

DELL

FIRST
EDITION

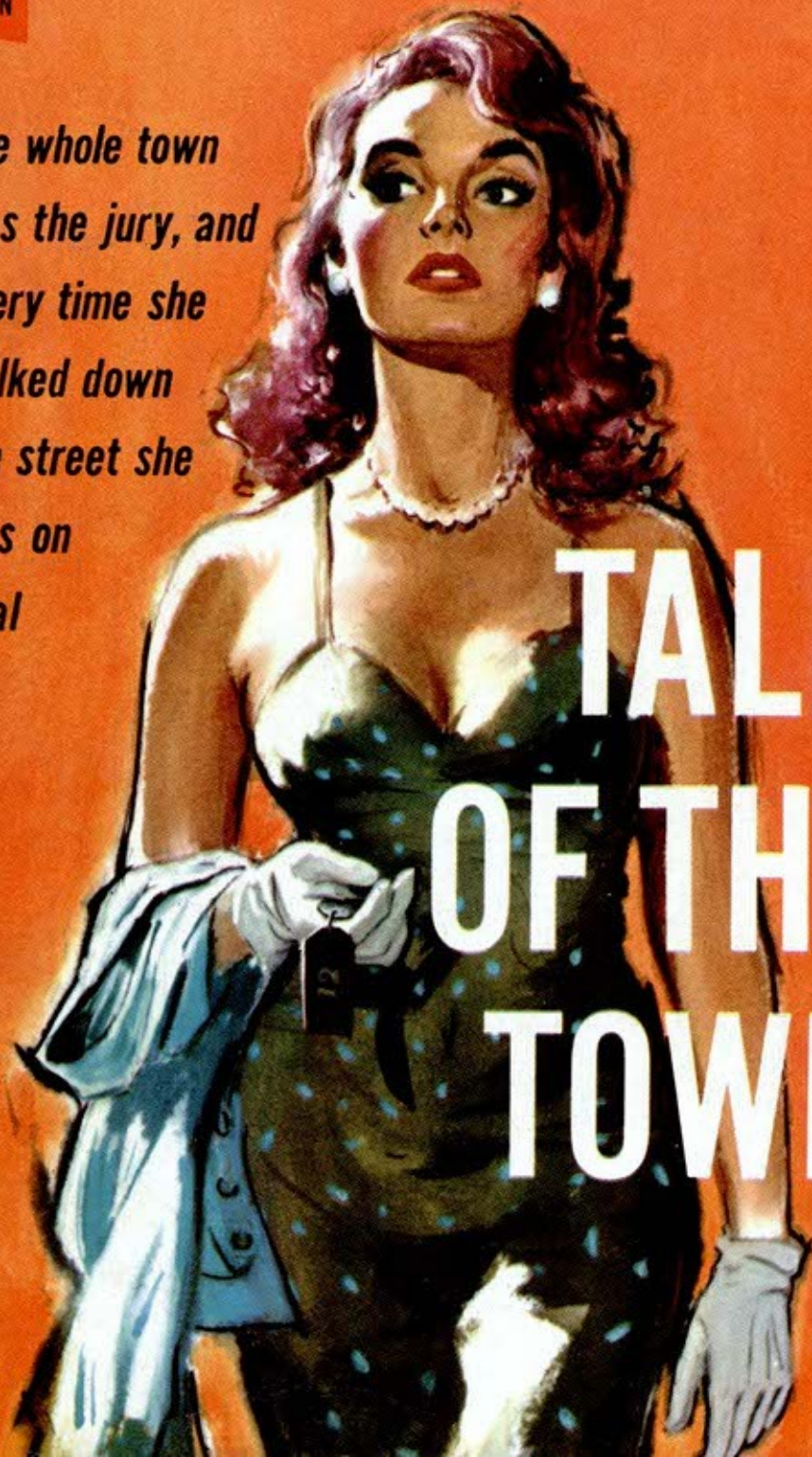
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CHARLES WILLIAMS

25¢

*The whole town
was the jury, and
every time she
walked down
the street she
was on
trial*

TALK OF THE TOWN

A stylized illustration of a woman with voluminous, wavy reddish-brown hair. She is looking upwards and to the left with a slight smile. She wears a dark green, sleeveless dress with small blue polka dots. Over her left shoulder, she carries a light blue jacket with a wide collar and dark buttons. She wears white gloves; her right hand holds a small black tag with the number '12' on it. A pearl necklace is visible at her neck. The background is a solid, warm orange color.

Talk of The Town

by

Charles Williams

1958

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It wasn't a very large town. The highway came into it from the west across a bridge spanning a slow-moving and muddy river with an unpronounceable Indian name, and then ran straight through the central business district for four or five blocks down a wide street with angle parking and four traffic lights at successive intersections. I was just pulling away from the last light, going about twenty miles per hour in the right-hand lane, when some local in a beat-up old panel truck decided to come shooting backwards out of his parking place without looking behind him.

There was another car on my left, so all I could do was to slam on my brakes just before I plowed into him. There was a crash of metal followed by a succession of tinkling sounds as fragments of grill-work and shards of glass rained onto the pavement. Necks craned up and down the sun-blasted street.

I locked the handbrake and got out, and shook my head with disgust as I sized up the damage. The front bumper was knocked loose at one end, and the right fender and smashed headlight were crumpled in on the wheel. But the worst of it was the spout of hot water streaming out through the wreckage of the grill.

The driver of the panel came charging out. He was about six feet, thin, dark, and hard-nosed, and the bony face he wanted to shove into mine was flavored with cheap

muscadell. "Look, stupid," he said, "maybe you think this is a race track—"

The bad mood had been building up in me for a long time, and I was in just the frame of mind to be jockeyed around by some summer-replacement tough guy with a nose full of wine. I caught a handful of his shirt in my left and started to slap him one across the mouth, but then the childishness of it caught up with me and I merely pushed him away. He sputtered some more, and at the same time somebody behind me clamped a big hand on my arm. I turned. It was a fat man with a hard and competent eye. He was dressed in khaki and wore a gunbelt.

"All right," he told me. "You want to start trouble around here, start it with me. I'm in the business."

"Okay, okay," I said. "There's no war."

He kept the flinty eye on my face. "You're a pretty big boy to be shoving people around."

The usual crowd was beginning to gather and I could sense I wasn't likely to be named Miss Northern Florida of 1958. It looked as if I'd started the beef, in addition to running into him, and the Californian license plates probably didn't help any.

He turned to the driver of the panel. "You all right, Frankie?"

Fine, I thought sourly; they're probably cousins.

Frankie unburdened himself. The whole thing was my fault; damned tourists, doing sixty through the middle of town. When he ran down, I had a chance to put in my nickel's worth, and that's about what it bought. I polled a few of the rubbernecks, looking for witnesses, but nobody had seen anything, or would admit it.

"All right, mister," the fat policeman told me bleakly, "let's see your driver's license."

I was getting it out of my wallet and making a mental note that if I ever came through here again I'd ship the car and walk, when a tall girl with dark hair stepped off the curb and came over.

"I saw the whole thing," she said to the officer. She told him just how it happened.

In some vague way I couldn't quite put my finger on, his reaction struck me as a little strange. He apparently knew her, but there was no word of greeting. He nodded, accepting the story, but it was a curt nod, grudging and perhaps faintly hostile. She wrote something on a card and handed it to me.

"If your insurance company wants me, they can reach me there," she said.

"Thanks a million," I told her. I slipped the card into my wallet. "It's very nice of you."

She went back onto the pavement. Some of the bystanders watched her, and I sensed the same odd reaction I'd felt in the fat policeman. It wasn't quite hostility—or was it? I had a feeling they all knew her, although not one had spoken to her. But she had poise.

I didn't know whether it was because of her story or because the officer finally got close enough to Frankie to pick up some of his muscadell fall-out, but the picture changed somewhat in my favor. He cut Frankie down to size with a couple of parade-ground barks, and wrote up the report, but didn't issue any tickets. The damage to the panel truck wasn't extensive. We exchanged insurance company information, and a wrecker came along and picked my car up. I rode to the garage with the driver. It was back the way I'd come, near the river on the west side of the business district.

It was hot and still, around two in the afternoon of a day in midsummer. Shadows were like ink in the white sunlight, and I could feel perspiration soaking my shirt. I'd left New Orleans early that morning and had planned to go on through to St. Petersburg and have a dip in the Gulf before dinner. Well, it couldn't be helped, I thought sourly. Then I thought of the girl again and tried to remember just what she'd looked like. The only thing I could come up with was that she was tall and quite slender. Attractive? Somewhat, but no real dish. About thirty, I thought. But there'd been something about her face, a quality that escaped me now—Well, it didn't matter.

The garage was a big place on a corner, with a showroom in front and some petrol pumps in the driveway. We towed

the car on into the repair department, and the foreman looked it over. He was a thin slat of a man with a cold face.

"You want a bid, is that it?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'll pay for it myself and let the insurance companies fight about it later."

"Day after tomorrow's the best we can do. We haven't got that radiator in stock, but we can get it out of Tallahassee on the bus."

"Okay," I said. I didn't look forward to spending thirty-six hours or more in the place, but there was no point in griping about it. I lifted the two cases out of the boot. "Where's a good place to stay?"

"One of the motels would be your best bet," he replied.

"Fine. Where's the nearest one?"

He wiped his hands on a piece of rag and thought about it.

"Only one on this side is about three miles out. East of town, though, there's a couple of good ones fairly close in. The Spanish Main, and the El Rancho."

"Thanks. Can I call a cab?"

He jerked his head towards the front office. "See the girl."

A big blond kid in a white overall had come in to get something off a work-bench. He turned and looked at us. "If he wants a motel, Mrs. Langston is out front now, getting some gas."

The foremen shook his head.

"Who's Mrs. Langston?" I asked.

"She runs the Magnolia Lodge, east of town."

"Well, what's the matter with that?"

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

He puzzled me. "Is something wrong with it?" I asked.

"I guess not. It's run-down and there's no pool, but where you stay is your own business, the way I look at it."

Just then the name clicked. I was almost sure it was the same one. Rather than fish it out of my wallet, however, I merely picked up the two bags, said "Thanks," and walked out front to the driveway. I was right. She was standing beside an old station wagon taking some money from her purse.

I walked over and put down the suitcase. "Mrs. Langston?"

She glanced around and gave me a brief smile. "Oh, hello," she said. And all at once I realized what it was about her face that had struck me before. It was tired. Simply that. It was a slender and rather attractive face with good bone structure, but there was an almost unfathomable weariness far back in the fine gray eyes.

"I understand you run a motel," I said.

She nodded. "That's right." "If you have a vacancy, I'd like to ride out with you."

"Yes, of course. Just put your bags in the back."

The boy brought her change and we drove off back down the main street. I hoped if Frankie was still in town with his panel truck we'd see him in time to take the station wagon apart and hide it.

"When will your car be ready?" she asked, as we paused for a traffic light.

"Day after tomorrow," I said. "By the way, I want to thank you again."

"You're quite welcome," she said. The light changed and we went on.

I turned and looked at her. She had dark reddish-brown hair in a long bob just off her shoulders, and a rather creamy complexion, though she wore no make-up except a touch of lipstick. The mouth was nice. Her cheekbones were high and prominent, giving an impression of faint hollows below them and adding to that general suggestion of being underweight and overstrained and tired. It was the face of a mature woman, and there was strength in it. Her wedding and engagement rings looked expensive, but the rest of her outfit failed to match them. The dress was a cheap hand-me-down and the sandals were old and beat-up. She had nice long legs, but wore no stockings.

On the right, just beyond the city limits, was the Spanish Main motel. It had a large pool set among colored umbrellas in front. It looked cool and blue in the white glare of the sun, and I remembered what he'd said about the Magnolia's not having one. Chump, I thought sourly. Well, I didn't like being conned. And she had been nice.

The Magnolia was about a quarter of a mile beyond, on the left. As she turned in off the highway I could see what he'd meant about its being run-down: there was an air of neglect about it, or an impression that it had never been quite completed. There were twelve or fifteen connected units in the usual quadrangle arrangement, with the open end facing the highway. The construction was solid and not too old, brick with a red-tile roof, but it all needed painting, and the grounds were bleak and inhospitable in the hot glare of afternoon. There'd been an attempt at a lawn in front, facing the road, and in the center of the square, but it was brown now, and dusty, and the white gravel of the drive was scattered and threadbare, with scrawny weeds poking up through it in places. I wondered why her husband had let it get into this condition.

The office was on the left. She stopped in front of it. There were two bags of groceries on one of the back seats. I gathered them up and followed her inside.

The small lobby was cool and pleasantly dim with its Venetian blinds closed against the harsh sunlight outside. There were two or three braided rugs scattered about the waxed floor of dark blue tile, and several bamboo armchairs with orange and black cushions. A T.V. set stood in one corner, and in front of a sofa was a long bamboo-and-glass coffee table with a number of magazines. On a table against the left wall was a scale model of a sloop. It was about three feet long and had beautiful lines. Opposite the door was the registration desk, and at the closed end of that a small telephone switchboard and the rack of pigeonholes for the keys. Directly behind the desk was a curtained doorway that apparently connected with their living quarters. Beyond it, somewhere in the rear, I could hear a vacuum sweeper.

I set the groceries on the desk. She called out, "Josie," and the sound of the vacuum sweeper cut off. A heavy-bodied colored girl in a white apron pushed through the curtains in the doorway. She had a fat, good-natured face and a big mouth overpainted with some odd shade of lipstick that was almost purple.

Mrs. Langston placed a registration card before me and nodded toward the groceries. "Take those into the kitchen, will you, Josie?"

"Yes, ma'am." Josie gathered them up and started to turn away. "Did the plumber call?" Mrs. Langston asked.

I undipped my pen and bent over the card, wondering— as I had for the past week—why I still gave San Francisco as my address. Well, you had to put down something, and at least that matched the license plates on the car.

"No, ma'am," Josie replied. "Phone did ring a couple of times but I reckon it was a wrong number. When I answer they don't say nothin'; they just hang up." She went on out.

I happened to glance up. Mrs. Langston's face was utterly still, but the creamy skin had gone a shade paler, and I had an odd impression she was having to fight for the composure she showed. She looked away.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Oh," she said. She shook her head and forced a smile. "No. I'm all right It's just the heat."

She turned the registration card round and looked at it. "San Francisco?" she said. "And how are you standing the heat, Mr. Chatham?"

"So you've been there?" I asked.

She nodded. "Once—in August. All I had was summer clothes, and I almost froze. But I loved it; I think it's a fascinating city." She reached back and took a key from one of the pigeonholes. "Take Number Twelve," she said.

"I'd better pay you now," I said. "How much is it?"

She started to reply, but the telephone rang. The effect on her was almost startling. She went rigid, as if she had been sluiced in the back with iced water, and just for an instant I could see the terror in her eyes. It was on the desk, just to the left of her. It rang again, shrilling insistently, and she slowly forced herself to reach out a hand and pick it up.

"Magnolia Lodge," she said in a small voice.

Then the color went out of her face, all of it. She swayed, and I reached out across the desk to try to catch her, thinking she was about to fall, but she merely collapsed onto the stool behind it. She tried to put the receiver back on the cradle, but missed. It lay on the blotter with faint sounds issuing from it while she put her face down in her hands and shuddered.

I picked it up. I knew I had no business doing it, but it was pure reflex, and I already had a suspicion as to what I'd hear. I was right.

It was an unidentifiable whisper, vicious, obscene, and taunting, and the filth it spewed up would make you sick. I thought I heard something else, too, in the background. In a minute the flow of sewage halted, and the whisper asked, "Are you hearing me all right, honey? Tell me how you like it."

I clamped a hand over the receiver and leaned over the desk. Touching her on the arm, I said, "Answer him," and held the instrument before her.

She raised her head, but could only stare at me in horror. I shook her shoulder. "Go on," I ordered. "Say something. Anything at all."

She nodded. I removed my hand from the receiver. "Why?" she cried out. "Why are you doing this to me?"

I nodded, and went on listening. The soft and whispered laugh was like something crawling across your bare flesh in a swamp. "Because we've got a secret, honey. We know you killed him, don't we?"

I frowned. That wasn't part of the usual pattern. The whisper continued. "We know, don't we, honey? I like that. I like to think about just the two of us—" He repeated some of the things he liked to think. He had a great imagination, with things crawling in it. Then, suddenly, there was a brief punctuation mark of some other kind of sound in the background, and the line abruptly went dead. He had hung up. But maybe not soon enough, I thought.

I replaced the receiver and looked down at the bowed head. "It's all right," I said. "They're usually harmless."

She raised her face then, but uttered no sound.

"How long has he been doing it?" I asked.

"A long—" she whispered raggedly. "Long—" She collapsed.

I whirled round the end of the desk and caught her. Carrying her out, I placed her gently on the floor on one of the rugs. She was very light, far too light for a girl as tall as she was. I stood up and called out "Josie!" and then looked back down at her, at the extreme pallor of the slender face

and the darkness of the lashes against it, and wondered how long she had been running along the ragged edge of a breakdown.

Josie pushed through the curtains and looked questioningly at me.

"Have you got any whisky?" I asked.

"Whisky? No, sir, we ain't got none—" She had taken another step nearer the desk, and now she could see Mrs. Langston on the floor. "Oh, good Lawd in Heaven—"

"Shut up," I said. "Bring me a glass. And a damp cloth."

I hurried out and brought in the two-suiter bag from the station wagon. There was a bottle in it. Josie came waddling back through the curtains. I poured some whisky into the glass, and knelt beside Mrs. Langston to bathe her face with the wet wash-cloth.

"You reckon she goin' to be all right?" Josie asked anxiously.

"Of course," I said. "She's just fainted." I felt her pulse. It was steady enough.

"Ain't you goin' to give her the whisky?"

"Not till she can swallow it," I said impatiently. "You want to strangle her? Where's her husband?"

"Husband?"

"Mr. Langston," I snapped. "Go and get him. Where is he?"

She shook her head. "There ain't no Mr. Langston. He's dead."

"Oh," I said.

"You reckon we ought to call the doctor?" Josie asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "Wait a minute."

Mrs. Langston stirred, and her eyes opened. I raised her with an arm round her shoulders, and held the whisky to her lips. She took a drink of it, and coughed, but kept it down. I handed the glass to Josie. "Get some water."

In a moment she was able to sit up. I helped her into one of the armchairs and gave her another drink, mixed with water. Some of the color had come back to her face.

"Thank you," she said shakily.

I waved it off impatiently. "Do you know who he is?"

"No," she said.

"You don't have any idea at all?" She shook her head helplessly. "But you reported it to the police."

She nodded. "Several times."

There was no time to lose. I went over to the phone and dialed Operator. "Give me the Sheriffs office." A man's voice answered after the second ring, and I said, "I'd like to speak to the Sheriff—"

"He's not here. This is Magruder; what is it?"

"I'm calling from the Magnolia Lodge," I said. "It's about the psycho that's been calling Mrs. Langston. I think you've had a complaint on it—"

"On the what?"

"A psycho," I repeated. "A nut. He's been bothering Mrs. Langston, calling her on the phone—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he said. "What about him?"

"I think I can give you a lead, and if you work fast you may be able to nail him. He just hung up about two minutes ago —"

"Hold if, friend. Not so fast. Who are you?"

I took a deep breath. "My name's Chatham. I'm staying at the motel, and I happened to be in the office here when the creep called this time. I listened to him—"

"Why?"

That might not be the stupidest question it would be possible for a police officer to ask, I thought, but it was close. I choked down a sarcastic reply. "Just to see if I could get a lead on where he was calling from—"

"And he told you? That was nice of him."

I sighed. "No. I'm trying to tell you. I think I lucked into something that could help you—"

"Yeah. Yeah. Sure. You got his prints over the phone."

"Then you're not interested?"

"Listen, friend," he said coldly, "you think we got nothing to do but pussyfoot around looking for a drunk on a telephone jag? Tell Mrs. Langston if she don't want to listen to this goof all she's got to do is hang up."

"She can't take much more of it," I said.

"She don't have to answer, does she?"

"A business phone?" I asked coldly.

"I can't help what kind of phone she got. But nobody's ever been hurt over one of 'em, believe me."

"I never thought of that," I said. "I'll tell her, and everything will be all right." I hung up, burning.

2

I turned back to her. Josie had returned to work. She pushed a hand up through the dark hair with that weary gesture she had, and she was still too pale. One of these days she was going to come apart like a dropped plate.

"They ever do anything about it at all?" I asked.

"The first time or two. They sent a deputy out to talk to me. But I'm not sure they even believe me."

That's about it, I thought; it was a pretty even bet.

"He bother any other women, do you know?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so." Then the horror came back into her eyes for a moment, and she cried, "Why does he do it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Why do they jump out of the shrubbery in a park without their clothes on? But they're nearly always harmless."

It occurred to me I was almost as silly as that clown Magruder. Harmless? Well, in any physical sense they were.

She glanced up at me. "Why did you ask me to answer him?"

I shrugged. "Force of habit. I used to be a cop."

"Oh," she said. "You wanted to keep him talking, is that it?"

"Sure. That's your only connection with him, and once he hangs up he might as well be in another universe. The longer he spews, the more chance there is he'll say something that'll give you a lead. Or that you'll hear something else in the background."

She looked at me with quickened interest "And did you hear something?"

That's right. He was calling from a box. That doesn't mean much, of course; they nearly always do. But this one was in a beer joint or a restaurant, and I think it could be identified —"

"How?" she asked wonderingly. "I mean, how did you find out?"

"Dumb luck," I said. "You play for the breaks, and sometimes you get one. Most of those booths have fans in 'em, you know; this one did, and the fan had a bad bearing. It was just noisy enough to hear. And I heard a jukebox start up."

I stopped, thinking about it. This guy was off his rocker, but still he was smart enough to hang up when that music started. Well, it didn't mean anything. A sexual psychopath didn't necessarily have to be stupid; he was just unbalanced.

She frowned. "Then they might have caught him? I mean, if they had listened to you?"

"I don't know," I said. "With luck, and enough men to cover all the places in town within a few minutes—" Her County police force was none of my business. And they could have been swamped and shorthanded. Police forces usually were.

"You say you were a policeman?" she asked. "Then you aren't any more?"

"No," I said.

I put the whisky back in the bag and closed it. The room key was on the desk where she'd dropped it. I put it in my pocket. She stood up. Instead of helping her, I watched to see how she handled it. She was still a little shaky, but apparently all right.

"Thank you for everything, Mr. Chatham," she said.

"How many times have you fainted lately?"

She smiled ruefully. "It was so ridiculous. I think this was only the second time in my life. But why?"

"You ought to see a doctor. You need a check-up."

"That's silly. I'm perfectly healthy."

"You're running on your reserve tanks now. And when they're empty you're going to crash. You don't weigh a hundred pounds."

"A hundred and ten. You don't know your own strength."

"Okay," I said. It was none of my business.

I went out and lifted the other bag from the station wagon. No. 12 was across in the opposite wing. It was in the corner, and there were three doors between it and the end; fifteen rooms altogether. As I put down the cases and fished in my pocket for the key, I turned and looked back across the bleak area baking in the sun. A twenty by forty foot swimming pool right there, I thought, visualizing it: flagstones, deck-chairs, umbrellas, shrubs, grass—It screamed for grass. It was a shame. I went on in.

The room was nicely furnished with a green wall-to-wall carpet and twin beds with dark green spreads and a chest of drawers with a big mirror above it. There were a couple of armchairs. On the left at the rear a door holding a full length mirror opened into the bathroom that was finished in forest-green tile. It was hot, but there was a room air-conditioner mounted in the wall near the closed and curtained window at the rear. I turned it on. In a moment cool air began to flow out. I stripped off my sweaty clothes and took a shower. The towels, I noted, were worn and threadbare, the type of thing you'd expect in a cheap hotel room. Contrasted with the good quality of the permanent furnishings, they told their story. She was probably going broke. I frowned thoughtfully, and then shrugged and poured out a whisky. Lighting a cigarette, I lay down naked on one of the beds.

It would be better when I had something to do. Some kind of hard work, I thought, maybe out in the sun, something I could get hold of with my hands. Building something. That was it. You made something with your hands and it was tangible. There were no people mixed up in it, no fouled-up emotions, no abstractions like right and wrong, and you couldn't throw away six years' work in five crazy minutes.

I thought of the house up there on the side of Twin Peaks with the fog coming in like a river of cotton across the city in the late afternoon, and I thought of Nan. There wasn't any particular feeling about it any more, except possibly one of failure and aimlessness. We'd been divorced for over a year. The house was sold. The job was gone—the job she'd blamed our failure on.

I took a drag on the cigarette and gazed up at the ceiling, wondering if she'd read about it when it finally happened. She'd married again and moved to Santa Barbara, but some of her friends in the Bay area might have written her about it or sent her the clippings. There'd been no word from her, but there was no reason why she should write. She wasn't the kind for that 'I told you so' routine, and there wasn't much else to say. I hoped they hadn't sent her that picture. It was a little rough. So was the simple caption: VICTIM OF POLICE BRUTALITY.

I crushed out the cigarette and sat up. If I spent the whole afternoon cooped up in a room with my thoughts I'd be walking up the walls. I thought of Mrs. Langston, and that telephoning creep who had her headed for a crack-up. The phone directory was over on the chest. No, I thought sourly; the hell with it. It was nothing to me, was it?

He'd be gone, anyway, by this time, so what good would it do?

But the idea persisted, and I went over and picked up the small phone book. It presented a challenge, and it would kill the afternoon, wouldn't it? I grabbed up my pen and a sheet of stationery, and flipped through the yellow pages.

Cafés. . . . There were eight listed, three of them on one street, Springer. That was probably the main drag. I wrote down the addresses.

Taverns. . . . Nine listed.

Beer Gardens. . . . No such heading.

Night Clubs. . . . One, a duplicate listing for one of the taverns.

That made a total of seventeen places, with the possibility of some duplications. I called a cab, and dressed quickly in sports shirt and lightweight trousers. As we drove out I noted one of the places on my list was just across the road.

The neon sign bore the outline of a leaping fish and said: Silver King Inn. Well, I'd stop there on the way back.

I watched the street signs as we came into town. The main drag was Springer, all right. I got out of the cab in the second block in front of one of the cafés, paid the driver, and went in. There was a call box, but it wasn't in a booth. The next one was on the other side of the street in the next block. The phone was in a booth near the back, and there was a jukebox not too far from it. When I closed the door the fan came on, but it wasn't the one. It made no noise at all. I dropped in a dime, dialed four or five digits at random, pretended to listen for a minute, and hung up, retrieving the coin.

Inside a half-hour I'd hit nine, ranging from the glass-and-chrome upholstered booths of the Steak House to a greasy hamburger-and-chili dive backing the river on Front Street, and from the one good cocktail lounge to dingy beer joints, and I had a fairly good picture of the layout of the town. The river and Front Street ran along the west side. South of Springer was another street of business establishments, and then the railroad and a weather-beaten station, with a colored section beyond the tracks. North of the wide main street were two more parallel to it, with the courthouse on one and a small post office and Federal Building on the other, and beyond them a school or two and the principal residential area. There were four cross streets, beginning with Front. Springer, which was of course also the main road, was the only east-west street that continued across the river; the others terminated at Front.

But I still hadn't found it. I went on. Most of the places were air-conditioned, and stepping out of them was like walking into an oven. The blacktop paving in the street bubbled and sucked at the soles of my shoes. My shirt was wet with sweat. An hour later, I ground to a halt, baffled. There wasn't a public telephone booth in town that had a noisy fan.

I still had two places on my list, however. One was the Flamingo, the night club, with an address on West Highway. But the chances were it wouldn't even have been open at the time he called, around two-fifteen. The other was the Silver King Inn, across the road from the motel. He wouldn't have called from there, would he? Practically in her lap? But

who could guess what a creep would do? I'd go back and hit it. There was a cab stand around the next corner, by the bus station.

I climbed into one, and when we came out on Springer and stopped for the first light, the driver turned and glanced at me over his shoulder. He was a middle-aged man with a pinched-up face, sad brown eyes, and a badly made set of false teeth that were too big and too symmetrical. He looked like a toothpaste commercial.

"Say," he asked, "ain't you the man that had the run-in with Frankie?"

"I wouldn't call it a run-in," I said. "A little fender-gnashing."

"I thought I recognized you. Man, you sure been lookin' the town over, haven't you? I bet I seen you three or four times."

I'd lived all my life in a city, and that hadn't occurred to me. It was a small town, I was a stranger in it, and a pretty big one at that. Add a dark red face, spiky red hair, and you'd never go anywhere unobserved.

"Just wandering around," I said. "Killing time while they fix the car."

"Where you staying?"

"Magnolia Lodge motel."

"Oh," he said.

I frowned at the back of his neck. There it was again, that same strange reaction you couldn't quite put a finger on. I thought of the bystanders at the accident, and that foreman at the garage. The light changed. We went on.

"What's wrong with it?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Nothing wrong with the motel, I reckon. Little run-down."

"Well, it's a big job for a woman alone. I understand her husband's dead."

"Oh, he's dead, all right."

Maybe I'd run across something new here. Varying degrees of being dead. "What's that mean?"

"That's right, you're from California, ain't you? I reckon the papers didn't play it up so big way over there—" He had

to skid to a stop at the next cross-roads as the light went red. Then he looked back over his shoulder.

"Langston was murdered," he said.

I didn't say anything for a moment. I was thinking of a soft and filthy laugh, and a whisper. *We know you killed him, don't we?*

I snapped out of it then. "Well, did they catch the party that did it?"

"Hmmm. Yes and no."

That was the kind of answer you liked. I sighed, lit a cigarette, and tried again. "Did they, or didn't they?"

"They got one of 'em," he said. "The man. But they ain't found out to this day who the other one was. Or so they say."

The light came up green then, and he shifted gears and shot ahead in the afternoon traffic. It made no sense at all, of course. I waited for him to go on.

"Course, now, they could have a pretty good idea, what with one thing and another, if you know what I mean. But they just ain't sayin'."

I read him even less. "Wait a minute. It *is* against the law to kill people around here, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, it sure is. But the law also says you got to have evidence before you arrest anybody and go to court."

It was like probing a raw nerve. Well, I thought angrily, I did have evidence. It just wasn't enough.

We'd left the business district behind now and were passing the box factory and ice plant on the edge of the town. I wished he'd slow down; there were a dozen questions I wanted to ask. "You mean they got one of them," I said, "and he admits there was somebody else, but won't say who? They can't get *anything* out of him?"

He tossed the words back over his shoulder. "Mister, they won't never get anything out of that feller. He tried to pull a gun on Calhoun, and he was dead before he hit the ground."

"Who's Calhoun?"

"That big cop that stopped you from clobberin' Frankie."

"Hell, I wasn't going to hit him—" I stopped. Of all the idiotic things to waste time on.

"You look like a man that could take care of hisself just about anywhere, but let me give you a tip. Don't start nothin' with Calhoun."

"I'm not about to," I said impatiently. I was sorry I'd asked.

"You think that's fat. Mister, I got one word for you. It's not fat. You know, I seen that man do things—" He paused, sighed, and shook his head. "Salty. What I mean, he's salty."

I wished he'd shut up about Calhoun and get on with it. "All right," I prodded, "you say one was killed instantly, resisting arrest. So he didn't say anything. Then how do they know there *was* another one? Did Calhoun catch him in the act?"

"No. That is, not exactly—"

We pulled to a stop before the Silver King. Heat shimmered off the highway, and the glare from the white gravel of the parking area was dazzling. I could hear a jukebox inside, and through the big window opposite us I could see some men drinking coffee at a counter. The driver put his arm up on the back of the seat and turned to look at me.

"What do you mean, not exactly?" I asked.

"Well, it was like this," he said. "When Calhoun jumped this man—Strader, his name was—he was down there in the river bottom about four-thirty in the morning tryin' to get rid of the body. Strader was drivin' Langston's car, and Langston hisself was in the back wrapped in a tarp with his head caved in."

"Yes, I can see where that might look a little suspicious," I said. "But was there anybody else in the car with Strader?"

"No. But there was another car, maybe fifty yards back up the road. It got away. Calhoun heard it start up and saw the lights come on, and ran for it, but he couldn't catch it. He was just going to put a shot through it when he stumbled in the dark and fell down. By the time he could find his gun and get up, it was gone around a bend in the road. But he'd already got the license number. They got them little lights, you know, that shine on the back plate—"

"Sure, sure," I said impatiently. "So they know whose car it was?"

"Yeah. It was Strader's."

"Oh," I said. "And where did they find it?"

He jerked his head towards the road. "Right over there in front of Strader's room in that motel. And the only thing they ever found out for sure was that it was a woman drivin' it."

I said nothing for a moment. Even with this little of it, you could see the ugliness emerging, the stain of suspicion that was all over the town, on everything you touched.

"When did all this happen?" I asked.

"Last November."

Seven months of it, I thought. No wonder you sensed that gray ocean of weariness when you looked at her, and had the feeling she was running along the edge of a nervous breakdown.

"That'll be one dollar," he said. "Outside the city limits." I handed him two. "Come on. I'll buy you a beer."

3

We went inside to air-conditioned coolness. It was an L-shaped building, the front part being a lunch-room. There were some tables to the left of the doorway, and a counter with a row of stools in the back of the window that looked out on the road. Swinging doors behind the counter led into the kitchen. There were mounted tarpon on the wall on either side of the swinging doors, and another above the doorway on the right that led into the bar. Two truckers were drinking coffee and talking to the waitress.

The bar was a longer room, running back at right angles and forming the other part of the L. At the rear, towards the left, were a number of tables, a jukebox that had gone silent for the moment, and a telephone box. I glanced at the latter. It could wait.

At one of the tables, a man in a white cowboy-style hat and a blue shirt sat with his back to me, facing a thin dark splinter of a girl who looked as if she might have Indian blood. Two more men were perched on stools at the end of the bar. They looked up at us as we sat down, and one of them nodded to the taxi driver. There was another mounted tarpon, the largest I'd ever seen, above the bar mirror.

The bartender came over, glanced idly at me, and nodded to the driver. "Hi, Jake. What'll it be?"

"Bottle of Regal, Ollie," Jake replied.

I ordered the same. Ollie put it in front of us and went back down the bar to where he'd been polishing glasses. He appeared to be in his middle twenties, and had big shoulders, muscular arms, and a wide tanned face with self-possessed brown eyes.

I took a sip of the beer and lit a cigarette. "Who was Strader?" I asked.

At the sound of the name, the bartender and both the men down at the end turned and stared sharply. Even after all this time, I thought.

Jake looked uncomfortable. "That was the craziest part of it. He was from Miami. And as far as they could ever find out, he didn't even know Langston."

One of the two men put down his glass. He had the sharp, meddlesome eyes of a trouble-maker. "Maybe he didn't," he said. "But he could still have been a friend of the family."

The bartender glanced at him, but said nothing. The other man merely went on drinking his beer. The ugliness of it hung there for a moment in the silence of the room, but it was something they didn't even notice any more. They were used to it.

"I ain't sayin' he wasn't," Jake protested. "All I'm sayin' is that they ain't never been able to prove he knew either one of 'em."

Then what the hell was he doing up here?" the other demanded. "Why was he registered over there in that motel three times in two months? He wasn't on business, because they never found nobody in town he come to see. Besides, you don't reckon he'd be crazy enough to try to sell Miami real estate around here, do you?"

"How the hell do I know?" Jake asked. "A man crazy enough to try to gun Calhoun might do anything."

"Nuts. You know as well as I do what he was up here for. He was a ladies' man, a regular stud. He was a no-good with a big front and a line of baloney, and some woman was supportin' him half the time."

It was a charming little place, I thought sourly. She stood trial for murder every day—over here, and in all the other bars in town, and every time she pushed a basket down the

aisles of the supermarket. I wondered why she didn't sell out and leave. Pride, maybe. There was a lot of it in her face.

Then I reminded myself that it was none of my business anyway. I didn't know anything about her; maybe she *had* killed her husband. Murder had been committed by people who couldn't even tell a lie without blushing. But for the sordid reasons they were hinting at? It didn't seem likely.

"And ain't she from Miami?" the other went on. The way he said it, you gathered being from Miami was an indictment itself.

"Dammit, Rupe," Jake said with sullen defiance, "stop tryin' to make it look like I was talking for her. Or for Strader. All I'm sayin' is there's a lot of difference between knowing something and provin' it."

"Proof!" Rupe said contemptuously. "That's a lot of bull. They got all the proof they need. Why do you reckon Strader went to all that trouble to try to make it look like an accident?"

I glanced up. That was deadly. And it reminded me of something that had been bothering me and that I'd intended to ask if I ever had the chance.

"Was that the reason for the two cars?" I asked Jake.

I had been momentarily forgotten in their argument, but now abrupt silence dropped over the place, and the chill you could feel had nothing to do with the air-conditioning. Jake gulped the rest of his beer and stood up. "Well, I'd better be hittin' the road," he said. "Thanks, mister." He went out. The others stared at me for a minute, and then returned to their own conversation.

I ordered another beer. Ollie uncapped it and set it before me. He appeared to be the most intelligent and least unfriendly of the lot. "Why two cars?" I asked.

He mopped the bar, looked at me appraisingly, and started to say something, but Rupe beat him to it. The shiny black eyes swung around to me, and he asked, "Who are you?"

"My name's Chatham," I said shortly.

"I don't mean that, mister. What have you got to do with this."

"Nothing," I said. "Why?"

"You seem to be pretty interested, for it to be none of your put-in."

"I'm just studying the native customs," I said. "Where I grew up, people accused of murder were tried in court, not in barrooms."

"You're new around here?"

"I'm even luckier than that," I said. "I'm just passing through."

"How come you're riding a taxi? Just to pump Jake?"

I was suddenly fed up with him. "Shove it," I said.

His eyes filled with quick malice and he made as if to get off the stool. The bartender glanced at him and he settled back. His friend, a much bigger man, studied me with dislike in his eyes, apparently trying to make up his mind whether to buy a piece of it or not. Nothing happened, and in a moment it was past.

I fished a dime from my pocket and went back to the telephone. The dark girl and the man in the cowboy hat had apparently been paying little attention to us. The girl glanced up now as I went past. I had an impression she was scarcely eighteen, but she looked as if she'd spent twice that long in a furious and dedicated flight from any form of innocence. Her left leg was stretched out under the edge of the table with her skirt hiked up, and the man was grinning slyly as he wrote something on her naked thigh with her lipstick. She met my eyes and shrugged.

I stepped into the booth, and the instant I closed the door I knew I'd found it. The fan came on with an uneven whirring sound caused by the faulty bearing. I thought swiftly. From the lunch-room in there he could even have seen her drive in when she returned from town; that was the reason he'd called almost immediately. But the maid had said he'd called twice before while she was out. Well, that meant those were from somewhere else and that he was moving round. The chances were a thousand to one against his being one of the three out there now.

I went through the motions of making a call, and as I left the booth I shot a glance at the literary cowboy. He could have been anywhere between twenty-eight and forty, with a smooth, chubby face like that of an overgrown baby, and the

beginnings of a paunch. The shirt, I noted now, wasn't blue, as I'd thought—at least, not all over. It was light gray in front, with pearl buttons, and flaps on the breast pockets, and was stained in two or three places in front as if he'd spilled food on it. His eyes were china-blue and made you think of a baby's, apart from the quality of yokel shrewdness and sly humor you could see in them as he patted the dark girl on the leg and invited her to read whatever it was he'd written on it. He was probably known as a card.

I went back to my beer. From sheer force of habit I sized up Rupe and his friend, but they were as unlikely as the humorist. Rupe was thin, swarthy, and mean-looking, the one you'd always expect to find at the bottom of it any time there was trouble reported in a bar, but he appeared normal enough otherwise. The other was a big man with thinning red-hair and a rugged slab of a face that could probably be tough but wasn't vicious or depraved. He wore oil-stained khaki, and had black-rimmed fingernails as if he were a mechanic.

Asking any questions was futile. It had been way over two hours to begin with, and the air of coldness and suspicion the place was saturated with told me I'd get no answers anyway. I pushed back the beer and started to get up.

"I thought you said you was a stranger around here." It was Rupe. I scooped up my change. "That's right."

"You must know somebody. You just made a phone call."

"So I did."

"Without looking up the number."

"You don't mind?" I asked.

"Where you staying here?"

I turned and looked at him coldly. "Across the street. Why?"

"I thought so."

Ollie put down the glass he was polishing. "You leaving?" he asked me.

"I'd started to," I said.

"Maybe you'd better."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Simple economics, friend. He's a regular customer."

"Okay," I said. "But if he's that valuable, maybe you'd better keep him tied up till I get out."

Rupe started to slide off his stool, and the big redhead eyed me speculatively. "Knock it off," Ollie said quietly to the two of them, and then jerked his head at me. I don't want to have to call the cops."

"Right," I said. I dropped the change in my pocket, and went out through the lunch-room. The whole thing was petty and stupid, but I had a feeling it was only a hint of what was submerged here, like the surface uneasiness of water where the big tide-rips ran deep and powerful far below, or the sullen smoldering of a fire that was only waiting to break out. I wondered why the feeling against her was so bitter. They seemed convinced she was involved in the murder of her husband; but if there were any evidence in that direction, why hadn't she been arrested and tried?

I crossed the highway in the leaden heat of late afternoon, and again was struck by the bleak aspect of the motel grounds as they would appear to the traveler who was considering turning in. The place was going to ruin. Why didn't she have it landscaped, or sell out? I shrugged. Why didn't I mind my own business?

She was in the office, making entries in a couple of big ledgers opened on the desk. She looked up at me with a faint smile, and said, "Paper work." I was conscious of thinking she was prettier than I had considered her at first, that there was something definitely arresting about the contrast of creamy pallor against the rubber-mahogany gleam of her hair. Some faces were like that, I thought; they revealed themselves to you a little at a time rather than springing at you all at once. Her hands were slender and unutterably feminine, moving gracefully through the confusion of papers.

I stopped inside the door and lit a cigarette. "He called from the booth in the Silver King," I said.

She glanced up, startled, and I realized I had probably only made it worse by telling her he had been that near. "How do you know?" she asked. "I mean, have you been—?"

I nodded. "The fan. I checked them out around town till I found the noisy one."

"I don't know how to thank you."

"For what?" I said. "I didn't find him. He'd probably been gone for hours. But you can pass it on to the Sheriff, for what it's worth."

"Yes," she said, trying to sound optimistic, but I could tell she had little hope they would ever do anything about it. I was filled with a sour disgust towards the whole place. Why didn't somebody bury it?

I went across to my room and poured a drink. Taking off my sweaty shirt, I lay down on one of the beds with a cigarette and stared morosely up at the ceiling. I wished now I had belted Frankie while I had the chance. Stranded in this place for at least another thirty-six hours.

You're in sad shape, I thought; you can't stand your own company and you've got a grouch on at everybody else. The only thing you can do is keep moving, and that doesn't solve anything. You'd feel just as lousy in St Petersburg, or Miami —

There was a light knock on the door.

"Come in," I said.

Mrs. Langston stepped inside, and then paused uncertainly as she saw me stretched out in hairy nakedness from the waist up. I made no move to get up. She probably thought I had the manners of a pig, but it didn't seem to matter.

I gestured indifferently towards the armchair. "Sit down."

She left the door slightly ajar and crossed to the chair. She sat with her knees pressed together, and nervously pulled down the hem of her dress, apparently ill-at-ease. "I—I wanted to talk to you," she said, as if uncertain how to begin.

"What about?" I asked. I raised myself on one elbow and nodded towards the chest. "Whisky there, and cigarettes. Help yourself."

You're doing fine, Chatham; you haven't completely lost touch with all the little amenities. You can still grunt and point.

She shook her head. "Thank you, just the same." She paused, and then went on tentatively, "I believe you said you used to be a policeman, but aren't any more?"

That's right," I said.

"Would it be prying if I asked whether you're doing anything now?"

"The answer is no," I said. "On both counts. I have no job at all; I'm just on my way to Miami. The reason escapes me at the moment."

She frowned slightly, as if I puzzled her. "Would you be interested in doing something for me, if I could pay you?"

"Depends on what it is."

"I'll come right to the point. Will you try to find out who that man is?"

"Why me?" I asked.

She took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "Because I got to thinking about the clever way you found out where he called from. You could do it. I can't stand it much longer, Mr. Chatham. I have to answer the phone, and sometimes when it rings I'm afraid I'm going to lose my mind. I don't know who he is, or where he is, or when he may be looking at me, and when I walk down the street I cringe—"

I thought of that farcical meat-head, Magruder. Nobody had ever been hurt over a telephone.

"No," I said.

"But why?" she asked helplessly. "I don't have much, but I would be glad to pay you anything within reason."

"In the first place, it's police work. And I'm not a policeman."

"But private detectives—"

"Are licensed. And operating without a license can get you into plenty of trouble. And in the second place, just identifying him is pointless. The only way to stop him is a conviction that will send him to jail or have him committed to an asylum, and that means proof and an organization willing to prosecute. Which brings you right back to the police and the District Attorney. If they're dragging their feet, there's nothing you can do about it."

"I see," she said wearily. I detested myself for cutting the ground from under her this way. She was a hell of a lot of very fine and sensitive girl taking too much punishment, and I could feel her pulling at me. What she was showed all over her, if you believed in evidence at all. She had courage, and that thing called class, for lack of a better word, but they couldn't keep her going for ever. She'd crack up. Then I wondered savagely why I was supposed to cry over her troubles. They were nothing to me, were they?

"Why don't you sell out and leave?" I asked.

"No!" The vehemence of it surprised me. Then she went on, more calmly. "My husband put everything he had left into this place, and I have no intention of selling it at a sacrifice and running like a scared child."

"Then why don't you landscape it? It looks so desolate it drives people away."

She stood up. "I know. But I simply don't have the money."

And I had, I thought, and it was the kind of thing I was perhaps subconsciously looking for, but I didn't want to become involved with her. I didn't want to become involved with anybody. Period.

She hesitated at the door. "Then you won't even consider it?"

"No," I said. I didn't like the way she could get through to me, and I wanted to get her and her troubles off my back once and for all. "There's only one way I could stop him if I did find him. Do you want to hire me to beat up an insane man?"

She flinched. "No. How awful—"

I went on roughly, interrupting her. "I'm not sure I could. I was suspended from the San Francisco Police Department for brutality, but at least the man I beat up there was sane. I would assume there is a difference, so let's drop it."

She frowned again, perplexed. "Brutality?"

"That's right."

She waited a minute for me to add something further, and when I didn't, she said, "I'm sorry to have troubled you, Mr. Chatham," and went out and closed the door.

I returned to studying the ceiling. It was no different from a lot of others I had inspected.

* * *

About six I called another cab and went into town. I ate a solitary dinner at the Steak House, bought some magazines, and walked back to the motel in the blue and dust-suspended haze of dusk. There were cars parked in front of only three of the rooms. I was lying on the bed reading about half an hour later when I heard another crunch to a stop on the gravel, and then after a few minutes the sound of voices raised in argument. Or at least, one of them was raised. It was a man's. The other sounded as if it might be Mrs. Langston. It continued, and the man's voice grew louder. I got up and looked out.

It was night now, but the lights were on. There were three of them before an open doorway two rooms to my left—Mrs. Langston, a tough-looking kid of about twenty, and a rawhide string of a girl at least five years younger who seemed incomplete without a motor-cycle and a crash helmet. A 1950 sedan was parked in front of the room. I walked over and leaned against the wail and smelled trouble.

Mrs. Langston was holding out her hand with some money in it. "You'll have to get out," she said, "or I'll call the police."

"Call the cops!" the kid said. "You kill me." He was a big insolent number with hazel eyes and a ducktail haircut the color of wet concrete, and he wore Cossack boots, jeans, and a Basque pullover thing that strained just the way he wanted it across the ropy shoulders.

"What's the difficulty?" I asked.

Mrs. Langston looked around. "He registered alone, but when I happened to look out a minute later I saw her bob up out of the back seat. I told him he'd have to leave, and tried to return his money, but he won't take it."

"You want me to give it to him?" I asked.

The kid measured me with a nasty look. "Don't get eager, Dad. I know some dirty stuff."

"So do I," I said, not paying too much attention to him. The whole thing had a phony ring. She rented these rooms for six dollars.

Mrs. Langston was worried. "Maybe I'd better call the police."

"Never mind," I said. I took the money from her hand and looked at the kid. "Who paid you?" I asked.

"Paid me? How stupid can you get? I don't know what you're talking about. So me and my wife are on our honeymoon and we stop at this crummy motel—"

"And then she hides out in back among the rice and old shoes while you go in and register."

"So she's bashful, Dad."

"Sure." I said. She had all the dewy innocence of a kick in the groin. "Where's your luggage?"

"It got lost."

"It's an idea," I said. I folded the two bills and shoved them into the breast pocket of the T-shirt thing. "Beat it."

He was fast, but he telegraphed with his eyes. I blocked the left, and then took the knee against my thigh. "Slug him, Jere!" the girl squealed. I chopped his guard down and hit him. He made a half turn against the side of the car and slid into the gravel on his face. I walked over by him. It was like watching the slowed-down film strip of some tired old football play you've seen so many times you can call every move before it starts—rolling over, pushing up, the quick stab at the right-hand trousers pocket, and the little sideways flip of the wrist as it comes out, the thumb pressing, and the metallic *tunk* as the blade snaps open. I kicked his forearm and the knife sailed off into the gravel. He grabbed the arm with his left hand, and leaned forward, making no sound. I closed the knife and threw it over the top of the building into the darkness beyond. He stood up in a minute, still holding the arm.

"It's not broken," I said. "Next time it will be."

They got in, watching me like two wild animals. The girl drove. The sedan went out onto the road and disappeared, going east, away from town. I turned back. Mrs. Langston was leaning against one of the posts supporting the roof of the porch with her cheek against her forearm, watching me.

She wasn't scared, or horrified, or shocked; the only thing in her eyes was weariness, an absolute weariness, I thought, of all bitterness and all violence. She straightened, and pushed a hand back through her hair. "Thank you," she said.

"Not at all."

"What did you mean when you asked who paid him?"

"It was just a hunch. They could get you into plenty of trouble."

She nodded. "I know. But it didn't occur to me it wasn't their own idea."

"The idea's probably nothing new to them," I said. "But since when did they need a six-dollar room?"

"Oh."

"They're not from around here?"

"I don't think so," she said.

Back in the room, I soaked a puffy hand for a while and read until nearly midnight. I had turned out the light and was just dropping off to sleep when the telephone rang on the night table between the beds.

I reached for it, puzzled. Nobody would be calling me here. "Hello," I muttered drowsily.

"Chatham?" It was a man's voice, toneless, anonymous scarcely louder than a whisper.

"Yes."

"We don't need you. Beat it."

I was fully awake now. "Who is it?"

"Never mind," he went on softly. "Just keep going."

"Why don't you write me an anonymous letter? That's another corny gesture."

"We know a better one. We'll show you, just by way of a hint."

He hung up.

I replaced the instrument and lit a cigarette. It was mystifying and utterly pointless. Was it my friend Rupe, with a nose full? No-o. The voice was unidentifiable, but whoever it was hadn't sounded drunk. But how had he known my name? I shrugged it off and turned on the light. Anonymous telephone threats! How silly could you get?

When I awoke it was past nine. After a quick shower, I dressed and went out, intending to go across the road to Ollie's for some breakfast. It was a hot, bright morning, and the sudden glare of the sun on white gravel hurt my eyes at first. The cars of the night before were gone. Josie was waddling along in front of the doors in the other wing with her baskets of cleaning gear and fresh bed linen.

"Good mawnin'," she said. I waved and started across towards the road just as she let herself into one of the rooms. Then I heard her scream.

She came plunging down the long porch that linked the rooms, running like a fat bear, and crying, "Oh, Miss Georgia! Oh, Good Lawd in Heaven, Miss Georgia—!"

I didn't bother with her. I whirled and went across the courtyard on the run, towards the door she'd left open as she fled. I slid to a stop, braking myself with a hand on the door-jamb, and looked in, and I could feel the cold rage come churning up inside me. It was a masterpiece of viciousness. I'd seen one other before, and you never forget just what they look like.

Paint hung from the plaster on walls and ceilings in bilious strips, and some of the piled bedclothes and curtains still foamed slightly and stank, and the carpet was a darkened and disintegrating ruin. Varnish was peeling from all the wooden surfaces of the furniture, the chest of drawers, the night table, and the headboards of the beds. I heard them running up behind me, and then she was standing by my side in the doorway.

"Don't go in," I said.

She looked at it, but she didn't say anything. I was ready to catch her and put out my hand to take her arm. but she didn't fall. She merely leaned against the door-jamb and closed her eyes. Josie stared and made a moaning sound in her throat and patted her clumsily on the shoulder.

"What is it?" she asked me, her eyes big and frightened. "What make them sheets and things bubble like that?"

"Acid," I said. I reached down and picked up a fragment of the carpet. It fell apart in my hands. I smelled it.

"What's the carpet made of, do you know?" I asked.

She stared at me without comprehension.

I asked Mrs. Langston. "The carpet. Do you know whether it's wool or cotton? Or a synthetic?"

She spoke without opening her eyes. "It's cotton."

Probably sulphuric, I thought. I could walk in it if I washed my shoes right afterwards. From the doorway I could see both the big mirrors had been placed on one of the beds and smashed, covered with bedclothes to deaden the sound, and I wanted to see just what he'd used on the bath and wash-basin. "Watch her," I warned Josie, and started to step inside. She cracked then.

She opened her eyes at last, and then put her hands up against the sides of her face and began to laugh. I lunged at her, but she turned and ran out on the gravel and stood there in the sun pushing her fingers up through her hair while tears ran down her cheeks and she shook with the wild shrieks of laughter that were like the sound of something tearing. I grabbed her arm with my left hand and slapped her, and when she gasped and stopped laughing to stare inquiringly at me as if I were somebody she'd never seen before I grabbed her up in my arms and started running towards the office.

"Come on," I snapped at Josie.

I put her down in one of the bamboo armchairs just as Josie came waddling frantically through the door behind me. I waved towards the telephone.

"Who's her doctor? Tell him to get out here right away."

"Yessuh." She grabbed up the receiver and began dialing.

I turned and knelt beside Georgia Langston. She hadn't fainted, but her face was deathly pale and her eyes completely without expression as her hands twisted at the cloth of her skirt.

"Mrs. Langston," I said. "It's all right."

She didn't even see me.

"Georgia!" I said sharply.

She frowned then, and some of the blankness went out of her eyes and she looked at me. And this time I was there.

"Oh," she said. She put her hands up to her face and shook her head. "I—I'm all right," she said shakily.

Josie put down the phone. "The doctor'll be here in a few minutes," she said.

"Good." I stood up. "What was the number of that room?"

"That was Five."

I hurried over behind the desk. "Do you know where she keeps the registration cards?"

"I'll get them," Mrs. Langston said. She started to get up. I strode back and pushed her down in the chair again. "Stay there. Just tell me where they are."

"A box. On the shelf under the desk. If you'll hand them to me—"

I found it and put it in her lap. "Do you take license numbers?"

"Yes," she said, taking the cards out one by one and glancing at them. "I've got that one, I know. It was a man alone. He came in about two o'clock this morning."

"Good." I whirled back to the telephone and dialed Operator. When she answered, I said, "Get me the Highway Patrol."

"There's not an office here," she said. "The nearest one—"

"I don't care where it is," I said. "Just get it for me."

"Yes, sir. Hold on, please."

I turned to Mrs. Langston. She had found the card. "What kind of car was it?" I asked.

She was seized by a spasm of trembling, as if with a chill. She took a deep breath. "A Ford. A green sedan. It was a California license, and I remember thinking it was odd the man should have such a Southern accent, almost like a Georgian."

"Fine," I said. "Read the number off to me."

"It's M-F-A-three-six-three."

It took a second to sink in. I was repeating it. "M-F-*what?*"

I whirled, reached out, and grabbed it from her hand.

"I'm ringing your party, sir," the operator said.

I looked at the number on the card. "Never mind, Operator," I said slowly. "Thank you." I dropped the receiver back on the cradle.

Mrs. Langston stared at me. "What is it?" she asked wonderingly.

"That's *my* number," I said.

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"They were the plates off my car."

4

We'll show you tomorrow, he'd said. But just a hint! you understand. The job was for my benefit. He'd done five hundred to a thousand dollars' worth of damage to one of her rooms to get his message across to me.

I stepped over by her. "Can you describe him?" I asked.

Her head was bowed again, and her hands trembled as they pleated and unpleated a fold of her skirt. She was slipping back into the wooden insularity of shock. I knelt beside the chair. I hated to hound her this way, but when the doctor arrived he'd given her a sedative, and it might be twenty-four hours before I could talk to her again.

"Can you give me any kind of description of him?" I asked gently.

She raised her head a little and focused her eyes on me, then drew a hand across her face in a bewildered gesture. She took a shaky breath. "I—I—"

Josie shot me an angry and troubled glance. "Hadn't you ought to leave her alone? The pore child can't takes no more."

"I know," I said.

Mrs. Langston made a last effort. "I'm all right." She paused, and then went on in a voice that was almost inaudible and was without any expression at all. "I think he was about thirty-five. Tall. Perhaps six foot. But very thin.

He had sandy hair, and pale blue eyes, and he'd been out in the sun a lot. You know—wrinkles in the corners of the eyes—bleached eyebrows. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"You're doing fine," I told her. "Can you think of anything else?"

She took a deep breath. "I think he wore glasses. . . Yes. . . They had steel rims. . . He had on a white shirt. . . But no tie."

"Any distinguishing marks? Scars, things like that?"

She shook her head.

A car came to a stop on the gravel outside. I stood up. "What's the doctor's name?" I asked Josie.

"Dr. Graham," she said.

I went out. A youngish man with a pleasant, alert face and a blond crew-cut was slamming the door of a green two-seater. He had a small black bag in his hand.

"Dr. Graham? My name's Chatham," I said. We shook hands and I told him quickly what had happened. "On top of all the rest of it, I suppose it overloaded her. Hysteria, shock—I don't know exactly what you'd call it. But I think she's on the ragged edge of a nervous breakdown."

"Yes, I see. We'd better have a look at her," he said politely, but with the quick impatience of all physicians for all lay diagnosis.

I followed him inside.

He spoke to her, and then frowned at the woodenness of her response. "We'd better get her into the bedroom," he said. "If you'll help—"

"Just bring your bag," I said.

She tried to protest and stand, but I picked her up and followed Josie in through the curtained doorway behind the desk. It was a combined living- and dining-room. There were two doors opposite. The one on the right led into the bedroom. It was cool and quiet, with the curtains closed against the sun, and furnished with quiet good taste. The rug was pearl-gray, and there was a double bed covered with a dark blue corduroy spread. I placed her on it.

"I'm all right now," she said, trying to sit up. I pushed her gently back onto the pillow. Framed in the aureole of dark and tousled hair, her face was like white wax.

Dr. Graham placed his bag on a chair and was taking out the stethoscope. He nodded for me to leave. "You stay," he said to Josie.

I went back through the outer room. It had a fireplace at one end, and there were a number of mounted fish on the walls and some enlarged photographs of boats. I thought absently that the fish were dolphin, but I paid little attention to them. I was in a hurry. I grabbed up the phone in the office and called the Sheriff.

"He's not here," a man's voice said. "This is Redfield. What can I do for you?"

"I'm calling from the Magnolia Lodge—" I began.

"Yes?" he interrupted. "What's wrong out there now. The voice wasn't harsh so much as abrupt and impatient and somehow annoyed.

"Vandalism," I said. "An acid job. Somebody's wrecked one of the rooms."

"Acid? When did it happen?"

"Sometime between two a.m. and daylight."

"He rented the room? Is that it?" In spite of the undertone of annoyance or whatever it was, this one obviously was more on the ball than that comedian I'd talked to yesterday. There was a tough professional competence in the way he snapped the questions.

"That's right," I said. "How about shooting a man here?"

"You got a license number? Description of the car?"

"The car's a green Ford sedan," I replied, and quickly repeated her description of the man. "The number was phony. The plates were stolen."

"Hold it a minute!" he cut in brusquely. "What do you mean, they're stolen? How would you know?"

"Because they were mine. My car's in the garage, being worked on. The big garage with a showroom—"

"Not so fast. Just who are you, anyway?"

I told him. Or started to. He interrupted me again. "Look, I don't get you in this picture at all. Put Langston on."

"She's collapsed," I said. "The doctor's with her. How about getting a man out here to look at that mess?"

"We'll send somebody," he said. "And you stick around. We want to talk to you."

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

He hung up.

I stood for a moment, thinking swiftly. The chances were it was sulphuric. That was cheap, and common, easy to get. And if I could neutralize it soon enough I might save a little something from the wreckage. The woodwork and furniture could be refinished if the stuff didn't eat in too far. But I had to be sure, first. Turning, I hurried back into the room behind the curtained doorway, and took the door on the left this time. It was the kitchen. I began yanking open the cupboards above the sink. In a moment I found what I was looking for, a small tin of bicarbonate of soda.

Grabbing it, I went out and up to Room 5 at the double. I stood in the doorway and rubbed my handkerchief into the sodden ruin of the carpet until it was damp with the acid. Then I spread it on the concrete slab of the porch, sprinkled a heavy coating of soda over one half of it and waited. In a few minutes the untreated part tore at a touch, like wet paper, but that under the soda was merely discolored. I kicked it off onto the gravel and went back. My hand itched where it had been in contact with the acid. I found a tap in front of the office and washed it.

I could take her car if I could find the keys. But I wanted to talk to the doctor before he left, and I had to be here when the men from the Sheriff's office showed up. I went inside and called a taxi. When I hung up I could hear the professional murmur of the doctor's voice in the bedroom. With nothing to occupy my mind for the moment, I was conscious of the rage again. The yearning to get my hands on him was almost like sexual desire. Cool off, I thought; you'd better watch that. In another minute or two a car stopped outside. I went out.

It was Jake, with his keyboard of grave and improbable teeth. "Howdy," he said.

"Good morning, Jake." I handed him a twenty. "Run over to the nearest grocery store or market, will you, and bring me a case of baking soda."

He stared. "A case? You sure must have a king-size indigestion."

"Yeah," I said. When I offered no explanation, he took off, still looking at me as if I'd gone mad.

There'd probably be very little chance of tracing the acid, I thought. We were dealing with a sharper mind than that: he'd know better than to buy it, and if he could break into that garage to lift my number plates he could certainly do the same to some battery shop to steal it.

I glanced at my watch with sudden impatience. What the hell was keeping them? It had been ten minutes since I'd called. I went back inside. Josie had come out and was standing by the desk in doleful and anxious suspension as if she couldn't figure out which way to turn to pick up the broken thread of her day. The doctor came out through the curtains and set his bag on the desk. He was carrying a prescription pad.

"What do you think?" I asked.

He glanced at me, frowning. "You're not a relative by any chance?"

"No," I said.

He nodded. "I didn't think she had any here—"

"Listen, Doctor," I said, "somebody's got to take charge here. I don't know what friends she has in town, or where you could run down her next of kin, so you might as well tell me. I'm a friend of hers."

"Very well." He put down the prescription pad, undipped his pen, and started writing. "Get these made up right away and start giving them as soon as she wakes up. I gave her a sedative, so it'll be late this afternoon or tonight. But what she needs more than anything is rest--"

He stopped then and glanced up at me. "And what I mean by rest is exactly that. Absolute rest, in bed. Quiet. With as few worries as possible and no more emotional upheavals if you can help it."

"You name it," I said. "She gets it."

"Try to get some food into her. I'd say off-hand she was twenty pounds underweight. I can't tell until we can run lab tests, of course, but I don't think it's anemia or anything

organic at all. It looks like overwork, lack of sleep, and emotional strain."

"What about nervous breakdown?"

He shook his head. "That's always unpredictable; it varies too much with individual temperament and nervous reserve. We'll just have to wait and see what she's like in the next few days. Off-hand, I'd say she's dangerously close to it. I don't know how long she's been over-drawing her account, and I'm no psychiatrist, anyway, but I do think she's been under too much pressure too long—"

His voice trailed off. Then he shrugged, and said crisply, "Well, to get back to more familiar ground. This is a tranquillizer. And this one's vitamins. And here's Phenobarbital." He glanced up at me as he shoved the prescriptions across the desk. "Keep the phenobarbs yourself and give it to her by individual dose, as directed."

"That bad?" I asked.

"No. Probably not. But why take chances?"

"Had I better round up a nurse?"

He glanced at Josie. "Do you stay here nights?"

"No, suh," she replied. "I ain't been, but I could."

"Fine. There should be somebody around. For the next few nights, anyway."

"You do that," I told her. "Let the rest of the place go and just take care of her. I'm going to close it for the time being, anyway."

Dr. Graham gathered up his bag. "Call me when she wakes up. I won't come out unless it's necessary, but you can tell when you talk to her."

"Sure," I said. "Thanks a lot."

He drove off. Just as he was going out onto the highway, Jake turned in. I set the case of bicarbonate on the porch, took the change, paid him, and gave him a large tip. He departed towards town, shaking his head.

I found a long garden hose that would reach up to No. 5, and coupled it to the tap outside the office. But I couldn't touch a thing until they'd been over it. I glanced up the highway; there was no Sheriff's car in sight. I looked at my

watch, threw the hose savagely onto the gravel, strode into the office, and picked up the phone.

The same Deputy answered. "Sheriff's office. Redfield."

"This is Chatham, at the Magnolia Lodge motel—"

"Yes, yes," he cut me off brusquely. "What do you want now?"

"I want to know when you're going to send somebody out here."

"Don't heave your weight around. We're sending a man."

"When?" I asked. "Try to make it this week, will you? I want to neutralize that acid and wash the place out before it eats it down to the foundations."

"Well, wash it out. You've got our permission."

"Look, don't you want pictures for evidence? And how about checking the hardware for prints?"

"Get off my back, will you? For Christ's sake, if he was working with acid, he had on rubber gloves. Prints!"

There was a lot of logic in that, of course. But it wasn't infallible, by any means, and as an assumption it was slipshod police work. And I had an odd feeling he knew it. He was being a little too hard, a little too vehement

"And another thing," he went on, "about this pipe dream that he was using your plates. I don't like gags like that not even a little. I just called the garage, and both plates are right there on your car."

I frowned. Had she seen them or merely taken his word for it? Then I remembered. She'd said they were California tags, but all he'd put down on the card had been the number. She'd seen them herself.

"So he put them back," I said. "Don't ask me why."

"I won't. I'd be goofy enough if I even believed he'd taken them."

"Did they report the garage had been entered?"

"No. Of course not."

"All right, listen. It's very easy to settle. But why not get off your fat and go do it yourself instead of telephoning? If you'll check that garage, you'll find it's been broken into somewhere. And you'll also find those plates have been

taken off, and then put back. There's no strain. California didn't issue a new plate in 'fifty-seven, just a sticker tab. So they've been bolted on there for eighteen months. If the bolts are still frozen, the drinks are on me. But how about dusting them for prints first? Not that I think you'll find any: the joker is too smart for that."

"Do you think I'm nuts? Why the hell would anybody go to all that trouble to get a license plate?"

"If you ever get out here," I said, "I'll tell you about it."

"Stick around. There's going to be somebody. You're beginning to interest me."

"Well, that's something," I said, but he'd already hung up.

I put down the instrument, and was just going out the door when it rang. I went back. "Hello. Magnolia Lodge motel."

There was no answer, only the faint hiss of background noise and what might have been somebody breathing. "Hello," I said again.

The receiver clicked in my ear as he hung up.

The creep, I thought. Or was it my friend this time, checking to see if I was still around? Then a sudden thought arrested me, and I wondered why it hadn't occurred to me before. It could be the same man. Maybe he wasn't a psycho at all. Maybe it was a systematic and cold-blooded campaign to wreck her health and sanity and ruin her financially. And he'd wanted to get rid of me in case I was trying to help her.

But why? There was suspicion here, God knows, like a dark and ugly stain all over town, and distrust and antagonism, but they couldn't explain a thing like this. A deliberate attempt to drive somebody crazy was worse than murder. It had to be the work of a hopelessly warped mind. But could a deranged mind call the shots the way he had last night? I didn't know. The thing grew murkier every time you turned around.

Out behind the building I found some planks that would do to stand on, and dragged them up in front of No. 5. Just as I was throwing them down on the gravel a police car turned in from the highway. There was only one officer in it. He stopped and got out, a big man still in his twenties, with the build and movements of an athlete. He had a fleshy, good-looking face with a lot of assurance in it, a cleft chin, green

eyes, and long dark hair meticulously combed. He could have attacked you with the creases in the khaki trousers and the short jacket, but he wouldn't have needed to. The gunbelt about his waist carried a .45 with pearl handles, and dangling from the trouser belt was an embossed leather case containing his handcuffs. With only a few changes of uniform he could have just stepped off the set of *Rose Marie*, and I half expected him to burst into song. Cut it out, I thought. You've had a grouch on so long you hate everybody.

"Redfield?" I asked.

He gave me a negligent shake of the head. "Magruder."

"I'm glad to see you," I said. "My name's Chatham."

He contained his ecstasy over that with no great difficulty. "I hear you're real antsy for somebody to look at that room," he said. "So let's look at it."

I nodded towards the open doorway of No. 5. He strode over with the insolent grace of a bullfighter, his thumbs hooked in the gunbelt, and peered in.

"Hmmm," he said. Then he turned and jerked his head at me. "All right. Get those planks in there."

I glanced at him, but kept my mouth shut, and tossed the planks in. I felt like Sir Waller Raleigh. While I was standing on the second and dropping the third, which would reach opposite the bathroom door, he stepped inside.

Glancing around at the obscene and senseless ruin, he said casually, "Quite a mess, huh?"

"That was more or less the way it struck me," I said. He paid no attention. I stepped over to look into the bathroom, and felt the proddings of rage again. He'd got the fixtures, all right. Both the tub and wash-basin had dark slashes across the bottom where he'd gouged the enamel off. I wondered how he'd managed to keep the noise down. Probably used a rubber mallet with the chisel, I thought. He'd also used the same tool to gouge long streaks across the tile on the walls. On the floor were two empty one-gallon glass jugs with the rubber stoppers lying beside them.

Magruder came up alongside me and peered in. He grinned. "That guy was in a real pet, wasn't he?"

You asked for a cop and they sent you a comic-opera clown like this. I choked down a sarcastic remark that wouldn't have helped the situation a great deal, and was just about to ask him where he wanted to start when he shrugged and said, "Well, that's about it, huh?" He turned and went out.

I stared at his back in disbelief, but followed him. I caught up with him on the porch. "What do you mean, that's it?"

He favored me with an indifferent glance and hitched up his gunbelt again. "I've seen it, haven't I? I'll make a report on it, but we haven't got much to go on."

"How about checking this place for prints?" I asked. "Or don't you want to? And how about the registration card he made out? And if you thought it wouldn't bore you too much, I can give you a description of him. And the car. Any of that interest you? And what about those jugs in there?"

"Well, what about the jugs? They had acid in 'em. So I know that already."

I was beginning to get it now, though not the reason for it. Even this scenic and posturing hero wasn't that stupid. He knew what you did with those jugs. You checked them for prints; you found out what kind of acid had been in them; then you found out where they'd been stolen from, and how, and went on from there. It was a deliberate goof-off.

"Then you're not interested? Is that it?"

"I didn't say that, did I?"

"How do you get hold of the Sheriff of this County?" I asked. "Is there a password or something? I've tried the office twice—"

"Try the Mayo Clinic," he suggested. Then he added, "It's in Minnesota."

"Thanks," I said. "But maybe somebody's in charge while he's gone?"

"Sure," he said. "Redfield."

"I see."

"You remember him; you talked to him on the phone." He grinned. "He mentioned it."

"Sure," I said. I remember him. That's what puzzles me. He sounded like a cop."

He turned and stared coldly. "What do you mean by that?"

"Did he tell you how to do this? Or did you figure it out yourself?"

"He did tell me to find out who the hell you are," he snapped. "Turn around and put your hands against that wall."

"Cut it out," I said.

"Turn around!"

I sighed and put my hands against the wall. He shook me down for the gun he knew I didn't have. Then he caught me by the shoulder and whirled me around facing him. and did it again. He managed to get an elbow under my chin a couple of times, pull my shirt tail out, and step on my feet, but as a rough frisk it was pretty crude Any rookie could have done better. Humiliation is the only object of it, anyway, and without an audience it's pointless. He stepped back.

"You through?" I asked.

"You got any identification?"

"It's in my hip pocket. You've been over it three times." "Give it here."

I took out the wallet, deliberately removed the money from it, and handed it to him. His face reddened. He shuffled through the identification.

His eyes jerked up at me. "Cop, huh?"

"I was one," I said.

"What are you doing around here?"

"I'm going to wash the acid out of that room as soon as we finish this comedy routine."

"I mean, what're you hanging around for? What have you got to do with this place? And Mrs. Langston?"

"I'm staying here, while they fix my car."

"How come you're working for her? Can't you pay for your room?"

"Let's just say she's a friend of mine. And I thought she needed help."

"A friend, huh? How long have you known her?"

"A little less than a day."

He gave me a cold smile. "You sure make friends fast. Or maybe she does."

"Tell me something," I said. "How does it happen she can't get any police protection?"

"Who said she couldn't?"

"Look around you."

"What do you expect us to do?" he asked. "Stay out here night and day because people don't like her?"

"*Who* doesn't?" I asked. "If you're supposed to be a cop, I'd think that would suggest something to you. It's just possible the guy who dumped that acid in there didn't like her."

"Round up half the people in town? Is that it?"

"You know better than that. There's not half a dozen people in any town that'd do a job like this."

I was wasting my breath. He turned away and stepped down onto the gravel. "Here's your stuff," he said, and tossed the wallet onto the concrete at my feet.

"Thanks," I said.

"Don't mention it. And there's one more thing. If it was me, I'd be mighty careful who I got mixed up with around here. She's going to have all the police attention she wants one of these days."

"Yes?" I said. I'd been wondering if he'd come out and say it. "Why?"

"If you've been around here all day, you know why. She killed her husband."

"Then you don't arrest people for that around here, and try them?" I asked. "You just let hoodlums burn their places down with acid?"

"You arrest 'em as soon as you've got a case," he said. "You're able to tell everybody how to run a police department, you ought to know that."

"Did you ever hear of slander?" I asked.

He nodded. "Sure. And did you ever try to prove it without witnesses?"

He went over and started to get into his car. "Wait a minute," I said. He paused and turned.

I reached down and picked up the wallet. "You wanted to see me do it, didn't you? I wouldn't want to spoil your whole day."

He stared coldly, but said nothing as he drove off.

5

I located the fuse box and killed the circuits in that wing of the building so I wouldn't electrocute myself with the hose. Changing into swimming trunks, I went to work. I stood in the doorway playing the hose on walls and ceiling and furniture until water began running over the threshold. I broke open a half-dozen boxes of the soda and scattered it around and washed down some more. When I tried to move the bedclothes, curtains, and mattresses, they tore into rotten and mushy shreds, so I found some garden tools and raked them out onto the gravel, along with all the carpet I could tear up. It was sickening.

Even as diluted as the stuff was now, it kept stinging my feet when I had to step off the boards. I played the hose on them to wash it off. In about fifteen minutes I had the worst of it out. I dragged the bed-frames and headboards, the chest, the two armchairs, and the night table out onto the concrete porch and played the hose on them some more and scattered the rest of the soda over the wet surfaces. I showered and changed back into my clothes, and went over to the office. Josie said Mrs. Langston was sleeping quietly. She brought me the keys to the station wagon.

"Turn on the 'No Vacancy' sign," I said. "And if anybody comes in, tell him the place is closed."

She looked doubtful. "You reckon Miss Georgia goin' to like that? She's kind of pinched for money."

"I'll square it with her," I said. "She needs rest more than she needs money, and we're going to see she gets it."

That wasn't the only reason, but I saw no point in going into it now. I drove into town and parked near the garage. In the repair shed a mechanic was working on my car, unbolting the old radiator. He looked up and nodded.

"Borrow one of your screwdrivers?" I asked. "Sure," he said. "Here."

I went around back and tested one of the screws holding the rear plate. It came loose freely. So did the other one. You could even see where he'd put machine oil on the threads to break them loose. I heard footsteps beside me and looked up. It was the sour-faced foreman in his white overall.

He nodded. "What's all the whoop-de-do with the license plates? Man from the Sheriff's office was fiddlin' with 'em a while ago. And dusting powder over them."

"Which man?" I asked.

"You wouldn't know him. That hard case."

"Magruder?"

He shook his head. "That's the one thinks he's hard. This one is. Kelly Redfield."

I thought he'd sounded like a good cop. He screamed about it and for some reason tried to slough it off, but in the end he had to come and see. "What he say?" I asked.

"Say? That guy? He wouldn't give you the time of day."

"But he did tell you where they broke in?"

Surprise showed for an instant on the sour and frozen face before he brought it under control again. "How'd you know? He said there was a busted pane in the washroom window. And he wanted to know if we'd missed anything."

"Have you?"

He shook his head. "Not as far as we can tell yet."

"How about battery acid?"

"We haven't got any."

Well, he'd stolen it somewhere in this area, because he had it here at two a.m. He couldn't have gone very far after

it. Maybe Redfield had some ideas. I should be able to catch him at the office.

It was at the rear of the courthouse, a dreary room floored with scarred brown linoleum and smelling of dust. The wall at the right was banked with steel filing cabinets, and across the room at desks near a barred window, Magruder and a bull of a man with red hair were doing paperwork. The wall at my left was filled with bulletins and "Wanted" posters. A large overhead fan circled with weary futility, stirring the heat. At the left end of the room there was a water-cooler and a doorway leading into an inner office.

Magruder came over. I noticed he still wore the heavy gunbelt and the .45 even while shuffling papers. Maybe he wore it to bed. "What do you want now?" he asked.

"I want to talk to your boss."

At that moment a lean-hipped man in faded khaki came out of the inner office with a handful of papers which he tossed on one of the desks. Magruder jerked his head at me. "Kelly, here's that guy now."

Redfield turned with a quick, hard glance. "Chatham?"

"That's right," I said.

"Come in here."

I followed him into the inner office. An old roll-top desk against the wall on the left. On the right there were two filing cabinets, and a hat-rack on which were draped his jacket, a black tie, and a shoulder holster containing a gun. A locked, glass-fronted case held four carbines. One barred window looked out onto a parking area paved with white gravel.

He nodded towards the straight chair at the end of the desk. "Sit down."

Without taking his eyes off me, he groped in the pocket of the jacket for cigarettes. He lit one, without offering them to me, and flipped the match into the tray on his desk. He was a man of thirty-six or thirty-eight, with an air of tough competence about him that matched the way he had sounded on the telephone. The face was lean, the jaw clean-cut and hard, and he had a high, rounded forehead and thinning brown hair. The hard-bitten eyes were gray. It was

a face with intelligence in it, and character, but for the moment at least, no warmth at all.

"All right, Chatham," he said. "What are you after around here?"

"Magruder told you," I said. "You sent him to find out."

"I did. And you don't make any sense. Start making some."

He irritated me, and puzzled me at the same time. Honest, hard-working professional cop was written all over him, and he hadn't been able to resist a police problem, but why the antagonism? "Were there any prints on those plates?" I asked.

"No," he said curtly. "Of course not. And there wouldn't have been any in the room, or on those jugs. You think the man who worked out that operation was a fool, or an amateur? But never mind him; let's get back to you."

"Why?"

"I want to know who the hell you are, and what you're doing here. He went to all that trouble to use your plates. Why?"

The message was for me," I said. I told him about the telephone call warning me to leave, and the earlier call to her and my efforts to find the booth with the noisy fan.

He walked over in front of me. "In other words, you're, not in town thirty minutes before you're up to your neck in police business. You're a trouble-maker, Chatham; I can smell you a mile off."

"I reported it to this office," I said. "And I was kissed off. You're trying to slough off this acid job, too, but you can't quite make yourself do it entirely. What's with it? I've seen dirt swept under the rug before, but you don't look quite the type for it."

Just for an instant there was something goaded and savage in his eyes, and I thought he was going to hit me. Then he had it under control. "Nobody is being kissed off here," he said. "And nothing is being swept under the rug. The description of that man, and his car, have gone out to all adjoining counties and to the Highway Patrol. I know where the acid came from—"

"You do?" I asked.

"Shut up," he said, without raising his voice. "You shot off your mouth, and I'm telling you, so listen. The chances are a thousand to one he'll never be picked up. Green Ford sedans are as common as Smiths in a raided whore house. So are men answering that description. Even together, you haven't got much, and by now he'll be in a different car altogether. In a place this size, he had to be from out of town. That means he was probably hired for the job, and he could be from anywhere within a thousand miles of here. The acid itself is a dead end. A truck was hijacked a few weeks ago just east of here, and one of the items on the manifest was ten gallons of sulphuric acid. I just looked it up. The hijackers were never caught, and none of the stuff's been located. The bulk of it was paint, that could be sold anywhere. So try to come up with a lead there. That just leaves you."

"What do you mean?"

He jabbed a forefinger at me. "You stick out of this mess like a blonde with a pet skunk, and the more I look at you the wronger you get. For some reason, it happens the very day you show up. You've got some cock-and-bull story about a mysterious telephone call. If you're lying about that, you're mixed up in it. If you're not lying and somebody is trying to get you out of here, you're mixed up in something else. I don't like trouble-makers and goons that wander in here for no reason at all and seem to wind up out there at that motel. We've still got the stink from the last one."

"I thought we'd get back to that," I said. "In other words you don't care what happens to her, or how she gets pushed around. You've got an unsolved murder on your hands and as far as you're concerned she's guilty, whether you can prove it or not. Well, you're right about the smell around here. And it's about time somebody found what's causing it."

He leaned over me with one hand on the corner of the desk. "Get this, Chatham," he said harshly, "and get it straight the first time. I don't know what you're after around here, but I know you. We don't need any meddlers, and we've got all the trouble we need. You make one phony move, and I'm going to land on you, and land hard. Now get out of here, and do your best to stay out." I stood up.

"Okay. I can hear you."

Magruder had come over, and was standing in the doorway. He stared coldly. Redfield nodded for him to let me out, and he moved to one side. "Big shot," he said.

I ignored him, and spoke to Redfield. "I'm not stupid enough to bring charges before a Grand Jury as long as you're going through the motions, but don't think you can stop me from looking under the rug myself. And when you land on me, make sure you've got legal grounds."

"I will have," he said. "Now, beat it."

I went out, conscious that I had just made the situation worse, but still angry enough not to care. I stopped at a drugstore to have the prescriptions made up, and drove back to the motel. When I parked in front of the office, I looked at my watch. It was after eleven, and I remembered I'd never had any breakfast. Maybe I could catch Ollie alone at the same time. I walked across the road, ordered a sandwich and a cup of coffee, and carried them into the bar. There was only one customer, a man in a linesman's outfit. He finished his beer and went out, clanking like a walking tool kit.

I put my stuff on the bar and pulled up a stool. "You don't mind if I sit here?" I asked. "As long as I'm not bothering your regular customer?"

He shrugged, but there was amusement in the level brown eyes. "I'm sorry about that. But you know how it is."

"Forget it," I said. He had a clean-cut look about him, and I had a hunch he wasn't one of the crowd that was on her back. I wished I could be sure.

He came over, propped a foot on the shelf under the bar, and leaned on his knee. He lit a cigarette. "That was a dirty pool, that acid."

"How did you hear about it?" I asked.

"Saw the stuff over there, where you pulled it out. I went over, and the maid told me about it. Sheriff's office come up with anything?"

"Not much," I said. I drank some of the coffee.

"That Redfield's a good cop. Tougher than a boot, but smart. And honest."

"Yeah," I said non-committally. "But why did you ask me?"

"It's all over town you've got some connection with her."

I nodded. "I didn't have. But I do now. That acid job was partly my fault."

"How come?"

"Let me ask you a question first," I said. "Do you honestly think she was involved in that murder?"

"You want to know what I really think?" He looked me right in the eye. "I think I've got a nice place here. Forty thousand dollars' worth, and I won't be twenty-seven till next month. It makes me a good living and I like it. So I think whatever my customers think, or I keep my fat mouth shut."

"Don't try to snow me," I said. "You didn't make all this in your twenties by being bird-brained or gutless. You know damned well what you think, and that is she's not the type of woman who'd even give Strader the time of day."

He nodded. "All right. So maybe that's what I think. I didn't say it, mind you; you did. So what does it buy? I've got a hobby, see—"

"Hobby?"

"Yeah. It's chasing things. Two things—women and tarpon. And by now I know just about everything there is to know about tarpon, but I still don't know one damned thing about women. Neither do you."

"Sure. But you can play the odds. Now, listen—do you recall who used your telephone booth around two yesterday afternoon? A couple of hours before I was here?"

He frowned and shook his head. "I'd probably never notice unless they asked for change. People are in and out of it all the time. Why?"

I told him about the filthy telephone calls and the noisy fan. "Somewhere around town he must have seen me, and caught onto what I was doing. If he was in your lunch-room when she drove home—and I think he was, because he called right afterwards—he also saw me go into the office with her. So he knew me. You don't remember, then?"

"No-o. There could have been several, but I never pay any attention."

"Many people in and out of the bar between two and the time I showed up?"

"Half-dozen. Maybe more. It's hard to say."

"What about the ones who were here at the same time?"

"Hmmm," he said. "Let's see. That big guy was Red Dunleavy. He works at a filling station just up the road. He's probably made his share of improper suggestions to girls, but he'd make 'em in person, not over the phone. Rupe Hulbert's a loud-mouth, and nosy, but generally harmless. But what you're looking for, Chatham, is a nut. It wouldn't be any of those guys. Pearl Talley gets off some pretty raw jokes, but nothing like that—"

"What about the guy in the guitar-player's shirt, at the table with her?"

Ollie grinned briefly. "That's who I'm talking about. Pearl can be a man's name too down here. Talley's a clown type, and to look at him you'd think they had to rope him every morning to put shoes on him, but it's a front. He's sharp as a razor in a business deal; he can swap nickels with you, even money, and come out two dollars ahead. Owns several farms around here; runs I cattle on 'em, mostly."

There didn't appear to be anything in those three to I warrant any further questions at the moment. "Tell me about that night," I said. "What was it about the fake accident? They figure the two of them were going to leave Langston's car down there?"

Ollie nodded. "That's right. Langston had all his tackle and his motor in the station wagon, and was supposed to be going fishing."

"At four-thirty in the morning?"

"Sure. You fish for bass at daybreak."

"But what about the fake accident? Are they sure of that?"

"Yes. There was never any doubt of it. You see, Langston was a man about forty-seven years old and not very strong. He'd been sick. Well, there at Finley's Cut where he kept his boat tied up, there's a steep climb down about an eight-foot bank to get to the edge of the water. And a big log at the bottom of it that they padlock their boats to. His outboard motor weighed nearly fifty pounds. So you can see yourself what everybody would naturally think when he was found

down there with his head busted open against the log with the motor on top of him."

I nodded. "And what was Strader doing when Calhoun jumped him?"

"He was down there by the water with a flashlight and a piece of the bloody tarp, fixing up the log."

"There'd have to be more blood than that."

"That's right. And Strader knew it. He had his knife out and had just sliced it into the heel of his left hand when Calhoun told him to stand up and turn around."

I nodded. Ollie went on, his eyes thoughtful. "You see? Strader's a complete stranger around here, and not supposed to know either of the Langstons. So how did he know any of this? Where Langston kept the boat, how to get there, about the steep bank, and the log at the bottom of it?"

"I don't know," I said. It was deadly, all right. It was planned, premeditated murder, and one of them had got away with it. But did it have to be Mrs. Langston? Not so far. Any number of local people would have known all those things. But the really damning part of it was the attempt to make it look like an accident. That meant somebody involved knew he would be, or could be, suspected if it were discovered to be murder. Somebody with a known and provable connection with Langston. And since it didn't seem to be Strader. . .

"How did Calhoun happen to be down there?" I asked. "He's one of the town police, isn't he?"

"Just one of those things," Ollie replied. "He was on a fishing trip too, camped right below there. The car woke him up."

"I see. And how do they know it was a woman driving Strader's car?"

"My cook saw the car stop over there and a woman get out."

"Was he able to describe her?"

Ollie shook his head. "No. It was just a little after five, and that time of year it's still dark. He'd just come into the dining-room from his room in the back to start coffee, and happened to glance out the window. This car drove into the motel and parked in front of one of the rooms over there on

the right. He didn't pay much attention, of course, and the light wasn't very good in that spot, but he did notice it was a woman. He thought she had dark hair, but he wouldn't swear to it. She walked across towards the office, but she didn't go in. She disappeared into that open space between it and the end of the left-hand wing of the building."

"And when the police found the car, it was parked in front of the right room? The one Strader was registered in?"

"That's right."

I shook my head. "It's too pat. Do they think she'd be stupid enough to drive the car right back here to the motel?"

He exhaled smoke and studied it thoughtfully. "The theory is that she didn't know Calhoun got the license number. It's logical. She couldn't have seen him chasing her, in the dark, and he didn't shoot because he fell down and lost the gun. And if she left it somewhere else, she'd have to walk back, with the chance of being seen."

"But she was seen. And she didn't go into the office."

"There's a rear entrance. Out of sight from here."

"How soon did they find the car?"

"In less than thirty minutes. As soon as Calhoun could make the town and report it, the Sheriff drove out to tell her, and see if she was all right. He didn't know but what she'd been killed too. And the first thing he saw when he drove in was that same Dade County license right there in front of Room Fourteen."

"Was she asleep when he knocked? He'd be able to make a pretty good guess."

"No. She was in her nightdress and dressing-gown when she came to the door, but she was wide awake."

"Is that the straight dope? Or gossip?"

"It's just what was in the papers. That Sheriff keeps his business under his hat. And so does Redfield. Magruder talked a little, but I understand he was stepped on for it."

"Did she explain why she was awake at that time of day?"

"Yes," Ollie replied. "She said it was a phone call. Just before he got there."

"Who was it?"

"A wrong number. Or that is, the wrong motel. Some woman that sounded about half-drunk wanted to talk to a party that wasn't even registered."

I nodded. "So she had to shuffle through all the cards to be sure?"

"Yeah."

Just then another customer came in. I went back across the road. Josie had been in to make up the rooms. I switched on the air-conditioner and sat down to see if I could make sense of what I was doing. The only thing that was really apparent was that I was going to get my head knocked off. In less than twenty-four hours I'd been warned by two different sets of people to leave town or get hurt. And since I had no intention of doing it, I must be crazy.

Two sets of people? Yes. It almost had to be. Redfield was a complex man I didn't understand at all yet, and potentially a highly dangerous one, but I simply couldn't believe he was corrupt—or corrupt enough to be at the bottom of all this. Maybe the savagery in him was warping his judgment, but it could be the result of an honest conviction she was guilty and that she had beaten him. Therefore, he probably didn't even know who the other was, and I did have two separate outfits bent on getting rid of me.

And they might do it. I had no illusions about that. He had all the power of the Sheriff's office behind him, and some of the things he could do to you with only a slight misuse of it would make your hair curl. And as for the other one—he'd said the acid was only a hint. That was self-explanatory. And ominous.

It always led back to Langston's murder. And more and more it looked as if somebody had deliberately tried to frame her. The telephone call that morning could have been an honest mistake, but I didn't think so. It was too convenient. The woman who'd left Strader's car at the motel knew the Sheriff would be knocking on the office door inside half an hour to tell Mrs. Langston her husband was dead, and that flushed and dull-eyed appearance of having just been roused from sleep is too nearly impossible to fake to be anything but genuine. So she had to be awake. Pawing through registration cards and arguing with an apparent drunk would guarantee it.

Then, if you could assume the whole thing tied together, where did I start? There was no lead at all in the acid job. Strader, I thought. It all began with him, and whatever he'd come up here for. So far, nobody had found out what it was, so at least I was starting even. But Strader had come from Miami. Well, that presented no great problem. . . .

The phone rang. When I picked it up, a woman's voice said softly, "Mr. Chatham?"

"Yes," I said. "Who is it?"

"You wouldn't know me, but I might be able to tell you something."

"About what?"

"About some acid, maybe. If you thought it was worth a hundred dollars—"

She left it hanging there, and then I caught something in the background that made the pulse leap in my throat. It was the rough whirring sound of that fan with the defective bearing.

"Yes," I said, trying to keep the excitement out of my voice. "It might be worth that. Where could I meet you?"

"You can't," she said softly. "I wouldn't risk it for a thousand, let alone a hundred. But if you get the money for me, I'll phone—" She stopped abruptly, gasped, and the receiver clicked as she hung up.

I dropped the instrument back on the cradle and was out the door in three strides. The entrance to the Silver King was in plain sight from here. Nobody came out I almost ran, going across. When I pushed into the lunchroom a lone trucker was at the counter and the waitress was emerging from the kitchen with a tray. I forced myself to slow down and strolled casually into the bar.

It was empty, except for Ollie. He was disassembling and cleaning a big salt-water reel on a newspaper spread out on the bar. I looked stupidly around. He glanced up and sighed. "Corrosion," he said.

"Where'd she go?" I asked.

"Who?"

"The woman that just used the phone booth."

“In here?” he stared at me, frowning. “There hasn’t been any woman here. There hasn’t been anybody since just after you left.”

6

He was telling the truth, or he was one of the great actors of all time. But there had to be some explanation. He went on watching me as if I'd gone crazy as I wheeled and strode to the doorway at the rear beside the jukebox. The rest rooms were on either side of a short, dead-ended hall. They were both empty and there was no way out back here.

The kitchen, then—I came out of the hall, half-running, and then braked to a stop in front of the phone booth. It should have occurred to me before I stepped inside, took down the receiver and held it against my ear. Ollie wasn't lying; nobody had called from here. It had still been less than a minute, and the handset was as cool as the air-conditioned room.

Then I was going crazy, because the little fan was making exactly the noise I'd heard. And had heard the other time. There was no doubt of it. I shook my head in bewilderment and went over to the bar.

"I owe you an apology," I said. I told him about it, without mentioning what the woman had called for.

He nodded thoughtfully. "Then there's another one."

"Not in this town," I said. "I checked every booth in it except the phone company and stores. And it couldn't have been those because I heard a jukebox."

"I don't get it," he said.

I heard the front door of the lunch-room open, and the sound of hard heels behind me. Ollie reached into the ice-box, uncapped a bottle of beer, and placed it on the bar to the left of me. I turned. It was Pearl Talley. He was still wearing the same flamboyant shirt, apparently with a few added food stains. I noticed now he was larger than I'd thought, probably close on two hundred pounds. He looked soft.

"Howdy, men," he said, and grinned at us with that odd combination of blue-eyed innocence and sly humor, like some precociously lewd but none too intelligent baby.

Ollie introduced us. He stuck out his hand. "Sure proud to meet you," he said. "Doggone if you ain't a big one. Like to see you and ol' Calhoun mix it up." He pronounced it *Kayul-hoon*.

I shook hands with him, wishing the populace of this place would stop trying to match me with Calhoun. He took off the white hat, placed it on the bar beside him, and wiped the perspiration from his brow with his left forefinger, using it like a windshield swipe and giving it a little flip at the end which snapped the moisture onto the floor. He looked older with the hat off. The sandy hair was receding across the top of his head, revealing a large area of scalp as glistening and white as the inner membrane of a boiled egg.

"Doggone if she ain't a real scorcher out there," he said.

He had a backwoods Southern accent that might have appeared overdone to the point of burlesque on a stage but seemed perfectly natural in him. Any other time I might have been intrigued with it, but now I paid little attention. My thoughts were still chasing themselves around in a futile and endless circle. I hadn't imagined the sound of that fan; I'd heard it. That was definite. And there wasn't another booth in town with a noisy fan. That was equally definite. So where did it leave me?

"You know what them ol' Coulter boys done to me last night?" Pearl said to Ollie. "They like to lift off me everything I had. With these here rascals—"

He removed two strange objects from the breast pocket of his shirt and placed them on the bar. In spite of my preoccupation, I leaned forward to look. They were small sea-shells, spiraled and rather conical in shape.

"What are they?" I asked.

Ollie grinned briefly. "Hermit crabs."

"Oh," I said. I remembered then. The hermit crab ate the mollusk and made its home in the shell. Or found an empty one and moved in.

"Well, sir," Pearl went on with a sigh, "them ol' boys found these things down at the beach somewheres, so they come by my place with 'em, and the first thing you know one of 'em says to me: Pearl, he says, why don't we have a hermit crab race? Like this, he says. You put 'em down real quiet, like I'm doin' now, and you wait, and you bet on which one is goin' to move first."

He took a dollar from his pocket and placed it on the bar. "Now you get out a dollar, and I'll show you—"

"No, you don't," Ollie scoffed. "So one of 'em is dead, or you shot it full of Novocain, or hypnotized it—"

"Why, shucks," Pearl protested. "You know I wouldn't do nothin' like that. And besides, you get your choice."

"Look, you barefooted shyster," Ollie said good-naturedly. "I wouldn't bet you even money the sun'd come up in the morning."

Pearl shrugged dolefully and dropped them back in his pocket and winked at me. "Heck. Some days a man just cain't pick up a cryin' dime." He took a drink of beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Hey, Ollie," he went on with a jocose grin, "I ever tell you the one about the ol' country boy that takened up with this here snooty society gal? Well, sir, it looked like he just wasn't makin' no time with her at all, so he went to the drugstore and he says to this feller behind the counter—"

I waited for the dreary punch line, and left. A battered pick-up truck I assumed was Pearl's was parked before the place, its spattered sides attesting that chickens roosted on it at home. Every town has its character, I thought; San Francisco had had its share too. I dismissed him from my mind and took up the rat-race again. Forget the fan for the moment. She wanted to tell me something, for a price. She was afraid to meet me. Something or somebody had frightened her and she had to hang up. Maybe she would try again.

I stopped at the office. Josie said there had been no further call. Back at the room I lit a cigarette and sat down to wait, prodded savagely by frustration and a hundred questions to which I had no answers and no way of gaining access to any. It was an odd sensation, this being utterly alone and without status: I'd always had the prestige and facilities of a metropolitan police force going for me when I wanted to know something, but here I was an outcast. I'd been thrown out of the Sheriff's office and was under suspicion myself. Anything Langston's insurance company had turned up was closed to me. I couldn't even talk to her; she'd be asleep for hours yet.

I came full circle and was back to Strader again. At least the course of action was clear there and I wanted to get started. I checked the money situation. I still had eight hundred in traveler's checks, three hundred and seventy-something in cash. The bank statement from San Francisco showed a balance of two thousand, six hundred and thirty dollars. I was all right for the moment. The other, the money I had received from my grandfather, a little over twenty-one thousand, was in Government bonds and gilt-edge stock, untouched since they'd settled the estate six months ago.

Apparently she wasn't going to call again. I waited impatiently for another ten minutes and then drove into town to the telephone office. It was on the street parallel with Springer to the south. I asked for a Miami directory and flipped through the yellow pages to detective agencies. I had nothing to go on, so I chose one at random, a man listed simply as Victor Lane, Investigations. I went into a booth and put through the call, and was lucky enough to catch him in.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Chatham?" he asked, when I'd told him my name and where I was.

"I want all the information I can get on a man named Strader, who was killed here in Galicia last November. He was from Miami. I don't have the first name, or address, but you can pick up his trail—"

"HMMMMM. Wait a minute— In the newspaper files. You're mining old ground, Mr. Chatham. I remember Strader now and he's been sifted over pretty thoroughly."

"I know. But I don't have access to any of it, even the newspaper stories, and I haven't got time to come down there and dig it up myself. And there's always the chance they missed something. Here's what I want you to do. Hit the newspaper morgues, and any contacts you may have at police headquarters; by five o'clock you should have a pretty good package on him—at least all the stuff that came out during the investigation. Call me here at the Magnolia Lodge motel and give it to me and we'll see if we can find the angle we want to follow up. What are your rates?"

He told me. "Right," I said. "I'll mail you a check for a hundred on account right now. That all right?"

"Sure," he said. "See you at five."

Outside again in the sun-blasted street, I looked at my watch. It was a few minutes past one. I went around the corner and found a drugstore about half-way up the block towards Springer. It was an old place, one of the few establishments in town not air-conditioned. Above the screen door a ceiling fan like an airplane propeller seen in slow motion was drowsily warning the flies to stay out but not making an issue of it. There were some marble-topped tables with iron legs and a marble soda fountain, and at the rear another counter and an open doorway leading into the prescription department. No one was in sight; it looked as if everybody had gone up the street to see if there was any more news of the *Titanic* and had forgotten to come back.

There was a telephone booth about half-way back on the right. I stepped inside and called the motel. Josie said nobody had tried to reach me. It was odd, I thought; she wouldn't have given up that easily with a hundred dollars at stake. Somebody had really given her a scare. And what about the fan I'd heard? I brushed it aside impatiently; there was no point in even wondering about it.

When I stepped out of the booth, the proprietor emerged from the prescription department and looked at me inquiringly. He appeared to be in his sixties, a slight, frail man in a white jacket, with neat gray hair parted precisely in the center, rimless glasses, and serene gray eyes. He found me a dusty packet of envelopes and dug a three-cent stamp out of a drawer in the cash register. I sat down at the fountain, wrote out Lane's check, and addressed one of the

envelopes. I ordered a coke. He stirred it and set it on the counter.

"Have you been here a long time?" I asked.

He smiled gently. "I bought the place in 'twenty-seven."

"Well, tell me something. Why is there so much feeling about that Langston thing? You people haven't got the only unsolved murder in the world."

"There are a lot of reasons," he said. "Langston was well liked. It was brutal, cold-blooded murder, and one of them got away with it. We're a small town here and everything is more personal; people are not just names in a headline. A lot of people are distrustful and jealous of southern Florida anyway, the big money and the flashy publicity and all that, and the man was a no-good bum from Miami."

"How long had Langston lived here?" I asked.

"He'd only been *back* about six months, but he was born here."

"I see. A home-town boy."

He nodded. "That's right. Maybe a kind of home-town hero, in a way. A local boy that made good down there in that big-wheeling-and-dealing crowd in south Florida, or at least showed 'em we could hold our own with 'em. We were always a little proud of him. He played some mighty good football at Georgia Tech. He was officer of a submarine that sank I don't remember how many thousand tons of Japanese shipping in World War Two. After the war he went into the construction business in Miami—low-cost housing. Made a lot of money. They say he was worth pretty close to a million at one time. But the thing was he never seemed to lose touch like so many kids do when they go away and get successful. Even after his daddy died—he used to be principal of the high school—after he died and there weren't any Langstons left around here at all, he used to come back and go duck-hunting and fishing and visit with people."

"But what happened?" I asked. "Why did he retire and buy a motel? He was only forty-seven, wasn't he?"

"That's right. He got hit by several things all at once. There was a bad divorce, with a big property settlement—"

"Oh," I said. "Then how long had he and the second Mrs. Langston been married when he was killed?"

"A little less than a year, I guess. Four or five months before they came up here and bought the motel."

"What were the other things?" I asked.

"Health," he replied. "And a business deal that went sour on him. He started a big tract development and then ran into a court wrangle over the title to part of the property. He lost it, and on top of the split-up of community property in the divorce thing it just about wiped him out. But mainly it was his health. He had a mild heart attack somewhere back in 'fifty-four or -five, and then a pretty serious one, and the doctors told him he had to slow down or he'd be dead before he was fifty. So he came up here and bought the motel with what he had left. It would make him a living, and he could do the things he liked to do—hunt quail and fish for bass and root for the high-school football team in the fall. Then six months later he was butchered in cold blood, like slaughtering a pig. Sure there's bitter feeling; why shouldn't there be? Just knock his head in and take him down there to the river bottom and leave him so it'd look like an accident. It'd give you the horrors if you kept thinking about it. What kind of woman could that be, for the love of heaven?"

"Not what kind of woman," I said. "*What* woman would be a little more to the point."

The fragile and essentially gentle face went blank, as if he'd drawn a curtain behind it. I was used to it now. "Maybe they'll never know," he said, speaking to me from a great distance.

"What about insurance?" I asked. She said she didn't have any money. "Who was the beneficiary? And was it ever paid?"

He nodded. "Fifty thousand, or something like that. To his daughter. It was paid, or is being paid, rather, into a trust fund. She's only thirteen."

"No other policies?"

"No. He couldn't take out any more when he remarried. He was too poor a risk, with a history of two heart attacks."

Then, where was the woman's motive?" I asked. "It wasn't money."

"They don't know who the woman was." he explained carefully and precisely from behind the drawn blinds. "So

naturally they don't know what her motive was. They don't know anything about her at all, except that she was with Strader."

Which answered everything very neatly, I thought. It was a closed circuit, like two snakes swallowing each other: she was a tramp because she was with Strader, and she was with Strader because she was a tramp. How could you argue with that? I went out and dropped the envelope in a postbox and drove back to the motel. When I walked into the office Josie came out of the curtained doorway and said there had been a call for me some ten minutes ago.

"A woman?" I asked.

"Yes, suh. She say she would try again."

"Thanks," I said. "How is Mrs. Langston?"

"She's still sleepin' quiet."

"Good," I said. "You stay right here with her."

I went across to the room and sat looking at the telephone, trying to make it ring. It was some twenty minutes before it did. When I picked it up, a feminine voice asked softly, "Mr. Chatham?"

"That's right," I said.

"Are you still interested in that deal?"

"Yes," I said. "What happened before?" I listened intently, but there was no trace of the noisy fan in the background now.

"I almost got caught and had to hang up. I'm calling from a different place. Look—it's going to cost you more. Three hundred; take it or leave it."

"So the other call was a build-up? Don't try to con me."

"I'm not," she replied. "I just told you you could take it or leave it. But if I spill anything I'm going to have to get out of here for good, and I'll need it. They'll guess who it was and I don't want any of that acid in my face."

"What do I get for three hundred?"

"Names. The man that did the job and the one who hired him."

"Names are no good. I need proof."

"You'll get it. Listen—they're going to do it again. It'll be a different man, of course, but I'll give you a description of him and tell you what night. What else could you need?"

I thought about it. "Sure, I could catch that one. But he might not talk, and I want the guy behind him."

"Use your head," she said impatiently. "You'll have his name. If the police pick him up at the same time and *tell* him his boy talked, how's he gonna to know the difference? He'll crack."

"He might," I agreed. It was an old trick, but it still worked.

"Then it's a deal?"

"Okay," I said. "Where and how do I meet you?"

"You don't. I told you that before. I'm just as close to you right now as I want to be."

"Then how do I get the money to you?"

"In cash. Put it in a plain Manila envelope and mail it to Gertrude Haines, care of General Delivery, Tampa."

"H-a-i-n-e-s or H-a-y-n-e-s?"

"What difference could it possibly make?" she asked boredly. "Send it in twenties."

"How do I know you'll call after you get there and pick it up?"

"You don't. But if you've had a better offer, grab it."

"I know a little about con games myself," I said. "And before I fork over that kind of money I want something more specific than cheap wisecracks."

"Well, I don't know how to help you there. You either trust me or I trust you. And I don't trust anybody. So where are we?"

"Try selling it to the police. Maybe they'll make you an offer."

"Wise guy. Well, I just thought you might be interested—"

"I am," I said. "And I'm not being unreasonable. If I'm willing to send you three hundred dollars, blind, I'm entitled to some assurance you know what you're talking about."

"We-ell," she said slowly. "The acid was the kind they use in car batteries. And it came off a hijacked truck. How about that?"

"Sounds fine," I said. "Except I still wouldn't know whether it's the truth or not. About the truck, I mean."

She sighed with exasperation. "God, you're a hard man to do business with." She paused, and then went on, "Well, look—I could tell you where the rest of the acid is—"

"That's better."

"But it won't do you a bit of good by itself, because there's no connection where it is and who put it there, if you get me. It's on an old abandoned farm, and the man the farm belongs to doesn't even live here any more."

"Never mind," I said. "Just tell me how to get there."

"Not so fast. You get this straight. If it looks like somebody's following you, don't go out there. They don't think I know where that stuff is, but it could still get plenty rough when they started trying to find out who tipped you. I don't care what happens to you, but I bruise like a peach."

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll watch it. Go on."

"All right. From the motel go on out east till you pass a concrete bridge over a creek. It's about four miles. Just beyond it, maybe half a mile, there's a dirt road going off to the left through the trees, and a couple of mailboxes. One of the mailboxes says J. Pryor, I think. Follow that road. You'll pass two farmhouses, and then you go over a cattle-guard and past a corral and a chute for loading cows into trucks, and then there's not anything for about three miles except pine trees and palmettos. The farm is on the right. The farmhouse burned down a long time ago and just the chimney is standing, and in back of it is an old barn. The acid is up in the loft, eight glass jugs of it buried under some moldy hay. You won't have any trouble finding it, because there's also a few five-gallon cans of paint hidden with it."

"Right," I said.

"When you get back, mail the money. I'll call you within a week, as soon as I know for sure who it's going to be."

"That long?"

"They've got to wait at least till you reopen the place, haven't they?"

They apparently watched every move I made. I felt like a man trying to set up housekeeping in a lighted display window. "All right," I said. "Incidentally, where are you calling from now?"

"You're cute."

"Where did you call from before?"

"Why, I thought I told you. From somewhere else." She hung up.

* * *

Traffic was only moderate on the highway. I could see five cars strung out at varying distances behind me as I settled down to about forty-five and started checking them in the mirror. About half a mile ahead, on the right, was the El Rancho motel. I glanced at it as I went past. It was in the same class as the Spanish Main, only perhaps somewhat larger. It looked as if there were twenty-five or thirty units spaced around the semicircular drive, with a pool and a lot of colored umbrellas and lawn furniture out in front. Apart from all the rest of it, she was bucking rough competition in the motel business.

Three of the cars passed me and went on out of sight at about sixty or sixty-five. Another joined the two still behind me, coming up from far back. It passed the three of us and disappeared. Neither of the other two made any move; forty-five appeared to suit them perfectly. When I came to the concrete bridge we were still strung out in the same order. I saw the mailboxes, marked the location of the dirt road, and began easing in the throttle until I hit sixty. They dropped back, and in a few minutes were out of sight. About ten miles ahead I spotted a road leading off to the right. Wheeling into it, I parked just around the first bend and walked back to where I could watch the highway. In two or three minutes they went past, still traveling at the same moderate rate of speed. I was in the clear. I turned and went back. When I came to the mailboxes and swung off into the dirt road there was no one behind me and nothing coming from the opposite direction except a big tandem rig.

I passed the two farmhouses in the first mile. Beyond the cattle-guard, the road deteriorated into an unfenced and poorly graded affair running through scrubby pine and

palmetto. Dust boiled up to hang in the still hot air behind me. The road tilted up a slight rise after another ten minutes and the cleared fields appeared, sloping away to the right. They were abandoned, grown up with weeds and dead, brown grass. A pair of ruts turned off the road into the old farmyard at the top of the slight grade. I swung into them and stopped the station wagon in the shade of a lone tree growing in front of the foundation blocks and the fire-blackened monolith of the chimney where the house had been.

When I cut the ignition and got out, the drowsy stillness of summer afternoon closed in around me. There was something peaceful and timeless and utterly isolated about the place that made it almost attractive. A painter would love it, I thought. Heat waves shimmered above the brown and empty expanse of the fields stretching away towards the timber beyond. The old barn, gray and weather-beaten and its roof full of holes, leaned in an attitude of precariously arrested collapse some eighty or a hundred yards away. I crushed out my cigarette and walked down to it through the brittle weeds. Some kind of burrs stuck to the legs of my trousers and shoe-laces. The door was at this end. It was closed, but I could see no padlock on it. Above it was a small square opening through which I could see the edge of the pile of hay in the loft.

The door was secured with only a doubled strand of baling wire pulled through two holes and twisted together on the outside, but when I had unfastened it I had trouble forcing it open far enough to squeeze inside because of the sand that had washed down the slope against the bottom of it in past rains. The interior was gloomy and smelled of old dust and dried manure and straw. Narrow shafts of sunlight slanted in through cracks in the wall, illuminating the dust motes hanging suspended in the lifeless air. My shoes made no sound on the springy footing. There were some empty stalls on the right, and about half-way back, against the left wall, was the ladder going up into the hayloft. There was an opening about three feet square above it, the top rung of the ladder gilded by a shaft of sunlight coming in through one of the holes in the roof. I stepped over in the dead silence and mounted it.

My head was just coming up into the opening, my eyes level with the last rung of the ladder, when my breath sucked inwards and the skin tightened up, cold and hard, between my shoulderblades. In the thick coating of dust there, where the puddle of sunlight was striking the top of the two-by-four, were the fresh imprints of four fingers and part of the palm of a hand. I threw my feet out into space, pushing against the rung above as if I were trying to shove myself downwards through clinging mud or tar, and for one awful fraction of a second I seemed to be hanging suspended in the air, unable to fall, like a balloon half filled with helium, and then the gun crashed behind me, paralyzing my eardrums. Pain like a hot icepick sliced across the top of my head and the air was filled with dust and flying splinters, and then I was falling at last, turning a little and trying to swim downwards into the gloom below me and away from that deadly shaft of sunlight. I landed on my feet, but off-balance, and fell backwards and rolled, all in one continuing motion, and as my feet went up and over and I was staring in horror at the opening above me, I saw the bent, denim-clad leg and the knee in the shaft of yellow light, and the beefy hand, and the searching twin barrels of the gun, still swinging.

I was over and down, then, with my knees under me, pushing up, and turning, and the gun crashed again. I felt the knife edge of pain once more, this time along my left arm from shoulder to elbow, as the shot string raked the powdery manure and dust and exploded it into the air about my head and into my eyes. I was blinded. I came on erect and crashed into the wall, and fell again. I pushed up, and staggered, tearing at my face with one hand to get my eyes clear, and felt the stickiness of blood mixed with the dust, but I could see a little, enough to make out the narrow oblong of light that marked the door. But even as I whirled and plunged towards it I heard the sharp metallic click of ejectors above me and then the thump as he closed the breech of the reloaded gun, and at the same time the swift and deadly rustling of dry hay as he ran towards the front of the loft. I was trapped.

While I was squeezing myself through the half-blocked door he would be right above me, leaning out of that opening with the shotgun barrels less than six feet above my

head. He'd cut me in two, like cheese under an axe blade. I veered and slammed against the wall with a hand to stop myself from going on into the opening and being blown to pieces. I whirled. There was no other way out, and all he had to do was jump to the ground and come in after me.

Then my mind began functioning a little better, and I realized there had to be another way out somewhere because he hadn't come in at the front. I was running even as I heard the heavy thud of his feet against the ground outside the door, and was already three-quarters of the way to the rear wall when the light cut off behind me and I knew he had made it and was squeezing through the doorway with his gun. But there was no sign of a door or opening of any kind ahead of me. And I was already past the ladder. Before I could turn and make it up into the loft to try to get out the front that way, he would blow my legs from under me and kill me at his leisure. There was nothing to do but keep going. I could hear him struggling with the door. I swept my eyes frantically across the cracks of light ahead of me, and then I saw it, one that was a little wider at the bottom than at the top. It had to be the plank he had pried loose to get in. I hit it head on, without slackening speed at all. It gave and my right shoulder tore loose the one next to it, and then I was out into blinding sunlight, fighting to keep my balance because if I fell now I was dead. I stayed on my feet somehow, and when I was running under control again I leaned and cut sharply to the left, like a half-back turning the corner, to get out of line with the opening behind me.

All the muscles in my back were drawn up into icy knots as I pounded across the open ground expecting at any second to feel the shot charge come slamming into it, but there was only silence behind me. I turned on one more burst of speed and then risked a glance over my shoulder. There was no sign of him, and I was nearly a hundred yards from the corner of the barn, well beyond the dangerous range of a shotgun. I cut left again and began running towards the car before he could head me off. I made it and looked back, sobbing for breath as I fumbled in my pocket for the keys. He was nowhere in sight. He hadn't even come out. His gun was useless at this distance and he was standing quietly inside somewhere, just waiting for me to go away. As long as I didn't know who he was, he could always

try again. I shuddered. He was in no danger of my coming back to get a look at him; a shotgun at point-blank range is one of the deadliest and messiest weapons in the world.

I scrambled into the car and whirled it out onto the road, conscious that I was dripping blood all over the seat. I had to keep wiping my eyes free to drive. When I had put a mile behind me I slid to a stop and got out to see if I could find out how bad they were; I had an idea they were isolated pellets from a blown pattern, but they hurt excruciatingly and were making a mess of the car whether the loss of blood was serious or not. I felt the top of my head. The scalp was split for some three inches where a shot pellet had raked across it, but the pellet itself was gone. I ripped off my shirt, spraying buttons into the road, wiped the blood and dust from my face with it, and looked at my arm. A single pellet had grazed it in a long and deepening gash downwards from the shoulder before it penetrated. I could feel it just under the surface in some muscle near my elbow. It felt large. A No. 2, at least, and possibly even one of the smaller sizes of buckshot.

I thought about the first shot. He couldn't have been over six feet behind me, and at that distance, with even a badly blown pattern, the stray pellet wouldn't have scattered more than a fraction of an inch from the rest of the shot column. Another fraction of a second in getting my head down out of that opening and it would have exploded like a dropped water-melon. The reaction hit me. I was weak and shaky and had to sit down.

I slumped back against the end of the seat and fumbled with a cigarette, but it was a mess before I could even get it into my mouth. I let it fall into the dust of the road beside the little tapping drops of red, and listened to the peaceful droning of an insect of some kind out in the timber. There was something chilling about the way they had outmaneuvered me. They had used the oldest con game formula in the world, and made me go for it like a greenhorn.

They were good; they were so good they scared me. An anonymous tip that I could find the acid if I'd go out to that isolated place would have put me instantly on guard. I would have been suspicious, at least, and careful. But she hadn't done it that way at all. The tip was something else, and *I* had

demanded this part of it. I'd talked her into it against her will. And then she'd warned me about being followed. While he was already waiting for me there in that loft with his shotgun.

These people were yokels?

7

Dr. Morley dropped the shot pellet onto the white enamel surface of the table, and grunted. "Humph. Goose load." He was a large, florid man with either a naturally bluff and hearty attitude or a chameleon-like adaptability in suiting the bedside manner to the patient. I was big, healthy, and relatively unhurt, so I was getting the he-man-to-he-man treatment, with overtones of gallows humor. "Sure wasn't a quail hunter, was he?"

"No," I said. Maybe I would think of some funny stuff myself later on, when I quit hearing that gun go off just back of my head. "It was a double barrel," I added, and winced a little as he swabbed the incision and started putting a dressing on it.

"Oh." He grinned. "Not much he can do with it, then."

Except make sure next time, I thought. I didn't have any idea who he was or what he looked like. He could get behind me any time. The only thing I knew for certain was that I was no longer merely looking for an acid-throwing hoodlum who faced a few months in the County jail if he were caught. You didn't treat a minor headache with brain surgery.

"Better give me a tetanus booster," I said. "I can't remember when I had the last one, and that place was paved with manure."

"Oh, you've got to have a tetanus shot, all right," he agreed with vast humor. "But first I want to do a little hem-

stitching on that head. You're not fussy about your hair-do, I hope?"

"No," I said. "Just so it's still up there and not sprayed across the side of some dirty barn."

"Now you're feeling better. I knew you would. You have any idea who he was or why he was after you?"

"No," I said.

"I have to report it to the police, you know. Gunshot wound."

"Sure." And while we were at it we could report it to the Garden Club and the nearest chapter of the Literary Society. We needed all the help we could get.

I'd managed to get the bleeding pretty well stopped at the motel, and changed clothes before coming on into town in a cab. The receptionist in Dr. Graham's office had said he was out on an emergency call, and recommended Morley, who was just down the hall. Their offices were in a sort of medical-dental warren occupying the second and third floors above a beauty shop and pharmacy near the east end of Springer. I looked at my watch and wished he'd hurry. It was almost four and I had to be back there to take Lane's call at five. The local he'd shot into my scalp had taken effect now, and he started putting in stitches after shaving off part of my hair. He gave me a tetanus shot.

"You're as good as new," he said, and reached for his phone. "Wasn't inside the city, was it?"

"No," I said. "Sheriff's jurisdiction."

"Hmmm. Let's see. Name . . . local address. Anything else I should tell them?"

"No," I said. "Except you ought to make sure they're not there alone before you tell them I've been shot." I started out.

"You'll be around, won't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm going over there now."

I paid his receptionist, stopped in a store to buy a cheap straw hat to protect my head from the sun and from pop-eyed stares, and walked over to the courthouse. They were waiting for me, Magruder and the big red-haired Deputy whose name I didn't quite catch because nobody ever

bothered to tell me what it was. He had very pale gray eyes, a basaltic outcropping of jaw, and hairy red hands that had too many sunken and offset knuckles to be very reassuring. They took me into one of the back rooms, fanned me individually and then jointly, and shoved me into a chair while they stood over me barking questions. Apparently, being shot at was a felony. In spite of all the adroit interrogation I finally managed to tell them what happened.

"Where's your gun?" Magruder snapped.

"I haven't got one," I said. "Nor a permit."

"You got in a gunfight without a gun?"

"I wasn't in a fight. I was shot at twice and I ran. Not that I'm really stupid enough to need two to start me, but I was flat on my back."

"Who was this man?"

"I told you. I never did see anything of him except one leg and a hand. I think he was wearing overalls, faded ones. And it was a pretty big hand. The shotgun was a double barrel, and it was probably an expensive one. Doubles with the type of ejectors I heard don't come in cereal boxes."

"Did you kill him? Where's the body?"

"No, I didn't kill him. I would have tried, if I'd had a gun."

"Describe this place again." I described it again.

They looked at each other and nodded. "The old Will Noble place," Magruder said. "There's a hundred spare miles out there you could hide a body in."

"I think that had occurred to him," I said. I lit a cigarette. The big redhead leaned down casually and slapped it out of my mouth.

"Step on it," he said.

I stepped on it. I wondered where Redfield was. Not that he would be in any sweeter frame of mind than they were, but if you had to sit there endlessly answering questions while your head hurt and the man who'd tried to murder you went home and went to bed, at least it helped if they were intelligent questions.

"Where's the car?" Magruder demanded.

"Out at the motel," I said.

Magruder nodded to the redhead. "Take a run out there and shake it down. Gun, bloodstains—"

"If you'll look carefully you may find a bloodstain in the front seat," I said. "I drove it nine miles with my scalp and one arm sliced open."

"You haven't got any on your clothes."

"I changed them. You'll find the others in the bathtub. Or would, except that of course you wouldn't dream of searching a room without a warrant. They're bloody for the same reason."

"So you say."

"There's enough of it to type. Or would that be the easy way?"

"I could get enough of this guy," the redhead said.

"Where have you been?" Magruder asked him.

I was feeling worse all the time, and didn't much care what they did. "What's the penalty in this state," I asked, "for being shot at with a rifle? I might change my plea."

They ignored me. "While you're out there," Magruder said to the other one, "run on out to that old barn and look it over."

The redhead left. I forgot the house rides and stuck another cigarette in my mouth and lit it. Magruder slapped it out. It was a change, anyway. He stepped on it.

"Thanks," I said.

He sat down at the desk and stared coldly at me. I stared longingly at the cigarette. "Am I under arrest?" I asked. "And if so, what's the charge? Target illegally in motion?"

"Let's just say you're being held for questioning till he gets back."

"About how long do you think it'll take him to search that hundred square miles? Half an hour, maybe? I've got a date at five."

"With your lady friend? I thought she was crapped out with the jim-jams."

"She's in bed from complete nervous and physical collapse," I said politely. "That might be what you meant." It didn't dent him, but it was probably just as well. I was in a

very poor position to be trying to provoke him. I'd just get my ears tenderized with a gun barrel, and thirty days in jail.

I heard footsteps as someone came down the hall. It was Redfield. He had his hat on and had apparently just come in. He looked hot and bad-tempered. Leaning in the doorway, he stared bleakly at me for nearly thirty seconds before he said anything at all.

"All right. Who did you kill?"

"Nobody," I said. "I haven't been in a gunfight, and I don't —"

"Shut up," he said tonelessly. "We'll get to that in a minute. I thought you might be interested to know, Chatham, that I just got an answer from San Francisco."

"Yes?" I replied.

"Unofficer like conduct. Has a nice sound, doesn't it?"

Magruder perked up his ears, and I realized it was news to him that Redfield had even sent a wire. "What's that?" he asked quickly. "Was this monkey kicked off the force back there?"

Redfield nodded. "He's a real bully boy; he beats 'em up. Probably gets his kicks that way. So when San Francisco can't hold him any more, he comes over here to give us the benefit of his talents."

"Well, what do you know?" Magruder asked, his eyes bright. "You suppose he can catch, as well as pitch?"

Redfield ignored him. "Well, Chatham, you have anything to say?"

"No," I said.

"Oh, come now," he said. He was smiling faintly, but his eyes were bitter.

"If they sent you a telegram," I said, "they told you the whole thing, not half of it. So if you want to ignore the rest of it when they tell you, why should I bother?"

"Oh, sure," he said contemptuously, "they said you resigned. Don't they always?"

"I did," I said. "And voluntarily. I drew a thirty-day suspension, but before it was up I decided to get out altogether." Then I wondered why I bothered to explain; I

seldom did to anybody. It was odd, but in spite of everything he was the kind of cop you instinctively liked and respected.

"Of course. And you weren't guilty of the charge, anyway."

"Yes," I said. "I was guilty."

He looked at me strangely, but remained silent for a moment. Then he went on, hard-faced, "So now you're a free-lance muscle boy. A professional trouble-maker. What's your connection with Mrs. Langston?"

"There is none. Except that I like her. And I'm beginning to have a great deal of admiration for her. I like people with her kind of poise under pressure."

"Crap. What's she paying you for?"

"I told you, Redfield, she's not paying me for anything."

"Then why are you still hanging around?"

"I could tell you it's simply because my car's not ready yet. You can check that with the garage."

"But that's not it."

"That's right. It's not. I could give you several reasons. One is that I don't like being pushed. Another is that the motel itself interests me, but that's business, and none of yours. But the principal one is that that acid job there was partly my fault. I started sticking my nose into something that didn't concern me—as you told me yourself—and it was a little hint that I was just going to do her more harm than good by meddling. So now, after buying it for her, am I supposed to go off and leave her to enjoy it all by herself?"

"You got a license in this state to operate as a private detective?"

"No."

"All right. Just stick your nose in one more thing around here and I'm going to shove it in your ear and pull it out the other side."

"You'd better start checking things with your District Attorney, Redfield. As long as she's not paying me, I'm not acting as a private detective. I'm a private citizen and that's something else entirely."

His face was bleak. "There are ways, Chatham. You ought to know."

"I do. I've seen some of them used."

"And you just keep going and you'll see some of them used again. Now what's this crap somebody took a shot at you, this note from Dr. Morley?"

I told him the whole thing, from the woman's first call. It was easy and took only a few minutes with nobody barking irrelevant questions and leaning on the back of my neck. He sat on the edge of the desk, smoking a cigarette and listening with no expression at all. When I had finished, he glanced around at Magruder. "Any of this been checked yet?"

Magruder nodded. "Mitch is out there now."

"Right." He swung back to me, and snapped, "Let me see if I've got this fairy tale straight. The woman, whoever she was, set you up out there so the man in the loft, whoever *he* was, could kill you."

"Yes."

"That makes it premeditated, of course, so it would be first-degree murder. You're still with me?"

"Sure."

He leaned forward a little, jabbing a forefinger at me. "So, look—am I supposed to believe that this stupid pipe dream makes sense, even to you? Two people are so worried about you they're going to kill you, commit first-degree murder with a chance of winding up in the death house, and *for what?* Simply because they're afraid you're going to find out they were the ones who threw the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder." He sighed and shook his head. "Chatham, do you have any idea what they'd probably get for that acid job? *If* they were ever convicted?"

"A year. Six months. Maybe less."

"But still I'm supposed to believe—"

"Cut it out. You know the answer as well as I do."

"Do I?"

"They're jumpy as hell about something, but it's not I some two-bit rap for vandalism or malicious mischief."

"Well, don't keep us all a-twitter. Tell us what it is."

"Try murder," I said. "What would they have to lose after the first one?"

He went on watching me, his face very still now. "Has somebody been murdered?"

"Langston," I said.

"I thought so. But isn't there a hole in your argument somewhere? We've been investigating it for seven months and nobody's tried to kill us."

I didn't like the way it was going, but there wasn't much I could do about it. He was backing me right into the corner while I watched him do it.

"Well?" he prodded. "Or, wait; maybe I see what you mean. They're not worried about us, because we're so stupid we'd never stumble onto 'em anyway."

"I didn't say that."

"And of course, there's always the other possibility," he went on. The tone was conversational, but I was tuned in on the savagery—still under control—that was behind it. I hoped it stayed under control. Magruder looked at him inquiringly. He didn't even know what was going on. "I mean, from your point of view, we could have been bought off. All we'd need is a patsy like Mrs. Langston, and even if we couldn't frame up enough evidence to convict her she'd take the heat off the others. Everything's rosy, nobody's hurt, and you don't have to pay taxes on it. It makes perfect sense when you look at it that way. Doesn't it? . . . Well, come on; speak up. Say something, you goon son of a bitch —"

He slid off the desk, caught the front of my shirt, and hauled. I had to come with it or have it torn off me. He slapped me backhanded across the mouth, and I felt the lip split against a tooth. He swung again, his face pale with suddenly uncontrollable rage and his eyes tormented and crazy-looking as if he were in pain. I jerked back, stumbled over the chair, and fell. I slid back and got up warily, expecting to have my head torn off, but he turned away abruptly, grinding a hand across his face.

He took two deep breaths, and you could see the battle going on inside him. "Get out of here," he said raggedly, "before I use a gun barrel on you."

"Wait a minute, Kelly," Magruder protested. "We can't let him go till we hear from Mitch—"

Redfield turned savagely and cut him off. "We know where to find him if we want him! Get the son of a bitch out of here!"

Magruder looked at me. "You heard the man."

"Yes," I said. I picked my hat up from the floor and dabbed a handkerchief at the blood in the corner of my mouth. "I heard him." I went out and walked over to Springer to find a cab, not even particularly angry at him. Or not nearly as angry as I knew he was at himself. He was too good a pro to give way to rage that way, with so little provocation. Somewhere inside Redfield a bunch of mice were eating the insulation off his nerves. But what mice? And where had they come from?

Well, when it came to being jumpy, he had company—plenty of it. If there was ever a place that was wired, this was it. It'd be a poor location, I thought, for the type of practical joker who liked to slip up behind people and say "Boo!" He wouldn't last till the coffee break.

It was ten minutes to five when I paid off the cab in front of the office. One of the Sheriff's cars was parked in the area and the door of my room was standing open. I walked over and looked in. The big redheaded Deputy was pawing through one of the chest drawers. He looked up at me without interest, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, and pushed the drawer shut.

"Looks like you just haven't got a gun," he said.

"Where's your warrant?" I asked.

"I forgot to pick it up. Want me to go back for it and search you again?"

"No," I said.

"I'd be glad to," he said helpfully. "No trouble at all."

"Don't bother," I said. "I wouldn't want to monopolize you."

"You got a great sense of humor," he said. He looked around for the ashtray, saw it was on the table between the beds, and shrugged. He ground out the cigarette on the glass top of the chest. "Yes, sir, a great sense of humor."

"How did you get in?" I asked.

"Maid. I told her you wouldn't mind a bit. Hell, I told her, a man with a sense of humor like that?"

I said nothing. He gave the room another indifferent glance and came out past me. "I guess you're doing right, friend. You're from out of town, and that seems to be all it takes."

I turned and looked at him with my hands shoved in my pockets. He waited a minute, hoping I'd be stupid enough to swing at him, and then stepped off onto the gravel. "Well, give her back the key, huh? Tell her I said you didn't mind a bit." He climbed into the cruiser and drove off.

I stepped inside and closed the door, took a deep breath, and lit a cigarette. In a minute or two I simmered down. I went into the bathroom and washed my face with cold water. The bloody clothes were still lying in the tub. Nothing was badly torn up in the room; he'd merely been killing time hoping I'd get back before he left. I finished the cigarette and felt all right again when I went over to the office. I put the key on the desk. Josie heard me and came out, grinning. "Miss Georgia's awake."

"Good," I said. "How is she?"

"Jest fine. You know what was the first thing she asked for?"

"A three-pound T-bone?"

"No, suh. A comb and a lipstick."

Well, I thought, a psychiatrist would probably score it the same way. "That's great. Will you ask her if I can come in?"

"Yes, sir. She's been asking where you was."

She went in back, and came out almost immediately and nodded. I went through. I still had the hat on and wondered if I could get by without removing it. Probably, I thought, remembering the slob way I'd acted when she came over to the room. She no doubt assumed I slept in it and ate with my feet. When I stepped into the bedroom, however, she solved the problem for me. She was propped up on two pillows with a filmy blue wrap about her shoulders, still too pale perhaps, but damned attractive, and smiling. She held out her hand. Well, I'd been answering questions all day.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said warmly. "I was afraid you'd gone on without even saying good-bye or giving me a chance to thank you."

She was the only one in town, I thought, who didn't know by now that I was her lover, bodyguard, partner, hired goon, sweetheart, private detective, and the father of her three Mongol children. She'd been asleep.

"Josie kept saying that you were still around, that you'd just gone to town—Oh, good heavens, what happened to you?" She broke off, staring at the strips of bandage and tape and the haircut.

"Just a little accident," I said, glad the other was covered by my shirt sleeve. "Couple of stitches, that's all. But never mind me. How do you feel? You look wonderful."

"How did it happen?" she asked firmly.

Maybe a few details would do it. "Your coloring's a lot better and there's more light and animation in the eyes—"

"My coat's shinier too," she said. "That's always a good sign." She pointed to the armchair beside the bed. "Drop the red herring, and sit down, Mr. Chatham. I want to know if you've been hurt and why—"

I remembered what the doctor had said about rest and no more emotional upheavals. Except for luck and a good constitution, she could be lying there now picking at the coverlet or staring blankly at the wall. No shotguns.

"Clumsiness," I said. "And not having a flashlight. I got an anonymous tip that acid was part of the cargo of a hijacked truck and that the rest of it was hidden in an old barn out in the country. I went out there, and while I was poking around in the loft I raked my head on a nail. The acid wasn't there, either, though I think it might have been at one time."

She appeared to believe me. "I'm sorry," she said simply. "It's my fault."

"Not at all," I said. "As a matter of fact, I'm partly to blame for their wrecking that room."

"How could you think a thing like that?"

I told her. "I think he caught onto what I was doing when I was checking those telephone booths. It's the same man. And probably the same one who sent those two kids out here last night trying to get you in trouble with the police. When I helped you get rid of them, he decided I was meddling too much. The acid was just a hint that I was going to do you

more harm than good by hanging around. I don't know what his object is, but let's find out."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Yesterday you wanted to hire me as a private detective to look into it. You still can't, because I have no license to do that kind of work; the minute the Sheriff's office could prove you were paying me I'd be in jail. But there's nothing on the statute books that says I can't take over the direction of this motel simply because you're a friend of mine and because I'm interested in buying a part of it—both of which are true —"

"You're going a little too fast for me," she said.

"We'll go into the business angle later. Obviously you don't have to sell me a part interest in it unless you want to, but as of the moment that's what the status is. We're considering it. When they call you, tell them that. As a matter of fact, I've already taken over the operation of it, and to some extent, the operation of you. I've closed the motel because there's no way in God's world you can stop them from coming back and doing it to another room as long as you're open to the public and obviously can't search your guests' luggage for acid. And I've accepted the responsibility for seeing that the doctor's instructions were carried out, and those instructions were that you were to stay in bed and rest, with this whole thing off your back, until he said you could get out—"

"Ridiculous," she said. "I'm as healthy as a horse."

"Sure you are. A horse that hasn't had a square meal in a month, or a full night's rest since last year. You're going to stay right where you are and let me handle it."

"But—"

"No buts. Ever since I landed in this town I've been jockeyed around by some character who thinks I'm on your side. He's finally convinced me he's right."

The telephone rang out in the office. Josie appeared in the doorway. "It's for you," she said. "A long distance."

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I went out and took it at the desk. I told the operator we'd accept the charges, and Lane came on. "Mr. Chatham?"

"Yes. How did you make out?"

"Fairly well. Here's what I've been able to round up since you called; so far it's mostly just the stuff anybody would know who followed the investigation last November. Strader's full name was Albert Gerald Strader, he was thirty-five years old at the time he was killed, and if you were looking around for a good one-word description of him, bum would probably do as well as any. Or lady-killer, except I guess that's gone out of style.

"Not a crook or a hood, however. He had no previous criminal record as far as they could discover—apart from a few misdemeanors like an occasional assault and battery, and a drunk driving or two—and they went into it pretty thoroughly. The F.B.I. had nothing on him. I gather that what you're trying to find out—along with everybody else who ever had anything to do with the case—is what the hell he was doing up there in that place, and I don't think there's much chance it was anything criminal unless being a compulsive tomcat is a crime. The consensus of opinion is almost a hundred per cent that it was a woman. Probably a married one.

"He was a pretty big guy with an athlete's build not too far gone to seed. Played football in the military school he went

to. Good-looking sort of Joe, dark hair, olive skin, gray eyes, and he knew how to buy and wear clothes. Women—or at least, certain kinds of over-sexed and bored and restless women—went for him in a big way. And let's face it; women like that usually know what they're after, so he must have had it.

"He was a salesman. He wasn't much good at it, oddly enough; you'd think he'd be a whiz with all that appearance and self-assurance, but I guess it takes more than that, like maybe some interest in working at it. From last July up until the time he was killed he was selling real estate, or trying to. Worked for an outfit called Wells and Merritt in the north-east part of town, housing sales and rentals, and had a small bachelor apartment not too far away on North-East Sixty-first Street—"

"How long had he been around Miami?" I asked.

"Off and on since about 1945, when he got out of the Navy. Its spotty, and they don't have the whole record. During the same period he spent some time down in the Keys, at Marathon and Key West, and for a while I think he was in New Orleans. But he usually came back to Miami. Let's see, I've got some notes here—"

"Let me get something to write on," I said. I located a sheet of stationery in the back of the desk and undipped my pen. "All right, shoot."

"Okay. He grew up in a small town in northern Louisiana. His father was a lawyer and later a District Judge. Both parents are dead now, and the only surviving relative at the time he was killed was a married sister three years older who still lives there in the same town. Whitesboro. She was the one who came down to Galicia to claim the body. Strader apparently wasn't a particularly wild kid, but just useless. Probably nothing on his mind but girls, even then. Managed to get through four years at a military school in Pennsylvania, but was dropped at Tulane before mid-term of his freshman year for poor grades. Went into the Navy in 1942, and after boot camp he got into an electronics school—Treasure Island in San Francisco, I think, and was a Radioman Second when he came out at the end of the war."

"He wasn't in subs, by any chance?"

"No. Jeep carriers, it says here. Anyway, in 1946, according to his employment record, he was announcer at a small radio station here in Miami. Stayed there a year or maybe a little longer. Most of 1948 is blank, but I understand a good part of that winter he was shackled up with some racy old girl who owned a string of horses. Then about 1950 he was selling cars. Worked for three or four different agencies here in Miami for the next two years, and was also down in the Keys. In the fall of 1953 he latched onto a traveling job, selling sound-motion projectors to lodges, churches, and schools. He was working for a distributor in Jacksonville, with Florida and parts of southern Alabama and Georgia for a territory. As usual, he didn't set the course on fire, and apparently quit or was fired after about six months. Seems to be a gap there, and the next thing he was back in Miami in the fall of 'fifty-four, selling cars again. Then in 1955, and up until about June 1956, another traveling job working for an outfit called Electronic Enterprises with home offices in Orlando. I don't know what he was selling, but maybe sound systems again. When that fizzled out he managed to pass the examination for a real estate salesman's license and went to work for this firm I mentioned first, Wells and Merritt. Just a boomer and a drifter, you see. I think women were supporting him a good part of the time.

"There's no record he ever knew Langston?" I asked.

"None whatever, and they dug into it for weeks. They were in different worlds. Langston was a pretty big wheel, till he smashed up, and Strader was a poor type that couldn't have bought his way into that crowd."

"How about the first Mrs. Langston?"

"Another big nothing. You'd think there might be a chance, since she was a pretty gay type, especially since the divorce, and she had a lot of money, but they've never found any connection at all. And believe me, they tried. Don't forget, Miami's a big place. And of course, where they really went to work was on the second Mrs. Langston, the widow. For obvious reasons. I mean, they had it made. Strader went up there to see a woman, presumably a married woman, and he winds up killing a husband, with a woman known to be with him while he was trying to get rid of the body, so where do you look? We'll crack this one in an hour, boys. That was

seven months ago, and they still haven't come up with the first lead to indicate the two of them had ever met. She simply wasn't his cup of tea. The only thing they had in common was the fact they'd both lived a long time in Miami. She was a medical lab technician with no money except her salary, and she didn't run with any gay or big-money crowd at all. I think the way she met Langston was slipping those wires to him to take an electrocardiogram."

"Okay," I said. "So far, so good. I suppose they gave up long ago on the angle that Strader was hired for the job?"

"Sure. In the first place, they couldn't find anybody who'd want Langston bumped off. The insurance went to his twelve-year-old daughter. I mean, even if the junior high crowd is circulating lists of professional triggermen these days, this kid was fond of her father. Langston had never made any particularly bitter enemies in business. He wasn't a chaser. There was some bad feeling between him and his first wife, but what would she stand to gain? She already had the divorce, a good chunk of the money, and the Cuban player she was after. And even if there'd been anybody who wanted to hire a killer, why Strader? He was no hoodlum, and nobody ever starts out in crime as a professional murderer. You generally work up—or down, depending on your point of view. Also, there's the way Langston was killed. Being hit on the head. That's too much work for a pro. No, that one was a dead theory almost before they got through saying it."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"No. That's about all at the moment. You always come back to the fact it had to be a woman he went up there to see. It wasn't business, because you couldn't even give away Miami real estate in that town, let alone sell it. And if it had been business, whoever he'd gone to see would have come forward and said so. So there you are. He drove up there three times in a little over two months, and it's nearly a thousand miles' round trip. And with Strader, only one kind of business was that important."

"Okay," I said. "Right at the moment I don't see any lead to follow at all, but take another run at him tomorrow. Maybe you can find out what he was up to during those holes in his employment record. See how many old girl

friends you can uncover and where they are now. I gather there were no letters in his stuff at the apartment, but did they check long-distance calls?"

"That's right; there were no letters. But there were two toll calls from there. And in both cases they were made the day before he drove up. No lead. They originated at call boxes."

"Smart baby," I said. "All right. Call me back tomorrow if you get anything new."

I went back. She was sitting up in bed with her arms around her knees. "Have you had anything to eat yet?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. I just woke up about half an hour ago."

"How about having dinner with me?"

She smiled. "I thought you weren't going to let me out of bed."

"I'm not. Do you like steak? That's the only thing I know how to cook."

"A steak sounds fine. But you don't have to cook it. I can do that, or Josie."

"You're going to rest. And Josie gets the evening off. I want to talk to you."

I went out and cleaned up the station wagon with the hose and some detergent, threw a folded blanket across the wet seat, and drove into town. I bought two steaks, an avocado, some French rolls, gin and vermouth, and a bottle of burgundy. Returning to the motel, I shaved and changed clothes, putting on a long-sleeved shirt to cover the dressing on my left arm.

The prescriptions I'd had made up were still in the station wagon. I removed the sleeping pills, though it seemed silly the way she was snapping out of it, and carried the rest of the stuff over to the office. Josie was just leaving.

"Try to be back before midnight," I told her. "I want you to set up a cot in the living-room and stay with her. She seems to be in a lot better condition than I expected, but it'd be a good idea for tonight, anyway."

"Yes, sir," she replied. She left.

I went on into the kitchen and sized up the facilities for cooking the steaks, and found Josie had put two potatoes in to bake. I broke open the gin and vermouth, and while I was stirring the Martinis I heard footsteps behind me and looked around. Georgia Langston was standing in the doorway. She had on slippers and dark blue pajamas, the blue dressing-gown around her. She'd put on a little lipstick, and her hair was freshly combed, the rich mahogany gleam of it contrasting darkly against the pallor of her face and the large gray eyes. Strader would have driven a lot further than five hundred miles, I thought. Except that he'd never seen the day he could play in her league.

"I thought I told you to stay in bed," I said.

She shook her head with a faint smile. "I won't be bullied in my own house."

"You're not well. The doctor says you're supposed to rest."

"I have news for you *and* the doctor. When a woman is well enough to feel uncomfortable about entertaining a man in her bedroom, she's well enough to be up. It's a perfectly sound clinical test."

I shrugged, and measured out the Martinis. "You win. Come to think of it, I don't believe a woman could be very far under the weather and look as wonderful as you do. So maybe you're right."

"Why, thank you," she said, with the same shadow of a smile. "But, really, hadn't you better tell me some more about your brutality before I'm misled? You can't be too careful about that."

"Ouch," I said. I carried the Martinis through to the living-room end of the outer room. She sat on the sofa with her legs curled under her. I put the Martinis on the coffee table, sat down across from her, and lit our cigarettes. "I'm sorry about clubbing you over the head with it that way. But I get in those moods. It's from having too much time on my hands to feel sorry for myself. I need a job."

She nodded. "But don't you think you owe me an explanation, after saying a thing like that about yourself?"

"There's not much to explain. It happens to be true, except that I wasn't fired. I was suspended, but resigned voluntarily

as soon as I realized I didn't belong in police work. That was what hurt."

"I realize it's none of my business," she said firmly, "but I still think you owe me an explanation. You said a while ago I was a friend of yours, and that can work both ways. Was this man in custody?"

"No," I said.

"Well," she said coolly, "that's quite a different thing, isn't it? Was it something personal?"

"No," I said. "But wait a minute. That's exactly it. It wasn't personal, but I made it personal. You see, I was no longer a pro; I was a fanatic."

"What had he done?"

"He was a pusher. A dope peddler."

"Oh," she said.

"That doesn't justify it," I said. "You can't. Laws are supposed to be enforced by impersonal people, not by crusaders or fanatics. Actually, I was as cool a cat as any of them until I happened to be assigned to a narcotics detail, but there's just something about that business that got to me. It's dirty in a way that nothing else can be dirty, especially where kids are concerned. You may not be familiar with quite all the things that, say, a sixteen-year-old girl will do to get the price of a fix when she has to have one, and if you don't know, don't bother to look into it—"

I broke off. "But never mind; I didn't intend to get on the soap box. It finally drove my wife away. She could see where I was headed, even if I couldn't, and she had this weird idea I should come home once in a while. And in the end it cost me the job. I was after one particular pusher, a smart punk around twenty-three who was shoving the stuff to kids, and I was too hot-eyed and eager to get him, and I muffed it. When I brought him in I didn't have a solid case and he beat it. He gave me the horse-laugh and walked out. Inside of three days he was right back in business. Then one night I ran into him in a bar. He tossed me some smart-alec remark, and then didn't have any better sense than to go back to the washroom."

I paused, staring at the cigarette in my fingers. "That's about it. There was a big uproar, of course, but even without

the suspension I realized what was happening to me and that I had to get out of it."

She nodded. "Yes, I suppose it was wrong. But I think you're too harsh on yourself. Nobody can turn emotion off entirely."

"No. But a cop is supposed to bring in a case that can be tried in court, not in a locked wash-room with his fists. But let's change the subject. I wanted to talk business."

She took a sip of the drink. "About the motel?"

"That's right. You said you wouldn't sell at a sacrifice. Do you want to sell, if and when you can get a fair price?"

She nodded.

"Tell me something about it. What you paid, the size of the mortgage—if any—and what you think it's worth now."

"We paid ninety-five thousand, a little over a year ago. Thirty-five cash, and the balance at five per cent. We intended carrying on the landscaping ourselves, but my husband's health became worse and we never could do it. And since his death it's gone downhill even more badly. I can't do it alone. Actually, I suppose the only sensible thing to do would be to sell and take the loss before I have to take a larger one, but I'm too stubborn to face it. The last time I had it evaluated, a real estate firm in Tallahassee that specializes in business property said they wouldn't even be interested in a listing on it at over seventy-five thousand."

"It could be built up," I said. "I think you could get over a hundred thousand. It's not the basic plant—it's just that the grounds are so bleak. You need a swimming pool, children's playground, lawns, shrubs, flower beds—"

"Of course. But I don't have the money. I don't know how I'm even going to refurnish that room—"

"That's where I come in," I said. "I've got a little money that was left me by my mother's family, and I told you I was looking for something to do, some kind of hard physical labor that'd sweat the gripes out of my system. I like gardening and landscape work; one of my uncles was a landscape architect down below San Francisco, and I used to work for him during summers when I was in high school and the two years I went to Stanford I know how to do all

that, even to most of the swimming pool, and I'd like to try it. I think I could make a real showplace out of it."

She nodded thoughtfully. "You'd like to buy a half-interest, and landscape it, as a speculation?"

"That's it. I'd match the present value of your equity in cash to be put into landscaping. And by doing most of the work myself, which is what I want to do, we could make a pretty good profit when we sell. I hope."

"But aren't you forgetting something? You've just seen an example of the bitterness here. If someone hates me enough to do that to me, he isn't going to stop merely because he'd be hurting somebody else too. Are you sure you want to let yourself in for it?"

"I was just coming to that. The thing to do is stop it. I gather you think that's the work of some crackpot? Some joker with a warped mind who's taking his viciousness out on you because he thinks you're responsible for the death of your husband?"

"Yes," she said, frowning. "Don't you?"

"No. I think it's the people who killed him."

She barely avoided spilling her drink. She put it down. "But that was Strader—"

"And some woman. Well, she's still here, and she's got help. Maybe another boy friend, I don't know. Listen—in all the time the police were questioning you, did they ever consider the possibility somebody might have tried deliberately to frame you?"

"Why, no," she said wonderingly. "Not to my knowledge."

"They could have kicked it around, of course, without telling you. At any rate, they should have."

"Do you ready think so?"

"Yes. I don't mean just her leaving the car out there; she had to get rid of it in some place that wouldn't incriminate her, and it would be logical to put it back where Strader might have left it himself. I'm thinking of the telephone call."

The one that woke me up?"

"Yes. You see—" I broke off then. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't intend to start digging into it now and ruin your evening. I want you to eat that steak."

She smiled. "Don't worry. I intend to eat it, and this isn't going to ruin my evening. After what I've been through, a little sympathetic questioning is almost like having a big shoulder to cry on."

"It was pretty rough?" I asked. "The questioning, I mean?"

"It was bad enough."

"Who questioned you? The Sheriff?"

"Mostly. And sometimes Redfield. And often both of them at once."

"What kind of man is the Sheriff?"

She thought about it. "A very competent one, I would say. He's in his sixties, and I understand he's held the job for over twenty years. But his health is failing; for the past month or more I believe he's been at the Mayo Clinic. But I wasn't mistreated, if that's what you mean; it was just so terrifying. The Sheriff himself is a very courteous old gentleman, and while I began to feel after a while that Redfield disliked me intensely there was nothing mean or vicious in the way he treated me. Certainly there were no third-degree methods used."

"Were you arrested?"

"Yes. But not right at first. In the beginning they were just trying to find out whether my husband knew Strader and if they'd planned to go fishing together and what time he'd left here, and so on and if I'd heard Strader's car leave or come back. Then about nine o'clock that morning they found out from the cook at the Silver King that he'd seen the car drive in and that it was a woman who got out of it. I was taken in to the Sheriff's office then, and late in the afternoon I was charged with suspicion of murder and put in jail. I was questioned for hours at a time for three days before they finally dropped the charge for lack of evidence and released me."

"And all the time they were hammering at you along one line? They wanted an admission, or proof of some kind, that you and Strader were—I mean—"

She smiled faintly. "Lovers," she said calmly. "Yes. And after a while I began to be terrified. It just didn't seem possible that they could believe a thing like that, but then I started seeing not only how they could but that it all looked so damaging they might even be able to convince a jury of it. In the first place, I'd told them originally I didn't know Strader, and didn't even know he was registered here. I'd just learned my husband had been killed and I was numb with shock, so naturally the name meant nothing to me. It didn't even register in my mind. Then later, when I was able to think a little, I did remember I'd been in the office the evening before when he came in and asked for a room. So they wanted to know if I'd ever seen him before. I told them no, which was true to the best of my knowledge. Then they showed me two registration cards for the previous month—October—both with Strader's name and automobile number on them. It was merely a simple matter of my husband's having been in the office on each of these times when he registered, but by now it had begun to snowball and everything looked suspicious. There was the fact I'd gone to Miami, alone, near the middle of October, between the first and second time Strader had come up here—"

"You went to Miami?" I hadn't heard that part before.

"Yes." She took another cigarette, and I lit it for her. "I went to see a doctor. They wanted to know why, of course, when we had a family doctor here—Dr. Graham. My nerves were just about at the snapping point by this time and I was on the ragged edge of hysteria, so my reaction was enough to arouse suspicion in itself. I became furious and refused to tell them why. Naturally, as soon as I realized the stupidity of this, I did explain, and they verified it with the doctor by long distance, but it was still damaging because it was something that could have been deliberately arranged as an excuse for going to Miami to meet Strader if I *were* carrying on an affair with him. I mean, I had appointments with the doctor for an hour each morning for two successive days, and while I did see an old friend or two while I was there, I was still alone in Miami for a large part of two afternoons and two nights. And then it wasn't a case of my being ill—"

She hesitated.

"It's all right," I said. "You don't have to go into it."

She made a little gesture, and smiled. "Oh, why should it be embarrassing? My husband and I were very anxious to have a baby and were beginning to be concerned. It happens all the time. But I *was* furious when they were questioning me."

"Well, look," I said. "One of the big items against you was the fact that when they knocked on the door a little before five-thirty that morning it was obvious you were already awake. You explained it was a telephone call. Do you know whether they ever made any effort to check that?"

She shook her head. "No-o. Not that I know of. Why?"

"Because that's the exact point it should have begun to occur to them there was a chance they had the wrong party. I understand the woman wanted to talk to somebody that wasn't even registered and that she sounded about half-drunk, or at least with enough of a heat on to want to argue about it?"

"That's right," she said.

"Do you remember the name of the man she wanted to talk to?"

"Yes. It was a Mr. Carlson."

"Well, do you know whether they ever made any attempt to find out if there *was* a Mr. Carlson registered at that time in any other motel or hotel in the county?"

"They never did say so if they did."

"Of course, they might have, without bothering to tell you. They should have, at least, because five-fifteen in the morning's a rather odd time to have a buzz on in a country town where the bars have been closed for hours. And either a little early or a little late to start trying to locate somebody in a motel. Did they ever challenge you on it?"

"Yes. They accused me several times of lying about it."

"Sure. It could mean, then, that they'd found out there wasn't any Mr. Carlson registered anywhere. So there was a pretty good chance nobody was trying to reach him. And if you were lying, you were obviously guilty. But if they accepted that, they were also morally obliged to accept the other side of the coin along with it. And that is that, if you weren't lying, you were not only innocent, but were actually talking to the woman who *did* kill your husband."

She stared at me. "What kind of woman could do a thing like that?"

"A tough one and a smart one," I said. "Take a good look at her. In the space of a little over an hour she'd helped to kill a man, she'd seen her lover shot down by a policeman, and still she was able to get herself off the hook and figure out a way to set you up for it so she could stay off. Not exactly a choke-up artist, and about as flighty and hysterical as a cobra."

9

I cooked the steaks after a while and we had dinner, not talking about it any more until afterwards when we were having coffee. She was quiet, but she ate a little of the steak and drank some wine. I lit a cigarette for her.

"Are you positive your husband never knew Strader?" I asked.

"Yes," she said definitely. "I never heard him mention the name."

"Then you realize he had to know the woman?"

"Why?" she asked.

"One of them had to have some provable connection with him; otherwise there was no point in trying to make it look like an accident. Strader wouldn't have been suspected merely because he happened to be staying here at the motel. So the woman knew she would be, or could be. Look—there's what's driving the police crazy. The whole thing goes around in a perfect circle and always comes right back where it starts. The woman knew she would be suspected if there were a homicide investigation; there *was* a homicide investigation, and you were the only one who was ever suspected. Q.E.D. Except that they haven't got any actual proof you even knew Strader, let alone were carrying on an affair with him. And if they tried to go to court without that proof, any defense attorney who'd been out of law school an hour would cut 'em to shreds. Redfield probably wakes up

shrieking and chewing the bedclothes. However, that's his problem; mine is something else."

"And what is that?"

"Simply this—*what in hell became of the other woman?* The one who knew she would be suspected, and never was?"

"Maybe she was mistaken, or exaggerating the possible danger."

"No. On the evidence she's a long-headed, cold-blooded type that doesn't get rattled or jump to silly conclusions. So why was she wrong?"

"You say you think there's another man involved. Maybe he was the one."

I don't think so. Strader came up here to see a woman; that's what you run into everywhere you turn. The woman was at the bottom of the whole thing, and in it up to her neck. But say for the sake of argument it was this other man—why wasn't *he* suspected? From what you say of that Sheriff, he wouldn't deliberately suppress evidence for anybody. And I don't think Redfield would."

"No. I'm sure neither of them would. Redfield is a very hard man, but fair. And I think he's thoroughly honest."

I frowned. "That's the picture I get of him too. But something's chewing him. I get the impression he hates you and doesn't care what they do to you out here, and at the same time he hates himself for it because basically he's too honest a cop for that kind of thing."

She nodded. "I think I understand what you mean. You remember I told you that during the questioning I began to feel he disliked me intensely. There are two reasons for it. My husband knew him quite well, and I remember his remarking once that Redfield was what was known as a dedicated police officer. There was nothing he hated worse than seeing a criminal get away with something. And the other reason is simply that my husband was a sort of boyhood hero to Redfield, as he was to a lot of others around here who were younger than he was. I mean, when they were in grammar school he was the greatest end the local high school ever turned out, and then when they were in high school he was being mentioned for Ail-American at Georgia Tech with his picture and big write-ups in the

Florida papers. Boyish, perhaps, but it lasts. Especially when he went on to become a war hero and then made a name for himself in business in Miami. He was always popular. And especially here in his home town, particularly when he returned to it when his health failed and he had to retire. So to Redfield and to a lot of others the whole issue is crystal clear. I'm a tramp, and I committed murder and got away with it."

She said it calmly enough, with no evidence of cracking. You'd have to look closely to see the weariness and pain far back under control. I had a strong desire to comfort her in some way, but at the same time sense enough to realize there was nothing I could do. Except get on with it.

"What time did Strader check in?" I asked.

"Around six p.m., I think," she replied.

"And he was alone?"

She nodded.

"And those two times in October, did the cards show he registered alone then?"

"Yes."

"You don't recall there was ever any evidence afterwards that there had been a woman in the room with him?"

"No," she said. "Even if there were, though, the maid would just assume the room had been rented to a couple and not say anything about it. But of course it was searched very thoroughly the last time, by the police. There was no trace of a woman at all."

"So the woman lived here in town, and he apparently wasn't bringing her to his room, even late at night. Or at least, not the last time. Did they check the records at all the other motels to be sure he hadn't been here at other times and stayed at a different place?"

"Yes. Apparently he came up only those three times, and always stayed here for some reason. That was damaging, too, of course."

"Did you recall seeing him at any time later that same night? I mean, when you went outside, did you notice whether his car was still in front of the room?"

She shook her head helplessly. "No. They kept asking me that, but I just don't remember. There were eight rooms rented that night, so the chances were against my noticing whether any one car was there or gone."

"And your husband was going fishing alone?"

"Yes."

"What time did he leave? Did you get up too?"

"No," she said. I always offered to, to make his coffee for the flask, but he insisted on doing it himself. He rarely took a lunch, because he was usually back by noon. That morning he got up at three-thirty—I remember him setting the alarm. It woke me, too, of course, and I could hear him moving around in the kitchen, drinking coffee and filling the flask. All the fishing equipment and his motor were already in the station wagon, of course, since he always loaded it the night before. He came into the bedroom before he left, as he always did, and kissed me when he saw I was awake. He made our standard joke about catching bass so big he wouldn't have to lie about it, and then I heard him drive off. I—I—" She took a sudden, shaky breath, and leaned forward to crush out the cigarette.

"You didn't hear any other car leave?" I asked quickly, to get her past it.

"No." She was all right now. "After a while I went back to sleep. And the next thing was when the phone woke me and this woman wanted to talk to Mr. Carlson. By the time I'd finally convinced her there was no such person registered, I was too wide awake to go back to bed. I washed my face and heated the coffee—he always left some for me. It was less than ten minutes later when the Sheriff knocked on the door."

"Do you know exactly what time he left here?" I asked.

"It would be between ten minutes to and four o'clock," she replied. "It was nearly always the same. It took twenty to twenty-five minutes from the time the alarm went off."

"And how long does it take to drive to this Cut where he kept the boat?"

"About twenty minutes."

"Did they fix the exact time Calhoun jumped Strader down there?"

She nodded. "Calhoun testified at the inquest that it was a squeaky brake on the car that woke him up. He looked at his watch, and it was four-twenty-five."

"Umh-umh. There's just one more thing. Have you ever had reason to suspect your husband was involved with any other woman at all?"

"No," she said. "Certainly not."

"Well, sometimes at that age—"

There was a quick ruffling of temper in the eyes. "I told you—" Then she stopped abruptly. "I'm sorry," she said, and smiled. She pushed a hand back through her hair with that weary gesture she had. "I didn't intend to snap at you that way."

She was tiring. It occurred to me I was doing a very poor job of carrying out the doctor's orders. I crushed out the cigarette and stood up. "Back to bed for you. I'll get your medicine." I brought over one of the sleeping pills from my room.

She smiled. "You and Dr. Graham are a heavy-handed pair of conspirators. Didn't it ever occur to either of you if I'd wanted to take that way out of it I'd have done it long ago?"

"To be frank," I said, "neither of us was too sure how you'd come out of that business this morning. You're a stronger girl than we gave you credit for."

She stood up and held out her hand. "Well, run along before I make a liar out of you. You'll never know how nice you've been."

"Good night," I said. "We'll talk over that deal in the morning." I locked the back door and left. I sat on the side of the concrete slab in front of my room smoking and watching the place until Josie returned. There was no telling what they would do next. Georgia Langston was sleeping peacefully when Josie came back around ten-thirty and set up her cot in the living-room. I told her to keep the front door bolted, and went across to bed.

I checked to be sure the window at the rear of the room was locked and the curtains tightly drawn. There was something very chilling in the thought of that shotgun. I could still see the empty eyes at the ends of its dual barrels searching for me down there in the gloom like some

nightmarish radar. Only a fool wouldn't be scared. He was smart, and he was deadly, and I didn't have the faintest idea who he was. And if I didn't flush him out before he had a second chance, I wasn't going to be very pretty when they found me.

I lay in bed in the darkness, listening to the quiet hum of the air-conditioner and trying to make some glimmer of sense of it. Langston had left here alive at ten minutes to four at the earliest, and he'd arrived there at four-twenty-five with his head bashed in, rolled up in a tarpaulin in the back of his own station wagon. It was a twenty-minute drive. So in fifteen minutes at the outside he'd gone somewhere and managed to get himself killed. He couldn't have gone very far. But that didn't mean anything. It was a small town, and at that time of morning, with no traffic, you could get from one end of it to the other in less than five minutes.

But how did a woman get into the picture? Even if he were a chaser, which everybody said he wasn't, nobody went prowling at four in the morning in a country town. Not with bass tackle and an outboard motor and a flask of coffee. It was ridiculous.

The woman was in the picture, obviously, because she was Strader's girl friend, the one he'd been coming up here to see. But what possible connection could there be between Strader's girl friend and Langston? The easy answer to that, of course, brought you right back to the police point of view. Langston was married to her. So try again. The woman was here in town. She lived here. Somewhere before she must have known Strader. He'd driven up here three times in two months to see her, and it was a thousand miles' round trip. Strader, on the evidence, was no love-starved adolescent, so she must be quite a girl. Of course, you never knew what some other man would go for, but how many had I seen around here so far that could pull me the length of the State of Florida?

One. I was back to the police point of view again.

I sighed in the darkness and lit a cigarette. She was here somewhere and I had to find her.

I had one very slim lead. When she'd called me on the phone, she had made no attempt to disguise her voice, even if it were possible, or cover it with the slurred speech of the

half-drunken as she had when she'd called Mrs. Langston that morning. It simply wasn't necessary, because in half an hour I was going to be dead anyway. It wasn't much, but it was something.

But how did you explain that insane thing about the fan?

Then I set straight up in bed, cursing myself for an idiot. Why hadn't I seen it before? There was no mystery about the fan at all. That first call, when she'd hung up abruptly, wasn't a teaser or come-on, as I'd thought it was, or a way of lending authenticity to her story. Or not solely any of those. It was also a test. They were checking me.

Somewhere he'd seen me going in and out of those phone booths, and suspected what I was up to, but he wanted to be absolutely sure. So what could be simpler than setting up a phony for me, duplicating the noise with a fan near some other telephone, and watching while she called me? If I ran across the street to try to catch her when she hung up, he'd know. And I had. And he knew. So she made the second one, and sent me out to meet the shotgun. Very smooth teamwork; you had to admit it, even if it scared you.

So far, so good. Did it mean, then, that it had to be one of the four who'd been at the place that first time—Rupe, Dunleavy, Ollie, or Pearl Talley? Not necessarily, I thought; they seemed to have ways of knowing everything I did in this town, and even if he'd spotted me somewhere farther up the line and followed me for a while to make sure what I was doing, he could have found out from any number of people that I'd finally come out and checked the booth at the Silver King. But it definitely made more sense if it were one of those four. He'd know I had more reason to suspect him, because he was still there.

Assume it was one of the four. Which one? Dunleavy worked in a filling station just up the road. He would have been able to see me when I ran over there. Ollie was already there, naturally. Pearl Talley had come in just after me. That left only Rupe unaccounted for. Did that make him more or less likely than the others? He could have been watching from anywhere around, and remained out of sight.

Wouldn't that be the natural thing to do, rather than walking in openly, as Talley had done? Sure, I thought, except for one thing. As far as my reasoning it out

afterwards was concerned, the way they saw it, there was no sweat at all. Afterwards I was going to be dead.

So it could have been Talley just as well as any of the others. No, I thought. Not with that mush-mouthed, Georgia-boy accent of his. Whoever the man was, I'd heard him twice on the telephone, and while he'd been whispering once and speaking very softly the other time, some of that houn'-dawg dialect would have come through if it'd been Talley. That left three of them.

So now I had two very tenuous threads to follow, both due to the fact they'd underestimated my life expectancy. They'd know I had them, and they wouldn't make the same mistake again. It was a long time before I got to sleep.

* * *

Dawn was breaking when I swung off the highway at the two mailboxes and followed the dirt road through the pines. No one was up at either of the two farmhouses. As I passed the cattle-loading pen, a covey of young quail crossed the road ahead of me and then flushed, exploding fanwise like feathered projectiles to sail out over the palmettos. In a few minutes I pulled in and stopped under the tree in front of the fire-blackened chimney.

I had wakened before daybreak and almost at once I'd been struck by the thought I was almost positive there had been no other car tracks in this road yesterday, at least none this side of the farmhouses. How had he got in here? There must be a road of some sort in that timber beyond the fields and he'd come in the back way. If I could find it, I might locate the place he'd left his car.

It was humid and warm and the air was utterly still as if the day were poised and holding its breath, waiting to explode. There was no sound, except now and then the *bub-bob-white* of a quail somewhere out in the field. It still wasn't full light, but I could see well enough to make out another set of tire tracks besides the ones I had made yesterday. The redheaded Deputy, I thought. When he'd been unable to provoke me into a charge of assaulting an officer, he'd become bored enough to come on out here and make a stab at doing his job. For a moment I felt almost

sorry for Redfield. It was a sadly undermanned police force, with one cop and two clowns.

There was no point in even going inside the barn now; it would be too dark to see anything. I went on past it, hearing my shoes slash through the dead weeds and feeling a chill between my shoulderblades as I thought again of that shotgun going off behind my head. Some two hundred yards beyond, at the lower end of the smaller field, I crawled between sagging strands of barbed wire and pushed into the timber. It was mostly oak and scrubby pine. So far I had seen no footprints, but I had no illusions as to my being a scout or tracker. I'd lived all my life on pavement. And what I was looking for was a road; I'd be able to see that.

I crossed a sandy ravine in which ran a small trickle of water, and then beyond it the way led upwards at a slight grade. I kept going. It was easy traveling, fairly open with not much underbrush and only occasional bunches of dead grass and nettles. It was broad daylight now. In another few minutes I hit the road. It was only a pair of dusty ruts winding through the trees, but there were tire tracks in it, and they looked fairly fresh. At least they had been put there since the last rain. The road ran roughly north and south, parallel to the one I'd come in on. I marked the spot by dropping a stick in one of the ruts, and turned right, following it south towards the highway. After a half-mile I'd still seen no indication the car had ever stopped or pulled out of the ruts. I turned and went back, and a few hundred yards north of the marker I'd left I found what I was looking for. An even fainter pair of ruts led off to the left, towards the fields in back of the barn, and there were fresh tread marks in the dust. They were a standard diamond pattern, which meant nothing, since there were thousands just like them anywhere. The sun was coming up now.

I followed them, walking between the ruts. In places the ground was covered with a carpet of pine needles so the treads didn't show at all, but in others there was open sand and I examined them carefully, looking for flaws or cut places that might identify one of the tires. There were none that I could see. In about two hundred yards I came to the place he'd stopped and turned around. A fairly large pine had fallen across the trace of a road, and there was no way he could get around it. I studied the tracks. He'd pulled out

to left, reversed as far as he could go, and then had pulled back into the road, facing the way he'd come. Several drops of oil had seeped into the sand in one place midway between the ruts, which meant whoever it was hadn't merely turned here and gone back. His car had sat here for a while. I nodded and lit a cigarette. The place should be less than half a mile directly behind the field and the barn; this was my boy, all right.

But there was nothing to indicate who he might have been or whether there had been more than one. I could see traces of footprints in one or two spots, but they were indistinct and incomplete, of no value. Then I noticed something. In turning, he'd been cramped for space because of the trees all around, and at the very end of his reverse he had backed into a pine sapling. I stood looking at it. The small gouge in the bark was unmistakable, but it was too high, at least eighteen inches above where it should have been. Then I knew what had done it. Not the bumper of a car; the tail of a pick-up truck.

Talley drove one. The picture of it flashed into my mind, standing in front of the Silver King with chicken droppings all over its sides. I shrugged it off, wondering why I kept thinking of that mush-mouthed clown. Circling the fallen tree, I went on west, towards the field. There were occasional traces of footprints between the old ruts, and in about a hundred yards I came across a half-smoked cigarette that had been ground out beneath a shoe. It had a white filter tip, and when I straightened out the torn and crumpled paper I could read the brand name. It was a Kent.

When I came back to the barn the sun was well up and it was light enough to see inside. I went through it and found nothing at all except the savagely mutilated plank at the head of the ladder where the shot charge had slashed through it. The empty shells were gone. I stood looking up at the torn plank, feeling a chill uneasiness. How would they try next? And where? They'd know I would be more difficult to decoy now, so they couldn't get me out here in the country. Would they dare try it in town, from a car? Possibly at night, I thought; I'd have to watch all the time. It gave you the creeps.

I drove back to town, had some breakfast at the Steak House, and called the Sheriff's office. Magruder answered. He said Redfield was taking the day off.

"What do you want?" he asked truculently.

"A cop," I said, and hung up.

I looked up Redfield's home number in the book, and dialed it. There was no answer.

The stores were beginning to open now. I went up the street to a hardware shop and bought a hundred-foot tape, and picked up some cheap drawing instruments at a dime store. Before I went back to the car I tried Redfield's number again. There was still no answer. I looked at the address; there was a chance he might be working in the yard on his day off and not hear the phone. It was 1060 Clayton. That would be the third street north of Springer and way out in the east end. I drove out. It was in the last block where the street dead-ended against a fenced peach orchard. On the left was a playground and baseball diamond fenced with high wire netting. The house was on the right, the only one in the block. It was a low ranch-style with a new coat of white paint. The rural mailbox out in front bore the neatly lettered name: K. R. Redfield. I stopped and got out.

Either he or his wife was a gardener. It was a big lot, probably half an acre, and the lawn in front showed plenty of care. At the left there was a concrete drive and a six-foot trellised fence with *pyracantha* espaliered beautifully against it. The same type of fence, covered with climbing roses, was on the right, with another strip of lawn and walk paved with bricks laid in sand. I stepped up on the porch and rang the bell. There was no answer. I crossed the lawn to the driveway and looked towards the back.

The garage was at least a hundred feet back, past this wing of the L- or J-shaped house. The door was closed. *Bougainvillea* was splashed like flame against the side of it. I stepped on back and around the corner, hoping he might be working in the backyard. There was a big oak tree over on the right, with more brick paving under it, and two peach trees and another strip of velvety lawn. He had been working back here, apparently laying a low brick wall for a raised flower-bed along the back of the lawn, but there was

no one in sight now. Tools were still lying near the job, and there was a pile of sand and a bag of cement at one end of the brick paving.

I had come slightly past the inner corner of the end of the wing, and as I turned to leave I glanced idly behind me at the alcove formed by the two wings of the house. Then I froze in confusion. Almost under my feet, a girl with dark, wine-red hair was lying on her back on a large beach towel with her feet towards me and her hands under the back of her head. She was completely nude except for a pair of dark glasses that were aimed at my face in a blank, inscrutable stare. I whirled, and was back around the corner on the drive again by the time I had grasped the obvious, but comforting, fact that she was asleep. My face was still hot, however, as I hurried down the drive and got into the station wagon.

I could still see her. She was Redfield's wife and I didn't want to, and tried guiltily to scrape the picture of her off my mind, but it stuck, the way the bright flame of an electric welding arc does after you've closed your eyes too late. I could see the dark red hair spread across the towel and the plastic squeeze bottle of suntan lotion beside her hip, and the concave belly—I cursed, and whirled the car around.

At the end of the block I turned left and came out on the main road near the Spanish Main. Redfield's place was almost behind the Magnolia Lodge. Not more than a quarter of a mile, I thought.

10

Georgia Langston was still asleep. I drank a cup of coffee in the kitchen with Josie, changed into faded denim trousers, and went to work. I tore up the rest of the ruined carpet in Room 5, swept it out onto the gravel with the piled remains of the mattresses, bedclothes, and curtains, and phoned for a truck to haul it to the city dump. When it was gone I washed out the whole room with the hose once more and pushed the water out of the door with a broom. The last of the acid should be out now, and in four or five days when the room was thoroughly dry I could paint it and have a new carpet laid.

The anger at all this senseless ruin began to wear off a little, and I felt fine. It was wonderful to be doing something again. The sun beat down and sweat rolled off my shoulders as I took the hundred-foot tape and a big rough pad and pencil and went out front. I stood by the sign where I could see the entire front of the place and as I began excitedly visualizing it as it would be, I wanted to grab the tools now and begin the assault on it, violently, in the hot sun. I made a crude sketch of the lot and the buildings, reeled out the tape, and began writing in the dimensions. I took all the data into my room, switched on the air-conditioner, and drew it to scale on a large sheet of drawing paper, putting the fifteen by thirty foot pool in the center, almost in front of the office, with the concrete edge around it and the whole

thing bordered with grass. The drive in from the road would be blacktop paving, as would the parking area in front of the rooms. Border the drive with two raised flower-beds and at the outer ends of the front lawns set solid masses of bamboo. That should grow here, and grow fast. Light the bamboo from below with colored spotlights—chi-chi and a little on the overdone side, perhaps, but it would be spectacular, and that was what we wanted. Children's playground here, at this end of the lawn.

I was breaking it down into square yards of lawn, square yards of blacktop and concrete deck, lineal feet of underground conduit and water pipe and numbers of sprinkler heads, when there was a knock on the door. I looked at my watch and was startled to see it was after eleven. I'd really been wrapped up in it.

"Come in," I called.

It was Georgia Langston. She was wearing a crisp white skirt and a short-sleeved blouse the color of cinnamon, and looked refreshed and very easy on the eyes. She smiled. "I'm not interrupting, am I?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Come on in. I want you to see this." I stood up. She came over and stood by my shoulder as I explained the drawing to her.

"What do you think?" I asked.

I think it would be absolutely wonderful," she said quietly. "But are you sure you want to do it?"

"Yes. The more I look at it, the more it appeals to me. Then it's a deal?"

She nodded. Then all at once she smiled warmly and held out her hand.

"I'll start the transfer of the money to an account here in the local bank," I said. "It'll take several days. In the meantime you can get your lawyer to draw up the partnership agreement."

"All right," she said. Then she shook her head wearily. "But, Bill, how can we even reopen the place? We don't know what they'll do next."

I took hold of her arms. "I'm still working on it. There are a couple of small leads and I'm trying to get hold of Redfield now."

"Do you think he'll ever do anything?"

"He has to," I said. "We've just got to keep trying."

When she went back to the office I stripped off the sweaty clothes, showered, and changed the dressing on my arm. I put on a fresh sports shirt and some new trousers and made up a bundle of laundry to drop off in town. It was a quarter to twelve when I got out to Redfield's again, and this time I had better luck. Just as I was stopping I caught a glimpse of him along the right side of the house. He was working in the backyard. I started rather hesitantly along the brick walk, but when he saw me coming and made no move to head me off I gathered it was all right. She had gone inside.

He was shirtless, kneeling as he worked at the low brick wall. Beside him, in the shade of the large oak, was the steel wheelbarrow containing a small heap of mortar. He glanced up.

"Hello," I said.

He nodded curtly, but made no reply. I wondered if he thought I'd come to start trouble. He'd roughed me up in the office when he lost his temper, I outweighed him by at least thirty pounds, and he was a long way from his gun. But if the thought had even occurred to him it obviously wasn't worrying him.

I lit a cigarette and squatted then on my heels, watching him. He was a good cop, but he'd never give Churchill any competition as an amateur bricklayer. "Something I wanted to tell you," I said. "I went back out there this morning. And I found the place he parked his car."

He didn't even look up. I don't bring the job home with me."

He was awkward with the trowel, and kept poking and patting more mortar between the bricks with his fingers. "You're not going to have any fingertips left," I said. "That stuff's abrasive."

"I know," he replied. "After half an hour of it they feel like they'd been sandpapered."

"You mind if I show you something?" I asked.

"You a bricklayer?"

"Not union. But I used to do a lot of this patio stuff. Walks, borders, things like that."

He said nothing, and for a moment I thought he was going to refuse. Then he handed me the trowel and moved back a little. I showed him how to slap down the mortar, spread it with the tip of the trowel to push it towards the edge of the bricks, and how to butter the end of the new one with mortar with a wiping motion of the trowel. I put it in place, sliced off the excess with the trowel, and went on to the next one. I put down three more.

He gave me a fleeting, hard grin. "You sure as hell make it look easy."

"It just takes practice," I said. "But you ought to wet your bricks down more. They're too dry."

"What does that do?" he asked.

"They're porous, so they absorb all the moisture from your mortar too fast. Makes it crumbly, and it won't bind. You got a tub or something to soak them in?"

"Sure." He went across to the garage and came back with a small garbage can. "How's this?"

"Fine," I said. We filled it with bricks and turned the hose on it. "Let them soak a few minutes and then take them out."

He nodded, and wiped the perspiration from his face. "How about a beer?"

"Sounds great," I said.

He went through the screened back porch and into the kitchen, and emerged in a minute with two punched cans of beer. We squatted on our heels in the shade. I glanced around the rest of the patio. The other wing of the house stretched across behind us to the drive and I could see the front wheels and hood of an old car beyond the corner of it. There was a picture window in the central part, with flowerbeds under it, and brick paving across the inner part of the L. That was where she had been. I tried not to think about her at all and hoped she didn't come out.

I nodded towards the mass of bougainvillea on the garage. "Don't you have frost here? How do you protect that?"

He took a sip of his beer. "We only have two or three a year that're sharp enough to hurt it. I put a smudge pot back in the corner and that saves it."

We discussed the local lawn grasses. He was full of the subject, and some of the hardness went out of his eyes as he warmed to it. He looked at me with interest. "You sound like a gardener yourself. How'd you happen to know so much about all this?"

I had an uncle who was a landscape architect," I said. "I used to work for him." I told him about the deal with Georgia Langston, and what I wanted to do with the grounds.

He nodded. "So that's the deal?" He turned the beer can in his hands, staring at the lettering on it. Then he said, curtly and ill-at-ease, "I'm sorry about that business in the office."

"Forget it," I said.

He reached into the pocket of his trousers and brought out a packet of cigarettes and held them out. "Smoke?"

They were Kents. "Thanks," I said. I took one and we both lit up.

We finished the beer and he rose. "Got to unload the rest of those bricks," he said. "I'll back in."

"I'll give you a hand," I told him. I felt good about having been right about him all the time. He went on round the corner of the opposite wing of the house and I heard the car door slam. It pulled ahead in the drive, and as it came all the way into view I stared. It was a pick-up truck. He cut the wheels and backed in across the brick paving and stopped. I shot a quick glance at the rear wheels. The treads were that same diamond pattern I'd seen out there in the dust.

I kept my face expressionless. It didn't mean anything, I thought. Plenty of people smoked that brand of cigarettes, there were hundreds of pick-up trucks around, and that was one of the most common of all truck tires. But he was out of the office when I'd got there.

We unloaded the bricks and stacked them. He leaned against the tailgate and looked at me thoughtfully. "You say you went out there this morning? And found the place he parked?"

"Yes."

"Then you know what he was driving?"

I wasn't too sure what he was after, but there was no use ducking it. "Yes," I said. "A pick-up truck."

He nodded approvingly. I was wondering if you spotted that gouged place on the sapling."

It was a relief, somehow. The other man, the unknown, was dangerous enough, but Redfield would have been worse. "So you went out, too?" I asked.

"After Mitchell came back and told me it probably happened about the way you said. I had a hunch how he'd got in there, so I took the back road and then walked down to where he'd turned around at that fallen tree."

"Did you go on down to the barn?" I asked.

"Sure." He gave me that hard-bitten grin. "If you mean the cigarette butt, I left that. You don't think he'd be stupid enough to do it?"

"No," I said. "I guess not, come to think of it."

At that moment a car came down the drive and stopped in front of the garage, and I realized I had stayed too long. It was a station wagon, and the girl who got out could have been any attractive young suburban housewife meeting the six-fifteen. except that I had to fight myself to keep from seeing her the way I had the first time. I kept my face blankly polite—I hoped.

She wore the dark red hair in a shoulder-length pony tail, and had on sandals and a crisp cotton dress with a very conservative heart-shaped face. She was prettier than most. And probably more extensively tanned—I cursed myself.

Redfield introduced us rather stiffly. She held out her hand, and smiled. "How do you do, Mr. Chatham."

"How do you do," I said.

"You're not from around here, are you?" she asked pleasantly.

I shook my head. "San Francisco."

She regarded me thoughtfully. "It's odd, though. I have the strangest impression I've seen you somewhere before.

I caught my party expression before it could slide off onto my shirt, and propped it up again. "Well—that is, I have been around here for a day or two."

"Maybe that's it." Then she smiled charmingly. "You've had that feeling, haven't you, Mr. Chatham. I mean, that you've seen someone before?"

"Oh, sure," I said. I suppose everybody does at times."

I was furious, and uneasy at the same time because I couldn't see what she was up to. So she hadn't been asleep. Then she knew it was purely accidental and that I'd fled the moment I saw her.

"How do you like our garden?" she asked. "Don't you think Kelly's done a wonderful job?"

"Yes," I said. "It's very good."

Maybe she was crazy. It was another minute or two before I could get away with any grace at all. Redfield said nothing, except to thank me curtly for helping him with the bricks.

"You *must* come back, Mr. Chatham," she said graciously.

"Of course," I said. "Thank you."

I went out to the station wagon, wondering if I was leaving blood tracks on the driveway. What was the matter with her, and what had she been trying to do? Why the knife? Or had it been that at all? Maybe she was just bouncing her nude body against me for kicks. Or as an invitation.

In the presence of her husband? *Redfield*? If she liked to live that dangerously, why not take up Russian roulette with *all* the chambers loaded?

When I got back to the motel, Georgia Langston was behind the desk in the lobby, making entries in two big ledgers. Josie was muttering indignantly. "I jest can't do nothin' with her, Mr. Chatham."

"I can," I said. I closed the ledgers, took her by the arm, and walked her into the bedroom. Stacking the two pillows, I told her firmly, "In you go."

She sighed with exaggerated martyrdom, but lay back. I removed her sandals, dropped them by the bed, and sat down in the armchair. She turned her head then, and smiled. "You're a bully. But nice."

"I happen to think you're pretty nice too," I said. "And I don't like picking up the pieces of people I'm fond of, so you stay there. I want to talk to you, anyway."

She made a face. "Well, do you think I could smoke, Doctor?"

I lit a cigarette for her and one for myself. "How well did you and your husband know the Redfields?" I asked.

"Not really well," she replied. "We rarely entertained at all. You just can't, and operate a motel. I think we played bridge together two or three times. But he and my husband went fishing together quite often."

"That's something else I wanted to ask you about," I said. "Weren't you worried about his going fishing alone? I mean, with a history of two heart attacks?"

She nodded. "Of course. But he practically never did, because of the way I felt about it. The only reason he went alone that day was that Redfield had to go out of town at the last minute and he couldn't get anybody else—"

"Hold it," I said quickly. "Back up a minute. You mean he and Redfield had planned to go together, but Redfield had to cancel? Tell me exactly how it happened."

She stared at me questioningly. "The day it all happened was Thursday, you know. They'd had the trip planned since the previous Monday, or something like that. But around noon on Wednesday Redfield called here. He was leaving town right then, going up into Alabama somewhere, I think, to extradite a prisoner, or some other police job. He said he was sorry he hadn't called sooner."

"He talked to you?" I asked. "Not your husband?"

"Yes. Kendall was out somewhere."

"And you gave him the message? You're sure of it?"

"Of course. But why are you asking me all this?"

"Frankly, I don't know," I said. "But there's something about it that keeps needling me. You say Redfield apologized because he hadn't called sooner? Did he say it was because he hadn't known about it sooner, or he'd just forgotten to?"

She thought about it "Wait. I remember now. I'm pretty sure he said it had just slipped his mind."

I nodded. "Well, wait a minute. You say Redfield questioned you, along with the Sheriff. The next day, I mean. Was his trip called off, or something, or had he gone and come back?"

"Let's see," she said. "They took me into the Sheriff's office about nine-thirty that morning, I think. Redfield wasn't there then, I know. He came in around noon, or one o'clock."

So he had gone out of town, apparently. And he'd known about it prior to noon the day before, possibly early that morning. I began to feel excited. Then it went flat. What possible connection could it have had with Langston, even assuming my wild guess was right?

"Do you know anything about Mrs. Redfield at all?" I asked. "Where she comes from originally and how long they've been married and so on?"

"No-o. I don't know much. As I say, I only met her a few times. But she seemed very nice. She was a school teacher, and I think they've been married a little over two years."

"Is she a native?"

"I think she came here from Warren Springs. That's about sixty miles. But she does have relatives here; you'd never believe it if you've met her, an attractive girl like that, but she's a cousin of that horrible Pearl Talley—"

"Talley?" I said sharply.

"Umh-umh." She smiled. I gather, from the way you said it, that you've met him?"

Twice," I said. I told her about it.

"That's Talley, all right. The lipstick thing is typical. A lot of people think he's amusing—you know, a character—but to me he's revolting. Those depraved girls he lives with—And it isn't as if he were stupid and didn't know any better. He's very intelligent, and probably the shrewdest business man in the County. He owns a half-interest in the movie theatre, and a junk yard, and I don't know how much real estate."

I know," I said. "Or at least, I've heard about his farms. But what else do you know about Mrs. Redfield?"

"Well, I gather you've met her too," she said coolly. "She is about the most attractive girl in town, isn't she?"

"Let's say the second most attractive," I interrupted. "But here's what I'm driving at. Everybody agrees Strader came up here to see some woman. And from what I've heard of him, the chances are it wasn't Gravel Gertie."

She stared. "You couldn't mean her?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know—but she just doesn't seem the type. And they've been married only two—"

"Let's take another look at the record," I said. "You don't exactly seem the type yourself. And you'd been married only *one* year. But that didn't seem to bother anybody when it came to hanging Strader around your neck. So why can't we try him on Mrs. Redfield, just for size?"

"But what do you have to go on?"

"Mostly coincidences and wild guesses, so far. He always stayed here, and she lives about a quarter of a mile behind the place. We know Redfield was out one night, at least—"

She looked worried. "Bill, do you have any idea how long you'd stay alive if you ever said that aloud in this town?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm afraid so."

It could have been Redfield in that loft. His saying he'd been out there later didn't mean a thing. I'd already told him I'd gone out there, he knew I was a trained cop and would have seen those things, so he had to explain them some way. What could be subtler and more convincing than that buddy-buddy mutual-admiration pitch that we were *both* pretty good.

Mrs. Redfield appeared to be in an absolutely impregnable position.

Then it began to fall apart.

"Wait," I said. "We could be a mile off the beam. We both have some idea of the kind of man Redfield is. So why are we taking it for granted he'd shield her if he knew she'd cheated with Strader? He'd be more likely to kill her."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully. "If he *knew*."

I nodded. "There. You've got it. He doesn't know, and he doesn't want to. That fits all the way round and explains everything he's done. So far, he doesn't have any more doubt than he can bury and try to ignore, and as far as he's concerned it's going to stay that way. Maybe it's very little. Say those other two dates that Strader was up here—"

"The sixth and the twenty-ninth of October."

They came out, of course, when they were questioning you," I went on. "So suppose Redfield checked back and found he'd also been out of town overnight on both the sixth and twenty-ninth of October?"

She thought about it. "That's still rather flimsy evidence to cause a man to suspect his wife."

"Sure," I said. "So he must have more. But not *too* much more. He's an intelligent man and a very hard one, so there's a definite limit to the amount of self-delusion he can come up with, or live with, no matter how desperately he's

in love with her—or infatuated with her, if you want to put it that way.”

“But what are you going to do?” she asked apprehensively.

“I don’t know yet,” I said.

It was deadly any way you looked at it. Redfield was a police officer, and a highly respected one. He had sources of information everywhere. I was already marked because of my connection with Georgia Langston. Anything I did or any questions I asked would get back to him within an hour. Even if she were completely innocent, he could kill me with no more penalty than a routine hearing. This was the South, and the small-town South at that; you didn’t go around publicly inquiring into the morals of another man’s wife unless you were already tired of living.

And why was there any reason to assume she even knew Strader? How could you prove it if there were? And if we did find out she was actually Strader’s girl friend, what possible connection did it have with Langston’s death? There simply was no motive for their killing him. And who was the man who was trying to drive Georgia Langston insane or run her out of business? And why? Where was the connection between him and Mrs. Redfield? Was it Talley? Merely because they were cousins? That didn’t make sense.

And in the end, it was not only deadly, but utterly futile. If we did learn beyond a doubt she was the one Strader had come to see and that there was a connection with Langston, where did we take our charge? To Redfield? Why, naturally. He had jurisdiction, didn’t he?

Redfield, old boy, if you’ve got a minute to spare, I’ve just learned your wife is a tramp and, I’d like to have her arrested for adultery, and murder, and a number of other things—let’s see, I’ve got the list right here—

Right here where you just emptied the clip.

Well, we had to do something. “Do you know,” I asked, “if there’s any chance the Sheriff may be back on the job any time soon?”

She shook her head. “Practically none, from what I’ve heard. I think they did learn the stomach condition he went up there for wasn’t malignant, but he’s over sixty and the ulcers are so bad the doctors told him he’d just have to

retire. Redfield will probably remain in charge and run for the office next election."

"Okay," I said wearily. "Let's take it from the top again. Mrs. Redfield. What else do you know about her?"

"It's sketchy, as I told you," she said. "Her first name is Cynthia. I'd say she was twenty-eight or twenty-nine, and I think they were married two years ago last June, just after school was out. It seems to me she taught third grade, and just for the one school term, and that somebody once told me she came here just before school started in September. That would be 1954. I don't know whether she came directly from Warren Springs or not, but somehow I have the impression that was the last place she taught."

"You don't know what her maiden name was? It might have been Talley, but not necessarily."

"No-o, I'm sorry."

"Well, that one's easy, anyway," I said. I went out to the desk and called City Hall for the name of the local Superintendent of Schools. He was a Mr. J. P. Wardlaw. I looked up his number, and called him at home.

"I'm trying to locate a Miss Talley, or Miss Tanner," I said. "She teaches one of the elementary grades here, or used to, and I thought perhaps you could help me."

"Hmm, no," he replied, "I don't have any records here at home, of course, the name's not familiar at all."

I laughed sheepishly. "Well, to tell the truth, Mr. Wardlaw I could be all fouled up on it. You see, she's an old friend of my wife's was supposed to call on on my way through here, but I've lost the slip she gave me. All I can remember is that her first name was Cynthia and I think she taught the third grade—"

"Wait. I know who you mean. That would be Mrs. Sprague. Cynthia Sprague. She's married now to a Mr. Redfield. Kelly Redfield. You can find her in the book."

"Thanks a million," I said.

I called the garage to see if my car was ready yet. The girl was sorry, but there'd been a little delay in getting the radiator from Tallahassee. It should be ready tomorrow morning. She was sorry again. I came in on the second chorus and was sorry with her.

I went back to the bedroom. Georgia Langston looked at me inquiringly. I couldn't figure out why just seeing her always gave me a lift. "Besides being a very honest and deserving girl with exquisite feet," I said, "you also have a station wagon I've been driving for the past few days. Can I drive it again?"

She smiled. "I'm an invalid; so how could I stop you? Where are you going?"

"Warren Springs," I said. "Cynthia Redfield was married before. To a man named Sprague. Somewhere, if we go back far enough, we might find a tie-in with Strader. If I'm late getting back, keep Josie here with you."

I was going out the door when she said, "Bill." I turned.

"Be careful," she said simply.

I was within ten miles of Warren Springs before it dawned on me at last that I was an idiot on a wild-goose chase. I hadn't even thought of it before, but there was no chance at all Cynthia Redfield could have been the woman who called me on the phone to set me up in that barn. Her voice was deeper, down in the contralto range, and the inflection and accent were entirely different.

Well, meat-head, I thought, law enforcement certainly didn't lose anything when you got out. I shrugged and went on; there was no point in turning back now.

* * *

Warren Springs appeared to be slightly larger than Galicia. It was built around a square where magnificent old trees did their best to hide a turn-of-the-century courthouse that set your teeth on edge. At two-fifteen on a Thursday afternoon in July it was less than hectic. I had no difficulty in finding a parking place, and ducked into the nearest drugstore. Ordering the inevitable coke, I went back to the phone booth. There were two Spragues listed. There was no answer at the first, and at the other I raised a charmer who sounded as if she were talking through a wide gap in her front teeth and who said Mommy was gone to the store and that she'd never heard of Cynthia Sprague.

I got some more dimes and tackled it through the Superintendent of Schools. When I'd run down his name, I

called his home. He was out of town, and his wife didn't know whether a Cynthia Sprague had ever taught here or not.

"What you ought to do is call my husband's secretary," she said. "She's been with him for fifteen years or longer, and she'd know whatever it is you want."

"Fine," I said. "Where can I get hold of her?"

"Her name's Ellen Beasley, and in the summer she always works vacation relief at the telephone-company business office. They're on Stuart Street, just off the north side of the square."

"Thank you very much," I said.

Ellen Beasley proved to be unmarried and forty-ish, with a petite face, a small bud of a mouth, and earnest but friendly blue eyes. She looked up at me from her desk and smiled inquiringly.

"Not phone business," I said. "I'm trying to locate a girl who used to teach here in town, and I understand you'd know her if anybody would. Have you got time for a cup of coffee?"

"Why, I think so," she said. She said something into the telephone at the corner of her desk, gathered up her purse, and we went out. There was an air-conditioned café just around the corner on the square. We went back to a table and ordered the coffee. I offered her a cigarette, but she refused with an apologetic smile.

"The girl's name was Cynthia Sprague," I said. "And if she taught here it would probably be three or four years ago."

She frowned thoughtfully, "You don't know whether she usually taught in high school or junior high? Or is the elementary grades?"

"No," I said. "But she would have probably been pretty young. Not over twenty-four or twenty-five, so I'd imagine in grade school. She was married, but I don't know her husband's first name."

"Oh, well, sure, I know who you mean," she said quickly. "She wasn't a teacher, though; at least, not the last two years she was here. She was married to a teacher. Her husband was principal of the junior high school. Robert

Sprague. I remember quite well now; her maiden name was Cynthia Forrest."

"Did she live around here long?" I asked.

"Well, yes. I think she and her mother came here from Georgia about the time she was in high school. When she got her certificate she started teaching in the third grade in—let's see—that would be about 1950. It seems to me she and Robert Sprague were married in 1952, in the spring, and that she quit teaching. But she did do part-time clerical work in his office. That is, up until the time he was killed—"

I glanced up quickly. "Killed?"

She nodded. "It was an accident. One of those awful bathroom things people are always being warned about, and that you just can't believe really happen. I mean, that people would do the things they do. You see, a lot of the older houses here don't have central heating, and they had a portable electric heater in the bathroom. Mrs. Sprague heard him fall, and rushed in, and the heater was right in the water with him. He must have tried to turn it off, or on, while he was sitting in the tub."

So? No grown man could be that stupid or careless, I thought. Then I knew I was reaching for it; it not only could happen, it did. All the time. And the police and insurance company—if any—would have taken a long, slow look.

"When was this?" I asked. "Do you recall?"

"Hmm. They'd been married less than two years, so it must have been early in 1954. January or February. I went to the funeral, of course, and I remember it was quite cold, with a north-wester blowing. She was very broken up about it."

"She didn't go back to teaching?"

"No. Mr. Snell told her she could have all the part-time work she wanted until the next term started and then have her job back in the third grade, but she said she was going away. Her mother had died the previous year, as I remember, so there was really nothing to keep her here. She must have left shortly after the funeral. Maybe the latter part of February."

"You don't know where she went?"

She shook her head. "No. If she wrote to anyone here, I don't remember hearing about it. I'm sorry; I do wish I could help you."

"You have," I said. So she'd left here in February, and started teaching in Galicia in September. Where was she and what was she doing for six months?

"I suppose there was some insurance?" I asked.

"Not very much, I'm afraid." She smiled gently. "Teachers don't make a great deal, you know. It seems to me there was a policy for about five thousand."

Ten, with a double indemnity clause, I thought. "Would there be anybody else in town who might know where she went?" I asked. "Any of his family, perhaps?"

"No," she said. "He came from Orlando. There are some Spragues here, but no kin."

She finished her coffee. I thanked her, and walked back to the office with her. Apparently I was up against a dead end now. There was nothing in any of this to link her with Strader, and I had no lead at all on where she could have spent that six months. I was in the station wagon and just turning on the ignition when it hit me. How fat-headed could you get? I reached for my wallet and snatched out the sheet of paper on which I'd scribbled the dope Lane had given me. The dates jibed, all right. Eager now, and very excited, I strode back into the drugstore and headed for the phone booth.

I couldn't pull it on her, because she'd recognize my voice. But I could start with her. I dialed the business office of the phone company and asked for Ellen Beasley.

"This is that quiz man again," I said. "If you'll answer just one more for me I'll quit bothering you."

"Why certainly," she replied.

"Who is the present principal of the junior high?"

"Mr. Edson. Joel Edson. And I believe he's in town now. He just came back from some summer work he was doing at Gainesville."

"Thanks a million," I said.

I looked up Edson's number and dialed. I was in luck.

"Yes, speaking," he said. "Who is it?"

"My name's Carter, Mr. Edson," I said heartily. "And you're just the man I was hoping to get hold of. I'm with Bell and Howell, and I wanted to see if I couldn't work out a little demonstration for you and some of the School Board members—"

"For what kind of equipment?" he asked.

"Sound-motion picture projectors. You've got to see these to—"

He laughed. "You people ought to keep records. We've already got one of your projectors. And it's working fine."

I could feel excitement running along my nerves. That's odd," I said, mystified. "I wonder how the office fell down on that. You're sure it's one of ours?"

"Sure," he replied. "We've had it about—hmm, four years, or something like that."

"You didn't buy it second-hand?"

"No. We got it direct from you people. I remember now, exactly when it was. It was October of 'fifty-three, just a few months before Bob died. Bob Sprague, that is—he was the principal here before me. I was teaching physics and chemistry in the high school, and got in on the demonstration when Bob and his wife and your man were trying to wear down the Superintendent and School Board. Your man was here for several days, and as a matter of fact he sold the Board on buying one for the elementary school too."

"Well, that's one on us, Mr. Edson. Somebody just goofed in the office. I'm sorry I troubled you."

"No trouble at all."

"You don't remember who the salesman was, do you?"

"No-o. I don't recall anything about him except that he was a pretty big guy, and he talked a good game of football."

"Well, thank you very much."

My luck was really running. I was hot, and I knew it. I went back to the soda fountain and talked the clerk out of a handful of change and put in a call to Lane's office in Miami.

"He's not in," his girl said. "But, wait a minute. He called in a little while ago on his way to see somebody in Miami

Beach, and he gave me a number. Give me yours, and he should call you back in a few minutes at the outside."

I gave her the number and sat down at one of the tables to wait. I had to be right; the hunch was too strong and the pieces were going together so beautifully I couldn't miss. I gazed out through the window at the sun-blasted square, thinking about it, and then I was thinking of Georgia Langston. Goofing off, I thought. But it was pleasant.

The phone rang in the booth. I waved off the soda clerk and ducked in.

I have a long-distance call for a Mr. Chatham," the operator intoned mechanically.

"This is Chatham," I said. I accepted the charges and pushed in quarters until she was satisfied. "Hello. Lane?

He came on. "Yeah. My girl just got hold of me. I'm glad you called; I was just about to buzz you."

"Good," I said. "But first I've got a question. In 'fifty-three, Strader was selling sound gear and motion picture projectors to schools and churches and so on. Whose projectors?"

"Bell and Howell."

It was perfect, right down the line. "Well, look. Did he have an exclusive territory?"

"No-o. Not exactly, as I get it. The distributor's territory, the one I gave you, was exclusive, but I think there were two salesmen working it for him."

That wasn't quite so good. But the odds were still much better than the mathematical fifty-fifty would indicate. "What's new there?"

"Couple of things. I still haven't come up with a girl friend with any Galicia angle to her, but I haven't much more than scratched the surface. God, that guy—I wish he'd written an instruction manual before he kicked off, and let some of the rest of us in on his M.O. But to get back. I've filled in a couple of soft spots in the employment record. Remember I told you I thought he'd been in New Orleans for a while?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I nailed down that lead. I may have racked you up for a little additional expense—couple of toll calls and a bill

for twenty-five dollars for a boy I do business with there once in a while—but I figured you'd want the dope."

"Sure," I said. "That's all right. What did he find out?"

"Strader was there in 'fifty-four. Spring and summer, from March until about the end of July. Shackled up, of course. This one was a smooth job with hair about the color of a good grade of burgundy, and he called her Sin. I don't know whether he had a sense of humor, or whether it was just short for Cynthia. Still no line on anything criminal. But this time he wasn't working for somebody else. He had a bar, on Decatur Street. Or at least, he did till he went broke. I don't know where he got the money to buy it—"

"From an insurance company," I said. "Sin's husband tried to take a bath while holding onto a light circuit."

"God, do they still get away with that up there?"

"There's a chance it could have been the McCoy," I said. "There was only five involved—ten if it carried double Indemnity."

"Yeah. Either that, or she was just smart enough not to take out any more. That's where they usually goof."

"Well, they'll never prove it one way or the other. But we've got our own headaches. You come up with anything else?"

"Just one other item. I found out what he was doing with this Electronic Enterprises Outfit in Orlando. It was burglar alarms. New patent of some kind."

"Oh?" That was an odd one.

"Yeah. He had a good background for that kind of sales job, because of the Navy training. Anyway, he was selling them, and supervising installation. Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. Jewelry stores, mostly. Now, is there anything else you want me to run down? I gather you've already found the girl?"

"Yeah," I said. "I've found her. I may never prove it, but I know who she is." I paused, frowning thoughtfully at the blank wall of the booth. "There is one other thing you could do. What's your big newspaper there, with the best State-wide and Southern coverage?"

"The *Herald*."

"If you can get hold of back copies. I'd like November eight of last year. The same day the Langston story broke. Airmail it to me."

"Langston story'd be in the ninth. It's a morning paper and it wouldn't have made the deadline."

"Sure. Be faster, though, if I looked up whatever you want and called you."

"That's the hell of it," I said. "I don't know what I am looking for. Maybe nothing. Anyway, shoot your bill along and I'll send you a check."

"Sure thing. It was a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Chatham."

"You did a good job. If I get down to Miami I'll look in on you and we'll have a drink."

"Do that."

I went back out and got in the station wagon. I knew now who Strader's girl friend was, for what it was worth. I couldn't prove it. If I even said it aloud, I'd have my head blown off. She still didn't have anything to do with Langston. And she still wasn't the girl who'd tried to get me killed.

Not yet, anyway.

12

It was a quarter to five when I turned in at the Magnolia Lodge and stopped in front of the office. Georgia Langston, dressed in slacks, was on a step-ladder painting the trim and supporting pillars along the porch.

"I give up," I said.

She smiled and came down. She was wearing a Cuban or Mexican straw hat with an unfinished brim. "You can stop the fragile business as from now," she said. "I went to Dr. Graham for the balance of that check-up this afternoon, and there's nothing wrong with me at all. I needed about two days' rest and I've had that."

"Wonderful," I said. "We'll celebrate by going out for dinner. But come on inside; I've got something to tell you."

Josie had gone home. I stirred a pair of Martinis and we sat down in the living-room. "Hold onto your hat," I said. "Cynthia Redfield was an old flame of Strader's. She lived with him in New Orleans for about six months in 1954. After her first husband was killed in an accident that might not have been as accidental as it looked." I told her the whole story.

She put down her drink with a look of horror. "But—it seems so impossible. And why hasn't anybody found it out before?"

I lit a cigarette. "For a lot of reasons. The first being just what you said—it's impossible. She's not the type. Why should anybody even suspect it? The only thing she actually had to hide was the fact she knew Strader while she was there. The rest of it would be common knowledge—and harmless. The police here and in Miami checked Strader out, but this happened in another state. If it'd been an F.B.I. case, they'd have found it out, but it wasn't. The only F.B.I. angle was whether he had a previous criminal record, which he didn't. And, then, she's married to Redfield. Who was going to raise the question?"

"Do you think she was—the one that night?"

"I don't think there's any doubt of it."

"But how can we prove it?"

"We can't," I said.

"Not ever? It's horrible. It's unbelievable—"

"I know. But, look—We could bring witnesses here from New Orleans—which isn't easy, believe me—and all we'd prove was that she'd once known Strader. If I went to the District Attorney with a flimsy thing like that, he'd laugh in my face. And if I went to Redfield, he'd kill me."

She gestured helplessly. "What can we do?"

"Nothing, on the basis of what we have now. There has to be more."

"More evidence?"

"Any evidence at all would be more evidence," I said. "What I mean is there has to be more to the case than the simple fact she was carrying on an affair with Strader. That'd obviously have nothing to do with your husband and yet they killed him. Why?"

She shook her head wearily. "It's insane."

"Listen," I said. I asked you this once before, but I've got to ask it again, so don't jump down my throat. Is there any chance at all your husband could have been involved with her?"

"No," she replied. "It's absolutely inconceivable."

"Try to be objective about it," I urged. "Say that he'd found out what she was. That's possible, you know. He

might have seen her with Strader one of those other times, or she could have made a play for him—”

“No,” she said firmly. “I just can’t buy it, Bill.”

“Tell me a little about him.”

She gazed moodily at the end of her cigarette. “He was a man who’d been almost wrecked, physically at least, and he’d just about finished rebuilding his whole attitude towards life. I say just about. He still had a little way to go, but he was closing the gap. Everybody up here thought he was ideally happy, of course, retired, with the motel to furnish him with an adequate living, and all the leisure he wanted to fish, but you don’t turn off drive and ambition that easily and just overnight. I was helping him, I think, and he needed me.

“He’d lived most of his life like a steam engine with the safety valve tied down and the throttle wide open, and in the end, of course, it almost killed him. We met in a doctor’s office. A clinic, rather. I was the lab technician, and he was the patient of one of the men there, the cardiologist.

“It was just after he and his first wife broke up. You might say I caught him on the rebound, except there really wasn’t much in the way of a rebound—he was going too fast and hit too many things all at once. A messy divorce and a big property settlement, a heart attack, and the loss of a lawsuit that almost wiped him out financially. However, if I’m giving you the impression I gathered up a bunch of pieces and tried to put them back together, I don’t mean to. The man was still there, more or less intact but just badly battered. He still had a sense of humor, most of the time, and he could get a perspective view of it—again, most of the time. He was being sentenced to live what he considered an old lady’s existence for the rest of his life if he wanted to have any rest of his life, and I simply helped him to do it. We liked each other from the first, and the things we did together were quiet things. His big fishing days were over, for instance, but we found we both liked to sail small boats. We liked to picnic, and lie in the water with masks and snorkels and watch sea life. Music bored him, but we both liked to read—Oh, I could go on, Bill, but what’s the point of it? He simply wouldn’t be capable of a thing like that. He had too much

sense of decency, to begin with. And Redfield was a friend of his."

I smiled at her. "I'm not accusing him of it," I said. "It's just that in a thing like this you have to consider every angle. And God knows we've got few enough angles as it is." I got up restlessly and walked back and forth across the room. It was so damned baffling. "Are you sure you told him about Redfield's canceling the trip?"

"Of course."

"And he understood?"

"Bill, how on earth could anybody misunderstand a simple thing like that?"

"Well, was he ever absent-minded? Could he have forgotten?"

She shook her head. "No. And, anyway, the last thing before he left that morning he promised to be very careful because I was worried about his going alone. What is it you're trying to find?"

"Simply why he went to Redfield's house that morning."

She stared. "Do you think he did?"

"He must have. Wouldn't you say that was where she and Strader were?"

She frowned. "In her own home? In—?"

"Yes. In case you haven't been able to grasp it yet, this girl's not the finicky type. I think that's where they were, and that's where it happened."

"But *why*?" she asked piteously.

"I don't know," I said. It made no sense at all except for the fact the three of them had to come together somewhere in that tragic fifteen minutes and he was the one who was in motion, so *he* must have gone there. But then, even if he had, why the killing? The situation might have the ingredients for explosion, but only if she were utterly stupid or insane. All she'd have to do would be to go to the door and tell Langston her husband wasn't home.

There had to be more to it. A lot more. There was another man, to begin with. There was the acid job and the deliberate attempt to drive Georgia Langston out of her mind or break her health with those filthy phone calls. Why?

Say that Cynthia Redfield had tried to frame her and had failed—her only object would have been to throw suspicion off herself, and she'd succeeded in that. Why keep lashing a dead horse? Sadism? Was she a complete mental case?

"We're just beating our brains out," I said. "We're going to forget it for tonight. We'll have dinner together and not mention it once." Then I remembered the way I looked. "That is, if you don't mind being seen in public with this open-toed haircut, and bandage."

"I don't mind at all," she replied with a smile that was only a little forced.

* * *

Around six-thirty I shaved and put on the lighter weight of the two suits I had. It was a San Francisco job, a gray flannel, and still no prize in this heat. I examined the result in the mirror, with the fresh white shirt and dark tie, and decided I looked like a well-tended moose even if a little like one that'd just walked into the props of a D.C.-7. Well, I could wear the hat, and we might find a place with table booths. The Steak House—that was it.

I went across to the office. She called from beyond the curtained doorway that she'd be ready in just a moment. I sat down in one of the bamboo chairs and thumbed idly through a magazine. When she came out she was wearing a very dark green dress, darker than avocado, that aided and abetted the creamy pallor of her face and throat and the mahogany highlights of her hair. She wore small gold earrings like sea-shells, and a gold sea-horse pin, and nylons and some very slender high heels.

I stood up. "Woof," I said. "You can quote me."

She gave an exaggerated curtsy. "Why, thank you."

"You're entirely too lovely to waste on the peasants," I said. "Why can't we go to Miami Beach for dinner?"

She grinned. "No reason in the world. Except it's a thousand-mile round trip and I'm hungry."

"Well, we could have breakfast before we start back."

The gray eyes were cool and appraising, though there was still humor in them. "Tell me, Bill, was that an honest proposition, or are you still conducting an investigation?"

"That's not fair and you know it," I said. "It was a perfectly honorable pass, from the bottom of my heart. Futile, maybe, but—Call it a gesture. Call it art appreciation."

She laughed delightfully, and we went out to the car feeling wonderful in a lightheaded sort of way, as if we'd had two quick Martinis. It was a bubbly sort of moment, the first one since I'd been here that was completely free of the tensions and ugliness that bore down on her. It didn't last, however. I found a place to park on an intersecting street around the corner from the restaurant, and we had to run the gauntlet of hard, unfriendly eyes and blank stares, moving in our own little corridor of silence along the walk. When we were inside, people glanced up at us, and looked away, without speaking to her. We found an empty table near the back and sat down, and she still managed a smile.

I reached across the table and took hold of her hand. "Don't let it throw you," I said. Then I realized how asinine it was. She'd been taking it for seven months completely alone, and now she needed my nickel's worth of backing. "I wish I had your poise," I added.

She shook her head. "Don't you dare go solemn on me. Let's have a Martini."

We had a Martini and admired the polished steer horns on the wall above us and wondered why they were never bull horns or cow horns or ox horns. Would the day ever come when horns would stand or fall on their own merits, without sex?

"What is an oxen?" she asked.

"An oxen is two or more ox," I replied.

She wrinkled up her nose at me. "Well, what are they? Are they any different from steers?"

"Not in any really worthwhile way," I said. "At least, from the Freudian point of view. I think it's only occupational. If they worked, they were oxen."

She propped her elbows on the table and looked at me with mock admiration. "You know the most fascinating things."

"Oh, I used to have a piece of information even more useless than that. If I can remember it I'll tell you."

We regained most of the mood, and had a fine dinner. She told me some more about herself. Her father had been a flight captain back in the old days of the flying boats and then later in the D.C.-4's. She'd gone to Miami for a year before starting nurses' training. She'd been engaged once, to a boy who'd gone off to Korea, and after waiting two years learned she didn't really want to marry him after he returned. She liked medical lab work better than nursing, but she didn't think she would have wanted to be a doctor even if she'd had the opportunity. Would she be glad to get back to Miami when we were able to get the motel back on its feet and sell it? She said yes, but that brought us back too near the ugliness again, and we shied off.

I paid the bill and we went out and walked back to the car past the eyes that were like nailheads in the wall of silence around us. Only this time the silence was broken. There were two of them leaning against the corner where we turned. We were just past when one said, loudly enough to be sure he was heard, "Well, I reckon all it takes is guts."

In the quick, bright flare of anger, I turned and looked at them, but then, even before she had time to pluck at my sleeve, I remembered where the obligation lay. We went on, and when we were a dozen yards away she whispered, "Thanks, Bill."

"I told you before," I said, "I wish I had your poise. When I get full, I blow up."

I looked back as I was opening the car door for her, and saw an odd thing. The big cop, Calhoun, was on the corner in front of the two men. It was too far to hear, but he appeared to be barking at them like a drill sergeant, and then he caught one by the shirt and snatched him off the wall as if he were a poster that had been imperfectly glued. When he let go and jerked a thumb, the two of them went across the street and disappeared.

I called her attention to it. She nodded. "I know. He's done that several times."

I remembered the first afternoon, when I'd collided with Frankie. "But still—"

"Yes. He always looks at me as if I didn't really exist. But he won't tolerate anything like that. He's a strange man, Bill. I've never understood him."

I turned right into Springer and we started back to the motel. We were just pulling away from the next traffic light when I heard her gasp. "Bill, that man!" I glanced quickly across the street in the direction she was pointing. There were several men. "The one in the white shirt! With the sleeves rolled up!"

I saw him then, but I was already at the cross-roads and had to keep on straight ahead. He was walking in the opposite direction, back the way we'd come. I turned left at the next corner, made a figure-eight around the block, and came back. We went all the way down Springer to the river, but he was nowhere in sight. I tried a couple of the intersecting streets, with no luck.

"Are you sure he was the one?" I asked. I'd had only a brief glimpse of him, but he did fit the description she'd given me that morning—tall, thin, sandy-haired, and sunburned.

"I'm almost positive," she said. Then she hesitated. "Of course, I just had a flash of him. And I didn't see any glasses. Did you?"

"No," I said. "But they could have been props the other time."

We drove around for another ten minutes, and then parked for a time on Springer, watching the side-walks, but it was no use. "I'm going to drive you home," I said, "and come back. He may be still in town, in a beer joint somewhere."

"You won't do anything?" she asked anxiously.

"No," I told her. "We can't even have him picked up unless you can give a positive identification. If he's the wrong man, he'll sue you for false arrest. If I can locate him and pin him down somewhere I'll call you so you can have another look."

I drove back to the motel. She unlocked the front door of the office, and I called a cab. I gave her the car key, and we went into the living-room. One bridge lamp was burning dimly in a corner, striking faint light in her hair.

She turned, and the gray eyes were concerned as they studied my face. "You will be careful, won't you?"

"Sure," I said.

She smiled then, and held out her hands. "It's been a wonderful evening, Bill."

I took the hint, and slid my hands up to take hold of her arms just above the elbows, and put my lips down against hers for a casual good-night kiss, but it got out of control. The next thing I was holding her far too fiercely and assaulting the sweetest and most exciting mouth in the world, and her arms were tight around my neck. Then she broke it up. She put her hands against my chest and pushed, but it was herself she was talking to. "As you were," she said shakily, and stepped back, her face flushed and confused.

"Cigarette," she said. She took an unsteady breath.

"It got away from me," I said.

"Thanks," she said laconically.

"How's that?"

"For not pointing out it was both of us it got away from. Or almost. It's a little silly, isn't it? I've known you for about three days."

"I hadn't noticed," I said. "My calendar and stop-watch are in my other suit. All I know is I think you're wonderful."

She smiled. "It's all right, Bill. I've never doubted you're a normal, healthy, thirty-year-old male. You don't have to prove it."

"I don't think I was trying to."

"It was just a little frightening. I hadn't realized before that after a long enough time a girl might give way just for a place to cry."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"I don't know. Don't ask me. But you'll never believe how utterly damn sick you can get of being brave about something. Or how tempting that shoulder has looked a couple of times."

"It's available," I said.

"Why?"

I put my hands on either side of her face and tilted it up under mine. I just told you why. I think you're magnificent. You're a very fine, sweet, warm-hearted woman, and you're full of tricks, like being a little more beautiful every time I see you."

I kissed her, very gently this time, and looked down at the fine dark tracery of lashes against her face. When she opened her eyes they were misty, but she smiled "All right, maybe I think you're pretty nice, too," she whispered. "And now, Bill, will you please get out of here?"

"No good night?"

"We've already said good night. I'm just trying to keep it airborne." The gray eyes were dreamy, and large enough to swim in. "Take your damned shoulder and *get out of here.*"

The taxi honked out front.

There'd been something I was going to do. I shuffled through the rose-tinted chaos in my mind and came up with it.

"Right, Georgia," I said. I turned in the doorway. "If I find him, I'll phone."

* * *

By the time we reached town I had the lipstick off my mouth and the rest of her bulldozed far enough towards the outer edges of my mind to be able to think rationally. The chances were he wasn't the acid thrower at all. It was a common description. And he certainly wouldn't be stupid enough to come back here. But I had to try. As flimsy as he was, he was our only lead at the moment.

It was nine-thirty. I still had a good general idea of the location of all the beer joints from the other day. I paid off the cab and started making the rounds of them on foot. In the first two I drew nothing except a few blank and unfriendly stares, but at the third place I hit the jackpot. It was a smoky but air-conditioned dive on the street south of Springer, facing the railroad tracks. The instant I pushed through the door, I saw him. There were six or seven men in the place, but I spotted the white shirt about half-way down the bar and caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror. He didn't see me. I ignored him and strolled to an open space near the front of the bar. There were a couple of pinball machines along the left wall, and at the rear an empty phone booth, and jukebox that was silent at the moment.

I considered swiftly. He had a half-empty bottle of beer before him. The minute he ordered another, so I was sure

he'd stick around, I'd duck into the phone booth, and call her. We could park in front of the place till he emerged. She'd be able to get a good view of his face, and once she gave a positive identification, he was my boy. I thought of the way that room had looked. Getting the police would be no strain; he was going to need them by the time they got there.

I'd paid no attention to the other customers when I came in, but now it struck me all at once a strange and rather ugly silence had fallen over the place. I looked around. On my left was Frankie, the hard case who'd backed into me. Beyond him was another familiar face with the same trouble-seeking stare. It was one of the two loafers who'd made that remark as we went back to the car. I didn't know any of the others, but they all had the same ugly expression. The bartender, a fat man with a hearing aid, was shooting uneasy glances at them.

Well, there wouldn't be any stupid brawl. There were too many of them, for one thing, and I had something much more important to take care of. That was out.

"She give you the night off?" Frankie asked.

I hit him with a left, and put down the beer I was holding in the right in time to take the next one just before he recovered his balance from having Frankie bounce off him. The third one, the loafer from the corner, was trying to claw his way between them waving a beer bottle. I caught his shirt and helped him through and hit him in the face as hard as I could with a right at the same time. He took Frankie back with him and they both slammed into the first pinball machine and turned it over with an explosion of glass and scattering of steel balls I across the floor.

Somebody must have dropped a coin in the jukebox, for it erupted with a hot flood of sound above the ugly scuffling of shoes and the meaty impact of fists and gasped curses and hoarse and labored breathing. They were all over me. I didn't have a chance, but I couldn't even feel the blows, if any of them were landing. All I was conscious of was the bright ocean of rage sloshing around inside me and faces popping up like targets in a shooting gallery. They backed me up against the bar with two of them riding my arms while three more jockeyed and scuffled for position in front

of me, trying to swing. There were so many they defeated their own purpose; nobody could throw a solid punch. I heaved forward, trying to break my arms loose, and we all went to the floor in a flailing heap. I tried to fight my way up through them, and then in the midst of chaos I became vaguely aware of an odd phenomenon. They were disappearing. There was no other way to describe it.

It was as if they were birds taking off in flight. I turned my head and saw two solid, khaki-clad legs apparently growing out of the floor. It was Calhoun. He was unpiling them and throwing them behind him towards the rear of the bar, methodically, effortlessly, like some huge and completely noiseless machine. He yanked the last one off me and flung him backwards and I pushed to my knees, still raging, and saw Frankie hanging to the bar just beyond him. I shoved him aside and lunged towards Frankie, and then the roof fell on me. He caught me by the shoulder and spun me around, and a hand like a picnic ham stiff-armed me in the chest. I shot backwards and slammed up against the wall and slid down beside the wreckage of the pinball machine. It was like being hit by truck.

"All right!" he barked. "That's all!"

He was right as far as I was concerned. I felt sick. A large section was torn out of the front of my shirt and dangled from my belt. Both hands hurt, and blood ran down my face from a cut over my right eye. I mopped at it. Something dangled and flapped alongside my neck. I wondered whether it was an ear, or merely a section of scalp. It was neither. It was the gauze dressing the doctor had put on my head, hanging by one strip of tape. I tore it loose and let it fall to the floor. It was too heavy to throw.

All the others were lined up along the bar, eyeing Calhoun uneasily. The bean-pole in the white shirt was gone, of course; he'd be out of town by this time. Swinging at Frankie had been a shrewd move; there was no doubt of it. I was too weak even to curse myself. The jukebox quit and a tense silence fell over the place.

"How much damage?" Calhoun asked the bartender.

The latter came nervously out from behind the bar and looked around. "Uh—three stools—the pinball machine ain't mine, but I'll have to pay for it—"

Calhoun stabbed with a forefinger, counting. ". . . Four, five." He swung around to me. "Six. Seventeen bucks apiece. Shell out," he ordered coldly.

There wasn't a murmur of protest. Wallets came out of pockets and money began dropping on the bar. One man was short by eleven dollars. Calhoun fixed him with a bleak eye. "You got till noon tomorrow. He better have it by then."

"Yes, sir."

They were cowed. Well, I could understand that, I thought. I'd seen a few really rugged men in my time, but Calhoun was in a class by himself, a lumbering fat slob who was around two hundred and sixty pounds of solid muscle and moved like a cat when he was in action. "You too, Chatham," he said. He caught the front of my jacket and draped me on the bar. I got my wallet out somehow and was counting the money into his hand when the door flew open and Magruder came charging in. He gave me a cold stare and grabbed me roughly by the arm.

He nodded to Calhoun. "I'll book this goon in."

Calhoun put a forefinger against his chest. "Go home and blow your nose, kid. I'm talking to one of the men."

Magruder's face darkened. "He's a trouble-maker—"

"You're inside the city limits, bub," Calhoun told him coldly. "When I need your help to keep order in this town I'll give you a call, huh? Now give the man back his arm."

Magruder stared savagely at me, turned, and went out. I leaned on the bar again, too sick to have much interest in this jurisdictional squabble. I'd taken a lot of pounding in the abdomen.

Calhoun jerked a thumb towards the door. "All right, you guys, out! And I'd better not see any of you downtown again tonight!"

I was conscious of surprise. He'd made us pay for the damage, but he wasn't going to arrest anybody. The others went out past me, one or two giving me a surly stare. I noted with satisfaction the loafer had an eye that was going to be swollen shut in another ten minutes and Frankie had a beautiful fat lip and swollen jaw. I pushed off the bar and aimed myself at the door.

"Not you, Chatham," Calhoun said. "You're going with me."

That added up, I thought bitterly. I was the stranger in town; I'd have the book thrown at me. I stopped and leaned wearily against the bar.

"Give this man a shot of whisky," Calhoun said to the bartender.

He put it on the bar. I gulped it and reached for my pocket. Calhoun shook his head. "That one was on the house. Let's go."

I followed him out, walking unsteadily, and we got into the sedan parked in front of the place. He shot across Springer, going north for two or three blocks, and then turned west. It was odd, I thought dully; the jail and police station were in the west end, near the river, all right, but south of Springer.

This was an older and rather shabby residential district, not too well lighted. I didn't know what he was up to and at the moment I was too beat to ask. He could be looking for a quiet place to work me over; if so, there wasn't much I could do about it.

He pulled to a stop under some big overhanging trees near the end of the street. I could see the dark bulk of a two-story house beyond the side-walk. We went through a gate and up the walk, but he turned before going up on the porch and we continued on round the side of the house. There were more trees back here and it was quite dark. I could feel mossy bricks under my feet. There was a guest house in the backyard. He pushed open the door, which was unlocked, and turned on a light.

It was apparently Calhoun's residence, and there was no need to ask whether he was married or not. A woman would have taken one look and run screaming into the night. Not that it was untidy; it was just the unrelieved and overpowering masculine effect of it. There was one large room, with a small kitchen beyond it and a doorway opening into a bathroom on the left. The floor was concrete, bare except for two small Indian rugs. His bed was a steel cot, and the other furnishings were an old leather chair, a straight chair, and a big table covered with hunting and fishing magazines. On the walls were a number of autographed pictures of fighters, a pair of boxing gloves, the tanned skins of two enormous diamond-back rattlers, an alligator skin, and two mounted bass that must have

weighed at least ten pounds when they were caught. I saw a case full of shotguns and rifles in one corner, and another on the right side of the room held fishing rods. Two screened windows were open, but there was no air-conditioner. It was hot and still, and I could hear mosquitoes buzzing. I mopped at the blood on my face to keep it from dripping onto the floor.

"Sit down," he said. I collapsed into one of the straight chairs at the table. He went into the bathroom and came out with a small metal box like a first-aid kit. Taking out some gauze and a couple of medicated sticks like large styptic pencils, he went to work deftly on the cut over my eye. There was a sharp stinging sensation. He mopped again, and grinned. "That does it. With twenty seconds to spare."

"You used to be a pro?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Go wash up, and we'll have some beer."

I went into the bathroom and repaired as much of the damage as I could. When I came out he handed me a can of beer.

"Sit down, son, and get your breath."

It hadn't occurred to me before, but he probably was on the other side of fifty. I remembered the way he'd slammed me against that wall, like a thrown bundle of laundry, and was glad he hadn't done it when he was twenty-five. Studying him now at close range, I decided he'd probably also fooled about as many people who had thought he was stupid as had thought he was fat. He was a hick, a town-clown, if you weren't careful where you looked. He wore a farmer's straw hat, suede shoes, and the pair of wide braces holding up the khaki trousers could have been props in a vaudeville skit. The eyes under the shaggy brows, however, were a piercing and frosty blue.

We sat down. He leaned back in the leather chair with his beer. "So you came back to look for him?" he asked "I heard him make the crack."

I got out a cigarette and fumbled with the lighter. "He wasn't the one I was looking for," I replied. "But while we're on the subject, I saw you give the two of 'em the roust. How come?"

"Why not?" he asked. "That's what they pay me for."

"But you think she's guilty yourself."

"If I do, I keep my mouth shut. And women don't get jockeyed around on the streets of this town while I'm patrolling it."

"They could use you in the Sheriff's office," I said.

"They've got a good man in the Sheriff's office," he replied. "He's a friend of mine."

I drank some of the beer and said nothing.

"What'd you go over to Warren Springs for?" he asked.

I looked at him in surprise. "How'd you know?"

"I find out things. And around here you're about as hard to keep track of as a moose in a phone booth. What were you looking for?"

"I'd rather not say," I told him.

"You should have made up something," he said. "Don't you figure maybe you've answered the question by refusing to?"

"I haven't said a word," I replied. "And, incidentally, who wants the information?"

The eyes went cold. "I wanted the information, son, and for my own reasons. If you think it's a trick, for somebody else—"

"Sorry," I said.

"It could be I'm just trying to keep you from getting yourself killed. There's been enough people killed already."

"Then this party we're so carefully not naming is crooked?" I asked harshly. "I wouldn't have thought so. At least, not at first."

"He's not. He's as honest as they make 'em. But down here they don't consider a man's crooked just because he defends his wife's reputation with a gun."

"And what would make him think it needs defending?" I asked.

"Easy, son. Look, I wouldn't talk this way to everybody, believe me. But you used to be in this business yourself, and I like what I've heard about you—"

"How'd you know I was a cop," I asked.

"I was in the Sherriff's office when the wire came in from San Francisco. He showed it to me. There's nothing wrong with the way you left the force."

"When was that?" I asked quickly. "I mean, when did it come?"

The other afternoon, Tuesday—

"No," I said. I mean, do you remember exactly what time?"

"Two o'clock. Quarter after."

Then it couldn't have been Redfield who'd tried to get me with the shotgun. It was almost exactly the same time.

Calhoun must have read my mind. He shook his head. "You didn't really think that, did you? In the back of the head with a shotgun? Let me tell you, son; if you're not careful, he may kill you, but when he does you'll be looking at him."

"That's a big help," I said wearily. "Now I've got two of 'em after me."

"You could knock off and leave it alone. I don't think it'll ever be settled, one way or the other."

"Listen, I'm not guessing any more," I said. "I *know* who killed Langston."

He put down his beer. "Can you prove it?"

"Not yet."

"And you won't. I think you're wrong—"

I leaned forward quickly. "You what?"

He realized the mistake, but it was too late. "I mean—you're a mile off base. Of course you're wrong."

"Cut it out, Calhoun," I snapped. "You know damn well what you said. You *thought* I was wrong. So maybe you've wondered just a little yourself. Why?"

He glared at me, but said nothing.

"*Why?*" I demanded.

"I'm not going to gossip about a man's wife," he growled. *I* told you I was a friend of his—"

I stood up and banged down the can of beer so hard it splashed on the magazines. "Yes, and goddammit, you're a cop too! You want to go on seeing an innocent woman crucified?"

"Don't get hard-nosed with me, Chatham. I was a cop when you were on the schoolboy patrol."

"Forget it," he said.

"It's beginning to get you, huh?"

"I guess so," I said.

"Well, it's got a lot of people at one time or another. You can go crazy trying to figure it out. It's open and shut, see? It's routine, it's even trite; a hundred of 'em happen every year—husband, wife, and boy friend. Only here they've never found a shred of proof the wife and boy friend even knew each other. And to make it even worse, the boy friend is dead, so you can't play one off against the other till one of 'em cracks—"

"Right," I said. "So then you begin to wonder if you've got the right woman, and start looking for somebody else."

"Except there is nobody else."

I lit another cigarette. "And that's where they're wrong. There not only is somebody else, I know who she is. Listen, Calhoun, why don't we stop pussyfooting and say what we mean? Strader's girl friend was Cynthia Redfield."

He sighed. "After I just got through telling you he was an old friend of mine. If I picked up that phone and called him, you wouldn't get out of this town alive if you started running right now."

"I know that."

"And you're going to take my word I won't tell him?"

"I don't even need your word."

"Why?"

"I'm returning the compliment. I like what I've heard about you."

He shook his head at me with a quizzical expression in his eyes. "Brother, you've got a lot of nerve."

"Not necessarily," I said. "I'll tell you what. We'll admit that with this weird and goofy set of values people seem to have, we can't discuss the possibility Mrs. Redfield might have a lover, or have had one, because it's simply not done. But there's no social law says we can't speculate as to whether or not she's guilty of some relatively minor thing like murder. Just talk a little shop."

He gave me a hard grin. "You should have been a lawyer instead of a policeman."

"I should have been a landscape architect instead of either," I replied. "But to get back to Mrs. Redfield. You've got some ground for suspicion or you wouldn't have known what I was after."

"All right," he agreed reluctantly. "It's nothing but a string of coincidences. The first one, naturally, is the location of the two places. The woman—if it wasn't Mrs. Langston—left Strader's car there at the motel and walked home before daybreak. Redfield's place is only a little over a quarter mile, cutting through that orchard. But if you're going to suspect everybody that lives within walking distance of that motel, you suspect the whole town. This is not Los Angeles—"

"All right," I said. "What else?"

He ground out his cigarette and sighed wearily. "Redfield was out of town both the other times Strader came up here."

I nodded. I suspected that, but there wasn't any way I could even ask about it without being racked up. That clinches it."

He banged the table angrily with his fist. "*That clinches what?* You'd condemn a woman on the strength of a stupid coincidence like that? Listen, Chatham, that girl's no floozie he picked up in a beer joint. She's a respectable married woman. She used to be a teacher—"

"But that's not quite all she used to be," I said.

"If you're dragging up that old thing about her first husband," he interrupted, "forget it. Everybody knows about it. It was an accident, pure and simple. The police and insurance company never questioned it at all."

"Sure," I said. "That's the deadly thing about a small policy. If it'd been a hundred thousand, they might have been a little more curious about what she did with the money."

"What did she do with it?"

"She bought a bar for a man she met just three months before her husband electrocuted himself."

He stiffened. "*What? Who was—?*" Then he sighed.

"Never mind. Are you sure it was Strader?"

"It was Strader I was back-tracking when I found *her*," I told him. "A girl he called Sin, with hair about the color of red wine. In New Orleans, the spring and summer of 1954. That would be between the time she left Warren Springs and showed up here."

He was staring at the cigarette in his hand and didn't answer for a moment. Then he said, as if he were very tired, "All right. How did you find out all this? Start with the day you got here."

I told him everything, pausing once while he went out in the kitchen for more beer. When I'd finished, he said, "You'll never prove any of it."

"I know," I said. "Not with what I've got now."

"You know what Redfield will do."

"She committed murder."

"You don't know that; you're just guessing there. And before you even take up that part, you got to tell him his wife is a tramp. You want to try that?"

The telephone rang. It was on the end of the table. He reached over and picked it up. "Calhoun."

He listened for a moment. "Who? Rupe Hulbert? Okay, tell him to come to the phone." There was a slight pause, and then, "Rupe, this is Calhoun. The bartender says you're making a nuisance of yourself. Go on home. . . . Okay." He hung up.

I looked at him and shook my head. "You just tell him over the phone?"

He made a deprecating gesture. "Oh, Rupe's not a bad boy. It's just that when he gets a few aboard he starts finding boxing gloves in his beer."

Rupe, I reflected, had probably been thrown *through* a wall.

"You think Langston went over there that morning?" he asked. "And walked in on them?"

"He must have."

"But why would he? Even if he'd forgotten Redfield had called off the fishing trip, he wouldn't have tried to go in."

"Let's try it this way," I said. "He *knew* Redfield wasn't there. And he *didn't* know Strader was. Remember, it was Mrs. Langston who registered him that time."

He whistled softly. "Son, when you're convinced of something, you don't care whose feet you step on, do you? Langston was a highly respected man around here. He wasn't a chaser. Redfield was a friend of his. He had no reason to believe that if he went in there Mrs. Redfield would do anything but scream her head off."

"I said I was trying it," I told him. "But. dammit, Calhoun, *he went in there, and it got him killed*. It has to be that way. He could have known what she was. He might have seen her with Strader one of the other times."

He shook his head. "But even if he did catch them, I'm still not convinced they'd kill him."

"Well, the obvious possibility, of course, is that it was a mistake. They thought he was Redfield, and panicked. They both drive station wagons. But I'm not sure that's it. I think there must be more to it."

"Okay. But here's where you fall apart. There's a hole in your case a mile wide, and it's the same old thing they've had from the start. The reason it had to be Mrs. Langston. And still does. And that's the fact that *one of them knew if there was a homicide investigation he'd be suspected*. And there's never been the slightest reason to suspect Mrs. Redfield. She and Strader could have dumped Langston's body in a ditch anywhere and there'd never be any reason to question either of them."

"Check," I said. "It took me a long time to see the answer to that; I just got it a little while ago. Mrs. Redfield is your cookie, all right, and the reason she's never shown up is she only *thought* she'd be suspected. It was a perfectly natural mistake."

He shook his head. "I don't get you."

"Put yourself in Mrs. Redfield's place a minute. You're looking down at the body of a man you've just murdered, and you realize that no matter when they find this body, or where, people are going to know that the last place it can be proved definitely he ever started for alive was your house, two minutes ago—"

"But he wasn't supposed to go there-" He stopped and stared at me. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"Sure," I said. "She simply doesn't know that. All she does know is that Langston is in his fishing clothes, and he's apparently come by for Redfield, the same way he's done a dozen times before. Maybe she didn't even know there'd been a trip planned. Maybe she knew it, and jumped to the conclusion Redfield had forgotten to notify Langston it was off. Either way, Redfield and Mrs. Langston both were going to know Langston had come there."

"Well, I'll be damned," he said again.

"The only drawback to it," I went on, "is the fact that if it did happen exactly that way, nobody'll ever be able to prove a word of it. There's not a shred of evidence: two of the people involved are dead, and all the third one has to do is sit tight. She's got it made, from every direction."

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He nodded. "It's a dead end."

"Check," I said. "But there's a chance it wasn't quite as simple as that Langston may have stumbled onto something more serious than a cheating wife that morning. And on more than two people."

"The man with the shotgun."

"That's right. And remember, the woman who called me on the phone to send me out to that barn definitely wasn't Mrs. Redfield."

"So that blows your boy-friend theory all to hell. Women cheating on their husbands don't sell tickets, or invite the neighbors."

"It would seem to," I said. "But I'm not so sure. Let me ask a question. Was there any other crime committed around here that night? Robbery, stick-up, anything?"

He thought about it. "No, I don't think so."

"Remember, when this murder broke it would get shuffled into the background."

"I'd have to dig back into the records. It'd have probably gone to the Sheriff's office, anyway. But why?"

"Well, several things," I said. "When you jumped Strader, he pulled a gun. Hasn't anybody ever wondered why he was carrying one?"

"Well, he'd just committed a murder. Carrying a gun doesn't stack up to much, compared to that"

"But that's not the point. *Why was he carrying one?* Langston wasn't killed with a gun, so it didn't have anything to do with that. And Langston's death was incidental, anyway. Strader came up here for something else. And real-estate salesmen don't usually go around muscled up that way."

"But he didn't have a record."

"No. But you got to start somewhere. Did they ever trace the gun?"

"It was stolen from a Tampa sporting goods store a year or so ago. Could have been through a dozen hands before Strader got hold of it."

"It doesn't fit in," I said. "He didn't need a gun."

"Wait a minute!" he said suddenly. "You asked me a minute ago if something else happened that night—" Then he subsided. "Oh, hell, that was in Georgia."

"What?" I asked.

"It was a gang that almost wrecked a town, just to steal a couple of lousy safes. Killed a man, completely destroyed a power substation, and burned up one of those big gasoline tankers, at least a hundred thousand dollars' worth of damage, and they probably got ten thousand for it."

"Was it the same night?"

"I'm pretty sure. But hell, this was up in Georgia. Weaverton. Nearly a hundred miles—"

"They never caught any of 'em?" I asked.

"Hm. Not as far as I know. But we'd have nothing to do with it."

I was beginning to feel excited. "Two safes? Whose were they?"

I think one was a supermarket and the other a jewelry store."

"Well, listen," I said quickly. The telephone rang and I broke off as he reached for it.

"Calhoun," he said. "Yes. . . . Prowler? . . . Where's that again? . . . Okay."

He hung up and sprang to his feet. "I've got to run out in the east end, but I'll drop you off in town. Did you have a car?"

"No," I said, hurrying out after him. "I'll get a cab."

"I want to talk to you some more," he said, as we shot back towards Springer. "Make it around noon. I'll be up by then."

"Sure," I said. "And will you dig up any dope you can find on that Weaverton thing?"

"Anything in particular?"

"Yeah. If it was the same night, and they still haven't made anybody for it, see if you can find out what kind of burglar alarms those places had."

He slid to a stop at the corner. "Burglar alarms?" But I was already out, and he shot across on the light without waiting for a reply.

I buttoned my jacket to hide as much of the wrecked shirt as possible, and hurried across the street to the cab stand, followed by silence and blank stares. I was Chatham, the trouble-maker, the goon who bore the marks of his trade, the split-open head, torn clothing, and the battered hands. When I climbed in the cab and told the driver where to go, he said curtly, without looking around, "I know where you live."

I let it ride. If I didn't get into another stupid and unnecessary fight for a week I'd still be ahead of quota.

When we pulled in at the motel, I looked around in surprise. The station wagon was gone and the front door of the office was ajar. Had she become worried and gone to look for me? I glanced at my watch; it was only twenty past ten. She wouldn't have left the door open, anyway. I paid off the driver and hurried inside. The lobby was dark, but cracks of light showed through the curtains in the doorway. I pushed through them, and stopped abruptly. The coffee table was overturned, the glass top broken, and cigarette butts were scattered on the rug from a shattered ashtray. A broken cup lay near it, in a wet coffee stain. I ran to the bedroom and peeked I into the bath. Everything was in order in both of them, and in the kitchen. I plunged back

through the living-room and snapped on the light in the lobby. There were no evidences of struggle here, no blood anywhere. But she wouldn't have left the door open.

I swore at myself for wasting time and grabbed the telephone. I couldn't call Calhoun; he was out, and this was beyond the city limits, anyway. Redfield was my only hope, and he was off. I looked up his home number. In my hurry, I botched it the first time, and had to dial it over. Cynthia Redfield answered.

"This is Chatham, at the Magnolia Lodge," I said quickly. "Is your husband there?"

"Why, no," she said. She sounded surprised. "I thought he might be over there, Mr. Chatham. I've been trying to call you for nearly ten minutes—"

"Over here?" I broke in.

"Yes. He went to a lodge meeting, and there's a man here at the house who wants to see him about something urgent, so I phoned the hall. But they said he'd got a call and left."

"Did they say he was coming here?"

"I thought so. Anyway, it's something about the Magnolia Lodge the man wants to tell him. About Mrs. Langston."

"Is he still there?" I interrupted. "Yes. Has something—?"

"Don't let him leave," I said. I snapped down the switch, and jiggled it furiously until I heard the dial tone. I called a cab.

When we pulled to a stop before the house the porch light was on, but there was no car parked in the street. Maybe the man had gone. I could see the back of Redfield's station wagon in the drive, however, so presumably he had got home. I tossed the driver a dollar and hurried up the walk.

Cynthia Redfield came to the door. "Oh, come in, Mr. Chatham."

"Has he gone?" I asked quickly.

She nodded. "But just downtown to look for Kelly. If he doesn't find him, he's coming back. Come on into the living-room and I'll try the lodge hall again."

I followed her down the short corridor. It turned to the right at the rear, apparently to the dining-room and kitchen. About half-way back a door on the left led into the living-

room. We went in. There was a fireplace at the far end and another corridor going towards the bedrooms in that wing of the house. The large picture window looking out over the alcove and rear yard was on the right, but the curtains were tightly closed. There was another curtained window in front, with a sofa, coffee table, and two modern Swedish chairs grouped in front of it. Over to my left was a record player and beside it a low table covered with L.P. records in their colorful jackets. The room was air-conditioned.

"What did he say?" I asked.

She turned, and smiled with a despairing shake of her head that set the pony tail a-swing. "He's a Cuban, and very hard to understand, especially when he's excited. But I think it's something about Mrs. Langston. Has something happened?"

"She's gone."

"It's probably nothing serious," she said soothingly. "But we're wasting time. Let me try that lodge hall again."

The telephone was on a small stand between the sofa and record player. She dialed, and said. "This is Mrs. Redfield again. Will you check and see if my husband's come back? Thank you." She waited.

"The Cuban," I urged. "Is he local? What's his name, and where can I—?"

She put a hand over the transmitter. "His name is Montoya," she said. "He lives on a farm just outside town. He always goes to Kelly with everything, because Kelly can speak Spanish to him." She nodded towards a chair. "Please sit down, Mr. Chatham."

I thanked her, but remained standing. Even in the midst of the worry sawing at my nerves, I was conscious of thinking she was incredible. I was positive she'd killed a man, and maybe she'd killed two, but you couldn't really believe it. I looked at the modest cotton dress, the flat slippers, the pony tail caught in its round comb at the back of her head, and the quiet, tanned face. When private eyes ran into them they were slinky, and long in the thigh, and their round-the-clock costume was just enough filmy nylon to raise a question as to whether their nipples were coral or mauve, and they carried .45's—God knows where—but this was the generic young suburban housewife, the psychology major four years

later with two children and every other week on the kindergarten car pool. Maybe I was crazy.

It was very quiet in the room except for the faint and rhythmic tapping of her nails against the top of the telephone stand as she waited. I had wandered over by the phonograph, and suddenly something caught my eye among the flamboyant jackets of the L.P. records piled on the little table. It was some Flamenco guitar, and the cover was taken up with the picture of the artist, and his name, of course, in large letters. It was Carlos Montoya.

Montoya!

I was suddenly tense and uneasy. No, I thought; I called her. But, still—

"All right, thank you," she said into the phone, and hung up. "He's not there," she said, frowning a little. "I think I'll try Farrar's Café. He goes there a lot—"

She'd just started to turn back to the phone when she wrinkled up her nose and glanced at the coffee table with an exasperated smile. "But let me get that horrible cigarette out of here before it smells up my curtains. Talk about ground-up cigar butts."

She picked up the ashtray and went past me. There were two cigarette stubs in it, and one of them was an oval type with very black tobacco. My nerves relaxed.

When she returned, I asked, "Could you make any sense at all out of what Montoya wanted?"

She hesitated. "Well, it probably sounds much worse than it actually is, the way he garbles things. But I gathered he drove in there to see her about buying her husband's old outboard motor, and she was getting in her car with two men. They were holding her up as if she were drunk, and she didn't speak to him. But let me try the café, and if Kelly isn't there we'll call the Highway Patrol."

She turned back to the phone and dialed. I waited, jumpy with impatience. She swung around facing me, the base of the instrument dangling from her right hand as she waited for someone to answer.,

Then she cried out, "Kelly . . . Kelly!" in a strangled voice, and casually tossed the instrument, receiver and all, onto the floor.

There was nothing I could do about it now, except watch. In some far-off corner of my mind I wondered how her tan would look under artificial light. She reached behind her to tip over the stand and the bridge lamp beside it. Before the crash had time to die, she picked up one of the sofa pillows and dropped it over the phone where it lay on the rug. Catching the yoke of her dress with both hands, she pulled down sharply, and the seams gave way down the front all the way to her waist. She wore no slip or bra, of course. I could see nothing wrong with the tan.

"It'll take him about two minutes to run it with the siren," she said, critically appraising the effect.

"I could kill you in less," I said. "Had you thought of that?"

"Of course," she said. She loosed the pony tail and let her hair fall about her face. "But why should you? You're not the type. And you might get away if you start running."

"Sure," I said. I had a wonderful chance of getting away.

She unbuttoned my jacket and looked at the wreckage of my shirt. "You don't really need any touching up, do you? Well, aren't you going to start?"

"No," I said. I could hear the siren now. I'd be shot down before I could get to the highway. "I'm going to call you. Your husband's not nearly as stupid as you think he is."

"Oh, you *are* an optimist, aren't you?" She reached briefly up under her skirt, and stepped out of the pants. Placing one slipper on them, she pulled upward, snapping the elastic.

"Why did you think it was necessary?" I asked. "You had it made. Nobody'd ever prove it."

She made no reply. I could hear the siren quite plainly now.

"You don't trust the others?" I asked. "Or don't they trust you?"

"Aren't you even going to try to get away?" she asked, frowning.

"No," I said. "I told you."

From the sound, he was within three or four blocks and still doing seventy. If he stopped it without turning over or going into the orchard he was a good driver, I thought. The siren cut and began to growl its way down.

She licked her lips. "You're a fool—"

It didn't seem likely she was doubtful about having enough stomach to watch it, so maybe she was thinking about the rug.

"All right, Mrs. Redfield," I said, and grabbed her. She put up a struggle, but it was pretty useless because I didn't care whether I hurt her arms or not. I got her in front of me, both her wrists clamped in my right hand while I held the left over her mouth, hard, and backed up against the wall beside the door from the hallway. When we were in position, I leaned back against it and locked her legs with one of mine so she couldn't kick. The long scream of his tires died outside and feet pounded on the porch and down the hall.

I tossed her aside as he hurtled through the door, and got him with a high tackle around both arms. He rode down under my weight and slid along the rug, and I chopped a right just under his ear. It had no effect on him at all except to make him explode. I thought he was going to climb to his feet with me on his shoulders and neck.

I chopped at him again and tried to get at the gun. I'd hoped he would have it out when he came through the door, because it was a shoulder holster, but he hadn't, so the only way was to work for it. He was like a maniac. I outweighed him by at least thirty pounds, but he heaved upwards and rolled the two of us against the coffee table, upsetting it and scattering ashtrays. I managed to pin him again, hooked my left arm around his throat and pulled back, and shoved my right hand under his chest. He fought without uttering a sound. He was trying to reach the gun, but I beat him to it, worked the holster around a little to get his weight off it, and pulled it free at last.

I dropped it into the pocket of my jacket having no illusions at all about threatening him with it. On television shows you ordered people around with a gun as if they were some kind of magic wand, but this was Redfield, and his wife had been beaten up and raped. The minute he saw her, the only way you'd stop him with a gun would be to empty it into him and try to stay out of his way till he died.

The thing I could use, however, should be in the right hip pocket of his trousers or the pocket of his jacket. But before I could try either of them he heaved upwards and we rolled

again, across the fallen bridge lamp, crushing it and scattering light bulbs. The only one that was turned on, fortunately, was that at the other end of the room. But in this new battle area we were facing towards where she had fallen when I'd shoved her, and he saw her at last, saw her sitting up with her hair in wild disarray and her clothes torn half off. He went silently berserk. If I'd weighed four hundred pounds I couldn't have held him down. He broke the stranglehold around my throat, heaved me off, and scrambled to his knees. I hit him on the jaw hard enough to drop him, and it had no more effect than hitting a wall. He battered at my face, pushed to his feet, and kicked at my head. I caught his legs and up-ended him again, and this time as we threshed across the floor I found the sap.

It was ugly and vicious and I hated to do it, but it was the only thing that could stop him. Knocking him out was no good, even if I could do it. I had to try to talk to him. I cut his arms down with it as he was trying to get to his feet, and then worked over the muscles at the backs of his legs. She ran past me to the fireplace and came back with the poker, and managed to hit me with it once before I could take it away from her. I shoved her again. She fell.

Redfield lay against the wreckage of the coffee table. I pinned him with a hand against his chest as he struggled to get at me with arms and legs that would no longer answer his commands. Wind roared in my throat and I could taste blood in my mouth; I'd taken a lot of punishment to get that sap.

"*Listen.*" I said. I had to stop for breath. "I didn't do that. Do you think I'm insane? She framed me. She wanted me killed or run out of here so I could never come back. Don't you know yet she killed Langston, you fool? How much longer are you going to try to close your eyes to it?"

I ran out of breath. I looked at his face as I gasped, and realized he was hearing nothing at all of what I said. He was conscious, and immobile, as I'd wanted him, and the whole thing was utterly useless. There was no way it could penetrate; there simply wasn't room in his mind for anything beside that implacable yearning to get to me and kill me. His eyes moved once, towards her, and then back to my face. They were terrible. If I lived a hundred years, I thought, I'd

never completely forget them. Then I remembered that if I lived until tomorrow morning it would be a miracle.

I stood up on shaky legs. There was no sound in the room except that of our breathing. I went over and yanked the phone out of the wall. I'd never find the keys to his station wagon, but he would have left those in the cruiser. It would make a wonderful, inconspicuous thing to try to get away in. But there was no point in even trying to think more than a minute ahead now. I turned at the doorway. She was lying on her side, sobbing. It was a good act. He had pushed himself out of the wreckage of the coffee table and was trying to crawl towards me like a dog with a broken back, still staring at me. And not once had he ever uttered a word. So I was going to talk to him, I thought.

Well, anyway, I'd gained a few minutes' time and a car.

I ran outside and got in the cruiser. The keys were in it. I slid around the corner back at the other end of the block and headed for the highway. By this time I was beginning to think a little and I realized I had no chance of getting out of the State, even if I had another car. And that I couldn't go anywhere until I'd found Georgia Langston. There was no telling what they'd do now.

15

Maybe Ollie had seen something. I still had a few minutes before Redfield could get to a telephone and spread the alarm. I slid in between two other cars in the parking area at the side of the Silver King and jumped out quickly. There was no one in sight. When I hurried through, the waitress and two customers turned to stare. I wondered what I looked like now.

The bar was crowded. A man I didn't know was behind the bar. Well, I thought wearily, he couldn't stay on duty all the time. Then I saw him down near the other end. He was checking the cash register. I went clown and found an open space and called his name. Customers turned to stare. I caught sight of my face in the bar mirror. The cut place over my eye had been opened again, and the blood had dried on the side of my face. The other eye was developing a shiner, and I had a big puffy area on the left side of my jaw. I stuffed the torn pennants of my shirt down inside my belt and buttoned the jacket. It didn't help any that I could see.

Ollie turned, and hurried over. "Good God, Chatham, what happened?"

"It's a long story," I said.

"Have you seen anything of Mrs. Langston tonight? You didn't see her leave over there, by any chance?"

"No," he replied.

"But she called here a few minutes ago. Wanted to know if I'd seen you—"

"Where was she?" I interrupted. "How long ago?"

"I don't know where she was. But it wasn't over five minutes ago."

"Was she all right?"

He looked surprised. "I guess so. Seemed a little worried about you, that's all."

At that moment there occurred one of those unexpected lulls that happen now and then in bars. The jukebox quit abruptly and several people stopped talking at about the same time, with the result that one voice somewhere behind me took over the floor. It was familiar, and still it wasn't. I turned. It was Pearl Talley, sitting with his back towards me, telling one of his interminable stories.

". . . So the first man says, "'Look, Morris, we know by you it's a sickness already, it should happen to Hitler, but, Morris, we're only asking would you please—"

"Tobacco Road Yiddish," Ollie said. "He also does a good southern Swede."

"It's not bad," I said thoughtfully, still looking at Pearl.

"Oh, sometimes when he gets wound up he'll go on all night with those half-witted dialects."

"Maybe he even speaks English?" I said.

Ollie grinned and shook his head. "I've never heard him try."

"Well, I'll see you," I said, and started to turn away.

"Anything I can do for you?" he asked. "Run you in to a doc if you haven't got a car."

"I'm all right, thanks. I've just got to find Mrs. Langston." And get out of sight within the next five or ten minutes, I thought, if I wanted to see tomorrow's sunrise. I went out the door, and looked across the road. Her station wagon was parked in front of the office. Nothing surprised me any more. I broke into a run, and was almost hit by a car. The driver called me something unprintable and sped on. I ran into the lobby and could hear her moving around in the living-room. She turned as I shoved through the curtains. She was still dressed exactly as she had been at dinner, and

as far as I could see she was unharmed. She looked at my face and gasped, and then, as if we'd been rehearsing it for a week, she was in my arms.

"I've been so worried," she said. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Bill, what happened?"

"No time now," I said. "We've got to get out of here. Fast."

She grasped the urgency in my voice and asked no questions. Running into the bedroom, she came out with her purse and a pair of flat shoes. We hurried out. She locked the front door. It occurred to me the back one was probably broken open, but it didn't seem very important.

"Where does Talley live?" I asked, as I hit the starter. "I mean, east of town, or west?"

"West," she said. "On the other side of the river, and then south four or five miles."

We'd risk it, I thought. I had no plan of any kind except to get off the highway and out of sight, but once we were committed we'd never get back through town or across that bridge. In a few minutes everything was going to be closed to us.

I whirled around and shot onto the highway, headed towards town. And almost at the same instant I heard the siren wailing up ahead of us. It was too late to turn now. I kept going straight ahead, holding my breath. The Sheriff's car shot past us, doing sixty. He hadn't seen us. They were still looking for me in their cruiser.

"Watch him," I said, opening up as much as I dared. "Is he turning in?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "What is it, Bill?"

They'd find their cruiser across the street, and then they'd be looking for this station wagon. "In a few minutes," I said. "If we get through town."

I went through as if I were driving on eggs. The streets were quiet now, with not enough traffic to cover us. I felt naked. Nobody paid any attention to us. We came onto the bridge at River Street and I was tied in knots expecting to hear the growl of a siren open up behind us. Nothing happened. Breath escaped from me in a long sigh. I eased in on the throttle and was doing fifty by the time we were across the river. "Where do we turn?" I asked.

"A little over a mile," she said. "There's a service station."

I prayed he'd be closed, but he wasn't. However, he was busy waiting on a customer as we made the turn and I didn't think he saw us. I straightened out and hit the throttle again. It was a gravel road running through timber and there were no other cars in sight. I slammed on the brakes.

"Look," I said, "you can still get out. If I'm not with you, they can't stop you. Go back to the highway and head east."

"Are you in trouble?" she asked quietly.

"Serious trouble. And you will be too, if you're caught with me."

"And leave you here in the dark, on foot?" she asked. "Bill, you're making me angry."

"I tell you—"

"If you're in trouble, it's because of me. I don't know what you're going to try, but I intend to help. Now, keep going, or I'll drive."

"It's a thousand-to-one shot—"

"*Bill!*"

I put the car in gear and hit the throttle. "Stubborn," I said, and grinned in the darkness. It made my face hurt.

"Have you ever been to his place?" I asked.

"No," she said. "Just by it. This is the road that goes down-river to the Cut where Kendall kept his boat."

"It figures," I said. I fought the car around a turn, throwing gravel, just inside the ragged edge of control. "Let me know when we're getting near."

"All right. I think about a half-mile before we get there we pass a fence and a cattle-guard."

"Good." We came around another turn and there was nothing but darkness and trees. We sped on, meeting no one. In another few minutes the fence flashed past and I heard the cattle-guard clatter beneath the tires. I slowed abruptly, watching the sides of the road. In less than a hundred yards I found a place I could get off. A faint pair of ruts went off to the left, winding through the trees. I followed them until they disappeared, and kept going, picking my way between the trunks and around clumps of underbrush. The ground was dry and firm. When we were at

least a quarter mile from the road I stopped. I cut the ignition and headlights. It was immensely silent and black all around us, as if we were alone on a whole continent that hadn't even been discovered yet. When I turned, it was impossible to see her beside me. I put out a hand and my fingers brushed her cheek. She came towards me, and then I was holding her very tightly and whispering against her ear.

I was scared," I said. "I was scared stiff."

"So was I," she replied. "What happened, Bill?"

"I'm batting one-thousand," I said. "First I was booby-trapped by a hillbilly who thinks intelligible English is a dialect. And now I've been clobbered by a small-town school teacher."

"What do they want you for?"

"Rape," I said simply.

She cried out. "How did she do it?"

I told her the whole thing. "I walked right into it. She even set it up so I'd get there in a cab, to have the driver's story to back her up. Then she stalled just long enough to make it look right. Was it a man or woman that called you?"

"A man. He said you'd been in a fight and were badly beaten up, and Calhoun had arrested you. I went to the jail and the hospital—"

I sighed. "He gets monotonous. But they had help on their telephone circuit this time. Let's try Frankie, that guy I bumped into. Who's he?"

"Frankie Crossman. He runs Pearl Talley's junk yard, out in the west end of town."

"You're doing fine. Frankie's in. He's another one who's mouse-trapped me. He started the fight so that acid-thrower could get away."

"But how did they turn things over in the living-room that way?"

"One of them went over and broke in the rear as soon as they saw you drive away. You see, it had to look as if something terrible had happened to you, without anything's actually happening—anything, that is, that might start Redfield wondering afterwards if maybe I *had* been tricked into coming there. Your being gone temporarily had nothing

to do with it; I just got a few drinks under my belt, started thinking about the way she looked without her clothes on, and went charging over there like a rutting moose—

"Incidentally, how *does* she look without her clothes on? And how would you know?"

I told her about it, and added, "You see, she'd already laid the groundwork for it. Trying to remember me. I was the Peeping Tom."

"What can we do?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "Up till now it's been a case of one minute at a time. My only chance is to get out of the State, and Redfield knows it. I could turn myself in, hire a good lawyer, and fight extradition until the Sheriff gets back. But he's not going to let me get out. The highways are all blocked right now."

"You think he's gone bad?"

"It's anybody's guess," I said. "It's been digging him for too long. He's got enough of it now to see the truth, if he wants it, but I don't think he will. He's been burying his integrity a little at a time to hang onto her, and that probably makes it easier to go all the way in the end."

"Why did you want to come here, near Talley's place?"

"A hunch. A very long shot I think I've got him tabbed now, and there's a chance we might even be able to prove it."

"What do you mean?"

I lit cigarettes for us. Nobody could see us here. "Talley is the boy who was making those filthy phone calls, almost beyond a doubt. He hired the acid job. I think he was there the night your husband was killed. And I'm pretty sure he was the one who tried to get me." I told her about that.

"Oh, God," she said.

"The telephone seems to be his favorite weapon, next to acid and shotguns. I kept picking up little leads that seemed to point to him, but I couldn't believe them because the man we were looking for spoke something that at least resembled English. I didn't know until tonight that Talley could speak anything but hawg-lawg-and-dawg—"

"He's a wonderful mimic"

I know. Tell me everything you can about him."

I suppose you'd say he was the local character," she began. "There's always a new Pearl Talley story going the rounds. He deliberately acts like a simple-minded hillbilly or some sort of low-comedy clown—why, I don't know, because it never fools anybody any more. Actually, I don't think he has much education, but he has a mind as sharp as a razor. Nobody's ever beaten him in a business deal. He buys, sells, and trades real estate all the time, as a speculator, but he'll spend three hours maneuvering and haggling the same way to trade somebody out of a fountain pen.

"He came here from Georgia about eight years ago, as I understand. With nothing but a ramshackle old truck loaded with some scrubby calves he wanted to trade or sell. I told you, I think, what he owns now—that big junk yard, a half-interest in the movie theater, and three or four farms that he runs cattle on, and a lot of highway frontage.

"He lives on this place and has relatives living on the others. Kinfolks, as he says. Nobody knows how many he has, or where they come from, or where they go to, or even whether he pays them anything. He's not married, so there are usually one or two over here with him, along with whatever ratty girl he's living with at the moment. I don't think I've ever seen him with a woman that didn't look like the dregs of something, and usually they're young enough to be juvenile delinquents, and probably are. I suppose a psychiatrist would say he was afraid of women, or hated them, and didn't want one around he couldn't degrade."

"He apparently does all his business in bars, but they say he drinks very little himself. Somebody once told me his house is even a little like a honky-tonk, with a coke machine and a jukebox. I understand they can play the jukebox with slugs, but everybody has to put real dimes in if they want cokes. On the other hand, though, they say he'll bring in a bunch of moonshine every now and then, absolutely free, and get them all drunk. Not convivially drunk, but falling-down drunk, animal drunk. While he stays sober, of course, and watches them make beasts of themselves Ugh! You've no doubt gathered I don't like him."

"Probably with good reason," I said. I think he was trying to drive you insane or wreck your health, simply to buy your

motel at a reasonable figure. No doubt it was perfectly logical from his point of view.

She was aghast. "But, good Lord, Bill, would he try to kill you just for that?"

I don't know," I said. "But I'm hoping it was for something else. Do you know whether he's ever been arrested? For a felony, I mean?"

"Not that I ever heard of. Why?"

"It's just a hunch so far. I may be able to tell a little more about it when I get to a phone."

"Where on earth," she asked incredulously, "do you expect to find a telephone out here?"

"Why, I thought we'd use Pearl's," I said.

"But—"

"It strikes me we've been shoved around by these telephoning guys about long enough. What do you say we change our tactics and go on the offensive? We've got nothing to lose now; any direction from here is up."

"I'm with you."

"Put on your walking shoes," I said. "Let's go."

* * *

It was a two-story house in a setting of big oaks some two hundred yards back from the road. One lighted window showed in front, on the right. The yard of packed bare earth was unfenced. I took her arm, and we moved silently around to the side, studying the place. There was a lighted window here, too. Probably the same room, I thought. I kept my eyes averted from the light to retain night vision. Fifty yards or so behind the house was a large shadow that presumably was a barn. There was only one car, a Ford sedan from the shape of it. It was parked under a tree to the right of the front porch.

I left her by the tree. Placing my lips against her ear, I whispered, "Wait here. Don't come in till I call you."

She nodded.

I slipped over towards the lighted window at the side of the house. As I approached it, phonograph music welled up

inside and I heard shoes against a wooden floor. I peered through the dirty screen, careful not to get too near.

It was a long room, extending from the front of the house almost all the way to the rear, harshly lit by two big overhead bulbs. Directly across from me, an overblown and vapid-looking blonde girl of eighteen or nineteen was lying on a sofa reading a book and glancing now and then towards the two people who were presumably dancing just outside my line of vision. She was wearing a pair of brief shorts and an inadequate halter that did their best but didn't have a chance against all that overflowing girlishness. She was barefoot, but wore a gold chain around each ankle, and a yellow gold wrist-watch. Beside the sofa was a flimsy card table stacked with magazines and more books. I couldn't see the rear of the room, or anything off to my left at all.

She lowered the book and said to one of the dancers, "Trudy, you ha'n ought to be rubbin' T.J. up like that. Pearl woul'n like it." She spoke like somebody with a mouthful of soap.

"Oh, shut up, La Verne," a girl's voice said. "And for Christ's sake, go put some clothes on. I get so sick of looking at that sloppy—"

Just then the dancers shuffled into view. I stared. One of them was that dark, hard slat of a girl Talley had been using for a memo pad that first day I saw him. But it was the man who caught my eye. He was the one who'd got away from me there in the bar when Frankie started the fight.

I slipped around in front and stepped up on the porch. The screen door swung open noiselessly and I was in a hall that was unlighted except for the illumination from the open door at the right. I stepped through it and looked swiftly around. There were only the three of them, and it was the craziest room I had ever seen.

An interior decorator, locked in it for an hour, would probably have gone foaming mad. Beyond the sofa was a coke machine. On top of it was a stock saddle, lying on its side. There was a jukebox against the outer wall, blushing in pastel colors and supplying the dance music, and at the far end of the room a bed made up with a patchwork quilt and old-fashioned bolster. In the corner across from it was a pinball machine. Directly opposite me was a small safe, and

in the corner next to it an old roll-top desk covered with papers. There was a telephone on the desk, and on the floor beside it was a small electric fan. There were no rugs, and nothing on the unpainted plank walls except perhaps a dozen pinups torn from magazines.

The dancers sprang apart. T.J. was a lank six-footer with an angular, sun-reddened face and pale eyes. It was a good description Georgia had given. Trudy didn't look any more attractive than the first time I'd seen her. The black eyes were hard, and the thin, dark face expressed a sort of wise-guy contempt for everything. La Verne merely looked at me as if she weren't sure the situation was serious enough to call for a change of expression.

T.J. said harshly. "Whata you want?"

"You, for one thing," I said.

Trudy made a noise with her lips, and laughed. She had all the charm of a strangulated hernia. "Take the bastard, T.J."

He pulled his knife, clicked it open, and advanced on me in a sort of prancing walk, feinting with the blade. I took the sap from my pocket and hit him across the muscles of the forearm. The knife fell to the floor. I kicked it under the sofa, where La Verne had become carried away with the excitement to the point of sitting up. Trudy shrilled something obscene and tried to rush past me, towards the desk. I tossed her back and she bounced against the jukebox before she fell to the floor with a display of stringy legs. T.J. was holding his arm. I sliced the sap across the other one, caught him by the neck and the back of his pants and threw him into the wall. Then I remembered the way that room had looked and picked him up and bounced him against it again.

The gun was in one of the top drawers of the desk. It was a .45 automatic. I dropped it in my left coat pocket and walked over towards La Verne.

"What's your name?" I asked.

She drew up her big thighs and hugged them, with her chin resting on her knees. It made her look completely naked. She regarded me with what I took to be concern, but might have been merely interest. "You ain't goin' to rape me, are you?"

"Not tonight," I said. "Maybe I can work you in tomorrow if I get a cancellation. So Pearl phoned you the good news?"

"Huh? Oh, sure, he told us about it."

"Name?" I asked again.

"La Verne Talley," she said. "I'm his second cousin."

"What times does he usually get back from town?"

"Oh, not never before one or two o'clock."

Trudy lashed out at her. "Shut up, you stupid punching bag!"

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Trudy Hewlett. She ain't no kin."

I turned and looked at Trudy. "Gertrude Hewlett. Gertrude Haines. You people never learn, do you?"

She cursed me.

"And this one?" I continued, nodding to T.J. "What's his name, and his kin rank, and what does he do when he's not throwing acid?"

"T.J. Minor," she replied. "He's a first cousin. He gen'ly sharecrops, but he had a little trouble up in Georgia and had to leave. Me an' him's engaged. We're goin' to run the motel for Pearl—"

Trudy tried to reach her, the tendons standing out in her neck as she screamed, "You dim-witted cow, shut up!"

I shoved her back and faced the big girl again. "That's a lovely watch you've got there. Is it the one Pearl gave you?"

She held out her wrist and gazed at it fondly. "No, Frankie give it to me. . . . Oh, it was before me an' T.J. got engaged."

"Pearl didn't give you one?"

She shook her head at me as if I weren't very bright. "Pearl? He ain't about to give no watch. He says what the hell, it don't cost you nothin'. He give Trudy one, but I reckon that was for something else."

"Yes," I said. "I guess it was."

I had to subdue the raging Trudy again. I pushed her harder, and she sat on the floor beside the jukebox.

"All right, La Verne," I said, "where do you sleep? Upstairs?"

"Umh-umh," she replied. "But like I said, TJ.—" She broke off and appraised me thoughtfully. "Hmmm."

"No," I said, "what I meant was you'd better go up to your room and go to sleep. Things are going to get a little rough around here, and you'll be safer out of the way."

16

The jukebox had stopped its plaintive moaning. The room was silent, and very hot under the naked lights. I could hear La Verne going up the stairs to her room. Trudy sat staring at me like some wild animal, while T.J. stirred and pushed his shoulders against the wall, trying to sit up.

I went over to the desk, picked up the little fan, and plugged it in. As I'd already known it would, it ran with a rough whirring sound just like the one in the phone booth at Ollie's bar. Emery dust in the bearings, I thought. I unplugged it and tossed it back on the floor.

"What time is it?" I asked Trudy. She spat at me.

I called Georgia and she hurried in. She looked anxiously at me, and then at the others, and I saw the quick recognition in her eyes as they came to T.J.

"I want you to meet some very charming people," I said. "That's the acid artist, of course. And the hard, gem-like flame is Trudy Hewlett. She's the girl who phoned me how to get out to that old barn."

"I think I feel a little sick," she whispered.

"Oh, don't be hasty or intolerant," I told her. "He gave her a nice wrist-watch."

"Bill, don't—"

"You kill me," Trudy said. "You really do. Squares!"

"Is there anything we can do?" Georgia asked.

"Why not call the cops?" Trudy asked. "That'd be a shrewd move." She was beginning to regain some of her confidence now. After all, squares never did anything to you, and when they couldn't call the police they were helpless.

"We've got a chance," I said. "It's still not much, but it's better than it was. You wait outside, and if a car turns in, warn me and then get out of sight. I'm ready to use that phone now, but we haven't got much time left."

She went out. I perched on the corner of the desk, took Redfield's gun from my pocket, and showed it to them. "You're just about to learn how it gets when squares are pushed too far. If either of you makes a move, you'll be gut-shot before you get off the floor."

T.J. said nothing. Trudy made her lip noise again, but stayed where she was. I looked up Calhoun's home number, breathed a prayer he'd be there, and dialed. The phone rang, and then again. I'd just about given up hope when he picked it up. "Calhoun."

"This is Chatham—"

He interrupted. "Listen. I don't know where you're calling from, and I don't want to know. But if you're not out of this County yet, *get out!*"

"I didn't do it. You know that."

"I don't think you did, but that's not the point. Don't you know what'll happen if they bring you in? He's half out of his mind. I've tried to get through to him; it's impossible. I just asked him to calm down a little and he almost hit me in the face with a gun."

"I can't make it out of the State," I said. "And that's the only thing that'd do any good."

He sighed. "No. They've got everything blocked, and he's pretty sure you're still here in the area. He's called in the Deputies from the other towns and they're taking the whole place apart."

I know," I interrupted. "But never mind. Have you had a chance to get anything on that job I asked you about?"

"Sure. I called up there long distance, just in case you did have something up your sleeve. The supermarket didn't have a burglar alarm. The one at the jewelry store was

installed by an outfit called Electronic Enterprises, in Orlando."

I sighed. "And by a man named Strader."

"God, are you sure?"

"Yes."

"But hold it a minute. Sure, the alarm was gimmicked. But there are plenty of pros would know how to do that."

"There's a lot more, but no time to go into it now," I said. "Give me anything else you've got on it."

"Okay. They figure there were three of them, at least, and maybe four. They hijacked the gasoline rig at a trucker stop on the highway about ten miles from town. Police found the driver the next morning in some bushes back of the place. They'd started to tie him, apparently, and then discovered they didn't have to. They'd hit him too hard.

"This power sub-station was out in the edge of town where the highway dropped down a little grade, on a curve. Fenced, of course, like they all are, but it might as well have had a silk scarf around it. They rolled the tanker right into it and let it burn. Melted the transformers and poles and switches like peanut brittle, had all the firemen and police in the county there for three hours, and put out the lights in the whole end of town where the supermarket and jewelry store were. The gang must have had a good-sized truck of their own, and dollies and hoists, because they just picked up both the safes and walked off with 'em. Burned them open out in the country somewhere, I suppose."

"Talley's junk yard would have a big truck, wouldn't it? And heavy moving gear, and acetylene torches."

"Sure. He's got all that stuff."

"How about the time and date?" I asked.

"Sub-station went just a little after midnight. November eighth. It was almost daylight before anybody discovered the robberies. Look, have you got any kind of proof at all?"

"No," I said. "Not yet. But I've got some very interesting people. And I'm going to have more if my luck holds."

"Anything I can do?"

"Yes. If you will. Is Frankie Crossman married?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. You told him to go home after that fight, so he should be there now. Get where you can watch his house. He's going to come out in a few minutes and drive off. After he's been gone a few minutes, knock on the door and ask for him. Be as vague about it as you can so you won't get in trouble, but give his wife the impression Frankie's wanted for questioning in something very serious."

"Got you."

"Then drive out to Redfield's house. I pulled his phone out of the wall. He won't be there, of course, but say you've been trying to get hold of him at the office and he's out. Give her the message, just in case she sees him first. Say that I called you. I wouldn't say where I was, of course, but it was a local call, so I'm still in the area and cut off, and I sounded as if I'd gone crazy. I wanted you to call the F.B.I, because I had some information in a Federal case of some kind, and that as soon as they were here to protect me I'd come in and surrender on the rape charge. Your opinion, of course, is that it's a lot of hogwash, but you think I might try again and they can trace the call if they'll set up a watch on your phone. Or Redfield himself could call the nearest office of the F.B.I, and make arrangements with them to have the call traced if I try to get in touch with them direct."

He whistled. "Son, I don't know how this is going to come out, but there's one thing. They'll sure as hell know you've been here."

I hope so."

"If only there was some way I could stop Redfield!"

"You can't. His office has jurisdiction. And he's in charge."

"Maybe if I did call the F.B.I—"

"I've got no proof. Not yet."

"Well, good luck."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm going to need it."

I hung up, and checked my watch. It was twenty past midnight; we were going to have to work fast. T.J. and Trudy were watching me uncertainly. I called Georgia. She hurried in.

I think we're in business," I said. "But there's no time to talk now. See if there's a sheet on that bed back there."

She brought it, and I began tearing it into strips. She watched, mystified. I rolled T.J. over on the floor, and tied his hands behind his back. The sheet was raw muslin, and quite strong. He struggled weakly and cursed. I shoved cloth in his mouth and made it fast with a strip tied in back of his head. I tied Trudy's hands, but didn't bother to gag her. She called me things I'd never heard before.

Hauling T.J. to his feet, I took the car keys from his pocket, handed Georgia the sap, and jerked my head towards Trudy. She was lying on the floor in front of the jukebox. "If she tries to get up, slice her across the backs of the legs just as hard as you can. Think you could do it?"

She nodded grimly. "I would love to. Believe me."

I shoved T.J. out the door ahead of me, and took him outside to his car. Pushing him inside on the rear seat, I tied his legs together with some more of the sheet, and drove the car down behind the barn where it would be out of sight. When I went back, Trudy was still mouthing obscenities and Georgia Langston was kneeling beside her with the blackjack poised. I untied Trudy's hands. Georgia looked at me questioningly.

I grinned coldly. "Trudy's our secretary. She's a great little girl on the telephone and she's about to go to work for us now."

I hauled her to her feet, "You impress me," she said. "You really do. Scare me some more."

"This may not be very pretty," I said to Georgia. "You keep an eye on the road."

"All right," she said quietly. "But don't think it would bother me." She went out.

I took Trudy's arm and led her over to the desk. "What a pair of creeps," she said, full of bright insolence.

I ignored her, looking up Frankie Crossman's residence in the phone book. Hoping he and his wife would be asleep, I dialed it, and listened, holding my finger on the switch. It went on ringing . . . four . . . five ... six. . . . Just after the seventh ring, somebody picked it up. I pressed down at the same instant, breaking the connection. I hung up.

"I'll bet that was a real smart move," Trudy said. "If I was stupid enough to figure it out."

"You don't have to," I said. "You just do what I tell you. In about two minutes, as soon as he gets back to bed, you're going to call him. I'll tell you what to say."

"Up yours," she said.

I slapped her.

She staggered sideways and fell to one knee. When she got up she tried to scratch me. I caught both her wrists in my left hand and slapped her twice more, forehanded and backhanded. I shoved and let her go. She fell backwards.

She looked up at me with the beginnings of doubt.

"You sumbitch, you're crazy--"

"Get up, Trudy," I said.

She climbed to her feet, watching me warily and trying to back away. I said nothing, and merely slapped her again, feeling a little sick at my stomach. She was about eighteen. But it had to be done. This was the method they'd left us.

"You cut it out," she said, sullen now instead of insolent.

"Your trouble, Trudy, is that you've been milking complacent mopes all your life and never did run into a desperate mope before. I haven't got anything more to i lose. Catch?"

I pulled the .38 from my pocket and cocked it.

"You wouldn't." She licked her lips nervously.

"We can use T.J. if you don't want to do it. He'll be easier to convince, too."

"Why?" she asked.

"Guess," I said.

She cracked. All the brass melted at once and she began to whimper. "What do you want me to do?"

"That's better," I said. I want you to call Frankie. If his wife answers the phone, don't say anything. I'll ask for him myself, because she might recognize your voice. As soon as we get hold of him, you do the talking. Here's what you say." I told her. "You got it?"

She nodded.

"All right," I said grimly. "And remember. If you try to tip him off, God help you. The State can't kill me any deader than Redfield."

I dialed the number and held the instrument so she could speak into it and we could both hear. Crossman himself answered.

"Listen, Frankie," she said hurriedly. "Pearl just called from town, and he's on his way out here now. He said he tried to get you, but you didn't answer—"

"He hung up before I could get to the phone," Frankie grumbled. "What is it?"

I don't know, except something's gone wrong. All he said was he was leaving right then and for me to call you and keep calling till I got you, if I had to try every place in town. Don't tell anybody, not even your wife, but just get out here as fast as you can."

"I'll be right there," Frankie said. He hung up.

I replaced the instrument and looked at my watch. It was 12:47. We were cutting it dangerously fine. She'd said Pearl sometimes came home as early as one. It would take Frankie a couple of minutes to dress, and then Calhoun would wait two or three more. It was very still in the room. I was hot in the flannel jacket. Sweat ran down my face. My hands were so stiff now I could hardly close them.

"How long have you been living with Pearl?" I asked Trudy.

"Three or four months," she said defiantly. Then she started to whine again. "I didn't have nothin' to do with anything. I came here from Tampa."

"When did T.J. show up?"

"About the same time. He was in a cuttin' scrape up in Georgia."

They were small change, I thought. I had to have the three big ones, and some kind of proof, and even then it might do me no good at all.

"What's in the safe?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied sullenly.

"What's in the safe?" I repeated harshly, taking a step towards her.

"Honest to God." She began to whine again. "He never lets nobody see in it. Or watch him open it. That Miz

Redfield offered me three hundred dollars if I could steal the combination—" She stopped abruptly.

"Why?" I asked. "What did she want with it?"

She retreated into sullen stupidity. "I don't know. But Pearl carries it in his head. Nobody'll ever know it but him."

I looked at my watch again. It was 12:55. Calhoun should be talking to Mrs. Crossman now. And Frankie should be here any moment. "When Mrs. Crossman calls," I told Trudy, "tell her Frankie's not here and Pearl's not here. Nothing else. Got it?"

She nodded. We went on waiting in hot, bright silence.

The phone rang. I nodded, and she picked it up. I stood beside her with my ear close to the edge of the receiver.

"This is Bessie Crossman," a woman's voice said. "Is Frankie there, Trudy?"

"No," Trudy replied. "He hasn't been here."

"You don't know where Pearl is?" I shook my head. She replied no.

"I'm worried. He got a phone call and rushed off somewhere, and then Calhoun come looking for him just a few minutes later."

It was beginning to work. I motioned for Trudy to hang up.

Almost at the same instant Georgia Langston said quietly at the side window, "Car turning in, Bill."

"Right," I said. "Stay out of sight. Don't come in unless I call you."

I strode to the corner beside the door, where I could watch Trudy and was out of sight from the windows. "Stay right where you are," I ordered. "And don't say a word."

The car came on and stopped under the tree near the corner of the front porch. Hurrying footsteps sounded in the hall, and Frankie came in. "Hey, Trudy, hasn't Pearl got here?"

I put a hand in his back and pushed. "You're the first, Frankie. Come on in."

He whirled, and the dark and bony face was mean as he caught sight of me. The lip was swollen where I'd hit him in the bar. He was wearing only khaki trousers and shirt, and I could see no place he could be carrying a gun, but I whirled

him around against the wall and shook him down anyway. He had nothing except a knife. I threw it under the bed at the back of the room and returned the revolver to my pocket.

He looked from me to Trudy, and back again. "What the hell's all this? Where's Pearl?"

"He'll be here, Frankie," I told him. "And Cynthia, I hope. Too bad Strader can't come. You could have a reunion."

Fear showed on his face for an instant. He whirled on Trudy. "*Why, you little slut!*"

She shrieked at him, "He made me call you!"

"Who killed Langston?" I asked. "All of you?"

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

"Who hit the truck driver too hard?"

"You must be nuts."

"It makes no difference," I said. "You know that. All of you take the rap, regardless of who hit him."

I was wasting time with Frankie. He had realized by now that Trudy had told me nothing. "Turn around," I said. "Against that wall."

He glared, about ready to jump me. I was too tired to want to fight him. I took the sap from my pocket and swung it in my hand. "Turn around, Frankie." He turned. I tied his hands with another strip of the sheet and stuck a wad of it in his mouth and made it fast. I shoved him onto the sofa, and turned to the girl.

"Call the Silver King and ask for Pearl. Here's what you say." I told her carefully, and then repeated it. "You got it?"

She began to cry. "He'll kill me."

"He won't be able to. Call him." She still hesitated, deathly afraid of him. "Call him!" I said harshly. My nerves were about ready to snap.

She picked up the phone and dialed. "Exactly the way I told you," I warned.

I held my car close to the receiver. We were in luck. I heard the bartender say, "Yeah. I think he's still here. Just a minute."

He must have put the receiver on the bar directly in front of somebody. Above the jukebox and the ground-swell of bar-room conversation I heard a man say, "I'm glad I'm not in the sum-bitch's shoes when Redfield catches him!"

"Hello." It was Talley's mush-mouth drawl. I nodded to her.

"Pearl!" she cried out. I think something's wrong. Miz Crossman phoned out here a few minutes ago—"

"What'd she want?"

"She's tryin' to find Frankie. She said he got a phone call from somebody about half an hour ago and left the house in a big hurry and didn't say where he was goin'. And just after he left, Calhoun came there lookin' for him. She don't know what for, but Calhoun acted like it was real serious."

"Oh, Frankie's jest been in another fight, or somethin'."

"No! That ain't all. Frankie called too. He jest this minute hung up. I don't know where he was, but he said he was gettin' out of town. He was so excited I couldn't make out everything he said, but it was something about all hell was going to bust loose. He said he found out that man is a private detective workin' for an insurance company. I'm not sure what he meant, but I'm scared, Pearl. T. J.'s scared. We're goin' to get out of here—"

"You stay right where you are," he said coldly. "That's the worst thing you can do—" He apparently realized that he was being listened to by people in the bar, for he went on easily. "Shucks, it ain't nothin'. You jest sit tight. I'll be along."

He hung up.

I dropped the receiver back on its cradle, feeling myself tighten up. We had seven or eight minutes at most. "All right, Trudy. Stand up and turn around."

"*Damn you!*" she lashed out. "He'll kill me. You don't know him."

"Shut up!" I told her. "I'm trying to get you out of sight before he gets here."

She put her hands behind her willingly then. I began tying them. "Georgia!" I called out. She came in quickly.

"What's Frankie's car? That panel truck?"

"Yes," she said. Then she gave a short laugh that ended in a little choking cry, and put a hand against the doorframe to steady herself. She brushed the other across her face. The strain was beginning to get her.

"Take it easy," I said.

"I'm all right." She took a deep breath. "It was just the truck. The same one that backed into you—when was it? How many years ago?"

I managed to grin at her. "We were young then." Then I jerked my head towards Frankie. "See if the keys are in his pocket. If he tries to kick you, brain him with something."

"The keys are in the switch," she replied. "I've already checked."

"Good girl." I finished off Trudy and hustled Frankie to his feet. "Bring the rest of those strips," I said, and shoved them ahead of me, holding them by the arms. We went out on the porch. After being in the light, I couldn't see at all for a moment or two. Frankie stumbled, stepping off the porch, and almost fell. I caught him. Georgia led the way to the truck. I opened the doors in back and shoved them in. She found the switch and turned on the light. I hurriedly tied their ankles. Frankie lay on his side, the black, mean eyes staring at my face. I was suddenly sick of all of them, sick to the bottom of my heart of the whole tough, cheap, crooked lot. Be a police officer and look at that all your life?

"Watch the road," I warned. "He'll be here any minute."

"Nothing yet," she said.

I slammed the rear doors and we got in and drove down behind the barn. I cut the lights and the engine, and sighed, beat-up and tired and hurting all over. I put out a hand to touch her, and she took it and held it between both of hers, in her lap.

"What are our chances?" she asked calmly.

"I don't know," I replied. "They pulled off a robbery that night and killed a man up in Georgia. Bringing the stuff into another State makes it a Federal case. That, and the felony murder, is what they've been so jittery about."

"Can we prove it?"

"Not yet," I said. "I'm trying to make them lose their heads. I couldn't get anything out of Frankie, but we've still

got Pearl and Mrs. Redfield to go." I broke off wearily, aware that if Cynthia Redfield sat tight and didn't panic we had no chance. We had to get her or it was nothing.

"But Kendall?" she asked. "Where was there any connection with him?"

"One of the places they robbed was a jewelry store," I said. "They must have had some of the stuff there in the house that morning, and he saw it. Remember, it wasn't just robbery; they knew they'd killed a man. A felony murder is the same as first degree."

"But why would he go there?" she insisted.

I don't know," I said.

Well, I thought defiantly, I don't really. It's just a guess.

And maybe I was still wrong about the whole thing. There was the time element. Langston was apparently killed at a few minutes past four in the morning. Weaverton was nearly a hundred miles. If they'd entered the first place shortly after twelve, when the lights went out and the police converged on the fire, they still had only four hours. They might have been able to get away with the safes and drive back in that length of time, but they couldn't have opened them. That would take hours. And disposing of them in a river somewhere would take more time. So what had Langston seen?

Well, they'd cleaned out a jewelry store, and everything wasn't kept in a safe at night. There'd have been watches, and silver. . . .

"I hear a car coming," she said.

Headlights flashed briefly across the trees beside the barn, and died. A car door slammed. Pearl was here.

"Stay here," I whispered.

I eased out of the truck and around the corner of the barn. It was too dark to see him, but I heard his footsteps as he hurried across the front porch. He wouldn't waste any time looking for the others. The car's being gone would be evidence enough they'd run out. I hurried across the yard and reached a position by the side window as he came into the room. I couldn't see him; he was off to my left somewhere. Then I heard the sound and recognized it, and excitement ran along my nerves. It was the faint, metallic rattle of the knob of the safe as he spun it through the combination.

He could be after money so he could run; or my hunch might be right and there was something in it he wanted to get rid of and hide somewhere else. I waited tensely; I had to be sure it was open before I went in. Then the telephone rang. It rang again. He paid no attention to it. I heard the click of the handle as he swung open the door of the safe. Slipping round in front, I eased the screen door open, and stepped into the hall. The telephone shrilled once more in the silence, covering any sound I might have made.

He was kneeling before the opened safe with his back to me, wearing another of those garish shirts, the cowboy hat pushed onto the back of his head. On the floor beside him

was one of the metal drawers from the safe. It held two chamois bags, one of them very small.

"Turn around, Pearl," I said. "And get away from the front of that safe."

He whirled and stood up. After the first gasp of surprise, there was no confusion or fear in his face. The blue eyes were calculating and more than a little cold as they looked at me and then moved slightly, estimating the distance to the desk drawer.

"There's no gun in it," I said. I crossed over in front of him. The telephone started to ring once more, but cut off in the middle of it. Whoever it was had hung up. Silence seemed to roar in my ears. I thought of the shotgun going off in that loft, and the obscene foaming of acid, and whispered filth on a telephone. For an instant I wanted to get my hands on him now that we were alone and beat him into something unrecognizable, but I pushed it wearily aside. What good would it do? What good had it done last time?

I jerked my head. "Move over. Away from that safe."

He took a step to his right, towards the jukebox, the china-blue eyes watching me carefully. He knew I had a gun. I lifted the two chamois bags to the desk and worked the drawstrings loose. One of them was filled with engagement rings in all sizes of stones, and the smaller one held perhaps a child's handful of unset diamonds. I didn't know whether they were expensive stones or not. Another drawer in the desk held several dozen men's and women's wrist-watches, wrapped in tissue paper. Apparently he had destroyed the gift cases as being too bulky to store. The last compartment I slid open was stacked with bundles of currency sorted by denomination and held together with rubber bands. Several thousand dollars, I guessed. You wondered how many times he'd counted it.

I stood up. He regarded me with a conspiratorial, but simple-minded expression on the fat baby face. "You know, I bet you an' me could work out a dicker."

"Yes?" I asked. This should be interesting to hear.

"Why, shore. Them po-lice has got you treed like a coon in a holler snag. You just ain't goin' to get out of here, and when they catch you, that Redfield's goin' to pistol-whup

you to death. But suppose I was to take you out in my truck?" There was a pause, precisely timed, and then he added, "Even give you a whole pocketful of that money to take along."

"Why?" I asked.

This was the second level, I thought—Talley the trader. It lay somewhere between the low-comedy yokel with a face like a lewd baby, and the real Talley, the coldblooded and deadly hoodlum. Pearl was an apt name for him; pearls were built up in layers. Or maybe there wasn't any actual Talley at all; if you stripped off all the succeeding layers, at the bottom there wouldn't be anything but an elemental force, a sort of disembodied and symbolic act of devouring. No wonder he was good at mimicry and spoke in dialects; he wasn't sure who he was himself.

He couldn't understand me. "Don't you want to get away?"

"No," I said. I doubt there's any way I can explain it to you, but all I want is to see you in jail."

"Shucks. Ain't no hard feelin's."

I see. Trying to drive a woman insane or wreck her health is just routine business strategy?"

"Oh, I didn't reckon she'd go real nutty or anything. I jest figured if she got a bellyful of the place she'd sell out cheap. You know how it is, you gotta be on your toes in real estate."

"What about trying to kill me with a shotgun?"

He grinned slyly. "Hell, you can't prove nobody tried to kill you. You're still alive."

I realized I was up against unanswerable logic. There was no harm done, because he'd missed. Why be churlish about it?

"Which one of you killed Langston?" I asked.

"Why, I don't know nothin' about that," he said innocently. "Look, let's talk over this dicker a little more."

"Knock it off, Pearl," I said. "I know what you people did that night, and the proof's right there in front of you. I've already got Frankie. All I've got to do now is call the F.B.I. They'll be glad to get their hands on you."

He was looking at something over the door. I whirled. Cynthia Redfield was standing just inside it. She was

wearing a dark blue dress and sandals, and was carrying a flat bag in her left hand and holding a short-barreled .38 in the other. It was a corny pose, and might have been ridiculous if it had been anybody else, but wasn't ridiculous on her at all. I knew she was deadly enough to mean it.

She came on into the room. "Turn around, Mr. Chatham," she ordered. I turned, raging at myself, and scared. I heard her walk up until she was about three feet behind me, and then she said, "Now, take off your jacket and toss it over there on that sofa."

She couldn't miss. I did as she said. "Now, get over there and stand by Pearl." I walked over and stood by the safe, facing her.

She stared coolly at Pearl, and said, "I thought you might walk right into it, so I parked up by the road. I tried to head you off in town, but they said you'd just got a phone call and left. Then I tried to get Frankie, and found out he'd also disappeared. Didn't it occur to any of you that Chatham was doing it, trying to panic you?"

I glanced sideways at Pearl and saw he was watching her nervously. For some reason he didn't appear as happy as he should be at this change in the picture. "Well, it was Trudy that called—"

"It doesn't matter," she said crisply. I don't have much time." She stopped to give him a taunting smile, and went on, I see you have the safe open. That's nice, isn't it? We can have an accounting now, after all these months."

Pearl said nothing, and it began to dawn on me at last that I wasn't the only one being threatened by that gun.

"Come on, Pearl," she taunted. "Tell me again how much was in those safes when you and Frankie opened them. Remember, all the paper money in one burned up when the torch set it on fire. And the other had only about two thousand dollars' worth of cheap junk in it. Remember, Pearl?"

He swallowed uneasily.

She walked to the desk, motioning for us to move back. Setting her handbag on it, she poked her finger into the openings of the two chamois bags. A few engagement rings spilled out on the desk.

"You got to listen—" Pearl began.

She cut him off coldly. "How did you get Frankie to lie about it, and cheat him out of his share at the same time? More blackmail, Pearl?"

"Listen, you got it all wrong," he explained earnestly. I had to keep it so none of it wouldn't git sold till it was safe. I was goin' to tell you. Honest. You don't reckon I'd cheat my own kin—?"

"Shut up, you filthy pig!" she lashed at him. "In the end, you got it all, didn't you. You always do. By lying, and blackmail, and extortion. You couldn't leave us alone, could you? All we wanted to do was break into just one of those stores to get enough money to go away together, but you had to force your way into it and make a production of it. Kill a man and burn up part of a town so you could carry off the safes. You're never satisfied, are you? You couldn't even leave that woman alone so she'd sell out and go away so the thing would quiet down and be forgotten. Not you, you dirty pig! You had to go to work on her so you could buy the place for nothing. So you made her too stubborn to sell, and you didn't even have sense enough to leave this man alone so he'd stay out of it. And then you let him make a fool of you. Well, I can still get out, Pearl, and I'm going to. And I'm going to take everything that's in that safe. I'd have killed you long ago if I could have thought of a way to get it open."

She could get away with it, if she got back home before she was missed. With both of us dead and the jewelry gone there'd be no evidence of any kind and nothing to point to her. Then I remembered Georgia Langston. Cynthia apparently didn't know she was here. She'd be safe if she stayed out of sight.

Almost at the same instant I thought I heard a faint sound like the scrape of a shoe in the hall, and involuntarily looked towards the door. A slender hand had come around the edge of the frame, groping for the light switch just inside. But Pearl was facing that way too. He stared, too obviously, and Cynthia Redfield started to turn. Then the exploring fingers touched the switch and the lights went off.

She pulled the trigger through sheer reflex, but I was already diving towards the floor. Pearl hit me and we crashed down together. I kicked him off me and rolled,

aiming for the spot where Cynthia Redfield had been standing. I missed her and swung my arms. One hand brushed the cloth of her skirt. The gun crashed again. I lunged at her and missed completely. Then Pearl slammed into me. We fell against a wall and he had me pinned under him. I heard a collision in the hallway, somebody cried out, and the screen door slammed. She was gone; I'd never catch her out there in the night.

Pearl had a knee in my chest and was swinging like a madman. A fist caught me just above the ear and rocked my head back against the wall. He had the range now and hit me again. One arm was pinned under me and I couldn't get any weight behind the other when I landed on him. A fist crashed against the side of my jaw. It rocked me, and I realized that one or two more like it would knock me out. I put everything into one last heave, and came up, toppling him into the darkness beside me. We rolled, locked together and straining, and hit the legs of the flimsy card table. It collapsed, dumping magazines and books on us. I thought I heard a car somewhere, but it was impossible to be sure above the hoarse sound of our breathing.

We threshed through the wreckage of the card table and the slithering and unstable carpeting of magazines. I found his throat with my left hand and swung with the right. Pain went up my arm, but he grunted. I swung it again and felt him go limp. I pushed myself away and collapsed, too weak to get up. Somewhere behind me a match flared, and then the lights came on. I pushed myself to a sitting position and turned. Kelly Redfield was standing just inside the door.

He was a good ten feet away. There was nothing I could do but sit and stare at him. His face was pale and intensely still, and the eyes deadly. There was no gun in his hand, but the short khaki jacket was open in front and I could see one in the shoulder holster under his left arm. He said nothing. There was no sound in the room except that of my breathing. His right hand came up and pulled the gun away from the spring clip that held it.

"All right, Chatham," he said. His voice was so tight there was no expression in it whatever.

Then I saw his eyes flick away from my face for the first time as they glanced towards the open safe and the desk

beside it. Something held them. I turned involuntarily and looked. On the desk one of the chamois bags was still pulled open and light glittered on the stones in the rings. And beside it was the maroon leather of Cynthia Redfield's handbag.

He pulled his eyes away from it and tried to do it anyway. He raised the gun and cocked it. Sweat stood out on his face like beads of glycerin. Then the muzzle wavered, and he let his arm fall to his side. He was motionless for what seemed like a long time, and at last he raised the gun and put it back in the holster. He walked over to the desk and stood with his back to me as he picked up the phone.

I let my head drop on my forearms, braced across my knees, and closed my eyes. I was shaking all over, and limp.

I heard him dialing. "Redfield," he said. "Call off the search for Chatham. But send somebody to pick up Frankie Crossman—"

"Frankie's out here," I said without looking up.

He gave no indication he had heard me, other than to change his orders. "Send Mitchell out here. Pearl Talley's place. To pick up Frankie Crossman and Talley for suspicion of murder."

He paused, as if he had been interrupted, and then said savagely, "*No, that's not all!* Goddammit, I'll tell you when I'm through—"

I looked up then. He reached slowly over and picked up the purse with his free hand, and tilted its contents out onto the desk. For an instant he stared down, stony-eyed, at the little accumulation of feminine articles, the tiny wadded handkerchief, comb, lipstick, mirror, and paper tissues, and then he probed through it with his finger and pushed something to one side and looked at it. It was an ignition key.

"And tell Mitchell to bring enough men to search the area," he said curtly. "One of them got away on foot."

I looked away. Georgia Langston was standing in the doorway with tears swimming in her eyes. I pushed myself erect some way, grabbed my jacket, and went out into the hall and reached for her. She came to me with a little cry.

* * *

Calhoun arrived a few minutes later. We were sitting on the porch, smoking cigarettes and holding hands in the darkness. "I tried to call you," he said, "and warn you he was on his way out here. It was my fault. I tried to tell him about Pearl and Frankie and calling in the Federal boys. He caught on to where you were, and tore out."

"It's all right," I said. I told him what had happened. He went inside.

More cars arrived, and the place was full of Deputies, most of whom I'd never seen before. They left the headlights on to illuminate the yard. Magruder and Mitchell came over, glanced at me, and went inside to talk to Redfield.

"I tried to catch her," Georgia said. "I followed her outside after she ran into me, but she got away."

"She had a gun," I said.

"I know. But it seemed to me she was our only chance."

"She would have been," I said, "except she left her purse. Incidentally, remind me to thank you sometime for putting out those lights."

The screen door opened and Redfield came out, followed by Mitchell. "You're in charge," Redfield said. "Take over. Search the place, inventory that stuff, and when you've got 'em all, bring 'em in and book 'em. I'll be at home."

Mitchell nodded to me. "What about Chatham?"

"There's no charge," Redfield said curtly. "He can go any time he wants."

I stood up, took the gun from the pocket of my jacket, and held it out to him butt-first. He accepted it without a word and dropped it in his jacket. Turning abruptly away, he walked across the yard, got into the cruiser, and drove away, picking up speed as he shot out towards the road.

I sat down. Georgia watched the red lights turn into the road and disappear. "Couldn't one of you have said something?"

"Said what?" I asked.

"Yes, I see what you mean."

Calhoun came out. He lit a cigarette, and we watched the flashlights searching out through the timber. "She still had the gun, didn't she?"

"Yes," I said.

"You haven't heard a shot?"

"No," I said. "And if she hasn't by now, she probably won't."

"More than likely she's just sitting up there in the car."

I thought about it. It made me shiver.

"They've got Frankie and Pearl spilling pretty well," he said. "They had Strader's car with them that night, besides the truck, so they split up on the way back. They brought the safes on out here, and butchered 'em open the next day. They claim they didn't go to Redfield's house at all. Sounds logical."

"But she and Strader had some of the stuff?" I asked. "Things that weren't in the safe?"

"That's right," he replied. "You had it pegged all the time. She told them that was the way it happened. He came around the house and started to walk into the kitchen. Strader was outside, getting some more of the stuff. All he saw was a silhouette, and thought it was Redfield. There were some watches and silver and things like that right in plain sight on the table. And a dead truck driver lying in the weeds behind a highway lunch-stand up in Georgia."

Georgia Langston rose and walked a few steps away, looking off into the darkness.

"I'm sorry," Calhoun said.

"It's all right," she replied. "Bill said it would be that way."

He stood up. "Well, I've got no business out here. And I guess you've had all of it you want, now that it's cleared up. I'll give you a lift to your car."

"We won't be able to find it till daylight," I said. "It's way off the road in the timber."

"Then let me drive you home. You can get it tomorrow."

I looked at her.

She smiled. "Yes. Let's go home."

* * *

It was nearly five. We were sitting in the living-room drinking coffee. I'd gone over to my room and showered and shaved my battered face as well as I could, and put on some

clean clothes. She was wearing dark pajamas and a dressing gown and looked very lovely, but tired. The phone rang. I went out and answered it.

It was Calhoun. They got her," he said. "About an hour ago. She made a full confession."

"She admit having any idea why Langston came over there?"

"She says no. But I doubt that part of it."

"So do I," I said. "Thanks a lot."

I went back and told her.

"I'm sorry, Georgia," I said. "But there wasn't any other way it would fit, from the first. He went there *hoping* something might happen. You see, he could just knock on the door and ask for Redfield, and play the ball as it bounced. But look at it this way—obviously, she'd made a play for him before. He was forty-seven, and they had just told him to get in his wheel-chair and watch the game from the sidelines the rest of his life, so maybe it was a gesture."

She interrupted me. "Bill."

"What?"

"Why all the apology and explanation? Doesn't it occur to you I might want to try to thank you for what you've done? It was a nightmare, and you ended it for me."

I didn't want to hurt you."

She nodded. "It hurts, yes. But I don't expect to go around the rest of my life posing as a tragic figure. Listen, why don't we go outside? It should be just about dawn now, and we can see exactly where we want to put that swimming pool."

We went out and sat on the edge of the concrete porch. Day was beginning. I tossed a pebble. "Center of the swimming pool right there. How does it look?"

"It's a beautiful pool," she said dreamily. Then she asked, "You mean it? You really want to stay and do it?"

"What do you think?" I said. I grinned, or tried to. "Let's say I've given too much of my face to this cause to drop it now."

She touched a few bruises with her fingertips. I was hoping you would. But do you know why I asked? This is the day they were supposed to have your car ready."

I turned, and we stared at each other for an instant. It was impossible, but she was right.

She gave a little smothered laugh, and went on in a faint voice. "It's inevitable. Bill. Some day somebody's going to ask you what on earth you did to pass the time, stuck in a little place like this for three whole days."