

They made each second count
in a love that had no tomorrow

35c

GOLD
MEDAL
GIANT

RIVER GIRL

Charles
Williams

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL—NOT A REPRINT

Bunge

River Girl

by

Charles Williams

1951

One

It was three in the afternoon and hot. Tar was boiling out of the black-top paving around the square and heat waves shimmered above the sidewalks. I drove on through town and down the street to the jail with the Negro boy. He was about nineteen and looked scared to death.

"I ain't done nothing, Cap'n," he kept saying.

"O.K.," I said. "Relax. Nobody's going to hurt you." My head still ached from last night and his talking got on my nerves.

I turned him over to Cassieres at the jail. "Stick him in the county tank. Did Buford call you?"

"No," he said. "What's he booked for?"

"Assault," I said. "Attempted assault. I don't know. He took after another boy with a knife. Buford said pick him up."

I drove the car around to the garage and left it and went back to the square. The courthouse was stifling and smelled of sweeping compound and old dust and cuspidors. Buford wasn't in the office.

"He's out for coffee," Lorraine said. "Though how anybody could drink coffee in this weather..."

She looked at me and smiled. We both knew he was in the back room of Billy Barone's drinking gin

rickeys. She had worked in the sheriffs office about six years.

I shed the gun and tossed it into a filing cabinet. "I'm going home," I said.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Louise was in. She said to tell you she picked up the car."

"O.K.," I said. "Thanks." I'd have to walk. Louise was probably playing bridge somewhere.

I went out and my head started to throb again with the glare. Cars went by, hissing on the soft tar as if it were raining. I started to walk across the square to get a Coke before I went home, and then remembered Buford had asked me to stop by and see Abbie Bell.

Abbie's hotel was out on Railroad Street, toward the planing mill and the freight depot. It was a run-down section, not over a half-dozen blocks from the square but tough and full of cheap beer joints. I could hear the shriek of the planer and the slap of dropped planks across the afternoon stillness and smell the heat.

It was different a long time ago, I thought. I walked this way to school before the old one burned down, and there were some good houses along here then. I was center on the fifth-grade football team and in love with a girl named Doris or Dorothy. At night I used to lie awake and rescue her from burning buildings and capsized boats and bullies big enough to be in the seventh grade.

A Negro girl was sweeping the lobby. I went down a dim hall and knocked. Abbie herself opened the door and looked out, then stood back for me to come in. There were two electric fans going and the blinds were pulled to keep out the sun.

"Hello, Jack," she said. She must have been around thirty-five, quite short, with very sharp brown eyes and closely cropped black hair in tight curls close to her head. She always wore ridiculously high heels to make herself look taller, and now she had on a blue dressing gown of some sort of filmy stuff.

"God, this heat. How about something cold to drink?"

"Thanks," I said. I sat down under one of the fans.

"Tom Collins?"

I nodded. She called out the door to the Negro girl. While we were waiting for the drinks she went into her bedroom and came out with a white envelope in her hand. The girl brought the drinks in and left them on a tray in front of the sofa. Abbie sat down and we lit cigarettes.

"Know any new toasts?" she asked.

"No," I said. "It's too hot to think. Here's how."

She put the envelope down on the table. "I don't know what the hell I get for this," she said.

I shrugged. "Ask Buford. I just work here."

She looked at me levelly. "You sure you want me to ask Buford?"

"He sent me," I said. I could bluff too. Buford didn't get all of it, but I didn't think she'd take it up with him. He didn't want to see her, anyway. Elections were tough enough without having to carry Abbie Bell on the ticket.

She spread her hands. "Oh, what the hell, you pay it anywhere. You always pay somebody. But I get tired of having my car tagged for overparking uptown."

"Take it up with the marshal's office," I said. "We've got a police force."

"Don't I know it? I have to support 'em. And you people too. My God. And when I get a drunk in here that wants to tear the joint down, I have to bounce the bastard myself. It's enough to make you cry."

I took another sip of the drink. It was too sweet, but it was cold.

"Cheer up," I said. "Suppose you worked here."

"Well, I've worked in better places than this," she said, and grinned. Somehow she looked like an impish kid when she did that. I liked her. And still I'm chiseling her out of twenty-five dollars every two

weeks, I thought, and wondered if the headache was getting worse.

"You never do any business here, do you? Except this."

"No," I said. "What the hell, you think I'm crazy?"

"Cut it out, Jack. My girls are clean. You can take my word for it."

"Yeah, I know. And they'll give you your money back if a parachute doesn't open, too."

"Well, it's a good thing all married men aren't as cautious as you are. I'd go broke."

I shook the ice in the glass. "Buford asked me to give you a message, Abbie. He says for Christ's sake don't let any more kids in here."

She took a deep drag on the cigarette and exhaled smoke into the blast from the fan. "Is he still crying about that?"

"Look," I said. "He's been sweating blood for a week, and so has the so-called police force. That kid was Buddy Demaree, and Buford's really had the heat put on him."

"I know, I know. I've heard enough about it. Look, Jack, I try to keep those lousy high-school punks out of here, but Jesus, I can't watch the door every minute. I don't want 'em in here any more than Buford does. I'd rather have a skin rash. They smell of a cork and they're drunk, like that dumb bunny. And they never have a crying dollar on 'em—all they want to do is to feel up all the girls and then go out chasing their lousy jail bait."

"Well, try to keep 'em out. Buford may not be able to smooth it over the next time one of 'em gets plastered down here and wrecks his old man's car. And that preacher is getting worse all the time."

She looked at me. "Yeah, how about that guy? I'm paying you people to do business here—why don't you keep him off my neck? God, I never know but what he may come in here some night with an ax like Carry Nation and chop the joint up. Can't you muzzle him before he closes the whole town up?"

"Maybe Buford'll think of something." I stood up and started for the door. "I'll see you, Abbie."

She waved the drink. "Tell Buford the girls are working for him."

I walked across town in the heat, thinking of the lake and of trees hanging over water very quiet and dim back out of the sun. It had been months since I'd been fishing. The car was parked in front of the house, and as I went past I noticed the white sidewalls were black again. I grinned sourly, thinking of Louise and curbs.

She wasn't in the living room. I went down the hall. A cold shower, I thought, and a bottle of beer out of the icebox, and maybe this headache will go away.

"Is that you, Jack?"

I looked in the bedroom. "You'd be in sad shape if it was somebody else, wouldn't you?" I said, smiling.

She was lying on the bed in nothing but a pair of pants and a brassiere, reading the latest copy of *Life*. The electric fan was running on top of the dresser. Louise was very pretty, a taffy blonde with wide, green eyes and a stubborn round chin. She took a great deal of pride in her clear, pale skin, and didn't go in for suntan because she always blistered.

"You're home early, aren't you? I called the office to ask you to bring in some steak, and Lorraine said you'd already left."

"I had an errand."

She reached out a slim arm for a cigarette and looked at me questioningly. "You did? Where?"

"Abbie Bell's."

She flipped the lighter and took a deep puff, letting the magazine slide to the floor and looking at me quietly through the smoke.

"Well, that's nice. How were the girls?"

I sat down and started taking off my shoes, thinking of the shower. "All right, I guess. I didn't see them."

"Well, then, how was Abbie?"

"Cut it out, Louise. You know what I was there for."

"Men are always on the defensive, aren't they? Really, dear, I'm not accusing you of anything. I was just asking about them. After all, I don't get much news. The husbands of most of my friends never go to whore houses."

"At least not on business," I said.

"You've got a dirty mind."

"O.K.," I said.

"I don't see why you have to go there in broad daylight. Suppose somebody saw you?"

"Nobody did."

"Well, it seems to me Buford could send somebody else."

"You know why I don't ask him to send somebody else."

"Yes, it's nice, isn't it?"

"It's being done," I said, feeling too rotten to argue.

"Maybe she'd raise your cut if you went down there and worked as a bouncer or something after hours."

"Maybe so. You want me to ask her?"

"And your father was a judge."

"You tried to buy anything with that lately?" I asked.

"Maybe I should go down and help Abbie out on Saturday nights."

"Oh, cut it out," I said.

She slapped the bed with an arm. "Oh, why do we always get in these arguments?"

"I don't know," I said. "I wish we didn't."

She was silent for a moment. I went on undressing for the shower and started into the bathroom in my shorts when she said, "Cathy and Mildred are going

down to the beach for a week. They asked me to go with them."

"How can you?" I asked.

"After all, it's only for a week."

"I don't know where we'd get the money."

"Well, it certainly wouldn't take any fortune."

"With those two? You know how they throw it around."

"They do get a little fun out of life, if that's what you mean."

"And you don't?"

"Sometimes I wonder."

Here we go again, I thought, off on the same old rat race. We were strapped with payments on a new Oldsmobile we didn't need just because Cathy bought a Cadillac. In January we had to go to the Sugar Bowl because Mildred was going. Cathy's got a new Persian lamb. Mildred's getting a Capehart for Christmas. They could afford it. Cathy's husband was Jim Buchanan, who was vice-president and a stockholder in the bank, and Mildred was married to Al Wayne, who was in the real-estate business.

"Sometimes I get a little fed up with those two," I said.

"Yes. I guess you do seem to prefer Abbie Bell."

"Oh, for God's sake—"

"If you'd like, we could ask her over for bridge. After all, we're practically in business with her. She could bring over one of the girls for a fourth."

"You could ask Mildred," I said. "Al Wayne owns the hotel and that whole block."

"I doubt if many people know it. And he doesn't have to go down there in broad daylight to collect the rent."

"All right," I said. "I'll quit going down there and to all other places. We'll live on my salary."

"Your salary!"

"Well, there you are."

"You could have had Buford's job if you'd run against him last time."

I sat down in a chair and lit a cigarette, forgetting about the shower. "I couldn't beat Buford, and you know it. He's been sheriff for twelve years. And I haven't got his personality. Nobody in the county could beat him."

"You were in the war."

"Who wasn't?"

"Buford," she said impatiently.

"He was over draft age. I'm telling you, if I'd run against him I would just have been beaten and then I'd be out of a job completely. I thought about it plenty, but it can't be done. He's just one of those people. Even people who know he's crooked like him."

"Well, I wouldn't be too sure he's going to be there forever," she said.

"How's that?"

"You know what I mean. Or who I mean. That new minister, the Reverend Soames or whatever his name is. I tried to get you to go to church with us yesterday. You'd have heard plenty."

"Well, before you crow too much, remember that if they get Buford over a barrel I'll be right there with him."

"Yes. And isn't that something nice to think about? And for the crumby few dollars you get out of it. Think of what he's made."

"My God, Louise, do you want me to take it, or don't you? I can leave it alone."

"So you'd like to blame it on me, would you? Well, I like that!"

"I'm not trying to blame it on anybody. But, for Christ's sake, if I'm going to take it the way Buford does, let's take it and shut up about it."

"You can do whatever you want to," she said coldly. She reached out and smashed the cigarette with a vicious stab at the ash tray, long slim legs

sprawling as she lost her balance on her elbow. "I'm going to the beach. I'll cash a check."

"Don't make it over seventy-five," I said. "That's all we've got in the bank."

"That's fine. That's just fine. I'll stay at the YWCA."

I got up and took the envelope out of my clothes. "Here," I said, tossing it. "There's a hundred and twenty-five in there." It landed on the bed next to her naked midriff. Well, it's gone full circle, I thought. That's where it came from—a girl on a bed.

"What about Buford?" she asked.

"I'll stall him. I've done it before. He knows he'll get it."

"You won't mind batching for a week, will you?"

"No." Suddenly I was fed up with everything—the quarreling, the heat, money, the job, all of it. I wanted to go fishing worse than I'd ever wanted anything. "I think I'll go to the lake."

"I may not have to spend all of it, Jack. I'll take it along, just in case." She had the money out of the envelope and was looking at it. She hadn't heard me. I went out in the hall to the telephone. After trying the office and Billy Barone's, I finally located Buford at the Elks Club. He sounded as if he had a pleasant glow.

"This is Marshall," I said. "I just wanted tell you I'm going fishing. I guess you can struggle along without me for three or four days." The way I felt, I didn't care whether he liked it or not.

Nothing ever flustered Buford. "Fine, Jack. It's all right, son. You need a little vacation. Bring me back a channel cat."

Two

I began to feel better the minute I turned off the highway onto the old logging road. It wound up through the pine and then dropped off toward the lake bottom country to the east, very rough and full of chuckholes and not used for anything any more. The highway crossed the south end of the lake some five miles further down, where there was a general store and restaurant and a place that rented boats, but I always went in here, as it was less used and saved that five miles by boat if I wanted to go very far up the lake. It was about fifteen miles from here clear in to the upper end of it, up in the swamps, but I'd never been that far. It was rough country, with unnumbered miles of sloughs winding all over the bottom, and you could get lost in it if you didn't know your way.

It was still two or three hours before sunset when I eased the Ford pickup and boat trailer down the last quarter mile of the old road and stopped under the big oaks at the end of a slough. The minute I cut the motor, absolute silence closed in on me and I felt at peace with everything.

It took only a few minutes to launch the boat, load it, and clamp on the motor, and then I was under way. The slough was about a quarter mile long, and

when I rounded the turn I was in the main channel of the lake itself, winding off toward the north and northeast. It was about two hundred yards wide with dead snags and cypress clumps here and there and dense timber hanging out over the east bank. There were occasional weed beds and I knew the bass would be feeding in them around sunset, but I had four whole days and wanted to go on up toward the head of the lake, farther than I'd ever been before.

Two or three miles up I met another boat coming down, with two men in it. They waved and held up a string of bass, then they were gone behind and I was alone again. At times the channel was so narrow the trees almost met overhead, and it was cool in the shade with the breeze blowing in my face. At other places it widened out into long flats full of dead snags and stagnant, dark water, not muddy but discolored from rotting swamp vegetation, with the lowering sun slanting brassy and hot across it. Now and then a grindle would roll just under the surface, making a big, spreading ring on the water, and two or three times I saw big gars swimming by very close to the top. Innumerable arms and sloughs wound off on both sides into the timber, but I knew the main channel here and stuck to it. In another half hour, however, I was beyond the country I was familiar with and was going only on a sense of direction and sticking always to what looked like the larger channel.

It was late when I rounded a long turn and saw just the place where I wanted to camp. The lake was about a hundred yards wide here, with an open bank under a towering wall of oaks on the right, and dead snags and big patches of pads along the left. The sun was gone now and the water lay still and flat like a dark mirror except for a boiling rise where a bass smashed at something near one of the snags. I cut the motor and started drifting in, and silence seemed to pour out of all the vast solitude and came rolling over me like a wave. I worked fast in the daylight there was left, stringing the trot line between two of the old snags and baiting it with the liver I had

brought, then went ashore and built a fire to cook supper. After I had eaten I washed the dishes and sat down on the bedroll in the darkness, smoking and looking at the fire. The big bullfrogs had opened up their chorus and I could hear the whipporwills' lonely crying up in the swamp, reminding me of the nights I had camped on the lake when I was a boy. The Judge and I had fished a lot in those days. My mother was dead, and there had been just the two of us for a long time. He taught me to use the fly rod, how to drop a cork bug forty feet away beside a sunken log and to set the hook when the surface heaved, exploding with the strike, and how to release a bass after it was whipped. He never kept them. Tomorrow, I thought, I might catch one the old boy had in the net and then released to fight some other day, and then I knew it wasn't likely. He'd died six years ago, while I was overseas. It would have to be a very old bass to have fought the Judge.

I took off my shoes and clothes and lay down on the blankets, but it was a long time before I got to sleep. I kept thinking of the fights with Louise and the endless bickering over money. Nothing had seemed to have any point to it after I came back from the Army, I had just seemed to drift aimlessly, taking the path of least resistance. I was twenty-three when I came back, and for a while I'd thought of going back to school under the GI plan, for I had finished two years at the state university before the war, but that had gradually fizzled out when I started going with Louise. Then Buford offered me a job as deputy as a favor to some people who had been friends of the Judge, and before long Louise and I were married. We had gone into debt for the house, and then there was a new car, a Chevrolet, and before that was two years old we bought the Olds. It wasn't too hard, after a while, to start taking money from the same places Buford was taking his.

Maybe it's just as well the Judge isn't here any more, I thought. He never cared that much for money.

It was a beautiful morning, very still and cloudless, with patches of light mist hanging over the lake in the early dawn. I got up and picked up a towel and ran down to the boat. Stepping into it, I pulled out into the channel with the oars, took off the shorts, and dived in. The water felt warm, but it was clean, and I swam down until I felt the bottom under my hands and then came shooting up, bursting clear of the surface like a seal playing. Beyond the wall of the oaks along the bank I could see the sky in the east growing coral now, and across the vast and breathless hush of early morning I heard the explosive smash as a bass hit something among the pads along the other shore.

I pulled hurriedly back to camp and got the fly rod and some bugs and came back, letting the boat drift silently among the snags. Tying on a cork bug with a dished-in face, I began working out line with false casts and dropped it thirty feet away in a pocket at the edge of the pads. It lay cocked up jauntily on the surface with its white hair wings erect, perfectly still like some big green-and-white insect trying to make up its mind what to do next. I twitched the line and the face dipped down and gurgled with a bubbling sound and little rings spread outward from it toward the pads. I twitched it again, quite gently, then the water bulged upward and swallowed it. I raised the rod tip and felt the weight that meant the hook was in, then he came out of the water glinting green and bronze in the early light and shaking his head to throw the hook. Bugs aren't so easy to sling as big plugs, however, for there isn't the leverage, and when he went down he still had it. He didn't like it a bit, and made a run for the pads, but I managed to get him turned in time, and began taking in line as he came nearer. He jumped twice more, tiring himself, and in a little while I had him close up to the boat. I was reaching for the net when he saw me and was off again, making the reel sing. The next time he came in he was about done for and lay weakly on his side as I slipped the net under him, I lifted, and he flapped in the net in the bottom of the boat, a beauty

that would go three pounds. Slipping the hook out, I lifted him over the side into the water. He lay quietly, then flipped his tail and swam out.

I missed a few strikes, and then quit feeding. Going over to the trot line, I ran along it, pulling hand over hand along the line. There were three catfish on it, one small one that would be just the right size for breakfast, and two others of two or three pounds each. I was wondering if I would be able to keep them alive until I went home, when I heard an outboard motor suddenly break the silence of the lake. It surprised me, for I hadn't thought there was anyone else up here. I looked up and saw it coming around the bend, three or four hundred yards distant. It was coming fast, and as it approached I saw it was a big skiff probably sixteen feet, with only one man in it, and that he apparently had no intention of stopping to swap fish stories. As he came abreast I waved. He looked at me once, lifted a hand in a gesture that was almost curt, and went past. Then his motor sputtered and died. I had started to row back to camp when it quit on him, and I watched the boat drift along on its momentum for a little way and then come to rest. He was looking at the motor. I turned and started over. "Trouble?" I called out.

I could see him shake his head. "Just out of gas." As I came up alongside I saw the motor was a big Johnson with a lot of power. He was filling the tank from one of those Army surplus jeep cans, and I looked at him, wondering if he might be anyone I knew. He glanced up briefly and went on pouring gasoline. I didn't know him, but for just a fraction of a second I had that feeling there was something familiar about his face; then it was gone. Maybe I just ran into him on the street sometime in town, I thought.

He didn't look as if he lived in town, though, or even went there very often. His face was deeply tanned, almost black from the sun, and the dark and graying hair was long above the ears and growing down his neck into the collar of the sweaty blue

shirt. It was the lean, bony face of a man somewhere in his forties, with haze-gray eyes faintly bloodshot, as if he had not slept, and full of an infinite sad tiredness like those of a man who has been looking for too long at something he doesn't like. The face was tired, too, and intelligent, but completely expressionless, and it was frosted along the jaws and chin with a beard stubble that was grayer than his hair. He wore a floppy straw hat and faded overalls rolled halfway to his knees, and I could see he was barefoot. His shoes, however, were up in the bow of the boat out of the inch or so of water sloshing around in the bottom. Lives up here, I thought. Probably makes a little whisky and traps some during the winter. His hands were shaking badly and he was spilling some of the gasoline.

"How's fishing?" I asked.

"All right." He screwed the cap back on the gasoline can and set it up forward by his shoes. Then I noticed the tow sack in the bottom, under the seat, and wondered if it didn't have whisky jars in it until I saw the dorsal fin of a catfish sticking through.

"Taking them down to the highway?" I asked. I knew the restaurant at the foot of the lake specialized in fried catfish and that they bought the fish from the swamp rats who lived up here in the sloughs.

He nodded.

"Here," I said, glad to find somebody who could use the ones I had. "Take these along. I've got more than I can eat and they won't stay alive until I go home."

He glanced up briefly and shook his head. "Don't need 'em." Then, as an afterthought, "Got all he'll take. Thanks."

I shrugged. "O.K."

He was ready to go and was about to crank the motor when he paused. "Pretty far up the lake, ain't you?"

"Yes," I said. "Why?"

"Nothing. It's easy to get lost up here, though." The motor caught and he was gone.

I kept thinking about him as I cleaned the catfish for breakfast. His face was familiar somehow. I thought, but I knew I'd never seen him before around here. And there was something else I couldn't get out of my mind. He looked like a swamp rat and dressed like one, but the speech didn't ring true. He used the right words but he said them differently, the way they would sound if you were reading dialect out of a book.

I wondered how far up he lived, then suddenly remembered the odd way I had first noticed the sound of the boat. He must have just started it when I heard it, which meant he hadn't come from much farther away than around the next bend, possibly half a mile.

Three

I probably would never have gone up to the cabin if it hadn't been for the accident.

It was one of those stupid things that seem to happen only when you're fishing alone. It was about midmorning and I was casting a white streamer fly for crappies near an old windfall at the edge of the lake along the other shore when I must have let my backcast drop too far and touch the water. At any rate, when I came forward with the rod I felt the line slap my back and then the sting of the hook.

I untangled the line from around my neck and tried to reach the fly. It was between my shoulder blades, and I could just touch it with my fingertips. Thinking it had only nicked me, I tried to shake it loose by jiggling the leader, but it stuck. I cursed myself for a clumsy fool, getting tangled up in a fly line like somebody who'd never had a rod in his hand before. After trying to dislodge it by poking at it with a small stick, I began to realize I was solidly hooked. It didn't hurt much, but any movement of my arms irritated it, because the shirt would move and shift the hook.

I cut the leader with a knife so I wouldn't have the fly line dangling from me, and sat there while I smoked a cigarette and thought about it. I hated the

idea of starting back down the lake looking for somebody to get it out for me. On a weekday like this I'd probably have to go the full twenty miles to the highway before I met anyone. Then I thought of the man who had gone by early in the morning, but I knew that even if he went down and straight back he'd be another three or four hours at least, and might not be back until night. Suddenly I remembered again the way I had first heard his boat, as if he had started it up just around the bend. Maybe his cabin was nearby and there might be somebody there.

I went back to camp with the hook digging painfully into my back with every stroke of the oars, and got out the small pair of diagonal pliers I carry in the tackle box. Then clamping on the motor, I started up the lake.

At first glance the long reach of the lake above the bend seemed to be empty and deserted, a continuation of the miles below it. There was the same wall of oaks, the weed beds and gaunt dead trees, and the water flat and brassy in the sun. A big slough led off into the timber on the right and I was almost past it before I saw the small boat landing just inside the entrance.

I wheeled about and turned in, cutting the motor and drifting up alongside the landing, which consisted of two big floating logs with boards nailed across them. There was a live box made of rabbit-wire netting alongside the float, and I could see a few catfish swimming around in it.

I tied the boat to the logs and went up the trail through the timber. There was a long clearing, with bunch grass and weeds, dead and brown now in the late summer, with a dust-powdered trail going back to the frame shack at the other end. The house was small, not over two rooms at most, with a sagging porch in front, and covered with old oak shakes the color of tarnished silver. It sat up off the ground on round blocks, and under it I could see the big black-and-tan hound lying in the dust. He rose and stalked dejectedly out as I approached, but there was no

other sign of life. Grasshoppers buzzed in the warm morning sun, and there was a peaceful, almost drowsy stillness about the place that made you think of a painting or some half-forgotten fragment of a dream.

I stopped in front and called out. "Hello. Hello in the house."

There was no answer and no sound of steps inside. I could see a feather of blue-gray smoke curling from the stovepipe and drifting straight up in the motionless air, and knew someone must be around nearby if there was still a fire in the cookstove. I tried again. "Hello in the house."

The old hound looked at me sadly and gave a listless wag of his tail, but the silence remained unbroken. I could feel the hook pulling at my back and began to wonder impatiently if I would have to go down the lake after all. Damn, I thought. Turning, I walked around the side of the house on the bare, hard-packed ground. Someone had tried to grow flowers in a little bed along the wall, but everything was dead and withered now except the lone morning-glory winding along some white string stretched up past the window. The ground at the base of the vine was damp, as if it had been watered last night.

There was nothing behind the house except a privy with its door hanging crazily open on a broken hinge. There was no barn, for there were no animals except the dog, and not even a well. They must get water from the lake, I thought. A black walnut tree shaded the corner of the house, and on beyond the privy there was just the dead bunch grass stretching out toward the wall of timber closing it all in. I heard a squirrel chatter across the stillness, and inside the kitchen the fire crackled once inside the stove.

I was just turning to go back around in front when I saw a sudden flash of color in the edge of the timber and a girl stepped out into the clearing. What I had seen was a blue bathing cap, and now she came on toward me along the trail in the wet bathing

suit, seeing me standing there but not changing the unhurried gait. It was a beautiful walk, and I watched her, trying not to stare, conscious of the crazy thought that she could be modeling a bathing suit instead of walking across a backwoods clearing.

It wasn't one of those two-piece Bikini things, or even the fancy and highly colored ones usually worn around beaches, and even though it was very small and tight and clung to her like nylon with a static charge, there was still somehow a suggestion of modesty rather than display about it, probably because it was of the kind professional swimmers wear, smooth and black, and cut down for utility rather than advertising. You had an idea, watching her, that she was a good swimmer.

"Hello," I said.

"Good morning." She stopped, with water still dripping from the suit into the powdery dust at the edge of the trail. She was a little over average height, with square shoulders, and quite slender, with long, smooth legs, not deeply tanned, and the suit pulled tightly across her breasts. Her eyes were deep blue and faintly questioning, and there was something incredibly quiet and still about the face. There was no way of knowing what color her hair was under the bathing cap. She might be any age, I thought, from twenty to twenty-eight.

I knew I had been staring and tried to smile to cover it up. It was awkward, because she somehow gave the impression she didn't care whether I stared or not, and didn't care a great deal, as a matter of fact, whether I was even there.

"I was just looking for a little help," I said.

"Yes? If there's anything I can do ..." She let it trail off, still looking at me quietly, and I was conscious of that same puzzling impression I had had about the man. The speech didn't fit, somehow. It wasn't what you would expect to hear up here in the swamps.

I turned around so she could see the fly sticking in my back, feeling like a fool because it was such a

stupid thing to have happen. "I can't quite reach it," I said.

She stepped closer and examined it, touching the shank of the fly gently with her fingers. "I can't tell because of the shirt," she said, "but I think the barb is caught."

"I think so," I said. "It's not hard to do, though. The thing to do is push it on through, cut off the barb, and then back it out. I brought some pliers."

I think I can do it," she answered. "Will you wait a minute until I change clothes?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "Go ahead. I'll wait out here."

I turned back around and she unfastened the chin strap of the cap and peeled it off, running her fingers through her hair and shaking it out. It was straight and dark brown, almost black, falling in beautiful disarray across the side of her face, and I stared at it with almost the same sense of shock or outrage you might have at seeing a beautiful painting defaced, for it had been badly mangled by some clumsy attempt at cutting it. Whoever had cut it must have used a lawn mower, I thought. She shook the cap to get the water off it and went in the kitchen door, straight-backed and unhurried. The door swung shut and then I heard the front one close.

I lit a cigarette and squatted on my heels in the shade of the walnut tree, listening to the ratcheting buzz of the grasshoppers and thinking of the way she had looked and of that strange stillness about her face. It wasn't the blank emptiness of stupidity or the quietness of inner serenity—there was something about it that made you think of the dangerous and unnatural surface calm of a city under martial law.

In a few minutes the door opened and she came out with the wet suit, which she threw across a clothesline. She had on a shapeless old cotton dress too big for her and hadn't bothered to put on any make-up or comb her hair, and she was barefoot like any backwoods slattern. She couldn't have made herself look any worse if she'd tried, I thought, and got the impression somehow that she had tried.

"You can come in now," she said.

I followed her through the small kitchen into the front room. The floor was bare except for a small rag rug, rough pine planks worn white with scrubbing, and there was a small mud fireplace neatly swept. There were a couple of rawhide-bottomed chairs, and an old iron bedstead standing in the corner by the fireplace, and across on the right between the window and the front door there was a dresser with a milky and discolored mirror. The air was hot and still inside the room, and I could hear the ticking of the tin alarm clock on the mantel above the fireplace. There was a photograph of her next to the clock, apparently taken not too long ago, but at least it was before her hair had been butchered up like that.

"Do you have a razor blade or a pair of scissors?" I asked.

"Yes. Do you want me to cut the shirt away?"

I nodded. "That'd be best. Then we can see what we're doing."

She got a small pair of manicure scissors out of the dresser and slit the shirt around the hook. I unbuttoned it and slid it off, and turned my back to the mirror to look over my shoulder. I was deeply tanned from the waist up and wore no undershirt. The streamer fly was a vivid slash of white and silver tinsel against the sun-blackened hide, and as well as I could tell, the barb was deeply embedded. I caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror and for the first time remembered I hadn't shaved since yesterday, and wondered what kind of thug I must look like to her, big, with the flat, sun-darkened face rasping with black stubble.

I motioned with a hand and passed her the diagonal pliers. "Pinch the muscle and skin up with your fingers and run it on through as if you were baiting a hook," I instructed.

"It'll hurt," she said quietly.

"Some," I said.

I turned my back toward her and felt the slight, trembling pressure of her fingers, pinching the skin. There was a fiery bite of pain, and when I looked in the mirror again the barb was through in the open and a thin trickle of blood ran down my back. She snipped off the barb and backed it out.

"Just a moment," she said. She pulled open one of the dresser drawers and brought out a bottle of iodine and a Band-aid and applied them to the punctures.

"You should have been a doctor," I said. "Thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it."

I am six feet one, and the top of her head came up just a little past my chin as she stood there when she had finished. She'd be taller in high heels, I thought. Barefoot! Why? And why, in God's name, did she ever let somebody hack her hair up like that?

I reached for the cigarettes in my shirt hanging over the back of a chair. "Do you smoke?"

"Yes. Thank you." She took one and I broke a match on my thumbnail and lit it and then mine.

The blue eyes were devoid of any expression as she looked at me through the cigarette smoke. "You can put your shirt on," she said.

You couldn't get behind her voice any more than you could behind the eyes. The way she said it, it might have been only a reminder that I had forgotten to put it on, or it might have been a flat command. I thought about it, remembering that she had wanted to change out of the bathing suit into that hopeless sack of a dress before she would take the hook out for me. She turned and looked out the door as I slipped it on and tucked it inside the trousers.

The room was perfectly quiet except for the same monotonous ticking of the cheap clock and the faintly drowsy hum of summer insects out across the sun-baked clearing, but there was nothing peaceful about it. Somehow, the whole mood of the place

seemed to come from her, as if the air itself were charged with that same tension you could sense behind the contained, set stillness of her face.

"My name's Jack Marshall," I said.

She turned back from the doorway and stood just inside it, leaning slightly against the frame, looked at my face for just an instant with an odd, intense glance as if she were trying to remember something, and then resumed the expressionless blankness. "I'm Mrs. Shevlin."

"Have you lived up here long?"

"About a year."

"I guess you swim a lot?"

"Every day. Except in winter."

"You must like swimming," I went on, in spite of the fact that it sounded more like a police investigation than it did a conversation.

"Yes. I like it. Fortunately."

"Fortunately?"

"Yes. There isn't much else to do."

"I guess you're pretty good at it. I'm not much myself. I just dog-paddle."

Oh?" It was polite and nothing more. Why does she want me to get out of here? I thought. You can hear the loneliness screaming there inside her.

There was no way I could keep from staring at her hair. We faced each other across six feet of hot, explosive silence in the room and I could not look away. It wasn't any of my business and I had no business here at all now that the hook was out, but it was like one of those terrible compulsions in a dream where you can't stop whatever it is you're doing.

"Who did that?" I asked.

"Did what?" She knew, though, what I meant.

"Cut your hair that way," I said, still with that feeling of being unable to stop myself.

"Are you a barber?" she asked coldly.

"No. But I could do a better job than that."

"I wouldn't dream of troubling you."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know it isn't any of my business. I just couldn't help it."

She shoved a hand through the dark confusion of the hair and turned abruptly away from me. "It's all right," she said. "I—I guess I'm just nervous." She walked over in front of the fireplace and threw the cigarette in it, remaining there with her back to me.

"I guess I'd better run along," I said tentatively. There was no answer except the ticking of the clock as my words hung and died in the stillness of the room. I turned toward the door.

"Thanks again for taking the hook out." She said nothing at all and didn't even turn around. I went on out, across the clearing in the hot sun, and down the trail to the boat.

It wasn't until I was all the way back to camp that I suddenly remembered the pliers. I had left them there.

Four

I should have broken camp and got out of there, but I didn't. Fishing had lost its magic and I was only going through the motions, but still I stayed. I kept seeing that disturbing picture of her coming across the clearing in the wet bathing suit with that deadly stillness in her face. Who was she? And what were they doing here?

I awoke once during the night, and for an instant I could have sworn I heard the rhythmic beat of someone's swimming past out in the channel, and then I knew I must have been mistaken. I lay on my back looking up at the stars, and then for some insane reason I couldn't understand I suddenly saw that forlorn and pathetic morning-glory vine before me in the darkness, its base freshly watered, and the girl walking up that long trail from the lake carrying bucket after bucket of water to pour on it to keep it from dying like the rest of the pitiful flower bed. I'm going nuts, I thought.

It was the second night before I would admit it to myself. I was waiting for him to go back down the lake. Why? I thought. I never did a thing like that before.

Friday morning I awoke at dawn, determined to pack and leave. I'll get out of here before he goes

down the lake again, I thought, and never come this far up again. I was still lying there twenty minutes later when I heard the sudden cough and sputter of his big motor up the lake. The boat came on around the long bend and then it was going past the camp, and when I looked up I saw him sitting with his big floppy hat in the stern of it, turning his head to stare at me. Neither of us waved. I lay there listening to the sound of the motor going farther away, getting fainter and fainter in the distance, and even after it was miles down the lake I kept imagining I could hear it. I should have gone, I thought.

I fought it until ten o'clock before I knew for certain I'd never leave here until I saw her again. I tied the boat up at the landing and went up the trail and along the dusty path through the grass. She wasn't swimming this time. As I came near the house sprawled dejectedly in the hot morning sun I could hear her inside, making some repetitious, scraping sound that rasped across the drowsy quiet of the clearing.

"Hello," I called out, as I had before. There was no answer but that same sound, that whusk, whusk, whusk from the front room. The old hound came around the corner and looked at me with listless indifference and then went back to the shade of the walnut tree. I stepped up on the porch and looked in the door. She was down on her hands and knees in the center of the floor of the front room with a bucket of soapy water and a stiff brush, scrubbing the floor with such an absolute fury of concentration she hadn't even heard me. She had on the same old sloppy dress and was barefoot again, and the wealth of lovely, dark, and mutilated hair swung untended and forgotten down the side of her face. There seemed to be something of fanaticism or driving anger in the way she swung the brush, as if she were determined to wear out the floor or herself.

I stepped back softly so as not to frighten her and called out again from the edge of the porch. The whusk, whusk ceased. "Come in," she said. I stepped up to the door. She had half straightened and was

upright on her knees, and now she brushed the hair back out of her face with the back of a hand.

"Hello," I said, smiling. She's beautiful, I thought. Even like that she's beautiful. I had a strange and almost overpowering impulse to walk into the room and pick her up bodily, out of that mess of soapsuds. Cut it out, I thought. Cut it out.

"Hello," she said, nodding slightly. She made no effort to stand. There was no surprise in her face, and I wondered if she had been expecting me. Then on second thought, I realized there wasn't anything else in it either—no hostility, welcome, friendliness, anger, or anything.

"I forgot my pliers the other day," I said as the silence stretched out.

"They're there in my dresser drawer." She gestured with a hand.

"Thanks." I stepped inside to the dresser and started to pull open the nearest drawer, the one on the left.

"No," she said hurriedly, gesturing. "The other one." But I had already pulled it out before I could stop. As I shoved it back I couldn't help seeing what was in it—some khaki shirts, two or three bottles of whisky, and the cold, slablike bulk of a Colt .45.

Well, practically everybody up here in the backwoods has a gun, I thought. I gave no sign I had seen it as I opened the other drawer and got out the pliers.

"Would you like a cigarette?" I asked.

She was still on her knees with one hand on the bucket. She shook her head. "No. Thank you."

I lit one for myself and threw the match out the door. She made no move to ask me to sit down or to get up herself. It was awkward, and I knew I should go.

"How is your morning-glory vine?" I asked. Realizing how stupid it sounded, after I had said it, I went on lamely, "I got to thinking about it the other

night. You carry water up from the lake for it, don't you?"

She looked at me oddly. "You noticed it?"

"Yes," I said. "The other day. It had been watered."

She stared down at the floor. "I water it at night. But I guess it will die, like the rest of them. Maybe the soil isn't right. I don't know."

Suddenly I didn't want to talk about the vine any more. It was strange, but I had a queer feeling it was more than just a flower to her, that it was a personal tragedy of some kind and not for me to blunder into.

"How does it happen you're not swimming today?" I asked, to change the subject.

"I was busy. And sometimes I swim at night."

I looked at her, somewhat startled. "You do? In this swamp? Isn't it dangerous? I mean—well, can you see where you're going?"

"You can see all right out in the middle of the lake."

"Where do you swim?" I asked. Suddenly I remembered that odd sensation the other night when for a moment I had been sure I had heard someone going by out in the channel.

"Up the lake, mostly. Sometimes down this other side, all the way around." She gestured off toward the right, in the direction of the slough. "This is an island."

Devil's Island, I thought, for no reason at all. Maybe it was the way she said it. "It is? You mean the slough connects with the lake on both ends?"

"Yes."

"Do you ever swim down the lake?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "Yes. Sometimes."

"I think I heard you one night."

"The day you were up here?"

I nodded.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I swam by your camp that night. I could see the remains of your fire."

"Do you think you'll go swimming tonight?" I asked.

I was standing there by the dresser, still holding the pliers in my hand, and I could feel that strange, tight stillness there had been in the room before, as if the air itself were charged with some meaning that never showed itself on the surface.

"I don't know." She was staring straight ahead, not looking toward me. The hand on the bucket was white-knuckled, as if she were clenching it. "Yes," she went on, softly almost as if talking to herself. "Yes. I might."

That was all there was to it. In a minute she returned to her scrubbing and I went on back to the camp.

* * *

It was late. I lay on the bedroll near the still faintly glowing remains of the campfire and looked up at the night sky through the openings in the trees. I had been there a long time, sleepless, waiting, and had watched the constellations swing as the hours dragged by, and had strained my ears toward all the night sounds of the swamp. I heard the deep bass garo-o-om, garo-o-om of the bullfrogs out at the edge of the lake and the whippoorwills calling far away in the night and once in a while a faint whisper in the leaves overhead as a small breeze stirred. I rolled over on my side and held my watch out toward the embers of the fire. It was almost midnight.

There hadn't been any use trying to make myself break camp and go on home that afternoon. I knew I didn't have any business here, waiting for a man's wife to come up this way just in the hope of seeing her again, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do about it. I knew it was a foolish and very dangerous thing to do, but I had to see her. Why did her husband let her go swimming around late at night alone in an immense swamp full of old snags and weeds and water moccasins? Did he know it? Or didn't he care? Who was he, anyway, and why did his

face look familiar? Who was she, in fact? She was just as foreign to the swamp as he was. And why had there been that clear and unmistakable but still unnamed tension in the air both times I had been up there? I went around and around with the same old questions, hour after hour, getting no nearer to an answer than I had ever been.

Suddenly I raised myself on an elbow and listened. Was that the sound I had heard, or imagined I had heard, the other night? It came again, a quiet ripple on the water and a rhythmic swishing that could have been an arm swinging forward and sliding into the water, I sat up. I was sure I heard it now, coming from up the lake, between here and the bend.

I got up and walked down to the boat. The surface of the lake was dark and still and powdered with stars, and I could see nothing except the black loom of the tree wall along the other shore. I stood still and then heard her quite plainly. Turning in the direction from which the sound came, I studied the darkness intently, and in a moment I could see the reflected stars heave drunkenly and drown in the broken surface. She was almost abreast of where I was.

"Hello," I said quietly. I took out a cigarette and lit it, knowing she would see the flame of the match. After the light went out I was totally blind for a moment and couldn't tell whether she was going on by or not.

Then, suddenly, I heard a splash right in front of me and there she was not ten feet beyond the boat, her head and shoulders out of the water as she stood up.

"Hello," I said again.

"Mr. Marshall?" she asked. "You're up late."

"Yes. I was hoping you might come by."

"Why?" I couldn't see her face at all, just the white blur of it under the bathing cap.

"I just wanted to talk to you. Why don't you come ashore and have a cup of coffee with me? I've got some made."

She didn't answer for a moment. "Well," she said hesitantly at last, "all right."

She waded ashore and we went up to the fare. I handed her a towel and she dried her arms and legs while I pushed the coffee bucket up against the embers. I threw a couple of small sticks on the fire, and when they caught and flared up the flames highlighted her face and the lines of her figure.

"Don't you want to take off the cap?" I asked. She shook her head. "It's all right." I was squatting down, poking at the fire, and I looked up at her. "Please do."

She stopped rubbing with the towel and looked at me with that odd stillness in her face. "Why?"

"Because your hair is beautiful." I could feel the silence tightening up around us again and knew I shouldn't have said it. But hell, I thought, a girl isn't that touchy unless she's afraid. And it isn't me she's afraid of—it's herself.

"Beautiful!" she said bitterly.

"It is."

She said nothing.

I took the other towel and spread it on the bedroll. "Sit down here," I said. "The coffee will be hot in a minute."

"But my suit will get your blankets wet."

"No. Not with the towel. Please do. It's more comfortable."

She sat down with her legs doubled under her and I handed her a cigarette. The coffee began to sizzle around the sides of the bucket, making a comforting sound in the night. I poured two cups and handed her one. "Do you like cream and sugar in it? I have some canned milk."

"No. Black, please."

I sat down across from her, on the ground. "What's your name besides Mrs. Shevlin?"

"Doris."

"You know," I said, "you shouldn't swim in that swamp at night. It's dangerous."

"It's all right. I know all the water and it's safe enough. I'm a good swimmer."

"Doesn't your husband ever swim with you?"

"No. He doesn't care for it."

"I can't understand his letting you do it," I said, and again I was conscious of walking on ground where I didn't belong. "I mean," I went on hurriedly, "I realize it's not my business, but doesn't he worry about you?"

"No—" she said, cutting it off as if she had started to say more and then had changed her mind.

"Do you go to town very often?" I asked.

"No. I've never been to town since we came up here."

"Not in a whole year?" I asked in amazement. "Doesn't your husband take you at all?"

"He doesn't go either. He goes down to the store at the foot of the lake twice a week, and that's all."

"What days does he go?" I asked, and after the words were out I knew why I had asked, and wondered if she did. She probably had noticed that I'd waited three whole days to go back after the pliers.

She knew, all right. She looked at me with that intense stillness and made no reply. It occurred to me then that I knew anyway, for he had gone first on Tuesday and this was Friday.

"No certain days," she said, and then I knew she had realized the same thing and that she wasn't telling the truth. "Just whenever they ask him to bring some fish."

I began to understand a little about her then—a little, and, as I found out later, I hadn't even begun. Loneliness was driving her mad. She wanted to talk

to me or to somebody, but she was afraid to. She didn't know, if she started something like that, whether it would get out of control. But, as I say, I didn't know half of it then.

"Look," I said, "I come up here fishing quite often. Would you like me to bring you some magazines? I'd be glad to do it."

She shook her head and smiled a little. It was the first time I had ever seen her smile, and it made her look even younger and prettier. I felt again that powerful desire I had this afternoon to pick her up in my arms. "No," she said. "Thank you. But he brings me things to read from the store. It was nice of you to offer, though."

'It wasn't as nice as you think it was," I said, leaning forward a little. "It was partly because I wanted an excuse to come and see you again."

"You know you can't do that, don't you?" she asked quietly.

"No," I said.

"You can't. Is it because I stopped here? Did that give you the idea—"

"Nothing gave me any idea. I wanted to see you again."

She stared at the ground. "Don't say that!"

"Why not?"

"I'll have to leave if you're going to talk like that."

"All right. I won't say it. But there's no way you can stop me from thinking it."

"You can't. I shouldn't have come here. It's crazy."

"Of course it's crazy," I said. "Does that change it?"

She put down the coffee cup, still looking at the ground, and made that same desperate gesture, that utterly hopeless quick movement of the hand across the side of her head and down her neck, that she had made the other day—only now it wasn't through her hair, because she still had on the rubber cap.

"Don't come back," she said, staring.

"Why not?"

"You can't."

"You don't want me to?"

"No."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Are you enjoying this?" she asked. Her face was white and she had forgotten to smoke the cigarette. It burned slowly up toward her fingers, the long gray ash precariously clinging.

I wanted to reach out and put my hands on her arms, to take hold of her, but her eyes held me away. I could see the battle going on behind them.

"You came down here to tell me to stay away, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"But I hadn't said anything then. Before you came tonight."

"Do you think I'm blind?" she said harshly. "Don't you think I could see, there at the house?"

"Yes," I said. "And you weren't the only one who could see. There were two of us there."

"Stop it!" she lashed at me.

I threw the cigarette in the fire. "Tell me," I said I quietly. "Where is he?"

"He's at the house."

"He knows you're here, doesn't he?"

"No."

"How could he help knowing it?"

The face was as white and still as smoke. "Because he's drunk. He's passed out."

"You can't go back—"

"Why not? I'm used to it."

I leaned forward and took her wrist in my hand and lifted the cigarette from her fingers. "You're going to burn yourself," I said, and threw it in the fire. She pulled back on the arm and I could feel my fingers shaking as they tightened. She hit me with the other hand, across the mouth, and stood up with

her face held together only by an effort of will, and I could hear the dry sound of the crying in her throat. "Listen," I said. "Doris—" She jerked away from me and ran through the darkness toward the edge of the lake. Before I could get there I heard the splash as she went in, and when I got down to the edge of the water she was gone. I could hear her swimming away in the darkness.

Five

There was no use trying to sleep. I built up the fire enough to see by, packed everything and stowed it in the boat, and went out and picked up the trot line. It must have been around two o'clock when I started down the lake on the oars. After about five miles I could see light in the east, and when the darkness over the water had begun to wash out to the thin gray of early dawn I cranked the outboard. She's back at the house, I thought, lying there beside a passed-out drunk, looking up at the oak shakes and waiting for another day to start.

I was back home by eight o'clock. Parking the old Ford and the boat trailer in the back yard, I went in through the back door, taking a long time to find the right key. Louise wouldn't be back until the middle of next week. I noticed she had left the light on in the kitchen, and when I went into the bedroom her nightgown and robe were dangling from the back of a chair and the bed was unmade. I undressed and went into the bath. There were some pants and a pair of nylons hanging on the curtain rod in the shower. I grabbed them off and threw them in on the bed. After a hot shower and a shave, I dressed and went out in the kitchen, remembering I hadn't had any breakfast. There were some unwashed dishes in

the sink, and I couldn't find any orange juice in the refrigerator. The hell with it, I thought. I'll eat in town. I got a bottle of whisky out of the cupboard and poured myself a big stiff drink for a bracer because I hadn't had any sleep.

I sat down at the kitchen table as I drank it, trying to put her out of my mind. I've got to stay away from there, I thought. Somehow I've got to do it...There's no way out of a thing like that. Without any way that I could stop it, my mind was thinking, this is Saturday. There's Sunday, and Monday, and Monday night...I won't go back, I thought. And then I could see the white, unhappy face and hear the dry sound of her crying.

I went out and backed the Olds out of the garage. Forty-five-fifty a month from now until the time we need a Cadillac, I thought. It was already hot in the square and the town was beginning to fill up with people coming in for Saturday. I parked and started into the courthouse and met Buford coming out.

"Hello, Jack," he said, smiling. "Catch any fish?"

"A few bass," I said. "No catfish, though," I went or lying, because I had promised to bring him one and hadn't.

"How about a cup of coffee?"

"Fine," I said. "I haven't had any breakfast yet."

"Come on. Let's go over to Barone's." Buford was a handsome man somewhere in his forties, but he looked younger than that. He was big, about my size, with coal-black hair graying at the temples and very assured gray eyes and a quiet, poised demeanor that made women crazy about him. He was a college graduate and smart, but he always wore a big white hat with the brim turned sharply up at the sides like any ham politician, and he would lift it clear of his head in a courtly gesture to every woman of voting age that he met, even when he was driving a car. Men liked him just as well, and people who must have known he was crooked would vote for him.

We crossed the square, dodging cars, and went down the street to the big neon sign that said,

"Barone's." It was full of chrome and big mirrors and the clattering sound of dishes, with a counter and a row of booths upholstered in imitation leather. In the back, next to the swinging doors going out into the kitchen, a heavy oak door bore a sign reading, "Members." It was supposed to be a club, and I guess in a way it was, but the membership was limited to anyone who could prove he had the price of a drink.

We went on in, and it was quieter here and the lights were less garish. The room had a small bar along one side and some more booths, with a stand at the back holding a half-dozen slot machines. Up front there was a juke box. There was no one in the place except the bartender and a large blonde in a tight black dress talking to him. It was the owner herself, Billy Barone.

She turned and smiled. "Good morning, Sheriff. Hello, Jack." Her hair was waved, and looked as if it had been carved out of lemonwood and buffed down with wax.

We sat down in the last booth and she came over. "What will you officers of the law have this morning?" she asked, still smiling, and giving Buford a long, lazy glance.

"Black coffee for me," Buford said. "With a shot of Bacardi rum on the side."

"You've been a bad boy, Sheriff," she teased. "And how about you, Jack?"

"Breakfast," I said. "Ham and eggs and some coffee."

"It wouldn't be safe to take all that on an empty stomach," Buford said. "You'd better have something."

"All right," I said. "Bourbon."

The bartender brought the drinks over, and in a minute a girl came in with Buford's coffee. He pushed two nickels across the table toward her. "How about putting those in the juke box?"

I knew he detested juke boxes and their canned noise, aside from the money they brought him—he owned a part interest in the outfit that controlled them and the slot machines and pinballs. It wasn't hillbilly music he wanted; it was privacy.

"Here's how," he said. We drank. The juke box hissed, then commenced its blaring.

He took out a cigar and lit it, then removed it from his mouth and looked at it in the manner of a man who loves good cigars. He's an odd one, I thought, a queer mixture, and not somebody I'd want to tangle with unless I had to. That nineteenth-century courtliness fronted for a lot of toughness you could see sometimes looking out at you from behind the noncommittal eyes.

When he talked business he never wasted words. "The grand jury convenes next week," he said quietly.

"And—" I said. It had met before.

"We've got trouble. There's talk. And too many people that a month or so ago would have been asking me for something just happen to be looking in store windows now when they meet me on the street. Most of it is Soames. He's got his teeth into that business about the Demaree kid, and he knows where the kid got drunk. The word is going around now that he's going to blast the lid off everything Sunday, and everybody's going. He's been doing a lot of looking around. Normally, it wouldn't amount to much, but just before the grand jury it's dangerous as hell. Soames, unfortunately, isn't just another crackpot, and he's no windbag. People are beginning to listen to him, people who don't usually pay much attention to rabble-rousers and crusaders with ants in their pants."

"All right," I said. "What do we do?" I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to get out of the whole stinking mess and get a job washing cars or digging ditches, but that's the bad part of that kind of business—it's not easy to get loose, especially when the heat starts.

"We do just what anybody else does with gasoline on his clothes—we don't light any cigarettes. I want you to tell Abbie Bell and that woman out on Cypress Street to keep the lid clamped on those places, because if we have any more trouble down there I'm going to run them out of town before we all get caught in the wringer. And slip the word to all the rest of them. Sometime today drive out to Moss Inn and tell Carpenter he'd better start looking his customers over a little more carefully before he lets them go back where the games are. There's no telling who Soames is getting his information from, but he's getting it straight. However, it's the cat houses he's got his guns leveled on right now, and particularly Abbie Bell's. But the whole thing's dynamite, at least until after the grand jury adjourns."

"O.K.," I said. "I'll tell 'em." It didn't show much on his face, but I knew he was worried.

As it turned out, I didn't get a chance to tell anybody anything. Trouble started almost before we got back to the office. The telephone was ringing as we walked in the door. Lorraine picked it up.

"Yes? Yes. He's here now. He just came in. Hold on a minute." She handed it to Buford.

"Yes, speaking," he said. He listened for a moment. "All right. Just keep your shirt on. Yes, Marshall. Of course I'll send Marshall. He'll be there before you can stop screaming." He hung up.

"You can get your coffee if you want, Lorraine, I'll stick around." She looked at him, grabbed her purse, and left, knowing it was an order.

When she was out the door he turned to me. "It's that Bell woman. Yelling her head off. Some big sawmill hand's gone berserk and is trying to kill one of the girls. She wants you. For God's sake, try to get it quieted down without anybody getting hurt."

I knew what he meant, and didn't even get the gun out of the filing cabinet where I'd left it Monday. I don't like guns anyway; I had enough of them during

the war. I was out the door before he'd finished talking.

I took my own car because there wasn't time to go to the county garage after one. Traffic was snarled in the square, as it always is on Saturdays, and I had to creep through it, cursing. When I got clear of that I shot down the next six blocks giving it the gun all the way. All we needed now was for somebody to be killed in one of those places and the county would blow up right in our faces. I slid to a stop in front of the chili joint and ran across the street to the hotel. The street was quiet except for the wailing of a juke box in one of the beer joints, and fortunately there wasn't any crowd gathering. I could hear a noise as of someone hammering in the back of the building.

Abbie let me in the door and then slammed it shut, fast. She had the filmy blue robe clutched around her with one hand and was waving an empty gin bottle in the other. The tight curls seemed to strain outward from her head as if she carried an electrical charge.

"Stop the crazy fool!" she was yelling. "He'll kill somebody!"

"All right, relax," I said. "Where is he?"

"Upstairs. At the end of the hall. My God, stop him!" I went up the stairs on the run, still hearing the pounding. The hallway had no windows at the ends and was dimly lighted with one small, unshaded bulb, and all the doors were closed. I could see him down at the end and ran toward him. He was a big devil, naked except for a pair of shorts and one sock, and he was swinging a small table by one leg like a footstool, hammering on the door with it. He had one of the upper panels already knocked in and was working on the other. Inside the room I could hear a girl's voice, high-pitched and on the edge of hysteria, not crying or pleading but dredging up obscenity I'd never heard before in twenty-seven years.

"I'll get you, you lousy little slut," he yelled, smashing the table into the door again and splintering the other panel.

"All right, knock it off, Mac," I said. "You've had your fun."

He paused, with the table pulled back for another swing, and looked around at me. I was still ten feet away, moving toward him. In those things you can never let them see any hesitation or you're a dead duck, but I didn't feel too sure about it. He was as big as I was, or larger, and crazy with rage, and he appeared to be only around twenty, an age when you haven't found out yet that you can be hurt. "Drop it," I said roughly. He stood poised to swing. "You a law?"

"Yes," I said. "Give me that." I reached for the table. I don't know whether it was because he could see I was alone and didn't have a gun or whether he was so wild with rage he didn't care, but at any rate I saw his face go wild again and he swung. I tried to get inside it, but the table caught my arm and shoulder and I fell over against the opposite door. I could hear somebody scream down at the other end of the hall, and realized Abbie had followed me up the stairs.

"I'll show her! I'll show the chippy!" he yelled, swinging the table at me again. I was down on my knees with my left arm numb, and I lunged at his legs, hitting him low and taking him off balance. He came down, and the two of us and the table rolled in a pile on the floor. I could hear the table give up the ghost as one of us rolled over it and the legs started caving in. He landed a big fist on the side of my head and made it ring. I slid clear of the tangle and got to my feet before he did, and as he tried to scramble up he was wide open for a second. I got my feet set and swung, catching him under the jaw, and his feet slid out from under him. He bounced up, too insane with fury to realize he was leaving himself open in exactly the same way he had the first time, and I hit him again. We went through the whole, identical procedure two more times before he finally quit and lay there on the door.

"I'll kill her! I'll get her!" he was saying over and over and beginning to cry.

I was winded and my left arm felt as if a car had run over it. I had to lean against the wall to steady myself while I fought for breath. He sat up, still crying, and I kicked the wrecked table out of his reach. "Sit right where you are," I said. He had his chin down on his chest and the big shoulders shook with the silent retching of his sobs. I felt sorry for him even if he had tried to brain me with the table, and wondered what the girl had done to him.

"Where are this guy's clothes?" I called out, and looked behind me. Abbie was coming back up the stairs again. Apparently she'd run down when he floored me with the table.

"Get his clothes," I said.

She was still waving the gin bottle as if she had forgotten she had it. "Jesus, I don't know where his lousy clothes are," she began, when suddenly one of the doors opened.

It looked like a sequence out of a movie comedy. The door flew open apparently of its own volition and a pair of blue serge trousers sailed out to land in the middle of the hall. A shirt followed it, then two shoes at once, and a tie. Just for an instant, the white, staring face of a girl appeared around the frame and then ducked back inside and the door slammed. She hadn't said a word. That's odd, I was conscious of thinking; he's trying to beat up this girl, but his clothes are in another girl's room. He must not have been with this one at all.

I picked up the clothes and tossed them to the boy. Now that I had time to get a good look at him, I saw he was a big blond kid who needed a haircut and that there wasn't anything vicious about his face.

"Put these on," I said. "You going to behave yourself?"

"All right," he mumbled. "Ain't no use fightin' laws."

"You took a hell of a long time finding it out," I grumbled, but glad he was getting some sense at last I could still hear the girl inside the room cursing obscenely and shrilly with the monotonous repetition

of a phonograph record with the needle stuck. Afraid she would get him started again, I stepped over and stuck my head in through the smashed panel.

“Pipe down,” I said. Then I saw her, and began to feel scared for the first time. She was sitting on the bed in a sleazy-looking kimono with her blonde hair rumpled as if she’d just got up, and if she was a day over sixteen, I was sixty.

Six

She saw me. "Who the hell are you?"

"Never mind," I said. "Just stop that noise."

"Why, you jerk!"

I heard the boy behind me and turned around. He was putting on his clothes, stuffing the shirttail inside his trousers. He had quit crying, but his face was white and trembling and I could still see that wild look in his eyes.

"Move down the hall," I said, trying to get him out of earshot of the girl. "Then put your shoes on. We're going for a ride."

He looked for an instant as if he wanted to jump me again, then he thought better of it and walked down toward the stairway.

"What are you going to do, Jack?" Abbie asked. "Ain't you going to lock him up? My God, I don't want the crazy ba—"

"Yes," I said roughly, still thinking about the girl. "I'm taking him out. Give him a chance to get his shoes on. I'll be back here in about ten minutes, and while I'm gone don't let that girl out of here! And don't let anybody in."

"All right, but—"

"Look," I said. "Don't let anybody in! And I mean anybody. Tell 'em you're dead, or the girls have gone to summer camp or the country club, or anything. But keep 'em out."

I motioned for the big kid to go on ahead of me and we went out and got in the car. "Where we going?" he asked. "Jail," I said, turning the car around. I could see his face begin to harden up again. "I reckon I'll get worked over when you guys get me in there—for fighting a cop. I've heard about that."

"You won't if you keep your big mouth shut," I said.

"You mean you ain't going to tell 'em?"

"No," I said. "Just keep clammed up and don't say anything to anybody. Especially about that girl."

"I'll get her yet," he said, with that tight sing to his voice.

"Shut up," I said. "Look. That's probably the stupidest thing in the world, making a statement like that. If anything ever happens to that girl, you'll go to the chair for saying what you just said if anybody can prove it. What'd she do to you, anyway?"

I shot a quick glance at him. His face was all screwed up as if he couldn't make up his mind whether to fight again or to cry. "She's a lousy, chippy little—"

"Never mind what she is. What did she do?"

"Me and her was married about eight months ago. We run off. Then her old man caught us and had it un-nulled because she ain't but fifteen."

"She's what!"

"She ain't but fifteen. I told her I'd wait around till she was old enough to get married proper and they couldn't un-null it on us, but she run off with another fella, an old guy twenty-five or thirty that didn't want to marry her."

"You're sure that's how old she is?" I asked. "Yeah. Of course. Ain't I knowed her since she was a little girl? I always figgered on marrying her."

"All right," I said, easing through the traffic in the square. "You just keep your mouth shut and you won't get in any trouble."

I turned him over to Cassieres and called Buford from the jail. "Lorraine back yet?" I asked when he answered. "She's just coming in now. How'd you make out? Did you get it straightened out?"

"Part of it," I said. "Can you meet me in front of the jail? Right now?"

"I'm on my way." He hung up.

In about two minutes his car pulled up behind mine. I went back and leaned in the window. "What is it?" he asked quietly, looking worried. "I've got the guy in there," I said. "He's just a kid about nineteen or twenty and he's all right, but he's off his rocker about the girl. I think I've got him shut up so he won't do any talking. But here's the thing. It's that girl. She's fifteen."

"Sweet Jesus! If Soames ever—"

"I know. And it's straight too. The kid says he's known her all his life. We've got to get her out of there. You got any money on you?"

"A hundred or so. Can you handle it all right?"

"I think so. I'll take her down the highway and put her on a bus."

"She'll just wind up in another cat house somewhere else. So you know about not buying her a ticket into some other state, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm not going to buy her a ticket of any kind if I can help it. I think I know a way to handle it."

"So she won't come back?"

"There's no way to guarantee that. If I work it right, though, she probably won't."

He took out his wallet and handed me a couple of fifties and some twenties. "There's a hundred and sixty. Jack, I'm glad there's somebody around that office can use his head."

"Now's as good a time to tell you as any other," I said. "I'm quitting as soon as this stink blows over. I don't like it."

"No," he said. "You think it over. I don't want to lose you."

"I've already thought it over. But we haven't got time to argue about it now. I've got to get back down there."

"That's right. I'll have that kid booked on a vag or something, and as soon as we get the girl out of town well tell him to beat it."

"O.K."

I went back to my car and drove down to Abbie Bell's. The Negro girl came to the door, still looking scared. "Ain't nobody heah," she said, trying to close it. "Miss Abbie say ain't nobody comin' in heah."

"I know," I said, pushing past her. Abbie heard me and came out of the parlor into the hall. She'd got her hair straightened out and had a drink in her hand this time instead of the empty bottle.

"Come on in, Jack," she said, and then to the maid, "Bring this man a Collins, Kate. And put some gin in it; he's not a customer."

We went into the parlor and I closed the door—"God, I'm glad you got rid of that big gorilla, Jack," she said.

"Never mind. Where's the girl?"

"Up there in her room still bitching her head off. Did you ever hear such a foul-mouthed little bag in all your life?"

"How did she get in here, Abbie?" I asked curtly. "And how long ago?"

She took a sip of her drink and looked at me with puzzled innocence. "What do you mean, how did she get in here, Jack? She just came in through the front door and said she was a hustler."

"Do you know how old she is?" I asked.

"How old? Lord, no. Why should I?"

"She's fifteen."

"No! Is that all? She looks older than that."

"Yes," I said sarcastically. "She looks sixteen." She lit a cigarette and stared at me with amiable exasperation. "Well, what am I supposed to do, Jack? Send her back to get ripe? She—"

"Didn't you even ask her how old she was?"

"Of course not. Why the hell should I? Look, Jack, this is a cat house, not a girls' boarding school. Jesus, if they're old enough to give it away, they're old enough to sell—"

I cut her off. "How long's she been here?"

"I don't know. Three, four days."

"Well, she goes out. I'm going to take her clear out of the county and put her on a bus."

She looked at me and saw I meant it. "Oh, O.K. She's a pain in the neck, anyway. Stays plastered about half the time, and she never makes any money. She's so foul-mouthed even the roughnecks can't stand her."

"Well, tell her to get her stuff packed."

"She hasn't got any stuff. All she had when she came in here was the clothes she was wearing, and that'd better be the way she leaves, too."

"She had on a kimono a while ago."

"I gave her that to keep her from running around here naked. It stays. And, by the way," she went on, "who pays for my door?"

"You do, I guess."

"I'll see Buford about it and get him to make that big ape—"

"You'd better stay away from Buford. The way he feels right now, about that girl being in here, he'd just as soon shoot you."

She rattled the ice in her glass and shrugged. "God, men! What a bunch of muttonheads! Why don't they let women write the laws?"

"How did all that fuss start anyway?" I asked.

"I don't know, exactly. He was here all night, and as near as I can get it from Bernice—the girl he was with, the one who had his clothes—everything was all right and peaceful until this morning he opened the door and started out in the hall for something. I guess he must have seen this other little bag then—she must have been going down the hall. She'd been swacked to the ears all night in her room, and I guess he hadn't seen her before. Anyway, Bernice said he let out a roar like a stuck pig and lit out down the hall, yelling at every jump."

The maid brought in my drink. Abbie went out, leaving the door open, and in a moment I could hear her going along the hall on the upper floor. There was the sound of shrill feminine argument and after a few minutes she came back.

Picking up her drink from the table where she'd left it, she sat down, shaking her head. "She'll be down in a minute. I'd tell you what she said you could do, but I can't repeat it."

I took a sip of my drink. "And that big kid's completely off his nut about her. How do you figure a thing like that?"

"It's men, I tell you. They should never let 'em out alone."

In a minute the girl came down the stairs and stood in the doorway. She had combed her hair, which was dirty blonde, and had on a blue summer dress with a wide, dark-blue patent-leather belt and high-heeled white shoes with no stockings. She might have been pretty if she hadn't shaved off all her eyebrows except a thin line and painted them on with black grease or something. She had rebuilt her mouth, too, the upper lip an exaggerated cupid's bow that went a third of the way up to her nose. She looked at me with edged contempt.

"Sit down," I said. "We'll be going in about half a minute."

"Who says we'll go anywhere?"

"I do," I said, lighting a cigarette.

"Why, you stupid jerk! You know what you can do?" She told me what I could do.

Abbie smiled at me. "She's a dear little thing, isn't she?"

I got up. "Come on, kid. Let's go."

"And what makes you think I'll go?"

I shrugged with elaborate indifference. "You either go where I'm trying to take you or go to jail. And you won't care for our matron. She'll like you, but you won't like her," I said, making it all up. The matron at the jail was all right.

"Oh." She hesitated. "And where do you think you're going to take me?"

"I'll tell you all about it on the way. You going?"

"All right," she said harshly. "It can't be any worse than this dump."

We started out. "Good-by, dear," Abbie said, still smiling sweetly. The girl stopped in the doorway and told her what she could do.

"You are a dear," Abbie said. The girl told her some more.

"How about knocking it off before we get out in the street?" I said. "There might be men present."

We went on out to the car. I had it all pretty well thought out by this time. It was about seventy miles down to Colston, and if I remembered correctly, the New Orleans bus went through there around one in the afternoon. It was a little after eleven now. We could make it. I threw the coat with my wallet in it into the back seat and got in.

The girl climbed in, crossing her legs with her dress up over her knees. "How about a cigarette?" I gave her one and we started out. "God, what a jerk burg this is," she said. "Anything would beat this."

We skirted the back streets to hit the highway without going through town, and when we got out on the road I opened it up to about sixty. "Where's your home?" I asked.

She took a drag on the cigarette and threw it out the window. "I haven't got any."

"You must have come from somewhere."

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I'm not trying to take you home."

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, you'll like this place," I said. "It's just outside Bayou City, kind of like a farm, you might say. Only not a real farm. And it's not a reform school, either. I mean, when you see it, reform school would be the last thing you'd ever think of. It's run by a man and his wife, by the name of—oh, nuts, I know their name as well as I know my own. It's—ah—Look in my coat, back there, and get my wallet out, will you? I think there's a card with the address and their name and everything."

"It sounds like a crumby dump to me," she said, but in a minute she turned around in the seat and lifted up the coat, slipping the wallet out. "Here," she said. "Look and see if you don't find a card in there," I said. She looked through it. "I don't see anything."

"I must have lost it, then," I said. "Well, doesn't matter. I know how to get there. Just throw the wallet back in the coat."

She put it back. "You don't think I'd go to a joint like that, do you?"

"Well, if you'd rather go to jail—" She was silent for a moment. "What do they do down there?" she asked.

"Oh, it's a nice place. They work in the vegetable gardens and milk the cows, things like that—lots of outdoor exercise. Have movies, too. Once a week, travelogues and science stuff, you know. The girls like it. No boys there, of course. It's for girls only."

"Jeezus!"

I didn't say anything. After a while she turned to me with a smile and said, "You know, big boy, maybe you're not such a sticky creep, after all. You have got a good car, and you're kind of good-looking, in an

ugly sort of way. Why don't you and me just go on to Bayou City and go on a little party? I could show you a good time."

"Relax, kid. Put it away. I've been to parties."

"God, what a jerk!"

She shut up after that and was silent the rest of the way to Colston. It was about five minutes of one when I pulled up and parked across the street from the bus station.

"Well, what are we going to do here?" she asked with that same insolence.

"I thought I'd better phone ahead so they could get a ce—I mean a room ready for you. Probably have a phone in the bus station over there. You stick here in the car and I'll be right back."

It was Saturday afternoon and cars were jammed in the streets and hordes of people roamed about. I took out the car keys and walked across to the bus station.

"What time does the New Orleans bus go through?" I asked the girl at the ticket window.

"Due here in about three minutes. And it's only a five-minute stop. You want a ticket?"

"No," I said. "I'm expecting somebody."

I went back to the car. She looked at me without interest. "They didn't have a pay phone. There's a drugstore just around the next corner. I'll try there."

"Well, don't drop dead of anything. It would just kill me."

"I won't be gone more than ten minutes," I said. "Don't you try to run off."

"Now that I've thought about it, you can drop dead."

I went around the corner to the drugstore and bought a pack of cigarettes, then went over and squeezed in at the fountain and ordered a lemon Coke. When the boy brought it I heard the big air horn of the bus down the street and knew it was on time. I drank very slowly and looked at the clock. It

was four minutes past one. Then I heard the blasting roar of its exhaust in low gear, and saw it go past the corner, headed for New Orleans. I paid for the Coke and went back to the car.

She was gone. I reached in for the coat, hoping she had left the wallet. It wasn't a very good one, but it was my only one. It was still there. She'd just taken the money.

I locked the car and went up the street to a beer joint, taking my own money out of my watch pocket and putting it back in the limp wallet. It was dim inside and I found a place at the bar. "A bottle of Bud," I said, wondering why I always got these headaches in the afternoons.

Oh, hell, I thought, she's probably stolen plenty of things before. You could see what she was like, couldn't you? You didn't teach her anything; nobody could. She was born that way.

It'll be all right now, I thought. At least, until something else starts to break loose. Suddenly I wanted to get in the car and just go on driving the way it was headed, go so far I could never find my way back. And it wasn't only Buford and the grand jury I could feel behind me. What was she doing now? Was she down on her knees in soapy water trying to beat all desire out of herself with a scrubbing brush, or was she looking for another withered leaf on that scrawny and pitiful vine?

Seven

Sunday morning I went to church to hear the Reverend Soames, and after I was there I wished I'd stayed away. There was something about him that made me uneasy, gave me that same feeling an escaping prisoner must have when he hears, far behind, the first baying of the hounds as they pick up his trail. He was a big, impressive man with a manner about him that kept reminding me of Buford, and his voice had a quality of persuasiveness and irresistible power that you could not escape no matter where your mind would turn. It brought you back and held you there and made you look at what it had to show.

He didn't rant or raise his voice, but he talked from information. "If the law-enforcement officers of this community will come to me, I will be glad to tell them where to find these places that have so far eluded their vigilance and that apparently only boys in their teens can find. I will point out the slot machines and gambling places, and give them the addresses of the brothels operating openly in this town, and give them the names of the women running them."

The church was packed, and I glanced around at the people sitting near me. They were completely

absorbed, their faces serious. How many of them will be on that grand jury? I thought. When it ended I went home. People were standing around in front of the church in little groups, talking. Maybe it was only my imagination, but I thought I could feel their curious, cold glances on my back.

I switched on the light at the side of the bed and looked at my watch. It was two in the morning. I had been lying there, smoking one cigarette after another, for three hours without ever approaching sleep. At every turn of my mind she stood before me, still-faced, un-speaking, very beautiful in her shapeless, terrible clothes. There was no way to get around her; she blocked every path of thought, every escape I tried. I could shut my eyes and see her, and when I opened them she was there looking at me from the darkness.

I've got to stop it, I thought. I can't go on like this. I'll be crazy as that big kid. She's just a woman who is being killed by loneliness in that swamp, and what woman wouldn't be? What's different about her? Is this going on and on until I go back there and see her again? And would it stop then, or get worse? I cursed, and got up to go into the bathroom to find Louise's sleeping tablets. I took two of them and lay down again. I tossed and turned for what seemed like hours. It must have been about three when I finally got to sleep.

Monday was an endless flat plain of heat, and of hours that seemed to go on forever. I walked through stagnant time like a man in a dream, hoping the day would end and dreading the night that had to come when I would have nothing to do but lie in the darkness and fight it again.

Buford had been tickled with the way I had got rid of that girl. "That was a good job," he said. "She won't be back."

"You can't tell," I said. "A girl like that is capable of anything. You don't know what goes on in her mind." I didn't want to talk about it. Everything

irritated me. I sat eating lunch in Barone's cafe without knowing what I ate and not even caring.

I went to a movie after supper and walked out before the end of it. I went home because I couldn't think of anywhere else to go. I sat there in the empty house, turning off the radio because I couldn't stand the noise, and then turning it on because I couldn't stand the silence.

I went out in the hall and looked at the telephone. I could call him, I thought. Call Buford. Just tell him I might not be in tomorrow. I wouldn't have to go up the lake. I could still show up for work even though I'd said I might not be there. It wouldn't mean I was going, would it? No. It didn't make any sense. I wouldn't call him. Then I had the telephone in my hand.

"Elks Club," a voice said. I couldn't even remember asking for the number.

"Is Buford there?" Maybe he wouldn't be. That would be fine. Then I would have that on my side. If I didn't locate him I couldn't go.

"Just a minute." There was a long silence. She was crying when she said he was drunk, I thought, crying with the dry sound of tearing something inside her throat. She didn't want to tell me. "Hello. No, he's not here."

That settled it. That settled it once and for all. I couldn't go because I couldn't find Buford.

I called Barone's,

I called the Eagles.

I was sweating, and cursing under my breath. I shook the telephone like a woman with a sick baby trying to get a doctor late at night. I put it down and sat there looking at it, feeling my nerves jumping. I wanted to tear it loose from its wires and throw it down the hall.

Lorraine! I thought. Maybe I could get her.

I could hear it ringing. She's not at home either, I thought, and began to have the crazy idea that all the rest of the human race had disappeared and I

was left here alone to go mad beside a telephone that didn't go anywhere or connect with anything.

"Hello," a girl's voice said.

"Is this Lorraine?" I asked stupidly.

"Yes. Oh, is that you, Jack? What is it?"

"This is Jack Marshall," I said, and then realized she already knew who it was.

"Yes. What is it?"

"I-ah—" What the hell did I want with Lorraine? Then, suddenly, I had the crazy idea she must think I was calling her up to ask her for a date because Louise was out of town. Why would she think a crazy thing like that? I thought angrily. Had I ever done—

I began to function again. "Oh. I just wondered if you'd tell Buford in the morning that I might not be in. I can't locate him."

"Why, yes. I'll tell him."

"Thanks."

It wasn't until I had hung up that I realized I hadn't given any reason at all. Well, what of it? I thought. What difference does it make? If you're going twenty miles back in a swamp because you can't stay away from another man's wife, why worry about a little thing like not making up a lie for your employer?

I stood there for a minute in the hall and then, without even thinking about it, as if I had planned it for a week, I took a flashlight and went out in the yard, along the wall of the house where the vines were growing. There were some morning-glories, and when I found a young, small one I dug it up with a butcher knife, taking a lot of dirt with it, and packed it in a small cardboard box. I went back inside the kitchen with it and poured some water on the soil, then stood there looking at it with a sort of stupid and unaccountable happiness like a kid who suddenly feels good for no reason at all.

What the hell am I doing this for? I thought. Am I losing my mind?

The sun was coming up now. I could see shafts of yellow light filtering through the dense canopy of timber like those in the pictures of the interiors of dim cathedrals. I sat very quietly in the boat, drawn far back under the overhanging trees where the slough came out and joined the main body of the lake. From where I was hidden I could not see up the lake at all, only a short section across and down, toward the south, but there was no reason for looking—I would hear the motor long before he came into sight.

I looked at my watch. He must have left up there over an hour ago, at least, which meant he should be down here in less than an hour. With his motor he could make it in that much time; it would take me at least three or a little over. I lit a cigarette and smoking it in fierce, quick puffs, impatient at the slow dragging of time. A water moccasin swam across the flat mirror of the slough, an undulating dark head at the apex of a spreading, V-shaped ripple on the water. It came up past the boat, paused, looking at me for an instant with the cold, unwinking, incurious eyes like little chips of stone, then submerged, dropping from sight without effort into water the color of tea.

Maybe he wouldn't come. Maybe she had been telling me the truth when she said he had no certain days for going to the store. I looked at the watch again; less than five minutes had passed. Why hadn't I brought at least a semblance of fishing tackle with me? What would I look like if I met someone up here, a man going up the lake in a boat for no reason at all, not fishing because he had nothing to fish with? Suppose I met him, or he saw me? There was nothing in the boat except that ridiculous cardboard box of moistened earth, shoved as far back out of sight as possible under the seat in the bow. I'm crazy, I thought. I'm insane. No man in his right mind would be doing this.

A half hour passed while I smoked cigarettes chain fashion and listened for the motor. Then I heard it, or thought I did, and held my breath to listen. Yes, there it was, still far up the lake. I waited while the sound grew in volume, and pulled farther back under the overhanging limbs into the shelter of the leaves. The boat came past the entrance of the slough, and then for a moment I could see him, less than fifty yards away, sitting up straight in the stern with the big floppy straw hat set exactly level on his head and looking neither left nor right as he went on down the channel. My boat rocked gently in his spreading wake and then he was gone, the sound of his motor dying away in the distance down the lake. I pushed out from under the trees and started up.

It was after ten and the sun was brassy on the water when I went past the place where I had camped. As I came around the bend I wondered if I would see her swimming in the long stretch of the lake above, but there was no sign of her, the water flat, unbroken, and shining like a mirror in the sun. I throttled the motor down and turned into the entrance of the slough, feeling my heart beating and conscious of the tightness in my chest. Without even thinking of it, I went on past the boat landing, around a swing of the slough, and pulled up at the bank under the low overhang of a tree. Even before you will admit to yourself that you are a criminal, I thought, you begin to act like one without conscious thought. I tied the boat up and stepped ashore with the cardboard box cradled in my arm.

Pushing through the timber and underbrush because the trail was below me, to my left, I came out into the clearing, seeing the brown, dry grass and the weathered ruin of the house squatting in the sun. I was out of breath and had a feeling I had run for miles. Would she be swimming? Or would she be at the house? What would she be doing?

I went on across the clearing in the hot sun like a man walking across an endless plain in a nightmare he cannot stop. Why, it hasn't changed at all, I thought. It looks exactly as it did before, and then

the realization came that it hadn't been years since I was here last. I had been four days.

I stopped in front of the porch, not seeing the old hound this time, or any sign of life. A grasshopper sang in the still, bright heat, and out at the edge of the timber a crow cursed me with raucous insolence and flew away. I stepped up on the porch. "Hello," I said. "Doris, where are you?"

There was the soft sound of bare feet from the rear of the house and I stepped to the door. She had come into the front room, apparently starting to the door to see who it was, but when she saw me she stopped. She had on a different dress this time, of another color at least, but an identical shapeless sack of cheap cotton too large for her, and she was still barefoot.

"Doris," I said. "I—" The words quit on me and I stood there foolishly with the clumsy box in my arms. She said nothing at all. Still standing unmoving in the center of the room with her arms down at her sides, she stared at me with the fixed intensity of someone in a trance.

"I brought you another vine, Doris," I said idiotically, not knowing what to do with it now that it was here. "You see, it's very green and fresh. I think it'll live." When she still made no move, I shifted it awkwardly to my hands and set it on the dresser.

She spoke then, though her voice was still little more than a whisper. "Why?"

"Well, I—I mean, the other one was dying."

"No," she said in the same strained and tightened voice. "Why did you come back?"

I stepped toward her and still she did not move. She watched me with that tortured intensity of the eyes, like someone suffering pain or grief and trying not to show it. The dark hair, uncombed but still lovely in its disarray, framed and intensified the paleness of her cheek, and her face, tipped slightly up to look at me, was blank, tightly held, as devoid of emotion as the hot, choking, and explosive silence about us in the room was devoid of sound.

"I came back," I said quietly, "because I had to. It wasn't because I didn't try. There wasn't any way I could stay away from you. You don't have to tell me what I'm doing, I know what I'm doing."

I reached out and took her by the arms and then began to go wild. I had my arms around her and was kissing her. She held onto me like someone drowning, and I could feel the trembling of her arms about my neck.

Her face was against my shoulder and her voice was muffled, but through the wildness of it I could hear her say, "Not here. Please, not here," the voice breaking as if she were crying.

Eight

We lay on old leaves in mottled shade, very close together, touching but not talking, the lake a sheet of stainless steel seen here and there through openings in the trees and time arrested and held motionless across the dead center of noon. Her head was on my arm, her face turned toward mine with her eyes closed, and I brought up a hand and ran it spread-fingered through the dark disorder of her hair.

There had been little talk between us, no need for talk, or thought of it. There were still the thousand things about her I wanted to know, but they seemed far away, things I could ask her later, after we had been pulled out of the spent and languid backwater and caught up again in the running current of time. Lying there, I thought about it and tried to remember if it had been real or only a dream, that fantastic and unbelievable thing of two people supposedly or at least otherwise sane, walking without a word or a sign, wooden-faced, not even holding hands or whispering, straight out of the house and across the clearing in silence and while sunlight without any cajoling or pleading on the one part or that age-old simulation of reluctance on the other, without any necessity for communication, as if

the whole thing had been planned and discussed for months and rehearsed like a big wedding. And when we had reached this place she had stopped and turned. That was all.

I thought of a fire burning for a long time inside a house with all the doors and windows closed, consuming the interior but still contained, until at last the roof caved in and it burst out with uncontrollable fury. Why? Was it just the loneliness?

There had been no reproach afterward, no silent accusation in the eyes or any mention of my coming back after she had told me to stay away. She had cried once, but only for a minute, with her face muffled against my arm, and then it had gone away, unmentioned and unexplained.

She opened her eyes. They were very near, and looked enormous and deeply blue and quiet while she studied me as if she had never seen me before. Reaching up a hand, she ran soft fingertips across my face. "I'm sorry I hit you. The other night."

"It's all right," I said. "I knew then I could come back. It wasn't me you were trying to stop."

"You knew that all the time, didn't you?"

"Yes. You were fighting yourself so hard you might as well have been carrying a sign."

"I know," she said quietly. "I thought then it would matter. But it doesn't. I guess it's like pain when you have it long enough—before you reach the point you can't stand it any longer you go crazy, or die, and it's all changed. I'm either crazy or dead."

"No," I said. "Just beautiful."

"You like my hair-do, don't you?" It was a joke, but she didn't laugh. There were just those enormous eyes, very close, watching me.

"Yes. The first time I saw it I thought that whoever chopped it up like that should be horsewhipped. But now I like it."

"I guess there are some things you can't stop," she said quietly, more to herself than to me.

"There's no way we could have stopped it."

"It's like it was sometimes when I was out there swimming in the lake at night. There'd be just the black top of the water with the stars reflected on it, and I'd wonder why I couldn't swim down until I drowned, just stay under, as if the water was a black sheet over me. You can't, though. If you can swim you can't drown yourself. When I began to hurt I always come up."

I could feel the anger begin to flame up inside me. "What did he do to you? Is he mean when he's drunk?"

"No," she said hesitantly. "Only once. We had a fight But I don't like to talk about it."

"I've got to know," I said. "Can't you see I have to know?"

"It was the loneliness. I was beginning to go crazy with it, I guess,"

"It was more than that, I said.

"No. It was mostly that. We were all right until we came up here."

"What did you come up here for, anyway? Neither of you belong in this swamp."

"We know that now, but it's not easy to get out."

"But why? I mean, in the first place."

"Running," she said woodenly. "It was a place to hide."

Somehow, I had known that. "Him?" I asked. "Or both of you?"

"Just him. It's something that happened before I met him."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. He never did tell me. But, as I said, it was all right before we came up here. Between us, I mean. The moving around was bad, all right, and we never had much because he was always changing jobs, but he was good to me and I guess we were still in love with each other. But this place was too much for us. I guess it was more my fault than his, but I couldn't stand it. We got on each other's nerves and

began to fight, and then he started drinking like that. He won't leave here because this is the first place we've ever found where he didn't sooner or later see somebody who might recognize him so we had to move again. And it's getting harder for him to get any kind of job. He looks older than he really is, and of course he can't ever give any references or say where he worked before."

"But," I said wonderingly, "why didn't you leave?"

She looked at me. "How?" she asked simply.

"Good God, you mean he won't let you?"

"In a way."

"But," I protested, "how could he keep you from it?"

"I said in a way. He won't take me down to the highway, or let me have any money. Where could I go?"

"But why?" I asked. "Why does he want to keep you here if there's nothing between you any more except fighting?"

She was silent for a moment. "I'm not sure," she said at last. "I think I know, but I don't like to talk about it"

"You have to tell me," I said.

"As I said, I'm not sure. But I think he suspects I'll turn him in. I guess it must be the law he's running from and it has preyed on his mind so long he suspects everybody. Maybe you crack up after just so much of that Anyway, I think that's what he believes—that if he let me get away from here I'd report him to the police because we've fought so much. Especially after he found I was trying to run away. I quit asking him after a while because it always caused trouble between us, and I began to steal from him."

"Steal?" I said. "How could you steal from you husband?"

"Stealing is what I mean," she said. "You could call it anything you liked, but I prefer to call it that. When he was drunk, or asleep, I would take money

out of his clothes. Not very much, because he never had much, but just a dime now and a quarter the next time so he wouldn't miss it. One day he found it, where I had it hidden, in a baking-powder can, and knew I was planning to leave someday when he was down the lake. He led me down to the edge of the water and made me watch while he threw the coins out in the lake, one at a time, and then made me throw some, and when I refused at first—" She broke off. "Are you enjoying this?"

I felt sick. "I can stop that," I said. "I'll take the—I'll take him in."

"No," she said. "Can't you see that's exactly what he's accusing me of? Not in words, of course, but in his mind. I can't do that. All I want to do is leave."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Four months. Maybe five. You lose track of time."

Yes, I thought, I guess you would.

I sat up and got two cigarettes out of my pocket and lit them, passing one down to her. She lay back with her head on the leaves, smoking the cigarette and looking up at me. The shapeless old sack of a dress was pulled down demurely across her knees, giving her an odd aspect of completely defenseless innocence, like a little girl. The bare legs below the hem of the dress extended down past my side, smooth and faintly tanned, and I turned around a little so I could see the feet. Suddenly, for no reason at all, I slid down there and gathered them up in my lap.

They were slender feet, quite small and beautifully formed, but rough and calloused on the soles from going barefoot, and they were dusty from the trail. Very carefully, with my fingers I brushed all the dust from them, as if they were very old pieces of fabulously valuable and very fragile jewelry I had found gathering cobwebs in an attic. Then I turned them slightly inward, pressing the soles together up near the toes, and held them, thinking how small and breakable they looked, like the delicate feet of a china doll, in the big, dark hands. I looked up and

she was watching me with a misty softness in her eyes.

"Why are you doing that, Jack?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know," I said.

I looked up again and she was crying, quite silently and without any movement of her face.

* * *

Time came back for us without any warning. It was the sound of a motor.

We sat up. "Jack—" she said.

It was an outboard, a big one, and coming nearer. He must have had it throttled down for it to get that near before we heard it.

"Where is your boat?" she asked in an urgent whisper. "It's all right," I said. "It's hidden. I'll get off here after dark. But I've got to see you again. Tonight. I'll be down there where I was camped. You've got to come."

"I—I don't know," she said. Her eyes were scared. "But I've got to go." We both stood up.

I kissed her. "It's all right. There's no hurry." We heard the motor quit and knew he was drifting up to the landing. "But you have to come. Promise me you will."

"I will if I can. There's no way to know." I had my face down against her cheek, holding her very tightly, not wanting to let her go. I knew what she meant. She would come if he got drunk and passed out. Isn't that wonderful? I thought. "I—I ought to go, Jack."

"It doesn't matter," I began.

"Oh—oh, God!" She pushed away from me and I could see the terror in her eyes. Then I remembered it too. It was that vine, in its box—sitting right there on the dresser in the front room. It would be the first thing he saw when he walked in the door.

She broke away from me, turning, and ran. I could see the color of the old dress flashing through the

trees along the trail. I ran after her until I was near the wall of timber along the edge of the clearing and then stopped, knowing I could go no further. I could feel my heart pounding as I saw her, still running, coming up directly behind the house so he couldn't see her from in front. He had come out of the trees by the boat landing, carrying a big paper bag in his arm. I saw her go in the back door while he was still a hundred yards away, and felt so weak in the knees I could hardly stand and wanted to sit down there and rest.

So this is the way it is, I thought. I walked through the trees to the upper end of the island, where the slough came back into the lake. It was nearly half a mile, through heavy timber, and I knew he wouldn't find me up here, but hiding like that gave me an uneasy feeling.

As soon as it was dark I eased back down the slough to where the boat was. I didn't dare go down past his boat landing, so I took the boat clear around, back up the slough and down the far side of the lake on the other side, pulling it very carefully with the oars and taking care not to bump the oarlocks.

I didn't like it. But what am I going to do? I thought. To say I won't come back up here any more to see her is silly. I know I will. There isn't anything that could keep me from coming back, not the dirty feeling or the uneasiness, or even being actually scared. By the time I get back to town I'll be counting the hours until I see her again.

Nine

With my back against the trunk of a big oak, I sat waiting in the darkness where I had camped before. A few mosquitoes buzzed, for there was no breeze, and night lay hot and sticky across the swamp. I smoked endless cigarettes, and once I remembered—and immediately forgot—that I hadn't eaten anything for twenty-four hours. I hadn't brought anything except an extra pack of cigarettes.

Would she come? For the twentieth time I struck a match to look at my watch. It was eleven-fifteen. It's about the time she came before, I thought. She'll come. I just haven't given her time. She has to. I got up and walked down to the water's edge and listened. There was nothing, no sound.

I began to imagine things. He had found the plant there. She hadn't had time to hide it. He had beaten her. Maybe he had killed her. Who knew what he would do? I could see her against the wall in yellow lamplight, being held and struck, the helplessness and terror in her face, and for an instant it was so real I wondered if I were going to be sick. If she doesn't come before long, I thought, I'm going up there. I won't go back without knowing. I'll go up there. And what? I thought. Walk into a man's house and demand to know if his wife is all

right, tell him I have to see her? I threw down the cigarette and ground savagely at the red coal with my heel. I heard her then. I wanted to run out into the water and meet her, but I stood there on the shelving bank and waited. She came up out of the water, wading, and I could see the pale gleam of her face and arms.

"Jack?" she whispered.

"Here," I said. I picked her up in my arms, wet bathing suit and all, and carried her up the bank.

"I'll get your clothes all wet."

"Hush," I said. "Hush." I kissed her, not putting her down.

"We have to talk, Jack," she whispered urgently.

"Yes," I said. "In just a minute."

I put her down, standing still holding her. "We've got to talk," she said.

"I know. I know what you mean. But not right now. I can't let you go or think of anything right now. I've been crazy, sitting here, imagining things. He was beating you."

"You're hurting me."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Jack. I don't mind."

"It was terrible," I said. I unfastened the chin strap of the cap and pulled it from her head, loosing the darker-than-night disordered riot of her hair. Everything began to go then, rushing outward in the night, and after a long time the swamp came back and became again the dark, familiar trees, the ground, and stars.

"We can't do this, Jack," she said after a while. "This afternoon, when I was running—"

"I know. But what can we do?"

"You felt it too, didn't you?"

"Yes. But maybe not as much. When I had to go up there and hide."

"It will always be that same way—that same feeling."

"Yes. I know. We've got to go away."

She told me a little about him that night, about how they happened to be married and how it was before they came to the swamp.

"It was during the war, Jack. I was living in a little town with my father. He's a minister and we'd always lived in a succession of little towns like that, and during the war they were heartbreaking in a way, they were so lonely. You were probably overseas and don't know what they were like with all the young men gone. Even the ones who were Four-F went away to work in shipyards and things like that. I was working in the office of a lumberyard and he came to work there. That was the first time I saw him. He was about thirty-five, I guess, and I was only twenty, but I was attracted to him in some way, partly because of the loneliness, I guess, and the fact that I knew he was lonely too. He didn't look nearly so old then and was rather good-looking. I used to wonder why a man that age and as well educated as he was would be doing common labor around the lumberyard, and I guess I built up quite a mystery about him. Girls do that, you know. After a while we began to go to movies and things like that.

"It was about a week before we were going to be married that it happened. We were sitting in the drugstore drinking a Coke one night after the movies when a man came in, a man I'd never seen around town before and who looked like a sawmill hand or laborer, in overalls, and all of a sudden I noticed how Roger—he had another name then—how Roger was looking at him. And when the man happened to face in our direction Roger turned his head suddenly, pretending to look for something in his coat. That night we left town on the bus. He didn't explain anything; he just said he was going and that I didn't have to, he wouldn't expect it of me. But I went. I was in love with him then. We were married in another town.

"It was that way for years. I knew after the first time that he was running from something, and it wasn't just that man, because another time it was a different one he saw. It was an awful way to live, worse than the way my father had always moved around from church to church, but I didn't mind too much. It was only after we moved up here that he began to go to pieces like that and drink. Before that he was always good to me. But now that thing has been preying on his mind so long he's changed and isn't like he used to be at all. The way he looks sometimes—almost as if he thinks people are hiding out there in the trees trying to catch up with him...."

* * *

I went back to town in the early morning, leaving the boat and trailer hidden in the underbrush near the end of the slough because there was no question any more about not going back. Louise hadn't come home, but there was a letter from her. They were going to stay another week, she said, and couldn't I send her a hundred dollars? I poured a big drink and sat looking at the letter in the kitchen while it grew light outside and the heat began.

My pay check was in the office and I endorsed it and sent it to her. The drink had made me lightheaded because I hadn't eaten anything for so long, and I was conscious of the wild thought that if I could keep on sending her enough money maybe she'd never come back. In sickness and in health, I thought, looking out the post-office door at the sun blasting into the street.

Buford said nothing about the money he knew I owed him, the pay-off from Abbie Bell. "I turned that kid loose," he said. "I told him to get out of town, and if he ever came back we'd throw away the key."

"O.K.," I said. I couldn't get my mind on anything. With the grand jury coming up we were walking through spilled gasoline with cigarettes in our hands and I couldn't even think about it. All I could see was an empty flat ocean of time to be crossed before I

would see her again. And what do you suppose she goes through, I thought, out there with that crazy bastard and never knowing what he knows or what he'll do? We've got to get away. But how? And using what for money? And if I run now there'll be an investigation for certain. It would look like guilt; why else would a man run off and leave his wife and home? And if they brought an indictment she'd just be moving around over the country with another fugitive. From what little she'd told me I could see what it had done to him, and I didn't want any of it.

Thursday I had to go with one of the other deputies to take a prisoner to the state penitentiary, and we didn't get back until late Friday afternoon. I was jumpy and on edge, and drove like a madman. When I got back in town I found out from Buford that the grand-jury session had been moved back to Monday. After nightfall I slipped out of town and headed for the lake. There was still no moon, but by now I could run the channel in the dark.

There was nothing to do but pray she would come. She did. At eleven or a little after she came swimming down the channel and waded out of the water where I stood waiting for her.

"I almost died, Jack. I thought something had happened when you didn't come. We can't go on like this."

"I know," I said.

"Can't we go away tonight?" she whispered. "Now. Just take me away somewhere."

"In a bathing suit?" I said. "With no money? We can't."

"We could go back in your boat and get my clothes, what few things I have."

I held her tightly, wanting to tell her yes but knowing we had to wait. "I know," I said. "But it won't be more than a few days more. I've got it all figured out. I can sell my boat and trailer and all the fishing and camping gear. I think I can get two hundred for it. And the old Ford will take us. We'll go to Nevada; that's far enough away. I can work at

something, and we can get divorces and be married."

"All right," she said slowly. "But please make it soon."

Suddenly, I felt her shiver as if she had a chill. "What is it, baby? Are you cold?"

"No," she said. "I guess I was just trying to shake off a feeling I keep having, a sort of premonition that we haven't got much time. It's like one of those dreams you have—you know, when you're trying to catch a train and can't get out of the waiting room because somebody has locked the door. You see the train pulling out and you keep on tugging at the door. ..."

"Don't do that, honey. It's going to be all right."

"Yes. I know. Only—"

"Only what?"

"I keep remembering something that happened a long time ago. I thought of it just then, when I had that chill."

"What is it?"

It was one of the strangest things I had ever known in my life. I began to know what she meant almost before she told me. She'd hardly said a word before it was all right there before me.

"It's a silly thing," she said. "But it's so plain, even after all these years. I can hear the school bell, and see the street corner in the early morning with the sun shining, and that big woolly-looking dog going by with the newspaper in his mouth—"

"Wait!" I said, wondering. "What dog? Say that again!"

"You made me late for school," she went on slowly, almost as if to herself. "It was the first time in my life I'd ever been late. But you were carrying my books, and you stopped to chase the dog to get the paper away from him"

"No!" I said. "Let me think. Doris... Doris... And your father was a minister, you said. I know now!"

"Doris Carroll," she said. "Didn't you know who I was, Jack? But then, with a different name... And it must have been more than fifteen years ago. I knew you though, as soon as you told me your name."

"We were in the fifth grade," I said. "You were the first woman I ever loved. I remember you moved away the next year and I was heartbroken."

"For a week, anyway?"

"For almost a month," I said.

We talked about it for a long time that night, and after a while I guess I forgot what it was that had brought it to her mind in the first place. I don't think she did, though. The last thing she said when we had to go was, "Please, Jack. Get us out of here. And don't let it be too long."

I knew what she meant. Don't make us late again.

* * *

We raided all the places. The delegation, headed by Soames, came into the sheriff's office Saturday afternoon and Buford heard them out with that grave, deferential courtesy of his. "Gentlemen, this office is at the service of the citizens of this county. That is what it is here for. Get the warrants, Jack."

He asked Soames to come along. The Moss Inn was first on the list, and when we got out there all the dice tables were gone out of the back room and the slot machines had disappeared. The next two places were the same. It was dark by the time we got to Abbie Bell's, and when we went in all the girls except two were gone. One of them was embroidering a doily and the other was sitting in a big chair in the front room reading *Better Homes and Gardens*. Abbie was wearing steel-rimmed glasses and working on a set of books.

"Can you tell me what this is all about, Mr. Buford?" she asked coldly. "Don't I have enough trouble trying to make a living out of this rooming house, with the government and all the XYZ's and ABC's making me fill out forms and tell them what I

did with every nickel I ever made, without you trying to drive away what few roomers I do have?" She followed us upstairs and we looked in all the rooms, finding no one. The beds were neatly made and the rooms clean, and in one of them a canary in a little wire cage was singing cheerfully. Abbie kept up her outraged scolding, but once when the two of us were alone in the rear she looked at me with the deadpan innocence of a child and said quietly out of the corner of her mouth, "Jesus, I hope the laundry don't come back while you guys are here."

I watched Soames to see what he thought of it, and wondered if he could be taken in by a trick as old as this. He said nothing at all during the raids, and afterward he thanked Buford with a courtesy that equaled Buford's own, but once I saw in his eyes the look of a man who has just drawn the other ace. It made me wonder.

I awoke before dawn Sunday and lay there thinking about it, unable to go back to sleep. I could get her out of there. I couldn't leave for a few more days, or maybe a week, until we saw which way the grand jury was going to jump and whether Soames had anything else up his sleeve, but I could take her away to wait for me somewhere. It wouldn't be safe to bring her into town, but I could take her down to Colston and get her a room there. Anything to get her out of that swamp and away from him before something happened or we got caught.

I made a pot of coffee and then drove out, picked up the boat and trailer at the end of the slough, and brought them in. I didn't want to sell the stuff in town if I could help it, because that in itself might look suspicious, as if I felt the heat and were getting ready to run, but there was a man over a New Bosque, the station agent there, who had been trying to buy my motor for a long time, and I thought he might take it. I loaded up everything, fishing tackle and all, and went over there with it. I was going to give up fishing, I said, if I could get the right kind of price for the stuff; there were too many arguments with my wife about it. He laughed and said he knew

how it was, he was married too; and we began. I knew I was going to take a beating on it that way, and I did; it was worth four hundred, even secondhand, and I finally got two-twenty-five. The worst part of it was giving up the Hardy rod the Judge had given me on my nineteenth birthday, but after taking it out of the case and looking at it once I handed it over and left.

I cashed his check the first thing Monday and waited. The grand jury convened that morning, and we sat through the long day wondering what would happen, but nothing did. It was quiet.

To get up the lake to where she was I'd have to go clear down to the south end and rent a boat and motor, now that I'd sold my own, but that was all right. I had it all figured out.

Tuesday morning I didn't say anything to anybody. I just went. And that was the day that everything fell in.

Ten

I was at the store on the end of the lake by daybreak and rented a skiff and a big outboard. After buying a bucket of shiners from the man who ran the place, I rented one of his cane-pole fishing outfits and said I thought I'd go up the lake a way and see if I couldn't catch a few white perch. He'd never seen me before, and merely grunted something and looked at me with the casual and almost contemptuous indifference with which fishing-camp proprietors regard all fishermen. By the time it was light enough to see, I was on my way. I wanted to try to get nearly halfway up before I had to duck in somewhere and wait for Shevlin to go by. He would be coming down with his catfish, headed for the store, and with all the turns in the channel he might be right on me before I saw him. I should be able to gauge it within a half hour, for I knew about what time he left.

But something went wrong. Either he had left earlier than usual or had tried to cut it too fine, tried to get too far up before I turned off into a slough and waited. Suddenly, I came around a bend in the channel and saw him up ahead, less than half a mile away. I looked wildly around, but there wasn't anyplace I could hide. He would have seen me by this time, anyway.

The lake was a little less than a quarter mile wide here, with acres of big weed beds off to the left. I cut the motor and swung hard left into one of the openings through the pads, getting as far out of the main channel as possible, and when I had come to the end of it I dropped the square concrete block of an anchor and grabbed up the cane pole. Not even bothering to bait the hook with one of the shiners, I swung it out, and sat there staring intently at the cork float like all the fishermen in the world.

He came on past, looked toward me only once, very briefly, answered my wave with a curt gesture of his hand, and then was gone. It's all right, I thought. Even if he saw me duck over here like that, he won't know me. This is a different boat. Mine was painted green, while this one, like all the rental boats down there, was a dirty white with a number on the bow.

I sat there waiting, listening for the sound of his motor to die out down the lake. When it was gone completely I pulled in the anchor and started up again. All the rest of the way I kept a sharp eye out for other boats, praying I wouldn't meet any fishermen, for I didn't want anyone to see us as I was bringing her out. There were none. Now that he was gone, I had the whole swamp to myself.

I must have been more than halfway up when I met him, for it still wasn't ten o'clock when I turned in at the entrance of the slough by his boat landing. Not bothering to hide the boat now, for I didn't want to waste the time, I tied up at the landing and went up the trail, feeling that same suffocating excitement I always felt when I was coming nearer to her, and now there was added to it the knowledge that we would have to hurry. We had to be back down the lake before he started home.

She wasn't in the house. I walked right in and looked quickly around, and then out the back. She's swimming, I thought. But no, her suit was on the line. "Doris!" I called out. There was no sound. Beginning already to feel that cold, greasy sensation of fear in my belly that I always had whenever I

thought of the two of them up here alone and of what he might do if he knew, I turned and ran along the trail toward the timber. Maybe—she was out there toward the lake. And then I saw her. She had just come out of the timber and was carrying something shiny in her hand.

She saw me and started running. “Jack! Jack!” she cried out, and then I saw what it was she had. It was the gun, that Colt .45 held out in front of her away from her body as if it were a dead snake, her fingertips grasping it by the end of the grip so it tilted slanting toward the ground. As we met, there in the open, sun-drenched clearing, she stooped and placed it carefully on the ground beside the trail, lowering it very gently as if it might explode, and then straightened, looking at me with eyes wild with relief and ecstasy and half crying and trying to smile at the same time. “Oh, Jack!” she said, her voice muffled against my shirt. “What are you carrying that gun for?” I asked. “What is it?”

“I was looking for another place to hide it. Are we going away today, Jack? Now? Isn’t that what you came for?” She looked up at me pleadingly.

“Yes. Right now. I’m going to take you out of here as soon as you can get ready.”

“Oh, thank God!”

“But tell me about that gun.”

“I’ve had it hidden out in the woods. For days now. One night he was drunk and I was out of the house, and when I came back way after midnight he was passed out, and the gun, which had been in that drawer ever since we came up here, was lying on the table just beyond where his hand was. I didn’t know what he had intended to do with it. But I was so scared I took it and ran out in the woods and hid it. Then, yesterday, he was out there a long time and I began to have the horrible thought that he had managed to find it and was just letting me go on thinking he hadn’t. So I thought about it all night and decided to throw it in the lake. And then this morning after he was gone I changed my mind and

thought maybe I was just being silly, and that I'd hide it somewhere else."

Holding her and feeling the shaking of her body, I knew she wasn't telling me all of it. She was afraid of him and had been bringing it back to hide it in the house where she could get it if she had to. I thought of the way she had been carrying it and felt a little sick, knowing just how much good it would have been to her if she'd had to use it. She wouldn't even know how to shoot it.

I picked it up and we walked back to the house. I put it on the dresser, thinking we would take it with us and drop it in the lake, and then I turned and looked at her standing there with her face flushed and her eyes shining with the thought of leaving and wanted to take hold of her again and knew there wasn't time. There was never any stopping when we started that, and we could both feel the minutes slipping past, hurried and driven by the remorseless ticking of the clock.

"No," she said. "I want to go, Jack. We've got to go."

"I know," I said. "Where are your other clothes, and your shoes and stockings?"

She went to the dresser and opened the bottom drawer. They were all wrapped in newspapers, the white, high-heeled shoes, the one pair of nylons, and the under-things. The little summer dress had been ironed and then folded inside a newspaper clipped together around the edges with pins. She carried them over and put them on the bed.

She looked down. "I'll have to wash my feet before I can put on the stockings."

"Wait." I went out in the kitchen and brought a basin of water from the bucket and found a bar of soap. She sat down in one of the rawhide chairs and washed her feet. I watched her, smoking a cigarette and listening to the hot dead silence of the room being chopped off in sections by the clock. I'll buy her stockings, I thought, and bathrooms with tile floors, and clothes, and...We'll be gone from here

and she can live like other women and somehow I'll make her happy.

"I'll wait out in the kitchen," I said when she had dried her feet and was ready to put on the stockings. I went out and sat down by the table, throwing away the cigarette and lighting another. She didn't bother to close the door and I could hear her changing clothes, the soft rustle of cloth and as she pulled off the old dress and put on the new one and the sound of the shoe heels against the floor.

"I've sold my boat and outfit," I said. "The one I'm in is a rental boat from the foot of the lake. I have to take it back, but this is the way we'll do it. I'll turn off down there at the slough where I used to launch mine, and leave you there. We'll wait there until he goes by, going up the lake, then I'll go on down and take the boat back and pick up my car. Then I'll come back by the old logging road and get you. That way nobody'll see us. Then I'll take you down to Colston and get you a room. You can wait there until I can get away and then we'll leave for Nevada."

"All right, Jack," she said quietly. "I'm about ready. You can come out now."

She had gone over to the dresser and was combing her hair at the mirror. I stood behind her, looking at her reflection in the glass. The dress was a blue one with short sleeves and trimmed with white at the collar, and I thought it was almost the color of her eyes.

"I just want to look at you," I said, and turned her part way around, holding her there at arm's length. My back was toward the door and she was facing it, looking up at me with her eyes shining. Suddenly I saw them change and could feel my back go cold as I saw the terror in them. I heard her little in-drawn gasp, as if ice water had hit her from behind, and at the same instant I heard the heavy shoe rasp against the flooring of the porch. His eyes were crazy. He stood framed in the doorway, not moving or saying anything, just looking beyond me as if he saw only

her and didn't even care that I was standing there, and I'll never live long enough to forget his eyes.

"Get back!" I yelled. "Stand back!" He didn't even hear me. Suddenly he made a lunge for the gun, still lying on top of the dresser. I beat him to it with my right hand and threw up the left to shove him back. He slid back against the wall and then I heard her run from behind me, going toward the other side of the room, and the scream that had been trying to fight its way out of her throat came free at last, going up higher and higher in a thin knife-edged column of sound slicing into the silence. He came off the wall and started for her and she stopped and turned to face him, helpless, with her legs against the bed. I felt the gun kick in my hand and he stopped then as if he had seen me for the first time, and put his hand up to his chest, still looking at me, and started to fall. The scream cut off as if the noise of the gun had chopped it in two, the way they blow an oil well fire with nitro, and then she began to sway.

I looked at him lying on his face with the little searching trickle of blood running out from under his shoulder and curling indecisively across the incredibly clean silvered white planks of the floor she had scrubbed so long and then I put the gun down on the dresser and went out the front door into the yard and was sick.

Eleven

There was just the humming of insects in the drowsy heat and the old hound watching me sadly with his red-rimmed eyes as I clung to the post at the corner of the porch. The noise and the violence had washed back like a receding wave and left me stranded here in the sundrenched peace of the clearing while I fought down the sickness and tried to get hold of myself enough to go back inside the room. I had to snap out of it; she was going to be bad enough without both of us going to pieces. If she waked up lying there like that and looking at what she would see not three feet in front of her eyes ... It wouldn't be pretty.

I straightened up and retched again and spat, trying to get the taste out of my mouth, and walked back into the room on unsteady legs, looking across and beyond him to where she was lying. She had almost fallen onto the bed, but her legs had bumped it as they doubled under her and pushed her out and away so she had crumpled to her knees and then slid down, and now she lay partly on one side with an arm under her face like a child asleep. I knelt down beside her with my back to him but still feeling him there behind me as if I were looking at him out of the back of my head. The blue dress had slid up as

she fell past the bed and the long legs were bare above the stocking tops, smooth and ever so faintly tanned, even fair now against the sand-colored stockings and the dress, and I looked at them, but not in that way, not even conscious of the loveliness of them, only busy at shutting him out of my mind. Her eyes were still closed as I rolled her on her back, and I noticed, in the fury of concentration of trying to see only her and not him there behind me, how long and dark the lashes were against the wax-candle paleness of her face. I smoothed the dress down very gently and picked her up.

The sickness rolled over again in my stomach as I had to step across him to go toward the door, and then I was in the open with her. I put her down on the porch in the shade, and as I was easing her shoulders back against the floor she stirred. Her eyes opened.

For an instant she stared at me blankly, not remembering. "Jack," she whispered. "What happened?" Then, as I had known it would, it hit her. I could see it come pushing up into her eyes and she cried out, grabbing my arm. "Where is he? Jack, where is he?"

I knelt with my arm still around her shoulders and held her with her face against my chest while the crying shook her body. This is what I've done to her, I thought; I was going to make her happy and this is the way I've done it. I could feel the helplessness and time going by and the trap closing around us, and all I could do was kneel there in agony of numbness with only that one little corner of my mind still working, telling me over and over that I had ruined her. When the shaking subsided I took a handkerchief from my pocket and wiped away the tear stains as well as I could.

"It'll be all right," I said. "Don't cry, Doris. It'll be all right."

I could see her fighting to get hold of herself. "We've got to go," she whispered frantically. "We've got to get out of here! Oh, Jack!" She started to

break up again and I shook her a little, holding her very tightly until she stopped.

"I'm sorry," she said weakly. "I'll be all right in a minute so we can go."

"No," I said, not wanting to do it but knowing I had to. "We can't go now."

She stared at me as if I'd lost my mind. "We can't go? But Jack, we've—we've got to."

"It won't do any good to run now," I said. My mind was working enough to see that.

"But it's the only thing we can do."

"No," I said. "You saw what it did to him; being hunted, I mean. We can't do it. We wouldn't have a chance of getting out of the country, in the first place, and if we did we'd just be running the rest of our lives or until they caught us."

"But what are we going to do?" she cried out piteously. "What can we do now. Isn't he—?" I could see in her eyes the question she couldn't ask.

"He's dead," I said bluntly, trying to get it on the line so we could look at it and know where we had to start.

"But you couldn't help it, Jack! You couldn't! Wouldn't they see you had to do it, that you were trying to protect me?"

I shook my head, not wanting to do it, but knowing there wasn't room enough for even one of us in that fool's paradise. I hadn't done it because I had to. I'd done it because I'd lost my head, gone completely wild when I saw him start for her. No jury on earth would ever believe I'd had to shoot an unarmed man twenty pounds lighter and fifteen years older than I was just to keep him from hurting her or to defend myself. I could have stopped him with one hand. And if by any stretch of the imagination they could ever manage to swallow that, there was still the fact that I was in his house, where I had no business, and that she was his wife. I gave it up and tried to close my mind on it. There wasn't any way out in that direction.

I fought at the numbness in my mind like a drunk trying to sober up enough to think. The trails ran outward from here in all directions, crossed and crisscrossed and tangled, and if we took any of the wrong ones we were finished. We couldn't run without being fugitives the rest of our lives. I couldn't go back to town and report it, because no matter how you tried to dress it up as something else, it was going to come out as murder. But wait! Suppose, I thought, grabbing at everything, suppose I had been fishing out there and had heard her screaming and had come to help and found him beating her. I'd tried to stop him and he'd got the gun out and in the fight over it I'd killed him. I was a deputy sheriff and I'd be within the law in butting into something like that. Would it work? Maybe, I thought. And then I thought of her on the stand and the district attorney tearing her to pieces the way I'd seen them do it. A woman as beautiful as she was, and her husband killed by another man under peculiar circumstances? He'd start to tie it up into a triangle killing before he'd finished looking at her legs. Had she ever seen me before? Was she sure she hadn't? Wasn't it rather odd that a man who hadn't been fishing for months should suddenly go four times in two weeks and to the same place every time, even neglecting his job to run off up there? I was beginning to think a little more clearly now, and in my mind I could see the succession of witnesses and the facts. And wasn't it a little odd, also, that I had sold all my fishing gear to the station agent at New Bosque because I'd given up the pastime, and then two days later I was up the lake again with a rented outfit, a cane pole and live bait, according to the testimony of the fishing-camp proprietor, and this in spite of the testimony of the other witnesses that I hadn't used an outfit like that since I was a boy in grammar school? And consider this other strange coincidence, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the fact that somehow this man was always up the lake fishing on just the days that this woman's husband happened to be away at the store. Are you sure now, Mrs. Shevlin, that you never saw this man before in

your life? No, I thought. That isn't it; we'd just be walking right into their arms.

I thought I had her quieted down, but now she started shaking again and pushing back on my chest with her hand. She got to her feet, swaying unsteadily, and then ran off the porch before I could stop her and started across the clearing toward the boat landing. "Doris!" I called out. "For God's sake!" I ran up behind her and caught her arm but she didn't even notice I was there. I gave up trying to stop her then; maybe if we got completely away from the house she could get hold of herself.

In spite of the high heels, she was walking faster and faster. We left the bright sunlight of the clearing and then suddenly she jerked away from me and started running down the path through the trees. Both the boats were drawn up at the float, one on each side, and she stopped at the end of the trail and stared at them wildly. I caught her arm again and then for the first time she noticed me.

"Let's go, Jack," she cried out frantically. "Start the boat!"

I swung her around and caught hold of both arms.

They were shaking as if she had a chill. The touch of lipstick she had put on her mouth, hardly noticeable a while ago when I had held her in exactly this way to look at her, was now a violent slash of carmine across the dead pallor of her face, and her eyes were staring with shock. I wanted to take her in my arms and just hold her until it wore off, but there wasn't time for that any more. I shook her almost roughly, and then when she screamed I let go of her arm with the right hand and slapped her, hard. It was like kicking a puppy.

The scream cut off and she put a hand up to her mouth, backing away from me. "Doris!" I said. "Listen! You've got to listen to me. Are you all right now?" Then I thought of that old football question. "Listen, what day is this?"

She stared at me as if I'd gone crazy. Maybe I have, I thought.

"Doris, do you know what day this is?" I asked again. She moved the hand from her mouth around to her cheek where I'd slapped her, still looking at me. She was beautiful and she was hurt, and more than anything in the world I wanted to reach out for her and just pick her up and take her away from here, but I had to keep my head. It was losing it that got us into this mess in the first place.

I took out a cigarette and lit it and handed it to her. She accepted it mechanically. I led her over and made her sit down with her back against a stump while I squatted in front of her, taking her chin in the palm of my hand so she'd have to look at me.

"It's Tuesday," she said suddenly. I had already forgotten about it.

All right, now," I said. "I think now you know why I asked that, and why I slapped you. We're in a jam, and if we run without using our heads we're going to be in a worse one. I'm trying to think, and I want you to help me. Can you answer some questions for me?"

The wild stare of the shock had gone out of her eyes now. She was rational, but I hated to look at the misery in them.

"Yes," she said dully. "But what difference does it make now, Jack? Everything is ruined."

"No," I said, almost roughly. "It's not. Just keep thinking that it's not, and after a while you'll see it. It wasn't your fault; there was no way on earth you could have prevented it. If anyone is to blame, I am, for losing my head and getting panicky when I saw he was after you, and even that was an accident. Neither of us wanted to do it." I stopped for a moment, and then went on, talking faster. "And in the end it won't make any difference. He's better off now than he was living the way he did. Nothing matters now except us. Nothing matters with me except you, because I love you, and I want to find a way out of this so we can always be together. Now, will you listen and try to help me?"

She had forgotten the cigarette and let it roll from her fingers. I picked it up and took a puff on it,

fighting to steady my nerves and to think. "Yes," she said quietly.

"I'll try, Jack."

"All right. Good. Now, tell me, and I want you to think hard. Do you have any idea at all what he was running from?"

She stared at me, puzzled, then shook her head. "No. He never did talk about it."

"And you never did ask him?"

"Only once. And after the way he looked, I never did again."

"But you think it was the police? I mean, that was always your impression, wasn't it?"

She nodded.

"Why did you think so? Try to remember."

She looked at me helplessly. "I don't know, Jack. I—I guess it was just because I couldn't think of anything else a man would run from. There couldn't be many other things, could there?"

"Yes," I said. "Probably dozens of them. A woman. Some man who was after him. The draft, during the war. A scandal of some kind. Blackmail. But the chances are that it was the police. Didn't you tell me once that when you had to run like that, it was usually after he'd seen someone you thought he was afraid would recognize him, and that it wasn't the same man each time?"

"Yes. That's right. It happened at least three times. I mean, that many times that I saw the man myself. And it was always a different one."

"Do you remember anything about these men? How did they look, and so on? I mean, was there anything special about them?"

"No-o. Except that they didn't seem to be policemen themselves. The first one looked as if he might be a sawmill hand or something like that. Another time it was a better-dressed man standing in a line at the post office. And—oh, I don't know, Jack. They looked just like anybody else."

I tried to add it up. There wasn't much to go on. These people he kept trying to dodge didn't make much sense except that the chances were they were ex-cons. An ex-convict can be anybody, and you won't know it or notice him unless, of course, you happened to be one yourself and were there with him and knew him. But why the running? Of course, a man who's served time and is trying to forget it isn't anxious to run into any of his old friends who might expose him to the community, but he's not that afraid of them, at least not to the extent of throwing up his job every time and dragging his wife all over the country. If that was all it was, he'd have probably told her anyway. An escaped convict? A good chance, I thought. And there was still that impression I'd had that I had seen him somewhere before.

I sat still, thinking. My mind was perfectly clear now and I could see all the angles. It'll have to do, I thought. There's a good chance that he's wanted for something pretty bad, in which case we're in luck. And if he's not on the lam from something, at least we're not any worse off than we are now. The thing to do is go back to town and find out. And then, if he is, come back here after him. Killed, resisting arrest.

No, I thought. It won't work; not that way. It would be tomorrow before I could get back, and by that time he'd have been dead too long. It'd never fool anybody. But I began to see it then, the other way, the perfect setup I'd been looking for. It was a long-shot bet, and it all depended on what he was wanted for and how badly, but if it worked we were out of the woods forever.

"What is it, Jack?" she asked, staring at my face. "What are we going to do?"

"I've got an idea," I said. "I think I know the way now. There isn't anything you can do, so you just wait here for me, and when I get through we can go. I'm going back to the house."

"Back there?" she asked with horror. "I have to," I said. I leaned forward and kissed her, holding her

face tightly between my hands. "I'll be back before long."

Without waiting for her to say anything. I got up and went back along the trail toward the cabin. As I neared it I saw the old hound lying under the porch, and suddenly I realized I had forgotten about him altogether, or had never thought of him at all. What were we going to do with him? We couldn't just leave him here to starve on this island. Oh, hell, I thought, he can swim. He'll get off.

I stepped up on the porch, dreading it. It had looked good when I'd thought of it back there at the boat landing, but it wasn't going to be easy to do.

Twelve

Putting it off wasn't going to help any. I stood in the center of the room looking down at the man I'd have to live with now for the rest of my life, then I started searching for the things I needed. There was an extra bedsheet in a little locker out in the kitchen, but that wasn't heavy enough. I had to have something thicker than that so he wouldn't drip blood all over me and onto the trail while I was carrying him down to the lake. In a minute I found it, an old canvas hunting coat in one of the dresser drawers.

Feeling the nausea well up and turn over in my stomach, I reached down and touched him, rolling him over onto his back. The eyes were open, staring up at me, and I would have lost it then if there'd been anything left inside me. Sweating, fumbling, in a near panic, I slipped the canvas coat over his arms, backward, then rolled him again, away from the pool of blood, and pulled the coat together around his back and buttoned it. It was big, like all hunting coats, and there was slack enough to make it reach around that way.

I stood up, thinking. It was nearer to the lake if I went straight out beyond the side of the house, on that path she used when she went swimming, rather

than going clear down to the boat landing. And, too, if I took him out that way and went down and brought the boat around to him, it would keep her from having to see him and possibly becoming hysterical again. Stooping, I put my hands under his waist and lifted. He was limp and awkward to handle, but not as heavy as I had thought he would be. Maybe the fright and the urgency gave me extra strength. Anyway, I managed to get him across my shoulder without too much trouble. Stepping carefully around the blood so I wouldn't get my shoes in it, I went out through the kitchen and across the clearing. The trail through the timber was dim, and cooler than the sunlight, and for an instant I remembered that other day when we were out here and how we had come running back when we heard his boat. Suddenly, that reminded me of the fact that we hadn't heard the boat at all this time, and I knew he had cut the motor far down the lake and used the oars. He had known I was up there, or had thought I was. What was it she had said—"After so much of that running maybe you start to crack up and suspect everybody"? There couldn't have been much reason for his thinking I was up here, unless he had recognized me down the lake, but he had, and now he was dead. It wasn't a pretty thing to think about—the way you had to live when you were on the run like that. And now, unless this idea of mine was good, we were the ones who would be running.

I put him down at the edge of the trees along the lake and walked away a few steps so I wouldn't have to see him and stopped to get my breath. While I was doing that I suddenly remembered something else I had forgotten. I had to have something heavy to weight him with. In this warm water he'd come to the top in a few days. That's too much forgetting, I thought uneasily. I've got to stop that. Once you start something like this, you can't overlook anything.

I tried to think of something I could use. It had to be some object that wouldn't be missed if anybody searched the place, as of course they would. There

was his big outboard motor, but that would be missed right away. And I couldn't use part of the kitchen stove for the same reason. Well, Christ, I thought, the thing to do is go back there and look—not stand here worrying about it like an old woman.

There was nothing under the house, no rocks or bricks. In the kitchen I found a flatiron, but only one, and it was too light. I stood there looking around, cursing the delay and feeling my nerves beginning to jump again. There had to be something. In desperation, I bent down and looked under the bed. And there it was. I hauled it out, another outboard motor, a small one he probably used for trolling. It was a two-and-a-half horse, and would weigh about thirty pounds, which was heavy enough. When I picked it up I heard a little gasoline splash around in the tank. I started to drain it out on the ground outside and then decided it wasn't worth the trouble, and started looking around for some wire. I looked at my watch. It was a little after eleven.

It had to be wire. Cord or rope would rot after a while. I finally found some tied up in the walnut tree, and went back out to the lake carrying the outboard, hurrying now to get it over with. I put the motor down beside him and went back across the clearing to the other end, to the boat landing. She hadn't moved.

"Are you all right now, Doris?" I asked gently.

She looked up. "Yes, I'm all right. Can we go now?"

"Not for a little while longer. You know what I'm doing, don't you?"

She shuddered. "Yes. I think so."

"Can you handle a boat?" I asked.

I could see the horror begin to come back into her face. "You want me to—to—"

"No," I said. "Not with me. I just want you to take the other boat up there to the bend and keep a lookout. There's not much chance anybody will come along, but we still can't risk it."

"Yes," she said quietly. "I can do that much. I'm sorry, Jack."

"It's all right," I said. "You're doing fine."

I helped her into the rental boat and gave it a shove. Then I got in his, undamped the motor and lifted it out onto the float, and followed her out of the slough, using the oars. When I got out into the lake I thought of something and looked under the seat for the tow sack he carried the fish in. They were still in it. So he hadn't gone on to the store. I didn't think he'd had time, even with that big motor, to get clear down to the store and back since the time I'd met him. I didn't like it, because the man who bought the fish down there would remember it, remember he hadn't shown up when he was supposed to. Well, I thought, there's nothing I can do about it now.

I rowed up the lake shore to where I had left him, then waited until she reached the bend and got in position. When she got there I took a good look up the lake, in the other direction, to be sure it was clear. There was no bend up there and I could see for a mile or more, the lake deserted and glaring in the sun. I backed in to the bank and got out. Pulling the stern up a little so it would rest on the beach, I picked him up again and laid him across the big seat, on his side with his legs doubled up, then brought the motor over and started fastening it to him with the wire. It was hot and breathlessly still now and the surface of the lake was like a sheet-metal roof blazing in the sun. The shaking and revulsion began to take hold of me again at having to touch him and move him around like that, but I kept on until I had done a thorough job of it.

It was harder to shove the boat off now, with him across the stern, but I worked it loose, still standing on the ground and holding it, and moved it around with my hands until it was parallel and I could get in without having to climb over him. Sitting on the middle seat, I splashed water with an oar until I had obliterated the mark the boat had left on the beach, took one more look down the lake to where she was

and up the lake to see that both directions were clear, and started pulling out into the channel. When I got out toward the middle I turned around and sounded with the anchor rope. It was about twelve feet deep. Stepping back to the stern, I took hold of the coat and rolled him off. There was a splash and the boat rocked, and then he was gone. A string of bubbles came to the surface, and then at last one big one that made a bulge in the water like a bass feeding. My knees gave way on me and I had to sit down.

She saw me head back to the landing and started rowing in herself. I tied up at the float and dumped the catfish out of the wet tow sack into the water. They were still alive. After looking the seat over carefully to be sure there was no blood on it, I put the motor back on the stern. She came alongside in a few minutes and I made the boat fast and helped her out.

"I've just got one more thing to do," I said. "It won't take more than about twenty minutes."

She came very close to me there on the float and looked up. "I'm sorry I went to pieces on you," she said quietly. "But I'm all right now, Jack. Hold me for just a minute before you go back and I won't cause you any more trouble."

When I reached out for her and tipped her face back I could see that a little of the color had come back into it and that the dead, washed-out agony was leaving her eyes. "Jack," she whispered, pleading, "it'll be all right with us now, won't it? Tell me it will."

I knew what she meant. It wasn't the police she was thinking of. I kissed her, holding her very tightly, then ran a hand along her cheek and through the straight, dark hair. "Yes," I said. "It'll be all right. It'll be just like it was before."

"For always, Jack?"

"For always," I said.

There were two water buckets in the kitchen. I found a big dishrag and a scrubbing brush and set to

work, spilling some water on the floor where he had lain, mopping it up with the rag and wringing it out into the bucket. When I had used up all the water I went down to the lake shore for more, throwing the dirty water out into the lake. Then I used soap and the stiff scrubbing brush over a wide area and carefully mopped up all the soapsuds, wiped the floor as dry as I could get it with the cloth, dumped the soapy water in the lake, washed out the buckets, filled one of them with water, and brought them back to the kitchen.

I stood there in the front room for a minute, looking around. The floor would be dry in a few hours and everything else was in order. I saw her purse lying on the dresser where she had left it, and picked it up. Then I gathered up the gun, wrapped the wet cloth around it, and stuck both in a pocket so I could throw them in the lake. It was as I was just starting out the door that I again felt that disturbing and uneasy awareness of having forgotten something absolutely damning. It was picking up the gun that reminded me of it. The gun was an automatic, and somewhere in this room was the ejected cartridge case, which I had completely forgotten. I stopped, feeling the hair prickle along the back of my neck. I was too slipshod about things like that.

It wasn't anywhere. I looked all over the floor, under the dresser, under the bed, and on top of it, and I couldn't find it. It had to be here, and it wasn't. You couldn't lose anything as large as a .45 case in this bare room I told myself. It's impossible. I stood still by the dresser, sweating, afraid again, hearing the ticking of the clock beat its way up out of the silence and the dead, empty air and the heat. Frantically I jerked the gun out of my pocket and unwrapped it, and pulled the slide back until I could see the cartridge in the chamber. It was unfired, as I had known it would be, for the gun hadn't jammed. The empty case had come flying out, as it was supposed to, and now it was gone. Had one of the dresser drawers been open, I wondered? Maybe it had flown in here. I yanked them open, one by one,

and pawed through them. It wasn't there. Hold onto yourself, I thought. Don't start coming apart like an old maid with the vapors. You've already lost your head once in this room and killed a man, and if you lose it again you may kill yourself. There's a good explanation for it if you'll just cool off and look for it. Nobody's been here, so it's still here. It has to be.

He was there, I thought, coming off the wall and going toward the bed, and I was right here in front of this dresser. The gun would have been along a line like this, with the slide over on this side... Christ, I thought, the door! Shoving the gun and the cloth back in my pocket, I hurried outside. It was lying near a clump of grass, glinting in the sun. I took a deep breath. When I came back to the boat she said nothing, but I could see the question and the pleading entreaty in her eyes. "Yes," I said. "We can go now. It's all finished."

She gave a little cry and caught my arm. I helped her in and shoved off. When we were well out in the lake I tied the gun up securely in the cloth, which would still show bloodstains in a laboratory, and dropped them over the side.

This was the part now that scared me. There were fifteen miles of lake between here and the slough where I would leave her, and at any turn of the channel we might come across a party of fishermen in a boat. There wasn't much chance of it, for it was a weekday, and there had been none when I came up, but I still didn't like the risk. It would be dangerous to have anybody see me taking her out. But there wasn't any other way to do it. I had to take the boat back, and if I kept it up here to run her down the lake after dark I wouldn't get back with it until midnight or later, which would cause dangerous talk later when the story broke. So there was nothing for us to do except go ahead and pray we wouldn't meet anybody.

Our luck held. I ran the whole fifteen miles with the motor wide open and my heart in my mouth as we came around every turn in the channel, and we didn't meet a single boat. As I swung into the

entrance to the slough where I used to launch my own boat, I breathed freely for the first time and lighted a cigarette, conscious of the way my hand had stiffened around the tiller. It was only then that I realized that neither of us had said a word since we left the landing. At the end of the slough I cut the motor and drifted up to the bank. I looked at my watch. It was five minutes of two. That was good time, I thought.

I helped her out. "It'll take me a little over an hour to take the boat back to the foot of the lake and get my car and get back here," I said. "You can sit down here, or if you want to you can start walking out toward the highway on that logging road and meet me. You won't meet anybody on it because it's never used any more. Can you walk in those shoes?"

She nodded eagerly. "Yes. I'd rather walk. I'd go crazy sitting here. I can't get lost, can I?"

"No," I said. "There's only one road and it doesn't branch off anywhere. But if you get to the highway before I get back, don't go out on it. Wait for me in the timber."

I refilled the fuel tank of the motor again from the can in the bow, and dumped most of the shiners in the lake to make it look as if I'd done a lot of fishing. They were dead because I'd forgotten to change the water on them. Of course, I didn't have any fish to show for my day, but fishing-camp proprietors never expected you to catch anything anyway.

I shoved off and started the motor, and as I went down the slough I swung around once and looked back. She had turned and was walking along the ruts of the old logging road, very straight and lovely and alone, and suddenly I knew, more than I ever had before, how much I loved her, and that if anything ever happened to her, everything would end for me.

I'd driven the Olds down this morning instead of the old Ford, and after I returned the boat I blasted it back up the highway to where the logging road turned off. It was slow work there, however, because of high centers, and I'd gone barely a quarter mile

before I met her. After she'd climbed in and I turned around I passed her the cigarettes and asked her to light me one. As she handed it over, she said, "You haven't told me yet what we're going to do, Jack."

"I'm not sure about all of it yet myself," I said, swinging out of the ruts to get past a high spot in the road. "A lot of it depends on what I find out in town. But right now I'm going to take you down to Colston, where you can get on a bus without being seen by anybody around here and where we won't be seen together."

"But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to meet you in Bayou City. Day after tomorrow, or that night."

On the way down to Colston I stopped at a small town and bought a cheap suitcase and three or four Sunday papers to stuff in it so it wouldn't feel empty. "You'll need that to check into a hotel," I said. "They probably wouldn't give you a room without it."

As I started to get back in the car I suddenly noticed her hair. I mean, I noticed it in the way that someone else would, the way I had when I had first seen it. I had grown accustomed to the way it was chopped up, and to me it was beautiful and I always wanted to get my hands into it and it made my breath catch in my throat to look at her, but everybody else who saw it was going to notice it and remember the girl who'd had her hair cut with a dull butcher knife.

She saw me looking at it and for an instant the tension went out of her face and her eyes were tender. "You're still fascinated with my hair-do, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "But I wasn't thinking of my reaction to it. The idea, for the next thousand miles or so, is to blend into the herd, or at least as much as a girl with your looks can do it, and you might as well be leading a couple of pandas on a leash."

She looked at herself in the rear-view mirror. "Can you run back in the drugstore and get me a package of bobby pins?"

She worked on it while I drove. It was long enough to roll into a knot on the back of her neck, and when she got through none of the ragged ends showed. "How do you like it now?" she asked, turning to lean toward me.

"Fine," I said. "Now you're just another beautiful girl. Women will look at your clothes and men'll look at your legs. You're safe enough."

"Do you like it better this way? I could wear it like this."

"No," I said. "I liked it better the other way. Somehow, it was easier to imagine being lost in it and never finding my way out."

She looked over at me with her eyes soft and reached out to pat my hand on the steering wheel.

"Warn me when you're going to do that while I'm driving," I said. "You'll get us both killed."

When we got to Colston I pulled off into a quiet side street under the big trees and stopped. Taking out the wallet, I handed her a hundred and fifty of the money.

"I'm going to tell you good-by here," I said, "because I'm going to drop you off a block or so from the bus station and run. There will be a bus for Bayou City sometime this evening, around seven, I think. You'll arrive there a little before midnight. Go to the State Hotel. It's a small one, quiet, and not too expensive, but still not crumby enough for the cops to have their eyes on it. Register as Mrs. Crawford and just wait until I show up. Try to buy yourself a few clothes, but make the money go as far as possible, because we're going to have to travel by bus. I won't be able to bring the car the way things are going to work out. And be sure to remember this: When I get there, don't recognize me. It may be safer for us to travel separately until we get clear out of the state. You can slip me the number of your room on the quiet, but don't let anybody see that you even know me."

I took her face in both my hands. "I won't see you for forty-eight hours, and after that we'll be together

for the rest of our lives. So this is two days' worth of good-by, and then there'll never be another one." She held onto me, and when she finally stirred and pushed back on my chest her eyes were wet.

"Jack," she whispered, "I'm afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," I said. "Just hang on."

"But you're up to something."

"No," I said. "It's not anything dangerous. Not as dangerous as running now would be."

"But what is it? Don't you see I have to know?"

"All right," I said. "But it may not pan out. That's the only reason I didn't want to tell you. It all depends on what I find out in town. I'm going to try to make it look as if he killed me."

Thirteen

It was nearly seven when I got back to town. The sun was down, but the air was still and heat lay stagnant and suffocating in the streets. I started to go on up to the courthouse, but remembered it would be closed now, and since I'd have to get the custodian to let me in the building there was no use in hurrying. He probably wouldn't be there to start cleaning up until nearly eight. Impatient and savage at the delay but still trying to tell myself there was no hurry, that I had all night to find out what I wanted to know, I turned in at the house. At least I could get out of the sweaty fishing clothes and take a shower.

As I was turning the key in the back door I heard the telephone ringing inside. The key stuck for a minute, and while I worked with it I could hear the ringing going on with that shrill, waspish insistence a telephone always has in an empty house. Just as I got the door open and started through the kitchen it quit. Well, the hell with it, I thought.

There was a postcard from Louise, the usual picture of a yellow beach covered with parasols and a Prussian-blue ocean in the background. "We're having a fine time," she said. I threw it in on the bed and started to undress for the shower. At least, I

thought, she didn't ask for money this time. The shower felt wonderful. I turned it on hot, then cold, then hot again, feeling my nerves begin to unwind and a little of the tightness go out of me. And then, in the middle of it, the telephone started in again. Oh, for Christ's sake, I thought, and let it ring. It went on, seeming to grow shriller and more angry as the seconds passed, and finally I turned off the water and reached for a towel. Just as I came out of the shower stall it stopped.

I dried myself, wrapped the towel around my waist, and went out in the kitchen. Getting a couple of ice cubes out of the refrigerator, I poured a glass half full of bourbon and ran a little water in it. By the time the first two swallows had gone down I could feel myself settling like a punctured balloon. I hadn't realized how taut I'd been now for hours. It'll be all right in a few days, I thought. It'll wear off, and I won't think about it. I know I won't. The telephone started again.

This time I got to it, still carrying the drink. "Hello," I said impatiently. "Marshall speaking."

"Where have you been?" It was Buford, and I could hear the cold anger in his voice. "I've been trying to get hold of you for hours." I could feel the tightness coming back. Something had happened.

"I had a little private business to attend to," I said. I knew I had a bawling out coming to me for going off without telling him, so if he wanted to give it to me now, this was as good a time as any.

"Well, next time how about letting me know about it? I might have to get in touch with you."

"Right," I said. "I see what you mean."

"No. You don't. You don't know how much I mean. I want to see you right away."

"All right. What's up?"

"All hell's broken loose. But I can't talk about it over the phone. Get over here as fast as you can."

"Where are you?"

"A friend's place. That four-story apartment house on Georgia street. Apartment Three."

"I'll be there in a couple of minutes." I hung up. I had an idea about the "friend's place," but I'd never been there or even known where it was. Buford was a bachelor and lived with his mother in a big ugly gingerbread house built by his grandfather back in the eighties, but I'd always been pretty sure he had another place somewhere, for he could disappear right here in town at times and nobody could find him. It wasn't any of my business, however, and I'd never thought about it much except to wonder once or twice why he didn't marry the girl, whoever she was. Maybe he didn't believe in marriage.

I finished the drink and went into the bedroom to throw on some clothes. The car was still in the driveway, and I backed out and headed across town. Apartment 3 had a private entrance. I pressed the buzzer and the door clicked. There was a short hall at the top of the stairs, and the door to the living-room was on the left. It was a big room on the corner of the building, looking out into both streets, but the curtains were drawn now and the Lights were on, for it was dusk outside.

It was beautifully furnished, with a beige rug and blond furniture, a big console phonograph, and shelves full of record albums and books, but the two things that would hit you in the eye as you walked into it would be first the girl, and then the guns. She was on the sofa with her legs curled under her, and as I came in she uncoiled and stood up with the connected flow of movement of a cat turning on a rug, a small girl with a vital, somehow reckless face and short-cropped hair in tight rings close to her head like curling chips of copper. She was wearing a blue dressing gown that just touched the floor under her feet and was pulled chastely together at the base of a creamy throat with a large silver pin in the shape of an Oriental sword. I had seen her around town a number of times, driving a Lincoln convertible, but never had known who she was except that someone had said she was married to an

Army engineer working on something in Alaska. The story had probably been started by Buford.

"Mr. Marshall?" she asked, smiling. "I'm Dinah."

"How do you do?" I said.

She saw me looking around inquiringly. "Mr. Buford is out in the kitchen mixing a drink. He won't let me do it; he says no woman should ever be trusted with a loaded gun or a cocktail shaker."

I nodded, and looked around at the wall. She must have seen the wonder on my face, for she laughed.

"How do you like my gun collection?" I looked back at her and saw the amusement in the gray eyes. Somehow you got the idea that the very incongruity of it tickled her probably as much as it did Buford, this idea of a girl's apartment—traditional in every other respect, secluded, anonymous, tastefully furnished—with one whole wall covered with guns. There were expensive shotguns, which he used during the bird season, rifles all the way from .22's to large-caliber things I'd never seen before, and a beautiful collection of antique firearms probably going back to Revolutionary days.

"They're nice," I said. Any other time I would have gone over and looked at them more closely and probably would have paid more attention to her, this amazing flame-haired figurine who found amusement in sharing a love nest with an arsenal, but right now I had too many other things on my mind. Impatience was making me jumpy and I wished Buford would come on and tell me what he thought was so damned important and get it over with so I could go on with what I wanted to do, get over to the courthouse and find out what I could about Shevlin.

He came in then with three highballs on a tray. "Hello, Jack," he said, quite calmly, and I knew that if he intended bawling me out any more about running off that way he wasn't going to do it in front of the girl. He was always an odd one; he was dangerous enough to kill you if the necessity for it

ever arose, but there wouldn't be any breach of good manners.

We sat down and he got right to it. Lighting a cigar, he looked at me across the coffee table. "Don't worry about Dianne," he said, which meant we could talk freely in front of her.

It seemed to me she had said her name was Dinah, but I let it go. "What happened?" I asked.

"It's your friend Abbie Bell. She's in the hospital. In bad shape."

"What!" I put down the glass. "What happened to her?"

"Some man jumped her with a knife and chopped her up pretty badly. She's in serious condition; they think she has a chance to pull through, but nobody can see her yet."

"Who did it? Did you get the—" I caught myself, thinking of the girl.

"That's the funny part of it, and the part that's got me worried. We've got him in jail, but we don't know who he is or why he did it. No identification of any land on him, and as far as we can find, he hasn't got a record."

"Was he drunk?"

"No. Cold sober. And he shut up like an oyster when we arrested him. Not a word out of him."

"And now?" I asked.

"It's dangerous. If Abbie dies, there'll be an awful stink, naturally, for allowing a place like that to operate. And the man'll have to stand trial, of course. And it isn't just what's on the surface here that worries me. Something tells me there's a lot more underneath."

"Who picked him up?" I asked.

"Hurd." Bud Hurd was the other deputy here in town. "It was about three this afternoon. The phone rang, and it was some Negro girl who works down there at Abbie's. The maid, I guess. She was screaming her head off, not saying anything but,

'Miss Abbie! Miss Abbie!' over and over, so I shot Hurd down there to find out what the hell was going on. He said the place was a madhouse. The Negro girl and a white one were screaming out in the hall, and when he went in the room where the rest of the racket was, Abbie was folded up across the end of a sofa with her clothes half torn off and a cut down one arm and another bad one in the back. The man was still waving the knife and swearing, and when Bud came in he made a break for the door but Bud collared him and hit him once with the sap to get the knife away from him. He called the ambulance and they took Abbie to the hospital. We can't get in to see her, and he won't talk, so we don't have any idea what it was all about."

"How about the girls?" I asked. Somebody should know what started it.

"They had disappeared. I guess there was only the one white girl left there, besides the Negro maid, and they both lit out while Bud was getting the man calmed down. They didn't seem to have taken anything with them."

"And they didn't come back?"

"No. Bud went back later and couldn't find them." I stood up. He looked at me questioningly. "You got any ideas?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "But I think the girls will come back, if their clothes are still there."

Dianne, or Dinah, looked at me across the rim of her glass, the reckless gray eyes alight with interest. "Yes," she said, nodding. "They'll probably come back now that it's dark. Can I go too? I'd like to see the inside of one of those places."

"No," Buford said shortly.

She said nothing, but the eyes shifted, studying him thoughtfully, and then she shrugged. You got the impression she'd never spent a great deal of time in her life asking permission of anyone, or paying much attention to refusals.

"I'll be back in a little while," I said, glad she wasn't going, and anxious to get started.

So far it was just a confused mess in my mind. I hadn't had a chance to sort any of it out, and as I got in the car and started down there my mind was busy with it. I was sorry about Abbie, of course, and hoped she would pull through, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. And, of course, the main thing was trying to figure out what bearing it was going to have on what I was trying to do. On the surface of it, it would have none, for if I had any luck and found out what I hoped I'd find about Shevlin, I'd be gone tomorrow and they could have this load of grief all to themselves from now on. But when you looked at it again, it wasn't quite that simple. With this thing flaring up and a grand-jury investigation a very real possibility, my disappearing the very next day was going to make the long arm of coincidence look as if it had been pulled out at the socket. I didn't like it. And I wasn't just running from a bribery charge now. If they got to sniffing around too much over the place where I'd disappeared, it would be Shevlin they'd find.

The square was full of people joy-riding to escape the heat and heading for the movies. I shot down the side street and stopped the car a block away from Abbie's. The beer joint was an island of light and juke-box noise, and beyond it the hotel was completely dark. A drunk came out of the saloon and lurched past me, headed across the street for the chili place, but there was no one else around. I went softly up the steps and opened the door, standing very quietly for a moment in the front room. Maybe the girl and the maid had already been there and gone. I could tell by turning on the lights and looking in the rooms upstairs to see if any clothes were left, but that would mean that if they started to come back now they'd see the light and run again. I was trying to make up my mind about it when suddenly I heard a footstep and the click of a switch in the hall on the second floor and I could see the reflection of light above the stairs.

I went up them, trying not to make any noise, and had reached the top before I heard a sharp cry of fright, and the door to the room slammed shut. This left me in total darkness, for the light had been inside the room, but I could see the thin crack of it under the door and walked toward it. The door was bolted.

"Who is it?" the girl inside cried out in fright. "Marshall," I said. "Open up. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Who?"

"Jack Marshall. From the sheriffs office."

"I didn't see anything! Honest, I didn't." I knew why she had run. She was afraid of being called as a witness in the trial in case Abbie died, and she didn't like the idea. In her profession, she probably figured the less she had to do with the courts and police, the better off she was.

I know," I said. "I'm not trying to take you in as a witness. I just want to talk to you."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"You don't. But you can't get out as long as I'm standing here, so you might as well open up and see."

"All right," she said hesitantly. I heard the bolt slide back, and pushed the door open.

There was an open suitcase on the bed and she had just started to put her clothes in it. She stood near the dresser, still holding a pair of stockings in her hand, her face pale and the large brown eyes watching me uneasily. I suddenly remembered this was the room that boy's clothes had been in.

"You're Bernice, aren't you?" I asked, trying to calm her a little.

"Yes. But I didn't see anything down there. You don't want me for anything, do you?"

"No," I said. I came on into the room. "Would you like a cigarette?"

She took it and I lighted it for her. This seemed to ease her mind a little, and she sat down in the chair near the head of the bed, sitting up straight on the front edge of it as if she might fly away any minute. Her hands turned nervously in her lap and I wondered if she'd burn herself with the cigarette. She must have been around twenty-eight, not a very pretty girl, but with a rather docile, not too bright face, which must have been pleasant and good-natured when she wasn't scared like this, and her eyes had something of the timidity and shy friendliness of an old dog's. Her hair had been very dark at one time and was now hopelessly fouled up in some shade between maroon and black as a result, apparently, of some attempt to dye it red.

She saw me looking at it. "Miss Abbie thought one of us ought to be a redhead, so I told her I'd try it," she explained bashfully. "It didn't come out very good, did it?"

I was conscious of wondering somewhat crazily if I didn't have anything better to do than sit here and talk about this girl's hair problems, but got hold of myself enough to make some sensible and halfway civil reply. Maybe it would get her to relax enough to tell me what she knew about that mess downstairs.

"I think it looks all right," I said. "But why red?"

"Well, you see, there was already a blonde here and two brunettes, and Miss Abbie thought maybe a redhead would be nice."

Christ, I thought, what the merchandise in one of these places goes through. But I wanted to get back to what I'd come here for.

"I guess you're leaving," I said, looking at the suitcase.

"Yes." She nodded. "Now that Miss Abbie's hurt..." She looked down at her hands in her lap. "There won't be nobody to run the place now. And I was afraid they'd arrest me for a witness. You're not going to, are you?" The big eyes regarded me apprehensively. "You promised."

"No," I said. "I just want to ask you a couple of questions. Did you see what happened down there? The first part of it, I mean."

"No," she replied. Her eyes avoided me and kept looking down in her lap. I knew she was still afraid and was lying.

"Well," I said, "that's too bad. But you go ahead packing and I'll give you a lift up to the bus station with your suitcase. Have you got enough money to get away on?"

"No-o, not very much," she said hesitantly. "I don't know for sure just how much a bus ticket to Bayou City is, but I might have enough. You wouldn't like to—to—" We had started to be friends now, and she had a little trouble getting back suddenly to the strictly commercial plane.

"No." I shook my head. "But I'd be glad to lend you twenty or twenty-five if it'd help any. It's kind of tough for a girl—"

"You would?" She said at me with surprise.

"Sure," I said. I took out the wallet and removed a couple of tens from it and handed them to her. I can get it back from Buford, I thought. "Now, you go ahead with your packing."

I smoked a cigarette and watched her get her meager clothing together, making no more reference to the fight. She knows something, I thought, and she's just about convinced I'm not going to get rough with her or take her in.

In a minute she paused, looking down at the suitcase. "Thank you for the money. It was right nice of you. Not many people..."

"It's all right," I said.

She went on, still not looking at me. "I didn't see much of that down there. It scared me. You know how us girls have to live. The least little thing, the police—"

"Yes. I know. It's a tough racket," I said, waiting and trying not to seem impatient.

"It wasn't Miss Abbie's fault." She turned away from the suitcase and looked at me now, the big eyes very earnest and full of loyalty to Miss Abbie. Now we're getting somewhere, I thought. "She kept telling him she didn't know where the girl was."

"He was looking for some girl?" I prompted casually, trying not to be too insistent.

She nodded. "Yes. He was looking for his daughter. That young kid that was here, the one that talked so mean."

She didn't have to draw me a picture. I knew what girl the man was looking for, and I knew just how quiet this whole thing was going to be the minute he decided to open his mouth.

Fourteen

There was a lot of it that didn't make sense. How had he known the girl had been here? And why had he shut up like that the minute he was arrested? I lighted another cigarette and ground the old one out on the floor. "Look, Bernice," I said, trying to be as offhand as possible, "why don't you sit down and tell me all about it? You've got plenty of time before your bus leaves."

"All right." She sat down on the bed and I stepped over and took the chair.

"Try to remember what this man said," I went on. "You were there when he came in, weren't you?"

She nodded. "Miss Abbie and me was both downstairs. This man come in the front door and looked at me first and then at her and said, 'Are you Miz Bell?' He wasn't a very big man, kind of scrawny, with his face all brown and wrinkled up with the sun grins, like he was a farmer or something, but he was dressed up in his town clothes, a kind of shiny old black suit and tan shoes, but he didn't have no tie in his shirt collar. It was buttoned, but didn't have a tie. But that don't matter, I reckon. I do remember, though, that he had a kind of wild look in his eyes. Anyway, when Miss Abbie said she was Miss Abbie, they went in that

other room, the one in back of the lobby, a kind of parlor. At first I didn't hear 'em, because they wasn't talking loud, and then his voice kept getting stronger. 'Ain't no use you lying,' he kept saying over and over. 'I know she was here.' Then he was cussing and yelling something awful and I began to be afraid he'd have the police after us. 'I'll show you how I know she was here,' he says. "This is how I know. Jest look at that and then tell me you ain't seen her.' Miss Abbie was beginning to yell by this time, and I could hear her telling him she didn't have no idea where the girl was."

"Hold it a minute, Bernice," I interrupted. "You couldn't see them from where you were, could you?"

She shook her head. "No. They was in that other room. The door wasn't more than half closed, but I couldn't see 'em."

"Did you go back in the room after the police had been here and gone? I mean, after they took Abbie away?"

"No. Kate and me run down the street. First, Kate called the shurf's office, and then later, when the shurf got here, we run."

I nodded. It must have been a letter the man was showing Abbie. But where was it? If he'd had it on him when Kurd brought him in, they'd have found it when they searched him, when they took his money and belt and things. And Abbie couldn't have been carrying it when she left, for she wasn't in any condition to be carrying anything. Could it have been on the floor down there? If so, why hadn't Hurd seen it?

I stood up hurriedly. "You finish up your packing, Bernice," I said, "and I'll drop you off in town. I'm going down to that room and have a look."

I went down the stairs in the dark and along the lower hall until I found the door. When I was inside I struck a match to locate the light switch, closed the door, and snapped on the light. There wasn't much evidence of a fight, but when I thought about it I realized there couldn't have been any great struggle,

as small as Abbie was. He'd just chopped her with that knife and she'd fallen over onto the sofa, and now she might be dying. There were blood spots on the rug, but they weren't what I was looking for. There was no sign of a letter.

I went across and looked at the sofa. There was blood on one end of it, on the arm. It sat in the corner, with the arm only about a foot from the other wall. Leaning over, I looked down. There it was. I squatted on the floor and reached an arm in after it and pulled it out. It was typewritten, on good stationery, and when I glanced down at the signature I could feel a draft blowing up my back.

Dear Mrs. Waites:

It is with extreme reluctance and with sadness and an almost overpowering sense of futility that I am forced to write you this letter. It appears that I have failed—at least so far—in all efforts to locate or get in touch with your daughter, and the only information I can pass along to you is that she has indeed been here in town but has now departed and I cannot even tell you where she has gone.

It goes without saying that I was pleased to receive your letter—apart from the sad tidings that occasioned it, of course—for it is always gratifying to be remembered by the members of one's former congregations. And, believe me, my dear Mrs. Waites, I have left no stone unturned in my efforts to locate your daughter, for I believe that if I could find and talk to her I could help her to see the right way of life. You must believe me when I say that I know she is a good girl at heart, for I remember her quite well, and had I been able to get in touch with her I could have prevailed upon her to return home to you.

But she is not here. I made arrangements to visit personally, with the police, of

course, that establishment of which you spoke, that Miss or Mrs. Bell's, and can assure you she is not there. I wish that I could also, with honesty, tell you that she had never been there, but I am afraid that this is impossible. I have reason to believe—from other sources, not from the police—that the information given you by young Mr. Elkins is quite accurate, though I can but wonder at his motives in bringing a sorrowing mother any such additional burden of sadness as that. I do agree, however, that you both were wise in keeping the information from your husband. I feel that he has been far too harsh with the girl in the past, and any further rashness on his part would only make a bad matter worse than it is now.

Rest assured that I have not given up, that I shall continue to do everything in my power to get in touch with your daughter if she is in this part of the country at all, and that my prayers are with you both in this trying hour.

With deepest regret that I have not been able to bring any better tidings, I am, as ever,

Your obedient servant,
RICHARD SOAMES

I read it over again and folded it up slowly and stuck it in my pocket. Buford was going to be interested in seeing this. Well, I thought, he had an idea there was more here than showed on the surface.

It wasn't too hard to piece it all together. Elkins must be that big crazy kid, the one who'd gone berserk when he found the girl down here. So as soon as he got out of jail he went back home, wherever it was, and told the girl's mother about it, or she had got it out of him some way. And the mother, knowing what a violent hothead like her

husband would do when he heard it, had made the kid promise not to tell him, or maybe the kid hadn't because he was still sore at the old man. The mother had written Soames, knowing he was in the same town, and asked him to find the girl and talk to her, try to send her home. And then the old man had got hold of Soames's reply and headed for here with blood in his eye. It all added up, all right. The only trouble with it was that no matter how many times you added it, you couldn't get any total you liked.

Soames knew, then, that the girl had been here. He knew, and Waites knew, and the whole country was going to know as soon as this thing had time to explode, that a brothel operating with police connivance had been harboring a fifteen-year-old girl, that a woman was dead, or might be, and that the girl's father was likely to be tried for murder as a result of it. The smell of bribery and police corruption was going to be so powerful the grand jury wasn't going to be able to ignore it any longer.

Just then I heard Bernice coming down the stairs. She had the suitcase in her hand and was ready to go. I flipped the light off and we went out.

"The car's up in the next block," I said. "Just stand here out of the street lights while I go get it."

I brought it down and stopped and she climbed in. No one had seen us, or paid any attention, apparently. Dropping over one block to miss the square, I headed back to town, stopping on a quiet street a block from the station. I ought to get a job driving a station wagon at a girls' boarding school, I thought. How many times have I done this?

"So long, Bernice," I said, and held out my hand. "Just forget everything you told me and don't ever tell anybody else and you'll be safe enough."

"I won't," she said. "I don't want to get mixed up in nothing." She thanked me again for the money and got out. I saw her walk up the street toward the station. What a life, I thought. Cat house behind, cat house ahead. Then I snapped out of it. I was in a hell of a spot to be feeling sorry for her.

I drove around and parked in front of the courthouse and sat there for a minute, trying to think. Cars lazily circled the square, boys out riding with their girl friends; and something about it, maybe the summer night or the hissing sound of tires or the quick, musical laughter of a girl, suddenly made me think of how it had been before I went off to the Army all those years ago in 1942, how it had been to be home from college in the summer, out riding in the Judge's automobile, a Chevrolet somehow forever five years old. God, I thought, that was a long time back.

I shook my head, trying to clear it, like a fighter taking a beating. Get up there, I thought. Get up to the office and see what you can find on Shevlin; Buford can wait a little while. But what about this other mess? It was going to blow wide open, tomorrow or the next day. If I tried to disappear now, wouldn't everybody know it was a phony? And, knowing it was a fake, they would do a lot of looking into the place where I had disappeared, a place I didn't ever want anybody nosing around because that was where Shevlin was. I'd be better off to stay here and take the rap on the probable bribery charge than to direct any attention toward Shevlin. But, then, there was no use trying to kid myself that Shevlin's disappearance was going to continue unnoticed forever. Somebody would miss him and start looking into it. I shook my head again, and ran a hand across my face. It was like being at the bottom of a well.

I started around again, taking up all the obvious facts and examining them, and when I almost completed the circuit I suddenly found the one I sought, the one that had escaped me until now. Waites hadn't talked; he'd never said a word about why he was down there at Abbie's and why he had attacked her. Why? I wondered. Probably at first it was a natural enough disinclination to go shouting to the world that he was looking for his daughter in a whore house—that was understandable. But when he had a little while to think it over and see what a

mess he was in, that he might wind up charged with murder... Had anybody been in to see him? A lawyer?

I climbed quickly out of the car and started across the street to the drugstore to call Buford and ask him, and then suddenly remembered I didn't know the telephone number of Dianne's, or Dinah's, apartment, and that I didn't even know her full name. I stopped. It adds up that way, I thought. I know what's going to happen tomorrow or the next day, but Soames and the grand jury and everybody else connected with it has every reason to believe I don't know a thing. But it was only a guess. Maybe they hadn't sent a lawyer to the jail to see him and tell him to keep his mouth shut until they got ready to close in on us. There wasn't any way to know for sure until I saw Buford.

But first, I thought, I'm going in that office and do the thing I've been trying to get to for the past nine hours. I'm going to find out about Shevlin. None of the rest of it means anything if I'm wrong about him. I wheeled and went up the front steps and banged on the door until the janitor came down and let me in. "Got to get in the office for a little while," I said, and went on past him up the stairs. I had a key to the office itself. When it closed at five-thirty all the telephone calls were switched to the office at the jail, but the files I wanted were up here.

I went in and switched on the lights. Getting out a cigarette, I turned to the bank of firing cases along the wall. It was going to be a long, tedious job, for I had no idea at all of how to begin, since there was obviously no point in trying to look him up by name. Shevlin was probably just the last of a series of them. I started in, riffling through the circulars and bulletins and notices, looking only at the ones with pictures. Ten or fifteen minutes dragged by. It was oppressively hot in the room with the big lights on and the windows closed, and I began to sweat. There was no sound in the building except occasionally the ring of a bucket somewhere down below as the janitor went about his mopping.

I slammed a drawer shut and paused, lighting another cigarette and thinking. I wasn't getting anywhere this way. It would take a week to go through all this stuff. The thing to do was to sit down and try to analyze it logically. What was I looking for, anyway? Well, obviously, a "wanted" notice out on Shevlin, with the picture on it. But there were two facts about it that didn't jibe. It would be a very old one, but still one that I had seen fairly recently. It would be an old one because Doris had been living with him for over five years and he hadn't committed any crime in that time; and it would be one that I must have seen fairly recently because there was still the fact that I had noticed something familiar about his face that day when I had run into him up the lake. I knew I had never seen him before, so I must have seen his picture somewhere, and the most logical place to have seen it was here. Therefore, it really must have been some old notice that I had looked at not too long ago. But why? In which cabinet, and what had I been looking for at the time?

I smoked the cigarette out to the end in sharp, vicious puffs, sitting there at the desk with my chin on my hand, trying to remember, to concentrate. Impatient, and conscious of the passage of time, with all the other events of the night gnawing away at the edge of thought, I struggled for the key to it. It must have been here that I saw the picture. I was more sure of it than ever. Some memory, some faint recollection of a thing that had happened here in the office lingered teasingly just beyond my grasp. I had looked at it not too long ago, and something outside the regular routine of office had made me do it. But what? I reached out for it desperately, almost knowing it, and it ran, laughing, off the edge of memory. It had something to do with Lorraine and the filing cabinets, some remark she had made. That was it! It was a joking and rather stupid observation she had made about the picture. And then I knew what it was.

It had happened three or four months ago. Lorraine had been firing papers in the cabinets and

forgotten that one of the drawers had a broken stop. When she pulled it open it flew out on the floor, spilling papers all over the office. I was there at the time and had helped her gather them up. And it was while we were bent over the disordered jumble that she had picked up a picture that had caught her attention and held it out admiringly.

“Boy, but he’s good-looking! If I ever get murdered, I hope it’s by somebody as handsome as that!”

I jumped up from the desk. Well, I thought, I know what drawer he’s in. And I know what he’s wanted for.

Fifteen

It took only a couple of minutes to find it now. With a grunt of satisfaction, I jerked it from the file and put it on the desk, and stood looking down at the picture of Lewis Farrell, alias Roger Shevlin, wanted for murder and escape.

The picture had been made a long time ago, apparently in 1940, and Lorraine had been right in saying he was a handsome man, but the identity was unmistakable. Looking at it now, I could see why I had still noticed the resemblance when I saw him that day on the lake. It was the deep-set, rather brooding eyes and the well-formed bone structure of the face, which the lines of the years and that grayish stubble hadn't been able to hide.

I read it hurriedly. He had been tried and convicted of killing his wife in 1939. There was no information about the crime itself, or the trial, but apparently it hadn't been first-degree murder, for he had drawn a life sentence instead of death. He began serving time in the state penitentiary in 1940, was transferred to a farm as a model prisoner in 1943, and had escaped the same year. So far, so good, I thought, and very good.

The picture stared up at me. Year after year of running, I thought, and terror, and nights of looking

up at the ceiling in the dark while he wondered who had seen him during the day. He'd had years of this and then wound up lying face down in his own blood in a backwoods cabin, and I had been the one who had killed him, so now I had bought my own ticket on the merry-go-round. I straightened up and ran a hand across my face. There was no use getting morbid about it now. I stuck the notice back in the file.

I closed the office and went back out into the square. It all depended now on what I found out from Buford. If he said that a lawyer or someone else had visited Waites after his arrest, we could be pretty sure they believed we didn't know what had really happened down there, or what was behind it, and that they were taking pains to keep us in the dark. Bernice was gone, and they wouldn't know we had the letter, and...I stopped. The letter! My God, why hadn't I thought of it sooner? If Waites hadn't already told them that he'd lost it down there, he would sooner or later, and they'd go look for it.

I crossed to the car as fast as I could walk, backed out of the parking place, and shot down the street toward the hotel. Parking in the same place I had before, I took a look up and down the street. The hotel itself was still dark and no one was in sight.

I went up the steps. Slipping softly into the lobby, I walked down the hall by feel until I came to the door of the room. Once inside, with the door closed, I struck a match and looked around. It appeared to be just as I had left it. Walking over to the sofa. I took the letter out of my pocket and dropped it carefully down against the wall where I had found it. Then I went back out and got into the car, breathing easily again. It would have wrecked everything if they had found out, after I was gone, that I had read that letter.

I was beginning to feel like a man being chased through some horrible dream. How many hours ago, I thought, did I stand there in that cabin and turn her around facing me so I could see how she looked in decent clothes and with her hair combed, stand

there feeling proud of the loveliness of her? Was it months ago now? I looked at my watch as I went past a street light. It was a little after nine. It didn't seem possible it could still be the same day.

Suddenly, I was conscious of a consuming desire to get back to the girl's apartment and find out the only other thing there was left to learn. Somehow, that seemed now to be the goal toward which I had been running since eleven o'clock this morning, the final knowledge that at last I had my hands on all the loose ends of this thing I so I could know definitely, once and for all, what I was going to do. It seemed that for a length of time beyond all measuring I had been running across the surface of a lake on treacherous cakes of ice that sank under me as fast as I stepped on them. When I got one thing straightened out in my mind, something else would explode in my face and change it.

I parked and hurried up the walk to the entrance. The door clicked as soon as I pushed the buzzer. They're anxious too, I thought. I must have been gone a long time.

Buford looked up as I came in. "I just called the hospital. They think the Bell woman will pull through all right. They won't let anybody in to see her yet, though."

I was glad to hear it, in spite of the fact that I knew the grand jury would probably subpoena her. She was a bandit, but a cheerful one, and I liked her.

Buford went over and turned off the radio and came back to sit down on the sofa beside Dinah. She looked at me with interest.

"What did you find out?" Buford asked. He might have been asking me who won the Tulane-Alabama game, but I knew what was going on in his mind.

I sat down. I reached for a cigarette, and found the pack was empty. Dinah pushed a silver cigarette case across the table toward me, smiling. "Before I start," I said, "I want to ask a question. Did Waites have any visitor after he was arrested?"

"Waites?"

"That's the man you've got in jail. Maybe he gave some other name when you booked him, but that's his right one."

"Then you found out about him?"

"Quite a bit. And it's all bad. But first, did anybody go in to see him?"

He nodded. "Yes. Holloway."

I knew then I'd been right. Holloway was a lawyer, and a good one. He was also a member of Soames's congregation and active in church work.

"All right, let's have it," Buford said quietly.

"Well, hold onto your hat," I said. "That fifteen-year-old girl Abbie Bell had down there is Waites's daughter."

Buford put down the cigar and whistled softly. As rapidly as possible I gave him the whole thing, what I had found out from Bernice, what the letter had said, and what I had been able to figure out from it. He got the whole picture as fast as I gave it to him. There was nothing slow about Buford.

"So now we've got Waites in jail, where he'll be very handy for the grand jury any time they want to listen to him," he said. "And that Bell woman's in the hospital, where they can get her story as soon as she's able to talk."

"Yes," I said. "And you can't do a damned thing about either of them. You can't move Abbie Bell; and you can't run Waites out of town because he's under a serious charge, or will be, and you'd never in God's world explain it if he turned up missing. It's just about as near perfect as anything can be."

Buford picked up his drink and looked at it. "Sweet Jesus," he said.

"They know they've got us," I went on. "Mrs. Waites probably got in touch with Soames again when her husband took off for here with his hot head and his knife, asking him to try to head the old man off before he got in trouble. It was too late for Soames to do anything about it, but of course he knew who it was as soon as he heard there'd been

trouble down at Abbie's place. So he had Holloway take the case to defend the old man, and in return they asked him to keep his mouth shut for another day or two until they could get their facts ready for the grand jury. I don't doubt that Holloway even told Waites he'd be in danger of having something happen to him if we found out who he was and what his testimony would do to us."

Buford got up from the sofa and walked slowly over to the wall where the guns were and stood there for a moment looking at them with his back to us. I sat looking at him, waiting to see what he would have to say, and then the rest of it began to fall into place for me. It was a part of the idea that had never occurred to me until this minute, and as I turned it over in my mind I was conscious of a warm feeling of elation and the knowledge that I had all the loose ends taken care of at last. This last piece fitted into it as perfectly as the final section of a jigsaw puzzle.

I turned back and noticed abruptly that Dinah had been watching my face with that speculative interest I had seen in her eyes before. Now that I thought of it, I remembered that every time I had looked around her eyes had been on me, not with anything flirtatious in them, but only with that intense and fascinated interest, as a child might watch grownups getting ready for a hunting trip.

The gray eyes smiled at me over the top of the highball glass. "You've got an idea, haven't you?"

"I think so," I said. "I'll bet it's a good one."

"I don't know," I said. "I hope so." Buford turned back from the gun collection. He had lifted down one of the shotguns, an English double barrel, and as he turned he brought it up and swung it in an arc, mounting the gun and swinging it through all in one fluid motion the way a good wing shot gets onto a covey of rising birds. Then he took it down, looked at it once, and replaced it on the rack. "I like expensive guns," he said.

And expensive women, I thought, wondering how many other custodians of the gun collection there

had been before Dinah. But I couldn't quite follow him at the moment. I knew he was down there at the bottom of the well, where I had been, looking up at the smooth, unscalable walls, and he wanted to talk about guns. But maybe guns just happened to be a good opening subject. I'd never underestimated him, and didn't intend to.

He reached down and picked up his drink off the coffee table. "You have any expensive habits, Jack?"

I began to have a strange and unaccountable hunch then, a feeling that we were both working our way around to the same idea. I lit another of Dinah's cigarettes. "No," I said. "None except staying out of jail. That may be a little expensive at the moment."

"It might be, at that." He sat down across from me on the sofa and looked at me. "You have any ideas? Don't worry about Dianne. Where information is concerned, she's a one-way street."

"Good," I said. "I wasn't worried about her." Actually, I didn't like this talking in front of her. Not that I didn't trust her, or had any reason to believe she talked too much, for after all he trusted her and he was no fool, but in something like this you increase your risk a thousand times for every additional person who knows what you're up to. However, there wasn't much I could do about it. If I insisted on talking to him alone, he'd probably tell her all about it later anyway, and it would be the same except that that way she might be angry about it and more likely to talk.

"All right," I said. "We're in the middle. We might as well admit it. Sometime tomorrow or the next day they're going to start issuing subpoenas by the dozen to find out what's been going on here. And you know as well as I do that that thing about the Waites girl is going to stir up a hell of a stink. It isn't anything that can be hushed up, especially now that her father will probably go to the pen over it. And Abbie Bell won't have any choice in the matter but to tell the truth when they get to her. She'll be under oath, and she's been around long enough to have

heard of the perjury laws. 'Why, I've just been paying the sheriff's office for protection,' she'll say. 'Doesn't everybody?'"

Buford nodded. "But we know that. Let's hear something new."

"That's right. But I just wanted to be sure we were both starting from the same place. Now, here's where we split. As top man, you're going to be the one they turn to for the answers. But balanced against that is the fact that I've been doing the collecting, at least for a long time now; that is, they've never actually given you anything direct. They gave it to me. And that'll be what they testify. However, the people investigating the thing will know who got the money unless you're able to show them otherwise. What you need is a goat."

He nodded again. "I'm still with you."

"However, you can't make a goat out of me without my consent. It's too easy to tell the truth on a witness stand, as we both know. But, on the other hand, if you had a goat who wasn't here to take the stand, you might get by with it."

"In other words, if you ran."

"That's right. And running is expensive."

He took the case out of his pocket, selected a cigar with extreme concentration, bit the end off it reflectively, and flipped the lighter. "How expensive, Jack?"

"Five thousand," I said. I looked across at him and then at Dinah. She had her elbows on her knees and was staring at my face almost enraptured.

"I haven't got that much," he said. "But disregarding the figure for the moment, let's look at this running angle. Just how long do you think you could keep from being caught? You ever look at yourself in a full-length mirror? Put you in any group of a hundred people and you'd stick out like a platinum blonde with two black eyes and a French poodle. You're six feet two, or thereabouts, you weigh over two hundred, your face is as flat as an

Indian's and two shades darker, and you've got coal-black hair with a curl in it you couldn't take out with a Negro's anti-kink solution. You wouldn't be away a week."

"Yes, I know," I said. "But if they thought I was dead, they wouldn't look very hard. Not in that way."

It startled him. He had the drink in his hand, and now he put it down and looked at me. "All right," he said. "Let's have it."

"There's a man up there in the head of the lake where I was fishing the other day who's wanted for murder and escape. I ran into him, thought his face was familiar, and tonight I looked him up in the files. You can verify this by looking yourself. His name is actually Lewis Farrell, but he's going under the name of Shevlin now. He's been on the run since 1943. Now, if I took one of the county cars tomorrow morning, drove down to the foot of the lake, rented a boat and motor, and went up the lake to arrest him and never did come out, what would be the natural conclusion after your searching parties found the abandoned boat floating around in some God-forsaken part of that swamp? Remember, this man is dangerous, and he's wanted for murder, not petit larceny or crap-shooting."

I could see the idea take hold of him. "By God, that sounds all right, Jack." And then doubt began to show itself in his eyes, and he shook his head. "It's good, all right, but it's going to look like too much of a coincidence. Two weeks ago, or even last week, it would have worked all right. But now—"

"No," I said. "You haven't looked at all of it yet. I couldn't be running from anything that's going to happen here, because I don't have the faintest idea anything is going to happen. Bernice is gone. Waites has never said a word because they told him not to, the letter is down there where he dropped it, and I've never seen it."

"Say, you're right!"

"Of course he's right," Dinah said excitedly. "Mr. Marshall, that's good."

Buford thought about it for a minute. "But how about this Farrell or Shevlin, or whatever his name is? If he gets caught—"

"There's practically no chance of it," I said, wondering just how much he was guessing now. "The man's no fool, or he couldn't have dodged everybody all these years. And if I get careless and let him give me the slip as I'm bringing him in, do you think he's going to hang around for me to make a second run at him? He'll be clear out of the country in less than a day. And then, when he reads in the papers that he's being hunted for killing me, he will make himself scarce."

Buford nodded his head approvingly. "You're right about that, too. That would take care of you, all right, but how about me? So I tell them that this deputy of mine who just got himself killed was a crook, that I'm sure he was because he's not here to defend himself, so everybody has a good laugh."

"Yes I know," I said. "There has to be more to it than your unsupported word. That can be taken care of."

"And there's Louise. Do you think she's going to hold still for it? Obviously, in a setup like this, you can't take her with you, unless you expect the grand jury to believe that she was both clairvoyant and a practical believer in suttee. So she'll be here, yelling her head off to get on the stand and deny that you ever took anything."

"Yes. I'm coming to that." I leaned forward in the chair and looked at both of them, and particularly at Dinah. I didn't know how she was going to take this. "But suppose Louise suddenly lost interest in defending my good name, if she has any anyway. Remember, she doesn't know I turned any money over to you. All she knows is that I didn't give it to her. Suppose it turned out that all this time I had been paying the apartment rent and buying Lincoln convertibles for a girl friend named Dinah."

Buford put down his drink. "Well, I'll be damned!"

But I was more interested in Dinah's reaction. Her eyes met mine very gravely except for a flutter of humor far back in the depths, and she inclined her head. "Mr. Marshall was such a nice gentleman and I appreciate everything he did for me, and I'm sure I never had the faintest idea he was married."

Sixteen

Buford went to the kitchen to mix another drink. After he had gone out the door I looked across at Dinah and said, "I hope you didn't mind my suggesting that. I mean, there's no reason you have to get dragged into it."

The gray eyes crinkled up in a smile. "I don't mind at all. I'd love it."

She puzzled me a little. I hadn't paid much attention to her, under the circumstances, with that thing this afternoon eating away at the back of my mind and the rest of it in a whirl from trying to cope with all this other mess, but still I was conscious of something a little disturbing about her each time she got mixed up in my thoughts. The different sides of her you saw didn't add up to anything you would normally expect, and it made you wonder where she had come from and what made her operate. Small, chic, and smooth, completely feminine and disturbingly good-looking with the clear skin and slender face and the hair like polished copper rings, she looked like the classic example of what you would collect if you had the true collector's spirit and plenty of money, but when you looked at her again you were aware of the vitality and the restlessness and the audacious spirit in the eyes. You

got the idea in a little while that she took excitement the way some people took drugs, and you wondered how she liked this bird-in-a-gilded-gun-collection existence she was living now.

Buford came back in a minute with the drinks. As he handed me mine he asked, "Where did you say this Shevlin lives, Jack? How far up the lake?"

"It must be about twenty miles up from the store," I said. "There's not much of anything except swamp above where he is."

He looked thoughtful for a minute. "That's over the county line, I think. Most of that swamp is in Blakeman County.

I shrugged. "Well, it doesn't make any difference. I don't think that anyone will ever take the trouble to look into whether I went a little beyond the line without knowing it."

"No. I guess not. Well, here's luck." We drank, and then got back to the question of money. I asked for five thousand again. He insisted he couldn't get hold of it on short notice, especially without attracting attention, but that he could put his hands on three thousand in a safe-deposit box at the bank the first thing tomorrow morning.

"O.K.," I said. That would do. After all, I had originally planned on having to do it on the two hundred odd I got for my fishing equipment.

I stood up. "I'll see you in the morning. It'll be better if you bring up this Shevlin job in front of the others. But then, you know how to handle it."

He nodded. "Leave it to me." He got up from the sofa and held out his hand. "I won't be able to tell you good-by tomorrow, so here it is. Good luck." He paused, and then went on quietly, with his eyes directly on mine. "And remember, I'm buying a one-way trip. Don't come back, or we'll both be in trouble." It wasn't until later that I knew just how he meant that.

I didn't go directly home. I was too restless to go back to the house. And in a way, though I didn't

want to admit it to myself, I knew that I was a little afraid. Ever since eleven o'clock this morning I had been going at a full run and my mind had been furiously intent on this problem, to the exclusion of everything else, but what was it going to be like when I lay down in the darkness with the problem solved and the movement stilled, with Shevlin putting his hand up to his chest in that terrible gesture and turning to look at me as his knees gave way under him and he started to fall? Was that what I would see when I tried to close my eyes? Or would there be nothing?

I turned and drove out north of town, past the lake where we used to swim in summers a long time ago when I was a boy. The bathhouse was gone now and the lake was filled with weeds, but as I sat there in the car in the summer night I could see the dazzling sunlight and hear the splash and the laughter as the sixteen-year-old Jack Marshall did a belly-buster trying to jackknife off the high board to impress a girl, coming out of the water stinging and crimson from the impact. Circling through streets that were quiet now and almost deserted, I went past the high school and the football field, remembering October afternoons and the sweat and the dry taste in the mouth like copper pennies and the way the ground jarred, tilting crazily against your face. The old grammar school had burned, and there was a box factory there now, but I could see the corner where she had waited while I chased the dog, trying to get the paper from his mouth, and I could hear the school bell ringing, telling us we were late. I'll never see any of this again, I but it's all gone now anyway.

It was midnight when I put the car in the garage and walked through the hot, dead air in the kitchen, hearing my footsteps echo through the house. I had changed into pajamas and was sitting on the side of the bed smoking a cigarette and wondering whether there would be any use in trying to sleep when it suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. I padded barefoot out into the kitchen and started looking through the

refrigerator, finding nothing except a bottle of milk that had been there for two weeks and was sour. In a cupboard I came across a can of salmon. I opened it and had started to dig it out onto a plate when the telephone rang. I started a little, surprised at the unexpected sound. Buford, I thought. My God, has something else happened? I went down the hall to the stand.

"Hello," I said.

"Mr. Marshall?" It was a girl's voice.

"Yes. Who is it?"

"Dinah Weatherford. I tried to get you a while ago, but I guess you were out. You haven't gone to bed have you?"

"No," I said. "Not quite. Has something happened?"

"Not exactly. But could I come over for a minute? There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Why yes," I said, wondering. "Do you know how to find the place?"

"I think so. You're sure it's all right?"

"Sure. I was just opening a can of salmon. I'll find you a clean fork."

She laughed. "I'll have you know I'm not a cat. Or am I?"

She hung up and I went back to the bedroom and put on a dressing gown and some slippers. It was hot, and I turned on the electric fan in the kitchen, sitting under it with my elbows on the table. What did Dinah have on her mind? I wondered if Buford had asked her to tell me something.

Glancing up at the clock, I saw it was nearly half past twelve and knew Doris would be at the hotel now. I thought of her alone and scared and tried to imagine what she would be doing at this moment. Was she trying to sleep, with a light on in the bathroom to drive away the dark? Was she standing at the window staring out into the streets at busses and neon signs and the hot bright lights of restaurant fronts and the people going home from

shows, feeling the strangeness of it after a year of living burial in that swamp? Was she counting the hours, as I was? Tomorrow, and tomorrow night, I thought, and part of another day...

I heard the car pull up and stop in front of the garage. When I went outside she had cut the lights, but I heard the car door slam shut and she came toward me out of the darkness in the yard. I followed her into the kitchen. She had changed into a white linen skirt and a Russian-looking sort of blouse with long, full sleeves quite tight at the wrists, and when she turned under the light and smiled at me her eyes were alight with that excitement I had seen in them before.

"Let's go into the living room," I said. She shook her head. "This is all right. I just wanted to tell you something."

I pulled out a chair and she sat down at the table. I sat down across from her, watching the play of light against the burnished copper hair and the audacious tilt of the head. "What's up?" I asked.

"I think I can help you."

"Thanks," I said. "How?"

"I got to thinking about it after you left and after Buford went home. This thing you're doing, I mean. It interested me." She stopped, her elbows propped on the table and her chin resting on her hands, looking at me. "You interest me."

"Why?" I asked. I didn't see what she was getting at.

"Imagination. You shouldn't have any, but you do. Imagination, plus the gambler's instinct. Don't you see?"

"No," I said. "All I see is a chump who got in over his head and is trying to wiggle out."

"Maybe you're not looking from where I am." She smiled, and then went on, "But let me tell you what I had in mind. Tonight when you told Buford what you were going to do, you didn't make any mention of what was going to happen after you abandoned the

boat there in the swamp. Have you thought about that? You don't mind my asking, do you?"

"No," I said. "Not at all."

"Good. You realize, of course, don't you, that you're going to be afoot and that when you get out to the highway you won't be able to flag a ride because whoever gives you a lift will remember you. And, naturally, you can't take your car. Also, even if you walked to the next town, you wouldn't dare get on a bus there. They might remember you."

"Yes," I said. "I know that. It's not very good, that part of it, but it can't be helped."

Actually, I had an idea about it, but I didn't see any point in telling her. It wasn't that I didn't trust her, but there just wasn't any reason she had to know. There was a railroad across on the far side of the swamp, and at one place a water tank and siding where freights went in the-hole for passenger trains. I planned to hang around there tomorrow night and get on a southbound freight.

She leaned a little across the table. "Well, there's where I can help you. You'll be afoot, so I can pick you up on the highway after dark."

"Why?" I asked. "I mean, I appreciate it a lot, but it would be risky for you, and there's no reason you have to get mixed up in it."

"Yes," she said eagerly. "Don't you see I want to do it? Listen, Jack! I can call you Jack, can't I? It would be so easy. You just tell me where you'll be, say at nine o'clock, and I'll come by very slowly. I'll flip my headlights up and then down a couple of times so you'll know who it is, and then stop. If there are too many cars in sight, I'll go on and turn around and come back for you."

"And then what?" I asked.

"I'll give you a lift to Bayou City. You can get a bus there without attracting attention. That'll be far enough away. I'll tell Buford I just went down there shopping. I do it quite often."

"He doesn't know about this, then?"

"No," she said quietly. "He doesn't know about it."

I was thinking. This was a lot better way of getting out of the swamp than the other. I'd get to Bayou City the same night, and I wouldn't have to go to the hotel looking like a tramp from having ridden all night on a freight, providing I even got on one. It was just what I needed, but I still hesitated a little. Nobody does anything for nothing. What did she want to get mixed up in it for?

"What do you think?" she asked, watching me intently.

"It sounds good."

"Then it's a deal?"

"I'm still wondering what you get out of it."

"Excitement," she said simply.

"Is that all?"

"I think so. I'm not sure. But isn't that enough?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not that fond of excitement."

She studied my face. "You just think you're not. You don't realize yet what you're capable of."

"Look, Dinah," I said. "I'm not looking for thrills. All I want to do is get the hell out of here before I get thrown in jail. And I don't care if I never see any more excitement the rest of my life than a good, fast checker game."

"All right," she said. "But where do I meet you?" What the hell, I thought. She just wants to help me for the laughs she gets out of it. Why not? It'd be a way out of that swamp.

"O.K.," I said. I was trying to get the layout of the roads and the lake straight in my mind to give her a picture of it. "Excuse me a minute. I want to get a pencil."

I found a pencil and an old envelope in the dining room and came back. She slid her chair around alongside mine, pressing gently against my shoulder and watching me as I drew the map.

"Here's town," I said. "The highway runs east along here, and then turns south, toward the end of the lake. You know where that store is down there, don't you? The highway goes across the south end of the lake on the big earth dam, and just beyond the east end of the dam there's a store and a boat place and a honky-tonk beer joint." She nodded.

"Well, about two miles beyond that bunch of buildings a secondary road takes off to the left, going north. This runs up the other side of the lake. It isn't much of a road, but there's not much travel on it, which is good for our purpose." I paused, trying to remember landmarks. It had been a long time since I'd been over there. The railroad was over there, running parallel and probably a quarter mile beyond the secondary road. I'd want to leave the boat at some place that would indicate Shevlin had headed for the water tank to catch a freight. There's a small creek, I thought, along there somewhere. And then I remembered.

"Look, Dinah. It would be about fifteen miles after you make the turn off the highway onto that country road. You hit a stand of big pines very close to the road on both sides, a half mile or more of them before they taper off into second-growth stuff again. Then there's a gravel pit with an old loading platform, off to the right, where I've marked it. Then, just about a half mile beyond the gravel pit, you'll cross a small concrete bridge. It won't be the first one, for there are some more below it, but I can't remember whether it's the third or fourth. Anyway, that's the reason I've put these other landmarks on here, so you'll know you have the right one. I'll be waiting just beyond the bridge. Blink your lights as you go over it. Think you've got it?"

"Yes. It's easy. Now, what time?"

"How about eight o'clock? It'll be dark by then." She put her—hand on my arm and smiled. "Wonderful. Can I bring anything for you, any clothes from here that I could put in the car now? Naturally, you won't be able to take anything extra in the morning."

I shook my head. "No. I won't take a thing. Just the clothes I'll have on. It wouldn't look right otherwise."

"Yes. That's right." She got up from the table. "Well, I've got to go and let you get some sleep."

I walked out to the car with her and opened the door. She stood very close to me for a moment, looking up, then she said, "Good night, Jack." I pretended not to notice the warmth in her voice.

"Good night," I said, and watched her back out of the driveway.

I took three of Louise's sleeping pills, and still it was a long time before I got to sleep. Doris was there, just beyond me in the darkness, and when I would start for her Shevlin would be there too, putting his hand up to his chest and looking toward me as he started to fall to the floor.

The pills made me oversleep a little. I got up and shaved and dressed and then looked around the house, not knowing why I did it, for it didn't mean anything at all. I'll never see it again, I thought, or Louise, and it doesn't mean a thing. I stood for a moment in the front door, then closed it and went on down the walk. Four years were just overnight in a hotel room. I had breakfast at Barone's and got to the office about half past nine. Buford was already there, with Hurd, and Lorraine was looking for something in the files. Buford nodded abstractedly, and then Lorraine put the paper on his desk. I went over and sat down and started looking at the morning newspaper.

"Say, Jack," Buford said, turning around in his chair, "you ought to know your way around that lake pretty well, the number of times you've been up there fishing. You like to take a trip up there today?"

"Sure," I kidded. "Can I take my fishing tackle?"

"Not today." He sobered. "I just got a tip this man is up there near the end of the lake somewhere. You ever see him?"

He handed me the notice on Farrell. I looked at it. "No-o. I don't think so. Wait a minute, though. Maybe I have, at that. When I was fishing up there yesterday. Man was having trouble with his motor. No, he was older than this. Must have been forty-something and much thinner."

"That picture was made ten years ago. It was probably him, all right. The dope I got on him is that he's living in a shack pretty far up the lake. Take this along, and make sure you've got the right man before you bring him in. The tip may be a false alarm. You know how it is."

"O.K.," I said. I went over and got the gun and a pair of handcuffs. "I'll rent a boat and motor down at the store."

"Watch yourself, in case he is Farrell. He's wanted for murder. You want Hurd to go along?"

I looked at Hurd and winked. "Not unless he wants to handle the motor while I troll for bass."

"O.K., then. You'd better get started. It's a long trip." He reached for his hat. "Wait and I'll walk down with you. I want to get a cup of coffee."

At the bend of the stairs there was no one in sight for a moment. He took an envelope out of his coat and handed it to me and I shoved it in my pocket. "Good luck," he said. "And remember what I told you." Don't come back, I thought. Out on the sidewalk there were several people standing around and we couldn't say any more. "I'll see you tonight," I said, and he waved and started across the square toward Barone's.

I went down to the garage for one of the county cars. While I was waiting for it I ducked into the rest room and checked the envelope. It was all there, in hundreds, fifties, and twenties.

The boy brought the car down and I got in and headed up past the square. It was beginning to be hot now, and I could hear the pigeons cooing up under the eaves of the courthouse.

You remember Jack Marshall? I thought. Big fellow, lived around here a long time. Quite a football player in high school. Daddy was a district judge, but he never did amount to much. Got to be a deputy sheriff and was killed out there in the swamp somewhere. Never did find his body.

Marshall? Jack Marshall? Name sounds familiar. Whatever became of him, anyway?

I swung around the courthouse, and then I was headed out the street going south toward the highway.

Seventeen

As I drove down toward the south end of the lake, I was busy with the fact that Shevlin hadn't gone all the way down there yesterday with his fish. It wasn't a very big thing, but I knew it could lead to talk. When I had parked the car by the boat place I walked across the road to the restaurant and ordered a cup of coffee. The proprietor himself, a sour-looking man in his fifties, was on duty behind the counter. He brought the coffee and then went back to looking at the morning paper.

"You know anything about the people who live up the lake?" I asked.

He turned a page, glancing up at me once and seeing the gun and the white hat. "Ain't many up there now. Used to be a few trappers, but most of 'em are gone the last few years."

I took out the wanted notice and shoved it across the counter. "Ever see this man around?"

He studied it for a moment, then shook his head. "No. Don't think so. Looks a little like a man up there I buy fish from once in a while, but he's older than this."

I knew he had recognized the picture, all right, but was reluctant to get mixed up in anything involving

the police. He said nothing about the fact that Shevlin hadn't shown up yesterday.

"This is an old picture," I said, rambling on like a fool. "It's probably the right man, all right. I was up the lake about ten miles yesterday, and ran into him. His motor was broken down. Something wrong with the ignition, I think. I offered to give him a hand with it, but he said he was going to row back to the house and work it over."

"Oh?" He said nothing further, but I was pretty sure I'd cleared up Shevlin's failure to appear, in case it came up later.

"You don't have any idea where he lives up there, do you?" I went on.

"Nope." He shook his head. "Except that it's pretty far up, I reckon."

I bought a couple of sandwiches from him for lunch and went back across the road. The man with the boats recognized me from yesterday and looked in surprise at the gun and the deputy's badge. "Going to try 'em again today?" he asked. "No," I said. "This is just business. I'm looking for a man who may be living up the lake."

I rented a boat and motor and shoved off. "I'll be back sometime this afternoon," I called out as I pushed away from the dock.

It was a little after eleven. I had nine hours between now and the time I was supposed to met Dinah out there on the road. Handling the boat almost automatically on the broad areas of the lower lake, I tried to think it all out logically to see if I had taken everything into consideration. It was necessary, first, that I go all the way to the cabin. This was principally to make sure that there was no one fishing near it. It would be bad if some fisherman testified later that he had been just below the place all day and had never seen me go past, for it had to appear that I had gone to the cabin, taken Shevlin into custody, and started out with him.

There were a few boats on the lower part of the lake. I passed three or four before I got up as far as

the slough where I had always launched my own, some five miles up from the store. After I passed that point I began to tighten up and worry. I could feel the tenseness growing inside me as each mile slipped back in the wake of the boat, and I stared with apprehensive eyes as I rounded every bend in the channel. Of course, if I met anyone fishing, the only thing I could do about it would be to remain above him until I was sure he had gone back down the lake. Obviously, I couldn't have someone see me come back down alone. And if someone testified that he had been fishing fifteen miles or more up the lake all day and had seen me go up, but never come back, it would lead to the conclusion that Shevlin had probably resisted arrest and killed me up near his cabin, which I didn't want at all. That would lead to a concentration of the later search for my body around the cabin itself, where Shevlin was buried in the lake. If they started dragging the lake around there, they might find him. Buford, after all, had to make some pretense of trying to solve the mystery. And, too, the newspapers would be full of it, with dozens of conjectures as to what had happened, and the swamp would be full of volunteer searchers for a long time. If, on the other hand, no one saw me go up or come down, the searchers would have no idea at all in which part of the thousands of acres of sloughs and channels and marsh Shevlin had disposed of my body. And since there would be no evidence of a struggle around the cabin, the theory would be that I had started out with him, got careless, and let him jump me somewhere below, after which he disposed of my body in some out-of-the-way backwater, went back for his wife after it was dark, and then escaped. That was the way I wanted it.

Another thing I had to do was to be sure I knew where to turn off to the east to get into the slough that led far across the bottom toward the road and the small stream where I would meet Dinah. I had been up it once, years ago, and thought I knew where it came out into the channel of the lake, but I

wouldn't be able to waste much time looking for it. As I went up I kept a sharp watch, trying to remember what had distinguished it from the dozens of other inlets and sloughs leading off on that side. As I recalled, it was a little larger than the others, and where it came out into the lake the point of land between it and the lake itself had a narrow shelf of sandy beach instead of the mudbank and the tangle of underbrush characteristic of most of the lake shore. By the time I was a little more than halfway up to the cabin I began to look for it in earnest, wondering if I had already passed it, for as I remembered, it was about ten miles up from the store. The slough itself led out across the bottom in a generally northeasterly direction and the small stream that flowed into it crossed the county road over on the east side of the swamp some fifteen miles above the highway, as I had told Dinah. After another mile or two went by, I began to worry, fearing that I might have my landmarks wrong and had passed it without recognizing it. Then, at last, I rounded a turn in the channel and saw it. I looked around carefully at the general location after I had gone by, to be sure I would recognize it without trouble on the way down. Of course, I could still be mistaken, but I was pretty sure that was it.

I had nothing to worry about except meeting another boat. I looked at my watch. It was a little after one, and I should be there by two or shortly after. In an attempt to relax and relieve the tension that grew with every bend in the channel, I unwrapped one of the sandwiches and tried to eat it. It was dry and tasted like cardboard, and I threw it into the lake. It's not much more than five miles now, I thought. There's not much chance I'll meet anybody this far up. But still, you never can tell. And right here would be the worst possible place, this near to the cabin. Turn after turn unfolded ahead of me, the lake flat and empty in the midday heat. I came up past the place where I had camped, rounded the last bend, and relaxed all over with a deep breath of relief. There was no one anywhere.

I'd better go up to the house, I thought, just to make sure everything looks all right and that nobody has been there. I had just swung the boat about, to head into the slough toward the landing, when I noticed it. There was something odd about the surface of the lake just above, a peculiar sheen or color to it that did not look right for the position of the sun. It seemed to have the appearance calm water sometimes has at sunset. I turned to look at it again, but the view was cut off by the trees as the boat entered the slough. Just imagination, I thought. Too much strain, and my nerves are beginning to play tricks on me. Then, for some crazy reason, "the multitudinous seas incarnadine" ran through my mind. For Christ's sake, I thought, I'm getting as jumpy as an old woman.

I was still thinking about it, though, as the boat nudged against the landing. I made it fast with the anchor rope, and then remembered I should refill the gasoline tank of the motor from the can of fuel in the bow. I took off the cap and found the funnel, and when I was unscrewing the cap of the can I spilled a little of the gasoline oil mixture into the half inch or so of water in the bottom of the boat. I looked down at it, indifferently at first, and then, as I watched it spread, with growing horror, while I turned cold all over as with a sudden chill.

Frantically I pushed the boat off and started the motor. Swinging hard around, I headed at full throttle out into the lake, terrified, already knowing what it was and cursing the stupidity that had ever let me fall into such a terrible blunder. No wonder the surface of the lake had looked odd! I swung right as soon as I was out of the slough, heading up the lake toward the spot where I rolled him from the boat. I was at the outer edge of it now and plowing toward the center, looking all around me at several acres of water covered with the microscopic and iridescent film of oil.

It was that outboard motor. I had started to empty the fuel I had heard splashing around inside the tank, and then had changed my mind, thinking it not

worth the trouble. There hadn't been much more than a pint of it, but now, lying on the bottom of the lake, it was being forced drop by drop out of the airhole in the cap and was coming to the surface to spread out into a monstrous and inescapable marker over his grave. There was no faintest breath of air to form a ripple on the water, the surface lying as still and unmoving as glass, with the result that it had spread out evenly over an incredible expanse for so slight an amount of oil, so thin it would be completely invisible except for the sheen of color reflected from the sky and sun.

I cut the motor and let the boat drift, trying to get hold of myself enough to think. The oil was going to be here; there was no current in the lake to move it, and there was nothing I could do about it now. Nothing, I thought desperately, except to find the spot where the motor was lying and see if more was still coming to the surface. If there was, I had to stop it. But how?

Taking up the oars, I pulled slowly along, watching the surface of the water. There was no way to tell exactly where it was, so I turned and rowed back toward the shore to get my bearings. Bringing the boat up near the bank just off the place where I had reached it yesterday to put him aboard, I lined it up and started pulling very slowly, stern first, out toward the center of the lake. When I thought I had come almost far enough, I quit rowing and let the boat come to rest, not moving about in it to set up any motion of water. Sitting dead still and swinging only my head, I began a minute scrutiny of all the area for twenty feet or more around the boat, on both sides and in front. The film of oil was slightly heavier here, and I knew I was very near the spot. Two or three minutes went by and my eyes began to ache with the bright sunlight and the staring. Maybe there isn't any more, I thought. Maybe it has all leaked out by now. Then I caught it, a glimpse of changing color seen out of the corner of my eyes, some ten feet ahead of me and to the left. I stared fixedly at the spot, waiting, almost afraid to blink my

eyes. They began to sting, but I held them there, and in a moment I saw it again, quite plainly this time. A drop of oil had come up out of the dark, tea-colored water and spread, shining and iridescent in the sunlight, the colors changing as it thinned out across the surface. With my eyes fixed unwaveringly on the spot, I picked up the oars, gave them one shove, and then reached around for the anchor and dropped it. I was right over it.

Now what to do? I looked up and down the lake, afraid again of other boats or fishermen, but the long reach was devoid of any form of life or movement. I was alone in the whole immensity of the swamp here in the bright heat of the middle of the day, but still I could feel the stirrings of panic within myself. Perhaps it was because already, without thinking about it, I knew what I was going to have to do and I was afraid of it. The oil on the surface of the lake was something I couldn't do anything about, except possibly to spread and scatter it by running through it with the boat and motor, but the oil in itself might not be too dangerous. After all, it would eventually disperse, collecting on the big leaves of the pads and the old snags and growth along the banks, and whoever saw it would probably believe that someone had spilled some fuel while refilling the gasoline tank of his motor, and think no more about it. But this other thing, this oil bubbling up here in one spot, a drop at a time and maybe going on for weeks, putting more and more on the surface, would be sure to arouse curiosity and eventually somebody would start dragging for whatever was down there. I had to stop it.

I sat still, thinking. The valve was probably shut off. There was very little chance that the fuel was leaking out there. That meant, then, that when the motor had come to rest there in the mud on the bottom it had been nearly upright, or tilted in that direction, and as air escaped from the tank and water forced its way in, the water naturally pushed the fuel up into the top of the tank, where it was

escaping now, drop by drop, and might go on indefinitely.

I had been trying to evade it in my mind, dodging around it and never coming face to face with what I knew; but now, with all other escape cut off, I turned and faced it. I had to go down there. But could I? I could feel the weakness and revulsion take hold of me at the thought. He had been down there a little over twenty-four hours, in that warm water, and I knew that by now he wasn't alone. I shuddered. I just couldn't do it.

Was there any other way? I knew there wasn't. The water was twelve feet deep and I couldn't reach it with an oar. Trying to drag the anchor over it would be a futile waste of time. It had to be that way or not at all. It wouldn't take four seconds, I thought. All I would have to do would be to locate the valve, make sure it was shut, and then tip the motor down so the water and fuel inside the tank would change positions. I could do it in one dive. And it's either that or go away and leave it the way it is, knowing that sooner or later somebody is going to get curious about the source of all that oil bubbling out of the bottom of the lake. I stood up in the boat and started unbuttoning my shirt.

The water was warm. I lay in it, naked, alongside the boat, with one hand on the gunwale, trying not to think of anything except the motor. I can't wait all day, I thought. If I don't do it now I'll lose my nerve. Shutting my mind to everything, to all thought, I took a deep breath and dived. I seemed to go on for a long time, pulling myself down with powerful strokes of my hands, wanting to turn back but forcing myself to go ahead. It must be twenty feet deep instead of twelve, I thought wildly, and then I felt the soft mud under my arm. I was against the bottom. This was the terrible part of it now. Pulling upward against the water with my hands to keep myself flat against the mud, I groped around with them, feeling for the motor. There was no use in opening my eyes to try to see, for at this depth in the discolored water there would be no light at all. I

swung my arms around wildly and felt nothing. My lungs were beginning to hurt and I thought of the boat above me, knowing I had to come up carefully as I approached the surface or I might bang my head into it. I couldn't wait too long. Putting my feet against the mud, I sprang upward, bringing my arms up over my head to feel for the boat. I missed it and came out of the water gasping for breath.

I can't give up, I thought, my mind still focused with that terrible intensity on just one thing—the motor. I gulped a deep breath and dived again. When I was against the bottom I started sweeping it again with my arms, and then my left hand brushed against something just at the ends of my fingers. I turned toward it, feeling my skin draw up tightly with revulsion. It was a shoe. Bringing my right hand around, I groped with it, moving a little, and felt the canvas coat. I was fighting desperately now to keep from being sick here twelve feet under water and drowning myself with the retching. I had my hands on the frame of the motor, and with some detached portion of my mind that still hadn't quite given itself up to the wildness I was able to orient myself. It was tilted against his doubled body in an almost upright position, just as I had thought it would be. Fighting at the panic, I ran my hands along the frame, feeling for the valve, and found it. It was tightly shut. Bringing my feet under me, I squatted upright alongside the motor and lifted, rolling the whole wirebound and terrifying mass of his body and the motor over 180 degrees until he was lying on his other side with the outboard upside down and its tank stuck into the soft and sucking mud. It wasn't until then, until I had started to shove upward toward the air and clean sunlight, that I felt the final horror, the thing I had feared more than all the rest. It brushed against my naked leg, hard and solid and cold, and then when I threshed wildly it was gone somewhere into the darkness. It was a turtle.

I held weakly to the boat, and in a minute I was able to climb in and collapse naked and dripping on the seat, waiting for the wildness to go away.

Eighteen

When I had dried a little in the sun I put my clothes back on, felt for the envelope that contained the money to be sure it was still safe, and sat looking out at the surface of the lake. No more drops of oil came up, and I felt sure I had solved it. As for that already spread out over the water, there was nothing I could do about it. I decided against trying to spread and disperse it by running through it, on the theory that it would do more harm than good. It would look more like an accidental spillage if it were all in one place.

I started the motor and headed back to the boat landing. After tying up at the float, I finished the job I had started before, filling the gasoline tank, and looked at my watch. It was three-fifteen. I went up the trail through the trees and out into the hot sunlight of the clearing. The old hound was nowhere in sight. When I went into the house, nothing had changed at all. It was all exactly as I had left it, except that the spot on the floor that I had scrubbed was dry now. I walked out into the kitchen and looked around there, finding nothing out of place. There wasn't a chance anyone had been here.

Going back into the front room, I stood there for a moment before the dresser, remembering the day she had taken out the hook for me and how beautiful

she had been even in that terrible dress and with the roughly cut hair uncombed. I could almost feel her there with me in the intense, hot stillness, and I wanted suddenly with an almost overpowering longing to see her now. It's only until tonight, I thought, or early tomorrow morning. I'll see her then. And then, all at once, I was conscious there was something different about the room. Something that had always been there before was gone now, and I missed it. Then I knew what it was. I no longer heard the ticking of the clock. It had run down and stopped. It doesn't matter, I thought. I'd better get out of here now, before I start seeing him instead of her. I took a last look around. There was nothing that could do us any harm, and I went out, leaving the door open, and walked back to the boat. I should have taken another look.

From now on it's got to be good, I thought. I stepped down off the float into the rental boat and sat down on the seat. Taking out my knife, I slashed a small incision on the side of one of the fingers on my left hand. When the blood started, I picked up one of the oars and smeared it rather sparingly up near the round, heavy end just below the hand grip. It would be dry by the time I was ready to abandon the boat. Then I let a little of it drip into the water in the bottom, and smeared some on the seat. That took care of it, except the bailing can. Very carefully I put a set of smeared and bloody, completely unrecognizable fingerprints inside it, just where the fingers would normally be as a man grasped it to dip water out of the boat.

I was ready to go. Wrapping the cut finger in my handkerchief so it wouldn't bleed any into his boat, I switched to Shevlin's, tied the rental boat on behind with the anchor rope, and was under way down the lake. Now it starts again, I thought. This makes three times, and if I had to do it once more my hair would be gray. Only now, if I meet somebody, it's the end of everything. But the miles ran back behind me, turn after turn, one empty and deserted reach after another while I sweated it out, and I saw no one at

all. At four-forty-five I was down to the sandy point where the slough turned off, the one I had marked in my memory this morning. I wheeled and turned into it and in a moment I was out of sight of the lake, cut off and hidden among the trees on either side.

I had to throttle the big motor down here, for the channel was narrow and twisting, winding its erratic way across the bottom. And two or three times in every mile there would be big trees down in the water. These had to be carefully worked around, sometimes forcing me clear up against the opposite bank. After I had gone about three miles I stopped, pulled the rental boat alongside, and cut the anchor rope up near where it was made fast to the bow. Coiling it up so there would be no free end to float around in the water, I tied it all up in one bunch and dropped it into the slough. The anchor was a concrete block that would weigh about fifteen pounds, and I knew that when they found the abandoned boat with it missing, the inference would be inescapable. Shevlin had used the thing that was handiest, and what was left of Jack Marshall was lying on the bottom somewhere in all these thousands of acres of lake and slough with it tied fast to his body. I dropped the deputy's badge and the gun and handcuffs into the water along with the anchor and sat for a moment watching the little rings recede where they had disappeared. There, I thought, goes the last trace of twenty-seven years of Marshall.

I got under way again, pulling the rental boat along with the short section of anchor rope still left fast to the bow. After about another mile I found the place I was looking for. A small stream came out into the slough on the right, its entrance choked with a rank growth of reeds. I stopped and pulled the rental boat alongside and got into it, setting the anchor of Shevlin's boat in its stern so it wouldn't get away. The blood I had smeared on the oar and the boat seat had dried solidly now, and I wet the bloody handkerchief I had had about my finger and set about washing it off. The way to do it, I knew, was to

wash it just as clean as a man would who was anxious to leave no trace but at the same time was working under tremendous pressure. There would be no indication that it had been planted, but rather that it had been thoroughly searched for and washed off with just a slight smudge overlooked here and there. The gory fingerprints inside the bailing can I left just as they were, for they were completely invisible as the can was lying now. Then I took the small handcuff key out of my pocket and dropped it so it bounced under one of the slats in the wooden grating on the bottom of the boat, invisible unless someone lifted the grating. I wiped the motor all over with the handkerchief to remove fingerprints, rolled the wet cloth into a ball, and threw it far out among the reeds.

Taking one of the oars, I poled the boat back among the reeds, then pulled Shevlin's boat in after it until they touched. Lifting the anchor back into his boat, I climbed over into it myself and poled it back out of the growth into the slough. I turned and looked back. It was a good job. The boat was hidden, but it could be found. It looked exactly like the kind of job a man would do at night and in a hurry, not knowing, because of the darkness, that just a little white was visible through the shield of greenery. It's done, I thought. It's all done except getting out of here. In a few more hours I'll be with her. The past ends here, and from now on everything is ours.

The sun was almost down now and twilight was thickening here in the heavy timber of the bottom. I knew I had to hurry and get up to the head of the slough before it was completely dark, for it would be impossible to negotiate a small, twisting, log-blockaded waterway like this at night. Starting the motor, I got under way, sure it couldn't be more than another mile or two out to the road.

The going became worse and worse, and in a few minutes I had to cut the motor and take to the oars, picking my way carefully around down timber and logs. In another ten minutes I could see it was going to be impossible to take the boat much farther and I

began looking around for a place to leave it. I wasn't long in finding it, a dead log projecting out into the water where I could step out and get on dry ground without leaving any tracks in the mud around the water's edge. I stepped out onto the log and gave the boat a shove, taking no pains to hide it. It made no difference how soon they found it.

There had been no rain for weeks, and above the water's edge the ground was hard and dry, with no danger of leaving tracks. It was almost totally dark now and it was slow walking, pushing through the underbrush. Then, almost before I expected it, I ran into the fence. The road was just beyond, and I was out of the bottom. There were no cars in sight, so I stepped out on the road, looking for the bridge. I could see the pale gleam of concrete just below me, and walked that way, squatting down just off the road where I could watch for the headlights of cars and get under the bridge to hide if necessary. I struck a match and looked at my watch. It was seven-forty.

At five of eight I saw the headlights down the road. The car was coming slowly, and when the lights began to break against the bridge I saw them drop and lift, and drop and lift again. The car pulled to a stop and I walked up the embankment and onto the road.

She grinned, the gray eyes alight in the soft glow of the instrument panel. "Jack, darling, I'm right on time. Here, I want you to drive." She slid over in the seat.

"All right," I said. I walked around and got in on the other side.

She curled up in the corner of the seat with her legs doubled back under her, and smiled at me. She was wearing a short gabardine skirt and another of those exotic-looking blouses, this one gathered up some way over her left shoulder with long diagonal folds running down across her breast. There was a bunch of violets pinned to it. "This is wonderful, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "Thanks a lot, Dinah."

I drove up the road a short distance, found a place to turn around, and headed back, gathering speed. "What's the news in town?" I asked, wondering if the storm had broken yet.

She shook her head. "I don't know, Jack. I saw Buford for a few minutes at noon, but I haven't heard anything since. I told him I was leaving at one o'clock."

I nodded. That made sense. She couldn't very well start down to Bayou City at seven o'clock at night. It would look crazy.

"You haven't had anything to eat, have you?" she asked.

"No. But we'd better not stop anywhere within a hundred miles. As Buford says, I'm too easy to see."

"Yes." She said quietly from the corner of the seat "I've noticed that about you."

I let it pass, pretending I hadn't caught the inflection of it. It worried me a little, though, and at the same time I was conscious of feeling slightly ridiculous and uncomfortable. And then I remembered last night and the way she had looked up at me as she was getting into the car. I didn't think I had ever been one of those chumps who was convinced that every girl that came along was making a pass at him, but now I was beginning to feel that way. This made twice she had rolled the ball squarely in front of me, and twice I had refused to pick it up. She didn't strike me as a girl who had ever had to be that obvious, with her looks and charm, and she must be convinced I was incredibly stupid. That I didn't mind, but I didn't want her jumping to the only other conclusion a woman is ever able to see when the bait remains untouched. Absolutely nobody was ever going to know about Doris if I could help it. It would be too dangerous for both of us now.

I shook it off. Maybe I was mistaken, I thought. And it's a small thing, anyway. I'm beginning to have the worry habit; that's the trouble. Here I am, in the

clear at last, on my way to Doris, with three thousand dollars in my pocket and an entirely new life ahead of us, and I insist on getting into a sweat about this thrill-chasing girl. By the time we get to Bayou City she'll probably have decided I'm just another Mortimer Snerd and be interested in something else.

"This is a nice car," I said, to change the subject and to keep the silence from stretching out.

"Yes," she replied absently, as if it didn't interest her much. "It rides nicely at a hundred and above. Why don't you let it out?"

"On this road?" I asked incredulously.

She grinned. "Why not? It's heavy."

"So's a granite headstone, but I don't want one," I said.

We came out onto the highway in a few minutes and I turned east onto it, headed toward Colston and Bayou City. She lit two of those king-sized cigarettes she smoked and handed one to me. Almost unconsciously, the way a man always does when a woman lights a cigarette for him, I looked at the end of it before I put it in my mouth.

She rested her cheek against the back of the seat, smiling. "You're not afraid of a little lipstick, are you?"

I grinned lamely. "No. I didn't mean it that way. It was just a habit."

"And," she asked softly, "whose lipstick have you been avoiding?"

"Jesus, I don't know," I said, almost irritably. I wished we could get those bedroom overtones out of the conversation. "After all, I've been married for over four years."

"But you're not any more," she said. "Your wife's husband is dead. By the way, I hope you didn't carry any life insurance. And not because I have anything against your widow."

"No," I said. I knew what she meant, because I'd already thought about it. "It lapsed a long time ago. We needed a new car worse."

"That's good. For you, I mean. You can fool the police sometimes, but nobody ever got rich trying to make suckers out of those insurance investigators."

Again she puzzled me. How did she know things like that? And how did she get that way? Was she convinced she was some sort of dilettante criminal, breaking laws for excitement? Or had she just been reading too many detective stories? I didn't believe either one was true. There was too much education and native intelligence showing at times in between some of the crazy things she said.

Then she jarred me again. She could keep you off balance better than a professional fighter. "You don't like obvious girls, do you? I should have known."

"Why?" I asked, playing dumb again. "What do you mean?"

"You're rather confusing to a girl. It's because you look like one thing and are something else. You look like a football player or a professional fighter, but somewhere along the assembly line they got mixed up and gave you a mind that works. That's what I mean I should have known. No moronic muscle man could ever have figured out all that mess the way you did."

I was beginning to feel like a chump again. "If all this is a gag, Dinah, how about knocking it off?"

I glanced around at her. She took a long puff on the cigarette and stared back at me without the usual humor in her eyes. "It's not a gag."

"What is it, then?" I knew it was a stupid question, and one I shouldn't have asked, but I couldn't think of anything else.

"Well, since I've decided not to be obvious, I'll be shameless. Or outright predatory. It's not a gag, because I'm in dead earnest. You couldn't give a girl a little help, could you?"

Lord, I should have taken the freight, I thought. This is a mess, and that's not the half of it. It could get to be dangerous. This girl knows too much to run any risk of getting her angry.

"You're kidding," I said lamely.

"I've just told you I'm not kidding. And you must think I have a queer sense of humor. Maybe I should go into burlesque and undress myself before a bigger audience."

"All right," I said. "You're not kidding. And I'll admit you're devastating, if that's what you're out to prove. You're good-looking and you're smooth, and I'd be eating out of your hand in a minute if it weren't that just at the moment I happen to be looking in the other direction—back over my shoulder."

She relaxed a little. "That's partly what I'm talking about, darling. I want to go with you. Look. I have most of my clothes in five bags in the back of the car, and a little odd change I've managed to save here and there, and this Lincoln with fancy leather upholstery and a surprising power plant under the hood, in case you'd care to investigate it. And I might be a little surprising too, if you'd take the trouble to try to become acquainted with me. I'm not really as dumb as you think I am, to be going at you this way. It's just that I haven't got time to follow any traditional feminine tactics. Bayou City is too near. And I'm not always too conventional, anyway. I get bored with it—"

"Dinah, cut it out," I said uncomfortably.

"I want to go with you."

"In God's name, why?"

"Well, to spring something entirely new, maybe it's biological. But that's not all of it. Jack! Will you get this car off the highway and stop the damned thing? I can't talk to you while you're driving. It's like trying to talk to a machine. Get it off the road. Jack! Please!"

I couldn't argue with her and drive at the same time. There was no telling what she might do, and I was convinced by now that she was capable of anything. I saw a dirt road up ahead, leading off into the timber on the right, and slowed to swing into it. Maybe I could talk or shake some sense into her.

Nineteen

I stopped the car and looked around at her in the dim light of the instrument panel. She remained curled up in the corner of the seat, staring moodily at me with the long cigarette in her fingers like some precocious and highly ornamental child.

"It's all right. I'm not going to attack," she said. "And you could probably defend yourself. I weigh a hundred and ten."

"Now, look, Dinah—" I began.

"You can drop the fatherly attitude. You're twenty-seven, and I'm twenty-four."

"I don't get it," I said, shaking my head. "You're acting like some nitwit high-school girl, and it doesn't fit you."

"I know. I know," she said impatiently. "For heaven's sake, darling, I know the manual of basic maneuver just as well as the next one. I could sprain my ankle. And I just adore Hemingway. And I just love to putter around in a kitchen. And I don't think for a minute that people really have to go to expensive places to have a good time, do you, dear? But, for the love of heaven, don't you see there isn't time for that? Can't we dispense with that bird-with-a-broken-wing routine? Aren't we old enough, and intelligent enough—"

"But Dinah." I objected, "what the devil are you after?" I might as well be dumb to the last. I couldn't think of anything else.

"Now who's stupid?"

"All right," I said. "But why? What for?"

"Does there have to be a reason? Is it like geometry?"

"But for God's sake," I protested. "Of all the men in the world, why some crooked ex-deputy sheriff on the run from the cops?"

"Well, if you really think we have time for me to draw a diagram, it's because I happen to be crazy about you. Or had you already managed to guess, from some subtle little hint I've given you?" She laughed, but there wasn't much fun in it. "It's just because I want you more than I ever wanted anybody or anything in my life. Right from the moment you walked into that living room which the cultured and sardonic Mr. Buford provides for me and his gun collection. Before you opened your mouth and started to talk, I thought you were just some magnificent thug—which wasn't too bad in itself, for I do have all of a normal, wholesome girls interest in thugs. And then I began to see a lot of other things about you. Imagination. Daring. And excitement. Always excitement. Don't you understand, Jack? To me you're the world's only defense against dullness. You're the personification of excitement."

"The personification of horse saliva," I said roughly. "Stop acting like a high-school girl. I told you it didn't fit you. It's not your type."

"I know it sounds idiotic when it's put that badly," she cried out. "I can't explain it to you, not in a hurry like this. But, Jack, can't you see we belong together? Can't I go with you?"

"No," I said desperately, trying to think of something. I couldn't just brush her off. I didn't know how, in the first place, for I'd never had enough girls chasing me in my life to get any practice at it. And there was another and more

important reason. She knew too much, and if she got furious there was no telling what she would do. "Look, you've got everything—"

"Except you," she interrupted.

"—everything a girl would want. And you'd like to throw it all away and go chasing around over the country with some man on the lam. Do you have any idea at all what it's like, hiding from the law?"

"Can't you see it doesn't matter? I don't care what it's like."

"You think it'd just be exciting. Well, let me tell you. The thrill wears off fast."

She threw the cigarette out the window. "Wait, Jack," she said softly. "You think I'm still some idiotic adolescent, just because I don't like boredom. Well, I meant what I said about excitement, but running from the police wasn't the only excitement I was referring to. I don't appear to have much success in trying to put what I feel into words, so maybe I could show you." She slid over a little in the seat and looked up at me with the gray eyes very large. "Jack. Look here at me. Just bend your head down—a little..."

The next thing I was conscious of was a soft, wild mouth, and the importunate, tightening arms about my neck, and the knowledge that, even with somebody else on my mind, I couldn't take too much of that. I got hold of myself and straightened up.

She slid back on the seat a little with her shoulders slumped, not looking up. "All right," she said. "You don't have to draw me a picture."

"I'm sorry, Dinah," I said. "Maybe we'd better go."

"Yes. But you could have told me, before I made a fool of myself. Is that where she is, in Bayou City?"

"Where who is?"

"Look. You've insulted me once. Don't do it again."

"There's not—" I began.

"If you don't mind, let's go! I told you I was going to take you to Bayou City, and I'm going to!" She

grew quieter then, and went on, "If you'll slide over, I'll drive—"

If I'd had any sense I'd have stayed behind the wheel, but I was too relieved at getting started again to heed any warning signs. By the time we were out on the highway, though, I knew what I was in for.

She was doing forty by the time she straightened out, and then I heard rubber scream, in high gear, and knew what she had meant by looking under the hood. The highway ran straight here for six or eight miles, and I sat back in the seat lighting a cigarette and watching the speedometer climb. I thought she would begin to flatten it off at ninety, but she didn't. At a hundred and five I quit looking.

It was a good road that would have been reasonably safe for eighty, in broad daylight, and there was very little traffic, but it was the cows I had the most trouble with. They have a bad habit of finding holes in fences and wandering out onto the roads at night, and I wondered if anybody would be able to separate enough of us from the hamburger to make burial worth while in case we found one tonight.

I thought that after the first blaze of anger burned itself out she might take it a little easier, but I was wrong. She apparently knew the road, for she cut it down before we came up to the turns and then gunned it again for traction as we started into them. Of course, it wasn't all as fast as that first straightaway, but she managed to stay pretty close to thirty miles per hour above what would be considered an absolute limit for night driving. Seeing, in a little while, that it was going to be like this all the way to Bayou City, I began to worry about patrol cars. We'd run across one sooner or later, and I thought hopelessly about my idea of getting clear out of the country without being seen by anyone who might remember me. Of course, a speed cop would never remember us, I thought bitterly—just a big overgrown gorilla and a hundred-pound dream of a flame-headed doll doing ninety-

five at night in a souped-up Lincoln. He'd never give us another thought.

She slowed down going through Colston. I had to give her credit. She didn't want to kill any defenseless bystanders. When we hit the city limit on the other side, the speedometer began winding up again.

"All right, Dinah," I said. "I'm impressed, and I know you can drive. So how about knocking it down a little before we pick up a cop?"

"They can't catch me with one of those Fords unless it's souped up. And it won't stay on the ground if it is." She was right. We picked up a patrol car just after we hit the first of the seventy-five miles of four-lane pavement. He never had a chance. Why they didn't set a road block for us, I'll never know. Maybe they'd chased her before and had just decided the best plan was to leave her alone and let her kill herself without any help. I had thought we'd be in Bayou City around two in the morning. At a quarter of twelve we were rolling into the downtown section. Traffic was beginning to slacken off and people were going home from the late movies.

"Is there any particular place you want out?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Anywhere will do. I wish you wouldn't go off angry, Dinah. I appreciate this, and I think you're a nice guy."

"You've already told me what you think, if you'll recall."

She pulled up at the curb. I got out, and then leaned back in the open window, holding out my hand. "Don't go away like that, Dinah."

At first I thought she was going to ignore me. Then her face relaxed and she reached out and took it, her hand very soft and warm and almost lost in mine. "Good luck, Jack," she said quietly. She started to say something else, but choked on it; the face turned away, her hand jerked back, and I got out of the window just as the tires shrieked. I stood on the curb watching her disappear down the street. It's not too

good, I thought. But what could she do? She was smart enough to know that after hauling me down here she was implicated in the thing herself, and that if she had any regard for her own safety she'd have to keep her mouth shut. There was one serious flaw in this, 'however, and I knew it. She wasn't exactly the overcautious type.

I shook the worry off impatiently. I had other things to think about than that wild-haired girl. Luggage, for one, I thought. Of course, I could check into the hotel without any, but the room clerk would be more likely to remember me that way. From now on I had to be careful always to do nothing in the slightest degree odd or out of the ordinary. I couldn't do anything that would make me stick in people's memories.

In the next block a chain drugstore was still open. I went in and bought a cheap overnight bag and some shaving gear and a toothbrush. Across the street at a newsstand I picked up two heavy magazines and an out-of-town Sunday paper. As I went back out into the street I snapped the bag open and slipped them inside. So far, so good, I thought, but I still don't know what room she's in. She'd be in bed now, and obviously I couldn't ask the room clerk.

I ducked into an all-night cafe and went back to the telephone. Looking up the number of the hotel, I dialed and waited.

The fan didn't work and it was stifling inside the booth. "State Hotel." It was a girl's voice. The operator was still on duty.

"A Mrs. Crawford, please. Is she registered? This is United Airlines."

"Just one moment, please." She paused. "Yes, sir. I'm ringing."

"Thank you," I said. I waited, feeling the tightness growing inside my chest as I realized how near I was to her at last. How long had it been since I had let her out of the car in Colston?

"Hello." It was Doris.

I wanted to cry out, "Darling, this is Jack!" Instead I asked smoothly, or as smoothly as I could, "Mrs. Crawford? This is United Airlines, the reservation desk." Would she recognize my voice and not say anything wrong? "We're very sorry, but so far we've been unable to confirm your reservation west of Salt Lake. I think we'll have it in another hour or two, however. Shall we call you then, or wait till morning?"

I heard a barely audible gasp and then she came through beautifully. "Thank you. Tomorrow morning will be all right. Just call me at Room Three-twelve here at the hotel."

"Thank you," I said. I hung up.

It was still hot in the street where the neon was beginning to die. A street-cleaning truck went by, swishing water into the gutters, and the traffic lights were flashing amber along the emptying canyon. Two yellow cabs stood idle at the stand up by the corner.

"State Hotel," I said, feeling the rasping of impatience.

I didn't have any name. I was nobody. I didn't exist. I stood with the pen in my hand, sweating, poised above the blank white card while the man behind the desk regarded me with the supercilious detachment of all hotel clerks. It had never occurred to me until this moment that if I was no longer Jack Marshall I must be somebody else, and that everybody had to have a name.

I had to put down something. He was watching me. "J. K. Mallard, Nashville, Tenn.," I scrawled across the card. He hit the bell.

The boy would never leave. He turned on the light in the bath. He turned on a floor lamp. He looked inside a closet. What does he expect to find? I thought. Ten million boys have looked inside ten million closets searching for something they've never found. I took two quarters out of my pocket and tossed them in my hand. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No," I said, waiting.

He went out and I heard his footsteps going away. Give him two more minutes, I thought, to get out of the corridor. The way he moves...I put the key in my pocket and went out and closed the door. My room was on the fifth floor, but I bypassed the elevators and walked down the two flights of stairs. I went along looking at the numbers on the doors, going softly on the carpet through the quiet, dim, impersonal tunnel that is the same identical corridor of a thousand different hotels. I walked past doors bearing the numbers 340 and 338; I was going the wrong way. I retraced my steps and started down the other way. I found 308, then 310. I stopped before the next door. I knocked softly, twice, and then once, the sound lost and absorbed in the empty, noise-proofed tunnel walled in by darkened cubicles of sleep. "Jack?" The whisper was very faint, barely reaching me through the door. "Yes," I said.

I heard the night latch click and the door opened a minute crack. "Give me just a minute," she whispered. I waited. She doesn't have a robe, I thought, and not even a nightgown unless she's bought one. I pushed open the door, stepped quickly inside, and latched it. The room was dimly lighted by a single small bulb in the floor lamp in one corner, and she sat up in bed with the sheet clutched to her breast. The dark hair fell down across her shoulder and she was very beautiful and all at the same time a little afraid and full of yearning and inarticulate happiness as I came across the room. It's the same with her as it is with me, I thought. We've both dreamed of this minute for all this time, and we don't know—there isn't any way we can know—what it will be like with us now. Would we ever be alone again? Had we escaped from Shevlin, or had we tied him to ourselves forever? I stood looking down at her, wanting to tell her how beautiful she was and what I felt, but no words would come. She forgot the sheet and lifted her arm up to me, letting it slide unnoticed from her breast and the cheap, peach-colored nightgown she had bought. I sat down on the

side of the bed and gathered her up to me with my face down against her throat. And then when I raised my head and looked at her I knew that neither Shevlin nor anybody, nor anything, could ever reach us as long as we were together.

"You're not afraid now, are you?" I asked.

"No," she whispered. "It's all right now."

"Everything is just the same."

"Yes," she said simply. She was silent for a moment, looking up at me with eyes incredibly large, and very close and still. "I haven't been in the dark since then. But you can turn the light out now."

I went across the room and turned it off.

Twenty

There was no way to tell what time it was because she was asleep with her head on my arm and I couldn't move it to see the watch. Light was growing, though, beyond the drawn slats of the Venetian blinds, and I could make out objects inside the room. I lay very still for a long time, not wanting to disturb her, and thought about the two of us and the things we would do now that we were free at last. When there was more light I turned again and looked at her. She slept as quietly as a child, lying on her right side with her face against my arm and the hair very dark across the pillow. The strap of the nightgown had slipped off her left shoulder and the breast was exposed, rounded and very smooth, rising gently with her breathing. I smiled, thinking of the confusion in her face when she awoke and discovered it. I didn't want to disturb her sleep, but still it was somehow lonely being awake without her. Even being this near and seeing and touching her wasn't the same without the eyes open and looking at me. I leaned my head down and kissed her and she stirred. The eyes came open, and just for an instant I saw in them the awful awareness and the terror that I had feared. Then she saw me and it went away and she smiled. It will gradually disappear with time, I thought. For a while there will

be these moments just at waking or just at dropping off to sleep when the mind has no defense at all and she is alone, but they will go away.

"You are very beautiful when you're asleep," I said.

"It's the first time I've slept since—"

"Yes," I said. "I know."

"You didn't mind, did you, Jack? I wanted to stay awake, but after a while I just seemed to melt and run together. I guess it was because you were here where I could touch you and I wasn't afraid any more."

"It's all right," I said. "I slept too."

She looked down at the gown slipping off her breast and quickly pulled it up, the confusion very becoming on her face, and would have drawn up the sheet but it had fallen to the floor.

"You haven't noticed my gown," she said reprovingly, to cover her embarrassment.

"I'm afraid not. You'll have to admit, though, that it has competition."

She smiled, and then her face sobered and she looked across at me with her eyes full of an almost childlike earnestness. "I—I bought it with some of the money you gave me, Jack. It didn't cost very much; it was the cheapest one they had. I can do without something else. But it's just that I wanted one so badly."

I could feel the tight constriction in my throat. It isn't even a wedding ring she's talking about, I thought, just a cheap, lousy nightgown she probably bought in a ten-cent store, bought looking back on being made love to in the leaves under a tree in broad daylight and looking forward to sleeping naked beside a man like a common prostitute. The only shred of respectability or common decency she would even ask me for was this sleazy, peach-colored misfit of a bargain-basement nightgown, and she was even anxious that I wouldn't think she had wasted too much money in buying that. For some

unaccountable reason I was growing angry, and at the same time humiliated and ashamed thinking of this pathetic attempt to clothe herself in at least some scraps of dignity.

"What else did you buy?" I asked.

"Just some—underclothes."

"And I suppose you got them at the dime store, too? The best they had?"

"Well, not exactly in a dime store, but they didn't cost very much." She looked at me uncertainly. "I know we don't have very much to spend. Remember, you told me.

I had forgotten that. And now that I was suddenly reminded of it I felt even more ashamed and angry. Then I remembered I hadn't even told her of the three thousand dollars we had.

"Do you know what we're going to do today?" I asked.

"Get on the bus?"

"No," I said. "Well take the bus tomorrow night, after we've got a little better organized. I think we're safe enough here, at least for the moment, and we've got to get some luggage and I need another suit. Today, though, we're going to take you shopping. We're going to buy you some clothes, and I don't mean cheap junk." I sat up in bed and looked at her, aware that I was beginning to sound like a wild man and that I probably didn't make much sense to her. "Do you know what I'm going to do? What I've wanted to do for a long time? What I've wanted to do every time I thought of you going barefoot like a sharecropper's child and thought of those misfit abortions of dresses you wore around that house? I'm going to see you dressed in the kind of clothes you should have. We're going to start at the bottoms of those feet. Let me see your feet. Where are "they?"

"Well, Jack, where would they be?"

I slid down along the bed and gathered them up in my hands, turning them inward and pressing the

soles together the way I had once before. "We're going to start right here with the sheerest nylons ever made and the most expensive shoes in town and gradually work up."

I looked up and she was watching me with an amused tenderness in her eyes. "But Jack, what are we going to use for money?"

I had forgotten it again. Leaping off the bed, I went over to where I had left the coat. Slipping out the envelope, I took it over to her, pulled out the thick sheaf of hundreds and fifties and twenties, and spread them along the sheet in front of her.

She looked at it, dumfounded, and then up at me. "Jack, where on earth did that come from?" I could see the fright and anxiety begin to come back into her face and she went on, "What have you done?"

As rapidly as I could, I told her all that had happened. She listened quietly, not even touching the money, and when I had finished all she said was I'm glad it's all over. There won't have to be any more of that, will there? I know it's too late now to think about the way it could have been, but at least we can try to live the way other people do, can't we? We can both get jobs and we'll get by all right. I used to work in an office."

"Yes," I said. "Only you won't have to any more. I can get a job without much trouble. We'll go to Washington—the state, I mean. I was there when I came back from the Pacific in 1945. It's beautiful country, and you'll love it—mountains and rivers and green forests. ..." I happened to think then that perhaps she'd already seen all the green forests she'd ever want to, and went on hurriedly, "And Seattle is a nice city. You'll love it."

"It sounds wonderful. But I don't care where we go, Jack. Just so we're together, and maybe we'll be able to live in peace."

"Yes," I said. I bent down, placed a hand alongside her cheek, and kissed her. "All that other is finished now. It's past and gone."

Her arms went up around my neck, softly at first, and then they tightened and she cried out, "Oh, Jack! I hope it is. I hope so!"

"Of course it is," I said. "We're in the clear now. They'll believe I'm dead, and they'll never bother to look for you except as part of the hunt for him. There isn't a chance that anything will go wrong. But we can't sit here all day moping like a couple of old women. We've got to get started shopping." I stopped a minute, thinking, and then went on. "Look. Here's what we do. Today and tomorrow well go on just as we are now, not even knowing each other as far as anyone else is concerned. That may be a little overcautious now that everything has turned out so well, but it's just in case our descriptions are broadcast. Two people answering a general description are a lot more likely to attract attention than one alone. So we don't want to be seen together around the hotel. I'll meet you—" I looked at my watch. "I'll meet you at ten-thirty in the cafeteria up in the next block. We'll have breakfast together and then start buying your clothes."

I went back up to my own room, tore the bed apart a little so it would look as if I'd at least been in it, shaved, and went down in the lobby for the morning papers. I worked through them very carefully, starting at the front page and going back to the want ads, and there wasn't a word about my disappearance or about the grand jury at home. I was just about to throw them aside when I saw her come out of the elevator and head for the street. She had put her hair back up in the roll at the back of her neck, the way she had done it coming down to Colston. I waited until she had been gone a few minutes, and went out the door myself.

The afternoon papers will be out in an hour or two, I thought. They'll have something in them. I was beginning to burn with impatience, wanting to see how Buford would break the story and how well it went over with the general public.

She was sitting alone at a table in the corner. I took my tray back and sat down across from her. "There's nothing in the papers yet," I said.

She nodded. "There hasn't been time." I knew she was right. Nobody would think anything about it until I failed to show up for work this morning. Buford, for the benefit of the others, would call the jail to see if I had come in there last night with Shevlin. Then he would call the garage and learn that the car was still out. By that time Lorraine and Hurd, and anybody else who happened to drop into the office, would be buzzing. Buford would call the boat place at the foot of the lake and learn that I hadn't come back with the boat and that the car was still parked there by the boathouse. The story would begin to spread like fire on a windy day, and the news services would probably have it by ten o'clock. I looked at my watch. It was a quarter of eleven; Buford would probably be leading a search party right now.

I was eager to get started and couldn't even taste what I was eating. "Let's go, Doris," I said. "You've got a lot of shopping to do."

She smiled. "All right. But Jack, I'm afraid you don't know much about women's clothes. Dresses and skirts have to have alterations, and we don't have time for it now. I'll just try to get something to travel in, and then buy other things when we get to Seattle. The clothes will be different there, anyway."

I hadn't thought of that, but I knew she was right. "O.K.," I said, disappointed. "But all the other things that don't need alterations—you'll get those, won't you?"

"Yes," she said, looking at me gently. "It means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

We went out into the swarming, sun-baked street where heat lay in wait and lunged at you just outside the air-conditioned doors. The first place was a luggage shop, where we bought her two matching bags and asked to have them delivered to the hotel. Then what she had said about alterations reminded

me that I had better get the suit now so they could have it ready for tomorrow. She waited inside the men's store while I bought it and made arrangements to have it delivered to me at the hotel no later than two the next afternoon.

"Now, you," I said, touching her gently on the arm.

"Are you sure you want to go along?"

"Yes," I said. I began to change my mind, however, before we'd even got through shoes and handbags. I was too alone here in this jungle of women, too conspicuous, like a chained bear at a Junior League tea. It was worse than foolish; it was stupid. I'd never blend very well into this background, and too many people would remember me.

"I hate to leave you for a minute, but I'm going to have to get out of here," I said at last. We stood in a crowded aisle with the stream of women shoppers eddying and flowing around us. I gave her three hundred dollars. "I'll meet you at the hotel."

"I don't need this much," she protested.

"Don't buy cheap things. Please," I urged.

She looked up at me. "Why, Jack?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. It's something I can't explain. I just don't want you to have anything second-rate or makeshift. You've had enough of that."

I went back out into the heat and drifted with the crowds, watching with rising impatience for the afternoon papers. At the second corner a truck was unloading them at a stand and I bought one and ducked into the nearest bar. It was cool inside, and dim, and I sat down on a stool at the end of the bar, ordered a bottle of beer and opened the paper.

It was a short item, less than a third of a column, on an inside page:

OFFICER MISSING

J. B. Marshall, 27, deputy sheriff of Devers County, was reported this morning to have been missing since early yesterday

in the vicinity of Stowe Lake, where he had gone to arrest a man believed to be an escaped convict. According to Wayne Buford, Devers County sheriff, Marshall left the boathouse at the south end of the lake yesterday morning in a rented boat.

I read it through twice to be sure I had missed nothing, then threw the paper aside. There wasn't much; just about what I had expected for the first break on the story. The general tone of it seemed to be that, so far, at least, they believed I had just got lost in the swamp. There'll be more in the later editions, I thought.

Impatience and restlessness had got hold of me again, and I wanted to get back to her, and get on the bus and start for the Coast. I wasn't scared now, I thought; the most dangerous part of it was over. That had ended when I had got out of the swamp and down here without being seen by anyone. By anyone but Dinah, I thought, correcting myself. But she wouldn't say anything. I was sure of it now. I wondered if she were still here in town or if she had gone home. She might even be shopping right alongside Doris at this moment, I thought, and was glad again I had got out of the stores. She was sure I was meeting somebody down here, and I wondered if she would suspect anything if any of the news stories mentioned Shevlin's having been married. Probably not, I thought. Why should she?

I couldn't sit still any longer and went back out into the street. How much longer would she be? Time away from her was wasted; why didn't she hurry and get back to the hotel? Then the ridiculous illogic of the struck me; I was the one who had insisted she go shopping in the first place, and now I was impatient because she was gone. And as far as being back at the hotel was concerned, I wasn't there either. Was it time to go now? No, I thought. She wouldn't be back for an hour or more and I'd go crazy waiting.

I was passing a jeweler's and suddenly realized she didn't have a watch. That was one thing I could get for her myself. The clerk sized up my clothes and began bringing out the \$37.50 and \$49.95 stock. I waved them away impatiently, feeling angry again, and would have walked out and gone to another store but my eye was caught by an exquisite timepiece in yellow gold with a matching strap of golden cord, very beautiful in its simplicity, and costing \$275. "Wrap it as a gift," I said, and waited, restless in the heat.

There was a later edition of the paper on the street and I bought it, but there was only a different headline on the Korean war. The story was still in its original location on the inside page, unchanged, with nothing new. No mention had been made of the grand jury at all. It'll be out later tonight, I thought, and then I'll know how they're taking it. I won't quit worrying until I know what they're going to believe. But I'm not worrying, I reminded myself. It's all right now.

I went into another bar and sat down at a table in the air-conditioned cool dimness in the rear. I ordered a bottle of beer, but when it came it had no taste and I let it die in the glass, forgotten. Taking the jeweler's box out of my pocket, I thought of looking at the watch again, but decided not to open it because it was gift-wrapped so well. She doesn't really want this, I thought. She doesn't want the clothes I insisted that she buy—at least, not so many of them—and she doesn't care whether they're expensive or not. All she wants is peace, and maybe she wants me. I hope she wants me, but maybe she never will in the way that I have to have her. She needs me because she is afraid now when she's alone, and because she is first and last a man's woman who needs a man and who could see no point in life without one, and because she likes me and maybe she loves me, but I don't think it's the obsession it has become with me.

No, I thought angrily, I've got no right to think that about her. How do I know how deeply she feels? Is

she some flirtatious idiot with everything on the surface where it shows? And do you expect her to dredge up all her feelings right now when she's trying so hard to bury some of them? Things are still terribly mixed up for her, and she's scared, and what she's gone through would have driven some women out of their minds.

But, on the other hand, I thought, staring straight ahead across the dimness of the bar and seeing nothing but a still-faced girl with tortured eyes and that beautiful, dark, and mutilated hair—on the other hand, hadn't it been only the loneliness that had driven her to me in the first place? Hadn't it been just the loneliness and neglect and the sordid way she'd had to live for almost a year, seeing him come apart that way in drunkenness and suspicion? Minutely, step by step, I went back over every one of our pitifully few hours together, looking for something and not even knowing what it was. I saw her again down on her knees scouring the floor with that agonized fury as if it were herself under the harsh scrubbing brush instead of the already whitened planks. Neglect? That was part of it. What was it she had cried out once, almost in self-reproach? "I can't help the way I am, can I, Jack? Is it my fault I'm that way?" But it wasn't only that, I thought. It had to be more than that with her. She would have gone on punishing herself until she wore the floor out with the brush before she'd have surrendered to what she would have considered the cheapness of that alone. It had just been little of this and a little of that, all adding up until it whipped her. No, I thought savagely. No, that wasn't it. I must have been more to her than just a means of escape. But I don't know. How could I know? How could I ever be sure?

I've got to stop this, I thought. Is this the kind of thing I'm going to go through when I'm away from her? Do I have to go on tormenting myself this way? I tried to drink the beer, but it was flat and warm by now and completely tasteless. I lighted another cigarette, forgetting I already had one burning on

the tray. Suddenly, sitting still was unbearable again, and I threw fifty cents on the table and went out without waiting for my change. Sunlight blasted into the street and the glare hurt my eyes after the dimness of the bar, and heat boiled up from the sidewalk in suffocating waves. She'll be back by now, I thought. She must be back.

She wasn't. I stood outside the door and knocked again, and then a third time in an empty hot eternity of silence before I would admit to myself she wasn't there. I was cut off, alone, with nowhere to go and nothing to do but sit down in the lobby through the hell of another hour of waiting.

I heard the elevator door and turned around. She had just stepped out of it and was coming toward me down the corridor with her arms stacked high with bundles.

Twenty-one

I took them from her while she unlocked the door. We went inside and she closed it and turned to me to take them. "Let me show you, Jack. Let's open them now, darling."

"No," I said. I threw them on the dresser, but there were too many and some of them fell off onto the floor. "No. Later on. They're not important."

She looked at me wonderingly. "But I thought you wanted—"

"Yes. I did. I still do. But they can wait." I was conscious of thinking I must not make much sense to her. Or to myself, for that matter, I thought. She was still regarding me with faint surprise as I reached out and caught her, quite clumsily, and in too big a hurry and almost roughly. Her arms went up about my neck and then she gasped slightly and said, "Jack, you're hurting me."

"I'm sorry," I said. I raised my head a little and looked at her, seeing the face slightly flushed from the heat and the eyes very large and dark, almost violet now in the dimness of the room. "I couldn't help it. I can't help it. Don't you see how it is?" I went on, wildly now, and knowing I must sound like a madman to her. "I love you so much I get jumpy being away from you and I can't keep my hands off

you when I'm here. God knows, I don't want to hurt you. Can't you see how it is? Don't you see?"

"Yes," she said softly. "I know. It's exactly the same with me."

"Is it that bad with you too?"

"Yes. But I don't think it's bad."

"No. Not bad. It's only bad when we're apart. It's awful then. I didn't know a man could come unstuck like this. Do you suppose I'm crazy?"

"If you are," she whispered, "I love you for it."

I raised a jittery hand and started fumbling with the pins with which she had fastened up her hair in that roll behind her neck. In my awkwardness and shaky-fingered impatience, however, I wasn't making any progress and was only messing it up. "Wait, Jack," she said gently, and quickly slipped them out. The hair tumbled down and she shook her head, freeing it. It was a dark shadow across her face and throat and I ran my fingers through it. "Is that better now?" she whispered.

"Yes," I said. "Yes. This is how I wanted it."

I put my face down against her throat and could feel the beating of her heart. The traffic sound down below us grew far away and faint, like distant surf, and I could hear nothing now except the caught, breathless, and then suddenly desperate whispering in my ear, "I love you, Jack. I love you so."

We were strangely clumsy, as if we'd never made love before, caught up in a dark and ecstatic wildness full of frenzied caress and inexperienced fumbling like the very young. It had never been quite like this the other times, and when it had flown away and left us I lay quite still and wondered at it, watching the lovely face so peaceful now in repose with the eyes closed and the lashes very dark against her cheek. Like a child, I thought, or an angel, and wondered why angels never seemed to have dark hair in pictures.

In a little while she opened her eyes and we lay looking at each other for a long time without saying

anything. She brought up a hand and gently ran a fingertip along my face, just touching it. I wondered if she knew or even remembered that she was completely nude, or whether it would suddenly come to her and she would be overcome with embarrassment and confusion as she had this morning. She knew, though, for in a moment she looked down at the swelling, dark-centered breasts and then back up at me with a faint wonder in her eyes.

"I guess I have no shame," she said.

"It's a ridiculous word to use," I said. "Why should you?"

"It's funny, isn't it? I keep telling myself I should, but there isn't any. Not at all. I couldn't get up this way though. Could I?"

"No," I said. "You're trapped."

She smiled very faintly. "Unless you went to sleep."

"I don't feel sleepy in the least," I said. "Or maybe you would be a gentleman."

"I feel even less like a gentleman than I do sleepy," I said. "I'm rotten all the way through."

"Don't you want me to put on the clothes I bought? You were very concerned about them this morning."

"I don't know," I said. I moved a little and put my face against hers, our foreheads touching, knowing it was a silly thing because I couldn't see even her eyes then, they were so near. "I think I don't know what I want. I want you here the way you are, but still I want to see you dressed up and very smart. I want to stand off and look at you and at the same time I want to be so near that there'd be no way of knowing whether there were two of us or only one. I want to talk to you, and still I want to be quiet, just watching you. I want to tell you all about it, how beautiful you are and how much I love you, and still I know there isn't any way I can really say it and that you shouldn't try to talk about it too much when it's like this, because talking takes a little bit of it away,

and all the words have been worn out anyway by people who maybe only thought they felt it. I want too many different things and I want them all at once. There's a lot of it I don't understand, and maybe I never will. I can see why I want to make love to you the way we did; I can see why touching you or looking at you or being around you should be exciting in that way; but there's no way to understand why I get angry just thinking about the way you had to live and the way you dressed and at your being barefoot, or why I feel the way I do about your feet and just want to sit there and hold them in my hands. Do I make any sense to you? Could anybody make any sense out of it?"

"Yes," she said softly. "It makes sense. Weren't you ever in love before, Jack?"

"I guess not. Anyway, not like this."

"But you were married."

"I know. But it wasn't anything. Even at first." It was odd I thought now. It seemed to have been years since I'd even thought of Louise.

"Yes," she said musingly. "I think you're right. I don't think you ever have been before. I know it's a funny thing to say, but you seem to be so completely amazed by it, like a little boy."

"Now you're talking as if you were a thousand years older than I am."

"I think I probably am," she said gently.

"Have you ever been in love before?" I asked, suddenly and furiously jealous.

"You want me to tell the truth, don't you, Jack?"

"Of course," I said, not wanting her to at all.

"It was a boy who was killed on Guadalcanal in 1942. I was nineteen then, and pregnant. When his parents received the telegram I tried to kill myself with sleeping pills. They didn't work, but when I went to the abortionist, he almost did it for me."

"My God!" I said. "No."

"It had been too long. I don't know why it didn't kill me as well as the baby. Maybe it was because I didn't really care."

"But," I cried out angrily, "Why, Doris? Why?"

"I don't know. It wasn't just because we weren't married. I wouldn't have minded that very much then, and wouldn't at all now. But it was the injustice of it. I hated everything. I wanted to die and I wanted to kill a baby who couldn't have been responsible for a war that did things like that. And maybe a little of it was because of my father. He was such a sweet old thing, and the disgrace would have ruined him. He'd have lost his church. Oh, I don't know. After all, I was very young, Jack. We wanted to be married in San Diego before he left, but I looked so young they wouldn't give us a license without my father's consent, and by the time I got the letter from him it was too late. He already had been shipped out."

"How did you get to San Diego in the first place?" I asked.

"I ran away and followed him. After he went overseas I came home. Daddy didn't say anything. It was after I got back that I realized I was pregnant. Of course, I was very happy about it then, married or not. But when his parents got the telegram—"

"My God," I said. "What an awful thing!"

"It was a long time ago, Jack. I mean, it's all over now."

I saw a little then of what she had meant when she had said she was older than I was. "And it was some time after that when you met him?" I wondered if either of us would ever be able to say his name.

"Yes," she said. "About a year."

We were quiet for a long time. Even though I didn't want to think about it I kept trying to imagine what their life had been like. After a while I turned and looked at her and asked, "Did he hack up your hair like that? Was he drunk?"

"No," she said. "I did it myself. I tried to cut it by looking in a mirror. I made a mess of it, but it didn't matter. It was too long, and all I wanted to do was hack it off so it wouldn't be so hot, and so I could get it inside the cap when I went swimming."

She certainly lived a wonderful life up there, I thought bitterly. But I'll make it up to her now.

"Where did he get the money for all that whisky?" I asked. "He didn't make that much from the fish he sold."

"No. He didn't buy it. I think the man who rented boats down at the store was a bootlegger or made whisky or something. He used to give it to Roger for repairing boats and motors and things like that. He was handy with tools. But do we have to talk about it, Jack?"

"No," I said. "It's all over now."

It was dark outside now. The floor lamp in the corner was turned on, and as I sat on the side of the bed, smoking, I could see the litter of opened parcels and the wrapping paper scattered about the floor. She had been in the bathroom for a long time, while I listened to her splashing in the tub, then she had come out, wearing the new robe she had bought, and opened all the other packages. Gathering up some of the things, she had gone back promising to put them on so I could see how they looked. As I sat there now, waiting for her, I suddenly remembered the watch that was still in the pocket of my coat. I'd forgotten to give it to her. When she comes out, I thought.

Thinking of the watch reminded me of the time and I looked at mine. It was after eight. The first editions of the morning papers should be on the street in a little while, if they weren't already. I should go down to the lobby and get them, I thought, but it was too pleasant just sitting there waiting for her to come out again so I could see how she looked. I'll pick them up when we go out to dinner, I thought.

I heard the door open, and looked up and whistled softly. She was very tall and smart-looking and cool in a white skirt and short white jacket, with a blouse of frosty blue gathered in some kind of ruffle about her throat. The stockings were very sheer and she had on white shoes that didn't appear to be much more than high heels and straps.

She turned, holding out her arms. "How do I look, Jack?"

"Don't come any closer. I might try to bite you."

"Do I really look all right?"

I got up from the bed, conscious of what a crumby-looking specimen I was now beside her, with nothing on except my shorts and with the stubble of black beard beginning to show, and went over to my coat. I took out the little parcel and handed it to her.

"This is for you," I said, "because you are the most beautiful woman in the world."

She took it, looking at me wonderingly. "Go ahead," I said. "Open it. It's for you. I bought it while I was waiting for you today."

She unwrapped it and held the oblong case in her hands a moment before she snapped it open. I heard the little gasp as she looked inside. "Oh, what a lovely thing! Jack, you didn't have to do this for me."

"I told you why I did it," I said.

She looked up at me with her eyes a little wet. "Jack I believe you do think I'm beautiful."

"Aren't you?" I asked quietly.

She nodded, not speaking for a moment. "Yes," she said then. "I feel beautiful, anyway."

I met her up the street and we went to dinner. It was very dim, with candles, and we had a table in a corner by ourselves. I didn't buy the papers after all, not before dinner, for I knew I wouldn't read them before we got back anyway, and the later editions would be out then. I couldn't sit down across from her and look at a paper, no matter what news I was expecting.

After a while we went back to the hotel. She went in first and I bought the papers and followed her. She had the white suit off and was changing to the robe when I got there, and we spread the papers on the bed and read them. The story was on the front page now, and growing.

"OFFICER BELIEVED VICTIM," the headlines said. They hadn't found either of the boats yet, but already the stories were full of the conjectures that I had hoped for, built on just the fact that I was still missing and that Shevlin's cabin was deserted and his boat gone. Dozens of men were searching the swamp now, and I was sure that by tomorrow morning they'd find the boats, which should clinch it. There was no mention of the grand-jury investigation. It was good news, all of it. I felt better and the strain was beginning to go away. It had been a good job.

There was another thing, though, that we hadn't outrun. Just before dawn I awoke suddenly, sweating and scared, and she was screaming in her sleep. I got her calmed after a while and lay awake until daylight smoking cigarettes and thinking.

Twenty-two

When the first gray light began to filter through the drawn Venetian blinds I got up and dressed. She was sleeping all right now, quite peacefully, with a hand beneath her cheek and the dark hair swirled across the pillow. It was cooler now inside the room, and I gently pulled up the sheet without disturbing her. It was only a bad dream, I thought; she'll get over it.

In the early dawn the empty canyon of the street was almost cool; yesterday's heat was dead, and today's was waiting to be born. A street-cleaning truck went by, swishing water, and I could smell the dust being overrun and drowned the way it is in the first large drops of rain. This is the only time of day, I thought, when a city is ever beautiful.

The final editions of the morning papers were on the stands. I bought them and hurried into a coffee shop full of white tile and chrome and sat down at the counter. The story sprang out at me from the front pages, apparently getting bigger by the hour.

"SWAMP SEARCHED FOR BODY," I read.

"MURDER CLUE IN DISAPPEARANCE."

"VIOLENCE FEARED."

They had found the boats. Wild with eagerness, I tore into the stories:

With the discovery late yesterday afternoon of an abandoned, bloodstained boat, identified as that which J. B. Marshall, 27, deputy sheriff of Devers County, had rented for the trip into the swamp area in the upper reaches of Stowe Lake to make an arrest, hope was rapidly dwindling that the missing officer might be found alive. Wayne Buford, Devers County sheriff, revealed to newsmen at a late hour last night that evidence found in and about the boat indicated there had almost certainly been a struggle and that the young deputy may have been murdered by the man he had gone into the swamp to arrest. He cited the ominous fact that the boat had been carefully hidden and that the bloodstains found on the seat and on the upper shaft of one of the oars had been hastily scrubbed at in an effort to obliterate them.

"But," the sheriff added grimly, his face haggard from the strain of the continuing 24-hour search, "the most significant and terrible of all the evidence is that missing anchor. I have been informed by the proprietor of the fishing camp that this boat was equipped, like all the others, with a fifteen-pound concrete anchor and some twelve or fifteen feet of rope. With the anchor gone and the rope cut, just recently and with a sharp knife, we have no choice but to believe..."

I sipped the coffee, hardly noticing it in my excitement. It was even better than I had hoped. And Buford was terrific. He should have gone on the stage, I thought.

"—the utter hopelessness of the search in the light of this almost inescapable conclusion. Nobody knows just how many thousands of acres of waterway—lake and

swamp and sloughs—there are up there, and it would take more than a lifetime to do a thorough job of dragging all of it for a weighted body lying on the bottom somewhere in the mud. However, we are not giving up. That boy was well liked by all of us, and we will not abandon the search while there is any remote possibility that he is still alive. And the manhunt for Shevlin, or Farrell, is being pushed by every officer in the state.”

The story went on with a lot more of Buford. He reconstructed the whole thing as indicated by the evidence, giving his opinion that I had arrested Shevlin and started out with him. Somewhere along the line I had grown momentarily careless, Shevlin had seized the opportunity to slug me with the oar, unlock the cuffs—they had found the key where I had dropped it—and had dropped me over the side with the anchor tied to my body. Then he had gone back for his wife—for by this time it was known that he was married, though no one could remember having seen her in almost a year—and on the way out of the swamp in his boat he had hidden the rental boat and then escaped. It was as nearly what I had planned as if I’d left him a script to read.

Full of elation, I paused to light a cigarette, and then read on, looking for some hint about the grand jury.

Young Marshall, a veteran of World War II and well known and liked throughout the county, was the only son of the late Judge Halstead Marshall and the last of a family quite prominent in this part of the state for over a hundred years.

I put the paper down. That last paragraph might be the answer. It carried a hint of something I had hoped for but had not dared count on too heavily. Now that I was presumably dead and nothing could be gained by investigation except to raise a smell, there was a good chance they had let it die out of respect for the Judge’s memory. Probably they had

started, got far enough into it to see where it was going to lead, and now that I was dead they'd let it drop. I hoped so, anyway.

I paid for the coffee and went back to the hotel, walking as if a hundred-pound weight had suddenly been lifted from my shoulders and knowing that at last there was no danger. I almost ran the last few steps down the corridor to get into the room to tell her.

She was just coming out of the bathroom in her robe. I caught her excitedly and kissed her while she looked at me in wonder, and then I handed her the papers.

"Read it," I said. "We're in the clear. They went for every bit of it. No, wait." I interrupted myself. "Before you start, call room service and order your breakfast. I've already had some coffee and I'm too excited to eat any thing."

"All right, Jack." She made an effort to smile, but it was a strained and pitiful attempt, and I knew that the terror of last night was still alive there somewhere below the surface. After she had made the call she started reading the news stories and I watched her face as the hope and relief grew in her eyes. When the waiter knocked on the door I went into the bathroom and hid while he set up the breakfast things. When he had gone I came out and drank a little of her coffee and watched her while she finished the papers and tried to eat. She didn't get much of it down.

"Look," I ran on, too full of plans now to be quiet, "the other things you bought will be delivered to the hotel by noon today and I'll have the suit and a change of clothes. We have luggage and can travel looking just like anybody else. So we'll check out, separately, sometime this afternoon, and catch the first bus. No, by God, we'll take the plane. We can afford it now. Why didn't I think of it sooner? We'll take the plane to San Francisco, stay there a few days, and then go on up to Seattle by bus to see the country."

She had begun to catch my excitement now. "I think that's wonderful, Jack," she said. She called the airline and found there would be a plane at six-fifteen p.m., and made her reservation.

"You'll have to go down and pick up the ticket sometime this morning," I said. "I'll follow you and get a ticket for myself. Maybe we'd better make it pretty soon, so they won't be sold out."

She called room service and I went back into the bathroom while the waiter took away the dishes. I prowled the room restlessly while she was in the bath changing into street clothes, and when she came out I spoiled her lipstick kissing her.

"You're just like a big bear," she said, smiling. She started to pin her hair up into that roll on the back of her neck and I took her by the arms and turned her around.

"Couldn't you leave it down now?" I asked. "After all, there hasn't been any description of you broadcast, as far as we know. As a matter of fact, nobody's seen you for a year and they don't even know what you look like. But, no, I guess not. It would attract attention, chopped up like that. I don't like it, though. Put up that way, I mean. Because it's so damned lovely when it's down across the side of your face."

"But after all, Jack," she smiled, "when we're alone together I always have it down. And you don't care what it looks like to other people, do you?"

"Yes that's right. But remember that when we're out in public, the other people aren't the only ones looking at you. I am too."

"You say awfully nice things for this early in the morning.

"There is no early morning in the way I feel about you," I said, grinning. "It's always just at dusk with the moon rising."

"Sweet! Maybe, though, I could get a beauty-shop appointment this morning and have it cut to even it up. It would be all right then."

"Try it," I said eagerly. "That'd be fine."

She looked up some in the telephone book and started calling. On about the third one she hit a cancellation and they said they could take her at eleven-thirty.

We went down the street to the airline office, going in separately, and she picked up her ticket while I bought one. There isn't much need for all this cloak-and-dagger stuff any more, I thought, and as soon as we're on the plane we'll call it off. It's all right now.

We went back to the hotel to wait until she had to go to the beauty shop. The rest of her packages had been delivered. I went up to my room and found that the suit and the other clothes I had bought had come, as well as the new bag. I packed, and just as I was starting out the door to meet her down in front of the hotel I remembered I hadn't shaved this morning. I'd forgotten all about it. Well, there isn't time now, I thought; I'll come back and do it while she's in the shop.

The beauty shop was only two blocks away, and we walked, going slowly along through the dense crowds and the heat. The boys were beginning to call the afternoon papers and I was just going to buy one when a sharp cry from Doris interrupted me.

"Jack! I left my watch!" She had stopped. "I took it off to bathe this morning and put it on the dresser. And when I got ready to meet you I went right over there and looked at it to see what time it was and didn't put it on. Oh, how stupid!"

"It's all right," I said. "It's safe in the room. "But I'm worried about it. It's such a beautiful thing, and you gave it to me. And, besides, the maid will be in to clean the room."

"I know what," I said. "Give me your key and I'll run back and pick it up while I'm waiting for you."

I watched her go across the street and into the shop, and when she was inside I walked back to the hotel. The watch was still on the dresser and I picked it up and put it in my pocket. I'll run upstairs

and shave, I thought, and go back to meet her. She said it'd take only about half an hour. Then I remembered the paper I hadn't bought, and was suddenly curious as to whether anything new had turned up. I went back out and bought one from the boy on the corner. He handed it to me folded and I stuck it under my arm, going up the street toward the bar I had been in yesterday. It was air-conditioned and would be more comfortable than the hotel.

The place was almost deserted, very cool and dim after the crowds and hot sunlight in the street. The barman in his white jacket was bent over a newspaper spread out on the bar, and as I went past I noted absently that it was the same one I carried under my arm, the afternoon paper with the salmon-colored outer sheet. I sat down at the end of the bar and he came over.

"Bottle of beer," I said.

He opened it and got a glass. "Quite a deal about that sheriff, wasn't it?" he asked.

I'm a celebrity now, I thought. But, anyway, a dead one. "Yeah," I said casually. "Probably never find his body, either."

He shook his head. "Not a chance, in that place. I been up there fishing a couple of times. But, say, that babe was a looker, wasn't she?"

What was he talking about? "Babe?" I asked.

"Yeah, that guy's wife. A real pipparoo."

"Wife?" I asked stupidly. What the hell, was Louise mixed up in it now?

"The sheriff?"

"No," he said. "The other one. The man that killed...his wife's picture is there on the front page."

I could feel my skin congeal inside the sweaty clothes. Somehow I got the paper out from under my arm and unfolded it, trying to keep my face still while the bar swam around me in a slow and horrible eddying of black mirrors and mahogany and white-jacketed barmen.

I knew what it was even before I looked. For some crazy reason, the thing she had said about the watch came back to me. "I went right over there and looked at it to see what time it was and didn't put it on." I had stood right there in the cabin day before yesterday, taking a last look around, and had looked right at the picture sitting there on the mantel beside the clock—the clock I had even noticed was stopped—and I had never even seen it.

"A honey, huh?" It was the barman.

Somehow I managed it. "Yeah," I said. "A honey." I had to get out of there. But I couldn't run like that. I might get him suspicious. Somehow I managed to dig a dollar out of my pocket and put it on the bar, to give him something to do besides just standing there looking at me. They had given it a full two columns. "sought," the caption said. "Mrs. Roger Shevlin, beautiful young wife of man sought in swamp killing." Good God Almighty, I raged, they didn't have a picture of him—only twenty thousand of them scattered in every law-enforcement office in the South—so they had to run hers!

I gulped at the beer, almost drowning myself to get it down so I could get out of there. Fortunately I had swallowed it before my eyes had started wildly down the front-page story alongside the picture, for then I got the second jolt—

as law enforcement officers of the adjacent county swung into the search for the body and the escaped killers. According to Sheriff Carl C. Raines of Blakeman County, Marshall may have been overpowered and killed in the cabin itself or nearby, and Shevlin and his wife may quite possibly have disposed of the body in the other direction, above the cabin, before they fled.

I tried to put the glass down without rattling it against the wood. So now Raines was mixed up in it, and thought she had helped to kill me, and he was looking for them both! Buford had called the warning, and I hadn't paid any attention. He had told me that the upper end of the lake was in Blakeman

County. I had even known it myself, but hadn't thought it was important. But now—

Buford covering my tracks behind me was one thing, but having Raines sniffing at the trail was something entirely different. He wasn't just going through the motions.

Somehow I got out of the bar. Heat rolled up and hit me as I went through the door, and I had to remember where I was to get my directions straight. The beauty shop was up the street toward the left. But what was I going to do? I thought of her sitting there, with that ragged hair already causing the girls to notice her, and with everybody looking at the picture on the front page. I've got to do something, I thought agonizingly. But what? I had to wait for her to come out; if I went in there to get her, that would attract attention. And if I got her back to the hotel, then what? Dye her hair? How did you disguise a woman?

The heat was beginning to make me weak, and I felt sick. This was the last intersection now, and I leaned against the lamp pole waiting for the light to change. The beauty shop was the fourth door from the corner and I stopped in front of it, not knowing what to do next. People going past in the hot sunlight bumped into me and I moved out toward the curb.

A sedan pulled up into the no-parking zone and stopped. Two men got out, and as I watched in growing horror they walked into the shop. But they're not in uniform I thought desperately. They're not police. They couldn't be! But there was no use trying to kid myself that they looked like the kind of men who frequented beauty shops.

The door opened. She was coming out. I wanted to jump forward and cry out and take her by the arm, but I stopped, rooted where I was. One of the men was right behind her and he had her by the arm, I had to move to get out of their way, for I was standing right in front of their car.

She saw me and I thought she would cry out. The terror was awful in her eyes, but she went past me with no word and no sign of recognition. I could swing and hit him, I thought through the black despair, but she couldn't run in those high heels, and there's always the other one. And by now I had seen the shoulder holsters and the guns. One of the men got in the front seat behind the wheel and the other helped her in and then sat down beside her in the back.

Nobody had said a word. The people going by on the sidewalk never knew it. As the car pulled away from the curb her face turned toward me just for an instant through the window and I wanted to die.

Twenty-three

Then I was back at the hotel. I had no idea how I had got there, but I was standing in her room looking around at her clothes and the two alligator bags and her robe and nightgown across the bed and feeling all the emptiness and silence of this place where she had been come crawling up over me like ants across a lidless eye. There was no escaping them, and I wanted to turn and run back out, but there was nowhere else to go and I had enough sense left to know that the emptiness was inside me and that I would take it with me when I ran.

The thing I had to do was sit down and try to think, try to see exactly what had happened. This torturing condemnation running endlessly through my mind like a singing commercial through a radio you couldn't turn off wasn't going to do anything except eventually drive me crazy, and then they'd have us both. I had done this to her. I had left the picture there where they had found it, I had been responsible for her going to the beauty shop, and I had stood there like a baby and let the police take her away to jail, but it wasn't going to help any to go on torturing myself with the knowledge.

I sat down on the bed. The maid had already been here and cleaned the room, so I was safe enough

from discovery. And they're not even looking for me anyway, I thought, struggling to reorient myself. They're only looking for the people who are supposed to have killed me. Then the terrible irony of it went to work on me again and my head was in a spin. I had done such a good job of erasing myself that they had already arrested her as an accomplice in my murder.

But does she know that? I thought. Does she know that it's my disappearance she's been arrested for, or does she, in her terror, think they've found out about Shevlin? What would she do? What would she be likely to say, to cry out without knowing where she might trap herself? That was the terrible part of it. I had no way of knowing what she was going to say, and no way to get word to her to tell her what to say. I thought of those "Information, Please" experts at work on her and of all their tricks, and had to tear my mind away from it.

If she saw from the first that they had picked her up only because they were trying to find Shevlin, she would be all right. There were a thousand things she could tell them that would leave her in the clear. And all the time she would be secure in the knowledge that the crime for which she had been arrested didn't actually exist, that they couldn't actually do anything to her for being accessory to my death, because I wasn't dead, and that as a last resort I could always reappear to kill the charge. But, I wondered then, suddenly, would her mind, having gone that far, go on to the next fact, the one staring me in the face right now? And that was that if I reappeared, what was I going to tell them when they asked me what it was all about and where Shevlin was? I could tell them that he had escaped from me. Sure. But what was I doing down here? Running from that grand-jury investigation at home? No. Because I didn't even know that such a thing existed. Again, I had covered my tracks too well. And, also, if I reappeared out of limbo right here in this city where she was and to save her from the charge, it would tie the two of us together. Shevlin

missing, and his lovely wife down here with me? It was a tabloid editor's dream come true, and they'd have a confession out of one of us inside a day.

I was calmer now and my mind was beginning to function, as it always seemed to do eventually when I was in a jam. It was a lot like the way I had felt that day up at the cabin on the lake. After the first shock wore off and I could see that the chips were down and I had to do something, I could think. I was conscious now of this growing clarity, this ability to see all paths at once and the dangers inherent in each one. And the first thing I could see was that I was going to have to get out of this room, and get out of it fast. I wasn't safe here; this was probably the most dangerous place in town for me right now. I sprang up from the bed. Why hadn't I seen it before? Someday, I thought, I'm going to realize something like that just a minute too late.

Taking the key out of my pocket, I left it on the dresser. Since she didn't have it with her and they'd know it when they searched her, it had to be here unless I wanted them to know somebody else had been here with her. As for the other things, the clothes and the bags she had bought, there was nothing to do but leave them. But no, I thought suddenly. I can't. I can't leave those two bags. I was with her when she bought them and helped her pick them out. The man who sold them to her could probably describe me to the police as easily as he could describe his brother. And since they were after Shevlin, they'd be backtrailing her all over town to see if anybody had seen him with her. I grabbed them up and looked out into the corridor. It was clear, and I slipped out hurriedly, closed the door, and went up the stairs to my room.

That had been close, and I'd probably caught it just in time. They would have her at the station by now. And, since they were after him and since it would be logical to assume that if she were here in town he might be too, there'd be dozens of them shaking down the hotels right this minute. The thing to do was get out of here, and the sooner the better.

They'd be here any minute with her picture. Thank God, I thought, we weren't registered together and the hotel people had no reason to connect me with her. Of course, they weren't looking for me, but my description, if they had it, would be one that would stick in the mind, and I couldn't take any chances of having them begin to wonder just how dead I was.

My bag was already packed. Just for a moment, as I saw it sitting there, the agonizing hell of what-might-have-been and the despair and bitterness came rushing back and hit me. In six more hours, I thought, we would have been on the plane with all the rest of our lives before us. Then I got hold of myself. I couldn't go to pieces that way. I had to keep moving and I had to keep my head. Dragging a hand roughly across my face, I went over to the telephone and called for a boy to come after the bags. There was no use taking the cheap one I'd bought in the drugstore, I thought, and threw it inside the closet and closed the door. I had two more than I'd checked in with as it was.

We went down in the elevator, and as we came into the lobby I looked guardedly around. There was no one at the desk who looked like a plain-clothes man. I wondered if the clerk would notice the extra bags. The boy took them on out and I settled the bill. There was a cab outside and I got in.

"Where to, chief?" the driver asked. Where? I thought I had to go somewhere.

"Bus station." I had to get rid of those bags, no matter what I did. We crawled through snarled traffic and heat and blaring horns. The bus station was jammed and sultry, full of a loudspeaker's blasting and the roar of a departing bus. I put the three bags in lockers and stuck the keys in my pocket. All right, I thought, I've cut the trail from her to me to give myself time to think, but where do I go from here?

I pushed through the crowd to the lunch counter and ordered a cup of coffee. What had she told them? That was the question that went through my

mind over and over. Everything depended on that, and there wasn't any way I could know. Suppose she had confessed? In spite of the sticky heat I felt the chill between my shoulder blades. And it was possible; I knew it. In her terror and confusion, not even knowing what she had been picked up for, with all of them firing questions at her, who knew what she might blurt out?

But suppose, I thought, trying to pick up the thread of thought I'd had before I realized I had to get out of the hotel, suppose she kept her head and hasn't said anything so far? Then we're safe enough—for the moment. The danger then would lie in the fact that eventually they might wear her down, keep hammering at her until she let something slip, or that eventually, as they kept looking for my body, they might find Shevlin's. That was a very real danger now that Raines had joined in the search because he wasn't trying to cover anything up, as Buford was. Therefore, I had to get her out of there. But how? Obviously, the only way I could do it was by turning myself in, or coming back to life. And then they would be asking me the question, the big one: Where was Shevlin?

But wait, I thought. I was very close to it a while ago when I had to run away from the hotel. Suppose I could come back to light in some way that wouldn't indicate I had ever been down here at all or even knew her? They were still looking for me in that swamp, with some faint hope that I was still alive and only hurt and lost. Well, suppose it turned out that I was? They would release her. The charge then wouldn't be worth holding her for. That would take the pressure off her before she broke down and confessed, or let something slip.

The girl brought my coffee. "What's the matter, big boy?" Suddenly I realized she was talking to me.

"Matter?" I asked. "Why?"

She gave me a pert smile. "Well, I don't know, but you just looked so worried and kind of moving your lips like somebody talking to himself."

I've got to stop attracting attention, I thought. "Oh," I said. "It's my wife. She's having a baby."

"Oh." She started to move away. "I hope it's a boy."

"Thanks," I said. Where was I? Oh, yes. Back in the swamp. But if I came back out of there, they would probably dust off that grand-jury investigation again, even providing they'd really dropped it. All right, I thought, what of it? A year, two at the most. And even a chance of a suspended sentence. We're young. We could stand it. And it would be a hell of a lot better than what we had staring us in the face right this minute.

I was working on it at top speed now. I could do it. I could get back in there, fake the scalp wound where he had slugged me with the oar, fall in the swamp a few times, wander around all night until I was dirty and bloody and haggard enough, and then start finding my way out, get picked up by some of the searchers, and have a good story ready for them. I could make it stick. But wait, I thought. I've got to get that bag back out of the locker and change clothes somewhere. I've got on the new suit, and I'd have a hell of a time explaining how I bought it while I was lost in a swamp. But that was easy. I could do it in the men's rest room. I put a dime on the counter for the coffee and started to get up, and then the other thought hit me. I sat down.

My hands were tied. I couldn't make a move until I found out what she had said to the police. God, suppose I went back into the swamp, and then, tomorrow morning, when I found my way into one of the searching parties, learned that she had confessed the whole thing! Talk about walking into a trap...I flinched.

Her story would probably be in the papers. I had to wait for them; there was no other way. I couldn't do a single damned thing now but sweat through the whole, hot, nerve-racking eternity of this afternoon waiting for the story to hit the streets. I looked at my watch. It was twelve-thirty. It would be at least three

hours, if it hit the last edition of the afternoon papers, and it might not be in them at all and I'd have to wait until around eight for the morning ones.

But in the meantime there was something else to work on. Was there any way to get word to her to tell her what I was going to try to do so she could hold on and not break down and spill everything after I had started in there? I thought about it for just a minute. There was one slight chance.

I got up hurriedly and got some change from the cashier at the counter and went over to the bank of pay phones along the wall. I dialed, "Long-distance? I want to put in a person-to-person call to a Miss Dianne Weatherford at Bigelow. I don't know the number."

"What is your number, please?"

I told her and waited. It was a slim chance. Would Dinah even be there? She was probably still here in town. And suppose she was home; would she talk to me? I remembered the way she had driven off. I could hear the terse, efficient chatter of the long-line operators and then somewhere far off a telephone ringing. It went on, while I waited, sweating. "Hello?" It was Dinah. I deposited the coins.

"Hello, Dinah?"

"Yes. Oh, is that you, Ja—?" She caught herself in time and cut it off.

"Yeah," I said. "Look, can you get in touch with Buford? It's important, and I can't call him at the office."

"I will if he's there. He may still be down at the lake."

"Well, look," I said urgently. "Try to get hold of him. Ask him to come to your place and I'll call again exactly an hour from now. Got it?"

"All right." She paused, then went on blandly. "Oh, by the way, I see they caught that awful Shevlin woman. It was on the radio."

"Yes," I said. "I heard it."

"And isn't it funny, too, that the creature was right there in Bayou City? Where you are."

"Yes, isn't it? Remember. I'll call you an hour from now." I hung up. Wait till she sees the picture, I thought. Then she won't have any doubt of it. Well, it couldn't be helped now.

Somehow I sweated out the hour. When I called back Dinah said, "Yes, he's here now. Just a minute."

"Yes?" It was Buford his voice as impersonal as death.

"Listen. I want you to do something for me," I said, beginning to talk fast and stumbling over myself. "They've just picked up Mrs. Shevlin. I guess you know it by now. And I suppose you're going to have to send a man down to get her. I want him to give her a message".

"Yes? What is it?" he asked coolly.

"Tell her not to worry about anything. I'm coming back."

"I thought so. That's about the way I had it figured. Well, I've got news for you. I can't do anything about your girl friend. We're not claiming her; Raines is. That place was in Blakeman County, as I told you, so now they've issued a warrant for her on suspicion of murder."

"What?" I almost shouted it.

"And another thing. Don't try to come back."

"What do you mean, don't try to come back?" The booth seemed to be shrinking, trying to choke me. "Listen, don't you understand—"

"The thing I understand is that we had an agreement and I carried out my end of it. I didn't know then that I was just financing your expedition, but I'm satisfied with it because so far it's worked. And if you come back, it won't. The minute you show up, everything'll hit the fan. I don't like to be doubled-crossed, so I'm telling you to stay away. Do we understand each other?"

I understood him, all right. He was warning me. He knew now what had actually happened up there

in the swamp, or he was pretty sure of it, but nothing interested him except that two-bit graft investigation. She could go to the chair for all he cared, so long as he was all right. My mind grew quite clear and I no longer shouted.

"I'm coming back," I said. "Don't get in my way." I hung up the receiver and walked out.

But I still couldn't go until I knew what she had told the police. It was going to be dangerous enough going in there without being able to get word to her, and having Buford trying to stop me, but it would be simple suicide if she'd confessed and I didn't know it.

I never did know afterward where I was that afternoon. It was a blur of hot streets and a million faceless people going past while time ran down and stopped like a clock no one had thought to wind. And then somewhere, later, with the sun slanting obliquely through the east-west streets and brazen on the shop windows, I heard the newsboys shouting, "Read about Mrs. Shevlin. All about Mrs. Shevlin."

I bought one and ducked inside a bar. There was another picture of her, but it was the caption I was looking at. "DENIES CHARGE." I breathed again. Thank God, I thought. She kept her head. Forgetting the beer I had ordered, I tore into the story, trying to absorb it all at once.

MARSHALL NOT DEAD—MRS. SHEVLIN

Mrs. Roger Shevlin, beautiful young wife of the man sought in the disappearance and suspected murder of J. B. Marshall, Devers County officer, denied today in a statement to police, who arrested her in a beauty shop in downtown Bayou City, that her husband had killed Marshall. According to Mrs. Shevlin, who was near collapse in the city jail following her arrest, her husband returned for her after he had overpowered the officer and

escaped while the two men were on their way out of the swamp, telling her he had merely tied Marshall up with the boat's anchor rope, knowing he would eventually work free and get back to town. The boat had been hidden to prevent Marshall's finding it, to give the Shevlins more time to make good their escape.

If only they don't break her down before I can get there, I thought desperately. If she cracks...But I didn't have time to sit and think about it. Paying for the beer, I got up and took a taxi back to the bus station, got the bag out of the locker, and changed back into the old suit in the rest room. Taking out the plane ticket and the watch so there'd be nothing in it by which they could ever connect me with Bayou City, I shoved the bag back into another locker and left it.

I can't take the bus, I thought. Somebody might see me getting off at Colston. Too many people know me there. I've got to get back into that swamp the same way I got out—without being seen. And I haven't got time to horse around with freight trains.

Thirty minutes later I was weaving through traffic in the outskirts of the city, headed toward Colston in a stolen car. It had been easy. I just walked up the street until I saw a woman park and leave the keys in the car. When she went inside a store I got in and drove off. Nothing was going to stop me any more.

Twenty-four

I stopped once and bought a flashlight in a drugstore. I'd need it, trying to get around in that swamp at night, and at dawn I could throw it in the lake. I worked it out in my mind as I drove, staying just under the speed limit in spite of the impatience riding me. I couldn't leave the car up there where I had come out of the swamp before, on the deserted country road. It would be picked up eventually, and the state troopers might begin to wonder why somebody would steal a car in Bayou City, drive it to a place like that, and leave it, forty miles from anywhere. But if I wrecked it on the main highway, on the opposite side of the bottom, it would look all right.

It was dusk when I went through Colston, and nearly nine by the time I had passed the store and the boat place on the dam at the south end of the lake. The highway swung and turned north again, along the west side of the bottom. Fifteen miles up, and only three or four miles outside of town, it swung sharply left again, away from the bottom, and here was where I crashed it by the simple method of not making the turn. I had slowed to about twenty-five, and as I went down off the roadbed and through the ditch I took out a section of fence, and then

finally came to rest without much damage up against a tree. I picked up the flashlight and started out through the pines. Joy-riding kids, they'd say.

It was a still, sultry night, with no moon but a faint light from the stars. As soon as I was in the timber, however, it was black, and I could see nothing at all. I snapped on the flashlight and started up over the ridge, leaving no tracks in the dense carpet of pine needles. When I came out on top I stopped and looked at my watch. It was nine-thirty.

If I went straight out across the bottom now, I'd hit the lake about five miles below Shevlin's cabin. But I wanted to go in at least five miles above it, right into the swamp country itself. The best thing to do, then, was to go north here along the high ground for about ten miles and then swing down off the ridge.

It was fairly open up here in the pines and I made good time. At a little before one in the morning I figured I had come far enough, and turned right, going downhill. Before long the sand and pines gave way to big oaks and heavy underbrush. Inside an hour I was drenched with sweat and my clothes were badly torn. I ran into a wide marshy area where the mud and water were up to my knees, and to make matters worse, in the middle of it there was a place a quarter mile wide where a cyclone had gone through years ago. Big trees were piled like spilled matches in a nightmare confusion of tree trunks, limbs, and vines. I scrambled over, crawled under, and fought my way through the muck. Once, clambering along the trunk of a big windfall stacked crisscross above another, I slipped in my muddy shoes and fell into the tangle of big limbs below me, laying open a gash on my head and almost knocking myself out. I scrambled up, cursing and wiping blood out of my face, and then grinned sourly as it occurred to me it wouldn't be necessary now to fake any signs of violence. I'd look as if Shevlin had worked me over with a ball bat.

It was nearly four when I hit the first sizeable channel of open water. I flashed the light out across it, saw that I was going to have to swim now, and

stopped to light a cigarette. There wasn't any necessity for swimming it before dawn, which would be in about an hour. I sat down against a tree and went over it in my mind. This was—What day was it, anyway? Time had been alternately stretched and compressed for so long I didn't even know. Let's see, I thought, I went into the lake Wednesday morning. That night at midnight I was in Bayou City. The next afternoon, then, when the story first broke, would have been Thursday. Then today was Friday. No, I corrected myself, it's almost daylight Saturday morning. Then I've been lost in here for three night and two days, assuming that I tell them it wasn't until very late Wednesday that I arrested Shevlin. It had taken me nearly all day to find his house, and I didn't get started out with him until nearly sunset. That would make his being able to jump me and get away a lot more plausible, anyway; it'd naturally be easier in the dark.

He'd banged me with the oar, and when I came around I was in the bottom of the boat tied up like a pig with the anchor rope. It was dark and I was down there where I couldn't see anything anyway, so I had no idea where he took me except that we went a long way. He put me ashore somewhere hours later, with my hands still tied, but not very tightly, and I'd managed to get them worked loose before daylight. The only thing, though, was that I was lost. I kept looking for the lake, and there wasn't any; there was nothing but a thousand small sloughs and the marsh and flooded areas. After a while I'd run across some tracks and started following them, thinking somebody else was up here and I might find a cabin, and then I had lost my head completely when I found I was going in circles and that they were my own. They wouldn't have any reason to doubt it; at least one man I knew of had been lost up here and never had found his way out. I shivered, thinking about it. I was taking a long chance. And not only of getting lost, either. I thought. Suppose they broke her down while I was in here?

I shook it off with rough impatience. It was just a chance I had to take. I lighted another cigarette, knowing that as soon as I swam the slough they'd be ruined anyway and I might as well use them up. Would I look as if I'd been lost up here for nearly seventy-two hours? Yes, there wasn't much doubt that I'd look the part. My clothes were in ruin already and sweat-soaked and bloody from the cut on my head. Of course, I had shaved on Thursday morning, but I never had got around to it on Friday and would have a forty-eight hour growth of beard, ugly enough to convince anybody. All I had to do now was fight my way down through the swamp until I ran into some of the searchers. They would probably have a camp set up somewhere down there below and be firing guns, still hoping to guide me in. I listened now but there was no sound except that of the frogs.

The darkness was beginning to fade now and I could see the weed-choked dark water in front of me. I stood up, threw the flashlight out into the water, and waded in. Mud sucked at my feet and I pushed forward and started swimming. It was only a few strokes to the other side, where I climbed out and began beating my way through the brush again. Inside an hour I had lost track of the number of times I had to swim. I made no effort to turn aside when open water blocked my path, for if I didn't move in a straight line I wouldn't get out of here. When the sun came up I was able to check my direction, going due south with it on my left. My progress was agonizingly slow and the cut places on my head began to throb. Vines tripped me and I fell, and at times I had to wade for hundreds of yards through water and mud up to my waist. Most of the channels I had to swim were matted with pads, and the long, twining underwater stems wound around my arms and legs and threatened to pull me under. There was no way to know what time it was any more, for my watch was long since drowned and stopped, but the sun was climbing higher. As midday approached it

was harder and harder to tell direction, for the sun was almost directly overhead.

Noon came and went and I was conscious now of beginning to weaken from hunger. I'd eaten nothing since Thursday night, and the back-breaking struggle and the heat were beginning to wear me down. Suddenly I was again in the midst of the piled windrow of down timber where the tornado had left its path through the swamp, and for a while my mind was black with panic. I was lost. I was going in circles and had come back to the place I had fought my way through nearly twelve hours before. Collapsing against the trunk of an uprooted tree, I fought to get hold of myself. It couldn't be the same one. Tornadoes play leap-frog through a place like this, I told myself desperately, and this is another one. It had to be. I'd been going steadily south for hours. But how did I know I was going south? Part of the time the sun had been invisible down here in the timber, and for the past two hours it had been so nearly overhead it was impossible to tell direction from it.

And why didn't I hear any guns? There hadn't been a sound all morning except that of my own desperate plunging through the swamp. If I'd been going in a straight line for all that time, I should be somewhere near Shevlin's cabin and the main channel of the lake itself, and there would almost certainly be a camp set up there for the searchers. I listened now, trying to hush the sobbing sound of my breathing, and heard nothing but the infinite silence of the swamp.

I don't know where I am, I thought wildly. I'll never get out of here. And now, suddenly, I was conscious of the way time was flying past. Every minute of it they would be working on her, firing questions at her, trying to wear her down, and if she broke I'd be better off if I did die in here. I sprang to my feet and tried to run, crazily, the panic washing over me. Again I fell, breaking open the cut on my head. I got up, tearing ahead. Then, somehow, I was past the windfall area, and I plunged headlong into

the underbrush. Vines caught me and I collapsed, struggling weakly, like a fly in a spider web, and sank to my knees and fell.

There was no knowing how long I lay there. Sanity gradually returned, and I began to be conscious of my surroundings and capable of rational thought. Mosquitoes buzzed about my face in clouds, and in the hot, humid stillness among the leaves and vines I was bathed in sweat. Thin shafts of sunlight probed through the dense foliage overhead, and as I watched them I could see they were slanting a little as the sun wheeled over into the west. I've got to keep my head, I thought. If I lose it once more I'll be done. Twenty-four hours have gone by now since they arrested her, and if I don't find my way out pretty soon she'll think I've run and deserted her and she'll break. I've got to get up and start in a straight line again, going south.

I started again, moving with the shafts of sunlight slanting across my eyes from right to left. Time ran on, like an endless belt, with no beginning and no end and nothing to mark the hours. I noticed I was beginning to fall sometimes now when nothing had tripped me, and wondered if the two blows on my head had affected me that much. No, I thought dizzily, it's only fatigue, and the weakness of hunger. Five miles through that mud and water and tangle of underbrush were the equivalent of fifty on solid ground, and there was no way of knowing how many miles I had actually walked. At times it seemed as if I were an insect trying to fight its way through a sodden sponge, pressing inward just so far and then being thrown relentlessly back. The swamp gave way before me, swallowed me up, and then closed behind, all of it looking so much alike there was no way of knowing whether I went ahead or was merely raising and lowering my dead-weary legs in some sort of slow-motion and idiotic dance in an endless dream. I began to think of her nearly all the time, forgetting for long stretches to watch the sun or the direction in which the shafts slanted through the leaves. We lay side by side on the ground in mottled

shade, whispering to each other; then she was smiling at me, radiant and lovely in her new clothes, while I caught her arms to look at her. I stopped and shook my head, running a hand across my face and seeing it come away covered with dirt and blood. Stop it, I thought. Stop it! Which way was south?

And then, strangely, the forest was more open. Immense oaks towered overhead and the brush was thinning out. The ground here was dry and firm underfoot and walking was easier. I caught a glint of sunlit water off to the right, shining through the trees, and tried to run toward it, but I was too weak and fell again. When I got to my feet I staggered on toward it, the view opening up, and then I knew I had reached the lake. A hundred yards of open water stretched out past me, disappearing around a bend up to my right, and full of big weed beds along the other shore. I looked down at my feet and saw the remains of a campfire, but knew it was an old one even before I knelt frenziedly and ran my hands into the ashes. But somebody had been here! I could find them!

But where were they? Where was the sound of guns? I stared wildly around in the little open glade, so peaceful in the sunlight of late afternoon, and then, suddenly, I began to have the awful feeling that it was somehow familiar. I knew now. The campfire was my own. This was where I had camped on that first trip up here, when I had met her, and there was where the bedroll had lain and I had caught her hand and she had pulled away from me, crying, to run out toward the lake. I was back to where I had started, but now she was in jail and he was dead and I was the one who had killed him. I was conscious of the horrible sensation that I wasn't just walking in circles in space and time, but that I was actually swinging around the steep black sides of some enormous whirlpool and sliding always toward the center.

But there is a way out, I thought agonizingly. There's always a way out. All I had to do was locate the searching parties and she would be freed when

word was flashed that I had been found. But where were they? I had thought the lake would be busy with motorboats and the sound of guns being fired at intervals throughout the day and night, and here was only the same dead, lost silence I had been fighting through all day. Had they given up? Would I ever get out of here in time, before she collapsed and told them?

And then I heard it—not gunfire, but a motor starting. It was up there to the right, around the bend, sudden, staccato, and very near, so similar to the way I had heard his motor start that morning a long time ago that I was conscious again of that feeling of going around and around in some tightening and deadly spiral. Immediately after it I heard another start, and they were coming nearer. I looked up and saw them appearing around the bend, and there were not two boats, but three. The first had two white-hatted men in it, the second was being towed and was empty, and the one in the rear held two.

I've found them, I thought wildly. Shouting and waving my arms, I ran across the small open glade and down to the water's edge. They had seen me now, and I watched the boats change course a little to swing in toward the bank. I had made it, and in a little while word would be going out that I had been found alive, and she would be freed. The boats were drawing nearer. I didn't know either of the men in the front boat, but I saw suddenly that Buford was one of the two in the other one.

Instead of waving he was swinging around in the seat with something extended in his hands. I saw the glint, then, of sunlight on steel and recognized it as a rifle, the barrel suddenly foreshortening into nothing as he brought it into line. He was directly behind the boat being towed, and even as I was throwing myself down and back in the awful realization that he was going to shoot, I saw that the second boat was carrying Shevlin.

He shot after I was on the ground and rolling. Mud exploded in my face and then I heard the crack of

the rifle almost at the same time because he was so near. Before the sound had even died I was on my feet, knowing somehow that I had to get up and over the bank while he was working the bolt or I would never move from there alive. And then I was in the trees, hurtling zigzag through them while the gun cracked again. They had cut the motors and in another few seconds they would be on the bank themselves and chasing me.

I didn't know where I ran, or how far. There was just the pain in my chest and the crying sound from my open mouth as it gulped for air, and the only thing my mind could hold was the picture of that long, canvas-wrapped bundle like an old rolled-up rug lying in the bottom of the second boat. After a while I fell, unable to move, and lay there in the brush trying to still the tortured sound of my breathing enough to listen. There was no sound behind me now.

Twenty-five

I don't know how long I lay there on the ground with nothing but the numbness and the terror in my mind. We were whipped now, and this was the end. They already had her, and I was trapped. They had found him; they knew I had killed him and I was a fugitive with no plan of escape and nothing ahead but futile and senseless flight. Flight? I thought. To where? I looked down at my clothes, at the utter ruin that I had deliberately sought, and thought of the way I would look if I did get out of the swamp, Bearded, bloody, mud-caked, I wouldn't have a chance. And if Buford got to me first, he'd kill me. I knew that now. He didn't want me arrested.

Once, though I was not sure, I thought I heard an outboard motor start, far away across the bottom. One of them would go down the lake to take the body in and get to the telephone. The other three would stay here and keep up the search until they began to pile in here with the dogs sometime late tonight. They'd call in the state police cars and swear in a bunch of special deputies to patrol the roads on both sides of the swamp, and everything moving out there would be searched. And I couldn't stay in here because in another few hours without food or rest I'd be too weak to move.

And what of her? I thought. What will it be like with her when they bring the news that he's been found? Or was that how they had found him? Had she broken already and told them? But what difference did it make now how they'd done it? It was done, and we were trapped.

We would have been in San Francisco now...I caught myself up, almost savagely, knowing I had to keep away from that or I'd lose my mind. The sun was setting now, and I wondered if, where she was, she could see even a little reflection of it along a wall. This was what I had done to her. I was going to give her everything, and now this was what it was. I had to get up, to move, to do something to shut it out of my mind. Jumping to my feet, I started walking, aimlessly at first, and then, as some strange compulsion began to take hold of me, swinging south and then west in a large circle back toward the lake.

It was growing darker here in the timber and I began to walk faster. The direction I was going at least made a little sense. Since I was on this side of the lake and they would expect me to run east and try to get out to the railroad and catch a freight, it would be better to move west and get across the lake. Suddenly, then, I knew where I was headed. I had about one chance in a thousand of getting there, but I was going toward Dinah's. There was no use in trying to get home for some more clothes and a car; they'd be watching the house just on the chance I might try it. But maybe to Dinah's apartment...I wanted to break into a run.

Just at dusk I came out on the bank of the lake a mile or two below where the boats had been. It was breathtakingly beautiful, like dark glass, with the wall of the trees a black silhouette against the sunset afterglow along the other shore, and as I came up I saw a big, spreading ring where a bass had risen, out among the snags. Often when I had been fishing and left the lake just at dusk like this, full of its immense and lonely quiet, I had wondered what it would be like to know that I would never see it again, and now that I was looking at it for probably

the last time I was conscious of nothing except that I did not want to think about it. I walked deliberately out into it, and as the water rose to my waist I started to swim. Halfway across I began to wonder if I would make it, exhausted as I was to the point of collapse and weighted with the shoes and clothes, but somehow I kept going. I fought my way through fifty yards of the entangling pads on the other shore and climbed gasping onto the bank. It was dark now, completely black among the trees.

I had to go straight ahead, but how? Five or six miles due west I would begin to hit the rising ground and the pines, but all the intervening distance was flat, unvarying bottom country full of sloughs and heavily timbered, with no landmarks and only glimpses of the stars. With my back against the lake shore and facing the direction in which I wanted to go, I studied the sky a moment to line up the few constellations I knew, then plunged into the darkness. I lost track of the number of times I fell and the number of sloughs I waded and swam and finally just wallowed through. I bumped into trees and entangled myself in vines, and each time I plunged to the ground it was more difficult to rise again. A dreamy lassitude would begin to flow over me like warm water and I would want to lie there in the hope that if I slept and then awoke the whole horrible dream would be gone and I would open my eyes to find that we were on the plane to San Francisco and were circling over the bay ready to land in the early dawn. Then the terror would come sweeping back and with it the bitter knowledge that if I did not get out of here before daylight I was finished, and I would force myself to rise and go staggering on. By daybreak they would have the dogs in here and I would no longer be able to hide, and of course I couldn't get across the highway and into town except very late at night, if I could at all.

It was a dream at first, and then a nightmare, and at last an eternal and monotonous black hell without fires or light where I was doomed to go staggering forward and forever falling. After a while I began to

believe I was losing my mind, because for long periods she would be moving along beside me. Once I turned and called her name aloud. The sudden sound of my voice in the silence of the forest shocked me into consciousness of what I had done, and terror took hold of me again and I thought for a moment I would cry out and run.

Time had no meaning now. It might have been an hour since I had left the lake and it might have been five. I could have covered four miles, or I could be walking in circles and be almost back there again. But then, suddenly, when I fell again I felt the dry, aromatic slickness of pine needles under my face and threw my hands about wildly, grasping at them. I had come out of the bottom and was beginning to mount the ridge.

An almost insane urgency took hold of me and I wanted to run. I had come this far, across that black maze of bottom, and suppose now that daylight should catch me before I got to Dinah's? The difficult part, the almost impossible part, lay behind, but ahead was all the danger. I had to get into town, where everybody knew me, and being seen by anyone would mean disaster. After I got up on the ridge in the fairly open pines I could make better time, and before long I began to see the winking of lights below me and knew I had reached the highway. I turned and plunged downhill.

What time was it? That was the only thing in my mind now. I still had nearly four miles to go to get into town, and then I had to get around it, skirting the back streets and alleys, and if daybreak caught me I was done for. There were very few cars on the road now and I took a chance on walking along the pavement, rather than out in the trees, to make better time. When I would see a car ahead or behind I would run into the roadside bushes and hide until it had gone past. Then I would come back out onto the road, feeling the urgency driving me, and start hurrying again, trotting and then walking and then trotting, my legs numb and without any feeling now that they were even mine. I had been walking for so

long I couldn't stop. I had the insane feeling that if I fell down and went to sleep my legs would keep right on moving because I no longer knew how to turn them off.

I turned and looked behind me, toward the east, searching for the telltale fading, the beginning of the coral flush I had watched so many times from duck blinds and fishing boats. It was still as dark as ever there, but even the thought of dawn drove me forward desperately. A car topped the slight rise ahead and the sudden, searching lights were almost upon me before I could run and plunge down off the road. I've got to get there first; I've got to beat the daylight. It ran through my mind in a sort of endless chant I couldn't turn off any more than I could the walking movement of my legs. A gun, a car, these were the things I had to have. She had a whole roomful of guns and the fastest car in town.

The old familiar streets were quiet, the street lamps at the corners the only pools of light. I swung left, keeping to the outskirts and slipping along the alley, feeling my skin crawl and prickle with sudden cold at the barking of a dog or the sound of a car somewhere on another street. I wanted to run. I was naked, skinless, a light-tortured organism fleeing toward the dark. It was less than a dozen blocks now. Ten more. Nine. I wanted to stop counting them and couldn't. At any one of them a car might swing around a corner, its lights flashing....

I cut through one more alley and I was on Georgia Street and broke into a run. The windows of her apartment were dark. Suppose she wasn't there? She must be. She had to be. She was home when I telephoned this afternoon. No, that was yesterday. It wasn't even yesterday—it was the day before, because now it was almost dawn on Sunday. I ran up the walk and pressed the bell, waiting, listening for the sound of movement or of footsteps and hearing only the pounding of blood in my ears.

I pushed the bell again, and then I heard it. Someone was coming quietly down the stairs. The door opened a crack, there was a sharp gasp, and

then she was throwing it back and reaching out for me. She led me hurriedly up the dark stairway, still holding me by the arm. There was light in the hallway, coming from the open bedroom door, and now she turned and stared at me, seeing the sodden ruin of my clothing and the blood across my face.

"Jack!" she whispered frantically. "Jack! What have they done to you?"

She had on her nightgown and robe and the coppery hair was tousled from the pillow, but I could see she hadn't been asleep. "Thank God you've come. I've been praying...I've been praying all night! Ever since I heard. But you've been hurt!"

"No," I said. "It's nothing. I fell." I swayed and almost fell now, and leaned against the wall. The whole apartment seemed to be swinging in that big whirlpool which had caught me and I wanted to hold onto something.

Then she had hold of me again, towing me down the hall. We were in the bathroom and she was tugging at my coat and then unlacing the mud-caked shoes. "Well leave them right here," she was saying. "Right here where he'll see them and know. I want him to know, damn him." What was she talking about? I wanted to ask her what time it was, but she was busy at the shirt and I was too numb for thought. Then I could hear the shower blasting and she was shoving me into it. I was naked, and it had never occurred to me, and probably not to her, that there was anything odd about her undressing me and pushing me into the streaming water.

"Hot," she said. "As hot as you can stand it, and then cold." The water beat down and I could feel the dirt and caked blood and sweat going away and my nerves unwinding, and then I was conscious that she had disappeared. She was back in a minute, holding a glass in her hand. "Drink this," she said. She turned her head as I stepped from under the water. I took the glass and drained it in three large swallows. It burned going down and exploded into warmth and life in my empty stomach.

I had turned off the water and was rubbing myself with a towel. She returned in a minute and handed me a pair of shorts around the partition of the shower stall. "When you get them on, come outside and we'll get the other things."

I slipped them on and went out and looked at my face in the mirror as at somebody I'd never seen before. It was haggard and sunken-cheeked, black with beard, and the cut place on my head was ugly, inflamed and still encrusted with clotted blood. I went into the bedroom and she was taking clothes out of a suitcase on the bed. "They're his," she said. "He keeps this bag here for trips to the city."

Then she was gone again. I couldn't keep up with her. I heard something rattling in the kitchen and then she came back for me once more, while I was putting on the shoes. She had me by the arm and was seating me at the table. While I was eating the piece of cold steak and drinking the milk she pulled up a chair and sat down, not across from me but just around the corner of the table at my left. She had her hand on my wrist and was talking, very fast.

Her voice was quiet, but still full of that tremendous urgency which seemed to have hold of her now as well as of me. "I've done nothing but think about it since I heard the news, about nine o'clock. Just think about it, and pray you'd come, that you could get here. And now you have!"

"Wait," I interrupted. What was she talking about? And through all the numbness I was conscious there was something I had to know. "How did they find him? How did they know?"

"Find him? Oh. All I heard was what was on the radio. Something about an outboard motor they couldn't find. He was supposed to be repairing it for the man down there at the store, and it wasn't there. So they got to thinking about some oil that was on the lake."

I guess it doesn't matter now, I thought. There wasn't any way I could have known the motor wasn't his. It just wasn't meant to be. That had ruined it,

that and not seeing the picture of her sitting there in front of my face, but what good was there in torturing myself with it now?

Dinah was still going on, her eyes shining, touching me with her fingers. The white, gleaming kitchen and this lovely copper-haired figurine of a girl with her unstoppable torrent of speech were all mixed up now in the endless movement of the whirlpool. What was she talking about?

"I even went down and had the car serviced and filled with gasoline. We won't have to stop at all for over two hundred miles. My clothes are packed and I've got over two thousand dollars in cash in my bag, and I took the money out of your wet suit, too. We'll leave your old wet clothes right there where he'll see them, and the muddy shoes, and he'll know. Don't you see, Jack? He can't say anything, or tell anybody. He'll know you're gone and that I've gone with you and he can't do anything about it and he'll have to cover up for us, because he's afraid to have you arrested. He was going to try to kill you in that swamp if you came back. And I would have killed him, if he had. And now you're here and we can go, and he's still down there looking for you."

I began to get it, even through the numbness in my mind.

"Everybody is looking for you. They've called in the state police and all the roads around the lake are blocked, but we can get through the other way, going north. You'll be in the back, in the luggage compartment, anyway. I took out the spare tire and put in a bunch of blankets to make a bed. It's big. I measured it. I got in it myself, thinking: When I'm standing up, the top of my head is just under Jack's chin. It's plenty large enough for you. I even put in a pillow."

I had stopped eating. I stared at her. She had everything figured out, and for the first time I began to realize what a mind there was behind that lovely and reckless face.

"Nobody will ever know except Buford, and he won't talk. He can't. The rest of them will think you died in the swamp. We'll go on to southern California, with you traveling all the way in the luggage compartment and staying at night in tourist cabins. I'll cut your hair short, a crew cut, so the curl doesn't show. And you'll grow a mustache. They'll never find us. Think how it'll be, Jack! Just the two of us. I've been crazy all night, praying to God to let you get here."

It would work. It would work perfectly. I could see it would. I could get in there in the back of the car and be out of the state before dark tonight. Buford's hands would be tied and he wouldn't even report it; there'd be no description of the car, or anything. I knew she was a little wrong about one thing, about their thinking I had died in the swamp, for the dogs would tell them I'd got out of it. But even then they'd never know where I'd gone; the trail would end at the highway, for the dogs couldn't follow me through all that oily smell and gasoline. I would just disappear into the air. Nobody had seen me get here to this place, and nobody would see me leave. It was perfect, all of it, and this girl was tremendous, this flame-haired toy with the brain of Machiavelli. I sat there looking at it for a whole minute, at the beauty of it, thinking that two hours ago I was whipped, without a chance in the world, and now escape was right here in my hand. All I had to do was get in the car with this girl and go.

Not with this girl, or any other girl, to anywhere, I thought. I knew what had brought me up out of that lake bottom, and it wasn't this.

She had both hands on my arm again, still looking at my face and talking. "It'll take me only a minute to dress, Jack. You wait here, while I change." I looked at her.

"I'm not going, Dinah."

"What?" She was staring, open-mouthed. It didn't make any difference. She couldn't stop me. Nothing

could, anymore. "I'm not going with you. I want your car, and a gun. I'm going after Doris Shelvin."

Twenty-six

Jack! Please! For the love of God, listen to me!" She had me by the arm, pulling at my sleeve. I had run into the living room and was in front of the gun case, snatching up an automatic.

"Where's the ammunition for this?" I asked. Then I saw it, and jerked out the clip to load it. "What time is it?"

"They'll kill you!" she cried out, paying no attention to my question. I shoved the gun in my pocket and grabbed her wrist to look at the watch. It was ten minutes to four. I had a little over an hour until daylight. But I still had to get the car keys from her. Would she give them to me? I thought wildly. I didn't want to have to take them away from her, but I would if I had to.

"Give me the keys, Dinah!" I said. "I've got to have that car."

She was around in front of me now, grabbing at my shirt. "Listen, Jack! Please listen to me. Oh, God, isn't there any way I can make you understand? Haven't you heard what I've been telling you? I can take you away, where they'll never find you. I want you, Jack! I want you to go with me. I'll take care of you. I'll hide you."

"Dinah! The keys." I caught her arms.

"I'll watch out for you. We'll go anywhere you say! What do you want with her? What kind of woman is she for you? Don't you know that she confessed tonight, after they got her back to Harrisville?"

Suddenly she let go my shirt and became deadly calm.

"We're too wild to use our heads. We've got to stop it. I don't think you understand, and I want you to be perfectly quiet while I tell you. I love you. And I can take you out of here. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"And if you try to take her out of that jail in Harrisville they'll kill you. And even if you got her out, you know what would happen, don't you?"

"Yes," I said again. Somehow, in all the mad urgency of it, there was enough sense left in me to know that she was right.

"They'll have every road blocked. They've got radio cars all around that lake, and they'd be swinging out and onto every road in this end of the state in a matter of minutes. You'd be trapped. Now, will you listen to me?"

We were both silent for a minute, staring at each other. Somehow I was as calm as she was now and I understood everything she had said, and I knew that none of it made any difference at all. "Where are the keys, Dinah?"

She dropped her head and turned away from me. "They're in my purse. In the bedroom." She walked over and sat down in a big armchair, not looking at me any more or saying anything.

I ran out and across the hall to the bedroom and found the purse on a dresser. I took out the keys and the roll of wet bills that had been in my suit. Catching a glimpse of my face again in the mirror, I suddenly remembered I should have shaven, but there wasn't time for it now. I pawed hurriedly through Buford's bag, however, and found the razor and some shaving soap, and stuck them in my pocket. One of his big hats was lying on a chest, and

I snatched it up and put it on. It would hide the ugly cut.

I came back across the hall and she hadn't moved. "I'm sorry about the car, Dinah," I said.

"Yes. Isn't it too bad about the car?" She turned away and put her head down on her arms.

I went down the stairs and backed the Lincoln out of the garage.

* * *

Time was a burning fuse. It was twenty-eight miles to Harrisville and I made it in twenty-five minutes by the clock on the dash. There were no patrol cars on the road, and I knew they were all back there covering the roads on both sides of the lake. Raines and all his deputies would be down there. In the wilderness of the irresistible compulsion that had hold of me now there was some part of my mind still calm and thinking about it. There shouldn't be anybody there except the jailer himself.

I stopped the car right in front of the entrance and got out. It was still dark, and the glaring pool of light from a street lamp was shiny against the leaves of the trees along the street. In one of the windows of the jail a Negro was singing, an insane dirge with something about the Lawd over and over.

I went up and knocked on the door. It opened a little and I shoved my way in. He was alone in the office, a lank, sandy-haired man of about forty-five with a lean, sour face, and tough eyes with a little yellow in them like a goat's. He was wearing wide police-type suspenders to hold up his seersucker pants, but had taken off his shirt on account of the heat.

"I want Mrs. Shevlin," I said. "Open it up." I prodded toward the steel-barred door in the back of the office.

He looked at me, and I could see he knew who I was. "Go to hell," he said.

I saw the ring of keys on his desk, next to the detective magazine he had been reading, "Open it up," I said. "What cell is she in?"

"You can go to hell," he said again. He had been sidling a little toward the desk, and suddenly he lunged for the open drawer. I hit him over the eye with the flat of the gun barrel and he doubled up on the desk. Yanking him erect, I shook him, and then threw him back against the wall. "Get smart," I said. I tossed the keys to him and he opened the door.

He was taking too much time. I shoved him in the back and he snapped out of it. Some of the prisoners had waked up by this time and they began to yell, thinking it was a lynching. We came to her cell and she had been sitting on the side of the bunk. She looked up and saw me. "Jack!" she screamed, and while he was fumbling with the lock I saw her slide to the floor. I wanted to hit him again, but by that time he had it open.

"You won't get away with this, Marshall," he said. I pushed him and he slammed into the wall and lay on the floor, moaning a little.

I knelt down beside her, wanting to gather her up and kiss her until she came around, but feeling time running past us like a millrace. I turned her over very gently. She still had on the white suit she had bought, but it was wrinkled and soiled, and didn't look cool any more. Her face was waxen white and the lashes were dark and very long, almost unreal against her cheek. I wondered if I had strength left to pick her up.

Somehow I got her up and went out and slammed the door shut. Turning the key in it, I hurried along the cell block and back out through the office. There was still no one in the street. As we went under the glaring light I looked down at her. Her head was tilted back, the face very still and white, with the long dark hair swinging free. I couldn't help it. I bent my head and kissed her on the throat.

I started to slide her into the seat, and then suddenly thought of something. What was it Dinah

had said about the bed she'd made in the back? That would be perfect. There would be a lot less chance of our being spotted with just me alone up here than with both of us. I put her down temporarily in the seat while I reached for the keys to unlock the trunk. Then I noticed I was still carrying the jailer's key ring in my hand. I threw it out into the street and went around to the back, and unlocked the trunk and raised it. She went into it perfectly, curled up like a child with her head on the pillow. But suppose she wakes up there in the dark, I thought. I ran back to the front and looked in the glove compartment. There was a flashlight, as I had hoped, and I snapped it on and put it down beside her on the blankets. She'll know where she is, I thought.

I didn't want to leave her. But it's only for a little while, I thought. As soon as we're out of the worst of the danger area I'll pull off onto a side road somewhere, by a little creek, and she can get out and I'll shave myself. I put the shell down and went back and lifted the back seat up, pulled it out a little. Feeling back with my hand, I could see there was plenty of opening for air to get through, and with the shell closed the carbon monoxide from the exhaust couldn't back up on her.

I jumped into the seat, and then discovered I had left the keys in the lock of the trunk. I was getting jittery with the hurry now. There still wasn't anyone in the street and it was growing light. I ran back, snatched them out, and climbed in. It had been too easy, and I was scared.

Take it easy, I thought. Keep your head. The worst is over. They'll discover it in a little while, but the jailer didn't see the car and they'll have no description of it. I hit the starter and had just got out from under the street light when the other car pulled into the street behind us. For an instant the headlights washed across us, glaring in the mirror, then they went out. He had stopped. Fighting the terror, I went on, picking up speed without gunning it. Just before I turned the corner I looked back. A

man had gotten under the street light and was walking up the steps of the jail.

He didn't pay any attention to the car, I told myself. Sweat was greasy on my face as I swung around another corner and went up through the deserted streets in the middle of town, headed for the highway going north. When I passed the city limits I was doing sixty and gaining speed. The road dipped down in a long grade, across a valley two or three miles wide, and over the hill on the other side. Darkness was fading, with the sky growing pink over to the east, as we shot across the valley and started up the hill. They won't know which road we took, I thought. There are four of them out of town. Just before we topped the hill I looked back and the road was empty.

It was thirty miles to Woodley. That was a highway junction too, and if we got past it before they got the alarm on the air, the chances were against their having all the roads blocked. They wouldn't have enough cars. In a few minutes I shot another look behind me and felt the terror again. Headlights had just topped a hill, far back. I hadn't passed anybody, and if a car was overhauling us at this speed it was chasing us. It was nearly full daylight now, and I cut the headlights as we went over another rise and slowed to swing into a country road running west. At the first crossroad I turned south. About fifteen miles down there it should bisect the highway running west from Harrisville. It did, but just as I approached I saw a patrol car go careening past, headed west. I'll be behind him, I thought desperately, and they're going to plug it somewhere up ahead. When he was out of sight I shot across the highway, still roaring south on the secondary road.

I could feel the panic closing in. They were plugging them fast now, too fast. North was shut off, and west was being cut. About thirty miles south I'd hit the east-west highway out of Bigelow, but could I get west on that one now? They were turning me inward in a big circle, and again I had that awful sensation of going around and around in a big

whirlpool and sliding toward the center I slammed around a turn and was nearly on top of a farmer in an old Ford. He was in the center of the road, and I swung down into the ditch and clawed my way back up just before I hit a culvert. The sun was up now, and I could feel it burning the side of my face. Everything looked unreal, like an impressionistic painting, all the farmhouses and barns too sharp-angled and light-struck, so they hurt the eye, and then suddenly I thought with amazement that it was Sunday morning and people would be going to church and that sometime before long I was going to unwind like a broken clock spring because I couldn't remember what it was like to sleep.

The last highway going west was the one out of Bigelow. I made the turn, throwing gravel across the pavement, and then hit the brakes. A half mile up ahead a patrol car waited, sitting beside the road. I shot into reverse, swung, and was going east before he could get turned around. We were trapped now. No, I thought wildly, maybe not. It may be wide open to the east and south, because all these cars had to come from somewhere. They pulled them off the lake when they heard I was in Harrisville. If I can get through Bigelow I might get on down to Colston and shake them going east. But I had to pull away from him to get through town. It was fifteen miles and he was almost out of sight by the time I hit the city limits. I cut down side streets and missed the square, not even recognizing anything because by now it was all an endless mad race through a dream with this part just like any other and having no connections with the town I'd lived in all my life.

Then we were clear of town on the highway going east. The car chasing us was nowhere in sight; I slowed a little to make the turn four miles beyond, where I had wrecked the other car, then began to let it out. The pines began to blur and run together on both sides, with the highway a straight groove down the middle; the car was a projectile in a green-walled chute, gathering speed. I was too tight now, dead on my feet and lightheaded, and hypnotized by abstract

speed. I couldn't think connectedly of anything; flashes of thought raced through my mind, jumbled, like small sections of a hundred motion pictures pasted together and run through a projector at blazing speed. Why hadn't I heard a sound from Doris? If we could get by the lake I'd take to the country roads before we got to Colston, try to get another car. We'd be all right now if all the cars down here had been pulled out. All the ones with radios, anyway; the others didn't matter.

Then, suddenly, there was a patrol car cruising up ahead. I swung over in the groove and went around him at a hundred miles an hour. I heard the shots, and then the curve was coming up, and I had to ride it down. Ninety, seventy, sixty, and still too fast. It was almost right-angled to the left and poorly banked. I could feel them riding up on my tail and heard the guns again. Then we were into it and I ground the throttle, hearing rubber scream. The left wheels lifted, floating, and then were down again and we were straight, going across the dam.

There was no road block, and I breathed again. I could see a bunch of cars and men before the store and beer joint, and on the other side by the place where they rented boats, but the road was clear and they couldn't close it now. I bore down on the throttle and was gaining speed, but the car behind had ridden too far up on me on the turn. The guns were very near. The windshield shattered, and then I heard the tire explode. I caught it, held it for a long half second, and then lost it again, and we started over. I made it to the floor boards. It wiped the top off clean, and then we came up, the lake and sky swinging in a tremendous arc, and somehow the car was gone.

The roaring and the flight chopped off, straight-walled and clean, against the edge of vacuum. Then I was on my knees in the broken bushes while dam and lake and sky settled into place and sound returned. It was a juke box in the beer joint wailing "Falling in Love with Love" out across the water in the early morning sun, and men were running. I

watched them disinterestedly, from far away, wanting only to go to sleep. Then I turned my head a little and saw the car, and I tried to scream.

It had smashed through the young willows and was lying on its side some twenty yards ahead of me, tail down along the front slope of the dam with the rear end of the trunk some four feet above the water. It was balanced precariously on its right, the open seats facing me with all the top and windshield gone, and I could even see the keys dangling from the ignition lock. And it was settling, slipping a little on the smashed greenery beneath and then hanging up, poised, precarious, to break and slip again, trunk first, toward the surface of the lake. I got somehow to my feet and began to run, holding out my arm to point, my body bursting with all the horror of the sound I couldn't make. The men had almost reached me, running past the car but up on the road above it, ignoring it because they could see no one was in it now. I was almost there when the vanguard piled down off the road and reached me. Plunging into and through them, I took them with me, fighting, pushing, dragging them forward, still moving, trying to reach the keys and trying to form words to tell them, but making only hoarse animal sounds deep inside my throat. I saw the car slip again, and poise, hanging by a whisper to the slope just above the water where it dropped away to a depth of twenty feet against the steep face of the dam.

They thought I was crazy now, but they couldn't shoot because we were all so tangled together in a writhing mass of men. I could see the saps swinging in the sunlight, and the blows, and could even feel them faintly, like a gentle rain, painless, unreal, without effect, like something happening in a street riot I was watching in a newsreel.

It slid once more. The rear bumper was in the water now and I could see the whole front end rise a little as it balanced, teetering, ready to plunge.

And then, somehow, my voice came back and I was screaming "The trunk! The trunk!" I could hear it, going up and up, above the blaring of the juke box

and the meaty sound of fists falling and the raggedness of breathing and all the roaring in my ears. "The trunk! Get her out of the trunk!"

They must have understood, somehow grasped the fact that she was not here and they had not seen her. Some of them broke away from the heaving mass of us and lunged for the keys dangling in the lock.

They got her out just before the car slid into the water. I took five of them down there with me and got my hands on her as they lifted her, but she was already dead. Her neck was broken.

Twenty-seven

In the exact center of the moving wheel there is no movement. It is winter now, or late autumn, and one day is very much like the rest. The leaves of the trees outside the window were full of autumn color for a time, but now they are mostly gone, and I can look up the street through the naked limbs in the early morning and see the frost across the lawns. It looks very much as it did when we used to walk to school that year when she lived here, when they had the pictures of blue eagles inside the glass windows of all the stores around the square.

People come to see me and talk a while and go away. Abbie Bell comes every Sunday morning and brings me a carton of cigarettes. She recovered from the knife wounds and the case against Waites was finally thrown out of court when she didn't press the charges or testify against him. She says she feels sorry for men, and I don't know whether she means Waites, or me, or just all men together.

"You know, Jack," she said once, looking at me through the door, "it just doesn't seem possible to me that in only eleven million years, or however long they've been here, men could have got as stupid about women as they have. They must have practiced somewhere before. Imagine them trying to

do anything to that poor bastard, when someday he might even get that girl back."

I never see Buford. He ran. But he'll be back.

They got Dinah's car out of the lake. She came up to see me the day it came back from the garage where they fixed it up, and said she was leaving that afternoon for California. I told her I was sorry about the car, but she just looked at me and said it didn't matter, and after a while she went away.

They brought me down here for the district court. There has been one trial, but something was wrong with it, and there'll be another. Or so the lawyer says. He is very earnest, and explained it all to me, but I guess I wasn't paying much attention. He comes in nearly every day, sometimes alone and sometimes with the other men, the doctors or psychiatrists who are working with him. They ask a lot of questions, tap me on the knees, and try to find out whether I know right from wrong, and go away after taking down a bunch of notes. They are all very earnest and seem to be trying so hard you want to help them.

Somehow, they seem to think it matters.