushels of guns away from dames clad in almost nothing, and then slapped them all over the joint or made love to them. Joe Crestone sighed. His head was aching brutally. He did not feel like taking any guns away from any dames.

Car 750 came back into service. Moore and Windoff had drunk their coffee. Then 752 went out of service temporarily at the Sunset Drive Inn. Crestone knew how Purcell was feeling now, the to-hell-with-it attitude. Old McGlone would be telling him, “There’s some things, Dewey boy, that you’ve got to learn about being a cop.” Old McGlone knew them all.

Car 751 signalled arrival at River and Pitt. A few minutes later Kurowski said, “10-98.” Assignment completed. There was no use to elaborate on nothing.

Judith Barrows said, “Send 751 to the Silver Moon on Oldtown Pike to look for a ‘49 green Ford sedan with front-end damage.”

Crestone obeyed. He studied the map. She wanted 751 north and east all the time. Then where in the southern or southeastern part of Midway was any heavy money? There was a brawl at the Riverview country club tonight, maybe a few thousand loose in pockets and a handful of jewelry, but—

The phone at Crestone’s elbow and the extension on the desk near the big filing cabinet spilled sound all over the room.

"Don't touch it until I say so!” the woman said.

She went around the counter and backed into the chair at the other desk. She crossed her legs and steadied the .38 on her knee. She raised the phone and nodded.

"Police station, radio dispatcher,” Crestone said.

"Ten cents, please," the operator said.

Crestone heard the pay phone clear. A man asked, “You got a report on State 312?”

"Just a minute.” Crestone had never heard of 312.

"Just tell him it's all clear, Buster.” Judith Barrows was holding the mouthpiece against her thigh.

"All clear.” Crestone held on to hear a jukebox, the clatter of a cafe—anything to help position the call. The man hung up. A booth, Crestone thought. He put his phone down, staring at the woman's legs. They were beautiful. He did not give a damn. She got up carefully, standing for a moment in a hip-out-of-joint posture. A model, he thought. It was in her walk too when she went around the counter again.

So they knew this end of it was set now. Where was the other end? Somewhere in the southern part of the district covered in normal patrol by Car 751. Anybody could read the red outlines on the map. It struck him then: the Wampum Club. Big business, cold and sure, with a fine patina of politeness, free drinks, free buffet and other incidentals for the regular suckers. The green-and-cracklely on the line at Sonny Belmont's Wampum Club. Let the cops take Jimmy Britton home and tuck him in, but Belmont never took his check, drunk or otherwise.

The job would take at least four fast, tough men. Making Sonny's boys hold still for a deal like that was not for amateurs. There was a lot of dough around the Wampum; the income tax lads had been wondering how much for a long time.

So I think I've got it doped, and what good does it do? Belmont could stand the jolt. Why should men like Corky Gunselman and Sam Kurowski risk catching lead to protect money in a joint like the Wampum?

That was not the answer and Crestone knew it.
He looked at the last two stolen cars on the list. A ‘52 blue Mercury and a ‘53 green Hornet. That Hudson would go like hell and the Mercury was not so slow either. Both cars stolen around midnight in Bristol. He wondered which one was outside right now. He could be way off, but he had to figure he was right.

Since the Hornet and the Merc were already aired as hot, they would probably be used only to make the run to another car stashed close. East was the natural route. Old State 7 was narrow and twisting, but the farmers who used it would all be sleeping now. Say a half hour to reach the web of highways around Steel City, and then road blocks would be no more than something to annoy whiz kids on their way home with the old man's crate. She had asked about State 7.

Car 751 came in. Kurowski said, “Nothing at the Silver Moon with front-end damage. What's the dope on it?”

"Code 4,” Judith Barrows said. “The Ford was last seen going north on Pennsylvania at Third Avenue.”

Code 4, hit and run. Crestone obeyed the .38.

Kurowski said, “10-4. We'll swing up that way.”

She was keeping 751 north, sure enough. The phone exploded. Judith Barrows went around the counter again to the extension. She nodded.

From the background of a noisy party a man said, “Somebody swiped my car.” A woman shouted. “Tell 'em it's even paid for!”

Crestone wrote down the information. A ‘52 cream Cadillac sedan, R607, taken sometime between 12:30 A.M. and 1:30 A.M. “It was right in the damned driveway,” the owner complained. “We're having a little party here and—”

"Keys in it?” Crestone asked.

"Sure! It was in my own driveway."

"We'll get on it right away.” Crestone hung up.

The woman said, “You won't put that one out, Buster."

So he was guessing right. They had a cream Cad waiting. If they planned to use State 7, the quick run for the crew at the Wampum was up the county road past the country club and then on out Canal to where it intersected across the river with State 7 near the old brick plant. Barrows could shoot straight north on Meredith to Glencoe, turn east—Why hell, she would strike State 7 just a hundred yards from the old brick works. The Cad was waiting out there now!

She was behind him once more. As if she had read his thoughts she asked, “What's in your little round head now, Buster?”

"I'm wishing you'd beat it."

She laughed but there were little knots of tension in the sound. The deal must be on at the Wampum now. Before she left she would have to level him. She would swing lower and harder then. The thought made Crestone's headache worse. He hoped she knew the bones on the side of a man's skull couldn't take it like the thick sloping top. She might stretch him so he never got up. He could smell his own sweat.

Before the clincher came he would have to run a test on her. The next time she was in the chair.

One of the side doors made a whushing sound and then a voice boomed across the lobby. “Hey there, Bill, how's the peace and dignity of the community?” It was old Fritz Hood on his way home from the power company's sub station. He always stopped to bellow at Bill Walters.

"Hello, Fritz!”
"You, Joey! Where's Bill tonight?"

"Sick."

"The old bastard! I'll go see him before he dies." The door rocked back to center. Hood was gone.

Judith Barrows was in the chair, with her jacket across her lap and the code sheets on the desk. Crestone rose slowly. The fur jacket slid away and showed the .38. Something dropped out of one of the jacket sleeves. He made another step. She tilted the muzzle, resting the edge of her hand on her knee. She cocked the gun then. Her face was white.

Crestone tried to talk himself into it; but he knew she was too scared. An excited or scared dame with a gun. Murder. He backed up and sat down. His head was pounding. On the floor at her feet lay a piece of doubled wire, the raw ends covered with white tape.

The phone sang like a rattlesnake. The woman made a nervous stab at it before she gained control and nodded at Crestone. Mrs. John Slenko, 3648 Locust, had just seen a man in her back yard. She wanted the police.

Judith Barrows' vigilance wavered while she was fumbling her phone back into the cradle. Crestone used his phone to push the Gain dial of the radio down to One while he was putting the instrument away. He dispatched 750 to Mrs. Slenko's home.

The big dame was in a knot now and Crestone was coming out of it. She had grabbed at the phone because she was expecting a call to tell her that the job at the Wampum was done. She was staying in the chair to be near the phone.

When York and Shannon began to talk about a revoked driver's license, the sounds came faintly.

"What did you do to the radio!"

"Nothing."

The .38 was on his stomach. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, damn it! We get a split-phase power lag on the standby tower every night." He hoped she knew as little of radio as he did. "The reception fades, that's all."

"You're lying! You did something, didn't you?"

"No! You've been watching me every second."

"You're going to get it, Crestone, if anything goes wrong." She was wound-up but the gun was easy.

Car 752 came in, so faint that only "seven-fift" was audible, but Crestone knew Purcell's voice and he could guess the message. Purcell had sulked in the Sunset Drive Inn, dwelling on the inequalities of traffic code enforcement, but now he and Old McGlone were on their way again.

The woman's voice was a whip crack. "What was it?"

"I'll have to get it on the other mike."

"What other mike?"

Crestone kept his finger close to his chest when he pointed. "On a hook around at the side of the radio."

The faint call came again.

"All right," Judith Barrows said.

There was dust on the curled lead of the hand mike. Crestone said, "Car 750, I read you 10-1. The standby trouble again, as usual." 10-1 meant: receiving poorly. From the corner of his eye he saw the woman grab the code sheet to
check on him.

Car 750, which had not called, now tried to answer at the same time 752 came in. Crestone said, “Standby, 751. 10-6.” Busy. Now he had them all confused. He called for a repeat from Car 750 to make it more confused. During the instant Judith Barrows was checking the code number he had used, he turned transmitting power to almost nothing.

Faint murmurs came from the radio as the three local cars asked questions Crestone could not hear. The woman did not like her loss of contact. She got out of her chair. “Where's 751?” she demanded.

Into a dead mike Crestone asked the location of the car. He pretended to hear the answer from the receiver against his ear. “He's trailing a green Ford toward the Wampum Club.”

"Get him away from there!” She was panicked for a moment and then she got hold of herself. She grabbed the local code sheet. “Code 9 him to the Silver Moon.”

Code 9 was a disturbance. Crestone went through the pretense of calling 751. There was still enough flow of power to light the purple eye.

"Tell him to disregard the Ford,” she ordered.

"10-22 previous assignment, 751. Code 9 at the Silver Moon."

When the next small scratch of sound came from the speaker, he said, “Midway, Car 55. Go ahead.” He began to write as if he were taking a message: ‘52 cream Cadillac sedan, R607, State 7 near old brick plant. Driver resisted arrest.

She came out of her chair. “What's that message?”

"Car 55 just picked up a guy in a stolen car near the brick works."

It struck her like death. “Give me that paper!”

He tossed it toward her. She raked it in with her heel, and picked it up without taking her eyes off him. She read it at a glance and cursed.

The phone rang. She had it with out making her signal to Crestone. He lifted his receiver. A tense voice said, “All set here.”

"No!” she cried. “The state patrol just got Brownie and the car!”

"You sure?"

"It just came in on the radio."

"The other way then. You're on your own, kid, till you know where.” The man hung up.

Crestone said into the hand mike, “10-4, Car 750.” He swung to face the woman when she went around the counter. “Car 750 is four blocks away, coming in.”

She raised the gun. “They're coming in,” he said. A man might have done it. She broke. It was her own safety now. Her heels made quick taps on the steel steps, a hard scurrying on the lobby tiles.

Crestone loaded the shotgun as he ran. The blue Mercury was at the first meter south of the police parking zone. She spun her wheels on the gutter ice and then the sedan lurched into the street. He put the muzzle on the right front window. Her face was a white blur turned toward him. He could not do it. He shot, instead, at the right rear tire and heard the shot rattle on the bumper.

He raced back to the radio and put the dials where they belonged. He poured it out then in crisp code. All cars, all stations. First, a ‘53 green Hudson sedan, K2066, possibly four men in car. Left Wampum Club, Midway, two
minutes ago. Armed robbery. Dangerous. Second, a ‘52 blue Mercury sedan, K3109, last seen going north on Meredith one minute ago, possibly shotgun marks on right rear fender.

The phone blasted. “This is Sonny Belmont, Bill. We’ve had some trouble down here. Four men in a late Hudson tudor, a light color. They cut toward town on Market. The license was a K2—something.”

"K2066, a green ‘53 Hornet, Belmont."

"Who is this?"

"Crestone. What’d they look like?"

Belmont's descriptions were sharp. “I slipped, Joey. They nailed me opening the safe.”

"How much?"

"About eighty grand.” Belmont said the amount reluctantly. It would be in the papers and he knew it. “How’d you boys get hot so quick, Joey?"

"Luck.” Crestone hung up. Car 750 reported that a speeding Hornet sedan had outrun the cruiser and was headed north on 315. Crestone sent that information to all cars north of Midway.

Car 752 came in. “We're on the blue Mercury with the woman,” Purcell said. “She's got a flat rear tire.”

"She's got a .38 too,” Crestone said.

Three minutes later Purcell called from Glencoe and Pitt. “We got her. Car 751 is here with us.”

Crestone dispatched Car 751 to the old brick works with the dope on a cream Cadillac sedan. Car 55 came in from Highway 315. “The green Hudson got past me, Midway. I'm turning now to go north. Tell Shannon.”

The Shannon dispatcher said, “10-4 on that message, Midway.” A moment later he was talking to a sheriff, and then state patrol 54 came in.

When the channels were clear again Crestone called Steel City to cover State 7 from the east, just in case. He called the police chief and the sheriff by telephone. The chief said he would be down at once. Crestone was still talking to the sheriff when Car 751 reported. “We got the cream Cadillac sedan at the brick plant,” Kurowski said. “The guy screamed into the weeds and took the keys with him.”

The message went into the mouthpiece of the telephone. The sheriff said, “I'll be down there with a couple of boys in ten minutes.” Crestone hung the phone up. He told Car 751 to stand by at the brick works.

Everything was set now. There would be a tough road block at the Y on State 20 and Highway 315. If the Hudson got around that, there would be trouble on ahead, piling up higher as more cars converged.

Crestone lit a cigarette. The phone rang. A man asked, “You got my car yet?”

"What car?"

"My Cadillac! My God, man! I just called you."

"The only stolen car in the world,” Crestone said. “Yeah, we got it. You can pick it up at the police garage in the morning. Bring your registration and title and five bucks for towing charges.”

"Towing! Is it hurt?"

"No keys."

"Oh,” the man said. The party was still going on around him. “Look, officer, I've got an extra set of keys. If you'll
Crestone decided that his skull was breaking. He punched his cigarette out and tried to swallow the bad taste it had left in his mouth.

They brought her in, Purcell and Old McGlone. The tension was gone from her now; she looked beaten down and helpless.

"Cute kid." Purcell held up the .38. "She put a couple of spots on 752 by way of greeting us. Is the chief on his way?"

Crestone nodded. The woman looked at him and said, "I'm sorry I kept hitting you."

"Yeah."

"She was here?" Purcell asked. "She slugged you?"

"She did."

Old McGlone needed a shave as usual. He was staring at Judith Barrows. All at once he asked, "When did you leave Pulaski Avenue, Zelda Tuwin?"

Her eyes jerked up to Old McGlone's face. "Five years ago. It was raining."

"I remember you. You were a chubby kid, Zelda. You—"

"I was a big fat slob!"

"You been a dress model?" Crestone asked.

"Yeah! Big stuff! I got tired of parading in front of bitches and their men. I couldn't eat what I wanted to. I had to walk like I was made of glass. I got tired of it."

Old McGlone nodded. "Sure, sure. So you wanted to have the money like them you pranced in front of. You were doubtless making plenty yourself—for a kid from the Polish section of Midway. You'd have been better off staying on Pulaski and marrying a good boy from the mill, Zelda Tuwin."

Old McGlone looked sad and wistful. He never did want to believe the things he had been seeing for twenty-five years. He was tough but not hard. He understood and he deplored but he never could condemn. Zelda Tuwin watched him for several moments and seemed to recognize those things about him.

And then she stared at the floor.

The chief tramped in. Crestone gave him the story. The chief nodded, watching Zelda Tuwin. He tilted his head toward his office and clumped down the steps. Old McGlone and Purcell took her out, Purcell walking ahead. Old McGlone said, "Watch them steel steps there, Zelda."

After a while the sheriff's car came in. He had Brownie, who had tried to jump a canal and nearly drowned. Car 54 was on the air a moment later.

"We got the Hornet, Midway. Four men. What's the authority?"

"Midway PD. Bring 'em back, and everything they have with them."

"They got it too. Cars 55 and 86 are coming in with me."
Crestone sent out a cancellation on the two stolen cars. He could hear the chief talking to Zelda Tuwin downstairs. He knew how Old McGlone felt about some things there seemed to be no help for. It was 3:41 A.M.

Joe Crestone had a hell of a headache.

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BAIT FOR THE RED-HEAD by EUGENE PAWLEY

Ron Jordan saw the relief man coming across Berkeley Street and knew something was up. Jordan was standing in the gore on the Trimount Avenue side, letting the traffic flow by on both sides of him. At three o'clock the traffic was full but not bad. The sun was behaving for June, and Ron Jordan was standing there letting it flow and looking at the girls going away from him in the crosswalk. Then this relief, an old traffic fixture named Dennehy, walked out and gave him a funny look.

"You're wanted at the station," said Dennehy.

"What for?"

Dennehy's face, with its puckered round mouth, had a knowing and maybe pleased shape to it. He shot a veiled glance up at Jordan's cap, which sat at a jaunty angle like a flying colonel's; he let his eyes travel slowly down Jordan's trimness and thought the gesture was explanation enough. "I don't know," he said.

"You know. Give, my friend, give."

"I said I don't. But the sergeant was talking to the inspectors' bureau before he sent me to relieve you. When he hung up he said, 'Send Lover Boy back here, and tell him to hump it.' " The relief gave Jordan a sidelong glance. "So maybe you know."

A girl in the crosswalk crowd said, "Hi, Ron." She was a chick from the office building on Berkeley below Trimount. Ron said, "Hi, honey," and answered her smile, and absently watched her tick-tock gait as she walked away from him. At the curb she looked back and smiled again.

Jordan put his whistle in his pocket. "It's all yours."

At the station, Sergeant Gillchrist said, "Get down to the inspectors’ bureau. Report to Captain Sline, and hightail it."

"What for?" Jordan asked, again.

The sergeant put his lips against his teeth and sucked in air. It was a gesture; it meant suction—pull, influence. Gillchrist thought Jordan was finagling a transfer to the bureau. Rookies under a year in the department didn't get into the bureau, even as clerks. Not without pull. The sergeant thought it was pull, the relief thought Jordan was in trouble over a girl. So neither of them really knew anything.

The inspectors' bureau was high in the chopped-up warren atop the City Hall building. It was strange territory.

Jordan knew the two men in the captain's office because they were who they were. He had never seen either up close before. Captain Sline, the broad one, sat behind his desk, his back more rigid than the clerk's had been. The other one, the little one with the quick, burning, black eyes and the hat on, was Shorty Eglin. Chief Inspector Bernard Eglin of the homicide detail. They said he didn't like the Shorty and he didn't like the Bernard; so everybody called him Ben Eglin. He sat slumped and loose as a sleeping child, so very loose that Jordan knew he was doing it because he was even more taut inside than the other man. They were talking when Jordan came in. They looked at him and then at each other, leaving some question suspended in the air between them.

"I'm Jordan. You wanted me?"

"You took your sweet time," Eglin said.

Jordan looked at him. The pressure was infecting Jordan, too, making him sore at the relief with his puckered mouth, sore at Gillchrist who wasn't going any higher and so found pull in the promotion of every other cop. Ron was sore at this little man with the raspy voice, the hot eyes and sardonic lips. Jordan said to himself, You're an ugly runt with a reputation and so you shove rookies around. I ought to call you Shorty to your face. Aloud he said, "I came as
soon as I was told to."

Eglin grunted and looked at the captain. The question was between them again. Jordan wondered if he should have talked back to the inspector. Eglin had no say-so in traffic and couldn't touch him. Maybe Captain Sline could, though. Jordan said to himself, Remember your own rules. Keep your nose clean.

Sline turned to the rookie. “So you're a lady's man,” he said.

"He don't look it," said Eglin. "What's he got?"

The relief guessed right, then. Jordan was in trouble over some girl. But it didn't add up. There wasn't any girl down on him. There wasn't any girl who had cause to be down on him. He didn't fool around with the kind that hollered; they were no good for anybody.

Sline said, “Know a girl named Elsa Berkey? Name mean anything?”

"No,” said Jordan quickly. Maybe too quickly, but it was the truth.

"A man named Bart Berkey?"

"No."

"A man named Joe Crider?"

"If it's the cigar-store guy, I know who he is. I don't know him."

The silence between the two men at the desk started again. Ease worked through Jordan. No one was accusing him. Joe Crider was in jail for investigation of murder. The murder of a cop—Bob Garfield, a young beat patrolman. Joe Crider was the owner of the biggest cigar-store chain in town. Garfield had been found in an alley alongside of one of Crider's cigar stores not a half-dozen blocks from the City Hall. There'd been a hole in his chest and a .32 slug in his spine.

For two days the papers had been full of it. Station talk centered around it. One drop of blood had put Joe Crider behind bars. One drop of the dead officer's blood, dripped on the sidewalk an inch beyond the sill of the alley entrance to Crider's cigar store. Everybody said Garfield must have been killed in the store and carried out that entrance and dumped in the alley.

Now that the captain had brought up Crider's name, the names of the other two fell in place. Elsa and Bart Berkey, sister and brother, clerked for Crider. They were in jail, too.

The captain said slowly to Eglin. “If it went wrong I'd take the fall, not you."

"Name another way," challenged Eglin.

"A little faster footwork out of you and your boys might've helped. It might even have uncovered some blood inside that store."

Eglin's expression said that didn't deserve an answer. Jordan wondered about Sline's statement. No blood in the store? They hadn't heard about any of this in Traffic.

"Suppose we flub it," Sline went on. “We flub it and Crider—or somebody—kills young Berkey. We lose our only witness against Crider, unless the girl does know something—and I doubt it."

"Name another way," repeated Eglin inexorably. “And if Jordan here is as cute as he thinks he is, he'll get something out of the dame that'll be of some value to us. Let the three of them free to roam around. If we're going to get something on any of them, it's got to be under cover."

Jordan didn't get much of it. But the piece Eglin just recited was plain enough. It didn't smell good. They needed a
cop who was fast with women, and they thought Jordan was their man. They wanted him to con some dame; to be bait for the hook.

It was cheap stuff. Jordan liked women too much for that. It was no go. When they gave him a chance, he'd tell them so.

Eglin looked impatiently at his wrist watch. “Time's running out,” he said. “Dammit, Frank, we settled this once.”

"I still don't like it," the captain said. “Young Berkey knows something and as soon as he walks out of here, his life's in danger.”

"We gave him his chance to talk. What are we going to do? What do you want us to do, Sline? Tuck him in every night?"

"If there was any other way I wouldn't touch it. Maybe, if it was anybody but a cop that was killed, I wouldn't touch it. I don't know ... “ His voice trailed off, then came back strong. “Let's run 'em through. The girl first."

Eglin shot out of his chair and through a door behind him, yelling somebody's name as he went. Sline fired up a stubby pipe and looked at the wall, lost in thought. Time was running him to earth; a year, maybe two, and there would be a little retirement ceremony in the chief's office and Captain Sline would be all done. When it's that close, big decisions can come hard.

"Somebody's got me wrong," Jordan said. “I don't cuddle tramps."

"Keep your shirt on,” said the captain.

In a minute Eglin was back. The tension was out of him.

"I still can't figure what women see in you,” he said to Jordan.

"Maybe he's the quiet type,” said Sline. “The kind that slips up on their blind side."

"Maybe he just talks a good game,” said Eglin.

"Maybe," said Jordan, “you can go to hell."

The captain looked up thoughtfully. Ben Eglin grinned.

A cop in plain clothes came through the door Eglin had used. He was about ten years older than Jordan; thirty-six, say. Well dressed, round-faced, with that cold expression all the others had.

Eglin spoke to him. “Tague, this is Jordan. He's the one we picked for the girl."

Tague seemed to know what was expected of him. He had Jordan follow him into the adjoining room.

Eglin called after Jordan, “Get yourself a good look."

Tague held the door until Jordan came through, then moved over to its hinged side. He pulled the door toward him until a crack opened between door and jamb on the hinged side.

"This is your box seat,” he said.

He pulled up a chair, motioned Jordan into it and killed the light. Sitting down, Jordan found that by leaning his head to the right he could see through the crack to Sline at his desk, and Eglin beyond.

Jordan heard the captain say, “Garfield was a wrong one. He shouldn't have been a cop.”

"But he was a cop. A cop on duty.” Eglin was unaccountably sharp.
"I know, I know," said Sline irritably. "You're not the only man in the department that feels it."

Eglin grunted. Silence settled in the next room.

It gave Jordan time to think. He needed it. He was in trouble now, if he hadn't been before. They were going to burn plenty when he told them no soap. He should have told the captain straight out. The way it sounded, Crider and the other two were going to be turned loose. And then Jordan was supposed to con the girl. If he did, he would be what Eglin and Sline thought he was, a hit-and-run guy with women.

Already, somebody else thought that. Sline's search through the department looking for a smoothie with dames, and somebody told him Ron Jordan was his man. Well, they had him wrong. He wasn't a chaser. He didn't have to chase. Women liked him; he liked women. That was all, and what was wrong with that? He played with women who knew the score. The married ones, and the dewy-eyed innocents, he left strictly alone.

A door was opened in the next room. A voice said, "In here, Miss Berkey."

He heard Captain Sline say, "Did the matron tell you this is bag and baggage for you?"

"Bag and baggage?" came Elsa Berkey's low reply. "I don't understand."

"It's jail talk," explained Sline. "Means you collect your things because you're going free."

She asked quickly, "Does that mean—are you freeing my brother, too?"

"We are," said Sline.

Ben Eglin said, "Go on, Elsa. Ask us if Joe Crider goes out, too." He wasn't polite like Sline. "That's what's on your mind, isn't it?"

"I wondered," she said.

"He goes out," said Sline. "All three of you. We can't hold you any longer without filing a charge, and we haven't the evidence. You knew that."

"No," she said. "I didn't know that."

She was lobbing them back quietly; there was something subdued about her that did not fit her voice. Jordan took a look. She was standing before Sline's desk, legs together, body poised in natural balance. Long red hair that picked up a gleam from the light above her. A regular profile, with high cheekbones shadowing the hallows below, the lips compressed too tight. Something about her puzzled him.

Sline spoke again. "We never intended to file a charge against you. It's Joe Crider we want. You could have helped us. You didn't. We have to remember that."

She pulled her eyes away from Sline's and sent a quick, careful gaze about the room. Jordan got a glimpse of gray eyes. The voice and the eyes told Jordan enough. He had her pegged. The puzzling thing, the thing about her that Jordan couldn't see though he knew he was looking right at it—what the devil was it?

"It's not too late for you to straighten out your story," said Eglin. "Things have a way of popping up. Suppose we find a witness who saw a woman of your height and build going into Crider's School Street store at around ten o'clock that night. That would mean you were there when Crider shot Garfield, wouldn't it?"

She turned a little, studying his bland and ugly face. "I was home," she said.
Sline broke in, impatient with Eglin. “There's another matter, Miss Berkey. We're worried about your brother.”

Her attention carne quickly back to Sline. He went on, “If Crider killed Garfield—and he did—your brother helped him. Or at least saw it. You know that. Bart was there, and admits he was there. You say you were not. That would make Bart the only eye-witness who could ever testify against Crider. Crider might want to do something about that.”

They let that soak in, giving her the fixed-stare business with it. This was what they had been leading up to, planting the fear in her.

"We don't want a second killing," continued Sline. “We'd like to hold Bart for his own protection. But our hands are tied. You and Bart tied 'em. Now let me give you some advice. Don't try to leave town, because you might need friends, and we're your friends whether you know it or not. And stop working for Joe Crider, both of you. It'd just be giving Crider more chance to knife you."

"But I—" She stopped, then went on coolly, “May I go now?"

"Wait for your brother," said Sline. “One of the boys will run you both home in a police car. We're going to deliver you safe. Then you won't be our responsibility any more."

She turned and walked out without a word, Jordan's gaze following her slim hips. He couldn't tell too much about her age—she might be twenty-five, she might be thirty. And that elusive quality about her, that thing that he was so close to seeing....

In the other room Captain Sline said, “I can't make up my mind about her.”

"I can," said Eglin. He was venomous. “Crider's woman."

"I don't know. If she was his woman she wouldn't be putting in eight hours behind the counter at his store."

"See here, Frank," said Eglin. “Why don't you come out with it?” He was suddenly, harshly explosive. “You and the chief and the commissioners think Garfield was taking. You figure Garfield was knocking down from Crider on his bookmaking. You think he tried to hike the ante and got himself killed for it. You won't say so because you don't want the public to hear about a crooked police officer. That's why you're bucking me on a cop killer. And you're all dead wrong!"

"Nobody's bucking you, Ben," said Sline mildly. “You're all steamed up because we've got to let Crider go."

"It won't wash," Eglin went on. “You ought to know Crider better than that. He knows how we feel about a cop killer. The last guy in the world he would kill would be a cop, if he used his head."

"He was using his head," put in Sline dryly. “He used it so well you couldn't make a case on him."

"He's using it now. But he wasn't when he shot Garfield. And what does that mean? A cool customer like Crider—what would make him go off his rocker? The dame that just walked out of here! Maybe Garfield was taking; I don't know. But he didn't go too far until he tried to take Crider's girl. Probably she made a play for him. She got Garfield killed, and I'll bet a month's pay she was there when it happened."

The far door opened and a young fellow was pushed in. A kid, really. Jordan figured him to be about sixteen. He was dragging his left leg—a club foot. He came slowly up to the desk.

Sline said abruptly, “Bart, we're turning you loose."

"Yeah," said Eglin. “Take good care of yourself. Lock your door nights."

Bart Berkey looked from one to the other. He had dark, deepset eyes that turned upon himself, high cheekbones like his sister, and a weak face. He was scared, of Eglin more than the captain. He pulled jerkily at a cigarette.
"We're letting Crider loose, too," said Sline. "He'll be coming around to see you. What you going to tell him?"

"I—" Bart swallowed.

Eglin didn't let him get any farther. "You going to tell him you almost cracked? You going to tell him you almost put the whole thing on the line for us? You're not going to do that, are you, Bart? You know what he would do to you, don't you?"

It was nice teamwork. The old one-two. Against the girl they couldn't work it well. But it was working on Bart.

"I told you the truth!" Bart burst out. "I didn't do anything. I didn't see anything. Elsa knows I didn't."

Jordan saw the glisten of tears. Still, you couldn't despise him too much. That club foot had beaten him and shaped him; he was just a kid without the stuff to overcome it. Bart hung his head. For him, there was an object of terror somewhere that was more fearful even than Ben Eglin.

Sline punched at him. "Crider is going to worry about you. You're his soft spot. You're the one that might let your tongue slip. He's going to think about that, but one day he'll make up his mind and start looking for you."

"I'll be too late then," Eglin nodded. "We won't be around to wipe your nose." His voice changed, became brutal. "Your sister is waiting for you. Get out!"

Bart Berkey left. There was another wait, during which Sline and Eglin exchanged low-voiced growls. Jordan still had the girl on his mind.

The far door opened again and Joe Crider walked into the room. He was a trim, compact man with a good-humored mouth. A roundish face, not a line in it, matched the gray at his temples. He wore rimless glasses, the lenses cut almost square, reflecting the overhead light, blanking out his eyes, making them shiny apertures without depth. He was smiling when he turned to look across at Sline and down at Eglin. A man sure of himself, sure he had won. But his cigarette was long, newly lighted. He had fired up just outside the door and taken one deep drag to relieve the tension inside of him.

"Well, Inspector," he said. His words came flat and soft. "Is this good-bye?"

Sline gave the reply. "You go out," he said. "But don't go far. We're not through with you."

"So?" said Crider. "I get ridden, eh? You make it a bad job and you're sore, so you ride Joe Crider. How long?"

"It was a cop you killed," Eglin snapped.

Crider took the hand from his pocket and raised it, palm up. "Why? Why should I want to kill Bob Garfield?"

"Bart Berkey knows," said Eglin. "And we'll know when Bart figures out he's being a chump. He'll come crawling back to tell us the rest of it. That's why we ride you, Crider. And if something happens to Berkey, we're not going to sit on our behinds, we're going to pin it on you. Just you bear that in mind."

Ron Jordan got the full force of it, then. Eglin had been systematically setting them all on edge, pitting them one against the other, as a means of making something happen that would break the Garfield killing. And ladies-man Jordan had a noble part to play. He was to be the observer—the buzzard flying overhead. He must con the girl to stay close inside, be in a position to report whatever happened. Jordan saw it all now.

Ben Eglin stared at Crider and played out his perfidy, that might mean the life of Bart Berkey. Crider turned his head to examine the half-open door; the glare on his glasses gave Jordan the queer impression that opaque, depthless eyes were fixed on him. Slowly Crider brought his attention around to Sline, studying him, then to Eglin.

"Let's stop horsing each other," he said. "Bart's a kid. He couldn't stand up to you. If he had known anything, you'd have got it out of him. Now tell me, why with the cop-pressure off, should he suddenly start talking?"
"That's right," said Eglin, ignoring Crider's question. "He couldn't stand up to me. You should have seen him cry like a baby and call for his sister when I hammered at him about a woman being in your joint that night."

Eglin dropped it there, left it to Crider to figure what might have been added but wasn't. Bart Berkey had almost broken. Eglin didn't have long enough to work on him. Eglin couldn't hold him any longer without filing a charge, and Bart didn't confess enough to make a charge stick. That was what Crider was supposed to think. It was clear, without Eglin coming out and saying it, that Bart was so weak his silence couldn't be depended on and that he was the kind of a kid who might crack at any time.

Captain Sline stood up. "All right, Crider," he said. "You can go, now."

Before the door closed on Crider, he looked back, smiling. The last little trick was his. And maybe all tricks. Jordan couldn't for the life of him figure out under which one of the three Sline and Eglin had set the keg of dynamite.

This was the time for Jordan to count himself out. They couldn't touch him for it. There was nothing in the manual that said a traffic cop could be ordered to do a job on a woman.

Crossing toward Sline he said, "I tried to tell you, Captain—"

"Tell it later, Jordan," broke in Eglin. "Go change to a suit and pack a bag. Then come back to homicide. I'll be there. You're moving in across the hall from her tonight."

Jordan came on. He told himself, Don't look at Ben Eglin. Don't look in those eyes or he's got you. He looked down at Sline's desk. The ash tray there had two stubs in it. One butt was Bart Berkey's, the other was Crider's. If Elsa Berkey were a chain smoker she would have needed a smoke when Eglin was working her over. But she hadn't smoked. That was the thing that didn't fit. Her throaty voice was natural.

Sline spoke. "What did you try to tell me, Jordan?"

"Nothing. Only—only you didn't ask me if I would."

Eglin came around the corner of the desk. "How long have you been in the department, Jordan?"

"A bit over a year."

"That's long enough. You should know when a police officer is murdered, a chunk of you dies, too. You should know if a cop killer ever got away with it, it would be open season on the department for every cheap gunman in town. You should know when a police officer is murdered, the wives of every one of us don't sleep nights, wondering if their man is next. You wouldn't think about the wives, would you? You don't know that kind of women." The voice sank, mimicking Jordan with a world of contempt, "'You didn't ask me if I would.' Godamighty!"

Ben Eglin spun on his heel and stalked out.

In the silence that followed, Captain Sline said, "You'd better run along now and pack."

2.

Ron Jordan stood in the middle of the strange living room. The couch's velour was a dirty brown, its nap slicked by time. The wood pieces bore the scars of conflict with a hundred tenants.

He said to himself, How did you get here and what do you do next?

He hadn't kept his nose clean. That was how he got here. He had got himself tagged at headquarters as a lady killer, and now Ben Eglin was using him. He had to warm up the girl across the hall. That's what he had to do next. The world was full of floozies who didn't smoke.

In homicide, an hour ago, Ben Eglin had said, "We shook down the Berkey apartment while we had them here.
Found nothing. The one across the hall was empty and we grabbed it. The landlady knows who you are. We’ll have a phone in there by morning. There’s no time tonight to fill you in on background. Come back here in the morning; get it then."

Jordan had got to the door with his bag when Eglin’s voice reached for him again. “The games you play with that dame are police business, Jordan. You’re going up there to get information out of her. Don't forget it.”

Odd, how this little runt of a man could make Jordan forget the rule book. Jordan had snarled, “You're funny. When I want to have fun with a girl, she'll be one I pick.”

This living room looked down three stories to the street. In front of him, as he stood, was a kitchenette-dinette. On his right, a bedroom. Then a bath. Then another bedroom. Two bedrooms. That might need explaining. Why would he need two bedrooms? He could tell her he had to find an apartment quick, and this was all he could find. Or he could work up a leer and let it answer for him.

He stepped into the kitchenette. He opened the refrigerator aimlessly, seeing the heavy coat of frost around the coils, arriving slowly at an idea. The freezer control was a knob that turned in a half circle from “off” through numerals to five. He worked on the knob for several minutes, and it came off in his hand. He dropped it into a drawer, then went across the hall, smiling.

He rapped four times at her door, trying to make his knuckles talk briskly rather than alarmingly. “Who is it?”

"Your new neighbor,” he said.

Silence again. After a time she repeated, “Who?”

He caught on. It was his voice she was studying. She wanted to hear it again, make sure whether she knew it.

He said quite loudly, “My name is Ron Jordan. I just moved in across the hall and I can't figure out how to defrost my refrigerator.”

The door opened three inches; a night chain caught it there. Her face was wary and hostile.

"Sorry." He smiled. “It is kind of late, isn't it? But I thought maybe you had the same kind of refrigerator as mine and could show me what gadget to turn. I've been fooling with it for ten minutes and it's got me whipped."

She studied him coldly. He kept his smile, feeling a stiffness in his lips. The great lover—yeah! She was going to close the door in his face.

"Bart," she called. Then to Jordan, “Just a minute.”

He heard the murmur of voices, then the chain dropped and the door came open. Bart stood behind her, his mouth sullen.

"I'm Ron Jordan," Jordan repeated, catching her guarded glance down the hall.

"I'm Elsa Berkey. This is my brother Bart. Why didn't you call the landlady?"

"You know how it is. You start griping the first day you're in, and you get tabbed as a complaining tenant.” He grinned. “I always wait ‘til the second day."

Still unsmiling, she said, “Come on, Bart.” She closed her door carefully. The night latch clicked again. They crossed and entered behind Jordan.

She took one look in the refrigerator, said, “No wonder. The knob's gone,” and began rummaging in the drawers. In a moment she came up with it, stuck it on its spindle and turned the control to the “off” position. “There,” she said. “Leave it off ‘til morning.”
He said in genuine surprise, “How did you know where it was?”

“Any woman would know.” She had resumed her study of him in this stronger light. Her eyes were gray, under quite dark eyebrows. A hard gray, and suspicious. She said, “You just moved in?”

“Just tonight. I took it yesterday, but didn’t have time to get my stuff over from the hotel. The company transferred me from St. Louis last week. I sell.”

“Sell what?”

“Exterminator chemicals. You know. Terminate the termites. Roust the rats.”

It was moderately safe ground with him. Once he had worked six months for a pest-control company. And it got a small smile out of her.

She said, “Your wife coming out later after you get settled?”

“No wife. No kids. No nothing.”

She looked at Bart through a long, thoughtful silence. When she turned back to Jordan she gave him a smile. “I think we should welcome the new neighbor with a drink.”

The Berkey apartment was identical with his, laid out in reverse. But different. The living room was freshly painted, a soft chartreuse that fought the gloom. Wall to wall carpeting—a dark green. A gay slip cover hid the ugliness of the couch. The one big chair, too. She guided him toward it, saying, “You don't mind bourbon?”

“Does a fish mind water?”

He couldn't have been more trite. But she laughed. Her smile said, “You're handsome and witty and I think I'm going to like you a lot.” He couldn't figure it. She hadn't looked this easy to him. Too bad this was strictly police business. She was a trim little schooner, and he liked her jib, too.

Bart Berkey was bothered. He had slumped down at one end of the couch. His eyes were puzzled as they followed his sister.

Jordan said to him, “What do you do?”

“Nothin’ right now.” He spoke resentfully. He didn't like Jordan's presence here. Jordan barely noticed. He was thinking. So they took the advice. They're not working for Crider any more.

Elsa returned with three glasses in her hands. One was a different color; it looked like tomato juice. She handed it to Bart.

Jordan stood up and took his.

She took a sip, smiled at him, and moved around behind his chair to the front window. Jordan started to sit down. But he couldn't very well sit with his hack to her. He joined her as she raised the window blind.

“Why, it's raining!” she said.

It wasn't actually, he saw. The night sky was depositing something less than a shower, something more than a fog. It was enough to make the streets gleam darkly, and to blur the outline of cars a block away. In this apartment-house district there was never enough garage space. He could see at least a dozen cars parked for the night. Ben Eglin might have a couple of men in one of them. They might be watching this window, seeing him, at this moment. Well, they could report to Eglin that he had made the grade.

Working on his bourbon, he wondered if Ben Eglin gave all his men that Fourth of July oration about cop killers? Remembering it, remembering Eglin's intensity, Jordan felt again a tingling in his nerve ganglia, and resented it. It
was like some high-school halfback being hopped up by his coach. If Bob Garfield was taking, he was a crook like any other crook. The department would snare his killer, sure. But they didn't have to pull a man off traffic to do it.

Bart interrupted his thoughts. He said, "I'm going to bed."

"Sleep tight, Bart," said Elsa.

Jordan massaged his chin, thoughtfully. A man's afraid of an attack, he doesn't go merrily off to bed. It'd be especially true in the case of a nervous kid like Bart. You'd expect him to be at the window, furtively peeking out, not being able to pull himself away.

Bart stopped at the door of the bedroom nearest the kitchen and sent his sister a questioning look. Jordan saw it, saw the puzzlement that remained on his face as he dragged his foot through and closed the door. Something had Bart scared. But if it wasn't Crider, what was it? Elsa's tone with her brother made Jordan smile. Her throaty voice held the gentle reassurance a grownup uses with a small child. He hadn't seen her give Bart the high sign to get out of the living room. But he knew she had done it.

"Do you know our town?" she asked.

"I've been here before," he said.

"I hate it!" she said vehemently.

"Hate it? Why?"

She brought her gaze around to him, a little off balance, a little confused. "I didn't intend to say that." She smiled. That slow, cozy smile again. "You know how it is. Some nights you feel jumpy and restless."

"Yeah, I know," he said. He knew some other things, too. All of a sudden he knew. Why she was giving him the business. Why she drew him to the window. Why she held him there with small talk. She thought Joe Crider might be down there on the street. The cops had instilled a strong fear of Crider in her. She wanted Crider to see, if he was down there, that she had a man with her. She had protection for Bart.

It was a laugh. Who was conning who? Jordan hadn't done anything. He hadn't had a chance. Not even for an opening pass at her. If he had had two heads, it would have been the same. Protection for Bart. For all he knew, Bart might have gone off to bed because he and Crider had been in on the killing together, and it wasn't Crider at all who was troubling him.

He left the window and dropped to the couch. Now that he knew all the ground rules, he could relax. He drained his glass as she came across and held it out. "Same size, same color, hm?"

He didn't get up when she came back with it. "When you get caught up with your chores you can come over and fix up my living room like this."

"There's nothing to it," she said. "Bart did the painting. I bought the slip covers. My kid brother's awfully handy."

He reached up with his right hand and after the briefest of hesitations she came down beside him.

"Gray eyes and red hair," he said. "I'm a sucker for 'em."

"You are? I like blue eyes in a man. Really dark blue. Yours are dark blue, aren't they?"

He reached across her shoulders and pulled her to him. Eglin, you picked the right man. He put his mouth on hers. You sure did, Eglin. Then he was thinking, I ought to bite your lips until that cold blood of yours came and made them really red. That blood so cold you think of using your sex to pull in a perfect stranger and put him between a killer's gun and your punk of a brother.

There was a quick knock at the door.
Elsa broke away and jumped to her feet. Jordan came up, too. The knock was repeated. Bart came out of his bedroom in pajamas and no robe, stood there looking scared.

"Elsa!"

That was a woman's voice, coming distantly through the door.

"Oh," said Elsa. She turned toward Jordan, giving a little laugh of nervous relief. She came to him, her handkerchief in her hand, and wiped her lipstick from his mouth. Bart shot a look of pure hatred at Jordan.

Elsa went to the door, calling through it, "Gloria, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Are you alone?"

"I sure am, honey."

As the door opened, a small, rounded figure burst in. "Oh, Elsa, I came just as soon as I heard they'd turned you—"

She saw Jordan and stopped abruptly, her look of compassion turning to a bright, questioning smile.

"Miss Hume," said Elsa. "Mr. Ron Jordan, our new neighbor."

"Why, hello there," said Gloria. She came to him and held up her hand for him to take. She was the cuddly type, curvy at bosom and hip. Brown eyes that were soft and round and innocent didn't go at all with her opal earrings in their intricate gold setting. She saw Bart and said, "Oh, Bart, did I get you up? I'm awfully sorry."

"Naw, I was awake," said Bart.

He didn't like Gloria, and didn't mind showing it. Jordan thought, He hates everybody but his sister and himself.

Bart limped back into his bedroom slowly.

Elsa said hurriedly, "Ron just moved in today. He's from St. Louis."

"Today? Then he—does he—" Gloria stopped.

Elsa said, again quickly, "Let me get you a drink."

"No, honey. I can only stay a minute. I just ran in to say hello and to hear about—" She stopped again, making heavy going of it, shooting quick little glances at Jordan. She tried a new direction, "Have you seen Joe since—"

"No," said Elsa.

"But you're going to, aren't you? I mean, honey, you've got your job and all. You can't let something like this get you down. Why, hundreds of innocent people have been locked up and pushed around by policemen! You're not the—"

She stopped and put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, Elsa," she wailed. "Me and my big mouth."

She was as deliberate about it, thought Jordan, as a cabbie jumping a signal light. And pretty good at acting, too. The eyes she showed Jordan swam with contrition and self-accusation, all but hiding the sharp curiosity behind them.

Elsa was watching him, too. She said to him defiantly, "A policeman was killed near the cigar store where my brother and I worked. Bart and I were arrested and—and put in jail for two days. They let us go this afternoon."

Jordan tried for the casual touch. "It happens every day in St. Louis."

"Let's not talk about it," said Elsa.

"That's what she came for—to talk about it!"
It was Bart. He stood again at his bedroom door, a robe over his pajamas.

"Bard" said Elsa.

"I don't care, Sis. Why did she have to come? She knows she's got no business coming here." His voice rose, riding out of control. "I didn't tell them anything! I didn't know anything! That's what she came for. To find out for him! To find out what I told them."

Elsa reached him just as his face twisted and the tears came. He backed away from her into his bedroom, pointing at Jordan. "Why is he here, too? Why does he have to be here?"

Elsa followed and closed the bedroom door behind them.

"Poor kid," said Gloria. "Whatever did the police do to him?"

"Worked him over, I guess. Tough on his sister. We'd better go."

"Uh-hm," said Gloria absently, staring at the bedroom door. She took Jordan's drink from his hand, downed a gulp and handed it back to him. "Say, you walked into something, didn't you?"

"It beats killing rats."

That startled her. She said, "Huh?"

Elsa came out. She looked suddenly spent. Yet an expression close to tenderness was on her face fleetingly before she closed Bart's door behind her. Damn the woman! She wasn't simple enough.

"I'm sorry," she said. "He's—"

"Forget it, kid," said Gloria. "Your friend Jordan and I will run along."

Jordan asked, "Is there a night drug store close? I need tooth paste." It was true. He needed a brush and a razor, too. Always he forgot to pack things.

"The next block down on your right," said Elsa. She threw a quick glance at Gloria. It was accusing. Hostile, even. She thought Gloria made a fast steal while she was in the bedroom with Bart.

Gloria got it, too. Jordan caught another under-the-eyelids appraisal from her. If it wasn't in her mind before, it was now. But she said definitely, speaking of herself in the third person and to both of them, "Gloria needs her sleep. Gloria's headed straight for bed."

Jordan let Gloria make her goodbye small talk and go out ahead of him. From the hall she said to Elsa, "See you at work tomorrow."

Elsa Berkey shook her head vaguely. It wasn't quite no, and it wasn't yes.

As Jordan passed Elsa he said. "I'll be back in a minute."

"No." She hesitated, fixing her gaze on the knot of his tie. "Ron ... I'm not ... " She stopped, started again, "Come to dinner tomorrow night, will you?"

"Sure. I'll bring steaks. Three filets," he said, and smiled.

Walking down the hall he thought, You poor fish, what got into you? She would spend her last dime for the finest steaks in town just to get you back. All she was thinking of was little boy Bart's future protection.

Gloria was waiting in front of the automatic elevator. It clanked up as Jordan arrived. They entered and he pushed the down button.
She said, “What did you mean by that rat-killing crack?”

“That’s the business I’m in, baby. Not human rats—the things that crawl. You got any you want killed?” He put a finger under her chin, lifting her face. “Pretty baby,” he said, and kissed her. All in line of duty, he thought, while his lips stayed on hers. Eglin wouldn’t mind. He’d okay his conning Gloria.

The elevator came to a stop. She said, “I’m not that easy.”

That was it. That was what Elsa had started to say just as he was leaving, then didn't. She didn't because she knew he wouldn't swallow it. She had kissed him back. And Gloria had kissed him back. And Bart thought Joe Crider had sent Gloria. Things were whirling merrily.

Gloria left him at the drug store. And as Jordan made his purchases, he thought of the razor ads in which sexy gals ran their hands ecstatically over the freshly shaven faces of men. This assignment did require that he look his best, he told himself, and then felt annoyance that he should feel the need for this justification. The thought came and he couldn't dismiss it, that dead men were shaved and lotioned before being deposited in their coffins.

3.

Ben Eglin had a long, narrow cubbyhole off the homicide detail room.

"They're both in the apartment,” said Jordan, “or were when I left this morning. And some salesman or other came."

Eglin nodded. “Who was the other girl you mentioned?”

"Name's Gloria Hume. Bart thought Crider sent her. I do, too. Last night everybody was conning everybody. It was great."

Eglin wrote down the name. He pushed across an open folder file. It was almost two inches thick. “Read it,” he said. “Take it out in the detail room.”

Jordan picked up the file. He felt Eglin's eyes on him steadily. It was a somehow different stare, not pushing or demanding. Jordan stared back resentfully. To his surprise Eglin dropped his gaze.

Looking down at the desk, Eglin said, “How did you manage it so fast with the Berkey girl?”


In the detail room he took the first empty desk he found. There were a half-dozen men around, some on the telephone, some writing. Eglin's detail. They knew who he was and what he was doing. And they seemed contemptuous of him.

He opened the folder and riffled through the file. This was his first look at a murder file. Report of the coroner's deputies. The autopsy surgeon's report. Photographs. Measurements on the position of Bob Garfield's body. A question and answer statement of the citizen who looked down the alley by chance and first saw the body. Maps. Measurements on the interior of Crider's cigar store. Ballistics on a .32 calibre bullet. A pathologist's finding on submitted samples. Reports by Inspectors Tague, Barry, Furlong, Maloof; there were others. And statements. A great sheaf of question and answer statements, free and voluntary, by Crider, Elsa Berkey, Bart Berkey and somebody named James Lombard. All taken by Bernard Eglin, chief homicide inspector.

At the end of an hour Jordan was only half finished but he had, for the first time, a physical picture of the murder scene in his mind. And he began to understand a little of Ben Eglin's rage.

Crider called it Store No. 1 because he started there. It fronted on School. Alongside it ran Romar Terrace, which was an alley dignified by a name. The store had two rooms. The front was typical—cigars, cigarettes, candy and gum racks, magazine racks, three pinball machines, a claw machine, shaving gear, paper back novels. The other room was directly behind. Shelves for storage. A desk in a corner that Crider sometimes used. A long table. And five telephones. A side door opened from this back room onto the alley. You stepped directly out to the narrow
sidewalk. There, in the gutter opposite the door, Bob Garfield's body lay. And there, on the sidewalk an inch beyond the sill, the one drop of Garfield's blood was found.

Garfield lay on his back, stretched at length. His cap was a foot from his head. His service revolver was holstered and unfired. Blood stained his blouse around the single chest wound. But there was no blood beneath him. No blood around him. No blood anywhere except that single drop. Garfield had not died there at all.

There was no blood in the store, anywhere—floors, walls, furniture or stock—according to the pathologist. Jordan could see in the reports the mounting fury of Eglin as he sent his men back to search again and again. No blood—and without it no proof, beyond that single drop, that Garfield had been killed in the store and his body carried out to the alley.

Jordan turned to the question and answer statements. Crider first. They had found him in bed at two that morning. His statement was taken at three. He was cool and seemingly frank. No, he owned no gun. Yes, he was there that night. He made it a habit to drop around to his stores just before closing time. Bart Berkey was just shutting up shop when Crider reached Store No. 1. Crider checked the cash register. They turned off the lights and said good night at the door. That was all. A quiet night. He didn't see Bob Garfield. Or anyone else.

Those five telephones were his bookie business—he wouldn't try to kid Inspector Eglin. His clerks took horse bets at every store except No. 1. They passed them along by phone to the back room of Store No. 1. James Lombard took them there. No, Lombard was not there that night. He left at seven.

Pay ice to Bob Garfield? Inspector Eglin should know better than that. The clerks were paid to take their chances. Sometimes they got knocked over by the department. Look at the arrest records; they prove it. The business wasn't worth protection money. Garfield was clean, and a friend. Was Garfield interested in Elsa Berkey? Maybe. Who wouldn't be? She was a good-looking red-head. Me? No, thanks—a smart man never fools around with his own women employees.

That was the meat of Crider's first statement. Underneath it was another, and another. And yet another. Eglin wouldn't give up. But Crider's fourth story didn't vary from his first.

Next, Elsa Berkey. She was more terse than Crider. She volunteered nothing. She answered carefully. Started working for Crider two years ago. Before that a singer in a night club. Look at the arrest records; they prove it. The business wasn't worth protection money. Garfield was clean, and a friend. Was Garfield interested in Elsa Berkey? Maybe. Who wouldn't be? She was a good-looking red-head. Me? No, thanks—a smart man never fools around with his own women employees.

Come now, Miss Berkey. The facts are against you. You admit you got Bart his job. Bart isn't what you'd call good material for a cigar-store clerk. Crider would never have hired him if there hadn't been something in it for Crider.

There was a bargain, but not that kind. A pretty girl helped business in a store where the customers were men. She knew hundreds of them by their first names. They bought there because of her. Bart had a good mind. But he was—well, he lived in a shell. She knew she had to make him break out of it. She had to make him meet people, deal with people. She asked Crider to put him to work. Crider refused. She quit. She thought that would make Crider give Bart a job. It did. Bart got the job on the condition that she come back.

Jordan stopped reading. She used her sex, all right, to get Bart a job. But it was the way she said, not the way Eglin said. It was just like last night, he thought, when she used her sex on me in an attempt to protect Bart. Everything she does is for Bart.

Then he knew what had happened to him. He had started believing her. Why? Maybe it was the cool, honest way she used her sex, without pretense or hypocrisy. He went back to the file, reading rapidly. There wasn't much more. She was in bed when Bart came home that night. She heard him but she did not look at the clock.

Ban Berkey's fear came through the very first words of his first statement. The stenographer taking it down had
asked him to speak louder. Eglin had been reassuring. Eglin told him he had nothing to fear.

Ban was telling Crider's story—the exact same story. Eglin had turned harsh. A fourth statement had been taken that night. A fifth at nine the next morning. Eglin was pitiless. A sixth and last had been taken yesterday. The time was just one hour before the old relief, Dennehy, had walked out into the intersection at Berkeley and Trimount and told Jordan he was wanted at the station.

As Jordan dug into this last statement the cold words took on tension and the scene came alive. He could see Eglin leaning forward, pinning the frightened Bart to the chair with those eyes.

Q: Your sister's no good, Berkey. She messes up men. You going to let her go on getting you in trouble all your life?
A: You've got no right to say that.

Q: No right. Then let's say she's not. Let's say she is a good girl but she was just having a little fun. But it got a man killed. Do you go to church, Bart?
A: Sometimes.

Q: Do you think a man has a right to lie about murder even to protect his own sister?
A: It wasn't ... She didn't, Mr. Eglin. Oh, why don't you leave me alone!

Q: I'll leave you alone when I get the truth. Let's start all over. You were there. Bob Garfield was there—
A: No.

Q: Bob Garfield was there. And your sister was there. Garfield and your sister were in that back room together. Crider came in and caught 'em in a clinch and shot Garfield.
A: Elsa wasn't there!

Q: But Garfield was there, wasn't he?
A: I didn't say that!

Q: All right, Bart. Let's leave your sister out of it. Let's forget your sister. Let's say she wasn't there. That takes away your only excuse for not telling the truth.
A: I don't know what you mean.

Q: I mean I'm giving you one last chance to tell the truth. I'm putting it up to you in a way that you don't have a reason in the world for not coming clean. And if you don't I'm going to send you to the penitentiary as an accessory when I do get the facts, so help me! Now then. You were there. Garfield was there. A woman was there—
A: No!

Q: A woman was there. You don't have to give her a name, Bart. Elsa was home in bed, remember. A woman was there. Let's say for now she was a woman you never saw before and couldn't recognize in court—
A: No! I can't! I can't!

Q: The truth, Bart. Quickly now, the truth. A woman was there—
A: I can't! You don't know what it would mean. Elsa! I want my sister!

Jordan closed the file. A cold lump seemed to be revolving slowly in his stomach. A woman had been there.
He walked in and laid the file on Eglin's desk. The chief inspector looked up.
"Gloria Hume," said Eglin. "Here's the dope on her. Clerk in Crider's store at Avery and Mason. Been with him a year. Works from two in the afternoon till ten-thirty. Lives in an apartment five blocks from the Berkey's. What do you make of it?"

"Avery and Mason. That's a block south and a block east of the No. 1 store. Was it on Garfield's beat?"

"It was."

"Then she was the one." Eagerness filled Jordan. The cold lump began to dissolve. "She was at Store No. 1 that night. She got Garfield killed."

"Possible. But not likely."

"Why not? How often has Crider been seen going in her apartment? Has he bought her any jewelry and stuff? Has she ever been seen with Garfield?"

"Are you beginning to fancy yourself a detective, Jordan? We'll check those things as a matter of routine ... No. You've let yourself forget the main fact. Bart wouldn't lie if his sister was in the clear."

"Maybe he didn't lie. How about last night? Crider sent Gloria up there as sure as you sent me."

"Probably. Could be he just wanted to know if the Berkeys were coming back to work. So he sent someone who knew them. Why are you suddenly so interested in clearing Elsa?"

"I just feel that you're dead wrong, Inspector," said Jordan. He spoke slowly. It was almost as though he were talking to himself, arriving at a final judgment he had long delayed. "She's no better than she ought to he, but still she's honest and—Well, I've never met a girl like her."

Eglin gave him a long, thoughtful look. "That's the way it is? First Garfield. Now you. One dead cop isn't enough. Suppose you go back to your traffic corner."

"No." He spoke without thinking. That was what he had wanted once, but not now. "You assigned me to get the low-down on her. And I did. So?"

"Young cops," said Eglin. He spoke bitterly. "The Lord save the public from young cops."

Jordan felt annoyed. "Don't you want an honest report?"

Eglin said, "Where do you carry your gun?"

Jordan tapped his left armpit, looked puzzled.

Eglin nodded. "If you have to get it out, keep the Berkey woman in front of it. As a favor to me, Jordan."

The steaks were nicely broiled. The meal was a man's meal, and relaxing. Even Bart's presence didn't spoil it. Elsa had probably done some talking to her brother since last night, told him that Ron Jordan from St. Louis might stand between him and a bullet.

During dessert abruptly Bart got up and started limping around the room. Something had him scared. It was working on him now.

"Bart, listen—" began Jordan. He stopped short, aware he had almost given himself away. He had almost told Bart to stop worrying.

He blurted, "You wash the dishes, Bart, and I'll dry. We'll show Elsa we appreciate good cooking, huh?"

"I'll do them," said Bart shortly.
Elsa sent Jordan a warning glance: Let Bart do them. It's something to occupy his time. He needs that.

She cleared the table, then came and sat beside Jordan on the couch. He took her hand; she pulled it away.

So that was the way it was going to be. He decided not to waste any time. "You're not what?" he said.

"I don't understand?"

"Last night as I was leaving, you were anxious to tell me that you were not something or other."

She answered quietly, "I'm not a kindergarten teacher any more. But I was once—for a year."

"Why did you quit?"

"Do you know what a school teacher's salary is?" She looked steadily into his eyes. "I'm no sweet and innocent young thing, Ron. You saw that last night."

He said, with a gentleness that surprised himself, "I want to hear it."

"The starting salary for a probationary teacher wasn't enough for two. I made more as a nightclub singer, but not enough more. So I found a job where I waited on men and—used my looks to make selling easy and profitable. Until—" She dropped it there, smiling. "You see?"

"I see," he said. He looked at her eyes and marveled that he had ever thought them hard. He saw that the maternal instinct in her held the quality of fierceness: Bart was the kindergarten class that was denied her by whoever determined the low salaries paid to teachers.

She expected him to walk out now. It was plainly there in her expression.

Elsa said, "Ron?"

"Yes?"

"That trouble I told you about—the policeman who was murdered. It's not over. Bart knows something he hasn't told."

She was confiding in him, and he thought of Eglin's crack about young cops. "What?" he asked.

"I don't know. Bart won't tell me what it is. He's terrified and—and I am, too."

"Why don't you go to the police?"

"I would but the man who was killed—I went out with him a few times. Bart is—well, you've seen. He's dependent upon me, and jealous. He didn't like this man, just as he doesn't like you. What if ... " Her mouth trembled. "He couldn't have. He's just a lonely and wretched boy without anyone to turn to but me. There are dark places in his mind but not that kind. I know he couldn't have helped ... "

The whisper dropped away to nothing. She did not need to finish. Jordan knew the rest of it. Did Bart help Joe Crider kill Garfield? That was what Eglin believed. That was what Elsa feared. He wondered if Bart had done the job himself. That would explain why he was not afraid of being attacked last night, his present troubled conscience.

She said quietly, "I've been using you, Ron. When you were a stranger I could do it and it didn't bother me much. Now I know you and I can't any more. You must leave. There's danger here."

He told himself that maybe she wasn't really trying to get rid of him. Maybe this was a more subtle play for his aid. She had adroitly taken the sex out of the situation; now she was appealing to his manhood. Angrily, he pushed away the thought. He was getting as bad as Ben Eglin.

"What kind of danger?" he asked.
"I'm not sure," she said. "But the man we worked for—"

She stopped when Bart came out of the kitchen.

"What is it, Bart?" asked Elsa.

"Nothing," he said defiantly.

"Bart, I've got an idea," said his sister. It was astonishing how soothing that husky voice could be. "Tomorrow you can start painting my room."

Bart straightened up. Animation came into his face. "Can I, Sis?" he said. He suddenly seemed a lot younger than he actually was. "Swell! I'll paint it that celadon green you like. I'll need a—" He stopped, his face unaccountably stricken.

Jordan caught Bart's tortured expression, wondered what Bart could possibly need that would affect him in this way.

Elsa hadn't noticed. She explained to Jordan, "Bart loves house-painting. He's good, too." Her pride was very apparent. "The owner of the store where we worked bought him some supplies and was going to let him paint the entire store. But then the—the trouble came up."

Jordan sat quite still, on the verge of discovery. Bart had been about to paint the store. Crider had bought him the supplies; they should have been in the store that night. But there was no word of painting supplies in those reports in the murder file. No listing of paint, or brushes ... What else would a painter need? A ladder, a canvas to spread on the floor—That was it! A waterproofed canvas.

Elsa, Jordan saw, had not finished her speech extolling Bart. Bart was always making or fixing something. That cedar flower box, he'd put it together just out of scraps. By laying the living room carpet, he'd saved them the thirty-six dollars that the carpet men wanted to charge for the job. Just yesterday he was puttering with the carpet, hammering some nails in, though he'd finished with that job sometime ago. And there was a lamp shade that never—

Jordan got up, forcing himself to be casual as he took Elsa's hand again and led her to the door.

"I'll be back," he said. "Won't be long. Just a little while."

He felt sorry for her because of Bart. He felt sorry for himself because of what his knowledge would now compel him to do to her and her brother. He could not leave her like this. He leaned forward to kiss her, but she turned her head aside.

"You don't have to do that," she said.

To do a complete Judas job, he thought bitterly, the kiss was called for. "We'll save that for later then," he said, knowing that there would be no later.

He closed the door and stood there until he heard both night lock and chain slip into place. In his own apartment he flicked on the light and strode to the front window. He beat a path between the window and the telephone, trying to decide what to do. He knew he had no choice. He must pass on to Eglin, at once, the discovery that he had made. Eglin would want to send men searching for a house painter's drop cloth stained with the blood of Bob Garfield.

Jordan started back toward the telephone. What if Crider had burned the canvas? But that would not have been so easy. Anyway, if he had, the burning would have left traces—ash or smell—that Eglin's men would never have missed. No, the canvas was hidden somewhere. If they could find it—

"Hello, Ron," said Gloria Hume. She stood in the doorway, smiling. She walked on in. "Nobody answers at Elsa's, but the lights were on when I came up the street. Do you know what's the matter?"

"Hi, baby!" Jordan had to get her out and make his phone call. He took her arm and turned her around. "They're home. Go knock again."
She let him lead her only a couple of steps. “Am I getting the bum's rush?”

"No, baby. I've got to talk on the telephone. Private talk."

"You're a strange one, Ron." Her full, red, over-painted lips pouted. “I wouldn't have come in, but I thought—"

She said the rest of it with her eyes. She said she thought he would like having a pretty girl walk into his apartment without knocking. She said something else with her eyes, too, that she didn't intend him to see. She said she wouldn't stand for a man not to rise to the lure she offered.

Standing there studying Gloria Hume, Jordan remembered how Eglin had ridden him, accusing him of trying to play detective. All he was in Eglin's eyes was a lady killer with merely enough brains to be a traffic cop. If he told Eglin to pick Crider up again on the basis of what he knew, he'd really ride him.

"Didn't I tell you that you were a pretty doll?" Ron put one arm around Gloria and pulled her to him. The pressure of her lips were not eager. “What's this? Suddenly, you're a marble statue."

"Go on to your old telephone," she said. “I'll go and shut the door behind me."

"Baby!" He drew it out so that it expressed hurt and pleading and had an underpinning of schmaltz. And at once he started nuzzling at her fleshy, powdered throat. “Who said anything about a phone?” He had to find that paint canvas on his own. No better starting place than with chubby, cuddly Gloria. “Am I forgiven? How about a drink?"

A smile came to her lips, seeped into them. She wriggled coyly. “You hurt my feelings, you did."

"Like they say, you always hurt the one you love."

She gave him a wet peck on the cheek for that. Before leaving her for the bottle he still had in his suitcase, he gave her a squeeze. If you're playing the part of a lover boy, he told himself, you play it. He brought the drinks from the kitchen to the couch, where she sat waiting, obviously for more than a drink ... The smooching and the hand-roaming was interspersed with tugs at the scotch. He tried to keep her drinking steadily, gambling that she had less tolerance for the scotch than he had.

Gloria cuddled to him. “St. Looie man,” she said.

"Rat killer."

"No. You're too damn sweet for that."

"Let me freshen your drink." He bent for the bottle on the floor in front of them, but her arms were around his neck. “Hey, baby, let me get to that bottle. Come on—"

She shook her head. She put her lips to his. Suction lips, Jordan thought. And he wondered how in the hell he was ever going to get any information out of her. Judging by the progress he was making, as a detective, he deserved to be in traffic.

"What's between you and this Bart across the hall?" he asked. Pulling it cold out of the hat. “That young kid's got it bad for you."

She laughed; the soprano trill let him know she was flattered.

"Elsa told me. Said he tossed in his sleep. Gloria. Gloria. All through the night—out of his sleep—he keeps calling your name."

"Men all over town do that," Gloria said, making a wide, drunken gesture with her arm.

"He's young, but he's a handy man. You know. He can make anything. But you're the one exception, baby."

Gloria giggled.
"And he paints. Houses. Anything. Wants to paint a room for his sister, but he needs this big canvas thing that you put down on the floor—"

She reacted to that. A shot of electricity wouldn't have had more of an effect. She sat poker-straight, her arms came from around Jordan's neck. Alert, no longer drunk.

"What's the matter, baby?" said Jordan.

She didn't answer, didn't move, sat glaring at him.

"Seems Bart lost this canvas," he gripped Gloria's wrist hard, thinking to hell with subtlety. "And he needs it now. Would you know where—?"

The hard jerk of her arm didn't free her wrist. "Who are you?"

If the canvas was destroyed, Jordan thought, she wouldn't be taking on so. And out of nowhere he remembered something—remembered Elsa saying that Bart had been fussing with their living room carpet, though he'd put that carpet down some time ago.

"You're a cop!" Her accusation was venomous. With an abrupt, savage threshing of her arm, she freed herself from Jordan's grip.

Jordan's hand groped to recover its hold, but Gloria had sprung back from the couch and stood facing him. Her heavy breasts rose and fell with her hard breathing. The cleavage accentuated their flaccid heaviness. From her bosom, she drew a small automatic, as Jordan arose slowly from the couch.

"I knew you was a cop! I knew you was a filthy cop right along!"

She moved carefully to the phone. She kept her eyes on Jordan as she dialed ...

5.

Crider moved across to Gloria as soon as he came into the room and took the automatic from her. As the depthless stare of the man's square lenses fixed on him, Jordan told himself that Ben Eglin would be furious with him. He'd flubbed it. That was the word Captain Sline had used that day.

"Hand over the gun, Crider," Jordan said. "You're all done."

"You know me?" The blank eyes studied him. "You are a cop."

"I told you!" Gloria wailed.

"Shut up, Gloria," said Crider.

"I told you, Joe," Gloria cried again. Her mind was fixed rigidly on that one idea, clinging to it as though it absolved her from all guilt. "He said he was a rat killer. I knew he was a phony."

Jordan ached to reach for the revolver in his armpit, but his hands down at his sides seemed a million miles away. He heard a sob from Gloria.

Crider had used her to get hold of Garfield in some fashion. Jordan was sure of it—as sure as he was that Gloria, and not Elsa, was there the night Garfield had died. She was a creature who could not tolerate indifference in any man, yet used any man she got her hands on. She had seen murder once. She thought she was going to witness it again.

Yet there was something Eglin had said: Crider was too smart to kill a cop in cold blood. Eglin was right. That was why Crider had not yet pulled the trigger. Crider was trying to figure a way out.
A warning cry came out of Gloria, mingling with the voice of Elsa. She stood at the door, with Bart behind her.

“Ron!” Elsa cried.

Crider fired once—an unintended shot—as he spun; reflex pulled the trigger. The bullet thudded into the wall to Jordan's left. Ron got his pistol half out before Crider twisted back. Jordan felt a burning sting at his shoulder and then the pain came. His gun was falling and he was falling. He was hit. Crider had fired a second time.

He heard Elsa call his name again, and a strangled cry from Bart. Bart flung himself blindly at Crider, half-jump, half-stumble, on the twisted foot. But it took Crider by surprise. Bart hit him, and they went down.

Elsa reached Jordan as he was trying to push up from the floor. Ben Eglin was there, too, flinging himself at the tangle of bodies. Jordan saw the automatic skid across the floor, saw Bart push it aside. Eglin stood, pulling Crider to his feet.

Eglin hit Crider once, hard, knocking him into the arms of the big, cold-eyed cop who had followed Eglin in. The big cop held him away and measured him, then struck. Crider slammed to the floor.

Gloria sat on the floor near the door, her hands over her face. Bart rolled over and sat up. Elsa looked with tragic face from Bart to Jordan where he stood weaving. When Bart got to his feet she came to Jordan and guided him to the couch, saying softly, “Ron. Oh, Ron.”

"Hey!” Eglin hollered to Jordan, “You're shot!” He turned to the big cop. “Call the ambulance."

Bart rushed to his sister. “Crider was going to kill you,” he sobbed. “If I told, he was going to kill you. Even if he went to prison and couldn't do it, he was going to have somebody kill you for him. I couldn't tell!”

"Well, I'll be—" said Eglin. He walked around Elsa and Bart and began taking off Jordan's coat, very gently. The big cop was back; he cut away Jordan's shirt, compressed a wad of it against the small hole. “You can be glad that wasn't a thirty-eight or a forty-five slug.”

Gloria got over on her hands and knees and crawled to the door.

"Not yet, sister," said Eglin. He went to her and pulled her to her feet and sat her in a chair.

Jordan said, “Bart, tell me how you happened to get hold of the canvas from that back room floor?”

Bart still held onto his sister. He looked defiantly at Eglin. “I had to hang onto it. If I didn't, it—it would end with my sister being killed.”

"Suppose you tell us about it," said Eglin.

"I can tell you some of it," said Jordan. “Gloria was there that night, not Elsa. And when Garfield was shot, he was standing on a canvas that Bart had put down in the back room, because he was getting ready to paint the room. That right, Bart?”

Bart nodded.

"I know you're a smart cop, Jordan," growled Eglin. “But you weren't there, Bart was. I want him to tell it.”

Bart Berkey was gaining confidence. He stood away from his sister but spoke to Jordan, not Eglin. “Mr. Crider and Gloria were there first. Then Garfield came in. He had a funny sort of look on his face. I don't think they expected him, the way they acted. They went in the back room and closed the door. I heard Gloria's voice. And Garfield's. He was angry. Then I heard a shot and I ran in—" Bart stopped and looked uncertainly at the unconscious Crider.

Eglin said, “Did you see the gun?”

"Mr. Crider had it. He gave it to Gloria and told her to walk a few blocks away and call a taxi and go home.”
Eglin walked over and stood in front of Gloria. “All right, Gloria,” he said. “It's your turn.”

She looked at Crider. “He made me!”

"He made you what?"

"He made me go out with Bob. I told him it would get us all in trouble."

"Stop sniveling. You played up to Garfield. What for?"

"To get him to leave the bookie business alone."

"Garfield was taking from Crider and spending it on you. Was that it?"

"That's the way you said it was."

Eglin cut at her coldly. “You corrupted a young cop with that body of yours. Stall again with me and I'll see that you have no chance to turn state's evidence. You'll go to trial right alongside Crider.”

She shrank down in the chair. “He made me, I told you.”

"Out with it now. What happened that night?"

"Bob said he was looking for us to tell us he was through. Through with Joe and—and through with me. He ordered Joe to take out all the phones. Joe accused him of trying to hike the ante and laughed at him. He knocked Joe down and started to knock him down again. That was when Joe shot him."

"That's enough,” said Eglin. “We'll put the rest in writing.” He turned away from her, then came back. “One more question,” he said slowly. “Was Garfield trying to hike the ante?"

"No,” said Gloria wearily. “He wasn't a bad guy. He was going to turn in his badge.”

"All right, Bart,” said Eglin. “Suppose you button it up for us. What happened after Gloria left?"

"Mr. Crider moved his car around into the alley by the side door. I—I tried to run then, but he caught me. He said he would kill Elsa if I didn't tell the story he gave me. And he ordered me to get rid of the paint canvas. Then he made me help him carry the body to the car. He was going to take it—I don't know where. We got the body out of the door and then—then I couldn't stand it any more. I dropped the feet and ran. But I came back because of Crider's threat. I'd seen the blood on the canvas; so I got it and the paint and stuff. I was too scared to try and get rid of the canvas, afraid I might not do a good job and Elsa'd be killed because of it. So I hid it—under our living room carpet.”

Elsa was half tearful, half angry. “Bart, you—why didn't you tell me?"

Eglin looked at her. In any other man his expression would have been called shame. In Eglin it was sheepishness.

Crider was beginning to stir, with the big cop standing over him. There was a bit of irony here, thought Jordan. Crider had understood Bart Berkey thoroughly, had seen that a threat to kill Elsa would terrify Bart into silence where a threat to kill Bart himself would not. But that same threat in the end had done for Crider. When Jordan was shot and Elsa ran to him, she put herself in front of Crider's gun. In that moment her brother lost all his fears and turned from a mouse into a tiger.

Eglin said, “Having Crider's wire tapped wasn't such a bad idea. We'd never have got here otherwise. Sometimes police routine is worth something.”

Eglin stood before Elsa. “Jordan here is supposed to be quite a terror with the women,” he said. “I sickness on you. He was right about you and I was wrong. Not just wrong. I've never been so wrong about anybody in my life.”

Elsa didn't reply right away. She gave Jordan a long, enigmatic look. When she returned her attention to Eglin she was smiling coolly. “Yes, Inspector.”
She had not quite forgiven him, Jordan thought. When a man thinks a woman is a tramp, and she finds it out, he is on the hook with her for a long, long time. But Jordan wasn't sore at him any more. Jordan had looked down the barrel of a killer's gun in line of duty. He understood that special hatred that Ben Eglin had for cop killers. He had it, too, now.

Two white-coated men came in, one carrying a bag, the other a collapsed stretcher. The one with the bag clucked over Jordan, the other spread the stretcher on the floor. Jordan felt good. He felt tough. He didn't feel like a rookie. He decided he would walk out. The two men caught him as he fell.

"That's shock," explained the one with the bag. "Puts rubber in your legs."

Elsa picked up his coat. “Bart, you stay with Inspector Eglin."

She did not add that she was going with Jordan. She just walked out beside the stretcher and climbed in back of the ambulance as though it were her unquestioned place. Jordan lay back and watched the shape of her smile on him as the ambulance swayed through the streets. He had an odd feeling that his fancy-free days were over.

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