

MAN DROWNING

BY

HENRY KUTTNER

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How many are mine iniquities and sins? make me to know my transgression and my sin.

Job 13:23

* * *

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1.

FIRST I THOUGHT SHE HAD A DOGWHIP hung around her skinny neck, with the ends dangling down the front of the sand-colored blouse. Then one end of the dogwhip lifted sluggishly, and muscles moved like sliding rings under the shiny purple-black scales.

Everything around was bleached dun, the color of a cow skull I'd seen stuck on a pole that morning on the road in, but there were shadings, from blinding, scalding, dry white to tawny earth, that had had all the vigor sucked out of it ages ago by the Arizona sun. Everything was the color of something burned, even that black rope, which had the color of oily cinders. It moved itself from left to right across the woman's throat with a slow disgusting motion. She put up a claw of a hand and rubbed its head with a finger that had skin coarser than the snake's. I heard a dry scratching. The snake quieted. It hung there. Once its tongue flickered out. It was still.

"What, my lord?" the woman said. "A soldier, and afeared?"

I stared down at her, rocking on the balls of my feet, a little dizzy with the sun and the heat. My tongue felt caked with dust. I licked my lips, swallowed, and managed a laugh that sounded more like a cough.

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"What, my lord?" the woman said. "A soldier, and afeared?" I stared down at her, rocking on the balls of my feet, a little dizzy with the sun and the heat. My tongue felt caked with dust. I licked my lips, swallowed, and managed a laugh that sounded more like a cough. Finally I said, "Don't let these suntans fool you. Technically, they've been civvies a long

time now." I tried to clear the dust from my throat. "Sorry," I said. "Could I have a glass of water?"

She pointed.

"Go through that door," she said. "Get me a bottle of beer out of the icebox. Take one for yourself."

Then she leaned back and closed her eyes. The snake watched me carefully. I waited a second or two, but she didn't move or speak again, so I turned around and walked across the patio along the way she'd pointed. In the center, in the open space, it was like stepping into an oven under the direct rays of the sun. It took me twenty steps to cross that exposed area, and before I'd reached the shade sweat was running down my neck

and cheeks. When I opened the door and went into the kitchen, it was like coming into a cave--cool and clear and dark by contrast with the white blaze outside. The first thing I saw was a big refrigerator, a ten or twelve-foot model, and it looked beautiful. I laid one hand flat against its chill white metal flank. My palm began to tingle with pleasure. But by then I'd taken in the rest of the picture, and a soft tink-tink pulled me toward the sink, where water was dripping from the swivel faucet. I didn't like that. After the traveling I'd had lately, it seemed a sin to waste water. I picked up a glass from the drainboard, and it nearly slipped out of my sweaty hand. I turned on the water, and, without

waiting for it to run cold, rinsed the dust out of my mouth and throat. I let a few swallows go down; they hit my stomach like a deep-toned muffled rubber hammer and made me feel slightly sick. The water was still running; I watched it. I held the glass under the tap. It was Mexican, green glass with bubbles blown into it, a short, fat glass shaped like a barrel cactus. I felt cold now.

I took a few more swallows and turned off the faucet. There was still a drip, hitting the porcelain bottom of the sink in rhythm. I pushed at the faucet, but that didn't help; the washer was worn.

The dripping made the silence louder. Most places have near horizons. Most places have trees for the wind to make

noises in, and grass and leaves for birds to rustle. But not Arizona, not this part of it. It was too big and hot and empty. There wasn't anything alive except the birds and reptiles that don't make sounds. There might have been a buzzard or a hawk, very far up; and you might have caught a sliding, soundless motion on the ground, that would turn into a horned toad or a lizard. Not much more than that. The sky was too big and too far away; no echoes came back. There weren't any walls.

I looked in a few cupboards till I found a tall glass, and I opened the refrigerator to get the beer. There was plenty of that. There was food, too, but I didn't let myself look; I grabbed two

bottles and slammed the door. Then I noticed the mark of my hand, dark and greasy on the clean white. I got a dishtowel and scrubbed it off. Afterward, I went out with the beer, but I didn't cross the patio this time. I circled it, staying under the shade of the gallery that ran around three sides. The house was U-shaped, white except for the blue shadows, and the roof was red tile. Brownish-black, eight-by-eight beams stuck out in a row under the roof, hand-adzed. The driveway, made of choking white dust, circled down the slope toward the highway, but you couldn't see much of the highway from here; the drive simply dipped out of sight, and then the mountains began a long distance away. It

was hard to see anything clearly. The air shimmered too much. She was still in her canvas deck chair, under the gallery; she hadn't moved. Neither had the snake. But she heard me. Without opening her eyes, she said, "There's a table around here somewhere. Get yourself a chair." I put the two bottles and the glass on the cement and found a small green metal table and another deck chair up against the wall of the house. I brought them back and put the table down cautiously. She opened her eyes and watched me.

"King snakes aren't poisonous," she said.

"Aren't they?"

She reached out and pulled the table closer. Its metal legs made a screeching

sound on the cement, and the snake stirred uneasily before relaxing. I poured the beer down the side of the glass, carefully, so there'd be no collar. The glass began to sweat.

"Sit down and drink," she said.

It felt good to take the weight off my feet. I hadn't realized how my muscles were aching. I leaned back in the creaking chair, tilted the bottle neck to my mouth, and shut my eyes. I forgot everything else while I let the beer flow down, cold and sharp as catnip, the chill spreading out from my gullet through the muscles of my neck till I was conscious of them sliding over each other and my throat felt numb. "Where are you heading?" She was looking at the

rucksack I'd let drop when I came in. Like me, it was Army surplus. I said, "Oh--east."

She laid thin, leathery arms on the smoother wooden arms of her canvas chair and looked at me. She had a face like a skull. The blue turban she wore was so tightly twisted that she might have been bald. Costume jewelry seemed her one vanity. She wore plenty of rings and bracelets. Most of them were luck charms; I saw the Indian swastika and the thunderbird. She liked blue and blue-green stones--turquoises.

"Hungry?"

"I could eat. But I'm not asking for a handout. I've got some dough. I could eat, sure, but I'd like to work it out."

"There's nothing to do around here," she said. "We've got a couple of Mexicans who take care of everything. Up till a few days ago we had a general handyman, too, but he quit. Say, can you cook?"

"I can broil steaks and fry eggs."

"Tell you what," she said. "The Mexicans went to Phoenix to shop this morning, and they should have been back by now. I'm hungry. But I don't feel like doing any cooking. How about you fixing something?"

"Sure," I said. "Unless you want pressed duck."

"Oh, sandwiches--whatever you can find. Fix yourself anything you like. No hurry. Finish your beer and bring me

another one first." I stood up, watching her. She was all bone and tendon and rough brown skin. Her skinny legs stuck out of faded shorts and ended at ripped, dirty tennis shoes. She had muddy brown eyes, fringed with wiry red lashes. I said, "All right, Miss--Countess . . ."

"De Anza's the name."

"I know. I saw it on the mailbox. It said Countess De Anza."

"What of it?" she asked. "Any woman can be a countess. All she needs is a marriage license and a count. That reminds me. Fix some bouillon and dry toast, too, will you? For my husband. Take it in to him." She gestured vaguely.

"Just bouillon and toast, Countess?"

"Mrs. De Anza will do. Yes, that's all."

Say, what's your name?"

"Banning," I said. "Nick Banning."

"Okay, Nick. Get that beer."

I went after it.

* * *

It was a pleasure to fool around in a clean, convenient, modern kitchen. The bread was in the refrigerator, in an airtight zipper-sealed plastic bag, and there was a tin of Oxo cubes with the canned stuff. After I had given the Countess her beer, I opened another bottle for myself and left it on the drainboard, where I could pick it up every time I came by. I let the hot water run and washed up as well as I could, drying myself with paper towels. But ordinary soap wouldn't cut the dirt I'd

picked up. I played with the faucet, irritated by its dripping. Finally, while the bread was toasting and the water getting hot, I began opening drawers till I found pliers and a cellophane sack of rubber washers. Then I got down on my knees and looked under the sink, located the cutoff, and turned the water off. I replaced the old washer with a new one in about two minutes, and felt a lot better. Not that it was any of my business, but the dripping got on my nerves.

I fixed the bouillon in one of the bouillon cups--there were plenty of dishes--and after I got the tray ready, I picked it up, balancing it on one palm, and went through the swinging door into

the next room. The first thing that hit me was the smell. I couldn't place it at all. It might have been incense or perfume. I couldn't tell whether or not I liked it. But it was everywhere. It didn't seem to fit the room.

Not that I saw much of the room, then, or of the rest of the house. All I got was an impression of Indian rugs, low furniture, blocky and comfortable, and a good deal of bright color that was subdued by the clear dim light. I went through an archway, climbed a few steps, went along a hall, and hesitated at a couple of doors. I pushed one open tentatively; it was a bedroom, but it had a bare look, I tried the other door. It was almost dark in this room, and the

perfume smell was drowned out by another odor. I had a name for this one, though. It was the smell of age--sour and sickly and hot. Dry and dusty.

"Yes?"

The voice came from the bed. I could see a pale splotch of a face, not much more than that. I stepped inside the room. "Something to eat, señor," I said. A dry, thin laugh sounded.

"Indeed," the voice said, in English. "Thank you. Put the tray on the table. Yes. Now please help me with these pillows."

Even when I came close, I couldn't make out much of his face. Not till I had propped the pillows behind him and was awkwardly helping him to inch upward

in the bed did I realize why. His whole face was thickly smeared with a white, greasy ointment. He had very black hair, white at the roots, and a long, straight, thin nose. That was about all I could see. But I could smell him, and I could feel the moist, cool, unpleasant slickness of his skin.

"Thank you," he said finally. I stepped back.

"Anything else, señor?" I asked, because he was a count and I didn't know what else to call him.

"No, thank you," he said, with an odd sort of dry mockery, and his light eyes, in that vague, pale mask, stayed fixed on me till I'd backed out of the room.

When I got back to the kitchen, I

washed my hands again. I didn't know why, but I had to do it. Afterward, I rummaged around and fixed sandwiches. Chicken, cucumber, lettuce, ham. My beer had gone a little flat, but I finished it anyway before opening a couple more bottles. Then I took everything outside to where the Countess was waiting. She seemed to be asleep. I laid out the lunch and made as much noise as I could, but she didn't wake up. The snake's tongue flickered out once or twice. Its eyes were tiny little glittering specks like specialized scales that had learned how to see. Staring at it, fascinated, I sat down in the canvas chair across from the Countess. Then I moved my gaze up a little, and she had opened her muddy

brown eyes and was watching me.

"Well, it looks like a good lunch you fixed, Nick," she said. "What are you waiting for?"

She reached for a napkin.

* * *

Just as we were starting to eat, the telephone rang from inside the house, and the Countess impatiently mumbled something around a mouthful of sandwich and jerked her thumb sidewise. So I got up and went inside looking for the phone. The perfume or incense or whatever it was hit me again the minute I stepped into that living room.

I took the message and told the man to hang on. Then I went out to the Countess

again. "It's somebody called Rafael," I said. "He's in Phoenix and the car's broken down and he wants to know what to do."

"Tell him to get it fixed, for God's sake."

"He's talking from a garage. He says it looks like an all-night job."

"All right, get the name of the garage and tell him to wait." She reached for her beer glass. "Hold on," she said suddenly. "Want to make twenty dollars?"

"I could use it."

"Fine. You can drive the Buick in and pick up Rafael and the groceries. And Benita. Fix it up with Rafael."

So I went back and gave Rafael the

word. Then I saw the Phoenix phone book on the table, and all of a sudden it hit me, the idea that I only had to do two things and then I'd be talking to Sherry again. Look up her name and pick up the phone. I guess until just that second I hadn't really believed it.

I opened the book to the B's, but she wasn't under Banning. I hadn't expected she would be. I flipped the pages, hunting Knox, Sherry Knox, but when I didn't find her there either, I stopped looking. Maybe I was afraid to push my luck. There was no hurry. Anyway, I knew how to find her, when I was ready. I told myself, take it easy.

Then I went back outside to the patio, where I found the Countess eating

greedily. Crumbs had spilled down her sand-colored, faded blouse. She gave me a glance out of those dull, chocolate-colored eyes and raised her red brows.

"I told him to wait for me," I said. "I don't have a driving license, though."

"Nobody's going to stop you for that. I've been thinking. Would you like a job?"

I swallowed part of a chicken sandwich and washed it down before I answered. "What kind of a job, Mrs. De Anza?"

"General. Take care of my husband when he needs it."

"He's ill?"

She reached up to pinch her lower lip, while she studied me thoughtfully.

"Not exactly," she said, and didn't amplify.

"Well--I don't know."

"Suit yourself," she said casually. "You don't have to decide right away. The pay is two hundred a month and keep. I'd want references. You could call yourself a private secretary or companion or handyman. It wouldn't matter. You'd stick around and make yourself useful."

"Just how?"

"Well, you can see the way we live, Nick. Practically in the wilderness. Of course there's the phone and the cars, and the Mexicans are here most of the time, but look what happened today. Suppose my husband had needed--" She

paused and changed her mind. "Suppose anything. Quite a lot of unpleasant things might happen to a woman alone in the desert with an infirm husband. It's a good idea to have a man around, And there's a lot of work--everything from writing letters to fixing the faucet in the sink--that Rafael and Benita can't handle."

I gave her a quick glance, but she wasn't looking at me. She reached for the bottle and poured out the rest of her beer.

"Get some more," she said.

When I came back, after a thoughtful inspection of the sink faucet, she had got out a compact from somewhere and was smearing an atrocious shade of orange

carelessly on her mouth. Teeth bared, the lipstick hovering over her lips, she hesitated, looked at me, and put her equipment away again. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

"Oh, it's too much trouble," she said. "Even if I didn't bother to get dressed, it's still too much trouble. You take the Buick in and bring those Mexicans back." She thrust a crumpled bill at me. "You may want some money."

It was the twenty dollars. I put it in my pocket. I stood up, kicked at my rucksack, and frowned. "I might as well leave this here till I get back."

"Well?"

"I'll need the keys."

"They're in the car."

"Look," I said, "you don't know a thing about me. Suppose I headed east with that Buick and kept on going?"

She didn't move, except to look me up and down, casually, but as though she wasn't missing anything.

"The keys are in the car," she repeated, and I wondered what she'd figured out by looking me over.

"Well . . . okay. Shall I get you another beer?"

"No. Look in on my husband, though, and see if he wants anything."

"All right," I said, though I'd rather have got her the beer. I went into the house again, through the cool, dark, pleasant kitchen, into the cool, dark, perfumed air of the rooms beyond, and

then, on impulse, I went back and fixed a pitcher of ice water--one of those fat round ceramic jugs. With that and a glass, I went to the Count's bedroom.

He didn't answer my knock, so I pushed the door open. He was looking straight at me, out of that white, shiny mask, doubly pale beneath the dead black hair, white at the roots. I went in and put the glass and pitcher on the bedside table. He didn't stir. His eyes had rolled toward me and stayed fixed there.

"Can I get you anything else?" I asked.

"Where is Callahan?"

"Who?"

"Never mind," he said.

"Anything else, then?" I asked.

He didn't say a word. He watched me. I couldn't see him clearly, but either he was looking hard at me or else he was dead.

Then he put up his hand and covered his eyes.

The sour, sick odor was strong. My stomach started to tighten up in a series of little spasms. The beer and sandwiches, after my long hike in the sun, hadn't been such a good idea after all.

I backed out.

2.

DRIVING TOWARD PHOENIX,
WITH A powerful car under me and the miles sliding past under the wheels, I felt fine. It was good to be riding again. I

played with the accelerator till I got the feel of it; then the car was a part of me. There was too much play in the steering wheel. That should have been fixed. And the motor had a knock in it. But all in all the Buick was in fair shape, and it had plenty of power. The sun danced on the road ahead. I slowed down, opened the dashboard compartment, and located a pair of sunglasses there. I put them on--expensive polaroids, I noticed--and then there wasn't anything else I wanted except perhaps a big bank account. It was pleasant to pass cars. I wasn't riding my thumb any more, while the cars passed me. I wanted a cigarette, but I didn't have any, and the dashboard compartment disappointed me this time.

When I came to a gas station, I pulled in, rolling forward far enough so I wouldn't block the pumps in case paying customers came along. It wasn't a Standard or Shell aviary, all glass and clean paint; it was a wooden shack with a big faded sign named EAT on top, and the pump, out in front, was an afterthought. No water hose, of course--just a big metal can with a spout. I took the key out of the ignition and put it in my pocket, where it rattled against some loose change there. I got out and walked stiffly through the white dust toward the shack.

Beyond the flyspecked screen door was a slow creaking from an overhead fan whose wooden paddle blades

revolved lazily. There was just about room enough in the shack for a greasy-spoon counter, with four stools, but a wooden partition, dividing it in half, made it look crowded with only me there. There was a glass showcase with candy and cheap souvenirs in it, and on one end of the counter was a hot plate with a Silex of coffee. I looked for a cigarette vending machine, but there wasn't any; there was no room for one.

The doorway in the partition had a curtain across it. A man came through the doorway, yawning. He was a thin, withered, brown-faced man with a fringe of gray-white hair tonsuring his scalp. His mouth worked like rubber. I guess it was too hot to wear teeth.

"Hot day, uh?" he said.

"You bet. Got any cigarettes?"

"Guess so. Luckies, Old Gold, Chesterfield--"

"Pall Malls?"

He fumbled around behind the counter. "Nope, but I got Luckies, Old--"

"Luckies. Anything."

He put a pack on the counter. I said, "Got any matches?"

"Two books for a penny."

While I was reaching in my pocket, he stared past me through the windows. Something he saw out there made his eyes squint. He chewed imaginary tobacco while he made change for a quarter. Then he said to me, "Heading east?"

"Phoenix, anyway,"

"Nice car you got there."

I opened the pack and shook out a cigarette. "It could use a ring job," I said. "But that's not my worry."

"Ain't, uh? How come?"

"It belongs to some people named De Anza. Know them?"

"I thought I recognized the car," he said, relaxing. "Hell, if you think that Buick needs some repair, you ought to see their Chevvy."

"I'm going to. It broke down. That's why I'm--" I jerked my head toward the windows. I sat down on a stool and lit my cigarette.

"Never yet saw a Mex that could drive a car," the old man said. "Did Rafe

have a crack-up?"

"I don't think so. He said the transmission went out. That doesn't sound like a crack-up."

"You can get a Mex to believe he's got to put gas and oil in a car once in a while," the old man said, "and if you pound it into his head, he'll give it water and air once in a month of Sundays. But a lube or an oil-change--" he shook his head slowly. "The way that Chevvy squeaks, it never had a grease job since it came from the factory. I'll just bet the transmission went out." He started to laugh, showing his gums. "Better keep your eye on that Buick. It's still quite a ways from here into Phoenix."

"She sounds all right," I said. "Just the

same, maybe you've got something. Thanks." I went out, opened the Buick's hood, and studied the motor. It was fairly dirty. There was a leaky gasket; oil was greasy on the block. I investigated further. The old man had followed me out and was standing behind me.

"Got any distilled water?" I asked,
"Battery low?"

"Dry, just about. And a quart of Eastern canned oil, thirty."

"Better use forty, this weather. No canned, though." He went back to get the stuff, and I let some air out of the tires and then tried the radiator. There was water, but so rusty it painted my finger when I stuck it in.

"It's a hell of a way to treat a car," I said, when the old man was bending down the oilcan's spout and letting the green-gold liquid pour sluggishly through.

"Some people don't give a damn is all."

"What's wrong with the man--De Anza?"

"I dunno. Never seen him. T. B. maybe. They come here in 'forty-five. Sort of standoffish."

"Funny thing to do, keeping a snake for a pet."

"Well," he said, straightening his back and squinting at me. "that's something I wouldn't worry myself about, personally. I've seen a lot of crazy pets."

Knew a guy once who had one of them bobcats--yeah, an ocelot--and it was tame as hell. Then there was a woman from Miami once, she had a couple of monkeys."

"Some friends of mine tamed a koala, a sort of little bear, when I knew them in Australia, but a snake's different."

"No different than a horn toad. You know, there was a while when the kids were wearing chameleons. On little chains, pinned to their coats. Course I wouldn't recommend a rattler or sidewinder. Is that what the De Anzas got?"

"No, it's a king snake."

"Oh, they're all right. Good to have around. They kill the other kind. Put a

rattler in with a king snake, and in the morning you'll just find the king, a lot fatter. The poison don't hurt 'em a bit."

"Just the same, it's not the kind of pet I'd want around."

"It's better than nothing," he said, shrugging his narrow shoulders. "Me, I've got a pup. Fox terrier bitch, one of the real little ones, you know? Half the time I never know where she is. She goes off hunting jack rabbits." He nodded toward the shack. "I got a little swinging door fixed up she knows how to open, and sometimes she'll drag in a dead rabbit bigger than she is. Quite a fighter for a runt."

I didn't answer that, and he began moving his lips. "Thirty-five cents,

that'll be. Thirty-five even."

I didn't have to break the twenty the Countess had given me. After I'd paid him, there was still enough change left in my pocket to rattle against the car key. I took that out and got into the Buick and started the motor.

"A ring job wouldn't hurt, would it? Guess you're right," the old man said, nodding.

"Yeah," I said. "Look, is there a place in Phoenix called the Green Lantern?"

"Green Lantern? Gin-mill? Restaurant?"

"Bar."

"Don't place it," he said. "I can look it up in the phone book, though."

"Forget it," I said. "Thanks. See you

again."

"Take it easy."

He backed up, and I swung the Buick out, waited for a truck to roar past, and accelerated into the highway. The motor didn't sound any different, really, but I felt better about it. I kept glancing at the dashboard for a while. The battery was charging safely. The temperature gauge swung down to one-eighty after the fan had cooled things off a little, and I lit another cigarette and pushed the Buick along the road at a fast pace. Not too fast, though.

After a while the tourist courts started in. Some of them were pretty, with Spanish architecture and landscaped grounds. Grass and palms and cactus.

And plenty of color. Farther out, in the desert, the sun seems to do something to colors. No matter whether you paint a house red or blue or yellow, after a while it starts looking like the natural color you'd find in the scenery. Sort of automatic camouflage. But closer in toward Phoenix it was different. More water, I guess, with date palms and grapefruit trees and even lettuce fields. And the pattern's different--grounds get landscaped the way a man would do it, not the way nature would. There's never been a cactus that looks like a beach umbrella.

The garage I was looking for was on a side street. I started wondering the minute I saw it. It was one of those

super-duper affairs, covering half a block, with a good deal of dough spent on glass-brick and a lot of attendants in neat white uniforms. The garage work proper was done out of sight, in a long low building that might have been a restaurant or a school or anything but a garage. I gunned the Buick into it, and I spotted the Chevvy at once among the rest of the cars. It was jacked up, and a mechanic was working under it. An attendant came over.

"Yes, sir," he said cheerfully. "Got some trouble?" "I'm from Mrs.-- Countess De Anza," I said, wondering if I'd got that right. "I'm supposed--"

"Oh," he said, still looking cheerful. "Yes, sir! Rafe told me." He swung

around and yelled. "Rafe! Hey!"

A plump little Mexican, dressed fit to kill, came hurrying toward us. He had a face like a fat, amiable gnome, with a button of a nose and a broad, happy grin.

"You bet, Tommy," he called, waving a comic book at us. "Pretty quick." His small feet, in smaller shoes, pattered rapidly across the concrete. I got out of the Buick. The attendant walked away.

"You're Rafael?" I asked.

"Rafael Fernandez. Hallo. You drive us back, eh? We got to get the groceries out of the Chevvy. Nita!"

"I'm Nick Banning," I said, and he shook hands enthusiastically. In the background, a thin, dark, silent woman was clambering over the jacked-up

Chevvy, loading herself with packages. I jerked my head in that direction.

"What happened?"

"Transmission go out."

"How do you know?"

"They say so."

"Well, how did it happen?"

"I let out the clutch--clunk!" he said.

"She stop. Truck tow us in."

"Let's go see," I said, and we walked toward the Chevvy. There was an extra dolly on the cement, and I couldn't hurt the clothes I was wearing, so I lay down on my back, with my knees bent, and shoved myself under the car. Springs squeaked as Benita crawled about inside the Chevvy. The mechanic turned a grimy face to me.

"How long will it take?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said and went back to work.

"This an all-night garage?"

"Yeah," he said. "But we're shorthanded."

"Plenty of whitewings outside."

"They know how to put gas in a tank," he said sourly. I watched him work for a minute or two. Then I rolled the dolly out from under the car and got up. Benita was handing down packages to Rafael. I said, "I'll take some of them."

She looked at me very quickly, but I thought she saw a lot in that one glance. I couldn't guess her age--somewhere between thirty and fifty, depending on how hard she'd worked and for how

many years. She had a thin, plain face, but remarkably fine eyes. If the Countess's were mud, hers were zircons.

Rafael spoke to her in quick Spanish. She nodded and put some packages in my arms. Among the three of us, we did it in one trip. After the junk was in the back of the Buick, I gave Rafael the key.

"Tell you what," I said. "Does Nita drive?"

"Hell, no," he told me, grinning.

"Well, let's see. I want to stick around a while and watch what's being done to the Chevvy. Does this garage take care of the Buick too?" He nodded.

"Sloppy work," I said, "Don't they ever check the battery for you?"

"Battery?" he repeated blankly,

accenting the last syllable. "Battery?" He thought that over. "I don't know," he came out brightly, and beamed as though that solved everything.

"Uh-huh. Well, it's one way for a garage to make sure it gets plenty of work. Tell you what. You and Nita take the Buick back home, and I'll wait here till the Chevvy's fixed. Then I'll bring that back." He exchanged a questioning stare with Benita, but, under the circumstances, I knew exactly what he'd say. He said it.

"Sí, hombre."

"Okay. Just tell the Countess I'll be along with the Chevvy as soon as it's ready to roll. Say, has she got an account here, or do you pay cash?"

"Not the cash. Charge."

"Well, take it easy," I said, and they bundled themselves hastily into the Buick and drove wildly off, not quite in all directions. I winced as I watched. But Rafael avoided scraping a fender by a quarter-inch margin, and so that was off my mind. I went back, got under the Chevvy again and watched the mechanic work. He didn't like it.

Finally he turned an annoyed face to me.

"Want something?" he asked.

"Just information," I said. "I learn things by watching."

"Yeah?"

"Figuring on a grease job?"

"I can't pack the transmission till it's

fixed, can I?"

"Guess not," I said, and looked around some more. After a while I rolled myself out and told the attendant to plan on giving the Chevvy a lube and an oil change. He wrote it down on the printed slip stuck under the windshield wiper.

I hung around and made a nuisance of myself. But I made sure the mechanic did a good job. He couldn't tell when I'd decide to slide under the car and see what he was doing.

Once I went across the street and had a sandwich and coffee, and once I thumbed through the phone book and found the address of the Green Lantern Tavern, on North Central. Time passed, but I was in no hurry. When the Chevvy

was ready to roll, it was nearly nine o'clock. I decided to drive out by way of North Central. There was a knock in the motor, the brakes were in lousy shape, and, when it suddenly started to rain, I found the windshield wipers were on strike. They made a sucking noise but that was all. I pulled over by a lighted store window, opened the hood, and fixed the hose connection. After that, the windshield stayed clear, but I felt sticky and wet. I wanted a drink, whisky or coffee, it didn't matter much. I saw the Green Lantern sign ahead of me down the street, and I parked opposite it. For a minute or two, I sat there checking. I might be dressed well enough for a gin-mill, but they wouldn't let me in the back

door of the Arizona Biltmore. From the neon-decorated front, I couldn't tell much about the Green Lantern's social status. Finally I got out of the car and walked quickly across the street; there were two doors, and one was marked BAR. I went in through that.

Right away I caught the easygoing atmosphere of the place. It wasn't a showcase. It was quite a few cuts above a gin-mill, but people came here to drink. The bar was a long one. It reached way back into the dimness. A juke-box was playing a quiet rumba. There was an archway on my left, and I could see tables through it, but here in the bar it was all informal. I hoisted myself on a stool and waited till one of the

bartenders stopped in front of me.

I ordered a straight shot, broke my twenty-dollar bill, and then asked for a highball, to give myself time to think. The bartender hadn't looked at my shirt, dirty as it was, which might have been due to the fact that he was obviously fairly high himself. I worked away on my highball and studied the mirror behind the bar.

After my glass was empty and the bartender had moved down to me again, I said, "The same." When he brought it, I asked, "Is Sherry around?"

"Why not?" he said, picking up a fifty-cent piece from the dough I'd left in front of me. Before I could ask him anything else, he was gone. So I drank a little and

watched the mirror and the rows of bottles under it. My own face was the only familiar thing I saw. On both sides of me people were talking and laughing and drinking, but I didn't know any of them. This was a strange place to me, and a strange city outside the bar, and for no reason at all I began to feel jittery.

In a bar, that doesn't generally happen to me. Because it's the one place where everybody's equal. I'm not talking about highclass night clubs where you have to slip the headwaiter ten bucks to get a table; I mean the real bar, whether it's a gin-mill on East Fifth in L. A. or a brass-and-leather cocktail lounge out along Wilshire.

I felt as though I'd got into the wrong

pew.

The people around me were all right, I guess, but--maybe it was the way they were dressed. Nothing formal at all, but you could tell that when they wanted new clothes, they went out and bought them. They didn't wait till they needed another suit, either. Money didn't mean the same thing to them that it did to me. When the man beside me pulled out his wallet, it didn't bulge, but he knew there was more where that came from, and he dropped a bill on the bar as though it didn't matter. And it didn't, to him. I heard someone come up behind me. I moved my eyes an inch or two. Sherry was standing behind me. We looked at each other in the glass. Right away it

happened again. I knew then that it was always going to happen, just like this, whenever we saw each other. Because, for a while, when we were living together, it was all right; I was standing on something solid then. She could always make me feel bigger than I was, just by letting me look at her. All at once I warmed up. My whole body seemed to come alive. The whisky hadn't done a thing yet, but now, all of a sudden, it spread out into every part of me and even my skin started to tingle. It's funny the way your mind slips its gears sometimes. In a split second I had it all worked out. I had twenty bucks, less the price of the drinks, and there was the Chevvy outside with a tank full of gas.

We were going to get in and start driving. The fact that it wasn't my car and eighteen-fifty was all the dough I had in the world didn't matter a bit. Things would work out somehow.

It had always been like this; away from Sherry I could sometimes forget about her, but when I looked right at her, there was only one important thing: Sherry, Sherry, Sherry. I wanted to get close to her. I wanted to hold her as close as a man can hold a woman and keep her like that forever and ever. It made everything all right when I could do that. It wasn't sensible; it wasn't safe.

But that's the way it was--the way it always was, since I first met her in San Diego. It never had changed, even after

our divorce a year ago. 3.

... IT HAPPENED.

I thought: Stop it!

I watched her in the mirror. I couldn't move. I was busy. I was fighting, and I suppose I was praying. They were the same thing

whenever--this--happened. Inside my chest, something had broken that was full of hot lava, and the boiling hotness was spreading out all through me, so fast that I felt I couldn't stop it at all.

If only Sherry hadn't looked at me the way she had--one flash of surprise and recognition, and then, so fast I couldn't even brace myself, her face got that old look I'd tried hard to forget, white, pinched, caught. Fear.

The instant I saw that, the hot feeling had spurted out in my chest and started to spread through me. I knew what was going to happen, but this time I knew that I wasn't going to let it happen. Because I could stop it. I had to. I had to stop it, before the pressure reached the red line and blew. Whenever that happened, I wasn't Nick Banning any more. I was somebody bigger and better. Not quite God Almighty. But . . . somebody who hit back. I didn't move an inch. I sat there fighting with myself. I told myself that I'd been wrong about the look on Sherry's face. But the mirror was a blur. The lava kept on spreading inside me. I tried to stop it. I tried. I could just see my hand in front of me, flat on the bar. It hadn't

moved yet. It hadn't curled up into a fist.

"Nick?" Sherry said, behind me. And then, "Nick!" That saved me.

I felt the pressure start draining away.

After a while, perhaps quite a long while, I felt safe again. Actually, I knew the whole thing hadn't taken long--not even long enough for Sherry to have noticed. It was all over, and maybe it would never happen again, now--if things worked out the way I wanted. Sherry was the one who could help me.

I was ready.

"Hello," I said.

But she couldn't seem to believe it. All she could say was "Nick?" again. Her voice was still soft. It was breathless, too, because she was excited,

so she sounded as though she had to get the words out in a hurry. I remembered just the way it would feel if I pulled her against me and held her hard. I wanted to. But I didn't move. I don't know why; maybe it was the way she was looking. It made me think that if I moved to touch her, she'd step back into nowhere. We kept staring at each other in the mirror, and presently I decided that she hadn't noticed my--near miss.

"Where'll we go, Sherry?" I asked, not even turning, but keeping her eyes fixed on mine. I couldn't help thinking that if I broke the look she wouldn't be there in the next second. I hadn't expected to feel this unsure, this excited. I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. Because, for

both of us, a lot depended on this meeting. It had to go the right way, my way. I had to be careful.

Sherry just stood there waiting. I couldn't guess what she was thinking. I had to speak again before she said anything.

"Well? Where'll we go?"

She came to life with a little shake of her head.

"I can't believe it," she said.

"Why not? I haven't been off the earth. We were bound to run into each other sometime. Glad to see me?" I was sorry the minute I'd said that. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer. The look on her face made me wonder. My throat got a little tight, so my next words came out

in a new voice.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" I asked.

She took a quick look along the bar. An expression came into her eyes that I remembered from away back, from the times after things started to go wrong between us. I said to myself, Easy. Take it easy. I swallowed, made the muscles in my throat loosen, and told myself that I wasn't going to get mad. Not any more. Not around Sherry. I thought, When she starts talking again, I'll turn around. When she's in the middle of saying something, so she won't run away. I watched her lips. They started to move.

"How long--"

I braced my elbow on the bar and swung the stool around toward her. I

heard her voice waver just a bit when I moved. Then I was facing her. She did step back, but the tremor stopped and she kept on talking.

"How long will you be in town, Nick?"

Then I knew what the matter was. And it wasn't too bad really, nothing I couldn't talk her out of. She was worried about her job here, that was all. Once, back in San Diego, she'd got fired when I had a fight with her boss. But everything had been tough then, I'd been drinking too much, and one thing had piled up on top of another until . . . well, I wanted to forget about that. I wanted Sherry to forget about it. It was all over now.

"I'm just driving through," I said, sliding off the stool and taking my drink along. "Let's grab a booth, Sherry. I can't stay long, but I thought it would be nice if we could have a drink together."

I noticed the way she relaxed. Every line of her eased up a little.

"Oh," she said. She glanced toward the barkeep. I don't think she knew what she wanted to do, but I didn't give her time to think about it. I started toward the back, carrying my glass, and that did it; she came along. There was one empty booth at the back of the room. It was close to the juke-box, but soft Spanish music was coming out of it, and we'd be able to hear each other. We sat down, she on one side, I on the other. Sherry

folded her arms on the table and gave me a long, uncertain, worried look. It still had a touch of fear in it.

I felt relaxed and good now, just being with her, just looking at her. She hadn't changed much. The tawny, sand-colored hair was the same, loose and curly. I remembered how she used to do it up at night with pins. Not often. About twice a week she had to, to keep it curly. Her eyes were nice. Wary, but nice. Gray or green or powder blue, depending on the lighting. And her eyebrows weren't plucked or arched; curved some, but not much. And they were darker than her tawny hair. She penciled them a little, to make them darker. Her lipstick was fairly light, and she never smeared her

lips all over her face the way some women do. She had on one of those full, flowery skirts and a white lacy blouse with a ruffle across the top, the sort of thing all the girls were wearing that year in the hot weather. She was tanned a little, she looked wonderful.

"You look . . . fine, Sherry," I said.

She tightened her lips and bent her head down. I could see her face mirrored in the shiny black surface of the table.

"What do you want, Nick?" she asked. She had a singer's voice, just touched with breathlessness at the end of her sentences, and she'd studied tone and pitch enough so she couldn't help using them when she talked. When you use

your voice as an instrument, it gets to be automatic--I mean she wasn't trying consciously to do it. Listening to her voice, I knew that it was one of the big reasons why I was in Phoenix right now. It wasn't a concert voice any more than "Barbara Allen" is "Ave Maria," but it was a voice that stroked the back of my neck and always had. I never pretended there was anything wonderful about Sherry, except for me. Plenty of girls are pretty enough and have good voices and nice eyes and are comfortable to be around. Only, with Sherry, the mixture happened to be made up just right, exactly right. That was the way I felt about her. I wanted to say so, but I didn't; it was too soon.

Instead, I said carefully, "I want to buy you a drink. That's all I want. Is it too much?"

She didn't answer directly. She still watched the table top.

"You're just driving through Phoenix?"

"That's what I said."

Then she looked up at me.

"I don't want any more trouble, Nick," she said. It was hard for a second. But I waited till my throat loosened up. I laughed.

"You haven't seen me for a year," I said. "A lot's happened. I'm a Boy Scout now. As good-natured as ... well, maybe not a dove. But look." I laid both hands, palms down, on the table. "See? No

scars." My sleeve had pulled up a little, and I saw she was looking at the old, healed, white scar above my wrist. I flattened that hand down hard to keep it from shaking. I'd made a mistake. I'd reminded her. She reached out and ran her finger along that scar. It was hard to keep from moving when she touched me.

She didn't say a thing. She drew her hand back and looked at me, questioningly, I thought.

I felt a warning tightness and warmth inside my chest. But this time I was ready. I turned it off again. Because it was Sherry I was talking to. Just the same, a dim worry floated across my mind. I wasn't taking things as easy as I'd thought I would. If somebody else--not

Sherry--were sitting across from me this way, perhaps ... no, forget it.

"Are you always going to hold that against me?" I asked. "Everything was fouled up then, and you know it. I had to--to do something. Well. I put my fist through that window. But I didn't hurt you, did I?" Only I could see that now she was remembering the other times, the times when I had hit somebody--not Sherry, never Sherry, but some bastard or other who stepped on my toes when the pressure had been boiling up inside of me for too long. I couldn't feel that it had ever been my fault. A man can stand being pushed around just so long, and then something's got to blow. But I couldn't say that to Sherry. That wasn't

the line to take with her.

"It doesn't matter any more now, though, does it?" I asked her. "We're divorced. It's over."

She said quickly, "That's right, Nick. It's over. You're--you're not staying over in Phoenix tonight, are you?"

I was glad to get out of that one. A hand came across the table and set a tall glass down in front of Sherry. I looked up. It was the bartender. He pointed at my glass, which was still half full.

"Not yet," I said, reaching in my pocket. I touched the car key and some small change, but no wad of bills. I stopped moving for a second. Then I dug deeper. God damn it, was everything going to start going wrong again?

Sherry said, "Nick isn't--" then she paused and finished up in the familiar breathless rush, "isn't a customer, Ed. He's an old friend. Don't take his money, not even for real drinks."

A good and wonderful feeling rushed through me as hot and strong as if a shot of whisky had just hit my stomach. Better. Stronger. Because I'd won. She was going to give in. At least, I'd won this first round. She wasn't going to get up and leave, and she wasn't going to throw me out. I was an old friend. Not an ex-husband. But still, an old friend. The bartender was saying something.

"I don't have to take his money. He left me plenty. Look what was on the bar when he walked off." He opened his

hand and spilled bills and silver on the table.

"Thanks," I said. "I guess I wasn't noticing."

"Behind the bar it's different," he told me. "You notice a lot of things." Sherry spoke, rather fast.

"Ed, I want you to meet Nick Banning. Nick, this is Ed Gavotte."

"Glad to know you," I said, getting up as much as I could and shaking hands. He had a big, pulpy grip that fitted his face--heavy and puffy, with that buttery look heavy-set blonds get. His mouth was a little loose and his blue eyes showed the whites in the wrong places, but his breath explained that without any guesswork.

"It's a pleasure, Nick," Gavotte said. He had a smooth, high-pitched voice.

"Going to be around long?"

"Not long. I'm on my way east."

"Stick around for a while," he suggested. "For a friend of Sherry, the drinks are on the house, any time. Here." He picked up my glass. "Don't drink that crap. I'll bring you something from under the counter."

"Good boy," Sherry said, and Gavotte grinned at her loosely.

"You bet I am," he said. "So's Nick here. I can tell. Some boys aren't good. I can tell that, too. Like I say, when a fella tends bar for years he gets so he can spot people right off. Even if he didn't hear things. Some people aren't welcome in

my place. But Nick's a good boy, and I'm going to get him a good drink."

He waited a second, watching Sherry, and suddenly looked puzzled. Then he moved away. Sherry watched him go.

"Cigarette?" I said.

"Thanks, Nick."

We lit up and I moved the ash tray to the center of the table. We waited till a kid in a flowered shirt had pushed some buttons in the juke-box and gone back to the bar. Meantime, we pretended not to be watching each other.

"Who's he?" I asked.

"Ed?"

I waited.

"He owns the place."

"What's he doing behind the bar,

then?"

"Trying to get rich. A tavern like this isn't any gold mine, when you know the setup. I ought to know; I've worked in enough of them." She tapped her cigarette on the tray. "Nick, nobody here knows I've been married."

"I won't say anything."

"Thanks." It wasn't the word; it was the way she said it, in that soft, breathless way of hers. I looked at her left hand. She wasn't wearing any rings.

"No," she said. "Next time I'll . . ."

"Be more careful?"

"That's right. I'll be a lot more careful. I don't take chances any more."

"Nobody wants to take chances," I said. "Things just work out that way,

sometimes."

Gavotte came back and put a highball in front of me. He took a small florist's box from under his arm and laid it before Sherry. She glanced up at him quickly, and it seemed to me that some kind of signal passed between them. Gavotte was leaning forward, his loose mouth drawn up and pursed, and his eyebrows drawn together so that his puffy face was oddly distressed. He didn't say anything and neither did Sherry; they just looked at each other and kept on looking.

To break it up, I rattled the change on the table before I took a bill and held it toward Gavotte.

He said quickly, "This just came,

Sherry," and turned to me. The eyebrows stayed unhappy, but the mouth loosened up and grinned. "What's that for?" he asked, pushing my hand back. "We give 'em away in Phoenix."

"Thanks," I said, but he was gone. When I looked at Sherry again, the florist's box had disappeared.

She lifted her glass toward me, and I picked up mine.

"What should it be, Nick? Luck?"

"I've had luck," I said. "Both kinds."

"Well . . ."

I looked at her across the top of the glass, lifted it a little, and moved it to my lips, watching her. She set her drink down suddenly, with a small, sharp crack. The juke-box changed a record

and began to play "La Cumparsita." She opened her mouth, but before she could speak, I said, "Doing any singing now, Sherry?"

"Not much. I told you I was being sensible now, didn't I? Not taking chances? I've found out one thing--how to take it easy. I don't swim without water wings any more."

"Got any?"

"I'm working on a pair," she said. "I'm taking singing lessons again. That's part of it."

"I thought you'd been through all that."

"This is special stuff. Not just singing. I'm learning how to sell my voice too. I've got to be able to do that. I'm not Lily Pons. All I've got is a fair voice, but"--

she nodded in a confident, pleased way--"I've got it all figured out, Nick. This time I've got a pretty good chance." I looked around the tavern and back at her. She shook her head quickly.

"Oh, you don't have to be good to sing in a place like this," she said. "I'm doing this to earn money for the lessons I need --and to eat. But there's a Chicago agent who'll handle me."

"What kind of agent? I mean, aren't there a lot of phonies--"

"He isn't," Sherry said. "I made sure of that first thing. I checked up. He handles nothing but top acts. He won't touch an unknown, except once in a while, when he thinks there's really a chance. Well, he thinks I've got a chance,

Nick."

"Singing?"

"And acting, after a while. Night clubs and video and anything that turns up, at first. He's done it for others, Nick." She mentioned a couple of names that I knew.

"It sounds good," I said, "but why aren't you in Chicago, then? Why keep on working in this joint?"

She laughed, a little unhappily.

"I don't have enough money yet. I'll have to buy my own costumes and put up a front and go to the Pump Room and--all kinds of things, till I'm known. It can't be done overnight."

"Won't this agent put up any dough?"

"Oh, no. He'll get me the right jobs

and try to build me up to the big time, but he's going out of his way to do that much. It is a gamble, you know."

"I thought you weren't taking chances any more."

"This isn't a chance," she said, very quietly, looking straight at me. "I've been trying for this ever since I can remember. You know I have. This is the kind of break I never had before, Nick. When you've worked for something all your life and the chance comes, then it isn't a chance at all--not when you're willing to," she shook her head, "to work yourself to death at it. When you've tried as hard as I have, it only takes one little push to put you on top." Then she reached around and rapped on the

wooden partition behind her with her knuckles. "No chances at all, see?"

"I guess our being married must have held you back quite a bit," I said. She gave me a long, steady look.

"What do you mean?"

"I ... feel that it's my fault. Your having to work here now, and--well, everything."

"I was working in a bar when I first met you, Nick," she said. "I knew what I was doing when I married you. I stopped thinking about a career then. If you mean what I think you mean, that I got a divorce because I wanted a career, then you're wrong."

"I know that, Sherry," I said.

"I didn't start thinking about it again

till afterward. I wasn't even sure I still had a chance. But I got this job here in Phoenix, and started taking lessons again, and then that agent dropped in one night when the plane was grounded, and--things are starting to work out, really to work out, the way I always wanted. I'm--pretty happy, Nick."

"I remember when I first saw you," I said. "That place in San Diego, remember? You had on something yellow."

"It was green."

"Was it? I guess it was. You were standing there with the spotlight on you singing 'Lili Marlene.' Don't tell me I'm wrong about that, too." She smiled at me.

"I'm still in love with you," I said.

I saw her tighten up. She folded her arms and looked down at them, and nothing happened for a long time.

"What are you really doing in Phoenix, Nick?" she asked, without looking up.

"Is that the way you want to play it?"

"Stop it, Nick."

"I thought it was stopped. Till I saw you again."

"Then you'd better stop seeing me."

I didn't move. I watched the shiny black table and Sherry's face, upside down.

She pushed the ash tray forward so that it covered the reflection. "I'm on my way east," I said. "New York. I've got a job promised me." I don't know what I

was building up to say, but it didn't matter, because just then Gavotte came back with fresh drinks on a tray. There was an extra shot glass with whisky in it. Gavotte picked it up so it disappeared completely as his big hand folded.

"Luck." The shot went down his throat. He sighed.

"Busy night," he said. "The rain's stopped. It was only a sprinkle. How're you coming?"

"Fine, Ed," Sherry said. "Do you need me?"

"Relax, relax. Not many stags around. Nobody you know, anyway." He paused, waiting. "Nobody you know," he repeated. "I'll give you the word if we fill up. If your feet hurt like mine do, you

ought to be happy sitting down. Right, Nick?"

"Three of us," I said.

"Weren't you driving? I thought I saw you get out of that Chevvy across the street."

"I did some walking today."

"Look," Gavotte suggested, "why not stick around till after hours? Then--"

"No," Sherry said quickly. "I haven't missed my eight hours since I started working here, and I won't begin now."

Gavotte pulled a cloth out of his pocket and wiped the table, leaning far forward. He straightened.

"Didn't you open that box yet?" he asked.

Sherry moved her head just a little.

"I forgot it," she said.

He hesitated, pushing his lower lip in and out. Sherry waited, and Gavotte, wiping his palms on the cloth he was holding, turned to me.

"How do you like Phoenix?" he asked.

"All right."

"You from the East?"

"California."

"That's right, you said you were heading east." He lifted the empty shot glass, turned it between his fingers, and set it back on the tray. Watching his hand, he said, "Why don't you open it, Sherry? See what's in it?"

"It'll keep." Her face had that mask a woman can put on--no expression at all.

Gavotte glanced toward the bar,

wiped the back of his hand across his mouth slowly, and picked up the tray. He began to turn away. Then, his puffy face unhappy, he swung back and rocked from one foot to the other.

"Somebody gave Lillian a corsage of roses," he said. "It doesn't go with her dress. She was telling me."

"All right, Ed," Sherry said quietly. She reached down and took the florist's box from the seat beside her. She put it on the table and began sliding the green ribbon off.

Gavotte, I saw, was leaning forward again, with the damndest expression on his face. I couldn't make it out. He looked scared and unhappy and worried-but pleased, too. I sat there, watching.

Sherry was moving just a little slower than was normal for her.

She opened the box, took out a little envelope, and held it in her left hand. With the other she spread the tissue paper. There was a yellow orchid in the box, speckled with brown.

Sherry said, "Would that suit Lillian's dress, do you think?"

"Yeah," Gavotte said. Sherry pushed the box toward him, but he didn't take it.

"Who's it from?" he asked, his eyes fastened on the envelope Sherry was holding.

She tore the envelope, card and all, in half and dropped the two pieces in the box with the orchid. Then she pushed the box away till Gavotte had to take it or

let it fall off the table.

"Give it to Lillian, will you?" she said.

"Sure. Sure I will. You bet. Nick, stick around, why don't you?" He relaxed and gave me a loose grin. "Have fun, kids," he said, and went off with the orchid and his tray under one arm.

Sherry picked up her glass and took a long drink.

I waited.

"All right," she said, with a tired sigh. "Now let's relax. Where were we?"

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"Oh--Ed's one of those people who tries to handle everything his way. And he's usually wrong. When he's drinking, he's always wrong. But he keeps right on

trying."

"I don't get it."

"You don't have to. It's got nothing to do with you, has it? Don't you understand that yet?"

"Maybe I never will."

"I can't help that. It's been nice seeing you. That's all there is. If you look for anything else, you'll just be disappointed. Finish your drink."

"What time do you get off?"

"After you've said good night." She smiled a little.

"You're sorry I dropped in, aren't you?"

"No. Of course I'm not. But what's the use of--"

"Ever since you saw me tonight,

you've been walking on eggshells. You can't fool me about that. Something's wrong, Sherry. What is it?"

"There's nothing wrong," she said. "Not a thing in the world."

"I don't believe you. I'm . . . going to keep on sitting here until you tell me."

"Oh--damn!" she said, and started sliding her knuckles against the palm of her other hand. "Of course I'm nervous! And you know what I'm nervous about. You. What did you expect, after--everything?" I rubbed my hand across my forehead.

She went on angrily, "All along I've been wondering how long it would be before you started to make trouble. Because you always do."

"Not any more."

"How do I know? Of course I've been walking on eggshells, and I don't like it, and I don't ever intend to do it again. We're divorced. I don't have to worry about that temper of yours any more. I always was afraid that some day you'd get into trouble you couldn't get out of, but I don't have to worry about that any more, either. Whatever happens to you--it's your responsibility, Nick, not mine."

"It's not like that any more," I said. Then there was nothing else I could say. I reached out quickly and got hold of her hands.

Finally I said, "Any way you want it, Sherry." Then I let go of her hands and got up and walked away.

"That's the way," she called after me softly. "Get out of town, Nick." 4.

THE CROWD AT THE BAR WAS beginning to thin out, and I caught a glimpse of Gavotte, flushed and smiling. He raised his hand at me and made an O with thumb and forefinger. I gave him a soft salute, excused myself around a couple arguing in the doorway, and reached the street. The night was clear now. The stars were shining. I went across to the Chevvy, found a rag in the side pocket, and polished up the windshield. After that, I got in and started the motor.

I drove off fast. At the intersection, I nearly ran into a car that had the right of way crossing, so I jammed on the brakes

and stopped in a hurry, while the other guy swerved out and glared. After he'd passed, the road was clear. I swung around in a U turn, eased to the curb, and stopped. Ahead of me, half a block away, were the green neon lights of the bar. I lit a cigarette and sat. A warm wind began to blow from somewhere. People walked along the sidewalk, but nobody paid any attention to me. A long time passed. After a while, a yellow convertible, a Cadillac with the cloth top up, swung in and parked in front of the Green Lantern. It was a nice piece of machinery, built for power, but even at this distance I could see the dents and places where the paint was scraped off. That model had only been out for about a

month, so I figured the driver must have worked hard.

More time passed. Once or twice a lighted cigarette butt sailed out from the driver's side of the yellow convertible. I thought about going to look in the bar, to make sure Sherry was still there.

Then she came out. She started away from me, and I pressed the starter button and let the motor catch and idle. I automatically gunned it a few times, not hard, while I watched through the windshield. Sherry had stopped and turned toward the Cadillac. I saw an elbow sticking out over the door. Then the door opened, and a man got out. He was short and heavy-set, but he had his back to me, so that was all I could see of

him. He and Sherry were talking. I sat there. Once I reached for the ignition key, but changed my mind. Then the man moved slightly, and I saw he was holding Sherry's arm.

He wasn't getting tough or anything, and probably nobody else would have noticed a thing. I couldn't be sure, myself. But I thought Sherry was trying to get away. Not trying to pull her arm free, just waiting for the moment when he'd let go of her and she could start walking away. I pushed in the clutch, shifted to low, and slid the Chevy slowly forward till it was about six feet behind the Cadillac. Then I turned off the motor and got out. I walked around between the cars and stepped up on the

sidewalk. "Hello, Sherry," I said.

The man stopped talking and turned around, and at the same time Sherry moved toward me, so he wasn't holding her arm any more. I couldn't tell anything by her face. It had that masked, placid look. "So there you are, Nick," she said, and looked back at the man. She lifted one hand. "Good night, Mac."

Mac stood there. He was a funny character. Or maybe not funny, exactly. His clothes were good, damned good--a sports outfit--and must have been tailored to fit his short, stocky body. He wasn't wearing a hat. His face would have been handsome if there'd been less of it. Every feature was a little too much. He wasn't fat, the most you could say

was that he was pudgy. With most faces, there's some feature that stands out--with Sherry, it's her eyes first, with those dark eyebrows over them, and then the mouth second. Some people have big noses or thick lips or long cheeks that make them look horsy. But with Mac every feature looked as though it had been put in carefully and then emphasized. He had yellow hair that looked silky and was combed straight back. The light, sleek shine of it drew your attention. But then so did his eyes.

They were smudged in, very far apart, and the lids were clayey and sooty at the same time. His eyes were pale. He looked just a little like Fritz, the blond kid in the "Katzenjammers."

I looked him over carefully. He stuck out his lower lip like a child and scowled at me. All right. I let it go at that. I hadn't been introduced. Sherry was back at the Chevvy by now, so I went after her and opened the door to let her get in. When she did, I slammed it and went around to the other side, noticing, as I did, that Mac had got back into the convertible. Just as I settled down behind the steering wheel, the Cadillac's exhaust roared and the big car jumped backward. Mac must have snapped out his clutch with the accelerator pressed way down. I didn't have time even to brace myself; I automatically threw out my arm in front of Sherry, pressing her back, and the

next second we got a jolt that made my teeth rattle. It was just luck that I'd forgotten to tighten the brake or leave the gear in reverse. We backed up, the way a billiard ball does when another one hits it. I grabbed the steering wheel, which had hit me hard under the breastbone. Then I saw the Cadillac was starting forward, as fast as it had backed up. Blowing out exhaust smoke, it accelerated and kept going. Now I knew why the convertible's paint-job looked so bad.

* * *

"You all right, Sherry?" I said.

I heard her whistle softly. "I'm fine. You?"

"If I thought I could catch up with that

Cadillac, I'd like to try it."

"Are you hurt, Nick?"

"No. Wait a minute." I got out and took a quick look at the radiator and the front axle; then I got in again. "I guess the car's all right. Who is that . . . that guy?"

"His name's McElroy. Ted McElroy. He's from back east. Rich man's son--you know, Nick."

"What was he up to just now? Does he make it a habit?"

"Driving like that? He certainly does. Phoenix is getting rich on the fines he pays."

"I don't mean that. What was he trying to pull with you?"

"Oh. Oh-that was nothing, Nick."

"You got in this car pretty quick."

"Well, of course. But only to save myself an argument. This happens almost every night." She reached for the door handle. "Thanks for waiting, Nick."

"Don't hurry away."

"I'm tired."

"All right. I'll drive you home. I remembered a couple of things I wanted to tell you."

"It's no good, Nick," she said, and pulled the door handle up. I reached over and got hold of her wrist. She tried to pull free.

"For God's sake," I said, "are you afraid of me, Sherry?" I felt the resistance leave her arm. I let it go, and sat there, feeling helpless and miserable.

I had no idea what to do next. I hadn't had any plans anyway. Things had worked out okay up to this point--at least, I was talking to Sherry--but now what? I put my hands on the steering wheel and looked at my fingers.

Her hand moved toward mine and patted it twice, but she didn't leave it there.

"I'm sorry, Nick."

"So am I."

"What did you want to tell me?"

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing you don't know already. I said I'm sorry. Oh ... hell. I'll drive you home now." I hesitated. "To the door, I mean. Or I'll drive you to the bus stop or whatever you want."

When she didn't answer, I depressed the clutch and slipped in the gear. The Chevvy rolled forward. I waited for her to tell me where to turn, but she kept quiet, so I drove straight on along North Central. After a while we passed Encanto Park and the auto courts started in. Then, suddenly, the desert began. I didn't remember making any turns, but we were on a good road, not a highway but a paved, empty road that rolled on smoothly under the headlights.

I didn't try to touch her. I was completely satisfied, and if this could have gone on forever without stopping, I'd have had no kick at all. There was just Sherry and myself, in the warm, closed home of the car, hurrying along

through the night.

"We'd better go back, Nick," she said.

I slowed down and woke up. I hadn't been noticing the scenery. The paved road had, sometime or other, changed over to an unimproved dirt one, but the rain hadn't been hard enough to do more than lay the dust. There weren't any car lights visible, but we had been climbing a long slope, and, as I turned around, a big splash of light, far away, showed where Phoenix was. I stopped the car and turned off the motor. Then I reached for Sherry, and I was kissing her, and it was the way it had always been, just the two of us, and nothing else mattered a damn.

* * *

On the way back to Phoenix neither of us said very much. Once Sherry asked me if I wanted a cigarette, and when I said yes, she lit it for me. When we got into the city, she told me the way, and after a time we pulled up in front of a medium-sized apartment house.

"Don't get out," she said.

I looked up to where two adjoining windows were lighted on the third floor.

"Is that it?" I asked her.

She gave a funny, breathless little laugh. "I room with a girl. Rents are high here, so it was cheaper to double up. But . . . just go away now, Nick. Don't come back tomorrow.

Go on east. I was right, you know. It isn't safe to have you around."

"Sherry--" I said.

She lifted her face to me, and I kissed her hard. I heard her say, "Good-by, Nick. Really good-by," and the car door clicked and her heels sounded on the pavement. Otherwise there wasn't a sound until a truck made a distant rumbling blocks away.

I watched her run up the steps to the apartment house door and get something out of her purse--the key. She stopped, turned around, and waved at me. After that, she was gone, and I started the motor and drove west. I didn't pay much attention to where I was going. But after a while I saw I was out in the desert, and a gray light was starting to come from behind me. Pretty soon I passed a

roadside shack on the left; it had an EAT sign on top of it and a gas pump in front. So I knew where I was going.

It was not quite dawn when I eased the Chevvy up the driveway to the De Anza place. There weren't any lights visible in the U-shaped house. Around to the side, the garage doors were open, and the Buick was parked inside. I put the Chevvy beside it, leaving the keys in the ignition. Then I got out and stretched, listening to my joints and muscles crack. I was dead tired physically, but my mind felt as if it had been washed in champagne. The cold, fresh air, clear and bright, tingled against my skin. It was still too early to do anything. I walked around the house to the open

side of the U, but there weren't any lights in the inner windows either. I hadn't expected to see any. I thought I remembered one of those canvas reclining chairs folded up near where the Countess had been sitting, and from what I'd seen of the Mexicans, I doubted if they'd put it away. They hadn't. I unfolded it carefully, making as little noise as possible, and set it up where the sun would hit me as soon as it climbed over the roof. There weren't any blankets or robes around, and the air was cold. Then I walked back to where I could look down the slope. All the darkness had gone by now. The mountains, very far away, were just a hazy layer that could have been low clouds, but Joshua

and cactus and yucca were so clear they seemed to have been stamped out against the background. Phoenix was behind me; I couldn't see it. But I followed the driveway with my eyes, till it dipped out of sight, and then I looked to the left where I could pick up a section of the black road that went to Phoenix.

My mind went along it till I found Sherry.

At last I returned to the reclining chair and arranged myself comfortably in it. I was so tired that even the cold couldn't keep me awake. I dropped into an uneasy doze that soon changed into deep sleep. Once I thought vaguely about the king snake, and told myself drowsily that it wouldn't be moving around in the cold,

and it was harmless anyway. Then I went deeper into sleep and had some dreams I didn't particularly like, though I couldn't remember them afterward, and I thought the sun was beating down on me and drying up my mouth and nostrils, and I was drinking beer with Sherry in a car somewhere, or maybe an airplane, but the beer splashed all over my face and it began to burn like fire.

Then the burning stopped. I woke up and stared blindly at Mrs. De Anza. She was standing between me and the sun, which was blazing hot on my legs and body. I blinked at her.

"You'll get sunstroke," she said, and turned away so the sun hit me again. I struggled to a sitting position, but it was

too awkward in that canvas chair, so I stood up, weaving a little, drunk with sleep.

"If Nick wants to sleep out here or on the roof, that's his business," Mrs. De Anza said. She wasn't talking to me. Looking beyond her, I saw the Mexican woman, Benita, standing silently in the background. "For God's sake, get me some coffee. Nick, don't say a word to me till after breakfast. You either, Nita. Get things under control first." She made an impatient gesture and hurried away.

Benita shrugged. I tried a smile, but my face felt stiff.

"I got in late," I said. "I didn't want to wake anybody up." She didn't say anything, but the jerk of her head told me

to follow her. So I did, through a door, along a short corridor, and into a bathroom. "Clean up," she told me. "Then come over to the kitchen. Good-by." She hadn't said a word, but the way she managed her arms and hands was a language. She went out, closing the door, and I turned on the cold water and splashed it over my face.

That cleared the dreams out of my head. I looked at myself in the mirror.

"Jesus," I said under my breath.

I went out looking for my rucksack. It still lay where I'd dropped it. I carried it into the bathroom, took out a razor and a tube of brushless shaving cream, and hoped the blade would still cut whiskers. My beard grows fast, and it's

black. I looked like a Hollywood heavy.

I turned on the water in the stall shower. There was nothing I could do about trimming my hair, but at least I could change my socks. I had another pair. They had holes in them but were clean. As for my clothes, all I could do was beat out the dust and pick a few burrs from the trouser legs. Fifteen minutes later, feeling more respectable, I headed for the kitchen. Benita was frying bacon. She twisted her head around when I came in and stared at me.

"Thanks," I said. "I needed to clean up." My voice sounded different, smoother and lower, I noticed, surprised. And I felt a little uncomfortable standing there by the

door. Why in hell--?

I knew why. I didn't feel quite as independent. I wanted something now--and this time I knew what I wanted. The job Mrs. De Anza had offered me yesterday. It had become important, because of Sherry. Once I realized that, I took a deep breath and explained to myself carefully that there were other jobs. I gave myself a brief, harsh pep talk. Benita interrupted me by pointing toward the inner door.

"No comprendo," I told her.

Her face didn't change. She kept on pointing.

"Oh," I said, and, not being up to a heart-to-heart one-way conversation, I went out of the kitchen and followed the

sound of clinking china to the living room. The perfume smell was still here. I didn't mind it so much this morning. I noticed a lot more--a big, expensive radio-phonograph-television set, a grand piano with the lid lifted, shelves of books and record albums lining the walls, sunlight in bright patches on the heavy rugs and the Monterey furniture. Mrs. De Anza was sitting at a small table, drinking coffee. There was another place set opposite her, but no sign of the Count.

"Well, sit down," she said impatiently.

"For me? Thanks." I pulled the chair back and eased myself into it. Even after the shower, I felt stiff and creaky.

She made a weary motion toward the coffee pot, indicating that I might as well help myself. I did. It was strong and black and scalding hot.

"Cream or sugar? Ask Nita if you want 'em."

"I take it Pittsburgh."

"What?"

"Black."

"All right," she said. "Go ahead and drink it and don't expect anything except breakfast. Nothing happens here in the morning. Nobody's awake. You look so cheerful you make me sick."

I drank coffee. "I ought to apologize," I said. "I didn't get back till . . . well, pretty late."

"Who cares?" she asked.

"I got lost," I said. "Then I got so sleepy I pulled over and took five. Except it turned out to be five hours. I guess I was bushed."

"You're so smart," she said. "Why didn't you try the doors? We don't lock 'em. You could have found a softer place to sleep than that canvas back-breaker."

"You don't lock the doors at night?"

She shut her eyes wearily, tired of me, and said, "I want some more coffee."

I poured it. She didn't thank me.

With her eyes still closed, she yawned widely, settled down in her chair, and said, "You want that job?"

"Yes," I said.

"That's good. Ever been in jail?"

"Yes."

She looked at me then, a little startled.

"Well, you've never killed anybody, have you?"

"Yes."

For the first time I had thrown her. She sat there, moving her mouth, frowning, not quite sure what to say next. I waited a second before I went on.

"During the war."

"Oh."

"The jail term was something else again. That was only ten days, for vagrancy."

"Anybody can get locked up," she said, giving me a flat stare. "I've been behind bars myself."

"Real ones?"

She saw I didn't believe her. I suppose she was trying to shock me a little, the way I'd surprised her, because she said:

"An insane asylum, Nick. In France, before the war." I didn't know whether to believe her or not, so I just nodded. The Countess looked slightly disappointed. She tightened her mouth, looked past me, and shouted, "Come on, come on, Nita. I'm hungry." Benita didn't hurry. She trudged across the room with her burden, a big, loaded tray, set it down on the table, and began to unload it. Mrs. De Anza started right in. She drained a big glass of orange juice and began tearing a brioche apart like a starving castaway.

I decided I'd better begin eating too, if I hoped to get any. So for a while neither of us said anything. It was a race to see who finished first. She won, but I was neater.

Afterward, my stomach felt full. I leaned back in the chair, sucking in a lungful of smoke, and looked around. The grand piano in the corner was probably out of tune, in this desert air--then I changed my mind, realizing that the house was air-conditioned. The De Anzas must have dough, I thought.

"Amuse yourself," Mrs. De Anza said, starting to get up. "I'm going to cut my throat or something. Lovely morning, lovely morning." Then she lifted her eyebrows and watched me stand up and

circle the table. I pulled back her chair.

"Such good manners," she said, getting up. "They're wasted here. Or are they?"

She stood with her back to me, apparently thinking.

Then she came to life and walked away. Without looking around, she went under the archway and out of my sight. The last thing I saw was a loose strand of red hair waving carelessly behind her.

The cigarette I was holding burned my finger. I came to life with a jump.

"Who cares?" I said under my breath.

5.

"WHERE'S RAFAEL?" I ASKED BENITA. She shrugged. I put down the

breakfast tray, which I'd loaded with the empty dishes, on the kitchen table. The door into the patio was half open, but the screen door wasn't, and a fly buzzed metallically against the mesh. I opened the screen six inches or so and used gestures, like Benita, to tell it to get out. It didn't understand. It kept dodging and circling and ramming itself against the screen. You'd think that with so many eyes it would have seen the exit, but no. It wanted out, but it couldn't find the way. Finally I pushed the door wider and it circled from the cool air of the kitchen into the heat of the patio and disappeared. I followed it. Benita, busy at the sink, didn't pay any attention to me.

There was no sign of Rafael or the

Countess. The morning sun had already begun to bake the parched red brick floor of the patio. I noticed I'd begun to feel drowsy, in spite of the coffee. There was a funny quality to the silence; it was a hot sort of stillness, and the muffled noises Benita was making were all muted, as though they came from a long distance. What I did hear was a steady humming, a sort of composite sound, so soft it was nearly inaudible. It might have been my ears. Probably it was. Remembering the king snake, I looked down. All I saw were my shoes, streaked and dusty in the cracks in spite of the quick cleanup I'd given them with toilet paper. I lifted one foot and saw that the sole was still okay, but the heel

was badly run-over.

I walked around the inside of the U, keeping in the shade of the gallery, and, since I didn't meet anybody, I kept on going and went around the house toward the garage. I had some vague idea of looking over the cars to see what I could do for them. But beyond the garage roof there was a greasy column of black smoke rising transparently against the brilliant blue sky, so I kept on and found Rafael beside a big incinerator. He was wearing old clothes this morning, with neat little canvas sneakers that kept popping in and out like scared mice from beneath his trouser cuffs. He gave me a broad, happy grin.

"Hello, Nick Banning," he said. "Nice

day, huh?"

"Sure is. You got the Buick home okay, I notice."

"Well, we got blowout. Pchs! You eat?"

I nodded, looking at the smoke that was coming out everywhere but the incinerator's chimney. Rafael had a newspaper-wrapped parcel in his hand, and a wheelbarrow with a garbage can and a few big wastebaskets in it. He picked up a glass demijohn, poured kerosene--it smelled like kerosene--on his bundle, and threw it into the incinerator. It burst into flame, began gushing smoke, and Rafael hastily screwed the top back on the bottle and set it down.

"Smokes, no?" he asked me.

I stepped up on the wheelbarrow and looked at the incinerator chimney. A couple of pieces of window screen were laid flat on top of it, completely choked with soot. I reached over and lifted the screen warily by the corners. Sparks and smoke came up.

"See?" Rafael said. "Starting a fire that way is no good." I replaced the screen and came down. "No good," I said. "Have you got any galvanized mesh around?"

He didn't think so. There was a lot of stuff in the back of the garage, though. I went to look, and found a roll of what I wanted hooked on to a nail in the wall. It was wide-gauge galvanized screen, and

there was enough of it. There weren't any tin shears, but I found some wire-cutting pliers hiding behind a cobweb, and I went back to where Rafael was feeding the incinerator. I sat down on the edge of the wheelbarrow and began cutting the screen into a sort of Greek cross shape. Rafael watched approvingly.

"Easier throwing the garbage in back," he said.

"Draws flies."

Flies didn't worry him. He shrugged, spilled more kerosene on another parcel, and got ready to toss it. "Hold on a minute," I said, and got up. I pushed the barrow closer to the incinerator, climbed up on it again, and measured the

chimney top with my hand. I've got an eight-inch span, and this didn't have to be too accurate. "Okay," I said, getting down and going to work on the mesh again.

Rafael threw the bundle in and watched it burn. "You staying?"

"Depends. Maybe it's up to De Anza. I don't know. What do you call a count, anyway?"

"Señor--Mr. De Anza. Just Meester. In Spain, Don Leopold. Here, Count not worth nothing."

"Well, is it up to him whether I get the job?" Rafael glanced at me sideways.

"Sure, ask. No matter. If she want you, she say. That's all. Hot today, no?" He spat into the incinerator.

"When does Mr. De Anza wake up?" I asked.

Rafael shrugged.

"What's the matter with him, anyway?"

"Sick."

"Does he stay in bed all the time?"

"No. One time before it happen. Last year. He never got up at all for two, three months."

"How long has he been sick this time?"

"One, two months."

"Is it T.B.? Doesn't he have a doctor or anything?"

"Doctor?" Rafael said. "Is nothing for no doctor to fix. Maybe a doctor for the eyes, that's all. His eyes get bad. But--

look there." Following his pointing finger, I saw a three-inch lizard motionless on a rock, its crooked legs holding it in an uncomfortable position as though it had just stopped doing push-ups.

"Culebra," I said. The name popped into my head. Rafael laughed. "No, culebra is the snake. Cold blood, though--not much different. Sleep all day is one thing, but when you no sleep--just staying in the bed ... I think Mr. De Anza is burn out."

"I don't get you."

"That fella"--Rafael pointed at the lizard--"long time ago, he used to be damn big. Like in King Kong. Hot, wet country--you know how big alligators

get? Here it is too dry. He is just a little fella now." The lizard raced away. Looking after it, the Mexican said, "Back in Spain, I think Mr. De Anza's family is pretty damn big too."

"I've heard the name. The De Anzas settled California, didn't they?" Rafael looked at me slyly.

"Maybe his name is not De Anza, Nick."

"Then what is it?"

He shrugged.

"No sé."

"Well, what did he leave Spain for?"

"Ah, Spain is not like the United States, Nick. Here, you get the poor people and the rich people and the people in between. In Spain, you get the

rich people and the poor people and that's all. The money, it don't mean so much. The big thing is to get born in the right family. You know, la aristocracia. If an aristócrata don't have no money, he is still the big shot. He don't leave Spain for that."

"Why does he, then?"

There was only one answer to that. I got it.

"Quién sabe?"

"Well," I said, "what's the matter with his face?"

"Nothing. He is like to have the soft white skin." Rafael noticed his own brown hands. He wiggled his fingers and laughed. "I am dress up outside--nice clothes, Nick. I like the nice clothes.

Then people look at the clothes and don't see Rafael." He emphasized the last syllable of his name; I figured he ought to know. "Everybody vain about something. Dress up somehow."

"Not Mrs. De Anza."

"Sure. That jewelry she wears. Real silver, real tur-turk--the blue stones. Good luck."

Turquoises?

"Sí, hombre. You wear those stones, you no get the poison. You never hear that?"

"No. It isn't a bad idea, though, in snake country like this. Well, let's give the incinerator a new hat. Maybe it's vain too. Want to brace the wheelbarrow?"

"Sure," he said, and I climbed up and tossed away the window screen that was on the chimney. Then I bent down the arms of my galvanized Greek cross till I had a square box open at one end. I worked it, open end down, into the chimney mouth, and that was all. I jumped down again. Some smoke began to come out of the right place.

Rafael put his hands on his hips and rocked back and forth, looking up.

"Goddam," he said. "That all it take?"

"That's all. Now it won't get clogged with soot." He was so pleased he poured kerosene over the remaining parcels of garbage and threw them all into the furnace at once. Then he came back and sat on the wheelbarrow beside me. He

had a healthy, sweaty smell, not like that funny perfume in the house or the smell in De Anza's room. I took out cigarettes and we lit up.

"Who lives here, anyway?" I asked.
"Just the De Anzas and you and your wife?"

"Nobody else."

"What about this guy that quit a couple of days ago? What was his name, Callahan?"

"Sure. What about him?"

"How long did he work here?"

"Couple of months."

"What did he quit for? Or was he fired?"

"Don' know," Rafael said thoughtfully, but this time I didn't believe him. He

was frowning at the desert.

I let it drop.

"How long have you been here, Rafe?"

"Around two years. When the De Anzas come here, they buy these house and need somebody to take care of it. Me and Nita, we hear about it. Nita is damn good cook."

"How are they to work for--the De Anzas?"

"All right," he said, still frowning. "Is depend. We get along fine. Mr. De Anza don't talk to me," he added.

"Why not?"

"He just don't see me much."

I thought that over.

"He talk to Veence, though," Rafael

said. "Veence Callahan. There was one fella what worked here before Veence, last year. He stayed three months. Thing is, Nick, this funny place. You get used to it, fine. But this not the city. Different here. Look. Lizard. Yucca. Cactus. Fine for them. You come here, look for peach trees, roses, pretty birds, that no good. You not like it. But lizard and yucca--sure. Just get used to things. Fella live in the city, he watch traffic lights. Live in snow country, wear lot of clothes. You go on boat, Nick, you act different, no? You not hunt deer then. You not look round for taxi. Get used to boat, okay, fine--fish and the birds, but no deer, no jack rabbit. On ocean, you relax, get healthy, maybe, but better get used to

fish. No fish here, except I tell you funny thing, Nick. You know what? This used to be ocean once."

"Did it?"

"Whole damn desert. Sure. Fella tell me 'bout it. All the water go away long time ago, but the land it remember. It not land and it not sea, I guess. What you call the dry ocean--mar seco. You take it easy, don't look for things you don't get here, and you be fine. The desert is all dead. The clock don't run here. Nobody does."

"It's too hot for running."

"Some people try. No good, Nick. It's one good place to sit and wait." He looked at me sideways. "Pero no hace nada. Veence, he couldn't sit and wait."

So--pchs!" He went on fast. "That incinerator look damn good now. I hope you stay."

I dropped my cigarette, stepped on it, and rubbed my eyes. "I'm sleepy. I'm sweating, too. Listen, Rafe, these are the only clothes I've got. I don't want to look like a tramp when I see Mr. De Anza. Could I wash 'em out somewhere?"

"Come on," he said, getting up. "Nita gonna wash 'em."

"No, I can do--"

"We got 'lectric washing machine. No trouble. Tell you, Nick, maybe we find something. I think, Veence, he leave some clothes when he quit. He was 'bout your size."

Rafael started to push the

wheelbarrow toward the garage, and I walked beside him. "What I need are shoes," I said. "No matter how much I polish these, they won't look good. Vince wouldn't have left any shoes, would he?"

"I dunno. Don't think so." Rafael grinned at me happily. "You take pair of my shoes, eh?"

I looked down and laughed. Pointing his narrow toes delicately, he followed the wheelbarrow around the garage, strutting a little.

"I get you fixed up, Nick," he said. "Don't you worry."

* * *

He got me fixed up. I didn't find out much more, because Rafael couldn't do

two things at one time, and whenever he started to talk he'd have to stop looking for Callahan's old suit or a new razor blade or a clean shirt. Finally he stopped talking altogether and just grunted. That way, he got efficient as hell and half an hour later I had everything I needed. But then Rafael discovered he had some work to do, so he went off, telling me I might as well take a nap and he'd wake me if I was wanted. I said, "Bankers' hours," as he went out, but that didn't call for an answer.

He'd put me in a bedroom, and I never did find out whose it was. I guess it was an extra guest room. It had a private bath, anyway, and was across the patio from the rooms I'd seen before. The

whole place was laid out in a casual way, it seemed to me, and the De Anzas lived just as casually. Apparently they just didn't give a damn. From what I'd seen of Leopold De Anza--or would it be Leopoldo in Spanish?--I figured that merely the effort of eating his dinner would knock him out for twelve hours at least. The Countess was a horse of another color. De Anza might be burned out, the way Rafael had said, but Mrs. De Anza--she wasn't. I couldn't figure what she was doing in a place like this.

She looked more like the Las Vegas or Reno type to me than a woman who'd settle down, and I mean settle down, in a desert ranch with only a half-dead husband and a king snake to keep her

amused. Physically she looked burned out too, but I'm not talking about that. It was nothing to me. Rafael and Benita got along okay with the De Anzas. Vincent Callahan had quit, but there could have been plenty of reasons. Maybe he just didn't like living in a dry ocean.

I went through my rucksack, getting things in order. I found a few letters of reference I was keeping; they said I was able, willing, and honest, and stopped right there.

Callahan's suit fitted me pretty well, and though Rafael's shirt was too loose at the neck and too short in the arms, it was a clean shirt, and, as a matter of fact, the soberest one of five he offered me. My shoes would have to do. I took

them into the bathroom, spread a newspaper, and went to work with saddle soap. Afterward, with a hand mirror to help, I trimmed the back of my neck as well as I could, and tried to get some of the dirt from my nails.

I stretched out on the bed. I started to open the window beside me, remembered the air conditioning, and didn't. Instead, I shut my eyes and tried to go to sleep.

Thinking about Sherry, I blanked out.

6.

I SLEPT STRAIGHT THROUGH TILL seven, when Rafael woke me and said I better get ready for dinner. That didn't take me long, even though I fussed over the details. My shoes felt tight, but

they looked a lot better. I'd had exactly the right amount of sleep. Just walking across the patio made me feel good. The air was still hot, but beginning to stir with coolness, and the sky was green, a sort of luminous stained-glass green with a light behind it. I could almost believe I really was at the bottom of the sea. It was nice to think about, because it made me feel cooler.

I went in the kitchen, where Benita ignored me, and I said, "Thanks for washing that stuff for me. Á sus ordenes."

She looked around and shrugged. I hadn't expected anything else. I went on, covering ground that was beginning to be familiar, and reached the living room,

though I felt more and more awkward with each step. It takes a while to get used to new clothes, and when they don't even fit you, it's worse. I found myself wishing I'd kept my old clothes on; at least they were a part of me, and I'd felt like myself in them.

I'm sure the Countess wouldn't have noticed what I wore. She was lying on a sofa, wearing a housecoat rucked up carelessly above her bare, bony knees. Either the housecoat was an antique or she washed it in lye. It looked awful. She had on leather sandals, with a strap loose and dangling, and she was loaded with costume jewelry, the heavy silver stuff with those blue and blue-green stones. And the blue turban, of course,

so tight it must have given her a headache. She was working a puzzle in a book of crosswords. She lifted abstracted eyes, saw me without recognition, and went back to her puzzle.

The room must have been aired out. That smelly perfume wasn't noticeable tonight.

Glass clinked. With his back to me, standing at a portable bar against the wall, was a tall man with glossy black hair. Between his hairline and collar was skin as pink-white as a baby's. He had on a light blue coat and slacks and what looked like moccasins.

The Countess said, "Leo, here's Nick Banning." De Anza turned around. He had the color and complexion of a

sixteen-year-old boy. It was the damndest thing I'd ever seen. There wasn't a line or wrinkle in his face, not even around the eyes, where the skin can't help wrinkling after you've looked at things long enough. But I couldn't be too certain of that, because he was wearing glasses with horn rims and very dark lenses, so dark I couldn't see his eyes at all. There weren't any lines on his forehead or running down from his nose to the corners of his mouth. If it hadn't been for that same aquiline nose, he could have posed for a Boy Scout poster.

He wasn't watching me; he was watching his wife. I saw that his hair wasn't white at the roots any more, the

way it had been when I'd seen him first in his bed. And, from this close, I could tell that he was made up. He'd got on rouge and maybe lipstick and pancake powder or whatever they call it.

He wasn't a fag, though. I felt pretty sure of that, somehow. And he wasn't made up to look like a woman, either. He was just made up to look young, and he'd done a swell job. But his hands were a tip-off. They had brown spots and wrinkles, and the joints weren't those of a kid. He turned his head a little and looked at me with those big round dark lenses. Probably there were eyes behind them. You'd never know it from looking. You'd never know he'd seen me before, either. We were meeting for the

first time. It wasn't up to me to make any moves. I waited. He waited. After a little I saw he'd decided to outwait me, but I wasn't sure what to do about it. Now that I wanted the job, I didn't feel quite so easy. The flat black lenses kept fixed on me calmly and coldly, like a tall insect's eyes.

Mrs. De Anza broke it up after too long a time had passed.

"All right, Leo, say something," she said, without looking up from her crossword puzzle. "Go through the motions, anyhow."

"You want to work here, Nick?" De Anza asked flatly.

"I--yes, I do," I said.

"You know what sort of work you'd

be expected to do?"

"I think so. A little of everything, Mrs. De Anza told me."

"Then you don't know," he said.

"I don't?"

"If she'd told you all she expects, you wouldn't be here." I didn't know what to say to that. I looked over at Mrs. De Anza, but she was digging her pencil into the crossword page and she didn't even glance up. I had a feeling like somebody caught in a crossfire. It didn't have anything to do with me, as Nick Banning. The crossfire was between the Count and his wife. I just happened to be standing there. It was all away over my head.

De Anza said, "Have you wondered at

all why this job is available just now?"

"It's not my business."

"Bravo," said the Countess, viciously erasing, her eyes on the page.

"Nonsense," De Anza said. "It's a vital part of your business, if you decide to take this job. What's happened to others could happen to you, couldn't it?"

"Callahan is buried under the incinerator," the Countess said, her head still bent, her eyes on her work. "The man before him we fed to the pigs. Don't let him rattle you, Nick. After all, who pays the bills around here?" The Count lifted his right hand and turned it around thoughtfully in front of his dark glasses. "If this hand were incapacitated, my dear," he said,

"nobody would pay the bills."

"All right, all right," she said impatiently. "You drive into town for groceries tomorrow."

"I don't deny we need a handyman," the Count said, letting his hand drop.

"I just doubt whether our friend here would be happy with all his duties."

"Who is?" Mrs. De Anza asked. "You?" For some reason this made the rouged cheeks get a little pinker around the edges of the rouge. As if she had expected this, the Countess lifted her eyes for the first time and looked directly at him. Neither of them said anything for a few seconds. Standing there between them, I didn't feel like myself any more. I felt like all the long

row of other guys who must have stood here, Callahan and the boys before him, all of us one faceless puppet jumping when the strings twitched between the Countess and the Count. I couldn't tell who won. But after a while Mrs. De Anza hoisted her bony knees higher on the sofa, propped the crossword book and licked her pencil. She was looking at the page again when she said, "Speaking of money, I'll need some if I go into town tomorrow. Write me a check, Leo."

"With pleasure, my dear," he said. Then he suddenly forgot all about me and went back to the bar, where he picked up a filled glass and kept on going toward a chair. "Fix yourself a

drink if you like," he said to the air, and set down his own on one arm of the chair. On the other was something wrapped up in a towel. He unwrapped the towel, and there was a glittering little revolver with a bottle of oil and a brush and everything else he needed to clean it. As near as I could tell, it was a .45, but no make I recognized. Anyway, I thought it was a special job, silver-mounted, silver every place there was room for it. When De Anza picked it up, I could see that on the butt an oval had been filed clean.

He shook out the cartridges.

I went over to him.

"Thanks," I said, "but I guess I'll skip the drink right now. I've got some letters

of recommendation here. If you want to look at them." He put a drop of oil in the right place.

I held out the letters.

He hesitated, but finally laid the gun down on the towel and took them. That was what I wanted. I sat down too, near him, and waited while he opened the letters one by one, very slowly, and read them slowly too. He didn't say a word. His face didn't change. The Countess, on the couch, ignored us both. I began to feel as though I weren't there at all. Finally I concentrated on looking at the gun. It was a beautiful piece of metal. The silver work was good, but it didn't add anything, for my money. I liked the lines of the gun itself. They did what

they were supposed to do. They fitted. They were right. Maybe I wasn't in the room, but the gun and I were real. The gun seemed a lot more real than either of the two De Anzas, just then.

At last the Count held out the letters to me. I took them. He went back to working on the revolver. I glanced toward Mrs. De Anza. She wasn't paying any attention.

I said, "Do I get the job?"

"Decisions shouldn't be made in a hurry, should they?" he asked. "Have you thought this over?"

"There isn't much to think over," I said. "A job means a salary. I could use a salary. That's the way I feel about it."

"Some jobs aren't worth the salary,"

he said, "and some salaries aren't worth the job. Those recommendations of yours don't say very much, do they?"

"No doubt he wrote them himself," the Countess said unexpectedly.

"No, I didn't," I said. "If I had, I'd have written better ones, wouldn't I?"

"Only if you were clever enough," she said, and went back to her crossword.

"She's joking," De Anza told me, "I suppose. The real point is, we know nothing about you, and you know nothing about us. We'd both be buying a pig in a poke, wouldn't we?"

"If you want to ask any questions, I'll answer them," I said. De Anza bent over the gun.

"Have you ever worked with the

mentally ill?" he asked.

"No."

"My God," said the Countess. "And you call yourself experienced. Every modern college has a course in the care and feeding of schizophrenics, these days. Seminars in paresis. We'll have to give you an orientation course, Nick. We'll start you off easily, on the baby--the two-headed cretin. Sing him to sleep with 'Oh, Little Town of Bedlam.' "

"Irene--" De Anza said.

"Yes, Leo?"

"We wouldn't want Nick quitting like Callahan, would we?" There was a little pause. The Countess lifted her head and looked steadily at De Anza.

"I wouldn't," she said.

"It's better to get everything clear in advance, then."

"Get what clear?" she asked. "I told Nick I'd been in an insane asylum once. So my reputation's made. You can relax."

"Is that all you told him?"

"Yes," the Countess said, showing her teeth in a smile. "I said you could relax."

De Anza suddenly snapped the cylinder back into the revolver. He laid it on the towel, his dark glasses reflecting patches of lamplight. He said, in a low, flat voice, "I'm responsible for Mrs. De Anza's actions, legally. There is no question of psychosis any more, of course. But these matters are complicated. You see my position, I'm

sure. I must--well, I can take no chances."

"A beautiful job," Mrs. De Anza said admiringly. "I'm sure Nick has exactly the idea you want him to have, after that. Nick. The job's yours." I didn't know what to say to that. I looked halfway between the two. It was a tricky setup.

But the Count didn't say a word, for a while. He picked up his glass, tilted it to his mouth, and didn't stop till the glass was empty. Then he stood up and nodded toward Mrs. De Anza.

"Very well, Irene," he said.

He looked at me through the dark lenses for a moment longer, and then, with an air of deliberate sacrifice, he clicked his heels and offered me his free

hand. I shook it. The skin felt cold, slick, faintly moist. He let go of my hand and sat down again. So did I.

He said to Mrs. De Anza, "Very well. Nick may have the job."

"That's what I said," the Countess told him.

"You didn't mention salary, though."

She said angrily, "He'll get paid."

"Certainly. Nick--remind me if I should forget."

"Don't be so sure Nick will need to remind you," she said. "I can always get money."

"Certainly you can. All you have to do is ask."

"You may have a surprise coming, one of these days," she said, and stopped

abruptly. "All right," she went on, after a second. "I'm going into Phoenix tomorrow. I'll need some money. Nick, remind me about that. I'll want you to drive me in, too."

De Anza said, "Why take Nick with you? There's a good deal to be done here. Callahan left a number of jobs unfinished, I suspect." She didn't answer.

"Why not go alone?" he repeated.

"I might go farther than Phoenix, Leo,"
He smiled at her.

"Not for long," he said. "Not alone, Irene. You'd be back. You'd find it hard to live away from the desert now."

She closed her chocolate-colored eyes and opened them again.

"No doubt," she said. "There's no

place like home. And since we're on clichés, I think I'll return to my crossword puzzle. Don't forget to tell Nick where the strait jackets are stored."

She picked up her pencil and ignored us. De Anza finally decided I was still present. But he couldn't bring himself to think I was a real person, even when he asked me how I liked the desert.

I told him I liked it fine.

That was what he wanted.

"Then why should anybody want to go into Phoenix?" he asked. "What can you do there?"

"What can you do here?" the Countess said, joining us again.

"A great many things."

"Shake hands and shoot ourselves?"

she asked, instantly forgetting us. De Anza was just about to light a cigarette, but changed his mind. Instead, he put out his hand to the revolver, pressing down lightly. The dark glasses swung toward me.

"Mrs. De Anza refers to an incident in my past," he said. "She hopes it will distress me. It doesn't. Well--I hope you'll find your new job pleasant, Nick. As for you, Irene, why don't you sleep on the idea of going into Phoenix? I don't know where the checkbook is, anyway."

She gave him a direct, frowning look.

"Will you give me some money or won't you?"

De Anza blew out cigarette smoke that smelled sickeningly heavy and sweet.

The pause lasted a long time.

"Yes," he said. "Tomorrow."

There was a little silence.

Then the Countess said, "All right. That's settled, thank God. Somebody fix me a drink. And after that, just let me alone for a while, will you? Pretend I'm not here. I want to relax. I want to pretend I'm all alone. In a wasteland, where no one comes or hath come, since the making of the world. The rest is silence." She looked blankly at us, dismissed us both with a blink, and went back to her crossword, scratching away noisily and muttering to herself in an angry voice.

De Anza got up, took his glass, and wandered over to the bar. He got busy.

Presently there was a tall glass pitcher on the bar, with ice in it, and what smelled like gin. He swirled a silver rod around a few times, leaned forward to sniff, and said to me, "Help yourself. Or there's tequila, if you like it."

"Thanks," I said, coming over to him. "This'll be fine."

"A civilized reaction. Martinis are fine. There's little difference between tequila and peyote buttons. Will you pour, please?" There was a little dish of curled-up lemon peels on the bar, and some cocktail glasses. The Count followed me along, twisting the lemon peels over the Martinis. Then he looked at the woman on the couch.

"Irene," he said.

She didn't answer. De Anza took one of the glasses and carried it carefully to her. He slid the pencil out of her right hand and replaced it with the Martini. Mrs. De Anza mumbled something, drained the glass so carelessly a trickle ran down her chin, and groped till she'd set the glass down on the rug. The glass fell over. She got the pencil again and concentrated on her crossword.

By then the Count was settling himself back in his chair. He moved his finger from me toward another chair near him and raised his black eyebrows above the dark glasses. I did what he wanted.

"Well," he said, leaning back and looking at me without any expression at all, "I take it we're going to see a good

deal of each other--for a while. I hope it won't be too painful for any of us. I hope you'll enjoy the work. No doubt that's possible. Personally, I'm emotionally incapable of working. Your references were not enthusiastic, but I doubt if I could produce any better ones myself--if I got a fair sample. The selection would range from the highest approbation to flat statements that I'm a son of a bitch. References don't always correlate with qualifications."

"I've just got general qualifications, I suppose," I said. "I'm a fair mechanic and handyman. I'm not much good in a sickroom."

"Well, we don't need a male nurse," he said. "In case you were wondering

why you found me in bed on your arrival, I can assure you that there's only one semi-invalid here--and that probably isn't the right term. It's nothing physical." He glanced toward his wife. "I myself occasionally have periods of nervous exhaustion. Then I merely stay in bed till I feel stronger. This house is very well situated in that respect. Nothing intrudes. It's like a sanitarium, isolated. Isn't that so, Irene?"

"What?" she said absently, without looking up.

"I was mentioning the isolation of a sanitarium. I think it's possible to relax only when you're disconnected from the world."

She gave us a blank, absent stare that

gradually cleared. Then she grinned.

"It depends on the sanitarium," she said. "Personally, I got rather tired of crossword puzzles and counting the mesh in the window gratings. The grave's a fine and private place, too." She waited a moment, watching the Count, and still grinning. "Incidentally," she said, when he got out his cigarette case and opened it, "you notice I'm beginning to work crosswords again. I need a vacation. Or something."

"The riotous excitement of Phoenix tomorrow should refresh you," De Anza said. But she paid no attention. She had dived back into the crossword and we didn't exist any more. De Anza took out a cigarette, lit it, and glanced down at his

glass. It was half empty. He said, "Another drink, Nick?" I hadn't finished mine, but I got up, brought over the glass pitcher, and poured. I went over to the Countess and picked up her glass, carrying it back to the bar for refilling. Afterward I brought it back to her, but I wasn't quite up to servicing her the way De Anza had. I just shoved the glass under her nose and asked her if she wanted it. It took a while for the idea to penetrate. I could almost imagine it burrowing down busily through sluggish layers of mud. No, chocolate. Like her eyes. When she finally looked up, I noticed that from where I was standing her lashes made a sort of network of tiny red wires, an untidy screen guard in

front of those flat eyes. It was queer--those eyes of hers that somehow weren't eyes at all, just as her face was less of a face than a skull, and that tight blue turban setting it off. A sort of mask, the kind sand-painters sculpt out.

"Fourteen vertical," she said, not to me, and refocused her eyes so I wasn't there any more. She took the glass, gulped, and began to put it down on the floor. But I got it first and carried it back to the bar. Then I went over and sat down beside the Count again.

"I noticed something in your reference letters," he said. "You don't keep jobs long, do you?"

"No, I guess I don't."

He didn't ask questions. "If a man is in

the wrong job, he should quit," he said. "Unexpended energy is apt to be a nuisance." I waited, and he turned his head slightly to watch me. I couldn't help feeling a little funny, talking to a guy who certainly must have been at least fifty, but who had the face of a kid. I suppose the reason is that you talk in a different way to different people, and if De Anza had really been as young as he looked, I'd have relaxed and kidded him along and let him talk about hot-rods and jet planes. Or, maybe, with his particular face, it would have been books and music instead. But as it was . . . His voice had sounded a little dreamy. Maybe the stuff he was smoking had begun to take hold, I thought. Certainly,

when he went on, he did sound more--well, relaxed.

"Nick," he said, "listen. Our routine is that we have no routine. Convenience is most important of all. Make yourself quite at home. You will dine with us if you care to. Having made the mistake of being born at this stage of evolution, it's wise to minimize the obvious disadvantages. For example, I'm comfortable in this chair, and I assume you're neither sedentary nor tired. So it's logical for me to ask you if you'd be good enough to freshen my drink again." He was putting it away pretty fast.

"Logical and sensible," I said, and did it. "This sounds like a good job."

"And you like the desert, you say.

Well, you may find this a fine place. A fine and private place," he said, and laughed softly. The dark glasses turned toward me.

"But don't be too unsuspicious," he went on. "Do you know what you're really selling?"

"What?"

"Your freedom," he said. "To start with. What more, remains to be seen." 7.

DINNER WAS GOOD AND WELL SERVED, but queer too, in a way. The Countess brought her crossword book and paid no attention to us. She alternately wrote down block letters and shoveled food into her mouth. There was wine, which she ignored for half the meal, and then gulped. I don't know what

the meat was; it was very tender, with a mild garlic flavor and some sort of sauce over it. The plates were ordinary ceramic stuff, but the silver was really something, heavy, and crusted over with designs that managed not to get in the way of the lines. I'm no artist, but I do know a little about tools. Those knives and forks were beautiful, functional tools. They had a crest on them; that is, I guessed it was a crest. De Anza pushed his food around carefully. He didn't seem to pay much attention, but I noticed he cleaned the plate, mopping up with a crust of sourdough. Whenever he wiped his mouth, I couldn't help wondering if he used kiss-proof lipstick, the kind that isn't supposed to come off. But I still

wasn't absolutely sure he had on lipstick at all.

Benita made Turkish coffee in a brass gadget that looked like an antique. De Anza asked me to get a bottle of brandy from the bar, Spanish, not cognac, and a big inhaler glass for himself. "Liqueur glass for the Countess," he said. "I don't know what you prefer, Nick." There were some pretty Swedish liqueur glasses on the shelf, each with a different color glowing softly through the stems and bases, so I took a couple of them and passed the brandy around. De Anza held out a cigarette case to me, but I saw they were some trick brand, so I said no thanks, I'd smoke my own. When we lit up, the funny perfume was in the

room again, and now I could tell where it came from. I tried to keep my nose from twitching. I tried to figure out just what the Count was smoking. I might as well say I never did find out, except it wasn't hemp. I know that smell. The funny part was, he looked almost too young to smoke. There hadn't been much conversation during dinner. The Countess hadn't said anything at all, and De Anza and I talked about things that didn't matter one way or the other. Now he warmed his inhaler between his hands and swished the brandy around, while I sniffed at mine so the sharp, strong smell would block that other smell, but it sneaked in around the side and felt like a greasy layer in my nose

and sinuses.

Mrs. De Anza dropped her pencil on the tablecloth, moved her narrow shoulders as though loosening the joints, and looked at us blankly. She saw the brandy and tossed it off. She did the same to the little cup of coffee, though it was so hot it must have burned her. That seemed to clear the board. She worked her mouth, trying to remember by the taste what she'd been eating and drinking, and apparently decided it didn't matter. It was food and drink. Okay.

The dull eyes focused on me and cleared a little. She opened her mouth slightly, jerked her head, and began fumbling under the table. She brought out

her hand with a wad of bills in it, and tossed them across to me.

"Advance on your salary," she said. "Not that I know how much it is. However. Remind me when it's pay day, will you? I'll extract a check from the Chancellor of the Exchequer."

"Thanks," I said, and started to count the money. Mrs. De Anza looked at me. "God, you're careful," she said. "I'll bet you'll write it down, too."

I finished counting and put the bills in my pocket. "Two hundred and seven dollars," I said. "Sure, I'll write it down. Somebody ought to." I did, while De Anza, his eyes half closed, slid his thumb and forefinger back and forth gently on the cylinder of his cigarette

holder. It was a long tube of smooth pale material, faintly greenish, with goldwork binding it to an amber bit. The Countess yawned.

* * *

Benita came in from the kitchen with an empty tray. The Count rose, and I went around to pull back Mrs. De Anza's chair. "Thanks, Nick," she said absently. "I wonder--do you know how to use a typewriter?" I told her I did.

"Good. I've been letting some stuff pile up since Callahan left. I loathe routine. Wait a minute." She went away. De Anza had gone back to his Monterey chair, and he sat slouched down in it, stroking the cigarette holder.

"Nita," he said.

"Sí?"

He made a little dipping motion with his fingers bunched together. She nodded, finished clearing the table, and carried the tray into the kitchen. De Anza held out his cigarette holder to me.

"Feel this," he suggested.

I took it from him and fingered the material. Then I laughed and showed him my hand.

"Too many calluses," I said. "What is it?"

"Jade, white jade. It's an acquired talent anyway. But it's possible to discriminate, simply through touch, between one grade of jade and another. The old Empress of China spent much of her time practicing it. It does gratify

some special sense, I find. And it's mechanical enough to occupy the conscious mind--very useful, sometimes."

He got up, crossed the room, and pushed back a corner of the rug with his foot. He slid a metal plate aside, and there was the dial of a floor safe beneath it. Crouching, he spun the dial a few times and opened the door, taking out a box as large as a cigarette carton.

The Countess came back, a bundle of papers in her hand. She walked past me and threw them on the dining table.

"There," she said with relief. "Mostly bills. There's a checkbook; make out the stuff and his lordship will sign it. Some letters to be answered. Try and answer

them for me, Nick. Ask me if there's anything you don't understand."

I began leafing through the papers with one hand.

"Oh, not now," Mrs. De Anza said impatiently. "Business makes my stomach crawl. Here." She seized an ash tray and thumped it down on the papers.

"And that settles everything," she said. "You see?"

"Not quite," I told her. "For instance, your cars really need some repair work--work I can't do myself, without the tools. Am I supposed to keep an eye on things like that?"

"Somebody should," she said. "All right, phone that garage--you were there today--tell 'em to send out and pick up

one of the cars. Or both. No, not both, we'll need one. Oh, go ahead and do what you want. Don't ask me. The more details you take care of yourself, the better I'll like it."

"Suppose I take the Buick in tomorrow and have it worked on? Not that garage, though--they do sloppy work. I'll find a good one."

"Fine," she said. "Nita, where's my snake?" Benita had come in. She was carrying a small brown pottery bowl, carefully, and she took it to De Anza, who was back in his chair, and set it down on the armrest, beside the silver-mounted revolver. De Anza, busy with the box on his knees, nodded. The carpet was back over the safe, I saw. Benita

pointed to the radio console. Underneath it I could make out a mounded, soft-looking heap of scales.

"Well, that's all right then," Mrs. De Anza said. She went to the radio, squatted down, and began whistling softly at the snake.

"Get some more brandy if you want it, Nick," the Count told me.

"No, thanks. I've had enough."

I went over and sat in the other Monterey chair, lighting a Lucky. De Anza drew out his case and I held the match for one of his trick cigarettes. It couldn't smell up the place any more, I thought; the odor had already moved in for the night.

The long box in De Anza's lap held

layers of cotton, and he was unpacking little beads and dropping them in the brown bowl, which was half full of what looked like water. De Anza nodded at it, and I bent forward. A faint flowery fragrance rose from the bowl. At the bottom were a lot of colored beads.

"See if you can detect any difference between the jades," De Anza suggested. "Shut your eyes and try it."

"All right," I said, dipping my fingers into the water. It was lukewarm. I rolled a few of the beads between my fingers, but they all felt alike to me. Shaking my head at De Anza, I sat back in my chair.

He dropped a few more beads in the bowl and laid the box aside. Then, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, he fished

for a bead, picked up a green one, and rolled it back and forth. Through the water his fingers looked queer, as though they'd been broken.

"Emerald green," he said. "I think Peruvian." He dropped it and got another.

"Black."

He tried again.

"White, the mutton-fat jade . . . Emerald green again, but Burmese. No, Mogaung. I can't tell."

"It's emerald green, all right," I said. "Do the different colors really feel different?"

"Yellow jade . . . yes, of course, Nick. Someone with an ear for music and enough training can name any note

he hears. Jade is no different. It appeals to a different sense, that's all. That snake, now--" he moved his head toward the Countess, who was sitting on the couch playing with the king snake, "it would easily differentiate between jades, better than any human, by using its tongue. However, snakes have other gratifications." He smiled and began playing with the beads in the bowl again.

"And it frees my mind," he said, after a moment. "It stabilizes my thoughts. Any semiautomatic routine will do that. Or music. That reminds me, Nick. I have two errands I'd like you to do in Phoenix tomorrow."

"I'll do them. What?"

"Some records I ordered have

arrived. And I want some prescriptions refilled. Do you have a pencil? These are the addresses." He dictated them.

"The pharmacist has my prescriptions on file; he'll know what I want."

"Okay. Is that all?"

The Count nodded.

"Phoenix!" he said. He snapped the cigarette butt out of the jade holder and crushed it firmly in the ash tray.

"It looked like a nice town," I said.

"With human beings in it," he said. "I distrust and dislike human beings. I prefer my own resources."

"Well--then you're living in the right place. Except you can't get away from people completely."

"The Countess, and Benita and Rafael,

I know very thoroughly. Nothing they might do would be unpredictable to me. But I don't wish to live near potential mobs. The people, sir, is a great beast." I raised my eyebrows at him.

"I saw it in Barcelona," he said. "I saw it in Amritsar in nineteen nineteen. I saw it in Peiping in nineteen thirty-seven."

"Wars?"

". . . Violence."

He closed his eyes and took a long drag of his cigarette. His carefully rouged cheeks looked a little pinker.

"A savage race that hoard and sleep and feed," he said, still with his eyes shut. "Jade is better."

His fingers dipped into the bowl

beside him.

I sat there, the queer, greasy smell of that smoke in my nose and throat, watching the slow, unpleasant motion of the snake around Mrs. De Anza's skinny neck.

"Yü," the Count said softly. "It means jade. And it means the five cardinal virtues, too. You won't find those in a growing civilization. Only in a mature one, where there's time for charity, modesty, courage, justice and wisdom--yü. I know one such place. It's on the Tibetan border, a little village on a lake. I lived there once for three years. I should like to go back. Some day I shall."

He glanced toward Mrs. De Anza.

"Bhutan--an exotic name. An exotic place. But so is this--the American desert. And--" he fingered the beads.

"White jade from Yünnan. Green jade from Mexico. Yü-chi, feits'ui, imperial jade."

"You'll never go anywhere," Mrs. De Anza said, sitting there with the snake moving gently against her throat. "You've found your wasteland, Brother Lawrence. You'll stay here tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. How long has it been since you went out of this house, anyhow? A year? Pretty soon you'll take root."

"Perhaps," he said calmly. "But I'll live longer."

"Me for the fleshpots," she said.

"Tomorrow, the world. Phoenix!" He smiled and shrugged.

"As you like. But I should think you'd prefer to rest, after such a long trip." She stared at him.

"Who said it was a long trip?"

"No one. But you were tired when you got back."

"Maybe I walked," she said. "Try working it out with a slide rule. I'm not going to tell you where I've been." She yawned. "Oh, I guess I'll buy a lot of clothes tomorrow. Then what about New Orleans? After all, I haven't seen Mardi Gras for years. Or the Cinco de Mayo, for that matter." The Count began to finger his jade beads again.

"You're a Californian, Nick?"

"That's right."

"What made you decide to emigrate?"

"Everybody and his wife are moving in. I figured I'd have a better chance somewhere else."

"Like Arizona, you mean?"

"Arizona, New York, it doesn't matter. I don't have any home. The desert suits me all right."

"Oh? It's a bloodless place." He turned the dark lenses on me. "It's a good country for bloodless people, I suppose."

"Leo, will you stop playing with that jade?" Mrs. De Anza asked abruptly. "I can't concentrate."

"May I help you?" he said, with a kind of smooth mockery. "What word ..." She

was writing down a letter, but the pencil point snapped, and she said sharply, "Just put the jade away, Leo, if you please."

"Soon, my dear."

"God damn it, Leo, I can't concentrate!"

He took the cigarette out of his holder, put it into the ash tray, and ground out the coal slowly. He kept on till the cigarette was mashed flat. Then he said, "Of course, Irene. But I find jade especially relaxing tonight."

"Can't you relax somewhere else? Or read a book?"

"I practically had to use clairvoyance to read Nick's letters of recommendation," he said, and put up his

hand toward his dark glasses. The Countess watched him.

"Good night, Leo," she said.

De Anza lowered his arm. He was smiling, but that didn't mean anything. He stood up, took the bowl and the towel with his silver-mounted gun wrapped up in it, nodded slightly to me, and went out of the room. I sat there, feeling uncomfortable. The Countess ignored me. Finally I went over to one of the bookcases, picked out *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, and settled down to read that, figuring that not everything that went on in this house was my business.

Mrs. De Anza finished her crosswords and said good night a little after twelve, so I went to bed too, in the

room Rafael had showed me, after a stopover in the patio to get some fresh air into my lungs. I pulled off my clothes, got into bed, and lay there, waiting for sleep. I couldn't sleep. All I could think of was Sherry.

I told myself: You can see her tomorrow. Relax. Forget about it for now. It'll only be a few hours. You can wait that long, can't you?

After a while I knew that I couldn't.

I got up and dressed in the moonlight. I let myself out quietly. There weren't any lights on in the house that I could see. I walked around to the outside of the U, where the garage was, and stood there, looking in at the two cars, thinking it over. I turned around and there was the

driveway, slanting down over the crest of the hill and meeting the highway some place down below, where I couldn't see it. The highway itself was dead black in that queer, watery brightness that lay over everything. The Buick was pointed the right way. I checked up and saw there was plenty of gas. Then I reached in, released the emergency, and shoved, bracing my foot against a joist in the wall. The car started to move. I pushed harder. It rolled out of the garage and started down the slope. I jumped in, leaving the door open, and got my hands on the steering wheel. I just coasted, guiding the big car down the driveway, glancing at the rear-view mirror to see if any lights showed in the house. I was

beginning to coast pretty fast, so I clicked on the ignition, pulled out the choke halfway, and slipped the gearshift into high, keeping the clutch pressed down to the floor boards. In that bright moonlight, it was easy to steer; I didn't need lights. When I looked at the mirror again, the rise of the hill hid the De Anza place.

I was going fast when I made the turn to the highway, but the grade was still with me, so I kept on for a quarter mile before I let out the clutch and used my headlights. Right away I started listening to the motor. It was good, but it could have sounded better; somebody had driven the devil out of it. Still, it would get me into Phoenix and back without

any trouble. I warmed it up for a while and then gave her the gun.

8.

I PARKED NEAR THE GREEN LANTERN, got out of the car, and started walking toward the bar. Before I got there, the neon signs blinked out. The Venetian blinds were turned so I couldn't see in, but there was a light inside. Both doors were closed. I tried the latch of the bar door; it was locked.

Okay. I knew where Sherry lived, now. She wouldn't be asleep yet, if the bar was just closing. I started to walk back to the car. As I reached it, a voice behind me said, "Hi, Mac."

Footsteps sounded hollow on cement. I turned around. A man was coming

toward me, cupping his hands around a match flame so I couldn't see his face very well. Then he stopped in front of me, lowering the match so the flame hung there between us, lighting his face. His pale blue eyes looked at me, squinting a little, the loose mouth drawn down, the cigarette hanging from one corner. He was the big, buttery blond guy I'd met in the Green Lantern last night--the bartender, Ed Gavotte.

He looked me over carefully. His breath smelled stronger than ever. His eyes would have been red, white, and blue, if there'd been enough white left to show.

"Nick," he said. "Nick Banning. That's right, eh? I got a good memory. What do

you say, Nick?"

"Looks like I missed the boat. Closing up?"

He studied me.

"I got to talk to you, Nick," he said.
"Can you spare some time?"

"Tomorrow do?"

"What you need is a drink. That's what I need, too. Suppose we have a little talk now, and then everything'll be settled. Do it the easy way. Sherry--I got to look out for Sherry."

"What about Sherry?"

"I thought you were Mac," he said.
"That bastard McElroy. You don't know about him, though, do you?"

He drew in on his cigarette. The red glow lit up his face. He was crying.

"Jesus, Nick," he said. "Don't do this to me, will you?"

"Do what?"

"I'm no dope. You're the guy Sherry used to be married to. I had the angles figured right from the start, don't fool yourself about that. Only I never bothered to check up. If I'd wanted to, I could of made Sherry spill it before now." He looked at me hard, trying to sell me the idea that he'd been a smart apple all along. Then his face crumpled. "Nick, what the hell do you want to come back for? Didn't you make trouble enough? She's not in love with you. She's in love with me."

"What's the tie-in?" I said. "You and Sherry?" He was off on another track.

"I'm a nice guy," he said. "Sure I am. Good old dependable Ed. Nice, helpful guy. You can always depend on Ed. Like a big brother. Even in bed they treat me like that. Oh, hell. Sherry isn't in love with me. But she's going to be, sometime. Business, she said. A straight business deal. When it's finished, no hard feelings either way. I said okay. She was straight, even when Mac came along. God-damned orchids. I want a drink. Some nights I come down here and just stay. She's a fine girl, a swell girl, but it doesn't mean a damn thing to her. You think I like that? I come down here and drink. I got me a bar. Nobody can--" He broke off impatiently. "Well, are you coming in and have a drink with

me? I want to straighten this out."

"I guess so."

He got a key out of his pocket, opened the bar door, and reached in. Lights came on. He backed up.

"Go ahead, Nick."

I did. Gavotte followed me, shutting the door behind him. The Venetian blinds were angled so that nobody could see in from the street.

"Down to the end. That last stool. I keep my own liquor there."

"You're calling them," I said, and did what he wanted. I sat down on the last stool, bracing my heels on the metal footrest, and Gavotte circled around me, lifted the hinged flap at the end of the bar, and let it bang down. He stood there

for a while, looking at me across the mahogany barrier, his pink face twisted, his mouth drawn down.

"It's that bastard's fault," he said. "I got nothing against you, Nick. Nothing personal. That guy McElroy--I'd of killed him. If he'd--my God, Nick, he's the skunk that's causing the trouble." He shook his head vaguely. "Crazy business. Here."

He set a three-quarter-empty fifth of Old Crow on the bar, poured drinks and slid a shot glass toward me.

"You going east tomorrow?"

"Why not?"

"You know why not. Don't try to bull me about what happened last night. Don't you suppose I know the score? It's been

like that all along. I don't mean a thing to Sherry--I'm a man, don't kid yourself about that, but with a girl like Sherry--hell! It don't mean anything to her. She's nice, she tries to be nice, but you can't fool a man about that. Not if he's in love with the girl."

"She's living with you."

"Yeah, she's living with me. She's having it better than with you, too. I don't know what happened between you, but a girl don't get a divorce when she likes things the way they are. When I met her, she was making peanuts. You didn't give a damn. You never even looked her up to see she was all right."

"I--okay."

"I don't know what happened between

you, but I see as far as the end of my nose. Things Sherry's said. And then the minute you walked in here last night, I had you tabbed. I've seen too many like you across the bar." I didn't say anything, and he showed me his teeth.

"Sherry don't mean a thing to you," he said. I still didn't answer him.

"A man's got a right to expect a few things. What the hell did you ever do for her? I been good to Sherry. I played it straight with her, all down the line. I got a right to expect her to keep her pants on when a guy like you comes sniffing around. You want two bucks for a lay, I'll give it to you." I looked at him.

"You poor bastard," I said.

He shrugged and poured more whisky.

"I'll tell you one thing that's as true as I'm standing here. You're no good to Sherry."

"You are, though."

"The books balance, anyway. I've played it square with Sherry since we started. Because I liked her, from the beginning. That's why I played it straight. I liked her a lot. I only met her a few times at parties, but she was ... I liked her. She was working in a hash-house. That was in 'Frisco. It's a tough job, slinging hash. I ... kept seeing her. It was a vacation for me, see? Day before I had to come back here, I laid it on the line. Yes or no, I didn't put any pressure on. I wouldn't of. I told her straight what I wanted, and she could take it or leave

it."

"So she took it."

"Yeah, she took it. But--" he shook his head like a bear, "she's scared of marriage. I guess you'd know more about that than me." He scowled.

"Another thing--she's just plain scared. You know anything about that?" I drank my whisky and pushed my glass over. Gavotte refilled it, and his own, under the bar, his mouth moving. He tossed the drink down.

"Good old Ed," he said bitterly. "Nice, easygoing Ed. I never had a woman that gave a good goddam about me. For a while, maybe, until Mr. Right came along. Then it was always--Ed, it's been swell, but you understand. You're

such a swell guy."

He showed me his teeth. "Yeah. Sure. What is it I don't have? You tell me. Why does Sherry run after you the minute you snap your fingers?" I didn't answer.

"I don't know," he said. "It's better than Mac, or maybe it isn't. With him, it's dough. Do you know what that bastard does? Every night or so he sends Sherry an orchid, with a card. There isn't a damn thing on that card but a price. Every time it goes higher. What do you think about a guy like that?"

"Who does he think he is?"

"He's got dough. I think he's crazy as a bedbug. First off, he didn't care, one way or another. Only when Sherry turned him

down, that set him off. I heard things about McElroy. He's like a kid, he's got to have his own way. And--I don't know. All he wants is to sleep with her once. There's something funny about it. The way he acts toward her." He brought up a box from under the bar, opened it, and took out the brown orchid. It must have been on ice, or another one, for it wasn't wilted. He started picking it apart.

"Sherry's straight. She likes dough, she's saving--I told you about that. Only it isn't just the money with her. It'll help her get what she wants. There was a while when I thought she might give in to McElroy. But then he kept on raising his price, and she got mad. I know damn well that he could have had her then, if

he'd even tipped his hat or said please. But he's a funny jerk, it's like he's got to buy her on a package deal, and he won't have it any other way. Sherry isn't taking that. She'd feel like a--well, you know. McElroy's a crazy bastard, but he isn't going to keep on sending these orchids forever. There's some price where it won't be worth it to him and then he'll stop."

He closed his hand on the ruined orchid.

"If she took his dough," he said, "she could maybe get that band spot now, if the publicity worked out okay. Anyway, she'd be a lot closer to it. I keep thinking I ought to give her the money, back her--make it a percentage deal, if she wants it

business. But I can't do that. She'd go right away, then. She might say no, but that's how it'd work out. If she stays around just a while longer, maybe she'll get to liking me enough to--but if she finds out I've--"

He started to cry again. I looked at my glass.

"What is it I haven't got?" he asked me. "It isn't my face. I've seen guys with faces that would stop a clock walk off with swell girls. So I was worried about McElroy. I ought to have worried about you. You come along, looking like a tramp, and Sherry right away starts saying, good old Ed, he'll understand, he'll be nice."

A plump hand moved across the bar

and took my glass.

I said, "Pretty tough."

He didn't even hear me.

"It isn't what you've got. It's what I haven't got. I don't know what it is. Maybe I'm too nice. Maybe I treat 'em too good. It's like cooking somebody swell meals, only without anything to drink. Then somebody else turns up with a bottle in his pocket. A bottle of what, Nick? What is it?"

"I don't know."

"Sherry's in love with you."

"Think so?"

He pushed the refilled glass at me. "You had your chance. Nick, please, don't stick around. Play it square, will you? Sherry was starting to like me. You

don't need her, you can get all the women you want. With me, I've got to do it the hard way. With me it takes a long time. Only once it clicks, maybe it'll stay that way. Get out of here. Don't come back. Don't write her. Give me a chance."

He was still crying. My mouth felt stiff.

"I told you I was heading east."

"But you changed your mind. Didn't you? You said that before you took Sherry out. You didn't just talk to her last night. You're a liar. I can tell that by looking at you. You figure on staying right here in Phoenix."

". . . No."

"She won't go away with you. She

hasn't got a cent. I don't know what she told you, but she hasn't got a red cent. She can't go anywhere without any dough, can she? Tell me that."

I didn't say anything. He leaned forward, his eyes blurry.

"Can she?" he insisted.

"Why ask me?" I said.

"Everybody should have a chance," he said. "Me. You. Everybody. You give me a chance and I'll do the same for you. Listen. Are you going to get the hell out of Phoenix? Are you going east? Or--"

I looked at his red, swimming eyes and his fat face, and what I felt must have showed. I didn't need to say anything. Gavotte's mouth twitched. He hesitated, weighed his drink in his hand,

and tossed it off. Breathing hard, he watched me. Then he pointed to my glass.

I drank the whisky. That was my mistake.

Something red-hot and tight as a vise grabbed my stomach and squeezed. I heard my breath groan out. I doubled up so fast my forehead hit the bar. My fists slammed against my middle. All I could feel was the griping pain. Then it was like spinning down inside a whirlpool. It was like a knockout punch. Some thoughts seemed to be floating past me, outside my head. I was thinking them, but they didn't have anything to do with me. The bastard's given me a Mickey. I hope to God it's only a Mickey. The pain kept

me clamped jackknifed against the bar, and then there was a voice.

"Got to get you out of here," I heard Gavotte say. "The hell with McElroy. You're the guy."

I heard his footsteps, and I put my hand against the bar and shoved hard. My legs remembered how to work by themselves; I wasn't telling them what to do. They carried me across the floor till I bounced off the wall. I tried to straighten up. I couldn't, but I managed to lift my head. My teeth felt cold as I breathed.

Gavotte, holding the Old Crow bottle clubbed, was coming toward me, not too steadily. He had his face screwed up like a crying baby's.

"You'll go east," he said thickly. "You'll go east in a freight car." The bottle came down, clubbed, on my back. He hit me almost blindly, not really aiming, just putting all the power he had in the blow. I lurched forward a step, nearly going over on my face. The griping pain in my belly clenched with this new pain around my kidneys.

"You're gonna wake up in a freight car," he mumbled. "Maybe you'll think you ought to come back here. But you won't feel good enough to try it. Not when I get finished with you. Maybe you won't be able to walk. Maybe you'll have a broken leg. When I get through, you won't dare come back here, God damn you. I haven't got it. I haven't got it."

The minute you--" He was crazy drunk enough to kill me without knowing it. I saw that. I was scared. There wasn't a thing I could do, with that fast-action Mickey holding me bent over, paralyzed with pain.

"God damn you," he said, and suddenly reached out and broke the bottle against the edge of the nearest booth partition. I couldn't straighten up, even when I saw the jagged glass coming toward my face as hard as Gavotte could swing it. I got out of the way somehow, with that awful cramp tearing the guts out of me, and the knife-edges whipped past my eyes. All I could see was Gavotte's white, creased shirt, stretched tight over his fat middle where

his coat hung open. By luck all my weight was on my right foot and my elbow was crooked and my fist doubled up, pressing hard against my belly. Things went into slow motion. I couldn't see what Gavotte was doing. All I could see was that big white shirt, bulging out and moving a little like a cloud, just as slow.

I watched my fist sail forward and sink into the white shirt. It was all still slow, slow as a cloud moving, and not even as real. The only real thing was the pain. I couldn't straighten up at all. Gavotte suddenly began bowing to me; I kept seeing more and more of the shirt till I found I was looking at the top of his head. The shiny yellow hair was messed

up in wiry strands, and there was a bald spot on the crown, pink and fuzzy. I couldn't see the bottle, but I hadn't heard it hit the floor. I could just see the edge of a roll of fat bulging over the side of his collar. I had to stop him. There was one way I might do it, but it would hurt like hell. I'd have to straighten up a little. It would feel like tearing my own flesh, I knew. But even that would be a relief. For I couldn't stand the pain any more unless it got better or worse. It didn't matter which, as long as it didn't stay as it was. I kept my left hand pressed hard on my belt, and twisted myself up till I was bent over to the left. My other arm went up at the same time. I hadn't done this for a long while. But my body

remembered. My elbow remembered to stay bent. My thumb remembered to stay stuck out. The pain was so bad now it couldn't get any worse. It was a crescent-shaped pain, like a quarter-moon, with one point running way up into my armpit. I struck down as hard as I could.

I couldn't feel his flesh at all, only the jarring shock that jolted up my arm to the elbow and paused and then the skin on the edge of my hand began to feel prickly, like pins-and-needles. I heard my own breath go out like a shouted grunt; Gavotte's breath snorted through his nose. I folded up, squeezing my eyes shut, clamping my fists against the pain, grinning and not caring what happened

next.

I lay down on the floor and stayed there for a while.

When the worst of the pain was over, I noticed Gavotte lying not very far away, on his side, facing me. He had one arm under him, and the other bent out, like an animal's paw, the fingers curled. His blue eyes looked out of focus. His mouth hung sideways.

I was breathing hard and sweating. I got up carefully, waiting for a streak of the pain to dig into me. It didn't. I kicked Gavotte gently in the chest. He didn't move. I went over behind the bar, saw a familiar label among the bottles lined up under the mirror, and drank whisky without bothering about a glass. First it

wasn't so good, then it helped.

I figured the worst was over.

I went back to Gavotte. The broken fifth was on the floor beside him, and I kicked it away. I crouched down and put my thumb in his eye socket and pushed. He didn't even groan. And when the nerve that runs up under the socket is pushed, only a dead man doesn't move.

His head rolled, though. I'd broken his neck.

I found out I was swaying. The barroom was rocking gently, turning a little, back and forth. I couldn't find the bar for a second or two. Then I located it, stumbled a few steps, and hung on to it. I was weaker than I'd known. There were shooting pains zigzagging through

my stomach, and now that the bar was holding me up, I didn't feel sure I could stand up by myself, if I tried. But I had to try. The only trouble was, I couldn't think quite straight. My mind seemed greased. I couldn't hang on to any ideas. There was one idea I had to hang on to. What the hell was it? Suppose I passed out? That was it. Suppose I dropped, right now? The police . . . I let go of the bar. It wasn't so bad. But I still couldn't hang on to my thoughts. So I didn't bother. I decided that I couldn't stay on my feet by arguing with myself. If I passed out, it would be because I couldn't help it. I stopped trying to think. I just let go of my mind, the way I'd let go of the bar, and started moving, not

trying to plan ahead, just--watching myself. Kept moving.

Part of my mind stopped working and another part started. I watched myself pull a handkerchief out of my pants pocket, and wipe clean the bottle I'd drunk out of and put it back among the others. I looked at my hands while they took up the jigger glass I'd used, polished it, and let it fall in the tank of soapy water behind the sink. I heard it clink softly on other glasses down there. I saw my right hand, with the handkerchief wrapped around it, press down on the light switch at the front of the bar. My hand opened the door, let me out, and closed the door behind me. The street was empty, though I thought I

could hear footfalls a long distance away.

I got in the Buick and started the motor. I drove west. I didn't pay much attention to where I was going.

But the dizziness kept coming back. I nearly went off the road a couple of times, and once I came within an ace of ramming something big--a track or a bus. At last I didn't even feel I was driving a car. I pulled off the road. I guess I passed out.

The next thing I knew I was looking up at the stars through the windshield. My neck was stiff. I was curled up on the seat, and I hadn't any idea how long I'd been there. I felt a good deal better, but I still couldn't think straight, though

the dizziness was gone except for a few mild spells. The confusion wasn't.

I thought: Nobody would believe me. And one idea kept hammering at me: Get back to the De Anza ranch. With any luck, nobody there had missed me. I started the motor and eased back onto the highway. Now all I had to do was keep going.

I thought: Why should anybody ever know?

A gray light was starting to show in the sky behind me. Pretty soon I passed a roadside shack on the left; it had an EAT sign on top of it and a gas pump in front.

Forget it.

This was the right answer, somehow. The part of my mind that was working

told me that. And the other part was beginning to wake up now, too. Forget about it.

9.

I WENT UP THE DRIVEWAY WITHOUT lights, cutting the engine down till it had just enough power to make the grade, and even then the purring sounded loud enough to wake everybody within five miles of it. My throat got tighter and tighter till I climbed high enough to see the house. There weren't any lights on.

I eased the Buick into the garage, swinging around and backing so it was headed out, the way it had been before, and then I switched off the motor and listened to the silence roaring.

That didn't help.

Finally I got out of the car and walked around the U into the patio. The door was still open, the way I'd left it. I tried to move quietly, but I could hear my joints cracking as I walked.

When I was back in my bedroom, I stood there in the dark for a long time, just listening. I didn't hear a sound until some animal started wailing, very far away. But there wasn't any nearer noise than that. I took off my clothes and slipped between the sheets.

Then I started to think again.

Just how smart was I really being?

But how else could I have played it? Gavotte was dead, wasn't he? I'd killed him, hadn't I?

Yes. In self-defense.

Try to prove that.

But maybe I could have proved it. Suppose I hadn't got panicky and run out? Suppose I'd phoned a hospital right away? They might have used a stomach pump on me and proved Gavotte had served me a Mickey. It wasn't a Mickey, though--not chloral hydrate. It was something else Gavotte had handed me. There was only one thing I'd ever heard of that could hit me the way that drink had. A medical student I used to drink with told me about it once. I remembered it now for the first time, and suddenly started to sweat. If I'd thought of it before, I guess I'd have headed for the nearest hospital. Because it could

have been cyanide--a damn short shot, but cyanide.

Only I didn't think Gavotte had intended to kill me. In a way, his coming at me with that broken bottle proved that. He'd wanted to mark me up and let me live. You don't use a broken bottle on a corpse. But cyanide is something only a crazy man would slip in somebody's drink, unless he was playing for keeps. Because only an expert can tell exactly how little of the stuff to use, and no expert would take the chance. But a crazy bastard like Gavotte might have.

If it had been cyanide, then I couldn't prove a thing. For, the way I'd heard, the only time cyanide leaves traces is when it kills somebody. If you get a small

enough dose, and keep on living, there's no trace at all. A stomach pump wouldn't show a thing now. But if I'd phoned a hospital from Gavotte's bar, then maybe .

..

Too late now. Unless I wanted to drive into Phoenix tonight and turn myself in. And if I did that, they might not send me to the gas chamber, but suppose they called it second degree homicide or manslaughter? After all, Gavotte owned a business and I was a tramp, technically speaking. Unless you've got good clothes, a job, and some dough in the bank, you're walking on the edge of the curb, all the time. All it takes is one push. In civilian life, it's the same as the Army, except different people are

on top sometimes. But when you see brass, you salute. And when brass gives an order, you obey it. There's something called the Articles of War, and we've got it in peacetime, and we've always had it, only it's never been written down and made into a law. The brass wins. You can carry an appeal to any court you want, and you'll still lose. Either you're an officer or you're not, that's all there is to it. If you've got enough stripes on your sleeve, that helps, but if you haven't got any stripes at all, you salute fast. Gavotte was no officer, but he had the stripes. His rating was a lot higher than mine. He owned a business. He had some dough. He wasn't a floater. He'd been lucky, and I hadn't.

One thing, the De Anzas were brass. They had money. I felt safer right here, in their house, than I'd have felt anywhere else. They were on top, because they were lucky, and some of that luck might stick to me, if I played it right.

I decided that I'd been smart, after all. The chances were I might not even be connected with Gavotte's death, but if the Homicide Bureau did get interested in me, they'd figure they knew what it meant if I'd run away. Nobody knew I was at the De Anza place. Suppose I stayed here? I could hide out . . .

Why the hell should I even hide out? There wasn't any proof. Any panhandler could have walked into the Green

Lantern, got in an argument with Gavotte, and slugged him. Nobody had seen us together. I tried to figure ahead. Suppose I should drop in on Sherry? That needn't be suspicious. I'd just changed my mind about going on east. I'd run into a chance at a good job here, so I'd taken it. Even a cop wouldn't wonder too much about that--Sherry used to be my wife. Naturally I'd look her up again. It'd smell worse if I stayed on near Phoenix and didn't see her. Then there was McElroy, Ted McElroy. With Gavotte dead, Sherry would probably be at loose ends. This was my chance to get her back. And I'd better not waste time, with that millionaire playboy tossing orchids around. What I'd have to do was

take it easy. Just wipe Gavotte out of my mind. I told myself I hadn't seen Gavotte since I'd left the Green Lantern that first time Monday night.

Forget about it and act as if it hadn't happened at all. That was the only safe way. Watch the newspapers, though. If I saw something about Gavotte being killed, then it would be natural for me to remember I'd met him, think about Sherry, and go to see her.

Or would it?

I decided to answer that later.

I rolled over in the bed and shut my eyes.

Then it was morning.

* * *

Ten o'clock was morning to the De

Anza house. I got out of bed wondering how I'd feel. My stomach was still sore, and once or twice I felt a little cramping pain, but I knew the worst was over. Whatever Gavotte had given me, from here on I decided I could ignore it. I didn't see myself going to a doctor now. I was a little weak, maybe, but that was all. I decided not to think about some things for a while.

By the time I'd showered, shaved and dressed, Benita had had time to make coffee, and when I got to the kitchen, Rafael was eating corn flakes and puffing at a cigarette at the same time. It was a Camel, though, not perfumed.

I said hello. Benita nodded shortly; Rafael beamed. "Swell day, Nick,

Gonna be hot. Sit down, have some coffee. You want breakfast?"

"How about it, Nita," I asked, "is Mrs. De Anza up yet?" She shook her head.

Rafael said, "She don't care if you eat with her or don't. Don't care 'bout nothing. You hungry?"

"Sure."

"Then you eat. Here." He kicked back a chair with his foot, and spoke quick Spanish to Benita, who set a cup of coffee in front of me.

"Thanks, Nita," I said. "I'm driving Mrs. De Anza into Phoenix today, to do some shopping. If you need anything, let me know." The zircon eyes touched me and moved away again. One shoulder lifted. I drank coffee

"You get the job, then?" Rafe asked.

"I guess so. I'm on trial."

"That don't mean nothing. They don't care. Veence, he quit--they no fire him. Easygoing, all time."

"What did he quit for?"

"Maybe he got bored. Veence couldn't take it easy. He say to me, 'Goddam, Rafe, nothing ever happen out here.' I tell him, 'Sure, that's fine thing, no?

Mean nothing bad happen.' No?"

"Nothing good either, though, eh?"

"Just nothing," he said. "It's the desert. Not bad, not good. Just take it easy. You get me some Camels in town, Nick?"

"Carton? Okay. Anything else?"

"No, guess not. I get everything yesterday."

"How about the spare on the Buick?" I asked. "Is it fixed yet?"

"No."

"Well, I'll do it this morning. How many spares are there, anyway?"

"Used to be two, now one. I run three miles on flat. The tire . . . not so good."

"I guess not."

Benita put a plate of eggs and ham in front of me, and a slip of paper with a short grocery list.

"Want me to get these?" I asked her.

She nodded, already back at the stove.

"This all?"

She nodded again.

"Servidor," I said, and Rafael giggled.

"Where you learn to talk Spanish?" he asked.

"Oh, around. Why, is it that bad?"

" 'Bout like my English, I guess," he said.

I began on the eggs. "Mrs. De Anza wants me to write some letters for her," I told him. "Is there a typewriter around somewhere?"

"Sure. I show you. No hurry. They never hurry 'bout nothing." Benita said something. Rafael shrugged.

"What's she going to town for?" he asked me. "You said shopping?"

"Yeah. Clothes, I think. First she wanted me to buy her some fashion magazines."

There was a rapid outburst of Spanish between them, with much hand waving. I thought Benita won; at any rate, she

made a dramatic gesture and turned her back on Rafael, who kept on talking for a while and then, finding Benita paid no attention, stopped.

"Got the morning paper?" I asked.

"We don't get no paper," Rafael said.

"Well, I might as well get busy. It's nearly eleven. Want to show me where the typewriter is? Then I can fix that tire afterward."

"Sure, Nick. Come on."

We got up. I thanked Benita for the breakfast, but she didn't care.

* * *

The typewriter was in fair shape, considering, though it needed a new platen. The one on it was hard as a rock. I made a note to get one in town, and a

ribbon. After that, I went out to the garage and worked on the blowout. The tube was a mess. I found an old one hanging on a nail and made that do. I went over the motor, too, and found some bugs. The plugs needed cleaning and one of them was cracked. The oil was dirty. The fan belt was loose, but so old I thought I'd better get a new one--two new ones, one for a spare. After all, this was the desert. I crawled around under the car awhile with a flashlight, having thoughtfully put on my old clothes first, and I was ready to start on the Chevvy when I remembered those bills and letters.

I cleaned up and started to work on those. Callahan--or somebody--had

made one of the rooms into an office, with a desk in it. There was paper, envelopes, pencils, everything I needed. In one of the drawers I found a new typewriter ribbon, so I put it on the machine. In another drawer I found a box of the Count's special cigarettes, half empty. I tore one cigarette apart and looked at the tobacco. It was yellowish, and the odor stayed on my hand.

That didn't get my work done, so I got busy with the typewriter. I went through the Countess's stuff carefully, writing checks and clipping them to envelopes I addressed. Then I answered some of the letters, the ones that made sense. Business stuff, mostly, routine. Finally I put a few aside to ask Mrs. De Anza

about, and that was that.

When I tried to ask her about them, she said to let 'em wait. De Anza would sign the checks later; there wasn't any hurry, was there? What about starting for Phoenix?

The Count wasn't up yet. It was two o'clock. Mrs. De Anza wore a tight blue turban, as usual, and a lot of costume jewelry with blue stones, but she didn't look so much like a ragpicker today. She had on a white blouse and a sort of gabardine suit. Her eyes had a little more life in them, but not much.

* * *

I brought the Buick around, and she climbed into the front seat beside me. Then she settled back, shut her eyes, and

went to sleep. Or hibernated. At any rate, she didn't wake up even when I pulled into the combination lunch wagon and gas station I'd stopped at a couple of days before. It was hotter than ever. I had to let air out of the tires. But I inflated the spare, with a few pounds more than it called for, and then relaxed, feeling relieved that we hadn't had a blowout or puncture before I'd got the spare ready. The old man came shuffling out of his shack, worked his mouth at me, and said hello, there, it was a hot day.

I told him it was and I could use some gas. The oil was high enough, and since I was going to have it drained anyway, there was no use bothering. A little

white dog rushed around the house, barking shrilly, and then lay down in the shade and panted.

"Looks like you got yourself a job chauffeuring," the old man told me, while he fed gas into the tank.

"I got me a job," I said, and shut up, because I didn't know whether or not Mrs. De Anza was really asleep.

"With them, uh?" he asked, jerking his thumb at the Countess. I nodded.

"Maybe you'll get them cars fixed up," he said. "That last fella didn't even know how to drain the radiator. Afraid he'd get his hands dirty. So you'll be around for a while now, eh?"

"Looks like it."

"Three-fifty even," he said, hooking

the hose back on the tank. "Well, my name's Hamilton. Walt Hamilton."

"I'm Nick Banning."

We tried to exchange money and shake hands at the same time. A dollar bill fluttered off, and the little white dog woke up, barked, and chased it out toward the road. Then she stopped, looked to right and left carefully, and, seeing the highway was clear, ran after the bill and snapped it up.

"She'll bring it back," Hamilton said, when I started to go after the dog.

"Watch and see."

She brought it back, all right. Hamilton took it out of her mouth, rubbed her ears, and grinned at me.

"Smart dog," I said.

"That's the truth. Betsy's smart. She's good on keeping snakes away. She can kill a rattler; maybe you wouldn't believe it, but I've seen her do it. She waits till she can jump in and grab its neck, right behind the head." I bent down and scratched the base of Betsy's spine. The stub tail snapped back and forth like a wigwag. She draped her pink tongue over her teeth and panted.

"Lots of rattlers here?" I asked.

"You get 'em. But they always rattle first, unless you step right on 'em. They're nothing to worry about. Thing to keep your eyes open for are cars. Eighty, ninety miles an hour, right along this highway. They don't even rattle 'fore they strike."

"Well, take it easy," I said, and got back in the car. Betsy yelped and ran away around the house. Hamilton stuck the money in his pants pocket and shuffled off. I waited till a truck had passed; then I pulled out on the road and relaxed, listening to the motor. Mrs. De Anza was still asleep. I had decided to see Sherry. There was no reason why I shouldn't look her up again, now I was working for the De Anzas. It would seem a lot more suspicious if I dodged her, under the circumstances.

Besides, I was wondering what the setup would be now, as far as she was concerned, with Gavotte dead. Gavotte had owned the Green Lantern. That probably meant Sherry would be out of a

job, and it was my fault--that was one way to look at it.

There was Ted McElroy, too. I hoped he'd drive into a truck tonight, at ninety miles an hour.

I thought about Ed Gavotte, but I couldn't feel sorry, somehow. I mean, I was sorry the thing had happened, but personally I didn't give a damn. I could still feel mad at Gavotte, for forcing the showdown. I pushed him out of my mind.

* * *

I was afraid the Countess would want me to tag along while she shopped, to carry her packages, so I'd worked out a story about how I ought to supervise the repairs on the Buick. But when we got into Phoenix, she told me to drive north

on Central and stop at the Westward Ho, which turned out to be a hotel like a desert resort--the luxury kind.

"Amuse yourself," she said. "It's too late to do much today. We'd better stay over. If I can bring myself to wake up before noon, I might be able to accomplish something, though I doubt it."

"All right," I said. "When will you want me again? I thought I'd leave the car as soon as I can find a good garage--you won't be needing it till tomorrow, will you?"

"There are taxis. You won't have to carry me piggyback. I might even walk. I've seen it done."

"Okay. When shall I show up, then?"

"I loathe making appointments," she said vaguely. "It's so difficult to keep them. Show up when you feel like it. I'll reserve a room for you here, so if I need you I can leave a note or something. I can't think of anything I'd need you for, though. If I'm going shopping tomorrow, I'll have to get in the mood. You'll find me in the Copper Bar for a while. Listen, buy me a nightgown and slippers and a comb and hairbrush and a toothbrush. Have them sent here by messenger. I may as well be comfortable."

"What sizes?"

"Twelve nightgown, seven and a half slippers. What else? I don't know. Make an appointment for me to get my hair

done tomorrow afternoon. Joyce's. It's in the phone book. Don't ask me another question. Use your own judgment. I want a drink. Good-by."

She walked rapidly toward the patio, and I sighed and drove off, trying to remember what equipment Sherry would have needed for an overnight stay. Finally I parked near a department store and got a girl clerk to help me. She picked out a batch of stuff, probably more than Mrs. De Anza could use, but it was my job to take care of details like this. After she'd asked me about the Countess's coloring, she laid out a selection of blue and green and violet nightgowns, and kept trying to make me choose one. Finally I just grabbed the

one in front of me and said that ought to do. Picking out nightgowns for Mrs. De Anza was my idea of nothing at all. I had the order sent to the Westward Ho, and, while I was in the store, started looking for what I needed. That didn't take long--a tan sport jacket, plain, a couple of pairs of slacks, a few shirts and a necktie, and some shorts and socks. I spent more time picking out shoes. I like leather, and I've done enough walking to know it's tricky to find shoes that look good and stay comfortable too. I got a pair of perfectly plain tan oxfords, good leather. They wouldn't show the dust and would be easy to clean. I was keeping my mind off my troubles, and almost enjoying myself. In the shoe department I

remembered the hairdresser, and phoned for the appointment the Countess wanted.

It was getting late, so I changed to the new stuff, had my old gear wrapped up, and took it with me out to the car. I looked and felt a lot better. The next step was to find a garage--a good one. That took me half an hour. I left the Buick, with my bundle in it, and walked around till I saw a barbershop. The sky was turning green, and street lights were beginning to go on. I relaxed in the chair for a haircut, shave, and shine. Meanwhile, I read the paper the barber gave me.

And there it was. Phoenix is only about 200,000 population, according to the Chamber of Commerce, so Gavotte's

death had made a splash. Right then, I felt myself relax. That is, there was a part of me that had been tense without knowing it, the same part that had kept me from hunting up a newspaper before this, and now it lay back and said, Okay, it's happened. It was real. Gavotte's really dead and his body's been found. The miracle hasn't happened.

So I read the article.

It didn't tell me much I didn't know already. Apparently Gavotte used to go back to the Green Lantern at night a lot, and drink, usually alone. The District Attorney or somebody said that it might have been a case of attempted robbery, since the door wasn't locked. Somebody could have walked in, tried to pull a

holdup, and got scared when Gavotte picked up a bottle for a weapon. And Gavotte could have been too drunk to defend himself in a scrap. The cash register was empty. Gavotte took the day's take home with him every night, but the holdup man couldn't have known about that. It was a theory, anyway, and I hoped the police would stick to it.

Sherry wasn't mentioned, but the Green Lantern was, by name. So that was all right. I wouldn't need to be surprised when she told me what had happened. Except--I'd have to remember--I wouldn't have any idea that she and Gavotte had been living together.

By the time the barber had finished, it

was dark. Phoenix isn't big enough to be confusing, so I had no trouble finding the Green Lantern again. I felt ready for almost anything. The only part of me that wasn't respectable was my fingernails, and I'd gone over them with a penknife. But when I walked along the street I missed something without knowing what it was. The neons, I found out. They weren't lighted, and the Green Lantern was dark, closed and locked.

I stood there, thinking it over. It was no secret that I'd driven Sherry home Monday night, so I'd naturally know where she lived. Except--I couldn't remember the street. What made it worse was that I'd left the car in the garage; I couldn't do it the easy way, driving

around till I found a familiar view.

I turned east and started walking. Every time I passed a cross-street I looked up and down it, trying to orient myself. My mind had suddenly stopped working. This began to feel like a small nightmare, walking around in a strange city trying to find somebody I had to find, while They shifted the scenery behind my back. Crazy.

I smoked the last of my cigarettes and went into a drugstore to buy another pack. There I saw a stack of papers piled up by the door, and my frozen mind started to click again, one, two, three. Sherry was living with Gavotte. So all I needed was Gavotte's address. The paper would give that. Before I could

reach for one, I remembered the telephone book. I went toward the booth at the back of the store and opened the directory on its rack. I turned to the G columns, and there it was, Edward R. Gavotte, with the address.

I didn't need to write it down.

When I bought my cigarettes, I asked the clerk where the street was, and it turned out to be only a few blocks away. I'd gone right past it. I said thanks, and cut back, hurrying now, my insteps rubbing a bit against the new shoes, where the leather wasn't broken in yet.

It was the same apartment house, all right.

I went up the steps and looked over the letter boxes. Sherry wasn't listed

under any name I recognized. Gavotte was, but how the hell could I ring that bell and then answer the question Sherry would be bound to ask--how I'd known which bell to ring.

Fine. Wonderful. Here I was, right on the doorstep, and I couldn't figure out a way to get that door opened. What was I going to do? Wait around until Sherry came out?

Don't make it too hard for yourself, I thought. Take it easy. The police aren't hiding in the letter boxes. Remember, you left Sherry here night before last, and then you drove right back to the De Anza place. Okay. Now you're back. You're looking for Sherry's name on the boxes. It isn't there. What would you do?

Ask somebody. Ask the manager.

So I did. She was one of those big, blocky women, built like an ox, with a face tomato-color and a trick of squinting like somebody trying to see through your disguise. I asked for Miss Knox, and she shook her face at me.

"You've got the wrong address. There's no Miss Knox here."

"Well, that's her professional name," I said. "Sherry--"

"Oh, Mrs. Gavotte. Sure. But she's left."

I stood there, trying to get my thoughts straightened out. The woman swung her head sidewise, a heavy slow motion that must have taken a lot of muscle, and tried to figure out who I was from that

angle.

"Do you know where I can reach her?" I said.

"You a reporter?"

"No."

"I guess you're not. They've all been here already. You know about what happened, don't you?"

"I read about it."

"Oh. Mm. Well, excuse me a minute." She retreated, and came back pretty soon holding a scrap of paper in her blue-red hand, like a gob of sour cream in borscht. "Here you are. I wrote it down. You drive about six blocks south--"

"I know where it is," I said, and went out, fast. 10.

I DIDN'T KNOW, BUT I FOUND IT,

ALL right. There was a phone number, which I decided not to bother about. Too much time had been wasted already. Somehow, now, I'd begun to feel that time was important, that I didn't have all I wanted of it stretching ahead. The apartment house when I got to it was a cut below Gavotte's, but still nice enough, and the apartment number was eight. On the letter box, that meant Miss Lillian Carlyle and Miss Rita Ferelli. I pressed the button, and when the buzzer sounded, outguessed it, got the door open, and started upstairs. Inside, it was still a nice place; they did cooking here, but not cabbage. And the halls weren't so narrow you had to turn sideways to walk through them. Number eight was well

polished brass on a brown door halfway back on the second floor. Above the brass eight was a round peephole filled in with fancy grillwork. I rang the bell. After a minute the peephole opened and a black eye with mascara on the lashes looked out at me inquiringly.

"Sherry there?" I asked. "I'm Nick Banning." A voice said, "Oh, oh," and the eye got wider.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Where's Sherry?"

"Wait a sec," the voice said. The peephole closed. I waited. I could hear muffled voices from inside, one protesting and arguing, the other too low to catch much of. Then the peephole opened again and the eye inspected me.

"Look," the voice that went with it said, a little nervously. "This is going to sound crazy, but don't blame me. I'm just the mouthpiece. Sherry's here. But she says she won't come out. She says not to let you in. She says if you want to talk to her, we've got a telephone in here. Call her up. That's what she says."

I looked at the round hole, the grill and the eye without saying anything.

"That's what she says," the voice repeated. "Don't blame me."

"I won't," I said.

"So?"

I took a deep breath. "Okay," I said.

I turned around and went downstairs without looking back. I could feel the black eye boring between my shoulder

blades all the way.

* * *

The telephone booth was full of cigarette smoke from the fellow before me. I fanned it out as I dialed the number listed under Rita Ferelli. Sherry's voice answered on the first ring. She sounded very calm.

"What's the idea, anyhow?" I said.

"What are you doing in Phoenix, Nick?"

That stopped me. I waited a second or two.

"I got a job," I told her. "Forget about that. What's the idea of treating me like a--a--"

"You know what the idea is, Nick."

"The hell I do."

"You'd better quit that job you got and go on east," she said. "That was the way we left it Monday night. It suited me that way, Nick. Not this way. I don't want to see you any more."

"You don't have to. If you mean it. But do you? After Monday night?" She hesitated.

"That didn't mean a thing."

"Sure?"

"Wait a minute." She must have put her hand over the phone, because I got a muffled booming in my ear, her voice making sounds above it I couldn't understand. When she took her hand off again I got the black-eyed girl's voice, far back, saying, "Okay, kid, take it easy," and the closing of a door. And

when Sherry spoke I knew by the changed pitch in her voice, the different feel of it, that she was alone in the room.

"Listen, Nick," she said. "Get this clear. Monday night was--like the old days, when you were in the Army. Because living together and sleeping together are two different things. Some people can have both. The lucky ones. We can't. It used to be all right, when you were in the Army. Then all we did was sleep together. But afterward--it didn't work any more. Monday night it was like the war, Nick. I knew you were shipping out. I knew you were going east. You said so. And I was glad to see you."

"Nothing else?"

"That doesn't matter a bit. Don't make any mistake about it, Nick. The other night--I wanted it to happen. But only because I knew I could afford to let it happen. Because you said you were leaving the next day. If I hadn't felt sure of that, I wouldn't have let myself risk anything at all."

"It was a risk, eh? Why? Because Gavotte might find out?" I heard her breath catch a little over the wire. "Did Ed tell you that?" she asked me.

I counted up to five, slowly and carefully. "Want the whole story?" I said.

"It started Monday. When we went for a ride. After that, I decided to take a Phoenix job. I figured you were on the

loose, and ... no strings. So I took the job. This afternoon I came into town, and I read the paper. I didn't place Gavotte right away, till it mentioned the Green Lantern. Then it clicked. It still didn't mean a thing, except I remembered meeting the guy Monday night. I wanted to see you and tell you I was staying. So I went over to your apartment house, where I let you out night before last, and the landlady gave me your new address. She didn't know a Miss Knox. But when I said Sherry, then she called you Mrs. Gavotte. Up till then, I didn't even guess there was a tie-up."

"Well?"

"It's true, isn't it? Were you married to him?"

"Oh, yes," she said, in a tired voice.
"It's true. But we weren't married."

"Well, what was it with Gavotte?
Living together or sleeping together?"

"You wouldn't--oh, never mind. Ed was a good fellow, that's all. He never tried to push me. You wouldn't understand about that. He paid the rent, bought me a few things, but--he never tried to pay me."

"So what was the attraction? His bright blue eyes?"

"The job. I got my salary and I got tips. The tips were the thing. They mounted up. You'd be surprised. And the house drinks, the setups. The money angle was separate. I lived with Ed, but I had my own job and made my own

money."

"But you went out with me Monday night."

"All right. I missed you. I missed the good things about you. I tell you, I forgot the bad things."

"How do you know they're still there-the bad things? A guy can change. Can't you believe that's possible? Hell, I've got a job. Didn't you notice?"

"You've had jobs before. You never kept any of them."

"So I was aiming too high. I know now it isn't the job in particular. It's the idea of having it and keeping it."

"What kind of a job have you got this time?"

"I don't know what you'd call it."

Something like a straw boss. I write letters and keep accounts, and I fix the stove when it gets out of order. It's a house outside of town a ways. A man and his wife, and a couple of Mexicans. De Anza. Know them?"

"I know where their place is. I don't know them."

"Well, it's a job. I'm going to keep it. I won't quit till something better comes along. I want to be near you, Sherry."

"I don't want you near me."

"Afraid?"

"Maybe."

"What of?"

"Of your acting just the way you're acting now. Push, always push. I give in on one little thing, like sitting down to

have a drink with you, and--" she made a clicking sound with her tongue, a sound that might mean despair or anger.

I grinned at myself in the dim reflection of the glass wall. I got out a cigarette one-handed and lit it, blowing smoke into a tall square cube the size and shape of the glass booth, with me in the middle of it. With me and Sherry's voice, pulled out to a thin thread of sound.

"Well, what are you going to do, then?" I asked.

"I'll wait. See what happens. Things are all mixed up now. The Green Lantern may open again. Ed owned it. I suppose somebody will inherit. Maybe they'll sell it. I can't count on anything." I

was wondering what I should say about Gavotte. It was a queer situation. I wondered what I'd say if I really knew only what I'd read in the paper, and I still couldn't tell. The situation was too damned queer. Do you offer condolences to your ex-wife because her lover has just been killed?

I knew one thing, though. I felt good about it. I felt fine. I doubled up my fist and tapped the telephone booth lightly with the tips of my knuckles. Gavotte was dead, and it was murder, and I was the murderer. That felt wonderful. It hadn't been murder at the time he'd died, but it was murder now. Murder after the fact. I'd do it again. I'd like to do it again. I wished there was some way to

go back and play the whole thing over, only this time maybe I'd be the one with the broken bottle in my fist, and maybe .

..

"I suppose I was always sorry for Ed," Sherry was saying in my ear. "I'm sorry I can't feel sorrier now. I don't know. Maybe it's that I think Ed didn't care much, himself. Maybe he was even a little relieved that now he can stop trying."

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

"No, I guess not. I--Nick, you aren't mad, are you? About Ed?"

"I'm very happy, naturally," I said. "For God's sake, Sherry. Why wouldn't I be mad? Sure I'm mad. But--I know it's

your business now, not mine. See?

I have changed."

"Have you?"

"I suppose I'll have to prove it, some way. I'll find a way." She was silent. I could tell by the sound of her breathing on the wire that she was about to break off and hang up. I don't know how I knew it. I just did. I said the first thing that came into my head to stop her.

"Who do you think killed Gavotte?" I asked. Then I stopped and held my own breath, scared and mad at myself. But it was a perfectly natural question, wasn't it? Wouldn't anybody have asked the same thing? I suppose they would, because Sherry's voice only sounded tired when it came, not suspicious or

afraid.

"I don't know, Nick. Nobody knows."

"Didn't the police talk to you? Ask about enemies he might have had? Stuff like that?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not? You weren't in love with the guy, were you?"

"Oh, stop it, Nick."

But I couldn't stop.

"Well, did he?" I said. "Have any enemies?" Sherry said tiredly, "Of course he did. You can't run a bar and not have a few quarrels. Ed drank too much. You couldn't tell what he'd do when he was drunk. He'd get ideas, you know, the way things look when you're high enough. He'd do crazy things and

wouldn't remember them the next day."

"He did, eh? Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. He'd cry and carry on, about how he was as good as anybody else. You know what a crying drunk's like. He wasn't very responsible when he was tight. When I first knew him, I thought he took drugs. But it was just the way he was. Liquor set him off, that was all. He'd do crazy things."

"Like a marijuana jag, you mean?"

"I guess so. He was a worrier."

"What did he have to worry about?"

"He made up things," Sherry said.

"Like what?"

"You."

"What do you mean?"

She said angrily, "Ed wasn't a fool.

Night before last--don't you suppose he knew what happened? He was drunk when I came in, sitting at his desk going over a lot of bills with a bottle on the desk beside him. He knew what we'd been doing."

"That was too goddam bad," I said. "Maybe I should have asked his permission."

She pretended not to hear me.

"He had the closet locked. The one with my clothes in it. He said he knew what I was going to do, run away with you."

"He wasn't such a fool, maybe."

"He was drunk," Sherry said. "Once he thought I'd run away with McElroy. Then I got him calmed down about that. I

told him he couldn't stop me if I wanted to leave, but that I'd let him know, fair and square, any time it happened. It was that sort of an arrangement all along. That was how I wanted it. Ed kept trying to make it into something else. Once, when I was going out, he hid my purse-- and I was only going to a show. But he could convince himself of anything. This time I suppose he did have something to worry about, though. He knew who you were."

"So what did he do?"

"Oh, he apologized, after a while. And went back to worrying over his bills and writing checks. And drinking."

"He must have been crazy," I said. "A guy like that would make a lot of

enemies. The wonder is he lived as long as he did."

"All right, now let's stop talking about him," Sherry said. "Aren't you satisfied yet? I told you I didn't want to talk about it. I don't even want to think about it. I've got my own plans, and that's all I want to think about now. I'm going to do exactly what I want."

"I won't try to stop you. You're right, it's none of my business. I've learned that much. I've got to ... well, leave it at that. Can I see you tomorrow?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to Ed's funeral," she said.

"That won't be tomorrow."

"The detective said it probably would

be."

"But--I mean, when a man's killed, they--"

"He said they'd have the autopsy today. He thought it would be routine. I don't know. They might ... I don't want to talk about it. If the funeral's tomorrow, I'm going to be there. And I'm not going out with you afterward. That's the least I can do for Ed."

"For my dough, you've done too much for him already."

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

"Then what do we talk about? Why won't you see me tomorrow?"

"I told you, Nick. Besides, I've--well, I've got to see McElroy. I'm not sure just when, but--"

"Maybe he'll be at the funeral," I said, trying to keep the anger out of my voice.

There was a little pause. When she spoke again, Sherry sounded a little sharp.

"At least he happened to think I might be needing money. I got a check from him in the mail today, with a card that just said, 'No strings.' What do you think of that?"

"I think he's a smart bastard, as well as a rich one. Are you going to fall for it?"

"I'm sorry I mentioned it," she said. "Forget it. I don't need McElroy's money, Nick. I'm just going to see him to say thanks and give him his check back. It's all right." The sharpness had gone

out of her voice, leaving it just tired.

I said, "Well--if you can see him, you can see me, can't you? Just for half an hour, anyhow. Ill drive you to the funeral and--"

"We said good-by Monday night. I meant it. I think it's time to say it again."

"Sherry, I--"

"You see why I wouldn't let you into the apartment, Nick? This way I can be sure you'll keep your promises."

"Sherry, that isn't fair," I said. "If things are wrong, why blame me? I do the best I can. I don't do things out of--of meanness. You know that. Everybody makes mistakes, but nobody wants to. Nobody says, 'Now I'm going to make a mistake,' and then goes ahead and does

it. I do the best I--"

"I know, I know," she said, and then:
"Good-by, Nick."

I heard the telephone click, and the line went dead.

I stood there for a few moments looking at the little round mouth of the thing on the wall facing me. I was mad, but not too mad. After a while I blew smoke into the black mouth where Sherry's voice had been. I pushed open the door and walked out.

Let it lay, I thought.

She'd see me again when I was ready to make another try. I'd have to watch it, though. Because Sherry was perfectly capable, if pushed, of settling things by getting on a plane or train and leaving no

forwarding address.

Meantime, here I was, on a street corner in Phoenix, Arizona, and what next?

What I'd done, I suppose, was commit that perfect crime you hear so much about. I'd done it in self-defense, without any intention or motive. But now--afterward--I had the motive. I'd just done it backwards was all. If it could happen all over again tonight, it would be more murder than killing. Except that I wouldn't do it; I wasn't really a murderer. That's one of the words you read in newspapers and books. Not real. Not--you.

Well, let it lay. Sherry hadn't mentioned me to the cops, and I guessed

she wasn't going to, now. So I was in the clear. I'd still have to be careful with De Anza. There was no telling what his screwball mind would work out if he found out Sherry was my ex-wife, Gavotte had been keeping her, and that Gavotte was dead. But that was simple. Why should De Anza find out? He probably never went more than a hundred yards away from the house. He had his jade and those other habits of his, whatever they were. They needn't bother me, though. I didn't have to smoke those hopped-up cigarettes of his or pet the king snake. Or anything else. Remembering Callahan, I began to wonder. He'd been smoking those cigarettes. And what else had he got

into?

So what? I'd been around enough to know some of the angles, the lengths a man can go to, to think he's having fun. Women, too. De Anza might like circuses or getting beat up or just being a peeper or a dozen other tricks, but that was his business, and I knew enough to stay in the clear. There was one guy I met once, he liked to have a woman in a coffin, with her playing dead, and it gave him quite a bang. I couldn't see it myself, figuring that there's only one thing worth doing in a coffin, and it takes only one person to do that.

A bus stopped, but I waved it on. I started to walk, humming "Minnie," and after a while switched over to "Willie

the Weeper." She promised him a pretty Ford automobile

With a diamond headlight and a silver steering wheel.

The new shoes were still hurting, so I flagged a bus after all, and rode nearly to the hotel. Then, to kill time, I went in a drugstore, a big place, all bright lights and shiny glass and metal. It suited me; I didn't much feel like hitting a gin-mill. I picked up a few things, toothbrush, tooth powder, a razor and some shaving cream, and had a Coke and sandwich at the fountain. In the mirror, I didn't look half bad. The haircut had done it--that, and the new clothes. I looked as if I had some money in my pockets. Not a thousand bucks, but enough to call a taxi

if I wanted one. All my muscles felt a little tired but good, the way they feel after you've taken a lot of exercise, and it's a day or two later, when you've had a chance to relax. I liked the drugstore. Shiny and clean and new. Phoenix was new, too. New to me. In a funny way, it was like getting a fresh start, and still it was like going back to the time before my mother ran off, when I was a kid, and a drugstore meant sodas and Hershey bars. Usually when you go back to a place after a long time it's got dirty in the meantime, but here it was clean and bright and--and new. Like a new Buick, the same car, the same one you used to drive, but without the mileage chalked up on the speedometer. Good rubber,

fast pickup, a clean motor--that's the way it was with me, somehow. I was glad I hadn't pushed Sherry too hard. You don't drive a new car seventy miles an hour right off. Break it in, break it in easy. Same with my job, I thought. You've got your chance, don't burn out the engine. And change the oil, get a grease job, pretty often, at first. That reminded me of the car, so I phoned the garage and talked to the mechanic. It was an all-night place, and the man knew his stuff. He said a few gimmicks ought to be replaced, so we kicked it around and I said okay, do it, but save the old parts, I'd use 'em for fishing weights. He knew what I meant and laughed about it. We cried on each other's shoulders for a

while about the way the Buick had been treated, and decided the car would be ready by morning. A rush job is no good; I told him to take his time. After that, I thumbed through the phone book looking for my own name and the names of friends. None of them lived in Phoenix, except me, but I suppose everybody does it. I did look for McElroy, Theodore, and that was listed.

It was too late to do any more of my errands; they'd keep till tomorrow. I was still packing the little bundle with my extra new shirt and shorts and socks, so I decided to try the hotel. Mrs. De Anza had remembered to register for me. The desk clerk handed me a key and called a bellboy. My luggage being in a paper

parcel didn't seem to worry them. Since this wasn't a cheap joint, I knew it must be because whatever Mrs. De Anza did was okay around here. They knew her. They didn't know me, but they pretended they did.

It was fine to go along with the bellboy to my room, watch him fixing windows and checking towels, and to hand him half a buck. It had been so long since I'd done this that I didn't know what to tip, but the way the kid acted, it was just right. After he'd gone, I lay down on the bed and turned myself off.

* * *

When I woke up I was thinking about Ed Gavotte.

I must have been tired. It was

morning. I had a thick, sour taste in my mouth, but tooth powder fixed that. I showered and shaved, put on clean things, and went out to the lobby. When I turned in my key, the clerk reached in the nest of boxes behind him and handed me a note from the Countess. All it said was, "We're staying over another night. Meet me in the bar at eight."

I stuffed it in my pocket. That was all right. I'd have plenty of time to do my errands now. I looked up a drugstore and had breakfast; and then walked over to the garage. The Buick was ready. The mechanic I'd talked to was off duty, but he'd done a good job. The motor hummed like a top. I paid, which left me with about seventy dollars in my pocket,

and took the car out for a road test. Finally I parked, downtown, and got out my list of errands.

The druggist De Anza had mentioned knew about the prescriptions, and said he'd have to make them up, so I went over and picked up the record albums the Count had ordered. There were five of them, foreign stuff. I found a typewriter shop, got a new platen for the Royal, and by that time the prescriptions were ready. That left only the grocery. There was one, a big open-front supermarket I'd noticed a few blocks back, so I drove there, turned into the parking lot, and finished the shopping, salt and eggs and stuff like that for Benita, a carton of Camels for Rafael, a carton of Pall

Malls for myself. There wasn't anything that would spoil overnight. My money was going fast, but I'd kept a list I could turn in to the Countess. Sitting there in the car, I took out her note and unfolded it. She'd meant eight P.M., not A.M. Not even Mrs. De Anza would head for the bar at eight in the morning, and, anyway, it wouldn't have been open. I looked at the writing. Her pen had dug into the paper, as though she'd been writing fast and hard, and there were a couple of splatters of ink. Now that I hadn't much money left, I remembered I should have offered Sherry some last night. It just hadn't occurred to me. But she didn't need it, she'd said. Okay, what now? I didn't know. There was only one thing I

knew I didn't want to do, and that was go to Gavotte's funeral. Every time I thought about the man I started to tighten up. Not fear, it wasn't that. It was ... I don't know, jealousy, maybe. But how could I be jealous of a dead man?

I got a paper and looked it over, while I drank more coffee in a drive-in. The Gavotte business was still wide open, as far as the police were concerned. A couple of suspicious characters had been picked up. Tramps, I gathered. I wondered if things could go so far that one of them might get convicted, and what I'd do then, if I saw an innocent man headed for the gas chamber. I stopped that thought. I was afraid of it. It wouldn't happen, anyway. There couldn't

be any evidence.

I looked up the funeral, too, and checked the time. Then, because I was bored, I started driving around and ended in front of Sherry's place. I didn't get out. I waited there, smoking and thinking. She might have left already. But she hadn't. When she came down the steps she was wearing black--a black dress and shoes and a bunched-up veil on her hat brim. Her hat was white, a little straw number, and she had on white gloves, but she looked ready for a funeral.

Something was wrong, though. I could tell that. Sherry's mouth was tighter than ever, and there was something funny about her eyes. They were pink around

the edges, the lids a little swollen. But I didn't see that till I'd got out and headed her off.

"I thought I'd drive you there, if you wanted," I said. Now I didn't know if I'd done the right thing, if I was pushing her too much, and my stomach tightened up a little. It was all right, though. She drew in her breath, gave me a quick look that was almost desperate, and nodded. I handed her into the car and got in myself. I started up.

"Anything wrong?" I said.

"No."

But she was on edge; something had happened. Her fingers kept knotting themselves around the handle of her bag. I stopped at a red light, lit two

cigarettes, and handed her one. Then I turned into a side street, where there wasn't much traffic, and eased the Buick along.

"Something's happened," I said. "Is it about Gavotte? Are the police riding you?"

"No. It's nothing. Nothing you can fix, anyway. It's my own fault. I ... I don't know how I could have been such a damned fool. It doesn't--I'll have to start over. But I can't, I can't do that. Just a few thousand dollars. I haven't got all the time in the world. I'm getting older, Nick."

"What's happened?"

"I'm cleaned out," she said. "The money I had in the bank--it's gone. I've

got just about forty dollars, that's all."

"... How?"

"Ed did it. I've figured out ... I went to the bank this morning to get some money, and my statement was ready too. When I looked at it, I saw my balance was 'way down. There was one canceled check ... It was made out to Ed. Nineteen hundred dollars."

"He forged your name?"

"No, I can't even say that. I ... signed a blank check."

"But ... what for?"

She drew in her breath, not too steadily. "I'll tell you just what happened. It was night before last. Ed gave me--some extra money sometimes. That night he had a customer's check for

a hundred, and he said he'd give me fifty, so--somehow he worked it around so he endorsed that check over to me, and I gave him one of my own for fifty dollars."

"Well?"

"He was working on his bills ... he had everything laid out on his desk. His little portable and everything. I told you about it--it was that night I came in late, when he'd locked up my clothes and was pretty drunk. This was after he'd calmed down. He gave me a check and I signed it, and then I watched him to fill it out on the typewriter. He must have worked it right under my eyes, while I was watching him. I . . . I know what a fool I was, Nick. I was upset, and so was he,

but I never thought he'd--I mean, I'd signed things before, there wasn't any reason--"

"Did he need money?"

"It wasn't that," she said, taking quick, nervous puffs of her cigarette. "It was just the way Ed was. He always expected the worst. Always. And we'd been quarreling."

"What about?"

"I told you. He was afraid I was going to leave him--for you. He was feeling sorry for himself. He said I'd been saving my money just so I could go away with you--not for my Chicago build-up at all. Oh, I don't know. I suppose he thought he could keep me if I was broke again. Maybe that seemed like the only way."

"So he took the money. Didn't he know you'd find out?"

"Ed never thought ahead, when he was

in one of his spells. I suppose he meant to give it back, with something extra, before the statements were sent out--I don't know, Nick. It doesn't matter now. It's too late. I called a lawyer. There isn't a thing I can do."

"What about Gavotte's heirs?"

"I asked the lawyer that. He wasn't very cheerful. There isn't any proof."

". . . The canceled check?"

"It doesn't prove anything. The lawyer's going to do what he can, but he told me not to count on it. I'm right back where I started. I suppose I could start saving again--God knows how long it would take--but I'm afraid of the time element. I ... Nick, it's been months since that agent said he'd handle me. I've still

got my voice and my face and figure, but how long will I keep them?"

"You'll keep them."

"Standing behind a counter all day? That job I had at the Green Lantern was something special. You don't find jobs like that every day. And . . . three thousand dollars. I don't have any trade. I can't get a big salary. Even if I managed another setup like the one I had, it ... I can't wait and wait and wait all over again."

"The Green Lantern's closing? That's out?"

"Yes. It's being sold. I'll try, of course, but ... I feel sick. When you've counted on something for so long, to have it drop right out from under you .

.."

I wished I still had that two hundred Mrs. De Anza had given me.

"Maybe I can do something," I said.

"No. No, it's my fight. Thanks. Anyway--"

"You don't think I've got it."

She didn't say anything.

"I'll get you some dough tonight. Or tomorrow at the latest. It won't be three thousand, but it'll be enough to eat on. I told you I had a job. I can get an advance easy enough."

"I don't care about eating. All I care about is three thousand dollars. Getting that agent to take me on. Oh, you don't see--thanks, Nick, but I wouldn't take anything from you; I've got to do it my

way." I drove on for a while. Then I said, "Did you send that check back to McElroy?"

"What?"

She opened her bag, fumbled in it, and brought out a folded slip of paper.

"I forgot about it," she said.

"You're not getting any ideas, are you?"

"I--I'm not sure."

"Not sure?"

"Stop it, Nick."

"But--for God's sake, don't you know?"

She didn't answer, and I felt that old need of wanting to hit something rise up in me. It didn't even matter that I was driving a car. I turned and grabbed her

arms with both hands. The car wobbled crazily under us as the front wheels hit some bump in the road.

"Nick!" Sherry almost screamed.

It was all over in a second. I let her go and turned back to the wheel.

"You--" she had trouble getting the words out, "you haven't changed, have you?"

"What about McElroy?"

"I said, you haven't changed. You're the same old Nick. Wanting blood when you don't get your way. Nick--"

"The hell with me," I said, keeping my eyes on the road. "What about Mac?"

Now that Gavotte's gone."

I glanced at her and caught her biting her lip.

"Nick, don't be cruel."

"Cruel, for Christ's sake. What're you doing to me? You're breaking me up inside. Sure, that's corny, but I get a pain in the middle when I think of you, I want you so much. Sherry, look. I can say this honestly. You're me, at least part of me. I love you. It's no wonder I blow my top once in a while, the way you treat me. Can I help it if I love you? Sherry, if you knew what it was like--" I made myself shut up.

I hadn't meant to talk like that. Maybe I shouldn't have. I gripped the wheel hard, watching my knuckles show little white double ridges under the skin, and waited for her to say something. I held my breath. But she didn't say a word.

She didn't even move. The silence gradually got worse and worse, until it seemed to me anything at all would be better than just sitting there beside her without a word. I glanced sidewise at her. She was looking straight ahead, and there was something funny about the way she held her head and the way her eyes looked.

"Sherry?" I said, very softly. She shook her head, not turning toward me. But I remembered that look. I leaned forward a little to make sure. There was a rim of brightness along her lower lids and her eyes had that swimming look she always had when she was right on the verge of crying.

"Sherry!" I said.

"No!" She shook her head again, impatiently, and turned away from me to hide her face. Her voice sounded muffled and angry. "Maybe I do know what it's like, Nick," she said. "That's my business." I gave the wheel a hard turn toward the curb, not quite sure what I was going to do. I wanted to give all my attention to this. But Sherry said, "No, don't park, Nick. I mean it. Go on."

I said, "But--"

She laid her hand on the door handle. "If you stop, I'll get out and walk. There's nothing to stop for, Nick. There's nothing that needs to be said."

"But Sherry, I thought you meant--I thought you said" She sniffled a little, got a handkerchief out of her purse

and blew her nose angrily.

"I don't know what I said. Don't push me, Nick. I've got too much on my mind."

"Why are you crying?" I asked, watching the road.

"Because you--because--"

"Because you're still in love with me? Is that what you meant?" She put the handkerchief back and closed her purse with a snap.

"That's my business."

"Mine, too. If you meant it, Sherry, then why can't we just--"

"Pick up where we left off?" Her voice sounded hard.

"Well, why not?"

"Remember where we left off, Nick?"

I said quickly, "Don't think about those days, Sherry. I told you I'd changed. I've got a good job now, and things will be different." There was a clear space in the road ahead, and I turned to look at her. "You did mean what I think you mean, Sherry? You do know what it's like, what I've been through in the last year? Has it been hard for you too, Sherry? You do still love me?"

"I didn't say that. Watch where you're going, Nick."

"Will you say you don't love me, then?"

She was quiet for a while. Then she gave her head another shake.

"It doesn't make any difference. I

couldn't possibly live with you again, Nick. You know that. I've got my plans and I hope you have yours. We gave marriage a good try and it didn't work out. It wouldn't, no matter how hard we tried. I just couldn't stand going through all that again and I won't. You can't change my mind, Nick."

"Say you don't love me," I said.

She was silent.

"Sherry--"

"Don't push me, Nick!"

I said, "Okay, Sherry. I guess I've got the answer." I turned the car around and headed back toward town. Neither of us said anything more for a while. I suppose neither of us knew what to say. After all, she was going to the funeral of

a guy who ... I didn't bother with the rest of the thought.

"About that check from McElroy," I said as we hit the edge of town. "You--"

"I'm going to give it back."

"When?"

"Tonight," she said sharply. "Ten thirty tonight. He's meeting me somewhere, and I'm giving the check back to him then. Now I don't want to talk any more. About anything."

"Suit yourself."

I kept driving, thinking about Gavotte and Ted McElroy and Sherry, and a lot of things, including three thousand bucks.

Neither of us spoke till we'd reached the funeral parlor. I let her out and she asked me not to wait.

"Whatever you want, Sherry," I said. "When can I see you again?" All she did was shake her head, as though she didn't know what to say. So I let her go. I drove off, heading toward the edge of town and out on the highway. Then I let the Buick out. I told myself it was a road test, but it wasn't. I wanted to feel the power of the Buick pushing up my leg and into my body. When I jammed my foot down, I wanted to feel that big, roaring car thunderbolt forward as though nothing could stop it. Somehow I found myself at the same place I'd taken Sherry on my first night in Phoenix. I felt my stomach turn over. I jammed on the brakes, spun the car around, and drove her back, fast.

Once, in the rear mirror, I noticed a dark sedan making a U turn, about half a mile back, and that gave me an idea. I kept watching the mirror off and on, and pretty soon I felt certain the sedan was trailing me. The way I felt, I didn't give a damn.

Ahead of me Phoenix grew larger. I had a queer thought: I could go right on driving, faster and faster, till I saw a yellow Cadillac in front of me, and then-not stop.

Three thousand dollars. McElroy had it and I didn't. And Sherry was fed up. I began to think about Ed Gavotte and the dirty trick he'd played Sherry. I liked him less than ever. I hated the bastard. I wanted him to be alive again, so some of

the power vibrating through the car could smash him. It wasn't the Buick's motor any more, it was me, it had charged me like a battery. It was jealousy. Plain, ordinary jealousy. It was strong enough to make me want to smash Gavotte and keep on smashing him. But Gavotte was dead.

Then I began to think about Ted McElroy again.

11.

WHEN I GOT BACK TO THE HOTEL, I was covered with sweat and dirty from changing a tire, but that job had given me a chance to cool off. After I'd left the tire and tube to be patched, I was looking forward to a shower. After a while, I was looking back on it, but I

felt a lot better. I lay on the bed, wondering what was wrong, till I localized the discomfort around my stomach. I was just hungry. I laughed at myself.

I phoned Mrs. De Anza's room. She wasn't there, and she hadn't left any note for me at the desk. I thought it over, and then telephoned the ranch. Rafael answered me.

"Oh, hello, Nick. You having fun? Get my Camels?" I told him I had them, and that we were staying over another night, at the Westward Ho. And did the Count or Benita need anything else from town?

"No, don't need nothing. How's . . . how's Mrs. De Anza?"

"I haven't seen her since last night. I

guess she's been around buying herself some clothes."

"Yeah. Well . . . take it easy, Nick."

I heard a knock at the door, and hung up. I pulled on a pair of slacks and, barefoot, went across the tickling carpet and opened up to a man I didn't know. He was a big fellow, built like a fighter, narrow hips and deep chest, but he didn't dress like one. He had on a conservative business suit, blue, and a light shirt and a plain wine-colored tie. His hat had a wider brim than usual--no Stetson, but you could see it admired the thought. He took it off and said, "Mr. Banning?"

"Right."

"Got a minute?"

"Why?"

He took a shiny badge out of his pocket and showed it to me.

"Oh," I said. "Come in. What's it about?"

"You don't know?"

He came in, closing the door behind him, and I waved him to a chair. I sat on the edge of the bed and reached for my coat. He watched me while I got out cigarettes and lit one. He had a squarish, sun-browed face, thinning brown hair, and his eyes were brown, too, but darker. He looked like a cattleman more than anything else.

"Gavotte?" I said.

"That's right. My name's Hobson, Lieutenant Hobson. Homicide Bureau. For the record, I'd like to ask you some

questions. Got any objections?"

"I'm free till eight o'clock. Go ahead."

He took out a small ring notebook and a pencil.

"You haven't been in Phoenix long, have you?"

"A few days."

"Traveling through?"

"I was. But I ran across a good job here, so I took it. People named De Anza. They live out of town a ways."

"Any reason why you came here? To Phoenix, I mean?"

"My wife lives here. I mean, my ex-wife. If you've been checking, you must know about that."

He nodded. "That's how we ran across you, Mr. Banning."

"Sure. She'd have told you--"

"We try to find out things, one way or another. Miss Knox has been under surveillance," he said. "After all, she was living with Gavotte. You knew about that?"

"She told me. Yesterday."

"You didn't know before?"

"No. I didn't kill Gavotte, either."

"I didn't ask you that," he said, and wrote down something in his notebook. I smoked and watched him.

"You didn't think of coming around to Headquarters and telling us what you knew?"

"I didn't have anything to tell."

"Where did you intend to go this afternoon when you drove out of town?"

"Nowhere. Oh. I get it. That must have been one of your cars trailing me on the road."

"If you didn't want it, you should have stayed away from Miss Knox, right?"

"Suit yourself."

"You were driving pretty fast."

"I was giving the car a road test. I'd just had some work done on it. You can't be sure about the bugs till you hit seventy or better."

"I see. How did you hear about Gavotte's death?"

"Newspaper."

"When did you see him last?"

"Monday night. That was the first and last time."

"Mind telling me about it?"

I told him; there was no harm in that.

"Then what did you do?"

"Took Sherry home."

"You took her up to Gavotte's apartment and left her?"

"I left her on the street, outside the apartment house. I watched her till she opened the door and went in. I told you I didn't know about Gavotte then."

"Oh, that's right." He glanced at the notebook. "Well, then what?" I went over it all carefully, how I'd gone back to the De Anza place, what had happened the next day and night and up to the time I'd driven Mrs. De Anza into Phoenix. He put in a few questions.

"You know when Gavotte was killed?"

"Tuesday night, wasn't it?"

"You see what I mean. Matter of fact, it was Wednesday morning. The bar closed at two, so it was later than that. You covered?"

"I was in bed and asleep."

"What time did you go to bed?"

"Oh, twelve thirty. One. Around then."

"Until?"

"About ten, I guess."

"The Army gave you a dishonorable discharge, didn't they?"

". . . Yes."

"Black market?"

"Call it that."

"Were you a ranger?"

"You've got my record, haven't you? You must know all about me by now."

"We have to check," he said. "All right, it was infantry, then. Pacific theater. The point is, you learned how to kill a man that way, didn't you?"

"What way? Breaking his neck?"

"Rabbit punch."

"I know enough about it so I wouldn't use it," I said. "It's the jerk who's just heard about these things who's apt to get in trouble that way. I know what a rabbit punch can do. That's why I wouldn't use it except in combat. A good punch on the jaw is a lot safer, for a civilian."

"Ever killed anybody with the edge of your hand?"

"No."

"Overseas?"

"It still goes. I had a rifle and a side

arm and a knife. By the time I'd worked down through all those--" I shrugged. "As a matter of fact, there wasn't much hand-to-hand combat where I was. The idea is not to take chances."

"Well, what about Miss Knox? Why did you separate?"

"Cruelty. Or non-support. I forget."

"I mean the real reasons, not the legal grounds." I looked at him. He waited a second or two, shrugged a little, and asked me if I knew anybody in Phoenix except Sherry.

"No."

"She's the only reason you're staying here?"

"Not the only reason. I've got a job I like."

"So you changed your mind about going east?"

"Why not? You've got more sunshine here than any place else in the world."

"That's right. Intend to stick around for a while?"

"That means don't leave town."

"Did you intend to?"

"The papers said Gavotte was probably killed by some stumble-bum who just walked in from the street."

"We've made a couple of pickups. But we've got to cover all the angles."

"Well, when I saw Gavotte Monday night he was burned up about something, but it wasn't me. I didn't even know he and Sherry were living together then. He was the one who acted funny."

"You mentioned that."

"Sure. That orchid--"

"We've checked on Mr. McElroy," he said.

"And?"

His brown, blocky face didn't show anything. He put away the notebook and pencil and stood up.

"I guess that's all, Mr. Banning. Thanks for your help."

"How does it look?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

"This won't ... I mean, I want to keep my job. I guess you'll want to see Mrs. De Anza. I'm meeting her at eight. If you can--"

"I've talked to her already," he said.
"We have to check up. Thanks again."

Good night."

"Good night."

He went out, closing the door gently behind him.

* * *

The Countess showed about nine. She'd been shopping, all right; she had on new clothes and her hair was done in a different way, and she was wearing a hat instead of a turban, though it looked just as tight. She'd kept on her bracelets and turquoise; she was loaded with costume jewelry and she glittered and twinkled as she walked. And there was that brown skull-face. Only it was different now. I think the clothes must have done it. Before, she'd looked withered, now she looked--I don't know--

-as though she'd put on that face on purpose. Maybe distinguished is the word. Still, my heart didn't beat any faster.

I stood up, and she hurried across and got on the next bar stool. "Quick one, Scotch," she said to the bartender. Her voice sounded higher and sharper, somehow. She pointed a thin finger at me. "Cigarette, Nick." When that was taken care of, she gave me a quick glance, nodded, and faced the bar. Her right hand, with the cigarette, rested on the raised edge of the wood, her left hand was curled up, palm down, on the bar. Her fingers wouldn't stay still. They kept tapping, as though she was typing a letter, using only five keys. She glittered,

too. The costume jewelry kept glinting and twinkling. She didn't seem to be jumping around, but those bracelets were the tip-off. She couldn't stay still a minute. She was wound up. She finished her cigarette before the drink came, and it came right away.

"Who's that detective fellow?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "He came to see me a couple of hours ago. Asked questions."

"What happened, anyway?"

"Didn't he tell you?"

"A man was killed in a bar. What does that mean to me? Cigarette. Thanks. Well, what about it?"

"That's about all there is. I'd met the

man the night before. The police have those routine checkups."

"Yes, I suppose."

"His name's Hobson, Lieutenant Hobson. You can check with him if you like."

She took a drink.

"If you'd rather not have me keep on working for you--"

"Don't yammer."

"Okay. It's up to you. But if the police are really interested in somebody, they pick him up as a material witness. Then they can hold him for a while. I gather they've picked up a couple of tramps, so they're not too interested in me."

"All right, all right, don't bother me. I asked that detective about you. He

seemed to know who you were."

"What did he say?"

"I like to make my own decisions. I don't like to be pushed." She finished her drink, turned her head, and stared at me for what seemed to be a long time. The red wires didn't crisscross over the eyes now; they were opened wider.

"You didn't kill anybody," she said finally. I laughed.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. Want another drink?" Her fingers tapped faster and faster on the bar. She clenched her fist.

"Let's get out of here. Where's the car?"

"I'll bring it around."

"No, I'll go with you. I don't want to

sit here doing nothing. Come on." She was at the door, pushing it open, before I could get there. I put my hand under her elbow and turned her to the left. Under the silk I could feel the hard bone. Her skin felt hot.

She walked with fast, long strides, so that I had to stretch to keep even with her, and my legs aren't short.

"Where to?" I asked.

"I'll tell you where. Oh, stop at a drugstore some place. I've got a prescription here." She started to open her bag, changed her mind, and waited till we were in the car, driving downtown. Then she rummaged around angrily, swore under her breath, and turned the purse upside down over her

lap. Everything fell out. She picked out a folded paper and handed it to me. Then she picked up the lapful and crammed it back anyhow into the purse.

There was a drugstore at the next corner, and a parking place, so I stopped and got out. "If this is going to be expensive, I'll need some money," I said.

"Why didn't you tell me at the hotel? I'd have cashed a check."

"Maybe I've got enough."

I went in the drugstore and gave the prescription clerk the paper. He said,

"It'll be ready in a minute, if you want to wait."

"Okay."

There was a demonstration electric razor on the counter, so I picked that up

and played with it. I heard the door open and looked around, to see the Countess come in.

"Forget something?" I said.

"Tired of waiting. How long will it be?"

"A minute or so."

She started walking restlessly around the store, picking up things and putting them down, not nervous exactly, but acting as though she'd got an overcharge of juice. I didn't watch her, but I could hear the fast tapping of her heels rattle along and stop. Then I'd wait. And after a few seconds, tap tap tap tap tap. Fast. Another pause. Then the tapping again. The clerk came out and handed me the bottle. "This isn't refillable, you know,"

he said.

"Okay."

He told me how much he wanted, and I had it. I paid him. By that time the Countess was gone. I found her out in the car. I gave her the package.

"Thank God for sleeping pills," she said. "Ever have much trouble getting to sleep, Nick?"

"Not very often."

"Lucky. Yes, you'd sleep like a log, wouldn't you?" I started the car. "Do you have to be rich to have nerves?" I asked.

"Perhaps you have to be poor to have strength. You've got that, you know. It's worth having."

"It might help me get a job as a weight-lifter."

"You remind me a little of my husband. He can be quite nasty too."

"Sorry."

"Leo says it in French. So you'd like to be wealthy, would you? Would that make you happy?"

"I think I could manage to squeeze out a laugh once in a while."

"One of the wealthiest men I know has an insane fear of death."

"Well, he's got a lot to lose."

"By death?"

"By dying."

"Do you think they're the same thing? I don't. When you're dead, it's over. It's finished. It's out of your hands. But the moment before death, when you're still conscious of yourself, when you know

it's too late--" she drew a long breath. "Too late. The most horrible words I've ever heard. How many people go to hell in that last second? And nobody can avoid that summing up. The condemned man in the electric chair, waiting for the switch to be thrown--what do you suppose he thinks about?"

"I'll try to let you know, if I ever find out," I said.

"Thank you, Nick. Even Crichton couldn't top that. Oh, turn right here. Now that I've finished 'Il Penseroso' for the evening, suppose we go and get rich?"

"Suits me. How?"

"Roulette."

I remembered something.

"About money, Mrs. De Anza. I kept a list of what I spent--"

"Down to the last decimal point, I'll bet. Well, give it to me some other time. I didn't intend to jump you about it. How much did you have, two hundred? That wouldn't last long."

"Those record albums and the rest made a bite in it."

"What? Why didn't you charge all the stuff? We've got accounts everywhere. No wonder you're broke. Two hundred dollars. I've been through a couple of thousand since yesterday."

"Your clothes cost more than mine do."

"Clothes? I charged them. Roulette."

"Oh."

"Turn left here. Go left again up the first side street. Park somewhere."

"Okay."

"You like roulette?"

"I can't afford it."

"Well, I don't want you standing around like a dummy. You'll make me nervous. What's your game, craps?"

"I'll watch."

"Don't breathe down my neck. Just don't go anywhere. When I'm ready to leave, I want to leave."

I cruised along, trying to find a place to park. There were plenty of cars lined up along the curb, late models, and among them I noticed a yellow Cadillac. When I passed it, I looked for the bumps and scratches. They were there.

Nearly at the end of the block I found a parking space. We got out and walked back toward what looked like a private house--a rich man's house. It was big, and set back in landscaped grounds.

"This it?" I asked.

"This is it. The best place, anyway. Everybody comes here." She was walking faster and faster, till I nearly had to run to keep up. The door opened before we reached it, and a man in evening clothes stepped back to let us in.

"Good evening, Mrs. De Anza. Back so soon?"

"Hello, Sammy. I've got a check here somewhere. God knows where. Oh, here it is. My husband's autograph and everything. I want a lot of chips,

Sammy."

"Certainly." He made a slight bow in my direction, and Mrs. De Anza must have noticed it, for she said, "Oh, this is Mr. Banning. He's wanted by the police. He's really an FBI man in the pay of the antigambling interests. Look, order up a lot of chips and wish me luck, will you?"

"Of course, Mrs. De Anza. All the luck in the world." He included me, too, but I didn't count on it. He reached for a telephone with his left hand and held the right one out to me. I shook it.

"I hope you'll enjoy yourself, Mr. Banning."

"I've started to already," I said.

BY THE TIME WE GOT UPSTAIRS, Sammy had phoned ahead and the Countess' chips were waiting for her. The layout was spread through a suite of six rooms, and voices were low and there was a scattering of evening clothes, though not enough to make me feel undressed. Mrs. De Anza got her chips at the desk and forgot about me. She headed for the roulette wheel so fast I felt the wind. I stood there, feeling in my pockets. I couldn't even buy a brown chip. However, one thing was free here, and I took the drink a waiter offered me. I drank the brandy and exchanged the glass for another, which I carried with me as I made the rounds, trying to look undecided whether to drop a few grand

on chuck-a-luck or blackjack. What I found, at the dice game, was Ted McElroy. It was Mac, all right, short and thick and looking like the blond Katzenjammer kid, with his lower lip stuck out and his shiny yellow hair smooth as ever. He didn't see me; he was watching the game. I looked around the table, but I didn't see Sherry. Just to make sure, I toured the place. She wasn't there. Finally I went back and watched McElroy again. I kept working on the drinks the waiter kept giving me, but I took it easy, so I didn't really feel them. After a while, when McElroy still hadn't noticed, I decided that was all for the best, and decided to look up the Countess.

From across the room I could see her glittering at the roulette table. She seemed to be sitting there motionless, but all that costume jewelry was quivering and shaking. As I reached her, a waiter put down an empty ash tray beside her and picked up the old one, jammed full of half-smoked butts. Mrs. De Anza stubbed out another cigarette and saw me.

"Having a run?" I said. "Don't kill it." She had plenty of chips in front of her now, the right colors.

"Play these for me, Nick." She shoved a stack toward the edge of the table.

"No, not roulette. Something else." Her voice sounded high and thick, as though her throat had tightened.

"Okay. Thanks."

She went back to the wheel. I dropped the chips in my pocket and took a few steps toward the desk before I realized what I was doing. Then I waved at a waiter, picked up another brandy, and walked into the next room. I couldn't cash the chips. I didn't dare. These people knew Mrs. De Anza; they'd mention it to her. . . . The croupier had overheard her telling me to play those chips for her.

Easy money. About eight hundred--in chips.

I drank the brandy, with my hand in my pocket, feeling the smooth, cool surfaces, imagining I was feeling real money. And not eight hundred, either.

Three thousand. The three thousand Sherry needed. I went on to the dice game and stacked Mrs. De Anza's chips on the table. Nearly across from me was McElroy.

* * *

An hour later I was broke.

But McElroy was out of the game. He recognized me, I could tell that. And he started getting nervous. He covered up fairly well, but I kept watching him, and after a while he couldn't concentrate on the game. Neither could I, but I didn't give a damn. I was remembering that he had a date with Sherry for ten thirty, and it was a quarter after ten already. After he got out, I saw him talking to a houseman and looking at me. I stared at

him. He didn't like that at all. He suddenly remembered he had to go to the John. I wandered over to the Countess, but she was too busy to notice anything but the wheel. She still had plenty of chips in front of her. Finally she glanced up, gave me a blank stare, and forgot I existed. I had been keeping an eye open for McElroy, and I saw him coming along now. So I stepped in front of him.

"Stay away from Sherry or I'll knock your goddam teeth in," I said.

". . . What?"

I didn't say anything.

He glanced around, stuck out his lower lip, and said, "Who do you think you are?"

"You heard what I said, Mac."

"Get out of my way." He started past me, and I got hold of his arm. He tried to jerk it away, but I held on. He looked around again, scared.

"Let's talk it over," I said.

"Take your hand off my arm. I've--I've got an appointment. I don't know who you are, anyhow."

"You're asking for trouble. You'll get it, too, if you make a fuss. Come over here."

There was a clock on the wall, and it said ten twenty-five. I lugged him across the room, in a friendly way, holding him hard enough to show I meant it. His flesh felt pulpy. His lower lip was still stuck out, but it was quivering.

I sat him down and pulled a chair up

to face him, so that our knees nearly touched. He hunched his shoulders, drew in his neck, and glared at me. A waiter started toward us, balancing his tray. I dropped my hand beside my knee, where McElroy could see it but nobody else could, and showed him a fist. I didn't say anything.

Neither did he, to the waiter. We each took a glass, and I held up mine toward the clock.

"You don't want to keep any dates tonight, do you?" He gulped his drink and it seemed to stiffen his spine.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Didn't you find out my name?"

"You're going to get yourself in trouble."

"Well, you don't have to stick around. You can take a walk if you want. But you'd better think it over first. I don't like you much." He licked his lips and glanced up at the clock.

"Yeah," I said. "But you wouldn't want to call on a girl if you had a nosebleed, would you?"

"You--"

"Oh, shut up. You ought to know a few things, besides my name being Banning and Mrs. De Anza introducing me here. My first name's Nick, but don't call me by it. Did you know Sherry used to be married? Her name used to be Banning."

His eyes flickered. He shifted his weight in the chair a couple of times, looking at me sideways. He'd turned

sullen.

"With the right kind of lawyer," I said, "I could take you for plenty, if you got out of line. I don't know whether or not Sherry told you she was divorced. Don't believe everything she says. A divorce can have a lot of tricky angles, especially Mexican ones. Sometimes they turn out not even legal. Playing around with somebody else's wife costs money, sometimes. And publicity. Your family might hate the wrong kind of publicity."

"Nobody tells me what to do," he growled.

"I'm telling you, Mac. You're not keeping that date with Sherry tonight, see?"

He started to get up. I leaned forward a little, waiting, watching him. He dropped back.

"I can get lawyers too, don't forget," he said.

"You'd better get goddamned smart ones, while you're at it," I said. "Maybe you'll be needing them."

The muscles in his face let go, for just a second. But he tried to cover. Only he didn't know what to do with his hands.

After a little too long, he said, "What are you talking about?" I looked at him, and the same thing was in both our minds.

"Ed Gavotte," I said softly.

"What do you know about it?"

"I read the papers." I didn't say

anything else. I just stared him down and waited, not for long. Because he sat up, tight and tense, and said fast:

"I'm clear. I haven't got anything to hide. I wasn't anywhere near there. I talked to the police. I wasn't even--"

I laughed at him.

He caught himself and flushed red.

"What the hell business is it of yours?" he asked me. "You're not a cop." He was beginning to use his head a little now, and I didn't want that. If I'd been smart, I wouldn't have brought up the subject at all. I halfway wished I hadn't. I was on pretty shaky ground myself, only McElroy hadn't thought of that yet.

I said, "I'm Sherry's husband. That's enough, isn't it? Or do you like trouble?"

"You're the one who'll get in trouble if you try to start anything, Banning."

"Sure. I could land in jail for beating the crap out of you, too. But you'd still be in the hospital. All you have to do, Mac, is stay away from Sherry. And you're going to do it. Tonight and--"

"Let's go, Nick," Mrs. De Anza said behind me. McElroy looked up past me blankly.

"Hello, Mac," the Countess said, coming around so I could see her. "How are you? Any luck? You two know each other, I see." McElroy got up. So did I. He swung his eyes from me to the Countess and back again. A twisted little smile showed on his face.

"Hello, Mrs. De Anza," he said. "It's

been quite a while. Introduce us, will you? We just happened to get talking, but--"

"Mr. McElroy, Mr. Banning," she said casually. "Nick's our new social secretary or something. And I want a cigarette, somebody." McElroy didn't move. After a moment I gave her one and lit it. All the while McElroy watched me.

The Countess took one puff and shrugged impatiently.

"Give my regards to your mother, Mac. Good night. Nick?"

"Yes."

"Coming?"

If McElroy had smiled again or even looked at the clock, I think I'd have

swung on him. But he didn't move. He just waited.

I nodded at him.

"I'll see you," I said. "I'll be around." He didn't answer.

I trailed out after Mrs. De Anza.

She wanted to go back to the hotel. "Then home. I'm tired of Phoenix. This gay, mad metropolitan excitement exhausts me." But she was still wound up tighter than a violin string. She vibrated, too. Her jewelry kept shifting and twinkling beside me; I could see it from the corner of my eye.

"Tonight?"

"Now. How long will it take you to pack? I phoned the hotel and told them to get my stuff ready. I don't want to wait

around."

"Give me five minutes."

"Five minutes." She leaned forward, turned on the radio, and fiddled with the dial till she got a fast rumba.

"Hurry up, Nick," she said.

* * *

It took me four minutes to pack. We didn't even wait to pay the bill; they must have been used to Mrs. De Anza here. She went on ahead, while I followed with two bellboys trailing me--she'd picked up a lot of packages somewhere--and when I looked ahead, I saw her heading for a Packard that stood next to the Buick. I called her back and herded her into the right car. She got behind the wheel. When the motor started, she

gunned it impatiently while the luggage was piled in. Then everybody stood back and waited. I reached in my pocket and stopped right there.

"Nick. Come on."

"Tips," I said. "I'm broke."

She must have had the car in gear and taken her foot off the clutch, for it jumped forward, bucked, and stopped. She opened her purse and gave me some bills. I passed them around and got in the Buick.

"Ready," I said.

We started. She was an expert driver but not a good one. I couldn't put my finger on the trouble, but I had the feeling she wasn't making the car part of herself, the way a good driver does. It's

like throwing your leg forward to catch yourself when you stumble; it ought to be automatic. You should do it without taking time to think. The brake and the accelerator shouldn't be levers you put your foot on; your leg shouldn't stop at the foot. It should go right down into the heart of the engine, and into the brake drums too. She didn't have that.

Some people don't like to follow through. They don't recognize or accept the limits of a machine. Because they can use trick footwork themselves, they never can quite understand why a car can't do the same thing. They feel held down. Then the only way to make up for it is to push the right foot hard on the gas pedal. That was what Mrs. De Anza was

doing. By the time we were on the open road, she was hitting eighty.

It wasn't smart and it wasn't safe. She wasn't satisfied with eighty, either. The needle kept pushing up. I was glad I'd had the lights adjusted at the garage. But I was worried about the headlights of cars coming toward us. When they didn't dim, the Countess irritably snapped the blinker from dim to bright a few times and squinted.

"Cigarette," she said.

"You need both hands on the wheel."

"Shut up and give me a cigarette."

"Sorry."

"Nick. Did you hear what I said?" Her voice was shrill.

"I heard you. You can't smoke and

drive when you're going ninety."

"Can't I?"

She used one hand to fumble with her purse. I reached over and held the wheel, keeping it steady.

She let go of the wheel completely, but didn't slow down at all. She even speeded up. There was nothing I could do except kick her foot off the accelerator, and I was afraid to try. I didn't know what her reaction would be, and the wrong reaction would land us in the ditch, rolling. She took her time getting out a cigarette and lighting it, holding it in the corner of her mouth so the smoke wouldn't drift up in her eyes.

Then she took the wheel again.

"You're so helpful," she said. "Next

time do it the easy way."

"There isn't any easy way, going this fast."

"Want to get out and walk?"

"It's your car."

"It's your neck. You seem worried about it." After a minute I said, "I don't give a damn." She laughed and threw the cigarette out the window.

"Lose your shirt?"

"Yes."

"It's only money."

"Your money."

"Not even mine. That was on the house. It didn't cost me anything. Paper profits, paper losses. I never count my chips till they're cashed."

"There's a truck ahead. No tail-light."

She blinked the lights, sounded the horn, and passed the truck. I leaned back again.

"Who's this fellow McElroy?" I asked after a while.

"You met him."

"I'd seen him before. He backed into the Chevvy Monday night, when I was in town."

"Hurt it?"

"No. But does he do that sort of thing all the time?"

"Only when somebody's watching," she said. "When he's alone, he's a careful driver."

"Well, who is he? What's his line?"

"Doing a high-wire act on a silver cord, these days. Now where did I meet

his mother first? Europe somewhere. My husband would know. He's got a memory like a clock."

I looked at her, but she just watched the road. I sighed and reached for a cigarette and then changed my mind. I didn't want to remind her about smoking.

"How about women?" I asked. "Does he go in for that very much?"

"Who?"

"McElroy."

"Good God, how should I know? He's a most uninteresting little man. Unpleasant, too. See if that bottle of sleep caps is still around, will you? I want to get a good night's sleep."

"They're in the dash compartment."

"Look and see."

"Okay. Here they are." I took the package out. The Countess turned her head to look. The car nearly went into the ditch.

"You'd better watch the road," I said. "I'd like to live a while longer."

"Then you're a fool," she told me. "But who isn't? I'm a fool too, or I wouldn't be driving this fast, would I, Nick?"

"It won't get you there any quicker," I said. She turned her head toward me again.

"Where?"

"You ought to know."

"I don't know," she said loudly, looking back at the road and slapping the wheel with the flat of her hand. There

was a sort of desperation in the slapping. "Nothing helps, Nick. Gambling. Driving. Whisky. Nembutal. Nothing."

"Helps what?"

"Never mind. You wouldn't understand."

"I might," I said.

She shook her head impatiently. "You have no idea. You've never--you couldn't begin to--" She laughed. "Curiously enough, though, Nick, I'm quite sane. Quite, quite sane. It will be a blow to my husband, but it's true."

"Sure," I said.

"You don't believe me. Tomorrow night you will, though. I'm expecting a call from my lawyer in New York.

Report of the sanity commission, Nick. Oh, it's perfectly legal. My husband doesn't know it yet, but I flew to New York and my lawyer arranged the hearing. Sounds like hallucination, doesn't it?

But it's true."

"Sure."

"Don't believe me? Just wait. When that call comes through, and my money's my own again, I'll--I'll--" her voice trailed off. She gave me a sharp look. "Do you believe me?"

"I don't know," I said. "Does it matter?"

"It might. Later on. I may be needing you, Nick. I don't know yet." Suddenly she stamped on the accelerator and the

car almost jumped out from under us. She let up after a second and we eased back down to a good conservative eighty-five. She began slapping the wheel again.

"What is it?" I asked. "Worried about the telephone call?" She snorted. "That? Oh no. I know the answer on that. I just can't make a move until the papers are signed. The call is to tell me I can go ahead and

..." Again her voice faded.

"And what?"

She didn't answer.

"Is that what's bothering you? The--and what?" She still didn't answer.

She didn't say another word until we reached the ranch. 13.

SHE PARKED AT THE OPEN PART OF the U and was out of the car before the motor died. I heard her quick footsteps as I went around to unload the luggage compartment. A floodlight sprang into a white glare above the patio.

I carried the luggage to the front door, which she had left wide open. The room hadn't changed. Soft lights, bright colors, the sick smell of the Count's cigarette. I looked around for the king snake, but I didn't see it. Mrs. De Anza was talking in a high, fast voice. She was on the sofa, hunched over a telephone.

The Count's face, rouged and powdered, looked up at me over the edge of the grand piano lid. The black

glasses gave me a brief, blank look and then lowered again to whatever it was he was doing behind the angle of the lid. Smoke spiraled up from the cigarette in the holder between his teeth. I set the luggage down and went back to the car. It took me four trips, with the last one for the record albums. Afterward I put the car away and went back to the living room. There weren't any other lights on, so I guessed Benita and Rafael had gone to bed. It was a little past midnight. I picked up the groceries Benita had wanted and Rafael's cigarettes, and took them to the kitchen. All the while the greasy smell of the smoke was getting thicker, and Mrs. De Anza's high, fast voice rattled on. The Count was making

muffled thumping sounds now and then behind the piano lid. I said, "I think I'll make some coffee. Do you want some?" He gave me another blank look and then shook his head. I turned to the Countess. De Anza cleared his throat. I glanced back and he shook his head warningly. I shrugged and went out into the kitchen.

There was a jar of instant coffee in the cupboard. I boiled a cup of water and carried the black coffee back into the living room. Mrs. De Anza had carried the telephone on its long extension cord to the far end of the room. She was saying sharply, "London. No, London. That's in England." I didn't know anybody in London, so I picked out a chair and sat down. From here I could

see what the Count had been doing. I'll be damned if he hadn't got that silver-mounted pistol out again for a cleaning. He had it all spread out on the towel and he'd been going over it as carefully as if it hadn't been cleaned for a year.

I don't know if he saw me watching, but a minute after I'd sat down, he got up and crossed over to the record albums. He opened the package and went through it carefully, slipping out each disc, holding it by the edges, turning it slowly under a slanting light, looking for cracks or flaws. Finally he piled a stack of the records on the phonograph and fiddled with the volume until it was low. The music was bell music, soft, tinkling bells, with different tones. I can identify

sweet or hot, but this was something I'd never heard before. The Countess said in a high, tense voice, "Well, keep trying, operator. Ring me back." She slapped the receiver on its cradle and then sat there looking around the room in a feverish sort of way. She made me think of a big cat lashing its tail impatiently and waiting for something to move so she could jump at it.

The Count looked up. "Ah," he said. "Welcome back." Apparently she hadn't even spoken to him before now. She nodded in his direction without even glancing at him.

"Did you win?" he went on in a pleasant voice.

"Certainly I won," Mrs. De Anza told

him. "Thousands. Thousands. Not that I'll ever see it again. All fairy gold. Tomorrow it turns into dead leaves. Nick, get me a--"

"Then we'd better take precautions," De Anza interrupted. "I'll put it in the safe."

"No you won't," she said, giving him a direct look for the first time. "I may try my luck again tomorrow."

He let a few notes of the bell music tinkle through the room. Then he said,

"Nevertheless, we're out in the desert here. Robbery isn't unheard of. Better let me have it."

"No," the Countess said flatly.

De Anza looked around the room, taking his time. No expression showed

through the make-up on his face. He located her purse on the sofa, where she must have dropped it when she came in the door. Its sides bulged. He started toward it.

"Don't waste your time," the Countess said. "I gave Nick the money." There was something in the slow way he turned his head that made me think of the king snake. Sluggish but smooth, and no expression showing.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why what?"

"For what service," he said, forming the words carefully, "did you give Nick so much money?"

The Countess put back her head and laughed. The cords in her bony neck

stood out and you could see the pulse beating under the leathery skin. All her ornaments twinkled and jingled.

"Wouldn't you like to know!" she said.

The flat black lenses swung around toward me. I set down my coffee cup and looked at the Countess. She just sat there grinning back at me, enjoying the spot she'd put me on. I didn't know which side I was playing. That story about the trip to New York and the sanity commission sounded like a pipe dream, but it could be true. I didn't even know who would be signing the checks around here this time tomorrow. I couldn't choose sides.

"For what service, Vince--" the Count began to ask me. But the Countess

hooted him down.

"This is Nick, remember?" she shouted in her high, tight voice. "Nick, not Vince. Callahan's gone and forgotten."

I thought it was time to stop the whole thing.

"I haven't got the money," I said. "I never did have." Then they were both quiet, watching me. Her muddy stare and his flat round lenses both bored at me and for a minute there wasn't a sound in the room except the bell music tinkling and jingling through the smoke. De Anza crossed to the sofa where the bulging purse lay. He picked it up and wadded bills spilled out over the cushions. The Countess was laughing again, flat and

high. He ignored her. He was counting the money carefully, smoothing out the bills and laying them together with the printed faces all right side up.

"Nearly seven thousand," he said, and walked across the rug toward the safe, his moccasins making no sound. He pushed the rug aside with his toe, got down on one knee and opened the safe. As far as he was concerned, our little three-cornered exchange of a minute ago had never happened. I was beginning to build up quite a picture of Callahan. Laying the money carefully away under the floor, De Anza said without looking up, "I got a telephone call today I didn't like, Nick. From the police."

I opened and shut my mouth a couple

of times. I didn't know what came next. Things were happening just a little too fast for me.

"I don't like to get police calls about my staff," the Count went on, apparently talking to the safe, which he was now closing up very carefully.

"I hope you have a satisfactory explanation."

"I--it was just police routine," I said. "Mrs. De Anza talked to one of their men too. So did I. They're just checking up on a killing in town." That sounded too casual, so I added quickly, "Someone I know works in the place where it happened. It's nothing. I'm sorry you had to be bothered."

"Suppose you tell me about it," the

Count said. He stood up and kicked the rug smooth over the safe.

I told him what I'd already told the Countess, and some extra. I made it sound as good as I could. He just stood there watching me, the smoke spiraling up past his face.

"The police have made no arrests yet?" he asked when I finished.

"A couple, I think."

"You expect to hear further from them?"

"Why should I? I didn't kill the guy."

"You have killed men, though, haven't you?"

"What?"

"You were in the South Pacific, fighting?"

"Oh. Yes."

"An interesting sensation, killing," he said casually, watching me. "Don't you agree?"

I thought that didn't call for an answer. I just looked at him, waiting. He smiled suddenly, little creases showing in his pink and white make-up.

"I have killed men too, you see," he added. I found I'd been holding my breath. I let it out carefully. I still waited.

He watched me a minute longer. Then he turned away toward the piano bench where the silver-mounted gun was spread out.

"In another war," he said over his shoulder. "A long time ago now."

"I wonder what time it is in Paris?" Mrs. De Anza said. De Anza ignored her. He was looking down at the gun. "Do you suppose, Nick," he said, "there's much difference in killing--privately, so to speak?"

"I don't know what you mean," I said. I found I was beginning to hold my breath again. I made myself let it out evenly. "Why?" I asked.

"No reason. What do you think?"

"I never thought about it."

"The act of killing made no impression on you?" I tried to see what he was driving at by looking hard at his face, which was the only clue I could find, but the glasses and the make-up hid every sign of expression. I couldn't tell.

He'd got too friendly too suddenly, but it might mean nothing at all. And it might mean a lot. I didn't like it, but what could I do?

"Not exactly," I said. "But it was war. After I got out of uniform I never had any ideas about solving problems with a side arm, if that's what you mean."

"Have you ever encountered an insoluble problem?" he asked.

"You mean one that had to be solved by killing? No. There aren't any."

"It would be later than midnight, anyhow," the Countess said, apparently to herself. "That I know."

"You read the newspapers, Nick," De Anza said. "People are killed. Obviously, as you say, the problems of

these people could be solved without killing, but that would require intelligence. And even those with a glimmer of mind are badly biased when their emotions are involved. Certainly killing isn't necessary. Neither are automobile accidents, ideally. But they happen. Why?"

I shook my head.

"Momentum. Momentum carries them on. They can't stop in time." For a minute all I could see before me was a bulging white shirt front lurching toward me, slow, like a cloud, and a glitter of glass that was a broken beer bottle angled toward my face.

But De Anza's voice went on calmly.

"They can't stop in time. It's a

fascinating subject, murder. It's really the only noncompetitive career a man can follow, whether he goes in for quality, like Landru, or quantity, like Haarman."

"It doesn't fascinate me," I said.

He picked up the revolver and slanted it to the light, making the silver glitter. "What do you think, my dear?" he asked the Countess. "Wouldn't you say murder fascinates any normal person?"

"Who's normal around here?" the Countess said. "Good God, Leo, you aren't cleaning that damned gun again?"

"Certainly I am."

"Mysophobe!" the Countess said. He gave her one of his blank-lensed looks, his eyebrows showing for a second over

the tops of the glasses. He smiled and rubbed a fleck of dust off the silver. He didn't say anything. The Countess looked at me.

"In case you wonder," she said, "mysophobia means a fear of dirt. It ought to mean fear of mice, but it doesn't. A neurotic symptom, really. Lady Macbeth washing her hands, you know. The blood won't come off no matter how often you--"

"Don't labor the analogy, my dear," De Anza broke in. "As a matter of fact I'm indulging myself. This gun reminds me of something pleasant. A mistake I didn't make." He looked at me over the gun. "Did you ever hear of General Fernandez Silvestre?"

I thought about it.

"No."

He blew out smoke and smiled. "That was the man who made Franco dictator. There was a military scandal and Silvestre and his staff made the only amends they could for an inexcusable blunder. They blew their brains out." He smiled in a secretive sort of way. I felt his eyes on me through the dark lenses.

"Spanish Morocco it was," he went on. "Nineteen twenty-one. A long time ago. Ten thousand Spanish soldiers massacred by the Riffs, because of a blunder." He looked down at the revolver.

"Was that his?" I asked.

"Oh, no. This was mine."

He whistled a few notes and rubbed the silver. The bell music tinkled from the phonograph.

"War was a romantic affair in 'twenty-one," he said. "I wasn't a romantic, though, even then. I was a realist. Even when there were only half a dozen of us left. I was on Silvestre's staff, you see." He paused and looked up at the blank wall, not saying anything for a minute. After several bars of bell music, he went on, still staring at the wall.

"The Riffs had us surrounded. At a place called Sidi Dris, it was. We kept sending out little bands with the wounded, trying to get through to Melilla. But not many did. There were too many Riffs. Silvestre stayed behind,

with his staff. When he was sure the men had all been evacuated, he . . ." De Anza smiled. "Only a half-dozen of us left, you understand. He said,

'Gentlemen, the moment has come for each of us to do his last duty.'

Wasn't that a fine line? Then we shook hands all around. Every officer answered the roll, as Silvestre called it. Every man. 'Presente!' And then"--De Anza lifted the unloaded revolver and made a gesture toward his temple--" 'Presente!' and blow your brains out," he said.

"All but you," the Countess said in a hoarse voice. He made a little bow toward her.

"When I looked down the gun barrel,"

he said, "I remember it was exactly like Silvestre's eye. He had black eyes, very cold and sharp. A man with a stare like a gun barrel and the romantic mind of a child. When my turn came"--he lifted the revolver again and aimed it a little to one side, past his temple--" 'Presente!'" he said. Then he lowered the gun and laughed.

"The flash burned me a little. I prudently fell down like the rest. I heard Silvestre call his own name, and there was a shot, and that was all. Except for the little problem of escaping from the Riffs. I managed." He looked reflectively at the revolver. "Honorable suicide," he said.

"Nonsense. How childish to expect a

man to kill himself for an abstraction. The Code of Hammurabi--expiation. A life for a life. What fools men are!" He blew on the silver and polished the mist away on his sleeve. "The breath of life remains to me," he said.

"For what it's worth," the Countess added in a flat voice. When he didn't say anything more, she shrugged. "Divert it to the purpose of the worm." She got up and began to pace restlessly around the room. I began to have the feeling this session would never come to an end. "A rose is a rose is a rose," she said in an angry voice. "Four roses make a drink. Fix me a highball, Leo. What's this?" She had got to the far end of the room. "Good God, more letters?" She swooped

back toward me, dropping a handful of envelopes over my knees. "I'm going to phone New Orleans," she said. "Or maybe London's clear now. Take care of those letters, will you, Nick?" I was feeling a little dazed. Things went by pretty fast here.

"You still haven't signed the last batch," I said. She laughed as if I had said something funny, and began to dial with nervous jerks of her finger.

De Anza put down the gun and crossed slowly to the bar. Over his shoulder he said to me in a soft voice.

"I don't want to hear from the police again about you, Nick. Keep it in mind."

"Sure," I said.

He gave me an expressionless look. I

turned my head a little and saw that Mrs. De Anza was looking at me too. All three of us were quiet. The two pairs of eyes watched me without a motion. Somehow I didn't like it at all. Then the record-changer clicked, and the tableau broke up. De Anza mixed his drink. The Countess began squabbling with the telephone operator. I looked through the letters, all addressed to Mrs. De Anza or Countess De Anza. There were only a few, a couple of bills, a brief letter of thanks for a donation to some charity, and a note written in a slanting hand that was signed Vincent Callahan. I reread that one. All it said was that Callahan had left a suitcase behind him when he quit, and he'd appreciate having it kept

for him till he had a forwarding address.

Mrs. De Anza was phoning London again by the time the records were finished. I said I'd put them back in their albums, and the Count said thanks, he'd appreciate it. Then he lay down on a couch and shut his eyes. I guess he went to sleep after a while.

14.

SURE, HE COULD SLEEP, WHAT DID he have to worry about, now? When I got into bed a couple of hours later, I was ready for a bad night. Because I was worried about the questions De Anza had been asking. Now I didn't dare walk out. It would have made De Anza suspicious right away, after what we'd been talking about. I might get away with

it, sure. I might climb a freight and pull out--would the police be watching the freights, after the Gavotte killing?--but suppose I fumbled? Suppose a railroad dick got me by the arm and asked questions? All I could say would be, "A guy named De Anza gave me a job, so I ran away." Oh, sure. Anyway, Lieutenant Hobson had told me not to leave town. And he'd fouled up my chances even more by calling De Anza about Gavotte's death, and asking a lot of questions. Maybe I'd wind up with no job and on charity--the barred window kind. But they couldn't prove anything--not even if Sherry told them about my--my temper. Hell! Everybody's different. Some people get mad easier than others. The

way the world's made, you've got sheep and wolves. If you've enough dough, you can be a wolf and pay your way out of any jam. But if you're an ordinary guy, if you don't have the dough behind you, then by God you'd better be a sheep. Your job's to get clipped as soon as you grow more wool, and finally you'd better follow the Judas goat into the killing pen. Because if you don't, then you're breaking the rules, and, somehow or other, they'll get you.

Maybe I was a black sheep. Maybe I wasn't a sheep at all. Whenever that hot burning started in my chest, pouring through me till it was ready to blow off, then I knew I wasn't a sheep. And when it did blow off, I was bigger than the

world. That was the time when I could hit back. All I ever needed was to find the right . . . enemy.

I made myself turn my mind away from that.

Then my thoughts circled back to the memory that had been waiting for me all evening, and I lay there picturing the rug, and the floor safe under it, and the safe stuffed with dough. Seven grand--Sherry.

It was about thirty feet away from me, horizontally, and maybe a foot straight down. It might as well have been in Fort Knox. But it wasn't so much the locked steel door that was holding me back--I could see ways to get around that, one way or another. The real reasons why I couldn't touch the money didn't have a

thing to do with safes or combinations. Suppose I did get hold of it? The police were watching me already, and even if they hadn't been, the Count wasn't a fool and neither was his wife. What good would it do me to give Sherry the dough if I landed in prison? That way, I'd lose her too.

I couldn't see any answer. So, thinking about Sherry, I turned over and got ready to worry some more. But somehow I fell asleep right away. Then I started to dream.

* * *

I was looking at a bulging white shirt front and watching my fist moving slowly toward it. I concentrated on my fist. I tried to ignore the creased shirt

and the pink, contorted face I knew would be above it if I looked up. Ed Gavotte faded away as I watched my hand, and then my index finger was hooked inside a trigger guard and the warm, smooth stock of a Garand was against my cheek and the familiar pressure braced against my shoulder. Take it easy, relax, watch and sight. Look at the bushes and wait for a movement.

There was a movement.

Then I felt myself falling, and I was splashing around in salt water that got in my throat and stung like the Count's cigarette smoke. I had on fatigues and GI shoes and a rucksack and an ammo belt and I couldn't let go of my rifle. I tried to

swim, but I went down once and twice and three times, and the last time I didn't come up. Then I realized I was drowning and I'd never see Sherry again. I couldn't face that. I couldn't stand it. I couldn't go on living without her.

But you're not going to go on living, I thought.

I had to. I had to swim up, somehow. Only I couldn't swim; I'd forgotten how. All around me there must be plenty of fish swimming along like experts, but I couldn't manage it; there was too much weight dragging me down. And I'd never learned to swim, anyhow.

Then somebody threw me a rope. But when I grabbed it, it broke. That didn't matter; somebody else had thrown me

another by then, and I started hauling myself hand over hand along it. The guy at the other end was Ed Gavotte. He didn't hate me any more; in fact, he was pulling me right into his gin-mill so he could offer me a partnership. But just as I was nearly on dry ground, he let go of the rope.

Other people kept throwing me ropes, and then letting go of them. . . . I sank down in cool, dark water. It wasn't too bad. It kept getting darker and quieter. The roaring in my ears was fading. I stopped dog-paddling. I noticed the back of my hand, floating in front of my face. The skin was getting lighter, changing from tan to white. And my clothes were dissolving off of me. I was going back a

long ways, I thought, and the water was getting into my brain and washing out memories. I began to feel better. I was still holding my breath, but I almost decided not to. The water had to soak all through me, inside and out, before . . . before-Count De Anza threw me a rope. I grabbed it. He hauled me up through the water. My clothes stopped dissolving and got solid against my skin again. If De Anza let go of the rope, the way the others had ... if I couldn't manage to keep on holding my breath long enough . . .

The pain in my throat woke me. Only it didn't, because now I was standing in the De Anza living room, wearing my dripping wet fatigues and holding my

rifle at parade rest. The Count was sitting opposite me, and the Countess lay on the sofa working crossword puzzles. Coiled in a heap on the carpet, right over where the safe was, I saw the king snake. The Count patted rouge on his cheeks and nodded in my direction.

"My wife tells me," he said, "that she found you asleep in the patio this morning. I don't recommend sleeping in an uncomfortable chair, or in the hot sun. It's apt to give a man unpleasant dreams." He hadn't noticed the rifle yet. I didn't dare move, for fear I'd call his attention to it. But I didn't want to stand there holding it, either. The damned thing might go off.

The Count was still waiting. Staring at

him, trying to hold his eyes, I said,

"I got back late. I didn't want to wake anybody up."

"It might be preferable to bad dreams. You were talking in your sleep, the Countess tells me."

I heard myself say, "Yes? What was I saying?"

"Nothing very clear. Something about killing someone." Time went slow. It took me hours to turn my head and look toward the Countess. I could see her sharp profile and the tight blue turban. Her pencil lifted, hung in the air, and jabbed down at the crossword book. She wasn't listening, apparently.

I started to turn my head back toward the Count, but my eyes wouldn't do what

I wanted. They slipped down from Mrs. De Anza to the carpet and across it till I was looking at my own feet. I wanted to run. But my feet looked too heavy to move, somehow, in their wet, heavy shoes. Army surplus shoes.

I said, "That was in the Army. I still . . . I--" My tongue stuck. My thoughts had run aground.

"Whom did you kill?"

I was looking at a bulging white shirt front again and watching my fist move slowly toward it. I stared at my fist, trying not to see the twisted pink face of Gavotte. But he wasn't there; there wasn't anything there except the smooth stock of the Garand against my cheek and the butt pressing against my

shoulder. Relax your muscles, control your breathing, take it easy. Look at the bushes and wait for a movement. There was a movement.

I woke up. The Countess was in bed with me.

* * *

"I can't help it," she said, in a fast, breathless voice. "I can't help it. I'm not a nymphomaniac. It's only at times like these. Then I've got to do something, something, something. Always different. Always fast. There's too much energy inside of me."

I don't know how long she'd been talking. I sat up, and she got hold of my arm with fingers that bit in hard, like metal.

"I can't help it, Nick. I tell you I can't. Don't pull away. Leopold wanted to ask you to leave. I wouldn't have it. He's keeping you on because of me. He's terrified of people and the things they can do. He's seen too much of it. He thinks human being are devils, Nick, all of them. Just pretending to be civilized."

"Wait--" I said. "Wait." I couldn't stand the thought of that bony mummy beside me, with its red wire eyelashes and its skull-face. I didn't know what I was saying. There was only one crazy certain thought that kept popping back into my head, regular as clockwork. It wouldn't be any good. Not with you. Even if I could make myself do it, it wouldn't be any good, I can tell that right

now.

"Don't worry about it," she said rapidly. "He does what I want. When I feel this way, I--it's only that I can't sleep without dreaming. And I can't stand those nightmares any more, I can't--you don't know. I'd rather be insane. That's what will happen, unless . . . Nick, you've got to help me. You've got to."

"Listen," I said. "Your husband's in this same house. I--"

"He's old, he's too old. This doesn't mean anything to him any more. He's got his own ways, with--Nick, I can't help it, all I want is to get to sleep. I haven't slept for two days. I want to sleep."

Another thought slipped in and joined

the first crazy one; it had a label that said gigolo, and it had something to do with the floor safe. One way to get three thousand dollars, I thought, while my throat closed and tightened.

No. Even if I would, I couldn't. Not with her.

I said, "Look, I ... I want a drink. I'm not even awake yet." I reached out in the dark to touch her and drew my hand back without doing it.

"Don't go away. Don't."

"I tell you, I'm not awake. I need a couple of shots. That's what you need too, I'll bet."

"Nick!"

I pulled myself out of her grip and got out of the bed as fast as I could, my skin

crawling. I was glad it was too dark for her to see me. Fumbling in the blackness--the moon must have gone down--I found my pants and pulled them on. I didn't bother with shirt or shoes. I said, "I'm going to get a bottle. Understand?"

There was a silence in which I could hear her breathe. Then she laughed, a harsh, cracked sound.

"I'm not insane," she said. "Don't you know the difference between--All right. Get a drink. But--"

"I'll be right back."

She didn't answer. I could hear her fingernails scratching on linen slowly. I went out, crossed the patio, went through the kitchen into the living room, and

switched on a lamp. I looked quickly at the couch. The Count wasn't there. I don't know whether or not I expected him to be. I went over to the bar and hung on to it with both hands, trying to think. If only Mrs. De Anza looked just a little bit less like a living mummy, I might have been able to take it, for three thousand bucks. But I knew when I was facing something impossible, and I was glad I didn't have to go through with it. But I had to think of something. I kept listening for her footsteps. When I looked around the room, trying to find the answer, my eyes stopped at one place on the rug. That would be the answer, for me, if I could only work it out the right way.

It wasn't the Countess' answer; money

didn't mean a thing to her. She wanted something else. She wanted to go to sleep, that was all--and sleep without dreaming. And, with all her dough, she couldn't even manage a simple thing like that. Just as I couldn't get what I wanted, even though it was only a few feet away from me. As for the Countess, an idea began to stir at the back of my head. Something I'd forgotten till now. I uncorked a bottle of brandy and poured stiff shots in two glasses. Then I doubled the amount. I put the bottle back and finally remembered another bottle, the one I'd got at the Phoenix drugstore, with the Countess'

sleeping caps in it.

I found it in her bathroom.

I had no way of knowing whether or not the Count was awake, or where he might be. I took five capsules, in my hand, back to the living room. I opened one and let the powder sift down into the brandy. I put the empty capsule in my pocket and opened another.

Then the thought hit me: Suppose it kills her?

Was that what the Count had been talking about? The time when a man first kills unnecessarily? The time when he becomes a murderer, a guy who can't stop, who's gone down for the third time, and never comes up again?

I opened two more capsules and put the contents in the brandy. Carrying the glasses, I went back to my room.

* * *

I sat on the bed beside her.

"Listen," I said, "I'm worried about your husband."

"Don't be. It isn't necessary."

"Why don't you take a sleeping pill?"

I heard her laughing harshly in the dark.

"Gallant bastard."

"I'm sorry. Remember I'm working for you. You told me to take care of details. And you said what you want to do is get to sleep."

"Go on, say it."

"I said I'm worried, didn't I? Guys get shot for things like this. How do I know your husband won't come after me with a shotgun? Maybe you need a drink."

"No. I don't . . . Nick."

Her hand touched me. I got her wrist and shoved the glass into her hot fingers.

"Come on. Drink up. Where are you?"
I clinked my glass to hers. "Drink up."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," she said. I heard glass tap softly against her teeth and I heard her swallowing. I sipped at mine.

"Finished?"

"Not yet," I said.

"Nick--"

"These nightmares. Do you get them all the time?"

"No. Only when I'm . . . once in a blue moon. I keep thinking they'll stop. I go along for months--nothing matters at all. I don't want to do anything. But I don't

dream. Then I--things begin to matter. I can feel the dreams coming back."

"What are they?"

The bed moved.

"Something that happened to me once--it happens again. It keeps on happening, over and over. It was--I'm not going to remember, I'm not going to dream about it again. . . . Finished?"

"Wait a minute. What about a doctor? They can cure things like that, can't they?"

"Doctors can't help everybody," she said. "There's only one way. For me. Once I get past it, it's over, for a while. But . . . I can't stop going as fast as I can. I don't want to stop. If I'm exhausted, body and soul, the dreams can't get

through . . . I don't know what I want. Leo's a vampire, and yet I can't just go away and leave him. He wouldn't have a dime without me. If only he'd be satisfied to take just money!"

She stopped. When she spoke again, her voice was calmer.

"I can't get away. So I've got to do something. Got to. Nick, put your arm around me. I think I'm relaxing."

"All right. That better?"

"Better," she said, sighing. "You're strong. You've got a hard core, down inside. It can't bend. It may break, but it won't bend. You remind me of Leo, the way he used to be, years ago. But it was all sham, with him ... I waited too long."

"But Leo won't leave. He won't let me

leave. He won't have a thing changed. Everything's got to stay the way it's always been. Something happened to him in Morocco. He tells everybody who'll listen. All about how everyone else is a fool and the rest of it. But he's afraid. He's locked himself in. Nick, does everybody want to die?"

"No."

"Then what do they want?"

"Another chance, maybe. A chance to start over again, without having all the odds against them."

"Even if I never leave him," she said, "he'll lose me. Because there won't be anything left. I'll be quite dead. Walking around like a zombie, you know. If this goes on, it'll happen. It isn't a spiral, it's

the same circle, over and over. Each time there's a little less left inside of me. A little less what?"

"Forget about it. Don't--"

"Strength," she said. "I haven't much left now. But that's the part of me Leo needs. He hasn't any, not any more. He lives off mine. And yet he keeps trying to destroy what's left of it. I know why. He's afraid I'll leave him. And I will."

She moved a little.

"If I don't, you know what? We'll stay here, forever and ever, world without end. Just sitting across from each other, not even talking, breathing a little, doing the same things over and over but not for long . . . pretty soon, not doing anything at all. Sitting and breathing. Rafael and

Benita will take care of us. If you go, like Callahan, there'll be somebody else for a while . .

. and then somebody else, until even that stops. Then we'll be alone together, Leo and I. Quite damned. Doing nothing but wait and be afraid. Afraid the other will die first. Because we'll be one flesh by then." She stopped, waiting. I didn't say anything. I couldn't think. There was too much coming at me, too fast.

"Nick?" she said, after a while.

There were two things I could do. I could say no and get fired. Or I could say yes, and then what? As nearly as I could figure out, I wouldn't be sure till her lawyer phoned whether or not she had a cent. Maybe she'd borrowed

money, or arranged on tick, to grease the wheels of the right people on a sanity commission. Maybe such wheels can't be greased. I didn't know. It seemed to me that Mrs. De Anza's chances with a commission that was on the level were pretty lousy. But I wasn't a psychiatrist. And maybe it was all a pipe dream she'd had. Who could say?

What did she want? Well, she wanted a lay. I knew that, all right. And I knew why, too. It would prove something to her. But what else? Did she want me to take her to New Orleans or somewhere? How the hell could I?

McElroy might take off to Chicago with Sherry any time now, and . . . okay, suppose the Countess and I did head for

New Orleans. I remembered the seven thousand in the floor safe. Nice money. But not a damn bit of good to me in New Orleans.

Maybe I could stall her along, somehow. If she just wanted me to take her into Phoenix again, to the casino, then there we'd be, with the seven thousand in her purse. Well?

God damn it, I thought, even a whore gets paid. And what does this bitch expect? That I'll sleep with her for the fun of it? I heard myself breathing hard; I was tense all over. I felt her hand touch my arm, and instantly all the tightness went away. It drained off, leaving me empty. There was nothing I could do. I was in another trap. Little by little, I was

being pushed somewhere, somewhere I didn't want to go. I suppose I knew then that it was too late.

But there was Sherry. And there was the seven thousand in the floor safe. Seven thousand dollars. It could be mine. With a break--and all I'd ever needed, really, was a break.

Seven thousand dollars.

"Nick--" she said. Her voice had begun to get fainter. "Nick, what are you thinking? There isn't much time left, Nick." She sounded drowsy. "Not any more. So you've got to help me, Nick. I've got to get away this time. I'm afraid if I die without breaking the circle, it'll go on after I'm dead, in hell. Hell will be just like this. I'm afraid of dying while

I'm still alive. Whenever I get sleepy now, I'm afraid it isn't real sleep that's coming. That I'll wake up--not really waking--and find myself sitting in the patio and not caring any more. So I've got to keep going. I can't let go. Not until" She stopped for a while, and I thought she was asleep. I started to draw my arm away, but she murmured: "It's like the moment before you die. That's why I'm afraid. I'm afraid I won't wake up. There's still time, isn't there?"

"Plenty of time."

"No, there isn't. Nick."

"Yes?"

"Will I wake up tomorrow?"

"Yes. You'll wake up all right."

She didn't answer. The rhythm of her

breathing changed. I sat there in the hot dark, sweating, the brandy making me feel dizzy and sick, and after a while I knew she was asleep.

* * *

She was wearing pajamas. I carried her across the patio, into the house again, and to her bedroom, hoping to God I wouldn't run into the Count. I dropped her on her bed and covered her up. I switched off her light and listened to her breathing.

Finally I went over and found her pulse. It was slow but seemed steady enough.

I went out of the bedroom, realizing now why Vincent Callahan had run out. I didn't get very far. I'd taken only a

couple of steps down the hall when I heard something that brought me up sharp, swinging me around toward De Anza's bedroom.

The Count was talking.

I heard it faintly, through the closed door, but he was talking to somebody, all right. I froze. It was a few seconds before I got myself enough under control to move again, and then I wasn't too completely under control. For when I stepped forward and tried to put my ear against the panel, I put it there a little too hard. It didn't make much noise, and it didn't hurt me, but the door started to swing open. The latch wasn't caught, I suppose. I pulled back fast, out of sight in the hall. The Count's voice was a little

louder now, but not much, and it sounded funny. Irregular. Sometimes he'd just mumble, and sometimes he just breathed hard. And he was talking in Spanish.

I realized then that I was in the darkness, there in the hall, and that moonlight was coming through the Count's windows. So I moved a little to where I could see most of the bedroom. De Anza was alone. He was in bed and asleep, and he was talking to somebody, all right, but that somebody was dead.

Because I heard him say, after a gabble of choking Spanish, "Presente, Silvestre!"

Then he let out a long, groaning sigh and wrenched himself over, away from me. There was no sound after that.

I made no sound, either, as I went back to my own little hell. 15.

SOMETIME IN THE EARLY MORNING I heard a car start and I raised myself up to look at the alarm clock on the bureau. It was five-fifteen. The way the motor kept racing, coughing and dying, three times, told me who was in the Buick. It was a hell of a way to treat a cold engine on a cold morning. After a while she got it started and roared off. I went back to sleep. She got back at seven thirty-five, while I was dressing, and I heard her quick footsteps tap across the patio and then I heard a door slam. I took my time getting ready, paying a lot of attention to every detail. I shaved carefully, first with the grain,

then against it. My hair looked stiff and dry and wouldn't stay down, so I played with hair oil and water till it looked civilized. I polished my shoes, and finally I couldn't delay any longer. Somebody was cooking bacon. The clear, bell noise of wood being chopped began. I took a deep breath mid stepped out into the patio. It was a wonderful morning. The heat hadn't started yet, and the air was tingling and sharp, but not too cold. To the west I could see the desert, stretching for miles until a purple-gray haze began and hid the mountains. There wasn't a cloud.

The sound of wood-chopping was just right, somehow.

When I went into the kitchen, Benita

and Rafael were getting breakfast. That is, Benita was; Rafael was sitting at the table restitching a fancy leather belt, hand-tooled, with a silver buckle. Benita looked over her shoulder at me. Rafael stretched his wide mouth as far as it would go and said hi.

"Nita. Rafe. Nice morning."

"Pretty good," Rafael said. "Thanks for the cigarettes, Nick."

"That's okay. Nita, I hope the eggs didn't get broken." She held up two fingers at me.

"So Mrs. De Anza had omelette for breakfast," Rafael said. "We owe you some dough. Nita has house money. You tell her how much, she pay." I got out my notebook and told her the amount. She

reached under her dress, took out a little purse, and counted the money onto the table. Outside, the Countess yelled something. The chopping didn't stop. Benita picked up a couple of eggs, broke them in the pan, and began scrambling them. Rafael groaned and pushed his needle slowly through the leather. Then, as the call came again, he got up, staring at the back of Benita's head.

She said something fast in Spanish.

"Eh," Rafael said, and dropped the belt. He shook his hand, clucked his tongue, and began sucking his thumb. "I stuck myself. Ow. Damn. Nick, you wanta take Mrs. De Anza some coffee?"

"Is that what she wants?"

"Yeah, she . . . you take a cup to her,

eh? I gotta put iodine on my thumb." He went out fast.

Benita was keeping herself busy with the eggs. She used her free hand to set a cup on a saucer and pour coffee in it. Then she held it out to me.

"Okay," I said, after a minute. There wasn't any use delaying. I took the coffee and went to find the Countess. That wasn't hard. The bell noises led me around in back of the house, where I found her, swinging a long-handled axe as though she was being paid by the cord. There was a lot of wood piled up, and she was working on the fairly big pieces, splitting them when she could manage it, but when she couldn't not bothering to use wedges, just going on to

another one. She wasn't particular, though. Sometimes she chopped smaller pieces in half. She was wearing a dress I hadn't seen before, and it looked too good to use for this kind of work. On the other hand, I guessed she simply hadn't bothered to change it. It would have taken at least a minute.

Right then I knew it wasn't over; she wasn't better, she was worse. A lot worse. She looked terrible. Her face was shining with sweat, and her eyes were sunk into her face. There were lavender blotches under them. She'd slept, all right--she couldn't have helped it, after three Nembutal caps--but the sedative hadn't kept the nightmares away. I was afraid to get near her. She

chopped the way she drove a car, the way she'd keep going at ninety miles an hour while she was lighting a cigarette. She didn't stop for a second. She saw me, all right, but the axe flashed up and swung down and the wooden bell rang and the axe came up again. She had that blue turban on, and the costume jewelry was catching the sun in a sort of crazy dance along her arms and breast. I stood there, holding the coffee, wondering how I could get close enough to hand it to her and not get my arm cut off. I guess Benita and Rafael were used to this. Anyhow, they'd certainly got busy on other jobs the minute the Countess yelled for coffee. I picked up a chunk of wood, in case Mrs. De Anza wanted something to

chop, and held it in my right hand as I started to walk forward. The axe stuck in a log. "Son of a bitch," the Countess said, and wrenched at the haft.

"Here's your coffee," I said.

She was bent halfway over, pulling at the axe, and she twisted her head around to look at me. We both stood that way for a while, I don't know how long, but it seemed long. I thought she was deciding how to play it. I just waited, holding out the cup and saucer.

Then she decided. She straightened, reached out, and took the cup, leaving me with the saucer. I dropped the piece of firewood and gripped the axe haft. I pulled. I couldn't budge it.

The Countess looked at me.

I put the saucer on the ground and used both hands on the axe. The blade had bit deep, and this wasn't pine; it was hard oak. I forced it forward a bit and rocked the blade till it worked free. Then I leaned it against the log, just in time to take the cup the Countess handed me. She'd drunk the coffee without taking a breath, apparently.

"Thanks, Nick," she said.

"Want any more?"

"I'll yell if I do."

She reached for the axe and I went away. Circling the garage, I noticed the Buick sitting beside the Chevvy, so I went in and checked the speedometer. Last night I'd automatically noticed the mileage when I put it away, and I did a

bit of quick figuring. She'd chalked up 180, in about two and a quarter hours of driving. That didn't mean she'd driven at 80 m.p.h. all the way, even on a clear road. The thing that pulls down your average is starting and stopping, and slowing for curves and intersections. She must have burned up the road at a good deal more than 80 for part of the time. Rafael wasn't in the kitchen, but Benita was dishing up my breakfast on a tray. I said, "I'll eat it here, if it's all right with you." She didn't care. She put the dishes on the kitchen table and took the empty cup and saucer away from me.

She didn't say anything in Spanish or English. I didn't either. I ate breakfast and, after a while, decided to go right

along as though nothing had happened. If Mrs. De Anza was going to forget about last night, fine. I didn't think for a minute that she'd really forget, but at least she hadn't blown her top at me, so far. Then I had another idea; suppose she really didn't remember what had happened after she got sleepy? Suppose she thought . . .

I felt relieved for a minute, but not for long. If she were hazy enough about details to believe I'd slept with her last night, then maybe I'd find her in my bed again tonight.

Maybe I ought to lay in a supply of sleeping caps.

* * *

After breakfast, I went into my office,

trying to shut out the sound of wood-chopping. I found a little screw driver and put the new platen on the Royal. While I was at it, I oiled the machine a bit, not too much, and I went to work on the correspondence. One thing that needed answering was Callahan's note, and I reread that a couple of times. It was postmarked Tucson, and after a while I realized there wasn't any return address, so I couldn't answer it anyway. I made a note on the back of the envelope to locate Callahan's suitcase and stow it away safely somewhere. Suddenly I remembered the two brandy glasses in my room. They were still there. They wouldn't prove anything, probably Benita wouldn't even notice

when she came in to clean up, but I was feeling guilty. I went to my room, washed the glasses in the bathroom, and dried them on a towel. I wrapped the towel around them and headed for the kitchen. Benita wasn't there, though. I put them back where they belonged, behind the bar. The cigarette smell was gone, thanks to the air-conditioning system. I looked around the room.

The telephone was still trailing its cord across the carpet. I picked it up and took it back where it belonged. The cord was on a spring reel, so it wound itself up.

Standing there, I picked up the receiver and listened to a voice say, "Number, please."

But I had forgotten Sherry's number. I cradled the receiver and tried to remember the names of the girls she was staying with, or the address of their apartment house. Lillian was all I could think of. I looked across the room at a pattern on the carpet, just over the sunken safe.

I had fifty dollars now, plus the six-odd bucks Benita had given me. It wasn't three thousand.

I thought: Take it easy. Use your head. After all, Sherry's been living with'

Gavotte. And he's been dead only a few days. She's not going to fall in McElroy's arms today or tomorrow or any time soon. She just wouldn't do it. Even if Gavotte stole her dough, she

wouldn't go right from one man to another. Not Sherry. I noticed that the sound of wood-chopping had stopped.

All day the Countess never slowed down for a second. She decided to have a general house cleaning. Benita, Rafael and I were roped in, but it was Mrs. De Anza who did the hard, heavy work, before we could get there to lift a chair or push a sofa for her. The Mexicans seemed to go blank. They didn't say anything except yes or no, and they said it in Spanish. The Countess told them what to do, and they did it, and they didn't seem to get nervous. But I did, even though she treated me the same as she'd always done.

During one brief break, I asked Rafael

about the suitcase Callahan had left, but he didn't know where it was. We found it, by accident, while we were turning out a closet for Mrs. De Anza. The noise should have wakened the Count, but he stayed in his room, and, though Benita took him a tray during the afternoon, he probably ate it in bed, with his face greased up and a cigarette in his fingers, stuck in that green-white jade holder. The king snake crawled out from under the piano, and Mrs. De Anza glared at him, or it, and told Benita to get the lazy reptile out of her sight. We stopped for sandwiches once; the Countess made them herself, with a lot of rattling and clashing in the kitchen. I noticed her hands, blistered from chopping wood,

and got her some ointment and gloves, but when I looked again, she'd taken them off. She stopped only when her hands started bleeding a little, around the blisters, and then she just went over to the telephone and called New York or maybe China, I don't know. It was quite a day.

She went for a drive, alone, around five, and the rest of us put the furniture back where it belonged and cleaned ourselves up. We were all fagged out. I took a shower and changed my clothes. Afterward, I saw Rafael sitting out in the patio, drinking a beer and smoking, so I joined him. He called something, and Benita came out of the kitchen with another glass and two opened cans.

"Thanks," I said. She went back in the house and Rafael and I sat there, drinking beer, listening to the silence. I wondered if he knew about Gavotte and the rest. I thought about that detective, Hobson, the lieutenant, and I wondered what he'd decided about me, if anything. Then I wondered how the Count really felt about me, considering all the questions he'd asked last night. If he was really just afraid of taking chances, I needn't worry too much about that angle.

"How long is this going to last?" I asked Rafael.

"Eh?"

"Mrs. De Anza. Does she get like this often?"

"Like what?"

"Don't play dumb, Rafe. You know what. I like to know what to expect. What's the matter with her?"

He took a long drink of beer, sighed, and wiped his mouth. "She wake up, Nick."

"She acts hopped-up."

"She . . . sleep. Most time, sleep--only not real sleep. Take it easy, like snake."

"Snake?"

"Maybe bear." He nodded. "Sí, bear. Bear sleep all winter."

"Hibernate?"

"Zombie," he said, grinning with pleasure at finding the word. "Like zombie in movie. Walk around, not give goddam. Zombie."

"You could say the same thing about

Mr. De Anza."

"No. He--he snake, she not. The blood--is no like ours--"

"Cold blood?"

"Sí. Burned out. She just the opposite."

"Hot blood for her, eh?"

"Bear, she sleep all winter, wake up--spring." He made helpless gestures.

"She wake up winter if she want. No matter. She zombie. Wake up, pretty soon, bang. Raise hell."

"How?"

He drew down his mouth and shrugged.

"Time like this, she don't give one goddam. She get idea, maybe crazy--okay, she go ahead. Do it, crazy, no

matter. She act like she gonna die tomorrow and got to do everything today. She go sort of crazy."

"What does she do?"

"Any damn thing. Veence get his arm broke once. I dunno. They go over Las Vegas way that time. Mrs. De Anza, kinda like buzz saw. When she go round real fast . . ."

"Well, maybe Mr. De Anza understands it. I certainly don't. What does he do when she acts like this?"

"Oh, he watch her. Funny. He watch. Never do nothing. He tell me, you want to know somebody, find out if they sick inside. Dig right there. You find out."

"What's his angle in that?"

"Maybe he prove something to

himself. I dunno. Maybe he sick himself, gotta think everybody else sick. Snake, Nick. You watch. You find out."

"He was asking me a lot of questions last night."

"'Bout something you don't like much?"

I nodded.

"Same with Veence. Veence was kinda afraid of people. Mr. De Anza always talk to him about it. Ask things. He smart fella, sure as hell. He feel round till he find right place. Same with fella worked here before Veence. One before that, too. They all quit. I think Mr. De Anza won't hire nobody who ain't got some--some trouble." He coughed over a mouthful. "Not you, Nick. Other fellas.

You more like me, take things easy. He don't try dig in me. No fun. No-good lazy fella like me, sick all over, maybe, huh?" He held up his glass and looked at the half-inch of beer that remained in it.

"She wake up. She get tired. She turn into zombie again. The bear sleep. Like fella go 'long fine, work hard, take it easy. One day take a drink. Whole goddam bottle. Get drunk for a week. Then good, quiet fella again." He watched me light another cigarette.

"You smoking a lot, Nick," he said.

"What of it?"

"Don't let Mrs. De Anza throw you. Soon she get quiet again."

"How soon?"

"I dunno. Something happen, most

always. One big bang. Pchs!"

"I wish she'd bang and get it over."

"Soon, maybe. She no can stop, I guess, till it happen. But you take it easy, Nick. Slow down, like these desert. Dry sea is good place to relax, bad place not to."

"Anyhow, I can't drown in a dry sea, can I?" 16.

THINGS SPEEDED UP, AS
THOUGH the Countess were pressing
down on some accelerator I couldn't see.
She didn't make anything happen,
actually. It was only that she kept so
busy, racing her motor so fast, that even
Rafael's dry sea seemed to wake up a
bit, like a tide beginning to move. The
king snake got a little more lively.

Rafael said the snake was hungry and maybe he ought to catch a kangaroo rat or something for it. Benita didn't say anything, but she gave the reptile a dish of milk and some raw eggs.

I played it as safe as I could, not saying much, staying out of the way most of the time. The Countess had got back around six and then I didn't see her for a while. I figured she might not be feeling too good because of her blistered hands. She had slapped on a couple of Band-aids, and they made her nervous.

For myself, I was embarrassed every time I thought of the Count. I couldn't tell how much he knew or guessed. After a while I went into my room and lay down. I tried to make some plans, but

nothing clicked. I couldn't think straight. All my ideas were jumbled up, and they wouldn't sort themselves out into any kind of order. After about half an hour I heard a car drive up and stop, and then Rafael opened my door.

"Fella want to see you, Nick."

"Be right with you," I said. My stomach was queasy, because I thought it might be Lieutenant Hobson about Gavotte again. But when I crossed the patio I glanced out toward the open part, and there was a yellow Cadillac--at least, the lines said Cadillac, and it looked light. I detoured to make sure, because it was getting dark. The sun was down beyond the mountains on the horizon, and the air felt cold.

McElroy was in the living room, looking through a magazine. He was alone.

"Banning."

He tossed the magazine down and came toward me, ready for a man-to-man talk. But it was all bluff. I could see that. He was watching me too carefully.

"Well?"

"You're the fellow I want to see. I came out here to talk to you."

"Nice of you."

"Banning, what's the use of trying to start trouble? It won't get you anywhere."

"Never can tell."

"There wasn't any Mexican divorce. I found that out. Sherry divorced you in Las Vegas, and it was perfectly legal."

"Then you've got nothing to worry about."

"You . . . you could use five hundred, couldn't you?" That stopped me cold. I stared at him, trying to figure it out. He might be afraid of me; hell, he was. And he might be afraid of my influencing Sherry. But he had the hole card that could take the pot any time: money. He must have known that. He could give Sherry what she wanted, and all he had to do was play that card and take the pot. Why should he offer me a red cent?

I said, "What do you think you're buying?"

His eyes slid away. He smoothed back his slick yellow hair and opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Well, I ... what's the use of doing things the hard way? It--well, if we could . . ."

De Anza had told me a few nights ago that he was buying my freedom. McElroy didn't even know that much. I saw then that he didn't quite understand what he was doing.

"You want me to stop seeing Sherry? Is that it?"

"Yes, that's it. There's no reason--"

"Or do you want me to run out?"

He blinked, thinking it over. I laughed.

"Suppose I took your dough. What makes you think I wouldn't double-cross you the first chance that came along?"

"Why don't you stay away from Sherry? We'll be in Chicago--"

"What the hell would I do with five hundred bucks?" I asked. "Do you want to pay me three thousand? Then we might do business." He chewed his lip. I thought I could see the angles, now. He was scared, that was all. As simple as that. He was ninety-nine per cent sure everything would work out his way, but he had a stripe down his back. All he had ever had was money, and not a damn thing else. It had always been enough. It had always got him what he wanted. Right now, it didn't make any sense; it wouldn't buy me, because nothing short of three grand would get me what I wanted, and if I had that much, Mac would be cutting his own throat with Sherry. Because, if it came to an even

choice, I knew she'd take me.

It was like a kid trying to bribe a bigger one not to beat him up. He'd got the habit. Money had always worked before. So without even thinking it out he'd gone ahead and used the same old routine, and I wasn't following the rules.

I remembered that kid story about money that turned into dead leaves. For the first time in my life, everybody was handing out dough; all I had to do was reach for it. Twenty from the Countess the first day, and a couple of hundred later, eight hundred or so in chips at the casino, now McElroy with five hundred. All told it came to about fifteen hundred, if I'd been able to keep it. If I could sell the Buick, I might have got it up to three

grand, but the way things were turning out it was the old dead-leaves gag. All of it had been money I couldn't use to get what I really wanted. McElroy had taken out his wallet, I looked at the hand-tooled leather in his hand. I don't know what makes guys that way, but I've seen plenty of them. They're always just a little nervous because they're afraid something will come along, some day, that they can't handle. Deep down, they're afraid of everything, just a little. So they try to take out insurance, one way or another. Some of them are blowhards. Others pretend they don't give a damn what happens. McElroy probably had always figured his money made him as safe as anything could, so

he was just trying to buy out of trouble--without even being sure it was trouble. After all, what could I do? I could take a swing at him; that was about all.

But he couldn't be sure, and all his life, I suppose, he'd never been sure what the other guy could do to him.

I almost felt sorry for the bastard.

And then I hated the bastard.

Because, fooling with his wallet, he carefully let me see two plane tickets that said Chicago on them. His face took on a smirk that needed wiping off. So Sherry was going with him. I felt a hot sting in my chest. I took a step toward him. He raised his head and looked at me like a scared rabbit.

"Banning--" he said.

Before he could say anything else, Mrs. De Anza came into the room.

* * *

"The first thing is a drink," she said, heading for the bar. "Mac, you must want something or you wouldn't be here. What is it, good advice? Cut your throat. Everybody should do that. What are you having?"

"I'll tend the bar," I said, starting toward 'her.

"How gallant you are tonight. Whisky and soda. Lots of whisky." She was wearing another dress, bright green, and a green turban. She was still wound up tight as a mainspring. The load of costume jewelry was jumping. Her orange lipstick was put on carelessly, as

usual. Her eyes didn't look like mud any more; they had a shining hardness to them, like metal.

"I was out at the ranch today and took the short cut back," McElroy said.

"Then I saw your place and thought you might give me a drink. How are you, Mrs. De Anza? You did all right in town, I hear."

"Pounds and pence and shillings," she said, and glanced at me. I took an ice-tray out of the small refrigerator behind the bar. "What are you having, Mac?" she asked him.

"Oh . . . the same."

"Two whisky and sodas, at least, Nick."

"Not too strong. I've got to drive."

"And how were all the sheep? Dragging their tails? Hurry up, Nick."

"Sheep? It's cattle, dairy cattle."

"How boring. Cigarette. Cigarette? Thanks, Mac." I finished the drinks and passed them around. Mrs. De Anza took a sip of hers, raised her eyebrows at me, and took it back to the bar.

"Perhaps I'd better mix my own," she said. "There's so much ice in this,"

"I'll fix it," I said.

"Never mind. You might put in too much soda next time." She poured plenty of whisky and squirted a half-inch of soda on top of it. I didn't say anything. All I could do was try.

"Hurt your hands?" Mac asked her.

"You should see my feet." She

pressed a Band-aid back in place on her palm. "Want to stay for dinner? Cigarette. Somebody." She had finished her drink and went over to fix another, waving me away. After that, she found a record album and told me to stack the discs on the phonograph. It was noisy stuff, with a lot of percussion. I turned it low.

"Well?" the Countess asked McElroy. "Dinner or not?" He didn't look at me, but after a moment he nodded.

"I'd like to. Thanks."

So he thought it wasn't settled.

Mrs. De Anza kicked back the carpet, knelt, and began to work on the safe.

"Feel like some gambling tonight, Mac? I'm going to stay up all night

anyhow, so I might as well keep busy. No sleep for me."

"I'll drive you in when you're ready," he said. "But I'm trying to arrange things so I can fly to Chicago. There's some business about putting up a bond with the police--I don't know. My lawyer's handling it. He says there'll be no trouble. As soon as I get word, I'll be ready to go, and I'm waiting on that."

He was talking at me. I let it slide past.

The Countess swore.

"Missed the combination," she said. "I'm too jittery. Oh, let it go till later, there's no hurry." She stood up, kicked the rug back over the unopened safe, and glanced at me. "All right, all right," she

said. "Nick will take me in. Do you feel lucky tonight, Nick? I don't. Some time after dinner, say. The later the better. Nick."

"... Yes?"

"Tell Nita there'll be another guest. She'll want to break an extra egg, no doubt. Turn up the volume on that music, while you're at it. I like my dissonance loud. Another drink, Mac?"

"I have to drive."

I spun the radio knob as I went past and the music blared out harshly. In the kitchen Benita was washing up pots and pans, and Rafael was reading a comic book. I passed the word. Rafael was too busy with "Wonder Woman" to notice me, but Benita nodded and made a few

gestures. I went on out into the patio. The moon was rising. Down the slope, fingers of cactus stuck up like coral, the same colors, in the soft cool light. I walked around toward the garage. The yellow Cadillac looked good, low and powerful and with nice lines. There wasn't light enough to show up the dents and scratches.

I could hear the music from the house.

So McElroy was arranging to put up bond and go to Chicago. With Sherry. Tonight, maybe.

While I tagged along after the Countess and watched her play roulette. She might even hand me out a few chips.

And with Mrs. De Anza hopped up this way, anything might happen. I knew

how much Nembutal it took to put her to sleep. There were other angles, too. She might drink too much and pass out. She might not remember what happened, afterward. I didn't even try to plan ahead. After dinner the Countess would transfer the dough in the safe--probably all of it--to her purse, and then we'd be going into Phoenix, alone together. I could figure some way to get hold of that money. Somehow, some way, I'd manage it. And a hell of a lot of good it would do me if Sherry and McElroy were on the Chicago plane.

I stood there for a while, thinking. Then I knew the answer. Something happened inside my head. I could see what I was going to do, all in one split

second. I saw myself going into the garage and getting the flashlight out of the Buick. Then that clear, bright figure that was me opened the luggage compartment and took out a Stillson. Part of an old tarp was hanging from a nail, and I pulled it down and shook it out. The tarp was to keep my clothes from getting dirty.

The only other thing I'd need was a piece of rag.

I saw myself crawling under the Cadillac and using the Stillson, padding the jaws with rag so it wouldn't leave marks. Afterward, I smeared grease back on the bolts and got out from under the car. I put the Stillson, the flashlight, and the tarp where I'd found them, and

threw the greasy rag in a corner. I brushed off my clothes and looked down to see if any oil had spilled on me. . . .

There wasn't any oil. I hadn't moved. It had all happened inside my head. Jesus . . . what was I getting into?

I walked away fast. I headed for my room and sat on the bed, nervous as a cat. All right, it was only a daydream. Everybody has them. But I was getting awfully close to the edge. It wouldn't have taken much to push me right over it and arrange a nice little crack-up for McElroy. He was taking Sherry away from me.

Well, hadn't I done the same thing to Ed Gavotte? But that was different. Sherry had been my wife.

Gavotte hadn't seen it that way, though.

And then I thought: Gavotte was too gutless to hold Sherry. He'd got himself backed into a corner. That was why he'd tried to kill me--because I had something he didn't have.

And McElroy had something I didn't have, too--dough. Not another thing, not a single thing. If I had three thousand dollars in my pocket, I thought I knew what Sherry would do.

It's easy to go over the line. Every time I remembered the safe with all the money in it, I had to push the idea out of my head. Because it wasn't any good. Not unless I could get somebody to lend or give me the cash. The money wouldn't

be any use to me if I stole it, because I just wasn't smart enough to get away with a straight robbery.

Anyway, why should I turn thief? I felt the pressure. All along I'd been pushed a little, not hard, but enough so I felt it. Well, I could shove too. If I shoved in the right direction, maybe something would give. Now De Anza and his wife didn't care much about money. They took it for granted, so three grand wasn't especially important to them. They could give me that much without feeling it. But they wouldn't, unless . . . There my thoughts stopped.

There was an answer, but I couldn't think of it. Maybe I didn't want to think of it.

All the same, it pushed its way up through my brain and looked at me with dull chocolate-colored eyes, and somewhere there was the king snake pouring itself sluggishly into sight.

I kept thinking about that snake.

And about three thousand dollars.

My palms were sweating. I rubbed them together. Then I heard the snake moving. My stomach jumped. The sound stopped. I'd been making it myself with my hands.

It was a crazy idea, I suppose, but, after all, it wasn't my idea. The Countess had started it. She'd crawled into my bed last night. De Anza himself was an exigolo, unless I was away off beam. And, damn it, Sherry had been whoring

around ever since our divorce. She was charging McElroy three thousand bucks for just the same thing the Countess had wanted from me.

My hands were sticky with sweat. I got up and washed them. I felt lousy.

17.

DINNER WAS BAD. I DON'T MEAN THE food, Benita had fixed a good meal, but the Countess was on the narrow edge of a spasm. She ate hardly anything, and kept bouncing back and forth between the table and the bar. Once she went over and put in a call to Miami, but most of the time she just drank and listened to the phonograph. She'd got it turned up so high my nerves kept jumping, and McElroy and the Count

weren't very happy either. Mrs. De Anza talked all the time, about nothing in particular. The rest of us got in a word or two, whenever the record-changer put on the next platter.

Talking to the Count still embarrassed me a little. Luckily McElroy acted as a sort of buffer. Most of the conversation was over my head, about people they knew and I didn't, but once in a while De Anza would remember me and try to bring me into the conversation. I didn't want in. The music was giving me a headache.

Finally Benita came in to make coffee, while the Count went to work on one of his trick cigarettes. He still looked too young to smoke. I kept watching him, off

and on, trying to guess how old he was. I was remembering what Mrs. De Anza had said about him.

I wished McElroy would hurry up and go.

"Nita," the Countess said.

"Sí, señora?"

"Where's my snake? I haven't seen him around all day." Benita talked Spanish fast.

"Well, find him. Sluggish monster. And hurry up with that coffee. I need it." She might have needed it, and she drank it fast enough, but before she could sober up she was at the bar again. The Count didn't try to stop her. He seemed to be taking everything for granted, even that damned blasting music. That never let up

once, because every time an album was finished Mrs. De Anza picked out another and had me load the machine. After coffee, we changed places, and the Count ordered his bowl of warm water and got the jade beads out of the floor safe. That reminded me of the money that was in the safe, but there didn't seem to be much I could do about it. It wasn't my dough. I kept looking at the carpet, over where it was. There was a design there, in blue and brown, like a cactus. De Anza stopped even trying to talk. He fingered his beads. McElroy and I didn't talk much either. The Countess' voice got higher and shriller and faster as she worked her way along the bar. She kept going back to the phone now, but she

couldn't get through to her party in Miami, whoever it was.

"I could do it faster in a plane," she said. She was walking back and forth, a glass in her hand. She tripped over the edge of the rug. "Why, God damn. A conspiracy? If I thought for a--" The music got too loud for me to hear her, but her lips went on moving.

I noticed I was rubbing my thumb and forefinger together, hard. I stopped it. After a bit I noticed I'd started again. The smell of De Anza's cigarettes was making me sick. McElroy was hunched up in his chair, looking stubborn, watching me when he thought I wasn't noticing.

--charming group of waxworks. Oh,

charming. You must come and see us more often, Mac. Bring your mother. Just give a good hard yank on the silver cord. Something in the Bible for everyone, isn't there?" She looked at the Count. "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not. Is that how it goes? No use asking you, Mac; you can't read. How about it, Nick? Did you go to Sunday school? The almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail--"

She started to laugh.

Then she went over to the piano, sat on the bench, and put her glass beside her. She began to play something, not what was on the phonograph. After a

little while she started singing.

The Count waved toward the phonograph and moved his fingers counterclockwise. I reached out and switched the record off. Then I could hear what Mrs. De Anza was playing. It sounded familiar. She was singing in German, but switched over to English in a moment or two.

"Lullaby, and good night ..."

She turned her head toward me, while her fingers still moved on the keys.

"Remind me to take my sleep caps into town, Nick," she said. "Don't forget. And some money out of the safe. I keep forgetting." I nodded. She turned again.

"Lay thee down now and rest ... May thy slumber be blest . . ." She was off

key.

"Lay thee down now and rest. . . ."

She reached down with her right hand, tried to pick up her glass, and managed to spill it over her dress.

"Damn," she said, and got up.

Then the telephone rang.

She dropped the glass and went across the room like a sprinter. But her hand was steady enough on the phone. I looked at her and tried to listen, but she kept her voice so low I couldn't get more than a word or two. Then, all of a sudden, her face got wooden. No expression on it at all. I wondered if she was getting the word about her sanity hearing. If so, her face didn't show whether the word was yes or no.

She hung up. She sat staring at the phone for a few seconds, and then, moving as though she'd had plenty to drink, Mrs. De Anza rose and walked stiffly out of the room. The silence grew.

After a while De Anza dropped a bead into the water; it made a soft splashing plinking noise. "Nick," he said.

"Yes?"

"Can you make Turkish coffee?"

"I never tried."

"I'd like some more. Would you ask Nita to do it, please?" I nodded and went out to the kitchen. Rafael and Benita were eating. I passed the word and came back into the living-room.

Then I heard a car start.

* * *

". . . That's not the Buick," I said.

De Anza tilted his head, listening.

"Hey," McElroy said, "I must have left the key in my car." On my way to the front door, I looked toward the sofa and saw that her purse was gone. She'd taken it with her. That meant she was heading for Phoenix--or else it didn't. You couldn't call the shots with her. By the time I opened the door, the Cadillac's tail-light had vanished over the slope. For a moment or two I couldn't trust my own voice. Then I said, "She shouldn't be driving. She's drunk. Coming back from town, she hit eighty and over most of the way."

De Anza didn't say anything. He had

come up behind me and was looking out across the desert.

"Hell," McElroy said.

"I ... want me to try to catch her?" My voice sounded queer. De Anza waited a year before he answered. Then he said, "Yes. She's not sober. It might be--"

But by then I was running toward the garage. I was trying to remember whether I'd really done something to the Cadillac, or only thought about it.

* * *

I backed the Buick out of the garage and swung around fast. The door at my right opened and McElroy jumped in. I said, "Get the hell out of here."

"Somebody has to drive the--"

I didn't argue; I gunned the motor and

we went roaring down the driveway. The engine was cold. That wouldn't help. I didn't know which way the Countess had turned, either, east or west. I shifted to second and then to high, played the choke, and got the Buick down to the highway in nothing flat. It was just luck that the dust showed her tire marks, swerving to the right, away from Phoenix. I made the curve and started to drive. I didn't know whether or not the Buick could take it. Anything could happen now. A tire might blow, at the speed we were reaching. Some bug I hadn't found out about might develop. Or the Cadillac might be in the ditch already.

Beside me McElroy was leaning

forward, staring along the path of the headlights. There was another car on the road, coming toward us. I dipped my beams but he didn't bother. I snapped them back and forth, said, "Son of a bitch," and pushed the throttle down. For a second or two I couldn't see where I was going. I heard a scream of rubber from the other car, a noise from McElroy, and then we were past and there was a red tail-light ahead. A long way ahead.

"For God's sake," McElroy said under his breath.

"She's hitting seventy."

"How are you going to make her stop? Try blowing the horn. That car of mine-- I've only had it a month."

I didn't answer. I didn't blow the horn, either. I knew what effect that would have on Mrs. De Anza. She'd just drive faster. Maybe she'd want to race.

The whole car was vibrating now. The motor was getting hot. I looked at the gas gauge; there was plenty. I held on to the wheel; it was trying to pull away. We were nearly at eighty, and a shimmy had started in the front wheels. "Better slow down," McElroy said.

But the tail-light was getting nearer. I couldn't keep the Buick on the road at this speed, with the shimmy; I had to hold on as hard as I could to keep the steering wheel from wrenching free. All I could do was go faster, till we'd passed the speed that was causing the

shimmy.

Around ninety-five I managed that, and the tail-light wasn't far ahead, but I had to concentrate on steering. At the slightest shift the Buick would sway and rock.

The Cadillac started to pull ahead. She'd seen us.

I fed more gas into the engine and spurted. We were on a straightaway. If we hit a turn, it would be just too bad. I couldn't spare time to look at the speedometer now. The road was clear except for us. I was a pair of eyes and hands and a foot, nothing else. And at this speed I couldn't stop the car from swaying.

"Jesus Christ, Banning, slow down!"

I didn't answer. I poured it on. I heard metal begin rattling somewhere. The road was climbing. There was a crest ahead and then a dip and beyond that the road wasn't straight any more, I thought. It was hard to tell in the moonlight. But in the distance I saw a pair of headlights, very small, and they were off to the right. This wasn't flat desert any more, either. The ground was getting broken up.

"Banning! Slow down!"

There was still another m.p.h. or two left in the Buick, and I reached for it and got it. I was creeping up on the Cadillac. What I'd do when I caught her I couldn't tell yet. But somehow, some way, I'd manage. McElroy kicked my foot off the

accelerator.

I drove my elbow into his side as hard as I could. That was a mistake. The Buick went out of control. The steering wheel pulled out of my hand. I grabbed for it, wrestled with it, felt the bottom go out of my stomach as we skidded. I don't know why we didn't go over. We should have. We should have been killed.

What happened was that we ended up thirty feet off the road, bogged down in sand, but right side up.

I forgot about McElroy. I went into reverse and tried to gun the motor, but nothing happened at all. Even if the motor were still running, we were in deep sand.

McElroy had jumped out of the car. I

got out, on my side, and stood there, looking west. I couldn't see any tail-light. There was only the desert, cactus and Joshua and sage, and a mesa off to the left, looking like a sand castle on the beach. I could hear McElroy breathing hard, and I could hear myself breathing, but outside of that there wasn't a sound except for a soft, deep drone far away.

Then I heard him moving. I couldn't see very well; it was too dark. But he got up crouching, and his outline and the way he moved told me it was going to be a fight. That was okay. That was the way I wanted it, too. His arm swung, and it was an awkward swing, almost overhand. He didn't know a thing about boxing. I started another one for his chin,

ducking a little and rolling my head with his punch--and that was my mistake. The bastard had a rock in his hand.

It nearly took part of my scalp off. It hurt like hell. I wasn't even sure whether or not my own fist had connected, but I knew it hadn't done much damage. Everything seemed to stop moving except the flat desert skyline, and that started to tilt slowly sideways. My head, inside, felt cold as ice. McElroy was coming in again, I thought, but I couldn't be sure, because there were two shadows of him that kept jumping apart and thudding together again. I heard rasping breathing. I was scared to death of the rock McElroy was holding, but I knew that somehow or other I was going

to stay on my feet. I didn't know how, because I couldn't hang on to that toppling skyline much longer.

I kicked out, hard. It wasn't the French savate trick, it was just a kick. But it worked. It landed. The rock missed me and before McElroy could do anything else I'd got my balance and jumped him. There wasn't any skill there either. I wanted to get my hands on him. I wanted to get in close where I could grab his arm.

We smashed together. My head was low; I jerked it up against his jaw. The trick now was to keep him so busy he couldn't use that rock. If he still had it. I didn't take any chances. I grabbed for his wrist. With my other hand I reached for

his face, trying for his eyes, digging for the nerve centers around the jaw. He pulled his head back and I smashed the heel of my hand under his chin. He went over backwards, with me on top of him.

. . . Then it was too late.

I couldn't stop it any more. I didn't want to stop it. I had to keep on hitting him. My arm was a machine. My fist was a piston. It was going to go on like this forever. There weren't any more thoughts. There was just this boiling hot feeling spreading out like whisky from my chest, pouring up my spine and into my head, down into my groin and my legs, building up to an explosion inside me that I couldn't stop now. I was big and strong and rich. Big . . . rich . . . big.

...

Somebody was shaking and pulling at me. It didn't matter. Nobody was big enough to stop me. Pain couldn't stop me.

An arm hooked around my neck and pulled me over backward. I went down rolling and fighting. It was funny. My fists hit empty air now, but I was still punching them into flesh. I could still feel McElroy's body give and bounce when I hit him. I knew I wasn't hitting him any more, but I couldn't stop.

"Nick!"

I jumped up, shaking my head, trying to get the light out of my eyes. It was dark, wasn't it? It had been dark, but now there was a bright light shining. I

had to find McElroy. I wasn't finished. I had to find something to hit and go on hitting.

There was someone standing in front of me. I swung at the white face in the light. I stumbled forward ready to sink my fists again into the give and bounce of something I hated-"Nick!"

It wasn't McElroy in front of me. It was the Countess. I knew it and I didn't know it. Part of my mind knew her, but most of me just wanted to go on striking and smashing, anything, anything so long as it was alive. She understood. She saw it in my face. She saw me coming at her, and the damndest look came over her that I'd ever seen in my life. She was scared and yet not scared. She opened

her mouth wide and took in one tremendous gasp of air, and then she seemed to blur as she fell toward me.

I could have killed her. I don't know what stopped me. I was dizzy, and the fight wasn't out of me yet, and I didn't know what I was doing. I knew her, but she was McElroy too, for just a minute as she came at me. I couldn't stop my arm from moving. I swung at her with my fist. If it had hit it could have killed her. But she ducked under it, and I lost my focus on her face because now she was too close-She was flat against me. She wrapped her arms around my neck and plastered herself against me as though she wanted to come out on the other side. I could feel her body grinding into

mine. She didn't try to kiss me or anything, she just held me close and tight, and when I tried to move to get loose, she moved too, as much with me as if she were part of me. I couldn't get free.

There was just one second longer while she held me that I still needed to strike and smash with my fists. The old hot exploding feeling still boiled. If I could have hit her I'd have done it, and gone on doing it forever. But she was too close. I couldn't get at her. I couldn't. And then it was over. All of a sudden the fight went out of me. I'd had enough. I'd done enough. It was funny, the way the exploding feeling seemed to drain out of me while she held me like that, tight and

hot against me, draining all that violence out, drawing it off into herself. I felt weak and cool.

I pulled back, and she let me go. She stood there; that was all. She stood there with her mouth a little open, breathing hard and deep, looking right through me.

Then her eyes focused a little, not much.

"You'd have killed him," she said, and began to laugh, as though something had broken and the laughter was spurting out. She sounded like a crazy woman. Maybe she realized that, for she stopped right away. She lifted her narrow shoulders in a shrug. Then she turned away from me and went to kneel beside McElroy. There was something different in the

way she moved. The tension had gone out of her.

After a long time, I said, "Is he dead?"
She looked back at me.

"No," she said--and her voice was different too, calmer, somehow surer. "He needs a doctor, though. Let's get him into the car."

"I ... yeah. All right. The Buick--"

"Don't bother now," she said. "Here. Take his shoulders." I didn't know if I could lift McElroy. I felt weak. I tried not to look at his face. It was pretty well smashed up.

The lights, I saw, were the lights of the Cadillac, angled just off the road. We carried McElroy there and got him on the back seat. I walked around to the

driver's side.

"I'll drive," Mrs. De Anza said.

"Okay. What about the Buick?"

"Forget it."

I climbed in beside her and shut the door. The Cadillac swung around. We headed back along the highway, picking up speed. But it was an easy acceleration now, not that nervous, jerky gunning. I looked back at McElroy and then at Mrs. De Anza.

"What made you come back?" I asked.

"Saw your lights go off the road."

"Did you see what happened?"

She didn't answer. I said, "You came back . . . you were watching us. You didn't try to stop us till--"

"Till what?" She wasn't paying much

attention.

"Did you see that rock he had?"

"Don't count on me as a witness."

"What do you mean, witness? He's all right. You said he just needed a doctor."

"I'm no expert. I was thinking he might charge you with assault, that's all. Now keep quiet and don't bother me. I want to think." An assault charge? Jesus, what had I got myself into now? I tried to think of a dozen things at once. The police--no, wait. It takes two to make a fight. McElroy was under suspicion for Gavotte's killing. Being in a scrap wouldn't look so good for him, either, especially when I mentioned that rock he'd tried to brain me with.

If they believed me.

... Sherry wouldn't believe me.

She knew me. She'd seen this happen before. She was always afraid of my breaking loose. I'd told her that it wouldn't happen any more--and I'd felt sure that it wouldn't. It was only when things piled up on me too much that I really blew my top--that way. But now .

..

This was the thing she was afraid of in me. But she didn't realize that I never could hurt her. She didn't understand that. So, when she found out what had happened, I'd be finished. I wouldn't have a chance. If she found out.

I glanced back at McElroy. He hadn't moved.

Suppose I got to Sherry first? Suppose

I talked fast enough to convince her we should both get out of Phoenix right away? What would she say?

"You can't get me what I want, Nick."

The spotlight. Maybe not. Not now, anyway. But I could get her some money, couldn't I? If I went to her right now with seven thousand bucks in my pocket and said, "Let's take off," we could be a thousand miles away before morning.

Why seven thousand bucks?

I knew, of course. The floor safe back at the De Anza place. I had to get to Sherry before McElroy did. I had to convince her. And the only way I could do that was, somehow or other, getting my hands on that money. Once I'd done that, I wasn't going to worry too much

about Lieutenant Hobson. Money goes a long way.

It could take Sherry and me a long way from Phoenix.

18.

MRS. DE ANZA DIDN'T SPEAK AGAIN until we pulled up in front of the ranch. When we stopped I could hear McElroy breathing noisily in the back seat, almost snoring. He was still out. She glanced at him once and looked away.

"Leave him," she said. "Come inside with me. I've got a surprise for you." I didn't like the way she said it.

She was a different woman as she crossed the patio toward the door. It wasn't only that she had become

completely impersonal now. That minute in the desert had done something to her, or for her. There was even something new about the way she moved. She wasn't jittering any more. When she'd got out of the car, she'd done it all in one piece, fast, but somehow not in a nervous hurry.

I followed her into the house.

She went straight into the living room. It was thick with the usual sweetish smoke. The Count was standing at the bar. His dark glasses gave him a funny disguised look as he lifted his head and smiled.

"Ah, Irene," he said.

She didn't even glance at him. She was looking around the room for

something. She didn't say a word.

"I've come to a decision about you, Irene, my dear," De Anza said, still smiling. "I think it's time you had a rest. A month or two in a sanitarium would--"

"Shut up," the Countess said in an absent sort of voice. The smile never left his painted face.

"Shall I pour you a drink, my dear?" he said. "A stirrup cup? I hear the state hospital isn't so crowded since the criminally insane were moved to Florence. Perhaps you may not even need a reservation to get into Ward One. Nick can come and visit you occasionally, if you like." The Countess put her hand on my arm and pulled me along with her. I didn't want to go. But

her fingers felt like bone. My stomach was cold. I didn't want any part of this, and I kept trying to pull away. She wouldn't let go of me.

"Look--" I said.

"You shut up too," she said sharply. "Get over there and sit down until I--ah, there it is."

She let go my arm and crossed the room toward the telephone on its long cord, sitting on the piano bench. Her back was to me, but I heard the click of the instrument, and then the noise the dial makes, turning three times.

"Long distance?" the Countess said. "Get me New York." She gave a number that didn't mean anything to me. I looked at the Count. Apparently it did to him.

He was still smiling, looking like a kid from this distance, but a sort of strain had come into his face even under the mask the make-up and the glasses made. He didn't quite get what was happening, but he didn't like it. He gave me a look. I thought it was inquiring.

"The Buick went off the road," I told him, "but--" He shook his head impatiently. "Never mind that. I--"

"Shut up. Both of you," Mrs. De Anza said without looking around. We shut up. The funny thing was that the Count still had that smile on his face, like something he'd arranged there and forgotten to take off. He held an empty highball glass in his hand.

"Hello," the Countess said into the

telephone. "Hello. Yes. This is Irene De Anza. Yes. Hold on a minute."

She turned around and faced us, holding her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and looking from her husband to me and back again with a nasty sort of smile on her face.

"I have news for you," she said. "Both of you." The smile pulled back and showed her teeth.

"You're fired," she said. "You're both fired." The Count didn't say a thing. He just drew in his breath with a little hissing sound.

I said, "Fired?" Whatever I'd expected, it hadn't been quite that. "Fired?"

What do you mean, fired?"

"You know what I mean," she said.
We looked at each other.

I guess I knew, all right. What had happened back there in the desert had been enough--whatever it was. It had given her what she needed. I suppose I'd known that all along, during the ride back, because she wasn't at all the same woman that she had been. She didn't need me any more. She'd taken a pretty bitchy way of telling me so, but it suited her. From the first time I'd ever seen her, with the snake squirming around her skinny neck, I'd felt that there was something wrong with her, and it wasn't insanity, either. I don't know what it was. But it was something that made her unsafe to be around and doubly unsafe if

you were depending on her. A snake will strike only if it's cornered, they say. I wondered how many years Mrs. De Anza had been backed into her corner.

De Anza laughed. It was a little shaky, but a laugh.

"Very amusing, my dear. Very. Not entirely in good taste, perhaps, but--" The telephone made metallic noises against the Countess' hand. She glanced down at it.

"--but of course you aren't entirely normal," De Anza went on. "Especially right now. You've been under a strain. Why don't you--"

"Didn't you hear me, Leo?" the Countess said. "You've just been dismissed. I'm of sound mind, Leo. What

do you think of that?"

"But you are not sane, Irene."

"Remember that phone call I got this evening?" she said. "Well--I'm of sound mind. Just in case you doubt it, you'd better listen to news from New York about me."

She put the impatient, clicking phone to her mouth.

"Irene De Anza speaking," she said. "I want you to give my husband the good news. Here he is."

She held out the phone.

He came forward to take it, his eyes on her face. She dropped the instrument into his hand a second before he was ready for it, and he had to move fast to keep it from falling. She didn't even

notice. She turned away and walked out of the room.

I watched De Anza while the phone made noises in his ear all the way from New York. Whatever it said, it must have been convincing. I could tell by the way the angle of his shoulders changed, though he didn't say a word from first to last. He listened until the voice stopped making noise in the instrument.

Then without a word he laid it back in its cradle. It started to talk again halfway down, asking questions, I thought, but he paid no attention. The sound cut off in the middle of a word, and New York was a couple of thousand miles away again, and out of hearing.

He looked at me without much

expression.

"What happened?" he asked. "After you left here, what happened?" There was too much to explain. I made some kind of gesture with my hand. De Anza's face twitched.

"Hurry up," he said. "There isn't much time. What happened?"

"McElroy started a fight," I said. "I had to knock him out. He's outside, in the car. Mrs.--"

"Yes. That's it. What happened to her?"

"She came back," I said. "She--that was all." I couldn't tell him. What was there to tell? It didn't make sense, in words, the way she'd drained the fight out of me. It was crazy. The whole thing

was crazy. And this was craziest of all, the Count and I standing here in a kind of nightmare while something we couldn't stop was beginning to happen all around us. For just a second I felt the room start to tilt. Everything seemed to slide sidewise. It was imagination. The room was perfectly steady. But I still sensed that feeling of hurry, out of sight, somewhere else in the house, or in Phoenix, or in the world.

We were standing there trying to think what to say next when the Countess came back into the room. She had two fur coats over her arm. One of them was mink. There was a checkbook in her other hand.

"What do you--where do you think

you're going?" De Anza asked. He seemed to be having a little trouble with his words.

"Did you talk to my lawyer? I see you did. Very well. I'm going to Reno. Rafael's going to drive me into Phoenix, and I'll get a plane from there. He'll drop McElroy at a hospital. I think that clears us up."

"Oh, you're insane," De Anza said. "How far do you think you'll get?"

"That has nothing to do with you any more."

"It will. When I get a call from Bellevue or somewhere."

"You won't get a call," she said. "We'll be divorced in six weeks."

"You'll be in an asylum in two," he

told her. "You can't live away from me any more."

"What you mean is that you can't live away from me. And you're entirely right. You can't--not without money."

She laughed and waved the checkbook in front of him.

"It's my money now. I write the checks, starting tomorrow. You won't need this any more." And she tossed the checkbook into the empty fireplace. A little puff of ashes flew up and settled again around it.

"We--we're civilized people," De Anza said. "You--"

"What's so wonderful about civilization?" she asked.

"Look here, Irene. I can contest the

divorce. This isn't necessarily as easy as you--"

"You won't get a cent," she told him. "I checked on that, too. You haven't a leg to stand on. And I hold malice. Stay here and rot. There's money in the safe. You can have that--just out of charity. Hell, keep the cars too. I hope it makes the attrition more painful. But I'm putting the house on the market tomorrow. You'll have to get out when it's sold. You'll hate that, won't you?"

De Anza made a queer half-laughing, half-angry sound and walked away from her. He went back to the bar.

"We're civilized," he said over his shoulder. "After all, we're both civilized." She was walking toward the

front door all the while he was talking. He kept on, a little faster. "We can talk things over and come to a convenient solution, Irene. Sit down for a moment. I'll fix you a drink." She had opened the door and was standing there looking out into the night, with the two fur coats over her arm. "Irene, I said sit down. Even in this barbarous world, we can still act like civilized people. Matters can be worked out logically--" She looked back at him.

"You son of a bitch," she said, and went out and shut the door after her. De Anza stood perfectly motionless for a moment. Then he laid both of his hands, palms down, on the surface of the bar. His back was toward me. A moment

later, he picked up a bottle and a tall glass and started pouring. He'd got about an inch in the glass when a motor started. He tilted his head and stopped pouring. He held the bottle motionless and listened. Wheels spun on gravel. The sound of the motor grew fainter. It kept on getting fainter.

I saw De Anza's hand move again, just a little. Brown liquid pulsed out of the bottle again, into the glass. I watched the glass fill. Just before it spilled over, De Anza put down the bottle, picked up the glass and walked to the nearest chair.

He sat down.

He looked at the glass.

He started to drink.

I stood there looking at him,

completely mixed up, but knowing I had to keep on watching him.

Because, if I didn't, my eyes would swing down to where the floor safe was under the carpet.

Seven thousand dollars. I hung on to that thought. Everything else was getting thoroughly fouled up. But there was still big money in that safe. De Anza took a drink, met my eyes through his dark glasses, and shrugged.

"The trouble with life," he said coolly, "is that there aren't any curtains. The last-act curtain on *A Doll's House* would be rather effective now. But in life there's no audience, except one's self."

But he wasn't as cool as he sounded. I

could tell that all right. He couldn't quite cover it up. Inside, he'd changed as much as the Countess had done. And I thought that she'd done to him exactly the same thing she'd done to me, back there in the desert, even though she hadn't touched him. She'd drained him.

He sat there, pretending there was still something left inside of him. I had to think of myself.

"What's going to happen now?" I asked him.

He kept on pretending.

"The curtain's down," he said. "We're at an intermission." I opened my mouth and shut it.

Finally I said, "It's none of my business, but I was in the middle of what

happened, after all. Aren't you going to have to make some changes around here? Am I fired?"

He reached up to adjust his dark glasses.

"Nothing happened."

". . . What?"

"Nothing important."

"Well, all right. But I have to make plans. I can't just sit around and wait. It seems to me I'd better know right now whether I'm fired or not."

"Why should I fire you?"

"Because you can't pay my salary," I said.

"What do you suggest, then? Shall we shake hands and kill ourselves?"

Nonsense. Forget the future. Humans

are fools, Nick." He hesitated. Then, a little unsteadily, still carrying his glass, he stood up, went to the door, and pulled it open. He stood there on the threshold staring out across the desert. I glanced down at where the floor safe was. Somehow, instead of seeing the rug on the floor there, I could see an hourglass with the sand running fast, very fast. McElroy. Sherry. Money. Sherry. If I could get De Anza to open the safe, somehow . . . My thoughts stopped there.

At the door, the Count said, "This is much like Sidi Dris, the desert here. But the Mediterranean should be over there"--he waved--"and there was no house like this, of course. A few palms. The smell of blood, and gunpowder.

And sweat. But honor has no smell." He turned to face me. "Nick, if I believed as you do, I'd have died at Sidi Dris thirty-odd years ago, with Silvestre and the others."

"I'm not you," I said. "So I think I'd better consider myself fired. If you want to pay me up to date--"

"You haven't any more money coming, Nick," De Anza said. "How long have you worked here? And how much money have you had, in advances? I think we're quits."

For a second I thought about asking for a week's notice or a week's salary, but I knew that wouldn't be any good. Because I realized pretty clearly that I couldn't get another cent out of De Anza.

Not by asking him for it.

"Mr. De Anza," I said, "it's this deal with McElroy that's bothering me. He started that fight, but he pulls weight around here, and I don't. If he charges me with assault, I'll be in trouble. I ... you know McElroy. What do you think I'd better do?"

He'd gone back to his chair while I was speaking, and he sat there looking blankly at me through the dark glasses. He took a drink, still silent.

"I mean, should I pull out? If Mrs. De Anza isn't here to explain how it happened, I'd feel a lot better if I knew that you'd back me up if--" De Anza put his empty glass on the chair arm and stood up.

"Good night, Nick," he said.

He walked out of the room.

* * *

I went over to the bar and had a drink, hoping it would stop the jerky twitching of my stomach. But whisky wasn't enough to do that. The front door was still open. I walked toward it, just because it was an open door, but there was nothing outside that told me any answers. The moon had risen. The desert looked as though it went right on and never stopped. There were a lot of stars, and there was a lot of desert, and it was all empty. It didn't tell me a thing. Neither did the section of the Phoenix highway I could see beyond the slope. If I was looking for a road, I was out of

luck. There were no maps to where I was going. It was big, and it was waiting. Waiting for me to make a move. That was the way it had always been. The wind felt cold. I shut the door quickly, stepping back. Now I was inside the house. It made a difference. I walked across the room and stopped, without quite knowing why. I was waiting. I was trying not to think, because once I started, I knew I'd realize I didn't have any time at all left. The walls of the room seemed to be closing in toward me, as though I stood inside a stone-and-wood mouth that was going to spit me out into the night and the desert. I stood there, my feet solid on the carpet, not wanting to move. As long as I didn't

move, I was okay. My feet had grown roots, right through the soles of my shoes. They had dug through the carpet and the floor, down deep, and they were sucking up something that made my feet tingle, a warm, tight feeling that gradually spread up my legs to my thighs.

When I looked down, I saw that I was standing directly over the floor safe. There wasn't a sound. I couldn't hear Nita anywhere, and the doors were all closed. I crouched down, pulled the rug away, and slid aside the little metal plate over the safe's sunken dial and the handle. I tried the handle. I pulled at it. But the safe was locked. I turned the dial gently, listening, but nothing happened.

A noise from somewhere made me look up fast, but it came from the kitchen. Just the same, I slid the metal plate back where it belonged, pulled the rug into place, and went over to the bar, where I poured myself a quick straight one and for the first time let my mind open wide. Suppose the safe had been open?

All right. I'd have taken the seven thousand dollars. The Countess had thrown it at De Anza. It didn't mean anything to her. But she hadn't thrown anything my way. She'd just got me into trouble, she and De Anza both. Seven thousand. And the Chevvy was in the garage; Rafe had used McElroy's Cadillac to drive Mrs. De Anza and Mac

into town. If the safe had been open, I could have headed into Phoenix fast, to reach Sherry before McElroy did. Chances were the Count wouldn't have noticed the missing dough till morning, or later than that. By then Sherry and I would have been out of town, far enough, on a plane--Chicago or somewhere. After that ... My mind shut down. It didn't matter. I'd have Sherry back. We could work it out, somehow, together. But I couldn't work it out without Sherry. Not by myself.

I had a funny thought. Suppose I got in the Army again? Things would be easy then. Everything would be labeled again. You just follow orders. You know what's right and what isn't. The goddam

Japs and Germans. Only this time it was different, wasn't it? This time, it was the goddam Russians and Chinese. That didn't matter. They told you what to think, and you thought it, and . . . you were sure of something.

But that was no answer for me, not any more. Even if I got in and stayed in, in spite of my dishonorable discharge and the fact that fingerprints get checked, I knew now that wars end. That you can't stay in the Army, and you don't want to, unless everybody else is in too. You have to put on civvies again, and the answers aren't the same. There's nobody to believe. You don't have to believe everything. But you do have to believe something, and what is there? People

don't wear labels, the way they do in the Army. You can't trust them, you can't believe anything. De Anza had said people were dogs. He was right. They were sons of bitches. And it was a dogfight--the whole stinking mess of living. But you had to have somebody. You couldn't be alone. You couldn't live. Not when you wake up at night wondering if you're hollow inside, and there's nobody and nothing there, just the dark, and all you can do is grind your teeth and bang your fist on the bed and say, "God damn it," over and over.

My hand closed over a bottle. I nearly smashed it on the bar. But I didn't. Instead, feeling the round, cold slickness under my fingers, I remembered the

safe's dial, and turned the bottle a little, back and forth, in my hand. If I knew the combination to the safe . . .

. . . The Count's door was closed. Mrs. De Anza's door was open, directly across from it, and everything was tumbled around inside, the bureau drawers hanging half out, some clothes on the floor. I went in without making a noise. The light from the hall was enough. Anyway, I didn't dare turn on the bedroom light. De Anza might have seen it under the crack of his door. As it was, I sweated while I searched.

I had no luck. It was a relief when I gave up. But now I'd started out, I had some momentum to carry me. I hadn't thought for a minute before I got the idea

of trying Callahan's desk. I don't know why, unless it was that I'd found some of De Anza's special cigarettes in that desk the other day. Something made me sure, from the start, that Callahan would have got the safe's combination if he could, that he'd have followed pretty much the same path I was following. You couldn't avoid it, with the De Anzas. But I had a queer little shock when I bent open an empty match folder with one match left in it and saw some letters and numbers written inside. I thought it was almost too good to be true. I wondered why I didn't feel happier about finding the thing. It seemed to me that I'd been almost hoping Callahan hadn't got the same idea. But he had. Maybe the De

Anzas never hired really normal people.

Normal? I was a damn sight more normal than that impotent bastard and his crazy wife.

I sat there at the desk looking at the numbers on the match folder and wondering why Callahan hadn't used them. Or maybe he had. He'd certainly left the ranch fast enough. Suppose he had used it? Then the De Anzas would have changed the combination of the safe. Maybe this thing wasn't any good after all. Maybe it wasn't the combination. But I didn't know what else would say L 23 R 15 L 25.

Somehow I was afraid to make the next move.

But I had to. Every minute I wasted,

Sherry might hear from McElroy. And he'd give her a big build-up, that was certain. She'd be convinced I was a homicidal maniac. For all I knew, the police might be heading out for the ranch right now, on the chance that they'd found Gavotte's killer. I couldn't wait. I had to move. I don't think I wanted to use that combination, but there wasn't a thing else in the world I could do, by then. So I'd take the money and get out of town with Sherry. A clean break. We'd start fresh, after that. Somehow. Changing our names, going somewhere--Mexico, maybe. All I wanted was this one break. And the only breaks you ever get you make for yourself. I knew that, now.

The match folder had one match left in

it, and I tore that out. I scratched it alight. I held it in front of my face, watching it burn, turning it so it wouldn't go out. The yellow flame came up spade-shaped, with a little ghost of blue around it. It burned toward my fingers, the match turning black and curling behind it, except for a little band of orange-red that slowly followed the flame.

I blew out the match.

Then it was all right. A little smoke curled up. I put the match in an ash tray on the desk. I felt easy now, settled about what I was going to do. Somehow, the match had made a difference.

With the match folder in my pocket, I went back to the living room. And I went

ahead of myself, watching while in my mind I pulled back the carpet, opened the safe, took out the seven thousand bucks, and went out to the garage where the Chevvy was. Sherry wouldn't have heard from McElroy yet. When the odds start turning in your favor, they keep on. I had a break now. All I had to do was ride it. And not let anything get in the way. Now I was in a hurry.

In the door of the living room I stopped. Benita was in there cleaning up. She fiddled with a Venetian blind, she picked up a used glass, she rubbed dust off the piano, and now and then she looked at me. Did she know where I'd just been?

I thought, Well, if she does, this is it.

I'm going to have that dough. I'm going to have Sherry.

But then I decided there was an easier answer to why Benita kept glancing my way. I was all revved up, and it must have showed in my face, in the way I stood, even. I tried to relax. I tried on a smile when Benita went past me to the hall broom closet.

She was moving as slow as the hour hand of a clock. She had all the time in the world. But time was running out on me. I knew I couldn't wait until she swept up, or mopped, or whatever. I had to get to Sherry. She stepped inside the closet, and I moved almost without thinking. I shut the door on her. I turned the key in the lock. Then I stood looking

at the blank panels, wondering if I'd really done it. The first step, I thought. After this I can't go back. I've made the first move and it leads right on to the last. But I didn't know what the last would be. Only, now there was no time to waste. I had to start moving fast.

I hadn't taken three steps before Benita yelled. It wasn't so loud, from inside the closet, but just the same my breath stopped. I was back at the closet in one jump. I slammed the heel of my hand against the door; not too hard, but hard enough. She didn't scream again. But now I couldn't be sure of anything. I stood there silently, sweating, waiting, listening. If the Count had been asleep, I was sure Nita's voice wouldn't have

carried to his bedroom loud enough to wake him up. The house was well built. But if he was awake, he could have heard. And I kept expecting her to yell again. There was a row of knives in a rack on the kitchen wall. I went in, got a long butcher's blade, and holding it in my left hand, I unlocked the closet with my right. When I opened the door, Benita was trying to push herself back through the wall, as though she'd just jumped back away from the door. Her black eyes were big and staring. They flickered down to the knife, back at me, and her mouth opened again.

I frowned at her, put my finger to my lips, and shook my head. I showed her the knife. I didn't know enough Spanish

to tell her to keep quiet, so I let the knife do the talking. She understood, all right. Which was just as well. Because showing her the knife was one thing, but using it was another. I just wanted to make sure she wouldn't yell again, and scaring the crap out of her was the only way.

She kept staring at me as I shut the door again, but her lips were pressed together hard. I turned the key, put the knife back where it belonged, and listened again. There was no sound. And by now something would have happened, if De Anza had heard Nita yell.

Okay. The track was clear. But I had less time than I'd hoped. And what about

the phone?

In the living room, I bent down to yank the telephone wires loose from the box. I'd need all the time I could get. But with seven thousand dollars in my pocket and Sherry along, I'd take my chances. The Mexican border isn't too far from Phoenix. Sherry--I'd have to think of a good story to explain why we were going to Chicago the long way round. But--not now, not yet. The money first.

By then I was at the safe, the rug kicked aside, the metal plate slid back. The open match folder was in my hand, and I was being very careful about turning the dial. Left to twenty-three. Right to fifteen. Left to twenty-five .

..

I'd missed it.

Easy. Not too fast. You can't hurry a safe. It has to be precision work, right on each calibration. Left to twenty-three. Right-"It won't work," De Anza said.

--to fifteen. Exactly fifteen. Exactly.

I watched my fingers stop on the dial. I looked down at them. Then I turned my head slowly. He was standing inside the hall door, wearing pajamas and a dressing gown, his left hand hanging, his right hand holding that silver-mounted revolver of his aimed right at me. He didn't have his dark glasses on. There wasn't a thing wrong with his eyes. Not a thing. They were just gray and empty. They were a million miles away. My left

hand held the empty match folder. I closed my fingers, crushing the pasteboard, rolling and wadding it up as tight and hard as I could.

"What?" I said.

He watched me as though I weren't even human.

"I said it won't work. We had the combination changed after Callahan left.

.. Get up."

I stood up slowly. The match folder was crushed inside my hand, as tight a pellet as I could make it. I lifted my hands over my head. De Anza, watching me, moved sidewise toward the phone. Thank God I'd pulled the wires loose.

I let him lift the receiver before I

moved. Then I moved fast. My left hand shot that pasteboard pellet at his face, and maybe the sweat from my palm had glued it together, because it didn't open up in midair. It didn't even hit him. It wouldn't have hurt him if it had. But that wasn't the idea. He'd jerked aside, he hadn't squeezed the trigger, and that half-second was all I wanted. I'd learned this kind of fighting the hard way. Get in the first shot. Rattle the enemy enough so his bullet goes wild. The first shot's the important one--even if you don't have a gun.

I didn't even have to think. My body knew what to do. My arm swung down and knocked his sidewise, so the revolver had to point somewhere else. It

was easy, quick and easy. Maybe he'd been tough once, but that was a long time ago. I swung my hip sideways so he couldn't knee me, and then I had one hand for each of his hands, and he couldn't do a thing. He tried. He did his damndest to point that revolver at me. But my wrist was stronger. I turned it, little by little, till it pointed at him instead. His finger was still on the trigger, but now if he kept on fighting, he was really running a risk.

"Open the safe," I said.

But he still thought he could stay on top. His face smoothed out into blankness. Those empty gray eyes stared at me.

"Let go of me," he said.

I think it was his tone that made me blow my top. Suddenly I hated his guts. He didn't give a damn about me. He didn't care whether I lived or died. As far as he was concerned, I wasn't even a dog. Nothing could touch him, the big-shot bastard. He still thought he was back in Spain, one of the top brass, and I was just an enlisted man. He was an officer and a gentleman.

"You impotent son of a bitch," I said.

He just gave me the OCS direct stare that's supposed to make you snap to attention.

"You're going to open the safe," I said. "I'm going to twist your arm behind your back until you get down on your knees and open that safe. You're going to

crawl. Maybe there isn't any past or any future, but there's sure as hell a right now, and this is it. And you're in it, whether you like it or not. A Count. Yeah. Your wife's got more guts than you, you impotent old bastard."

His eyes didn't change a bit. Neither did his face.

I started to laugh. It wasn't funny, but I wanted to laugh at him, and I felt like laughing at him.

And then his face did change. The lips weren't tight and hard any more. I felt him try to pull away from me, but I held him harder, helpless, and I kept on laughing, forcing it, because I saw that this was working. Then, all of a sudden, I realize that he wasn't looking at me any

more. He was looking at the gun muzzle. It wasn't six inches away from his face, and he must have been looking right down it, right into the little black hole. Something like a flash passed over his face. It happened so fast I never understood what was happening. But whatever he saw down the gun barrel made him turn into somebody else, for just a second. It wasn't just a gun barrel, either. It was the most horrible thing in the world that he was looking at.

Then the flash passed over his face again, and he said, almost in a whisper, "Silvestre--presente!"

The gun bucked. I don't know if I heard the sound of the shot. But I saw his forehead disappear.

* * *

I thought he fell slowly. My fingers had opened, but my elbows stayed bent, and my hands stuck out in front of me. I looked down at him, past my hands. There wasn't a sound.

Then I came to life. My head came to life. My eyes did. Because I felt people watching me. I jerked my head around to the left, and there was nothing there. Then to the right. Then I turned around. The room was empty. I looked down again at him.

My eyes focused on my hands, stuck out in front of me, the fingers curled. I let my arms drop to my sides. But then my hands felt empty. They had to do something. They had to grab something,

move something. I looked around again-- short, quick glances. I saw the safe. That was it. My hands pulled me over there. I got down on one knee and started to turn the dial. But my left hand had nothing to do. I flattened it down on the rug. That was no good. It grabbed my shoe. It let go and tightened and unclosed on my leg. It kept doing that, while my right hand turned the dial back and forth. It was like a clock. All I had to do was turn the dial. The right number had to come up. It had to come up. It had to. But of course it didn't. After a while I knew the safe wasn't going to open, no matter how long I fiddled with a combination I didn't know.

My left hand was rubbing up and

down my leg hard. Bent over this way, my stomach and my throat began to feel hollow. I thought I was going to vomit. There was too much blood in my head. I stood up quickly. I breathed deep.

There was a vase on a table near me. I picked it up. I looked around. Whatever I was looking for, it wasn't there. My gaze settled on the bare wall opposite me.

I threw the vase at it as hard as I could.

Maybe it was the vase that reminded me of Benita. I looked over at ... him, and all of a sudden it hit me--the spot I was in. With Benita as a witness. The revolver was on the carpet. I picked it up. I don't know what I intended to do. I

wanted to see where I stood. I had to check up. I didn't even know if there were any more bullets in the gun. But I had it in my hand when I started out toward the back.

The closet door was wide open. So was the outside door. I got there fast. I started to run across the patio, then made myself stop and listen. There wasn't a sound.

I couldn't see very well, even in the moonlight, after the lights inside the house. But I went out beyond the U of the patio, till I could see down the slope, looking for any sign of Benita. There wasn't any sign. She might still be in the house, hiding. Or ...

I remembered the car. I hadn't heard it

start, but Benita might have her foot on the starter right now. I ran.

The Chevvy was there, and the key was in the ignition. I reached over and touched the steering wheel, and then it came to me--there wasn't a thing to keep me from Sherry now.

The money? I couldn't get it. The safe was set in concrete, and there wasn't a thing I could do about that. All I could do was get to Sherry now. There was nothing else left. Get her, and head for the Mexican border, before the police got after me. Benita--maybe I could catch up with her. By then I was backing the Chevvy out, cramping the wheel hard to turn, gunning the motor and kicking up the driveway's dust.

All the way down I kept my eye open for Benita. But I didn't spot her by the time I passed Walt Hamilton's place. There was no light on there. Still, Benita could wake him up. He had a phone. I pushed the accelerator down harder.

I'd have to get gas somewhere this side of Yuma, or Nogales. I wondered how Benita had got out. But there must have been some tool in the closet she'd used. Or maybe a hairpin. I didn't know. It didn't matter. I had the accelerator down to the floor, but it didn't help a bit. The Chevvy was too slow. My hands were aching. But I couldn't ease up my grip on the wheel. There was a hot feeling in my chest, boiling hot, trying to spread out, but being pushed back. I felt

ready to explode. I kept holding my breath without noticing it and letting it out with a little grunt. The desert was all around me, the dry sea. My headlights made shafts through dark water. They showed me where I was going. The road showed me. But ahead there was a highway sign. A side road went off to the left. I started to feel scared. I had to decide. And I had to decide fast. I tried to let up on the accelerator, but I couldn't. Where was I going, anyhow?

Something made me look down. There on the seat beside me was the gun. Two of us together, the gun and I.

The car roared past the highway sign and the side road and kept on straight ahead. I knew where we were going. We

were going to Sherry. 19.

AFTER A WHILE I WAS IN PHOENIX. That surprised me. My mind had been turned off. I realized that I was in traffic, and jerked my foot off the accelerator, looking at the speedometer at the same time. But the needle pointed to twenty-five, exactly. I didn't remember slowing down, and back on the highway I must have been pushing seventy.

Then I did remember. I'd seen the speed-limit signs all right, and I'd obeyed each one. I'd even stopped at a couple of stop lights, now that I thought back. The minute I'd passed that side road; I knew where I was going. All I had to do was what the signs told me.

I turned left, and pretty soon slowed down in front of Sherry's apartment house. I didn't stop. I'd spotted a drugstore across the street, at the end of the block, so I went on and parked near it. Then I slipped the revolver into my belt, where my coat would hang to cover it, and I got out of the car and headed for the drugstore.

It was bright and shiny inside, everything new. Some night-owl high-school kids were at the fountain drinking Cokes. A woman was looking over the magazine rack. A man with gray hair was at the prescription counter, talking to the druggist. I spotted the phone booths at the back and walked that way, careful of my coat so nobody would see

the revolver. On the way I passed a counter of toys, with some guns mixed up together--imitation Colts, cap pistols, and atom guns--and it made me think that the revolver in my belt was a toy gun too, that would just spout sparks if I squeezed the trigger. When I got to the phone booth, I stepped in and shut the door, but when I started to pick up the receiver, I couldn't remember Sherry's number. I looked out through the glass panels of the door. What I could see of the drugstore was clean and bright and somehow sunny. It made me think of the toy floor in a big department store, when I was a little kid. I don't know why, but everything in the drugstore fitted together and made sense. Everything in it

belonged. And it all made sense. That was the important thing. You took a cap gun and put a roll of caps in it and squeezed the trigger. That was all. It wasn't a real gun. When you played cops and robbers, you pretended to be killed sometimes, if the cap gun was aimed at you when it went off. If you didn't, you weren't playing fair. But it wasn't playing fair when you kept on lying there after the game was over--pretending to be dead when it was only a game.

The phone was right beside me. I wondered what would happen if I called the De Anza ranch. It seemed to me that what would happen was this: De Anza himself would answer the phone. I'd have caught him when he wasn't looking.

He couldn't really be dead, the way he'd looked when I'd last seen him. It couldn't really have happened. Not now, with the drugstore all around me, shiny and bright and making sense through the glass of the phone-booth door.

Toy guns. It was a game. The whole thing had been a game. But when had it started? How many years ago?

And maybe the drugstore wasn't real either. I didn't know when the game had started, so how could I tell what was part of the game and what wasn't? I started to feel scared. The floor of the phone booth didn't seem quite solid. I put a nickel in the slot and dialed Sherry's number without even trying to remember it. She was real. I knew

Sherry was real. She didn't answer right away. That worried me. I thought of Nita, and I thought of the police. What would I do if Sherry didn't answer? Get the car gassed up and head for the border at Yuma? "Sherry," I said into the mouthpiece, and at the same moment her voice came.

"Hello?"

"Sherry. It's Nick."

She didn't answer. I remembered the police. I said:

"Is everything all right?"

"Nick. I ... where are you?"

It was my turn not to answer. I looked around the bright, shiny drugstore through the glass. Finally I said, "I'm at the De Anza place. Why?"

"What do you want, Nick?"

I wasn't sure how much I dared say. If the police hadn't talked to her yet, I mustn't say too much. So I tried to be careful.

"You know what I want," I said. "I want you back. I don't want you to go off with that bastard McElroy. I was afraid you might have gone. That's why I called. One reason, anyhow."

She said, "Mac phoned me. From the hospital. I heard about what happened, Nick."

"You . . . heard his side of it. It wasn't my fault."

"It never is. It never was. I'm--Nick, there isn't any use your calling me again, ever. I'm going away tonight."

"What do you mean, going away?
Where to?"

"It doesn't matter at all where I'm going."

"It's Chicago, isn't it? With McElroy."

"Yes, it is," she said. "I've got permission from the police to go. My plane's leaving in half an hour. You can't get into town in that time."

"So you're going with McElroy, eh?"

"Nick," she said as if she were tired, "I'll put it in words of one syllable. I've tried to make you understand, but you won't look at it squarely. I'm stranded here with no money. I'm getting no younger. I've got to have my chance at what I've worked for, and I can't do it alone. You can say whatever you like--

that I've sold myself, that I'm a thus-and-so, but it doesn't matter. I've made my choice."

"If it's money, Sherry, I'll get it for you."

"I wish I could believe you, Nick. I really do. But I can't believe anything you say."

"I've got the money!" The words came out by themselves.

"Nick," she said wearily, "lying just makes it tougher. I'm going to hang up."

"Wait, Sherry! Just one more thing."

"Yes?"

There was one last way to get to her. I was certain that if I needed her bad enough--God knows I did!--she would help me. She wouldn't forget everything

we'd meant to each other, or the many times she'd helped when I needed help.

"Sherry, I'm in bad trouble. The worst in my life. I've got to see you."

"Trouble?" she said. "Mac isn't going to sign a complaint. He'll be in the hospital for a few days, and then he's coming on to--he's joining me. Nothing for you to worry about there."

"This is worse, Sherry, a million times worse. You've got to believe me."

"No, Nick." She sounded sad. "I can't believe you."

"But--" I hesitated a second or two, and then said, "you do love me, Sherry. Remember? You know it's true. You can't deny that."

"Do I?" Her voice was thin and far

off.

"I love you," I told her over the buzzing distance. "Sherry, do you hear me?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I even believe you. But it's not what I want, Nick. It's the wrong kind of love. I'm afraid of it. It just makes trouble for us both. Go away, Nick."

"Sherry, I need help! You've got to help me!"

"No!" This time her voice sounded sharp and close. "I don't want to know about it, Nick. You'll always be in trouble, one way or another. I can't help you. I won't. I wouldn't if I could. Do you hear me, Nick?"

"No," I said.

"You'll always be in trouble. You always have been. You make trouble. You are trouble. I'm getting out, Nick. I can't save you but I can save myself and I'm going to. Good-bye, Nick."

"Wait," I said, my own voice sounding a long way off in my ears. The line buzzed between us. I thought she'd hung up, but then her voice sounded once more.

"I'm going away, Nick. I never want to see you again. Do you understand?"

If I do see you, I won't speak. I won't know you." There was a sound of hardness in her voice I'd never heard before. "It's all over, Nick. It really is. Now do you believe me?"

I looked out across the bright, shiny

drugstore.

". . . Yes."

Yes.

Yes, Sherry, I believe it. Finally. It's taken a long time. But I believe it now, in a drugstore in Phoenix with toy guns on counters outside and a silver-mounted revolver from Spain in my belt. It takes a long while to believe things sometimes. You get mixed up between toy guns and real guns. You believe what people tell you. You go on ahead, doing what you're told, and suddenly you discover nobody's there any more to tell you what to do. But you keep on. You follow the rules. But they don't work any more. They switch guns on you. Because you don't use real guns in a game. You use

cap pistols.

But you have to believe. Even when it's a lie. You find out it's a lie, but you can't be sure. You can't trust the people who make the rules. There's only one reason they make the rules in the first place. To keep you down. Try climbing up and see what happens. The bottom falls out. You land on your tail and get up with your pockets picked.

I can believe it, Sherry. It was the only thing I never could let myself believe. You were the only one who never crossed me up. But there aren't any exceptions. There isn't anyone to trust.

You're all alone, on the desert, under the sky. It takes quite a while, sometimes, to find out that there's only

one person on earth. Only one real person alive. Yourself.

The phone was dead. I put it back in its cradle and went out of the phone booth. I walked out of the drugstore and started along the street. When I got to Sherry's apartment house, I crossed over, but I didn't go up the steps. There was shrubbery on both sides of the stairway, and plenty of shadows there. I walked into the shadow and stopped. The silver-handled pistol hurt my side. I was breathing harder now, and every breath hurt me where the gun pressed my ribs. I slipped my hand under my coat and drew the gun. All right, Sherry. I'm ready now.

* * *

The street lamp made shadows through the leaves on the steps that went up to the door. I thought it looked like a stage set. Not real. Nothing looked real. Nothing felt real, me least of all. I couldn't feel the ground under my feet or the gun in my hand.

Sherry was taking a long time.

Maybe she was calling the police.

But why should she? What did she know? Nothing. The police had probably been alerted for me by now, anyhow. They'd be looking for me. For the murder of De Anza.

I hadn't killed De Anza, though.

What about Ed Gavotte?

That was self-defense.

Was it self-defense with De Anza?

De Anza killed himself. It was his finger on the trigger. Not mine. The paraffin test would show I didn't fire the gun. Wouldn't it?

I had an idea it would. My hand had been over his; I didn't remember feeling any back-blast. All I had to do was say De Anza had killed himself, and keep on saying it. He had reason, didn't he? His wife had just walked out on him, taking the family dough with her. It made sense. Nita hadn't seen what happened.

But she'd say I'd locked her in the closet.

It was her word against mine. She was a Mexican. She didn't speak English. I had a chance, after all.

But what about the floor safe? I'd left

it with the rug kicked aside and the metal plate slid open and my fingerprints all over the dial. Okay. I hadn't opened the safe, had I? I hadn't stolen anything. The Count had killed himself, and suppose I had tried to open the safe after that? It wasn't even breaking and entering. I'd been living at the ranch. Attempted robbery, maybe. I let it go. I'd find an answer later. That wasn't important. A murder charge was. But Nita was the only witness, and all she could say was that I'd locked her in a closet--and I'd deny that. What could anybody prove?

I checked the revolver in my hand. Four cartridges left. All right, then. Who did I think I was fooling, anyhow? Why was I trying to argue myself out of a

corner? Suppose I beat the rap, what then? I'd be back where I started--no money, no Sherry, no guideposts to follow anywhere. . . . A car was rolling slowly along the street, slower than looked natural with no traffic. I stayed where I was, in the shadow, and watched. As the car passed, I got a good look at it. It was a squad car, all right. But it kept on going. It didn't stop. It was just patrolling. Looking for me, maybe.

I watched its tail-light drift down the street.

Then I heard a door latch click. I looked up. Sherry was up there at the top of the stairs, holding a suitcase with one hand, holding the door open with the other as she looked around. I guessed

she'd phoned for a taxi, and it hadn't showed up yet. That was fine.

I was still in the shadow. Sherry couldn't see me. The revolver came up slowly. I couldn't miss. But I didn't want to fire. I wanted to say something to Sherry, and I knew that nothing I said would make any difference. She was taking away from me the only thing I had left--Sherry. She was robbing me of Sherry. And Sherry was the only thing I wanted. There had never been anything else. Now that I needed her more than ever, she was robbing me, the way everybody had always done--pretending I had a chance, offering me something, and yanking it away when I reached for it. The hot feeling started to spread out

through my chest. It got hotter. It was boiling hot. The sparks needled out all through me, building up fast. I couldn't feel a thing but my index finger, and that felt huge, as though the trigger were a foot long and my finger big enough to pull it back. Sherry was in the sights. I couldn't miss. The bullet would go through her heart.

Dead. She would be dead. I liked the thought of it. I hated her. I had always hated her. I knew that now, Funny I'd never known it before. All this time I'd thought it was love, and really it had been--hate? Had it? I didn't know. I couldn't tell. You don't kill the people you love, I thought, so it had to be hate. I looked at her around the black shape of

the revolver. She was bright and small and far off, and the black barrel almost hid her. If I shut one eye she'd disappear. If I pulled the trigger she'd--disappear.

"What are you waiting for?" I asked myself. But I think I knew. I'll never be sure.

That was the moment when I felt, or heard, or saw, the shadow right in front of me lurch forward between Sherry and me. There was one terrible second when I looked into a man's face in the street light and thought it was my own face. Myself, in uniform, from a long time ago. . . . No, it was a cop. This was real. It wasn't my own face at all. I could see his, and it was young. He had to be a rookie, new on the job, because of the

crazy thing he did. He grabbed for my gun. That was something only a fool would do, because I was ready. I was so ready that I wasn't ready--not for a crazy trick like that.

His hand clamped over mine and he tried to hook his other arm around my neck. I pulled my left fist back and smashed it into his belly. He let out a wheezing cough and doubled forward, his whole weight coming down on my gun arm.

I dropped the gun.

It clattered on the sidewalk, striking red sparks and then lying there quiet. It hadn't gone off. I could even pick it up again, if I wanted to. I could even get away. If I wanted. The cop was still

fighting for his breath. But there was something that roared in my ears. Louder and louder roaring. It turned into light.

Everything was suddenly blinding bright.

The patrol car had pinned me with light. The roaring was its motor. It was coming fast, driving up the beam of its spotlight toward me, and there I was with the revolver at my feet and the cop doubled over right in front of me, wheezing and gasping for breath. Everything was sharp and clear and frozen.

I could keep it like that forever. Frozen. As long as I didn't move, nothing else could move. Time had stopped.

I could see what the future would be

like. It stretched out in front of me a long way. I could run. I could get away. There was still time, if I wanted to. But the long, long road had no signposts. I could see myself running down it, getting smaller and smaller, going nowhere.

"No!" I said. "God damn it, no!"

When I spoke, time started again.

That did it. The motor roared, the siren began to scream and the light was terrible, blinding and burning me. I couldn't stand the light. I saw my hands come up in front of me to shield my eyes. They'd caught up with me, the way I'd always known they would. My stomach felt cold and empty and hollow. The bottom was dropping out of everything.

Then my stomach wasn't cold any

more. It was hot, boiling hot. Heat poured like whisky up my spine into my head, down into my groin and legs, building up to a pounding rhythm that was a piston as big as I was, inside of me, faster and faster, harder and harder. The sons of bitches, the god-damned rotten crooked bastards, all of them from the beginning. Faces. Yelling orders. Pointing. And lying, lying, lying. I was big. I was rich. My hands came down from my face. They were solid as iron, my hands. Black iron against the light. There was a siren. Or someone screaming. There was the roaring car chasing me down the highway, and everybody in the world was in it. Everybody except the cop beside me,

bent over, his neck pulled tight between his collar and hair line. God damn you all.

My hand was iron. My hand knew what to do. It came up and started down toward the cop's neck. My elbow remembered to stay bent. My thumb remembered to stay stuck out. I struck down with the edge of my palm, as hard as I could. I heard his neck break.

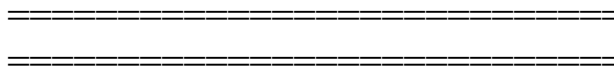
* * *

. . . They were closing in. I could hear their feet pounding. I think one of their bullets hit me somewhere. The revolver was at my feet. I didn't bother to pick it up. I straightened and turned around, looking up the steps to where Sherry stood. I could have killed her, once. I

hadn't. So that question had an answer, too. I knew which, now. Hate, or love? You don't kill the things you love. So I knew.

She stood there backed against the door, caught in the spotlight too. This was what I wanted. This was what I had always wanted. And there's your spotlight, Sherry, I said. I've got you what you wanted, too.

We looked at each other across the white light.



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