

THREE COMPLETE NOVELS

PSYCHO

PSYCHO II

PSYCHO HOUSE

THERE'S ALWAYS A  
VACANCY  
AT  
THE...

BATES  
MOTEL

NO VACANCY

Robert Bloch

# Robert Bloch

## THREE COMPLETE NOVELS

PSYCHO  
PSYCHO II  
PSYCHO HOUSE

Robert Bloch has been hailed as “the finest psychological horror writer working today” by fellow bestselling author and master of the macabre, Stephen King. And the *Washington Post* declared Robert Bloch a writer who has “etched [his] name permanently in the horror hall of fame.”

Bestselling author Robert Bloch is famed as the creator of that great American horror classic, *Psycho*, the inspiration for the spine-tingling motion picture. He continued the story of Norman Bates and the Bates Motel—where Death is the desk clerk—in *Psycho II* and then *Psycho House*. Now, for the first time, all three suspense thrillers appear in one hardcover volume.

### PSYCHO

When the Bates Motel loomed up out of the storm, Mary Crane thought it was her salvation. The rooms were musty but clean, and the manager, Norman Bates, seemed like a nice enough fellow, if a little *strange* . . . Then Mary met Norman’s mother . . . And the butcher knife . . . The nightmare had just begun.

### PSYCHO II

Dr. Adam Claiborne thought Norman Bates was on the road to recovery—until Norman killed a young nun and escaped from the asylum dressed in her habit. Now the psychiatrist and former patient are engaged in a desperate—and deadly—game of cat and mouse. Claiborne knows that Norman will head for Hollywood, where a movie based on the Bates Motel murders is underway. But no actor can portray Norman Bates and Norman himself will see to that . . .

### PSYCHO HOUSE

The fully-restored Bates Motel, a recreation of the infamous murder site—complete with robot copies of Norman Bates and his lovely mother—is about to become Texas’s newest tourist attraction. Right before opening day, there’s an unplanned addition to the exhibits . . . a bloody corpse is found in the front hall. Was the death a publicity stunt? Was it an accident or deliberate murder? Or has the madness that claimed Norman Bates returned to his home for another killing spree?

# **ROBERT BLOCH**

“Is one of the all-time masters.”—*Peter Straub*

“America’s acknowledged King of Terror.”—*Harlan Ellison*

## **PSYCHO**

“A terribly chilling tale!”—*Bestsellers*

## **PSYCHO II**

“Never in finer form.”—*Stephen King*

## **PSYCHO HOUSE**

“Keeps you guessing all the way . . . marvelous prose . . .”—*Booklist*

“Scary moments and some genuinely funny ironic twists. *Psycho House* [is] kind of like going home again.”—*Washington Post*

**ROBERT BLOCH**

THREE COMPLETE NOVELS



**PSYCHO**

**PSYCHO II**

**PSYCHO HOUSE**

**WINGS BOOKS**

New York • Avenel, New Jersey

This edition contains the complete and unabridged texts of the original editions. They have been completely reset for this volume.

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This 1993 edition is published by Wings Books, distributed by Outlet Book Company, Inc., a Random House Company, 40 Engelhard Avenue, Avenel, New Jersey 07001, by arrangement with Tor Books/St. Martin's Press, Inc.

Random House  
New York • Toronto • London • Sydney • Auckland

P.V.S EBOOK

*Jacket art by Tim Barrall*

Printed and bound in the United States of America

ISBN 0-517-09314-6

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# PSYCHO



10%  
of this book  
is dedicated to  
*Harry Altshuler*,  
who did 90% of the work

Norman Bates heard the noise and a shock went through him.

It sounded as though somebody was tapping on the windowpane.

He looked up, hastily, half prepared to rise, and the book slid from his hands to his ample lap. Then he realized that the sound was merely rain. Late afternoon rain, striking the parlor window.

Norman hadn't noticed the coming of the rain, nor the twilight. But it was quite dim here in the parlor now, and he reached over to switch on the lamp before resuming his reading.

It was one of those old-fashioned table lamps, the kind with the ornate glass shade and the crystal fringe. Mother had had it ever since he could remember, and she refused to get rid of it. Norman didn't really object; he had lived in this house for all of the forty years of his life, and there was something quite pleasant and reassuring about being surrounded by familiar things. Here everything was orderly and ordained; it was only there, outside, that the changes took place. And most of those changes held a potential threat. Suppose he had spent the afternoon walking, for example? He might have been off on some lonely side road or even in the swamps when the rain came, and then what? He'd be soaked to the skin, forced to stumble along home in the dark. You could catch your death of cold that way, and besides, who wanted to be out in the dark? It was much nicer here in the parlor, under the lamp, with a good book for company.

The light shone down on his plump face, reflected from his rimless glasses, bathed the pinkness of his scalp beneath the thinning sandy hair as he bent his head to resume reading.

It was really a fascinating book—no wonder he hadn't noticed how fast the time had passed. It was *The Realm of the Incas*, by Victor W. Von Hagen, and Norman had never before encountered such a wealth of curious information. For example, this description of the *cachua*, or victory dance,

where the warriors formed a great circle, moving and writhing like a snake. He read:

The drumbeat for this was usually performed on what had been the body of an enemy: the skin had been flayed and the belly stretched to form a drum, and the whole body acted as a sound box while throbbings came out of the open mouth—grotesque, but effective.

Norman smiled, then allowed himself the luxury of a comfortable shiver. *Grotesque but effective*—it certainly *must* have been! Imagine flaying a man—alive, probably—and then stretching his belly to use it as a drum! How did they actually go about doing that, curing and preserving the flesh of the corpse to prevent decay? For that matter, what kind of a mentality did it take to conceive of such an idea in the first place?

It wasn't the most appetizing notion in the world, but when Norman half closed his eyes, he could almost see the scene: this throng of painted, naked warriors wriggling and swaying in unison under a sun-drenched, savage sky, and the old crone crouching before them, throbbing out a relentless rhythm on the swollen, distended belly of a cadaver. The contorted mouth of the corpse would be forced open, probably fixed in a gaping grimace by clamps of bone, and from it the sound emerged. Beating from the belly, rising through the sunken inner orifices, forced up through the withered windpipe to emerge amplified and in full force from the dead throat.

For a moment, Norman could almost hear it, and then he remembered that rain has its rhythm too, and footsteps—

Actually, he was aware of the footsteps without even hearing them; long familiarity aided his senses whenever Mother came into the room. He didn't even have to look up to know she was there.

In fact, he *didn't* look up; he pretended to continue his reading, instead. Mother had been sleeping in her room, and he knew how crabby she could get when just awakened. So it was best to keep quiet and hope that she wasn't in one of her bad moods.

“Norman, do you know what time it is?”

He sighed and closed the book. He could tell now that she was going to be difficult; the very question was a challenge. Mother had to pass the

grandfather clock in the hall in order to come in here and she could easily see what time it was.

Still, no sense making an issue of it. Norman glanced down at his wrist watch, then smiled. "A little after five," he said. "I actually didn't realize it was so late. I've been reading—"

"Don't you think I have eyes? I can see what you've been doing." She was over at the window now, staring out at the rain. "And I can see what you haven't been doing, too. Why didn't you turn the sign on when it got dark? And why aren't you up at the office where you belong?"

"Well, it started to rain so hard, and I didn't expect there'd be any traffic in this kind of weather."

"Nonsense! That's just the time you're likely to get some business. Lots of folks don't care to drive when it's raining."

"But it isn't likely anybody would be coming this way. Everyone takes the new highway." Norman heard the bitterness creeping into his voice, felt it welling up into his throat until he could taste it, and tried to hold it back. But too late now; he had to vomit it out. "I told you how it would be at the time, when we got that advance tip that they were moving the highway. You could have sold the motel then, before there was a public announcement about the new road coming through. We could have bought all kinds of land over there for a song, closer to Fairvale, too. We'd have had a new motel, a new house, made some money. But you wouldn't listen. You never listen to me, do you? It's always what *you* want and what *you* think. You make me sick!"

"Do I, boy?" Mother's voice was deceptively gentle, but that didn't fool Norman. Not when she called him "boy." Forty years old, and she called him "boy": that's how she treated him, too, which made it worse. If only he didn't have to listen! But he did, he knew he had to, he always had to listen.

"Do I, boy?" she repeated, even more softly. "I make you sick, eh? Well, I think not. No, boy *I* don't make you sick. You make *yourself* sick.

"That's the real reason you're still sitting over here on this side of the road, isn't it, Norman? Because the truth is that you haven't any gumption. *Never* had any gumption, did you, boy?"

“Never had the gumption to leave home. Never had the gumption to go out and get yourself a job, or join the army, or even find yourself a girl—”

“You wouldn’t let me!”

“That’s right, Norman. I wouldn’t let you. But if you were half a man, you’d have gone your own way.”

He wanted to shout out at her that she was wrong, but he couldn’t. Because the things she was saying were the things he had told himself, over and over again, all through the years. It was true. She’d always laid down the law to him, but that didn’t mean he always had to obey. Mothers sometimes are overly possessive, but not all children allow themselves to be possessed. There had been other widows, other only sons, and not all of them became enmeshed in this sort of relationship. It was really his fault as much as hers. Because he didn’t have any gumption.

“You could have insisted, you know,” she was saying. “Suppose you’d gone out and found us a new location, then put the place here up for sale. But no, all you did was whine. And I know why. You never fooled me for an instant. It’s because you really didn’t *want* to move. You’ve never wanted to leave this place, and you never will now, ever. You *can’t* leave, can you? Any more than you can grow up.”

He couldn’t look at her. Not when she said things like that, he couldn’t. And there was nowhere else for him to look, either. The beaded lamp, the heavy old overstuffed furniture, all the familiar objects in the room, suddenly became hateful just *because* of long familiarity; like the furnishings of a prison cell. He stared out of the window, but that was no good either—out there was the wind and the rain and the darkness. He knew there was no escape for him out *there*. No escape anywhere, from the voice that throbbed, the voice that drummed into his ears like that of the Inca corpse in the book; the drum of the dead.

He clutched at the book now and tried to focus his eyes on it. Maybe if he ignored her, and pretended to be calm—

But it didn’t work.

“Look at yourself!” she was saying (*the drum going boom-boom-boom, and the sound reverberating from the mangled mouth*). “I know why you didn’t bother to switch on the sign. I know why you haven’t even gone up

to open the office tonight. You didn't really forget. It's just that you don't *want* anyone to come, you hope they *don't* come."

"All right!" he muttered. "I admit it. I hate running a motel, always have."

"It's more than that, boy." (*There it was again, "Boy, boy, boy!" drumming away, out of the jaws of death.*) "You hate *people*. Because, really, you're *afraid* of them, aren't you? Always have been, ever since you were a little tyke. Rather snuggle up in a chair under the lamp and read. You did it thirty years ago, and you're still doing it now. Hiding away under the covers of a book."

"There's a lot worse things I could be doing. You always told me that, yourself. At least I never went out and got into trouble. Isn't it better to improve your mind?"

"Improve your mind? Hah!" He could sense her standing behind him now, staring down. "Call *that* improvement? You don't fool me, boy, not for a minute. Never have. It isn't as if you were reading the Bible, or even trying to get an education. I know the sort of thing *you* read. Trash. And worse than trash!"

"This happens to be a history of the Inca civilization—"

"I'll just bet it is. And I'll just bet it's crammed full with nasty bits about those dirty savages, like the one you had about the South Seas. Oh, you didn't think I knew about *that* one did you? Hiding it up in your room, the way you hid all the others, those filthy things you used to read—"

"Psychology isn't filthy, Mother!"

"Psychology, he calls it! A lot *you* know about psychology! I'll never forget that time you talked so dirty to me, never. To think that a son could come to his own mother and *say* such things!"

"But I was only trying to explain something. It's what they call the Oedipus situation, and I thought if both of us could just look at the problem reasonably and try to understand it, maybe things would change for the better."

"Change, boy? Nothing's going to change. You can read all the books in the world and you'll still be the same. I don't need to listen to a lot of vile obscene rigamarole to know what you are. Why, even an eight-year-old

child could recognize it. They *did*, too, all your little playmates did, way back then. You're a Mamma's Boy. That's what they called you, and that's what you were. Were, are, and always will be. A big, fat, overgrown Mamma's Boy!"

It was deafening him, the drumbeat of her words, the drumbeat in his own chest. The vileness in his mouth made him choke. In a moment he'd have to cry. Norman shook his head. To think that she could still do this to him, even now! But she could, and she was, and she *would*, over and over again, unless—

"Unless, what?"

God, could she read his *mind*?

"I know what you're thinking, Norman. I know all about you, boy. More than you dream. But I know that, too—what you dream. You're thinking that you'd like to kill me, aren't you, Norman? But you can't. Because you haven't the gumption. I'm the one who has the strength. I've always had it. Enough for both of us. That's why you'll never get rid of me, even if you really wanted to.

"Of course, deep down you *don't* want to. You need me, boy. That's the truth, isn't it?"

Norman stood up, slowly. He didn't dare trust himself to turn and face her, not yet. He had to tell himself to be calm, first. Be very, very calm. Don't think about what she's saying. Try to face up to it, try to remember. *She's an old woman, and not quite right in the head. If you keep on listening to her this way, you'll end up not quite right in the head, either. Tell her to go back to her room and lie down. That's where she belongs.*

*And she'd better go there fast, because if she doesn't, this time you're going to strangle her with her own Silver Cord—*

He started to swing around, his mouth working, framing the phrases, when the buzzer sounded.

That was the signal; it meant somebody had driven in, up at the motel, and was ringing for service.

Without even bothering to look back, Norman walked into the hall, took his raincoat from the hanger, and went out into the darkness.

The rain had been falling steadily for several minutes before Mary noticed it and switched on the windshield wiper. At the same time she put on the headlights; it had gotten dark quite suddenly, and the road ahead was only a vague blur between the towering trees.

Trees? She couldn't recall a stretch of trees along here the last time she'd driven this way. Of course that had been the previous summer and she'd come into Fairvale in broad daylight, alert and refreshed. Now she was tired out from eighteen hours of steady driving, but she could still remember and sense that something was wrong.

*Remember*—that was the trigger word. Now she *could* remember, dimly, how she'd hesitated back there about a half-hour ago, when she came to the fork in the road. That was it; she'd taken the wrong turn. And now here she was, God knows where, with this rain coming down and everything pitch-black outside—

*Get a grip on yourself, now. You can't afford to be panicky. The worst part of it was over.*

It was true, she told herself. The worst part was over. The worst part had come yesterday afternoon, when she stole the money.

She had been standing in Mr. Lowery's office when old Tommy Cassidy hauled out that big green bundle of bills and put them down on the desk. Thirty-six Federal Reserve notes bearing the picture of the fat man who looked like a wholesale grocer, and eight more carrying the face of the man who looked like an undertaker. But the wholesale grocer was Grover Cleveland and the undertaker was William McKinley. And thirty-six thousands and eight five-hundreds added up to forty thousand dollars.

Tommy Cassidy had put them down just like *that*, fanning them casually as he announced he was closing the deal and buying a house as his daughter's wedding present.

Mr. Lowery pretended to be just as casual as he went through the business of signing the final papers. But after old Tommy Cassidy went away, Mr. Lowery got a little bit excited. He scooped up the money, put it into a big brown Manila number ten envelope, and sealed the flap. Mary noticed how his hands were trembling.

“Here,” he said, handing her the money. “Take it over to the bank. It’s almost four o’clock, but I’m sure Gilbert will let you make a deposit.” He paused, staring at her. “What’s the matter, Miss Crane—don’t you feel well?”

Maybe he had noticed the way *her* hands trembled, now that she was holding the envelope. But it didn’t matter. She knew what she was going to say, even though she was surprised when she found herself actually saying it.

“I seem to have one of my headaches, Mr. Lowery. As a matter of fact, I was just going to ask if it was all right if I took the rest of the afternoon off. We’re all caught up on the mail, and we can’t make out the rest of the forms on this deal until Monday.”

Mr. Lowery smiled at her. He was in good humor, and why shouldn’t he be? Five percent of forty thousand was two thousand dollars. He could afford to be generous.

“Of course, Miss Crane. You just make this deposit and then run along home. Would you like me to drive you?”

“No, that’s all right, I can manage. A little rest—”

“That’s the ticket. See you Monday, then. Take it easy, that’s what I always say.”

In a pig’s ear that’s what *he* always said: Lowery would half kill himself to make an extra dollar, and he’d be perfectly willing to kill any of his employees for another fifty cents.

But Mary Crane had smiled at him very sweetly, then walked out of his office and out of his life. Taking the forty thousand dollars with her.

You don’t get that kind of an opportunity every day of your life. In fact, when you come right down to it, some people don’t seem to get *any* opportunities at all.

Mary Crane had waited over twenty-seven years for hers.

The opportunity to go on to college had vanished, at seventeen, when Daddy was hit by a car. Mary went to business school for a year, instead, and then settled down to support Mom and her kid sister, Lila.

The opportunity to marry disappeared at twenty-two, when Dale Belter was called up to serve his hitch in the army. Pretty soon he was stationed in Hawaii, and before long he began mentioning this girl in his letters, and then the letters stopped coming. When she finally got the wedding announcement she didn't care any more.

Besides, Mom was pretty sick by then. It took her three years to die, while Lila was off at school. Mary had insisted she go to college, come what may, but that left her carrying the whole load. Between holding down a job at the Lowery Agency all day and sitting up with Mom half the night, there wasn't time for anything else.

Not even time to note the *passing* of time. But then Mom had the final stroke, and there was the business of the funeral, and Lila coming back from school and trying to find a job, and all at once there was Mary Crane looking at herself in the big mirror and seeing this drawn, contorted face peering back at her. She'd thrown something at the mirror, and then the mirror broke into a thousand pieces and she knew that wasn't all; *she* was breaking into a thousand pieces, too.

Lila had been wonderful and even Mr. Lowery helped out by seeing to it that the house was sold right away. By the time the estate was settled they had about two thousand dollars in cash left over. Lila got a job in a record shop downtown, and they moved into a small apartment together.

"Now, you're going to take a vacation," Lila told her. "A real vacation. No, don't argue about it! You've kept this family going for eight years and it's about time you had a rest. I want you to take a trip. A cruise, maybe."

So Mary took the *S.S. Caledonia*, and after a week or so in Caribbean waters the drawn, contorted face had disappeared from the mirror of her stateroom. She looked like a young girl again (well, certainly not a day over twenty-two, she told herself) and, what was more important still, a young girl in love.

It wasn't the wild, surging thing it had been when she met Dale Belter. It wasn't even the usual stereotype of moonlight-on-the-water generally

associated with a tropical cruise.

Sam Loomis was a good ten years older than Dale Belter had been, and pretty much on the quiet side, but she loved him. It looked like the first real opportunity of all, until Sam explained a few things.

“I’m really sailing under false pretenses, you might say,” he told her. “There’s this hardware store, you see—”

Then the story came out.

There was this hardware store, in a little town called Fairvale, up north. Sam had worked there for his father, with the understanding that he’d inherit the business. A year ago his father had died, and the accountants had told him the bad news.

Sam inherited the business, all right, plus about twenty thousand in debts. The building was mortgaged, the inventory was mortgaged, and even the insurance had been mortgaged. Sam’s father had never told him about his little side investment in the market—or the race track. But there it was. There were only two choices: go into bankruptcy or try and work off the obligations.

Sam Loomis chose the latter course. “It’s a good business,” he explained. “I’ll never make a fortune, but with any kind of decent management, there’s a steady eight or ten thousand a year to be made. And if I can work up a decent line of farm machinery, maybe even more. Got over four thousand paid off already. I figure another couple of years and I’ll be clear.”

“But I don’t understand—if you’re in debt, then how can you afford to take a trip like this?”

Sam grinned at her. “I won it in a contest. That’s right—a dealer’s sales contest sponsored by one of these farm-machinery outfits. I wasn’t trying to win a trip at all, just hustling to pay off creditors. But they notified me I’d copped first prize in my territory.

“I tried to settle for a cash deal instead, but they wouldn’t go for it. Trip or nothing. Well, this is a slack month, and I’ve got an honest clerk working for me. I figured I might as well take a free vacation. So here I am. And here *you* are.” He grinned, then sighed. “I wish it was our honeymoon.”

“Sam, why *couldn’t* it be? I mean—”

But he sighed again and shook his head. “We’ll have to wait. It may take two-three years before everything is paid off.”

“I don’t want to wait! I don’t care about the money. I could quit my job, work in your store—”

“And sleep in it too, the way I do?” He managed a grin again, but it was no more cheerful than the sigh. “That’s right. Rigged up a place for myself in the back room. I’m living on baked beans most of the time. Folks say I’m tighter than the town banker.”

“But what’s the point?” Mary asked. “I mean, if you lived decently it would only take a year or so longer to pay off what you owe. And meanwhile—”

“Meanwhile, I have to live in Fairvale. It’s a nice town, but a small one. Everybody knows everybody else’s business. As long as I’m in there pitching, I’ve got their respect. They go out of their way to trade with me—they all know the situation and appreciate I’m trying to do my best. Dad had a good reputation, in spite of the way things turned out. I want to keep that for myself and for the business. And for us, in the future. Now that’s more important than ever. Don’t you see?”

“The future.” Mary sighed. “Two or three years, you said.”

“I’m sorry. But when we get married I want us to have a decent home, nice things. That costs money. At least you need credit. As it is, I’m stretching payments with suppliers all down the line—they’ll play ball as long as they know everything I make goes toward paying off what I owe them. It isn’t easy and it isn’t pleasant. But I know what I want, and I can’t settle for less. So you’ll just have to be patient, darling.”

So she was patient. But not until she learned that no amount of further persuasion—verbal or physical—would sway him.

There the situation stood when the cruise ended. And there it had remained, for well over a year. Mary had driven up to visit him last summer, she saw the town, the store, the fresh figures in the ledger which showed that Sam had paid off an additional five thousand dollars. “Only eleven thousand to go,” he told her proudly. “Another two years, maybe even less.”

*Two years.* In two years, she’d be twenty-nine. She couldn’t afford to pull a bluff, stage a scene and walk out on him like some young girl of twenty.

She knew there wouldn't be many more Sam Loomises in her life. So she smiled, and nodded, and went back home to the Lowery Agency.

She went back to the Lowery Agency and watched old man Lowery take his steady five percent on every sale he made. She watched him buy up shaky mortgages and foreclose, watched him make quick, cunning, cutthroat cash offers to desperate sellers and then turn around and take a fat profit on a fast, easy resale. People were always buying, always selling. All Lowery did was stand in the middle, extracting a percentage from both parties just for bringing buyer and seller together. He performed no other real service to justify his existence. And yet he was rich. It wouldn't take *him* two years to sweat out an eleven-thousand-dollar debt. He could sometimes make as much in two months.

Mary hated him, and she hated a lot of the buyers and sellers he did business with, because they were rich, too. This Tommy Cassidy was one of the worst—a big operator, loaded with money from oil leases. He didn't have to turn a hand, but he was always dabbling in real estate, sniffing the scent of somebody's fear or want, bidding low and selling high, alert to every possibility of squeezing out an extra dollar in rentals or income.

He thought nothing of laying down forty thousand dollars in cash to buy his daughter a home for a wedding present.

Any more than he thought anything about laying down a hundred-dollar bill on Mary Crane's desk one afternoon about six months ago, and suggesting she take a "little trip" with him down to Dallas for the weekend.

It had all been done so quickly, and with such a bland and casual smirk, that she didn't have time to get angry. Then Mr. Lowery came in, and the matter ended. She'd never told Cassidy off, in public or in private, and he never repeated the offer. But she didn't forget. She couldn't forget the wet-lipped smile on his fat old face.

And she never forgot that this world belonged to the Tommy Cassidy's. They owned the property and they set the prices. Forty thousand to a daughter for a wedding gift; a hundred dollars tossed carelessly on a desk for three days' rental privileges of the body of Mary Crane.

*So I took the forty thousand dollars—*

That's the way the old gag went, but this hadn't been a gag. She did take the money, and subconsciously she must have been daydreaming about just such an opportunity for a long, long time. Because now everything seemed to fall into place, as though part of a preconceived plan.

It was Friday afternoon; the banks would be closed tomorrow and that meant Lowery wouldn't get around to checking on her activities until Monday, when she didn't show up at the office.

Better still, Lila had departed, early in the morning, for Dallas—she did all the buying for the record shop now. And she wouldn't be back until Monday either.

Mary drove right to the apartment and packed; not everything, just her best clothes in the suitcase and the small overnight bag. She and Lila had three hundred and sixty dollars hidden away in an empty cold-cream jar, but she didn't touch that. Lila would need it when she had to keep up the apartment alone. Mary wished that she could write her sister a note of some kind, but she didn't dare. It would be hard for Lila in the days ahead; still, there was no help for it. Maybe something could be worked out later on.

Mary left the apartment around seven; an hour later she halted on the outskirts of a suburb and ate supper, then drove in under an OK USED CAR sign and traded her sedan for a coupé. She lost money on the transaction; lost still more early the next morning when she repeated the performance in a town four hundred miles north. Around noon, when she traded again, she found herself in possession of thirty dollars in cash and a battered old heap with a crumpled left front fender, but she was not displeased. The important thing was to make a number of fast switches, cover her trail, and wind up with a junker that would take her as far as Fairvale. Once there she could drive further north, maybe as far as Springfield, and sell the last car under her name; how would the authorities trace down the whereabouts of a Mrs. Sam Loomis, living in a town a hundred miles from there?

Because she intended to become Mrs. Sam Loomis, and quickly. She'd walk in on Sam with this story about coming into the inheritance. Not forty thousand dollars—that would be too large a sum, and might require too much explanation—but maybe she'd say it was fifteen. And she'd tell him Lila had received an equal amount, quit her job abruptly, and gone off to

Europe. That would explain why there was no sense inviting her to the wedding.

Maybe Sam would balk about taking the money, and certainly there'd be a lot of awkward questions to answer, but she'd get around him. She'd have to. They'd be married at once; that was the important thing. She'd have his name then, Mrs. Sam Loomis, wife of the proprietor of a hardware store in a town eight hundred miles away from the Lowery Agency.

The Lowery Agency didn't even know of Sam's existence. Of course they'd come to Lila, and she'd probably guess right away. But Lila wouldn't say anything—not until she contacted Mary first.

When the time came, Mary would have to be prepared to handle her sister, keep her quiet in front of Sam and the authorities. It shouldn't be too difficult—Lila owed her that much, for all the years Mary had worked to send her through school. Perhaps she could even give her part of the remaining twenty-five thousand dollars. Maybe she wouldn't take it. But there would be some solution; Mary hadn't planned that far ahead, but when the time came, the answer would be ready.

Right now she had to do one thing at a time, and the first step was to reach Fairvale. On the scale map it was a distance of a mere four inches. Four insignificant inches of red lines from one dot to another. But it had taken her eighteen hours to get this far; eighteen hours of endless vibration, eighteen hours of peering and squinting in headlight glare and sunlight reflection; eighteen hours of cramped contortion, of fighting the road and the wheel and the dulling, deadly onslaught of her own fatigue.

Now she had missed her turn and it was raining; the night had come down and she was lost, on a strange road.

Mary glanced into the rear-view mirror and caught a dim reflection of her face. The dark hair and the regular features were still familiar, but the smile had gone and her full lips were compressed to a taut line. Where had she seen that drawn, contorted countenance before?

*In the mirror after Mom died, when you went to pieces—*

And here, all along, she'd thought of herself as being so calm, so cool, so composed. There had been no consciousness of fear, of regret, of guilt. But the mirror didn't lie. It told her the truth now.

It told her, wordlessly, to *stop*. *You can't stumble into Sam's arms looking like this, coming out of the night with your face and clothing giving away the story of hasty flight. Sure, your story is that you wanted to surprise him with the good news, but you'll have to look as though you're so happy you couldn't wait.*

The thing to do was to stay over somewhere tonight, get a decent rest, and arrive in Fairvale tomorrow morning, alert and refreshed.

If she turned around and drove back to the place where she made the wrong turnoff, she'd hit the main highway again. Then she could find a motel.

Mary nodded to herself, resisting the impulse to close her eyes, and then jerked erect, scanning the side of the road through the blur of rainswept darkness.

That's when she saw the sign, set beside the driveway which led to the small building off on the side.

MOTEL—VACANCY. The sign was unlit, but maybe they'd forgotten to switch it on, just as she'd forgotten to put on her headlights when the night suddenly descended.

Mary drove in, noting that the entire motel was dark, including the glass-front cubicle on the end which undoubtedly served as an office. Maybe the place was closed. She slowed down and peered in, then felt her tires roll over one of those electric signal cables. Now she could see the house on the hillside behind the motel; its front windows were lighted, and probably the proprietor was up there. He'd come down in a moment.

She switched off the ignition and waited. All at once she could hear the sullen patter of the rain and sense the sigh of the wind behind it. She remembered the sound, because it had rained like that the day Mom was buried, the day they lowered her into that little rectangle of darkness. And now the darkness was here, rising all around Mary. She was alone in the darkness. The money wouldn't help her and Sam wouldn't help her, because she had taken the wrong turn back there and she was on a strange road. But no help for it—she'd made her grave now and now she must lie in it.

Why did she think that? It wasn't *grave*, it was *bed*.

She was still trying to puzzle it out when the big dark shadow emerged out of the other shadows and opened her car door.

“Looking for a room?”

Mary made up her mind very quickly, once she saw the fat, bespectacled face and heard the soft, hesitant voice. There wouldn't be any trouble.

She nodded and climbed out of the car, feeling the ache in her calves as she followed him to the door of the office. He unlocked it, stepped inside the cubicle and switched on the light.

“Sorry I didn't get down sooner. I've been up at the house—Mother isn't very well.”

There was nothing distinctive about the office, but it was warm and dry and bright. Mary shivered gratefully and smiled up at the fat man. He bent over the ledger on the counter.

“Our rooms are seven dollars, single. Would you like to take a look, first?”

“That won't be necessary.” She opened her purse quickly, extracting a five-dollar bill and two singles and placing them on the counter as he pushed the register forward and held out a pen.

For a moment she hesitated, then wrote a name—*Jane Wilson*—and an address—*San Antonio, Texas*. She couldn't very well do anything about the Texas plates on the car.

“I'll get your bags,” he said, and came around the counter. She followed him outside again. The money was in the glove compartment, still in the same big envelope secured by the heavy rubber band. Maybe the best thing to do was to leave it there; she'd lock the car, and nobody would disturb it.

He carried the bags over to the door of the room next to the office. It was the closest, and she didn't mind—the main thing was to get out of the rain.

“Nasty weather,” he said, standing aside as she entered. “Have you been driving long?”

“All day.”

He pressed a switch and the bedside lamp blossomed and sent forth yellow petals of light. The room was plainly but adequately furnished; she noted the shower stall in the bathroom beyond. Actually, she would have preferred a tub, but this would do.

“Everything all right?”

She nodded quickly, then remembered something. “Is there anywhere around here where I can get a bite to eat?”

“Well, let’s see now. There used to be a root beer and hamburger stand up the road here about three miles, but I guess it’s closed down since the new highway came in. No, your best bet would be Fairvale.”

“How far away is that?”

“About seventeen-eighteen miles. You keep going up the road until you come to a county trunk, turn right, and hit the main highway again. It’s ten miles straight ahead, then. I’m surprised you didn’t go through that way if you’re heading north.”

“I got lost.”

The fat man nodded and sighed. “I thought as much. We don’t get much regular traffic along here any more since that new road opened.”

She smiled absently. He stood in the doorway, pursing his lips. When she looked up to meet his stare, he dropped his eyes and cleared his throat apologetically.

“Uh—Miss—I was just thinking. Maybe you don’t feel like driving all the way up to Fairvale and back in this rain. I mean, I was just going to fix a little snack for myself up at the house. You’d be perfectly welcome to join me.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not? No trouble at all. Mother’s gone back to bed, and she won’t be doing any cooking—I was only going to set out some cold cuts and make some coffee. If that’s all right with you.”

“Well—”

“Look, I’ll just run along and get things ready.”

“Thank you very much, Mr.—”

“Bates. Norman Bates.” He backed against the door, bumping his shoulder. “Look, I’ll leave you this flashlight for when you come up. You probably want to get out of those wet things first.”

He turned away, but not before she caught a glimmer of his reddened face. Why, he was actually *embarrassed!*

For the first time in almost twenty hours a smile came to Mary Crane’s face. She waited until the door closed behind him and then slipped out of her jacket. She opened her overnight bag on the bed and took out a print dress. She let it hang, hoping some of the wrinkles would disappear, while she used the bathroom facilities. Just time to freshen up a bit now, but when she came back she promised herself a good hot shower. That’s what she needed; that, and sleep. But first a little food. Let’s see, now—her make-up was in her purse, and she could wear the blue coat from the big suitcase—

Fifteen minutes later she was knocking on the door of the big frame house on the hillside.

A single lamp shone from the unshaded parlor window, but a brighter reflection blazed from upstairs. If his mother was ill, that’s where she’d be.

Mary stood there, waiting for a response, but nothing happened. Maybe he was upstairs, too. She rapped again.

Meanwhile, she peered through the parlor window. At first glance she couldn’t quite believe what she saw; she hadn’t dreamed that such places still existed in this day and age.

Usually, even when a house is old, there are some signs of alteration and improvement in the interior. But the parlor she peered at had never been “modernized”; the floral wallpaper, the dark, heavy, ornately scrolled mahogany woodwork, the turkey-red carpet, the high-backed, overstuffed furniture and the paneled fireplace were straight out of the Gay Nineties. There wasn’t even a television set to intrude its incongruity in the scene, but she did notice an old wind-up gramophone on an end table. Now she could detect a low murmur of voices, and at first she thought it might be coming from the gramophone’s bell-shaped horn; then she identified the source of the sound. It was coming from upstairs, from the lighted room.

Mary knocked again, using the end of the flashlight. This time she must have made her presence known, for the sound ceased abruptly, and she

heard the faint thud of footsteps. A moment later she saw Mr. Bates descending the stairs. He came to the door and opened it, gesturing her forward.

“Sorry,” he said. “I was just tucking Mother in for the night. Sometimes she’s apt to be a bit difficult.”

“You said she was ill. I wouldn’t want to disturb her.”

“Oh, you won’t make any bother. She’ll probably sleep like a baby.” Mr. Bates glanced over his shoulder at the stairway, then lowered his voice. “Actually, she’s not sick, not *physically*, that is. But sometimes she gets these spells—”

He nodded abruptly, then smiled. “Here, let me just take your coat and hang it up. There. Now, if you’ll come this way—”

She followed him down a hallway which extended from under the stairs. “I hope you don’t mind eating in the kitchen,” he murmured. “Everything’s all ready for us. Sit right down and I’ll pour the coffee.”

The kitchen was a complement of the parlor—lined with ceiling-high glassed-in cupboards grouped about an old-fashioned sink with a hand-pump attachment. The big wood stove squatted in one corner. But it gave off a grateful warmth, and the long wooden table bore a welcome display of sausage, cheese and homemade pickles in glass dishes scattered about on the red-and-white checkered cloth. Mary was not inclined to smile at the quaintness of it all, and even the inevitable hand-crocheted motto on the wall seemed appropriate enough.

*God Bless Our Home.*

So be it. This was a lot better than sitting alone in some dingy small-town cafeteria.

Mr. Bates helped her fill her plate. “Go right ahead, don’t wait for me! You must be hungry.”

She *was* hungry, and she ate heartily, with such absorption that she scarcely noticed how little he was eating. When she became aware of it, she was faintly embarrassed.

“But you haven’t touched a thing! I’ll bet you really had your own supper earlier.”

“No, I didn’t. It’s just that I’m not very hungry.” He refilled her coffee cup. “I’m afraid Mother gets me a little upset sometimes.” His voice lowered again, and the apologetic note returned. “I guess it’s my fault. I’m not too good at taking care of her.”

“You live here all alone, the two of you?”

“Yes. There’s never been anybody else. Never.”

“It must be pretty hard on you.”

“I’m not complaining. Don’t misunderstand.”

He adjusted the rimless spectacles. “My father went away when I was still a baby. Mother took care of me all alone. There was enough money on her side of the family to keep us going, I guess, until I grew up. Then she mortgaged the house, sold the farm, and built this motel. We ran it together, and it was a good thing—until the new highway cut us off.

“Actually, of course, she started failing long before then. And it was my turn to take care of her. But sometimes it isn’t so easy.”

“There are no other relatives?”

“None.”

“And you’ve never married?”

His face reddened and he glanced down at the checkered tablecloth.

Mary bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ask personal questions.”

“That’s all right.” His voice was faint. “I’ve never married. Mother was—funny—about those things. I—I’ve never even sat at a table with a girl like this before.”

“But—”

“Sounds odd, doesn’t it, in this day and age? I know that. But it has to be. I tell myself that she’d be lost without me, now—maybe the real truth is that *I’d* be even more lost without *her*.”

Mary finished her coffee, fished in her purse for cigarettes, and offered the package to Mr. Bates.

“No, thank you. I don’t smoke.”

“Mind if I do?”

“Not at all. Go right ahead.” He hesitated. “I’d like to offer you a drink but—you see—Mother doesn’t approve of liquor in the house.”

Mary leaned back, inhaling. Suddenly she felt expansive. Funny what a little warmth, a little rest, a little food could do. An hour ago she'd been lonely, wretched, and fearfully unsure of herself. Now everything had changed. Perhaps it was listening to Mr. Bates which had altered her mood this way. *He* was the lonely, wretched, and fearful one, really. In contrast, she felt seven feet tall. It was this realization which prompted her to speak.

"You aren't allowed to smoke. You aren't allowed to drink. You aren't allowed to see any girls. Just what *do* you do, besides run the motel and attend to your mother?"

Apparently he was unconscious of her tone of voice. "Oh, I've got lots of things to do, really. I read quite a lot. And there are other hobbies." He glanced up at a wall shelf and she followed his gaze. A stuffed squirrel peered down at them.

"Hunting?"

"Well, no. Just taxidermy. George Blount gave me that squirrel to stuff. He shot it. Mother doesn't want me to handle firearms."

"Mr. Bates, you'll pardon me for saying this but how long do you intend to go on this way? You're a grown man. You certainly must realize that you can't be expected to act like a little boy all the rest of your life. I don't mean to be rude, but—"

"I understand. I'm well aware of the situation. As I told you, I've done a bit of reading. I know what the psychologists say about such things. But I have a duty toward my mother."

"Wouldn't you perhaps be fulfilling that duty to her, and to yourself as well, if you arranged to put her in an—institution?"

"*She's not crazy!*"

The voice wasn't soft and apologetic any longer; it was high and shrill. And the pudgy man was on his feet, his hands sweeping a cup from the table. It shattered on the floor, but Mary didn't look at it; she could only stare into the shattered face.

"She's not crazy," he repeated. "No matter what you think, or anybody thinks. No matter what the books say, or what those doctors would say out at the asylum. I know all about that. They'd certify her in a hurry and lock her away if they could—all I'd have to do is give them the word. But I

wouldn't, because I *know*. Don't you understand that? I *know*, and they don't know. They don't know how she took care of me all those years, when there was nobody else who cared, how she worked for me and suffered because of me, the sacrifices she made. If she's a little old now, it's my fault, I'm responsible. When she came to me that time, told me she wanted to get married again, I'm the one who stopped her. Yes, I stopped her, I was to blame for that! You don't have to tell me about jealousy, possessiveness—I was worse than she could ever be. Ten times crazier, if that's the word you want to use. They'd have locked *me* up in a minute if they knew the things I said and did, the way I carried on. Well, I got over it, finally. And she didn't. But who are you to say a person should be put away? I think perhaps all of us go a little crazy at times."

He stopped, not because he was out of words but because he was out of breath. His face was very red, and the puckered lips were beginning to tremble.

Mary stood up. "I'm—I'm sorry," she said softly. "Really, I am. I want to apologize. I had no right to say what I did."

"Yes. I know. But it doesn't matter. It's just that I'm not used to talking about these things. You live alone like this and everything gets bottled up. Bottled up, or stuffed, like that squirrel up there."

His color lightened, and he attempted a smile. "Cute little fellow, isn't he? I've often wished I had a live one around that I could tame for a pet."

Mary picked up her purse. "I'll be running along now. It's getting late."

"Please don't go. I'm sorry I made such a fuss."

"It isn't that. I'm really very tired."

"But I thought perhaps we could talk awhile. I was going to tell you about my hobbies. I've got a sort of workshop down in the basement—"

"No, I'd like to, but I simply must get some rest."

"All right, then. I'll walk down with you. I've got to close up the office. It doesn't look as if there'll be any more business tonight."

They went through the hall, and he helped her on with her coat. He was clumsy about it, and for a moment she felt rising irritation, then checked it as she realized the cause. He was afraid to touch her. That was it. The poor guy was actually afraid to get near a woman!

He held the flashlight and she followed him out of the house and down the pathway to the gravel drive curving around the motel. The rain had stopped but the night was still dark and starless. As she turned the corner of the building she glanced back over her shoulder at the house. The upstairs light still burned, and Mary wondered if the old woman was awake, if she had listened to their conversation, heard the final outburst.

Mr. Bates halted before her door, waited until she inserted the key in the lock and opened it.

“Good night,” he said. “Sleep well.”

“Thank you. And thanks for the hospitality.”

He opened his mouth, then turned away. For the third time that evening she saw him redden.

Then she closed her door and locked it. She could hear his retreating footsteps, then the telltale click as he entered the office next door.

She didn't hear him when he left; her attention had been immediately occupied by the duty of unpacking. She got out her pajamas, her slippers, a jar of cold cream, a toothbrush and toothpaste. Then she rummaged through the big suitcase looking for the dress she planned to wear tomorrow, when she saw Sam. That would have to be put up now, to hang out the wrinkles. Nothing must be out of place tomorrow.

*Nothing must be out of place—*

All at once she didn't feel seven feet tall any more. Or was the change really so sudden? Hadn't it started when Mr. Bates got so hysterical, back there at the house? What was it he had said which really deflated her?

*I think perhaps all of us go a little crazy at times.*

Mary Crane cleared a place for herself on the bed and sat down.

Yes. It was true. All of us go a little crazy at times. Just as she'd gone crazy, yesterday afternoon, when she saw that money on the desk.

And she'd been crazy ever since, she *must* have been crazy, to think she could get away with what she planned. It had all seemed like a dream come true, and that's what it was. A dream. A *crazy* dream. She knew it, now.

Maybe she could manage to throw off the police. But Sam would ask questions. *Who* was this relative she'd inherited the money from? Where

had he lived? Why hadn't she ever mentioned him before? How was it that she brought the money along in cash? Didn't Mr. Lowery object to her quitting her job so suddenly?

And then there was Lila. Suppose she reacted as Mary had anticipated—came to her without going to the police, even consented to remain silent in the future because of a sense of obligation. The fact remained that she'd *know*. And there'd be complications.

Sooner or later Sam would want to visit her down there, or invite her up. And that would never work. She could never keep up a future relationship with her sister; never explain to Sam why it was impossible to do so, why she wouldn't go back to Texas even for a visit.

No, the whole thing was crazy.

And it was too late to do anything about it now.

Or—*was it?*

Suppose she got herself some sleep, a good long ten hours of sleep. Tomorrow was Sunday; if she left here about nine and drove straight through she could be back in town Monday morning, early. Before Lila arrived from Dallas, before the bank opened. She could deposit the money and go on to work from there.

Sure, she'd be dead tired. But it wouldn't kill her, and nobody would ever know.

There was the matter of the car, of course. That would take some explaining, for Lila's benefit. Maybe she could tell her that she'd started out for Fairvale, intending to surprise Sam over the weekend. The car broke down and she had to have it towed away—the dealer said it would need a new engine, so she decided to junk it, take this old heap instead, and come back home.

Yes, that would sound reasonable.

Of course, when she figured everything up, this trip would actually cost about seven hundred dollars. That's what the car had been worth.

But the price was worth paying. Seven hundred dollars isn't too much to pay for one's sanity. For one's safety, one's future security.

Mary stood up.

She'd do it.

And all at once she was seven feet tall again. It was *that* simple.

If she'd been a religious girl, she would have prayed. As it was, she felt a curious sense of—what was that word?—predestination. As if everything that had happened was somehow *fated* to be. Her turning off on the wrong road, coming here, meeting this pathetic man, listening to his outburst, hearing that final sentence which brought her to her senses.

For a moment, she could have gone to him and kissed him—until she realized, with a giggle, what his response would be to such a gesture. The poor old geezer would probably faint!

She giggled again. It was nice to be seven feet tall, but the question was—would she be able to fit inside the shower stall? And that's what she was going to do right now, take a nice, long hot shower. Get the dirt off her hide, just as she was going to get the dirt cleaned out of her insides. *Come clean, Mary. Come clean as snow.*

She stepped into the bathroom, kicking off her shoes, stooping to slip her stockings off. Then she raised her arms, pulled the dress over her head, tossed it into the next room. It missed the bed, but she didn't care. She unhooked her bra, swung it in an arc, and let it sail. Now, the panties—

For a moment she stood before the mirror set in the door and took stock of herself. Maybe the face was twenty-seven, but the body was free, white, and twenty-one. She had a good figure. A *damned* good figure. Sam would like it. She wished he was here to admire it now. It was going to be hell to wait another two years. But then she'd make up for lost time. They say a woman isn't fully mature, sexually, until she's thirty. That was something to find out about.

Mary giggled again, then executed an amateurish bump and grind, tossed her image a kiss and received one in return. After that she stepped into the shower stall. The water was hot, and she had to add a mixture from the COLD faucet. Finally she turned both faucets on full force and let the warmth gush over her.

The roar was deafening, and the room was beginning to steam up.

That's why she didn't hear the door open, or note the sound of footsteps. And at first, when the shower curtains parted, the steam obscured the face.

Then she *did* see it there—just a face, peering through the curtains, hanging in midair like a mask. A head-scarf concealed the hair and the glassy eyes stared inhumanly, but it wasn't a mask, it couldn't be. The skin had been powdered dead-white and two hectic spots of rouge centered on the cheekbones. It wasn't a mask. It was the face of a crazy old woman.

Mary started to scream, and then the curtains parted further and a hand appeared, holding a butcher's knife. It was the knife that, a moment later, cut off her scream.

And her head.

The minute Norman got inside the office he started to tremble. It was the reaction, of course. Too much had happened, and too quickly. He couldn't bottle it up any longer.

*Bottle.* That's what he needed—a drink. He'd lied to the girl, of course. It was true Mother wouldn't allow liquor in the house, but he *did* drink. He kept a bottle down here, at the office. There were times when you had to drink, even if you knew you had no stomach for liquor, even if a few ounces were enough to make you dizzy, make you pass out. There were times when you *wanted* to pass out.

Norman remembered to pull down the Venetian blinds and switch off the sign outside. There, that did it. Closed for the night. Nobody would notice the dim light of the desk lamp now that the blinds were down. Nobody could look in and see him opening the desk drawer and pulling out the bottle, his hands trembling like a baby's. *Baby needs his bottle.*

He tilted the pint back and drank, closing his eyes as he did so. The whisky burned, and that was good. Let it burn away the bitterness. The warmth crept down his throat, exploded in his stomach. Maybe another drink would burn away the taste of fear.

It had been a mistake to invite the girl up to the house. Norman knew that the moment he opened his mouth, but she was so pretty, and she had looked so tired and forlorn. He knew what it was to be tired and forlorn, with nobody to turn to, nobody who'd understand. All he meant to do, all he did do, was talk to her. Besides, it was *his* house, wasn't it? Just as much as it was Mother's. She had no right to lay down the law that way.

Still, it had been a mistake. Actually, he never would have dared, except he'd been so angry with Mother. He'd wanted to defy her. That was bad.

But he had done something far worse after he extended the invitation. He'd gone back to the house and told Mother he was having company. He'd

marched right up to the bedroom and announced it, just as much as to say, “I dare you to do something about it!”

It was the wrong thing to do. She was worked up enough already, and when he told her about the girl coming for supper she practically had hysterics. She was hysterical, the way she carried on, the things she said. “If you bring her here, I’ll kill her! I’ll kill the bitch!”

*Bitch.* Mother didn’t talk that way. But that’s what she had said. She was sick, very sick. Maybe the girl had been right. Maybe Mother should be put away. It was getting so he couldn’t handle her alone any more. Getting so he couldn’t handle himself, either. What had Mother used to say about handling himself? It was a sin. You could burn in hell.

The whisky burned. His third drink, but he needed it. He needed a lot of things. The girl was right about that, too. This was no way to live. He couldn’t go on much longer.

Just getting through the meal had been an ordeal. He’d been afraid Mother would make a scene. After he locked the door to her room and left her up there he kept wondering if she’d start screaming and pounding. But she had kept very quiet, almost too quiet, as though she was listening. Probably that’s just what she had been doing. You could lock Mother up, but you couldn’t keep her from listening.

Norman hoped she’d gone to sleep by now. Tomorrow she might forget the whole episode. That often happened. And then again, sometimes when he thought she had completely forgotten an incident, she’d bring it up out of a clear blue sky, months afterward.

*Clear blue sky.* He chuckled at the phrase. There weren’t any clear blue skies any more. Just clouds and darkness, like tonight.

Then he heard a sound, and he shifted quickly in his chair. Was Mother coming? No, it couldn’t be, he’d locked her up, remember? It must be that girl, in the next room. Yes, he could hear her now—she’d opened her suitcase, apparently, and she was taking things out, getting ready for bed.

Norman took another drink. Just to steady his nerves. And this time it worked. His hand wasn’t trembling any more. He wasn’t afraid. Not if he thought about the girl.

Funny, when he actually saw her, he had this terrible feeling of—what was the word? *Imsomething*. *Importance*. No, that wasn't it. He didn't feel important when he was with a woman. He felt—*impossible*? That wasn't right, either. He knew the word he was looking for, he'd read it a hundred times in books, the kind of books Mother didn't even know he owned.

Well, it didn't matter. When he was with the girl he felt that way, but not now. Now he could do anything.

And there were so many things he wanted to do with a girl like that. Young, pretty; intelligent, too. He'd made a fool of himself answering her back when she talked about Mother; now he admitted she had told the truth. She knew, she could understand. He wished she would have stayed and talked more.

As it was, maybe he'd never see her again. Tomorrow she'd be gone. Gone forever, Jane Wilson, of San Antonio, Texas. He wondered who she was, where she was going, what kind of a *person* she really was, inside. He could fall in love with a girl like that. Yes, he could, after just seeing her a single time. It was nothing to laugh at. But she'd laugh, probably. That's the way girls were—they always laughed. Because they were bitches.

Mother was right. They were bitches. But you couldn't help yourself, not when a bitch was as lovely as this one was, and you knew you would never see her again. You *had* to see her again. If you were any kind of a man, you'd have told her so, when you were in her room. You'd have brought in the bottle and offered her a drink, drunk with her, and then you'd carry her over to the bed and—

No, you wouldn't. Not *you*. Because you're impotent.

That's the word you couldn't remember, isn't it? *Impotent*. The word the books used, the word Mother used, the word that meant you were never going to see her again because it wouldn't do any good. The word the bitches knew; they must know it, and that's why they always laughed.

Norman took another drink, just a sip. He could feel the wetness trickle down the side of his chin. He must be drunk. All right, he was drunk, what did it matter? As long as Mother didn't know. As long as the girl didn't know. It would all be a big secret. Impotent, was he? Well, that didn't mean he couldn't see her again.

He was going to see her, right now.

Norman bent forward across the desk, his head inclined and almost touching the wall. He'd heard more sounds. And from long experience he knew how to interpret them. The girl had kicked off her shoes. Now she was coming into the bathroom.

He reached out his hand. It was trembling again, but not with fear. This was anticipation; he knew what he was going to do. He was going to tilt the framed license on the wall to one side and peek through the little hole he'd drilled so long ago. Nobody else knew about the little hole, not even Mother. Most certainly not Mother. It was his secret.

The little hole was just a crack in the plaster on the other side, but he could see through it. See through it into the lighted bathroom. Sometimes he'd catch a person standing right in front of it. Sometimes he'd catch their reflection on the door mirror beyond. But he could see. He could see plenty. Let the bitches laugh at him. He knew more about them than they ever dreamed.

It was hard for Norman to focus his eyes. He felt hot and dizzy, hot and dizzy. Part of it was due to the drinks, part to the excitement. But most of it was due to her.

She *was* in the bathroom now, standing there facing the wall. But she wouldn't notice the crack. They never did. She was smiling, fluffing out her hair. Now she stooped, sliding down her stockings. And as she straightened up, yes, she was going to do it, the dress was coming off over her head, he could see the bra and panties, she mustn't stop now, she mustn't turn away.

But she did turn away, and Norman almost called out to her, "Come back here, you bitch!" but he remembered just in time, and then he saw that she was unhooking her bra in front of the door mirror and he could see. Except that the mirror was all wavy lines and lights that made him dizzy, and it was hard to make out anything until she stepped a little to one side. Then he could see her . . .

Now she was going to take them off, she was *taking* them off, and he could see, she was standing before the mirror and actually *gesturing!*

*Did she know? Had she known all along, known about the hole in the wall, known that he was watching? Did she want him to watch, was she*

doing this to him on purpose, the bitch? She was swaying back and forth, back and forth, and now the mirror was wavy again and she was wavy, and he couldn't stand it, he wanted to pound on the wall, he wanted to scream at her to stop because this was an evil, perverted thing she was doing and she must stop before he became evil and perverted too. That's what the bitches did to you, they perverted you, and she was a bitch, they were all bitches, Mother was a—

Suddenly she was gone, and there was only the roaring. It welled up, shaking the wall, drowning out the words and the thoughts. It was coming from inside his head, and he fell back in the chair. *I'm drunk*, he told himself. *I'm passing out*.

But that was not entirely so. The roaring continued, and somewhere inside it he heard another sound. The office door was opening. How could that be? He'd locked it, hadn't he? And he still had the key. If only he'd open his eyes, he could find it. But he couldn't open his eyes. He didn't dare. Because now he knew.

Mother had a key too.

She had a key to her room. She had a key to the house. She had a key to the office.

And she was standing there now, looking down at him. He hoped she would think he had just fallen asleep. What was she doing here, anyway? Had she heard him leave with the girl, come down to spy on him?

Norman slumped back, not daring to move, not wanting to move. Every instant it was getting harder and harder to move even if he *had* wanted to. The roaring was steady now, and the vibration was rocking him to sleep. That was nice. To be rocked to sleep, with mother standing watching you—

Then she was gone. She'd turned around without saying anything and gone out. There was nothing to be afraid of. She'd come to protect him from the bitches. Yes, that was it. She'd come to protect him. Whenever he needed her, Mother was there. And now he could sleep. There was no trick to it at all. You merely went into the roaring, and then *past* the roaring. Then everything was silent. *Silent, silent sleep*.

Norman came to with a start, jerking his head back. God it ached! He'd passed out there in the chair, actually passed out. No wonder everything

was pounding, roaring. *Roaring*. He'd heard the same sound before. How long ago—an hour, two hours?

Now he recognized it. The shower was going next door. That was it. The girl had gone into the shower. But that had been so long ago. She couldn't *still* be in there, could she?

He reached forward, tilting the framed license on the wall. His eyes squinted and then focused on the brightly lit bathroom beyond. It was empty. He couldn't see into the shower stall on the side. The curtains were closed and he couldn't see.

Maybe she'd forgotten about the shower and gone to bed leaving it turned on. It seemed odd that she'd be able to sleep with the water running full force that way, but then he'd done it himself just now. Maybe fatigue was as intoxicating as alcohol.

Anyway, there didn't seem to be anything wrong. The bathroom was in order. Norman scanned it once again, then noticed the floor.

Water from the shower was trickling across the tiles. Not much, just a little, just enough for him to see it. A tiny rivulet of water, trailing across the white tiled floor.

Or was it water? Water isn't *pink*. Water doesn't have tiny threads of red in it, tiny threads of red like veins.

*She must have slipped, she must have fallen and hurt herself*, Norman decided. The panic was rising in him, but he knew what he must do. He grabbed up his keys from the desk and hurried out of the office. Quickly he found the right one for the adjoining unit and opened the door. The bedroom was empty, but the open suitcase still rested on the bed itself. She hadn't gone away. So he'd guessed correctly; there'd been an accident in the shower. He'd have to go in there.

It wasn't until he actually entered the bathroom that he remembered something else, and then it was too late. The panic burst loose, but that didn't help him now. He still remembered.

*Mother had keys to the motel too.*

And then, as he ripped back the shower curtains and stared down at the hacked and twisted thing sprawled on the floor of the stall, he realized Mother had used her keys.

Norman locked the door behind him and went up to the house. His clothes were a mess. Blood on them, of course, and water, and then he'd been sick all over the bathroom floor.

But that wasn't important now. There were other things which must be cleaned up first.

This time he was going to do something about it, once and for all. He was going to put Mother where she belonged. He had to.

All the panic, all the fear, all the horror and nausea and revulsion, gave way to this overriding resolve. What had happened was tragic, dreadful beyond words, but it would never happen again. He felt like a new man—his own man.

Norman hurried up the steps and tried the front door. It was unlocked. The light in the parlor was still burning, but it was empty. He gave a quick glance around, then mounted the stairs.

The door to Mother's room stood open, and lamplight fanned forth into the hall. He stepped in, not bothering to knock. No need to pretend any more. She couldn't get away with this.

She couldn't get away—

But she had.

The bedroom was empty.

He could see the rumpled indentation where she had lain, see the covers flung back on the big four-poster; smell the faint, musty scent still in the room. The rocker rested in the corner, the ornaments stood on the dresser just as they were always arranged. Nothing had changed in Mother's room; nothing ever changed. But Mother was gone.

He stepped over to the closet, ruffling the clothing on the hangers lining the long center pole. Here the acrid scent was very strong, so strong he almost choked, but there was another odor, too. It wasn't until his foot

slipped that he looked down and realized where it was coming from. One of her dresses and a head-scarf were balled up on the floor. He stooped to retrieve them, then shivered in revulsion as he noted the dark, reddish stains of clotted blood.

She'd come back here, then; come back, changed her clothes, and gone off once more.

He couldn't call the police.

That was the thing he had to remember. He mustn't call the police. Not even now, knowing what she had done. Because she wasn't really responsible. She was sick.

Cold-blooded murder is one thing, but sickness is another. You aren't really a murderer when you're sick in the head. Anybody knows that. Only sometimes the courts didn't agree. He'd read of cases. Even if they did recognize what was wrong with her, they'd still put her away. Not in a rest home, but in one of those awful holes. A state hospital.

Norman stared at the neat, old-fashioned room with its wallpaper pattern of rambler roses. He couldn't take Mother away from this and see her locked up in a bare cell. Right now he was safe—the police didn't even know about Mother. She stayed here, in the house, and *nobody* knew. It had been all right to tell the girl, because she'd never see him again. But the police couldn't find out about Mother and what she was like. They'd put her away to rot. No matter what she'd done, she didn't deserve *that*.

And she wouldn't have to get it, because nobody knew what she'd done.

He was pretty certain, now, that he could keep anyone from knowing. All he had to do was think it over, think back to the events of the evening, think carefully.

The girl had driven in alone, said she'd been on the road all day. That meant she wasn't visiting *en route*. And she didn't seem to know where Fairvale was, didn't mention any other towns nearby, so the chances were she had no intention of seeing anyone around here. Whoever expected her—if anyone *was* expecting her—must live some distance further north.

Of course this was all supposition, but it seemed logical enough. And he'd have to take a chance on being right.

She had signed the register, of course, but that meant nothing. If anybody ever asked, he'd say that she had spent the night and driven on.

All he had to do was get rid of the body and the car and make sure that everything was cleaned up afterward.

That part would be easy. He knew just how to do it. It wouldn't be pleasant, but it wouldn't be difficult, either.

And it would save him from going to the police. It would save Mother.

Oh, he still intended to have things out with her—he wasn't backing down on that part of it, not this time—but this could wait until afterward.

The big thing now was to dispose of the evidence. The *corpus delicti*.

Mother's dress and scarf would have to be burned, and so would the clothing he was wearing. No, on second thought, he might as well get rid of it all when he got rid of the body.

Norman wadded the garments into a ball and carried them downstairs. He grabbed an old shirt and pair of coveralls from the hook in the back hallway, then shed his clothing in the kitchen and donned the others. No sense stopping to wash up now—that could wait until the rest of the messy business was completed.

But Mother had remembered to wash when she came back. He could see more of the pink stains here at the kitchen sink; a few telltale traces of rouge and powder, too.

He made a mental note to clean everything thoroughly when he got back, then sat down and transferred everything from the pockets of his discarded clothing to those in his coveralls. It was a pity to throw away good clothes like this, but that couldn't be helped. Not if Mother was to be helped.

Norman went down into the basement and opened the door of the old fruit cellar. He found what he was looking for—a discarded clothes hamper with a sprung cover. It was large enough and it would do nicely.

*Nicely—God, how can you think like that about what you're proposing to do?*

He winced at the realization, then took a deep breath. This was no time to be self-conscious or self-critical. One had to be practical. Very practical, very careful, very calm.

Calmly, he tossed his clothes into the hamper. Calmly, he took an old oilcloth from the table near the cellar stairs. Calmly, he went back upstairs, snapped off the kitchen light, snapped off the hall light, and let himself out of the house in darkness, carrying the hamper with the oilcloth on top.

It was harder to be calm here in the dark. Harder not to think about a hundred and one things that might go wrong.

Mother had wandered off—where? Was she out on the highway, ready to be picked up by anyone who might come driving by? Was she still suffering a hysterical reaction, would the shock of what she had done cause her to blurt out the truth to whoever came along and found her? Had she actually run away, or was she merely in a daze? Maybe she'd gone down past the woods back of the house, along the narrow ten-acre strip of their land which stretched off into the swamp. Wouldn't it be better to search for her first?

Norman sighed and shook his head. He couldn't afford the risk. Not while that thing still sprawled in the shower stall back at the motel. Leaving it there was even more risky.

He'd had the presence of mind to turn off all the lights, both in the office and in her room, before leaving. But even so, one never knew when some night owl might show up and nose around looking for accommodations. It didn't happen very often, but every once in a while the signal would buzz; sometimes at one or two o'clock in the morning. And at least once in the course of a night the State Highway Patrol car cruised past her. It almost never stopped, but there was the chance.

He stumbled along in the pitch blackness of moonless midnight. The path was graveled and not muddy, but the rain would have softened the ground behind the house. There'd be tracks. That was something else to think about. He'd leave tracks he couldn't even see. If only it wasn't so dark! All at once that was the most important thing—to get out of the dark.

Norman was very grateful when he finally opened the door of the girl's room and eased the hamper inside, then set it down and switched on the light. The soft glow reassured him for a moment, until he remembered what the light would reveal when he went into the bathroom.

He stood in the center of the bedroom now, and he began to tremble.

*No, I can't do it. I can't look at her. I won't go in there. I won't!*

*But you have to. There's no other way. And stop talking to yourself!*

That was the most important thing. He had to stop talking to himself. He had to get back that calm feeling again. He had to face reality.

And what was reality?

A dead girl. The girl his mother had killed. Not a pretty sight nor a pretty notion, but there it was.

Walking away wouldn't bring the girl back to life again. Turning Mother in to the police wouldn't help alter the situation either. The best thing to do under the circumstances, the *only* thing to do, was to get rid of her. He needn't feel guilty about it.

But he couldn't hold back his nausea, his dizziness, and his dry, convulsive retching when it came to actually going into the shower stall and doing what must be done there. He found the butcher knife almost at once; it was under the torso. He dropped *that* into the hamper immediately. There was an old pair of gloves in his coverall pockets; he had to put them on before he could bring himself to touch the rest. The head was the worst. Nothing else was severed, only slashed, and he had to fold the limbs before he could wrap the body in the oilcloth and crowd it down into the hamper on top of the clothing. Then it was done, and he slammed the lid shut.

That still left the bathroom and the shower stall itself to be cleaned up, but he'd deal with that part of the job when he came back.

Now he had to lug the hamper out into the bedroom, then put it down while he found the girl's purse and ransacked it for her car keys. He opened the door slowly, scanning the road for passing headlights. Nothing was coming—nothing had come this way for hours. He could only hope and pray that nothing *would* come, now.

He was sweating long before he managed to open the trunk of the car and place the hamper inside; sweating, not with exertion, but with fear. But he made it, and then he was back in the room again, picking up the clothing and shoving it into the overnight bag and the big suitcase on the bed. He found the shoes, the stockings, the bra, the panties. Touching the bra and panties was the worst. If there'd been anything left in his stomach it would have come up then. But there was nothing in his stomach but the dryness of fear, just as the wetness of fear soaked his outer skin.

Now what? Kleenex, hairpins, all the little things a woman leaves scattered around the room. Yes, and her purse. It had some money in it, but he didn't even bother to look. He didn't want the money. He just wanted to get rid of it fast, while luck still held.

He put the two bags in the car, on the front seat. Then he closed and locked the door of the room. Again he scanned the roadway in both directions. All clear.

Norman started the motor and switched on the lights. That was the dangerous part, using the lights. But he'd never be able to make it otherwise, not through the field. He drove slowly, up the slope behind the motel and along the gravel leading to the driveway and the house. Another stretch of gravel went to the rear of the house and terminated at the old shed which had been converted to serve as a garage for Norman's Chevy.

He shifted gears and eased off onto the grass. He was in the field now, bumping along. There was a rutted path here, worn by tire tracks, and he found it. Every few months Norman took his own car along this route, hitching up the trailer and going into the woods bordering the swamp to collect firewood for the kitchen.

That's what he'd do tomorrow, he decided. First thing in the morning, he'd take the car and trailer out there. Then his own tire marks would cover up these. And if he left footprints in the mud, there'd be an explanation.

If he *needed* an explanation, that is. But maybe his luck would hold.

It held long enough for him to reach the edge of the swamp and do what he had to do. Once back there he switched off the headlights and taillights and worked in the dark. It wasn't easy, and it took a long time, but he managed. Starting the motor and shifting into reverse, he jumped out and let it back down the slope into the muddy quagmire. The slope would show tire tracks too, he must remember to smooth away the traces. But that wasn't the important thing now. Just as long as the car sank. He could see the muck bubbling and rising up over the wheels. God, it had to keep sinking now; if it didn't, he could never pull it out again. It *had* to sink! The fenders were going under, slowly, very slowly. How long had he been standing here? It seemed like hours, and still the car was visible. But the ooze had reached the door handles; it was coming up over the side-glass and the windshield. There wasn't a sound to be heard; the car kept descending, inch by silent

inch. Now only the top was visible. Suddenly there was a sort of sucking noise, a nasty and abrupt *plop!* And the car was gone. It had settled beneath the surface of the swamp.

Norman didn't know how deep the swamp was at this point. He could only hope the car would keep on going down. Down, deep down, where nobody could ever find it.

He turned away with a grimace. Well, that part of it was finished. The car was in the swamp. And the hamper was in the trunk. And the body was in the hamper. The twisted torso and the bloody head—

But he couldn't think about *that*. He *mustn't*. There were other things to do.

He did them, did them almost mechanically. There was soap and detergent in the office, a brush and a pail. He went over the bathroom inch by inch, then the shower stall. As long as he concentrated on scrubbing, it wasn't so bad, even though the smell sickened him.

Then he inspected the bedroom once more. Luck was still with him; just under the bed he found an earring. He hadn't noticed that she was wearing earrings earlier in the evening, but she must have been. Maybe it had slipped off when she shook out her hair. If not, the other one would be around here somewhere. Norman was bleary-eyed and weary, but he searched. It wasn't anywhere in the room, so it must either be in her baggage or still attached to her ear. In either case, it wouldn't matter. Just as long as he got rid of this one. Throw it in the swamp tomorrow.

Now there was only the house to attend to. He'd scrub out the kitchen sink.

It was almost two o'clock by the grandfather clock in the hall when he came in. He could scarcely keep his eyes open long enough to wash the stains from the sink top. Then he stepped out of his muddy shoes, peeled off the coveralls, stripped himself of shirt and socks, and washed. The water was cold as ice but it didn't revive him. His body was numb.

Tomorrow morning he'd go back down into the swamp with his own car; he'd wear the same clothing again and it wouldn't matter if it showed mud and dirt. Just as long as there was no blood anywhere. No blood on his clothes, no blood on his body, no blood on his hands.

There. Now he was clean. He could move his numb legs, propel his numb body up the stairs and into the bedroom, sink into bed and sleep. With clean hands.

It wasn't until he was actually in the bedroom, donning his pajamas, that he remembered what was still wrong.

Mother hadn't come back.

She was still wandering around, God knows where, in the middle of the night. He had to get dressed again and go out, he had to find her.

Or—did he?

The thought came creeping, just as the numbness came creeping, stealing over his senses, softly, smoothly, there in the silken silence.

Why should *he* concern himself about Mother, after what she had done? Maybe she had been picked up, or would be. Maybe she'd even babble out the story of what she'd done. But who'd believe it? There was no evidence, not any more. All he'd need to do was deny everything. Maybe he wouldn't even have to do that much—anyone who saw Mother, listened to her wild story, would know she was crazy. And then they'd lock her up, lock her up in a place where she didn't have a key and couldn't get out again, and that would be the end.

He hadn't felt like that earlier this evening, he remembered. But that was before he had to go into that bathroom again, before he had to go into the shower stall and see those—*things*.

Mother had done that to him. Mother had done that to the poor, helpless girl. She had taken a butcher knife and she had hacked and ripped—nobody but a maniac could have committed such an atrocity. He had to face facts. She *was* a maniac. She *deserved* to be put away, *had* to be put away, for her own safety as well as the safety of others.

If they did pick her up, he'd see that it happened.

But the chances were, actually, that she wouldn't go anywhere near the highway. Most likely she had stayed right around the house, or the yard. Maybe she had even followed him down into the swamp; she could have been watching him all the time. Of course, if she were really out of her head, then anything might happen. If she *had* gone to the swamp, perhaps

she'd slipped. It was quite possible, there in the dark. He remembered the way the car had gone down, disappearing in the quicksand.

Norman knew he wasn't thinking clearly any more. He was faintly aware of the fact that he was lying on the bed, had been lying on the bed for a long time now. And he wasn't really deciding what to do, either, or wondering about Mother and where she was. Instead, he was *watching* her. He could *see* her now, even though at the same time he felt the numb pressure on his eyeballs and knew that his eyelids were closed.

He could see Mother, and she *was* in the swamp. That's where she was, in the swamp, she'd blundered down the bank in the darkness and she couldn't get out again. The muck was bubbling up around her knees, she was trying to grab a branch or something solid and pull herself out again, but it was no use. Her hips were sinking under, her dress was pressed tight in a V across the front of her things. Mother's thighs were dirty. Mustn't look.

But he *wanted* to look, he *wanted* to see her go down, down into the soft, wet, slimy, darkness. She deserved it, she deserved to go down, to join that poor, innocent girl. Good riddance! In a little while now he'd be free of them both—victim and victor, Mother and the bitch, bitch-Mother down there in the dirty slime, let it happen, let her drown in the filthy, nasty scum

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Now it was up to her breasts, he didn't like to think about such things, he never thought about Mother's breasts, he mustn't, and it was good that they were disappearing, sinking away forever, so he'd never think about such things again. But he could see her gasping for breath, and it made him gasp too; he felt as if he were choking with her and then (*it was a dream, it had to be a dream!*) Mother was suddenly standing on the firm ground at the edge of the swamp and *he* was sinking. *He* was in filth up to his neck and there was nobody to save him, nobody to help him, nothing to hang onto unless Mother held out her arms. *She* could save him, she was the only one! He didn't want to drown, he didn't want to strangle and suffocate in the slime, he didn't want to go down there the way the girl-bitch had gone down. And now he remembered why she was there; it was because she had been killed, and she had been killed because she was evil. She had flaunted herself before him, she had deliberately tempted him with the perversion of

her nakedness. Why, he'd wanted to kill her himself when she did that, because Mother had taught him about evil and the ways of evil and thou shalt not suffer a bitch to live.

So what Mother had done was to protect *him*, and he couldn't see her die, she wasn't wrong. He needed her now, and she needed him, and even if she were crazy she wouldn't let him go under now. She *couldn't*.

The foulness was sucking against his throat, it was kissing his lips and if he opened his mouth he knew he'd swallow it, but he had to open it to scream, and he *was* screaming. "*Mother, Mother—save me!*"

And then he was out of the swamp, back here in bed where he belonged, and his body was wet only with perspiration. He knew now that it had been a dream, even before he heard her voice at the bedside.

"It's all right son. I'm here. Everything's all right." He could feel her hand on his forehead, and it was cool, like the drying sweat. He wanted to open his eyes, but she said, "Don't you worry, son. Just go back to sleep."

"But I have to tell you—"

"I know. I was watching. You didn't think I'd go away and leave you, did you? You did right, Norman. And everything's all right now."

Yes. That was the way it should be. She was there to protect him. He was there to protect her. Just before he drifted off to sleep again, Norman made up his mind. They wouldn't talk about what had happened tonight—not now, or ever. And he wouldn't think about sending her away. No matter what she did, she belonged here, with him. Maybe she was crazy, and a murderess, but she was all he had. All he wanted. All he needed. Just knowing she was here, beside him, as he went to sleep.

Norman stirred, turned, and then fell into a darkness deeper and more engulfing than the swamp.

Promptly at six o'clock on the following Friday evening, a miracle happened.

Ottorino Respighi came into the back room of Fairvale's only hardware store to play his *Brazilian Impressions*.

Ottorino Respighi had been dead for many years, and the symphonic group—*L'Orchestre des Concertes Colonne*—had been conducted in the work many thousands of miles away.

But when Sam Loomis reached out and switched on the tiny FM radio, the music welled forth, annihilating space and time and death itself.

It was, as far as he understood it, an authentic miracle.

For a moment, Sam wished that he weren't alone. Miracles are meant to be shared. Music is meant to be shared. But there was no one in Fairvale who would recognize either the music itself or the miracle of its coming. Fairvale people were inclined to be practical about things. Music was just something you got when you put a nickel in a jukebox or turned on the television set. Mostly it was rock-'n-roll, but once in a while there'd be some longhair stuff like that *William Tell* piece they played for westerns. What's so wonderful about this Ottorino What's-His-Name, or whoever he is?

Sam Loomis shrugged, then grinned. He wasn't complaining about the situation. Maybe small-town people didn't dig his sort of music, but at least they left him the freedom to enjoy it for himself. Just as he made no attempt to influence their tastes. It was a fair bargain.

Sam pulled out the big ledger and carried it over to the kitchen table. For the next hour, the table would double in brass as his desk. Just as he would double in brass as his own bookkeeper.

That was one of the drawbacks of living here in one room behind the hardware store. There was no extra space available, and everything doubled

in brass. Still, he accepted the situation. It wouldn't go on this way very much longer, the way things were breaking for him these days.

A quick glance at the figures seemed to confirm his optimism. He'd have to do some checking on inventory requirements, but it looked very much like he might be able to pay off another thousand this month. That would bring the total up to three thousand for the half-year mark. And this was off-season, too. There'd be more business coming this fall.

Sam scribbled a hasty figure-check on a sheet of scratch paper. Yes, he could probably swing it. Made him feel pretty good. It ought to make Mary feel good, too.

Mary hadn't been too cheerful, lately. At least her letters sounded as if she were depressed. When she wrote at all, that is. Come to think of it, she owed him several letters now. He'd written her again, last Friday, and still no reply. Maybe she was sick. No, if that was the case he'd have gotten a note from the kid sister, Lila, or whatever her name was. Chances were that Mary was just discouraged, down in the dumps. Well, he didn't blame her. She'd been sweating things out for a long time.

So had he, of course. It wasn't easy, living like this. But it was the only way. She understood, she agreed to wait.

Maybe he ought to take a few days off next week, leave Summerfield in charge here, and take a run down to see her. Just drop in and surprise her, cheer her up. Why not? Things were very slack at the moment, and Bob could handle the store alone.

Sam sighed. The music was descending now, spiraling to a minor key. This must be the theme for the snake garden. Yes, he recognized it, with its slithering strings, its writhing woodwinds squirming over the sluggish bass. Snakes. Mary didn't like snakes. Chances were, she didn't like this kind of music, either.

Sometimes he almost wondered if they hadn't made a mistake when they planned ahead. After all, what did they really know about each other? Aside from the companionship of the cruise and the two days Mary had spent here last year, they'd never been together. There were the letters, of course, but maybe they just made things worse. Because in the letters, Sam had begun

to find another Mary—a moody, almost petulant personality, given to likes and dislikes so emphatic they were almost prejudices.

He shrugged. What had come over him? Was it the morbidity of the music? All at once he felt tension in the muscles at the back of his neck. He listened intently, trying to isolate the instrument, pinpoint the phrase that had triggered his reaction. Something was wrong, something he sensed, something he could almost hear.

Sam rose, pushing back his chair.

He could hear it now. A faint rattling, from up front. Of course, that's all it was; he had heard something to bother him. Somebody was turning the knob of the front door.

The store was closed for the night, the shades drawn, but maybe it was some tourist. Most likely would be; folks in town knew when he closed up, and they also knew he lived in the back room. If they wanted to come down for anything after regular hours, they'd phone first.

Well, business was business, whoever the customer might be. Sam turned and went into the store, hurrying down the dim aisle. The blind had been pulled down on the front door, but he could hear the agitated rattling very plainly now—in fact, some of the pots and pans on the traffic-item counter were jiggling.

This must be an emergency, all right; probably the customer needed a new bulb for his kid's Mickey Mouse flashlight.

Sam fumbled in his pocket, pulling out his key ring. "All right," he called. "I'm opening up." And did so, deftly, swinging the door back without withdrawing the key.

She stood there in the doorway, silhouetted against the street lamp's glow from the curbing outside. For a moment the shock of recognition held him immobile; then he stepped forward and his arms closed around her.

"Mary!" he murmured. His mouth found hers, gratefully, greedily; and then she was stiffening, she was pulling away, her hands had come up shaping into balled fists that beat against his chest. What was wrong?

"I'm not Mary!" she gasped. "I'm Lila."

"Lila?" He stepped back once more. "The kid—I mean, Mary's sister?"

She nodded. As she did so he caught a glimpse of her face in profile, and the lamplight glinted on her hair. It was brown, much lighter than Mary's. Now he could see the difference in the shape of the snub nose, the higher angle of the broad cheekbones. She was a trifle shorter, too, and her hips and shoulders seemed slimmer.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "It's this light."

"That's all right." Her voice was different, too; softer and lower.

"Come inside, won't you?"

"Well—" She hesitated, glancing down at her feet, and then Sam noticed the small suitcase on the sidewalk.

"Here, let me take this for you." He scooped it up. As he passed her in the doorway he switched on the rear light. "My room is in back," he told her. "Follow me."

She trailed behind him in silence. Not quite silence, because Respighi's tone poem still resounded from the radio. As they entered his makeshift living quarters, Sam went over to switch it off. She lifted her hand.

"Don't," she told him. "I'm trying to recognize that music." She nodded. "Villa-Lobos?"

"Respighi. Something called *Brazilian Impressions*. It's on the Urania label, I believe."

"Oh. We don't stock that." For the first time he remembered that Lila worked in a record shop.

"You want me to leave it on, or do you want to talk?" he asked.

"Turn it off. We'd better talk."

He nodded, bent over the set, then faced her. "Sit down," he invited. "Take off your coat."

"Thanks. I don't intend to stay long. I've got to find a room."

"You're here on a visit?"

"Just overnight. I'll probably leave again in the morning. And it isn't exactly a visit. I'm looking for Mary."

"Looking for—" Sam stared at her. "But what would she be doing here?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that."

"But how could I? Mary isn't here."

“Was she here? Earlier this week, I mean?”

“Of course not. Why, I haven’t seen her since she drove up last summer.” Sam sat down on the sofa bed. “What’s the matter, Lila? What’s this all about?”

“I wish I knew.”

She avoided his gaze, lowering her lashes and staring at her hands. They twisted in her lap, twisted like serpents. In the bright light, Sam noticed that her hair was almost blond. She didn’t resemble Mary at all, now. She was quite another girl. A nervous, unhappy girl.

“Please,” he said. “Tell me.”

Lila looked up suddenly, her wide hazel eyes searching his. “You weren’t lying when you said Mary hasn’t been here?”

“No, it’s the truth. I haven’t even heard from her these last few weeks. I was beginning to get worried. Then you come bursting in here and—” His voice broke off. “Tell me!”

“All right. I believe you. But there isn’t much to tell.” She took a deep breath and started to speak again, her hands roaming restlessly across the front of her skirt. “I haven’t seen Mary since a week ago last night, at the apartment. That’s the night I left for Dallas, to see some wholesale suppliers down there—I do the buying for the shop. Anyway, I spent the weekend and took a train back up late Sunday night. I got in early Monday morning. Mary wasn’t at the apartment. At first I wasn’t concerned; maybe she’d left early for work. But she usually called me sometime during the day, and when she didn’t phone by noon, I decided to call her at the office. Mr. Lowery answered the phone. He said he was just getting ready to call me and see what was wrong. Mary hadn’t come in that morning. He hadn’t seen or heard from her since the middle of Friday afternoon.”

“Wait a minute,” Sam said, slowly. “Let me get this straight. Are you trying to tell me that Mary has been missing for an entire week?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Then why wasn’t I notified before this?” He stood up, feeling the renewed tension in his neck muscles, feeling it in his throat and his voice. “Why didn’t you get in touch with me, phone me? What about the police?”

“Sam. I—”

“Instead, you waited all this time and then came up here to ask if I’d seen her. It doesn’t make sense!”

“Nothing makes sense. You see, the police don’t know about this. And Mr. Lowery doesn’t know about *you*. After what he told me, I agreed not to call them. But I was so worried, so frightened, and I had to know. That’s why, today, I decided to drive up here and find out for myself. I thought maybe the two of you might have planned it together.”

“Planned what?” Sam shouted.

“That’s what I’d like to know.” The answer was soft, but there was nothing soft about the face of the man who stood in the doorway. He was tall, thin, and deeply tanned; a gray Stetson shadowed his forehead but not his eyes. The eyes were ice-blue and ice-hard.

“Who are you?” Sam muttered. “How did you get in here?”

“Front door was unlocked, so I just stepped inside. I came here to get a little information, but I see Miss Crane already beat me to the question. Maybe you’d like to give us both an answer now.”

“Answer?”

“That’s right.” The tall man moved forward, one hand dipping into the pocket of his gray jacket. Sam lifted his arm, then dropped it, as the hand came forth, extending a wallet. The tall man flipped it open. “The name’s Arbogast. Milton Arbogast. Licensed investigator, representing Parity Mutual. We carry a bonding policy on the Lowery Agency your girl-friend worked for. That’s why I’m here now. I want to find out what you two did with the forty thousand dollars.”

The gray Stetson was on the table now, and the gray jacket was draped over the back of one of Sam's chairs. Arbogast snubbed his third cigarette in the ashtray and immediately lighted another.

"All right," he said. "You didn't leave Fairvale any time during the past week. I'll buy that, Loomis. You'd know better than to lie. Too easy for me to check your story around town here." The investigator inhaled slowly. "Of course that doesn't prove Mary Crane hasn't been to see *you*. She could have sneaked in some evening after your store closed, just like her sister did, tonight."

Sam sighed. "But she didn't. Look, you heard what Lila here just told you. I haven't even heard from Mary for weeks. I wrote her a letter last Friday, the very day she's supposed to have disappeared. Why should I do a thing like that if I knew she was going to come here?"

"To cover up, of course. Very smart move." Arbogast exhaled savagely.

Sam rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not that smart. Not that smart at all. I didn't know about the money. The way you've explained it, not even Mr. Lowery knew in advance that somebody was going to bring him forty thousand dollars in cash on Friday afternoon. Certainly Mary didn't know. How could we possibly plan anything together?"

"She could have phoned you from a pay station *after* she took the money, on Friday night, and told you to write her."

"Check with the phone company here," Sam answered wearily. "You'll find I haven't had any long-distance calls for a month."

Arbogast nodded. "So she didn't phone you. She drove straight up, told you what had happened, and made a date to meet you later, after things cooled down."

Lila bit her lip. "My sister's not a criminal. You don't have any right to talk about her that way. You have no real proof that she took the money.

Maybe Mr. Lowery took it himself. Maybe he cooked up this whole story, just to cover up—”

“Sorry,” Arbogast murmured. “I know how you feel, but you can’t make him your patsy. Unless the thief is found, tried and convicted, our company doesn’t pay off—and Lowery is out of the forty grand. So he couldn’t profit from the deal in any way. Besides, you’re overlooking obvious facts. Mary Crane is missing. She has been missing ever since the afternoon she received that money. She didn’t take it to the bank. She didn’t hide it in the apartment. But it’s gone. And her car is gone. And she’s gone.” Again a cigarette died and was interred in the ash tray. “It all adds up.”

Lila began to sob softly. “No, it doesn’t! You should have listened to me when I wanted to call the police. Instead I let you and Mr. Lowery talk me out of it. Because you said you wanted to keep things quiet, and maybe if we waited Mary would decide to bring the money back. You wouldn’t believe what I said, but I know now that I was right. Mary didn’t take that money. Somebody must have kidnaped her. Somebody who knew about it —”

Arbogast shrugged, then rose wearily and walked over to the girl. He patted her shoulder. “Listen, Miss Crane—we went through this before, remember? Nobody else knew about the money. Your sister wasn’t kidnaped. She went home and packed her bags, drove off in her own car, and she was alone. Didn’t your landlady see her off? So be reasonable.”

“I *am* reasonable! You’re the one who doesn’t make sense! Following me up here to see Mr. Loomis—”

The investigator shook his head. “What makes you think I followed you?” he asked quietly.

“How else did you happen to come here tonight? You didn’t know that Mary and Sam Loomis were engaged. Outside of me, no one knew. You didn’t even know Sam Loomis existed.”

Arbogast shook his head. “I knew. Remember up at your apartment, when I looked through your sister’s desk? I came across this envelope.” He flourished it.

“Why, it’s addressed to me,” Sam muttered—and rose to reach for it.

Arbogast drew his hand away. “You won’t need this,” he said. “There’s no letter inside, just the envelope. But I can use it, because it’s in her handwriting.” He paused. “As a matter of fact, I *have* been using it, ever since Wednesday morning when I started out for here.”

“You started out for here—on *Wednesday*?” Lila dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

“That’s right. I wasn’t following you. I was way ahead of you. The address on the envelope gave me a lead. That, plus Loomis’ picture in the frame next to your sister’s bed. ‘*With all my love—Sam.*’ Easy enough to figure out the connection. So I decided to put myself in your sister’s place. I’ve just laid my hands on forty thousand dollars in cash. I’ve got to get out of town, fast. Where do I go? Canada, Mexico, the West Indies? Too risky. Besides, I haven’t had time to make long-range plans. My natural impulse would be to come straight to loverboy, here.”

Sam hit the kitchen table so hard that the cigarette butts jumped out of the ash tray. “That’s about enough!” he said. “You have no official right to make such accusations. So far you haven’t offered one word of proof to back up any of this.”

Arbogast fumbled for another cigarette. “You want proof, eh? What do you think I’ve been doing back there on the road, ever since Wednesday morning? That’s when I found the car.”

“You found my sister’s car?” Lila was on her feet.

“Sure. I had a funny hunch that one of the first things she’d do would be to ditch it. So I called around town, to all the dealers and the used car lots, giving a description and the license number. Sure enough, it paid off. I found the place. Showed the guy my credentials and he talked. Talked fast, too—guess he thought the car was hot. I didn’t exactly contradict his notion, either.

“Turned out that Mary Crane made a fast trade with him on Friday night, just before closing time. Took a hell of a beating on the deal, too. But I got all the info on the title, and a full description of the heap she drove out with. Heading north.

“So I headed north, too. But I couldn’t go very fast. I was playing one hunch—that she’d stick to the highway because she was coming here.

Probably drive straight through, the first night. So I drove straight through, for eight hours. Then I spent a lot of time around Oklahoma City, checking motels along the highway, and used car places on the road. I figured she might switch again, just to be on the safe side. But no dice. Thursday I got up as far as Tulsa. Same routine, same results. It wasn't until this morning when the needle turned up in the haystack. Another lot, another dealer, just north of there. She made the second trade early last Saturday—took another shellacking and ended up with a blue 1953 Plymouth, with a bad front fender.”

He took a notebook from his pocket. “It’s all down here in black and white,” he said. “Title dope, engine number, everything. Both dealers are having photostats made and sending them back to the home office for me. But that doesn’t matter, now. What matters is that Mary Crane drove north out of Tulsa on the main highway last Saturday morning, after switching cars twice in sixteen hours. As far as I’m concerned, this is the place she was heading for. And unless something unexpected happened—unless the car broke down, or there was an accident—she should have arrived here last Saturday night.”

“But she didn’t,” Sam said. “I haven’t seen her. Look, I can dig up proof, if you want it. Last Saturday night I was over at the Legion Hall playing cards. Plenty of witnesses. Sunday morning I went to church. Sunday noon I had dinner at—”

Arbogast raised a hand wearily. “Okay I get the message. You didn’t see her. So something must have happened. I’ll start checking back.”

“What about the police?” Lila asked. “I still think you ought to go to the police.” She moistened her lips. “Suppose there *was* an accident—you couldn’t stop at every hospital between here and Tulsa. Why, for all we know, Mary may be lying unconscious somewhere right now. She might even be—”

This time it was Sam who patted her shoulder. “Nonsense,” he muttered. “If anything like that had happened, you’d have been notified by now. Mary’s all right.” But he glared over Lila’s shoulder at the investigator. “You can’t do a thorough jog all alone.” he said. “Lila’s being sensible. Why not let the police in on it? Report Mary missing, see if they can locate her.”

Arbogast picked up the gray Stetson. “We’ve tried it the hard way so far. I admit it. Because if we could locate her without dragging in the authorities, we might save our client and the company a lot of bad publicity. For that matter, we could save Mary Crane some grief, too, if we picked her up ourselves and recovered the money. Maybe there wouldn’t be any charges that way. You’ve got to agree it was worth a try.”

“But if you’re right, and Mary did get this far, then why hasn’t she been to see me? That’s what I want to know, just as badly as you do,” Sam told him. “And I’m not going to wait much longer to find out.”

“Will you wait another twenty-four hours?” Arbogast asked.

“What do you have in mind?”

“More checking, like I said.” He raised his hand to forestall Sam’s objections. “Not all the way back to Tulsa—I admit that’s impossible. But I’d like to nose around this territory a bit; visit the highway restaurants, filling stations, car dealers, motels. Maybe somebody saw her. Because I still think my hunch is right. She intended to come here. Perhaps she changed her mind after she arrived, and went on. But I’d like to be sure.”

“And if you don’t find out in twenty-four hours—?”

“Then I’m willing to call it quits, go to the police, do the whole Missing Persons routine. Okay?”

Sam glanced at Lila. “What do you think?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I’m so worried now, I *can’t* think.” She sighed. “Sam, you decide.”

He nodded at Arbogast. “All right. It’s a deal. But I’m warning you right now. If nothing happens tomorrow, and you don’t notify the police, I will.”

Arbogast put on his jacket. “Guess I’ll get a room over at the hotel. How about you, Miss Crane?”

Lila looked at Sam. “I’ll take her over in a little while,” Sam said. “First I thought we’d go and eat. But I’ll see that she’s checked in. And we’ll both be here tomorrow. Waiting.”

For the first time that evening, Arbogast smiled. It wasn’t the kind of a smile that would ever offer any competition to Mona Lisa, but it was a smile.

“I believe you,” he said. “Sorry about the pressure act, but I had to make sure.” He nodded at Lila. “We’re going to find your sister for you. Don’t you worry.”

Then he went out. Long before the front door closed behind him, Lila was sobbing against Sam’s shoulder. Her voice was a muffled moan. “Sam, I’m scared—something’s happened to Mary, I know it!”

“It’s all right,” he said, wondering at the same time why there were no better words, why there never are any better words to answer fear and grief and loneliness. “It’s all right, believe me.”

Suddenly she stepped away from him, stepped back, and her tear-stained eyes went wide. Her voice, when it came, was low but firm.

“Why should I believe you, Sam?” she asked softly. “Is there a reason? A reason you didn’t tell that inspector? Sam—was Mary here to see you? Did you know about this, about the money?”

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t know. You’ll have to take my word for that. The way I have to take yours.”

She turned away, facing the wall. “I guess you’re right,” she told him. “Mary *could* have come to either one of us during the week, couldn’t she? But she didn’t. I trust you, Sam. Only it’s just that it’s so hard to believe anything any more, when your own sister turns out to be a—”

“Take it easy,” Sam cut in. “What you need right now is a little food, and a lot of rest. Things won’t look so black tomorrow.”

“Do you *really* think so, Sam?”

“Yes, I do.”

It was the first time he’d ever lied to a woman.

**T**omorrow became today, Saturday, and for Sam it was a time of waiting.

He phoned Lila from the store around ten, and she was already up, had already eaten breakfast. Arbogast wasn't in—apparently he'd gotten an early start. But he had left a note for Lila downstairs, saying that he would call in sometime during the day.

“Why don't you come over here and keep me company?” Sam suggested, over the phone. “No sense sitting around in your room. We can have lunch together and check back at the hotel to see if Arbogast calls. Better still, I'll ask the operator to transfer any calls over here to the store.”

Lila agreed, and Sam felt better. He didn't want her to be alone today. Too easy for her to start brooding about Mary. God knows, he'd done enough of it himself, all night.

He'd done his best to resist the idea, but he had to admit that Arbogast's theory made sense. Mary must have planned to come here after she took the money. If she had taken it, that is.

That was the worst part: accepting Mary in the role of a thief. Mary wasn't that kind of a person; everything he knew about her contradicted the possibility.

And yet, just how much did he know about Mary, really? Just last night he'd acknowledged to himself how little he actually understood his fiancée. Why, he knew so little that he'd even mistaken another girl for her, in a dim light.

Funny, Sam told himself, how we take it for granted that we know all there is to know about another person, just because we see them frequently or because of some strong emotional tie. Why, right here in Fairvale there were plenty of examples of what he meant. Like old Tomkins, superintendent of schools for years and a big wheel in Rotary, running away from his wife and family with a sixteen-year-old girl. Who ever suspected

he'd do a thing like that? Any more than they'd suspected Mike Fisher, the biggest lush and gambler in this part of the state, would die and leave all his money to the Presbyterian Orphans' Home. Bob Summerfield, Sam's clerk in the store, had worked here every day for over a year before Sam knew he'd pulled a Section Eight in service—and for trying to beat out his chaplain's brains with a pistol butt, too. Bob was all right now, of course; a nicer, quieter guy you wouldn't find in a hundred years. But he'd been nice and quiet in the army, too, until something set him off. And nobody had noticed. Nice old ladies did away with their husbands after twenty years of happy marriage, meek little bank clerks suddenly up and embezzled the funds—you never could tell what might happen.

So perhaps Mary did steal the money. Perhaps she was tired of waiting for him to pay off his debts, and the sudden temptation was just too much. Maybe she thought she'd bring it here, cook up some story, get him to accept it. Maybe she planned for them to run away together. He had to be honest about the possibility, even the probability, that this was the case.

And if he granted that much, then he had to face the next question. Why hadn't she arrived? Where else could she have headed for after leaving the outskirts of Tulsa?

Once you began speculation about that, once you admitted to yourself that you didn't really know how another person's mind operated, then you came up against the ultimate admission—anything was possible. A decision to take a wild fling out in Las Vegas; a sudden impulse to drop out of sight completely and start a whole new life under another name, a traumatic access of guilt, resulting in amnesia—

But he was beginning to make a federal case out of it, Sam told himself wryly. Or a clinical case. If he was going off on such farfetched speculations, he'd have to admit a thousand and one other alternatives. That she had been in an accident, as Lila feared, or picked up some hitchhiker who—

Again, Sam closed off the thought. He couldn't afford to carry it any further. It was bad enough keeping it to himself without the added burden of keeping it from Lila. His job today was to cheer her up. There was always the slim chance that Arbogast would find a lead. If not, he'd go to the

authorities. Then, and only then, would he allow himself to think about the worst that might happen.

Talk about not knowing other people—why, when you came right down to it, you didn't even know yourself! He'd never suspected that he could entertain such sudden doubt and disloyalty concerning Mary. And yet how easily he'd slipped into accepting the attitude! It was unfair to her. The least he could do, in partial atonement, was to keep his suspicions from her sister.

Unless, of course, she was thinking the same things . . .

But Lila seemed in better spirits this morning. She'd changed into a lightweight suit, and when she came into the store her step was buoyant.

Sam introduced her to Bob Summerfield, then took her out to lunch. Inevitably, she began speculating about Mary and about what Arbogast might be doing today. Sam answered her briefly, attempting to keep both his replies and his tone of voice on a casual level. After their meal, he stopped at the hotel and arranged to have a transfer made on any calls which might come in for Lila during the afternoon.

Then they went back to the store. It was a light day, for Saturday, and much of the time Sam was able to sit in the back room and chat with the girl. Summerfield handled the customers, and it was only occasionally that Sam had to excuse himself and step out to take care of matters.

Lila seemed relaxed and at ease. She switched on the radio, picked up a symphonic program on AM, and listened with apparent absorption. Sam found her sitting there when he returned from one of his trips up front.

"Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*, isn't it?" he asked.

She looked up, smiling. "That's right. Funny, your knowing so much about music."

"What's so strange about that? This is the age of hi-fi, remember? Just because a person lives in a small town doesn't mean he can't be interested in music, books, art. And I've had a lot of time to fill."

Lila smoothed the collar of her blouse. "Maybe I've got things backward, then. Maybe the funny thing isn't that you're interested in things like this, but that you're also in the hardware business. The two just don't seem to go together."

"There's nothing wrong with the hardware business."

“I didn’t mean to imply that. But it seems, well, so—trivial.”

Sam sat down at the table. Suddenly he stopped and picked up an object from the floor. It was small, pointed and shiny.

“Trivial,” he echoed. “Perhaps. Then again, maybe it’s all in the way you look at it. For example, what’s this in my hand?”

“A nail, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Just a nail. I sell them by the pound. Hundreds of pounds a year. Dad used to sell them too. I’ll bet we’ve sold ten tons of nails out of this store alone since it opened for business. All lengths, all sizes, just common ordinary nails. But there’s nothing trivial about a single one of them. Not when you stop to think about it.

“Because every nail serves a purpose. An important, a lasting purpose. You know something? Maybe half the frame houses in Fairvale are held together by nails we’ve sold right here. I guess it’s a little silly of me, but sometimes when I walk down the street here in town I get the feeling that I helped build it. The tools I sold shaped the boards and finished them. I’ve provided the paint that covers the houses, the brushes which applied it, the storm doors and screens, the glass for the windows—” He broke off, with a self-conscious grin. “Listen to the Master Builder, will you? But no, I mean it. Everything in this business makes sense, because it serves a real purpose, fills a need that’s a part of living. Even a single nail, like this one, fulfills a function. Drive it into a crucial place and you can depend on it to do a job, keep on doing it for a hundred years to come. Long after we’re dead and gone, both of us.”

The moment he said the words he regretted them. But it was too late now. He watched the smile fade from her lips, as if on cue.

“Sam, I’m worried. It’s almost four now, and Arbogast hasn’t called—”

“He will. Just be patient; give him time.”

“I can’t help it! You said twenty-four hours, and then you’d go to the police if you had to.”

“I meant it. But it won’t be twenty-four hours until eight o’clock. And I still say maybe we won’t have to go. Maybe Arbogast is right.”

“Maybe! Sam, I want to *know!*” She smoothed her blouse again, but her brow remained wrinkled. “You aren’t fooling me for one minute, with all

this routine about nails. You're just as nervous as I am. Aren't you?"

"Yes. I guess so." He stood up, swinging his arms. "I don't know why Arbogast hasn't called in by now. There aren't that many places in this area to check, not if he stopped at every highway hamburger joint and motel in the county! If he doesn't get in touch with us by suppertime, I'll go over to Jud Chambers myself."

"Who?"

"Jud Chambers. He's the sheriff here. Fairvale's the county seat, you know."

"Sam, I—"

The phone rang, out in the store. He disappeared without waiting for her to complete her sentence. Bob Summerfield was already answering.

"It's for you," he called.

Sam picked up the receiver, glancing over his shoulder and noting that Lila had followed him out.

"Hello—Sam Loomis speaking."

"Arbogast. Thought you might be worried about me."

"We were. Lila and I have been sitting here and waiting for you to call. What did you find out?"

There was a short, almost imperceptible pause. Then, "No dice, so far."

"So far? Where have you been all day?"

"Where haven't I been? I've covered this area from one end to another. Right now I'm in Parnassus."

"That's way down at the edge of the county, isn't it? What about the highway in between?"

"I came out on it. But I understand I can come back another way, on an alternate."

"Yes, that's right. The old highway—it's a county trunk now. But there's absolutely nothing along that route. Not even a filling station."

"Fellow in the restaurant here tells me there's a motel back in through there."

"Oh—come to think of it, I guess there is. The old Bates place. I didn't know it was still open. It isn't likely you'll find anything there."

“Well, it’s the last on the list. I’m coming back anyway, so I might as well stop in. How you holding?”

“All right.”

“And the girl?”

Sam lowered his voice. “She wants me to notify the authorities immediately. And I think she’s right. After what you’ve told me, I know she’s right.”

“Will you wait until I get there?”

“How long is it going to take?”

“An hour, maybe. Unless I run into something at this motel.” Arbogast hesitated. “Look, we made a bargain. I’m willing to keep my end of it. All I’m asking is for you to wait until I come back to town. Let me go with you to the police. It’ll be a lot easier to get co-operation that way, with me along. You know how it is with small-town law. The minute you ask them to put through a long-distance call they press the panic button.”

“We’ll give you an hour,” Sam said. “You can find us here at the store.”

He hung up and turned away.

“What did he say?” Lila asked. “He didn’t find out anything, did he?”

“Well, no, but he isn’t finished yet. There’s another place where he plans to stop—”

“Only one more place?”

“Don’t say it like that. Maybe he’ll hear something there. If not, he’s due back within an hour. We’ll go to the sheriff. You heard what I told him.”

“All right. We’ll wait. One hour, you said.”

It wasn’t a pleasant hour. Sam was almost grateful when the late Saturday afternoon crowd came in and he had an excuse to go out front and help wait on the overflow. He couldn’t pretend to be cheerful any longer, couldn’t make small talk. Not to her, nor to himself.

Because he was beginning to feel it now.

Something had happened.

Something had happened to Mary.

Something—

“Sam!”

He turned away from the cash register after completing a sale, and Lila was there. She’d come out from the back room and she was pointing at her wrist watch. “Sam, the hour’s up!”

“I know. Let’s give him a few more minutes, shall we? I’ve got to close up the store first, anyway.”

“All right. But only a few minutes. *Please!* If you knew how I felt—”

“I do know.” He squeezed her arm, squeezed out a smile. “Don’t worry, he’ll be here any second.”

But he didn’t come.

Sam and Summerfield shooed out the last straggler at five-thirty. Sam checked the register and Summerfield spread the dust covers for the night.

Still Arbogast didn’t appear.

Summerfield switched off the lights, prepared to depart. Sam got ready to lock the door.

No Arbogast.

“Now,” Lila said. “Let’s go now. If you don’t, then I w—”

“Listen!” Sam said. “It’s the phone.”

And, seconds later, “Hello?”

“Arbogast.”

“Where are you? You promised to—”

“Never mind what I promised.” The investigator’s voice was low, his words hurried. “I’m out at the motel, and I’ve only got a minute. Wanted to let you know why I hadn’t showed. Listen, I’ve found a lead. Your girlfriend was here, all right. Last Saturday night.”

“Mary? You’re sure?”

“Pretty sure. I checked the register, got a chance to compare handwriting. Of course she used another name—Jane Wilson—and gave a phony address. I’ll have to get a court order to photostat the register entry, if we need proof.”

“What else did you find out?”

“Well, the car description tallies, and so does the description of the girl. The proprietor filled me in.”

“How’d you manage to get that information?”

“I pulled my badge and gave him the stolen car routine. He got all excited. A real oddball, this guy. Name’s Norman Bates. You know him?”

“No, I can’t say that I do.”

“He says the girl drove in Saturday night, around six. Paid in advance. It was a bad night, raining, and she was the only customer. Claims she pulled out early the next morning, before he came down to open up. He lives in a house behind the motel with his mother.”

“Do you think he’s telling the truth?”

“I don’t know, yet.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, I put a little heat on him, about the car and all. And he let it slip that he’d invited the girl up to the house for supper. Said that was all there was to it, his mother could verify it.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“No, but I’m going to. She’s up at the house, in her room. He tried to hand me a line that she’s too sick to see anyone, but I noticed her sitting at the bedroom window giving me the once-over when I drove in. So I told him I was going to have a little chat with his old lady whether he liked it or not.”

“But you have no authority—”

“Look, you want to find out about your girl-friend, don’t you? And he doesn’t seem to know anything about search warrants. Anyway, he hotfooted it off to the house, to tell his mother to get dressed. I thought I’d sneak through a call while he’s gone. So you stick around until I’m finished here. Oh-oh, he’s coming back. See you.”

The receiver clicked and the line went dead. Sam hung up. He turned to Lila and reported the conversation.

“Feel better now?”

“Yes. But I wish I knew—”

“We will know, in just a little while. Now all we have to do is wait.”

Saturday afternoon, Norman shaved. He shaved only once a week, and always on a Saturday.

Norman didn't like to shave, because of the mirror. It had those wavy lines in it. All mirrors seemed to have wavy lines that hurt his eyes.

Maybe the real trouble was that his eyes were bad. Yes that was it, because he remembered how he used to enjoy looking in the mirror as a boy. He liked to stand in front of the glass without any clothes on. One time Mother caught him at it and hit him on the side of the head with the big silver-handled hairbrush. She hit him hard, and it hurt. Mother said that was a nasty thing to do, to look at yourself that way.

He could still remember how it hurt, and how his head ached afterward. From then on it seemed he got a headache almost every time he looked in a mirror. Mother finally took him to the doctor and the doctor said he needed glasses. The glasses helped, but he still had trouble seeing properly when he gazed into a mirror. So after a while, he just didn't, except when he couldn't help it. And Mother was right. It *was* nasty to stare at yourself, all naked and unprotected; to peek at the blubbery fat, the short hairless arms, the big belly, and underneath it—

When you did, you wished you were somebody else. Somebody who was tall and lean and handsome, like Uncle Joe Considine. "Isn't he the best-looking figure of a man you ever saw?" Mother used to remark.

It was the truth, too, and Norman had to admit it. But he still hated Uncle Joe Considine, even if he *was* handsome. And he wished Mother wouldn't insist on calling him "Uncle Joe." Because he wasn't any real relation at all—just a friend who came around to visit Mother. And he got her to build the motel, too, after she sold the farm acreage.

That was strange. Mother always talked against men, and about Your-father-who-ran-off-and-deserted-me, and yet Uncle Joe Considine could

wrap her around his little finger. He could do anything he wanted with Mother. It would be nice to be like that, and to look the way Uncle Joe Considine looked.

*Oh, no, it wouldn't!* Because Uncle Joe was dead.

Norman blinked at his reflection as he shaved. Funny how it had slipped his mind. Why it must be almost twenty years now. Time is relative, of course. Einstein said so, and he wasn't the first to discover it—the ancients knew it too, and so did some of the modern mystics like Aleister Crowley and Ouspensky. Norman had read them all, and he even owned some of the books. Mother didn't approve; she claimed these things were against religion, but that wasn't the real reason. It was because when he read the books he wasn't her little boy any more. He was a grown man, a man who studied the secrets of time and space and mastered the secrets of dimension and being.

It was like being two people, really—the child and the adult. Whenever he thought about Mother, he became a child again, with a child's vocabulary, frames of reference, and emotional reactions. But when he was by himself—not actually by himself, but off in a book—he was a mature individual. Mature enough to understand that he might even be the victim of a mild form of schizophrenia, most likely some form of borderline neurosis.

Granted, it wasn't the healthiest situation in the world. Being Mother's little boy had its drawbacks. On the other hand, as long as he recognized the dangers he could cope with them, and with Mother. It was just lucky for her that he knew when to be a man; that he *did* know a few things about psychology and parapsychology too.

It had been lucky when Uncle Joe Considine died, and it was lucky again last week, when that girl came along. If he hadn't acted as an adult, Mother would be in real trouble right now.

Norman fingered the razor. It was sharp, very sharp. He had to be careful not to cut himself. Yes, and he had to be careful to put it away when he finished shaving, to lock it up where Mother couldn't get hold of it. He couldn't trust Mother with anything that sharp. That's why he did most of the cooking, and the dishes too. Mother still loved to clean house—her own room was always neat as a pin—but Norman always took charge of the kitchen. Not that he ever said anything to her, outright; he just took over.

She never questioned him, either, and he was glad of that. Things had gone along for a whole week now, since that girl had come last Saturday, and they hadn't discussed the affair at all. It would have been awkward and embarrassing for both of them; Mother must have sensed it, for it seemed as if she deliberately avoided him—she spent a lot of time just resting in her room, and didn't have much to say. Probably her conscience bothered her.

And that was as it should be. Murder was a terrible thing. Even if you're not quite right in the head, you can realize that much. Mother must be suffering quite a bit.

Perhaps catharsis would help her, but Norman was glad she hadn't spoken. Because *he* was suffering too. It wasn't conscience that plagued him—it was fear.

All week long he'd waited for something to go wrong. Every time a car drove into the motel driveway, he just about jumped out of his skin. Even when cars merely drove past on the old highway, it made him nervous.

Last Saturday, of course, he'd finished cleaning up back there at the edge of the swamp. He took his own car down there and loaded the trailer with wood, and by the time he'd finished there wasn't anything left that would look suspicious. The girl's earring had gone into the swamp, too. And the other one hadn't shown up. So he felt reasonably secure.

But on Thursday night, when the State Highway patrol car pulled into the driveway, he almost passed out. The officer just wanted to use the phone. Afterward, Norman was able to laugh to himself, yet at the time it wasn't a joke at all.

Mother had been sitting at her window in the bedroom, and it was just as well the officer hadn't seen her. Mother had looked out of the window a lot during the past week. Maybe she was worried about visitors too. Norman tried to tell her to stay out of sight, but he couldn't bring himself to explain why. Any more than he could discuss with her why he wouldn't permit her to come down to the motel and help out. He just saw to it that she didn't. The house was the place where she belonged—you couldn't trust Mother around strangers, not any more. And the less they knew about her, the better. He should never have told that girl—

Norman finished shaving and washed his hands again. He'd noticed this compulsion in himself, particularly during the past week. Guilt feelings. A regular Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare had known a lot about psychology. Norman wondered if he had known other things too. There was the ghost of Hamlet's father, for example.

No time to think about that now. He had to get down to the motel and open up.

There'd been some business during the week, not very much. Norman never had more than three or four units occupied on a given night, and that was good. It meant he didn't need to rent out Number Six. Number Six had been the girl's room.

He hoped he'd never have to rent it out. He was done with that sort of thing—the peeking, the voyeurism. That was what caused all the trouble in the first place. If he hadn't peeked, if he hadn't been drinking—

No sense crying over spilt milk, though. Even if it hadn't been *milk*.

Norman wiped his hands, turning away from the mirror. Forget the past, let the dead bury the dead. Things were working out fine, and that was the only thing he had to remember. Mother was behaving herself, he was behaving himself, they were together as they always had been. A whole week had gone by without any trouble, and there wouldn't *be* any trouble from now on. Particularly if he held firm to his resolve to behave like an adult instead of a child, a Mamma's Boy. And he'd already made up his mind about *that*.

He tightened his tie and left the bathroom. Mother was in her room, looking out of the window again. Norman wondered if he ought to say anything to her. No, better not. There might be an argument, and he wasn't quite ready yet to face her. Let her look if she liked. Poor, sick old lady, chained to the house here. Let her watch the world go by.

That was the child speaking, of course. But he was willing to make such a concession, as long as he behaved like a sensible adult. As long as he locked the downstairs doors when he went out.

It was locking the doors all week long which gave him his new sense of security. He'd taken her keys away from her, too—the keys to the house and the keys to the motel. Once he left, there was no way she could get out. She

was safe in the house and he was safe in the motel. There could be no repetition of what had happened last week as long as he observed the precaution. After all, it was for her own good. Better the house than an asylum.

Norman walked down the path and came around the corner toward his office just as the towel-service truck drove up on its weekly rounds. He had everything ready for the driver. He accepted the fresh supply and gave him the old, dirty linen. The towel service handled the laundering of sheets and pillowcases, too. That made it simple. Actually, there was no trick to operating a motel these days.

After the truck departed Norman went in and cleaned up Number Four—some traveling salesmen from up in Illinois had pulled out earlier in the day. Left the usual mess, too. Cigarette butts on the edge of the washbowl, and a magazine on the floor next to the toilet seat. One of these science fiction things. Norman chuckled as he picked it up. Science fiction! If they only *knew!*

But they didn't know. They'd never known, and they must not know. As long as he was careful about Mother, there'd be no risk. He had to protect her, and he had to protect others. What had happened last week proved it. From now on he'd be extra careful, always. For everyone's sake.

Norman walked back to the office and put the towels away. There was already a fresh supply of linen in every unit. He was ready for today's business—if any.

But nothing happened until around four o'clock. He sat there watching the roadway outside, and he got bored and fidgety. He was almost tempted to take a drink, until he remembered what he'd promised himself. No more drinking. That was part of the trouble, when there was trouble. He couldn't afford to drink, not even a drop. Drinking had killed Uncle Joe Considine. Drinking had led to the killing of the girl, indirectly. So from now on he'd be a teetotaler. Still, he could use a drink now. Just one—

Norman was still hesitating when the car pulled in. Alabama plates. A middle-aged couple climbed out and came into the office. The man was bald and wore heavy, dark-rimmed glasses. The woman was fat and perspiring. Norman showed them Number One, way at the other end, for ten dollars, double. The woman complained about the stuffiness in a high,

whining drawl, but she seemed satisfied when Norman switched on the fan. The man took their bags, and signed the register. *Mr. and Mrs. Herman Pritzler, Birmingham, Ala.* They were just tourists; they wouldn't present any problems.

Norman sat down again, riffling the pages of the science fiction magazine he'd found. The light was dim; must be around five o'clock now. He switched on the lamp.

Another car rolled up the drive, with a lone man behind the wheel. Probably another salesman. Green Buick, Texas license.

*Texas license!* That girl, that Jane Wilson, had come from Texas!

Norman stood up and stepped behind the counter. He saw the man leave the car, heard the crunch of his approaching footsteps on the gravel, matched the rhythm with the muffled thumping of his own heart.

*It's just coincidence,* he told himself. *People drive up from Texas every day. Why, Alabama is even further away.*

The man entered. He was tall and thin, and he wore one of those gray Stetson hats with a broad brim that shadowed the upper portion of his face. His chin showed tan under the heavy stubble of beard.

"Good evening," he said, without much of a drawl.

"Good evening." Norman shifted his feet uneasily underneath the counter.

"You the proprietor here?"

"That's right. Would you like a room?"

"Not exactly. I'm looking for a little information."

"I'll be glad to help, if I can. What is it you wanted to know?"

"I'm trying to locate a girl."

Norman's hands twitched. He couldn't feel them, because they were numb. He was numb all over. His heart wasn't pounding any more—it didn't even seem to be beating. Everything was quiet. It would be terrible if he screamed.

"Her name is Crane," the man said. "Mary Crane. From Fort Worth, Texas. I was wondering if she might have registered here."

Norman didn't want to scream now. He wanted to laugh. He could feel his heart resume its normal functions again. It was easy to reply.

"No," he said. "There hasn't been anybody by that name here."

"You sure?"

"Positive. We don't get too much business these days. I'm pretty good at remembering my customers."

"This girl would have stopped over about a week ago. Last Saturday night, say, or Sunday."

"I didn't have anyone here over the weekend. Weather was bad in these parts."

"Are you sure? This girl—woman, I should say—is about twenty-seven. Five feet five, weight around one-twenty, dark hair, blue eyes. She drives a 1953 Plymouth sedan, a blue Tudor with a stove-in front fender on the right side. The license number is—"

Norman stopped listening. Why had he said there hadn't been anyone here? The man was describing that girl all right, he knew all about her. Well, he still couldn't prove the girl had come, if Norman denied it. And he'd have to keep on denying, now.

"No, I don't think I can help you."

"Doesn't the description fit anyone who's been here during the past week? It's quite likely she would have registered under another name. Perhaps if you'd let me look over your register for a minute—"

Norman put his hand on the ledger and shook his head. "Sorry, mister," he said. "I couldn't let you do that."

"Maybe this will change your mind."

The man reached into his inside coat pocket, and for a minute Norman wondered if he was going to offer him some money. The wallet came out, but the man didn't remove any bills. Instead he flipped it open and laid it on the counter, so Norman could read the card.

"Milton Arbogast," the man said. "Investigator for Parity Mutual."

"You're a detective?"

He nodded. "I'm here on business, Mr.—"

"Norman Bates."

“Mr. Bates. My company wants me to locate this girl, and I’d appreciate your co-operation. Of course, if you refuse to let me inspect your register, I can always get in touch with the local authorities. I guess you know that.”

Norman didn’t know, but he was sure of one thing. There mustn’t be any local authorities to come snooping around. He hesitated, his hand still covering the ledger. “What’s this all about?” he asked. “What did this girl do?”

“Stolen car,” Mr. Arbogast told him.

“Oh.” Norman was a little more relieved. For a moment he’d been afraid it was something serious, that the girl was missing or wanted for some major offense. In that case, there’d be a real investigation. But a missing car, particularly an old beat-up heap like that one—

“All right,” he said. “Help yourself. I just wanted to make sure you had a legitimate reason.” He removed his hand.

“It’s legitimate, all right.” But Mr. Arbogast didn’t reach for the register right away. First he took an envelope out of his pocket and laid it down on the counter. Then he grabbed the ledger, turned it around, and thumbed down the list of signatures.

Norman watched his blunt thumb move, saw it stop suddenly and decisively.

“I thought you said something about not having any customers last Saturday or Sunday?”

“Well, I don’t recall anyone. I mean, we might have had one or two, but there was no big business.”

“How about this one? This Jane Wilson, from San Antonio? She signed in on Saturday night.”

“Oh—come to think of it, you’re right.” The pounding had started up in Norman’s chest again, and he knew he’d made a mistake when he pretended not to recognize the description, but it was too late now. How could he possibly explain in such a way so that the detective wouldn’t be suspicious? What was he going to say?

Right now the detective wasn’t saying anything. He had picked up the envelope and laid it alongside the ledger page, comparing the handwriting.

That's why he'd brought the envelope out, it was in *her* handwriting? Now he'd know. He *did* know!

Norman could tell it when the detective raised his head and stared at him. Here, close up, he could see beneath the shadow cast by the hat brim. He could see the cold eyes, the eyes that *knew*.

"It's the girl, all right. This handwriting is identical."

"It is? Are you sure?"

"Sure enough that I'm going to get a photostat made, even if it takes a court order. And that isn't all I can do, if you won't start talking and tell me the truth. Why did you lie about not seeing the girl?"

"I didn't lie. I just forgot—"

"You said you had a good memory."

"Well, yes, generally I do. Only—"

"Prove it." Mr Arbogast lit a cigarette. "In case you don't know, car theft is a federal offense. You wouldn't want to be involved as an accessory, would you?"

"Involved? How could I be involved? A girl drives in here, she takes a room, spends the night, and drives away again. How can I possibly be involved?"

"By withholding information." Mr. Arbogast inhaled deeply. "Come on, now, let's have it. You saw the girl. What did she look like?"

"Just as you described her, I guess. It was raining hard when she came in. I was busy. I didn't really take a second look. I let her sign in, gave her a key, and that was that."

"Did she say anything? What did you talk about?"

"The weather, I suppose. I don't remember."

"Did she seem ill at ease in any way? Was there anything about her that made you suspicious?"

"No. Nothing at all. She seemed like just another tourist to me."

"Good enough." Mr. Arbogast ground his cigarette butt into the ash tray. "Didn't impress you one way or the other, eh? On one hand, there was nothing to cause you to suspect anything was wrong with her. And on the

other, she didn't particularly arouse your sympathies, either. I mean, you felt no emotion toward this girl at all."

"Certainly not."

Mr. Arbogast leaned forward, casually. "Then why did you try to shield her by pretending you never remembered that she had come here?"

"I didn't try! I just forgot, I tell you." Norman knew he'd walked into a trap, but he wasn't going any further. "What are you trying to insinuate—do you think I *helped* her steal the car?"

"Nobody's accusing you of anything, Mr. Bates. It's just that I need all the facts I can get. You say she came alone?"

"She came alone, she took a room, she left the next morning. She's probably a thousand miles away by now—"

"Probably." Mr. Arbogast smiled. "But let's take it a little slower, shall we? Maybe you can remember something. She left alone, is that it? About what time would you say?"

"I don't know. I was asleep up at the house Sunday morning."

"Then you don't actually know she was *alone* when she left?"

"I can't prove it, if that's what you mean."

"How about during the evening? Did she have any visitors?"

"No."

"You're positive?"

"Quite positive."

"Did anyone else happen to see her here that night?"

"She was the only customer."

"And you were on duty alone?"

"That's right."

"She stayed in her room?"

"Yes."

"All evening? Didn't even make a phone call?"

"Of course not."

"So you're the only one who knew she was here at all?"

"I've already told you that."

“What about the old lady—did *she* see her?”

“What old lady?”

“The one up at the house, in back of here.”

Norman could feel the pounding now; his heart was going to beat its way right through his chest. He started to say, “There is no old lady,” but Mr. Arbogast was still talking.

“I noticed her staring out of the window when I drove in. Who is she?”

“That’s my mother.” He had to admit it, there was no way out. No way out. He could explain. “She’s pretty feeble, she never comes down here any more.”

“Then she didn’t see the girl?”

“No. She’s sick. She stayed in her room when we ate supp—”

It slipped out, just like that. Because Mr. Arbogast had asked the questions too fast, he’d done it on purpose just to confuse him, and when he mentioned Mother, it caught Norman off guard. He’d thought only about protecting *her*, and now—

Mr. Arbogast wasn’t casual any more. “You had supper with Mary Crane, up at your house?”

“Just coffee and sandwiches. I—I thought I told you. It wasn’t anything. You see, she asked where she could eat, and I said Fairvale, but that’s almost twenty miles away, and it was raining, so I took her up to the house with me. That’s all there was to it.”

“What did you talk about?”

“We didn’t talk about anything. I told you Mother’s sick, and I didn’t want to disturb her. She’s been sick all week. I guess that’s what’s been upsetting me, making me forget things. Like this girl, and having supper. It just slipped my mind.”

“Is there anything else that might have slipped your mind? Like say you and this girl coming back here and having a little party—”

“No! Nothing like that! How can you say such a thing, what right have you got to say such a thing? I—I won’t even talk to you any more. I’ve told you all you wanted to know. Now, get out of here!”

“All right.” Mr Arbogast pulled down the brim of his Stetson. “I’ll be on my way. But first I’d like to have a word with your mother. Maybe she might have noticed something you’ve forgotten.”

“I tell you she didn’t even *see* the girl!” Norman came around the counter. “Besides, you can’t talk to her. She’s very ill.” He could hear his heart pounding and he had to shout above it. “I forbid you to see her.”

“In that case, I’ll come back with a search warrant.”

He was bluffing, Norman knew it now. “That’s ridiculous! Nobody’d issue one. Who’d believe I’d steal an old car?”

Mr. Arbogast lit another cigarette and threw the match into the ash tray. “I’m afraid you don’t understand,” he said, almost gently. “It isn’t really the car at all. You might as well have the whole story. This girl—Mary Crane—stole forty thousand dollars in cash from a real estate firm in Fort Worth.”

“Forty thousand—”

“That’s right. Skipped town with the money. You can see it’s a serious business. That’s why everything I can find out is important. That’s why I’m going to insist on talking to your mother. With or without your permission.”

“But I’ve already told you she doesn’t know anything, and she’s not well, she’s not well at all.”

“I promise I won’t say anything to upset her.” Mr. Arbogast paused. “Of course, if you want me to come back with the sheriff and a warrant—”

“No.” Norman shook his head hastily. “You mustn’t do that.” He hesitated, but there was nothing to hesitate about now. *Forty thousand dollars. No wonder he’d asked so many questions. Of course he could get a warrant, no use making a scene. And besides, there was that Alabama couple down the line. No way out, no way at all.*

“All right,” Norman said. “You can talk to her. But let me go up to the house first and tell her you’re coming. I don’t want you busting in without any explanation and getting her all excited.” He moved toward the door. “You wait here, in case anyone drives in.”

“Okay.” Arbogast nodded, and Norman hurried out.

It wasn’t much of a climb up the hill, but he thought he’d never make it. His heart pounded the way it had the other night, and it was just like the other night now, nothing had changed. No matter what you did, you

couldn't get away from it. Not by trying to behave like a good boy and not by trying to behave like an adult, either. Nothing helped, because he was what he was, and that wasn't enough. Not enough to save him, and not enough to save Mother. If there was going to be any help at all now, it would have to come from her.

Then he unlocked the front door and climbed the stairs and went into her room, and he intended to speak to her very calmly, but when he saw her just sitting there by the window he couldn't hold it back. He began to shake and the sobs came tearing up out of his chest, the terrible sobs, and he put his head down against her skirt and he told her.

"All right," Mother said. She didn't seem surprised at all. "We'll take care of this. Just leave everything to me."

"Mother—if you just talked to him for a minute, told him you don't know anything—he'd go away, then."

"But he'd come back. Forty thousand dollars, that's a lot of money. Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I didn't know. I swear it, I didn't know!"

"I believe you. Only *he* won't. He won't believe you and he won't believe me. He probably thinks we're all in on it together. Or that we did something to the girl, because of the money. Don't you see how it is?"

"Mother—" He closed his eyes, he couldn't look at her. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get dressed. We want to be all ready for your visitor, don't we? I'll just take some things into the bathroom. You can go back and tell this Mr. Arbogast to come up now."

"No, I can't. I won't bring him up here, not if you're going to—"

And he couldn't, he couldn't move at all, now. He wanted to faint, but even that wouldn't stop what was going to happen.

In just a few minutes, Mr. Arbogast would get tired of waiting. He'd walk up to the house alone, he'd knock on the door, he'd open it and come in. And when he did—

"Mother, please, *listen* to me!"

But she didn't listen, she was in the bathroom, she was getting dressed, she was putting on make-up, she was getting ready. *Getting ready.*

And all at once she came gliding out, wearing the nice dress with the ruffles. Her face was freshly powdered and rouged, she was pretty as a picture, and she smiled as she started down the stairs.

Before she was halfway down, the knocking came.

It was happening, Mr. Arbogast was here; he wanted to call out and warn him, but something was stuck in his throat. He could only listen as Mother cried gaily, "I'm coming! I'm coming! Just a moment, now!"

And it *was* just a moment.

Mother opened the door and Mr. Arbogast walked in. He looked at her and then he opened his mouth to say something. As he did so he raised his head, and that was all Mother had been waiting for. Her arm went out and something bright and glittering flashed back and forth, back and forth—

It hurt Norman's eyes and he didn't want to look. He didn't have to look, either, because he already knew.

Mother had found his razor . . .

Norman smiled at the elderly man and said, “Here’s your key. That’ll be ten dollars for the two of you, please.”

The elderly man’s wife opened her purse. “I’ve got the money here, Homer.” She placed a bill on the counter, nodding at Norman. Then she stopped nodding and her eyes narrowed. “What’s the matter, don’t you feel good?”

“I’m—I’m just a little tired, I guess. Be all right. Going to close up now.”

“So early? I thought motels stayed open until all hours. Particularly on Saturday nights.”

“We don’t get much business here. Besides, it’s almost ten.”

*Almost ten. Nearly four hours. Oh, my God.*

“I see. Well, good night to you.”

“Good night.”

They were going out now, and he could step away from the counter, he could switch off the sign and close the office. But first he was going to take a drink, a big drink, because he needed one. And it didn’t matter whether he drank or not, nothing mattered now; it was all over. All over, or just beginning.

Norman had already taken several drinks. He took one as soon as he returned to the motel, around six, and he’d taken one every hour since then. If he hadn’t, he would never have been able to last; never been able to stand here, knowing what was lying up there at the house, underneath the hall rug. That’s where he’d left it, without trying to move anything; he just pulled the sides of the rug and tossed them over to cover it. There was quite a bit of blood, but it wouldn’t soak through. Besides, there was nothing else he *could* do, then. Not in broad daylight.

Now, of course, he’d have to go back. He’d given Mother strict orders not to touch anything, and he knew she’d obey. Funny, once it had

happened, how she collapsed again. It seemed as if she'd nerve herself up to almost anything—the manic phase, wasn't that what they called it?—but once it was over, she just wilted, and he had to take over. He told her to go back to her room, and *not* to show herself at the window, just lie down until he got there. And he had locked the door.

But he'd have to unlock it now.

Norman closed the office and went outside. There was the Buick, Mr. Arbogast's Buick, still parked just where he had left it.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if he could just climb into that car and drive away? Drive away from here, far away, and never come back again at all? Drive away from the motel, away from Mother, away from that thing lying under the rug in the hall?

For a moment the temptation welled up, but only for a moment; then it subsided and Norman shrugged. It wouldn't work, he knew that much. He could never get far enough away to be safe. Besides, that thing was waiting for him. Waiting for him—

So he glanced up and down the highway and then he looked at Number One and at Number Three to see if their blinds were drawn, and then he stepped into Mr. Arbogast's car and took out the keys he'd found in Mr. Arbogast's pocket. And he drove up to the house, very slowly.

All the lights were out. Mother was asleep in her room, or maybe she was only pretending to be asleep—Norman didn't care. Just so she stayed out of his way while he took care of this. He didn't want Mother around to make him feel like a little boy. He had a man's job to do. A grown man's job.

It took a grown man just to bundle the rug together and lift what was in it. He got it down the steps and into the back seat of the car. And he'd been right about there not being any leaking. These old shag rugs were absorbent.

When he got through the field and down to the swamp, he drove along the edge a way until he came to an open space. Wouldn't do to try and sink the car in the same place he'd put the other one. But this new spot was satisfactory, and he used the same method. It was really very easy, in a way. *Practice makes perfect.*

Except that there was nothing to joke about; not while he sat there on the tree stump and waited for the car to go down. It was worse than the other time—you'd think because the Buick was a heavier car that it would sink faster. But it took a million years. Until at last, *plop!*

There. It was gone forever. Like that girl, and the forty thousand dollars. Where had it been? Not in her purse, certainly, and not in the suitcase. Maybe in the overnight bag, or somewhere in the car. He should have looked, that's what he should have done. Except that he'd been in no condition to search, even if he'd known the money was there. And if he *had* found it, no telling what might have happened. Most probably he would have given himself away when the detective came around. You always gave yourself away if you had a guilty conscience. That was one thing to be thankful for—he wasn't responsible for all this. Oh, he knew all about being an accessory; on the other hand, he had to protect Mother. It meant protecting himself as well, but it was really Mother he was thinking about.

Norman walked back through the field, slowly. Tomorrow he'd have to return with the car and the trailer—do it all over again. But that wasn't half as important as attending to another matter.

Again, it was just a matter of watching out for Mother.

He'd thought it all through, and the facts just had to be faced.

Somebody was going to come here and inquire about that detective.

It just stood to reason, that's all. The company—something-or-other Mutual that employed him wasn't going to let him disappear without an investigation. They probably had been in touch with him, or heard from him, all week long. And certainly the real-estate firm would be interested. Everybody was interested in forty thousand dollars.

So, sooner or later, there'd be questions to answer. It might be several days, or even a week, the way it had been with that girl. But he knew what was coming. And this time he was going to be prepared.

He had it all figured out. No matter who showed up, the story would be perfectly straight. He'd memorize it, rehearse it, so there'd be no slip of the tongue the way he had slipped tonight. Nobody was going to get him excited or confused; not if he knew in advance what to expect. Already he was planning just what to say when the time came.

The girl had stayed at the motel, yes. He'd admit that right away, but of course he hadn't suspected anything while she was here—not until Mr. Arbogast came, a week later. The girl had spent the night and driven away. There'd be no story about any conversation, and certainly nothing about eating together at the house.

What he *would* say, though, is that he'd told everything to Mr. Arbogast, and the only part which seemed to interest him was when he mentioned that the girl had asked him how far it was from here to Chicago, and could she make it in a single day?

*That's* what interested Mr. Arbogast. And he'd thanked him very much and climbed back into his car and driven off. Period. No, he had no idea where he was headed for. Mr. Arbogast hadn't said. He just drove off. What time had it been? A little after suppertime, Saturday.

There it was, just a simple little statement of fact. No special details, nothing elaborate to arouse anyone's suspicions. A fugitive girl had passed this way and gone on. A week later a detective followed her trail, asked for and received information, then departed. Sorry, mister, that's all I know about it.

Norman knew he could tell it that way, tell it calmly and easily this time, because he wouldn't have to worry about Mother.

She wasn't going to be looking out of the window. In fact, she wasn't going to be in the house at all. Even if they came with one of those search warrants, they weren't going to find Mother.

That would be the best protection of all. Protection for her, even more than for him. He'd made up his mind on it, and he was going to see that it worked out. There was no sense in even waiting until tomorrow.

Strange, now that it was actually over, he still felt fully confident. It wasn't like the other time, when he'd gone to pieces and needed to know Mother was there. Now he needed to know she was *not* there. And he had the necessary gumption, for once, to tell her just that.

So he marched upstairs, in the dark, and went straight to her room. He switched on the light. She was in bed, of course, but not asleep; she hadn't been sleeping at all, just playing possum.

“Norman, where on earth have you been? I was so worried—”

“You know where I’ve been, Mother. Don’t pretend.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Certainly.” He took a deep breath. “Mother, I’m going to ask you to give up sleeping in your room for the next week or so.”

“What’s that?”

“I said, I have to ask you not to sleep here for the next week or so.”

“Are you out of your mind? This is my room.”

“I know. And I’m not asking you to give it up permanently. Only for a little while.”

“But why on earth—”

“Mother, please listen and try to understand. We had a visitor here today.”

“Must you talk about that?”

“I must, for a moment. Because sooner or later, somebody will be around to inquire after him. And I’ll say he came and left.”

“Of course that’s what you’ll say, son. That’ll be the end of it.”

“Perhaps. I hope so. But I can’t take chances. Maybe they’ll want to search the house.”

“Let them. He won’t be here.”

“Neither will you.” He gulped a breath, then rushed on. “I mean it, Mother. It’s for your own protection. I can’t afford to let anyone see you, like that detective did today. I don’t want anyone to start asking you questions—you know why as well as I do. It’s just impossible. So the safest thing for both of us is to make sure you’re just not around.”

“What are you going to do—bury me in the swamp?”

“Mother—”

She started to laugh. It was more like a cackle, and he knew that once she really got started she wouldn’t stop. The only way to stop her was to shout her. A week ago, Norman would never have dared. But this wasn’t a week ago, it was *now*, and things were different. It was *now*, and he had to face the truth. Mother was more than sick. She was psychotic, dangerously so. He had to control her, and he would.

“Shut up!” he said, and the cackling ceased. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “But you must listen to me. I’ve got it all figured out. I’m going to take you down into the fruit cellar.”

“The fruit cellar? Why, I can’t—”

“You can. And you will. You have to. I’ll see to it that you’re taken care of, there’s a light and I can put in a cot for you and—”

“I *won’t!*”

“I’m not asking you, Mother. I’m telling you. You’re going to stay in the fruit cellar until I think it’s safe for you to come upstairs again. And I’ll hang that old Indian blanket on the wall, so that it covers up the door. Nobody will notice a thing, even if they bother to go down into the cellar. It’s the only way we can both be sure that you’re going to be safe.”

“Norman, I refuse to even discuss it any further with you. I’m not going to budge from this room!”

“Then I’ll have to carry you.”

“Norman, you wouldn’t *dare—*”

But he did. Finally, that’s just what he did. He picked her up right off the bed and carried her, and she was light as a feather compared to Mr. Arbogast, and she smelled of perfume instead of stale cigarette smoke, the way he had. She was too astonished to put up a fight, just whimpered a little. Norman was startled at how easy it was, once he made up his mind to go through with it. Why, she was just a sick old lady, a frail, feeble thing! He didn’t have to be afraid of her, not really. *She* was afraid of *him*, now. Yes, she must be. Because not once, all through this, had she called him “son.”

“I’ll fix the cot for you,” he told her. “And there’s a pot, too—”

“Norman *must* you talk that way?” For just an instant she flared up in the old way, then subsided. He bustled around, bringing blankets, arranging the curtains on the small window so that there’d be sufficient ventilation. She began whimpering again, not so much whimpering as muttering under her breath.

“It’s like a prison cell, that’s what it is; you’re trying to make a prisoner out of me. You don’t love me any more, Norman, you don’t love me or else you wouldn’t treat me this way.”

“If I didn’t love you, do you know where you’d be today?” He didn’t want to say it, but he had to. “The State Hospital for the Criminal Insane. That’s where you’d be.”

He snapped out the light, wondering if she’d heard him, wondering if his words had gotten through to her, even if she had.

Apparently she understood. Because just as he closed the door she answered. Her voice was deceptively soft in the darkness, but somehow the words cut into him; cut into him more deeply than the straight razor had cut into Mr. Arbogast’s throat.

“Yes, Norman, I suppose you’re right. That’s where I’d probably be. But I wouldn’t be there alone.”

Norman slammed the door, locked it, and turned away. He wasn’t quite sure, but as he ran up the cellar steps he thought he could still hear her chuckling gently in the dark.

Sam and Lila sat in the back room of the store, waiting for Arbogast to arrive. But all they heard were the sounds of Saturday night.

“You can tell when it’s Saturday night in a town like this,” Sam commented. “The noises are different. Take the traffic, for one thing. There’s more of it, and it moves faster. That’s because Saturday is the evening when the teenagers get the cars.

“And all that rattling and squealing you hear—that’s parking. Farm families in their old jalopies, coming in to see the show. Hired hand in a hurry to head for the taverns.

“Notice the footsteps? They’re different, too. Hear that running. The kids are loose. Saturday’s the night they stay up late. No homework.” He shrugged. “Of course, I suppose it’s a lot more noisy in Fort Worth on any night of the week.”

“I suppose so,” Lila said. Then, “Sam, why doesn’t he get here? It’s almost nine.”

“You must be hungry.”

“It isn’t that. But why doesn’t he come?”

“Maybe he’s tied up, maybe he found out something important.”

“He could at least call. He knows how worried we are.”

“Just be patient a little while longer—”

“I’m sick of waiting!” Lila stood up, pushing back her chair. She began to pace back and forth across the narrow room. “I never should have waited in the first place. I should have gone straight to the police. Wait, wait, wait—that’s all I’ve heard, all week long? First Mr. Lowery, then Arbogast, and now you. Because you’re all thinking about the money, not about my sister. Nobody cares what happens to Mary, nobody but me!”

“That’s not true. You know how I feel about her.”

“Then how can you stand it? Why don’t you *do* something? What kind of a man are you, sitting here and handing out cracker-barrel philosophy at a time like this?”

She grasped her purse and pushed past him.

“Where are you going?” Sam asked.

“To see that sheriff of yours, right now.”

“It would be just as easy to call him. After all, we want to be here when Arbogast shows up.”

“*If* he shows up. Maybe he’s left town for good, if he’s found something. He wouldn’t have to come back.” Lila’s voice teetered along a thin, hysterical edge.

Sam took her arm. “Sit down,” he said. “I’ll phone the sheriff.”

She made no attempt to follow him as he walked out into the store. He went over to the rear counter, stood next to the cash register, and picked up the receiver.

“One-six-two, please. Hello, sheriff’s office? This is Sam Loomis, over at the hardware store. I’d like to speak to Sheriff Chambers . . .

“He’s *what*? No, I hadn’t heard anything about it. Where did you say—Fulton? When do you suppose he’ll be back? I see. No, nothing wrong. I just wanted to talk to him. Look, if he gets in any time before midnight, would you ask him to call me here at the store? I’ll be here all night. Yes. Thanks, I’d appreciate that.”

Sam hung up and walked back into the rear room.

“What did he say?”

“He wasn’t there.” Sam reported the conversation, watching her face as he spoke. “Seems somebody robbed the bank over at Fulton around suppertime this evening. Chambers and the whole State Highway Patrol gang are out setting up roadblocks. That’s what all the excitement’s about. I talked to old Peterson; he’s the only one left in the sheriff’s office. There’s two cops walking the beat here in town, but they wouldn’t be any use to us.”

“So now what you are going to do?”

“Why, wait, of course. Chances are, we won’t be able to talk to the sheriff until tomorrow morning.”

“But don’t you even care what happens to—”

“Of course I care.” He cut in on her sharply, deliberately. “Would it ease your mind any if I called the motel and found out what’s holding Arbogast up?”

She nodded.

Again he went back into the store. This time she accompanied him and stood waiting while he asked the operator for information. She finally located the name—Norman Bates—and found the number. Sam waited while she put the call through.

“Funny,” he said, hanging up. “Nobody answers.”

“Then I’m going out there.”

“No, you’re not.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m going out. You wait right here, in case Arbogast comes in.”

“Sam, what do you think happened?”

“I’ll tell you when I get back. Now you just relax. It shouldn’t take me more than three quarters of an hour.”

And it didn’t because Sam drove fast. In exactly forty-two minutes he unlocked the front door, came into the store again. Lila was waiting for him.

“Well?” she asked.

“Funny. The place was closed up. No lights in the office. No lights in the house behind the motel. I went up there and banged on the door for five minutes straight, and nothing happened. The garage next to the house was open and empty. Looks like this Bates went away for the evening.”

“What about Mr. Arbogast?”

“His car wasn’t there. Just two parked down at the motel—I looked at the licenses. Alabama and Illinois.”

“But where could—”

“The way I figure it,” Sam said, “is that Arbogast *did* find out something. Maybe something important. It could be that he and Bates both went off together. And that’s why we haven’t gotten any word.”

“Sam, I can’t take much more of this. I’ve got to know!”

“You’ve got to eat, too.” He displayed a bulging paper bag. “Stopped in at the drive-in on my way back, brought us some hamburgers and coffee. Let’s take the stuff into the back room.”

By the time they finished eating it was after eleven.

“Look,” Sam said. “Why don’t you go back to the hotel and get some rest? If anyone calls or comes in, I’ll phone you. No sense in us both sitting around like this.”

“But—”

“Come on. Worrying isn’t going to help. Chances are, I’ve figured it right. Arbogast *has* located Mary and we’ll get news by morning. Good news.”

But there was no good news on Sunday morning.

By nine o’clock, Lila was rattling the front door of the hardware store.

“Hear anything?” she asked. And when Sam shook his head, she frowned. “Well, I found out something, Arbogast checked out over at the hotel yesterday morning—*before* he even started to look around.”

Sam didn’t say anything. He picked up his hat and walked out of the store with her.

The streets of Fairvale were empty on Sunday morning. The courthouse was set back in a square on Main Street, surrounded by a lawn on all four sides. One side contained a statue of a Civil War veteran—the kind cast up by thousands back in the eighties to occupy courthouse lawns all over the country. The other three sides displayed, respectively, a Spanish-American War trench mortar, a World War I cannon, and a granite shaft bearing the names of fourteen Fairvale citizens who had died in World War II. Benches lined the sidewalks all around the square, but they were vacant at this hour.

The courthouse itself was closed, but the sheriff’s office was over in the annex—Fairvale citizens still spoke of it as the “new” annex, though it had been added back in 1946. The side door was open. They entered, climbed the stairs, walked down the hall to the office.

Old Peterson was doing duty at the outer desk, all alone.

“Morning, Sam.”

“Good morning, Mr. Peterson. Sheriff around?”

“Nope. Hear about them bank robbers? Busted right through the roadblock down at Parnassus. FBI’s after ’em now. Sent an alert—”

“Where is he?”

“Well, he got in pretty late last night—early this morning, I should say.”

“Did you give him my message?”

The old man hesitated. “I—I guess I forgot. All this excitement around here.” He wiped his mouth. “ ’Course I intended to, today, when he comes in.”

“What time will that be?”

“Right after lunch, I guess. Sunday mornings he’s over to the church.”

“What church?”

“First Baptist.”

“Thanks.”

“You wouldn’t go pulling him out of—”

Sam turned away without answering. Lila’s high heels clattered hollowly beside him in the hall.

“What kind of a hick town is this, anyway?” she murmured. “A bank is held up and the sheriff is in church. What’s he doing, praying that somebody will catch the robbers for him?” Sam didn’t answer. When they reached the street she turned to him again. “Where are we going now?”

“First Baptist Church, of course.”

But it turned out that they didn’t have to interrupt Sheriff Chambers at his devotions. As they turned down the side street it was apparent that the services had just ended; people were beginning to emerge from the steepled structure.

“There he is,” Sam muttered. “Come on.”

He led her over to a couple who stood near the curbing. The woman was a short, gray-haired nonentity in a mail-order print dress; the man was tall, broad across the shoulders and paunchily protruding at the waistline. He wore a blue serge suit and his red, seamed neck twisted in rebellion against the restraint of a white, starched collar. He had curly graying hair and curly black eyebrows.

“Hold on a minute, Sheriff,” said Sam. “I’d like to talk to you.”

“Sam Loomis. How are you?” Sheriff Chambers held out a large red hand. “Ma, you know Sam, here.”

“I’d like you to met Lila Crane. Miss Crane is visiting here from Fort Worth.”

“Pleased to meet you. Say, you aren’t the one old Sam keeps talking about, are you? Never let on you were so pretty—”

“It’s my sister you’re thinking of,” Lila told him. “That’s why we’re here to see you.”

“I wonder if we could go over to your office for a minute,” Sam broke in. “Then we can explain the situation.”

“Sure, why not?” Jud Chambers turned to his wife. “Ma, why don’t you take the car and go along home? I’ll be over in a little while, soon’s I’m finished with these folks.”

But it wasn’t a little while. Once settled in Sheriff Chamber’s office, Sam told his story. Even without interruptions, that took a good twenty minutes. And the Sheriff interrupted frequently.

“Now let me get this straight here,” he said, at the conclusion. “This fella who came to you, this Arbogast. Why didn’t he check with me?”

“I already explained that. He was hoping to avoid going to the authorities. His idea was to try and find Miss Crane and recover the money without any embarrassment to the Lowery Agency.”

“You say he showed you his credentials?”

“Yes.” Lila nodded. “He was a licensed investigator for the insurance firm. And he managed to trace my sister all the way up here, to that motel. That’s why we’re so worried now, because he never came back, the way he said he would.”

“But he wasn’t at the motel when you drove out there?” The question was addressed to Sam and he answered it.

“There was nobody there at all, Sheriff.”

“That’s funny. Damned funny. I know this fella Bates who runs it. He’s always there. Scarcely even leaves for an hour to come into town. You tried calling him this morning? Why don’t you let me do that now? Probably turn out he was sound asleep when you got there last night.”

The big red hand picked up the phone.

“Don’t tell him anything about the money,” Sam said. “Just ask for Arbogast and see what he has to say.”

Sheriff Chambers nodded. “Leave it to me,” he murmured. “I know how to handle this.”

He put through the call, and they waited.

“Hello . . . Bates? That you? This is Sheriff Chambers. That’s right. I’m looking for a little information. Party here in town is trying to locate a fella name of Arbogast. Milton Arbogast, from Fort Worth. He’s a special investigator or something for a firm called Parity Mutual.

“He’s what? Oh, he did? When was that? I see. What’d he have to say? It’s all right, you can tell me. I already know all about it. Yeah . . .

“What’s that again? Yeah. Yeah. And then he left, eh? Did he say where he was going? Oh, you think so? Sure. No, that’s all . . .

“No, there’s no trouble. Just that I thought he might check in here. Say, while I’ve got you, you don’t think he might have stopped back later on in the evening, do you? What time you generally go to bed out there? Oh, I see. Well, I guess this just about covers it, then. Thanks for the information, Bates.”

He hung up and swiveled around to face them.

“Looks like your man headed for Chicago,” he said.

“Chicago?”

Sheriff Chambers nodded. “Sure. That’s where the girl said she was going. Your friend Arbogast sounds like a pretty smooth operator to me.”

“What do you mean? What did that man Bates tell you just now?” Lila leaned forward.

“The same thing Arbogast told you yesterday evening when he called in from there. Your sister stayed at the motel last Saturday, but she didn’t register under her own name. Called herself Jane Wilson, said she was from San Antonio. Let it slip that she was on her way to Chicago.”

“It couldn’t have been Mary, then. Why, she doesn’t know anyone in Chicago; she’s never been there in her life!”

“According to Bates, Arbogast was certain this was the girl. Even checked her handwriting. Her description, the car, everything fitted. Not only that, once he heard about Chicago, Bates says he took off from there like a bat out of hell.”

“But that’s ridiculous! She has a week’s start—*if* she was going there at all, that is. And he’d never find her in Chicago.”

“Maybe he knew where to look. Maybe he didn’t tell you two *all* he’d found out about your sister and her plans.”

“What else could he know that we don’t?”

“Never can tell about these smart operators. Could be he had some idea of just what your sister was up to. If he could get to her and lay his hands on that money, he might not be so interested in reporting back to his company again.”

“Are you trying to say that Mr. Arbogast was a crook?”

“All I’m saying is that forty thousand in cash is a lot of money. And if Arbogast didn’t show up here again, it means he had something figured out.” The Sheriff nodded. “Must have been working the angles all along, the way it looks to me. Else why wouldn’t he at least stop in here beforehand and see if I could help? You say he already checked out of the hotel yesterday.”

“Now wait a minute, Sheriff,” Sam said. “You’re jumping to conclusions. You’ve got nothing to go by except what this man Bates said over the phone just now. Couldn’t he be lying?”

“Why should he? He told a straight story. Said the girl had been there, said Arbogast was there.”

“Where was he last night when I came, then?”

“Fast asleep in bed, just like I thought,” the Sheriff answered. “Look here, I know this fella Bates. He’s kind of an odd one in his way, not too bright, or at least that’s how he always struck me. But he certainly isn’t the type who’d ever pull any fast ones. Why shouldn’t I believe him? Particularly when I *know* your friend Arbogast was lying.”

“Lying? About what?”

“You told me what he said when he called you from the motel, last night. Well, that was just a stall. He must have already found out about Chicago,

and he wanted to keep you quiet long enough for him to get a good head start. That's why he lied."

"I don't understand Sheriff. Just what did he lie about?"

"Why, when he said he was going up to see Norman Bates's mother. Norman Bates has no mother."

"He hasn't?"

"Not for the last twenty years he hasn't. She's dead." Sheriff Chambers nodded. "Quite a scandal around these parts—surprised you don't remember it, but you were only a kid, then. She built this motel with a fella name of Considine, Joe Considine. She was a widow, understand, and the talk was that she and Considine were—" The Sheriff stared at Lila, then broke off with an aimless wave of the hand. "Anyways, they never did get married. Something must of went wrong, maybe she was in a family way, maybe Considine had a wife back where he came from. But one night they both took strychnine together. Regular poison pact, you might say. Her son, this Norman Bates, he found them both. Guess it was pretty much of a shock. Way I remember it, he was laid up in the hospital for a couple of months, after. Didn't even go to the funeral. But I went. That's how I'm sure his mother is dead. Hell, I was one of the pallbearers!"

Sam and Lila had dinner over at the hotel.

It was not an enjoyable meal for either of them.

“I still can’t believe Mr. Arbogast would go off without a word to us,” Lila said, putting down her coffee cup. “And I can’t believe Mary would go to Chicago, either.”

“Well, Sheriff Chambers believes it.” Sam sighed. “And you’ve got to admit Arbogast lied to me about seeing Bates’s mother.”

“Yes, I know. It doesn’t make sense. On the other hand, neither does this story about Chicago. Mr. Arbogast didn’t know any more about Mary than what we could tell him.”

Sam set his dessert spoon down next to the sherbet cup. “I’m beginning to wonder how much any of us really knows about Mary,” he said. “I’m engaged to her. You lived with her. Neither of us could believe she’d take that money. And yet there’s no other answer. She did take it.”

“Yes.” Lila’s voice was low. “I believe that, now. She took the money. But she wouldn’t do it for herself. Maybe she thought she could help you, maybe she wanted to bring it to help pay off your debts.”

“Then why didn’t she come to me? I wouldn’t have accepted anything from her, even if I didn’t know the money was stolen. But if she believed I might, then why didn’t she come?”

“She did. At least, she got as far as that motel.” Lila crumpled her napkin, held it wadded tightly in her hand. “That’s what I was trying to tell the sheriff. We *know* she got as far as the motel. And just because Arbogast lied, that’s no reason why this man Bates can’t be lying, too. Why doesn’t the sheriff at least go out there and take a look around for himself, instead of just talking to him on the phone?”

“I don’t blame Sheriff Chambers for refusing,” Sam told her. “How could he go any further? On what grounds, what evidence? What is he supposed

to be looking for? You can't just go breaking in on people for no reason. Besides, they don't operate that way in a small town. Everybody knows everybody else, nobody wants to stir up trouble or cause unnecessary hard feeling. You heard what he said. There's nothing to make anyone suspect Bates. He's known him all his life."

"Yes, and I've known Mary all my life. But there were some things about her *I* didn't suspect, either. He admitted this man was a little peculiar."

"He didn't go that far. He said he was sort of a recluse. That's understandable, when you think of what a shock it must have been to him when his mother died."

"His mother." Lila frowned. "That's the one thing I can't get through my head. If Arbogast wanted to lie, why should he lie about a thing like that?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was just the first thing he—"

"In fact, if he *was* planning to run off, then why did he bother to call up at all? Wouldn't it have been simpler to just leave, without our even knowing he'd actually been to that motel?" She let go the napkin and stared at Sam. "I—I'm beginning to get an idea."

"What's up?"

"Sam, just what *did* Arbogast say there at the last, when he called you? About seeing Bates's mother?"

"He said that he'd noticed her sitting at the bedroom window when he drove in."

"Maybe he wasn't lying."

"But he had to be. Mrs. Bates is dead, you heard what the sheriff said."

"Maybe it was Bates who lied. Perhaps Arbogast merely assumed that the woman was Bates's mother, and when he spoke of it, Bates said yes. He said she was sick, and nobody could see her, but Arbogast insisted. Isn't that what he told you?"

"That's right. But I still don't see—"

"No, you don't. But Arbogast did. The point is, he saw *somebody* sitting in the window when he drove in. And maybe that somebody was—Mary."

"Lila, you don't think that—"

“I don’t know what to think. But why not? The trail ends there at the motel. Two people are missing. Isn’t that enough? Isn’t that enough for me, as Mary’s sister, to go to the sheriff and insist that he make a thorough investigation?”

“Come on,” said Sam. “Let’s get going.”

They found Sheriff Chambers at his house, finishing dinner. He chewed on a toothpick while he listened to Lila’s story.

“I dunno,” he said. “You’d have to be the one to sign the complaint—”

“I’ll sign anything you want. Just so you go out there and look around.”

“Couldn’t we wait until tomorrow morning? I mean, I’m expecting word about those bank robbers and all, and—”

“Now, just a minute,” Sam said. “This is a serious business, Sheriff. This girl’s sister has been missing for over a week now. It isn’t just a matter of money any more. For all we know, her life could be in danger. She could even be—”

“All right! You don’t have to tell me my business, Sam. Come on, let’s go over to the office and I’ll let her sign. But if you ask me, it’s a waste of time. Norman Bates is no murderer.”

The word emerged, just like any other word, and died away. But its echo lingered. Sam heard it and Lila heard it. It stayed with them as they drove over to the courthouse annex with Sheriff Chambers. It stayed with them after the Sheriff drove away, out to the motel. He’d refused to take either of them along; told them to wait. So they waited in the office, just the two of them. The two of them—and the word.

It was late afternoon when he returned. He came in alone, giving them a look in which disgust and relief were equally compounded.

“Just what I told you,” he said. “False alarm.”

“What did you—”

“Hold your horses, young lady. Give me a chance to sit down, I’ll tell you about it. Went straight out there and didn’t run into any trouble at all. Bates, he was down in the woods behind the house, getting himself some kindling. I never even had to show the warrant—he was nice as pie. Told me to go look around for myself, even gave me the keys to the motel.”

“And did you look?”

“Of course I did. I went into every unit of the motel, and I covered that house of his from top to bottom. Didn’t find a soul. Didn’t find anything. Because there’s nobody there. Nobody’s been there, except Bates. He’s lived alone all these years.”

“What about the bedroom?”

“There’s a bedroom up front on the second floor, all right, and it used to be his mother’s, when she was alive. That part’s straight enough. In fact, he even kept it the way it was. Says he has no other use for it, seeing as how he’s got the whole house to himself. Guess he’s kind of an odd one, that Bates, but who wouldn’t be, living alone like that all these years?”

“Did you ask him about what Arbogast told me?” Sam murmured. “About seeing his mother when he drove in, and all that?”

“Sure, right away. He says it’s a lie—Arbogast never even mentioned seeing anyone. I talked kind of rough to him at first, on purpose, just to see if there was something he was holding back on, but his story makes sense. I asked him about this Chicago business again, too. And I still think that’s the real answer.”

“I can’t believe it,” Lila said. “Why would Mr. Arbogast make up that unnecessary excuse about seeing Bates’s mother?”

“You’ll have to ask him, next time you see him,” Sheriff Chambers told her. “Maybe he saw her ghost sitting in the window.”

“You’re *sure* his mother is dead?”

“I already told you I was there, at the funeral. I saw the note she left for Bates when she and this Considine fella killed themselves. What more do you want? Do I have to dig her up and show her to you?” Chambers sighed. “I’m sorry, miss. Didn’t mean to fly off that way. But I’ve done all I can. I searched the house. Your sister isn’t there, this man Arbogast isn’t there. Didn’t find a trace of their cars, either. Seems to me the answer’s pretty plain. Anyway, I’ve done all I can.”

“What would you advise me to do, now?”

“Why, check with this fella Arbogast’s home office, see if they know anything. Maybe they’ve got some lead on this Chicago angle. Don’t suppose you can contact anyone until tomorrow morning, though.”

“I guess you’re right.” Lila stood up. “Well, thank you for all your trouble. I’m sorry to be such a bother.”

“That’s what I am here for. Right, Sam?”

“Right,” Sam answered.

Sheriff Chambers stood up. “I know how you feel about all this, miss,” he said. “I wish I could have been more of a help to you. But there’s just nothing solid for me to go on. If you only had some kind of real evidence, now, then maybe—”

“We understand,” Sam said. “And we both appreciate your cooperation.” He turned to Lila. “Shall we go now?”

“You look into this Chicago business,” the big man called after them. “So long, now.”

Then they were on the sidewalk. The late afternoon sun cast slanting shadows. As they stood there the black tip of the Civil War veteran’s bayonet grazed Lila’s throat.

“Want to come back to my place?” Sam suggested. The girl shook her head.

“The hotel?”

“No.”

“Where would you like to go, then?”

“I don’t know about you,” Lila said. “But I’m going to that motel.”

She raised her face defiantly, and the sharp shadow line slashed across her neck. For a moment, it look as though somebody had just cut off Lila’s head . . .

Norman knew they were coming, even before he saw them driving in.

He didn't know *who* they'd be, or what they'd look like, or even how many of them would come. But he knew they were coming.

He'd known it ever since last night when he lay in bed and listened to the stranger pound on the door. He had stayed very quiet, not even getting up to peek through the upstairs window. In fact, he'd even put his head under the covers while he waited for the stranger to go away. Finally, he *did* leave. It was lucky that Mother was locked in the fruit cellar. Lucky for him, lucky for her, lucky for the stranger.

But he'd known, then, that this wouldn't be the end of it. And it wasn't. This afternoon, when he was down at the swamp again, cleaning up, Sheriff Chambers had driven in.

It gave Norman quite a start, seeing the Sheriff again, after all these years. He remembered him very well, from the time of the nightmare. That's the way Norman always thought about Uncle Joe Considine and the poison and everything—it had been a long, long nightmare from the moment he phoned the Sheriff until months afterward, when they let him out of the hospital to come back here to the house once more.

Seeing Sheriff Chambers now was like having the same nightmare all over, but people *do* have the same nightmare again and again. And the important thing to remember was that Norman had fooled the Sheriff the first time, when everything had been much harder. This time it should be even easier, if he remembered to be calm. It should be, and it was.

He answered all the questions, he gave the Sheriff the keys, he let him search the house alone. That was even funny, in a way—letting the Sheriff go up to the house and search while Norman stayed down at the edge of the swamp and finished smoothing out all the footprints. It was funny, that is, as long as Mother kept quiet. If she thought Norman was down there in the

cellar, if she cried out or made a sound, then there'd be real trouble. But she wouldn't do that, she had been warned, and besides the Sheriff wasn't even looking for Mother. He thought she was dead and buried.

How he'd fooled him the first time! Yes, and he fooled him just as easily again, because the Sheriff came back and he hadn't noticed a thing. He asked Norman some more questions about the girl and Arbogast and going to Chicago. Norman was tempted to invent a little more—maybe even say that the girl had mentioned staying at a certain hotel up there—but on second thought he realized it wouldn't be wise. It was better to just stick to what he'd already made up. The Sheriff believed that. He almost apologized before he went away.

So that part was settled, but Norman knew there'd be more. Sheriff Chambers hadn't come out here just on his own initiative. He wasn't following up any hunch—he couldn't be, because he hadn't known anything. His phone call yesterday was the tipoff. It meant somebody else knew about Arbogast and the girl. They got Sheriff Chambers to call. They sent the stranger out here last night, to snoop. They sent the Sheriff out today. And the next step would be to come out themselves. It was inevitable. Inevitable.

When Norman thought about that, his heart started up again. He wanted to do all sorts of crazy things—run away, go down into the cellar and put his head in Mother's lap, go upstairs and pull the covers back over his head. But none of this would help. He couldn't run away and leave Mother, and he couldn't risk taking her with him, now; not in her condition. He couldn't even go to her for comfort or advice. Up until last week, that's just what he would have done, but he didn't trust her any more, couldn't trust her after what had happened. And pulling the covers over his head wouldn't help.

If they came here again, he'd have to face them. That was the only sensible solution. Just face them, stick to his story, and nothing would happen.

But meanwhile he had to do something about the way his heart pounded.

He sat there in the office, all alone. Alabama had pulled out early this morning, and Illinois had left right after lunch. There were no new customers. It was beginning to cloud up again, and if the storm came he

needn't expect any business this evening. So one drink wouldn't hurt. Not if it made his heart calm down again.

Norman found a bottle in the cubbyhole under the counter. It was the second bottle of the three he'd put there over a month ago. That wasn't bad; just the second bottle. Drinking the first one had gotten him into all this trouble, but it wouldn't happen that way again. Not now, when he could be sure Mother was safely out of the way. In a little while, when it got dark, he'd see about fixing her some dinner. Maybe tonight they could talk. But right now, he needed this drink. These drinks. The first didn't really help, but the second did the trick. He was quite relaxed now. Quite relaxed. He could even take a third one if he wanted to.

And then he wanted to very much, because he saw the car drive in.

It had nothing to distinguish it from any other car, no out-of-state license or anything like that, but Norman knew right away that *they* were here. When you're a psychic sensitive, you can *feel* the vibrations. And you can feel your heart pound, so you gulp the drink and watch them get out of the car. The man was ordinary looking, and for a moment Norman wondered if he hadn't made a mistake. But then he saw the girl.

He saw the girl, and he tilted the bottle up—tilted it up to take a hasty swallow and to hide her face at the same time—because it was *the* girl.

*She'd come back, out of the swamp!*

No. No, she couldn't. That wasn't the answer, it couldn't be. Look at her again. Now, in the light. Her hair wasn't the same color at all, really; it was brownish blond. And she wasn't as heavy. But she looked enough like the girl to be her sister.

Yes, of course. That must be who she was. And it explained everything. This Jane Wilson or whatever her real name was had run away with that money. The detective came after her, and now her sister. That was the answer.

He knew what Mother would do in a case like this. But thank God he'd never have to run *that* risk again. All he had to do was stick to his story and they'd go away. Just remember nobody could find anything, nobody could prove anything. And there was nothing to worry about, now that he knew what to expect.

The liquor had helped. It helped him to stand patiently behind the counter while he waited for them to come in. He could see them talking together outside the office, and that didn't bother him. He could see the dark clouds coming on out of the west, and that didn't bother him either. He saw the sky darken as the sun surrendered its splendor. *The sun surrendered its splendor*—why, it was like poetry; he was a poet; Norman smiled. He was many things. If they only knew—

But they didn't know, and they wouldn't know, and right now he was just a fat, middle-aged motel proprietor who blinked up at the pair of them as they came in and said, "Can I help you?"

The man came up to the counter. Norman braced himself for the first question, then blinked again when the man didn't ask it. Instead he was saying, "Could we have a room, please?"

Norman nodded, unable to answer. Had he made a mistake? But no, now the girl was stepping forward, and she *was* the sister, no doubt about it.

"Yes. Would you like to—"

"No, that's not necessary. We're anxious to get into some clean clothes."

It was a lie. Their clothing was fresh. But Norman smiled. "All right. It's ten dollars, double. If you'll just sign here and pay me now—"

He pushed the register forward. The man hesitated for a moment, then scribbled. Norman had had long practice when it came to reading names upside down. *Mr. and Mrs. Sam Wright. Independence, Mo.*

That was another lie. Wright was wrong. Filthy, stupid liars! They thought they were so clever, coming in here and trying to pull their tricks on him. Well, they'd see!

The girl was staring at the register now. Not at the name the man had written, but at another one, up on top of the page. Her sister's name. *Jane Wilson*, or whatever it was.

She didn't think he noticed when she squeezed the man's arm, but he did.

"I'll give you Number one," Norman said.

"Where is that?" the girl asked.

"Down at the end."

"How about Number Six?"

*Number Six.* Norman remembered now. He'd written it down, as he always did after each signature. Number Six had been the room he'd given the sister, of course. She'd noticed that.

"Number Six is up at this end," he said. "But you wouldn't want that. The fan's broken."

"Oh, we won't need a fan. Storm's coming up, it'll cool in a hurry."

*Liar.* "Besides, six is our lucky number. We were married on the sixth of this month," *Dirty, filthy liar.*

Norman shrugged. "All right," he said.

And it *was* all right. Now that he thought it over, it was even *better* than all right. Because if that's the way the liars were going to play it, if they weren't going to come out with any questions but just sneak around, then Number Six was ideal. He didn't have to worry about them finding anything in there. And he could keep an eye on them. Yes, he could keep an eye on them. Perfect!

So he took the key and he escorted them next door to Number Six. It was only a few steps, but already the wind had come up and it felt chilly there in the twilight. He unlocked the unit while the man brought out a bag. One ridiculous little bag, all the way from Independence. *Nasty, rotten liars!*

He opened the door and they stepped in. "Will there be anything else?" he asked.

"No, we're all right now, thank you."

Norman closed the door. He went back to the office and took another drink. A congratulatory drink. This was going to be even easier than he'd dreamed. It was going to be easy as pie.

Then he tilted the license in its frame and stared through the crack into the bathroom of Number Six.

They weren't occupying it, of course; they were in the bedroom beyond. But he could hear them moving around, and once in a while he caught muffled phrases of their conversation. The two of them were searching for something. What it was he couldn't imagine. Judging from what he overheard, they weren't even sure, themselves.

". . . help if we knew what we were looking for." *The man's voice.*

*And then, the girl's.* “. . . anything happened, there'd be something he overlooked. I'm sure of it. Crime laboratories you read about . . . always little clues . . .”

*Man's voice again.* “But we're not detectives. I still think . . . better to talk to him . . . come right out, frighten him into admitting . . .”

Norman smiled. They weren't going to frighten *him* into anything. Any more than they were going to find anything. He'd been over that room thoroughly, from top to bottom. There were no telltale signs of what had happened, not the tiniest stain of blood, not a single hair.

*Her voice, coming closer now.* “. . . understand? If we only *could* find something to go on, then we'd be able to scare him so that he'd talk.”

*She was walking into the bathroom now, and he was following her.* “With any kind of evidence at all we could make the Sheriff come out. The State Police do that kind of laboratory work, don't they?”

*He was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, watching her as she examined the sink.* “Look, how clean everything is! I tell you, we'd better talk to him. It's our only chance.”

*She had stepped out of Norman's field of vision. She was looking into the shower stall now, he could hear the curtains swishing back.*

*The little bitch, she was just like her sister, she had to go into the shower. Well, let her. Let her and be damned!*

“. . . not a sign . . .”

Norman wanted to laugh out loud. Of course there wasn't a sign! He waited for her to step out of the shower stall, but she didn't reappear. Instead he heard a sudden thumping noise.

“What are you doing?”

It was the man who asked the question, but Norman echoed it. What was she doing?

“Just reaching around in back here, behind the stall. You never know . . . Sam. Look! I've found something!”

*She was standing in front of the mirror again, holding something in her hand. What was it, what had the little bitch found?*

“Sam it's an earring. One of Mary's earrings!”

“Are you sure?”

*No, it couldn't be the other earring. It couldn't be.*

“Of course it's one of hers. I ought to know. I gave them to her myself, for her birthday, last year. There's a custom jeweler who runs a little hole-in-the wall shop in Dallas. He specializes in making up individual pieces—just one of a kind, you know. I had him do these for her. She thought it was terribly extravagant of me, but she loved them.”

*He was holding the earring under the light now, staring at it as she spoke.*

“She must have knocked it off when she was taking her shower and it fell over in back of the stall. Unless something else happ— Sam, what's the matter?”

“I'm afraid something did happen, Lila. Do you see this? Looks to me like dried blood.”

“Oh—*no!*”

“Yes. Lila, you were right.”

*The bitch. They were all bitches. Listen to her, now.*

“Sam, we've got to get into that house. We've got to.”

“That's a job for the Sheriff.”

“He wouldn't believe us, even if we showed him this. He'd say she fell, bumped her head in the shower, something like that.”

“Maybe she did.”

“Do you really believe that, Sam? Do you?”

“No.” He sighed. “I don't. But it still isn't proof that Bates had anything to do with—whatever did happen here. It's up to the Sheriff to find out more.”

“But he won't do anything, I know he won't! We'd have to have something that would really convince him, something from the house. I know we could find something there.”

“No. Too dangerous.”

“Then let's find Bates, show this to him. Maybe we can make him talk.”

“Yes, and maybe we can't. If he *is* involved, do you think he's just going to break down and confess? The smartest thing to do is go after the Sheriff,

right now.”

“What if Bates is suspicious? If he sees us leave, he might run away.”

“He doesn’t suspect us, Lila. But if you’re worried, we could just put through a call—”

“The phone is in the office. He’d hear us.” Lila paused for a moment. “Listen, Sam. Let *me* go after the Sheriff. You stay here and talk to Bates.”

“And accuse him?”

“Certainly not! Just go in and talk to him while I leave. Tell him I’m running into town to go to the drugstore, tell him anything, just so he doesn’t get alarmed and stays put. Then we can be sure of things.”

“Well—”

“Give me the earring, Sam.”

The voices faded, because they were going back into the other room. The voices faded, but the words remained. The man was staying here while *she* went and got the Sheriff. That’s the way it was going to be. And he couldn’t stop her. If Mother was here, she’d stop her. She’d stop them both. But Mother wasn’t here. She was locked up in the fruit cellar.

Yes, and if that little bitch showed the Sheriff the bloody earring, he’d come back and look for Mother. Even if he didn’t find her in the cellar, he might get an idea. For twenty years now he hadn’t even dreamed the truth, but he might, now. He might do the one thing Norman had always been afraid he’d do. He might find out what really happened the night Uncle Joe Considine died.

There were more sounds coming from next door. Norman adjusted the license frame hastily; he reached for the bottle again. But there was not time to take another drink, not now. Because he could hear the door slam, they were coming out of Number Six, she was going to the car and he was walking in here.

He turned to face the man, wondering what he was going to say.

But even more, he was wondering what the Sheriff would do. *The Sheriff could go up to Fairvale Cemetery and open Mother’s grave. And when he opened it, when he saw the empty coffin, then he’d know the real secret.*

*He’d know that Mother was alive.*

There was a pounding in Norman's chest, a pounding that was drowned out by the first rumble of thunder as the man opened the door and came in.

For a moment Sam hoped that the sudden thunder would muffle the sound of the car starting in the driveway. Then, he noticed that Bates was standing at the end of the counter. From that position he could see the entire driveway and a quarter of a mile up the road. So there was no sense trying to ignore Lila's departure.

"Mind if I come in for a few minutes?" Sam asked. "Wife's taking a little ride into town. She's fresh out of cigarettes."

"Used to have a machine here," Bates answered. "But there wasn't enough call for them, so they yanked it out." He peered over Sam's shoulder, gazing off into the dusk, and Sam knew he was watching the car move onto the highway. "Too bad she has to go all that way. Looks as if it's going to be raining pretty hard in a few minutes."

"Get much rain around here?" Sam sat down on the arm of a battered sofa.

"Quite a bit." Bates nodded vaguely. "We get all kinds of things around here."

What did he mean by that remark? Sam peered up at him in the dim light. The eyes behind the fat man's glasses seemed vacant. Suddenly Sam caught the telltale whiff of alcohol, and at the same moment he noticed the bottle standing at the edge of the counter. That was the answer: Bates was a little bit drunk. Just enough to immobilize his expression, but not enough to affect his awareness. He caught Sam looking at the whiskey bottle.

"Care for a drink?" he was asking. "Just about to pour a little one for myself when you came in."

Sam hesitated. "Well—"

"Find you a glass. There's one under here someplace." He bent behind the counter, emerged holding a shot-glass. "Don't generally bother with them, myself. Don't generally take a drink when I'm on duty, either. But

with the damp coming on, a little something helps, particularly if you have rheumatism the way I do.”

He filled the shot-glass, pushed it forward on the counter. Sam rose and walked over to it.

“Besides, there won’t be any more customers coming along in this rain. Look at it come down!”

Sam turned. It was raining hard, now; he couldn’t see more than a few feet up the road in the downpour. It was getting quite dark, too, but Bates made no movement to switch on any lights.

“Go ahead, take your drink and sit down,” Bates said. “Don’t worry about me. I like to stand here.”

Sam returned to the sofa. He glanced at his watch. Lila had been gone about eight minutes now. Even in this rain, she’d get to Fairvale in less than twenty—then ten minutes to find the Sheriff, or say fifteen just to be on the safe side—twenty minutes more to return. Still, it would be better than three quarters of an hour. That was a long time to stall. What could he talk about?

Sam lifted his glass. Bates was taking a swig out of the bottle. He made a gulping noise.

“Must get pretty lonesome out here sometimes,” Sam said.

“That’s right.” The bottle thumped down on the counter. “Pretty lonesome.”

“But interesting, too, in a way, I suppose. I’ll bet you get to see all kinds of people in a spot like this.”

“They come and go. I don’t pay much attention. After a while you hardly notice.”

“Been here a long time?”

“Over twenty years, running the motel. I’ve always lived here, all my life.”

“And you run the whole place by yourself?”

“That’s right.” Bates moved around the counter, carrying the bottle. “Here, let me fill your glass.”

“I really shouldn’t.”

“Won’t hurt you. I’m not going to tell your wife.” Bates chuckled. “Besides, I don’t like to drink alone.”

He poured, then retreated behind the counter.

Sam sat back. The man’s face was only a gray blur in the growing darkness. The thunder sounded overhead again, but there was no lightning. And here inside everything seemed quiet and peaceful.

Looking at this man, listening to him, Sam was beginning to feel slightly ashamed. He sounded so—so damned *ordinary*! It was hard to imagine him being mixed up in something like this.

And just what was he mixed up in, anyway, if he *was* mixed up? Sam didn’t know. Mary had stolen some money, Mary had been here overnight, she had lost an earring in the shower. But she could have banged her head, she could have cut her ear when the earring came off. Yes, and she could have gone on to Chicago, too, just the way Arbogast and the Sheriff seemed to think. He really didn’t know very much about Mary, when he came right down to it. In a way, her sister seemed more familiar. A nice girl, but too hair-triggered, too impulsive. Always making snap judgments and decisions. Like this business of wanting to run straight up and search Bates’s house. Good thing he’d talked her out of that one. Let her bring the Sheriff. Maybe even that was a mistake. The way Bates was acting now, he didn’t seem like a man who had anything on his conscience.

Sam remembered that he was supposed to be talking. It wouldn’t do to just sit here.

“You were right,” he murmured. “It is raining pretty hard.”

“I like the sound of the rain,” Bates said. “I like the way it comes down hard. It’s exciting.”

“Never thought of it in that way. Guess you can use a little excitement around here.”

“I don’t know. We get our share.”

“We? I thought you said you lived here alone.”

“I said I operated the motel alone. But it belongs to both of us. My mother and me.”

Sam almost choked on the whiskey. He lowered the glass, clenching it tightly in his fist. “I didn’t know—”

“Of course not, how could you? Nobody does. That’s because she always stays in the house. She has to stay there. You see, most people think she’s dead.”

The voice was calm. Sam couldn’t see Bates’s face in the dimness now, but he knew it was calm, too.

“Actually, there *is* excitement around here, after all. Like there was twenty years ago, when Mother and Uncle Joe Considine drank the poison. I called the Sheriff and he came out and found them. Mother left a note, explaining everything. Then they had an inquest, but I didn’t go to it. I was sick. Very sick. They took me to the hospital. I was in the hospital a long time. Almost too long to do any good when I got out. But I managed.”

“Managed?”

Bates didn’t reply, but Sam heard the gurgle and then the bottle’s thump.

“Here,” Bates said. “Let me pour you another.”

“Not yet.”

“I insist.” He was coming around the counter now, and his shadowy bulk loomed over Sam. He reached for Sam’s glass.

Sam drew back. “First tell me the rest,” he said quickly.

Bates halted. “Oh, yes. I brought Mother back home with me. That was the exciting part, you see—going out to the cemetery at night and digging up the grave. She’d been shut up in that coffin for such a long time that at first I thought she really *was* dead. But she wasn’t, of course. She couldn’t be. Or else she wouldn’t have been able to communicate with me when I was in the hospital all that while. It was only a trance state, really; what we call suspended animation. I knew how to revive her. There *are* ways, you know, even if some folks call it magic. Magic—that’s just a label, you know. Completely meaningless. It wasn’t so very long ago that people were saying that electricity was magic. Actually, it’s a force, a force which can be harnessed if you know the secret. Life is a force, too, a vital force. And like electricity, you can turn it off and on, off and on. I’d turned it off, and I knew how to turn it on again. Do you understand me?”

“Yes—it’s very interesting.”

“I thought you might be interested. You and the young lady. She isn’t really your wife, is she?”

“Why—”

“You see, I know more than you think I know. And more than *you* know, yourself.”

“Mr. Bates, are you quite sure you’re all right, I mean—”

“I know what you mean. You think I’m drunk, don’t you? But I wasn’t drunk when you came here. I wasn’t drunk when you found that earring and told the young lady to go to the Sheriff.”

“I—”

“Sit still, now. Don’t be alarmed. I’m not alarmed, am I? And I would be if anything was wrong. But nothing is wrong. You don’t think I’d tell you all this if there was anything wrong, do you?” The fat man paused. “No, I waited until I saw her drive up the road. I waited until I saw her stop.”

“Stop?” Sam tried to find the face in the darkness, but all he could hear was the voice.

“Yes. You didn’t know that she stopped the car, did you? You thought she went on to get the Sheriff, the way you told her. But she has a mind of her own. Remember what she wanted to do? She wanted to take a look at the house. And that’s what she did do. That’s where she is, now.”

“Let me out of here—”

“Of course. I’m not hindering you. It’s just that I thought you might like another drink, while I told you the rest about Mother. The reason I thought you might like to know is because of the girl. She’ll be meeting Mother, now.”

“Get out of my way!”

Sam rose, swiftly, and the blurred bulk fell back.

“You don’t want another drink, then?” Bates’s voice sounded petulantly over his shoulder. “Very well. Have it your own w—”

The end of his sentence was lost in the thunder, and the thunder was lost in the darkness as Sam felt the bottle explode against the roof of his skull. Then voice, thunder, explosion, and Sam himself all disappeared into the night . . .

And it was still night, but somebody was shaking him and shaking him; shaking him up out of the night and into his room where the light burned, hurting his eyes and making him blink. But Sam could feel now, and somebody's arms were around him, lifting him up, so that at first he felt as if his head would drop off. Then it was only throbbing, throbbing, and he could open his eyes and look at Sheriff Chambers.

Sam was sitting on the floor next to the sofa and Chambers was gazing down at him. Sam opened his mouth.

"Thank God," he said. "He was lying about Lila, then. She did get to you."

The Sheriff didn't seem to be listening. "Got a call from the hotel about half an hour ago. They were trying to locate your friend Arbogast. Seems he checked out, but he never took his bags with him. Left 'em downstairs Saturday morning, said he'd be back, but he never showed. Got to thinking it over, and then I tried to find you. Had a hunch you might have come out here on your own—lucky I followed through."

"Then Lila didn't notify you?" Sam tried to stand up. His head was splitting.

"Take it easy, there." Sheriff Chambers pushed him back. "No, I haven't seen her at all. Wait—"

But this time Sam managed to make it. He stood on his feet swaying.

"What happened here?" the Sheriff muttered. "Where's Bates?"

"He must have gone up to the house after he slugged me," Sam told him. "They're up there now, he and his mother."

"But she's dead—"

"No, she isn't." Sam murmured. "She's alive, the two of them are up at the house with Lila!"

"Come on." The big man ploughed out into the rain. Sam followed him, scrambling along the slippery walk, panting as they began the ascent of the steep slope leading to the house beyond.

"Are you sure?" Chambers called over his shoulder. "Everything's dark up there."

"I'm sure," Sam wheezed. But he might have saved his breath.

The thunder came suddenly and sharply, and the other sound was fainter and much more shrill. Yet both of them heard it, somehow, and both of them recognized it.

Lila was screaming.

Lila went up the steps, reaching the porch just before the rain came.

The house was old, its frame siding gray and ugly here in the half-light of the coming storm. Porch boards creaked under her feet, and she could hear the wind rattling the casements of the upstairs windows.

She rapped on the front door angrily, not expecting any answer from within. She didn't expect anyone to do anything any more.

The truth was that nobody else really *cared*. They didn't care about Mary at all, not a one of them. Mr. Lowery just wanted his money back, and Arbogast was only doing a job trying to find it for him. As for the Sheriff, all he was interested in was avoiding trouble. But it was Sam's reaction that really upset her.

Lila knocked again, and the house groaned a hollow echo. The sound of the rain drowned it out, and she didn't bother to listen closely.

All right, she *was* angry, she admitted it—and why shouldn't she be? A whole week of listening to *take it easy, be calm, relax, just be patient*. If they had their way, she'd still be back there in Fort Worth, she wouldn't have even come up here. But at least she'd counted on Sam to help her.

She might have known better. Oh, he seemed nice enough, even attractive in a way, but he had that slow, cautious, conservative small-town outlook. He and the Sheriff made a good pair. *Don't take any chances*, that was their whole idea.

Well, it wasn't hers. Not after she'd found the earring. How could Sam shrug it off and tell her to go get the Sheriff again? Why didn't he just grab Bates and beat the truth out of him? That's what she would have done, if she were a man. One thing was certain, she was through depending on others—others who didn't care, who just wanted to keep out of trouble. She didn't trust Sam to stick his neck out any more, and she certainly didn't trust the Sheriff.

If she hadn't gotten so angry she wouldn't be doing this, but she was sick of their caution, sick of their theories. There are times when you must stop analyzing and depend on your emotions. It was sheer emotion—frustration, to be exact—which prompted her to keep on with the hopeless task of rummaging around until she found Mary's earring. And there's be something else here in the house. There *had* to be. She wasn't going to be foolish about this, she'd keep her head, but she was going to see for herself. Then it would be time enough to let Sam and the Sheriff take over.

Just thinking about their smugness made her rattle the doorknob. That wouldn't do any good. There was nobody inside the house to answer her, she already knew that. And she wanted in. That was the problem.

Lila dipped into her purse. All those tired old gags about how a woman's purse contains everything—the kind of gags that hicks like Sam and the Sheriff would appreciate. Nail file? No, that wouldn't do. But somewhere or other, she remembered, she'd picked up a skeleton key. It might be in the coin compartment, which she never used. Yes, here it was.

*Skeleton key.* Why did they have to call it that? Never mind, she wasn't going to worry about problems in philology now. The only problem was whether this key would work.

She inserted it in the lock and turned it part way. The lock resisted, and she reversed the motion. The key almost fitted, but there was something—

Again, anger came to her aid. She twisted the key sharply. It snapped at the handle with a brittle click, but the lock gave. She turned the doorknob, felt the door move away from her hand. It was open.

Lila stood in the hall. It was darker inside the house than out there on the porch. But there must be a light switch somewhere along the wall here.

She found it, snapped it on. The unshaded overhead bulb gave off a feeble, sickly glare against the background of peeling, shredded wallpaper. What was the design—bunches of grapes, or were they violets? Hideous. Like something out of the last century.

A glance into the parlor confirmed the observation. Lila didn't bother to go in. The rooms on this floor could wait until later. Arbogast had said he saw someone looking out of a window upstairs. That would be the place to begin.

There was no light switch for the stairway. Lila went up slowly, groping along the banister. As she reached the landing, the thunder came. The whole house seemed to shake with it. Lila gave an involuntary shudder, then relaxed. It *was* involuntary, she told herself. Perfectly natural. Certainly, there was nothing about an empty house like this to frighten anybody. And now she could turn on the light here in the upstairs hall. It had been papered in green stripes, and if *that* didn't frighten her, then nothing could. Ghastly!

She had her choice of three doors to enter here. The first led to the bathroom. Lila had never seen such a place except in a museum—no, she corrected herself, they don't have bathroom exhibits in museums. But they should have had this one. An upright bathtub on legs; open pipes under the washstand and toilet seat; and dangling from the high ceiling next to the toilet, a metal pull-chain. There was a small mirror, flawed and flecked, over the washbowl, but no medicine cabinet behind it. Here was the linen closet, stacked with towels and bedding. She rummaged through the shelves hastily; their contents told her nothing except that Bates probably had his laundry sent out. The sheets were perfectly ironed, neatly folded.

Lila chose the second door, switched on the light. Another weak and naked overhead bulb, but its illumination was sufficient to reveal the room for what it was. Bates's bedroom—singularly small, singularly cramped, with a low cot more suitable for a little boy than a grown man. Probably he'd always slept here, ever since he was a child. The bed itself was rumpled and showed signs of recent occupancy. There was a bureau over in the corner, next to the closet—one of those antique horrors with a dark oak finish and corroded drawer-pulls. She had no compunctions about searching the drawers.

The top one contained neckties and handkerchiefs, most of them soiled. The neckties were wide and old-fashioned. She found a tie clasp in a box from which it had apparently never been removed, and two sets of cuff links. The second drawer contained shirts, the third held socks and underwear. The bottom drawer was filled with white, shapeless garments which she finally—and almost incredulously—identified as nightgowns. Maybe he wore a bedcap, too. Really, this whole house belonged in a museum!

It was odd that there were no personal mementos, though; no papers, no photographs. But then, perhaps he kept them down at the motel, in the desk there. Yes, that was very likely.

Lila turned her attention to the pictures on the walls. There were two of them. The first showed a small boy sitting on a pony, and the second showed the same child standing in front of a rural schoolhouse with five other children, all girls. It took Lila several moments before she identified the youngster as Norman Bates. He had been quite thin as a child.

Nothing remained, now, except the closet and the two large bookshelves in the corner. She disposed of the closet quickly; it contained two suits on hangers, a jacket, an overcoat, a pair of soiled and paint-spotted trousers. There was nothing in any of the pockets of these garments. Two pair of shoes and a pair of bedroom slippers on the floor completed the inventory.

The bookshelves now.

Here Lila found herself pausing, puzzling, then peering in perplexity at the incongruous contents of Norman Bates's library. *A New Model of the Universe, The Extension of Consciousness. The Witch-Cult in Western Europe, Dimension and Being.* These were not the books of a small boy, and they were equally out of place in the home of a rural motel proprietor. She scanned the shelves rapidly. Abnormal psychology, occultism, theosophy. Translations of *Là Bas, Justine.* And here, on the bottom shelf, a nondescript assortment of untitled volumes, poorly bound. Lila pulled one out at random and opened it. The illustration that leaped out at her was almost pathologically pornographic.

She replaced the volume hastily and stood up. As she did so, the initial shock of revulsion ebbed away, giving place to a second, stronger reaction. There *was* something here, there must be. What she could not read in Norman Bates's dull, fat, commonplace face was all too vividly revealed here in his library.

Frowning, she retreated to the hall. The rain clattered harshly on the roof and thunder boomed as she opened the dark, paneled door leading to the third room. For a moment she stood staring into the dimness, inhaling a musty, mingled odor of stale perfume and—what?

She pressed the light switch at the side of the doorway, then gasped.

This was the front bedroom, no doubt of it. And the Sheriff had said something about how Bates had kept it unchanged since his mother's death. But Lila wasn't quite prepared for the actuality.

Lila wasn't quite prepared to step bodily into another era. And yet she found herself there, back in the world as it had been long before she was born.

For the décor of this room had been outmoded many years before Bates's mother died. It was a room such as she thought had not existed for the past fifty years; a room that belonged in a world of gilt ormolu clocks, Dresden figurines, sachet-scented pincushions, turkey-red carpet, tasseled draperies, frescoed vanity tops and four-poster beds; a room of rockers, china cats, of hand-embroidered bedspreads and overstuffed chairs covered with antimacassars.

*And it was still alive.*

That was what gave Lila the feeling of dislocation in space and time. Downstairs were remnants of the past ravaged by decay, and upstairs all was shabbiness and neglect. But this room was composed, consistent, coherent; a vital, functioning entity complete unto itself. It was spotlessly clean, immaculately free of dust and perfectly ordered. And yet, aside from the musty odor, there was no feeling of being in a showplace or a museum. The room *did* seem alive, as does any room that is lived in for a long time. Furnished more than fifty years ago, untenanted and untouched since the death of its occupant twenty years ago, it was still the room of a living person. A room where, just yesterday, a woman had sat and peered out of the window—

*There are no ghosts,* Lila told herself, then frowned again at the realization that it had been necessary to make the denial. And yet, here in this room, she could feel a living presence.

She turned to the closet. Coats and dresses still hung in a neat row, though some of the garments were sagging and wrinkled through long lack of pressing. Here were the short skirts of a quarter of a century ago; up on the shelf the ornate hats, the head-scarves, several shawls such as an older woman might wear in a rural community. At the rear of the closet was a deep, empty recess which might have been meant for the storage of luggage. And nothing more.

Lila started over to examine the dresser and vanity, then halted beside the bed. The hand-embroidered bedspread was very lovely; she put out a hand to feel the texture, then drew it back hastily.

The bedspread was tucked in tightly at the bottom and hung perfectly over the sides. But the top was out of line. It had been tucked in, yes, but quickly, carelessly, so that an inch of the double pillow showed; the way a spread is tucked in when a bed has been made in a hurry—

She ripped the spread down, pulled back the covers. The sheets were a smudgy gray and covered with little brown flecks. But the bed itself, and the pillow above it, bore the faint yet unmistakable indentation made by a recent occupant. She could almost trace the outline of the body by the way the undersheet sagged, and there was a deep depression in the center of the pillow where the brown flecks were thickest.

*There are no ghosts*, Lila told herself again. This room has been used. Bates didn't sleep here—his own bed offered sufficient evidence of that. But somebody had been sleeping, somebody had been staring out of the window. *And if it had been Mary, where was she now?*

She could ransack the rest of the room, go through the drawers, search downstairs. But that wasn't important at the moment. There was something else she had to do first, if she could only remember. *Where was Mary, now?*

Then she knew.

What was it Sheriff Chambers had said? That he found Norman Bates down in the woods behind the house, gathering firewood?

Firewood for the furnace. Yes, that was it. *The furnace in the basement—*

Lila turned and fled down the stairs. The front door was open and the wind howled in. The front door was open, because she'd used the skeleton key, and now she knew why the term bothered her, it was because of the *skeleton* of course, and she knew why she had been so angry, too, ever since finding the earring. She had been angry because she was afraid, and the anger helped to hide the fear. The fear of what had happened to Mary, what she *knew* had happened to Mary, down in the cellar. It was because of Mary that she was afraid, not for herself. He had kept her here all week, maybe he'd tortured her, maybe he'd done to her what that man was doing in that

filthy book, he'd tortured her until he found out about the money, and then

—

*The cellar. She had to find the cellar.*

Lila groped her way along the downstairs hall, into the kitchen. She found the light, then gasped at the tiny furry creature crouched on the shelf before her, ready to spring. But it was only a stuffed squirrel, its button eyes idiotically alive in the reflection of the overhead light.

The basement stairs were just ahead. She fumbled at the wall until her hand brushed over another switch. The light went on below, just a faint and faltering glow in the darkened depths. Thunder growled in counterpoint to the clatter of her heels.

The bare bulb dangled from a cord directly in front of the furnace. It was a big furnace, with a heavy iron door. Lila stood there, staring at it. She was trembling now, she admitted that to herself; she could admit everything now. She'd been a fool to come here alone, a fool to do what she had done, a fool to do what she was doing now. But she had to do it, because of Mary. She had to open the furnace door and see what she knew would be inside. *God, what if the fire was still going? What if—*

But the door was cold. And there was no heat from the furnace, no heat from within the dark, utterly empty recess behind the door. She stooped, peering, without even attempting to use the coal-poker. No ashes, no smell of burning, nothing at all. Unless it had been recently cleaned, the furnace hadn't been used since last spring.

Lila turned away. She saw the old-fashioned laundry tubs, and the table and chair beyond them, next to the wall. There were bottles on the table, and carpentry tools, plus an assortment of knives and needles. Some of the knives were oddly curved, and several of the needles were attached to syringes. Behind them rose a clutter of wooden blocks, heavy wire, and large shapeless blobs of a white substance she could not immediately identify. One of the bigger fragments looked something like the cast she had worn as a child, that time she'd broken her leg. Lila approached the table, gazing at the knives in puzzled concentration.

Then she heard the sound.

At first she thought it was thunder, but then came the creaking from overhead, and she knew.

Somebody had come into the house. Somebody was tiptoeing along the hall. Was it Sam? Had he come to find her? But then why didn't he call her name?

*And why did he close the cellar door?*

The cellar door had closed, just now. She could hear the sharp click of the lock, and the footsteps moving away, back along the hall. The intruder must be going upstairs to the second floor.

She was locked in the cellar. And there was no way out. No way out, nowhere to hide. The whole basement was visible to anyone descending the cellar stairs. And somebody would be coming down those stairs soon. She knew it now.

If she could only keep herself concealed for a moment, then whoever came after her would have to descend all the way into the basement. And she'd have a chance to run for the stairs, then.

The best place would be under the stairway itself. If she could cover up with some old papers or some rags—

Then Lila saw the blanket pinned to the far wall. It was a big Indian blanket, ragged and old. She tugged at it, and the rotted cloth ripped free of the nails which held it in place. It came off the wall, off the door.

*The door.* The blanket had concealed it completely, but there must be another room here, probably an old-fashioned fruit cellar. That would be the ideal place to hide and wait.

And she wouldn't have to wait much longer. Because now she could hear the faint, faraway footsteps coming down the hall again, moving along into the kitchen.

Lila opened the door of the fruit cellar.

It was then that she screamed.

She screamed when she saw the old woman lying there, the gaunt, gray-haired old woman whose brown, wrinkled face grinned up at her in an obscene greeting.

“Mrs. Bates!” Lila gasped.

“Yes.”

But the voice wasn't coming from those sunken, leathery jaws. It came from behind her, from the top of the cellar stairs, where the figure stood.

Lila turned to stare at the fat, shapeless figure, half-concealed by the tight dress which had been pulled down incongruously to cover the garments beneath. She stared up at the shrouding shawl, and at the white, painted, simpering face beneath it. She stared at the garishly reddened lips, watched them part in a convulsive grimace.

“*I am Norma Bates,*” said the high, shrill voice. And then there was the hand coming out, the hand that held the knife, and the feet were mincing down the stairs, and other feet were running, and Lila screamed again as Sam came down the stairs and the knife came up, quick as death. Sam grasped and twisted the hand that held it, twisted it from behind until the knife clattered to the floor.

Lila closed her mouth, but the scream continued. It was the insane scream of an hysterical woman, and it came from the throat of Norman Bates.

It took almost a week to reclaim the cars and the bodies from the swamp. The county highway crew had to come in with a dredger and hoist, but in the end the job was done. They found the money, too, right there in the glove compartment. Funny thing, it didn't even have a speck of mud on it, not a speck.

Somewhere along about the time they finished with the swamp, the men who knocked over the bank at Fulton were captured down in Oklahoma. But the story rated less than half a column in the *Fairvale Weekly Herald*. Almost the entire front page was given over to the Bates case. AP and UP picked it up right away, and there was quite a bit about it on television. Some of the write-ups compared it to the Gein affair up north, a few years back. They worked up a sweat over the "house of horror" and tried their damndest to make out that Norman Bates had been murdering motel visitors for years. They called for a complete investigation of every missing person case in the entire area for the past two decades, and urged that the entire swamp be drained to see if it would yield more bodies.

But then, of course, the newspaper writers didn't have to foot the bill for such a project.

Sheriff Chambers gave out a number of interviews, several of which were actually printed in full—two of them with photographs. He promised a full investigation of all aspects of the case. The local district attorney called for a speedy trial (primary election was coming in October) and did nothing to directly contradict the written and oral rumors which were circulating in which Norman Bates was portrayed as guilty of cannibalism, Satanism, incest, and necrophilia.

Actually, of course, he had never even talked to Bates, who was now temporarily confined for observation at the State Hospital.

Neither had the rumor-mongers, but that didn't stop them. Long before the week was out, it was beginning to appear that virtually the entire population of Fairvale, to say nothing of the entire county area south of there, had been personally and immediately acquainted with Norman Bates. Some of them had "gone to school with him when he was a boy" and even then they had all "noticed something funny about the way he acted." Quite a few had "seen him around that motel of his," and they too attested to the fact that they'd always "suspected" him. There were those who remembered his mother and Joe Considine, and they tried to establish how they "knew something was wrong when those two were supposed to have committed suicide that way," but of course the gruesome tidbits of twenty years ago seemed stale indeed as compared to more recent revelations.

The motel, of course, was closed—which seemed a pity, in a way, because there was no end to the number of morbid curiosity-lovers who sought it out. Quite conceivably, a goodly percentage would have been eager to rent rooms, and a slight raise would compensate for the loss of the towels which undoubtedly would have been filched as souvenirs of the gala occasion. But State Highway Patrol troopers guarded the motel and the property behind it.

Even Bob Summerfield was able to report a noticeable increase in business at the hardware store. Everybody wanted to talk to Sam, naturally, but he spend part of the following week in Fort Worth with Lila, then took a run up to the State Hospital where three psychiatrists were examining Norman Bates.

It wasn't until almost ten days later, however, that he was finally able to get a definite statement from Dr. Nicholas Steiner, who was officially in charge of the medical observation.

Sam reported the results of his interview to Lila, at the hotel, when she came in from Fort Worth the following weekend. He was noticeably reticent at first, but she insisted on the full details.

"We'll probably never know everything that happened," Sam told her, "and as for the reasons, Dr. Steiner told me himself that it was mostly a matter of making an educated guess. They kept Bates under heavy sedation at first, and even after he came out of it, nobody could get him to really talk very much. Steiner says he got closer to Bates than anyone else, but in the

last few days he appears to be in a very confused state. A lot of the things he said, about fugue and cathexis and trauma, are way over my head.

“But as near as he can make out, this all started way back in Bates’s childhood, long before his mother’s death. He and his mother were very close, of course, and apparently she dominated him. Whether there was ever anything more to their relationship, Dr. Steiner doesn’t know. But he does suspect that Norman was a secret transvestite long before Mrs. Bates died. You know what a transvestite is, don’t you?”

Lila nodded. “A person who dresses in the clothing of the opposite sex, isn’t that it?”

“Well, the way Steiner explained it, there’s a lot more to it than that. Transvestites aren’t necessarily homosexual, but they identify themselves strongly with members of the other sex. In a way, Norman wanted to be like his mother, and in a way he wanted his mother to become a part of himself.”

Sam lit a cigarette. “I’m going to skip the data about his school years, and his rejection by the army. But it was after that, when he was around nineteen, that his mother must have decided Norman wasn’t ever going out into the world on his own. Maybe she deliberately prevented him from growing up; we’ll never actually know just how much she was responsible for what he became. It was probably then that he began to develop his interest in occultism, things like that. And it was then that this Joe Considine came into the picture.

“Steiner couldn’t get Norman to say very much about Joe Considine—even today, more than twenty years later, his hatred is so great he can’t talk about the man without flying into a rage. But Steiner talked to the Sheriff and dug up all the old newspapers stories, and he has a pretty fair idea of what really happened.

“Considine was a man in his early forties; when he met Mrs. Bates she was thirty-nine. I guess she wasn’t much to look at, on the skinny side and prematurely gray, but ever since her husband had run off and left her she had owned quite a lot of farm property he’d put in her own name. It had brought in a good income during all these years and even though she paid out a fair amount to the couple who worked it for her, she was well off. Considine began to court her. It wasn’t too easy—I gather Mrs. Bates hated men ever since her husband deserted her and the baby, and this is one of the

reasons why she treated Norman the way she did, according to Dr. Steiner. But I was telling you about Considine. He finally got her to come around and agree to a marriage. He'd brought up this idea of selling the farm and using the money to build a motel—the old highway ran right alongside the place in those days, and there was a lot of business to be had.

“Apparently Norman had no objections to the motel idea. The plan went through without a hitch, and for the first three months he and his mother ran the new place together. It was then, and only then, that his mother told him that she and Considine were going to be married.”

“And that sent him off?” Lila asked.

Sam ground out his cigarette in the ash tray. It was a good excuse for him to turn away as he answered, “Not exactly, according to what Dr. Steiner found out. It seems the announcement was made under rather embarrassing circumstances, after Norman had walked in on his mother and Considine together in the upstairs bedroom. Whether the full effect of the shock was experienced immediately or whether it took quite a while for the reaction to set in, we don't know. But we do know what happened as a result. Norman poisoned his mother and Considine with strychnine. He used some kind of rat poison, served it to them with their coffee. I guess he waited until they had some sort of private celebration together; anyway there was a big dinner on the table, and the coffee was laced with brandy. It must have helped to kill the taste.”

“Horrible!” Lila shuddered.

“From all I hear, it *was*. The way I understand it, strychnine poisoning brings on convulsions, but not unconsciousness. The victims usually die from asphyxiation, when the chest muscles stiffen. Norman must have watched it all. And it was too much to bear.

“It was when he was writing the suicide note that Dr. Steiner thinks it happened. He had planned the note, of course, and knew how to imitate his mother's handwriting perfectly. He'd even figured out a reason—something about a pregnancy, and Considine being unable to marry because he had a wife and family living out on the West Coast, where he'd lived under another name. Dr. Steiner says the wording of the note itself would be enough to tip off anyone that something was wrong. But nobody noticed,

any more than they noticed what really happened to Norman after he finished the note and phoned the Sheriff to come out.

“They knew, at the time, that he was hysterical from shock and excitement. What they didn’t know is that while writing the note, he’d changed. Apparently, now that it was all over, he couldn’t stand the loss of his mother. He wanted her back. As he wrote the note in her handwriting, addressed to himself, he literally *changed* his mind. And Norman, or part of him, *became* his mother.

“Dr. Steiner says these cases are more frequent than you’d think, particularly when the personality is already unstable, as Norman’s was. And the grief set him off. His reaction was so severe, nobody even thought to question the suicide pact. Both Considine and his mother were in their graves long before Norman was discharged from the hospital.”

“And that’s when he dug her up?” Lila frowned.

“Apparently he did so, within a few months at most. He had this taxidermy hobby, and knew what he’d have to do.”

“But I don’t understand. If he thought he *was* his mother, then—”

“It isn’t quite that a simple. According to Steiner, Bates was now a multiple personality with at least three facets. There was *Norman*, the little boy who needed his mother and hated anything or anyone who came between him and her. Then, *Norma*, the mother, who could not be allowed to die. The third aspect might be called *Normal*—the adult Norman Bates, who had to go through the daily routine of living, and conceal the existence of the other personalities from the world. Of course, the three weren’t entirely distinct entities, and each contained elements of the other. Dr. Steiner called it an ‘unholy trinity.’

“But the adult Norman Bates kept control well enough so that he was discharged from the hospital. He went back to run the motel, and it was then that he felt the strain. What weighed on him most, as an adult personality, was the guilty knowledge of his mother’s death. Preserving her room was not enough. He wanted to preserve her, too; preserve her physically, so that the illusion of her living presence would suppress the guilt feelings.

“So he brought her back, actually brought her back from the grave and gave her a new life. He put her to bed at night, dressed her and took her

down into the house by day. Naturally, he concealed all this from outsiders and he did it well. Arbogast must have seen the figure placed in the upstairs window, but there's no proof that anyone else did, in all those years."

"Then the horror wasn't in the house," Lila murmured. "It was in his head."

"Steiner says the relationship was like that of a ventriloquist and his dummy. Mother and *little* Norman must have carried on regular conversations. And the adult Norman Bates probably rationalized the situation. He was able to pretend sanity, but who knows how much he really knew? He was interested in occultism and metaphysics. He probably believed in spiritualism every bit as much as he believed in the preservative powers of taxidermy. Besides, he couldn't reject or destroy these other parts of his personality without rejecting and destroying himself. He was leading three lives at once.

"And the point is, he was getting away with it, until—"

Sam hesitated, but Lila finished the sentence for him. "Until Mary came along. And something happened, and he killed her."

"Mother killed her," Sam said. "*Norma* killed your sister. There's no way of finding out the actual situation, but Dr. Steiner is sure that whenever a crisis arose, *Norma* became the dominant personality. Bates would start drinking, then black out while *she* took over. During the blackout, of course, he'd dressed up in her clothing. Afterward he'd hide her image away, because in his mind she was the real murderer and had to be protected."

"Then Steiner is quite sure he's insane?"

"Psychotic—that's the word he used. Yes, I'm afraid so. He's going to recommend that Bates be placed in the State Hospital, probably for life."

"Then there won't be any trial?"

"That's what I came here to tell you. No, there won't be any trial." Sam sighed heavily. "I'm sorry. I suppose the way you feel—"

"I'm glad," Lila said slowly. "It's better this way. Funny, how differently things work out in real life. None of us really suspected the truth, we just blundered along until we did the right things for the wrong reasons. And right now, I can't even hate Bates for what he did. He must have suffered

more than any of us. In a way I can almost understand. We're all not quite as sane as we pretend to be."

Sam rose, and she walked him to the door. "Anyway it's over, and I'm going to try to forget it. Just forget everything that happened."

"Everything?" Sam murmured. He didn't look at her.

And that was the end of it.

Or *almost* the end.

The real end came quietly.

It came in the small, barred room where the voices had muttered and mingled for so long a time—the man’s voice, the woman’s voice, the child’s.

The voices had exploded when triggered into fission, but now, almost miraculously, a fusion took place.

So that there was only one voice. And that was right, because there was only one person in the room. There always *had* been one person and *only* one.

She knew it now.

She knew it, and she was glad.

It was so much better to be this way; to be fully and completely aware of one’s self as one *really* was. To be serenely strong, serenely confident, serenely secure.

She could look back upon the past as though it were all a bad dream, and that’s just what it had been: a bad dream, peopled with illusions.

There had been a bad boy in the bad dream, a bad boy who had killed her lover and tried to poison her. Somewhere in the dream was the strangling and the wheezing and the clawing at the throat and the faces that turned blue. Somewhere in the dream was the graveyard at night and the digging and the panting and the splintering of the coffin lid, and then the moment of discovery, the moment of staring at what lay within. But what lay within wasn’t really dead. Not any more. The bad boy was dead, instead, and that was as it should be.

There had been a bad man in the bad dream, too, and he was also a murderer. He had peeked through the wall and he drank, and he read filthy books and believed in all sorts of crazy nonsense. But worst of all, he was responsible for the deaths of two innocent people—a young girl with

beautiful breasts and a man who wore a gray Stetson hat. She knew all about it, of course, and that's why she could remember the details. Because she had been there at the time, watching. But all she did was watch.

The bad man had really committed the murders and then he tried to blame it on her.

*Mother killed them.* That's what he said, but it was a lie.

# PSYCHO II



This book  
is for  
*Stella Loeb Bloch*  
with  
life-long love.

Norman Bates stared out of the library window, trying hard to avoid seeing the bars.

Just ignore them, that was the trick. Ignorance is bliss. But there was no bliss, and tricks didn't work here behind the bars of the State Hospital. Once it was the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane; now we live in a more enlightened age and they don't call it that anymore. But there were still bars on the windows and he was still inside, looking out.

*Stones walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.* The poet Richard Lovelace said that, way back in the seventeenth century, a long time ago. And Norman had been sitting here a long time—not three hundred years, but it felt like centuries.

Still, if he had to sit, the library was probably the best place, and serving as the librarian was an easy chore. Very few of the patients bothered with books and he had plenty of time to read on his own. That was how he'd encountered Richard Lovelace and all the others: sitting here undisturbed in the cool semi-darkness of the library, day after day. They'd even given him a desk of his own to show that they trusted him, knew he was responsible.

Norman was grateful for that. But at times like this, with the sun shining and birds singing in the streets outside his window, he realized that Lovelace was a liar. The birds were free, but Norman was in a cage.

He'd never told Dr. Claiborne because he didn't want to upset him, but he couldn't help feeling this way. It was so unjust, so unfair.

Whatever had occurred to bring him here—whatever he was *told* had occurred, if it was true—happened a long time ago. Long ago in another country, and the wench was dead. He knew now that he was Norman Bates, not his mother. He wasn't crazy anymore.

Of course, no one was crazy nowadays. No one, whatever he may have done, was a maniac; just mentally disturbed. But who wouldn't be

disturbed, shut away in a cage with a bunch of lunatics? Claiborne didn't call them that, but Norman knew a madman when he saw one, and through the years he'd seen many. Screwballs, they used to call them. But now television had the last word—wackos, weirdoes, freakos who've gone bananas. What was it the standup comics said on the talk shows about not playing with a full deck?

Well this deck was full, even though the cards were stacked against him. And he wasn't buying this humorous terminology they used to describe a serious illness. Strange how everyone tried to disguise truth with nonsense. Like the slang for death: kicking the bucket, wiped out, snuffed, wasted, blown away. The light touch to dispel the heavy fear.

What's in a name? *Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.* Another quotation, but not from Richard Lovelace. Mother was the one who used to say that, when Norman was just a little boy. But Mother was dead now and he was still alive. Alive and in a cage. Knowing this, facing up to the truth, proved he was sane.

If they'd only realized it, they'd have tried him for murder, found him guilty, sentenced him to a term in prison. Then he'd have been out in a few years, seven or eight at the most. Instead they said he was psychotic, but he wasn't; *they* were the crazy ones, locking up a sick man for life and letting murderers run free.

Norman stood up and walked over to the window. When he pressed close, his range of vision was no longer limited by the bars. Now he could look down on the grounds, sparkling in the bright sunshine of a Sunday afternoon in spring. The birdsongs were clearer now, soothing, more melodious. Sun and song in harmony, the music of the spheres.

When he'd first come here, there'd been no sunlight and no song—only the blackness and the shrieking. The blackness was inside him, a place where he could hide from reality, and the shrieking was the voice of demons searching him out to threaten and accuse. But Dr. Claiborne found a way to reach him in the darkness, and he'd exorcised the demons. His voice—the voice of sanity—had stilled the shrieking. It had taken a long time for Norman to come out of his hiding place and listen to the voice of reason, the voice that told him he was not his own mother, that he was—how did they say it?—his own person. A person who had done harm to

others, but never knowingly. So there could be no guilt, no blame. To understand this was to be healed, accepting it was the cure.

And cured he was. No restraint jacket, no padded cell, no sedation. As librarian he had access to the books he'd always loved, and television opened another window on the world, a window without bars. Life was comfortable here. And he was used to being a loner.

But on days like this he found himself missing the contact with other people. Real flesh-and-blood people, not characters in books or images on a tube. Aside from Claiborne, doctors and nurses and orderlies were transient presences. And now that he'd completed his task, Dr. Claiborne spent most of his time with other patients.

Norman couldn't do that. Now that he was himself again, he couldn't relate to the crazies. Their mumbling, grimacing, gesturing antics disturbed him, and he preferred solitude to their society. That was the one thing Claiborne couldn't change, though he'd certainly tried hard enough. It was Dr. Claiborne who'd urged Norman to participate in the amateur theatrical program here, and for a while it was an interesting challenge. At least he'd felt safe onstage, with the footlights separating him from his audience. Up there he was in control, making them laugh or cry at will. The greatest thrill of all came when he took the lead in *Charley's Aunt*—playing the role in drag, playing so well that they cheered and applauded his performance—but all the while knowing that it *was* just a performance, pretense, make-believe.

That was what Dr. Claiborne said afterward, and only then did Norman realize this had all been arranged, a deliberate test of his ability to function. *You should be proud of yourself*, Claiborne told him.

But there was something Claiborne didn't realize, something Norman didn't tell him. The moment of fear that came toward the end, just before the hero's disguise was discovered. The moment when, simpering and swishing and coquetting with tossing curls, Norman lost himself in the part. The moment when he *was* Charley's Aunt—except that the fan in his hand was no longer a fan but a knife. And Charley's Aunt became a real live woman, an older woman, like Mother.

The moment of fear—or the moment of truth?

Norman didn't know. He didn't want to know. He just wanted to give up amateur theatricals for good.

Now, staring out through the window, he noted that the sunshine was fading rapidly into an overcast; thunderheads hovered on the horizon, and the trees bordering the parking lot shivered in the chill of rising wind. Warbling gave way to the discord of fluttering wings as the birds rose from bobbing branches to swoop and scatter against the darkening sky.

It wasn't the coming of the clouds that disturbed them. They left because the cars were arriving, pulling into the parking spaces on the lot below. And their occupants emerged, moving toward the entrance of the hospital, just as they did during visiting hours every Sunday afternoon.

*Oh, Mommy, look at the funny man!*

*Now, Junior, you mustn't say such things! Remember what I told you—don't feed the crazies.*

Norman shook his head. It wasn't right to be thinking like that. These visitors were friends, family, coming here because they cared.

But not for him.

Years ago the reporters had come, but Dr. Claiborne hadn't let him see them, not even after he'd snapped out of it. And now nobody came.

Most of the people he'd known were dead. Mother, the Crane girl, and that detective, Arbogast. He was alone now, and all he could do was watch the strangers arrive. A few men, a few children, but mostly women. Wives, sweethearts, sisters, mothers, bringing their gifts and their love.

Norman scowled down at them. These people meant nothing to him, brought nothing to him. All they did was scare away the birds. And that was cruel, because he'd always liked having birds around, even the ones he'd stuffed and mounted years ago when he was interested in taxidermy. It wasn't just a hobby with him; he'd had a real feeling for them. *Saint Francis of Assisi.*

Odd. What made him think of that?

Glancing down again, he encountered the answer. The big birds below, moving away from the van in the parking lot, close to the outer gates. Squinting, he could even make out the lettering on the side of the van: *Sacred Order of the Little Sisters of Charity.*

Now the birds were almost directly beneath him. Two big black-and-white penguins, waddling up the walk toward the entrance. Suppose they'd come all the way from the South Pole just to see him.

But that was a crazy idea.

And Norman wasn't crazy anymore.

The penguins entered the hospital and approached the lobby reception desk. The short, bespectacled one leading the way was Sister Cupertine and the tall, younger one was Sister Barbara.

Sister Barbara didn't think of herself as a penguin. Right now she didn't think of herself at all. Her thoughts were centered on the people here, these poor unfortunate people.

That's what they were, she must remember: not inmates, but basically people very much like herself. This had been one of the things they'd stressed in psychology class, and it certainly was a fundamental precept in religious training. *There but for the grace of God go I.* And if the grace of God had brought her here to them, then she must bear His word and His comfort.

But Sister Barbara had to admit that at the moment she wasn't entirely comfortable. After all, she was new to the Order and she'd never been on a mission of charity before, let alone one that would take her to an asylum.

It had been Sister Cupertine who suggested their journey together, and for an obvious reason; she needed someone to drive her. Sister Cupertine had been coming here once a month for years with Sister Loretta, but Sister Loretta was ill now with influenza. Such a tiny woman, and so frail—God grant her a speedy recovery.

Sister Barbara fingered her rosary, giving thanks for her own stamina. A big, healthy girl like you, Mama always said. *A big, healthy girl like you shouldn't have any trouble finding a decent husband after I'm gone.* But Mama had been too kind. The big, healthy girl was just a klutz, lacking the face and figure or even the basic femininity necessary to attract any man, be his intentions decent or indecent. So, after Mama passed away, she was left alone until the call came. Then, suddenly, the way opened; she answered the call, made her novitiate, found her vocation. Thank God for that.

And thank God for Sister Cupertine now, greeting the little receptionist at the desk with such confidence, introducing her while they waited for the superintendent to come out of his office down the hall. Presently she saw him as he emerged from the corridor beyond, wearing a light topcoat and carrying an overnight bag in his left hand.

Dr. Steiner was a short, bald-headed man who cultivated a fringe of bushy sideburns to compensate for his cranial alopecia, and a bulging paunch to distract attention from his lack of height. But who was Sister Barbara to pass judgment on him or guess at his motivations? She wasn't a psych major anymore; she'd dropped out of school in her last year, when Mama died, and now all those head-games must be put aside forever.

Actually, Dr. Steiner proved to be quite pleasant. And as a professional, he had obviously recognized her shyness and was doing his best to put her at her ease.

But it was the second man, the other doctor who followed Steiner out of his office to join them, who really succeeded in that task. The moment Sister Barbara saw him, she consciously relaxed.

"You know Dr. Claiborne, don't you?" Steiner was addressing Sister Cupertine, who nodded her acknowledgment.

"And this is Sister Barbara." Steiner turned to her, gesturing toward the tall, curly-haired younger man. "Sister, I'd like you to meet Dr. Claiborne, my associate."

The tall man extended his hand. His grip was warm and so was his smile.

"Dr. Claiborne is something you don't encounter very often," Steiner said. "A genuine non-Jewish psychiatrist."

Claiborne grinned. "You're forgetting Jung," he said.

"I'm forgetting a lot of things." Steiner glanced at the clock on the wall behind the reception desk, his expression sobering. "I should be halfway to the airport by now."

He turned, shifting the overnight bag to his right hand. "You're going to have to excuse me," he said. "I've got a meeting scheduled with the state board first thing in the morning, and the four-thirty flight is the only one out of here until tomorrow noon. So, with your permission, I'll leave you with Dr. Claiborne here. As of now, he's in charge."

“Of course.” Sister Cupertino bobbed her head quickly. “You go right ahead.”

Glancing at the younger man, Steiner started toward the entranceway. Dr. Claiborne went with him, and for a moment the two halted before the door. Steiner spoke rapidly to his companion in low tones, then nodded and made his exit.

Dr. Claiborne turned and walked back to the sisters. “Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said.

“Don’t apologize.” Sister Cupertino’s voice was cordial, but Sister Barbara noted the sudden furrowing of the forehead behind the masking frames of her thick glasses. “Perhaps we’d better postpone our visit until next time. You must have enough to look after here without worrying about us.”

“No problem.” Dr. Claiborne reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small notepad. “Here’s the list of those patients you asked for on the phone.” Tearing off the top sheet, he extended it to the older woman.

The furrow vanished as she studied the names scrawled upon the white rectangle. “Tucker, Hoffman, and Shaw I know,” she said. “But who’s Zander?”

“A recent arrival. Tentative diagnosis, involuntional melancholia.”

“Whatever that means.” There was a slight edge to Sister Cupertino’s voice now as the furrow returned, and before she quite realized it, Sister Barbara found herself speaking.

“Severe depression,” she said. “Guilt feelings, anxiety, somatic preoccupations—”

Conscious of Dr. Claiborne’s sudden stare, she faltered. Her companion gave him an apologetic smile. “Sister Barbara studied psychology in college.”

“And did quite well at it, I’d say.”

Sister Barbara found herself blushing. “Not really—it’s just that I’ve always been interested in what happens to people—so many problems—”

“But so few solutions.” Claiborne nodded. “That’s why I’m here.”

Sister Cupertine's mouth tightened, and the younger woman wished she had kept her own mouth tight instead. It had been wrong to upstage her that way.

She wondered if Dr. Claiborne could read body language. No matter, because Sister Cupertine was verbalizing now.

"And that's why *I'm* here," she said. "Maybe I don't know very much about psychology, but sometimes I think that a few kind words can do more good than all this fancy talk."

"Exactly." Dr. Claiborne's smile stroked her furrow away. "I appreciate that, and I know our patients appreciate it even more. Sometimes a visitor from outside can do more for their morale in a few hours than we're able to accomplish in months of analysis. That's why I'd like you to see Mr. Zander after you look in on your regulars today. As far as we can learn he has no living relatives. I can get you a copy of his case history if you like."

"That won't be necessary." Sister Cupertine was smiling again, very much her usual take-charge self. "We'll just talk, and he can tell me all about himself. Where can I find him?"

"Four-eighteen, right across from Tucker's room," Dr. Claiborne said. "Ask the floor nurse to take you in."

"Thank you." The cowed head turned. "Come along, Sister."

Sister Barbara hesitated. She knew what she wanted to say; she'd been rehearsing it in her mind all during the drive here. But should she risk offending Sister Cupertine again?

Well, now or never.

"I wonder if you'd mind if I stayed here with Dr. Claiborne? There are a few things I'd like to ask him about the therapy program—"

There it was, the warning furrow. Sister Cupertine cut in quickly. "We really mustn't impose anymore. Perhaps later, when he's not so busy."

"Please." Dr. Claiborne shook his head. "We always clear our schedule during visiting hours. With your permission, I'd be happy to answer the sister's questions."

"That's very kind of you," said Sister Cupertine. "But are you sure—"

“My pleasure,” Dr. Claiborne told her. “Now don’t worry. If she doesn’t find you upstairs, you can meet her again here in the lobby at five.”

“Very well.” Sister Cupertine turned away, but not before the eyes behind the thick lenses flashed a message to her companion. *The five o’clock meeting will be followed by a lecture period on the subject of duty and obedience to superiors.*

For a moment Sister Barbara’s resolution wavered; then Dr. Claiborne’s voice put an end to indecision.

“All right, Sister. Would you like me to show you around for a while? Or would you prefer to get down to business immediately?”

“Business?”

“You’re breaking the rules.” Dr. Claiborne grinned. “Only a qualified psychiatrist is permitted to answer a question with another question.”

“Sorry.” Sister Barbara watched the older woman enter an elevator down the hall, then turned to him with a smile of relief.

“Don’t be. Just ask what you’ve been meaning to ask me all along.”

“How did you know?”

“Merely an educated guess.” The grin broadened. “Another privilege we qualified psychiatrists enjoy.” He gestured. “Go ahead.”

Again, a moment of hesitation. Should she? Could she? Sister Barbara took a deep breath.

“You have a patient here named Norman Bates?”

“You know about him?” The grin faded. “Most people don’t, I’m happy to say.”

“Happy?”

“Figure of speech.” Dr. Claiborne shrugged. “No, to be honest, Norman’s rather special in my book. And that’s not a figure of speech.”

“You’ve written a book about him?”

“I plan to, someday. I’ve been accumulating material ever since I took over his treatment from Dr. Steiner.”

They had left the lobby now, and Dr. Claiborne was leading her down the right-hand corridor as they spoke. Passing a glass-walled visiting area, she noted a family group—mother, father, and teenaged boy, probably a brother

—clustered around a fair-haired young girl in a wheelchair. The girl, who sat quietly, her pale face smiling up at her visitors as they chattered away, might very well have passed for a convalescent patient in any ordinary hospital. But this was not an ordinary hospital, Sister Barbara reminded herself, and that pale, smiling face concealed a dark, unsmiling secret.

She turned her attention to Dr. Claiborne as they moved on. “What sort of treatment—electroconvulsive therapy?”

Dr. Claiborne shook his head. “That was Steiner’s recommendation when I came on the case. I disagreed. What’s the necessity, when the patient is already passive to the point of catatonia? The problem was to bring Norman out of amnesic fugue, not increase his withdrawal.”

“Then you found other ways to cure him.”

“Norman isn’t cured. Not in the clinical or even the legal sense of the term. But we did get rid of the symptoms. Good old-fashioned hypnotic-regression techniques, without narcosynthesis or any shortcuts. Just plain slugging away, questions and answers. Of course, we’ve learned a lot more about multiple-personality disorders and the disassociative reaction in recent years.”

“I take it you’re saying Norman doesn’t think he’s his mother anymore.”

“Norman is Norman. And I think he accepts himself as such. If you recall, when the mother-personality took over, he committed murders as a transvestite. He’s aware of that now, even though he still has no conscious memory of such episodes. The material surfaced under hypnosis and we discussed content after the sessions, but he’ll never truly remember. It’s just that he no longer denies reality. He’s experienced catharsis.”

“But without abreaction.”

“Exactly.” Dr. Claiborne glanced at her sharply. “You really studied your texts, didn’t you?”

Sister Barbara nodded. “What’s the prognosis?”

“I’ve already told you. We’ve discontinued intensive analysis—no point in expecting any further major breakthroughs. But he’s functioning now without restraint or sedation. Of course, we don’t risk letting him wander outside on the grounds. I put him in charge of the library here; that way he

has at least some degree of freedom combined with responsibility. He spends most of his time reading.”

“It sounds like a lonely life.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. But there’s not much more we can do for him. He has no relatives, no personal friends. And lately, with our patient overload here, I haven’t been able to spend much time with him in just casual visiting.”

Sister Barbara’s hand strayed to her rosary beads and she took another deep breath.

“Could I see him?”

Dr. Claiborne halted, staring at her.

“Why?”

She forced herself to meet his gaze. “You say he’s lonely. Isn’t that reason enough?”

He shook his head. “Believe me, I can understand your empathy—”

“It’s more than that. This is our vocation, the reason Sister Cupertine and I are here. To help the helpless, befriend the friendless.”

“And perhaps convert them to your faith?”

“Don’t you approve of religion?” Sister Barbara said.

Dr. Claiborne shrugged. “My beliefs are irrelevant. But I can’t run the risk of upsetting my patients.”

“Patients?” The words came in a rush now, unbidden. “If you had any empathy yourself, you wouldn’t think of Norman Bates as a patient! He’s a human being—a poor, lonely, confused human being who doesn’t even understand the reason why he’s shut away here. All he knows is that nobody cares about him.”

“I care.”

“Do you? Then give him a chance to realize that others care too.”

Dr. Claiborne sighed softly. “All right. I’ll take you to him.”

“Thank you.” As he led her along the hall and into a side corridor, her voice softened. “Doctor—”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry for coming on so strong.”

“Don’t be.” Dr. Claiborne’s voice had softened in turn as he replied, and here in the dimness of the corridor he looked suddenly drained and spent. “Sometimes it helps to get chewed out a little. Starts the adrenaline flowing again.”

He smiled, pausing as they reached the double door at the far end of the hall. “Here we are. The library.”

Sister Barbara took her third deep breath for the day, or tried to. The air was moist, muggy, absolutely still, and yet there was movement somewhere—a throbbing, pulsing rhythm so intense that for a moment she felt quite giddy. Involuntarily her hand went in search of the rosary beads, and it was then that she discovered the source of the sensation. Her heart was pounding.

“You all right?” Dr. Claiborne glanced at her quickly.

“Of course.”

Inwardly, Sister Barbara was none too certain. Why had she insisted? Was it really compassion that moved her, or just foolish pride—the pride that goeth before a fall?

“Nothing to worry about,” Dr. Claiborne said. “I’m coming with you.”

The throbbing ebbed.

Dr. Claiborne turned and the door swung open.

And then they were in the web.

That’s what it was, she told herself—the shelves radiating from the center of the room were like the strands of a spiderweb.

They moved along one of the shadowed rows bordered by shelving on both sides, and emerged into the open area beyond. Here, under the sickly fluorescence of a single lamp on the desk, was the center of the web.

And from it rose the figure of the spider.

Her heart was pounding again. Over it, faintly, came the sound of Dr. Claiborne’s voice.

“Sister Barbara—this is Norman Bates.”

For a moment, when he saw the penguin walk into the room, Norman thought maybe he *was* crazy after all.

But the moment passed. Sister Barbara wasn't a bird, and Dr. Claiborne hadn't come here to hassle him about his sanity or lack thereof. It was purely a social visit.

*Social visit. How does one play host to his visitors in an asylum?*

"Please sit down."

That seemed to be the obvious thing to say. But once they'd seated themselves at the table, there was a moment of awkward silence. Suddenly and surprisingly, Norman realized that his visitors were embarrassed; they didn't know how to start a conversation any more than he did.

Well, there was always the weather.

Norman glanced over toward the window. "What happened to all that sunshine? It feels like there's rain in the air."

"Typical spring day—you know how it is," Dr. Claiborne told him. And the nun was silent.

*End of weather report. Maybe she is a penguin, after all. What do you say to your fine feathered friends?*

Sister Barbara was glancing down at the open book on the table before him. "I hope we didn't interrupt anything."

"Not at all. Just passing the time." Norman closed the book and pushed it aside.

"Can I ask what you were reading?"

"A biography of Moreno."

"The Romanian psychologist?" Sister Barbara's question caused Norman to look up quickly.

"You know about him?"

“Why, yes. Isn’t he the man who came up with the psychodrama technique?”

*She really isn’t a penguin, then.* He smiled at her and nodded. “That’s correct. Of course, it’s just ancient history now.”

“Norman’s right.” Dr. Claiborne cut in quickly. “We’ve more or less abandoned that approach in group therapy. Though we still encourage acting out one’s fantasies on the verbal level.”

“Even to the point of letting patients get up on the stage and make fools of themselves,” Norman said.

“Now that’s ancient history too.” Dr. Claiborne was smiling, but Norman sensed his concern. “But I still think you gave an excellent performance, and I wish you’d stayed with the group.”

Sister Barbara looked puzzled. “I’m afraid I’m not following this.”

“We’re talking about the amateur dramatic program here,” Norman said. “I suspect it’s Dr. Claiborne’s improvement on Moreno’s theories. Anyway, he coaxed me into taking a part and it didn’t work out.” He leaned forward. “How did—?”

“Excuse me.”

The interruption came suddenly, and Norman frowned. A male nurse—Otis, the new one from the third floor—had entered the room. He approached Dr. Claiborne, who looked up.

“Yes, Otis?”

“There’s a long-distance call for Dr. Steiner.”

“Dr. Steiner’s out of town. He won’t be back until Tuesday morning.”

“That’s what I told them. But the man wants to talk to you. It’s very important, he says.”

“It always is.” Dr. Claiborne sighed. “Did he give you his name?”

“A Mr. Driscoll.”

“Never heard of him.”

“He says he’s a producer with some studio out in Hollywood. That’s where he’s calling from.”

Dr. Claiborne pushed his chair back. “All right, I’ll take it.” Rising, he smiled at Sister Barbara. “Maybe he wants us to put on a psychodrama for

him.” He moved to the seated nun, ready to assist her from her seat. “Sorry I have to break this up.”

“Must you?” Sister Barbara said. “Why don’t I wait here until you come back?”

Norman felt his tension returning. Something told him not to say anything, but he concentrated on the thought. *Let her stay, I want to talk to her.*

“If you like.”

Dr. Claiborne followed Otis through the stacks to the doorway beyond. He paused there, glancing back. “I won’t be long,” he said.

Sister Barbara smiled, and Norman sat watching the two men out of the corner of his eye. Dr. Claiborne was whispering something to Otis, who nodded and followed him out into the hall. For a moment Norman saw their silhouetted shadows on the far wall of the corridor beyond; then one shadow moved off while the other remained. Otis was standing guard outside the door.

A faint clicking claimed Norman’s attention. The nun was fingering her rosary beads. *Security blanket*, he told himself. *But she wanted to stay. Why?*

He leaned forward. “How did you know about psychodrama, Sister?”

“A college course.” Her voice sounded softly over the clicking.

“I see.” Norman spoke softly too. “And is that where you learned about me?”

The clicking ceased. He had her full attention now. He’d taken over. For the first time in years he was in charge, controlling the situation. What a wonderful feeling, to be able to sit back and let someone else do the squirming for a change! Big, rawboned, ungainly woman, hiding behind her penguin disguise.

Quite suddenly he found himself wondering exactly what was underneath that habit; what kind of body it concealed. Warm, pulsing flesh. His mind’s eye traced its contours, moving from thrusting, thirsty breasts to rounded belly and the triangulation below. Nuns shaved their heads—but what about their pubic hair? Had that been shaved too?

“Yes,” said Sister Barbara.

Norman blinked. Could she read his mind? Then he realized she was merely replying to his spoken question.

“What did they say about me?”

Sister Barbara shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “Actually, it was a footnote, just a few lines in one of our texts.”

“I’m a textbook case, is that it?”

“Please, I didn’t mean to embarrass you—”

“Then what did you mean?” *Strange, watching someone else trying to wriggle out of a spot. All these years he’d been the one who wriggled, and he still wasn’t out, never would be. Out, damned spot!* Norman hid behind a smile. “Why did you come here? Is the zoo closed on Sundays?”

There she was, clicking away at those damned beads again. Damned beads, damned spot. Was the damned spot really shaved?

Sister Barbara looked up. “I thought we might talk. You see, after I came across your name in that book, I went through some newspaper files. What I read interested me—”

“Interested?” Norman’s voice didn’t match his smile. “You were shocked, weren’t you? Shocked, horrified, revolted—which was it?”

Sister Barbara’s voice was scarcely more than a whisper. “At the time, all of those things. I thought of you as a monster, some sort of bogeyman, creeping around in the dark with a knife. For months afterward I couldn’t get you out of my mind, out of my dreams. But not anymore. It’s all changed.”

“How?”

“It’s hard to explain. But something happened to me after I took the veil. The novitiate—meditation—examining one’s secret thoughts, secret sins. In a way it’s like analysis, I suppose.”

“Psychiatry doesn’t believe in sin.”

“But it believes in responsibility. And so does my faith. Gradually I came to acknowledge the truth. You weren’t aware of what you did, so how could anyone hold you responsible? It was I who had sinned by passing judgment without trying to understand. And when I learned we’d be coming here today, I knew I must see you, if only as an act of contrition.”

“You’re asking me to forgive you?” Norman shook his head. “Be honest. Curiosity brought you here. You came to see the monster, didn’t you? Well, take a good look and tell me what I am.”

Sister Barbara raised her eyes and stared at him for a long moment in the glare of the fluorescence.

“I see graying hair, lines in the forehead, the marks of suffering. Not the suffering you caused others, but that which you brought upon yourself. You’re not a monster,” she said, “only a man.”

“That’s very flattering.”

“What do you mean?”

“No one’s ever told me I was a man,” Norman said. “Not even my own mother. She thought I was weak, effeminate. And all the kids, calling me a sissy—the ballgames—” His voice choked.

“Ballgames?” Sister Barbara was staring at him again. “Please, tell me. I want to know.”

*She does. She really does!*

Norman found his voice again. “I was a sickly child. Wore glasses for reading, right up until a few years ago. And I never was any good at sports. After school, on the playground we played baseball, the oldest boys were the captains. They took turns choosing up kids for their sides. I was always the last one chosen—” He broke off. “But you wouldn’t understand.”

Sister Barbara’s eyes never left his face, but she wasn’t staring now. She nodded, her expression softening.

“The same thing happened to me,” she said.

“To you?”

“Yes.” Her left hand strayed to her beads and now she glanced down at it, smiling. “You see? I’m what you call a southpaw. Girls play baseball too, you know. I was a good pitcher. They’d choose me first.”

“But that’s the direct opposite of what happened to me.”

“Opposite, but the same.” Sister Barbara sighed. “You were treated like a sissy. I was treated like a tomboy. Being first hurt me just as much as being last hurt you.”

The air was close, sticky; shadows crept through the window, detaching from the dusk beyond to cluster around the circle of lamplight.

“Maybe that was part of my problem,” Norman said. “You know what happened to me—the transvestite thing. You were lucky. At least you escaped loss of identity, loss of gender.”

“Did I?” Sister Barbara let the rosary fall. “A nun is neuter. There is no gender. And no true identity. They even take away your given name.” She smiled. “I don’t regret that. But if you stop and think, you and I are very much the same underneath. We’re kindred spirits.”

For a moment Norman almost believed her. He wanted to believe, wanted to accept their similarity. But in the pool of fluorescence on the floor he saw the shadow that separated—the shadow of the bars on the window.

“One difference,” he said. “You came here because you wanted to. And when you wish, you’ll go of your own free will.”

“There is no free will.” Sister Barbara shook her head. “Only God’s. He sent me here. I come and go only at His choosing. And you remain only to serve the same divine purpose.”

She halted as a livid light lanced through the room. Norman sought its source in the sudden darkening beyond the window. Then thunder shook the bars.

“Looks like we’re in for a storm.” Norman frowned glancing at Sister Barbara. “What’s the matter?”

The answer to his question was all too evident. In the lamplight the nun’s face was deathly pale, and her eyes closed as she clutched at her rosary. There was no hint of spiritual security here, not even a trace of tomboyish bravado. The harsh, almost masculine features had melted to reveal the fear beneath.

Norman rose quickly, striding to the window. Peering out, he caught a glimpse of sullen sky over the ground beyond. Now another streak of lightning razored across the parking area; for an instant it shimmered nimbuslike above the cars and the nuns’ van. He drew the drapes against the greenish glow, then turned away as, once more, thunder hurled its threat.

“Better?” he said.

“Thank you.” Sister Barbara’s hand fell away from the rosary.

Something clicked. *The beads.* He stared at them.

All that mumbo-jumbo about psychological insight, all that nonsense about God’s will, had vanished with a thunderclap. She was only a frightened woman, afraid of her own shadow.

Shadows were all around them now. They huddled in the corners, crawled between the looming bookshelves that stretched to the distant doorway. Glancing past it now, Norman realized the corridor beyond was empty; the shadow there had vanished. He knew the reason, of course. Whenever a storm broke, there was trouble with the loonies. God must have sent Otis off to calm his charges upstairs.

Norman turned back to Sister Barbara as the clicking sounded again. “You sure you’re all right?” he said.

“Of course.” But the beads clicked beneath her fingers and the quaver echoed behind her voice. Afraid of thunder and lightning; just a defenseless female, after all.

Suddenly, surprisingly, Norman felt a stirring in his loins. He fought it the only way he knew, with words that were bitter on his tongue.

“Just remember what you told me. If God sent you here, then He also sent the storm.”

Sister Barbara looked up, the rosary beads dangling, jangling. “You mustn’t say such things. Don’t you believe in God’s will?”

Thunder roared again outside the walls, hammering at Norman’s skull, beating at his brain. Then the lightning flash flared up behind the drapes, illuminating all. *God’s will. He had prayed and his prayers had been answered.*

“Yes,” said Norman. “I believe.”

The nun rose. “I’d better go now. Sister Cupertino may be worried.”

“Nothing to worry about,” Norman said. But he was speaking to himself. *There’d been rain that night long ago when it all started. And now it was coming again. Rain from heaven. God’s will be done.*

Thunder rumbled, and then the rushing rain thudded against the outer wall of the shadowy room. But Norman didn’t hear it.

All he could hear was the jangling of Sister Barbara's beads as he followed her into the shadows between the shelves.

Sister Cupertine didn't get an opportunity to visit the new patient in 418. She was still in Tucker's room when the storm broke, and by the time she left him the rain was already drumming down.

She made her way as quickly as possible through the confusion of the corridor, jostled by excited patients as they returned to the open wards, escorted by friends and family. Orderlies and floor nurses hurried past, responding to the outcries emanating from locked rooms at the end of the hall. When she reached the fourth-floor elevator door, a crowd was already waiting before it, anxious and impatient.

Then the elevator arrived and the visitors crowded in, Sister Cupertine started forward, but by now the car was filled with passengers. The door closed with a clang, leaving her standing with half a dozen other stragglers.

There had been no attempt to make room for her in the elevator, and none of the others left behind paid Sister Cupertine the slightest attention. *No respect anymore, not the slightest. Holy Mary, forgive them—what is the world coming to these days?*

Sister Cupertine's lips pursed as she recited the rosary of indignities she had suffered here. Old Mr. Tucker had been in one of his contrary moods, rejecting her offer to pray with him and meeting her reprimand with foul language. In a way, of course, that was to be expected from someone in his condition. But there had been no excuse for Sister Barbara's behavior; her refusal to come upstairs was outright insubordination. It might be necessary to have a few words about her conduct with Mother Superior when they returned to the convent.

Thunder boomed as the elevator returned again. This time Sister Cupertine was among the first to enter. But the move did nothing to speed her progress; the descent was interrupted on the third floor and again on the second as more passengers shoehorned their way into the car. Little Sister

Cupertine was squeezed uncomfortably in the metal corset of the elevator's left rear corner. And when the door slid back at the lobby level, she was forced to wait until the other occupants moved out. Underneath the habit she felt the trickling and tickling of perspiration; her glasses had steamed over in the body heat of the crowded cubicle.

Removing them, she wiped the lenses on her sleeve, and was almost knocked off her feet by a couple blundering past in their rush toward the outer exit. Sliding the bows back beneath the cowl and over her ears, she surveyed the lobby. By this time only a few others remained in the reception area, but Sister Barbara was nowhere to be seen.

Sister Cupertine peered up at the wall clock behind the reception desk. *Five-ten*. Already pitch dark outside, with the rain coming down in buckets. *Holy Mother of God, they'd be soaked just getting to the van. Where was the girl?*

She moved to the desk and the receptionist looked up.

"Can I help you?"

Sister Cupertine managed a smile. "I'm looking for—"

Thunder crashed over her question and part of the little receptionist's answer.

"—saw her going out just a minute ago."

"She left? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Sister." The girl seemed concerned. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, thank you."

Sister Cupertine turned away, starting toward the exit. *Peccavi*. A white lie, to be sure; it was none of the girl's affair and there was no sense in upsetting her. But something was very much wrong when such an outright act of disobedience occurred. Mother Superior would definitely hear about this whole affair before the evening was over.

If only it *was* over! There would still be the ordeal of the long drive back through this awful storm. Sister Cupertine paused for a moment and stared through the glass door panel, contemplating the seething, wind-driven downpour beyond. Swiftly moving headlight beams crisscrossed the darkness as departing cars sped off in the night. Now a slash of lightning momentarily illuminated the outline of the van, still standing near the gate

of the parking lot: *Thank heaven for small favors!* And thank heaven, too, for the protection of her habit.

She opened the door and moved out, water sloshing against her heavy shoes and rain pelting her coif. Midway across the lot, the heavy drops clouded her lenses and blurred her vision almost completely.

As she wrenched the glasses off to wipe them clear, her ankle twisted and she felt a stab of pain. Stumbling, she cried out, then recovered her balance as the sensation mercifully ebbed. Only then did she realize the glasses had slipped from her fingers.

Sister Cupertine glanced down helplessly, trying to locate them in the watery expanse of blackness below. No use—they were gone. Thank goodness she had a second pair to replace them back at the convent. Best to stop fretting and get out of this rain.

Now, as she started blindly forward, the wind rose to a howl, tearing at her water-soaked sleeves and flapping skirts.

Suddenly a light burst through the blur, and the snarl of a starting motor echoed over the wind's wail.

Glancing up, she saw that the van ahead was moving. *What on earth—* did Sister Barbara mean to leave without her?

“Wait!” She floundered toward the light source. “Wait for me!”

Sister Cupertine gasped as she reached the side of the vehicle, groping for the door handle as the van slowed to a halt. The door swung forward and she clambered up into the passenger seat.

The motor roared and the van wheeled out to the gateway. Before it turned onto the road, Sister Cupertine was already launched into a tirade she knew she would later regret.

“Where were you, Sister? Why didn't you wait in the lobby? Haven't you any consideration? If you had to come out alone, the least you might have done was pull up to the entrance and pick me up there.”

“I'm sorry—”

Her companion's reply was punctuated by the growling thunder. Not that it mattered, because Sister Cupertine wasn't finished yet.

“Look at me—soaking wet! And I dropped my glasses back there in the parking lot. Really, it’s—oh, look out!”

The van skidded across the highway toward a gaping ditch, and Sister Barbara swung the wheel just in time to avoid disaster.

“Please, watch where you’re going—”

Sister Cupertine broke off, abruptly aware that this was not the time to voice further complaints. Distraction would be dangerous, driving in this downpour.

She fell silent, peering ahead as the windshield wipers wheezed rhythmically to reveal the blurred expanse of the road beyond. Sister Barbara glanced at her but said nothing; it was impossible to read her reaction in the darkness. After a moment she turned away, concentrating on keeping the van steady on the slick pavement. Rain rattled against the roof.

Sister Cupertine stared forward, dimly discerning a clump of trees, branches bowing in the wind. Directly past them was a side road leading down through a wooded area. Now the van slowed, turning left into the deeper darkness there.

“Wrong way!” she called above the sound of the storm, but Sister Barbara drove on and the van moved through a tunnel of twisted trees. Sister Cupertine tugged at her sleeve. “Didn’t you hear me? You made a wrong turn!”

This time Sister Barbara nodded and pulled to a halt on the shoulder of the narrow roadway, her right hand reaching out to switch off the ignition. Then she leaned forward and her left hand descended to the floor of the van, between her feet.

For a moment it seemed to Sister Cupertine that the blurred, bending figure beside her resembled some sort of bird—a bird of prey. But only for a moment.

Then the figure straightened and turned, just as the lightning came.

In its glare, Sister Cupertine saw the contorted face beneath the coif, and the upraised hand holding the gleaming tire iron as it swung forward.

She never heard the thunder.

*Pumping. Pumping.* Plenty of room in the back of the van. Room to strip away the concealment of cloth, to spread the lifeless legs. Maybe the other one—Sister Barbara—had shaved the spot, but this one was unshaven. It was the other one he'd really wanted, from the moment he'd followed her back into the stacks, only there wasn't time. Not even time enough to look; it all had to be done so quickly. This one was old, but now he did have time, and if he closed his eyes he couldn't see the face.

The feeling was what mattered. *Pumping. Pumping life into the dead. The Mother Superior position.*

*Mother?*

That was incest. But he knew Sister Cupertine wasn't his mother. *Or was she?* With his eyes closed, he couldn't see the face. *Pumping.* Harder, faster now. *Mother, Oh God, God, God—*

Norman rolled to one side, sat up. Sweaty, still panting, but it was over now, thank God. God sent the nuns to deliver him from evil. *The Bride of Christ was his bride now. Or had been. It was all ancient history—the Norman Conquest.*

He giggled softly in the darkness as he fumbled the unfamiliar contours of his habit back into place. A perfect disguise. He'd fooled Sister Cupertine, he'd fooled them all, walking out this way. But then he'd had experience in the role. *All the world's a stage . . . and one man in his time plays many parts.* He'd played the woman and now he'd played the man. Mother had always called him a sissy; maybe she thought he couldn't get it up. Well, she knows better now, don't you, Mother? *Mother of God—*

His giggle was lost in the sound of thunder, jerking him back into full awareness of the moment. And when lightning flickered again, Norman couldn't escape the sight of the grotesquely sprawling figure beside him.

Averting his eyes, he quickly pulled the black skirt down over the naked obscenity of thighs and legs.

No need for that anymore. The thing to do was to get rid of it as soon as possible. But how?

He peered forward over the seat at the rain-streaked windshield. There was a narrow ditch running along between the road and the trees. He could conceal the body there, under a pile of brush, but not for long. Someone was bound to come this way and see. Unless he could dig a grave—

Norman turned, waiting until another lightning flash gave him a glimpse of what was contained in the back of the van. That was where he'd found the tire iron. But he didn't see a shovel; it was foolish to think they would carry one there. And he certainly couldn't dig in that muck with his bare hands.

With a start, Norman realized he was trembling, and not just from the cold. *There had to be another way; Oh God, there had to—*

He eased forward toward the cab of the van, and as he did so, something clattered beside him. Reaching down, his hand closed around a metal container. Its contents made a sloshing sound as he raised the heavy can to eye level and squinted at the label. But even before he did so, his nose told him what he needed to know.

*Gasoline.* A gallon can, carried in case of emergency.

Well, it would solve this one. *Burn the body, burn the van too. Cover all traces.*

The perfect solution. *Seek and ye shall find.* Norman's hand groped out across the floorboards, searching for a matchbook.

Suddenly he was trembling again. Because he found no matchbook. No matchbox. No matches anywhere. Why should there be? Under ordinary circumstances, matches were as unnecessary as a shovel. Unless, of course, they kept some in the glove compartment—

He clambered back into the driver's seat and yanked at the little rectangular cover on the dash. It fell forward, revealing the contents of the shelf behind. His hand took groping inventory: an empty box of facial tissues, a road map, a small screwdriver, the car registration framed in a plastic folder, a phalliform flashlight. But no matches.

*No matches. You've met your match.*

Numbed, Norman sat there listening to the voices stammering, clamoring, yammering.

The stammering voice was his own. *Help me—please, somebody, help me!*

The clamoring was an echo of Dr. Claiborne's voice. *Relax. Just remember, I can't do it all for you. In the long run you've got to learn to help yourself.*

The yammering wasn't a voice at all, just the sound of rain on the roof of the van overhead.

And Dr. Claiborne was right. In the long run he had to help himself. But he couldn't run for long, not in this storm. He'd have to stay in the van. The one way he could help himself now was to stop trembling. What he had to do would need steady nerves, steady hands.

He remembered seeing a blanket in the rear, covering the spare tire in the right-hand corner. Norman turned and forced his way back into the dark recess as he edged past the thing lying there—the Mother-thing, the Sister-thing—staring silently up from the shadows. Strange how he couldn't bear the thought of touching it or even seeing it again.

But for a moment he did see it as the lightning flared, forming a halo around the hideous head. *Holy Mother!*

Closing his eyes, he reached for the blanket, pulling it free and spreading it out with frantic haste. When his eyes opened again, the motionless mound was covered. Carefully he tucked the sides down, then surveyed the results of his effort. You couldn't tell what was underneath now; no one could tell. And if anyone tried—

Norman's hand found the tire iron where he'd tossed it, just behind the seat. He carried it with him as he crawled back into the cab, and dropped the heavy length of metal between his feet. At least he had that much, the means of protection in case of need.

But there would be no need, not if he was careful. His hands weren't trembling now, and he could drive. That's what he had to do now. Drive, get away from here.

He turned the key in the ignition and the motor responded. Carefully he edged the van back onto the road, moving through the trees, then past them to a clear stretch beyond. The mere act of driving was in itself a reassurance. Controlling the van meant that he was controlling himself. And he who controls himself controls the future. All that remained was the need to plan ahead.

Somewhere along the road he'd come to a store or a service station. He'd get matches there.

But there wouldn't be much chance of finding a roadside business place here on this bypass. His best bet was the main highway. Norman found a spot ahead, made his turn, and drove back to the junction.

Once on the wider stretch, he relaxed. Better road, better opportunity ahead. Or so he thought, until the flapping sleeve of his robe brushed against the steering wheel. He glanced down at his habit, frowning.

Back at the hospital it had been his salvation. No one had given him a second glance during the brief moment of hurrying out through the confusion of the lobby and into the darkness beyond.

But now the robe was damnation. He couldn't hope to enter a country store unnoticed; even Sister Barbara herself would be an object of curiosity there. And driving into a service station was equally dangerous.

The picture formed quickly in his mind. A rainy Sunday evening, with no traffic, no business—some kid attendant sitting inside the office with his old man, reading a comic book and listening to the radio, then scowling in resentment as the sound of a horn summoned him out into the rain. *Jesus Christ, it's a nun! And she doesn't want gas—she's asking for matches. What the hell does a nun need with matches? Something funny going on here. Hey, Pa, maybe you better go see what gives—*

The picture faded and he was staring at the sleeve again. Easy now. Just keep thinking, keep driving. But where? Where could he go in this outfit?

*Get thee to a nunnery.*

Hamlet said that.

But Hamlet was mad.

*This way lies madness.* What other way remained? Removing the habit was no solution; the regulation blue hospital uniform underneath would

identify him anywhere he appeared. The choice was his: either as escaped patient or a creature of habit. He needed matches, yes, but he needed ordinary clothing even more. *Clothes make the man.*

Thunder rocked, shocked, mocked. The voice of God. But God wouldn't mock him, not now, not after guiding him safely through all this. *The Lord will provide.* God will send a sign.

Then the lightning came. Only for an instant, but long enough for Norman to see the figure huddling under a lone tree at the side of the highway ahead, holding up the square of cardboard with the word scrawled on it in crude capital letters.

God had sent a sign, and it said *Fairvale.*

**D**r. Adam Claiborne didn't realize how tired he was until he reached Steiner's office and lowered himself into the chair behind the desk. It was an executive chair with leather-covered arms and back, and a well-padded, oversized cushion designed to accommodate well-padded, oversized butts. The seats of the mighty.

Momentarily his exhaustion gave way to irritation as he contrasted this comfort with the hard, confining contours of the cheap plastic and plywood furnishing of his own small office down the hall. No wonder he was exhausted, working double shifts while Steiner sat giving orders in his padded chair or ran off to meetings on his padded expense account.

Claiborne sighed, reaching for the receiver of the waiting phone on the desktop. So much for self-pity.

"Hello, this is Dr. Claiborne. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"That's okay." The voice on the other end of the line was deep, booming loudly enough to be heard over a background of stereo sound. "Marty Driscoll here, Enterprise Productions. I'm calling about the picture."

"Picture?"

"The film. Didn't Steiner tell you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That's funny. I talked to him Thursday and laid out the whole deal. Did the package get there?"

"What package?"

"I sent it out registered, special delivery, Friday morning." A faint click punctuated Driscoll's sentence, and the stereo music behind the voice faded out. "He should have gotten it by now."

Claiborne nodded, then caught himself. Why did people nod when talking to someone on the telephone? That was the sort of thing you'd

expect a patient to do. Maybe psychosis was contagious. *You don't have to be crazy to work here, but it helps.*

"I wouldn't know anything about a package," he said. Then, "Wait a minute."

While speaking, he'd noticed the big brown envelope lying in a wire basket on the far side of the desk. Now he pulled it out, reading the printed return address in the upper left-hand corner. "Your package did arrive. It's here on his desk."

"Did he open it?"

Claiborne examined the slitted flap. "Yes."

"So why the hangup? He promised to call back as soon as he read the script."

Thunder competed with conversation, and Claiborne wasn't quite sure of what he'd heard. "Would you mind repeating that? We're having a thunderstorm here—"

"The screenplay." Driscoll's voice boomed louder, emphasizing impatience. "It's gotta be there. Take a look and see."

Claiborne upended the envelope, and its contents cascaded across the desktop: three eight-by-ten glossy photographs, plus a bulky segment of manuscript pages stapled together in a leatherette binder. He glanced at the typewritten title on the card affixed to the center of the cover.

"*Crazy Lady*," he said.

"That's it. You like that title?"

"Not particularly."

"Neither did Steiner." Driscoll's reply conveyed amused tolerance. "Don't worry, we're not married to it. Maybe you and Ames can get together and come up with something better."

"Ames?"

"Roy Ames. My writer. I'd like to send him out to see you people for a coupla days. Sort of get the feel of things in case he's screwed up on technical details. I know Bates is still flaky, but maybe if he talked to him —"

"I'm not following. Are you referring to Norman Bates?"

“Yeah. The fruitcake.”

“But what has he got to do with—”

“Easy, Doc.” Driscoll chuckled. “I keep forgetting you didn’t read the script. We’re doing a film on the Bates case.”

Claiborne dropped the leatherette binder on the desk. *Crazy Lady*. He stared at it numbly. What was it he’d said to Sister Barbara about psychodrama? *You don’t have to be crazy to work here, but it helps.*

“Doc—are you there?”

“Yes.”

“So say something. How does it grab you?”

“You want my professional opinion?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Then listen carefully. As a practicing psychiatrist, I think you’re out of your skull.”

Driscoll’s laugh boomed louder than his voice until Claiborne cut in. “I mean it. You can’t make a picture about Norman Bates.”

“Don’t worry, the legal department checked it out. The whole *kapoosta* is public record, like the Boston Strangler and Charlie Manson—”

“This is different.”

But Driscoll wasn’t listening. “Trust me. We’ll knock their socks off. Set it for a late-fall release and go right through the roof.”

“What you’re proposing is cheap sensationalism—”

“Cheap, hell! This is a biggie. Were budgeted at eleven-five, minimum.”

“I’m not talking about finances.”

“Right. That’s my department.”

“And mine is the welfare of my patients.”

“Stop worrying. We don’t want a piece of *schlock* any more than you do. That’s why I sent the script—give you people a chance to catch any mistakes—”

“If you ask me, the whole thing is a mistake.”

“Come on, Doc, you haven’t even read it yet!” The booming voice resounded through the receiver. “Why don’t you take a look, do us both a

favor? Just remember, if there's any changes, we got to get them set by a week from Monday at the latest, so's we'll have a couple days for run-through and rehearsals. All I want from you is a little cooperation. And if you think Ames should come out to look around for a few days, just say the word."

"Did Dr. Steiner agree to this?"

"He said he'd get back to me as soon as he read the script. So if you'll ask him to call me when he gets in—"

"I'll do that."

"Thanks." Now the stereo surged again, signifying an end to further conversation. "Nice talking to you," Driscoll said. "Have a good day."

Claiborne cradled the receiver and leaned back. *Have a good day*. For a moment he envisioned the good day Marty Driscoll was having, probably calling from a poolside phone in Bel-Air, basking in Technicolor sunshine surrounded by Dolby sound.

There was no sunshine here, only the storm-stirred darkness; no sound except thunder and rain.

He thought of Steiner sitting snugly, smugly, in his first-class seat on the plane. Why hadn't he mentioned the script? Didn't he realize the implications? How could he even consider lending support to such a project, endangering the dignity of his profession, putting indignity upon his patient? But he wasn't concerned about how Norman would feel; all Steiner cared for was that big meeting in St. Louis. What happened back here had no importance. But that was showbiz; the star takes all the bows and the supporting players do all the work.

Claiborne shook his head. *Prejudgment. You're just too damned tired to be logical. You don't really know what Steiner thinks. And you haven't read the script—*

He pushed the leatherette binder aside, glancing at the eight-by-tens beneath. The first was a head-and-shoulders glossy print of a glossy man with a glossy smile, instantly recognizable. Paul Morgan, one of the current crop of stars who were—how did they put it?—bankable. Surely they weren't casting him in the role of Norman?

But that was the only male photo; the other two were head shots of a girl Claiborne didn't know. Or did he? There was no identification beneath the smiling, wide-eyed face, and yet it was somehow vaguely familiar.

Suddenly he realized where he'd seen that face before—staring up at him in smudgy reproductions photocopied from old newspaper clippings which were a part of Norman Bates' case-history file.

She was Mary Crane!

*Impossible.* Mary Crane had been Norman's victim, the one he'd killed in the shower.

They'd found a lookalike.

Gazing at the girl in the photos, Claiborne had the feeling he'd known only in dreams—dreams where something threatened and pursued, something menacing that he couldn't see or identify. But he knew it was coming after him, so he'd keep running until he was ready to drop, even though there was no escape. Then, just as it closed in, he'd wake up.

He wasn't dreaming now, yet the threat was still there. *Something—*

“Dr. Claiborne!”

Otis was standing in the doorway, breathing hard.

Claiborne looked up, letting the photos fall to the desktop. “Yes?”

“Hurry—the library—something's happened—”

*Something.*

He hurried, the way he did in the dreams, but this time he wasn't running away. He was running toward the thing. Running down the stairs, not waiting for the elevator, following Otis.

He called to him as they descended. “What's happened?”

“I don't know—I wasn't there—”

“You mean you left them alone?”

“The storm—I had to check Ward C, get those patients back to their rooms—nobody else on duty there.” Otis was panting and the stairwell's echo amplified his gasps. “They were just talking when I left. Wasn't away more than five minutes, but when I got back he was gone.”

“Norman?”

Otis reached the first level, pushing the door open, and Claiborne followed him into the corridor.

“I told the desk to alert all floors. Allen’s on security, he’s out searching the grounds.”

Claiborne was panting now as they ran towards the library. His footsteps hammered in the hall, and the voice hammered in his head. *Norman’s gone. He ran away. And you’re running now. Running towards something.*

Running. Through the doorway and into the darkened room, into the shadowy stacks where something waited.

Claiborne halted, staring down.

“Sister Barbara—”

But it wasn’t Sister Barbara, not anymore. It was just a thing. A naked thing lying cold and still, staring sightlessly back at him with bulging eyes protruding from behind a mask.

It had to be a mask, for her body was ghastly white; the face above, hideously purple. *A mask*, Claiborne told himself. What else could it be?

Then bending forward, he saw the answer, imbedded in swollen flesh—the rosary, twisted tightly around Sister Barbara’s neck.

**B**o Keeler must have been standing there almost half an hour, standing in the frigging rain.

Only two cars came by the whole time, and both mothers passed him up. Either in too goddamn much of a hurry or too scared to stop.

So okay, maybe the hair and the beard and the bushhat turned them off. Maybe they figured him for a freako, maybe the jacket got them uptight, like they thought he was in with a bike club.

Shee-it, if he was, he wouldn't be standing here in the rain without wheels! And he could of been, once. Two years ago he made his move to get it on with the Angels down in Tulsa, but he didn't have his own chopper. Sorry, kid, up yours.

So no sweat, he cased out the Honda dealer's layout and set the rip for Labor Day, everybody gone for the weekend, dynamite. The lock in back was a mickey-mouse job, and inside he eyeballed the biggest goddamn bike in the joint. Super, a two-G ticket, all the extras, lubed and ready to roll. How the hell could he of figured on that silent alarm system? But they came crashing in and did the whole number on him, yelling freeze, and he froze. Lousy mother-suckers busted him, breaking and entering, second offense, take two in the slammer, do not pass go.

Bo shivered and edged back under the tree, trying to keep the sign dry. Fat chance in this storm. If he had any smarts he would've took the bus. When they sprung him yesterday, they popped for the ticket.

Cashing it in was a big mistake, but he got what he craved: six joints and sack time with that jungle bunny he'd flashed on at the bus station. And today, when he split, it looked like it would be easy to thumb his way. First off, he lucked out with the oil rig—trucker said he was routed smack through Fairvale, he could of dropped him off right in front of Jack's pad. But then the frigging storm come up and the guy chickened out on him.

*Sorry, buddy, can't take a chance, I'm laying over right here in Rock Center until it clears up.*

So it was over and out. Out on the highway in the rain, up the creek without a paddle, only this goddamn cardboard sign on a stick.

But he had to get to Fairvale tonight before old buddy Jack cut out for the coast, like he wrote him last month. Jack owed him some bread, maybe he'd take him along for the ride. He sure to Christ had to, because there was nobody else who gave a diddly-damn what happened to him, no other way to go. Not with half a pack of butts and thirty-seven cents in change.

The wind was blowing so hard now that the rain came down almost sideways, and standing under the tree didn't help much. Bo shivered, holding the sign in front of his face like a shield. You could goddam well drown out here in the middle of nowhere. What he needed was an umbrella.

No way. What he needed was a score. Face it, Fairvale was a crock and so was old buddy Jack. But if he could score, score big enough to get hold of some real bread and his own wheels—

Something flickered off to the right. It wasn't lightning, it kept flashing steadily. A car was coming along the road.

Bo stepped out in front of the tree, holding up the sign. As the headlights moved closer he squinted at the outlines of a van.

*Stop. Stop, you mother—*

It did. The van stopped and Bo moved up to the door.

The driver peered down at him from the far side of the darkened cab.

“Do you need a lift?”

*What the hell do you think I'm standing here for, dummy? Only he wasn't about to say so. Play it cool.*

“You going to Fairvale?”

“That's right.”

Bo tossed the cardboard sign into the ditch and climbed in, slamming the door as the van started off. Neat in here with the heater on, warm and dry. He settled back in his seat, then glanced over at the driver.

For a minute he thought he'd flipped out. Who the hell goes around driving a van wearing a big black cloak, the kind you see in one of those

Dracula movies?

Then he flashed on the head—the cowl, whatever they called it—and he knew. The driver was a nun.

Bo wasn't one of those born-again Jesus freaks, he didn't go for that crap, but this was like somebody answered his prayers. *A nun, driving a van. His own wheels.* Right away, other wheels began spinning in his head. If he could only figure how to orchestrate. *Play it cool. Go with the flow.*

The van moved on. The cowed figure glanced at him, but only for a second, not long enough for Bo to get a good make on her face in the dark. He laid a smile on her, just in case his gear put her off.

Mostly she watched the road, but he knew she was watching him too, out of the corner of her eye. And all at once she started talking in a kind of a husky voice, like she was coming down with a cold.

“Do you live in Fairvale?”

“No, Sister.” *Play it cool.* “Just passing through. I got friends there.”

“Then you know the town?”

“Sort of. Is that where you come from?”

She nodded. “I grew up near there. But I haven't been back for years.”

“I guess when you're in a convent they don't let you get around very much.”

She kind of giggled—funny sound, coming from a nun. “That's true.”

“Well, you didn't miss much. I bet Fairvale's just the same as when you left.”

The rain was coming on hard, and she kept her eyes on the road ahead. “You say you have friends in town?”

“Yeah.”

“I was wondering. You wouldn't happen to know a Mr. Loomis, would you? Sam Loomis?”

“Seems like I heard the name,” Bo said. “Is he the one who runs the hardware store?”

“Then he's still there?”

Bo nodded. “It's like I told you. Nothing much changes.”

But a lot had changed, right here and now. All the while they talked, he'd been trying to set up the action. And then, when the old bitch came out with that last question, he flashed on the answer.

*Sam Loomis.* Damned right he'd heard of him. He was the sucker mixed up in that heavy murder case years ago, when they collared some weirdo doing snuff jobs out at the old motel. The Bates Motel, way off in the boondocks on County Trunk A. Place burned down, but the road was still there. Hardly anybody used it on account of the highway going through, and sure as hell nobody'd be using it tonight.

How long had they been driving? If he remembered right, the turn off should be coming up pretty soon. Bo squinted through the windshield, but the rain was so heavy the wipers couldn't clear it and everything was dark. He heard thunder, and then lightning streaked across the stretch of road ahead just long enough for him to spot what he was looking for. *Play it cool.*

"Sister—"

"Yes?"

"See the fork up ahead? If you take a right, it's a shortcut into town."

"Thank you."

Was he hearing things, or did she giggle again? No, it sounded more like coughing.

"You catching cold?"

The sister shook her head. "I'm fine."

You better believe it, she was. Kind of on the heavy side, almost as big as he was, but he knew he could hack it. One good swipe, just enough to put her out and dump her alongside the road. Then take over the wheel and screw Fairvale, cut out for Ravenswood, across the state line. *Go with the flow.*

They were bumping along the county trunk now, hitting those big potholes in the dark. For a minute he thought she was going to give him a hard time about it, but she didn't say anything. And the storm was letting up a little; maybe the rain would stop soon.

Trick now was to get *her* to stop. Trees up ahead, nice and dark, super. Time to get his act together now.

When he opened his mouth, he was the one who sounded like he had a cold. His throat went all dry and cottony and he started to tighten up inside. *Go with the flow, goddammit!*

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled a butt out of the pack. “Mind if I smoke?” he said.

She jerked her head around fast, like he’d just come out with a dirty remark, but there was just enough light for him to see she was smiling.

“Do you have matches?” she said.

*Jesus, what a dumb question!* Instead of saying anything, he fished them out for her to see. Then he gave her the nod.

“Maybe if you slowed down for a minute, so’s I can get a light—”

“Of course.”

And she pulled over and stopped next to the trees. Beautiful!

He stalled for a second, making sure he had his moves figured out. Light the butt first, then quickly shove it in her face. She’ll jerk away, put up her hands, and that’s when to let her have it, whammo, right in the gut. Then, when her hands come down, give her one good chop on the jaw. *Over and out.*

Bo lipped the butt, struck a match, cupped his hands around the flame. When the match flared up, he lost her in the glare, but only for a moment or two.

Just long enough for her to bend forward and pick up something lying between her feet . . .

Claiborne had lost track of time.

It seemed to take forever for the highway patrol to arrive, and when they finally drove into the hospital parking lot, the rain had stopped.

There were three men in the car. The driver remained seated behind the wheel while the other two climbed out and started toward the entrance, where Claiborne stood waiting.

Introductions were brief. The big, thick-necked, gray-haired man was Captain Banning and the thin one was a trooper named Novotny. Claiborne found himself wondering about that. Why are the mesomorphs always the chiefs and the ectomorphs always the Indians?

Not that Banning didn't seem capable. He was firing questions at Claiborne even before they entered the lobby, and he ordered Novotny to stay there and take a statement from Clara at the reception desk.

Banning and Claiborne went straight to the elevator. "Sorry about the delay," Banning told him as the car ascended. "You hear about the accident?"

"What accident?"

"Greyhound bus smacked head-on into a big semi and flipped over, right outside Montrose. Seven dead so far, and around twenty other passengers injured. Damn near every unit in the county's over there right now—sheriff's department, ambulances, and our people. On top of that, we got a problem with power outages on account of the storm. You lucked out, getting through to us at all. Hell of a mess."

Claiborne listened, nodding at the appropriate intervals, but somehow the captain's remarks weren't registering. The thing that mattered to him was the one right here, in the library.

And that was where the questions began again.

On Claiborne's orders, Otis had draped a sheet over the body, but nothing else had been touched. Now Banning was interrogating them both, jotting down their replies on a pad. Halfway through the session he sent Otis away to fetch Allen and when the security guard appeared there was another go-round.

Yes, the grounds had been covered—everything, including storage sheds and the employee's quarters. At Claiborne's direction there'd been a quiet but thorough checkout of the hospital itself: patients' rooms, lavatories, kitchen, laundry, even the broom closets.

"Waste of time," Banning said, flipping the notepad shut. "Your man put on the victim's outfit and walked right out the front door. Chances are he headed straight for that van the sisters came in."

"But Sister Cupertine left, too," Claiborne said. "Wouldn't she have recognized him?"

"Captain—"

Banning turned as another uniformed man came through the doorway. It was the trooper who'd remained in the patrol car, and now Banning started down the aisle to where the newcomer stood waiting. "What's up?" he asked.

The trooper's reply was muffled. But when Banning spoke, his words came loud and clear.

"Jesus H. Christ!" he said.

Claiborne moved toward him between the stacks. "What's the problem?"

"The van." Banning scowled. "Some salesman spotted it just now, when he was coming down County Trunk A. Had a phone in his car and he called the fire department right away—"

"Fire department? What happened?"

Banning shoved the notepad into his pocket. "When I find out, I'll let you know."

*Fire department.* Claiborne's dreamlike feeling returned, the way it had when Otis summoned him here to the library; the nightmare feeling of something waiting. No sense in running now; sooner or later you had to face it. Only then could you wake up.

“Can I come with you?” Claiborne asked. “My car’s outside.”

“Okay if you want to follow.” Banning headed for the doorway. “In case you lose me, it’s County Trunk A—”

“Don’t worry, I won’t lose you,” Claiborne said.

But he did.

By the time he’d instructed Otis to take over, and cautioned him to keep the staff silent about what was happening, Banning’s patrol car was already backing out of the parking lot.

The two troopers had stayed behind to take further statements and call an ambulance for Sister Barbara’s body. But Banning didn’t need any help driving; his taillights were winking in the distance before Claiborne wheeled onto the road.

He gunned the motor, watching the needle arc over to seventy. No use; the car ahead must be doing ninety or better, and he couldn’t hope to match its speed on the wet pavement.

In a moment or so the patrol car rounded a curve and disappeared completely. Claiborne slackened his speed to sixty, but even then it required his full concentration to keep from going into a skid. As a result he overshot the fork in the road and had to head back when he realized his mistake. Then, after turning onto County Trunk A, he needed no further guidance.

On the highway the rain-cleansed night air had been cool and fresh. Here there was an acrid odor mingling with a sickly sweet stench, and in the glare ahead, Claiborne found its source.

He’d expected to see fire trucks, but only two cars stood parked on the shoulder of the road, their headlight beams focused on a third vehicle.

Claiborne recognized the van, or what was left of it. The windshield was gone and there was a gaping hole in the charred roof of the cab; its doors hung open on melted hinges. The back had blown out completely, and the hood was gone up front, exposing a tangle of melted metal from which wisps of smoke still curled upward to mingle with the reek of gasoline fumes. Beneath bubbling tires lay a litter of broken glass and unidentifiable debris.

Leaning against the trunk of his car, the salesman was vomiting noisily into the ditch. The patrol car on the other side of the road was empty, but as

Claiborne parked and emerged, he saw Banning turn away from the cab of the van. He glanced up, his face livid in the light.

“Gas tank exploded,” he said.

“Accident?”

“Can’t tell. Could be arson. Fire department ought to know, if they ever get here.” Banning peered up the road, frowning.

The air was poisonous; Claiborne’s stomach churned. “What’s your theory?” he said.

“Something’s wrong somewhere. The van was parked when it happened—the brake’s still on. And the fire started up front, from the looks of things. Seems to me like they’d have had time to get out before the tank blew.”

Claiborne stiffened. “They?”

He moved up to the open cab, but Banning put a restraining hand on his shoulder. “No point looking.” He nodded toward the retching salesman across the road. “Bet he wishes he hadn’t.”

“I’ve got to know.”

“Okay, Doc.” Banning’s head dropped and he stepped back. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Claiborne leaned forward, glancing into the cab. The leather was burned away from the seats, and plastic had fused on the dash. The sickly sweet odor was stronger here, almost overpowering. Now he saw its source.

Lying crossways on the floorboard frame below was a charcoal-colored blob with two stumps outthrust on either side. The reeking mass was only vaguely recognizable as a human torso, and the rounded protuberance atop it was just a burnt black ball from which all trace of features had been seared away. Eyeless, noseless, no vestige of skin or hair remained, and what had been a mouth was now just a yawning, tongueless opening, grimacing in a silent scream.

He turned, choking from the smell and the sight of it, and peered down at the interior of the van behind the seats.

Another blob lay in the shadows, its limbless bulk crisped like a barbecued side of beef. There was no head; apparently the gas tank explosion had shattered the skull. Only one anatomical detail identified the

remains as female: the charred cavity of the vagina. Here a single sliver of skin had curled away, revealing a fleck of pinkish flesh beneath.

Claiborne backed out of the cab, breathing deeply. Conscious of Banning's scrutiny, he fought to control his features and his voice.

"You're right, it's useless. You'll need a complete autopsy."

"That'll take a while," Banning said. "Coroner's going to have his hands full after that bus crash over at Montrose. But I've got a rough idea of what happened here." He ran two fingers across the grayish stubble on his chin. "Way I figure, Sister Cupertine was either knocked out or killed and shoved out of sight in the back of the van. Next move was to find a spot off the main highway and—"

"Wait a minute." Claiborne frowned. "First you tell me you don't know if it was an accident or not, and now you're saying there was a murder."

"Never had any doubt about that part," Banning told him. "Body in back tells us that much. If she hadn't been dead or at least unconscious, Sister Cupertine would have been up front trying to fight her way out of the cab when the fire started."

"But we still have no way of knowing what caused the van to explode," Claiborne said.

The salesman moved up beside him, silent and shaken, as Banning reached down into the shadows at his feet and picked up a blackened metal cylinder.

"Here's your answer," he said. "Found this gasoline can here in the road while you were looking around inside. It's arson, all right. The idea was to soak the body and van, let the fire take care of the evidence." Banning nodded. "But somewhere along the line something went wrong, and he got himself trapped in the cab."

"He?"

"Your patient. Norman Bates."

*Trapped. That thing up front in the van was Norman. Of course, it had to be.*

"No!"

"What do you mean?"

Claiborne stared at Banning without answering. Because there was no answer, only the conviction, born of years of professional experience, years of working with his patient.

The salesman glanced at him, puzzled, and Banning shook his head. “Makes sense, Doc. We know Bates got away in the van, and Sister Cupertine must have gone with him. Get the picture? She doesn’t recognize him in the nun’s outfit at first, and when she does it’s too late—he clobbers her and comes here, like I said. Then, when he touches off the gasoline, whammo! What else could have happened?”

“I don’t know,” Claiborne said. “I don’t know.”

“Take my word for it. Bates is dead—”

The rest of his words were lost in the wailing.

The three men looked up, finding its source as lights flashed and whirled on the roadway ahead. A screech of brakes announced the rumbling arrival of the fire truck. It slammed to a halt and spotlighted the scene.

Turning, Banning started toward it, with the salesman tagging along behind. Claiborne hesitated, watching the uniformed men clamber down and cross to the wreckage of the van. A bareheaded fire captain stood waiting beside the truck, then began talking as Banning and the salesman approached.

From now on there’d be a lot of talking, endless talking, because talking was all anyone could do. An ambulance would come to haul the burned blobs away, but the talk would go on—useless, meaningless talk. It was all meaningless now, and there was no need for Claiborne to hear it again. He’d given his testimony, his presence wasn’t required here. *Leave the postmortems to the coroner. You’re just an innocent bystander.*

He walked back to his car and slid behind the wheel. Nobody noticed and nobody tried to stop him as he drove off, turning back to retrace his route to the main highway.

Gradually the smell and the sound faded, at least externally. But the sight remained, looming before his eyes more vividly than the road ahead—the sight of the blackened, twisted torsos, the charred creatures at the scene of the crime.

*No postmortems. Innocent bystander.*

But the postmortems went on, somewhere deep inside, and the protestations of innocence died.

Because Norman was dead.

Norman was dead, and Claiborne was guilty. Guilty of misjudgment for allowing Norman and Sister Barbara to meet. Guilty of negligence in leaving them alone together. By the same token he was indirectly responsible for Sister Cupertine's death too. But above all, he was guilty of failing Norman. His professional errors of diagnosis and prognosis were the real crimes.

Claiborne reached the highway and made his turn almost automatically. The fresh air helped clear his lungs and his head.

Now he could face facts. Now he could understand his resistance to the reality of Norman's death. For in a way it wasn't Norman who'd died back there in the flaming van; it was Claiborne himself. It was *his* self-image that had been burned beyond all recognition; his plans, his hopes, his dreams had exploded, his life had gone up in smoke.

There would be no book now, no scholarly but subtly self-congratulatory account of restoring reason to an apparently incurable psychotic without the use of ECT, psychosurgery, or ataractics. That, he knew, had been the goal all along: write the book, make a name and a reputation, get out from under Steiner's shadow, out of the dead-end job, and into a decent post. He'd been as much a prisoner there in the hospital as Norman was, and if only things had gone right, they could both have been free.

And he'd come close, so very close. Close to succeeding, close to Norman himself. They'd worked together so long, he knew the man, or thought he did. How could he have made such a mistake?

*Hubris.*

Pride, the belief in the superiority of science, the omniscience of intellect. That was the fatal error.

Sometimes it was better to trust to the gut feeling, the way he had when he'd almost blurted out that Norman wasn't dead.

With a start, he realized the feeling was still there.

*Suppose it was true?*

Of course that made no sense, but what had happened to the van made no sense either. Banning was jumping to conclusions; he had his hubris too, needed an easy answer. But why would Norman spread gasoline around and ignite it without first getting out of the van? No matter what else might be, Norman was neither suicidal nor stupid.

There had to be another answer. What if someone else was involved—a third party?

But who?

That didn't make sense either. Nothing made sense except the gnawing feeling. Unless it was just wishful thinking, voicing itself over and over again. *Norman is alive, alive, alive—*

Claiborne blinked, forcing himself to focus full attention on the highway ahead. And it was then, at that precise instant, that he saw what was lying in the ditch on the left-hand side of the road. Saw it, slowed, and stopped.

Climbing out, he crossed over for a closer look. Perhaps his eyes had played a trick on him.

But as he picked up the soggy cardboard sign mounted on the makeshift pole, he knew there was no mistake. The lettering was still plainly visible.

*Fairvale.*

Claiborne stood staring down at the sign, and suddenly everything fell into place. He glanced at the shoulder of the road beside it.

The van could have stopped here and picked up a hitchhiker.

If so, there ought to be tire tracks in the mud. He stooped for a closer look, but all he saw was a puddle of water. Of course; the rain must have washed the marks away. And it didn't matter, nothing mattered but the truth. *Trust your instincts. There was a third party after all.*

And if there was a third party, then everything was possible. The hitchhiker could have been lured to the spot where the van was to be destroyed, knocked over the head there, and left to the flames after being stripped of his clothing. While Norman—

Claiborne picked up the sign and carried it over to the car. He placed it carefully on the back seat, then started the engine racing. His thoughts raced with it.

The car made a U-turn. Fairvale was back up the highway, beyond the fork. And that was where Norman would be heading after leaving the burning van. A man capable of killing innocent strangers in a manic state would certainly not hesitate to kill known enemies.

*Sam Loomis and his wife, Lila, lived in Fairvale.*

The fork loomed ahead. For an instant Claiborne debated; should he turn off and alert Banning? But that meant talk, more talk, and he already knew what the reaction would be if he told him what he suspected.

*Okay, but where's your proof? All you've got is a sign you found lying in a ditch. From this you expect me to believe a whole number about Norman killing a hitchhiker and stashing his body in the van? And even if he did, how do you know he'd go after the Loomises? You may be a shrink, but that doesn't make you a mind reader. Look, Doc, you're tired. Why don't you go on back to the hospital and get some rest, leave the police work to us?*

Banning's voice. The voice of *hubris*.

Claiborne shook his head. He did feel tired, completely spent, that much was true. And he wasn't a mind reader. How could he convince Banning that he did know, knew for a certainty, what Norman was thinking?

No way. And no time.

The car moved past the fork, gaining speed as Claiborne's foot pressed down on the gas pedal in sudden decision.

Coming abreast of the roadside marker on the right, he read the legend without slowing down. *Fairvale—12 mi.*

The car zoomed forward.

Now the feeling was stronger than ever—the feeling of moving toward some dreadful destination in a dream.

But this wasn't a dream.

And there was no time.

Norman walked down the street and it was dead.

The storm had killed it; the storm, and Sunday night. Every small town has its Main Street, and when sundown comes on Sunday, death arrives. The stores close, parking spaces stand empty, and if any life lingers at all, it retreats to the residences beyond, hiding behind drawn blinds.

That was where Sam and Lila would be—hiding in one of the houses. Sam, who ran the hardware store, and Lila, his wife. She was Mary Crane's sister, and she'd come here looking for Mary after she disappeared. She'd gone to Sam, knowing that he and her sister were lovers.

No one would have known what had happened if it wasn't for their meddling. Mary Crane and the detective who'd tried to find her were both dead, and Sam and Lila should have gone to their graves too. Instead they'd come to the Bates Motel and discovered Norman, and he was the one who got buried—buried alive in that asylum all those years.

Shutting him away was a worse punishment than death—punishment for crimes he'd never committed. It was Mother who did it, taking over his mind and body and putting them through the motions of murder. He wasn't responsible, everybody admitted that. If he were, they would have held a trial.

But there was no trial, only the long years of punishment, while Sam and Lila went free. *And so they were married and lived happily ever after.*

Until now.

Tonight it would end. Not because he was crazy; he was sane again and he, not Mother, would be the avenger. Thank God for that.

No, not God. Thank Dr. Claiborne. He was the Savior, the one who had saved him from madness. If it weren't for Dr. Claiborne, Norman wouldn't be here.

And perhaps he shouldn't be, because Dr. Claiborne wouldn't approve. All these years together, talking it out, helping him find himself again, get rid of Mother, get rid of the fear and the hatred—wonderful man, so much kindness and caring, so much empathy. If things had been different, maybe Norman would have become a doctor himself.

But things weren't different. And they couldn't be until justice was done. Justice, not vengeance. Surely Dr. Claiborne must realize that.

There could be no justice as long as Sam and Lila lived. They were the ones who'd branded and sentenced him with their testimony—but who were they to pass judgment? Lila, giving her warm body to satisfy the lust of her dead sister's lover. And Sam, living on the blood of the innocent, selling guns and knives in his store—hunting rifles to shoot down helpless animals, and knives to cut them up with. He was the killer, the butcher, the dealer in death—why couldn't anyone see that?

Dr. Claiborne would never understand, but Norman did. Those who live by the sword must die by the sword. Tonight.

But Main Street was dead and the side-street homes were dark. Sam and Lila were hiding from him, hiding behind the windowshades. Where—in which house? He couldn't go around knocking on doors. How could he find them?

Norman halted at the corner, frowning. No one saw him standing there under the streetlight, but he wouldn't go unnoticed forever. He was a fugitive, they'd come looking for him. If he meant to act, it must be now. There wasn't time—

Then he noticed the phone booth in the shadows at the side of the darkened filling station. Of course, that was the answer. Look in the telephone directory.

He moved past the deserted gas pumps and entered the glass cubicle. There he stood, eyes fixed on the rusty length of chain dangling empty-ended beside the phone.

The directory was missing. He'd have to call the operator for information.

Norman reached for the receiver, then pulled his hand away. He couldn't call. Nobody asks for addresses; even if she gave it out, the operator would

remember. In a place like this, everybody was curious about strangers. The minute he hung up, she'd probably call Sam and Lila and tell them someone was looking for them. It would be a dead giveaway.

*Dead.* He wasn't dead and wouldn't be, if only he took care. But he had to act quickly. No time—

Norman left the booth, moved out from under the light, and crossed at the corner, passing the tavern there. Its windows were darkened, thanks to Sunday-closing laws. All the windows on the street were dark, all but one.

One storefront up ahead was lighted. He couldn't see it clearly until he started forward, then peered across the street at the sign.

*Loomis Hardware.*

A light in the window, but that was just for display. It was the other light that mattered—the one overhead, shining dimly from the back of the store.

Someone was inside.

Norman started across the street, then slowed.

Careful now, stop and think. Be cautious. The thing to do was move on, cross at the corner, and come back along the side of the store, in case anyone might be looking out. Stay in the shadows. *Out of sight, out of mind.*

Norman nodded to himself, then moved quietly. It was only when he reached the shadowed shelter of the narrow walkway between the store and the adjoining building that he began to giggle softly. He had to, because the old saying was wrong. As he came around to the back door and fumbled with the latch, he was out of sight.

But he wasn't out of his mind.

Lila Loomis was at home when it happened, sitting in the darkened living room and watching some stupid game show on television. The program wasn't her choice; reception was poor because of the storm, and Channel 5 was the only one coming through clearly. At least the show served to distract her attention from what was going on outside.

For the hundredth time she found herself wondering about what she was seeing. The game was silly and the questions offered to its contestants were even sillier. *Here we go now with the Giant Jackpot! For ten thousand dollars in cash, a brand-new Ford Galaxie, and a fun-filled, all-expenses-paid week's vacation for two at the beautiful Acapulco Hilton . . . What was Jackie Onassis' maiden name?*

"Minnie Schwartz," Lila murmured. Then, catching herself, she smiled at her own silliness. Talking back to the tube made no sense at all, but lately she'd fallen into the habit. And she wasn't the only one; other people seemed to be responding to quizmasters, talk-show hosts, and the anonymous idiots who shouted out commercials over a background of some unseen heavenly choir lifting angel voices in praise of a liquid fertilizer. A few more years of this, and everybody would end up talking to themselves.

Lila was just about to get up and go into the kitchen when the evening news came on. She settled back and listened gratefully. The normal voice and features of the commentator offered welcome relief after the phony hysteria of the gameshow's MC and the shrieking responses of the grinning contestants.

Most of the bulletins concerned the recent storm, and the top story dealt with the terrible bus accident over at Montrose. Fortunately for Lila's peace of mind, there was no live coverage of the scene, though the newscaster promised film at eleven. She made a mental note not to tune in; maybe it was childish of her, but she just couldn't stand the sight of death or suffering.

Lila shook her head, dismissing the self-criticism. It wasn't just a childish reaction; she of all people had the right to feel that way, after what had happened. Of course it had been years ago, ancient history, and she hadn't been present when her sister and the detective were murdered by that maniac. But Lila had seen Norman Bates coming at her with a knife in his hand, and the fear remained. Sometimes it returned in dreams; she'd shiver and cry out until Sam took her in his arms and comforted her. *Honey, it's all right.* Then he'd switch on the light beside the bed. *See? No one's there. You had a nightmare.*

Even now, Lila wished Sam were here. Way past seven, and he was still at the store, working on those figures. He had to, of course, with the quarterly tax payment coming up, and Sunday afternoon was the best time to do the books. But it ruined plans for a decent dinner, and there was no point in even thinking about going out later in the evening.

Not that they'd want to anyway, after this storm. Still, it was over now, thank goodness, and reports of local damage and power outages around the country didn't really concern her. Lila was only half listening when the newscaster started to talk about the all-points alert for a patient who'd escaped from the State Hospital this afternoon after murdering a visitor.

“Authorities believe he fled in a van belonging to the murder victim, who was a member of a religious order, the Little Sisters of Charity. The patient, Norman Bates, is still at large.”

*Norman Bates.*

Lila froze.

*Murdering. Escaped. Still at large.*

She couldn't move, couldn't see, couldn't hear. Everything was frozen now, the way it was in the nightmares. But she was wide awake. And Norman—

Somehow she managed to externalize her perception again, listening closely as the commentator brought her another late bulletin. “Lightning struck the Weiland Nurseries greenhouse in Rock Center late this afternoon, with damages estimated at—”

*Was that all?* She'd missed the rest of the report about Norman when she panicked. But damn it, she had a right to panic, every right. And if that

ignoramus reading the news had any brains, he'd panic too. *This isn't just another bulletin. Norman's loose!*

And she was talking to the tube again, talking to herself. When the one she should be talking to was Sam.

Lila rose, went to the TV set, shut it off. Then, crossing the room in darkness, she turned to switch on the lamps, but stopped herself in time.

No lights. What if *he* was out there?

But how could he be? Even if Norman knew where she lived, there was no real reason to think he'd come here. Except that people like Norman weren't guided by reason or reality.

Lila was still standing beside the lamp when she heard the sound.

Suddenly alert, she strained to listen, but now there was silence. *Just nerves. Imagining things.*

Then she flinched as it came again—a muffled scraping.

Footsteps?

She couldn't identify the noise, only locate its source. It was coming from outside.

Now, once more, silence. Silence and darkness. Not hearing, not seeing, Lila edged her way to the front window. Her hand trembled as she raised the shade to one side. Slowly, just an inch, enough to look out and see—

Nothing.

The walk, the lawn, the street beyond, stood empty in the night.

And the sound came again as the tree beside the house swayed in the wind, its upper branches brushing against the eaves of the roof.

Norman wasn't here.

Lila didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she found herself exhaling in sudden relief. *You see, it was your imagination. Why should Norman want to harm you? You're not his enemy. He wouldn't come here.*

Then, as she let the shade swing back into place, the relief faded into realization.

*Of course he's not here. In Norman's mind there was another enemy. He'd be coming after Sam.*

Lila was trembling again by the time she reached the end table and found the phone. Fumbling in the dark, she forced herself to concentrate, counting off the unseen digits as she dialed the number of the store.

Then she waited for the ring, but it didn't come; all she heard was a buzzing sound. Busy signal? No, the tone was wrong. What had they said on the news about a power outage?

As she replaced the receiver, the scraping noise resumed outside. Now, even though she knew its source, she held her breath once more. Perhaps this time she could hear another sound over it, the sound of a car motor. Sam's car coming down the street, pulling into the driveway—

Silence.

If Sam had been listening to the radio at the store, he'd have heard some kind of news report and come home to her. But there was no car, so he hadn't listened, didn't know.

She glanced at her watch; the luminous hands on the dial told her it was eight o'clock.

Eight o'clock. Even if he hadn't heard anything, he should be home by now. Unless—

There was no need to pursue the thought. The need was to stumble across the room into the kitchen, grope for her purse on the serving counter, carry it to the back door. And then to peer out through the door-window toward the walk beyond, making sure no one was standing there.

The walk was empty. Slowly she opened the kitchen door and stepped outside. Night wind fanned her face as she turned and surveyed the backyard, the side lawn, the stretch of walk leading to the street. All clear.

Gripping her purse, she shut the door and went up the walk, glancing at the darkened outline of the house next door. Maybe she ought to tell the Dempsters, let Ted drive her to the store. Then she remembered that her neighbors were away; they'd said something about visiting their married daughter in Ravenswood over the weekend. And the people across the street had left this morning for a vacation at the lake.

Lila emerged onto the street, slowing to scan the sidewalk leading to the right. Nothing moved there but the shadows under the trees. But in the shadows—

*Don't panic. Just keep your eyes open, take your time, only three blocks to go.*

She kept telling herself that, over and over again, but in spite of everything, Lila found herself hurrying. The shadows were merely shadows and the night was silent except for the sigh of wind and the quickening clatter of her heels against the wet cement of the sidewalk.

Then, turning onto Main Street, Lila saw the headlights of a car coming from the left.

*Sam?*

She halted, ready to wave, but it wasn't their station wagon that swept past her, and the face of the driver was unfamiliar. Perhaps she ought to have waved anyway; now it was too late, for the car rounded the corner up the street, making a right turn. Main Street was empty again.

Lila moved forward. One more block. She was approaching the store now, glancing ahead to look through the lighted window.

But the light was out.

She slowed, staring through the glass into the darkened store beyond.

*Don't panic. Maybe he's just closed up, gone out the back way to the car.*

Lila started along the walk at the side of the building, moving slowly, cautiously. She gone only a few yards when she caught sight of the station wagon parked next to the alley exit in back. Its doors were closed and the driver's seat was empty. Sam hadn't left.

Then why were the lights out?

Perhaps he'd fallen asleep. Or maybe—

Now it came to her, the other thought, the one she'd tried to push out of her mind. Sam's visit to Dr. Rowan last month, and the medical report—the electrocardiogram. *Nothing serious, just a little murmur, don't worry about it.* But doctors didn't know everything, and half the time those reports were wrong. Suppose Sam had had a heart attack? *Don't panic.*

Carefully, Lila made her way down the walk. She moved silently, and only silence greeted her as she rounded the corner to reach the back entrance. The blinds of the windows on either side were drawn, and the door was shut. A touch of the knob told her it was locked.

There was a key in her purse, but she didn't reach for it. That was one lesson she'd learned from that awful experience years ago. Play safe, don't take chances when you're alone. And if something *had* happened to Sam, there was nothing she could do about it unless she got help. *Don't panic.*

Lila turned and walked past the empty station wagon to the alley beyond, pausing to inspect its expanse in both directions. There was no sound, no movement in the night.

Satisfied, she walked along the alley to the right, emerging on the side street at the far end. Across the way, the courthouse stood in the square. She started over to it, moving past the wet, empty benches and the granite shaft of the war memorial. The building beyond was dark, but here on the annex side the door was unlocked, and a light shone out from the corridor behind it.

Entering, Lila climbed the stairs and moved down the hall. As she did so, she had this feeling—what was it called, *déjà* view, or *vue*, something like that, when you think a thing has happened before?

Then she corrected herself. It was memory, not feeling. This *had* happened before, years ago, when she and Sam were looking for the murderer of her sister. They'd come here on a Sunday morning to see Sheriff Chambers, and the clerk—what was his name?—Peterson, old man Peterson, told them he was at church. Peterson and Chambers were both gone now and she was here alone, but the similarity of her present errand to the former one was unnerving. Lila's pace quickened as she crossed the threshold of the office at the far end of the corridor.

Little old Irene Grovesmith sat at her desk, reading a magazine. She put it aside to peer up owlshly over her reading glasses, then recognized her visitor and nodded.

“Lila—”

“Hello, Irene. Is Sheriff Engstrom busy?”

“You can say that again.” Behind the thick lenses, Irene's eyes narrowed in sour disapproval. “Left here more than three hours ago. Going over to Montrose on account of that bus crash, you heard about it? He promised me he'd be back by seven at the latest, and here it is, past eight-thirty. The

squawk's out, and the phones don't work either. They're supposed to be fixing the lines now."

"Then there's no way I can get in touch with the sheriff?"

"I just told you—" Irene caught herself, took off the glasses, and cleared her throat self-consciously. "Sorry. What's the trouble?"

*It's about time you asked, you old bat.* Lila hid the thought behind a token smile and a shake of her head. "I'm a little worried about Sam. He's been down at the store all afternoon and didn't get home for dinner. I was just over there now and the car's still outside, but the door's locked and all the lights are out."

"Don't you have a key?"

"Yes. It's just that I didn't like the idea of going in alone." Lila hesitated, wondering how much she ought to reveal. One word to Irene, and it would be all over town by tomorrow morning. But that didn't matter; what mattered now was Sam. If something had happened to him—

"There was a report on the news," she said. "They were talking about a patient escaping from the State Hospital this afternoon."

"Norman Bates?"

Lila caught her breath. "You heard about him?"

Irene nodded. "Chuck Merwin stopped by here looking for the sheriff half an hour ago. He's with the fire department, you know, Dave Merwin's boy? Tall, dark-complected fella with bad teeth—"

"Yes, I know him. What happened?"

"Well, the truck just come from there, and they wanted to let the sheriff know before heading over to Montrose again. Couldn't raise him on the squawk."

"Came from where?"

"I made a note." Irene fished a pad out from under the magazine. "Here it is." She slid the glasses on and glanced down. "Chuck says they found the van that lunatic escaped in. Over on County Trunk A, right outside of town. Looked like there'd been a gasoline explosion—two bodies inside. One was a woman, some nun visiting the hospital, at least that's what they think. The other was this Norman Bates."

“He’s dead?”

“Burned to a frazzle. Chuck said he never saw anything so awful, not in five years with the department.”

“Thank God.”

Irene glanced up quickly. “What’s all this got to do with Sam?”

“Nothing.” Lila shook her head. “Look, I’ll be going over to the store now. But when the sheriff gets back, would you ask him to please stop by? If the station wagon’s not there, it means we’ve gone home and everything’s all right. Just ask him to take a look.”

“Of course. I’ll make a note.”

Irene was scribbling on the pad as Lila left. This time she had no need to move slowly; the street outside was still deserted, but the night held no terror.

The only thing to worry about now was Sam himself. That damned electrocardiogram—

*Don’t panic. He could have fallen asleep.*

In spite of the thought, Lila found herself hurrying as she turned back into the alley. She half hoped the station wagon would be gone, but when she saw it still parked before the rear entrance of the store, her pace quickened.

The key was already in her hand as she reached the darkened doorway. Steadying her grip, she fitted it to the elusive lock. Metal met metal and the knob turned.

Lila entered, then halted just inside, trying to recall the location of the light switch. Which wall was it on—the left or the right? Funny, she couldn’t remember a simple thing like that.

Her hand groped against the plaster on the right, found and flipped the toggle, but nothing happened. Had the bulb burned out? *Burned. Norman’s burned*, she reminded herself. *Don’t panic.*

Perhaps the power outage explained the lack of light here and up front. Lila forced herself to wait while her vision adjusted to the dark. As she did so, her eyes inventoried the contents of the room. File cabinets flanked the far wall, shelving stood on both sides, a desk and chair occupied the center

of the floor ahead. The desktop held a litter of ledgers and file cards, but the chair was empty. Sam wouldn't leave things in a mess, so he must have gone up front.

Now she moved past the desk to the doorway leading into the store area. The darkness was deeper there, and she paused on the threshold, scanning the shadows beyond.

“Sam?”

The shadows were silent.

“Sam!”

*Oh my God—something's happened—his heart—*

She started forward, rounding the corner of the rear counter, and found him there.

He was lying face upwards on the floor, staring at her.

Lila stared back. She'd been right, it was his heart.

That was where the knife had struck, leaving the gaping, bubbling hole in his chest.

For a moment she thought he wasn't dead. He couldn't be, because she could hear the sound of breathing.

Then, as the shadow moved out from the counter behind her, Lila turned and the knife came down.

And down.

And down . . .

When Claiborne pulled up before the hardware store, the sheriff's car was already parked in front.

The sight of it caused him to slam on the brakes. He climbed out and headed for the lighted, open entrance.

“Just a moment, please.”

Claiborne halted as the tiny man stepped out to intercept him at the doorway.

Almost automatically he made an instant professional appraisal of the stranger: the thin, sallow face, the sparse brown hair matching the color of the eyes, the neatly trimmed mustache. He was dressed in a dark business suit, a white shirt, and a dull gray tie. It was the typical Sunday garb of the typical small-town merchant, and as Claiborne noted it, he smiled in sudden relief.

“Sam Loomis?” he said.

The little man shook his head. “Milt Engstrom,” he said. “County sheriff.”

Claiborne's relief faded and his gaze dropped. It was then that he caught sight of what he'd overlooked before: the shiny, pointed black boots protruding from beneath the conservatively cuffed trousers.

So much for keen psychological insight. And so much for renewed hope.

Claiborne looked up to meet the sheriff's level stare, knowing what he had to ask and dreading the answer.

“Where's Mr. Loomis? Did something happen to him?”

The expressionless eyes didn't waver. “If you don't mind, I'll ask the questions. For openers, suppose you tell me who you are and what you're doing here.”

Claiborne felt a muscle spasm shoot through his legs as he shifted his stance to accommodate the weight of weariness. How long had it been since he'd been given a chance to rest? Driving into town after leaving the highway, he'd found himself dozing off behind the wheel; too much tension had taken its toll. All he wanted right now was to sit down and relax.

"It's a long story," he said. "Couldn't we just go inside and—"

The sheriff frowned. "Start talking," he said. "I haven't got all night."

By the time Claiborne identified himself and told Engstrom what had happened at the hospital and on the road, he was ready to drop. Unlike Banning, the sheriff wrote nothing down, but there was no doubt that he carefully absorbed everything he was told. Finally he nodded, signifying that his mental notebook was closed.

"Maybe you better step inside now," Engstrom said. "There's been an accident."

Turning abruptly, the sheriff walked into the store without giving Claiborne time to reply. But now, as he followed Engstrom down the aisle, he had a chance to speak.

"Is Loomis dead?"

The sheriff stopped before the rear counter and gestured down toward the floor at his left.

"You're a doctor," he said. "Suppose you tell me."

Claiborne moved forward, following the arc of gesturing fingers with his gaze.

For a long moment he stood silent, conscious of Engstrom's scrutiny, the cold eyes boring into his back. *The little sadist—he's enjoying this! What does he expect me to do, throw up like that salesman at the van? I'm a doctor, I've seen violent death before.*

And he'd seen Sam Loomis before, too. It was that which really disturbed him—the familiarity of the corpse's contorted features. Then realization came to him; there were clippings in the file, newspaper clippings with photos of the people involved in Norman's case.

*Norman's case.* Claiborne forced himself to look up and meet Engstrom's stare. He couldn't match its impersonal coldness with his own eyes, but he did his best to convey it in his voice.

“The incision is quite large,” he said. “Obviously made by a knife with an extremely broad blade. From the amount of hemorrhage, I’d assume that the aorta was punctured, probably severed. Do you want me to make an examination?”

The sheriff shook his head. “My man’s on his way over from County General—or will be, when he gets back from the mess over in Montrose. I’m running shorthanded tonight, can’t even rouse an extra deputy.” Engstrom turned to step behind the rear counter. “While we’re waiting, there’s something else you might want to take a look at.”

Claiborne moved around the corner from the other end, then glanced down.

The sheriff was wrong. He didn’t want to look at it—not that hacked and horrid handiwork sprawling supinely beneath the counter’s edge, bathed in blood from a dozen wounds gaping like red mouths against the white flesh.

There was no sense of recognition stemming from what he saw here, but even before Engstrom spoke, he knew.

“Lila Loomis,” the sheriff said. “Sam’s wife.”

Claiborne turned away, sickened in spite of himself, like a pre-med student confronting his first dissection. When speech came, all he could muster was a murmur.

“Then he killed them both.”

“He?”

“Norman Bates. The patient I told you about.”

“Maybe so.”

“But there’s no doubt now. I knew I was right—he came straight here after burning the van. Remember what I said about the hitchhiker he must have picked up on the road?”

“Must have? Seems to me you’re jumping at a pretty big conclusion.”

“I’ve got his sign out in my car.” Claiborne turned. “Come along, let me show you—”

“Later.” The sheriff walked to the end of the counter. “I want you to see this first.”

As Claiborne joined him, the sheriff pointed down at the open drawer of the cash register on the counter top. “Empty,” he said. “Nine hundred and eighty-three dollars there this afternoon and it’s all gone.”

“How do you know the amount?”

“Found this on the floor.” Engstrom pulled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket. “Deposit slip all made out and ready for the bank tomorrow morning.”

“Then Norman took the money.”

“Somebody did, that’s for sure.” The sheriff turned. “Come along, there’s more.”

He reached under the glass-topped counter and brought out a display tray. Its slotted surface held a dozen bone-handled carving knives of varying sizes, their steel blades glittering under the light.

No, not a dozen—Claiborne counted them off quickly and corrected himself. There were eleven knives and one empty slot at the far end.

Watching, Engstrom nodded. “One missing,” he said. “The murder weapon.” He pivoted and walked into the back room, gesturing up at the overhead light as Claiborne followed.

“When I came here looking for Mrs. Loomis, the back door was unlocked and the light didn’t switch on. At first I figured it had burned out, but then I spotted the bulb lying here on the table. I screwed it back in and you can see there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Of course.” Claiborne noted the desk and chair. “Norman slipped into the store and killed Loomis while he was working at his desk. He dragged the body up front where it would be out of sight—look, you can see blood here on the floor. Then he came back here, unscrewed the bulb, and waited for Mrs. Loomis in the store—”

“How did he know she’d be coming?”

“He must have expected her to show up looking for her husband. Don’t you understand? That’s what he was here for—he wanted to kill them both.”

Engstrom shrugged. “Suppose we try it my way,” he said. “Let’s take a thief, an ordinary thief. Could be someone who lives around here, or even this hitchhiker you claim got burned up in that van. But whoever he is, he’s

looking to rip off a store. Maybe he checks out a couple of others first and can't break in. Then he sees a light here. He tries the back door and it isn't locked. I'll buy what you said about sneaking in unnoticed. But that's all."

"What about the rest? What's wrong with it?"

"What's wrong is that you're not much of a detective." Engstrom glanced down at the floor. "Sure, there's blood here, but only a few drops. I'd say it came off the knife when the thief carried it away with him. Sam wasn't stabbed sitting at his desk; the wound's in his chest, not his back. In fact, the thief didn't even have a knife when he came in; he got it from under the counter in the store."

Claiborne frowned. "I still think—"

"Never mind, let me finish." Engstrom gestured toward the doorway. "The way I figure Sam was up front turning off the store lights when the thief got in. He came for money, not murder, and all he wanted to do was keep out of sight until Sam left. There was no place to conceal himself in back, so he went on into the store to hide behind the counter in the dark. But then something goes wrong; Sam either sees him or hears him. That's when the thief reached up, grabs a knife, and lets him have it.

"The thief takes the money from the register. He's ready to run out the back way when Lila shows up in the back alley. He locks the door, thinking she'll try it and go away.

"But he's got a surprise coming; she has a key. There's just time to unscrew the overhead bulb so she can't switch on the light. And when she gets inside, he's waiting up front in the dark with the knife."

Claiborne frowned. "You saw her body," he said. "Perhaps someone who's committed murder in a moment of panic would strike again to avoid discovery. But not like that. She wasn't just killed, she was slashed over and over again, the way Norman slashed her sister in the shower—"

He broke off, conscious that his words weren't registering. No one would believe him, not without proof—solid, incontrovertible proof.

"Don't worry," Engstrom said. "If Bates really is alive, he can't get far."

"But he has money now."

"And we have an ID, photos, his entire record on file. He can't hide out for long; where would he go?"

Claiborne didn't answer. There was no answer.

Then, glancing down at the clutter of ledgers and file folders on the desk, he saw the newspaper lying on the edge. It was partially folded, as though it had been tossed aside ready to discard, but the headline of the two-column story on the uppermost side was plainly visible.

*Hollywood Producer Plans Film on Bates Case*

And now he knew where Norman would be going.

Jan Harper inspected her makeup in the bathroom mirror and decided it was perfect. Then she stuck out her tongue at the image in the glass.

*Okay, kid. Let's get the show on the road.*

Picking up her purse from the counter, she turned and tiptoed out. The precaution wasn't really necessary; in the second bedroom on the far side of the bath, Connie was still snoring away. Jan's roommate would probably be dead to the world until noon and wish she were dead when she finally awoke, hungover and overhung with remorse for last night's fun and games.

But as she made her way down the hall to the front door, Jan felt a nagging prickle of envy. Connie didn't have to slave away in front of a mirror; a cold shower and a quick comb-through would do the trick when she arose. No point in her worrying about a perfect makeup job, not with that big nose and those tiny tits. What you needed to cut it in this business was a small nose and big tits, and that let Connie out.

Abruptly, Jan felt a sudden surge of shame. Connie wasn't to blame for the way she looked; at least she was honest and didn't try to fake it with a nose job above and styrofoam below. She did the best she could with what she had, and that deserved praise, not a putdown.

Jan shrugged as she let herself out and locked the door behind her. Connie would manage; right now it was time to consider her own goals. That's why she'd spent an hour on makeup, that's why the neat little Toyota stood waiting for her in the carport. Every time she thought of the monthly payments, she shuddered, but when she opened the door and got a whiff of that wonderful new-car smell, her good vibes returned.

The Toyota wasn't a luxury; it was part of her outfit, her image. And the new-leather smell was as necessary as the Chanel she sprayed on after a shower, even though gas was beginning to cost more than perfume. If you want to get to the top, don't take the bus.

Starting the motor, she backed out carefully, then climbed the road and turned east on Mulholland Drive. Clusters of homes huddled at intervals along the winding way, but most of the stretch was given over to cliffside and brush. In the Monday-morning mist it was still possible to catch a glimpse of gophers, coyotes, joggers, and other forms of wildlife.

Ignoring them, Jan stared down into the San Fernando Valley at her left. Rising out of the yellowish smudge of smog, she could see the sound stages of Coronet Studios, midway between CBS Studio Center and Universal's black tower.

Now the Toyota turned left again and began its descent. Jan took a deep breath, just as she always did before spiraling down into the smog. The damned stuff ate right into the Toyota's chrome; God only knew what it did to human lungs. But when you're headed for the top, sometimes you've got to go down into the pits.

Crossing Ventura Boulevard, she drove north to the studio gate on her right. A shiny Rolls preceded her, then halted at the guard's cubicle ahead, but only for a moment. The striped crossbar blocking the entrance swung up quickly as the uniformed man at the gate grinned and waved the driver forward. The Rolls moved onto the lot.

Now, as Jan came abreast of the cubicle, the crossbar dropped back into place. The guard stared at her.

She gave him a smile. "Jan Harper," she said.

There was no change in his expression—or lack of it. "Who did you wish to see?"

"I'm on the lot. With the Driscoll unit."

"One moment, please."

Turning, the guard entered the cubicle and checked the listings stacked on a shelf beside the doorway. Then he peered out and nodded. "Okay. Better tell them to give you a sticker."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

The crossbar lifted and Jan drove on, hoping her smile hadn't cracked. That wimp in the Rolls got the big hello, but after all these weeks the guard didn't even remember her name.

*Cool it, kid. Someday when you drive through that gate, they'll lay out a red carpet for you all the way to Driscoll's office.*

Jan was passing that office now, in the Administration Building at her right, but she didn't stop there. All the parking slots were posted with neatly lettered signs reserving them for executive personnel. That was the way the system operated: execs had the spaces nearest the offices; working stars and directors got choice spots next to the sound stages; top production people owned the openings before their headquarters.

But signs can be rubbed out and new names lettered in. And the way things were going in the industry, the sign painters had the only steady jobs in town.

Jan shrugged and headed for the parking area at the rear of the lot, moving past mailboys on bicycles, elderly producers with motorcarts, drivers of vans and trucks filled with props and camera equipment. The Toyota edged through narrow openings between portable dressing rooms and trailers, then halted before a stage as a red light flashed and whirled, signaling a take in progress, which could be ruined by traffic noises.

The industry was turning out its product.

Once upon a time these studio streets had been glutted with glimpses of glamour: bit players in oriental robes conceived in Arabian nightmares; pirate outfits; French Empire ballroom gowns; Confederate cavalry uniforms. Dress extras had sauntered along in top hats and tails, chorus girls had paraded like walking rainbows. Indian chiefs, wearing full warpaint, and cowboy stars with white suits and matching Stetsons had mingled with leading ladies resplendent in creations designed in the cerebral salon of Edith Head's head.

But the costume picture had been swept away in a tide of red ink. Today, Valentino's Sheik would be a squat little oil profiteer in a business suit, sunglasses, and a soiled *kayyifeh*. The pirate ships were sunk, discos had replaced ballrooms, the Confederate army was gone with the wind. Fred and Ginger had hung up their dancing shoes forever, Indians carried briefcases when they went on the warpath at Senate hearings, cowboys looked like any bearded university student, and most leading ladies performed in bedroom scenes, wearing nothing at all. When you go to a studio now, don't look for glamour—look for a parking place.

Jan drove into the rear area, glancing at her watch. Quarter to ten; she still had fifteen minutes. But the lot was already full, or almost so.

Circling, she found an opening at the far end and started to angle in, then braked quickly as the door of a car on her right swung open and a figure backed into her path.

She leaned on the horn. “Hey, watch it—”

The figure turned, and Jan recognized Roy Ames.

He waved and moved to her left as she parked. “Sorry, I didn’t see you coming.” Opening the door, he took her arm as she slid across the seat.

Jan suppressed her frown, but she couldn’t suppress her thoughts. What was with this character? Even after all these weeks of contact, she still couldn’t get used to his here-let-me-help-you routine. Common courtesy wasn’t very common nowadays; most men let a girl emerge from a car unaided, and a fairly high percentage would goose her as she backed out.

Roy Ames was a problem case. He didn’t even look like most of the other screenwriters she knew. To begin with, he was well groomed—not exactly handsome, but far removed from the specimens who were heavily into hair and horn-rims. His wardrobe lacked Levi’s, and apparently he’d learned to ride a typewriter without wearing boots. She’d never seen him stoned or strung out, and if he had other hangups, he did a good job hiding them.

*Hiding.* These straight-arrow types were usually hiding something. So where was he coming from, behind his old-fashioned manners and the open grin?

*And where are you coming from?* Jan caught herself wondering what was wrong with her. Why did she automatically suspect instead of respect a man like Roy? There was no reason for it; he was probably as upfront as she was.

They crossed the lot and started down the street, dodging agents and clients *en route* to Monday-morning meetings, carpenters scurrying onto sets, memo-bearing messengers racing their rounds—the usual organized confusion.

“I called you earlier,” Roy said. “Connie told me you’d left.”

“How’d she sound?”

“Bitchy. Guess I woke her up.”

“Don’t worry, she’ll survive the shock. I did.”

Roy glanced at her. “Then you know about it.”

“Know about what?”

“Didn’t you listen to the news? Norman Bates escaped.”

“Oh my God.”

“Report says he went on another murder rampage. Five victims. They’re not sure, but he could still be on the loose.”

Jan halted. “So that’s why Driscoll wanted us to come in! You think they’re going to shut down the picture?”

“Maybe.”

“But they can’t—” Jan put her hand on Roy’s arm. “We’ve got to stop them. Please, promise me you’ll help.”

He was staring at her. Why didn’t he say something?

Taking a deep breath, Jan gave him her best shot. “It’s not just my part I’m worried about. You need this picture too, that screen credit is your future. Don’t throw it away.”

Roy’s eyes were ice. Suddenly his face contorted and his voice rose. “What the hell’s the matter with you? A maniac breaks out and kills five innocent people, and all you’re worried about is killing a goddam movie!”

He jerked his arm free so quickly that for a moment Jan thought he intended to hit her. Instead he turned and strode away, leaving her stunned and shaken.

She’d guessed right, after all. There had been something hidden behind the good manners and the friendly smile, and now she knew what it was.

Violence.

Oddly, she felt no fear of him. But after the initial shock faded, the emotion that remained surprised her. It was disappointment.

Damn it, Roy must have been turning her on more than she’d realized. Even now it wasn’t possible to reject him completely. Maybe she wasn’t as hard-nosed as she pretended, because a part of her had really responded to that Mr. Nice Guy image.

Perhaps his anger was justified; his concern about those murders might be genuine. And if it was—

Jan shook her head. What he believed was his own business, but she couldn't go along with him. She'd worked too long and too had to settle for that.

All her life, ever since she was a little girl, staring into the mirror at her acne-riddled face and wondering if she'd ever grow up and find someone who thought she was pretty, someone who'd love her, she'd been working—working to become the kind of person who would deserve attention, the kind she saw in the movies and on TV.

And now she *had* grown up, she'd been on TV, she was going to be in the movies, and they'd all love her—not just a single someone, but everybody. She was going to make it. Not just for herself; it was a debt she owed to that pimply-faced girl in the mirror, the little girl with the big dream.

Watching Roy enter the Administration Building, Jan started forward with renewed determination. All the violence in the world couldn't hang a guilt-trip on her now. Feeling sorry for the victims, whoever they were, wasn't going to help them. They were dead and she was alive and what you called “a goddam movie” was the break she'd worked and waited for. She and the little girl.

No matter what happened, Jan wouldn't let them stop the picture.

Anita Kedzie was ambidextrous.

Seated in Driscoll's outer office, with copies of *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter* resting on her desk, she turned their pages simultaneously in search of items that might interest her employer and circled them in red with a felt-tipped pen.

Jan had observed this ritual before, and she'd never been able to figure out just how Miss Kedzie managed to read both trade papers at the same time. But one had to remember that the woman was a little strange; anyone who would take a job as a producer's secretary *had* to be strange. Part insect, perhaps. Weren't there some insects whose eyes functioned independently, so that they could see in two directions at once?

Correction: *three* directions. For, without shifting her gaze from the pages before her, Miss Kedzie said, "Please go right in. Mr. Driscoll will be with you in a moment. He's running a little late this morning."

Jan nodded and moved past the desk and through the doorway behind it.

*He's running a little late this morning.*

So what else was new? According to their secretaries, producers were always running a little late, like cheap watches. An apt comparison, really, because you always had to keep an eye on their hands, and some of them wouldn't give you the time of day.

Of course, there were exceptions to the rule, men whose talent and good taste were indisputable and indispensable. The industry couldn't survive without them.

But nowadays anyone could call himself a producer. All he had to do was plant a few items in the trades announcing the purchase of properties for future filming, rent office space, put his name on the door, and wait for the chicks to walk in and lie down.

Marty Driscoll didn't seem to fit into this category, thank God; he'd never tried to come on to her, and he certainly had an impressive layout.

Jan glanced around the private office as she entered, taking inventory of the Daumier prints on the walls, the oversize couches right-angled before the huge glass coffee table, the massive fruitwood desk with its intercom system and the silver-framed portrait photographs of the most recent wife and two smiling children.

Impressive, that was for sure, but not entirely convincing. Something about the office disturbed her.

From what she'd seen of Driscoll, he wouldn't know a French print from a French postcard. The contemporary décor, however elaborate and expensive, reflected no particular style except Early Executive—running a little late, of course. And the family portraits in their expensive frames were standard equipment; the whole spread might have come straight out of the studio's prop department, just moved in and set up overnight. Which meant it could be moved out just as quickly when Driscoll lost his parking space. And that was what bothered her. The décor wasn't contemporary—just a temporary con.

Jan dismissed the thought quickly. Driscoll wasn't a phony; he had a long track record as a producer of top-grossers. At least he'd taken credit for them, and that was what counted. He knew the business, knew where the money was, knew where the bodies were buried.

*Bodies.* Five victims, Roy said. *Don't think about it.*

She glanced across the room and saw Roy, already seated in the corner with his back to the doorway. Oblivious to her quiet entrance, he was leaning forward and talking to Paul Morgan, her co-star in the picture.

*Come off it,* she told herself. *You're no co-star—he gets the billing.*

And why not? Paul Morgan was almost an institution. Standing there silhouetted in profile against the light from the window, he looked like a miniature model of his oversize screen image. It still puzzled her to think he'd take an offbeat role like Norman Bates.

But then, he was probably just as puzzled to have her as his female lead instead of a name star. Maybe that was why he ignored her now as she came

in; come to think of it, Paul Morgan hadn't said a dozen words to her directly since the day she was set for the part.

Whatever his reason, she'd better do something about it, and fast. Chat him up, stroke him, make it plain that this was his ego trip and she was only along for the ride.

Jan started toward the two men, then halted at the touch of a hand curling around her waist. A wave of sickly scent accompanied the movement.

A good thing she already had a smile on her face, intended for Morgan; now she could give it to Santo Vizzini. Not that he didn't deserve a smile for his own sake; after all, he'd been responsible for her getting the role. But it wasn't easy to register pleasurable emotion at the sight of the man with the caterpillar moustache. The odor of his perfumed presence was overpowering, and his fingers probing and moving downward toward her thigh gave Jan the creeps.

She turned quickly, preserving the smile and hoping it would atone for her evading his touch. "Mr. Vizzini—"

"Santo." The caterpillar was crawling now as the thick lips parted beneath it. "Please, there is no need to stand on ceremony."

Jan nodded. *I get the message, buster. You don't want me to stand on anything—just lie down.*

But she didn't say it. Luckily she didn't have to say anything, for now all conversation broke off as Marty Driscoll's voice echoed from the outer office.

"Hold my calls," he said.

It was part of the ritual, the classic invocation signifying that the conference, the meeting, the ceremony was about to begin.

The next step was Marty Driscoll's own, as he moved into the room. The fat, balding producer had a tall thin shadow; it glided behind him, closing the door as Driscoll hunkered down into the overstuffed chair behind the big desk. The shadow's name was George Ward, and its hair and face had gone gray in long years of service as Driscoll's *eminence grise*. Now the shadow slithered to a halt at the end of the desk, poised for a signal.

It came as Marty Driscoll hunched forward, broad shoulders bowed under the weight of the thick neck and heavy head. "Sit down, everybody,"

he said.

Roy Ames and Paul Morgan took the sofa facing the desk. Vizzini lowered himself on a lounge at the right, near George Ward, while Jan settled into a chair on the left.

Now she waited for Driscoll to utter the prescribed opening: "Anyone want coffee?" Instead he sat silently, a tonsured Buddha, staring down at the desk top through heavy-lidded eyes. He might have been meditating on Infinity or contemplating his navel, but Jan doubted it. From what she knew of Driscoll, he was neither a mystic nor a navel-observer. All he did was make her nervous, and perhaps that was his intention. A quick glimpse of the others grouped before the desk told her that they were equally uncomfortable as they waited for him to break the silence.

Then, abruptly, the head arched upward and the eyes widened.

"You all know what happened yesterday," Driscoll said. "Since then, I've had some second thoughts about the picture."

*Second thoughts.* The phrase echoed and Jan stiffened in response. *He's going to shut down. Roy was right.*

And Roy was speaking now. "You're not the only one. I was just telling Paul the same thing. We're in trouble."

"I don't see it." Paul Morgan broke in quickly. "Norman Bates's escape has nothing to do with our story. As long as the script sticks to the facts—"

Roy shook his head. "The facts have changed now."

"So we change the script." Vizzini spoke rapidly. "A little fix, perhaps, a few pages. We've still got a week. And since I'm shooting the scenes with the Loomis characters in sequence, we won't be using Steve Hill and the Gordon girl until next month, when they come out from New York."

"What is this, a story conference?" Roy gestured impatiently. "Forget the script! As long as Bates was in the asylum we had no problem. Our story was only a fairy tale, something that happened a long time ago. Audiences wouldn't give a damn if it was fact or fiction. But now we're up against reality."

"Right."

Driscoll nodded and Jan felt a knot forming in the pit of her stomach.

He was running scared. That meant the picture was dead, she was dead, and all her talk about not letting them stop was dead too.

“But you can’t!” Her voice rose and she was rising with it, ignoring their sudden stares, ignoring everything except the inner urgency. “You can’t quit now.”

“Jan, please—” Roy was moving toward her, his eyes troubled, his hand reaching out to grasp her arm. “This is no time for hysteria—”

“Then stop being hysterical!” She shook herself free, ignoring him, concentrating on the bald man behind the desk. “What’s the matter with you people? You’re behaving like a bunch of old women! It would be crazy to stop. Don’t you see what you’ve got here? You’re sitting right on top of a gold mine and you’re afraid to dig!”

Jan hesitated as Driscoll’s hands came up from the desktop, palms moving inward. For an instant she thought he was assuming an attitude of prayer; then, as the sound came, she realized he was applauding.

“Bravo!” he said. “Cut and print.”

“That isn’t funny, dammit!” Jan felt her face redden as the anger burned outwards. “I’m not doing a performance, I’m telling you the truth. If you’d only stop and think for a minute, you’d realize the publicity—”

Driscoll gestured, halting her. “You stop,” he said. “Give me a chance to say what I’ve been thinking.” He turned and poked a pudgy finger at George Ward. “Here, you tell her.”

The Gray Eminence nodded. “As Mr. Driscoll told you, he had second thoughts about the production. At first we were upset by the reports; like Mr. Ames here, we wondered about having problems. Then we got into what you’re talking about. The news value, the publicity. And we came up with the same answer. Norman Bates’s breakout could be the best thing that ever happened to *Crazy Lady*. It ties us right into front-page headlines, top-of-the-show exposure on every TV and radio newscast in the country. Sure, Bates is dead, but the story will stay alive; they’ll be investigating those murders for months now. A media event like this is something money couldn’t buy. Every mention of the case is a free plug for our film.”

The knot in Jan’s stomach began to loosen. “Does that mean you’re going ahead?”

“Full speed,” Driscoll said. “Make it fast, get it shipped, and laugh all the way to the bank.”

Jan felt the knot unwind.

“Great!” Paul Morgan grinned at Roy. “I told you there was nothing to worry about.”

“The hell there isn’t.” Roy stood up, ignoring Morgan, and stood before the desk, facing Driscoll. “You’re forgetting the script. What happened yesterday shoots down our ending.”

“I’m not forgetting.” Driscoll’s index finger jabbed forward. “Like Santo says, you’ve got a week for changes. If you don’t finish by next Monday, you’ll stay on after the start-date. We’ll shoot the production schedule as is and shoot the new scenes last.”

“Now wait a minute, I haven’t made any commitment—”

“Your agent has. I called him this morning and set the deal.”

Jan listened, smiling. The knot in her stomach was gone.

“Don’t worry.” Santo Vizzini moved up beside Roy. “It’s only a few pages. I’ve got some ideas. Think of the material we can work with now—the new murders, and Norman’s death.”

Roy scowled, but when he spoke his voice was soft. “Just one thing,” he said. “What makes you so sure Norman is dead?”

“Of course he’s dead.”

Dr. Steiner stubbed his cigarette against the side of the ashtray on Claiborne’s desk. “Look, Adam. I know how you feel—”

“Do you?”

“For God’s sake, stop being defensive! Nobody’s blaming you for what happened. So why are you blaming yourself?”

Claiborne shrugged. “It’s not a question of blame,” he said. “What it comes down to is responsibility.”

“Word games.” Steiner took out another cigarette. “Blame, responsibility, what difference does it make? You want to go that route, then Otis was responsible for leaving Bates alone with the nun. And what about Clara? She was on the desk when Bates slipped out. If anyone’s to blame for his escape, it’s those two.”

“But I was in charge.”

“And I’m the guy who put you there.” Steiner reached into his pocket for matches. “If you’re looking for the ultimate responsibility, the buck stops here.” He lit his cigarette, dropped the match into the ashtray, and blew a spiral of smoke toward the ceiling. “When I say I know how you feel, it’s not just a figure of speech. Why do you think I skipped my meeting and scooted back here the minute I got word? I had the same reaction you did—first shock, then guilt. Thank God there was a little time to think things over during the flight. I admit I’m still traumatized by what happened, we all are, but it’s only natural under the circumstances. But the guilt is gone.”

“Not for me.”

Dr. Steiner gestured with his cigarette. “Look, nobody’s perfect. We all make mistakes. Isn’t that what you and I tell our analysands? We can’t go through life blaming ourselves for honest errors. And yesterday was a comedy of errors—a tragedy, if you prefer. But the point is that none of us

—Otis, Clara, you, or myself—could foresee what was going to happen. The only thing we can be faulted for, individually and collectively, is lack of infallibility.”

“Now you’re into word games,” Claiborne said. “Whether or not I’m infallible doesn’t matter. I had a job to do and I fell down.”

“Fell down.” Steiner puffed reflectively. “Fell down and tore your stockings and what will Daddy say when he gets home? Come off it, Adam, you’re not a child! And I’m not your father.”

“Jesus, Nick, if you’re going to play doctor with me—”

“Let me finish.” Steiner leaned forward, peering through a gray halo of smoke. “Okay, so you’re guilty. But of what? All you did was instruct Otis to watch the library while you took a phone call. That’s the extent of it.

“You had no way of knowing Otis would leave, no way of knowing Norman was planning a break. And from then on, we’re dealing with hard facts. It was Norman who killed Sister Barbara and took over the van. He was in the van when it exploded, his actions resulted in Sister Cupertine’s death and his own—”

“But that’s just it.” Claiborne rose. “Norman wasn’t killed in the van. They picked up a hitchhiker. I know because I found the sign, back on the other road. Norman got rid of him and Sister Cupertine, set fire to the van, then went after Sam and Lila Loomis in Fairvale. Didn’t Engstrom tell you?”

Steiner nodded. “Yes, I heard all about your theory when I spoke with him this morning. But let’s stay with facts. He’s convinced the Loomises were killed by another party—a sneak thief, maybe even the hitchhiker you’re talking about—”

“Convinced?” Claiborne said. “By what? Where are *his* facts? All he’s got is another theory. A nice, convenient theory that wraps up everything. That is, if you’re willing to accept the Loomises’ deaths as just coincidence.

“Well, I’m not. I think they were deliberately murdered by the one man in the world who had a motive.” He paced the narrow opening between the wall and his desk. “If it’s hard evidence you’re looking for, consider this: Sam and Lila Loomis weren’t just struck down. They were butchered. Put

motive and method together and you get a clear picture of Norman Bates at work.”

Dr. Steiner extinguished his second cigarette. “Nothing’s going to be clear until we have the complete autopsy report,” he said. “Engstrom talked to Rigsby at the coroner’s office. He expects to give us his findings by the end of the week—”

“End of the week?” Claiborne halted and turned, frowning. “What’s the matter with those people? Nick, I don’t know a damned thing about forensic procedure, I haven’t even sat in on a PM since medical school, but give me three hours with that corpse and I’ll bet we’ll come up with a firm ID.”

Steiner nodded. “So will Rigsby, when he has the time. But Engstrom tells me it’s like a madhouse over there.” He smiled selfconsciously. “If you’ll pardon the Freudian slip.”

“You mean because of that bus crash?”

Dr. Steiner sighed. “Seven victims yesterday. Two of the injured died during the night. That makes nine. Total of fourteen, when you add the five we’re concerned with.”

“I’m only concerned with one,” Claiborne said. “Couldn’t Engstrom lean on Rigsby to give us priority?”

“He tried. But don’t forget, county coroner’s an elective office.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that Engstrom is one man, and the families of the victims run into several dozen people. They’re leaning too, and all of them are voters. So much for Rigsby’s priorities.” Dr. Steiner produced another cigarette. “I’d hate to be in his shoes right now. He’s going to be working night and day, and until he gets around to us, we’ll just have to sweat it out.”

“Because politics is more important than murder?” Claiborne shook his head. “Maybe Engstrom and Rigsby can believe that, but not me. And I never thought you would, either.”

“I don’t.” Dr. Steiner held up his hand. “Look at this—third one in fifteen minutes!” He scowled ruefully and tossed the unlit cigarette into the ashtray, then settled back in his chair. “Believe me, I’m just as uptight as you are. But we have no options. We’ve got to make up our minds to be patient until the word comes down.”

“While Norman is running loose?”

Dr. Steiner shrugged. “All right. I still don’t buy it, but let’s say he’s still alive. Engstrom tells me his department is cooperating with Captain Banning. They’ve put out an all-points, they’re making appeals asking possible witnesses to come forward, they’re going over the available evidence. But until they come up with something concrete, you can’t stop stop them from having their own opinions, any more than you can stop these people out in Hollywood from making their picture—”

Claiborne looked up, a question in his eyes, and Dr. Steiner nodded.

“Forgot to mention it. I had a call from that producer, the one you talked to yesterday.”

“Marty Driscoll?”

“He phoned this morning, right after I got back. Said he’d heard the news and wanted more details on what happened yesterday.”

“And you gave them to him?”

“Of course not.” Steiner frowned. “I’ve no intention of helping him, never did. I haven’t read his script, don’t want to talk to his writer. And in view of the circumstances, my advice to him was to cancel the picture entirely.”

“Did he agree?”

“He as much as told me to go to hell. He thinks all this is great publicity. They’re going to start shooting next Monday.”

“But they can’t!” Claiborne shook his head. “Nick, we have to do something.”

“Of course.” Dr. Steiner pushed his chair back, rising. “I’m going to work. And you’re going to take a few days off, get some rest.”

“I don’t want—”

“Never mind what you want, it’s what you need. I’ll take over your case load this week. You’re overtired and you’re overreacting.”

“Overreacting?”

“This business about the picture. When you come right down to it, what’s the difference whether they go ahead or not? We can’t stop them.”

“Maybe not,” said Claiborne. “But if we don’t, Norman will.”

**I**t had been a mistake to tell Steiner anything.

Claiborne should have known the minute Nick started talking about overreacting. But he hadn't caught the implication then; he'd gone on explaining about the newspaper item in the hardware store, how Norman must have seen it, where he guessed Norman would be going and what he'd do. He should have realized that Steiner wouldn't understand, but it was too late now.

Now they had him in the hospital.

God knew what the diagnosis was—they wouldn't tell him, weren't going to tell him. The nurses and orderlies never forgot to call him "Doctor" when they addressed him; they were all very courteous, but they were also very firm.

Claiborne understood the need for firmness. It was a necessary measure, a professional procedure that he himself had followed, something he'd accepted as part of the job he had to do. But now they were doing a job on him. And he couldn't take it.

He couldn't get used to being a patient, being ordered around, treated like a child. Getting examined, inspected, searched as though he were some kind of criminal. Told to stand there, sit here, served his meals on a tray.

And then there were the noises. The syrupy, supposedly soothing sound of canned music, interrupted by buzzing voices issuing commands. And always the droning that music couldn't disguise, the droning that set up a vibration inside his head, a pressure that made his ears ring. Even with his eyes closed, Claiborne couldn't escape; there was no escape.

Because he was strapped down.

That was when it really hit him, when he knew he couldn't move. *They had him in restraint!*

Claiborne began to tremble. He forced himself forward, his body arching up against the confinement of the unyielding straps. But the straps held, they were firm, everyone was firm, no escape, no way. *Got to get out of here, out of here—*

His eyes opened and he stared down.

At the seat belt.

*Relax. You're on the plane.*

He sank back, conscious that he was smiling, relieved and ashamed at the same time. Steiner had been right; he was overtired, and that's why he'd fallen asleep during the flight. And overreaction had emerged in his nightmare.

Its elements seemed obvious. The nurses and orderlies were the airline personnel. In dream, going through the airport security check became a physical examination. The directions—being told to wait for boarding, to remain seated and fasten his belt—were self-explanatory. And of course they'd served him a meal on a tray.

The canned music and the pilot's messages had come over the cabin intercom. Now there was only the drone of the engines as the plane began its long, gliding descent. But the vibration was real enough, and he did feel pressure in his ears.

He felt pressure, period. But now was not the time to think about it. Now was the time to *please remain seated until the aircraft reaches the terminal*—although all around him, Claiborne noted, passengers were rifling the overhead storage compartments for their hand luggage and crowding down the aisle, propelled by competitive compulsion to be first in line.

Now was the time to pick up his own briefcase and move through the exit, running the gauntlet of mechanical smiles and automated goodbyes from the perspiring stewardesses stationed there.

*Welcome to Los Angeles International.*

In the airport's upper lobby, friends and family greeted his fellow passengers. For a moment Claiborne caught himself scanning faces in the crowds clustering around the semicircle of arrival and departure gates, then smiled self-consciously. Who the hell was he looking for? Norman wasn't

waiting at the terminal to say hello—if, indeed, he was waiting anywhere at all. Suppose Steiner had been right and all this was a fool's errand?

Only one way to find out. Claiborne started forward, shouldering through the throng and escalating down—neat contradiction in terms, that!—to the lower level. Now he began to plod the interminable tunnel leading to the outer lobby.

The symbolism of these movements didn't go unnoticed; it was like reenacting one's birth. Once in the tunnel, everyone became impatient, anxious to reach the exit, emerge reborn into the new world beyond.

But actual birth was a simple phenomenon compared to what still had to be endured. Making the car-rental arrangements, buying the street guide, locating his baggage and snatching it from the conveyor—everything took time, taxed patience, enhanced irritation.

How long had it been since travel had transformed itself from pleasure to an endless ordeal? Perhaps he had a low pain threshold, or maybe he was just too damned tired; whatever the reason, he resented the regimentation and the herding, the hordes jabbering and jostling at the luggage stations. No amount of soporific sound could disguise the discomfort, whether it came from the speaker system or rose in recollection of the television commercials chorusing the delights of flight.

Flight, escape—all he wanted was to get out of here. And even after he'd reached the rented car, stowed his bag, consulted the map for guidance, appraised the instrument panel on the dash, and started moving, there was still the problem of leaving the airport. Inching along in bumper-to-bumper traffic, interpreting the constantly confusing overhead signs, fighting to change lanes, Claiborne finally reached Century Boulevard and crawled east to the San Diego Freeway. Here, exhausted by exhaust, he located the northbound entrance ramp and moved up, swerving left between a thundering semi and lurching camper. Life in the fast lane wasn't all that great, either, but at least now he was headed in the right direction.

Or so he hoped.

The mere mechanics of driving at a regular speed, of functioning as a comparatively free agent once again, had a relaxing effect. Now he was calm enough to review the situation objectively.

No point in faulting Steiner; actually, Nick had been extremely supportive. Once he'd realized Claiborne's mind was made up, he'd put his skepticism aside and cooperated fully. Maybe he didn't give the trip his unqualified blessing, but he helped get plane reservations, ordered Otis to drive Claiborne to the airport, promised to stay in touch and pass on a report of autopsy findings or any other developments as soon as possible.

Best of all, he'd called a halt to that cheap-shot analysis of motivations, perhaps because Steiner knew Claiborne would be doing the job for him.

And he was, now.

The nightmare on the plane—sorting out its elements had been easy enough, but unimportant. The meaning behind those elements was what counted.

His dream of incarceration was a dream of punishment. Nobody had punished him for letting Norman escape, so he was punishing himself.

The actual trip was another expression of guilt feelings. He'd taken a flight, and flight was *fugue*, running away. But he couldn't run away from his responsibility.

And that was where he parted company with Steiner. He *was* responsible. If Norman had come out here, he must find him, and quickly. Maybe he had no solid proof to support his position, but Steiner and Engstrom had none to support theirs. Not yet, anyway. And until proof was forthcoming, he must go with his instincts, his convictions, his training.

So much for the professional reaction, but there was more to it than that. Norman wasn't just another patient. When you saw someone every day for years, shared his confidence, learned his innermost secrets, counseled and guided him in moments of stress, there was only one word to describe the relationship. Norman was his friend.

*A friend in need.* To hell with the professional reaction. He was here because Norman needed help.

Claiborne angled right and took the eastbound interchange onto the Ventura Freeway. Checking the overhead signs, he got off at Laurel Canyon, headed south for a half-mile, turned left onto Ventura Boulevard.

Coronet Studios would be another mile or so down the street, and a block north. But there was no need to locate it precisely at the moment. Right now

he had to find a place to stay.

He drove slowly, noting a number of motels along the boulevard route, most of them standing flush against the sidewalks, aligned with the pet hospitals, cocktail lounges, and car lots. What he saw didn't attract him; never mind the heated pools, the color TV. He wanted a place set back from the busy arterial, away from the traffic noise.

Then he spotted it, on his right.

*Dawn Motel.*

The sign was weathered, and so was the modest L-shaped structure behind it, but both stood well to the rear of the combination patio and parking area. He didn't see a pool, and only one car stood slanted in a slot near the office entrance—an indication, he hoped, of peace and quiet.

Claiborne pulled in, killed the motor, clambered out. His legs ached, signaling fatigue, as he moved to the office door, blinking against the rays of the late afternoon sun. Pulling the door open, he stepped into the welcome coolness of the dim domain beyond.

His vision blurred, then adjusted to inventory the small, makeshift lobby area. Plastic-backed chairs huddled behind a battered coffee table supporting a metal ashtray amid a litter of old magazines. The right wall held the usual trio of vending machines offering the weary traveler a choice of carbonated citric acid, stale candy bars, or overpriced cigarettes. At his left was the reception desk, unoccupied. Behind it, surrounded by a cluster of framed and faded photographs, was a wall clock, its insistent ticking commanding his attention.

He stared at the face and hands. *Why do we personify Time? Is it because we're afraid to admit that our lives are measured by an abstract force that neither knows nor cares about our entry into existence or our departure into death? Time is our mysterious master; giving it a face and hands, we attempt to transform it into our servant.*

Claiborne shrugged. Enough of that; it was only a clock and he was just tired. The hour hand stood at six, though his wristwatch insisted it was eight. He adjusted the latter to local time, but his own internal chronometer was still functioning unchanged, and he'd need a good night's rest to compensate for jet lag and fatigue.

So where was the proprietor?

Walking over to the desk, he caught a sight of the metal bell and clanged it with his forefinger.

Then he stepped back, waiting, and as he did so, his eyes moved to the pictures on the wall. The clock was ticking away, but in the photographs surrounding it, Time had stopped.

Sun-fading had bleached the backgrounds and blurred the inked inscriptions, but the faces in the portrait frames smiled forth bravely and unchanged from the security of a darkened, distant past. Poses and garments suggested their subjects' affinity with showbiz, though Claiborne recognized only one: the sole unsmiling countenance staring down from the shadows.

Now the door leading onto the patio was opening and the clerk entered, moving behind the desk.

He was tall, thin, cotton-haired, his deeply tanned face seamed and cracked with wrinkles like a dry riverbed. But age hadn't erased his smile, and his gray-green eyes were inquisitively alert.

Claiborne's appraisal was automatic; he dismissed it quickly now and concentrated on the routine of room rental.

Yes, forty dollars a night would be okay, and he expected to stay until Sunday. Stove and refrigerator? Good enough, though he didn't intend to do much cooking; he'd probably be out most of the time. If Number Six was a rear unit, it sounded fine to him.

Signing the register, Claiborne checked the impulse to put down a fake name. No need for any cloak-and-dagger stuff; after all, he expected to be getting his calls here. But he did refrain from initialing M.D. after his signature. As he glanced up at the wall photos, once again the single somber face caught his attention.

"Isn't that Karl Druse?" he said.

The elderly man nodded.

"I thought I recognized him." Claiborne studied the portrait. "Remarkable actor. Next to Chaney Senior, probably the best of the early horror stars."

“Right.” The inquisitive eyes brightened. “But that was back in the silent days. How’d you know about him—are you in the industry?”

Claiborne shook his head. “No. Are you?”

“A long time ago.” The clerk gestured toward the cluster of photographs. “I knew them when they owned this town. Now they’re hanging on the wall and I’m still moving around down here. Funny how things work out.”

“You were an actor?”

One of the cracks in the riverbed widened to produce a smile. “If I was, you can bet my picture would be up there, bigger than any of the others.” The clerk chuckled. “No, I never acted. Just a writer—what they used to call a scenarist—down the street here at Coronet Studios.”

“Coronet?” Claiborne glanced at him quickly. “That’s interesting, Mr—”  
“Post. Tom Post.”

“You must know quite a bit about the business, Mr. Post.”

“Not anymore. When the talkies came in, I got out. Got pushed out, if you want the truth.” Tom Post chuckled again.

“You don’t sound unhappy about being retired.”

“Who said I was?” Post’s smile faded. “I ran a used-car lot in Encino before I built this place down here. No big deal, but at least it keeps me busy. I’ll never quit working, not now.” He gestured with a bony finger. “You know what retirement is today? An old man with diseased lungs, catching poisoned fish in a polluted stream.”

Claiborne grinned. “I see you’re still a writer.”

“Just an old fart with a leaky mouth, if you’ll pardon the mixed metaphor.” Tom Post reached into the desk drawer and selected a key attached to a wooden paddle. “Here you are. Want some help with your luggage?”

“Don’t bother—I can manage.”

“Number Six is down at the end, next to the alley.”

Claiborne nodded. “Before I go, I’d like to make a few calls.”

“There’s a phone in your room.”

“Good.”

“If you need anything else, feel free.”

“Thanks.”

Claiborne went out to the car for his bag and briefcase, then carried them down the patio walk to Number Six.

The room was like an oversize microwave oven, but he located the thermostat on the window air conditioning unit and turned it on high. The ancient appliance rasped in senile response. He shed his jacket, sprawled out on the double bed, and picked up the telephone.

It was after six-thirty now, probably too late to reach anyone at Coronet, but he took a chance and dialed the operator for the number. Then he called the studio, and a girl on the switchboard put him through to Driscoll’s office. Much to his surprise, he heard the click of the phone being picked up.

“Yeah?” Marty Driscoll’s deep voice was instantly identifiable.

“This is Adam Claiborne, Mr. Driscoll.”

“Who?” The question conveyed casual irritation rather than actual interest.

“Dr. Claiborne. We spoke on Sunday, when you called the hospital.”

“Oh sure Doc, I remember.” Annoyance vanished from Driscoll’s voice. “Glad to hear from you. Maybe you can set me straight on what’s coming down.”

“I’d be happy to, if you’ll give me an appointment.”

“Appointment?” A brief pause. “You here in town?”

“Just arrived. I was hoping we might be able to get together sometime tomorrow—”

“Whenever you say. I’ll be in all day.”

“Nine o’clock?”

“Make it nine-thirty. There’ll be a pass waiting for you at the gate.”

“Good enough,” Claiborne said. “Nine-thirty.”

“Wait,” Driscoll cut in quickly. “That boss of yours, Dr. Steiner—I called him yesterday and all I got was a brush. What’s the real poop on Norman Bates?”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.” Claiborne started to lower the receiver as he spoke. “See you tomorrow.”

He hung up, leaving Driscoll hanging. A cheap ploy but an effective one, or so he hoped. It was good to find that the producer worried. So far, nobody else seemed to give a damn.

Twilight invaded the room as the air conditioner whined in feeble protest. Claiborne debated before switching on the bedlamp. What he really wanted to do was stretch out and sleep around the clock. Seven o'clock here now—that meant it would be nine o'clock home. And he'd promised to give Steiner a call when he got in.

Picking up the receiver again, he dialed the private number. A hollow ringing echoed in response. *For whom Ma Bell tolls.* On the tenth ring he hung up. Wearily he tried again, this time on the regular hospital line, and Clara answered from the reception desk.

Steiner was out, she said. Something about a dinner meeting with the Fairvale Rotary.

*Good public relations, business as usual. Don't you understand, Nick? The bell tolls for thee.*

Controlling his voice with an effort, Claiborne gave Clara his motel address and the phone number, telling her he'd call Dr. Steiner sometime tomorrow. No point in asking what was happening back there; she'd be the last to know. And very probably nothing had happened, if Steiner was free to go off and eat rubber chicken with the Rotary.

By the time he set the phone down again, his annoyance had faded with the last rays of sunset. For a moment he debated going out for some food, then rejected the notion. Let Steiner chase the canned peas around his plate. Right now, for Claiborne, rest was more important.

He kicked off his shoes and hung his clothing in the narrow closet. He opened the bag, unpacked, stowed garments in the bureau drawers, put his second suit on a hanger, carried the shaver and toiletries to the bathroom. If traveling salesmen had to go through this boring routine every night, no wonder they got drunk and picked up hookers.

He used the toilet and considered a shower, then decided it could wait until morning. After donning his pajamas, he returned to the bedroom and pulled down the shade, then the bedcovers.

As he did so, he noticed his briefcase resting on top of the bureau and remembered its contents. The script of *Crazy Lady* had remained untouched on the plane. He could read it now, but what would be the point? He wasn't seeing Driscoll to discuss the script; tomorrow's meeting had another purpose.

Claiborne silenced the air conditioner, lowered himself onto the bed, and flicked off the lamp on the nightstand. *Tomorrow's meeting*. How was he going to handle Marty Driscoll? What was the case entry here?

*Case entry*. Of course, that was it. Lead from strength, establish a doctor-patient relationship. Dr. Claiborne, the authority figure. Stripped of all the Latin and Greek buzzwords, that was what therapeutic technique amounted to: let the patient talk. Break through the reaction formation.

Let Driscoll argue himself hoarse about the spectacular potential of the picture, the money it would make. Listen to him the way you'd listen to a man standing on the window ledge of a tall building, ready to jump.

Then and only then, explain his position to him. Certainly the picture would be spectacular and attract attention—just like jumping out of that high window. And it would probably make a lot of money. But if the man who jumped out of the window was insured, that could mean a lot of money too. The trouble was he wouldn't be alive to enjoy it.

*So look before you leap, look down into the darkness below and you'll see what I see. Norman Bates, waiting for you. Mark my words, he's waiting for you to jump into this thing. I'd stake my life on it. And that's why I'm warning you not to stake yours—*

*Stake my life.*

The phrase echoed. He still thought of Norman as a friend, but what did Norman think? To him, Claiborne might be an enemy.

And perhaps it was true, in a way. In his dream he'd come here to punish himself. But in reality maybe he'd come to punish Norman for running away, ruining his plans.

The book, that was it. The book had been the key to the whole thing. He'd hoped to write it as a record, a report, on five years of successful therapy. Reputations had been made with less.

To hell with reputations! It didn't matter now. What mattered was what had happened to those innocent people back in Fairvale and to those who survived them.

Claiborne frowned up into the darkness. It was time to stop worrying about himself, stop worrying about whether Norman was his friend, his patient, his enemy. The important thing was the trauma, the suffering of the victims' families. They were the ones who deserved concern, needed help. And it was his duty to give it to them. Not because he was a psychiatrist—to hell with that, too!—but because he was a decent, caring human being.

He couldn't change the past, but at least he could try to alleviate some of their anguish and anxiety in the future, save them from exploitation and exacerbation, relieve their fears of further danger. That's why he had to stop this picture, find Norman and bring him back, even if his own life was on the line—

The sound was so faint that Claiborne scarcely heard it. Only the fact that his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness gave him a clue. Lying on his side, facing the door, and seeing the doorknob turning—

*Click.*

And the thump of Claiborne's bare feet hitting the floor as he bounded off the bed. Impulse impelled him; there was no time to think until it was too late, he'd already unlocked the door, flung it open—

A shadow stood in the doorway.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you," said Tom Post.

"What's the idea? You could have knocked."

"Thought you were asleep." Turning, half-profiled in the outside patio light, the leathery lizard face wrinkled into a grin. "Just a security check. I always make sure the doors are locked before I turn in for the night." Post peered into the darkened room. "Everything all right?"

Claiborne nodded, his tension draining.

"Then I won't bother you. Have a good night's rest."

"I intend to." Claiborne started to close the door.

As he did so, Post chuckled. "Don't worry, you're safe here. Remember, this isn't the Bates Motel."

The door closed.

The lock clicked.

The footsteps moved away along the walk.

And Claiborne stood enshrouded amidst the darkness, hearing nothing but the echo of the old man's chuckle in the night.

The caterpillar was gone.

Jan stared at Santo Vizzini as he rose from behind his desk.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“Your mustache—you shaved it off.”

Vizzini nodded as he moved toward her in a swirl of scent, running a pudgy forefinger over the bare spot between his nose and upper lip.

“You approve?”

“I’ll have to get used to it. You look so different.”

Which was true, of course. Without the mustache, the director seemed to have shed his ethnic stereotype. But he was still gesticulating nervously, still smelled as if he mainlined cologne. And there was nothing different about his approach.

Jan managed to drop the copy of the script she was holding and stooped to retrieve it just in time to avoid the touch of his hand on her arm.

“Clumsy,” she said, stepping back.

“Relax,” Vizzini told her. “I won’t bite you.” He grinned, exhibiting a serration of yellow molars and incisors that seemed to belie the statement. *What big teeth you have, Grandma.*

Jan smoothed the crumpled cover of the script. “About the reading—”

“Reading?” Vizzini’s grin faded into a puzzled pout. His lips seemed thicker without the protection of a mustache.

Jan nodded. “Tuesday afternoon, three o’clock,” she said. “Here I am, right on the button.”

Vizzini struck his forehead with the flat of his palm, an exaggeratedly melodramatic gesture he would never have permitted in an actor under his direction. “Of course! That stupid cow, Linda—I told her to call you this morning—”

“Problems?”

“Paul Morgan. He’s coming in for a rehearsal. I promised to walk him through the scene on the parlor set.”

“But I’m in that scene too. Couldn’t we do it together?”

“That’s what I suggested. He says he prefers to work alone.”

“I get it,” Jan said. “The star treatment.”

“Star, no. Treatment, yes. Just between us, he is very unsure of himself. Playing a transvestite, he has to go against his image. It is important that I help him.”

“What about me?” Jan did her best to conceal her irritation. “I’ve got some questions about my own part—”

“They will be answered, I promise you.” Vizzini perfumed the air with his gesture. “We will schedule another reading later in the week. I’ll have Linda check and let you know when to set it up. Perhaps by that time you will have a better grasp of the character.” He led her to the door, patting her shoulder, and this time she didn’t flinch away from his touch. “Believe me, if you get up in your lines there will be nothing to worry about. I trust my instinct. When I selected you for the part, I knew you would come through.”

*Not for you, buster,* Jan told herself. *Stuff yourself.*

But when she drove back up the hillside to the apartment in the humid heat of late afternoon, she did decide to have another go at the script.

Connie was gone, out on a casting call for a commercial, so there were no distractions. Once she’d changed into slacks and settled down on the living room sofa, Jan opened the pages of *Crazy Lady* and addressed herself to the sides of dialogue she’d carefully underscored in vivid green.

The trouble was that she couldn’t stick to her own lines; before long she was reading the entire script straight through. And once again she was disturbed by the impact and import of the subject matter. This was no whodunnit, it wasn’t structured like a routine suspense film, and it didn’t rely on what they called “pop-ups” for its shocks. The thing read almost like a documentary; its fright was factual. And what disturbed her most was that Roy Ames had written it.

Once again she recalled his outburst the other day. That was disturbing too—not just what he’d said or the way he’d said it, but the realization of how completely it had caught her off guard. Up until then she’d had a thing about Roy, and it wouldn’t have taken much more to turn her on. But now —

Now the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“That’s a great line. Mind if I steal it?” said Roy Ames.

*Speak of the devil.*

But she didn’t hang up. She listened to his apology and accepted it. And when he came out with an invitation to dinner at Sportsman’s Lodge, she accepted that too.

“No, don’t pick me up—I’ll meet you there,” she told him. “Eight o’clock’s fine. See you.”

Jan put the phone down, but the burden of doubt remained. Had she made the right move? The words of an old proverb emerged from memory. *He who sups with the devil must have a long spoon.*

Maybe so. But whoever had invented that one-liner was speaking of men, not women. And she’d made sure the spoon was long enough, by not inviting him here to pick her up.

Besides, he wasn’t a devil, but merely an opponent in this hassle about the film. So the right thing had been to accept, to try to win him over.

Jan shelved the script on the bookcase. No more time to rehearse now; this evening she had another part to play.

She dressed for it carefully and considered her role. Roy had handed her the right cues. His apology amounted to an admission that he was the heavy, and the dinner invitation indicated he’d be doing his best to make amends for past behavior. All she had to do was remember to play the injured party and steal the scene.

By the time she arrived at Sportsman’s Lodge, Jan had her act together.

She came into the lobby a few minutes before eight, but Roy was already waiting for her; a good sign. He had two martinis before ordering dinner, and that was good too. Meanwhile he kept chatting her up with a lot of

small talk, indicating that while the drinks had loosened his tongue, he wasn't really relaxed. And he never said one word about the picture; obviously he intended to avoid the subject entirely.

But it had to be discussed if she meant to end his opposition. Jan half listened to him over her fruit cocktail, and by the time their steaks arrived, she'd found the lead-in.

"I hate to admit it, but I'm glad I canceled my other date," she said.

Roy put down his salad fork and looked up. Jan met the question in his eyes with a smile.

"Vizzini wanted me to have dinner with him and discuss the picture."

"That creep." Roy's reaction was even better than she'd hoped for. Or worse. "Don't get yourself involved. I know it's none of my business, but —"

"Right. It's mine." Jan retained the smile as she interrupted. "I agree he's a creep, but he also happens to be my director. And it could be important, having him on my side."

"He'll be on something more than just your side if you aren't careful," Roy said. "You know how he operates. The stuff that went on at his place in Nichols Canyon, the dog-and-pony act with the rock groupies. Sure, it was all hushed up, he was right in the middle of shooting that twenty-million-dollar turkey, and the money people couldn't afford to see him indicted. But you don't need trouble. Not with a kink who's that far into S-and-M and violence."

Roy slashed at his steak as he spoke, then paused as Jan caught his eye.

"Look who's talking," she said.

"Sorry." His motion slowed, his knife and voice lowered selfconsciously. "Maybe it's contagious."

"I know," Jan murmured. "I caught some of it today, going over my script. Scary."

"Guess I was in shock when I wrote it. But you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"Stop and think." Roy pushed his plate back. "I've done spooky stuff before, mostly teleplays, but that's why Driscoll handed me the assignment."

Writing about vampires and werewolves is like writing fairy tales. It never got to me because I knew the monsters were just make-believe.

“But this time was different. What I wrote about was based on something that really happened, and Norman Bates was for real.” Roy nodded. “He got to me.”

“How?”

“You’re an actress. You know what’s needed when you play a part, the way you try to get a handle on the character’s motivations?” Roy gulped coffee. “A writer does that upfront, too—his job is to find that handle. Doing the script, I had to somehow get inside Norman, figure out how he thought, how he felt, what made him tick until he exploded.

“It wasn’t easy, but somehow I managed, and it worked. But when I finally managed to get into that sick head of his, all I wanted was to get out again, finish the script so I’d be finished with Norman.

“What I forgot is that Norman wasn’t finished with me. At least when I was writing the character, I could control him, just like the real Norman was controlled back there in the asylum. But now—”

Jan put down her fork. “I know how you feel. He freaks me out too. But scrubbing the picture won’t change anything. Besides, Norman’s dead. You saw the paper this morning; they’re almost positive now he died in that van explosion.”

“Almost positive.” Roy leaned forward. “Suppose they’re wrong?”

“You said the same thing yesterday at the studio.” Jan spoke softly. “Why? Do you know something we don’t?”

“It’s not what I know.” Roy paused and Jan had the feeling his usual glibness had deserted him; he was fumbling for something deep inside that couldn’t be captured by a phrase. “All I’ve got is a gut instinct that Norman is still alive. Alive and waiting.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know.” Roy grimaced. “How can I expect you to understand when I can’t even understand it myself?”

*He’s hurting. Really hurting.* Jan’s resentment vanished with the realization. This was no adversary, merely a deeply troubled man tormented by something he couldn’t exorcise or express.

She'd forgotten about her role-playing, but now she needed its help if she wanted to come to his rescue. Perhaps the best way was to laugh it off.

And so Jan smiled her I'm-putting-you-on smile and said, "Sounds bad. Maybe you ought to see a shrink."

Roy nodded. "I will."

"What?"

"Didn't you know?" Roy leaned forward. "Driscoll called me tonight just before I left. He's set up a meeting for tomorrow morning with Norman Bates's psychiatrist."

Jan lucked out at the studio gate on Wednesday morning.

She arrived early, her Toyota wedged into a queue of cars conveying regular employees, and when the guard saw the new sticker pasted on the windshield, he waved her forward.

No one asked her if she had an appointment, and that was a break because she wasn't expected.

Certainly, Anita Kedzie was surprised when Jan showed up in Driscoll's outer office. The moment she appeared, the insectoid eyes behind the bulging lenses began a quick scan of the ruled notepad resting on the desktop between the intercom and the telephone.

"I don't seem to have you down here," said Miss Kedzie. "What time did Mr. Driscoll say for you to come in?"

"He didn't." Jan's smile was casual. "I just happened to be on the lot and thought I'd stop by for a moment."

Miss Kedzie's pursed lips revealed her reaction. *Stop by? But nobody sees a producer without an appointment. It's like dropping in at the Vatican to have a surprise quickie with the Pope.*

"I'm afraid he's tied up," the secretary said. Her brisk tone didn't indicate whether Driscoll was bound and gagged or merely suffering from constipation. "If you like, I can tell him you're here."

"Don't bother," Jan told her. "It's really not important."

But it *was* important. She glanced at her watch. Nine-forty-five. Roy hadn't mentioned a specific time for the meeting and she hadn't risked arousing his suspicions by asking. She'd guessed it would probably be scheduled for ten and had made her plans accordingly. Barge in early, give Driscoll some excuse about coming on the lot for wardrobe fittings, and just happen to be on hand when this Dr. Claiborne arrived.

She didn't expect an invitation to stick around, but at least she might have a chance to say hello and size him up, maybe even get some clues as to why he was here. Of course, Roy would be furious, but after last night Jan had decided it was no use trying to turn him around. What she needed to know right now was whether Dr. Claiborne was on her team or the enemy list.

Too late now—she'd blown it.

Jan was already turning away when Anita Kedzie called after her.

“Miss Harper—”

“Yes?”

“Would you do me a favor? I want to go down the hall, just for a minute. Mr. Driscoll doesn't like for me to leave the office unless someone's here to take calls.”

“No problem. I'll stick around.”

“Thank you.”

The secretary rose and scurried into the corridor, closing the door behind her.

Jan smiled. She wasn't too entomology, but apparently insects had bladders too. *Let's hear it for Miss Kedzie's kidneys.*

Now, if there was only some way to take advantage of her security leak —

The desk intercom offered the obvious solution. Keeping a wary eye on the outer door, Jan stepped over and flipped the unit's audio switch.

*Driscoll's voice.* “Okay, Doc, let's put it this way. I'm already committed. The deals are made, the contracts are signed, the sets are going up. You got any idea what the interest charges are on even one day's delay? I'm talking facts and figures now. All you've got is this hunch—”

“But it's not just a hunch.” *Roy Ames.* “It's a professional evaluation.”

“What about Dr. Steiner? He doesn't go along with it, he told me so himself. Neither do the police.”

“This man was Norman Bates's therapist. He's the only one in a position to know. He came out here at his own expense.”

“Believe me, I appreciate it! But there’s no point arguing now. Look, Doc, I’m sorry you had to waste your time—”

“Maybe it isn’t wasted.” George Ward’s soft murmur. “Remember your idea about sending Roy to Fairvale before he did a final polish on the script?”

“Yeah. But Steiner turned me down.”

“Dr. Claiborne is the man Roy should talk to. And you’ve got him right here. If you put him on as technical advisor for a few days—”

“Now you’re talking!” *Driscoll, cutting in.* “Make a good story—”

“But I’m not interested in promoting your film.” *The firm, resonant voice had to be Dr. Claiborne’s.* “I’m warning you—the only publicity the press will get from me is a statement that this picture should not be made.”

*And there goes the ballgame.* Jan snapped off the intercom. *Smug bastard sounds like he means it, too. If he goes public he could raise enough stink to get the PTA and all the other pressure groups into the act.*

Behind her, Jan could hear footsteps approaching in the other hall. Probably Miss Kedzie, returning.

Jan didn’t wait to find out. She moved to the door of the private office and flung it open.

The occupants of the room stared up in surprise as she entered. Presumably the big smile on her face was for all of them, but Jan zeroed in on the tall man standing directly before Driscoll’s desk. That would be Dr. Claiborne.

“Hi,” she said. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

Driscoll scowled. “What do you want? We’re in a meeting—”

“So I heard.”

“Heard?”

Jan gave him her no-big-deal look. “Somebody must have left the intercom on accidentally.”

“Where the hell is Kedzie?”

“She went down the hall for a minute and asked me to hold the fort.”

Driscoll reached for the unit on his desk, and Jan gestured quickly. “Please, don’t chew her out. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have listened.”

The producer was still scowling, but his hand drew back. “Okay, so you listened. What do you want?”

Roy and George were scowling too, but Jan ignored them. And she ignored Driscoll as she turned to face the tall man standing before the desk. He was younger than she’d expected—not handsome, but with a cool, laid-back look that contrasted with the nervous frowns of the others. He eyed her steadily.

“Dr. Claiborne?” she said. “I’m Jan Harper.”

He nodded, his stare softening as he returned her smile. “I’ve seen your photograph.”

“Then you know I’m playing Mary Crane in the picture.”

“Yes.”

Driscoll’s voice boomed. “What the hell is this, boy meets girl? Look, if you’ve got anything to say—”

“I do.” Jan swivelled her smile, then focused again on Dr. Claiborne’s face. “I need your help.”

His eyes flickered momentarily. “What’s the problem?”

“You.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“It’s the picture I’m talking about. I need your cooperation. We all do.”

“I’ve already stated my position—”

“I know. But you could change your mind.”

“For what reason?”

“Because this film must be made.” Jan was winging it, and as his stare challenged her, she met his question with another. “Have you read the script?”

“As a matter of fact, I haven’t.” The voice was firm and assured, but the stare dropped, and Jan felt confidence return. She’d caught him off guard, and now she had her cue.

“Then you should. Because it’s a marvelous piece of writing.”

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Driscoll and Ward watching. They wouldn’t interrupt now, they’d let her run with the ball. Roy had stopped

scowling too, and that was good. But she wasn't here to stroke Roy; she was playing to Dr. Claiborne.

"I'm not talking about technique," she said. "It's the concept. This isn't just another one of those horror flicks with a crazy heavy chewing the scenery. Norman Bates comes off as a human being—an ordinary man with hopes and fears and desires we all share, but caught in a compulsion he can't cope with. What he does is horrifying, but we see the reason and in the end we realize he's more of a victim than any of the others. The real heavy of the story is our own society."

Dr. Claiborne was smiling now. "That's quite a speech. How long did you rehearse it?"

"I didn't." Jan eyed him earnestly. "If I had, I'd give you the business about how much I want my part, how many people's jobs depend on making the picture. But there's more to it than that."

She waited a beat, then modulated her voice. The words came easily now. "You're a doctor. You worked with Norman Bates, know his problems. Haven't you ever wanted, just once, to tell people what it's really like—get them to understand and share the problem?"

"Well, here's your chance. Our chance. Read the script. Tell us what's right and what's wrong, so we can tell the world. You owe that much to yourself and to your patient."

Dr. Claiborne hesitated, his eyes searching, challenging, then submitting.

"You're right, of course," he said. "As far as you go. But it's not that simple. What I've been trying to say to Mr. Driscoll and the others here is that Norman Bates may still be alive. And if so, going ahead with this project could place you all in a potentially dangerous position."

"I agree," Roy said. "Look, Jan—"

"I agree too." Jan cut him off quickly, but her smile never wavered. "But Mr. Driscoll has already decided to go ahead. And that's all the more reason we need Dr. Claiborne here with us."

She turned to face the tall man again. "Now I'll speak for myself," she said. "If you're right, if Norman Bates is still alive, I'd feel a lot safer knowing you were here."

Dr. Claiborne was silent for a moment. And when he spoke, it was not to her but to George Ward.

“I’m free until Sunday,” he said. “Just what does a technical advisor do, and where do I begin?”

Claiborne sat across the table from Roy Ames. The commissary was filling up with the noon luncheon crowd, and their background babble made it difficult for him to catch what Ames was saying.

Not that he really wanted to. At the moment he was still listening to an interior dialogue that had begun immediately upon leaving Driscoll's office.

Why had he allowed himself to be persuaded? Was it just a matter of being caught off guard? True, the girl seemed to grasp the situation instantly, and her arguments made sense. At least she didn't discount the threat like all the others, except for Roy Ames here.

Still, that wasn't the real reason he'd agreed to stay. Perhaps the clincher was not what the girl said, but her physical presence. Claiborne remembered his reactions when he'd encountered her photograph, but actual confrontation with Jan Harper had an impact he wasn't prepared for.

He found himself voicing it to Roy Ames, and the writer nodded.

"Right. That's why Vizzini chose her. Jan's a dead ringer for Mary Crane."

"I hope not." Claiborne paused as the waitress came over and handed them their menus. "Ringer, yes. Dead, no."

"You're really convinced that Bates is alive?"

Claiborne nodded. "Isn't that your feeling?"

"Yes. But only a feeling. I can't explain why. I thought maybe you might have something more to go on—something you didn't tell them at the meeting."

"I'm not prepared to discuss it at the moment."

"Meaning you don't trust me either?"

"I don't know you." Claiborne tempered his words with a smile, gesturing toward the surrounding tables. "I don't know anyone yet."

“Your first time in a studio?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, let me give you a guided tour.” Ames followed Claiborne’s gaze. “The people over there are part of management. Don’t let the jeans fool you; they’re top echelon. You’re one of them, you dress like a slob, do the I’m-just-another-working-stiff routine. But when you leave the studio you make damn sure everybody sees you’re wearing a twenty-five-thousand-dollar car.” He grinned. “We live in an autoerotic society.”

Claiborne smiled, knowing the reaction was expected, but he sensed that this was not the first time Roy Ames had used the line. Now he nodded toward a group at a window table whose dark suits, white shirts, and carefully knotted neckties seemed to invalidate the writer’s explanation. “What about those people over there?”

Roy Ames followed his gaze. “Visitors. Probably network execs from back east. They come out from Mad Avenue looking for new ideas—to steal. Of course, what they usually settle for is stealing old ideas.”

Claiborne singled out a group of exceedingly hirsute young men across the aisle. “And those kids?”

“I’d say they’re into tapes and LPs. That’s where the action is today. One platinum record is worth a ton of Oscars.”

Someone brushed past them and halted before an adjoining table. There was a disturbing dichotomy about his appearance; his potbellied, middle-aged body was surmounted by a bronzed and youthful face. He said something to the seated group, laughed loudly, waved, then moved on.

“Table-hopper,” Roy Ames said. “If you see an actor who’s laughing it up, you can bet he’s unemployed. The tired-looking ones who don’t talk at all are working.”

Claiborne nodded and turned his attention to the menu. “What do you recommend?”

“Going somewhere else for lunch.” Ames smiled. “But as long as we’re stuck here, you’re safe with a sandwich.”

“That’s odd. I expected the food would be good.”

“Once upon a time it was, or so they tell me. Now nobody seems to care.” Ames put his menu down. “You know the old saying, ‘You are what

you eat'? If that's true, then most people must be coprophagists."

Claiborne thought about the remark as the waitress returned and took their order. Again he had the feeling that what he'd heard hadn't been improvised on the spur of the moment. Roy Ames wasn't a table-hopper, but he was definitely trying to make an impression.

"Coffee now," Ames called after the waitress when she moved away. Then he glanced at his companion. "Met anyone else on the picture?"

"Not yet. Paul Morgan's playing Norman, isn't he?"

"Supposedly. Up to now he's never played anything but Paul Morgan. Mr. *Mucho Macho*." Ames paused as his coffee arrived. "If you ask me, our culture is suffering from jock-shock."

"Then how did he get the part?"

"Ask Vizzini." Ames lifted his coffee cup. "On second thought, don't bother. Vizzini doesn't make suspense pictures anymore—just spatter-films. That's what the kids want. Plenty of special effects, and lots of punk rock during the car crashes and murder sequences. It's like the good old days in Rome—the musicians play louder when the lions eat the Christians in the arena."

More pat phrases, but they didn't answer Claiborne's question. He leaned forward. "If that's the way you feel, why did you write the script?"

"Money." Roy Ames shrugged. "No, that's not true. Or only partially. I saw something in this—a chance to reach the audience with the real thing instead of just grabbing them with gimmicks and grossout." He dumped sweetener in his coffee cup. "Maybe you'll understand when you read it."

"I'll give it a try," said Claiborne.

And that afternoon, back at the motel, he did just that.

The day had turned sultry and the air conditioner complained as the sun beat down against the west window, but Claiborne didn't notice because he wasn't really in the room.

He was inside the script, in a world two thousand miles and twenty years away.

The writing was uneven; in spite of what Roy Ames said, he hadn't entirely eliminated the elements he professed to despise. There was still

plenty of shock sequences, and the emphasis was on murder rather than motivation.

But it worked. The innocent young girl and the cunning madman were stereotypes, yet somehow they carried conviction. Perhaps the girls weren't all that innocent today, but the madmen were more cunning than ever. And more numerous. There was nothing in the film that wasn't duplicated daily in the news reports. Especially out here, Claiborne reflected, remembering the Skid Row Slasher, the Hillside Strangler, the Freeway Killers, and all the other mass murderers glamorized by the media's fancy labels. But there was nothing glamorous about their condition or their activities—sick people, hung up on homicide, OD-ing on death.

Claiborne sighed as the phrases flashed. He was falling into the trap, beginning to sound like a scriptwriter himself. The thing to do was eliminate those touches from the dialogue, let the contrast between appearance and reality speak for itself.

As the sunlight subsided he switched on the lamp, took a pad from his briefcase, and started making his notes.

Now the air conditioner droned in darkness, but the lamplight above the table haloed his head as he scrawled away, losing himself in the limbo of another time, another place. Norman's world.

The rapping on the door returned him to reality.

"Yes?" He rose, moving across the room. "Who's there?"

"Tom Post."

Claiborne opened the door and the old man grinned at him. "I remembered to knock this time. You busy?"

"No." Claiborne shook his head. *Nosy old bastard—what did he want?*

"Noticed your light. Just thought I'd stop by and offer you a beer." Post nodded at the cans he clutched in his left hand. "Compliments of the house." He chuckled.

For a moment Claiborne hesitated, but the sound was a signal he'd learned not to ignore. The chuckle, the nervous laugh, wasn't an indication of amusement but of defense—an attempt to conceal the real emotion underneath. What was Tom Post hiding?

“Come in.” Claiborne stepped back. “I’ll see if there’s a clean glass in the bathroom.”

“Don’t bother on my account.” Post moved to a chair, put the containers on the table, and punctured the tops with a left thumb. He held out a can to Claiborne, waited until the younger man seated himself on the edge of the bed, then raised his own can. “Cheers.”

“Thanks.” Claiborne drank.

“Weather like this, beer hits the spot.” Again the chuckle sounded. But the gray-green eyes were searching the room, finally focusing on the tabletop.

“Script?” he asked. “Thought you weren’t in the industry.”

“I’m not. Just looking it over for a friend.”

“I see.” Post tilted the beer can again. “What’s the story like? Or shouldn’t I ask?”

“No secret.” As he spoke, Claiborne watched the wrinkled face. “Come to think of it, you may be interested. The main character is Norman Bates.”

“The hell you say.” Tom Post wasn’t chuckling now.

Claiborne leaned forward. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that remark last night. How come you know about the Bates Motel?”

“I thought everybody did. Don’t you read the papers or watch the news?” Post’s tone was explanatory rather than defensive. “Matter of fact, there was an item about Coronet making a film on the case.” He glanced toward the table. “I take it your friend did the script.”

“That’s correct.” Claiborne was casual. “You used to write for pictures. Care to look at it?”

To his surprise, Tom Post shook his head. “Waste of time. I don’t understand movies nowadays. All those sex scenes—people in bed rolling over and over. Try doing it that way and you’ll end up with a broken back. And then, when he’s finished, the stud pops out from under the covers and damned if he isn’t wearing boxer shorts! That sure as hell isn’t the way we did it in my day.”

Now the chuckle sounded again. “Of course, times change. Take censorship. Maybe four-letter words are in, but other words are out. You

don't believe me, try getting up in public and singing the second line of 'My Old Kentucky Home.' ”

He sloshed the liquid at the bottom of his can. “Junk food, junk films. Writers have too much power nowadays.”

“That's not what my friend tells me,” Claiborne said.

“I don't mean pictures.” Post finished off his beer. “But think about this. Some politician gets up and reads a speech. His opponent reads a rebuttal. Then a TV commentator reads a report explaining what the two men read. All of it—the speech, the rebuttal, the explanation—is the work of some anonymous writers in the back room. And we call it 'news.’”

“Ten days or ten months or ten years later, another writer comes out with a book exposing everything they said as a lie. And that's called 'history.' So when you come right down to it, whether they're dealing with fact or fiction, all writers are professional liars.”

He set the empty container down on the tabletop. “How about another beer?”

“No, thanks.” Claiborne glanced through the window at the darkened patio beyond. “Time for me to go out and eat.”

“Wish I'd thought of it sooner,” Post said. “I fixed dinner early tonight. Should have asked you to join me. Must be pretty dull, eating alone when you're away from home.”

“That's all right. I'm used to it.”

“You're not married?”

“No.” Claiborne forestalled further questions by rising and moving to the closet for his jacket.

Tom Post switched off the lamp and followed him to the side door. “Plenty of restaurants around here,” he said. “But you could buy a few things at that supermarket down the street and stash them away here in the refrigerator.” He gestured toward the cupboard behind the unit. “You've got dishes in there, and a hot plate. Comes in handy for making breakfast.”

“Thanks for the tip.” Claiborne opened the door and stepped out.

Post followed, nodding his approval as the younger man closed the door and locked it. “That's the ticket,” he said. “I try to keep an eye out in case

anyone comes prowling around here, but these days you can't be too careful."

He started down the patio, toward the office, and Claiborne waved farewell, meanwhile inhaling the odor of night-blooming jasmine from the clump of shrubbery bordering the alleyway. Then he turned and headed for the street, where the floral scent was lost in the traffic fumes.

He breathed the stench until he entered the little steak house a block away. Here it was replaced in turn by the reek of charcoal-broil, onion rings, hash browns, and fries. But even that was preferable to the emanation from the armpits of his red-jacketed waiter. Post was right; it would be better to prepare a snack at the motel. Follow your nose.

Good enough, but what did the other sense organs convey? Post's nervous chuckle echoed in his ears. And when he closed his eyes there was a retinal recall of Tom Post watching while he locked the door of the room. *Nosy old bastard.*

Noses again, but there was more to it than that, something else lurked behind the chuckling and the curiosity. Post must have a passkey; he could be in the room right now, going through Claiborne's belongings. Or the script. He'd been eager enough to learn its contents—then, when he found out, even more eager to change the subject. Why?

*Come off it,* Claiborne told himself. Of course there was a reason. The elderly often chuckled self-consciously to disarm possible rejection. It was a signal, a way of saying, "Look, I'm not really a serious threat, don't get angry with me for speaking to you." And many of them were inquisitive about other people's affairs merely because their own lives were empty.

It must be a dismal existence for a man still in full possession of his faculties to just sit there in a rundown motel day after day and night after night. Judging by the absence of other vehicles in the parking slots, Claiborne was presently the only tenant. No wonder Tom Post brought the beer to his room, asked questions, talked a blue streak. The old man was lonely.

Either that, or damned devious. What was that remark he made about all writers being professional liars?

Roy Ames was a writer too. Full of facile phrases. Claiborne recalled the intuitive suspicion that his glib one-liners had seen service before. Like the table-hoppers, he'd trotted out his jokes seeking approval.

But for what reason? On the face of things, he must know that Claiborne was his ally; he saw eye-to-eye with him about toning down the script. Though, if so, why hadn't he fought harder, earlier on, to do the job himself? He was the one responsible for the violence in the first place.

That too could be a masking mechanism. In a sense, the Norman of the script was Roy Ames's creation. He supplied the character with his own frustrations, his own furies. And if spilling it out on paper wasn't catharsis, then it might be *cathexis*, a means of strengthening an unconscious attachment to Norman's *persona*. Which could be dangerous.

*All writers are professional liars.* A statement made by a writer. Which meant it was also a lie. But everyone lied, including his own patients, whose problem was that they lied not only to him but to themselves. In a way, they were the most professional liars of all. And he was a professional truth-finder.

Truth-seeker, he amended. And his search wasn't always successful; Norman was a case in point.

After finishing his meal and leaving the restaurant, Claiborne moved along the boulevard. Automatically, as he thought of Norman, he caught himself glancing around for the sight of a figure that wasn't there.

The cars sped by, the vans and Broncos and Jeeps, as well as an occasional motorcycle snarling through the snarl. Youth on the prowl.

But not on the sidewalks. Claiborne squinted at his watch; scarcely nine o'clock, and he was the sole visible pedestrian.

In spite of the gas situation, everyone drove. Walking city streets by night was too risky; even the cop on the beat made his rounds on wheels. Police were suspicious of strolling strangers, people like himself.

Passing by the darkened shopfronts, Claiborne peered at the unlit passageways between the buildings, knowing as he did so that his apprehension was absurd. Norman wasn't going to pop out from one of the passageways. Norman wasn't here. Or was he?

Damn that script! Reading it had brought everything back with a vengeance. Vengeance was the rationale.

Either that, or the whole thing was a paranoid delusion. If Norman had preceded him out here, he should have found his way to the studio by now. In the interval between psychotic episodes he was certainly capable of making plans, taking action to implement his vengeance. But everything pointed to one inescapable conclusion: Norman was dead. It was only the script that brought him to life again.

Even so, Claiborne found himself hastening toward the shopping mall looming ahead on his left. He turned into the parking area, welcoming the lights, the sounds, the presence of people.

Crossing the lot, he qualified his reaction. The presence of people wasn't all that welcomed a phenomenon, now that he observed their cars. *You are what you eat*, Roy Ames had said. Perhaps *you are what you drive* would be a more accurate observation. One can judge people by their motor-reflexes.

He noted the frantic maneuvering of vehicles entering the lot; the way in which aggressive drivers jockeyed for position, impeding the movement of those behind as they competed for vacated spaces close to the store entrance while other motorists hurled mechanical curses at them with their horns. The banged fenders of cars already parked attested to previous encounters, and the ultimate contempt for common courtesy was evident in those that occupied positions in the *Absolutely No Parking* zone.

In the market itself, the pattern continued. Old ladies with dyed orange hair squeezed the dyed oranges at the produce counter, blithely blocking the passage with their shopping carts. Tank-topped, barefooted beach bums crashed down the aisles, aiming their carts like weapons. Mom-and-Pop couples crowded single customers away from the displays of brain specials, though in nearly all instances it was bulldog-jawed Mom who took the initiative while little old dried-up Pop stood meekly by. *They also serve who only pay the freight*.

Claiborne took a quart of milk from the dairy shelves, brushing against a Japanese youth in a mesh blouse. The young man hissed and shook his head, causing his earring to bob about furiously.

At the deli counter he selected a modest assortment of packaged cold cuts. Picking over the cellophane-wrapped cheese, he found a small slab, but as he reached for it, a hand snaked around from behind and snared the prize. He turned to confront a grinning girl in a bumpy T-shirt emblazoned with the classic motto: *Up Yours*.

Moving on to the next section, he halted there to pick up a dozen eggs, waiting patiently while a middle-aged housewife in curlers opened cartons to inspect their contents while lipping a cigarette.

The smoke was acrid, and Claiborne turned away. Never mind the eggs, he could do without. Right now all he wanted to do was leave. It had been a long day and he was tired—tired of people, tired of noise and lights and confusion. The smarmy strains of amplified music dulled his hearing, the overly bright fluorescence made his vision blur.

As he reached the bakery goods display, he cast an irritated glance upwards, seeking the source of the piped-in sound. But the big rounded discs hanging at intervals between walls and ceiling were not amplifiers; their shiny surfaces reflected the movements of the customers below. Spotting devices, installed to detect shoplifters. And when he looked up, the long, livid fluorescent tubes cast a glittering glare.

Claiborne turned away. As he did so, another mirror installed directly behind him caught his eye. It was angled to reflect the image of shoppers approaching the left-hand checkout counter at the front of the store, but at the moment only one man was moving through the checkout. He stared up and Claiborne saw his face.

The face of Norman Bates.

Thrusting his cart to one side, Claiborne raced down the aisle toward the front of the store, swerving midway to avoid a gaggle of oncoming shoppers, who scowled in annoyance as he careened past them.

Their irritation scarcely registered; it was Norman's image that impelled him to the checkout, which in thirty seconds had already attracted a line-up of carts and customers.

But Norman was gone.

Claiborne halted, eyeing the unfamiliar faces, then pushed his way through the queue to confront the gum-chewing, bovine blonde behind the counter.

"Where is he?"

The rumination ceased as the blonde looked up.

"Your last customer—he was here just a minute ago—"

She shrugged, glancing automatically toward the nearest exit. Even as she did so, he elbowed his way past the counter, striding to the door.

The parking lot was almost full now; cars were moving in and out, patrons zigzagging across the open areas. Claiborne scanned the scene, searching for a familiar figure. He moved onto the lot, trying to locate vehicles on the point of pulling out.

There were three—no, four—and still another, way down at the far right. He hurried toward it as the car backed hastily into the open lane and then moved forward. In the glare of overhead floodlights he glimpsed a woman's face behind the windshield and, beside it, the knoblike silhouette of a child's head.

Turning, he started back to the center of the lot, then jumped at the blare of a horn directly behind him. He stepped aside just in time as a dune buggy zoomed past, the roar of its motor blending with the profanity of the mustached driver, who thrust his hand out to give him the finger.

Breathing heavily, Claiborne stared out across the area beyond, knowing as he did so that it just wasted effort now. Norman was gone.

But to where?

If he'd come here, it must mean that he was holed up someplace nearby, perhaps in one of the other motels lining the length of the boulevard.

Could they be checked out? There were dozens of places, not counting the big hotels, and Norman certainly wouldn't have registered under his own name, if in fact he was registered at all. Trying to identify every one of the single men who might have occupied motel rooms during the past three days would be a major project, even for a police task force. A project they weren't about to undertake unless Claiborne could offer them something more tangible than just his word.

*Yes, I realize the man's supposed to be dead, but I saw him there in the supermarket. No, I didn't speak to him, he was up at the front of the store and I was at the back. Not directly, I saw him in one of those overhead mirrors, but I'm positive—*

A lost cause. Claiborne sighed. There was nothing to do now except return to the market, retrieve his cart, and check out.

Walking back to the motel with his bag of groceries, he glanced around warily, searching the striations of light and shadow in the street. He'd seen Norman—but had Norman seen him? Had Norman followed him to the store, was he following him now?

Nothing stirred in the darkness.

Even so, he was relieved when he reached his room. The locked door yielded to the turn of the key, and when he switched on the light, the room revealed no sign of present occupancy or prior disturbance.

If Norman didn't know his whereabouts, Claiborne was secure here, at least for now. And there was always the possibility of subjective error. Noise, light, fatigue, tension—they could all add up to a simple case of mistaken identity. That was what the police would say; that was what he himself would probably say if some patient came to him with a similar story.

Under the circumstances, there was no point in talking to Driscoll and the others. Telling them what he'd seen, or thought he'd seen, would only

weaken his position unless he could offer proof. The thing to do now was exercise caution, watch and wait, and continue to emphasize the need for security. If Norman was here, he'd make his presence known soon enough.

*If Norman was here.*

Claiborne unpacked his groceries, put them away, shed his clothing, donned pajamas, and sank down on the bed. The air conditioner whispered to him.

*Norman. Here. Planning something. Where? What?*

Thank God he'd decided to stay on. At least he could keep his eyes and ears open, act as a sort of guardian angel to the others.

But even as he surrendered to sleep, a further question came.

*Who would be guarding him if Norman acted?*

There was no answer to that one. All he knew was that whatever happened, it would be soon.

**R**oy Ames's office was in the same building as Driscoll's, but there was no resemblance between the two. The cramped cubicle with its single window was smaller than the producer's private washroom, and by no means as lavishly appointed.

When Claiborne opened the door, he found Ames already seated behind his desk, midway between the file cabinet and the single extra chair. Apparently he was accustomed to these close quarters; whatever his hangups, claustrophobia wasn't one of them.

Blinking against morning sunlight radiating from the open window, Claiborne nodded a greeting and put his copy of the script down on the desktop.

Ames glanced at him expectantly. "Well, what do you think?" he said.

Claiborne hesitated, once again debating whether or not to reveal last night's experience. No sense in taking that chance. And right now the script had priority.

"I've got some notes here," Claiborne said. "If you'd like to go over them —"

"Great."

Claiborne opened his briefcase and pulled out the yellow pages. "Hope you can read my handwriting."

Ames managed.

His eyes moved rapidly over the scrawled sheets, revealing nothing. But Claiborne had no trouble recognizing his reactions. Long ago he'd learned that mouths are often most eloquent when not speaking. Ames's mouth was no exception. At first the lips curved upward in a slight smile; then, as he read on, they tightened. And finally the upper lip curled, forming a fixed frown.

It was time to intervene. “Please remember one thing,” Claiborne said. “I’m not criticizing the writing. Just content, the violence.”

Ames looked up. “We use another term now. As in ‘box-office gross.’ ”

“I’m aware of that. But I thought you were trying to avoid it.”

“I did, in my first draft.” Ames was on the defensive. “Most of the stuff you object to here is Vizzini’s work. He did a partial rewrite and Driscoll went along with it.”

“Sounds as if I’m wasting my time,” Claiborne said. “As technical advisor, I thought I was the one to suggest changes.”

“Technical, yes. Suggest, yes. But Vizzini has the clout—script approval, casting, the works. I told you how he insisted on Jan just because she was a lookalike for Mary Crane.”

“That’s another thing,” Claiborne said. “Did you notice my comments on her scenes?”

“I noticed.” Ames’s voice was tight, and Claiborne cut in quickly.

“It just seems to me that her character comes across as a bit too simple, too one-dimensional—”

“Okay, so it shows.” Ames shrugged. “If you must know, I wrote it that way on purpose. Jan’s not ready for anything heavy, even though she thinks so, and I want to keep her from screwing up. She comes on pretty strong, but when you know her better, you’ll see there’s something else behind it.”

“I hope to,” Claiborne said. “Matter of fact, I ran into her on the lot just now. She invited me to have dinner tonight.”

Ames didn’t reply, but the sudden set of his silent lips spoke for him.

And so did Claiborne’s inner voice. *Talk about screwing up—what’d you have to tell him that for? It’s obvious he’s emotionally involved with the girl. You need an ally and now you’ve got a jealous rival.*

He smiled quickly, indicating casual dismissal of the statement. “But that’s not important. We’ve got to—what do they say out here?—lick the script. If you’re willing to revise along the lines I’ve indicated—”

“Indicated?” Ames’s antagonism was open now. “All that stuff about displacement, latent content, reaction-formation—it reads like a medical report!”

“Sorry. What I was trying to do—”

“Don’t draw diagrams. You’re playing doctor, aren’t you?” Ames shook his head. “Psychs are like economists, meteorologists, seismologists—just a bunch of guessers with gadgets. Someday all you shrinks will be replaced by computers.”

“Suits me.” Claiborne kept his cool. “But that’s not going to help us now. I’ll go along with the way you’ve handled Jan’s role. The big job is to eliminate some of the violence.”

“No way. I told you Vizzini wants it in.”

Claiborne shrugged. “Then we’ll have to change the emphasis.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The real problem with this kind of film isn’t violence itself—it’s the *attitude* toward violence. That’s where the danger lies today, in the way antisocial behavior is exploited as the final solution to everything. Heroes, antiheroes, or villains, all winning out by taking the law into their own hands. We can keep Norman’s behavior just as it is, without dulling the knife-edge or mopping up the blood. But let’s not justify it.”

Ames was listening now, and Claiborne pressed on quickly. “Let’s tell the truth for once. Make it clear that murder solves nothing; it’s not heroic, and Norman Bates is no one to envy or emulate. You actually won’t have much rewriting to do if you keep this in mind. All it takes is a slight shift of emphasis to show him as a driven, tormented man whose compulsive behavior brings misery instead of satisfaction.”

“And that’s your big solution?” Roy Ames grimaced. “Turn the clock back fifty years to tell the audience ‘Crime does not pay’?”

“Maybe it’s time to do just that. There was a hell of a lot less homicide fifty years ago, and what there was went on mainly among professional criminals. Now it’s Amateur Night—student terrorists, kids on the street, all competing for status by slaughter. Because our films, our television, our books and plays tell them that violence is rewarding.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of ‘the me generation’? This is what sells today.”

“Not exclusively. Damn it, I’m not a religious man, but I know the Bible is still a top best-seller. And it spells out its message loud and clear: ‘The

wages of sin is death.’ ”

Ames stared at him for a long moment. It was no longer the stare of a jealous suitor; his concern now was for every writer’s love—the work at hand. “I get it. What you’re really pitching is what old Cecil B. De Mille did to get around the censors. Put in the orgies, but make sure you show the consequences. And you’re right about the changes. All that needs work are the scenes showing Norman’s reactions. Less gloating, more grief.” He paused. “Level with me. Did he actually feel that way?”

Claiborne nodded slowly. “In all my experience, I’ve never seen a more unhappy man.”

Roy Ames sighed and picked up the script again. “Might as well get to work. I should have pages sometime tomorrow, unless I run into problems.”

“If you do, give me a call.” Claiborne moved to the door. “Now I’ll get out of your way.”

He left the office, walked down the hall. For the first time since last night he felt a resurgence of hope. At least part of his task was done; the script would be improved and he’d managed to retain Roy Ames’s allegiance.

But not Norman’s.

That was the problem. If he could just sit down and talk, reason with him, explain that the script was being changed, assure him there was nothing to fear or resent. Maybe—just maybe—it still might work before anything happened.

Only he had to find him first.

Where?

Needles hid in haystacks. Searching for them was a waste of time. The easiest way to draw a needle out was with a magnet.

Claiborne moved onto the studio street, and it was there that realization came.

*This* was the magnet. The studio itself—the magnet that had drawn Norman here.

No need to worry about a manhunt, private or public. Norman would come to the studio. If he hadn’t taken action before, it might merely mean

that he'd just arrived. But he was on the scene now, and if he got onto the lot—

Claiborne glanced along the street in the direction of the main gate. The guard stood beside it, monitoring the cars as they drove up. There were other entrances, of course; he'd checked them out and knew that all were similarly protected.

Which meant nothing. Norman wouldn't attempt to pass through a gate.

Claiborne turned and headed toward the rear of the lot, glancing at the studio wall to his left as he did so. The wall was a solid mass of masonry, high and thick. But thickness was irrelevant. Norman wasn't going to tunnel his way through the wall. And height itself was no guarantee of protection. Anyone with a rope or a ladder could scale one of these walls unobserved in darkness. The lot was patrolled at night as well as by day, but once he was atop the wall, it would be a simple matter to wait until the coast was clear and drop down inside to seek shelter somewhere in the studio.

Now Claiborne moved past a concrete cluster of offices, set-storage sheds, the studio garage, wardrobe, and makeup departments. Many of these structures had outside stairways leading up to projection rooms and editing booths. Angled against the sides of the buildings were trucks, trailers, campers, and semis; beyond them loomed the vast sound stages with their tangle of overhead catwalks and equipment bins.

Turning right toward the rear of the lot, he came upon an empty, unpatrolled, deserted domain of standing exterior sets: a western street with a bar, livery stable, feed store, hotel, dance hall, bank, and sheriff's office. Behind it was a small-town square boarded by the friendly façades of white houses nestling amid lawns and shrubbery, a high-steepled church, a bandstand in a wooded park. Beyond lay a big-city street with its shops and theaters and tenements; past that, still another half-dozen smaller enclaves of foreign settings.

There were a million hiding places here, and no security force could possibly cover them all completely. Once over the wall, Norman need only keep moving from place to place, stay out of sight. And it could have happened; for all Claiborne knew, he may have spent the night sleeping in Andy Hardy's bed. He could be on the lot now.

If the studio was a magnet, it was also a haystack in its own right, offering far more concealment than the world outside. A needle would be safe here, but even more dangerous to others. Needles are sharp, they have eyes—

*And so have I*, Claiborne told himself. *Watch and wait*. This was no time to spread panic, not without something substantial to support his suppositions, not until he was sure of his ground.

He turned and walked back, coming abreast of the sound stages. Number Seven, on his left, was open, its huge sliding doors secured in the slotted wall. On impulse, he approached and peered inside. A half-circle of sunlight revealed concrete flooring laced with snakelike coils of cable, but the vast area above and beyond was steeped in shadow.

Claiborne moved past the doorway, trying to adjust his vision to the inner gloom. He'd never seen these surroundings except in films *about* films, and then only as a background to accompany action. But there was no action here, only the solitude and the silence.

Stepping forward, he eyed the dim outline of the rounded roof high above the walkways. Somehow he hadn't realized the immensity of the stage; block-long and bleak, it was like an old-style zeppelin hangar or the interior of a cathedral reared to some strange god of darkness.

The darkness wasn't complete. Beyond the barricade of lath-and-plaster wall backgrounds encased in wooden supports, he caught a glimpse of dim light—a bare bulb dangling on a cord from an iron grid overhead. The area it lit was obscured by other walls mounted and joined together at right angles on three sides.

Claiborne approached it, passing a row of portable dressing rooms at his right. Their doors were closed, and no trace of illumination issued from beneath them.

*A million hiding places.*

He started over to the nearest one, then slackened his pace before the wooden steps leading up to the door.

Suppose he was right? Suppose that by some crazy coincidence he'd actually find himself coming upon Norman, crouching there in the dark behind the door—crouching and waiting?

Claiborne hesitated, deep in internal debate. *What are you waiting for? Damn it, that's why you're here, isn't it? To find him?*

He mounted the steps slowly. *Don't worry. If he is in there, he's frightened. As frightened as you are.*

Again he paused. He *was* frightened, admit it; his tightened muscles offered tense testimony. There was a prickling across his scalp, a trickling beneath his armpits.

That was a normal reaction to fear, and he could accept it. But would Norman's reaction be normal? When Norman was afraid, he lashed out. If he had a weapon—

*You've faced that problem before. Occupational hazard, it comes with the territory. Only it won't happen. He isn't here, can't be here, not with a million hiding places to choose from.*

Claiborne reached for the door.

And heard the sound.

It was quite faint; even here, in the cavernous echo chamber of the sound stage, there was scarcely more than a hint of it. A rustling sound followed by a creak.

But it didn't come from behind the door. The source was the lighted area beyond.

He turned away, descending the steps before the dressing room. Now there was silence, broken by the soft scraping of his own footsteps over concrete as he started forward. Even this was stilled as he slowed his pace, moving in quiet caution, feeling the fear, straining to detect a repetition of the rustling and the creaking.

Nothing.

He came to the open area at the right of the three-sided set where the light bulb dangled. There he halted, peering forward.

No one moved beneath the light. The set was deserted.

Slowly he started past the walls enclosing him on both sides, into the rectangular room set beyond. Then, as he entered, something changed. Looking down, he saw carpeting beneath his feet. Red and faded carpeting,

the kind one finds only in old houses where old people ignore the passage of time.

And he was in such a house now, standing still in a room where time stood still.

Claiborne glanced at the old-fashioned dresser and vanity, their tops littered with mementos of long-ago yesterdays. A gilt clock, Dresden figurines, a pincushion, an ornate hand mirror, glass-stoppered bottles of scent. These objects, and a glimpse of the garments hanging from a rack in an open closet, told him he was in a woman's bedroom, even before he saw the bed itself.

The bed stood in the far corner at the right, past the high-backed rocker facing the window in the shadows to the left. He stepped forward, surveying the contours of the four-poster, admiring the hand-embroidered bedspread. But as he neared it, he noted that the spread had been tucked in carelessly, so that a portion of the double pillow was visible at the top. On impulse he reached down and pulled the covers back, revealing grayish sheets dotted with brown flecks. And the telltale indentation of recent occupancy—the deep indentation that could only have been made by someone resting here a long time.

*Someone.*

*Some thing.*

Claiborne knew where he was now. He'd never seen it, never been there before, but he'd heard and read enough to recognize what it must be.

*The bedroom of Norman's mother.*

It was here, of course, that the mummified body of Mrs. Bates, preserved by Norman's crude attempts at taxidermy, had lain untouched and unsuspected for all those years while Norman preserved the illusion that she was still alive—a crazed invalid, confined to her room. But it was Norman himself who had been crazed, who had assumed her *persona* when he killed. Wearing her clothing, talking in her voice, here in this room.

*No, not this room. It's only a set.*

Claiborne confirmed the reality by contact, pulling the bedspread up again to hide the indented outline. But his scalp crawled as he did so, and he couldn't hide the thought crawling beneath it.

What had it been like for Norman, living in the real house, sitting in the real bedroom night after night, mumbling to a mummy? *Mummy, Mommy*—

Then he heard the sound again, the creaking and the rustling.

He turned as the shadows stirred.

The creaking came from the high-backed rocker facing the window.

And the rustling came from the dress as the old woman rose from the chair and glided toward him.

She came out of the shadows with her gray hair gleaming, mouth contorted in a ghastly rictus. Her arms rose, her hands scrabbled upward, the wig came off.

Claiborne stared at the grinning face—a face he'd seen so many times on the screen.

The face of Paul Morgan.

Claiborne sat at the bar in the Tail o' the Cock, still nursing a beer as Morgan ordered his second drink.

Wearing skintight jeans, the V-neck of his shirt spread to reveal the gold locket nestling against a hairy chest, Morgan bore no resemblance to the hunched old lady on the darkened set of the sound stage.

“Sorry about that,” he was saying. “I didn’t mean to shake you up.”

“Forget it. You don’t have to keep apologizing.” Claiborne shifted on his bar stool. “Actually, I had no business being there in the first place.”

“Neither did I.” Morgan reached for his glass as the bartender set it down before him. “It was Vizzini’s idea.”

“The director?”

“I’m not used to this kind of jazz. He wants me to really sell those scenes in drag. Not just wearing the dress and wig—it’s the walk, the gestures, the whole bit. I figured doing it on the set would help me get used to the feel, dig?”

Claiborne smiled ruefully. “Well, you certainly sold me.”

Morgan raised his glass and drank, obviously pleased by the verdict.

Claiborne wondered just how pleased Morgan would be if he knew about his unspoken reservations. Morgan was indeed convincing when disguised as the old woman, but playing Norman would be an entirely different matter. Without makeup, he was imprisoned in his own image, instantly identifiable.

As if to prove the point, a girl rose from a group of three seated in one of the nearby booths and came over to the bar. Pettily pretty, she had shiny auburn hair and brown eyes that were accentuated by the outfit she was wearing; white slacks and open blouse emphasized both the baby fat and the plump, budding breasts. She was probably a tourist and undoubtedly not a day over sixteen.

Ignoring Claiborne, she moved up alongside his companion. “Excuse me,” she said. “Are you Paul Morgan?”

The actor put down his glass and turned, flashing his familiar grin. “What do you think?” he said.

The girl’s eyes dropped before his gaze and her hand came up clutching a small book, bound in imitation leather, and a ballpoint pen. The hand trembled almost imperceptibly, but the tremor in her voice was quite evident. “If you don’t mind—could I have your autograph?”

Morgan’s gaze zeroed in on the front of her blouse. “You can have anything I’ve got,” he said. She flushed and his grin softened. “Come on, honey, don’t be nervous.”

She relaxed, reassured by his change of expression.

“Where you from?” he murmured.

“Toledo. My girlfriends and me, we’re out here on a tour.” She smiled shyly, glancing back at the booth. “They dared me to come over. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No problem.” He reached for the book, opening it to a blank page, then took the pen from her hand. “What’s your name?”

“Jackie. Jackie Sherbourne.”

“Want to spell it for me?”

She did so, and he scribbled across the page in a bold, florid script, winking at her as he wrote. “There, that ought to do it.” Closing the book, he handed it back to her along with the pen.

“Thank you,” she said.

“My pleasure.”

The girl went away and Morgan turned to reach for his glass again. Claiborne watched the girl as she and her companions moved, chattering, to the exit.

Morgan swallowed his drink. “Anything wrong?”

Claiborne shrugged in denial. But the gesture was meaningless, because he’d seen what Morgan had written in the autograph book. *To Jackie Sherbourne, who gives good head.*

A shabby trick, and for a moment Claiborne was tempted to call him on it. He promised himself that he would, later, when the time came. But not yet. Now he needed allies. The script—

“Stinks, if you ask me.” Morgan was talking about it. “Don’t think I’m too dumb to know what Ames is up to, throwing all those scenes to the girl, building up her part. But she can’t hack it. Why the hell Driscoll signed her I’ll never know, he must have been out of his tree.”

“I get the impression the director is responsible for casting the role,” Claiborne said. “After all, she does look like Mary Crane. He’s trying for realism.”

“Then where do I come in, playing a gay?”

“Not a gay, a transvestite.”

“But Norman thinks he’s his own mother—”

“His fugue doesn’t necessarily involve homosexuality, except on the subliminal level.”

“Then what the hell does it involve?” Morgan frowned. “Skip the two-dollar words, give it to me straight. What was Norman Bates really like?”

Claiborne shrugged. “Very much like you or me,” he said. “If we were stripped of identity, reduced to a numbered case history, confined to a room that’s really a cell, subject to orders, surrounded by sickness and aberration —”

“I know about all that.” Paul Morgan spoke softly. “I’ve been in a flake-factory.”

Noting the involuntary flicker of surprise in Claiborne’s eyes, he continued quickly, “Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t whacko. Voluntary commitment, a couple of years ago—stayed for a month, just to dry out.” Morgan picked up his glass and downed the ice-diluted residue. “Didn’t work.”

His tone was sardonic, but there was no trace of the attitude in his face as he leaned forward. “Neither did I,” he said. “You want the truth, I didn’t work for damn near a year and a half. That’s one hell of a long time in this business, and once the word is out, you can’t even get arrested.”

“But Vizzini wanted you for this part.”

“He didn’t want me—just the name. And he got it dirt cheap. That’s the only reason Driscoll went along with the deal. He told me so to my face, the scumbag bastard.”

Morgan’s hand tightened around his empty glass. “Son of a bitch keeps riding me, thinks he can give me the needle, but he’s got a surprise coming. If he’d been alone with me on the set this morning instead of you—”

Conscious of Claiborne’s stare, the actor broke off with an abrupt laugh. “Forget it,” he said. “Have another drink.”

Claiborne slid off the bar stool, shaking his head. “I’d better get back to the motel.” He hesitated. “Sure you’re all right?”

Morgan nodded. “Just had to blow out my exhaust. But it’s okay now. I goddam know I can cut the part, so there’s nothing to sweat about.” He summoned the all-purpose grin. “Remember, I’m Paul Morgan.”

Driving away, Claiborne remembered. The disturbing vision of Paul Morgan in drag on the set—the casual cruelty of Paul Morgan with the autograph seeker—the bitterness and anger of Paul Morgan at the bar. And it wasn’t until he reached the motel that he asked himself the question:

*What is Paul Morgan really like?*

It was almost seven when Jan opened the oven door to check on the roast.

She frowned. *Still not done.* Closing the door, she turned the oven up to four hundred. *Give it another fifteen minutes while I do the salad. With luck, maybe he'll be late. He doesn't know these hills.*

But as she tossed the lettuce she caught herself listening for sounds of a car approaching outside. All she heard was the endless repetition of a nightbird's two notes, defiantly defining its territory. And inside, Connie's slamming things around in the territory of her own bedroom, getting ready to go out for the evening. *Here's hoping she's gone before he arrives.*

Jan drowned the thought in a mixture of oil and vinegar. She poured it over the salad, and then it was time to take another look at the roast, turn off the oven, give it a final basting, and let it brown a bit more—

*Domesticity, you can have it. Strictly for the birds.* Suddenly she was aware that the nightbird's call had ceased. And she'd never even heard the car drive up, but now the door chimes sounded, followed almost immediately by the buzz of voices. *That bitch Connie answered the door herself. I told her—*

Too late now. Jan untied her apron, flung it over the back of a chair, and freed her hands to smooth her hair. Why hadn't she had the sense to hang some kind of mirror here in the kitchen, just a little one for emergencies like this?

And it was an emergency, anytime she'd let herself get stuck in the kitchen with this cozy little dinner-for-two routine—

Hastily she grabbed a tissue from the open box on the counter and patted her face and forehead. At least she wouldn't make her entrance with a shiny nose. Once she lit the candles on the dining room table, it wouldn't matter so much. Dining by candlelight, a nice intimate touch, work the conversation around slowly over a few drinks, find out just what he and

Roy came up with when they huddled this morning. Damn it, this was all Roy's fault—him and his weird notions about shutting down the picture. If he'd done a selling job on Claiborne, it was up to her to un-sell him, fast. Or slowly—with the candles, the drinks, the salad, the roast, and whatever else seemed necessary.

Moving across the kitchen, she heard the voice-buzz fade, then the final punctuation of the front door slamming. Connie must have left; sure enough, her clunker was rattling away as it backed out of the carport.

Jan paused at the kitchen doorway to give her hair a final pat, then started forward. *Okay, kid, you're on. Break a leg.*

Funny about showbiz: everybody in the profession has stage fright, even the biggest. She remembered the stories she'd heard about Al Jolson on Broadway, how Jolson used to run the dressing-room water faucets full force before his performances, drowning out the sound of applause for the act preceding him. It didn't matter whether you were doing live theater, films, or television. There was always that terrible moment before you went on—the glands pumping flop-sweat, the stomach turning into a netful of butterflies. But when the curtain rose, the director yelled, "Roll 'em!" or the monitor blinked red—that was when everything changed. That was when *you* changed, took over, delivered. There's no business like show business; it's the greatest orgasm in the world.

Jan was enjoying the foreplay now, welcoming her guest and lighting the candles, pouring the ready-made martinis from the pitcher on the bar.

What she hadn't anticipated was enjoying Dr. Claiborne himself.

She remembered finding him attractive, and she'd always been a sucker for men with deep voices, the virility thing. But most of the actors she knew had similar qualities. What made Claiborne different was that he didn't ego-trip. He had that calm, reassuring approach—if it was his bedside manner, it might be worth finding out about—and didn't talk about himself.

Over drinks, he complimented her in a way she hadn't expected—not on her appearance but on the looks of the apartment, the table-setting, the candles. And during dinner he even ran a number on Connie.

"Your friend is an actress too?"

Jan nodded.

“Hard to believe. She seems so reserved. What sort of roles does she play—character parts?”

“Meaning you don’t think she’s pretty.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you’re right, in a way. She is a character and she does parts. Mostly hands and feet.”

Claiborne eyed her across the candle flame. “I don’t follow.”

“Connie’s always working. You must have seen her a hundred times in TV commercials or theatrical features, but you wouldn’t recognize her because they never show her face. They use her for inserts—tight closeups—doubling for stars whose hands or feet aren’t right. There’s a lot of that going on out here. Some people just dub vocals or loop lines of dialogue, but the big call is for bodies. A casting director can find whatever he needs from checking pictures in a catalogue—legs, thighs, breasts, anything he wants.”

“Sounds like picking out cut-up chicken parts at the supermarket.” Claiborne smiled, then sobered. “No wonder she’s shy. There must be a tremendous feeling of inadequacy and resentment, knowing that others take the bows while she’s doomed to anonymity.”

“True.”

“At least that’s not your problem,” Claiborne said. “Obviously you don’t need doubling or dubbing, and you don’t have to worry about rejection.”

“How do I take that?” Jan smiled. “Is it flattery or just analysis?”

He pushed his plate aside, reaching for his coffee cup. “Which would you prefer?”

“I get enough stroking in this business—everybody does. But you have to make it big before you can afford analysis. Or need it.”

Claiborne leaned back in his chair. “Maybe so. Then again, if more people understood their own motivations at the start, they might not end up in therapy.”

“You offering me a freebie?”

“Hardly that. I couldn’t even take a stab at it until I knew more about you.”

“Ask.”

“All right. First, a generalization. Seems to me most actresses come from either of two backgrounds. One is the broken home—father died, divorced, or just drifted away when the child was young, and the mother took over. Aggressive, ambitious, using her daughter as a puppet, forcing her into the limelight, but always keeping a tight hold on the strings. Sound familiar?”

“Right on,” Jan murmured.

“The second group evolves from a slightly different situation. Again no father, but the mother is missing too—dead, perhaps, or sometimes psychotic. The girl is orphaned. Finding no security in a foster home, she often rushes into an early marriage, but that solves nothing. So she seeks out men in power who use her, just as she uses them to further her career.”

“Like Marilyn Monroe,” Jan nodded. “I know that kind too.”

“Good enough,” Claiborne said. “But now we come to the question. Which type are you?”

“Can’t you guess?”

He met her smile and returned it. “From what I’ve observed, you belong in the second category.”

“Now wait a minute! If you think I’m one of those crazy, mixed-up, pill-popping, suicidal—”

Claiborne shook his head. “Of course not. That comes later. And my whole point is, it needn’t come at all if you understand the problem.”

“How’d we ever get into this?” Jan forced her laugh, knowing it was her fault for letting things get out of hand. Time to stop with the ad-libs, just stick to the script she’d mentally prepared. *The script—*

“Enough of my problems,” she said. “How’d you make out with Roy this morning?”

“Pretty well, I think. He seems to agree with most of the changes I suggested.”

“What kind of changes?”

“It’s mainly a matter of how to handle Norman’s characterization. That’s what he’s working on right now.”

“How about my scenes?”

“I don’t imagine they’ll be affected very much. Perhaps you’ll lose a few lines here and there.”

“Why?”

“If Norman’s attitude is changed, naturally your reaction changes too. A few dialogue cuts would emphasize that.”

“Dialogue cuts?” Jan stiffened. “What is it in this business? Nobody tells a producer how to produce or a director how to direct, but everybody and his brother thinks he’s a writer.”

Something inside her said, *Cool it, you’re out of line*. But if he was screwing up her part—

And meanwhile he was sitting there with that professional smile of his, telling her not to worry. Who did he think he was, giving her advice? The words seemed to tumble forth. “How long have you been out here—two, three days? Since when did you become an expert?”

“I’m not.” *God, he looked smug. And that deep voice of his, that phony medical manner.* “It’s just a question of logic. Changing Norman’s attitude means changing the way you respond to his input.”

“I don’t need a doctor’s diagnosis. What’s your idea of good input—a suppository?”

That broke him up, but she wasn’t playing for laughs. She was playing for keeps. Damn it, she wasn’t playing at all, this was too important. “Let me tell you something, buster—”

“You already have.” He wasn’t laughing now. “I know what you’re saying. You’re protecting your part.”

“It’s not just a part, it’s my whole future, can’t you see that?”

“Nobody can see the future. The only people who want to are the ones who can’t stand to look at the past.” He nodded. “And in your case, with the background you told me about—”

“I’m not a case, I’m an actress! And what the hell do you know about my background anyway?”

“I’d like to hear.”

“Sure you would! That’s how you shrinks get your rocks off, isn’t it? Listening to all those soap-opera stories about teenies from broken homes

getting beat up and raped, running away and balling everybody who comes along just to get a break.” She stared at him, watching his reaction. “Well, I’ve got news for you. That fancy theory about actresses is a load of crap.

“You want to know where I come from? Right here in North Hollywood, that’s where. My folks are still alive, out in Northridge. They never got divorced, never even had a real quarrel that I know of, and it was my own idea to go into drama classes after I graduated from Van Nuys High. For the last five years I’ve been making it on my own.

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t rough sometimes—this is a rough business, you fight for everything you get, and maybe it’s even rougher when you don’t have one of those stage mothers or some barracuda agent or producer to open doors for you. Sure, I fool around a little, but that’s how you play the game; it doesn’t mean I’m some kind of a prostitute—”

“Hollywood’s the prostitute,” Claiborne said.

Jan checked herself, frowning. “How’s that?”

“Don’t you see? It’s the syndrome of entertainment. Film itself prostitutes to audiences. The very way in which it advertises is pandering—come rape me, get your kicks, I’m here to rent myself for your enjoyment in the dark, I invite you to unleash your wildest fantasies of lust, murder, revenge. I lure you to identify with sadists, sociopaths, the polymorphically perverse, tempt you with dreams of destruction.” He smiled apologetically. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not putting down entertainment. We all need catharsis, a temporary escape into make-believe. That’s what the audience gets, and when the show is over it’s just a matter of walking out and returning to reality.

“But if you’re one of those who created the make-believe, you stay behind, living with fantasies night and day. That’s the danger, because you have no alternatives. In the end you lose contact, lose the ability to cope with reality. And when it touches your life, it can destroy you.”

“Who the hell are you to tell me how to run my life?” Jan rose quickly. “Maybe it’s not the greatest thing in the world, maybe I’m selfish and stupid and I’ll fall on my face. But I know what I’m doing. You want to dig alternatives, go talk to Kay.”

“Kay?”

“My kid sister. She’s the one who’s got everything going for her—a damned sight smarter than I am, and a lot prettier too—or was, until she turned sixteen. That was when she got into that real-life scene you’re so big on. Real life, right there in her belly where some stud put it. At seventeen she was a mother, at eighteen she was doing dope and living in a camper with her boyfriend and the baby. Then the guy got busted and they took the kid away and put it in an orphanage. She split, and God only knows where she is now. My folks blew their minds trying to find her, but no use. Maybe she’ll luck out and meet some shrink who’ll tell her not to worry, that what she did was better than throwing her life away on a career.”

Claiborne pushed his chair away from the table. “Stop fooling yourself. You talk as if those were your only choices. But there’s a wide area between those two extremes, and most of us manage to compromise and make a life there.”

Jan turned on him, eyes flashing. “What about you? Didn’t you do the same thing—spend years studying, slaving away, giving up everything just to get where you are today?”

“That’s just it.” Claiborne spoke softly. “I’m telling you this because I went the route. And where I am today is in limbo. Nowhere at all. No home, no family, no personal life. Being a workaholic isn’t living. By now it’s too late for me to change, but you still have a choice. Don’t throw it away.”

Jan listened, her anger ebbing. Maybe he wasn’t a phony, maybe he really believed what he was saying. Poor bastard, living in a hospital and busting his butt over the problems of a lot of crazies, just one long downer twenty-four hours a day. The thought flashed suddenly—*I wonder how long it’s been since he’s had a woman.*

And with the thought came the warmth building within her, a warmth she couldn’t quite explain. It wasn’t a sex thing, it wasn’t just sympathy either, but more like a mixture of both, and somehow that made it even stronger. Without realizing it, she found herself moving toward him, her hands reaching out, and then—

The chimes rang.

She turned, frowning, and moved to the front door. *Now who—*

Roy Ames.

And at a time like this. So he was jealous; since when did that give him the right to crash?

“What do you want?” she said.

He brushed past her into the room. “I tried to call, but your line was busy.”

Jan’s frown deepened. “This phone hasn’t rung all evening.”

Roy glanced toward the end table. “So I notice.”

She followed his gaze. “Connie made a call earlier, before she went out. She must have left the receiver off the hook.”

“Right.” He nodded at Claiborne. “You’re the one I wanted to reach. Let’s get going.”

Claiborne rose. “Where?”

“Coronet. Driscoll phoned me at home. Come on, we’ll take my car.”

“What’s the rush?”

Roy turned and headed for the door. “Somebody set fire to the studio.”

**R**oy drove swiftly, hunching toward the left to make room for Jan and Claiborne on the seat beside him.

Cornering hillside curves, speeding across the boulevard below, he listened for the sound of sirens. But there was nothing to hear and—as they wheeled into the entrance—nothing to see. The studio beyond loomed flame-free in the night.

“False alarm?” Claiborne murmured.

“Can’t be,” Roy said. “Driscoll called me himself.”

And Driscoll himself was at the gate, standing beside a guard.

They pulled up just past the entrance as he hurried over to them, scowling at Roy and gesturing toward his passengers.

“Where the hell did they come from?” he said.

“Dr. Claiborne was having dinner with Jan,” Roy told him. “Under the circumstances, I thought he ought to know—”

“Screw the circumstances!” He turned to Roy’s companions. “Okay, you’re here. But remember one thing. Keep your mouths shut, both of you.” He started off, not waiting for a reply. “Come on.”

“Aren’t you going to tell us what happened?” Claiborne asked.

“You’ll see. There’s been an accident.”

Halfway down the studio street, Roy realized their destination. One of the sound stages at the left was open, and parked before the entrance he saw the shiny red hatchback used by Frank Madero, head of the studio fire patrol.

Inside, Stage Seven blazed with light. Driscoll led them past a row of dressing rooms to the set beyond.

Roy recognized it as they entered; the décor was immediately identifiable. This was the bedroom of Norman’s mother, just as he’d described it in his script. Or almost so.

Two men were waiting there: stocky, mustached Madero and old Chuck Grossinger, one of the night-duty security guards, talking together over in the corner next to the four-poster bed.

Roy blinked in the brightness; at first glance the set seemed untouched. But there was a pungent odor in the air—the smell of burnt cloth.

Then he noticed the bedspread—the charred ends, the scorch marks across the pillow cases, which extended beyond the headboard to darken the wall of the set behind it.

“Caught it just in time,” Grossinger was saying. “The door was open just a crack when I come by, and I seen the light, kind of flickering from inside. Then I smelled the smoke. I run in and here was the bed on fire, so I grabbed the extinguisher off the wall—”

“And damned near got yourself barbecued.” Frank Madero shook his head. “Thing like this happens, you’re supposed to call me.”

“Hell, the whole place could go up before you guys got the equipment out of the garage. If that gasoline had exploded—”

“Gasoline?” Driscoll was scowling again as he moved toward Madero, who stooped down on the far side of the four-poster, below Roy’s range of vision.

“Found this under the bed just now,” he said. And held up a five-gallon drum.

Driscoll reached for the can and shook it. “This hasn’t even been opened.”

“Cap’s loose,” Madero told him. “Somebody was all set to use it, but he got interrupted.”

“How do you know?” Driscoll bent forward, peering under the four-poster. “Look, there’s paint cans here too, and brushes. Lazy bastards stow this stuff away when they knock off work, instead of taking it back to the stockroom. Maybe one of them caught himself a nap, dozed off with a cigarette in his mouth. The bed starts to burn, he panics and splits.”

Madero shook his head. “Take my word for it, this is a torch job. We’d better call—”

“Hold it.” Driscoll turned to the guard. “You talked to Talbot yet?”

Roy recognized the name; Talbot was head of studio security.

Grossinger shifted uneasily under Driscoll's stare. "I didn't have a chance. You know where he lives, clear out in Thousand Oaks. I figured by the time he got down here—"

"Never mind what you figured. Anybody else on the night shift know about this?"

"No. Jimmy's on the gate, Fritz and Manhoff are covering the back lot."

Driscoll faced Madero. "What about your people?"

"Perry and Cozzens are on duty, but they were upstairs sleeping when Grossinger called in. He told me no sweat, the fire was out and anyway it looked like an accident, so I just hopped in the car and ran over here alone."

"So nobody else knows what happened here except us."

"And the guy who did the job." Frank Madero gestured toward the gasoline drum in Driscoll's hand. "I know what you're driving at, but this is arson—"

Driscoll stepped back, shaking his head. "You're wrong. It was an accident."

Madero's face reddened. "Since when are you giving orders around here?"

"Since Barney Weingarten left for Europe," Driscoll said. "Ruben took off for New York, and that leaves me minding the store. Why the hell do you think I was still here at the office tonight when you called? I've got enough headaches without somebody trying to tell me how to run my job."

Madero's voice rose. "Maybe so. But if you try a cover-up, we're going to be in big trouble—"

"Shut up and listen! You want trouble, go running to the cops. Write up your reports, both of you, just the way you told it to me. And when Weingarten comes back and finds out how loose security was tonight—when he hears about those clowns on fire-duty sleeping through a blaze that could have burned down the whole goddam studio—I guarantee you'll both be out on your canastas."

"You'll never get away with this." Madero's voice was no longer strident; he was asking for reassurance.

“Trust me.” Driscoll faced Roy, Jan, and Claiborne. “All I want from you is to button up. Anyone wants to know why you’re here tonight, it’s a production meeting.”

Grossinger moved forward. “Aren’t you forgetting something? The evidence—”

“What evidence?” Marty Driscoll tapped the side of the gasoline drum. “This I’ll toss personally.” He glanced over at the four-poster. “You and Madero strip that bedspread and get rid of it. Tomorrow I’ll tell Hoskins the design was too busy, he should get me something in another pattern.” The producer glanced up. “Find something that will take those smudges off the wall. Turn on the air conditioning and get this smell out of here.”

Madero shrugged. “Okay, but if anything goes wrong—”

“It won’t, if you keep your nose clean.” Driscoll smiled. “Just do what I said and tomorrow you’re home free.” He started to move off the set. “Okay, that’s it. I’ll check with you first thing in the morning.”

Roy trailed his companions out onto the darkened studio street, frosted by silvery slivers of moonlight. Jan and Claiborne hadn’t spoken, but he knew what they were thinking: *Cover-up. Accessories after the fact.*

He quickened his stride to catch up with Jan; her eyes seemed almost glazed, and moonrays emphasized her pallor. It was too late to see Claiborne’s face, because he’d already moved forward beside Driscoll.

“I’ve got to talk to you,” he said.

“Go ahead.”

“Privately.”

The producer shook his head. “Look, we’re all in this together. You got anything to say, let’s hear it.”

As Roy and Jan approached, Claiborne fixed his gaze on what Driscoll was holding in his hand.

“That gasoline drum,” he murmured. “I saw one last Sunday, when Norman burned the van.”

“Oh Jesus, not again!” Driscoll’s balding forehead wrinkled in protest. “You going to tell me Norman started this fire?”

“I warned you he’d try something,” Claiborne said. “Who else has a better motive?” He nodded toward the can. “As for method—”

“Coincidence. Anytime somebody wants to pull a stunt like this, gasoline’s the first thing he thinks of.”

“Then you admit there was an arsonist.”

“I admit no such damn thing! It could still be the way I said it was, just an accident. If you’re trying to throw a scare into me, forget it.”

“I wish I could.” Now Roy saw Claiborne’s face, the perspiration beading his forehead. “That’s why I kept my mouth shut, because I didn’t want to frighten anyone and I wasn’t one hundred percent sure. But after tonight there can’t be any doubt. Norman’s here.”

“The hell you say.” Driscoll brandished the gasoline can. “This proves nothing.”

“But I saw him.”

“What—?”

“I saw him,” Claiborne repeated softly. “Last night.”

Nobody spoke. Roy watched Claiborne; they were all watching him now, standing there as moonlight faded into shadow, waiting for him to continue.

*The perfect setting, Roy told himself. Tell us a story, Daddy. Tell us about the bogeyman, coming to get us in the dark.*

Only Claiborne wasn’t anybody’s Daddy, and he wasn’t talking about something glimpsed in darkness. Roy listened intently as the words and phrases echoed in his ears. *The supermarket on Ventura. Crowds of shoppers. Bright lights. The mirror. Saw him standing there as clearly as I see you now. Ran out—got away—*

“Then how can you be sure?” Driscoll said. “Maybe you made a mistake.”

“The only mistake I made was in not telling you sooner. If you’d taken my advice and shut down, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Nothing happened.” Driscoll shifted the can under his arm and its contents sloshed. “Nothing’s going to happen.”

“But he’ll try again—”

“Don’t worry. From now on, we’re beefing up security. No more sack time for anyone on duty, no goofing off. I still think you’re wrong, but if not, we’ll be ready for the bastard.”

Roy stepped forward. “Why take that risk? Couldn’t you at least postpone the start-date and give the police a chance to find him?”

Claiborne nodded, smiling his gratitude for Roy’s support, but Driscoll spoke quickly.

“Too late. Madero and Grossinger are already cleaning up the evidence. And how do we explain why nobody called in first thing when we found out about the fire?” He shook his head. “No police.”

“But a postponement—”

“I’ll sleep on it.”

Driscoll turned and started away.

“Meaning he won’t shut down,” Roy murmured. He glanced at Claiborne. “You’re positive it was Norman you saw?”

“Absolutely.”

Jan’s eyes were troubled. “That supermarket on Ventura,” she said. “The one I’m thinking of is only three blocks away.”

“He won’t show himself around there,” Claiborne told her. “Not if he recognized me last night. But if he’s found a hiding place around here—”

Roy glanced down in surprise as Jan edged up beside him, her hand reaching out to grasp his own. When he looked up he saw the face of an actress, eyes mirroring composure, mouth miming calm control. But the truth was in the touch of her fingers tightening around his hand. This was a frightened girl.

She’d turned to him for reassurance and protection, but there was none to give. They were all vulnerable now.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

The knife blade was six inches long and one inch wide, double-edged and razor-sharp.

Santo Vizzini stood in shadow, gripping the hilt, his gaze fixed on the pointed tip as he raised it toward the light.

He froze, startled, as Claiborne entered the room.

“Mr. Vizzini—”

“Yes?”

“I’m Dr. Claiborne. Your office told me you were over here. Hope I’m not interrupting.”

“On the contrary, you’re just in time.” Vizzini placed the knife on the tabletop under the light, then extended his hand. “A great pleasure,” he said. “I have been wanting to meet you ever since they told me of your arrival.”

Claiborne caught the scent of after-shave—no, stronger, it must be perfume or cologne—masking the smell of stale perspiration and another odor he couldn’t identify. The director turned and glanced at the knife once more. “Too thin,” he murmured. “Don’t you agree?” And now the light flooded his features as he frowned down at the knife. He was staring at Vizzini.

“Don’t you agree?” the director repeated. “We need something wider—”

“Yes.” Claiborne nodded, forced his eyes toward the knife instead of the face before him.

“This prop department!” Vizzini sighed. “An abomination. I tell them what I want, and they send me switchblades!” He rolled his eyes. “I say no, this is not for Norman Bates, and they say why not, everybody uses switchblades today.” He sighed again. “Incredible!”

Again he smiled, and again Claiborne avoided his gaze.

“I am glad you’re here,” Vizzini was saying. “It is a good omen. We will select the proper instrument together.”

Vizzini started over to a rack at the rear of the room. Moving after him into the shadowed area, Claiborne became fully aware of his surroundings for the first time.

*You’ll find the weaponry stockpile down at the far end, to the left,* the prop clerk had told him. And so he did, but now he realized that description was an understatement.

This room was a miniature armory. Mounted against the right wall was a double rack holding implements of ancient warfare—spears, pikes, halberds, lances, assegais, clubs, knobkerries, battle-axes, and maces—each item tagged and numbered for identification.

On the opposite wall, the rifle stands stood row on row. Harquebuses, flintlocks, Winchesters, Mausers, Enfields, Garands, and more modern firearms ranged in order. Beyond them were bins crammed with longbows, crossbows, quivers of arrows for primitive Indian and sophisticated oriental archery. In glass cases overhead he saw handguns, dueling pistols, pepperboxes, Colts, Lugers, service revolvers, police models, and Saturday-night specials.

But it was the rear wall that attracted Vizzini and now claimed Claiborne’s attention. Here, even in the shadows, there was a glittering. The glint of burnished steel half-unsheathed from mounted scabbards—Roman broadswords, serrated Aztec blades, cutlasses, scimitars, yataghans, rapiers, the longswords of Vikings, and the sabers of Napoleonic cavalry.

Vizzini ignored the display; he was inspecting the cluttered contents of the shelves above. “Look how they store these things! Sheer madness.” He shrugged. “But we will try to find something.” Reaching up, he fumbled gingerly through an assortment of tagged daggers, poniards, dirks, and stilettos, his fingers curling around a thick handle as he pulled it free. Now he glanced down at the foot-long, single-edged blade, which protruded from the guard and terminated in a curling tip.

“What is this?”

“Looks like a bowie knife,” Claiborne said. “The kind they used on the frontier back in pioneer days.”

“But not now, eh?” Vizzini replaced the weapon with obvious reluctance. “A pity. It would be most impressive.”

His hand strayed along the shelf, then halted. Once more he reached forward, drawing out an eight-inch, double-edged knife with a broad shaft and plain handle. He held it against the light from the other end of the room, nodding appreciatively at the blade shimmering against the shadows.

“A butcher knife. This is what he will use.”

“Will—?”

“In the film.” Vizzini smiled. “The right size, the right length, and it will photograph beautifully. I will have them make up some duplicates.”

He turned away, tapping the steel surface. “A fortunate discovery. After all, the knife is the real star of our picture, don’t you agree?”

Claiborne avoided the smiling stare. “In a way—”

“Not that the script isn’t important,” Vizzini said. “I read the revised pages Ames brought in this morning.”

“That’s what I wanted to find out about. And meet you, of course,” Claiborne added hastily. “What do you think?”

“There are some good things. I like the way he handles Norman’s reactions; it gives more depth to the character. But those cuts in the murder scenes—this is wrong for us.”

“I’ll take responsibility for that,” Claiborne told him. “It was my suggestion to eliminate some of the overt violence.”

“For what reason?” Vizzini wasn’t smiling now. “After all, we are only telling a story.”

“People tend to believe what they see.”

“Of course! But our story is about murder, and that is what I must show them—what you call the gory details, to make it seem real.”

“Violence isn’t the only reality.”

“Oh, no?” Vizzini gestured toward the walls. “Look around you. These weapons here—they are like a history of mankind. First the club, then the bow, the cold steel, the firearms. All that is missing are the nuclear weapons of today. The progress of civilization, eh?”

“But you’re talking about war—”

“I have the right.” Vizzini stared at the knife. “When Sicily was invaded in World War II, I was still a child. But I saw it all, the looting, the tortures and the killings. That is long over and done with, but the violence has never stopped—in Biafra, Bangladesh, the Gulag Archipelago, the prisons of Papa Doc, the ‘tiger cages’ of Vietnam. We live today in a world of Turkish prisons, Latin American dungeons, Irish bombings, PLO terrorists, Iranian atrocities, Cambodian genocide. A world where kids kill their parents, rape their teachers, murder strangers on the streets, trample each other to death at rock concerts, even smash their own idols the way John Lennon was destroyed. Violence is normal now.”

“So is kindness and understanding.”

Vizzini shook his head, and on the wall behind him the weapons glared and glinted. “Kindness is a luxury afforded only in times of prosperity. The world isn’t prosperous anymore, and we will see worse. There will be more people like Norman Bates, the son of a bitch. His mother was a bitch and he is a child of our times.” The director gripped the knife handle tightly. “This I believe and this is what my film must say.”

Again, Claiborne looked away. He didn’t want to see Vizzini’s face, but he had to speak.

“Some of us still hold the belief that there’s good in the world.”

“Perhaps so. But to believe in good, you must also acknowledge evil.” Vizzini started toward the doorway at the far end, still holding the knife. “There is a part of the Devil in every man. And I will show him to you.”

He moved out of the room as Claiborne stood silent. *Paranoia. A sickness, a disease, very possibly a danger.* But it wasn’t the diagnosis that disturbed him; after all, he’d seen it many times before.

The real shock was the sight of Vizzini’s face. He had seen that before too.

Because Santo Vizzini looked exactly like Norman Bates.

As a writer, Roy tried to avoid clichés. But when Claiborne entered his office, he found himself using one.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Claiborne seated himself across the desk. “I’ve just had a meeting with Vizzini.”

“And he doesn’t like the changes.” Roy nodded. “What did he do, give you his pitch about violence?”

“Yes, but—”

“Forget it. He’s been handing out that line for years now, every time he does a talk show or a film seminar. I know, because a friend of mine wrote it for him. For two hundred dollars.” Roy grinned. “Never got paid, either.”

“It’s not that.” Claiborne still seemed dazed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“That Vizzini looks like Norman Bates.”

“You’re putting me on.” Roy’s grin faded. “We have photographs—”

“From years ago. He looks the way Norman looks *now*.”

Roy stared at him and the wheels began to turn. “Then he could be the one you saw the other night in the market?”

“Possibly.” Claiborne paused. “What do you know about him?”

“Only what I’ve read, things I’ve heard. He started out in Italy, playing heavies in spaghetti westerns. When horror flicks caught on, he switched over and started directing. Went to France, made a couple of things there. *Loup-garou*, the one about the werewolf, was his first biggie. That gave him the mix.”

“Mix?”

“Sex and violence.” Roy shrugged. “They loved it at the film festivals.”

“You weren’t impressed?”

“Nobody asked me. The art-house crowd liked what they saw on the screen, and the accountants liked the figures they saw on the books. He came over here on a three-picture deal, and the rest is history.”

“Got anything on his personal background?”

“He’s always kept a low profile. Of course, you hear a lot of rumors.”

“What sort of rumors?”

“The usual. He’s been married, and divorced five times, he’s as gay as old Paree, he swings both ways, he’s hooked on drugs and can’t get it up at all. Take your choice.”

“You have no opinion?”

“Only about his work. I think he’s a real kinko. The kind who’d update Jack the Ripper and have him do his jobs with an electric carving knife.

“Vizzini’s really got a thing about mass murderers. I suppose you know he’s the one who brought this project to Driscoll in the first place. That was before they called me in, but I heard his original idea was to play Norman himself.”

“I didn’t know.” Claiborne shook his head. “Of course, there’s the resemblance—”

“Driscoll must have talked him out of it, told him they needed a name, and signed Paul Morgan. But Vizzini’s coaching him personally. He’s even picked out the wigs and the dresses.”

“And the knife,” Claiborne said. “That’s what he was doing when I saw him just now. He seems to know just what kind of weapon Norman used.”

Roy took a deep breath. “No wonder you were shook up. If he really identifies with Norman—”

Claiborne rose. “I think we ought to have a chat with Mr. Driscoll.”

But Anita Kedzie had other ideas.

She was shaking her head almost the moment they entered Driscoll’s outer office.

“Sorry, he’s not in,” she told them. “I can’t say whether he’ll be back this afternoon or not—”

“Good girl.”

Miss Kedzie looked up as Marty Driscoll opened the door behind her and nodded at his visitors. “Congratulations,” he said. “I like the pages.”

Roy glanced at Claiborne. “Vizzini doesn’t.”

“I know.” Driscoll didn’t seem upset. “Want to talk about it?” He waved them forward.

“Mr. Driscoll.” Anita Kedzie captured his attention as he turned to follow. “On your call to New York—”

“Don’t worry.” The producer consulted his watch. “It’s after seven there now, he’s probably gone to dinner. If he checks in, he’ll ring me at home tonight.”

Closing the door on her frown, Driscoll seated himself behind his desk to face Roy and Claiborne. “Glad you stopped by. I was going to get in touch with you anyway, after Vizzini sounded off to me.” He smiled at Roy. “Gave you a hard time?”

“I’m the one he spoke to,” Claiborne said. “It seems he objects to the way the murder scenes are toned down.”

“Well, I don’t.” Driscoll’s smile broadened to include them both. “Remember one thing. Vizzini’s feeling a lot of pressure right now. We’re all under the gun with that start-date coming up.”

“That’s what I wanted to discuss,” Claiborne told him.

“Go ahead.”

As the psychiatrist repeated the story of his encounter, Roy watched Driscoll’s reactions.

He seemed to be listening patiently enough, sitting immobile behind the big desk. It wasn’t until Claiborne brought up Vizzini’s resemblance to Norman Bates that he interrupted.

“I don’t see it,” he said.

“But Vizzini does. He even wanted to play the part.”

“George Ward will love you for that.” Driscoll chuckled. “It’s his gag—he planted the item in the trades.”

“I’m serious. This man is—”

“A signature director.” Driscoll hunched forward. “Without him we come up with zip. Paul Morgan may still sell tickets out in the sticks, or at least

that's what we're hoping, but he isn't bankable. Jan is nothing. Vizzini's what they're buying, he's the key to the whole thing."

"Even if he's mentally unbalanced?"

"All directors are a little flaky. Don't let it bother you."

"But it does bother me." Claiborne frowned. "Last night, when you heard about the fire, you called Roy. Why didn't you try to get hold of Vizzini?"

"Matter of fact I did." Driscoll hesitated. "I left a message with his answering service."

"Meaning he was out." Claiborne's frown deepened. "Did he tell you where he was? Did he ever call back at all?"

"Christ on a bicycle!" Driscoll thumped his hand down on the desktop. "You think Vizzini set fire to sabotage his own picture?"

"Somebody did."

Driscoll's heavy eyebrows rose. "Look, Doc. What I said to those jokers last night about not telling anybody about what happened—that was a shuck, I wanted to be sure they'd keep their own mouths shut. Just between us, I had Talbot in the office at seven o'clock this morning."

"Your security chief?"

"Right. He got the whole story. And the gasoline can. It had my prints all over, and Madero's, but when he checked it out he came up with another set. We know who stowed that can under the bed and it sure as hell wasn't Vizzini."

Roy leaned forward. "How can you be certain?"

"We've got a print filed on every employee in the studio. And Talbot made a match. The other set on the can belongs to Lloyd Parsons, one of the set dressers. We saw him this noon, and after Talbot leaned on him, he talked."

"About the fire?"

Driscoll smiled triumphantly. "Remember what I told you last night? Well, that's almost the way it happened. Parsons worked Stage Seven yesterday afternoon with a crew—not on the bedroom set but one farther over. They're finishing up a bathroom for the shower sequence. The job ran late, and come quitting time, he stayed behind to collect the gear. Way he

tells it, the gasoline can wasn't even supposed to be there; they'd requisitioned shellac to use on the wall tiles, but somebody made a mistake.

"Anyhow, he got ready to lug this stuff back to supplies, but he couldn't locate a handcart. What he should have done was fetch one from maintenance, but he was either too tired or too damned lazy. So he shoved everything under the bed on the set next door. Then he decided to stretch out for a minute and have himself a cigarette—they don't let the crew smoke on the job."

"But all he had to do was go outside," Claiborne said.

"That's what we told him, but he gave us a lot of doubletalk about being beat. You ask me, he's on grass—they all are, particularly the younger ones—and he didn't want to get caught out on the street. Of course, he wouldn't admit it, but it sure as hell explains why he dozed off. When the fire started he woke up scared and ran, just like I figured. Lucky for him he didn't burn to death."

"Do you believe his story?" Roy said.

"If he was lying, why come up with something like that when he knew we could press charges?"

"Will you?"

"And get in a hassle with the insurance people? That'd be all we'd need right now." Driscoll pushed his chair back from the desk. "Naturally I didn't tell him that. He kept begging me not to bring him up before the union and I said okay, on one condition—I wanted him off the lot. I don't know what excuse he gave them—ill health, death in the family—but he punched out his afternoon. Don't worry, it won't happen again."

Roy waited for Claiborne to protest, but he merely nodded.

He was still silent after they left the office and filed out into the hazy late-afternoon sunshine of the studio street. And it was Roy who finally spoke.

"So what do you think? Was he telling the truth?"

"If you're asking about the workman, I don't know. But I'm not sure about Driscoll."

"Is there some way we could find out?"

Claiborne stared toward the setting sun. "There damned well better be," he said.

At twilight the fog came into the hills.

It came softly, like a serpent, encircling clumps of cypress and the shrubbery below. Coiling silently through the streets, its gray maw devoured darkness and swallowed the stars.

Jan watched through the window as she spoke into the phone.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “Messenger service delivered the new pages here an hour ago. And now you tell me—”

“Never mind the pages. We won’t be making any changes in the script,” said Santo Vizzini. “There has been a mistake.”

“Mistake?”

“It’s not important. I will explain tomorrow when you rehearse.”

“What time?”

“Probably late afternoon, after I finish with Paul Morgan. Wait for my call.”

“All right. But are you sure—”

Jan broke off, conscious that the line was dead. Vizzini had hung up and there was only a buzzing.

As she replaced the receiver the buzzing faded, but now there was another sound—softer, and from a different source.

Someone was crying.

Jan went to the window. The fog billowed against the pane, shrouding the hillside beyond. Here, neither shape nor shadow stirred, but the crying continued, faint and forlorn.

A child, lost in the fog?

She opened the front door, peering out. The light at the corner was barely visible, and there was no sound here, only a chill stillness.

Damn Vizzini—it was his fault, getting her all shook up over nothing. That was what *he* said: nothing. Then why had he called? Disregard the changes, he told her. But the changes were mimeoed at the studio, which meant someone had okayed them, or else why send them up by special messenger? Too much was happening—that business about the fire and what Claiborne had said about seeing Norman Bates—no wonder she was flipping out, hearing things.

And while she was at it, damn Connie too. Why couldn't she stay home nights at least once in a while, instead of leaving her all alone like this? Right now, Jan felt the need of someone's presence, anyone's. Maybe if she called Roy—

As she closed and locked the front door, she heard the phone ringing.

Telepathy?

No, because it wasn't Roy. Lifting the receiver, she found herself talking to Adam Claiborne.

"Sorry to bother you," he said. "I just thought I'd check and see if you got the new pages."

"Yes, I have them."

"Well, what do you think?"

She told him about Vizzini's call.

"You mean he's not going to use the changes?" Claiborne sounded disturbed, and that disturbed her, too.

"What's going on?" she asked. "Won't anybody level with me?"

Claiborne didn't reply for a moment. Then, "It's rather involved—"

"So am I," Jan told him. "Completely involved." She stared into the grey world beyond the window. "Look, if you're not busy, why don't you come by for a drink?"

Again he hesitated, and it was Jan who broke the silence. "Please. I've got to know."

"I'll be right over."

And that was that.

But not entirely. Because when she hung up and started down the hall into the kitchen, Jan heard the crying again.

It seemed louder here, and as she moved forward the sound held a note of urgency that impelled her to the back door.

Opening it, she saw the kitten.

The tiny yellow bundle of fur rested on the doorstep, staring up at her with topaz eyes. She picked it up; almost weightless, the kitten snuggled against her arm and the mewling modulated into a purr of pleasure.

“Where’d you come from, kitty? Are you lost?”

“*Rao.*”

The smoky green eyes regarded her gravely, but now she sensed a shudder rippling across the moist flanks.

“Poor baby, you’re all wet—”

Jan closed the door and carried the kitten over to the sink. Taking a dishtowel from the rack, she rubbed it gently over the damp curlicues of fur. Gradually the shivering subsided.

“There, that’s better.” She let the towel drop to the sink top. “Are you hungry?”

“*Rao.*”

“Okay, let’s see what we can do about that.”

Jan put the kitten down on the linoleum. It rested there motionless, but the little green eyes followed her movements as she opened the refrigerator and brought out a carton of milk. Taking a saucer from the cupboard, Jan filled it full and placed it on the floor beside her waiting guest.

And then her other guest arrived.

At the sound of the chimes she hurried through the hall to the living room, but this time she switched on the outside light and peered through the peephole to identify her caller. Then she swung the door open, admitting a wave of clammy dampness and Adam Claiborne.

“You made good time,” she said.

“The motel’s just down the hill, in Ventura.” He glanced toward the window. “But I almost got lost—couldn’t even make out the street signs. No wonder you don’t want to be alone up here.”

“I’m not alone,” Jan told him. “I have a visitor.”

She led him into the kitchen and they halted in the doorway. The kitten crouched beside the saucer, its pink tongue lapping lazily at the last drops of milk.

Claiborne smiled. “Friend of yours?”

“I hope so. She turned up at the back door a few minutes ago.”

“She?” Claiborne stared down at the fluffy figure. “How can you be sure of its sex?”

“Feminine intuition.” Jan went over and scooped the kitten up into her arms. “All right, baby, you’ve had your drink. Now it’s our turn.”

“*Rao.*”

It nestled contentedly against her as she led Claiborne back into the living room, and when she started to put it down, the tiny claws curled into the folds of her sweater. Jan tried to disengage its hold, but the kitten clung fast.

“Come on, give me a break,” she murmured.

“Never mind.” Claiborne went over to the bar. “I’ll do the honors. Scotch and rocks?”

“Super.”

Jan settled on the sofa while he fixed their drinks, stroking the kitten as it purred. Her fingers found the warm flesh beneath the wisps of fur and she marveled at the softness of its skin. Under the thin texture one could actually *feel* the purr vibrating through the inner organs. How fragile it was!

Almost instinctively her free hand went to her own throat, touching the pulse beating there. As it throbbed beneath her fingertips, she marveled anew. *Why, were all like that. So vulnerable. This fraction of an inch covering our flesh is our only protection. And if it were to burst, or be cut, here at the artery—*

“Penny.”

She looked up as Claiborne held a glass out to her.

“What?”

“For your thoughts.”

“Oh.” She reached for her drink and shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Make it a nickel. I keep forgetting about inflation.” He lowered himself beside her on the sofa. The kitten blinked and disengaged its claws. Scampering down onto the rug, it curled up at her feet.

Claiborne turned to Jan. “That gesture you made just now—what were you thinking about?”

“Mary Crane.”

She didn’t consciously intend to say it, and until the words came out she hadn’t even realized it was true.

“What about her?”

“Not her. Me.” Jan nodded self-consciously, avoiding his intent gaze. “It’s one of those professional things, I suppose. As you get familiar with a role, you start to identify with the character.”

“Don’t.”

She met his eyes, and he wasn’t smiling now. “But I should, really, if I’m going to play the part.”

“Don’t.”

Jan raised her glass and drank, but as the scotch went down, resentment rose. Damn it, he’d seemed so nice when he came in that she’d almost forgotten his hangup about the picture. But this time, she promised herself, she wasn’t going to lose her temper.

“Please.” She kept her voice and expression under control. “We’ve been through this number before. Just because I told you Vizzini isn’t going to make those changes—”

“There’s more to it than that,” Claiborne said. “Something happened this afternoon.”

She sat back, sipping her drink as he began to talk. About meting Vizzini, and how he looked like Norman Bates. About seeing Roy and going to Driscoll, hearing his explanation of the fire and his own reservations about Vizzini.

Jan listened in silence until he finished. “Is that all?” she asked.

Claiborne’s eyebrows arched. “Isn’t it enough?”

She lowered her glass. “Maybe it’s too much.”

“Look, if you don’t believe me, ask Roy Ames.”

“Just what am I supposed to believe? First you tell me Norman is alive, now you say he’s dead and Vizzini started the fire.”

“I’m not sure about Norman, and I’ve no hard proof of Vizzini’s responsibility. But one thing’s certain. He does identify with Norman Bates, and that’s why I warned you about identifying with Mary Crane.”

Jan reached down to pet the kitten as it rubbed against her ankle. “I identify with kitty here, too. And with all sorts of people, all sorts of things. Maybe because I’m an actress—”

“Most of us tend to identify, to a degree.”

“Most of us?” Jan straightened. “But not shrinks, I suppose. They’re above such weaknesses.”

“*Rao.*” The kitten nodded in seeming approval.

But Claiborne frowned. “Stop beating me over the head with a label,” he said. “Shrinks aren’t above or below anything. It’s just that experience tells us complete identification with anyone, whether it’s Jesus Christ or Adolf Hitler, is dangerous. We can still empathize, though, and relate—”

Jan’s eyes challenged. “And just who do you relate to?”

“Everyone.” Claiborne shrugged. “At least, I try to. Norman, of course—I share his resentment of confinement and restraint. I understand Marty Driscoll’s drive for success because there’s a little of that in me too. I can see Roy Ames’s position as a writer trying to tell it like it is; I wanted to tell the truth about Norman in a book.”

As she listened, Jan found herself recalling the other evening here with Claiborne, and her own sudden unexpected surge of feeling. Seeing him now, she felt the same reaction starting to build; it wasn’t what he was saying, but the sound of his voice as he said it. This wasn’t professional put-on, he really wanted her to understand, just as she wanted to reassure him that she did. It was all she could do to restrain herself from reaching out in response, reaching out physically—

She checked the impulse quickly. Words were safer. “Paul Morgan?” she said.

Claiborne nodded. “I don’t like what he does—the petty cruelty, the autograffiti thing. But I can share his insecurity, the doubts about one’s self-

image. And the same with Vizzini. Perhaps even more so. I know what it's like to be an orphan."

"You?"

His voice was soft. "Yes. I don't know who my parents were, or my real name. The only difference is that I didn't run away from the orphanage." He paused. "When you told me about your kid sister, it hit home. For all I know, my mother was in the same bind, and your sister's baby and I are twins."

Claiborne looked up at her with a smile. "Are you beginning to see what I mean? You don't have to completely identify in order to relate; if you just look deeply enough, you'll find something of yourself in everyone."

Jan nodded. "That's exactly how I feel about Mary Crane. Only it's closer, somehow, because there's the physical resemblance too. Sometimes I can't help thinking that if I play the part right, it could almost be like bringing her back to life again—"

"Even if it means ending your own?"

He leaned toward Jan, taking her hand. His voice deepened. "I know how much this means to you. But it's only a role, just remember that. Mary Crane is dead and you're alive. What happens to you is what's important now."

She met his gaze, and his eyes told her more than his words. *He cares. He really does care.* She could feel the warmth and pressure of his fingers, the throb of his pulse matching hers. He was turning her on and that was good, because it turned off the thoughts. Even though she'd kept her cool, the fear was there and she didn't want to think about it. Maybe he was right and she was wrong, but what did it matter? What mattered was here and now, the touching and the throbbing. That was what she wanted, that was what she needed, because it was real.

Jan moved into his arms, eyes closing, mouth seeking and opening against his own, and now their bodies were touching and throbbing together, soft fingertips grazing hard nipples, hips arching as hands went to her waist—

And thrust her away.

She opened her eyes. "What's wrong?"

“Jan, listen to me.” His voice was gentle. “I know what you’re trying to do, but it won’t help. Your safety is what matters, not just the threat to your career. Buying me off like this won’t solve anything.”

She rose quickly. Startled, the kitten sprang to its feet, stubby tail curling.

“Buying you off? Why, you smug bastard—”

“I’m sorry.” He was rising, facing her. “I didn’t mean it that way. You know I want you. But not like this, on these terms—”

The impact of her hand against his cheek halted him. “Terms? You’re the one who’s making terms. But not anymore. Just get the hell out. Out of here, out of my life!”

Jan turned, striding to the front door, and flung it wide. The kitten was mewling in fright somewhere on the floor below, but she couldn’t see it.

“Don’t be a fool,” Claiborne said. “You’ve got to realize—”

The sound of his voice blurred; everything blurred as he came toward her across the room. Sensing that he wanted to touch her, she edged back.

“No—get out!”

His hand fell and he moved past her. Then she slammed the door and leaned against it, shaking. It was only when she heard his car start up and pull away that the blurring sensation ebbed and she could see and hear clearly again.

But now there was nothing to hear, not even the frightened mewling. And as she stared around the living room, there was nothing to see.

The kitten was gone.

Two hours and two scotches later, Jan was still wide awake in her bed.

*Alone, damn him!*

She plumped the pillows, then settled back again. *While you're at it, you might as well damn yourself.*

It was her doing. She was responsible for everything; losing her temper, losing Claiborne, even scaring the kitten out into the fog. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

Only he hadn't scorned her. All he'd done was tell the truth. She did want him, but that wasn't her only reason for turning him on; doing so was also a way of turning him off about the picture. *Crazy Lady*—a good title to describe herself. She must have been crazy not to see that he was really anxious to protect her.

But from what? Hints and guesses didn't add up to proof. Was there something more, something he hadn't told her?

Maybe Roy would know.

Switching on the bedlamp, Jan reached for the phone atop the nightstand. She dialed Roy's number, then listened.

No answer.

And no answer to her question.

She replaced the receiver, turned off the light, pulled the covers back up around her shoulders. Now, oddly enough, she felt relieved that her call hadn't been completed. Roy would probably just have said the same things, tried to talk her out of doing *Crazy Lady*. Maybe she was crazy after all, but not *that* crazy. Unless he and Claiborne came up with something besides conversation, nobody was going to make her back down. Not after all she'd gone through. *Five years. Face it, you're not getting any younger. This is the heavy trip, so hang in there. You don't want to end up a nothing, like Connie. Poor Connie . . .*

Poor Connie was having a ball.

Or was the ball having her?

It didn't matter, really. Either way, she was balling. Or about to be balled, as soon as that smartass cameraman stopped fiddling with the focus on her crotch. Probably got his funsies peeking at her, but she was dying here under the lights.

Dying, but living.

Because for once nobody was ignoring her. There were seven others in Leo's rec room, and everyone of them was concentrating on Connie, or some part of Connie. The clown with the hand-held camera had staked out his claim between her legs, the body-makeup girl was rubbing pink goo on her munchies, the klutz handling the lights flooded her face, framed by the black pillowcase. The boom man positioned the mike above her head, and the sound man squatting behind his controls was concerned with her voice level, and Leo himself—the producer, director, and production designer responsible for erecting this set in his own pad—was eyeballing her approvingly. The sixth person, if you could call that hairy, naked ape a person, was also responsible for some erecting of his own. And when the others finished, he'd begin.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't exactly rose-garden time, holed up in a Boyle Heights bungalow to moonlight a porno flick. But who cared?

*I care, that's who. Me, Connie. Because for once they're looking at me.*

They were looking at her now, and the audience would be looking at her up on the screen. Not just her hands or feet or ankles, but all of her. So what if the audience was just a bunch of dirty old men with hats on their laps; at least she'd be *seen*. And nobody was complaining about the size of her boobs or trying to keep her face out of the shots. For this kind of film they could make do with a Japanese sex-doll or even a model of Godzilla, but Leo had picked her personally because he recognized talent when he saw it.

Connie lay back. They were about to go now. The cameraman nodded at Leo, he waved to the sound engineer, and the ape got ready to haul his banana into the shot on cue.

“All set, everybody?” Leo said.

Connie winked at him. Leo was no Marty Driscoll, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that she was playing the lead in her first feature film.

The clown who handled the lights stepped forward with his clapper board—a term she hoped was merely a figure of speech. “Scene one, take two,” he told the camera.

“Speed!” Leo said.

Connie smiled.

“Action!”

Connie spread her legs.

*To hell with Driscoll. She was a star . . .*

Marty Driscoll couldn't see a star.

Usually the big glass sliding doors leading onto the patio gave him a magnificent view of the Valley below and the sky above, but tonight nothing was visible outside the den except a solid wall of gray.

*The fog comes on little cat feet—*

And so did the quotation. Driscoll grimaced, wondering just what reaction he'd get if he came up with the line in the presence of coworkers at the studio. Not to wonder, really; he was already quite certain of their response.

Literacy dated you. In an era obsessed with youth, most producers graduated directly from acne to autonomy, and the older group lied about their ages even more than the performers did.

When Marty Driscoll had reached this realization, his body had already betrayed him. It was too late for hair dye or hairpieces, and any obvious attempt to emulate post-adolescent lifestyles would be futile. The din of a disco dance floor couldn't drown out his wheezing, and no corset could conceal his flab.

The only ploy remaining was the one he'd adopted: play it smart by playing dumb. Come on strong, come on crude and loud and vulgar, give them a stereo version of a stereotype—the no-taste, no-talent tyrant. Forget about the degrees from Princeton; they're not interested in your B.A., what counts is your b.s. And while you're at it, forget about those early low-

budget features, the idealistic efforts born of a desire for quality, only to die at the box office.

The formula worked. That's why Driscoll was sitting here now in the den of the big house on Mulholland where—except for a few foggy nights like this one—he could look down on the studio below. And that, he supposed, had been his ultimate gratification, to look down on the studio in every sense of the phrase. Look down on its vacuity, its vanities and venalities, even though he himself shared in them, *mea culpa*.

Driscoll shrugged as he considered the success of his deception. As far as the studio people were concerned, he wouldn't know *mea culpa* from Mia Farrow.

For that matter, his own wife hadn't learned the secret; none of them had. To Deborah he was just a big fat slob with a big fat bank account. She'd taken the kids down to the Springs for the week just to get away from the slob, but she called every day to pay her continuing respects to the bank account.

Suppose she found out there was no bank account? And that this house and the one in the Springs were creaking beneath the weight of heavy second mortgages plus interest penalties for overdue payments?

Irrelevant questions. She wasn't going to find out, not if his luck held. Luck—that was the random factor.

Bad luck with the last three films. He should have sold them to the Pentagon; with bombs like those, they could destroy the Soviet Union. It was after the release of the third that the mortgaging began.

Then, good luck again, when Vizzini brought him the development deal on *Crazy Lady*. And it had all been smooth sailing until this week, when New York heard of Norman Bates's escape and the murders.

*They want to pull out, Ruben told him. They think the news turns your story into ancient history.* Somehow he'd managed to sweet-talk Ruben out of an immediate cancellation, citing George Ward's conviction that the publicity would be a help rather than a handicap. But the best he got was a reprieve until Ruben and the money people came in for tomorrow's meeting. That was when the final decision had to be made.

And Claiborne was an unexpected complication. Until now, he'd been able to handle Roy Ames and his qualms of conscience, but Claiborne was really rocking the boat. Day by day their objections were undermining morale; day by day the interest rates mounted and the prospect of his receiving a healthy producer's fee on the picture's start-date sank.

This afternoon had been the worst. Labeling Santo Vizzini as mentally unstable hardly qualified as a late news bulletin, but that didn't prove him guilty of arson. One thing was certain: he hadn't started the fire.

Driscoll paused at his desk long enough to light a cigar, then wished he hadn't. The flaring match was a painful reminder.

Rereading the production-insurance contract the other day, he'd discovered the disaster clause. Everyone would be paid off in full in the event of demonstrable accident, the death or serious injury of stipulated principal performers, destruction of facilities due to water or fire damage—

Good luck again. Why risk further problems or gamble on persuading New York to let the picture proceed? He could get his money now—not just the upfront fee but the whole sum, guaranteed, more than enough to bail him out. And nobody could fault him for an act of God. He'd have another project in the works long before he ran short of cash again.

It had all seemed so simple once he worked out the details. Luck held when he carried the gasoline can onto the set unobserved. His mistake had been to ignite the bedspread before spreading the gasoline around; the flicker of flame had alerted the guard, and there was just enough time to shove the can under the bed and get out through the side door.

Good luck had borne him back to his office without being discovered, but bad luck had aborted the fire. And all he could do now was hope that Claiborne bought his story about the set dresser. In a day or so the shrink would leave, and by then the meeting with Ruben and New York people would be over. It was going to take some doing to convince them that George Ward was right about the publicity helping *Crazy Lady*; he'd really have to make a pitch tomorrow. But rough, gruff Marty Driscoll, that hard-nosed slob, would hardball it through. He had no choice now.

He paced before the glass doors, staring out into the night. The fog blurred the lights, but they'd shine again tomorrow, bright and clear. Better

get some rest so that he'd be bright and clear too, come meeting time.

One more day, that was all he needed. One more day to get the final okay. And then to hell with them all: the neurotic writer, the loud-mouthed shrink, the stupid girl, that crazy director, and his over-the-hill star.

*Don't worry, he told himself. You can handle them. But it won't be a picnic . . .*

“This really is a picnic,” Paul Morgan said. He gestured toward the nude males crowding behind him at the dressing table’s three-paneled mirror. “I mean, look at all those buns and weenies!”

Robert Redford giggled. “Speak for yourself, dearie. Whenever I see naked bodies, it just reminds me that God didn’t know very much about anatomy.”

“Let’s not be blasphemous.” John Travolta peered at his image intently, teasing his eyelashes. “Why are you always putting down religion?”

“Because my grandmother was raped by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t your grandfather?”

Everybody let out a shriek except Clint Eastwood. He glanced up from the chair in the corner, where he sat waxing his legs. “You’re a fine one to talk—you and your group-gropes!”

Sylvester Stallone elbowed his way to the mirror, pursing his mouth as he applied lipstick. “Personally, I detest the action at orgies. It’s like opening a dozen beautifully wrapped Christmas packages and finding them all empty.”

“But isn’t that what we’re doing here?” Robert Redford asked. “We’re peddling illusions, not just the bare necessities—”

Clint Eastwood rose. “It’s getting late. You’d better stuff your bare necessities into your jeans and get downstairs before Queenie throws a snit fit.”

Burt Reynolds tossed his powder puff into a tray on the dressing-room table. “Oh my God, I forgot! That party of Iranians is coming in again tonight—”

“Not again!” John Travolta made a face. “Iranians suck.”

“Doesn’t everybody?” asked Paul Morgan.

There was a hoot, and Clint Eastwood moved up beside him, nodding appreciatively. “That’s telling them, hon. Don’t pay attention to what they say. I know it’s your first time here, but there’s nothing to get uptight about. Just remember, Queenie’s here to protect you.”

Paul nodded, reaching for his Jordaches and peek-a-boo blouse. The others were dressing frantically now, jostling in front of the mirror panels and making last-minute inspections. He was grateful for their self-preoccupation and equally grateful for Eastwood’s reminder.

Because it *was* his first time, and he *was* edgy. He thought of Queenie’s blonde wig, the beaded gown, the artificial breasts, and wondered why he never bothered to shave off his beard. Now he visualized the scene downstairs—big fat Queenie playing madam in his grotesque outfit, surrounded by all those gorgeous studs. No wonder customers came into Queenie’s parlor from all over the world to be serviced by just about every top male star in the business.

As Robert Redford had said, they were peddling illusions, and perhaps Queenie’s beard was a not-too-subtle reminder that what came down here was fantasy.

Everybody knew the studs weren’t actually stars, but only lookalikes—gay guys, playing macho. But most of them took their work very seriously, copying voices, mannerisms, and *schticks*. With the prices Queenie charged, his clientele wasn’t about to make it with ordinary beefcake.

Well, some of them would be getting *filet mignon* tonight, and more than illusion.

Paul sat at the mirror pretending to work on his eyebrows when the others trooped out, their chatter echoing down the hallway as they headed for the stairs. Nothing remained of their past presence here except for a peculiar scent compounded of powder, perfume, and jock-sweat.

Thank God *that* part was over! Talk about illusions—he’d managed to fool them completely. None of them had guessed he was for real, not even Queenie himself, when he’d stripped down for the interview. It almost cracked him up when he’d heard those words of grudging approval.

“You’re a little old to do Morgan, but the delivery isn’t bad. And once the word gets out that you’re hung like a horse, you ought to get quite a play.

Some of my regulars are into quantity, not quality.”

So why was he sitting here now with the shakes? Queenie had assured him there'd be no trouble. “No bondage, S-and-M or leather freaks, no tearoom acrobats. This is strictly a straight gay house.”

*But I'm not gay. That's the problem.*

Sure, there'd been exceptions, like that time on location in Morocco with that little Arab gofer—what was his name, Abud, Abdul?—and the Jap kid, the gardener, that afternoon when he was so smashed. But you couldn't count such things, and if it weren't for Vizzini, he wouldn't even have remembered crap like that. Jesus, there was as real kinko for you, Vizzini, giving him the business. Telling him he had to psych himself into the role.

“Let's hear it again from the top. And this time forget the balls. I don't want Paul Morgan, I want Norman Bates. You know what I mean?”

Paul knew exactly what he meant. Play gay. Wearing the dress and the wig had helped, but not enough.

What had Queenie said? *You're a little old to do Morgan.* And that was the nitty-gritty. If he wanted to stay alive in the industry, it was time to segue into character parts, like Newman and Peck, time to make the switch.

*Switch.*

He raised a hand to smooth his hair, hoping the gesture would brush the word away, but it hung there in midair between his face and the mirror, blurring his image. All he could see was the trembling of his fingers.

Maybe he should have taken a few more belts to calm himself down before coming here. Or maybe he shouldn't have come at all. It was belting drinks that gave him the crazy notion in the first place, made it seem like a smart move. Okay, so Claiborne told him Norman wasn't gay, just a transvestite. But what did that dumb shrink know about the Method?

All these years he'd steered clear of that Actor's Studio jazz, but he needed it now if he was going to stop jiving and really play the character. He had to do more than just work in drag if he wanted to get the feel of the part. Even if it meant that in a few minutes some stranger, some garlic-breathed old oil-peddler, would be getting it off feeling *his* parts. Maybe it wasn't too late to bug out—

He forced himself to stare into the mirror again and this time the image was clear. He didn't see Vizzini, or Queenie, or the lousy teenagers who thought he was over the hill. What he saw was Paul Morgan.

So quit rattling the cage; crashing this scene was his own idea. And there was no sense in splitting now. Vizzini was right, he had to play for real because this was his last chance at the brass ring. That's why he was—

“Here, now!”

He looked up as Queenie peered around the side of the dressing-room doorway, his bearded lips framing a pout.

“What's keeping you, sugar? We're jammed downstairs, simply Jump City—”

Paul pushed back his chair and rose. “Okay, I'm coming.”

“Later.” Queenie tittered. “I've spread the word to some of my specials and they're just frantic to meet a new face.”

Paul trailed Queenie's waddling bulk down the hall, hearing the babble rising from the stairwell. Shrill voices, shrill laughter. Jesus, what was the matter with him—he'd known a lot of gays in the industry over the years, and most of them were decent dudes. But you wouldn't find that kind here, camping it up in a male whorehouse.

Suddenly the shakes came back. He wanted to turn, turn and run, but he couldn't because a hand was squeezing him. A huge, invisible hand, pushing him forward, pushing him down. Vizzini's hand . . .

Rose out of the fog and popped a 'lude into his mouth. Then it descended, lost in the mist that swirled about him like thick steam.

For a moment Vizzini had a vision of dead, boiled bodies and peeled, fleshless faces bobbing amid the bubbles of a hot-tub.

*Imbecile.* No hot-tub here. Wherever *here* might be. *Here* was lost in the fog and so was he. Fog, not steam. Cold, not hot. Prowling the hills, walking ten feet above the ground, he knew he should have stayed clean, should have stayed home, put down the thoughts that came with the fog and the night. But the thoughts had driven him to the pills and the pills had driven him from the house.

No, not thoughts. The memories, that's what he was trying to run away from, the memories of the dead.

*Mama mia*—

Yes, *Mama mia*, that day when the soldiers came to the village and she took his hand and they ran to the town square where they used to sit at the long picnic tables on Sunday afternoons while the band played Verdi. Only today the bandstand's shell was cracked like an egg from the bullets and there was no music, only the shrieks and the thud of boots on cobblestone as the soldiers came spreading out across the square. They had gotten into the wine and now they were getting into the women, and when Mama saw them she tried to turn back but it was too late because they saw her too. She had just enough time to grab him by the collar and push him under one of the tables and then they caught her; there must have been five or six of them, maybe more, or maybe the others came later.

He couldn't be sure because he was crouching under the table, listening to himself crying and the soldiers laughing and Mama screaming.

Then came the creaking and a louder sound—*bam, bam, bam*—shook the table above his head. The table was pounding and his head was pounding too. No more laughing, no more screaming, just the pounding. And the moans. *Mama mia*, moaning, and the boots scuffling in a line that stretched back away from the table, then moved up slowly, one pair at a time, to replace the ones that had stood closest just before. The boots were dirty, caked with mud and slime, and the fifth pair—or was it the fifteenth?—was speckled with spatters of red.

He knew what it was, but he had to look. Better to look at the boots than to hear the moaning and the grunting and the gasping that was worse than the pounding in his head.

That was where it was, that was where it always would be, the pills couldn't cut the sound, the fog couldn't deaden it. *Bam, bam, bam*.

Finally it stopped, all but the echo that never stopped. They were laughing again, moving away, and he crawled out from under the table, stood and stared. Five years old and the first naked woman he ever saw was his own mother. They'd ripped her dress off and torn her underthings and he saw her under thing with the blood oozing and there was blood trickling

from the bruises all over her body and face and from her mouth as it opened and she whispered, “Santo.”

The word was a big pink bubble bursting between her lips and that was his legacy, the last memory he had before he fainted. Maybe she died then or perhaps that came later; he never knew because when he woke up he was in the hospital ward at Catania. No one could or would tell him how he got there or what had happened at Vizzini and he never returned to the town that had given him his surname.

Vizzini—that was what they called him at the orphanage because he didn’t remember his real family name. For a long while he didn’t remember much of anything, and the good sisters scolded him for being a dunce and neglectful of his lessons.

But he did remember the pink bubble. *Santo*. Why did those doe-eyed Sicilian mothers insist on burdening their sons with such appellations—Angelo, Salvatore, Santo?

*What’s in a name?*

When he ran away to Palermo at thirteen, an Angelo took him in and trained him as a thief. The man was his first real teacher, educating him in the ways of the streets, but surely he would never be mistaken for an angel.

Later, in Napoli, there was Salvatore, who did indeed act as his savior when the *carabinieri* made the bust and broke up their little operation. But Salvatore hadn’t saved him from getting hooked on the products he peddled.

And Santo himself was no saint. What saint could survive what he had in Roma, Milano, Marseilles? What saint could have made the first snuff-film in the days when even nudity was still a scandal?

Vizzini stumbled up the steep grade, breathing hard; the fog was so dense that he couldn’t see light from the streetlamps or hillside houses, let alone read the signposts. Where was he now?

Then all at once the pavement firmed under his feet and he knew. He was on top. The top of the world. The climbing was over, he had arrived, the past vanishing behind him in the fog. There was one more capsule in his pocket; he swallowed it dry, not remembering what it was and not caring.

No point in remembering. Forget what *Mama mia* revealed to him on the table, forget the good sisters who had the same thing concealed beneath their robes; all black bristles and bloody too, every month when *la maledizione* visited them. Forget the pig in the snuff-film and what happened to her when the knife entered. *Cut*, he'd said, and that was what the knife did, but she'd deserved it, she was a *putana* and deserved to die.

How she had laughed before the knife came! Laughed and groaned and gurgled, enjoying it. They all enjoyed it, even the good sisters would have given anything to feel the *bam, bam, bam*. Of course, they'd scream and carry on at first, just as Mama had with the soldiers.

*Could she have enjoyed it too?*

What was the difference between a groan of pain and a groan of pleasure? How could a five-year-old boy know, how could he be sure *now*? Only one thing was certain: they all had things, and things didn't reason, merely responded. Black, bristly, bloody things, secret things with secret cravings for more, more, more. *Mama mia*, when he was conceived, rolling in a hedgerow with some nameless *paisan*. And Norman Bates's mother—

Vizzini ran a forefinger over the sweat-beaded surface of his upper lip, tracing the outline of his missing mustache. *He* could have played Norman, should have, because he understood him.

Instead it would be Paul Morgan, who understood nothing, not even his own latent homosexuality. But Norman wasn't homosexual, there was nothing about the crimes to indicate it. Nobody really knew Norman, not even that stupid doctor. Nobody knew except him, Santo Vizzini.

They didn't know he'd researched the case, visited Fairvale last year, seen the ruins of the house and the motel, taken photographs. Being there was an excitement, an excitement he had hidden and preserved and would put on film for all to see and share.

*Crazy Lady*. It would be a triumph because it would be real, almost as real as the snuff-film. The documentary flavor, that was what counted.

Driscoll didn't understand; the only thing he knew was money. To him, the bank statement was important, but to the creative artist, the film itself was all that mattered. The statement of reality, in a world where women

hide the dirty secret under their skirts. It took a man like himself, a man like Norman, to reveal that secret, expose the evil and punish it.

That was what Norman had done with Mary Crane, and that was what he'd do with Jan.

Vizzini blinked, groping his way through the fog. He was disoriented. Too many pills, too much fog swirling inside himself. He was here for a reason, if only he could remember. What had he been thinking about?

*Jan.* She looked like Mary Crane, and that was why he'd chosen her over all the objections. Now he must teach her how to *be* Mary Crane, that thief, that *putana*, flaunting herself and her secret at poor Norman. He must strip away all those silly acting-school mannerisms, strip her bare of everything but the flesh itself, until she was Mary Crane, standing in the shower.

Suddenly the fog cleared away and he could see her, he could see Jan naked, writhing in climax—the final climax that was death.

And suddenly he could see something else, something that drugs and fog had hidden away all these years, something he'd forgotten completely. The little five-year-old boy rising up from under the table and staring at *Mama Mia's* secret. The little boy who fainted, not from fright, but to blot out the realization that he had an erection.

Just as he did now.

*Now*, after a lifetime of thinking he was impotent, like Norman Bates. But it wasn't true. Norman was a man, he must have played the man with Mary Crane. And he himself was a man, this proved he could perform, would perform the role. With Jan . . .

She moaned, enjoying Roy's performance. It was good, so good, and he was good. Even better now, because as she looked up at him his face changed and all at once it was Adam Claiborne on top of her, just the way she'd wanted him earlier this evening. Only his features kept blurring and then it was Paul Morgan, doing her. She closed her eyes, telling him to stop, but when she opened them again, Jan realized something terrible was happening. Paul's face had disappeared and now she was making it with Santo Vizzini; he panted with effort, and drops of perfume trickled from his armpits. She reached up, clawing, and her nails shredded Vizzini's face.

What was on top of her now had no face, none that she could see, only a blur. Yet she knew, something inside of her knew exactly who it was.

*Norman Bates.*

He was the one, he'd been doing it all along, the other faces were just masks. But *his* face was real and she wanted to see it clearly, *had* to see it clearly.

Then came the scream and she awakened, her eyes really opening now to stare into the darkness of the bedroom.

Again the scream, and the frantic pounding on the door.

Jan thrust the covers away, switched on the lamp, slid her feet into the slippers beside the bed. Grabbing her robe from the chair, she ran through the hallway.

“Let me in—”

Connie's voice, from behind the front door.

And when the door opened, Connie stood shivering in the fog, shivering and crying.

“For God's sake, honey, what's the matter?”

“I just came home.” Wailing, her tear-stained face contorted like a child's.

Jan nodded. “Where's your key?”

“In my purse—can't find it—he was there—”

“He?”

Connie gestured toward the fog-choked street. “Someone—a man—standing under the trees when I got out of the car. I thought he was coming after me—”

Jan peered past the trembling girl. “I can't see anyone.”

“He must have run when I screamed. But he was there—I saw him—”

Tightening the robe around her waist, Jan started down the walk.

Connie turned quickly. “No—don't go!”

But Jan was already moving toward the trees. And it was there, beneath them, that she stooped and picked up the little blonde kitten.

The kitten made no resistance and it didn't move.

Because its throat had been cut.

Claiborne had overslept, but he didn't feel rested.

There was too much on his mind, there were too many things to consider. He shaved and dressed, sorting out the events of the past twenty-four hours. The encounter with Vizzini, the meeting with Driscoll, the episode with Jan.

Episode? It was far more than that. If only he could have gotten through to her, made her realize her safety was important because she was important to him. But he hadn't, so the danger remained. And this was Saturday already; time was running out.

He hurried to the phone and put through a call to Steiner at the hospital.

"In the hospital," Clara told him. "That's right, they took him over to County General on Thursday night. Bronchial pneumonia. You know we've had those terrible rains here all week—"

Claiborne asked questions and got answers. No, Dr. Steiner wasn't in intensive care, but there'd be no calls or visitors, at least not for a few days. And as far as she knew, there'd been no word yet from the coroner's office. Sheriff Engstrom was keeping after him for a report, he said Monday at the latest. "And by then you'll be back, thank God. We're having a rough time here—"

He thanked her and hung up. *Rough time*, she said. Things were rough all over.

But there was no point in self-pity, or self-recrimination either. It was enough to admit that so far he'd accomplished nothing. Steiner had been right; he was a doctor, not a detective. And he'd fallen into the most common pitfall of his profession; he'd become so interested in the people that he'd failed to give priority to the immediate problem. A detective knew that sticking to the problem was the only way to come up with solutions.

Claiborne sat on the side of the bed, reviewing options and priorities. Then he picked up the phone again.

He made two calls.

After the second one he went into the bathroom and put his head under the cold water tap. It was the unreasoning gesture of a man with a hangover, but the stinging shock of the spray helped, even though he had to change his shirt and comb his hair again.

After making sure the key was in his pocket, he left the room and started down the patio walk, glancing at his watch. *Past noon already.* He hadn't had breakfast yet, but there was no time for that, not after what he'd heard —

“Hello.”

Tom Post was standing in the office doorway, tendering a seamed smile of greeting. “Care for a cup of coffee?”

Claiborne started to shake his head, but the appeal of the invitation was reinforced by the odor of the offer itself.

“Thanks. I can't be too long, got an appointment—”

“No problem. It's ready.”

Post led him into the office and opened the door at the rear. “In here,” he said. “Might as well be comfortable while we're at it.”

The room beyond the doorway was comfortable enough, or had been at one time, when the parlor furnishings were new. But now the upholstery was faded and the drapery dimmed with dust; only the framed photographs on the walls seemed bright and ageless in the lamplight.

As the old man busied himself before the urn on the corner table, Claiborne turned his attention to the pictures. Like the ones on the wall of the outer office, they appeared to be studio publicity portraits, but none of them sparked recognition.

Tom Post came over and handed him his cup. “Cream and sugar?”

“Black is fine, thank you.”

And it was. Claiborne hadn't consciously realized how much he needed something; hot coffee was even better than cold water at this moment.

“Another scorcher,” Post said. “But the fog'll be rolling in again tonight. Usually does, this time of year.” He glanced up at the faces on the wall. “See anyone you know?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. Before your time.” A bony finger jabbed in the direction of an elderly man’s smiling countenance. “That’s Sol Morris. He was the head of Coronet Studios back in the twenties, when they were over on the other side of the hill.”

The younger man nodded and Post moved along the wall, like a tour guide in a museum. But then this *was* a museum, Claiborne realized; the faded furnishings and dusty décor were appropriate in a place where all clocks had stopped long ago.

“Theodore Harker,” said Post, looking up at the portrait of a hawk-faced man dressed in black. “Big director, like Dave Griffith in his day. The one next to him is Kurt Lozoff. I worked with him too, some said he was even better than Von. But nobody remembers now. Nobody cares.”

He turned away, and for a moment Claiborne thought the movement was meant to mask emotion. Instead, Post reached up into the darkened corner of the room and switched on a light attached to the portrait hanging there in single splendor.

Splendor. That was the word, the only word, for the incandescence of the face flaming forth—not a photograph, but a portrait in oils. The girl was young and very beautiful. There was something vaguely familiar about her face; somewhere he’d seen those eyes and that smile before.

“Dawn Powers.” The old man smiled. “That’s where I got the name for this place. The Dawn Motel.”

“I think I’ve seen pictures of her,” Claiborne said. “Was she an actress?”

“Yes, but only in silents. She could have gone on, she could have been the biggest of them all.” Tom Post’s voice sank to a soft murmur and Claiborne glanced at him.

“You were in love with her?”

“I still am.”

“What happened?”

The old man shrugged. “Retired. Married outside the business. Died years ago.” He switched off the light, then faced Claiborne from the dark corner. “They’re all gone now. I’ll be going soon myself and maybe it’s just as well.”

“Don’t be in such a hurry. You’ve still got your health.”

“And when I lose it?” Post shook his head. “I’ve seen those nursing homes. Do you know what it’s like to have everything you own in the world on a one-foot shelf next to your bed? People who had a whole houseful of possessions, reduced now to a plastic comb, a cracked mirror, a drinking glass, a sun-faded Polaroid snapshot of grandchildren who haven’t visited them in three years. And that’s not the worst. The real loss is dignity, privacy, self-respect. And hope.

“That’s the future, and we’re all afraid of it. Sure, they keep you calmed down by doping you up—the final ripoff, taking away your emotions. Tell me, Doc, which is better—sedated smiles or tranquilized tears?”

“It’s not just a medical problem,” Claiborne said. “If the world is falling apart, we’ve got to look at our culture pattern and value judgments to find an answer.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got plenty of answers.” Tom Post nodded. “A new one comes along every year. Isometrics. Organic foods. Zen. Biofeedback. Encounter sessions, Transcendental Meditation, jogging.” He smiled. “So where are all the perfect specimens?”

“I wish I knew.” Claiborne put his empty cup down on the coffee table. “But right now I’ve got to get going—”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to bend your ear that way.”

“Don’t apologize. What you said makes a lot of sense. No, really, I mean it.”

“Thanks.” Post chuckled. “Some people think the only thing of value that comes out of an old man’s mouth is his false teeth.”

As Claiborne started for the door, his host followed. “Forgot to ask you,” he said. “That picture you’re interested in—*Crazy Lady*. How’s it working out?”

“That’s a long story.”

“Like to hear it.” Post held the door open as Claiborne moved out onto the patio. “Look, if you’re free around six, why don’t you come by and have dinner here with me? I’m not the greatest chef in the world, but I promise not to poison you.”

“Sounds great,” Claiborne said. “I ought to be back sometime later this afternoon. Okay if I let you know then?”

“I’ll be here.” The cotton-haired man chuckled as Claiborne crossed to his car. “Good luck.”

As Claiborne drove off, the echo of the nervous chuckle seemed to follow him, and once more he found himself wondering about Tom Post. Was loneliness the sole reason for his hospitality and his curiosity?

From what he’d just said, it was obvious that the old man was bitter as well as lonely. Sitting there brooding in the dark, night after night, trying to recapture the past, resurrect the dead.

*But that’s what Norman did. Norman had a motel too.*

Claiborne frowned the thought away, or tried to. The parallel was too farfetched; Post didn’t seem to be fixated on his mother, and he certainly wasn’t hiding her body. All he had was the portrait of the girl he’d loved, a dead girl—

A dead girl with something about her eyes and smile that Claiborne recognized. Not from other pictures of Dawn Powers, but in another photograph, a newspaper shot. The face was different, but the eyes and smile belonged to Mary Crane.

*Nonsense.* How many basic facial types were there—thirty-seven? There must be thousands of girls who shared a similar resemblance. Take Jan Harper, now—

He shook his head. *You could have taken her, last night. Why not? You wanted her.*

Claiborne sighed. Yes, but did he want her as much as Tom Post wanted his Dawn, enough to spend his life with her in reality, or even in memory? He honestly didn’t know the answer. And maybe it would have to be just memory, if Jan couldn’t forgive him for his rejection. *Or if something happened to her—*

He thought about the calls he’d made. For the first time he was armed with more than a hunch or an educated guess. Now he had the weapon he needed, and he intended to use it.

If he could find Marty Driscoll.

But when he drove onto the lot and headed for the Administration Building, he discovered that Driscoll's office was closed and locked; not even Miss Kedzie worked on Saturday afternoons. He should have remembered to call here too. Perhaps he could locate Roy Ames.

He walked down the hall, past closed doors, then quickened his pace as he neared Ames's cubicle and found it open.

Open and vacant.

Did that mean Ames was still somewhere on the lot? Could be—at least it was worth a try.

Back on the deserted street, he started off in the direction of Stage Seven. Wasn't Jan supposed to be rehearsing with Vizzini today? If so, Ames might have decided to sit in on the session. And yes, somebody was there, because the big sliding door stood open.

The darkness beyond the doorway was cool, and he moved into it gratefully, glancing ahead for signs of light and life. But the sound stage was soundless, and the only light came from a distant corner, past the bedroom set where the fire had broken out.

It was here that he saw the bathroom and shower stall of Number Six in the Bates Motel.

He'd never been there himself, of course; the place had burned down years before Norman became his patient. But it was plainly recognizable from Norman's description. Correction—*vividly* recognizable, with its tiled walls, porcelain fixtures, shiny faucets, and heavy shower curtain.

*The scene of the crime.*

For a moment he found himself visualizing that scene: the walls spattered with crimson, the water gushing forth to churn in a pink froth over the naked figure lying sprawled and slashed at the base of the stall. And the other figure standing over it—

But the bathroom was just a three-sided film set, and the figure standing there was Roy Ames.

Ames turned. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," Claiborne said. "I called last night. Where were you?"

“Here.” The writer nodded. “That’s right. I always figured security was a farce, but I wanted to prove it. Anybody could climb over the walls. Maybe the fog helped me get away with it, but now I know how easily it can be done. Thank God, Jan canceled rehearsal today.”

“Canceled?”

“I talked to her this morning. She’s still too shook up after last night.”

There was no hint of accusation in Ames’s voice, but Claiborne found himself avoiding his gaze. *He really does love her*, he told himself. *Damn it, why do I keep blundering into other people’s lives?*

He glanced up defensively. “We had an argument,” he said. “But I don’t think I upset her that much—”

“You didn’t.” Ames told him about the kitten, and Claiborne listened, his eyes narrowing. *Cutting the kitten’s throat*. Suddenly he remembered Vizzini and the knives. *But why—?*

“Now do you see why she’s so uptight?” Ames said.

“Yes.”

“What do you think?”

“Let me work it out.”

“Is that all you’ve got to say?”

“No.” Claiborne shook his head. “Now it’s your turn to listen.”

“Keep talking.”

“I made some calls this noon. First I phoned the security office here, trying to get hold of the man in charge.”

“You’re talking about Talbot.”

“Right. He wasn’t in, but they gave me his home number and I called him there.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I asked about his meeting with Driscoll yesterday, after the fire, and the fingerprints he found on the gasoline can.”

“Did you learn anything new?”

“Several things.” Claiborne nodded, stony-faced. “Talbot didn’t examine that can. He never even came to the studio. He’s been in Vegas since

Thursday, just got back this morning.”

“Then what about the set dresser?”

“Lloyd Parsons?” Claiborne spoke slowly. “There’s nobody by that name working here at the studio. As far as Talbot knows, there never has been.”

“So Driscoll did lie.” Ames frowned. “You think he’s covering for Vizzini?”

“Perhaps.” Something was forming now, the pieces were coming together.

“But it sounds crazy—”

“So does that business with the kitten,” Claiborne say. “Maybe it ties in. The blonde girl, a kitten with yellow fur. It could be Jan’s surrogate. That man in the fog—suppose he came after Jan, but Connie’s arrival scared him off. So he killed the kitten instead.”

“Why?”

“Think for a moment.” Claiborne’s voice deepened. “The synonym for kitten is *pussy*. That’s why it was killed, because that’s what the killer really wanted to do. He stabbed her pussy.”

“Jesus! You really believe Vizzini would do a thing like that?”

“I don’t know.” Claiborne shrugged. “But Norman would.”

“What are you going to do?”

“The first thing is to talk to Driscoll. Do you have his home phone number?”

“Yes, in my office.”

“Then we’ll call from there. This time he can’t wiggle out of it. Either he stops the picture or we go to the police.”

In the shadows beyond the set, a figure stirred.

**P**olice.

Santo Vizzini felt the anger rise within him. It filled his throat, he could taste it on his tongue as he swallowed hard, knowing he must keep silent. Silence had saved him when he came onto the stage and heard the voices, and it would save him now.

He melted back into the darkness behind the side wall of the set as Ames and Claiborne stepped out, moving to the opening at the far end and out onto the studio street beyond.

Then he started after them, halting inside the open doorway to watch as they walked toward the Administration Building. When they disappeared inside, he was free to follow.

The street was empty, and as he entered the building he found the halls deserted. That was good, and now fortune favored him further. The door of Ames's cubicle was open at the end of the hall, and the office next to it was unlocked.

Vizzini pushed the door open quietly, then positioned himself next to the wall.

Ames was already making the call; his muffled voice sounded at intervals. "No, not on the phone. Look, I'm not going to argue. If you don't want to hear it, we'll do our talking to the police."

*That word again.* The anger was strong and bitter now.

"You're damned right I'm serious! It's up to you—we're giving you one last chance."

Anger had a scent, too; no perfume was powerful enough to disguise it.

"What time? You sure you can't make it earlier? Okay, we'll be there."

Ames hung up, and in a moment Claiborne's voice sounded through the wall.

“What did he say?”

“He’s taking a meeting in an hour—Ruben, Barney Weingarten, some of the people from the New York office. He’ll see us tonight at eight.”

“You’re sure he’ll keep the appointment?”

“He’d better. I think I scared him enough so there’ll be no tricks.”

“All right. I’ve got a date to have dinner with the fellow who runs the motel where I’m staying. If you’ll give me the address and directions, I’ll meet you there.”

Vizzini huddled behind the doorway as the two men came out of the office. They were still talking as they walked down the hall.

“That’s easy. He’s just up the hill on the other side of Ventura. You can take Vineland, then—”

Then they were gone, but the echoes lingered.

*Meeting. Eight o’clock. No tricks.*

Vizzini’s jaw muscles tightened. There’s been too many tricks already. Jan, canceling rehearsal. Now the business with Driscoll. This time they’d do it, cancel the picture, cheat him out of everything. He couldn’t stop them, too late for that, he was powerless, impotent.

*Impotent.*

But not with Jan.

Not if he could come up with a trick of his own.

“It’s getting foggy again.” Connie turned away from the window. “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“Stop worrying.” Jan picked up her leatherette-bound copy of the script from the table. “I told you what Vizzini said. Paul Morgan’s rehearsing with me. And they’ve tightened security.”

“I don’t understand you.” Connie shook her head. “All afternoon you keep saying you’re through, no more taking chances, it isn’t worth it. But the minute he calls, you start peeing all over yourself, can’t wait to rush down there. Couldn’t you at least have told him to hold it until tomorrow morning?”

“We’ll be rehearsing then too.” Jan reached for her purse and started toward the door. “Don’t you see? This means the picture’s going ahead on schedule.”

Connie opened the door for her, then peered out into the gathering fog. “Come on, I’ll walk you to the car.”

“But it’s right here—” Jan broke off, smiling. “Thanks, hon, I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mind me.” Connie watched Jan slide behind the wheel and switch on the ignition, and raised her voice over its roar. “Just promise you’ll be careful.”

“You too.”

Connie nodded. “Don’t worry, I’m staying put with the doors locked until you get back. And if anything happens—”

“Nothing’s going to happen.” Jan released the brake and backed the car down the driveway. She waved as Connie went inside and closed the door. Then she shifted into low and started down the hill.

The fog was thickening, but Jan drove cautiously and there was no traffic to impede her progress. Most of the hillside residents seemed to be staying

home tonight; families entertaining company, kids staying up to watch television. Passing an open garage, she glanced into the lighted interior and saw a potbellied man in a T-shirt, slicing up chunks of firewood with a power saw; a can of beer rested on the bench beside him, and a Rorschach-spotted Dalmatian sat watching as he worked. From behind a window next door came the blare of stereo; somewhat to her surprise, she recognized the final bars of a Strauss tone-poem, *Tod und Verklärung*.

*I don't understand you*, Connie had said.

What was there to understand? Of course she'd been frightened—who wouldn't be, with some nut running around killing kittens? But that was last night and nothing had happened since, no sign of anything wrong. Things like that went on all the time nowadays, no shortage of sickies around, and yes, you did need to be careful. Only you had to draw the line between caution and overreaction; you couldn't live your life behind locked doors.

That was what Connie and Roy and Adam Claiborne didn't seem to understand. She wasn't going to end up behind one of those locked doors in Saturday-night suburbia. A young matron doing the nervous-hostess routine for the new neighbors from across the street; a harassed housewife warning the kids that the set had to go off promptly at nine-thirty—*don't forget you're going to Sunday school tomorrow morning*; a middle-aged woman darning socks while her old man puttered around the garage with his power tools; a gray-haired widow sitting alone and listening to the stereo. *Tod und Verklärung*. That was no way to spend your life, waiting for death and transfiguration.

There were other roles to play, and she meant to play them. It was just a question of getting her act together, and that's what she was doing now. *Be a foxy lady*.

Vizzini might be a horny bastard, but he wasn't a fool; now that the film was going ahead, he'd changed his tune. He had too much riding on this picture himself, and he wouldn't louse up his chances just to make a pass at her. Calling a rehearsal with Morgan proved he meant business.

And he hadn't lied about security. When Jan drove up to the studio entrance, she saw not one but two men on the gate. The younger guard checked her sticker carefully before lifting the crossbar and waving her forward. As she parked and walked down the street toward Stage Seven,

she passed Chuck Grossinger making his rounds, and noted that he carried a revolver in his shoulder holster.

It gave her a comforting feeling; there wasn't going to be any trouble now. Not tonight, or ever. Let the good times roll—she was up to her lines, ready for what was to come.

Through the fog, she saw that the big sliding doors of the sound stage were closed. In the smaller side doorway ahead, Santo Vizzini stood smiling at her. As she approached, he glanced at his watch.

“Right on time,” he said. “It is a good omen, don't you agree?”

Jan nodded. She intended to be agreeable, but she'd be careful too. Careful and in control. No sense acting like a scared kitten—

*Forget the kitten, she told herself. That's all over with now.*

Vizzini stepped aside and waved her onto the stage.

Then he closed the door.

Claiborne sat in the car, waiting.

Here on the hilltop, the fog was a solid mass. As he stared out across the semicircular driveway, he could scarcely distinguish the outlines of the sprawling structure beyond its borders.

He glanced at his watch. *Five after eight.* Where was Roy Ames?

Claiborne rolled the window down, listening for the sound of a car approaching, but nothing stirred in the silent street below. After a moment he found himself shivering and he reached out to roll the window back up again.

The thin glass pane provided a barrier against dampness and darkness, but it couldn't shut out the thought of what the fog might hold. And the thought was colder than fog, darker than night. The thought of Norman prowling, Norman with a knife. He could sense his presence, feel him out there, waiting.

*Don't let your imagination run away with you.*

Good advice, but what did it mean? What is imagination, and just how does one distinguish it from thought? And isn't it just as valid an approach to reality as sensing or feeling? *You're the authority, let's have some answers.*

But he had no answers. After all these years he couldn't even define his terms, distinguish between allusion, illusion, and delusion.

*Cogito, ergo sum.* I think, therefore I am—*what?* A rational being? But man isn't rational; that much his experience had taught him. Man lives by instinct and intuition, and he was no exception. All that his training had done was to give him an esoteric vocabulary. He couldn't heal himself because he didn't know himself. Consciousness is all one possesses, and it's a fleeting phenomenon; we lose it in sleep, alter it with narcotics, distort it through emotional reaction, surrender it completely when stronger forces

within ourselves take over. Consciousness is like a pane of window glass—a flimsy protection erected against the fog beyond. But the fog is there always, there and waiting.

*Forget theory, forget logic. Try to see what's hidden in the fog.* Claiborne sighed, visualizing last night's murky mist and the figures it concealed. The kitten cowering under the tree, the man with the knife. Norman, thwarted in his attempt to reach Jan, thrusting his weapon into the kitten instead. And why not? *All cats are gray in the dark—*

Something thudded against the windowpane. He turned, peering through the glass as a hand drew back to reveal the face behind it.

“Hey, wake up!” said Roy Ames.

Claiborne opened the door and slid out. “I wasn't asleep,” he said. And at the same time he told himself this proved his point. How easy it was to lose awareness; Ames had driven up and he hadn't heard him coming. Anyone could have sneaked up on him in the fog, even Norman—

He erased the thought, eyeing his watch. “Eight-ten,” he murmured. “You're late.”

“Sorry about that,” Ames said.

The night air was clammy; Claiborne turned away and started up the walk to the front door. “Doesn't matter. Let's get inside—the least he can do is offer us a drink.”

Ames followed, coming up beside him as he pressed the buzzer and listened to the silvery sound of door chimes echoing from within.

For a moment they stood in the shadows of the darkened stoop. Again, Ames thumbed the buzzer. The chimes echoed obediently, but there was no other response.

“What is this?” Ames muttered. “You think he stood us up?”

“I doubt it.” Claiborne glanced toward the slatted blinds that covered a side window. “There's a light inside.”

Ames balled his fist and thumped on the door. It moved under the impact, opening inward.

“Unlocked,” he said. “Come on.”

Beyond the door, a spacious two-story entryway faced a white-railed staircase that curved upward against the far wall. Entrances on both sides of the hall blazed with light from rooms beyond.

Roy Ames cupped his hands against his mouth. “Anybody home?”

No reply. But the silence wasn’t total; from the right-hand doorway came a murmur of music.

“Doesn’t hear us,” Claiborne said. “Probably watching television.”

The two men moved to the opening, descending the carpeted steps in the den beyond. But the den had no denizen; on the wall screen, figures flickered and sound surged forth as a symphony orchestra began the final movement of *The Pines of Rome*.

“Somebody was here.” Claiborne nodded at the chairs grouped around the coffee table in the center of the room, and the clutter of glasses and ashtrays atop it.

“Well, they’re gone now.” Ames glanced past the fog-blurred glass doors and toward a small doorway on the far side of the room. “Maybe he’s in the john—”

But when they crossed over to enter the hall beyond, the bathroom at the left was open and unoccupied. So was the big bedroom opposite it.

Ames peered inside, inspecting the gaudy décor. “How about those mirrors? Place looks like a funhouse.”

Claiborne nodded. Maybe it was a funhouse, but the music rising from the den was inappropriate for such a setting. The ghosts of Roman legions advanced along the Appian Way, their tread a distant thunder in the night.

He was ready to turn back, but Ames started down the hall in the other direction, attracted by a lance of light issuing from the room at the far end. He halted as Claiborne moved up beside him, and together they stared into the kitchen beyond.

Like the other rooms, it was oversized and overly ornate. The caprice of some decorator had dictated the use of an oaken motif from flooring to overhead beams. Wall stove, cupboards, cabinets, enclosed sink, and built-in refrigerator and freezer were encased in dark oak paneling, which absorbed the dim illumination from overhead. In sharp contrast, the array of

knives and cutlery hanging from the long rack at the center of the room radiated a dazzling intensity of light.

Blinking at the glittering blades, Claiborne was reminded of the weaponry in the studio prop department. But these knives weren't props, and neither was the massive solid oak block beneath them.

It was an old-fashioned butcher's block, big enough to support a quarter of beef, and the cleaver imbedded upright at the far edge seemed more than adequate to do the job. But the job had already been done.

The round blob of bloody meat resting on the butcher's block was the head of Marty Driscoll.

Santo Vizzini walked Jan to the camper at the far end of the stage, just outside the bath-and-shower-stall set. He mounted the step and opened the door, disclosing the lighted interior.

“Your dressing room,” he said.

Jan peered inside, her face brightening at the sight of the full-size theatrical mirror, the vanity, the couch and armchair, the carpet on the floor.

“Neat.”

Vizzini nodded. It had been wise to provide her with these niceties, let her know she was getting the full treatment.

Jan’s smile faded. “Where’s Morgan?”

“Paul should be here any moment now. Why don’t you step inside and make yourself comfortable? I’ll go see if he’s arrived.”

Jan moved past him into the camper, carrying her purse and leatherette-bound script. As she entered, she saw the three red roses rising from a bud vase atop the vanity.

“Flowers!”

“You like them?” Vizzini shrugged. “A star should always have fresh flowers in her dressing room.”

He moved off, not waiting for a reply, knowing she’d closed the door, and started across the shadowed stage.

Everything was working out. There would be no picture now, but it no longer mattered. What mattered was to make the dream come true. Wasn’t that what a director did? Turn fantasy into reality with a wave of his magic wand? Up to now it had only happened on the screen, because the wand held no magic for him. Not until she came—the sorceress. Silly, stupid sorceress with the face of a dead girl and the body of a live woman. Not Mary Crane, not Mama, not anyone he’d ever known, except in dreams

when the power entered his wand and he entered the sorceress. And always the awakening, before it happened.

But it was going to happen now. He thought of how Jan stood there in the doorway of the dressing room, the light outlining the cradle-curve of her hips beneath the sheer skirt. The skirt would go up, the wand would go up, it was going up now, *Mama mia*—

He opened the side door, staring into the fog, making sure the guard was gone, just as he'd arranged. *We will be rehearsing—I would appreciate it if we are not disturbed.* Nobody suspected, nobody would suspect, not even Mama.

*Santo is always a good boy*, she said. She was saying it now, he could hear her, he could see her face there in the swirling fog, so he shut the door. Shut her out, shut them all out, they mustn't see him now, mustn't see his wand. The wand of power.

Power. Power from the pills, they did it—made you hear things, see things that weren't there. But the power was real.

He'd started again this afternoon—the amytal—and now he couldn't remember how many he'd taken. He could remember very little except the plan. Calling Jan.

Then everything speeded up, like the camera under-cranking, and he was here. Now normal speed again, twenty-four frames per second. So she didn't notice anything wrong, he'd played the scene perfectly. Actor, director, producer, completely in control.

But there were too many pills in the camera. That was why he'd seen Mama's face, heard her voice in the fog. Trick photography, special effects.

Next scene. Santo Vizzini turns, walks back through the darkened sound stage. Walks. Glides. Floats.

Camera out of control again. First too fast. Now too slow. Slow motion. *Everything. In. Slow. Motion.*

Change lenses. New focus. Distortion. Walls bend, catwalk swinging down, *look out!* Crazy camera. Crazy pills. *Mama mia, not me, I'm not crazy.*

No, he wasn't crazy, because he had the power. The secret power stirring in his loins. *The wand of power, the secret weapon, stabbing into the warm,*

*yielding flesh—*

Ready now, Santo Vizzini moved up to the dressing-room door.

**R**oy Ames watched as Claiborne knelt beside the corpse on the floor behind the butcher's block.

It had all happened so quickly—first the glimpse of the severed head and the bulging eyes, then the sight of the decapitated body. Claiborne was a doctor, he'd seen death before, and he conducted his examination with professional detachment. This, Roy could understand, but not his own reaction. Instead of fear and revulsion, there was only a numbness. Even his voice was unnaturally calm.

“There's not much blood,” he said.

Claiborne looked up, nodding. “No signs of bodily incision.” Rising, he bent over the block. As he reached down, Roy turned away, but listened intently.

“Massive occipital and parietal lesions,” Claiborne said. “He must have been struck from behind with the flat of the cleaver. Dead before he hit the floor. Then the head could be detached with a minimum of arterial or venous exudation—”

Roy understood what he was saying. Once the heart stops pumping, blood won't spurt from a wound. He'd researched when he wrote the script, because it was a story point. That was why nobody suspected Norman; without bloodstains on his clothing, he didn't even suspect himself. Blood on his hands, of course, but that could come just from touching the body. And it was easily washed away.

On impulse he found himself moving to the sink, staring down at the white porcelain basin. Only it wasn't white, it was pinkish, and the wet rills fringing the drain were dark and red. *Blood will tell—*

“What's wrong?”

Claiborne was standing beside him. Roy pointed at the drain. Claiborne nodded; he understood. *Norman was alive, he'd killed Driscoll here, and*

now—

Now Roy found his voice. “The reason I was late, I tried reaching Jan at the apartment before I came here. Connie told me she’d just left to rehearse with Vizzini.”

“At the studio?” Claiborne’s fingers dug into Roy’s arm. “How long ago?”

“Half an hour. She’d be there by now. Do you think Norman would—”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” Claiborne’s hand fell away and he turned, striding across the room. “Call the police, get them over here. And call the studio—ask security to contact Jan and Vizzini. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Wait—”

But by the time Roy got back down the hall, the front door had slammed and he could hear the motor throbbing from the driveway outside the house, over the symphonic sound of the orchestral broadcast.

Switching off the television, he glanced around and located the telephone on a desk in the corner beside the doorway. He hastened toward it. Then, just as his hand moved out, the phone rang.

Roy lifted the receiver.

“Hello.” A man’s voice, muffled by the hum of a poor connection. “Mr. Driscoll?”

“No.” Roy spoke quickly. “Get off the line. Emergency—I’ve got to call the police—”

“This is the police.”

“What?”

“Milt Engstrom, county sheriff here in Fairvale. Who’m I talking to?”

Roy identified himself. Then, “Please, I told you it’s an emergency. Mr. Driscoll has been killed—”

“Homicide? How’d it happen?”

“I can’t talk now—”

“Then maybe you better listen.” Sheriff Engstrom didn’t wait for a reply. “I’ve been trying to get hold of Claiborne all evening. Dr. Steiner gave me

Driscoll's number, figuring maybe I could reach him here. But you can give him the message. Tell him we've got Bo Keeler."

"Who?"

"Bo Keeler. He's the hitchhiker the nun picked up in her van last Sunday. According to his story, she attacked him with a tire iron. There was a struggle, he got it away from the nun and killed her in self-defense. Then he set fire to the van and made a run for it. Hid out in a friend's house until he couldn't stand it—came in last night and made a voluntary confession. Idea of killing a nun kept eating on him. Only it wasn't a nun."

"I don't understand."

"Neither did we, until this afternoon. Coroner identified the body from dental records. You tell Claiborne he was wrong. It wasn't the hitchhiker and it wasn't the nun. It was Norman Bates."

Roy felt the phone slipping through his fingers. Everything was slipping away now. *If Norman is dead, then Vizzini must have killed Driscoll.*

And he was with Jan—*now*.

Jan closed the script as Vizzini opened the door.

“Ready,” he said.

She rose. “Is Paul here?”

“He’s on the way. We can get started without him.” The director moved up from the single step and into the camper. “I’ll play Norman.”

Jan held the script out, but Vizzini shook his head. “Not necessary. He has no lines in the shower scene. Neither do you.”

“We’re doing the shower scene first?”

“Of course. It is the key to everything, don’t you agree? We will block out the action together.”

“What about cues?”

“I will tell you what I want. It is all very clear.” He smiled. “But first you must strip.”

“Now wait a minute—”

“Please. It is important to visualize your movements the way they will appear on camera.” Vizzini was still smiling as he closed the door behind him.

Jan shook her head. “Forget it. I’m not taking my clothes off.”

“No false modesty.” The smile was frozen. “I have seen naked women before. And this is not the first time you have undressed at a man’s request.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Everything.” The frozen smile was mirthless, and as Vizzini moved into the light, she saw the tiny pinpoint pupils of his eyes. Little cat-eyes, like the kitten’s.

He started toward her and she could smell the reek of his perfume, mingled with another odor, sickly sweet. *He’s on something. I should have*

known.

“You are a woman,” he said. “I am a man. It is only natural—”

For a moment she wanted to laugh. A voice inside echoed a mocking question— *Who writes your dialogue?*

But he was reaching out, pressing her against the vanity, arms encircling her as slit-eyes stared, mouth opening to slash away the smile, breath-stench flooding forth. Jan turned her head to avoid his lips, then realized that wasn't his intention. The hands against her back were clawing at the folds of the blouse.

She felt the cloth shred, felt his fingers fumbling the clasp of her bra, tugging it open so that the bra fell.

Jan screamed and jabbed at his eyes with her nails; averting his head, he caught her wrist, twisting it as he pulled her toward him.

Suddenly he released his grip and her arm dropped, numb. She tried to move back then, but his right hand slapped her face and his left rose to grasp the front of her blouse and tear it away, feeling her bared breasts. Dazed, Jan watched his fingers splaying toward her nipples.

As he cupped and squeezed her breasts, his head dipped down and forward and she reached behind herself, her fingers sliding across the vanity top until they encountered the crystal stem of the bud vase. She gripped it tightly, raised it high, and smashed the vase against the side of Vizzini's head.

Roses fell in a red shower, and a red bloom blossomed below his temple. He cried out, lurching back.

Jan ran past him to the door, and tugged at the knob. The door swung open and she hurtled out—then down. She'd forgotten the single step, but it was too late to think of that now; all thought was submerged in the torrent of pain racing from her right foot up to her thigh.

Was her ankle broken or merely sprained? It didn't matter, she had to get up. Sobbing, Jan started to raise herself from the floor, then fell forward as Vizzini's knee smashed against the small of her back.

This time the pain was so excruciating that she almost fainted. Forcing her eyes open, she fought against the encroaching darkness, but she couldn't fight the encroachment of his hands. Strong hands, yanking her

skirt away, ripping her panties down and off. And then, as she gasped and panted. Vizzini's fingers tightened in her hair, jerking her head back. She felt herself turning, sprawled face upward on the cold dampness of the concrete floor.

Jan stared up, fighting for breath as he bent over her. Blood streamed down his left cheek, but he was smiling again; his teeth were yellow and there were yellow highlights in the flecks of saliva at the corners of his twisted mouth.

"Get up!" he said.

"I can't—my ankle—"

Still smiling, he slapped her again, then reached down and grasped her shoulders, pulling her erect. The pain pouring from her ankle made her moan, and the sound seemed to excite him as much as her nakedness.

"*Putana!*" His hand dug into the gooseflesh of her upper arm. "Walk—"

Jan tried to break free, but he captured her wrists, then shoved her forward. Wincing, she stumbled out of the dark and into the lighted area beyond. The light of the set—the bath and the shower. He was pulling her toward the curtained stall. Little drops of red fell from his bleeding face to mark their progress across the tile flooring.

"Inside," he said. "I want you inside."

"No," she whimpered. And realized she was doing just that—whimpering, like an animal. And now she knew what he wanted, what he'd intended all along. He was going to jump her there in the shower stall, take her like an animal, helpless and beaten—

*Not helpless—*

She sucked air into her lungs, strength into her arms, then twisted free. As her hands loosened, she raised them swiftly, clubbing her fists together and smashing at his bloody temple.

Vizzini made a sound deep in his throat, then staggered back, clawing at the shower curtain behind him to keep from falling. Panting, he recovered his balance; for a moment he stood motionless as their eyes met.

Then, without warning, his hands darted forth.

Jan turned, but it was too late. Before she could move further, his nails bit into her shoulders.

And fell away.

She looked back, then halted. Vizzini still stood with his back to the shower, his face contorted in a grimace.

*“Mama mia—”*

His voice trailed off into a gurgle and he toppled forward to the floor, revealing the redness spurting and spreading from between his shoulder blades.

Then, as the shower curtain ripped back, Jan saw the occupant of the stall lunging forward, knife in hand.

The blade swooped out at her throat.

She had only time to scream before the shot echoed and the knife stabbed down to strike the floor, still clutched in the hand of Adam Claiborne.

**D**r. Steiner wasn't afraid.

There was nothing to fear, because Claiborne was harmless now. They'd dug the bullet out and the wrist was healing nicely, but he would never hold a knife in his right hand again.

For that matter, he might never leave this room. It had been a hassle—even without a trial, there were all those extradition hearings and court orders—but in the end, permission came through and Steiner brought him home.

*Home.* Steiner sighed, glancing around the room. Home was a cubicle with a few sticks of plastic furniture, a bed bolted to the floor, a lightbulb behind a mesh screen. Home was a barred window.

But at least the surroundings were familiar, if Claiborne was aware of them. At times he seemed capable of awareness, and even though he never spoke, he appeared to recognize Steiner and welcome his presence.

Claiborne was smiling now, looking up from the bed as Steiner entered, but then he was always smiling. The smile was a barrier he'd erected to shut out the world and shut the secrets in.

Dr. Steiner nodded at him. "Hello, Adam," he said.

No answer—only the smile and the silence.

Steiner pulled a chair over beside the bed and seated himself, knowing even before he started that nothing would bring the barrier down. Still he had to try, he owed him that much.

"I think it's time we talked about what happened," he said.

Claiborne's expression didn't change, but his eyes seemed clear; perhaps he'd understand.

Then Steiner spoke, choosing his words carefully, remembering that the relationship had altered—no longer doctor-to-doctor, but doctor-to-patient.

Even so, he did his best to tell the truth.

And the truth, as he saw it, was that after all these years together, Claiborne had come to identify himself unconsciously with Norman Bates. Both of them were motherless and alone, both confined, each in his own way, by institutional restraint.

Claiborne smiled.

“But there’s more to it than identification,” Steiner said. “After a time you began to feel that your fate, your future, was bound up in your patient—restoring his reason, writing a book about the case. Sanity would set him free, and the success of the book would give you the opportunity to get out of here on your own. And when Norman escaped, it meant you had failed, failed him and yourself. He was gone, leaving you a prisoner in his place.

“It must have started then, with the conviction that the only way you could escape now was to identify with Norman, share the triumph of his freedom. Yes, I know you went after him, but I think you were secretly hoping he’d get away for good. Then, when you found the body in the van and realized who it must be, hope vanished. You blacked out.

“Norman couldn’t let his mother die, so he *became* her. You couldn’t let Norman die, so you became him. And in the same way, during amnesic episodes when the alternate personality took over.”

Claiborne stared at him with the smile of the Mona Lisa, the silence of the sphinx.

“That’s what happened when you saw the body in the van. As Norman, you went on to Fairvale and killed the Loomises.” Steiner paused. “When the coroner’s verdict finally came in, they searched your car and found the stolen money from the cash register hidden under the floorboards. Do you remember putting it there?”

Claiborne was silent, his smile fixed.

“After hiding the money in your car down the street, you snapped out of fugue and returned to the store. Am I correct?”

No reply, only the set smile.

“The clipping you found prompted your trip to Hollywood. As Claiborne, you had rational reasons for trying to stop the film through argument and persuasion. But as Norman, you were ready to kill to stop it.

“Most of the time in Hollywood you maintained control—but Norman was there too. Reacting to Jan’s resemblance to Mary Crane, seeing the sets that recreated the scene of the crime.

“I talked to the people out there—Roy Ames, Jan, and the girl who shared her apartment. Some of the things they told me helped in reconstructing what happened. The rest is guesswork. For example, that face you saw in the supermarket mirror. It could have been Vizzini, it could have been hallucination. You were losing control rapidly after that, and when you quarreled with Jan, it was Norman who came back to kill the kitten. Of course, that was only a prelude.”

Claiborne’s smile never wavered.

“Time was running out for Norman, and so was all semblance of rational behavior. He had to destroy the film project, even if it meant destroying everyone connected with it.

“You broke your dinner engagement with Tom Post because Norman took over. Norman went to Driscoll’s house and murdered him. When Ames arrived, he found you there and waiting, but after you heard about Jan and Vizzini, it was Norman who rushed to the studio—not to warn them but to climb the wall, take a knife from the prop department, and hide, ready to attack. If Ames and the police hadn’t arrived when they did—”

Steiner broke off, glancing at Claiborne, but there was no reaction, only the silence and the smile.

Sighing, he rose and moved to the door. “We’ll talk again,” he said.

Even as he spoke, he realized the futility of his promise. He’d failed Claiborne, failed to reach the violence within him, the violence guarded by silence and hidden behind a smile.

There were too many of those smiles surrounding him now—not just here in the asylum, but outside in the streets. Smiles that concealed but couldn’t cure the secret sickness. Violence was a virus, a disease becoming epidemic everywhere in the world, and maybe there was no cure. All he could do was keep trying.

“See you later,” he said.

Claiborne smiled.

Claiborne wasn't listening to Steiner.

And when Steiner left, he listened only to himself. To Adam Claiborne. Adam, the first man. Claiborne, born of clay. God created him.

God created all things, including Norman Bates; we are all God's children.

*Am I my brother's keeper?*

I was *his* keeper.

We are all brothers. God said that. God said many things that we must heed.

*Vengeance is mine*, saith the Lord. Claiborne may die, but Norman lives. God will protect him, for he is God's instrument against evil.

*Norman Bates will never die . . .*

# —PSYCHO HOUSE—



This book is for  
*Kirby McCauley*  
just in case he has  
nothing to read

When Terry and Mick got to the front door the moon went behind the clouds.

“See?” Mick whispered. “Now you know why I said to bring flashlights.”

“What are you whispering for?” Terry said. “There ain’t nobody here.” But Terry’s flashlight switched on just as fast as Mick’s.

“Don’t be too sure.” Mick located the smallest key on the loop chain and inserted it in the lock, then hesitated.

“Scared?” Terry said.

“Not me.” The key turned in the lock and the door opened. “Anybody coming?”

Terry glanced toward the road. “All clear.”

Mick nodded. “Good. Let’s go in and see what’s shaking.”

The two slight-height, short-haired, blue-jeaned figures moved over the open threshold into the office. Here a pungent odor of fresh paint filled the darkness that their flashlights’ beams did little to dispel. Blinking, Terry followed Mick to the reception desk, then halted abruptly at the sight of the shadowed shape looming up behind the counter. Only its back was visible.

Now it was Mick who whispered. “See? What did I tell you? It’s him!”

Terry gulped. “Can’t be.”

“No?” Mick reached out to press the silver nipple of the circular bell on the countertop.

There was no sound—but now, slowly, the figure in the shadows turned, and they stared into the face of Norman Bates.

“Welcome to the Bates Motel,” he said. “Your room is ready.”

His eyes were glassy and his grin was fixed, but only the shrillness of his voice betrayed him.

“Sheesh! How’d they do that?”

“Easy. Ain’t no real bell. It’s ’lectronic. They got the dummy on a pivot like. You press the bell and it turns on some kinda tape recording.”

Terry jumped as the wax figure swung back to its former position. Concealing concern wasn’t easy. “So that’s ol’ Norman! You really think he looked that way?”

Mick shrugged. “They say Fatso Otto wants ever’thing to look, you know, like real.”

Terry inhaled, conscious of the paint odor. “Sure musta cost a bundle to build this place.”

Mick nodded. “My dad says Fatso Otto borried it from the bank. Case anythin’ goes wrong he ain’t going down the tube.”

Terry ran the flashlight beam over the office walls, then glanced toward the window. “You’re the one who’s gonna go down the tube if your dad finds out you borried his keys.”

“Don’t worry. Now he’s finished up all the painting he won’t need to come back here. He just stuck ’em up on a hook in the garage—that’s how I got hold of ’em last night and he never seen they was gone, so why should he notice now? All he does is sit there with his six-pack watchin’ that scuzzy ballgame.”

“Where does he think you are now?” Terry asked.

“Over at the lieberry, doing homework.”

“Bet I know what kinda homework you’d really like to be doing,” Terry said.

“Shut up! Lieberry closes at nine. We better get moving, you wanna see the rest of this joint.”

Turning, Mick led the way to the door on the far wall. It opened without the necessity of using a key. “That’s funny,” Terry said. “I thought the only way you’d get into the rooms was from outside.”

“There ain’t any more rooms ’cepting this one, dummy! All the rest is just fake walls made so’s it looks like it was the whole motel. Dad says Fatso Otto will maybe add on some rooms later if business is good.”

“You think people are gonna come and pay money just to see where ol’ Norman did his thing?”

Mick grinned. “We’re here, ain’t we?”

“Yeah, on a freebie. But so far I don’t see why anybody would want to buy tickets to look at a fake.”

“Would you like it better if the real Norman was around to come at you with a real knife?”

“He’s dead—ever’body knows that.”

“What about ghosts?”

“What about cutting out all that crap? You can’t scare me.”

Which was true. Terry wasn’t scared, not even here, as they entered the bedroom beyond the open doorway. That’s all it was, just a motel bedroom; nothing different about it except the paint smell. Staring at the bed through the flashlight beam Terry admitted it might be a little more scary if the real reason for coming here was that Mick wanted to Do It To Her.

But sheesh, sooner or later somebody was gonna Do It To Her and it was nothing to worry about; Nila Putnam said she’d been Doing It with Harry for almost a year now and it was great right from the start. Of course who could believe Nila Putnam, she was such a liar, and super-ugly; a hunk like Harry wouldn’t touch her with a ten-foot pole.

And let’s face it, Mick wouldn’t touch Terry, either, because Mick was a girl too. Even though she didn’t look any more like Michelle than Terry looked like Theresa. Not in jeans and sweatshirts, anyway. Maybe she’d let her hair grow out over the summer so’s it would look better when it came time to start busing over to Montrose High School in the fall.

“What’re you standing there for?” Mick said. “Move it.”

Terry’s flashlight beam paralleled Mick’s as they came through the doorway of the bathroom and up to the shower stall.

“Are you ready for this?” Mick said. There was something funny about the way she sounded and Terry realized what it was: a combination of whispering and echo. Voices always have echoes in the bathroom, that she could understand, but why was Mick whispering?

Unless she was getting scared. But hadn’t she kept telling her there was nothing to be scared about? Ol’ Norman really was dead, and there was nobody here but the two of them.

Then Mick ripped the shower curtain back and there were three.

The naked woman in the shower stall peered up at them, wide-eyed and fearful, her hands raised, open-palmed and pressing outward to ward off the slash of an invisible knife.

There was no blood, but even with her eyes closed Terry could see it; there was no sound, but she could hear the silent screams.

She turned away to face Mick before opening her eyes and forcing a grin. “Hey, that’s some statue!”

“Ain’t no such thing. That’s a dummy, dummy—my dad said Fatso Otto had it made special back east someplace. Sent ’em a picture of that bimbo who got killed and my dad says it looks just like her.”

“How’d he know—he ever ball her or somethin’?” Terry giggled.

“Don’t be funny!” It was obvious from the way she said it that Mick wasn’t mistaking Terry for another Whoopi Goldberg. “My dad was only a kid when this all happened here.”

Terry nodded, but she didn’t like the *here* part. Because even if this was a fake bathroom and the frightened figure in the shower stall was merely wax, there had been a real Norman, a real knife, a real murder, and here was just too gross. Here at night, in the dark, listening to the sound of the door opening in the other room.

“What’s that noise?” Terry grabbed Mick’s arm.

“I don’t hear anything.”

Terry’s grip tightened. “Shut up and listen!”

For a moment they stood in silence, then Mick pulled her arm free, then turned. “Nobody out there,” she murmured.

“Where you going?”

“Where you think?” Mick started back into the bedroom. “You coming, or are you chicken?”

Terry knew the answer to that one; she *was* chicken, but she moved up to join her companion anyway. No matter who or what might be creeping around out there in the office, she felt safer with Mick than she did with that wax lady in the shower stall—that naked lady waiting for the bare blade to come down.

As Mick reached out to open the bedroom door, Terry tapped her on the shoulder. Her whisper came quickly and urgently. “Wait—turn off your flashlight first. What if he sees us?”

“Nobody out there!” Mick sounded disgusted, but Terry noticed that she did keep her voice down and she did switch off her flashlight before easing the bedroom door open.

It moved forward, fanning the warm, fume-filled darkness of the office. Somewhere in the far reaches of the room the figure of Norman Bates still stood behind the shadowed counter of the reception desk. Still stood and stood still, for there was no sound of movement, no stir of shape or shadow.

Together the girls inched their way from the bedroom to the office door. It too was opened slowly and cautiously; only when it swung wide to reveal the deserted roadway beyond did it seem safe to switch their flashlights on again.

The night air was warm too, but it bore no hint of the acrid paint odors and Terry took a deep breath as Mick led her along the walk bordering the office, then stepped off onto the path arching upward against the hillside where the dark house loomed.

“Hey.”

Mick halted, glancing back as Terry spoke. “Now what?”

“Do we hafta go up there?”

“No, chicken. If you like, I’ll take you right home and put you back in the coop.” There was disgust on Mick’s face as well as in her voice. “Wasn’t for you we wouldn’t be here in the first place. When I tole you about sneaking in here last night you wanted to see it so bad you almost peed your pants.”

“Sheesh, you think I’m scared or somethin’?” Terry made a production out of lifting her left wrist and squinting at her watch. “If I don’t get home when I said, Mom’ll have a hemmrrage.”

Now it was Mick’s turn to glance at her own watch and top Terry’s production by adding a scowl as she replied. “We still got plenty of time. It’ll only take ten, fifteen minutes to look around. Unless you’re too chicken —”

That did it. “Who’s chicken?” Terry said. “Let’s go, turkey.”

So it was like the old song Aunt Marcella used to sing—“Over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go.” Only there wasn’t any river or woods, just the walk leading up to the porch stairs of the house on the top of the hillside. Not grandmother’s house, but Mother’s. Norman’s, really, because his mother was dead. And he was dead too. It was the house that was alive—this *new* house.

Terry felt better when she reminded herself of that. If there was such a thing as ghosts they’d be in the old house, but this place was brand-new, just like the motel. Fatso Otto built it at the same time and for the same reason, to make money off tourists. Which he sure as hell wouldn’t do in a place that had ghosts hanging out in it.

So there was nothing to be scared of and besides she was getting like a free preview, right?

It all sounded good inside Terry’s head, but the sound of the porch steps’ protest beneath their feet was almost a screech, and the grating of the key turning in the lock of the front door sent a harsh echo across the hillside.

Of course there was no one there on the hill to hear except the two of them, no one listening in the deep, dark hallway of the house as they entered.

Flashlight beams chased shadows from the corners. *Too bad nobody invented a gismo that can light up your mind the way a flashlight can light up a hallway.* Terry snuffed out the thought, wishing it could be that easy to snuff out what else she was thinking about the dark and the shadows here.

But it wasn’t, even with the fresh paint smell rising all around to remind her that this wasn’t the *real* house, the murder house, the place where that detective died and Norman’s mother lived even though she was dead too. Or was she?

Terry gulped. *She’d damn well better be, or else.* But *else* wasn’t a word Terry wanted to think about, any more than she’d wanted to think about *here*.

The neat thing to do right now was just take like a real fast look-around to show that smartass Mick she wasn’t chicken, then hightail it for home before Mom busted her behind for her.

Mick was already focusing her flashlight beam at the stairway just ahead on the right side of the hall. “Let’s go upstairs first,” she whispered.

*Whispering again.* Terry didn’t like the sound of it, any more than she had when she was the one who whispered in the motel. Whispering means you’re scared, and if Mick was scared now, maybe there was a reason. And if the reason was upstairs—

Again it was time for a fast either-or. Either go upstairs with Mick or stay down in that dark, spooky hallway all alone.

Terry tilted her flashlight upward, toward the bobbing blue-jeaned butt of her guide. The stairs creaked, she reminded herself, only because they were new.

The thing is, they didn’t look new, and neither did anything up above. Whoever built this place must of done it from photographs, just like they used to make those wax dummies. Or maybe they just guessed at how it must of looked in the olden days and bought up a lot of junk to furnish it with. Like here in the bathroom where Mick was beaming over a kind of bathtub she’d never seen before, one with legs on it. And the toilet was something else, it had an overhead tank and a pull chain. That she remembered seeing once before someplace, maybe in a book about pioneer days.

But she was grateful for one thing—there was no shower stall in this bathroom.

Maybe ol’ Norman didn’t believe in taking showers. Or maybe showers hadn’t even been invented way back then. Terry was a little fuzzy when it came to the details of American history; sometimes she couldn’t even remember the date when Elvis died.

The idea of thinking about that right now in a place like this took her by surprise; she turned to share her reaction with Mick and had another surprise.

Mick was gone.

“Hey!” she yelled.

And echoing along the dark and empty hall corridor a dozen voices yelled back.

The echoes were still dying down as she hurried out into the hallway. “Mick—where are you?”

“In here.”

The sound of Mick’s voice and the beam of her flashlight guided Terry into the surprisingly small room across the hall. Here Mick’s flashlight had taken control, playing across the walls and furnishings. Terry followed the progress of the beam, and from what it revealed she quickly realized that they must be standing in Norman Bates’ bedroom. Had to be, because there was an old-fashioned bureau instead of a vanity, and a plain cot for a bed with no spread. It sure as hell didn’t look like one of those fancy layouts at the Holiday Inn.

It didn’t really look like a man’s bedroom either; this was the kind of place you’d fix up for a kid to sleep in. But once upon a time Norman Bates *had* been a kid.

Terry wondered about that. What was ol’ Norman like before he grew up and turned into a creep?

Looking around the room gave her part of the answer. There was no jock stuff here, no balls, bats, helmets or even a baseball cap, and there weren’t any pennants hanging on the walls over the two bookshelves in the far corner. The shelves were almost filled; he must have done a lot of reading. That didn’t prove he was a freak, Terry reminded herself—lotsa people used to read books in the days before TV was invented. So this still didn’t tell her very much about what Norman Bates was really like.

It was Mick’s flashlight that gave the best answer as it fanned across the wall opposite the closet door and halted on a picture.

“Here he is!” Mick said.

And there he was, the smiling little boy in overalls, sitting on a pony, captured on film and confined by frame. Not that Terry thought of him that way. Staring at the faded photo all that crossed her mind was a question. How could such a neat little kid grow up to be a monster?

There was no sense asking Mick; she wouldn’t understand a thing like that. Besides, Mick was doing one of her disappearing acts again, and if Terry hadn’t turned around just in time she wouldn’t even have noticed her edging back out into the hallway.

“What’s with you?” she said. “Always sneaking off on me. You gotta use the john or somethin’?”

“Won’t catch me using any john around here,” Mick told her. She started down the hall, moving to a dark door that opened easily with a push instead of a key.

Mick swept the flashlight beam forward in a gesture of invitation. “Mother’s bedroom,” she said.

The paint smell was definitely out of place here. That’s the way Terry felt in this room—out of place. Talk about ancient history, Mother’s bedroom was a real Golden Oldie, just crammed full of stuff, kinda junk you’d find like in a museum. But there was nothing here that interested her except the big bed, and that turned out to be a disappointment too because it was empty.

She frowned at Mick through the flashlight’s glow. “Thought you said you’re gonna show me Mother.”

“That’s right,” Mick nodded.

“Well, where *is* she?”

“Hold your water, will ya?” Mick started toward the doorway. Then, stepping out into the hallway, she halted so suddenly that Terry almost bumped into her from behind. “Wait!” she murmured. “I think I hear somethin’.”

They stood unmoving for a moment, two small figures frozen in shadowed silence. But that’s all it was; shadows rising around them and silence down below.

No sounds. Nothing to be afraid of. The creaking noise came directly from their own Reeboks as they came down the corridor and descended the stairs. Mick paused as they reached the lower landing. “You wanna see the first floor?” she asked.

“Is Mother here?”

Mick shook her head. “No, but she’s waitin’ for us.”

“Where?”

“In the cellar.”

So that's where they went, Mick an eager leader and Terry a reluctant rear guard. She kept telling herself that she wasn't chicken but that was a lie. She was worse than chicken, she was a pigeon too, falling for Mick's hype about how exciting it all was. Maybe Mick got turned on because she put something over on her old man but as far as Terry was concerned forget it. Banging around in the dark and sniffing up all that stink from the paint fumes was no big deal. Okay, that moving statue in the motel office was a pretty cutesy idea and the one in the shower stall that didn't move was kinda scary. But if that's all there was to see ol' Fatso Otto wasn't likely to end up on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* just from selling tickets. He'd have to come up with more than that. Or come down with it, there in the cellar.

Trouble was when they got there the cellar was only a basement; a bare-walled, painted-over basement. It didn't even have one of those big furnaces they used to shovel coal into in the olden days; must have a built-in heating system upstairs instead if they figured on keeping open in wintertime. Not that Terry gave a diddly-damn one way or the other; that was Fatso Otto's problem, not hers. Her problem was that she was beginning to feel she had to go to the john and what was she doing futzing around down here in the first place?

"Okay," she said. "We're here. I still don't see anything."

Mick turned, her head bobbing in the flashlight's halo. "That's on account of this is only the basement. I said she was in the *cellar*, remember?"

"What cellar?"

"The fruit cellar. Down here."

Mick angled her way behind the basement steps and Terry followed. It seemed to her that the flashlight beam was getting weaker while her urge was getting stronger. There sure as hell wasn't going to be any john in the fruit cellar but maybe Fatso Otto had one put in on the first floor. If she knew him, it was probably a pay toilet. Right now she didn't much care; all she wanted to do was take a fast look down here in the fruit cellar and then go upstairs and take a fast leak.

"Hey!" Mick's voice jolted her. "What's happened to your light?"

Terry blinked down at the dim outline of her hand clutching the metal cylinder. She rattled it, her thumb working the projecting switch. “Batteries must be dead,” she said.

“Mine’s okay.” Mick brandished her beam in her right hand. With the left she gripped the handle of the door beneath the bottom of the stairs.

“Why don’t you open it?” Terry said. “Whatcha waiting for?”

“Promise me one thing first,” Mick told her. “No screaming.”

“You got to be putting me on. I ain’t gonna scream.”

“Maybe not,” Mick said. “But I sure let out a good one when I come down here last night. ’Course I heard all those stories about how Norman Bates’ *real* mother looked like when they found her down here, but it still got me to makin’ and shakin’ because the dummy is so—like—yucky.”

“Won’t scare me none,” Terry said. “It’s just a statue of an old lady.”

“That’s what I thought.” Mick’s shadow nodded on the wall at the base of the stairwell. “But I forgot all the things Norman did to her.”

“Like what?”

“Like killing her, for starters. Giving her and her boyfriend some kinda poison in their drinks, I forget just what they said it was, but it must of been an awful way to die, because you can see it in her face. Or what’s left of her face.”

“I thought ol’ Norman fixed her back up again,” Terry said.

“He had to *dig* her back up first.”

Mick sounded as if she was having a ball telling her about this but Terry wished she would have waited until they were outside again. It was too hot down here, too stuffy, too dark, too closed-in; too damned much like the place ol’ Norman dug up his mother from.

“That must of been a couple a months afterward,” Mick said. “So by the time he got his hands on her again she could of been, like you know—”

“Do you *have* to talk about it?” Terry didn’t give Mick a chance to reply. “Besides, I know what he did to her then. Taxidermy.”

“Taxidermy, dummy!”

“So who cares? Bottom line is ol’ Norman stuffed her.”

“That ain’t the way he told it. He thought she was still alive. They used to talk to each other all the time—only he was talking to himself, of course. But after that detective started snooping around, Norman put his mother down here in the fruit cellar so’s nobody would hear her. Or see her.”

“Okay, okay! Let’s just look at the old bat and get outta here,” Terry said.

Mick let out a snicker. “Scared you, didn’t I?” Her left hand moved to the doorknob and her right hand tilted the flashlight so that when the door opened the beam would fall directly upon what waited within.

“Get ready for the gross-out!” she said.

And opened the door.

The muscles of Terry’s neck constricted preparatory to vocalizing her reaction at what she saw. But strangely enough no sound issued from Terry’s throat and it was Mick who screamed at the sight of what was in the cellar.

Or what wasn’t.

Because the fruit cellar was empty.

Terry peered through the open doorway, then turned to her companion. “Mick—”

Mick didn’t look at her; she was still staring straight ahead, but now her scream modified into intelligible response. “She’s gone!”

“So?”

Mick turned, shoulders shaking. “She was here last night, I know it because I saw her! You believe me, don’t you?”

Terry nodded. “All right, she’s gone. Do you have to get so uptight about it?”

“You don’t understand, do you?”

Terry thought she did. “This is a put-on, right? You want me to think you’re flaking out because Mother all of a sudden came alive and walked out of here?”

“That’s just it!” Mick could prevent herself from screaming now, but the hand holding the flashlight was shaking. And in the shimmer of its glow Terry saw a face contorted with fear. “She didn’t walk. Somebody *took* her!”

Maybe you were right when you said you heard somethin'. Maybe somebody came to snatch her up, maybe they *saw us*—”

Now Mick's control of her voice seemed only momentary and Terry reached out to put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Mick wheeled, shaking her head. “Come on, we gotta get outta here!” Her feet stumbled toward the stairs, then pistoned as she raced upward. The fringes of her flashlight beam faded away abruptly into the confines of the staircase above, leaving Terry trapped in the deepening darkness below.

“Wait—wait for me!”

But the frightened footsteps did not halt or heed. Terry floundered up the stairs, her left hand groping for a railing that wasn't there, meanwhile thumbing frantically at the flashlight switch but without results. Except for one. As the hand holding the flashlight flailed forward, her knuckles struck the sidewall and the momentary twinge of pain relaxed her grip so that the flashlight fell.

The flashlight fell, and then the pain was no longer a momentary twinge. The pain, the *new* pain, lanced through her leg as the metal cylinder struck her ankle, then bounced off with a momentum gained from the force of the blow.

Terry gasped, wincing as her weight came down upon the injured ankle. Placing the palm of her left hand against the unseen wall of the stairwell, she stooped cautiously to run the fingers of her right hand across the swelling that was already beginning to bulge below the top of her Reebok. Her groping fingers loosened the lacing but could not ease the pain.

Gritting her teeth she reached the basement landing. Pain stabbed at a different angle here on the flat surface, but there was no sense moaning. No sense calling out, either, because she didn't hear Mick's footsteps on the stairs leading up to the first floor. Sure must of gotten out of here in one holy hell of a hurry; putting on about how brave she was, but underneath it had been Mick who was really chicken all the time. So what if somebody *did* bust in and steal that crummy dummy? They wouldn't have any reason to stick around afterward.

Or would they?

Maybe Mick knew something she hadn't talked about, maybe she had a real reason to be scared and that's why she hoofed out of here in such a hurry. It wouldn't hurt for her to do the same, Terry told herself, only she couldn't because it *did* hurt. Moving up the basement stairs, she wondered if that damn flashlight had busted her ankle. Whatever, it sure hurt like hell. And groping her way down the dark corridor was like walking on a bed of hot coals.

Twice she had to stop, and the only thing that kept her going as she came around the edge of the upper staircase was the sight of the open front door ahead, with Mick standing in the corner beside it. Despite the increased intensity of the pain Terry increased her pace. As she did so the front door started to swing shut.

"Hey, grab the door!" Terry called.

Automatically her right hand reached forward to carry out her own command, but by now the door had already closed and Mick was turning in the shadows.

Only the figure emerging into the hallway wasn't Mick. And the silvery thing in its upraised hand wasn't a flashlight.

Amy Haines hit the last stretch around six o'clock but the sky was already dark as midnight.

It had been three days since she had left Chicago, two days since leaving Ft. Worth to start the drive back up again. What had impressed her the most during the first two nights had been the sight of a skyful of stars—something that long exposure to urban illumination had obliterated from her vision and her memory. Tonight, of course, there were no stars above, but on the pavement ahead the raindrops sparkled and glittered before her looming headlights.

The rain was heavier now, pelting the pavement and splattering static across the signal band of the car radio. Amy switched it off with a sigh and concentrated on coping with the rush-hour traffic flow. The six o'clock peak load here was less than she'd expect to encounter at two A.M. on any Chicago expressway. And rain or no rain, she was making progress. Sometimes the long way around is the shortest way home.

At least that's what she kept telling herself. There had to be some excuse for doing what she did; it would have been so much easier just to drive her own car straight down from Chicago instead of taking a flight all the way down to Ft. Worth, on the slim chance that there still might be something of interest there.

But Ft. Worth had been a disaster area, and aside from the star-studded spectacle of the previous nights' skies there hadn't been all that much to see during the long, exhausting hours spent on the road. And what she'd secretly hoped for hadn't happened. She didn't feel a bit like Mary Crane at all.

“Secretly”? “Foolishly” was a better word. How could she possibly expect to identify with someone dead and gone all these years? The world she lived in was dead and gone too; Amy found that out in Ft. Worth when

she tried to find an entry point into the past. Her trip in the rented car followed the same route Mary Crane had taken, or as much of it as anyone had ever been able to determine, but over the passage of years the landscape, even the freeways themselves, had changed.

Besides, there was no resemblance between Mary Crane and herself. She hadn't ripped off a bundle of cash from her employer and fled town, switching cars *en route* to avoid detection. Most importantly she had not stopped off to spend a night at the Bates Motel. Part of a night, really—a night that ended with the splashing of a shower and the slashing of a knife.

There were only two things she had in common with the unfortunate girl who had died before she herself had been born. Like Mary Crane on her last evening of existence, she was driving through a rainstorm—and she was on her way to Fairvale.

But she was on the freeway, not on a side road leading to the Bates Motel. And both the actual motel and the house above it were long gone, as was the transvestite who murdered the girl and, later, the detective who came seeking her.

Gone, but not forgotten. And there were things that she'd better not forget. The off-ramps, for example; here was a sign announcing the location of an upcoming exit for Montrose and Rock Center. Fairvale would be next, or so she guessed.

And correctly.

As the car spun and spiraled down the ramp Amy's sigh of relief was drowned in thunder. Turning right onto the county highway leading into town, relief gave way to anticipation, underscored by a flash of lightning that slashed across the sky the way Norman Bates' knife had slashed across the—

But what put *that* into her head? This was no time for such thoughts, now that she was entering Fairvale itself. Rain and darkness dampened and dulled her first impressions of the town; at first glimpse and first glance it seemed no different from a thousand other small communities scattered throughout the heartland of midwest America.

Which, of course, was what made it so fascinating, she reminded herself. So many similarities between Fairvale and all the others, with only one

significant difference—it had happened here. *Here was where the knife slashed down.*

Hard to believe and, of course, strictly speaking, the actual murders took place some seventeen miles away from Fairvale's main street. But Norman Bates had gone to school in this town, he had walked these streets as an adult. Local citizens knew him as a friend and neighbor. He'd probably visited some of them in their homes here, done business in the local stores. From the looks of them, most of the residences and shops had been around back then. Fairvale itself was like something preserved in a time capsule.

Self-preservation, the first law of nature. Norman Bates had gone a step farther—he'd preserved his mother in himself. Which made him a time bomb, not capsule, a bomb that had long since exploded.

But now was not the time to think of that. Now was the time to peer ahead at oncoming local traffic and thank God that the windshield wipers were still working. Outside of a few drivers inside their cars there was no one to take note of Amy's arrival at the courthouse square. She recognized it from photographs; the granite shaft of the World War II memorial, the Spanish-American War trench mortar and the Civil War statue of a Union veteran flanking it on either side of the block. Preservation was Fairvale's way of life.

But the annex adjoining the main courthouse was comparatively new and so was the Fairvale Hotel in the next block on the opposite side of the street. The parking lot next to the building was almost empty and Amy slid into a space close to the overhang above the entrance. Even so, she wished she'd brought an umbrella, because just lugging her bag from the car to the shelter of the overhang was enough to expose her to the chill of the undiminished downpour.

But the lobby was warm and dry and, somewhat to her surprise, comfortably well furnished. There were no other guests visible in the area at this moment and no sign of a bellhop or porter waiting to relieve her of the overnight bag. But there was a clerk on duty behind the reception counter; a tall, gangling young man with a sallow complexion, green eyes, and hair the color of used kitty litter.

Placing his comic book to one side, he devoted his full attention to the needs and welfare of the arriving guest.

“Looking for somebody?” he asked.

“I’m Amelia Haines. I believe you have a reservation for me.”

“Oh.” The greenish eyes slipped sideways toward the discarded comic book, but only for a moment. “What did you say that that name was again?”

“Haines.” She spelled it for him as he consulted a register which apparently rested on a lower level beneath the countertop. Obviously the Fairvale Hotel was no more into computers than its clerk was into neckties.

But he did find her reservation and she had no problem signing in, except for the fact that she couldn’t fill out the space assigned to *Name of Company*. When she pushed the completed form across the counter the clerk glanced down at the card and noted the omission. “You’re not working for anybody, lady?”

“Self-employed,” Amy said. “Not that it’s any of your goddamned business.”

At least that’s what she would like to have said, but due to the somewhat delicate nature of her situation, she merely nodded. No sense making waves or even reaching across the counter to give this nosy young jerk a slight belt across the chops. She even managed a smile of pseudo-gratitude as she accepted the key to room 205.

No mention was made of bellboy assistance and she didn’t bother to ask; long before she crossed the lobby and reached the single elevator, the green eyes behind the counter were again eagerly attempting to decipher the lettering inside the balloons above the heads of the comic’s characters.

Room 205 was state-of-the-art, if one considers plastic *décor* an art form. But at least it contained the feminine essentials—a mirror, a closet, and a telephone. Amy glanced out of the window at the flat rooftop, wondering if it covered a restaurant or kitchen area below. She hadn’t bothered to ask if the hotel had a coffee shop and/or dining room, but she hoped so; the last thing in the world she wanted right now was to expose herself to what was happening beyond the window-pane. Closing the drapes obscured the sight but did little to muffle the sound of the rain drumming down on the adjacent roof.

The thing now was to get out of her travel-creased and still slightly dampened clothes, but what she really wanted to do this very moment was

find out about food. Her watch told her it was eight o'clock and her stomach added as a postscript that it had received no consideration whatsoever since she'd stopped the car to gas up during the noon hour.

She picked up the phone and called the hotel operator. At least that was her intention, but his voice on the other end of the line was that of the comic book reader behind the reception counter. Restraining herself from apologizing for interrupting his studies, she asked about the dining situation.

"We don't have a dining room here," he told her. "Coffee shop's open until nine."

"Thank you." Amy hung up without bothering to ask about room service; this being state-of-the-art she was willing to settle for the serendipity of a small supply of toilet paper instead of those little squares from the dispenser. Such are the hopes and dreams of the seasoned traveler.

In that capacity Amy had no great expectations of what she might encounter when she entered the downstairs coffee shop through a side entrance off the lobby. It proved to be the usual fast-food setup; stools closely aligning the three-sided counter so that each bite-grabber could get a good view of the fry-cook's activities through the rectangular opening in the rear wall. Small booths offered imitation-leather seats, imitation comfort, and outside-window views. Tonight, however, the drapes were drawn; nobody wanted to look out at the rain. Apparently nobody wanted to eat either because when Amy entered she saw no other customers. Booths and stools were empty and so were the expressionless eyes of the waitress-cashier who plodded out from the kitchen area to plunk a glass of ice water down on the table mat of the corner booth that Amy selected.

"Evening." The word could be construed either as a greeting or a statement of fact; the waitress' voice was expressionless. "Menu?"

"Please." Amy could be monosyllabic too. Not out of rudeness, but because she sensed that the weary woman with the wilted uniform and hairdo wasn't in the mood for idle conversation; all she really wanted was nine o'clock closing and a chance to kick her shoes off.

So Amy gave her order—*pot roast of beef w. choice of 2 vegs* was usually a safe bet in light of previous experiences—and quickly added, "Coffee,

now.”

Then she relaxed as the waitress headed kitchenward. At least fry-cooks can't do too much damage to a pot roast, and when it came to coffee she'd learned that wherever you dined you'd just have to take a chance.

Amy sipped her water and settled back in her seat. Her feet didn't hurt, but now, at the end of the long day's driving, she could empathize with the waitress. At best, waiting on tables in a place like this must be a boring occupation, almost as boring as being a customer.

Outside the rain thudded down but here there was no source of sound, not even from the kitchen where the waitress and the fry-cook were presumably puzzling over the order, since Amy had forgotten to specify her choice of veggies. Oh well, sometimes you've got to resign yourself to living dangerously. Let it be their decision and her surprise. She just hoped they wouldn't be trying to get rid of yesterday's squash or creamed rutabagas.

A pity she couldn't hear their conversation. At the moment she felt the need for some distraction, and gazing at the glass-coffined slices of embalmed pies and pastries really did nothing for her. Alone in the bleak, forlorn flare of the fluorescence she scanned the booths nearby, hoping to catch sight of a discarded newspaper. Fairvale wouldn't have a daily, of course, but perhaps some salesman out of Springfield might have discarded one after his meal.

No such luck. Amy abandoned her efforts with a sigh of resignation. In cases like this there was nothing one could do except read the menu.

Two events spared her that fate. The first was the return of the waitress, coffeepot in one hand, cup and saucer in the other. The second was the arrival of additional customers, a male trio clad in rainwear. By the time Amy announced and received her choice of cream and sugar the three men had seated themselves on stools at the end of the counter. As the waitress departed to serve them, Amy creamed, sugared, and sipped her coffee. A trifle too hot, but the addition of an ice cube from her water glass solved that problem.

Satisfied, she turned her attention to the newcomers. From where she sat all she could see were two backs and a semiprofile. The backs were broad and burly, the heads above them surmounted by the inevitable baseball

caps. The semiprofile sat beside them at the angle closest to Amy's observation post. He was a small man, sharp-featured, his mustache a grey wisp beneath a beaked nose. His headgear was traditional, immediately identifying him as a lawman—a member of the local constabulary, the Sheriff's Department, perhaps State Highway Patrol. Then Amy glanced down, saw the black boots with their pointed toes, and made her ID. Only the Sheriff's Department would indulge in this form of foot-fetishism, and any man this small could bypass departmental qualifications solely through election. This had to be the Sheriff himself.

And his name was Engstrom. Milt Engstrom, to be exact. This information was relayed in the conversation between the counter customers, along with the announcement that they too wanted coffee and yeah, it sure as hell was coming down cats and dogs outside.

It was at this point that the waitress returned with Amy's dinner platter and set it down on the mat before her. The 2 vegs. turned out to be peas and carrots, neither of them fried, creamed, scalloped, or the victims of any other unnatural practices. And the pot roast was good.

So was the distraction. Like many of those accustomed to solitary dining, Amy had consciously or unconsciously perfected the art of people-watching and eavesdropping. And while in this instance the watching was nothing to write home about, what she was hearing might definitely be worth putting down on paper. In the absence of pen and pad she made a mental note of the conversation at the counter.

Reduced to its essentials, the Sheriff and his two anonymous companions were talking about Terry Dowson's murder last week and Mick Sontag's alibi.

Amy paid little heed to the exact phrasing of the questions but she paid strict attention to Sheriff Engstrom's answers.

No, he didn't mind talking, now that the goddamned reporters had cleared out. Hank would be running most of the stuff in this week's paper anyhow.

Way it added up, Joe Sontag went out to the garage for something and found out his keys were missing. According to him, he guessed right away where his kid must have gone and went after her in his pickup. When he got

to the Bates place she was already running up the road. He pulled up alongside her and she was just climbing in when they both heard what sounded like screams coming from the house. Not all that loud and clear, understand, because when he backed up to park and started running to the porch he saw that the front door was closed.

“The kid didn’t come with him?” one of the baseball caps asked.

“He told her to stay in the truck, and a damn good thing he did too, considering what he found in the hall when he yanked that door open.”

“Pretty bad,” said the other baseball cap.

The Sheriff nodded. That in itself told Amy nothing, but the way he nodded was eloquent.

“You say he didn’t see anybody?”

“He says.” Again the Sheriff nodded. “And I believe him. According to his story he went straight back to the pickup and drove down to the Fawcett place, which was the closest he could find a phone. Irene took the call and got hold of me just as I was heading out to check Crosby Corners. Only took me another three, four minutes to get there, but by then young Mick was really having hysterics—which was only natural after that damfool father of hers blabbed about what he’d found up at the house. When the ambulance from Montrose Hospital got there, Mick was the one who needed attention. It was too late to do anything for Terry.”

“You don’t think—”

“That Mick could have had anything to do with it?” The Sheriff shook his head quickly. “No way either she or Joe Sontag could have pulled off something like that. No way, no motive, no weapon that we could locate.”

“Suppose they stashed the knife someplace first before Sontag went to call you?”

Engstrom shrugged. “Just doing that wouldn’t have gotten them off the hook. They’d both need a complete change of clothing. The way Terry was put down, whoever did the job was bound to get splashed. Neither Mick or her father had a drop of blood on their clothes or shoes, even though there was a big pool around the body. Just to make sure we sent what they were wearing that night over to Montrose for labwork.”

“If they didn’t do it, then who did? Don’t you have any clues?”

“Just what I put out in the press statements. The only fingerprints we came up with were the girls’. The killer didn’t touch anything inside the house and motel, or else he or she was wearing gloves.”

One of the Sheriff’s companions glanced toward him quickly. “He or she?”

“Who knows? Besides, I don’t want any of those women’s libbers to feel left out.”

“Come on, level with us. You must have some kind of theory.”

“I don’t have much use for theories.” The Sheriff paused long enough to swallow the remaining contents of his coffee cup. “Captain Banning put two of his men from the State Highway Patrol on full-time duty, just to see if they could come up with anything. Main thing they looked for was someplace nearby where a car might have been parked on the night of the murder. Couldn’t locate so much as a tire tread to show for it. Which means that whoever committed the murder was probably a transient.”

“Meaning you don’t think you’re going to find anyone?”

“Don’t be too sure of that. We’re still working on it.” The Sheriff’s coffee cup rattled down into the cradle of its saucer. “Now, if you boys will excuse me, I’m heading out for a little fresh air and sunshine.”

That was when Amy tuned out; she didn’t wait to hear which of the trio was paying for the coffee or whether they were going Dutch. In the end the three men left together and Amy did her best to down the rest of her pot roast before it got any colder. The waitress appeared to warm the coffee and stoically endured rejection of her dessert offers. When Amy paid, tipped, and left, the pie slices still lay in state, awaiting either a further viewing or decent burial tomorrow.

The clerk at the reception counter was obviously not into speed reading; his eyes and lips were still moving over the final pages of his comic as Amy crossed the lobby. But as she entered the elevator he must have glanced up, because she sensed his eyeballs boring into her back.

Or was she just edgy? The chance conversation she had overheard could be a godsend, but there was a hint of the diabolic in its details. Lack of details, rather; it was Amy’s own imagination that had supplied them and

was still going about its grisly business now. *Pool of blood*. It was all too easy to expand that simple phrase into a full and explicitly gory story.

But was the story complete in itself, or merely a continuation? As Amy left the lonely elevator, moved down the lonely hall, and unlocked the door of her lonely room, questions were her only companions.

Once she switched on the lights she settled down in a chair and eased her feet out of their shoes. Had that weary waitress downstairs been able to kick off her shoes yet?

Amy shrugged the question off. It was the other questions that demanded an answer. Questions about connections. Somewhere in her yet-to-be-unpacked overnight bag was the collection of notes and data she'd carefully prepared and assembled but there was no need to consult them for details. All she needed now were the links in the chain of events.

It was more than thirty years ago that Norman Bates had been confined in the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and it was almost a decade ago that he'd murdered two visiting nuns and escaped, only to be killed in a struggle with a hitchhiker he'd picked up in a van stolen from the nuns. The charred body found in the burned van was mistakenly identified as that of the hitchhiker and Norman Bates was still sought as an escapee.

There were more killings, Mary Crane's sister Lila and her husband, Sam Loomis, died in Fairvale on the night following Norman Bates' escape. His physician at State Hospital, Dr. Adam Claiborne, undertook a search on his own that led him all the way to Hollywood where a film about Norman was being prepared. Both the film's producer and its director died violent deaths and the actress playing Mary Crane narrowly averted the same fate.

Dr. Claiborne returned to State Hospital as an inmate rather than an attending physician. When his prized personal patient crashed out he'd apparently flipped in a similar fashion—Norman's other persona was his mother, and Claiborne's was Norman Bates.

Obviously Claiborne had not gone over the wall of the asylum to kill poor Terry Dowson so there was no connection there; at least none that would be obvious. On the other hand people had not suspected the connection between Norman and his dead mother. And years later, after all that continuing intensive therapy, no one at the hospital seemed to have

realized he was still potentially dangerous. Certainly Dr. Claiborne didn't recognize his own schizoid disorder. And the murder victims out in California had no inkling that death was traveling in their direction from almost two thousand miles away.

But there was an overall connection, the apparently unrelated events did form a continuing chain, and somehow Amy sensed that last week's tragedy was the last link.

At least she fervently hoped it was the last—although there was always a possibility that it was only the latest.

*Latest.* Amy glanced at her watch. Almost nine, so there was probably still time. Reluctantly abandoning her cushioned comfort she rose and crossed to the bedstand on which the telephone rested. Reaching down into the shelf opening below, her fingers groped empty air. They repeated the exercise, when, one by one, she opened the drawers of the bureau. Either the hotel didn't provide guests with the local phone directory or there was no such animal.

Amy picked up the phone and informed the desk clerk of her predicament. He must have finished his pursuit of literature for the evening, because he sounded a bit more friendly.

"I can get the number for you from down here," he said. "Who do you wanta call?"

When she told him his voice did a double take.

"State Hospital?"

"That's right," Amy said. "Person-to-person, for Dr. Nicholas Steiner."

There was momentary hesitation at the other end of the line. "Pretty late."

Doing her good deed for the day, Amy resisted the impulse to inform him that she wasn't calling for a time signal. "He's expecting to hear from me."

"Okay, lady. Just hang on and I'll get him for you."

A few minutes later she was talking to a nurse, and after another minute or so to Steiner himself.

"Dr. Steiner speaking." The voice of an elderly man resonating through well-worn vocal cords. "I take it you're calling from town?"

“That’s right. I’ll be staying here at the Fairvale Motel.

“Please—it’s *hotel*. They don’t like to mention motels in Fairvale.”

“Sorry,” Amy said. “It must have been a Freudian slip.”

His response was a dry chuckle and as she listened it seemed to have an echo. Either the rain was creating problems with the connection or there was somebody else on the line.

Amy chose her words carefully. “I was hoping it might be convenient for me to come out sometime tomorrow.”

Steiner cleared his throat. “I’ll have to ask.”

“You haven’t told him? Or shown him my letter?”

“Not yet. In view of what happened, I thought it best to wait for a more opportune moment.”

“Are you saying there might be a problem?”

“I hope not. I’ll know more after I talk to him tomorrow morning.”

“I was planning to spend a little time at the courthouse before noon, but I can get out to the hospital by two o’clock if you’re available. Of course I’ll give you a call first.”

“That won’t be necessary. If he refuses to allow you to invade his privacy, feel free to invade mine.”

His chuckle, her thanks, and the click of the receiver sounded simultaneously. All three conveyed a hollow quality and once again. Amy wondered about the possibility of eavesdropping.

But who was she to talk—wasn’t that what she was doing at dinner? It was something to think about, one consideration among many. But right now the priority was to unpack the overnight bag and distribute its contents wherever appropriate in the room, its closet, or the adjoining bath.

As she solved these problems in logistics Amy found herself stifling a yawn. Kicking off her shoes had eased foot-fatigue, but her body felt tired all over, and its encasement of skin and sinew could not be as easily removed.

Not that Amy really wanted to part with her body under any circumstances. She surveyed it with a touch of pride as she removed her makeup and stripped in the bathroom; for someone who would never see

twenty-six again there really weren't too many grounds for complaint. At least her legs were good and as long as she took it easy on the french fries her hips didn't constitute a problem. She noted a tiny sag in her left breast, but in a way it only contributed to the natural look. Nobody would mistake her cleavage for Silicon Valley.

No one had been in a position to make such a mistake recently, worse luck. She dismissed the thought; this was neither the time nor the place for such activity. Outside, the cold rain was still coming down. But here in the shower stall the water was warm. The only chill came from a sudden, unexpected comparison of what she was presently doing and what Mary Crane had done those many long years ago or, more precisely, what had been done *to* her under the same circumstances.

How old was the Crane girl when she died? Amy withdrew a number from her memory-bank. Twenty-nine. In order to reach that age she'd have to stay here under the spray for an additional two years. In any case, enough of this shower-stalling.

Time to towel-dry her hair—there just wasn't enough room to bring everything, which meant either she needed a larger bag or a smaller hair dryer. Time for powder, deodorant, and a fresh nightie for a wilted bod. Time to snuggle under the sheets and cast a final sidelong glance at the face of the wristwatch resting on the nightstand. Time to tell time.

It was exactly ten P.M. No need to ask for a wakeup call; her eyes would open automatically at seven A.M.

Amy switched the lamp off. Somehow the rain sounded louder in the darkness. Perhaps it would stop before morning. Sunshine makes no sound.

No sound, nothing to disturb her, not even raindrops now. For a moment inner vision behind closed eyelids gave flickering glimpses of highways stretching ahead; it was as though she was reenacting the hours of driving today, editing them visually, then miniaturizing them on a microchip of memory.

Now both sound and vision had vanished, together with sensation. No rain, no pain, no Crane. Because Mary Crane was two years older, she'd died before Amy was born, so what was the point in bringing her back to life? Points were for knives and knives were for killing and nothing would

happen as long as she remembered that, remembered next time to bring a bigger bag, buy a smaller dryer, stay out of the shower.

But she was in the shower again, because all at once she heard the water running, opened her eyes to see the shower curtain waving.

Only the water wasn't coming from the showerhead and the curtain wasn't flapping in the stall. Amy sat up quickly, switching on the lamp beside her. What she heard was the rain and what she saw flapping was the curtain before the window opening outward.

*Open.* Amy was out of bed and halfway across the room before she fully realized the potential significance of the term. The window had been closed when she went to bed; although she remembered glancing out of it after her initial arrival, she couldn't recall opening it then. Considering that there was a storm going on outside, there'd be no point.

She halted in midstride. Suppose there *was* a point? That's what she'd been thinking about when she fell asleep, the point of a knife.

Amy glanced around the room. She'd left the closet open and its contents were plainly visible. The clothing on the hangers stirred slightly in the draft from the open window but the spaces between and behind the garments revealed nothing but their shadows.

The bathroom door was open too, and Amy tried to remember if it was poised at the same angle when she retired. Not that this would really make any difference; if the opening had been wide enough for her to exit, it was wide enough for someone else to enter.

Amy edged up to the bathroom doorway as quietly and cautiously as she could. Anyone lurking inside wouldn't hear her barefoot passage across the room or the sudden thudding of her heart beneath the slight sag of her left breast.

All of which was stupid, she reminded herself, because she'd switched the lamp on and that would be signal enough for anyone in the bathroom to stop lurking and start—

Forget it. There was nobody in that bathroom. Amy quickened her pace, peered around the edge of the doorway, and slowed her heartbeat as she saw that the room and shower held nothing to be afraid of.

Except the *nothing* itself.

Turning, she made her way to the flapping curtain and the open window. The curtain billowed inward, giving her a glimpse of the rain pelting down on the bare expanse of the flat one-story roof directly below. Someone could have come to the window by way of that rooftop, clambered to the ledge, pushed the window up to enter.

Again she reminded herself there was no point, none that she could see and none—thank God—that she had felt. The explanation was simple; she'd forgotten to lock the window and it blew open.

Too simple. Amy pulled the window shut, adjusted the curtains, returned to bed, and—after a surprisingly short interval—fell asleep once again.

So it wasn't until seven o'clock the following morning that she realized how easy it would have been to determine whether or not there had been a visitor.

But by then it was too late. There were no visible markings and the carpet was dry.

**D**r. Nicholas Steiner awoke that morning at five forty-five, beating the clock by a full fifteen minutes.

He reached out to switch off the alarm, then settled back again on his pillow with a self-congratulatory smile imposing itself upon his wrinkled face. At this point in time beating the clock was always an occasion for a victory celebration. Or, in this instance, at least an excuse to lounge in bed for another fifteen minutes until his official rising time.

Glancing toward the window he noted that the rain had stopped and the clouds were clearing. That was something to be grateful for; meteorologists, psychologists, and all the other -ologists might dispute him, but Steiner knew from his own experience that weather patterns affected the behavior patterns of his patients. Wind, moisture, barometric pressure, sunspots perhaps, but above all the moon. Just because they didn't call them "lunatics" today didn't change the facts. Tides, menses, and cerebral stimulation were still governed by the goddess when her shining countenance came fully into view.

Now what brought that on? There was enough to think about without wasting his time mooning around. At his age he could no longer afford such musings; his poetic license had been revoked. Forget the lunar flights, the fancies, come down to earth, rejoin the human race.

But not just yet. Steiner cocked an eye at the clock. He still had another eight minutes and until then there was no need to enter the human race or the rat race it was forever running.

Once up and dressed, once shaved and breakfasted, it was necessary for Dr. Steiner to assume his professional posture as a humanitarian and, hopefully, a healer. But right now during those eight precious minutes still left to him, his posture would remain recumbent and his private opinion unchanged.

Simply stated, Steiner had come to the conclusion, after long years of observation, that his mentally disturbed charges were less disturbing than the concept of the so-called normal person roaming unconfined in our society. Except for cases involving physiological damage, the problems of the average mental patient might be construed as symptoms of sensitivity. The problems of the so-called normal person were usually symptomatic of mere stupidity.

The majority of the normal population cannot draw a map of the world in which they live. Most of the citizens of this country can't tell you its history. They are unable to identify quotations from the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, or its amendments. They can't list the Ten Commandments. They can't even tell you the number of bones in their own bodies or accurately locate the principal organs, let alone describe their functions.

The average person doesn't know the earth is moving as well as revolving; he can't name the planets of our solar system. Ask him to identify some great men and he'll rattle off a variety of Johns, depending on his age—John Wayne, Johnny Carson, John Lennon, John Belushi. Inside his head is a gaggle of jocks, rock performers, and “media personalities” including talk-show hosts and currently popular guest bimbos. He cannot name two Nobel Prize winners. Don't expect him to explain the workings of the electoral college or the function of photosynthesis. Nevertheless, he's a mine of information—and misinformation—about cars, sexual practices, and other sports.

But the eight minutes were up now and so was Steiner. Dr. Nicholas Steiner, the caring, sympathetic, understanding, empathizing and consoling counselor whose lifelong career was dedicated to restoring the mentally ill to the ranks of normal society.

In addition to attendance upon his bodily needs and functions Dr. Steiner had certain diurnal duties to perform, and it was a good two hours before he was able to see Adam Claiborne.

But out of sight doesn't necessarily mean out of mind, and the problem of Claiborne occupied Steiner's thoughts for some while prior to their actual meeting.

For that matter, Steiner's mind had never really been free since Claiborne had been confined. It's not easy to deal with the fact that a former

professional colleague is now a patient in the same institution where he once served as your assistant.

Not easy to deal, not easy to heal. But at least some progress had been made in the years since Claiborne had been undergoing therapy. According to Steiner's evaluation he seemed to be making significant gains. At least he was able to talk about himself *as himself* again—there was no longer any evidence of that “Norman Bates will never die” delusion. Odd, Steiner parenthetically observed to himself, how many patients suffering from psychotic disorders seemed to identify with Norman over the years. It was as though he had somehow touched a nerve, as the saying goes.

The saying went, because it was meaningless in this situation. The problem confronting Dr. Steiner this morning was how to confront Claiborne with what was going to happen this afternoon. And he'd better come to grips with it and quit stalling. A man his age could no longer afford the luxury of delay. Don't waste time or time will waste you.

Sound advice, but it didn't solve his problem and he found himself reaching Claiborne's room before reaching a solution.

At least what Claiborne occupied could legitimately be described as a room, in contrast with the quarters to which most patients were assigned. Perhaps the State Board would take a dim view of the matter, but thus far none of its members had ever set eyes on Claiborne's room. Except for the presence of the standard bunk bed occupying the far corner and the security bars crisscrossing the window, Claiborne's quarters might be mistaken for a small private office. Once his initial disorientation vanished and the possibility of violent reaction or overreaction gave way to abreaction, Steiner had furnished him with the desk, swivel lamp, bookshelves, and the volumes he requested with which to fill them. A final aesthetic touch was the rug on the floor, something to which any inspector from the State Board would object. That had been Steiner's own idea; at least it lent a hint of comfort to the surroundings in which his old colleague was destined to live out the rest of his days, poor devil. There was no television set in the room; Claiborne had never been *that* crazy.

Male nurse Lloyd Semple accompanied Steiner to the door, then halted, keys dangling, as Steiner took a precautionary squint through the peephole.

Claiborne had apparently been lying on the lower level of the bunk bed, but now as the keys clinked, he swung his legs over the side and eased himself into a sitting position. A quick glance reassured Steiner that his reaction indicated alertness, not alarm, though it was still difficult to reconcile himself to the evidence of how Claiborne had aged. Over the past few years he'd gone quite grey and his forehead seemed permanently furrowed in a frown. But there was nothing out of the ordinary about his manner and Steiner, satisfied, knocked on the door.

“Adam, I'd like to talk to you. Mind if I come in?”

“By all means, Nick. My house is yours.”

Steiner turned, signaling to the male nurse. As Semple selected the proper key, the doctor issued his instructions in a low murmur. “I don't think we have any problems, but I'd like you to stand by outside, just on the off-chance.”

Nodding, Semple unlocked the door, pushing it open far enough for Dr. Steiner to enter the room, then closed and relocked it behind him.

Claiborne, on his feet now, advanced and extended his hand in greeting. “Good to see you,” he said. “Thanks for stopping by.”

Steiner noted that his patient seemed bright, cheerful, and loquacious. As for himself at this moment, he wished to hell he hadn't given up smoking. He didn't know what to do with his hands because he had a problem on them.

“Sit down,” Claiborne said, indicating the swivel chair before the desk. Turning, he moved to the bunk bed and again seated himself on the side, leaning forward to keep his head clear of the upper level.

“Sure you'll be comfortable there?” Steiner asked.

“No sweat.”

No sweat, just small talk, Steiner told himself. He still hadn't figured out a way of leading up to what he wanted to say. Had to say, rather; given a preference, he wouldn't discuss the matter at all. But since it concerned a patient's interest, there was no choice.

Sometimes intimacy involves actions rather than words. Steiner wondered if he should draw his chair back from the desk and bring it closer to the bunkside. Hesitation vanished as he reminded himself that

Claiborne's right hand had been partially but permanently crippled when a shot in the wrist put an end to his rampage out there on the coast. Since then the injury had rendered him comparatively harmless. Steiner suddenly remembered that Maurice Ravel had once written a *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand Alone*. Not to worry—Claiborne didn't play piano.

Telling himself to relax, he swiveled around and propelled himself into position close beside Claiborne.

"What's on your mind?" Claiborne said.

Steiner smiled. "Isn't that supposed to be my line?"

It was Claiborne's turn to smile now. "I forgot."

"Frankly, so did I." Dr. Steiner nodded. "Just between us, you've made remarkable progress."

"Thanks to your help." For a moment Adam Claiborne's smile twisted wryly. "Or maybe I'm just undergoing temporary remission."

Steiner shrugged. "There are times I wonder if all of what passes for sanity isn't just a form of remission from our natural state. What was it Norman Bates used to say? Something like 'everybody goes a little crazy at times.' "

"I remember," Claiborne said softly. "He said a lot of things that made sense. Come to think of it, between the two of us, you and I probably know more about Norman than anyone else still alive."

Steiner breathed a silent sigh of relief. This was the opening he'd been hoping for. "That could change," he said.

"In what way?"

"I don't suppose you're familiar with the work of Amelia Haines," he said.

"Should I be?"

"Not necessarily, but under the circumstances I wish you were. Two years ago she published a book titled *Tricks or Treats*, about the Walton case."

Claiborne's reaction was a puzzled frown and Steiner reminded himself that without access to television or newspapers it was unlikely that his patient could keep abreast of recent or current crime waves.

“The case itself goes back about five years or so,” Steiner said. “Bonnie Walton was a prostitute who committed the serial murders of eight clients before she was apprehended. As I understand it, Miss Haines was commissioned to do a magazine article on the case, but what she learned led to a book-length, thoroughly researched study. For some reason or other, the publishers sent me a copy when it first came out; I thought it was an honest, objective job, without the usual sensationalism you might expect.”

Claiborne’s smile had vanished. “Why are you giving me a book review?”

“I’m not giving a review,” Steiner told him. “I’m offering you an option.” He leaned forward. “Miss Haines contacted me recently to request an interview. Because of the success of *Tricks or Treats*, her publishers are interested in having her do a similar book about Norman Bates.”

“Similar?” Claiborne’s voice was strident. “But there’s no comparison. Norman wasn’t a serial killer, not if you stop to analyze the circumstances —”

Dr. Steiner gestured quickly. “That’s exactly it. What Miss Haines wants to do is analyze the circumstances rather than conduct a postmortem on Norman himself. She’s already accumulated quite a bit of material. As a matter of fact, she happens to be in Fairvale right now. I got a call from her last night, asking if she might come and talk to me this afternoon.”

He paused, waiting for a response, but none came. “Would you have any objection if I discussed Norman Bates with her?”

“That’s your privilege.”

Steiner took a deep breath. “Yours also. Would you like to speak to her yourself?”

“Why should I?”

“I can’t presume to provide you with reasons. Mine are simple enough; I think it could help give her a greater insight into what really happened, make it a better book. I believe she’s sincere about finding the truth. That’s why she came here, because she’d like to contact everyone left who might still have some connection with the case.”

“Case?” Claiborne echoed.

Steiner cursed himself silently for making the slip; he might have known it was a mistake to use that word in this connotation. But it was too late now. The best he could do was to try concealing any outward sign of reaction as Claiborne voiced his paranoia.

“How can you say that? You make it sound as though there were some kind of criminal proceedings. Norman never stood trial. There’s no such thing as a Bates ‘case’!”

“I’m afraid there is now,” said Steiner softly. “At least that’s what they’re calling it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“A child was murdered last week, a little girl name Terry Dowson.”

Claiborne’s eyes widened in surprise, then slitted in angry accusation. “And you’re accusing me?”

Steiner shook his head quickly. “Of course not.”

If Claiborne heard the demur he didn’t heed it. “You’ve had me here under lock and key for damn near seven years now! For God’s sake, Nick, what makes you think I could sneak off and kill some kid I’ve never even heard of?”

“Nobody’s saying you’re involved.”

The anger in Claiborne’s eyes gave way to a glint of suspicion. “Oh no? Don’t think I’m not aware of how people talk about me, ever since—”

Steiner broke in, gesturing. “There’s nothing to worry about. If you must know, I did get an inquiry on the day following the murder. Because of what I told them, it’s now a matter of official record that security checks show you were here in this room before, during, and after the time the girl was stabbed to death.”

“Stabbed?”

Steiner nodded. “They haven’t found the weapon, but they think it was probably some sort of butcher knife.”

Anger glinted once more in Claiborne’s eyes. “Just because the murderer used a knife, those miserable bastards think that’s enough to drag Norman’s name into the mud again.” Now scorn joined anger. “The Bates case—”

Steiner shook his head. “They’re not calling it that because of the weapon,” he said. “It’s the location.”

Claiborne’s frown furrows deepened. “Where did you say this happened?”

Steiner hesitated. He hadn’t said where, he didn’t want to say where, but there was no way out now. And perhaps paranoia required puncturing rather than reassurance. “They found the girl’s body in the Bates house,” he said.

Claiborne stared at him. “What are you trying to tell me? The Bates house burned down years ago.”

“True. We both know about it. But what you don’t know is that the house has recently been rebuilt.”

“That’s impossible!”

Steiner nodded again. “Rebuilt and restored,” he said. “Apparently someone located an old photograph album with pictures taken against the background of various interiors, plus enough exterior shots to guide reconstruction. Of course there was no way to duplicate furnishings exactly, but I understand they managed to come pretty close to the originals.”

Claiborne had continued to stare and now he spoke in a shocked whisper. “How could they do a thing like that? And why?”

Try as he would, Steiner could not bring himself to maintain eye contact. And it didn’t matter now, because he was flying blind. Flying into the face of misfortune, into the face of a patient whom he should have protected, not traumatized.

And while he was at it, he’d better rid his mind of all this nonsense about traps, flying blind, and putting a face on misfortune. What he really needed was a security lock on his tongue, but it was too late for silence now. And come to think of it, this security lock business was just another example of what he’d promised himself to avoid. It was time to choose his words carefully—very carefully.

“There’s one obvious reason for rebuilding the Bates house,” he said. “Profit.”

“Are you trying to tell me that anyone would want to buy the place and live there? It doesn’t make sense!”

“It wasn’t built as a permanent residence,” Steiner said. “Just for visitors.”

“They can’t do that.” Something was happening to Claiborne’s voice. “Making a hotel out of the house? They must be insane!”

“It’s not supposed to be used as a hotel.” Steiner softened his tone, hoping Claiborne would follow suit. “Neither is the motel, for that matter.”

“They rebuilt *that* too?” If anything, Claiborne’s response was louder than before.

“Only the office and one room,” Steiner told him. “The rest of the building is just a shell.”

“Then where’s the profit coming from?”

Steiner pitched his own voice lower. “Tourism,” he said.

“You mean they’re turning the property into a tourist attraction?”

Steiner shrugged. “So I’m told.”

Claiborne leaned forward, his features distorted. “What are they going to do, charge people so much a head to take a look at the murder mansion? Will they have tour guides give a canned speech about what happened? Are they going to offer family rates or let the kiddies in for free?”

“Take it easy,” Steiner said. “It’s not that bad.” But it was. He’d been an idiot not to anticipate the problem. Ordinarily he went counter to today’s trend of substituting sedation for solutions, but right now he wished he’d relaxed his opinions and his patient.

Claiborne started at him. “Why didn’t you stop them?”

“I think you know the answer to that question, Adam. We’re twenty miles away from Fairvale. I’m not a resident, I have no say-so in community affairs. For that matter, when you get right down to it, it’s not even a question of Fairvale’s choice. From what I understand, the Bates property comes under the jurisdiction of the County Board of Supervisors.”

Claiborne’s scowl was deep-set. “Don’t you think I know that? You could have talked to Joe Gunderson.”

Steiner shook his head. “I don’t know anybody by that name.” And yet, very faintly, it rang a bell.

“Don’t give me that! Everybody knows Joe Gunderson. He runs this county. Mother went to him about a permit before she started building—”

This time the bell clanged loud and clear. Gunderson, the county’s political boss, famous throughout the area for twenty years. And dead for ten.

Steiner took a deep breath. “Adam, I want you to listen to me now very carefully.”

Claiborne wasn’t listening to anything but the sound of his own voice. Or was it his own? “You’re not fooling me. The reason you didn’t talk to Gunderson is because you don’t care what happens, nobody cares what happens, you’re going to let them go ahead and do anything they like, turn the motel into some kind of carnival sideshow!”

“I’ve told you, there’s nothing I can do—”

“You’ve told me a lot of things, haven’t you, about who I am and what I should do. But I don’t believe you anymore. *I know* who I am.”

The bell inside Steiner’s head clanged again, this time in warning. Its tone changed as Claiborne’s voice was changing. And now, incredibly, his distorted features were changing too.

Steiner pushed his chair back.

“Stop it, Adam! Calm down now, and relax.”

“I know who I am and what I must do!” Adam Claiborne shouted.

But it was not Adam’s face that Steiner saw before him now as Claiborne rose; nor was it himself that Claiborne got hold of as the long fingers found his visitor’s throat.

Dr. Steiner gasped, clawing at his attacker. Gasp became gurgle, gurgle trickling into silence as the pressure tightened, cutting off the blood supply to the brain.

Steiner’s last conscious thought came as a simple observation. Perhaps Claiborne didn’t play the piano but he’d certainly learned how to use his left hand.

Morning sunshine filtered through the bathroom blinds as Amy finished applying minimal makeup in the fluorescence illuminating the mirror above the washstand. That would suffice while she was indoors; this afternoon, before leaving, she'd subject herself to natural light from outside the window and do a more thorough job. What she did now would serve her purpose—which was to go downstairs and have someone serve her breakfast.

Why was she so hungry? Must be all this fresh air. Thinking of air brought back the memory of her fleeting panic upon awakening last night to confront that open window. Once again she reassured herself that it must have been unlocked, blowing open when the wind did its work. In any case, nothing had happened and it seemed silly to be uptight about it.

Nevertheless she started at the sound of the phone jangling in the bedroom beyond. She picked it up after the fourth ring, but hesitated for a fraction of a second before speaking.

For some reason or other, answering the phone had always presented problems. “Hello” seemed meaningless; ritualism, like asking “How are you?” when opening conversation with a total stranger whose welfare was really not a matter for concern at the moment. “Amy Haines speaking” or “Amy Haines here” both sounded superfluous; of course she *was* the one who was speaking and since she was not a machine she certainly had to be here in order to do so. Which really left her with little choice but to say, “Yes?”

So, of course, she said “Hi!” instead.

“Miss Haines?” A man’s voice, deep and resonant. “Hope I didn’t wake you up.”

“You didn’t.” Amy flicked her left forefinger at the lower lash of her left eye; apparently a speck of mascara was causing a problem there. “Who is

this?”

“Hank Gibbs—*Fairvale Weekly Herald*. I’m calling from the lobby. Thought maybe if you were free I could invite you to come down and have breakfast.”

Amy hadn’t put on her watch yet; it still lay on the nightstand. Twisting her neck, she glanced down to read the time. Nine A.M. Apparently her finger had done a good job because her eye was clear, with no further feeling of discomfort. And if Fairvale was like most of the other small towns she knew, the courthouse wouldn’t be opening until ten o’clock.

“Thank you, Mr. Gibbs,” she said. “I’ll be down in five minutes.”

After hanging up Amy went to retrieve the larger of the two plastic-bound notebooks she’d placed on the bureau while unpacking last night. Opening it she scanned the contents of the second page until she found what she was looking for. Yes, here he was on the list—Hank Gibbs, nwspr. ed., Fairvale. The fact he’d sought her out instead of vice versa might be a good omen. In any case, she wanted to see him.

By the same token, it might be a good idea if nobody saw the list, or for that matter, the rest of the contents of this particular notebook. Carrying it over to the closet, she opened her overnight case and placed it under lock and key. When she crossed the room again she slipped the smaller notebook into her bag. One last reassurance from the mirror and she was off.

The elevator was empty when it arrived and she was the sole passenger when it descended. All of which made for a meeting that was quick and easy because Hank Gibbs was the sole occupant of the lobby when she stepped forth into it.

At first glance Gibbs appeared to be a man pushing forty, and forty was pushing back. About five-eight, Amy judged, with the mesomorphic build of a former football player who has allowed himself to go out of training and into McDonald’s. He wore tan slacks, a blue-and-white checked shirt open at the collar, and a brown jacket with the leather elbows popular a dozen or more years ago. His blond hair was cut short in a manner that clearly indicated that the local barber wasn’t much for all that newfangled hairstyling. But somehow Gibbs, with his tanned face and surprisingly vivid blue eyes, seemed quite appropriate to the setting in which she was

encountering him. Amy's first impression was that he might have stepped out of one of those old-time Norman Rockwell cover illustrations for *The Saturday Evening Post*.

"Pleased to meet you." Apparently Amy's first impression was correct; Hank Gibbs accompanied his statement by shaking hands—a custom she tended to believe had gone out of fashion around the time Gloria Steinem reached puberty.

His hand was warm, his grip firm; body language reinforcing his greeting. For a moment she regretted not having taken a little more time on her makeup, then pushed the thought aside. This was business.

But breakfast itself was pleasure. Their waitress was tall, angular, bespectacled, and briskly efficient; the coffee was stronger, the service prompt and unobtrusive. Even so, Amy was aware that the young woman who served her, together with the waitress assigned to counter-trade, checked Hank Gibbs and herself whenever their eyes were free to do so. The eyes of other patrons also searched out the activities of what they presumably regarded as the odd couple. Apparently Amy and her companion were considered an item; but if Gibbs didn't seem concerned about the possibility of gossip, why should she?

His eggs were fried, with a side order of ham; hers were scrambled, with bacon. Both had toast and passed on the fried potatoes. But before their orders arrived Amy had already removed the small notebook from her purse.

"I hope you don't mind if I ask you a few questions," she said.

"Not at all." Hank Gibbs smiled. "Matter of fact, you took the words right out of my mouth." His smile broadened. "I guess the first thing we'll have to decide is just who is interviewing who."

Amy peeked at her watch. "To be perfectly frank, I think it will help if you'd let me interview you first. Maybe we could set up another meeting later, at your convenience. I've got to check some things out this morning over at the courthouse, and perhaps you'll have some information to assist me."

"What's your hurry?" Gibbs sipped his coffee, then held out the half-empty cup to the waitress as she approached. "I take it you expect to be

here all day.”

“Not really. I have an early afternoon appointment.”

Gibbs nodded. “At State Hospital.”

“How did you know?”

“I stopped by Sheriff Engstrom’s office on my way over here. His secretary told me.” Gibbs rescued his refilled coffee cup from the waitress. “In case you’re wondering, she got the information from the desk clerk here.”

“Since when—”

“Since time immemorial.” Gibbs reached for the sugar. “This is a small town, Miss Haines. Word gets around. The desk clerk is Les Chambers; his father used to be the sheriff here when Engstrom just started out as a deputy. Les and Engstrom are almost like family, you could say, so whenever anything happens over here at the hotel it gets back to the Sheriff’s office right away.”

“All I did was place a phone call,” Amy said. “But nothing happened.”

“Not until about half an hour ago.” Gibbs stirred the sugar in his cup. “Word came through while I was still at the Sheriff’s office.” He hesitated for a moment, frowning. “Guess I should have told you earlier.”

“Told me what?”

“Dr. Steiner won’t be seeing you this afternoon. He’s in Montrose Hospital.” Gibbs lifted his spoon from the coffee cup in a quick gesture of response to Amy’s sudden look of alarm. “Far as they know, it’s not all that serious but he’s going to need a couple of days’ rest. It’s Claiborne who’s in a bad way.”

“What happened?”

“No details yet. It seems Dr. Steiner was talking to Claiborne in his room; there was some kind of flare-up, and Claiborne tried to strangle him. By the time the male nurse broke in Steiner had passed out. Nobody’s given the straight story about how Claiborne was pulled off but somewhere along the line he suffered what they’re calling a coronary embolism. He’s at the hospital too, listed in critical condition.”

“My fault,” Amy murmured.

“What did you say?”

“It’s my fault that it happened. When I called Dr. Steiner last night I asked about the possibility of seeing Adam Claiborne when I came out and he said he’d speak to him this morning. According to what you tell me, I should have left well enough alone.”

“Wrong. First of all you can’t judge anything on the basis of what I have told you because there’s not enough information to go on. Secondly, you don’t strike me as the type who’d ever settle for leaving well enough alone. If you did, you wouldn’t be a journalist. Any more than I would.” Gibbs shook his head. “But the bottom line is, don’t blame yourself for what you think may have happened or what did happen. There’s no need for a rush to judgment.”

True enough, Amy told herself. It doesn’t pay to be judgmental about anything without getting sufficient input first. She glanced up at Hank Gibbs; his appearance hadn’t changed since their meeting, but he was a perfect illustration of misjudgment, because he no longer looked like a Norman Rockwell illustration at all.

“Relax,” Gibbs said. “Steiner’s going to be okay and Claiborne will probably make it too. Point is you don’t have to be such a hurry to get over to the courthouse because now you have all day. But if you want to ask any questions, feel free.”

Amy did relax enough to take another sip of her coffee, and while she didn’t feel entirely free, at least what he’d said lifted some of the burden from her conscience. Enough so that she was able to accept his invitation.

“How long have you been editing the paper?” she asked.

“Nine years. Why?”

“I was wondering about the files. Would there be anything going back about thirty years ago?”

“Not that I know of.” Gibbs smiled. “Believe me, I looked. Then I asked around, trying to find out if some of the older folks happened to save copies from back in those days. If anyone did, they won’t admit it; people here didn’t want to talk about Norman Bates back then and chances are they didn’t want to read about him either. Most of them still don’t seem to want to know the details.” He leaned forward. “Why do you?”

“Because he’s a symbol,” she said. “In some ways he seems to be more alive today than he was thirty years ago. Or is it just that we’ve turned into a violent society?”

“I think our society has always been violent,” Gibbs said. “The only difference is that now we’re beginning to admit it. And we’ve still got a long way to go. People fool themselves into thinking that reading about it or watching it on screen is ‘facing reality.’ But actually what they see or read is preselected. I think that we turn our backs on violence in its worst and most commonplace forms—penning and butchering fowl and livestock, death on the highways, crime in the streets.” Gibbs shook his head. “But who am I to get on a soapbox? Isn’t that what your book was all about?”

Amy nodded. “I started to tell the story of Bonnie Walton, try to find out why her grungy life as a common hooker could lead to committing a series of cold-blooded murders. But *Tricks or Treats* ended up dealing more with her johns than with herself. When I researched their past histories it seemed to me that all of them were victims of society before they became victims of murder. A couple of them turned out to be just kids sampling what they thought would be more sophisticated sex, the same way they’d experiment with designer drugs in preference to pot.”

Hank Gibbs arched his eyebrows. “That’s a pretty heavy way to describe it,” he said.

“Caught me out?” Amy smiled as she spoke. “Most of what I just said is a direct quote from the book. I don’t usually talk that way.”

“Why not?”

“No audience, I suppose.”

“Try me.” Gibbs reached for his coffee cup. “You were saying about the johns—”

“All they seemed to be looking for was a little excitement to ease the monotony of a dull existence. In the case of the three middle-aged men you could strike out the word ‘existence’ and substitute ‘marriage.’ The older men weren’t looking for great sex—from what I was able to find out, they weren’t looking for sex at all. A little conversation, a little sympathy, the temporary illusion of being the center of attention; that’s what they were buying. But they got more than they bargained for. Sad.”

“I agree.” Gibbs finished his coffee and centered his cup in the saucer. “I’m glad you don’t sound like one of those feminists.”

“I believe in equal rights,” she told him, “but that means looking at both sides of the question. There’s no doubt that Bonnie Walton was also a victim; forces in her early life drove her into prostitution, and prostitution drove her into mental illness. You might say that her psyche, as well as her body, was bedridden.”

“I might, but I’ll bet you beat me to it.” Gibbs smiled. “Something tells me that’s a line from your book too.”

“Right.” Amy glanced down at her notebook for a moment as she continued. “But what I’m leading up to is that it seems possible Norman Bates might have been a victim if we had all the facts to go on.”

Gibbs nodded. “Problem is, there’s not too many people around who knew him.”

“And some of those who did had a very short acquaintance,” Amy said. “That insurance investigator, Arbogast, probably saw him for only a few moments. With the Crane girl it might have been a matter of several hours, but of course there’s no way of telling. And now with her sister dead, Sam Loomis dead, Sheriff Chambers and his wife both gone, there doesn’t seem to be anyone left who had a direct connection with the case. I’d been counting on Dr. Steiner and Claiborne but it looks like that will have to wait. Meanwhile—”

“Meanwhile, what?”

“I have a secondary list.” Amy opened the notebook. “There’s this man who’s responsible for putting up that replica of the house and motel.”

“Otto Remsbach? Might be a good idea if you found out what that’s all about.”

“Don’t you know?”

“Not very much.” Gibbs shrugged. “You’ll probably get more out of him than I could. You’re prettier.”

Amy ignored the lead, if it was a lead; as far as she was concerned pleasure ended with breakfast. This was business. “Then there’s a Dr. Rawson. Also Bob Peterson, and of course I want to have a talk with the Sheriff—”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

“I appreciate what you’re saying, Mr. Gibbs, but I really can’t ask you to inconvenience yourself.”

“Meaning you wouldn’t feel comfortable having me around unless I kept my mouth shut.” Gibbs nodded. “Okay, I promise.”

He turned in his chair to signal the waitress for the check but the long arm of coincidence—or, more precisely, her scrawny one—was already extended to deposit the bill on the table. “Thanks, Millie,” he said.

Leaving his tip, paying at the cashier’s stand, and conducting Amy through the lobby, Gibbs slowed his movements once they stepped out onto the sidewalk. “Mind doing a little walking?” he asked. “Nobody on your list is more than three blocks from here. That’s one of the joys of living in a small town. Right offhand, I can’t think of any other.”

Their first stop was the office and showroom of Remsbach Farm Implements Co.; at least that’s what the lettering on the display window proclaimed, and Amy had no reason to dispute it because she could see the tractor model looming up on the platform behind the window-pane.

Otto Remsbach’s office was on the left-hand side of the hall just a few steps past the doorway. Gibbs held the door of the outer office open for Amy’s entrance, then followed her, moving up beside the desk where a honey-blond secretary whom Amy judged to be about her own age sat behind a typewriter. She glanced up as they entered, her tentative smile broadening as she recognized Gibbs.

“Hi, Doris,” he said. His head bobbed in accompaniment to the customary introductions. “Doris Huntley—Amelia Haines. It *is* Amelia, right?”

Amy nodded. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Huntley.”

Gibbs’ resonant voice broke in before the secretary could respond. “Miss Haines just got into town last night. She’s doing a story about the Bates place so naturally she’d like to have a talk with Mr. Remsbach.”

Doris Huntley’s brown eyes focused momentarily on Amy in what seemed to be a quick reappraisal. But her reply was directed to Gibbs. “I’m sorry, he’s over at the warehouse in Marcyville. Probably won’t be back

until sometime late this afternoon.” Now she turned to Amy again. “Is there somewhere he can reach you then?”

“I’m staying at the hotel,” Amy told her.

“Ask him to give her a call when he’s free,” Gibbs said. “Tell him from me that I think it’s a good idea. That tourist trap he’s opening could use a little good publicity for a change.”

Doris Huntley nodded. “Soon as he gets back.”

“Thanks. Be seeing you.”

She nodded again, then leaned forward. By the time Amy and her companion reached the door the typewriter was already clattering away.

“She’s very attractive,” Amy murmured.

“Otto likes them that way,” Hank Gibbs told her. “Can’t say that I blame him.”

Amy allowed her voice to rise to its normal level when they reached the street outside. “From what I saw, Fairvale hasn’t yet moved into the world of computers.”

“Not so. They have ’em at the bank, over at the super, and maybe four, five offices in and around town. I guess Otto’s just holding out until he sees how things go on this Bates proposition. So far the Grand Opening’s been postponed twice—once on account of some hangup bringing in furnishings, and of course that business out there last week meant another delay.”

“I forgot to ask you about that,” Amy said. “What’s your theory?”

“My theory is that nobody knows the first damn thing about it,” Gibbs said. “And they never will unless someone can come up with a motive. Who would want to kill an eleven-year-old girl like that? She wasn’t sexually molested, had no problems with family or at school. It’s a puzzler.”

“Those reporters who came here after the murder,” Amy said. “Did you talk to them about it?”

Gibbs nodded as they crossed the street. “They all hunted me up, first thing. Fella from Springfield, one from St. Louis, and a stringer covering this area for K.C. All I could do was tell them what I’d heard and turn them over to Engstrom, the coroner’s office, and the Highway Patrol people. Guess they came up empty-handed because in forty-eight hours everyone

was gone without bothering to kiss me good-bye. And there's been nothing in any of the papers since the first items were run."

He turned to hold the door open at the entranceway of a small, two-story structure imaginatively fashioned of concrete blocks shaped into a square with rectangular apertures for windows on the upper floor. Amy was under no misapprehension that the building had been designed by Le Corbusier.

"Rawson's office," Gibbs told her. And so it was, there on the left again, about the same distance down the hallway as Otto Remsbach's had been. The raised plastic lettering on the dark door spelled out CLIFFORD RAWSON, M.D.

Inside, the reception room offered the usual dingy discomforts accorded to patient patients by health-care professionals throughout the land. It occurred to Amy that at this very moment there must be several hundred thousand worried sufferers sitting on uncomfortable chairs and on edge in doctors' waiting rooms exactly like this one.

But at the moment there was no one else besides the two of them in the outer office and their stay was not lengthy. Gibbs went over to the glass-topped counter and rapped on the pane. The receptionist seated at the desk beyond appeared to be thirty-something, her hair jet-black, eyes almost violet, and—wouldn't you know it?—she was operating the keyboard of a small computer. Or had been, until Hank Gibbs claimed attention.

Now the two of them were talking, but while she smiled, nodded, and responded, Amy was quite conscious of her frequent side glances. The scrutiny concluded when she rose and disappeared into a corridor area beyond the cubicle housing her desk and files.

Gibbs walked over to where Amy stood waiting. "Doctor's in. I told her why you wanted to see him."

"Why do you suppose she was eyeballing me like that?" Amy asked.

"Marge?" Gibbs chuckled. "Don't mind her. She used to be my insignificant other."

Amy frowned. "What are you, some kind of comedian?"

"Not me," Gibbs said. "A comedian is somebody who talks dirty for money."

The routine—if that’s what it was intended to be—ended abruptly now as the door to the inner office opened and the receptionist nodded them forward.

Dr. Rawson’s own private office was at the end of the hall, past the two examination rooms and the storage unit. There was a big desk, two small chairs facing it, a bookcase against the wall opposite the window. The wall behind the desk bore half a dozen framed diplomas and certificates, all of which added up to attest Clifford Matthew Rawson’s rights as a physician, surgeon, and one of the last of a dying breed of balding, horn-rimmed-wearing general practitioners.

Once introduced he listened attentively as Amy stated her purpose for the visit—very much, she imagined, as he would listen to a new patient’s description of symptoms. But when she finished, Dr. Rawson offered neither diagnosis nor cure.

“I’m afraid there’s not very much I can tell you,” he said. “It’s true I was Lila and Sam’s family physician, but that’s as far as it goes. Now that they’re both gone, I don’t think I’d be violating confidentiality to tell you that Lila Loomis only came in once a year for a routine physical; as I recall it, she never had any serious problems. Sam had a slight heart murmur, but that’s all. I put him on a low cholesterol diet and checked him out every six months.” Dr. Rawson ran the fingers of his right hand across the side of his head to smooth nonexistent hair. He smiled apologetically. “I don’t suppose that means very much one way or the other.”

“What I was wondering about,” Amy said, “is whether either of them might have happened to mention anything to you about the Bates case.”

Dr. Rawson’s smile vanished. “They never talked about it,” he said. “And neither did I.”

“I see.” Amy nodded. “Thank you for answering my questions.”

Dr. Rawson stared at her through the upper section of his bifocals. “Mind if I ask you one?”

“Not at all.”

“Has anyone else here in town given you information about the case?”

“Not at all.” Amy wondered how many more times she might have to use the same phrase today. *Not at all*, she hoped. But if this was any example of

what she could expect to encounter—

“Let me say something to you, young lady. People around here just don’t like to remember what happened. Finally, I can’t say that I blame them. What’s done is done, and as far as they’re concerned there’s no more point in digging up those memories than there would be in digging up Norman Bates’ body.”

“You do have a poetic way of putting things,” Hank Gibbs murmured.

Dr. Rawson’s reaction was a self-conscious smile directed at Amy. “I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t offend you.”

“Not at all,” Amy told him. *Here we go again*, she told herself.

And go she did, after the obligatory farewell amenities. Hank Gibbs conducted her out and led her down the street. Traffic was brisker, Amy noted, and there were more cars angle-parked in front of the stores; the supermarket across the street had its own lot already more than half-filled now.

“My apologies,” Gibbs said. “I should have told you the old boy is a little touchy.”

Amy congratulated herself for restraining from replaying, “Not at all.” Instead she said, “I’m the one who ought to apologize, making you drag me around from pillar to post this way.”

“No problem.” Gibbs smiled. “Gives me something to pass the time. During the day I frequently suffer from insomnia.”

“Maybe you ought to see a doctor,” Amy said.

“About my insomnia?”

“No, about your sense of humor.”

“Touché.” Gibbs glanced at her. “Next stop?”

“Loomis Hardware.”

“No such place. After Sam died and Bob Peterson took over he changed the name to guess what.” Gibbs gestured toward the shop window directly ahead on their right.

Even a novice in sign language wouldn’t fail to recognize the name which covered the entire upper surface of the hardware store’s window. Bob Peterson had indeed taken over.

And a pity it was too, Amy decided, once they entered and Gibbs had introduced her to the proprietor. Peterson was middle-aged, a short man who was losing the battle of the bulge; his hair was pepper-and-salt, eyes and complexion grey. His smile of greeting vanished upon Gibbs' introduction, replaced by a stony stare.

"You the reporter staying over at the hotel?" he asked.

Amy nodded. "In that case I assume you may also know why I'm here."

"That's for damn sure." If anything the steel in his stare was hardening. "Might as well tell you right off the bat that far as I'm concerned I got nothin' to say."

Hank Gibbs frowned. "Now look, Bob—"

Peterson ignored him, his stare still fixed. "Don't get me wrong, it's nothin' personal. Just that I made up my mind a long time ago I was never gonna talk about that business, never have and never will."

Amy waited him out, forming a reply that she never made. The sound of a phone ringing from a room behind the counter at the far end of the store put an end to further conversation.

"Sorry. Got to catch the phone." But Peterson didn't look sorry; it was warm relief that melted the steely stare as he turned and started off.

Amy followed suit, but in the opposite direction, Hank Gibbs moving up beside her, lengthening his stride to open the door as she approached it.

Sunlight nooned directly overhead as they emerged.

"My fault," he murmured. "Should have told you. He's got a thing about what happened to Sam Loomis and Lila in the store here. Wouldn't talk to those reporters either, but I hoped maybe he'd loosen up a little when he saw you." His smile implied a compliment, but Amy did not acknowledge it.

Instead she said, "I hate to say so, but most people here don't seem to go out of their way to be very friendly."

"You haven't seen anything yet." Gibbs shrugged. "As the captain of the *Titanic* used to say, 'It's just the tip of the iceberg.' "

The courthouse and its annex loomed directly ahead. Making their way past the artillery on the lawn, Hank Gibbs spoke again. "This time I'm

going to warn you in advance.”

“About Sheriff Engstrom?”

“You could include him, I suppose.” Gibbs grinned. “But the one I really had in mind is that secretary of his—Irene Grovesmith.”

“She hates reporters too?”

Gibbs shook his head. “Irene is impartial. She hates everybody.”

“Any special reason?”

“Just old age, I guess. Engstrom should have gotten rid of her years ago. Irene ought to be grateful he kept her on, but she gives him a rough time. She gets her nourishment from biting the hand that feeds her.”

Amy gave him a look, but it was nothing compared to the one she received from Irene Grovesmith upon entering the Sheriff’s office in the annex.

“Morning,” Gibbs said. “Sheriff Engstrom around?”

“He’s not in.”

Gibbs nodded. “Must be over at State Hospital checking out what happened last night.”

“Never mind where he is.” The little old lady with the vinegary voice and matching expression would never be mistaken for Grandma Moses. Although it was he whom she addressed, Amy was still getting the look. And now a message came with it.

“I can tell you one thing right off,” Irene Grovesmith said. “Even if he was here, the Sheriff wouldn’t have anything to say to this young lady. When the time comes, he’ll be handing out an official statement.”

“Knock it off, Irene,” Gibbs said. “Miss Haines isn’t here to talk about what happened at the hospital, and you know it.”

“What I said still goes.” Now the voice poured vinegar directly for Amy’s consumption. “And I advise you to do the same, Miss Haines. Just pack up and go. Nobody here wants to talk to you—”

The telephone rang on the desk beside her. *Instant replay*, Amy told herself, thinking of how the incident at the hardware store had ended.

This one was only beginning. Irene Grovesmith picked up the phone but said nothing. Whoever was at the other end of the line had already begun to

she spoke and all she could do was nod repeatedly. As she did so her eyes brightened and her features defrosted. “Yes sir,” she said. “Right away.”

Replacing the receiver she turned and looked up with a triumphant stare. “If you’re snooping around to try and find out who killed that little girl, you can forget it.”

“What are you talking about?” Gibbs said.

“That was the Sheriff calling just now. They got the killer!”

The sun had shifted slightly to the west when Amy and her companion made their exit through the annex door. Gibbs stepped into the shaded area at the left of the entrance and halted, nodding. “Cooler here,” he said.

“Is that why you came out?” Amy asked. “They have air-conditioning inside. It didn’t seem warm to me.”

“It’s going to be a lot hotter when Engstrom hauls that prisoner in.”

“Then why did you tell his secretary we had to leave? Don’t you want to see who they caught?”

“Sure do. That’s why we’re out here. At least we’ll be able to get a look at him when he arrives. I somehow doubt that Engstrom would invite us into the holding cell for coffee and Twinkies.”

“It isn’t funny,” Amy said.

Hank Gibbs nodded. “I know that. Probably better than you do. Don’t forget, this is my town and these are my people. But if I let myself think too much about what all this is doing to them—” The way his voice trailed off added eloquence to his words.

“Have you got any idea whom they might be bringing in?”

“We’ll see in a couple of minutes.”

But they didn’t. Normal traffic streamed along the street bordering the square but there was no sign of a car bearing the official insignia entering the reserved parking space at their left.

Gibbs consulted his watch. “What’s holding them up?”

“The secretary didn’t say where they’d be coming from,” Amy said.

“That’s right. But I should’ve guessed where they’d be going.” Gibbs turned and opened the annex door. “Follow me.”

Amy tagged along as he reentered, doing her best to keep pace as he strode down the corridor. “Engstrom’s sharp. I just remembered he could

take the back entrance to the main courthouse and sneak through to this side by way of the basement.”

Once again Irene Grovesmith peered up at them as they came through the office doorway. “I thought you’d left,” she said.

“Don’t you wish.” Gibbs’ eyes semicircled the room and came to rest on the door to Engstrom’s private office. “Where is he?”

“I’ve already told you it’s none of your business. And there’s no sense wasting your time hanging around here, Hank Gibbs. The Sheriff won’t be talking to you until he’s good and ready.”

Gibbs winked at Amy out of the corner of his eye. “So much for southern hospitality,” he murmured.

Irene Grovesmith glanced up quickly. “What’s that you said?”

Before Gibbs could answer, the door to Engstrom’s inner office opened abruptly and a uniformed deputy emerged, closing it behind him as he nodded at Gibbs.

“Afternoon, Hank.” He came forward, smiling. “Now I know what they mean when they say news travels fast.”

“Happens we were here when the call came in. Just stepped out front in case you needed a welcoming committee.” Gibbs glanced at Amy. “Miss Haines, I’d like you to meet Dick Reno.”

As introductions were concluded the Sheriff’s deputy was standing almost side by side with Hank Gibbs and Amy found herself inevitably—or was it automatically?—comparing the two men. Dick Reno was almost a head taller than the newspaper editor and at least a half dozen years younger, maybe more. He had dark, curly hair and would have been strikingly handsome were it not for the bridge of his nose, which was curiously flattened. Probably broke it playing football, Amy told herself, unless someone had broken it for him under other circumstances. Not an easy thing to do, if he’d been as trim and fit as he looked now. In any case, the slight irregularity of his features didn’t mar his engaging smile, and just why the hell was she wasting her time over that one way or the other? *Business before pleasure.*

“Is there anything you might be able to tell us about what’s happened?” The question was strictly business, but there was no harm in allowing a hint

of possible pleasure to creep into her glance and voice.

As a matter of fact, it seemed to help, and even more than she could have hoped. “It’s up to the Sheriff,” Dick Reno said. “But seeing as how you two already know we brought somebody in, I guess that part of it isn’t exactly a secret. Fact is, we don’t really know all that much more about him ourselves; not yet, anyway.”

“I’ll settle for a name,” Gibbs said.

“Don’t have one.” Reno’s smile was almost apologetic. “He refuses to identify himself and he’s not carrying any IDs.”

“Where did you find the suspect?” Hank Gibbs asked.

“He’s not a suspect,” Reno said. “That is, he hasn’t been charged with anything yet. We just took him into custody for questioning.”

“That’s not the way I heard it.” Gibbs gestured. “Irene here told us you got the killer.”

Irene Grovesmith’s eyes were like miniature ice cubes. Her mouth opened and the vinegar flowed. “Why, Hank Gibbs! I never said any such thing!” That made two indignant sniffs in a row, Amy noted, then wondered if there would be a third forthcoming now as the secretary directed her attention to Dick Reno. “As for you,” she told him, “I think you’ve said more than enough already.”

Apparently a third sniff was unnecessary because Reno nodded quickly, and when he addressed Amy the apologetic smile had returned. “Irene’s right, Miss Haines. I don’t think there’s anything more I can tell you until you have a chance to talk to the Sheriff.”

“Chance?” Gibbs’ eyebrows rose. “You mean we’ve got to win the lottery or something?”

“Take it easy, Hank,” Reno said. “He’s just started questioning this guy now.”

“Does he know we’re here?”

Dick Reno shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Then it’ll be a surprise.” Gibbs moved past the deputy in the direction of the Sheriff’s private office. As he did so, the voices of Reno and Irene Grovesmith rose and blended.

“Hey, wait a minute—”

“You can’t do that!”

He glanced back for a moment, grinning. “Don’t worry, I’m knocking.” Actions followed words.

But not for long. The door opened partially; just enough for Sheriff Engstrom’s head to emerge from the aperture.

“What’s the big idea?” The question was obviously rhetorical, and Engstrom made no pretense of waiting for a reply. Instead his stare focused on Reno. “Get these people out of here!”

“Come on, Sheriff.” Hank Gibbs contrived a smile. “It’s just a matter of common courtesy. Young lady here’s been waiting to see you—”

“Is that so?” Engstrom’s stare shifted in Amy’s direction. “Then why didn’t she take the trouble to come over and introduce herself to me in the coffee shop last night?”

“I’m sorry,” Amy said. “Actually, I wasn’t quite sure who you were at that time.”

“Looked to me as though you were listening up pretty good,” Engstrom told her.

“Or else you were speaking pretty loudly,” Amy said. Something happened to Engstrom’s stare as she spoke; his eyes flickered momentarily and the corners of his mouth twitched.

“Now look here, young lady—”

“I am looking,” Amy said, “but you’ve got the rest of it wrong. I’m going to be twenty-seven years old in another couple of months, which isn’t all that young. And when I’m working, which I happen to be right now, I’m not that much of a lady. Come to think of it, I’m not a lady at all, not in your sense of the word. Because from what I’ve been able to observe around here so far it’s just a word to you. As far as you’re concerned, the idea is still to keep the young ones barefoot and pregnant and stick the old ones behind a stove—” Amy paused for an instant, glancing at Irene Grovesmith. “Or a desk,” she concluded.

“Well I never!” The secretary sniffed in emphatic punctuation.

Somehow Amy resisted the obvious reply.

It was Engstrom who spoke for her. "That's enough, Irene," he said, then eased himself forward without opening the door any farther, glancing at Amy as he did so. "Be glad to set up something with you later. Right now I can give you five minutes."

"Thank you, Sheriff." Amy accompanied her nod with a smile. For a moment she debated whether or not to reach for the notebook inside the bag, then decided against it. Enough that she'd won; no sense pressing her luck. "Might I ask the name of the person you've taken into custody?"

"Sorry, I don't have that information." Sheriff Engstrom's pause was almost imperceptible. "Not yet."

"May I ask your reasons for questioning him?"

"My deputy didn't tell you?" Again the slightest of pauses; Amy imagined she could almost hear the wheels clicking inside his head. What she did hear next was, "Reno's been staked out over at the Bates property. This afternoon he picked up this prowler trying to break into the house."

"Then there is a charge," Amy said. "Breaking and entering."

"Well, not exactly." Amy revised her mental image. There were no wheels inside Engstrom's head; only a scale used for weighing his words. "When Reno picked him up he was trying the doorknob."

"Which makes him a suspect?"

"Let's just say it's a matter of suspicious circumstances. Here's this man showing up out of nowhere, no car, no ID. Doesn't even have a driver's license."

"Is that a crime, Sheriff?"

"No, but whoever killed Terry Dowson wasn't driving either. There was no sign of a car having been parked anywhere near the scene of the crime. But I guess you heard me mention that last night."

Whichever it might be, wheels whirring or scales weighing, didn't matter to Amy at this precise moment. What mattered was that she was watching Hank Gibbs. As she and Engstrom were talking he had begun to edge his way toward the door that stood ajar behind the Sheriff's back.

He had moved so slowly and cautiously that neither Dick Reno nor Irene Grovesmith seemed to notice; their attention was focused on the thrust and parry of the conversation. Thus they weren't aware that Hank Gibbs had

hooked the heel of his right foot and the base of the door's far edge, pressing it toward him to gradually expand the opening.

Now the gap in the doorway was six inches wider. Staring past the Sheriff's head, she caught a clear glimpse of the inner office, and of the man seated there before the desk.

"Sounds like you're implying that these circumstances are all somehow connected to the person you just brought in." Amy shifted her gaze to Engstrom quickly as she spoke. "Are you saying you think he could have killed that girl?"

The Sheriff's eyes narrowed. "I'm not saying anything. But I'm going to find out."

"Let me save you the trouble," Amy told him. "He's not guilty."

The narrow eyes widened. "How do you know?"

Amy met his stare. "Because on the night of the murder he was in Chicago, in my home."

"Your home?"

"That's right. I had friends over for the evening who can testify they saw him when he showed up unexpectedly at the apartment. I told him I couldn't talk to him then, but made an appointment for an interview on Monday morning. Unfortunately, by Monday I'd read about what happened here and I was already on my way down. I'm afraid I forgot to notify him and cancel off."

"Interview?" Engstrom scowled. "What kind of an interview?"

"For the book I'm doing. He'd read a squib about it in the paper."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Eric Dunstable," Amy said. "He's a demonologist."

Otto Remsbach was a good driver. He kept both pudgy hands on the wheel, both piggy eyes on the road.

*Not very charitable*, Amy told herself. But from what she had seen of Mr. Remsbach thus far there was little about him to inspire charity. For a moment she regretted having accepted his dinner invitation on the phone, but his call after she returned to the hotel had caught her by surprise. After all, she did have to eat dinner somewhere, and Remsbach was on her list, one of her lists anyway; although from what she had already observed he might also earn himself a place on another.

Having conceded her lack of charity Amy tried her best to be objective about obesity. But even if she could dismiss the common cultural prejudice and replace her image of Otto Remsbach with that of a man a hundred pounds lighter, it still wouldn't help. No matter how thin Remsbach became, everything about him would still be oversized. His vintage Caddy was too big, the diamond in his ring was not only too big but a bit too yellow. He had an outsized voice, and he used it constantly from the time he picked Amy up at the hotel until their arrival at the Montrose Country Club.

If the purpose of their meeting was an interview, he got the session off to a bad start. It was his big, booming voice that asked all the questions and Amy found herself floundering for answers in their wake.

“Is it Miss or Mrs.? What’s with this ‘Ms.’ business anyway? How come a classy lady like you didn’t pick herself a husband and settle down? What do you do for a living? Yes, I know you’re a writer, but what do you do for a living? That book you wrote—what was the name again? Does it have anything to do with Halloween? How come I never saw you on any of those talk shows? If you don’t mind my asking, how much money do they pay for writing one of those things?”

Oh, Otto Remsbach was a pistol, and no mistake. That was the important part, Amy kept reminding herself. No *mistake*. She did her best to avoid making one while avoiding answering him too explicitly. Maybe he'd talk himself out by the time they arrived. And then it would be her turn. At least it was a carrot of hope at the end of the stick formed by the questions with which he kept prodding her.

Just outside Montrose they turned off onto the winding road that led up the hillside to their destination. Once the drive spiraled to the plateau above they drove through wide gates past lines of light that blazed and beckoned, then parked.

At first glance the Montrose Country Club looked very much like thousands of others—a recreational center for wealthy businessmen who have not yet been indicted.

Once inside Amy was pleasantly surprised to discover a large lounge area, complete with fireplace and bookshelves. At one time this must have been the living room of a large and imposing private residence. Carpeting, drapes, and paneling were recognizable holdovers, but the bar and the dining room beyond had obviously been added when the home was converted for its present use.

The bar was standard; booths lining the window wall, mirrored wall elongating behind the serving counter. The side walls were hand-muraled with desert scenes featuring sagebrush, cactus, burning sand, blazing sunlight, all artfully assembled to stimulate the viewer's thirst. The bartender wore a red vest, the barstools had red plastic coverings, the patrons had red, flushed faces. Time did not stand still here, but at least it was a bit wobbly; the cocktail hour stretched from five to eight. Actually there were only a half-dozen customers at the bar but what they lacked in numbers they made up for in volume; these greying, elderly men in their carefully tailored casual jackets and tattersall vests were used to talking just as loud as they goddamned pleased, both in the office and in public places. How they may have been forced to modulate their tone at home might be another matter. The point was they weren't at home, they were *here*, just having a drink or six to relax before dinner. Good ol' boys almost always cut their real deals over drinks and dinner; Mother ought to be used to it by now. At least she knows that's where the money comes from, and it wasn't

like she had to just sit on her hands at home with nothing to do; she could always watch cable.

The dining room held a large number of customers but few surprises. There were no booths here, only square or round tables, each bearing a lighted, glass-sheathed candle and a bud vase containing a single rose. Since the room was a comparatively recent addition it didn't boast a chandelier, but the indirect lighting was pleasantly non-fluorescent. Amy noted a preponderance of middle-aged and elderly patrons but almost half were wives and mothers. The conversational level was lower, and about one out of three of the male diners wore neither vest nor necktie, but none were in shirtsleeves. Out here at the source of what advertising copywriters would describe as down-home country goodness, country club dining was still a form of ritual, separating the men from the good ol' boys.

Apparently some things had never really changed. The maître d' who greeted and seated them was white, but the waiters and busboys were black; still the same old setup, boss man and hired hands. The waiter, whose name was Quentin, was very good; he took Amy's order for a vodka martini and twinned it with a double Daniel's on the rocks without Remsbach having to request it.

Obviously her dinner partner's preferences were well known here. Amy consulted the menu before deciding on her brook trout almondine, baked potato and dinner salad, coffee later. But Otto Remsbach didn't bother to order; at proper intervals they served him his shrimp cocktail and a second drink, then his porterhouse medium rare and a Daniel's redoubled.

All of which Amy noted out of the corner of her mind. Most of her attention was concentrated upon Remsbach's continuous conversation which, like the liquor, flowed freely. It was interrupted only twice early on; the first time being when a couple identified only as Mr. and Mrs. Aversham nodded a greeting as they passed *en route* to a table. "Mayor of Montrose and his better half," Remsbach told her, nodding in the direction of their departing figures. "No point introducing you—they wouldn't have anything you want. Besides, he hates my guts and she's gonna spend all night trying to figure out what I'm doing here with a foxy lady like you." This observation came after the shrimp cocktail and the second drink but

Amy noted that his accompanying laughter was already a trifle above the ordinary decibel level here. Good ol' boys will be boisterous.

The other interruption followed almost immediately and she welcomed it. This one did involve an introduction to the thin, sharp-featured, middle-aged man whose most attractive attribute seemed to be a comely wife twenty years his junior. Number two, Amy guessed, then amended her estimate after a downward glance. Custom-made alligator shoes worn in these surroundings were indications of taste that might easily run to a higher number of nuptials.

“Hey there, Charlie!” Remsbach cocked his head up at the couple, ignoring the woman completely, even though it was she who nodded in response to the greeting. Probably not his wife after all, Amy decided, but outside of the AA meeting in the bar this seemed to be a fairly stuffy place; it would take a considerable amount of nerve to bring a bimbo into a roomful of self-described decent, respectable wives and mothers. Come to think of it, Remsbach had his quota of nerve too, bringing a bimbo like herself into the same surroundings. So much for snap judgments; nevertheless she was eager to be introduced to this particular stranger. Now Remsbach gratified her wish.

“Senator, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine. Miss Haines, this here’s Charlie Pitkin. Better watch what you say about me when you’re around him, on account he happens to be my attorney.”

“You’re the writer, I believe?” As Amy nodded the thin man offered her a thin smile. “In that case, I think I already know what brought you here. Otto can probably answer most of your questions, but if there’s anything else you think I might be able to tell you, I’ll be around for most of the week. You can reach me through my office.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Amy said.

Charlie Pitkin shook his head. “Actually it’s just a sneaky way of trying to get my name into your book.” He gestured to Remsbach. “Give me a call on that other matter.”

“First thing tomorrow.”

Amy’s gaze joined Remsbach’s as they watched Pitkin and his unidentified companion move to the waiter who had been standing patiently

a dozen feet away during their halt at the table. Now he turned and they followed, moving past a pillar to disappear at a table directly behind it.

“Is he really a senator?” Amy asked.

“Sure is. Been in the State Legislature three terms now.” Remsbach’s laughter had a rasp to it. “Never hurts to have yourself a lawyer who knows his way around politics. Got to hand it to him—he’s one smart little jew-boy. Sure been a big help to me.”

At the moment Amy would have liked nothing better than to say farewell to Fairvale. And she would, she promised herself, once her mission was accomplished. Getting information for the book was the problem that had brought her here; the sensible thing was to accept people like Remsbach as part of the problem. Amy recalled some of the people she’d interviewed for the first book, the hookers, dope dealers, gangbangers. By comparison Otto Remsbach, on a scale of one to ten, was scarcely more than a four. She could deal with him. As the thought came, sheer coincidence echoed it in Remsbach’s words.

“—deal,” he was saying. “He set it all up so’s I could get hold of the Bates property out there. That’s where politics comes in. Thing I figured was just putting up the house and part of the motel and running tourists through it at maybe two, three bucks a head. Pitkin’s the one who came up with improvements.”

And it was Quentin, their waiter, who came up now with a cart bearing the two plates, the tall wooden pepper mill and the big wooden bowl. “Toss your salad, Mr. Remsbach?”

“Yeah. Just as long as you don’t try serving it to me.” Again the rasping laugh.

Amy took the opportunity to break in quickly. “Would you mind telling me what gave you the idea of rebuilding in the first place?”

“Cartoons,” Remsbach said. “Got to thinking one day. For thirty years now I’ve been seeing cartoons and hearing jokes about Norman Bates and his mother. Seems like people out here remember him just like they do that woman back East. Lizzie Borden or whatever her name was. So I said to myself, if I can get my hands on the property that the state’s been holding

onto all these years, maybe it'd be worth a try. Call it something like the Bates Murder Mansion, run a few ads around the area, see what happens.”

Quentin served Amy in silence, pantomimed proferment of the pepper mill, accepted its rejection, and wheeled the cart away—all without interrupting Remsbach’s monologue for a moment.

But Amy wasn’t standing on courtesy. “You mentioned something about your attorney making suggestions.”

Remsbach nodded. “He’s the one who got the idea about selling souvenirs—room keys, ashtrays, stuff like that you could sell from the motel. He even talked about towels and shower curtains, but I told him wait and see how the other stuff goes first. But I went for his pitch about getting some postcards printed up and later on he wants to get out some kind of booklet with pictures of Norman and the old lady, maybe have somebody like Hank Gibbs write up a little piece for it.”

“Getting back to the building project,” Amy said. “Did you have much trouble finding furnishings for the house?”

“That part was easy.” Ice cubes rattled as Remsbach put down his empty glass. “Pitkin reminded me that they were gonna do a movie seven, eight years back, some outfit named Coronet Pictures. It never got made, on account of what happened, and they sold off the studio in some kind of conglomerate deal. But Pitkin remembered they’d already started shooting the picture before the trouble started, so they must of had props and furniture. He contacted somebody out there and sure thing, the whole *kapoosta* was in storage, along with the sets or whatever they call ’em. He made a deal and they shipped the whole lot here direct. The dummies were the hard part.”

“They didn’t come from the studio, did they?” Amy said.

“No.” Remsbach glanced up as Quentin reappeared with the cart that, this time around, bore their entrees. Good customer scowled at faithful servitor. “Hey, you forgot my drink!”

“No sir.” Quentin lifted the tumbler from its hiding place between the domes of the casseroles covering the two plates. His fingers curled around the glass, mahogany against crystal, as he set it down before Remsbach.

A quick gulp later, conversation was resumed where it had left off. “Charlie Pitkin gets credit for the dummies too. Had them made out there in L.A., someplace that does them for movies.” He leaned to one side as Quentin set the porterhouse platter down before him, then reached for his glass again. “Damn things cost a fortune, but like Charlie says, it makes all the difference in the world.” Gulp. “All the difference in the world.”

Down went the glass, up came the steak knife. As Amy might have suspected, Otto Remsbach’s eating habits were governed more by enthusiasm than elegance. She averted her gaze while filleting the trout as best she could; evidently Montrose Country Club’s silver service did not include fish knives. But the trout was excellent.

When she glanced up her dinner companion gestured to Quentin as he passed by their table on his way to the kitchen. Apparently Remsbach had already finished off almost half of his steak and needed another Daniel’s for additional gravy.

“I got to hand it to them, whoever made those things sure did a job.” Remsbach nodded, then chewed and swallowed for punctuation. “Get ’em in the right light and you’d swear they were real people. Mother—old lady Bates, I mean—is some scary-looking sight.”

“So I’ve heard,” Amy said. “It’s one of the things I wanted to see.”

Remsbach scowled. “What I want to know is, who the hell stole her?”

“That’s part of the mystery, isn’t it?” Amy said. “I was hoping you might have some ideas.”

Otto Remsbach chewed over the thought along with his steak. “I got ideas, all right. Might of been Reverend Archer. I don’t think he’d be up to it himself but he could get somebody to do the job for him. He’s got his whole goddamn congregation turned against me. Damn fools can’t see what this proposition is gonna do to bring business into town.”

He paused long enough to launch another frontal attack on his drink, and when he thumped the glass down again his scowl faded. “Le’me tell you something, they’re all gonna hafta change their tune once we get started. Charlie says just as soon as he can finagle the permits we’ll put in a parking lot and a couple refreshment stands. He’s got a crazy idea about serving some special kind of hamburgers covered with ketchup—wants to call them

Murderburgers. With a side order of shower-kraut.” Remsbach drowned his rasping laugh in drink. “Sounds pretty weird if you ask me, but it just might work.”

Amy nodded. One thing was certain; Remsbach’s drinks were working.

And his timing was perfect as he caught Quentin’s eye when the waiter turned from a nearby table. Then he turned to Amy. “ ’Scuse me. You like another drink?”

“Only my coffee,” Amy said, raising her voice just enough so Quentin heard before he moved on.

Remsbach pushed his plate away. “Pitkin’s got some other notions too, but they’ll stay on the back burner until later. Y’know we hadda postpone the opening twice already, first on account of some stuff coming in late, and then when that business happened out there last week. Terrible thing.” He hunched forward, head and voice lowered. “You been talking to people in town today. Any of them come up with ideas about what happened?”

Amy shook her head.

“What about Hank Gibbs? He generally puts in his two cents’ worth about everything that goes on.”

“I didn’t get any confidential information, if that’s what you mean,” Amy said.

Otto Remsbach’s voice became a rumbling whisper.

“Wouldn’t have too much to do with him if I were you. He’s a real weirdo. I couldn’t get him to put that damn paper of his behind this Murder Mansion proposition either.” The scowl returned. “For all I know, maybe *he* stole the dummy.”

“Not likely.”

“Well, somebody did, that’s for damn sure. And nobody’s doing anything about finding it. I been after Engstrom and Banning to—he’s in charge of the State Highway Patrol around here—but I can’t get any action.”

He did, however, get his drink and Quentin served Amy her coffee as Remsbach continued. “You’re a reporter, right? You must of come up with some ideas about what happened out there last week.”

Amy shook her head. “I haven’t even seen the place.”

“That’s easy.” Otto Remsbach raised the tumbler to his lips, then lowered it to the table. As his pudgy fingers relinquished their grasp they marched forward to encamp on Amy’s wrist. “What say you and me take a run out there right now and look around?”

Amy knew the answer to that question and she hoped it wouldn’t be necessary to utter it. Instead she tried to free her wrist from its five captors.

But the fat fingers tightened their grasp and the voice slurred on. “Y’know, one room in that motel is all rigged up—shower, bed, the works —”

Suddenly the slurring ceased and the fingers fled as Remsbach looked up. Amy followed his gaze.

Sheriff Engstrom was standing beside their table.

Remsbach’s mouth gaped, then managed a lopsided smile. “Well, whaddya know? We were jus’ talking about you—”

The Sheriff ignored him. When he spoke his words were directed at Amy.

“Come with me, Miss Haines,” he said. “You’re under arrest.”

There was one thing Amy had to concede; Engstrom got her out of the dining room quickly and quietly, without attracting undue attention or provoking any objection from Otto Remsbach.

So far the Sheriff had lucked out, Amy told herself, but once they got to the parking area he was going to be due for a big surprise.

Instead it was her turn to be surprised when they emerged and he led her to the shiny late-model Olds that half blocked the circular driveway directly before them. Engstrom opened the passenger door.

“Hop in,” he said. “You’re not under arrest.”

“Then why—?”

Engstrom slammed the door as she slid across the seat, speaking through the open window. “That was just for Otto’s benefit. Anytime you mention a word like ‘arrest’ it tends to shut people up in a hurry. I just figured you didn’t want to drive back to town with a drunk.”

“But how did you know about him?”

Engstrom circled the front of the car and climbed in behind the wheel before responding. “Friday night at the Club,” he said. “Happens around the same time every week. I generally make it a point to look in just about now, just to see that they take good care of him.” Closing the door, he started the motor.

“What will they do?”

The Olds looped around the driveway and down the long flambeaux-guarded entryway, then turned left on the road beyond. “Nothing much. Take him upstairs to one of the guest rooms and let him sleep it off for a couple of hours. Don’t worry, he’ll be on his way to town before midnight, safe and sound.” Engstrom gave Amy a sidelong glance without seeming to divert his attention from the road ahead. “Hope he didn’t give you a bad time.”

Amy smiled. "Let's just say I was glad to see you."

"Old Otto's not really as bad as he sounds," Engstrom said. "More bark than bite."

Another sneak peek out of the corner of his right eye. "Did he happen to introduce you to anybody else out there?"

"Somebody named Charlie Pitkin. I couldn't quite get it straight whether he was a business partner or just his attorney."

Engstrom nodded. "It's hard to get anything straight when it comes to Pitkin. He's an operator."

"He had a lady with him," Amy said. "We weren't introduced."

"Pretty girl?"

"Very. Tall, blonde, green eyes—"

"That was Charlie's daughter. He's been a widower about three years now."

Once again Amy felt the snap go out of her judgment. But Engstrom seemed in a talkative mood and she might just as well take advantage of it. "Are you married?" she asked.

"Right."

"Any children?"

"No." There was a slight smile lurking beneath Engstrom's mustache. "Don't get home all that often."

The smile disappeared. "Figure it out for yourself," he said. "Department's got two cars. That calls for three deputies working on eight-hour shifts. There's another three doing warden duty at the jail, and Irene handling the office, thank God. She may have a leaky mouth but she runs the whole shooting match."

"There doesn't seem to be too much crime around here," Amy said.

"Any crime is too much, as far as I'm concerned. The way I see it, with a small setup like ours, prevention is easier than detection so I spend most of my time just moseying around, sort of a troubleshooter. Like tonight, when I heard you were up at the Club with Fatso." His dry cough was followed by quick correction. "Mr. Remsbach, I mean."

“Don’t worry, I know the nickname.” Amy smiled. “And I really do thank you for your concern.”

Sheriff Engstrom’s grunt was noncommittal. “That’s my job. Besides, it wasn’t just concern.”

“Curiosity?”

“That’s my job too.”

“And mine,” Amy said. “But I’m afraid we’ve both been disappointed. I didn’t find out anything from him tonight except what I already knew.”

Engstrom rolled down the window beside him. “Too much draft on you?”

Amy shook her head. “Fine with me. It cooled off a little tonight, I noticed.”

“Now that we’re finished with the weather,” Engstrom said. “Exactly what is a demonologist?”

“Would you mind running that past me once again?”

“What’s a demonologist?”

He’d caught her by surprise—intentionally, of course—but now she was ready with her answer. “Someone who specializes in demonology, a branch of learning dealing with beliefs and superstitions about demons and evil spirits.”

Engstrom grunted again. “That much I know. We have a dictionary kicking around the office. I looked it up.”

“So did I.”

“Definition I read says it’s also a systematic religious doctrine. Do you believe in such stuff?”

“No—do you?”

Engstrom shrugged. “I’m just a cop,” he said. “I was hoping maybe you could feel me in a little more. Didn’t Dunstable tell you anything about it?”

“No.” Amy glanced at him quickly. “You were the one who questioned him. What happened after I left this afternoon?”

“First thing I did was check, long distance, for those names you gave me; people who saw Dunstable when he came to your apartment. They confirmed what you told me.”

“Then what?”

“I turned him loose.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know where he went?” Amy said.

“Pretty damn nosy, aren’t you?” This time the dry cough sounded more like a dry chuckle. “Well, so am I. Jimmy Onager, one of my deputies, was coming off his shift when Dunstable left. I gave him a little overtime out of uniform. He tailed Dunstable straight to the bus station. Turns out his luggage, wallet, and ID were all stashed in a locker there.”

Amy frowned. “You searched him when you picked him up. Where did he hide the key?”

“Onager says it was lying right back of the edge above the top locker.”

“In plain sight?”

“Only to basketball players.” Engstrom’s mustache masked another smile. “Must have figured he might be collared so he stowed everything away. Then he hitched a ride out to the Bates place. He wouldn’t tell us anything except that it was with some truck driver who was just passing through. Says he doesn’t want to make trouble for him.”

Amy nodded. “He’s not a troublemaker.”

If there was such a thing as a dry sigh, Engstrom uttered it now. “Maybe not intentionally. And neither are you. But if you stay here and make waves there’s bound to be trouble. My advice is that you get out of town before anything happens.”

“I’m here because I’m writing a book. I still have work to do.”

“So do I.” Engstrom frowned. “Thing that bugs me is, why would a demonologist come here? What kind of work does *he* have a mind to do?”

“Where is he now?”

“Your boyfriend? Last I heard he checked into the Fairvale Hotel for the night.”

Amy shook her head. “Haven’t I made it clear to you? He’s *not* my boyfriend!”

“Too bad.” Engstrom’s voice and stare were level. “He’s got room 204, next to yours.”

**W**hen Amy heard the tapping on her door she wasn't frightened.

At least she could thank Engstrom for that. But it was still disturbing to know what waited on the other side of the door at this time of night. Or was she disturbed because she didn't know? Outside of that one brief exchange a week ago and a thousand miles away, the presence in the adjoining room remained a complete stranger. Now the muffled tones of his unfamiliar voice sounded above the persistent rapping.

"Miss Haines—"

"Yes?"

"This is Eric Dunstable."

"I know."

"Please, let me in. I've got to talk to you."

Amy hesitated. Letting him in meant letting him into her life. And what would she be letting herself in for? There was enough to contend with here already; the last thing she needed right now was to be involved with the plans and purposes of a rival seeker of information.

But how could she be sure he was a rival, and just what were those plans and purposes? There was only one way to find out, and she'd better take advantage of the opportunity to ask some key questions.

She called to him.

"Just a moment. I've got to get the key."

The key dropped out of her purse and, moments later, Eric Dunstable dropped in.

As Amy opened the door and caught sight of her visitor she wondered again if she had made the right decision. She wondered too about Sheriff Engstrom's insinuation. How could he possibly imagine that she could be conducting a liaison with this man?

Eric Dunstable was thin, bearded, bespectacled, and bowlegged; at first glance he looked like a tall Toulouse-Lautrec.

Not that she held any conscious bias against painters, handicapped or otherwise. But there was more to this package than just the wrappings. Behind the thick-lensed glasses the left eye twitched spasmodically with a life of its own. The rhythmic tic was disturbing, a soundless punctuation to the words that issued in a hoarse half whisper, accompanied by gesticulations of bony hands and almost pencil-thin fingers.

All right, Amy told herself, *so he isn't exactly a Rambo*. Just who and what he was were questions for which she needed immediate answers. Instead, she asked, "How did you know I was coming here?"

"I knew." His eyes twitched at her across the threshold. "Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Of course, Mr. Dunstable." Amy covered embarrassment with a nervous giggle, then checked herself as he entered. This was not the time or place for schoolgirlish giggling, but the nervousness was real. Not because she had a man in her hotel room—if indeed this wimpish weirdo was a man—but because of that simple phrase he had half whispered in response to her question. She gestured to him to take a seat in the armchair at the far corner of near the window, and as he did so she spoke.

"You said you knew I'd be coming here. What made you so certain?"

Dunstable shrugged. "There's nothing mysterious about it, Miss Haines. I read the same papers and listen to the same newscasts as you do. And when I learned about what had happened here last week it became obvious why you left town so suddenly and what your destination would be."

"Then I hope you'll forgive my breaking our appointment," Amy said. "I really should have let you know, but I left in such a hurry—"

"I quite understand." Dunstable nodded and twitched at her. "What's really important is that you arrived when you did. If you hadn't seen the Sheriff this afternoon I'm afraid I might still be behind bars."

Amy pulled the chair out from behind the little writing desk and seated herself. "You came here by bus?"

Dunstable nodded. "I don't drive," he said. "And I have a strong aversion to plane travel. 'The demons of the air,' I suppose."

It was Amy's turn to nod, but she wasn't quite sure what she was nodding at. "Demons of the air"—was that meant to be some sort of joke or was it a serious allusion? She vaguely remembered the phrase as a quotation but couldn't recall its source. What she did remember was another question relative to the same subject, and this was her chance to ask it now.

"Just what is a demonologist?"

Eric Dunstable actually smiled. "A demonologist is not necessarily an old man with a long white beard, dressed in flowing robes and wearing something that looks like a dunce cap. He's not a sorcerer or black magician, carries no magic wand, and has no magic powers. For that matter, a demonologist isn't even necessarily a *he*. There are women who study the subject too—and I suppose that's as good a definition as any. A demonologist is a student."

"Please, Mr. Dunstable, don't hide behind the dictionary definition." Amy leaned forward. "I'm interested in how you got into all this, and just exactly what it is that you do."

"I can tell you how I got into all this, as you put it. I'm a failed seminarian. Not because of my grades, but because of my faith—or lack of it."

"I don't understand."

"Neither did I. That was the insolvable problem. To me, the theological concept of good and evil seems valid and self-evident. But while modern religion pays lip service to the abstraction it rejects the reality behind it."

"In other words, you are saying you believe demons are real?"

"It's not a question of belief. I *know*."

"Have you ever seen one?"

"No." Again the whisper, again the tic. "A demon is a discarnate entity—it's incorporeal. The shapes it may assume when conjured up are, of course, hallucinatory. Perhaps a psychologist versed in ethnology and anthropology could explain why a Tibetan demon would appear radically different than a Nigerian or a Romanian one."

It crossed Amy's mind that she should be taking notes, but the thought vanished almost as quickly as it came. Better to channel it through a more direct route—in one ear and out the other. Nevertheless she wanted to hear

more. “You say that demons are disembodied and appear only as hallucinations. How can you prove they exist if you can’t see them?”

“One sees them indirectly through the people whom they possess.”

Much to her surprise, Amy didn’t find it all that easy to smile in response. Sitting late at night in a strange room in a strange town with a strange man who might have come straight out of a horror comic wasn’t really all that disturbing. It was obviously Dunstable who was, in a polite euphemism, disturbed, and that didn’t alarm her. What did was her own reaction to what they were talking about. It was all superstition, of course; this much she knew and accepted on the intellectual level.

But below that level, far below, below common sense and even consciousness, something stirred.

“Just how do people become ‘possessed’?” she said.

Dunstable shrugged. “Think of evil as a communicable disease. A virus attacks the body when one’s defenses are down. Evil seeks out entry points in the mind and spirit.”

Amy frowned. “Are you talking about hypnosis?”

“This has nothing to do with suggestion. Possession takes advantage of situations involving loss of conscious control—during anesthesia, nightmares, at the extremes of manic-depressive states, or in some situations involving drug abuse, including alcohol.” His tic winked at her in the lamplight. “Of course the easiest point of entry is during heightened emotional states—extreme rage, hysteria, sexual or religious frenzy.”

Amy found herself smiling. “I know some people who might take offense at your last two examples.”

“I know a lot of people who might just tell me I’m flat-out crazy,” he said. “But in my profession I’ve learned to accept this as an occupational hazard.”

Amy shook her head. “You told me demonologists are students. Now you say what you’re doing is a profession. Are you talking about things like ghost-hunting or witch-finding?”

Eric Dunstable’s nictitation served as confirmation. “Hunting and finding, yes. But it’s after that the real work begins.”

“Which is—?”

“Exorcism.” The hoarse voice placed odd and added emphasis on the second syllable.

So *that’s it*, Amy told herself. She glanced up quickly. “But I thought exorcism can only be performed by ordained members of the clergy.”

“Exactly the sentiments of the faculty at the seminary.” The bearded man sighed. “They expelled me when they learned I’d been experimenting on my own.” He shrugged. “I’ve been on my own ever since. Fortunately, my parents left me a modest inheritance some years ago, so I’m more or less free to live as I choose. And while I was denied elevation to holy orders, I don’t need to take orders from anyone, holy or otherwise.”

Amy waited for the tic, then broke in. “Is that what you intended to do when they caught you trying to enter the Bates place?”

“That house has an aura of evil—I could feel it.” Behind the thick lenses his eyes caught hers in a solemn stare. “Death lurks there.”

Again Amy felt something stirring deep below the level of consciousness, something that reacted irrationally to all this nonsense about death and demons. Death, of course, was, is, and will be a reality, but demons—

“This isn’t why you wanted to see me in Chicago,” she said. “Neither of us knew about the house then. I’m here because I want to write a book about Norman Bates.”

“And I came to exorcise the demon that possessed him.”

*Why didn’t I quit when I was ahead?* Amy asked herself. But it was too late now. “It’s generally believed Norman assumed the personality of his mother. That doesn’t exactly fit your definition of demonic possession. And it wouldn’t matter if it did. You can’t exorcise a dead man, and Norman Bates is dead.”

“The demon still exists.” In this context, Dunstable’s wink was almost confidential. “When Norman died it took possession of Adam Claiborne. It left him last week to seek out another instrument for its purpose.”

“What purpose?”

“The ultimate purpose of evil is to destroy, to kill. Often its essence as an entity is nourished by returning to its former haunts. That’s why it came to the Bates house the other night and took over whoever it was that killed the

little girl. Then it returned to Claiborne, when he attacked Dr. Steiner. After Claiborne collapsed I think it went on to a stronger, healthier body. If it left Claiborne then, someone else in this town must be possessed.”

“How can you tell?”

A pause, a blink, a shrug. “I can’t. But I understand they’re holding a memorial service for that little girl tomorrow. Everyone will be there.” The hoarse voice sounded its own echo. “That’s when I’ll know.”

Amy was free to sleep in, and because her sleep proved to be mercifully free of nightmares, it was midmorning when she awoke.

Strangely enough, the lengthy rest didn't seem to have refreshed her. Perhaps it was the fault of the weather; as she opened the window it became obvious that the day would be hot, muggy, overcast. It was too warm and too gloomy, and so was she.

The source of the warmth was obvious, but the reason for gloom eluded her. Even under cloudy skies, in the morning light her impressions of Eric Dunstable clearly revealed him for what he was. She only wished he hadn't shown up here to complicate her own situation. But neither his unwelcome presence nor his equally unwelcome prescience could account for her feeling of depression.

Most likely what bothered her was the idea of attending today's memorial service for Terry Dowson. Yes, that was it.

Amy always tried to avoid funerals, and had no strong desire to attend her own. Even though on this present occasion the corpse and casket would be absent, she had an uneasy feeling about the whole affair.

Maybe breakfast would help. But when she slid the watch onto her wrist after showering Amy realized that the best description of the meal would be brunch. There was no question of wearing her best for an appearance in the downstairs coffee shop. Memorial service didn't begin until three o'clock, so she'd have plenty of time to change into more formal attire before driving out.

The coffee shop was deserted; Amy had slipped through the crack between breakfast and lunch. For a moment she wondered if would have been a polite gesture to invite Eric Dunstable to join her. But if she had, he'd probably bring his theories about possession with him, and she wanted

no part of demons in her present mood or present meal. Checking the sandwiches on the menu, Amy quickly decided against the deviled ham.

What she did order was satisfactory, and after her second cup of coffee she was able to consider Dunstable with less distaste. Could anything that he had told her last night be of possible use to her when she sat down to write the book?

For a moment the notion seemed tempting; including such fantasizing would add a touch of spice to the dull fare of data she'd accumulated. But such sensationalism would defeat her purpose. The book must deal with murder and its impact on a small town, and do so realistically. So thank you and good-bye, Mr. Dunstable.

Thank you and good-bye to the waitress-cashier, then back upstairs. Once again in her room, Amy checked the wedge of sky beyond the window and noted little improvement. Adjusting the thermostat made the air-conditioning unit hum in a lower key but didn't seem to lower the temperature. It was going to be sticky at the memorial services, in more ways than one.

Amy pulled out her notebook and sat down at the tiny desk in the chair which Eric Dunstable had occupied last night. Which was appropriate enough, inasmuch as she was jotting down what she remembered of his conversation.

But why? Amy paused for a moment, frowning. Hadn't she just told herself that this material would be wrong for her purposes? What prompted her to waste time making notes about invisible entities commuting back and forth between various bodies in order to do the Devil's work?

Or had Dunstable mentioned the Devil? She couldn't recall, but what she did remember kept her occupied throughout the noon hour. Amy still hadn't changed her mind, but just in case she ever did, the notes were there.

Now it was time for a careful application of makeup and a careful decision about dress. Obviously the occasion called for wearing something dark and discreet, which left her with no choice at all. The only garment fitting that description was the heavy suit she'd hastily folded up in the overnight bag before making her hurried trip to O'Hare Airport the other

day. What would have been cool and comfortable for Chicago was hot and irksome here; the suit was unsuitable, but so be it.

She put on the skirt before putting on makeup, then donned her blouse and jacket just before departure. The outfit looked better than it felt, but she knew she would welcome the air-conditioning in her car because it worked as well as hummed.

There were only three people in the lobby, none of whom Amy recognized as she crossed to the exit. The sky outside withheld sight of the sun but filtered its fire as she made her way into the parking area. Approaching the rental car she was surprised to find it a bit smaller than she had remembered. For some reason or other its height seemed to have shrunk overnight, or had it merely wilted in the midday heat?

*No such thing. Some bastard had slashed the tires.* Amy seethed, steamed, then boiled over.

There was no doubt about what happened; the deep gashes scoring the treads were outrageously obvious. And Amy was obviously outraged as she marched up to the counter of the reception desk to report what she'd discovered.

Young Chambers stared at her, but neither his eyes nor his features registered any hint of emotional reaction. He told her he was sorry, he couldn't imagine what had happened, they'd never had anything like this here before, and several other lies. At least Amy thought they were lies, but she really didn't give a damn. All she wanted now—and insisted on—was for the clerk to call the nearest service station and get somebody over here immediately.

Immediately turned out to be twenty minutes later. The pickup that pulled into the parking slot beside her car came from SMITTY'S SERVICE STATION and its driver was none other than Smitty himself. He wore the obligatory bill-cap, khaki trousers, and a khaki shirt rolled up to the elbows. As he stooped to inspect the damage, Amy admired the tattoos on his forearms. She was still staring as Hank Gibbs drove up behind the truck and climbed out of his car, leaving the engine running.

"Hi, Smitty," he said. And to Amy, "What's going on here?"

She told him quickly, and halfway through the telling he frowned. By the time she finished her account the furrows on his forehead seemed permanently fixed.

“I don’t like it,” he said. “You’re going to give this town a bum rap when you leave here.”

“Looks as if somebody here doesn’t want me to leave,” Amy said. “I’ve got to get out to the memorial service.”

“That’s where I’m headed for,” Gibbs said. “Come on, I’ll give you a lift.”

“But what about my car?”

Gibbs walked over to the man from the service station. “Think you can help the lady, Smitty?”

The bill-cap bobbed in nodding response. “No problem. Whitewalls, I’m positive. Radials I can get from Kleemann.”

Gibbs glanced at Amy and she shook her head. “Never mind the radials,” he said. “Just see if you can get the job done this afternoon. The lady’s staying here at the hotel. Any idea what this is going to cost?”

Smitty ran a tattooed nude across his sweaty hairline. “Got to see how this size runs when I get back to the shop. Then there’s the labor—”

Hank Gibbs smiled, “just remember, you owe me.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll hold it down.”

“You want me to sign anything?” Amy asked.

Smitty shook his head. “I can’t make out an order until I check the price list. No point you waiting until I get back here. I’ll get your name and address from the register when I leave the bill at the desk.”

“Thank you,” Amy said.

She repeated the words to Gibbs as they drove away. He nodded but she noted his forehead was still furrowed.

“Anything wrong?” she said.

“You park your car in plain view on an open lot facing Main Street, then somebody comes along and slashes all four of your tires. Sounds wrong to me.” The car curved onto a country trunk road at the far end of town. “What did Engstrom have to say?”

“I haven’t reported it.”

“Why not? Don’t you have any ideas about what could have happened?”

“Ideas, yes. I think somebody may have asked the desk clerk at the hotel about what I was driving.”

“You’re talking about young Chambers.”

Amy nodded. “I have a strong impression he doesn’t like me, but that doesn’t prove anything. And if I make a fuss it’s only going to stir up more hard feelings.”

Gibbs shrugged. “Maybe you’re right. I’m just sorry you had to run into all this trouble.”

“It’s not your fault. Nobody asked me to come.” Amy’s jawline tightened as she spoke. “But now that I’m here nobody’s going to scare me away.”

Which was the truth, Amy told herself. This was no time to back off. If anything, what had happened to the car strengthened her determination. Added to it now was a new element—suspicion. Given the circumstances she could understand why someone might tell her to get out of town, but slashing those tires was more than a suggestion; it was a threat. A threat from someone out there who was capable of slashing more than tires—

Amy found herself forcing a smile to hide the thought behind it. But hidden or not, the thought remained. And once again the feeling of depression surfaced as Gibbs headed the car into the parking area on the far side of the church at the crossroads. The sight of the white spire looming against the lowering sky evoked memories of Amy’s high school art classes years ago. The church was pure Grant Wood; the clouds were something out of Hieronymus Bosch.

Abandoning the cool comfort of the car, they emerged into the swelter and stifle surrounding the lone structure that soared against the background of open fields and sullen sky.

The time was ten minutes to three, and they were by no means the first to arrive; perhaps thirty other vehicles had already parked and several more turned in as they climbed the church steps to the open entrance.

The former occupants of the cars outside clustered in the area that joined the main body of the church with the smaller sections on either side. Amy had no idea what might lay behind the closed door of the right-hand wing,

but the left opened on the chapel. At the moment only a few people were seated there; the majority lingered in the lobby. Most of the women were matronly, pleased to be out of housedresses and into their Sunday best; high heels elevated both body and spirit. Many of the males offered a sharp contrast as they stood sweating into suits worn only at weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Awkward and ill at ease here, they had the look of men who'd be handy around the house, and kept power tools in the garage, along with their fishing gear and hunting rifles.

Generally the sexes were separated into small groups conversing in the muted murmur inspired by their surroundings. Whose idea was it that one must whisper when in the presence of the Lord?

Amy ignored the irreverence as irrelevant, but she could not shake off the feeling of depression. If anything it was heightened here. Church or no church, the air of sanctity had not been cooled by air-conditioning, and body heat did nothing to alleviate the humidity. Even the mumbling seemed to add to the lobby's oppressive atmosphere. Too many people grouped in too small a space; the result was cluster-phobia.

All of which made it uncomfortable for Amy when Gibbs started to introduce her around. At the same time she realized it might be her only opportunity to identify some of the people whose names were bound to crop up in the book. During the next five minutes she met and exchanged polite greetings with the glum local fire chief, the grim-visaged principal of Fairvale Elementary School, and the beaming president of The First National Bank. His sunny smile was probably prompted by the fact that Fairvale didn't have a Second National Bank.

But happiness, like fresh air, seemed in short supply here. It certainly wasn't reflected in the faces she recognized—Dr. Rawson, Bob Peterson, Attorney Charlie Pitkin, or Irene Grovesmith. Gibbs pointed out Terry Dowson's parents but did not introduce her to them. She would have recognized them anyway, for both were dressed in mourning, their features gaunt with grief. What startled Amy was the bulge beneath the waist of the black dress—Terry's mother was pregnant. *In the midst of death is life.*

Gibbs also introduced her to Robert Albert, the mortician in charge of the proceedings. In the midst of death Albert seemed neither overjoyed nor

grief-stricken; he greeted her politely enough, but his eyes kept searching for new arrivals, like a theatre manager counting the house.

Now organ music sounded from within the chapel and the clutter began to converge toward its entrance in response. Excusing himself, the mortician went over to Terry Dowson's parents and escorted them into the chapel. Gibbs started to move forward but Amy touched his arm. "Let's wait a minute," she murmured. "I'd prefer the last row, but if I sat there before the place starts to fill up it would be too conspicuous."

"Gotcha." Gibbs smiled. "In case you don't like the show you want to sneak out without anybody noticing."

Amy shook her head. "I'm interested in the audience, not the performance. Which reminds me—I don't see any children here. Where's Mick Sontag?"

"She went into shock after the murder," Gibbs said. "Doc Rawson told her father to take her on a vacation. They're probably in Disneyland right now, and I wish I was there with them."

"I understand." Amy shrugged. "But duty calls."

"Better sit down, folks. We're gonna start, next couple minutes." It was not duty who called, but one of the mortician's ushers; he had the suave, courtly manner of a high school basketball coach.

As they moved into the chapel Gibbs' murmur blended with the music. "Kids are in school today. There was some talk about making this a half holiday for Terry's classmates, but busing them over would be a hassle." Amy moved into the second seat of the last row; only then did she notice Irene Grovesmith was just two seats away at her left. Gibbs had already taken the aisle seat at her right, and it was too late to move farther upfront. Instead she glanced forward toward the lectern on the podium, seeking the source of sound. But there was no organ, no organist; somewhere in another room stereo piped its sacred strains into the chapel's secular speaker system.

Now she turned her attention to the audience seated ahead. There were only a few people Amy might possibly recognize face-to-face, let alone from behind, but she tried to search them out. It was a vain effort; Sheriff Engstrom wasn't here and she couldn't find Doris Huntley or the desk clerk

and waitresses from the hotel. Some people had to work. What did surprise her was the absence of most of the people she'd seen last night, the country club set. And where was Otto Remsbach?

She leaned over and voiced the question to Gibbs. His response sounded against the hymnal background.

"He won't show here, because of the feud over the Bates place. He and Archer hate each other's guts."

"Not so."

The voice was scarcely more than a shrill whisper, yet clearly audible.

Amy glanced up into the wizened face of a tall, white-haired, bearded man with the eyes of an Old Testament prophet.

He had entered from the lobby and come up behind them unobserved; now, as he bent forward to address Gibbs, there was no need for further identification or introduction.

"I don't hate Otto Remsbach," said Reverend Archer. "My feeling is directed only toward his project, his plans to capitalize on the suffering and torment of others. Don't you realize if he hadn't built on the Bates property that little girl wouldn't have had any reason to go out there? She'd still be alive today!"

Even though the whisper was soft, its shrillness carried. Nearby, heads were beginning to turn, and Gibbs nodded hastily. "I know your position on this, Reverend," he murmured.

"Then why don't you take a stand on it? Remsbach has his Opening scheduled there for day after tomorrow. Once that happens there's no telling what it may lead to. It's high time you ran an editorial."

"I'll think about it."

"Do so. One way or another, this man must be stopped before we find ourselves with more blood on our hands." Now and only now, his gaze pierced Amy's. "We have enough to live down already, thanks to the media," he said. "The last thing we need is strangers coming into town to blacken its name and—"

The music halted abruptly, and so did Archer's voice. But he himself did not halt; straightening, he moved briskly down the aisle in the direction of the lectern on the podium.

Amy and Gibbs exchanged glances, and his slight shrug said it all. To the left, Irene Grovesmith had turned to listen as Archer spoke; now, even in this muggy heat, Amy was chilled by her icy stare.

There was hostility here, no doubt about it, but thus far nothing to indicate demonic possession. Unless, of course, Eric Dunstable could make good his claim and recognize it.

*Dunstable.* She scanned the heads and shoulders in the rows ahead, quickly but in vain. Why wasn't he here? Had something happened to him; had something been *made* to happen to him? A foolish idea, of course. Just because some of these people looked hostile that didn't necessarily mean they were dangerous.

Reverend Archer's attack was merely verbal, and this only because he had no other targets. She and Gibbs were the only press people here today, because as far as major media was concerned the story was dead. Like Terry. There were no leads so no reason for them to follow up on a murder where no one would ever find the killer. Unless Dunstable was right.

Reverend Archer mounted the podium, gripped the far sides of the lectern and the attention of his audience.

"Let us pray," she said.

Heads bowed obediently as Archer's voice boomed.

*"O Lord, we are gathered here today to invoke thy blessing upon the soul of Theresa Dowson—"*

As Archer's voice rose, so did Amy's gaze. Disobediently she glanced toward the podium, trying to discover what there was about it which disturbed her. Then she realized there were no floral offerings, no wreaths or bouquet on the platform behind the speaker. It was only after a moment of reflection that she could understand the reason; after all, this was a memorial service, not a funeral. Probably plenty of flowers still on Terry's grave right now, wilting in the late afternoon heat.

*"—memory of that poor child struck down shall not be forgotten, but we console ourselves with the knowledge that our lamb is safe in the bosom of God. It is we who remain in mortal peril as long as the evildoer is abroad."*

Did he stare at Amy when he spoke those last words or was it just her imagination? She wasn't sure, but now the bowed heads before her were

gradually rising as the pretext of prayer yielded to the demands of stiffening neck muscles.

*“But the sacrifice of the lamb was not in vain. It teaches us that we must repent of our wickedness and forsake its ways.”*

Was he talking about her? But her ways weren't all that wicked. And it was up to Dunstable to find the real evildoer. If there really was a demon here, this was his chance for a demonstration. Better Dunstable with his tic than this fanatic with the relentless stare.

*“Hear us, O Lord, as we resolve ourselves to walk in the paths of righteousness in loving memory of that sweet innocent lamb. In the words of the psalmist, ‘lead us not into temptation’—”*

Amy was only half listening, but now his words intruded on her thoughts. Could he be reading her mind? Was he referring to the temptation of using Dunstable's crazy theories in her book?

And it was a temptation, of course. She'd done well with the first one, even without any special attention from the good folks at Stacy Publishing Company. Reviews and sales had been better than anyone expected, good enough to gain her double the advance on this effort. A thoroughly researched account of the Bates case and its mystique would probably do even better.

But even better wasn't good enough. Admit it, what she wanted was a smash. Full-page ads, top talk shows, the nationwide tour with a limo waiting at every airport, the works. She was tired of telling people she was a writer and hearing them say, “Yes, I know, but what do you do for a living?” She was tired of being introduced as “Miss Hayes.” Why settle for that when she had a sales gimmick like demonic possession right here in her hot little hands? It might destroy the credibility of the book, but it could create a name for her. *Amelia Haines, media personality*. And as far as that goes, there were millions of people out there who did believe in demons, ghosts, supernatural powers.

So why not take advantage of the opportunity? And quickly, before somebody else beat her to the draw. All she really had to do here was take a look at the Bates property; stick around for the Grand Opening, day after tomorrow, then get out.

*“—let her memory abide in our hearts even as we erase the memory of the other, his memory, from our minds. For his was the way of the transgressor and it is doubly a transgression for those who seek to resurrect his memory for gain. Let the dead bury the dead—”*

He was a fine one to talk, Amy told herself. In his own way Reverend Archer was capitalizing on the death of that child just as much as Otto Remsbach. Or herself, if she yielded to temptation.

*“—It is for us, the living, to cherish loving thoughts of the lamb who has departed from our flock and returned to the green and eternal pastures of heaven—”*

Amy wasn't all that interested in the sheep-herding business, but the townsfolk down front seemed moved and there was audible sobbing from the first row where Terry's parents and relatives were seated. She glanced to the left toward Irene Grovesmith; her ice-cube eyes had melted into tears.

As she did so the voice ceased sounding from the podium; gazing forward, she noted that Reverend Archer's head was again lowered in silent prayer, though only for a moment.

Then the invisible organ sounded again, this time in an accompaniment for an invisible choir. A thought suddenly occurred to Amy as the voices sounded. Wouldn't it be funny if God didn't like singing?

She glanced to her right. Whether or not God was a music lover remained debatable, but obviously Hank Gibbs was not. Sometime during the last few minutes he'd left his seat and headed for the exit.

Why hadn't he let her know his intentions? Just a nudge would have done the trick. Unless there was something wrong—

The thought prompted Amy to rise and propelled her to the doorway. In the lobby, electronically evangelical voices echoed. There was no sign of Gibbs' presence. Perhaps he'd gone outside to escape the sound and capture a breath of fresh air. If so, he'd acted sensibly; even though the lobby was deserted the stagnant, odoriferous heat persisted here.

Filtering through the speaker system from the chapel Amy caught a few words of the hymn sung by the choir, something to do with “The blood of the lamb.” An unfortunate phrase, in view of Reverend Archer's sermon.

She turned toward the lobby door, eager to make her exit before hearing any further sanguinary references.

As she did so the door opened to admit a figure momentarily silhouetted against the outer sunlight. Amy saw that the man was not Gibbs, but long before he reached her side she recognized the rumpled suit, the hair and beard; today he was wearing shades that concealed ocular spasm but didn't improve his general appearance. If anything the dark glasses added a slightly sinister touch that, in his case, seemed superfluous.

Amy greeted him softly as he approached. "Mr. Dunstable, I've been looking for you. Why weren't you at the memorial service?"

"I misjudged the length of time it would take me to get here from town," he said.

"You walked here? In this heat?"

Eric Dunstable nodded. "I had no choice. None of the cars headed in this direction would stop and give me a lift." If his sigh was accompanied by a rueful smile his beard concealed it. "Not very hospitable around here, are they?"

*But very cautious.* Amy's response was silent. No point trying to explain to Dunstable that Fairvale citizens took a dim view of strangers who might have emerged from the pages of *Gross-Out Comics*. Particularly when the stranger in question claimed to be a demonologist.

"I'm sorry," Amy said. And she was. After his long hike here in the heat Dunstable aroused her sympathies rather than her suspicions.

Nevertheless, she glanced around before speaking again. Sound piping forth from the chapel indicated ceremonies there hadn't concluded. But aside from herself and Dunstable the lobby held only shadows.

"You didn't happen to see Hank Gibbs drive off when you got here?" Amy murmured.

"The newspaper editor?" Dunstable shook his head.

"He might have gone up the road in the other direction." As she spoke Amy realized her voice had dropped almost to a whisper. What was there about this lobby that still retained the power to subdue speech as well as spirit?

Whatever it was Eric Dunstable felt it too. Weary and bedraggled, he seemed suddenly revitalized, alert and aware amid the shadows. He was watching, waiting, listening, though not necessarily to the ethereal voices of the choir.

Staring at him, Amy reconsidered. The way his head was poised didn't indicate a response to sound; absurd as it might seem it reminded her of something entirely different. *A bloodhound catching the scent—*

Now he spoke, and the shadows listened. The shadows listened, and she heard the whispered words. "I was right. There is evil here."

"Yes. I sense it too." Amy turned at the sound of Reverend Archer's voice. He was standing directly behind them. And now his only forefinger jabbed out toward Dunstable as he spoke again.

*"You are the evil one!"*

It was deputy Dick Reno who broke it up before their voices escalated into a shouting match. He came through the front door just as the audience started to emerge into the lobby from the chapel. The organ music continued to sound, and this helped; at least it served to muffle Archer's angry outbursts and Dunstable's hoarse rejoinders.

But it required Dick Reno's physical intervention to separate the two men before their altercation was generally noticed, and it took the combined efforts of Dr. Rawson and grey-haired Mrs. Archer to pull the angry clergyman aside.

For a moment Amy's full attention was diverted as wife and physician led Reverend Archer across the lobby and into a narrow hallway beyond. When she turned to locate Eric Dunstable he was no longer at her side and Dick Reno shook his head. "Minute I let go of his arm he took off like a bat outta hell. Mind telling me what that hassle was all about?"

Amy cast a sidelong glance at the crowd moving toward the exit, then shook her head. "I'd rather not talk about it now."

"Just as well." Reno nodded. "It'll be easier for you when you're in the car."

Amy frowned. "Don't tell me I'm under arrest again!"

Reno shook his head. "Hank Gibbs was pulling out just as I drove in. Asked me if I'd mind driving you back to town. Said he didn't know services would run so late. He has to put the paper to bed for tomorrow, and asked me to give you his apologies."

"I understand." Amy paused. "Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Mind driving me?"

"My pleasure." Reno led her down the steps, then followed the driveway to the far side of the church. "I parked in back," he said. "Figured people

might get the wrong idea if they saw you climbing into a patrol car.”

“Thanks.” Amy smiled. “I appreciate that.” Which was true; the last thing in the world she needed right now was to have the good citizens of Fairvale mistake her for a criminal. She had already been convicted of being female and was suspected of being a writer as well as an out-of-towner to boot.

Once the patrol car swung out into the narrow single-lane road behind the church she felt more secure. Safe from prying stares and insulated from muggy heat. Apparently Reno had already mapped out a route that would take them into town along the back roads, and she was grateful for his consideration.

As he peered forward through the windshield the flattened outline of his nose marred his profile. When he glanced toward her the imperfection vanished.

“Comfortable?” he said. “I can turn up the air-conditioning if you like.”

“This is fine.” Amy smiled. “I was just thinking—maybe some of your locals resent me but the rest of you go out of your way with hospitality. I haven’t had to drive myself once since I got here.”

“Don’t knock it,” Reno said. “Might as well save wear and tear on the tires.”

Amy frowned, and he caught it. “What’s the matter, did I say the wrong thing?”

Amy shook her head. “No, you just reminded me of something.” Having gone that far she decided to go all the way and told him about what had happened to her car in the hotel parking lot.

He listened without comment until she finished. “Want to file a complaint?”

“Be honest with me,” Amy said. “What good would it do?”

Reno shrugged. “Not much, I guess. People around here—well, you saw them at the services. Some of them can get pretty uptight over anything to do with what happened out there at the Bates place last week. Hell, some of them are still uptight about what happened there thirty years ago.”

“I know,” Amy said.

“That’s one of the things they’re uptight over—what you know, or what they think you know. I’m talking about the real diehards now, folks like Reverend Archer, Irene Grovesmith, and those older people. The rest of us would just as soon forget the whole thing.”

“Us?” Amy met his gaze. “Meaning you feel that way about it too?”

“I guess I can speak for most people my age who were born and brought up around here,” Reno told her. “I was only five when it all started, and I can still remember the way those Sunday drivers jammed the streets. The whole town was crawling with reporters, curiosity-seekers, people coming in from as far away as New York and California. To tell the truth, it was pretty exciting, seeing all those strangers and looking at all of those out-of-state licenses.”

Amy nodded. “I can imagine it would be, for a five-year-old.”

“Trouble was, I turned six. That’s when they began busing me to school over to Montrose. Kids were enrolled there from all over the area and every last one of them knew about the Bates case. Anyone who came from Fairvale got dumped on, and I don’t know which was the worse—the older kids trying to beat up on us or the younger ones trying to tell those stupid Norman jokes.”

“I know what you mean,” Amy said. “I’ve heard them too.”

“But not for twelve years running,” Reno said. “Seems like they never let up, and the more jokes they told, the less folks were laughing back in Fairvale. I can’t explain it, except that the shadow of those murders hung over the town like a cloud that never cleared away. I guess that’s one of the reasons I was glad to go off to the university—until I got there, that is. Because when they found out where I came from the jokes started all over again.”

“What was your major?” Amy asked.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Dick Reno said. “I had some idea about ending up in law school. But I said the hell with it and dropped out at the end of my freshman year. Came back here, passed the tests, and hired on as a deputy.”

“Any regrets?”

“Yes and no.” Reno hung a sharp left and suddenly they were moving along a street between two rows of tract housing. “For a few years after I

got back it looked like things were improving; the younger generation wasn't all that steamed up about what had happened way back when. I guess most of us knew Norman Bates was still alive over at State Hospital, but you might say he was really just a name to us. And nobody bothered going over there with candy or flowers." If Reno was attempting to lighten up, his tone of voice didn't match his words. "Then Bates escaped and Dr. Claiborne flipped out—well, you know the rest. After that it started all over again. And last week—"

"Do you have any ideas about what happened?" Amy asked.

For a moment Reno didn't reply; his attention was focused on parking. Glancing up, Amy was startled to realize that they had pulled into the area adjoining the hotel. Then he spoke. "Notice your car's back," he said. "Looks like they put on a new set of tires for you."

Amy followed his gaze and nodded her confirmation. "So I see. But you still haven't answered my question. I'd like to know if you have any ideas about what happened last week."

Dick Reno leaned across her, his hand reaching out to open the door on the passenger side. "Tell you later," he said. "At dinner."

Amy hesitated. Was he coming on to her? Right now the answer didn't matter. More important were answers to questions about the murder case. That's what she had come here to get, and if somebody wanted to throw in a free meal, why not? It certainly couldn't be any worse of an ordeal than last night's dinner with that sophisticate and raconteur, Fatso Otto.

"Thanks for the invitation." Again she hesitated, but only for a moment. "You weren't thinking of eating here at the hotel, were you?"

"Don't worry, I can feed you better than that." Now it was Reno's turn to pause. "Just one thing. I'll be going back on duty after we finish. Would it embarrass you if I wear my uniform?"

"Not if we're having dinner somewhere out of town." Amy smiled. "It may even help me feel protected."

"Good thinking." Reno pulled the door shut after she stepped out of the car.

"Suppose I pick you up right here at six-thirty."

“That sounds fine to me.” Amy waved as he put the car into gear. “See you.”

But there were other things to see before that time. First, the bill for tires and service awaiting her at the counter of the reception desk. She received it and her car keys from a matronly-looking lady clerk whose features resembled those of the waitress Amy had encountered last night in the coffee shop. A sister, perhaps?

Amy dismissed the possibilities of nepotism as she considered the realities of the bill. The total for tires and labor came to two hundred and sixty-five dollars, which seemed reasonable enough; apparently Smitty had heeded Hank Gibbs’ warning and inflated the tires rather than the price.

Once again she made a mental note to check on the rental car agreement and the status of her insurance coverage, and once again she neglected doing so after reaching her room. Instead she spent the next half hour adding to her notes. Nothing earthshaking had happened at the memorial services today and neither Reverend Archer’s sermon nor his dust-up with Dunstable would probably get more than a passing mention in the book. Still, one never knows, and it was her best to put things down before details faded from her memory.

By the time she finished Amy’s watch told her it was five-thirty. The clouded sky beyond her window had a sickly yellowish cast, which indicated the weather was still hot and sticky. And so was she.

In the shower she debated what to wear for the evening. It would help if she knew the sort of place she’d be dining at, but aside from that there were other factors to consider. Somehow she must combine comfort with looking her best. All she really had beside the suit was the blue dress, which she could wear with the black bag and the heels. Too formal? After all, Reno warned her he’d be in uniform. And if he had to go back on duty at nine he’d be staying in uniform, worse luck.

Toweling dry, Amy made a face at herself in the bathroom mirror. What put that thought in her mind; who was really coming on to whom now?

Might as well admit it, Reno did attract her and after all it had been a while since she and Gary split, just before the book came out. Come to think of it he and Dick Reno both had one thing in common; men with dark,

curly hair seemed to get to her every time. Of course Gary had been shorter and his nose wasn't broken. He was a lover, not a fighter, and at first this was no problem. It took her several months to learn that he was also slightly wimpish and very much of a mother's boy. The old barracuda ran his life and had some weird ideas about how he should live it. Amy should have suspected Gary's mother from the first; after all, what kind of a woman would name her son after a dead movie star or a town in Indiana?

Still, there'd been good times and smooth sailing until the barracuda roiled the waters and Gary went overboard. There'd been no one since and during the past six months the only man in her life had been Norman Bates.

She needed a change, and quickly, but tonight was definitely not the night. And even if the opportunity arose, she wasn't all that certain it would be a wise thing to get involved with a small-town deputy sheriff. Not in this particular town anyway. All the same, there was no harm in paying particular attention to her makeup after she'd pulled the dress over her head and fluffed out her hair. She sprayed her cologne in strategic spots at six twenty-six, picked up her bag and dropped her room key into it outside her door at six twenty-seven, and emerged from the lobby exit at precisely six-thirty.

Twilight time, but no breeze had risen to dispel heat or humidity. Most shops along the street closed at six; customers and owners alike had gone home for dinner, and there were few drivers passing to note Amy's escort and his vehicle as he arrived.

As she climbed into the passenger seat the streetlights came on and they took off, rounding the far corner. Once again Dick Reno seemed to have mapped out a route that would render them inconspicuous. This time they headed for the freeway; here too the traffic seemed light.

But that term didn't describe Reno's mood. He'd greeted her cordially enough and there was no doubt about his reaction to her appearance. But even in their small talk about the weather his voice was pitched low and his shadowed features seemed immobile. A dark mood.

Amy tried to fill gaps of silence with comments on her surprise at the reasonable price Smitty had charged for replacing her tires. Responding to Reno's lack of response she did her best to deliberately avoid discussing matters of great concern. But before she could stop, she found herself

saying, “Maybe I should have asked Smitty to keep the car in the garage overnight. I hope that whoever did a job on my tires won’t decide to try again.”

Dick Reno shook his head. “Wouldn’t worry about that. Seems to me what happened last night wasn’t vandalism. Looks to me it was supposed to be some kind of warning.”

“Like get out of town and stay out?” Amy nodded. “But I didn’t get out. So what happens next?”

“There’s a regular drive-by along Main Street every half hour or so. Engstrom’s given orders to keep a special lookout to see if your car’s okay. I don’t think there’ll be any problem.”

“You’re my problem,” Amy said. “You sound as if you’re down. Did something happen after you dropped me off this afternoon?”

“I’m all right. Haven’t eaten anything since breakfast, so what I probably need right now is to put a little food in my stomach.”

“And a drink.”

“Not now. Don’t forget, I’ll be going back on duty, but don’t let that stop you—the drinks here are special.”

The size and variety of the various rum concoctions at Wing Chu’s were surprising, as was the presence of a mandarin cuisine Chinese restaurant nestled on the hillside just beyond the freeway’s second turn-off ramp.

She told Reno so, and for the first time since his greeting tonight a smile accompanied his reply. “Place is really run by a Swede. Even the name’s a fake. Wing Chu—reverse it.”

“Chu Wing?” Amy laughed. “I get it. But you say the food here is good?”

“Take a look at the menu.” She did so, while sipping at the drink she’d ordered, a combination of fruit salad and alcohol ignorantly identified as a *Tahitian Zombie*. There were, Amy realized, no zombies in Tahiti—but there was enough rum in this drink to create one right here.

She manipulated her straws carefully, watching as Dick Reno made do with his ice water. The booth was comfortable; obviously he was not.

“Find anything you like?” he said.

“Suppose you order for us?”

And he did. The waiter was short, his complexion saffron, though his accent indicated origins closer to Mexico City than to Beijing. But the names of the dishes that Reno rattled off sounded authentically oriental.

Reno glanced at her as the waiter departed. “Hope you’ll like what I ordered.”

“I’m not worried,” she said. “I trust you.”

“Thanks.”

“But why don’t you trust me?”

“Never said I didn’t.”

“Level with me. Something *did* happen after you dropped me off at the hotel.” Amy leaned forward. “It’s connected with the murder case, isn’t it?”

“No—but you are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Engstrom asked me what I was doing for dinner tonight, and I told him. He made some suggestions.”

“Such as?”

“Seeing what I could do to discourage you from running around and asking all these questions.”

“I know he doesn’t like me,” Amy said.

Reno shook his head. “Wrong. He thinks you’re a neat lady. It’s your book he doesn’t like. And neither do I.”

“Hey, give me a break! How can you be judgmental about something that hasn’t even been written yet?”

“Because of all the other stuff we’ve seen before. Hasn’t been a year gone by without some newspaper or magazine article coming out with the same old story on Norman, and new ones of their own. Was Norman fooling around with his mother before she died? How many other girls could he have murdered and buried in the swamp? Don’t forget, they came damn close to making a movie about him until Claiborne messed that up for them. And what he did only made things worse; they started doing pieces on Claiborne too. Now you’re going to dump the whole mess into a big fat book.”

“No such thing,” Amy said, then halted as the waiter wheeled up the cart bearing their order. They sat silently as he served them; Amy recognized the chow mein, some of the Chinese vegetables, and most of the scents, but the rest required exploration.

Lifting her fork, she explored and, as she did so, explained. “I’ve researched most of that newspaper and magazine material you mentioned, and I agree a lot of it is sensationalism and sheer speculation. It all adds up to what you said—a real mess—but you’re wrong about what I intend to do with it. I’m not going to dump all this garbage into my book; if it turns out to be big and fat that’s because I intend to fill it with facts. The reason I’m here is to establish as many of those facts as I can and try to set the record straight.”

“You really think that’s going to do any good?”

“Tell your friend the Sheriff he and I are really in the same business,” Amy said. “Both of us are searching for clues. And yes, I do think my book will do some good. This afternoon you were telling me about what it was like to grow up haunted by memories of those murders. The only way to deal with the jokes, gossip, and those wild legends is to get at the truth. If I can manage to set it down once and for all, Fairvale will be rid of its ghosts. And these sweet-and-sour shrimp are delicious.”

“I hope you’re right,” Reno said. “About the book, I mean. I sure as hell don’t like the idea of my son growing up here and having to cope with all that crud.”

“Son?” Amy’s fork dug into a slice of abalone, then halted. “You’re married?”

“I was.” Reno seemed slightly more relaxed now as he started to eat. “David’s eleven now, same class in school as Terry. What happened last week shook him up pretty bad. I’d like to talk to him about it.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Divorce papers say I can see him twice a month, on Sundays. Way the schedule works out my next chance comes this weekend.” Reno scowled. “One of these days I’m going back to court to get custody. That kid belongs with me, particularly at a time like this. I hate to think of him sitting there in the house night after night because of the curfew—”

“No wonder I haven’t seen any children around.”

Reno nodded. “Been ordered on since the day after Terry was killed.”

“Sheriff Engstrom didn’t tell me about that.” Amy paused; the abalone was good too. “I guess he’s not anxious for me to know everything that’s going on.”

“Neither was I, until you explained about the book.” Reno’s frown vanished and he started to eat again. “But Engstrom and I don’t always see eye to eye. For one thing I don’t buy his idea that a transient could’ve committed the murder. Banning’s people with the Highway Patrol picked up a couple the day after it happened, but both of them had alibis that came out clean. Way I figure it, if a vagrant was involved then why didn’t he rip off some of the stuff in the house?”

“Something was taken,” Amy said. “That wax figure of Mrs. Bates.” She hesitated. “But maybe it helps to prove your point. Why would a vagrant want to steal a thing like that?”

“Why would anyone *make* a thing like that in the first place?” Reno’s scowl was back again. “You think your book will help? Forget it, lady; nothing’s going to help as long as that damn Remsbach is around. When he opens that tourist trap of his day after tomorrow he’ll really trash this town for keeps. He’ll trash the lives of our kids too. Talking to David isn’t going to do any good, any more than trying to talk to Remsbach.”

“I’m sorry,” Amy said. “I didn’t mean to spoil your dinner.”

“Not your fault.” Reno did his best to transform his scowl into a smile. “Let’s not talk about that business anymore. Here, how about trying a little fried rice?”

Amy tried the fried rice, tried not to talk about anything connected with the case, tried to elevate Dick Reno’s spirits with small-talk. By the time the meal ended she had seen no recurrence of his frown, and when they parted back at the entrance to the hotel Amy was reassured his mood had shifted. One thing was certain; she’d hate to get on his bad side. Maybe that was the reason for the divorce—

“Thanks for coming with me,” he said.

“Thanks for asking.”

“Hope I didn’t spoil your evening,” he told her. “Maybe you’ll give me another chance before you leave.”

She nodded. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Good. Time for me to punch in. Got to get moving now.”

As he drove off she turned away. Behind her the town seemed to have settled down for the night, streets and houses sleeping under a dark blanket.

But not Amy.

**F**at Otto Remsbach grabbed the tab and tossed it on the floor. Ignoring Doris Huntley's stare of disapproval he had himself a nice long swig.

What the hell was wrong with Doris tonight? Maybe her mother had told her it wasn't nice for a gentleman to drink beer out of a can when he's in bed with a lady. But where did Doris get off, thinking she was a lady? And if her mother was so uptight about drinking out of a can why didn't the old bitch come along with Doris and pour his beer into a glass?

Remsbach erupted a belch, indicating both appreciation of his drink and of his wit. Doris was scowling, but to hell with that too. This wasn't Remsbach's first drink tonight and it wasn't going to be his last, either; if his little chicky-baby didn't like it she could go stuff herself. He'd had it with Doris—too many times, and you can say that again. Somebody ought to tell her that smoking in bed isn't ladylike either and maybe injurious to your health, particularly when the guy you're balling kicks you out on your big fat butt.

Right now he was getting a good look at it because she'd stubbed her cigarette in the bedstand ashtray and settled down on the pillow with her back turned. That's another way ladies hint their dissatisfaction with their bed-partners. Well, when it came right down to it he wasn't all that satisfied himself. Another thing; just thirty seconds after she turned she started making those noises. Real ladies don't snore.

Remsbach dropped his empty beer can on the floor beside the bed and opened a fresh one. He was starting on the second six-pack already, but he might as well drink up before the rest of the cans got warm. What he needed was some kind of portable refrigerator in here, some place to put the beer and keep it cold. Maybe he could build shelves in Doris; she was frigid enough.

Remsbach substituted his chuckle for a belch. Hotdamn, he was really on a role tonight—a regular Johnny Carson—and all off the top of his head too.

Now he took another gulp of beer because the top of his head didn't feel so good; too much strain on the brain today. A lot of the stuff he'd ordered came in this morning, parcel post and Federal Express. Postcards with a picture of the Bates house, Bates Motel stationery, and those damn fool souvenir buttons reading *Norman Loves Mommy*. The buttons were Pitkin's idea; a lot of this deal was his idea, including all those ads that had to be proofed for the papers in Montrose, Rock Center, and the six other weekly rags in the surrounding counties. Too early to risk what it cost running them statewide or pay big-city advertising rates, but if these one-shots in the nearby weeklies pulled in enough suckers for the Grand Opening day after tomorrow, Pitkin wanted to give the dailies a shot. Next step would be radio, then TV.

Right now he had his hands full just keeping track of orders and deliveries. Tomorrow somebody would come along to haul this crap out to the property and stash it in the motel office ready for displays and sales. At least Remsbach hoped someday would be coming around; that was Charles Q. Pitkin's department. He was in charge of all hiring, from one-time truck deliverymen to the full-time staff out at the motel. "Full time" was maybe stretching it a little; they'd be starting out with one girl handling sales at the motel and two guys who would spell each other for the guided tours, motel and house both included. Open ten to six, closed Sundays. If they lucked out the next thing would be staying open nights—Charles already had some kinky notions about spooking things up for the evening trade. And they'd pave over and fence in a parking area with gates and a tollbooth.

*If they lucked out.* Otto Remsbach tackled beer number—who-the-hell cares. They'd better luck out, after the bundle it was costing him just to get started. But like Charles said, he had to do something, because agrobiz was sure as hell ruining farm implement sales; the little guys were going belly-up and the big guys bought their supplies and equipment at quantity discounts from outside sources.

So it was time to fish or cut bait. Nothing to worry about; Charlie only gambled on sure things and his dice were always loaded. What was it he'd

said? “You’ll know business is good at the motel when you’ve gotta make a reservation to use a pay toilet.”

Charlie was a smart-ass but he sure’s hell could come up with ideas that landed him on the profit side of the ledger. And this was just the beginning. The next step would be to build a *real* motel out there. Then they’d need statewide advertising, and after that they’d go national. *Visit the Bates Motel and the Houses of Horror!*

That was another one of Pitkin’s brainstorm. Not just a wax museum but a whole string of separate exhibits. If they could have a motel office for Norman and a house for the old lady, then why not build something for characters like the Boston Strangler, the Manson family, and all those famous weirdos? Hell, with enough loot they could put up a whole street like London in the old days and do Jack the Ripper.

“Theme parks,” that’s what they call such places now. With the right kind of luck it could end up with something like Disneyland or Universal Tours. And the big money wasn’t just from admissions. The real name of the game was concessions. Jesus, think how much you could take in just from the beer franchise alone!

The thought of beer triggered another belch, and its echo awakened his companion. Doris Huntley rolled over on her back and blinked up at him, bleary-eyed.

“Wha’ you say?” she mumbled.

“Nothing, I was just thinking about beer.”

“That’s pretty much all you ever think about. So what else is new?”

“Not this beer, dummy.” Remsbach gestured with the hand holding the can. “I’m talking beer sales out at the Bates place.” His hand uncurled and dropped the empty container to the floor.

“Don’t you have to have a license?”

“Sure, and one for fast-food stands too. That’s where your boss comes in.”

“Don’t be too sure. I know Charlie’s gotten liquor licenses for a couple of clients before, but it wasn’t easy. Took a lot of doing and a lot of time.”

“I can wait.” Remsbach rewarded his promise of patience with another beer from the six-pack. “We’re gonna need permits for the motel and the

concessions first before we get into the big stuff.”

“Know something, Otto? You ought to kick the beer habit.” Doris favored him with a frown of virtue as she lit a cigarette. “Get loaded like this and you don’t make any sense.”

“Hell I don’t!”

To prove it he explained what he had in mind. How much came from him and how much came from Charlie didn’t matter—once this thing got off the ground it’d be bigger than both of them. Plastic souvenir knives, with *Yours truly, Jack the Ripper* stamped on the handles. A roomful of waxworks in nurse’s uniforms, like those eight girls who got themselves snuffed in Chicago years ago. Maybe a bunch of murderer masks, at least the dead ones who couldn’t sue for invasion of privacy.

“How about that?” Remsbach laughed. “Bastards like that always squawking about somebody invading their privacy, right after they invaded somebody else’s privates with a butcher knife.”

“You’re disgusting!”

“Am I? Well, there’s one hell of a lotta people out there who don’t think so. They’re gonna come see, and your boss and I are gonna make megabucks.”

Doris abandoned her cigarette and reached for her undergarments. “What makes you so sure all this will work out the way you think?”

“Because it damn well better work out, that’s why.” Remsbach scowled. “Every goddamn thing I own is riding on this, plus what Charlie got from mortgaging stuff I really don’t own yet. Not that I’m telling you anything you don’t know; hell, you’re the one who drew up most of the papers on those deals. This idea just eats money, chews it up and spits it out.” Remsbach’s scowl became a full-fledged frown. “Christ, I wish I knew who stole that goddamn Mother waxwork. Why the hell would anybody do a thing like that?”

“I don’t know,” Doris said. Nor was it apparent that she cared as she sat on the side of the bed and pulled her dress over her head.

“Goddamn piece cost a fortune. Charlie got hold of the outfit that made it out on the coast and he ordered us another, only it won’t be done in time for the opening.”

“Too bad.” Doris stood up, wriggled her skirt down over her thighs and stepped into her shoes. “Maybe they’ll send it to you for Mother’s Day.”

“That’s okay, we can get along without it now.” Remsbach’s scowl was reshaped into the philosophic smile of someone who believes in looking at the bright side. “Whoever killed Terry Dowson really did us a favor—all that extra publicity is gonna boost attendance.”

Doris Huntley’s hair was a mess, but if she had harbored any intention of combing it out, Remsbach’s remark about the Dowson kid changed her mind. Grabbing her purse from the nightstand she turned and stormed out of the bedroom, but not before giving Otto Remsbach instructions which, owing to the limitations of human anatomy, would be impossible for him to fulfill.

Otto Remsbach hurled his half-empty beer can after her; it struck the upper panel of the door, then splattered its way to the floor.

Hell with it. Hell with her too. Have ’nother beer. Good stuff. ’N good riddance. Because even before he could get the can open, the phone rang. And whaddya know?

It was Amy.

Friggin’ betcha, Amy Haines herself, coming to you live, not on tape, none other than the same little snotty bitch who walked out on him last night.

Otto Remsbach did his best to eliminate the slur from both his voice and his thoughts as he spoke. Did a pretty good job of it too, but why not? Doing deals over the phone came easy to him; like Charlie used to say, he was born on the horn.

Beauty part was he didn’t have to make any deal at all. The way it went down the only thing he had to do was say yes. “I know it’s late and short notice, but I’d really like to see you for a few minutes if you can spare the time,” she told him.

It sure as hell was no problem saying yes to that; the trick was to keep the surprise out of his voice.

“Half an hour?”

“Sounds good to me.”

He hung up, or tried to; it took several attempts before he managed to cradle the phone, and it wasn't just the effects of drink that hampered him. Remsbach felt a surge of mingled anticipation and excitement, but overriding both was triumph.

Her walking out on him that way had been bothering the back of his mind all day. So he had a couple drinks with her out at the Club, no big deal. He remembered inviting her to come back to the house with him, but that was no big deal either. Thing was, she turned him down. Thing is, tonight she'd changed her mind.

Or had she? Maybe there was something she was after, something he could tell her, some favor he could do for her. Well, whatever the hell it was she wanted, the lady was going to get herself a lot more than she bargained for.

Half 'n hour. Jus' time for a drink before he got dressed. Or maybe not. Maybe better give himself a couple minutes to relax, put himself together.

He probed his right cheek with a fatty forefinger. Yeah, he could get by without shaving again. Save him 'nother couple of minutes.

Turn off the lamp. Close your eyes. Relax. But don't go to sleep. Ten minutes, that's all you got now. Relax. Take deep breaths. Gotta remember to make this bed when you get up, get rid of those beer cans an' all that other crap. And don't forget those goddamn cigarette butts with Doris' lipstick smeared all over them. Now *that* was good thinking. And good resting.

Here. In. The. Dark.

Remsbach came awake with a start. Must have passed out cold. How the hell long had he been lying here? Did Amy come and go while he was sleeping? He couldn't remember.

She must have come, but on what happened next he drew a blank. All he knew was that she hadn't gone. He could feel the curve of her bare hip against his own.

Almost reluctantly he broke contact to turn away and switch on the nightstand lamp. Then he turned back for a better glimpse of his bed-partner.

It wasn't Amy.

It wasn't Doris Huntley either.

The face that leered up from the pillow beside him was Mother's.

Amy entered the hotel lobby, grateful for its comparative coolness after the swelter of the street. The desk clerk looked up from his comic but she ignored his stare and crossed to the waiting elevator.

Usually elevators triggered off a touch of claustrophobia, but tonight Amy was grateful when the door slid shut and she ascended in solitary confinement. There had been too many people today, too many stares. The whole town had gotten a chance to look her over, talk her over.

So what? Amy shrugged as she left the elevator, fishing in her purse for the room key. Let them whisper behind her back, just so long as nobody stuck a knife in it.

Not exactly the kind of thing she wanted to think about while opening the door on darkness and fumbling for the switch beyond the threshold. The overhead light fanned across a room occupied only by herself; still, she gave a start when the phone began to ring.

Closing and bolting the door behind her she hurried to pick up the receiver, giving herself three guesses as she did so. Who would be calling her tonight—Hank Gibbs, Sheriff Engstrom, Eric Dunstable?

“Good evening, Miss Haines. I hope I’m not disturbing you at this hour.”

“No, I just came back from dinner.” Amy paused. “Who is this?”

“Nicholas Steiner.”

“Dr. Steiner!” Amy paused again. “I’m sorry—I didn’t recognize your voice.”

“Neither do I.” Steiner’s chuckle was weak and he spoke slowly. “I’m still trying to untangle my vocal cords but I wanted to give you a call as soon as possible and tell you I’m sorry about breaking our appointment.”

“You’re apologizing to me because somebody tried to kill you?” Amy said. “I’m afraid you’ll have to come up with a better excuse than that.”

Steiner's chuckle of response seemed stronger. "Would you be willing to settle for another meeting?"

"Of course. Are you at the hospital?"

"They released me this afternoon, on condition I don't go back on my regular schedule until next week. I'm resting, taking it easy, and bored stiff."

"So I'm your last resort."

"I prefer to think of you as my first concern."

"That's very kind. Most of the people I've run into around here don't seem to feel that way," Amy said. "I get the idea the only thing they're concerned about is how soon I'll get out of town."

"When will that be?"

"I haven't decided yet." Amy hesitated. "Do you think it would be possible to see me tomorrow?"

"Possible and pleasurable. What time would be convenient?"

"Offhand I think afternoon would be best. If I could have an hour with you, say around three o'clock—"

"You've got it, Miss Haines. Make it three-thirty. Gives me a chance to nap first after lunch."

"Good. I'll see you then." Amy prepared to hang up, then voiced a final question. "How is Dr. Claiborne doing?"

"Not too well. They've got him over at Bancroft Memorial Hospital and I can't get a straight answer out of anyone on staff there. Maybe I'll know more by the time we meet tomorrow."

"Thanks, Doctor. I'm looking forward to seeing you, but please take it easy until then."

"Don't worry, I intend to do just that." Once more, the dry chuckle. "I may not even shave."

After hanging up Amy reached for the smaller of her notebooks, though not to record the time of tomorrow's appointment; she was in no danger of forgetting that. But now it was time to review future plans again, checkout for possibilities or impossibilities.

On the basis of what Steiner had just reported, Dr. Claiborne sounded like an impossibility. She'd have to count on getting a fix on him from what Steiner could tell her. Meantime, a scrub for Adam Claiborne, M.D. A scrub for Bob Peterson too, and another for Dr. Rawson; as for people like Reverend Archer, there was no sense in even listing their names.

Hank Gibbs? Might be worthwhile talking to him again, and Sheriff Engstrom too, if she could only find a chink in his armor. So far the little man seemed to be an Achilles without a heel.

Who else was left? Instinctively Amy recoiled from the notion of a personal interview with Terry Dowson's parents. There was no reason to exploit their grief, no point in sensationalizing the sorrow of the victim's friends and classmates. It wasn't going to be that kind of a book.

But just what kind of a book *would* it be? Amy tried to deal with that question as she scanned her notes. Face it, so far she hadn't really come up with all that much new material; maybe because it was nonexistent. Perhaps this attorney, Charlie Pitkin, knew where the bodies were buried, but she had a strong hunch he wouldn't be doing any grave-digging for her. You don't get to be a hotshot state senator by giving away secrets, and from what Otto Remsbach had told her, good old Charlie wasn't in the habit of giving away anything.

Amy quickly considered and disgarded Irene Grovesmith, Doris Huntley, Dr. Rawson's receptionist—Marge or Margie, whatever she went by. Scrub Captain Banning too; she hadn't seen him around, and even if available the chances were he'd be another Engstrom type.

Dick Reno was no Engstrom, that's for sure, but she already knew what she could get out of him. And if she hung in here for another couple of days she'd probably accept it, out of sheer boredom. So scrub him too; the last thing Amy needed right now was to get tangled up with a small-town deputy and his problems. The book was still going to be about the Bates case and had nothing to do with hang-ups over ex-wives or the custody of eleven-year-old sons. *You're a nice guy, Dick Reno, but right now I've got no time for hitting or getting hit on; go cry in your own beer, not mine.*

Still, Amy knew that in a way she owed him after what he'd told her over dinner about Otto Remsbach's future plans. These would be very much a part of the story and Remsbach himself had dropped hints about them last

night, but only hints. Amy was sure there was more if she could only pry it out of him.

But when? That was the question. Even if she hadn't made an appointment with Steiner that tied her up during part of the afternoon, it was a good bet Remsbach would be tied up himself all day and all night in preparation for his Grand Opening the following morning.

Which left her with no alternative except to wait until after the Opening. And it was strange how her thinking had changed about that.

When she arrived, attending the event had been a top priority, but now she no longer felt any commitment. Amy wondered why; was it the result of the hostility she felt directed toward her in town here, at the Country Club, or the memorial services today? If so, appearing at the Grand Opening would be another ordeal. And, actually, an unnecessary one. No matter how few or how many customers showed up, this was one event that was bound to attract plenty of press coverage, to say nothing of radio and TV. As far as getting information about the event itself there'd be more than enough in print or on tape to provide her with all the gory details.

As for herself, Amy wasn't interested in gore. The details she needed concerned the actual reconstruction of the house and the motel. How authentic was it, had some actual artifacts from the original structures been salvaged for use here, did the settings convey the feel and the atmosphere of the place where Norman lived—and others died?

A complicated question, but one with a simple answer; she'd just have to go out there and see for herself. Not alone, of course, but not as part of a guided tour mob scene at the Opening, either. What she needed was an opportunity to examine whatever interested her, in depth and at leisure.

Once again Amy reviewed her options. Tomorrow was out. The day after tomorrow, the Grand Opening, was out too. Even if she changed her mind and stayed yet another day the place would still be open for business; she'd have no privacy. There had to be some other solution.

*Was tomorrow really out?* As far as she knew now, her only commitment was the afternoon appointment with Steiner. That Remsbach would be tied up all day was a natural assumption. But suppose she could talk him out of

it? Suppose she could get him to drive her over there in the morning, or when she returned from the interview with Steiner?

Amy glanced at her watch; the time was nine twenty-two. Not too late for someone to give Remsbach a call—

*Someone else, that is.* It was too late for her; had been, ever since she'd walked out on him at the Country Club. What made her think that all she had to do was pick up the phone and say, "Hi, Fatso, remember me? That's right, Amy Haines, the gal who did the dump on you in front of all your buddies last night. I know you're going to be busy tomorrow, but why don't you just drop everything and drive me out to the Bates place when I'm ready to go?"

Amy shook her head. Fat chance she had of selling that idea to Fatso. But what other chance would she have, what other choice?

Frowning, she crossed to the window and gazed out over the flat rooftop. The clouds had thickened and it was only for a moment that she caught a glimpse of the crescent moon before it vanished. Her frown vanished with it.

Crescent. Female sexual symbol. What did it have to do with her situation? Why was she suddenly thinking about *Tricks or Treats*?

Because of Bonnie Walton, that's why. True, Amy had written the book, but Bonnie had lived it. She'd wasted no time mooning over female sex symbols; there was little or nothing she didn't know about the realities. And if she had found herself facing a problem like this she'd come up with a solution.

And so would Amy. All she had to do was to think like Bonnie. It had been easy enough to adopt Bonnie's mind-set while writing about her. Now the time had come to make use of it for a practical purpose.

Suppose Bonnie had insulted a trick by walking out on him in public—and that now she needed a special favor from him?

Only two steps were involved and their order was obvious. First the apology, then the request. But Amy already knew this; she didn't need to get inside Bonnie Walton's head just to find that out. And she also knew Remsbach wasn't going to accept her apology or honor her request. At least

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“Not over the phone, dummy!”

Amy gave a start. Was she inside Bonnie’s head, or was Bonnie inside hers? For an instant there she could have sworn she’d actually heard Bonnie Walton speaking.

In any case, she knew what Bonnie was thinking. Gaining Otto Remsbach’s forgiveness would require not just a personal apology but a personalized, in-person one, and a lot of stroking. Pitching a request for a special favor would almost certainly involve physical presence; perhaps even a bit of physical activity. Just a bit, because the mere idea was repugnant. The phone call was still necessary, but only as a means of gaining access to her mistreated trick.

That’s the way Bonnie would have figured it and Bonnie was a smart girl. Amy remembered one of the things she’d said. “All the world can be divided into three kinds of people—whores, pimps, and customers.”

Amy picked up the phone.

She knew what she was.

When she hung up Amy didn't know whether to smile or to frown.

There'd been no difficulty arranging a meeting after her preliminary apology, so she didn't anticipate any trouble when she repeated it after her arrival. That was something to smile about.

The problem, and the frown it inspired, rose from the realization that Otto Remsbach was skunk-drunk.

Not that she was afraid; if Bonnie Walton could deal with drunks, so could she. On the other hand, she really hadn't promised Otto Remsbach that she'd be coming out alone.

She glanced at the door on the far wall. Maybe she wouldn't have to go alone. If Eric Dunstable was in his room it shouldn't be too hard to persuade him to accompany her. What would Bonnie say? Probably tell him Fatso Otto was possessed by evil spirits. Mainly alcoholic ones, but there'd be no need to be that specific.

Amy went into the hall and tapped softly on the upper panel of his door. Tapping gradually became rapping but there was no response.

On the off-chance that he still might be in there sleeping, Amy decided that the best way to rouse him was by phone. She dialed direct and waited, hearing the ring echoing both from the receiver and beyond the wall, but there was no answer.

Where could he be?

A useless question, under the circumstances. A more useful one concerned who else she might get to go with her. Hank Gibbs, perhaps?

Reno had said Gibbs would be at work getting out the paper for tomorrow, but asking him was worth a try. And as in the case of Remsbach, Bonnie Walton would probably advise her to make her request in person rather than just a phone call.

Amy decided to stop by the newspaper office on her way. One trip to the bathroom, one last-minute inspection of hair and makeup, then time to get moving.

The desk clerk gave no indication that she had improved her appearance; he didn't even bother to look up from his comic as she crossed the lobby to the exit.

It seemed warmer outside now than it had been half an hour ago. The clouds overhead had thickened into a lid clamping down to confine the heat, and the air had the deceptive stillness of water just before it starts to boil.

There would be rain before the night was over, no doubt about it. Instinctively Amy quickened her pace as she made her way to the car.

Main Street was a morgue aside from a few bars where, presumably, wakes were being held. Not just for Terry Dowson but for what had once been a way of life for youngsters in small-town America. Main Street was mourning the passing of its movie house, the bowling alley, the soda parlor. Kids didn't patronize such places anymore, and neither did their parents.

Rural residents had changed over the years. Today farmers were pudgy, middle-aged men wearing baseball caps and horn-rims; big heads on TV screens complaining about not getting enough rain or getting too much rain. In either case the price of foodstuffs would rise in the fall and they wanted more government subsidies.

These weren't the kind of people who needed to go to the movies, and neither did their kids. Television was their window on the world; given the circumstances it was difficult to understand how Hank Gibbs could compete with the prime-time nightly news.

But the lights were on in the building fronted by the *Fairvale Weekly Herald* office. When Amy parked and stepped out of the car she could hear the muffled combination of hum and clatter that serves as a lullaby whenever a paper is put to bed.

Once she entered the office the sound was scarcely soothing, and the accompanying vibrations were more nerve-wracking than the noise.

Amy had opened and closed the door quietly; it was difficult to believe anyone could have heard her come in with all this racket. But he did.

He waddled through the print-shop doorway and peered up at her through the lower hemispheres of his bifocals. That's when the shouting match began.

"Yes, miss. Something I can do for you?"

"I'm looking for Mr. Gibbs."

"Hank? He ain't here."

"You happen to know where I might reach him?"

The man in the leather apron shook his head. "He left about an hour ago. Didn't say where he was going."

Amy smiled. "Thank you, Mr.—"

"Homer." He raised his eyes and his voice simultaneously. "Be back anytime now. You want to leave word?"

"Just tell him Amy Haines stopped by. I'll phone him tomorrow."

"Okay."

They exchanged good nights but Amy's heart wasn't in it. As far as she was concerned this wasn't really a good night—not if she had to go up to Otto Remsbach's house alone. But at least there was a moment of welcome relief when she escaped from the newspaper office; the noise was bad enough but the vibrations had set her teeth on edge.

It was quieter here on the street. Hot and humid too. She hoped the rain would come quickly now, breaking up the clouds and easing the pressure. Perhaps Gibbs would also be coming soon, but she had no time left to wait for his arrival.

Reluctantly Amy climbed back into the car, switching on ignition and lights, then the air-conditioning. Where could Gibbs have gone this evening? Maybe he'd just stepped out for a bite to eat after getting the press-run started. She probably should have asked Homer if there were any fast-food places open nearby. And while she was at it, she could have asked whether Homer was his first name or his last. Not that it mattered one way or the other, any more than it mattered where Hank Gibbs might be at the moment.

Besides, what was she worrying about? Fatso Otto wasn't going to attack her, and she didn't have to worry about being stopped or mugged here on

the street. This was Fairvale, remember? Good old Fairvale, U.S.A., where you don't have to worry about crime and violence.

So who killed Terry Dowson?

And why did Eric Dunstable pick this place to come looking for demons? Because it was so quiet? Because it was so dark?

Ominously quiet and ominously dark, here on the side street slanting up the hillside to the house that stood alone within the semicircle of trees. Tall trees, motionless in the sweltering still of the clouded night.

Amy made a right turn which took her into the driveway, then braked quickly. There was something wrong about the imposing two-story house looming ahead, the red-brick house with the white wooden pillars flanking the entryway. If not wrong, at least odd or peculiar.

There were eight windows visible from the angle at which she was approaching—four upper and four lower—but not one of them was lighted from within. Gazing ahead, Amy noted the ornate iron grill-work supporting the two outside lamps on either side of the double-paneled front door. At least these should be lit in expectation of a guest's arrival, but both were dark.

Dark night, dark trees, dark house. Amy switched foot pressure from the brake to the gas pedal, gliding along the driveway past the entrance. Common sense told her there was probably nothing wrong here; Fatso Otto was just so bombed he'd forgotten to turn on the lights. In which case there wasn't much sense trying to talk to him.

But more important than mere common sense was the fact that she was frightened. It was the real reason she had no intention of going into this darkened house alone. What she was going to do was get the hell out of here, right now.

Or almost now. Because as she reached the other side of the driveway she noted its bifurcation; at her right was a stretch of pavement bordering the far side of the house and leading to a garage at the rear. Again she paused, long enough to observe its door was raised and Remsbach's big Caddy had been parked within.

But what about that other car, that beat-up old red Pontiac standing just outside the garage, facing inward? It certainly couldn't be Otto Remsbach's

second car, not a junker like that. And if it belonged to another guest why wasn't it parked in the outer driveway? Unless, of course, the purpose was to conceal its presence from anyone passing by on the street.

In which case somebody had been careless and left the car radio on. The music was clearly audible, probably loud enough to be heard from the street. Of course it was possible that the driver had just entered the car, turned on the radio, and was preparing to leave. Highly possible; what Amy had failed to note at first glance was that the Pontiac's headlights were on, and it was their beams which had so clearly revealed the presence of Remsbach's car in the opened garage.

Amy waited for a moment, ready to reverse if the Pontiac started to back out of the side driveway. The car didn't move, but the lights stayed on and the music continued to sound. Had the driver left it like that and gone into the house?

Amy peered down the driveway, focusing on the shadowy blur vaguely visible beyond the Pontiac's rear window. The car was occupied; someone was sitting behind the wheel. And something was wrong.

Amy switched off her lights, turned the key in the ignition, then dropped it into her purse as she left the car and walked up the driveway along the far side of the house. The air was stifling still; the calm before the storm. It had to come soon.

As she moved up to the left side of the Pontiac the blare grew louder from behind the glass and the seated shape became more distinct.

Only the figure wasn't seated; it was slumped forward over the wheel. Was the driver drunk, ill, passed out from the heat?

Amy tapped the window glass, her nails counterpointing the car radio's raucous rhythm. There was no response, so she added a vocal accompaniment. "Hey—anything wrong? Open up—"

Still no answer. Something was definitely wrong, and Amy reached down to grip the handle below the closed window. The door swung wide, releasing a blast of sound and a blur of moving shadow.

She must have been partially leaning against the door because when it opened she fell sideways, to land face upward on the pavement. In the shadow cast by the car her features were indistinct and Amy frowned for a

moment before recognition came. Yesterday's meeting had been brief but she remembered the name.

It was Doris Huntley.

Doris Huntley, lying there with eyes wide open, head cradled by a swirl of blond hair. She wore a dark dress, its exact color indeterminate in the shadows, and a pendant necklace.

As Amy looked down the lightning came, flashing from above and behind and only for an instant, but that was long enough. Enough to reveal that Doris Huntley wore no necklace. The beads were blood, trickling from the crimson slash encircling her throat.

Amy's gasp was lost in the roar as thunder came. Then something touched her shoulder. Turning, she stared into the face of Sheriff Engstrom.

**H**is name was Al.

There was no way of telling when or what he had for dinner but apparently it was still creating a problem because now, seated behind Engstrom's desk, he was chewing on a toothpick.

That in itself didn't bother Amy; this red-haired, freckle-faced, skinny specimen of what passed for humanity might be a sheriff's deputy but she wasn't intimidated by his uniform. It was the way he eyed her, as though he were looking at some exotic animal newly escaped from the zoo. But then they'd all stared at her like that; Engstrom, the deputy who had driven her here to the courthouse annex, and—most upsetting of all—Irene Grovesmith. What was she doing at the office here in the first place, at this hour?

Silly question. She was here because Engstrom had called and told her to be here. Somebody had to hold the fort while he stayed beside Doris Huntley's corpse, waiting for the paramedics to arrive. Maybe that's what life is really all about; just one long wait until the paramedics come.

Morbid thought. Amy frowned it away, but she didn't like what replaced it—the sudden, seering image of Doris Huntley's face in the lightning flash. Her face and her throat. Drops of blood dripping down her neck; drops of rain dripping down outside the office window. The storm had broken then and it would continue. Here at the courthouse annex and back there on the pavement where the rain ran red.

Thunder rumbled. So did Al's stomach. "Storm's pretty bad," he said, talking around his toothpick. "Good thing you didn't get caught in it."

*But I did get caught. That's why I'm here.* Amy almost spoke the words aloud but it wasn't necessary; the deputy grinned apologetically, toothpick teetering.

"My mistake, lady. I didn't mean it that way."

“That’s okay.”

She would have said more but her attention was distracted by the sound of voices and footsteps echoing from the outer office where Irene Grovesmith sat. Amy swiveled in her seat to glance through the open doorway. At the sight of Dr. Rawson and Sheriff Engstrom entering the room behind her, she started to rise from the chair.

As she did so, deputy Al involuntarily reached toward the weapon in his holster.

Amy caught the movement out of the corner of her eye and turned quickly. “That’s not necessary,” she murmured.

Al’s hand retreated to the desktop. “Sorry,” he said. “Sheriff’s orders.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t harm him.”

And even if she’d had the intention she lacked the opportunity. Irene Grovesmith had risen and moved to close the door of the inner office, shutting off sight and sound from behind it.

Lightning flashed outside the window. Rain spattered, thunder boomed. A pity Al wasn’t wearing a baseball cap and horn-rims; Amy could have asked him if this was good or bad for the crops. But Al wouldn’t know. He was just a sheriff’s deputy and besides he wasn’t fat enough.

Amy wondered if she was flaking out. Why a thought like that at a time like this? Was it a sign of hysteria, or just common sense to opt for frivolity over morbidity?

Al wouldn’t know the answer to that one either. As he toyed with his toothpick Amy found herself straining at the sound of muffled voices from beyond the door. Deep bass alternating with shrill soprano indicated Dr. Rawson and Irene Grovesmith were engaged in conversation; sharp staccato punctuated by short pauses suggested that Engstrom was talking on the phone. But even if she’d been spared the constant crashing of thunder Amy couldn’t make out what was being said. Sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Nothing except sweaty palms, a tendency to grip her purse too tightly; telltale tension along the inner lengths of her legs as she leaned forward in the chair, unable to relax. If Al didn’t get rid of that damn toothpick pretty soon, she’d do it for him. The odds were three to one she could yank it out

of his mouth before he could yank that gun out of his holster. Be a mighty sad thing if she couldn't beat a hick deputy sheriff to the draw.

Funny? Maybe not, but it was the best she could do. And the best wasn't good enough, because whenever she blinked she found Doris Huntley's face staring at her from the darkness behind her closed eyes. Each time it was only for a moment, just long enough to reassure her the image hadn't faded. And *reassure* wasn't the proper term; why couldn't she think straight? What was Engstrom doing on the phone, how much longer would he keep stalling her like this?

More questions that Al wouldn't be able to answer. Amy stared up into the light, trying to keep her eyes open without blinking. The deputy removed the toothpick, tossing it into the wastebasket, and in gratitude she asked him a question he could answer.

"What did you have for dinner?"

"Pizza."

Might as well take refuge in her role as a reporter and ask him what kind. Fortunately it wasn't necessary, because the door behind her opened at last and Engstrom hurried in. Al rose to his feet hastily, but not in time to deflect the Sheriff's scowl.

"Move," Engstrom said. "Now!"

Standing, the deputy towered over his superior by a good six inches, but without his toothpick he seemed defenseless. By the time Engstrom replaced him behind the desk Al was gone, closing the door behind him.

"Didn't mean to keep you waiting so long," he said. "Couldn't get through to the chief of staff over at the hospital. Sounds like something's up there. I told Doc Rawson to keep calling."

For a moment Amy wondered why Engstrom's uniform was dry, then remembered that both he and Dr. Rawson had worn hats and ponchos when they entered the outer office. As he spoke Engstrom's voice was dry too.

"All right," he said. "Where is Eric Dunstable?"

"I don't know."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

“Late this afternoon, at the memorial service. He had an argument with Reverend Archer—”

“We know that.” Engstrom leaned forward. “The other night you said you’d met Dunstable in Chicago.”

“Yes.” Amy nodded. “I gave you the names of the people who were with me when he came to my apartment that evening. Didn’t you try to reach them?”

“Sure thing. Your alibi checks out and so does his.” The Sheriff paused. “Of course they had no way of proving this was really the first time you and Dunstable met.”

“Why should I lie to you about that?”

Engstrom shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. Why should you have adjoining rooms?”

Amy tried to keep her voice under control. “I told you there’s nothing between us.”

“Except murder.” Engstrom paused again. “You two in on this thing together?”

“Of course not. What reason could we have?”

“You’re writing a book.”

“True. But Eric Dunstable has nothing to do with it.”

“Look, Miss Haines. Fairvale’s only a flyspeck on the map but we get television here, same as in Kansas City or St. Louis. That’s where the real money comes from, doesn’t it? First you write a book, then you sell it to some producer for a movie or a miniseries on TV.” Engstrom nodded. “Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about that possibility.”

Amy countered his nod, shaking her head quickly. “Possibility, yes. But it’s not very likely to happen. There are hundreds of books written about mysterious killers that never sell to television or films. There generally has to be some unusual angle—”

“Like demonic possession?” Engstrom hunched forward. “Dunstable’s theories might be just the extra touch you’ve been looking for.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Maybe.” The Sheriff’s mustache twitched with the suggestion of a smile. “I’m not accusing you two of collusion, mind you, just asking. There’s a lot of things we need to find out about and we will, one way or the other.” As he spoke, the hint of a smile vanished. “For starters, what were you doing up at Remsbach’s place?”

“You’ve already answered that yourself. I’m writing a book. My only reason for visiting him was to get information.” Amy paused. “But I suppose you already know. The desk clerk at the hotel must have been eavesdropping on my calls again. He phones and tells you I’m going to visit Mr. Remsbach at his home and you come charging after me, is that it?”

Engstrom shrugged. “More or less. Stopped by at Peachey’s on the way.”

“Peachey’s?”

“It’s a bar. Had to break up a little disturbance.” The Sheriff gave her a pointed look. “Couple of out-of-towners.”

“If you’d come directly maybe this thing wouldn’t have happened,” Amy said. “At least you saw me arrive—”

“Correction. We saw you opening the car door. That’s when we switched off our lights so we could slide in without you noticing.”

“I hope you noticed I didn’t have a weapon.”

The Sheriff nodded.

Amy hesitated for a moment, waiting for him to speak. But he said nothing, and it was she who broke the silence. “Do you know what the weapon was?”

“Pretty sure of it. Six-inch butcher knife, notched handle grip, bit of a curve in the blade.” His voice was flat, his stare sharp. “Sound familiar?”

“Why should it?”

“Because you could have had it with you when you came.”

“To kill Doris Huntley?” Amy’s voice rose above distant thunder. “I didn’t even know she was there.”

Engstrom was sitting up straight now. “Of course not. Must have come as a surprise for both of you—you see her getting in her car, she sees you getting out of yours. You walk over to her, maybe she opens the door to talk. Meanwhile you get the knife out of that big purse of your and—”

“Why?”

“To get rid of the only witness who could testify seeing you there. After you killed her you went inside. Maybe five, ten minutes later, you came out and checked again to make sure she was dead. That’s when we showed up.”

“Don’t play guessing games. I didn’t kill that woman! I never went inside, I didn’t carry any weapon.”

“Well, somebody did.”

The sound of thunder was scarcely more than an echo now, and Amy spoke before it subsided. “You found the knife?”

“That’s right.”

“Where? Was it in the house?”

“It was in Otto Remsbach’s chest. Whoever left it there stabbed him thirteen times.”

There was no more thunder. The rain had stopped, the storm was over, and the air had cleared.

But that was outside; here in the Sheriff's office, tension remained. Tension in the deep-set lines bordering Irene Grovesmith's lips as she monitored the tape. Tension in Engstrom's voice as he asked the questions that once again took Amy through the events of the evening. Tension in her replies, tension that came in sudden succession like the aftershocks following an earthquake.

For some reason, hearing about Remsbach's murder was even more disturbing than the actual sight of Doris Huntley's body. But both victims were equally dead.

*Double Event.*

Where did that come from? It took Amy a moment before she remembered the source. The term had originated over a hundred years ago when two victims were killed on the same night by Jack the Ripper.

Had his weapon been a butcher knife? Nobody knew. And today, more than a century later, his identity remained unknown.

There had been another Double Event tonight, but at least they'd found the weapon. Would they ever find the killer?

Engstrom had just concluded his interrogation when another thought occurred to her, and it was then that she voiced the question.

"May I ask you something, Sheriff?"

Engstrom's nod both dismissed Irene Grovesmith with her recorder and also signaled Amy to continue. "Go ahead. It's your turn."

"What makes you so sure both murders were committed by the same person? Couldn't there have been two instead of one?"

"How do you figure?"

“Suppose Doris Huntley killed Remsbach with that knife. And when she left, somebody was waiting for her outside.”

“Somebody.” Engstrom shook his head. “You’ll have to do better than that.”

“There should be prints on the knife.”

“I doubt it.” The Sheriff stretched the skin below his left cheekbone between thumb and forefinger. “I’ve got a feeling this isn’t Amateur Night.”

“But that doesn’t rule out the possibility that two people were involved in the murders.”

“You and Dunstable, perhaps?”

“I’ve already told you I haven’t seen him this evening. And you know I came to Remsbach’s house alone.”

“He could have walked. Or driven out in another car.”

“I don’t think he even knows how to drive,” Amy said. “And he doesn’t have a car here. But someone else could have come and gone before I arrived. There could be tire marks—”

“Not after this storm. Rain’d wash ’em out.” Engstrom pushed his chair back. “Which reminds me. I had your car driven over here. It’s in the lot.”

“Where are my keys?”

“I’ll tell Reno to give them to you.” Engstrom rose.

“Thanks.”

Amy had about forty-five seconds between the Sheriff’s departure and the moment when the office door opened again to admit Dick Reno. She used the interval to open her purse and inspect herself in the compact mirror, prompted by curiosity rather than vanity. After tonight’s experience it came as a surprise that there seemed to be so little change. True, her eyes did look tired but some fresh liner would take care of that.

Amy smiled at her image in the mirror. Maybe curiosity was just another synonym for vanity after all. As the door opened behind her, she closed the compact, dropped it back into her bag and zippered it before Dick Reno reached her side.

He must have left his poncho in the outer office, for his uniform showed no indication of storm damage. It was only when she glanced down that she

noted his boots were caked with mud at the heels and streaked along the ankles.

Then something jangled and she looked up; he was holding out her car keys. “How do you feel?”

“Much better, now that I’ve got my car back.” Amy zipped her purse open again to deposit the keys. “I take it this means your boss trusts me not to sneak out of town tonight.”

“Are you really okay?” Reno said. “They told me what happened. It must have been an awful shock.”

“I’m all right now.” Amy glanced down again at the deputy’s boots. “But where were you when all this happened?”

“Sheriff told me to go find Eric Dunstable.”

“Where did you look for him—in a swamp?”

“No, but that’s an idea. There *is* a swamp, not too far away.”

“Away from what?”

“The Bates place.” Dick Reno nodded. “Engstrom thought Dunstable might have headed out there.”

“I take it you didn’t run into him.”

Reno nodded again. “I didn’t run into anything, except rain and mud. Way I figure it, you had more chance of seeing him than I did.”

Amy rose. “You and Engstrom do a lot of figuring, don’t you? I guess theorizing comes easier than finding out the facts. But just for the record, let me tell you just what I told him. I didn’t see Eric Dunstable tonight, I have no idea where he went, and the two of us didn’t join forces to commit murder.”

“I never said that.” Reno spoke quickly. “And I wouldn’t be handing you back your car keys if the Sheriff really thought you were a suspect.”

“Then why was he pressuring me?”

“When something like this happens, there isn’t much choice. He needs all the information he can get, and fast. But for what it’s worth you’re pretty much in the clear. Sheriff knows we had dinner together. The clerk up at the hotel filled him in about how you talked to Steiner and Remsbach and tried to call Dunstable. We know when you left the hotel and if your story about

seeing Homer at the newspaper office checks out, there's no way you could've had enough time left to kill either one." Reno smiled. "Let alone put Mother in Otto Remsbach's bed."

"What?"

"They found that wax figure lying next to his body. You didn't know?"

Amy didn't answer. She strode to the door, yanked it open. The outer office echoed a babble of voices and the buzzing of unanswered phones. The deputy named Al, Irene Grovesmith, and Sheriff Engstrom were taking calls at three separate desks, but the instruments on three other desks continued their clamor.

Amy moved up beside Engstrom without slackening her stride. As she halted he concluded his conversation, forefinger poised to plunge down and establish connection with another call. "Damned phones been ringing off the hook," he muttered. "Rock Center, Montrose, *Kansas City Star*, you name it. Beats me how in hell the word always get around so fast."

"Me too." Amy's words rose through the confusion loud and clear. "Particularly when you take such plans to withhold information."

Engstrom's finger faltered. "Come again?"

There was no hint of faltering in Amy's voice. "Why didn't you say anything to me about finding the wax dummy of Mrs. Bates in Remsbach's bed?"

"Who told you that?" The Sheriff scowled. "I gave everybody strict orders—"

"To withhold evidence?"

"I have my reasons. You've got no right to question them."

"And you've got no right to give me the runaround." Amy's voice dropped to its normal level. "Don't worry, I'm not doing a story for the newspaper." She paused, glancing around. "Speaking of which, where's Hank Gibbs? You'd think he'd be interested in getting hold of this kind of news."

"That's right." Engstrom frowned. "Unless he *is* the news."

Engstrom's phones may have kept ringing all night, but when Amy drove back to the hotel there were no messages of any calls awaiting her there. The male desk clerk had finished his shift—and, presumably, his comic book—but Amy had no doubt that his female replacement would continue monitoring her line.

Nonetheless, the first thing she did after kicking off her shoes when she reached the room was to try Eric Dunstable's number. Again there was no response.

Where could he possibly have disappeared to, and why? The questions rose and once more she pushed them aside, or tried to. Hard to push when you're so tired, when so much has happened and there's so much to think about.

Only she wasn't going to think about anything more tonight. Tomorrow would be time enough, after she got some rest. It was already close to midnight, and while she had to remove her makeup, the shower could be put off until morning.

Shower put off and nightgown put on, Amy was ready for sleep. But sleep was not ready for her.

At least she was grateful for one thing; closing her eyes no longer evoked a vision of Doris Huntley's face. The problem now was not what she'd been but what she hadn't seen.

*Otto Remsbach, horizontal. The butcher knife in his chest, vertical. Thirteen stab wounds. Bloody bed. Bled like a stuffed pig. And Mother—was she bloody too?*

Amy had never seen Mother and she didn't want to, but the only way she could avoid it now was to keep her eyes open. Keep her eyes open and keep her mind off what had happened up there at Remsbach's house tonight. Maybe Sheriff Engstrom was right after all; it was none of her business.

*Business.* Now there was something she could think about. Her business was to write the book and—to be brutally honest, totally honest—what had happened tonight meant that business was going to be very good.

There'd be no more talk about leaving town tomorrow, or the next day, not after what had just occurred. Of course it was horrifying but it would be hypocritical of her not to admit that it was also exciting. Much of the horror lay in what she imagined; her excitement was rooted in reality.

All of those daydreams about a career were going to come true, and there was no point having any guilt feelings about it. Once again Amy reminded herself she hadn't been responsible for what happened, couldn't have anticipated or prevented it, and certainly couldn't change matters now.

Perhaps Dr. Steiner might help put things into the proper perspective tomorrow. Now it was more important than ever that she interview him; his was the voice of reason. By the same token it would be imperative to have a talk with Eric Dunstable. His was the voice of unreason, but reason alone couldn't account for the bizarre turn of events tonight.

Could Dunstable himself have been involved? And what about Hank Gibbs? Did the Sheriff really suspect him, and for causes as yet unrevealed? Or was it just due to the fact that his whereabouts were unknown? Absence makes the heart grow fonder—or, in this instance, beat faster. Hank Gibbs, a somewhat cynical knight in somewhat battered armor, a serial killer? Eric Dunstable seemed creepy but harmless; were his creepy ideas harmless too? And when you got right down to it, the Bates property wasn't the only place where Dick Reno could have gotten mud on his boots. In any case, wouldn't the rain have washed it off? The rain could wash away bloodstains just as easily.

And there she was, coming full circle again to what was the Sheriff's business, not hers. If Dick Reno had blood on his boots, it was his problem. That didn't make her Lady Macbeth; there was no blood on her hands.

No blood on her hands, and a nice clean makeup job when she went on those talk shows. And she would go, the book would go, all the dreams would come true. The good dreams, anyway. Bad dreams were what she didn't want; dreams about Doris Huntley and her necklace, Otto Remsbach and his heart surgery. Nothing to joke about, but sometimes a laugh smothers the scream.

No, this was business, serious business. And she would do a serious, straightforward job when she started the book. In light—or dark—of recent events, it might be well to have another meeting with the publishers upfront. This was going to be a much bigger project than either she or they had anticipated; big enough and time-consuming enough to justify renegotiation.

*Blood money?* Again Amy reminded herself that she wasn't accountable for the events that had taken place here both before and after her arrival. Nor did she intend to capitalize on them. In which case why was she thinking about her book in the language of a bookkeeper? What were words like "accountable" and "capitalize" doing in the vocabulary of someone who considered herself a serious writer? These weren't the right terms.

*Terms.* She really owed it to herself to renegotiate the terms of her contract. But what she really owed to herself most of all was honesty. If that meant admitting she was as mercenary as anyone else, so be it. Nobody ever said that Shakespeare gave his work away for free.

Which brought her right back to Lady Macbeth again, and to hell with it. Good night and God bless you, one and all.

It wasn't quite that simple, but in the end Amy did manage to drift off into sleep that was mercifully deep and dreamless.

Bright sunlight heralded the morning, and so did the phone at her bedside. Sudden light blurred her vision; sudden sound had a similar effect on what she heard after raising the receiver. Somebody from A.P. was calling from downstairs and would like to do an interview, how soon would it be convenient for him to come up or would she prefer to meet in the lobby? Amy's instinct was to tell him to drop dead, her watch told her it was eight o'clock, and she told her caller he could expect her down at eight-thirty.

As she stepped into the shower the phone rang again. Towel-wrapped, she responded. This time it was someone from a St. Louis paper but the conversation was the same.

Before she could do more than open a bureau drawer there was another call. The Montrose radio newscaster wanted to do a tape.

It wasn't until then that she realized her mistake. Interviews might be good publicity, but in the long run it meant she'd be giving away material that should be saved for her own use in the book.

After she hung up she phoned the desk and told the clerk to hold all calls. He promised to take messages instead.

All of which got Amy into a bra and panties and she was just completing the makeup on her freshly scrubbed face when the desk clerk broke his promise.

"No, he didn't," Hank Gibbs told her. "I had to blackmail him to get this call through. But I just wanted to warn you the enemy has landed in full force, so prepare for a hit."

"Where were you last night?" Amy said.

"Tell you when I see you."

"But those people in the lobby—"

"Will come racing up to your room if you don't show up when you promised." Gibbs paused. "Or do you want to get out of this?"

"You're a mind-reader! But how—?"

"Help is on the way."

"Wait—"

He hung up. And by the time Amy finished wriggling and started zipping he was rapping at the door.

Shoeless, she admitted him. "My hair's a mess," she murmured. "I can't go down there looking like this."

"You aren't going down there at all." Gibbs nodded. "Far as I'm concerned your hair looks great the way it is, but if you want to fiddle around with it, bring a comb and a mirror. My car's over on Second Street."

"Think we could get there alive?"

"Positive. Unless somebody's captured the service elevator."

But that hadn't happened, and they landed safely in the hall just off the kitchen, then left by way of the delivery door at the rear of the hotel. The alley that bordered it was empty and so was the side street beyond. Turning right at the corner, Hank Gibbs led her to his car.

Her compact mirror confirmed he'd told her the truth; a good thing she remembered to bring a shower cap, because her hair hadn't gotten wet and all it needed was a quick come-through. By the time she finished, the car was picking up speed.

"Where are we going?"

Gibbs grinned. "You ever hear a definition of the word 'impossible'?"

"Tell me."

" 'Impossible' means finding a Chinese restaurant that's open for breakfast."

"If you're saying what I think you are, we had dinner there last night."

Gibbs glanced at her quickly. "We?"

"Dick Reno and I."

"Then you're in for a surprise. They serve the best country-style ham and eggs breakfast this side of Springfield."

Now they were leaving the town behind them. Gibbs glanced at her as she settled back in the seat.

"Feeling better?"

"Much. Thanks for rescuing me. I wasn't really awake when I agreed to all those interviews. I could have spent half the day giving free handouts."

"Don't feel guilty. The same thing happens to me, and that's why I wanted to get away. Minute a big story breaks in a small town, every stringer in the state shows up, then it's radio and the television crews. They've got to deal with the local lawmen but that means waiting for a handout or a personally delivered 'no comment.' So the first thing they do is track down the editor of the local paper and try to get a story out of him."

Amy nodded. "Was it as bad as this when Norman Bates escaped and the Loomises were killed?"

"Bad enough. Thing is, after it blew over, nobody expected something like that would ever happen again. But now—"

He broke off in midsentence as they approached their destination and there was no further conversation during parking or entering the restaurant.

At the moment there were only a few other customers. On the way to their table Amy noted Gibbs hadn't exaggerated; the ham and eggs looked

good and she enjoyed an enticing preview of hot rolls, freshly squeezed orange juice, real marmalade in glass jars rather than synthetic glop in tiny plastic containers.

By the time they were seated and placed their orders from a menu entirely devoid of oriental cuisine, Amy was well pleased with Gibbs' surprise.

"Was dinner good here last night?" he said.

"Very."

"I'm not just talking about the food. Did you get anything worthwhile out of Reno, anything you could use?"

"I didn't accept his invitation in order to use him?"

"So the lady says." Gibbs grinned. "But the lady also happens to be a writer, and writers use everyone and everything. It takes one to know one."

Amy found herself smiling. "All right, you win."

"Did you?"

She shook her head. "Not really. That is, I didn't learn anything new. But he made it very clear how people around here feel about being saddled with guilt by association. The don't like what Norman Bates did, they don't like the idea of living in his shadow."

"Can you blame him?" Gibbs paused as their juice and coffee arrived. Amy discovered the cream was genuine too; this was a day for surprises.

She put some real sugar into her real coffee and glanced up. "I stopped by your office last night," she said. "Where were you?"

"Didn't Engstrom say?"

"No. He was looking for you too."

"I forgot. When I got back and heard the news I went over there, but by the time you'd already left." Gibbs smiled. "Guess I owe the Sheriff an apology. He couldn't have told you before I told him." The smile disappeared. "Matter of fact, I'm not so sure I ought to tell you now. Don't want to spoil your breakfast."

"Whatever it is, I'm going to find out anyway sooner or later," Amy said.

"True. But it's not the kind of surprise I had in mind when I brought you here."

“Are you going to tell me or aren’t you?”

“All right. Last night I was over at Baldwin Memorial Hospital.”

“I remember the name.” Amy nodded. “That’s where Dr. Claiborne is.”

“Was.” Gibbs’ voice was flat. “He died last night.”

“What happened?”

“Another heart attack—a big one.”

“Does Steiner know?”

“I assume so, by now. The first call came to me at the office; that’s why I went out there. They wouldn’t give me much by way of details, but I know there’ll be an autopsy within a day or two. Not that anyone is going to pay any attention, considering what’s been going on over here.”

Amy took a sip of coffee but she couldn’t taste it. Her senses were playing her false, senses and emotions. In this instance surprise should register as shock, but it didn’t. And compassion was oddly interlaced with irritation; why couldn’t she have had a chance to interview Claiborne before he died?

She stared at Gibbs across the table. “So that’s where you were.”

“If you don’t believe me, ask your friend Engstrom.”

Amy shook her head. “He’s not my friend.”

“Nor mine.” Gibbs was frowning. “Told me to get off his back and not mess up his investigation. When he got hold of me at his office he couldn’t wait to call Baldwin Memorial and check out my alibi.”

“He suspected you?”

“Why not? He suspected you too. That’s the name of the game.”

“Who do you suspect?”

Gibbs frowned. “Have to think about that. Might help if you told me what happened to you after you left Dick Reno last night.”

Amy obliged, but not until after the rest of their breakfast order arrived and they started to eat. Her taste buds were beginning to function again and for this she was grateful.

As for Gibbs, he seemed grateful with her information. When she concluded, he began. “What do you think really happened?”

“I’d know more if I could come up with some possible motives.”

“Try insanity.”

“That’s one of the things I intend to go into with Dr. Steiner,” Amy said. “I’d like to get a professional opinion about the personality profile of someone capable of breaking into the Bates property, stealing that dummy, and killing a harmless little girl.”

“Have you come up with any candidates on your own?”

Amy hesitated. “Norman would do it. Or someone who thinks like Norman.”

“Claiborne fits that description. But he’s dead now, and at the time Terry Dowson was murdered he was confined.” Gibbs speared a slice of ham with his fork and didn’t continue speaking until he’d stopped chewing. “Wild guess,” he said.

“Who?”

“Eric Dunstable. I get the distinct impression that his elevator doesn’t stop at every floor.”

Amy shook her head. “Not unless he has an identical twin. You’re forgetting he was with me in Chicago on the night Terry was killed.”

“If you told the truth.” He grinned quickly to counter her frown. “Only kidding. I know Engstrom checked up on your alibi, same as he did mine.” Gibbs nodded. “Okay, Dunstable’s off the hook as far as Terry Dowson is concerned. But where was he last night?”

“I don’t know,” Amy said. “I couldn’t reach him in his room then or this morning. It’s possible he might have run off without checking out.”

“That’s really Engstrom’s problem. You can bet he’ll be looking for him or some other fanatic.”

“Fanatic?”

“I suggest you try to feel out Steiner on the subject when you see him. There’ve been some rumors floating around that a local resident is getting outpatient treatment from him.”

“At State Hospital?”

Gibbs shrugged. “Not that many shrinks available in this neck of the woods. Though God knows we could use a few.”

“Any idea who this local resident might be?”

“I talked to Steiner a while back and he refused to give names. But he didn’t deny he’d been seeing someone. If I was the Sheriff I’d start looking for a weirdo.”

“Or someone who wants people to *think* it was a weirdo.”

“Why?”

“To cover-up their real motive, of course.” Amy took a final sip of her coffee. “That might go along with your hunch about a fanatic being responsible. Someone with far-out ideas but rational enough to make those murders look like the work of a psychotic.” Amy put her cup down. “But that doesn’t mean fanaticism is the only possible motive. We can’t rule out things like envy, revenge, jealousy—” She hesitated, frowning. “Did Doris Huntley have a boyfriend?”

Now it was Gibbs who frowned. “Not for publication.”

“But you know who it is?”

Gibbs rose. “Let’s go. Maybe we could get a chance to talk to him before Engstrom does.”

The office door was locked, but Gibbs reached down and rattled the doorknob.

“I know he’s in there. His car’s parked out back.”

Amy hesitated. “Under the circumstances, maybe we shouldn’t disturb him—”

But they already had. The door opened abruptly and a disturbed Charlie Pitkin peered up at them, standing in shadow and blinking at the light from the hallway. As recognition came he relaxed.

“Hank?”

Gibbs nodded toward Amy. “You remember Miss Haines, don’t you?”

“Of course.” Pitkin stepped back. “Come in.” Once they entered he closed the door behind them and the shadows deepened. “My apologies,” he said. “I’m keeping the blinds drawn. Officially we’re closed for the day; I told my girl not to come in and I’m not taking any calls.”

As if to prove his assertion the phone on the desk in the outer office began to flash and ring. Ignoring it, he led them through the reception area and into the even darker depths of his private quarters beyond. Here a lamp cast a fan-shaped wedge of light over the desk. Atop it another phone flashed, then ceased to signal.

Pitkin took his place behind the desk and gestured them forward. “Please sit down.” He glanced at Amy. “Sorry about lights. I’d rather not let the media people know where I am right now.” The phone flickered again but he ignored it.

Amy and Gibbs settled into chairs facing the attorney. He stared at them expectantly for a moment and it was Gibbs who broke the silence.

“Seen Engstrom yet?”

“He just left.”

“Have there been any new developments?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Pitkin shook his head in sharp-nosed profile, then turned toward Amy as the phone’s light signal faded. “Please excuse me, Miss Haines. I don’t mean to be rude. It’s just that this has all been quite a shock—”

“I understand.”

“But Hank doesn’t.” Again the attorney directed his attention to Gibbs. “You know better than to think Engstrom would clue me in on what’s going on. As far as he’s concerned, I’m still a possible suspect.”

Gibbs nodded. “But not enough of a one to be placed under arrest.”

“I did give him an alibi, in case you’re interested.” Once more the desk phone came alive with light and once more Pitkin ignored it. “I assume that’s what you really came to find out.”

Amy stirred uncomfortably. “It was thoughtless of us to bother you at a time like this. We’d better go—”

“Please.” Pitkin gestured quickly. “I gave you an invitation the other night at the Club.”

“But that was before all this happened. If you’d rather not talk about it —”

“What I told Engstrom is now a matter of public record. No reason why you shouldn’t know. My daughter and I were out at the lake last night. We have a cottage there. First we heard about what went on was around seven this morning when we caught a news bulletin. Needless to say, it hit me pretty hard at first. Otto’s been my friend as well as my client for so many years. He had so much ambition, so many plans. All gone now, and Doris too—”

The attorney’s voice broke off simultaneously with the flicker of the phone, then resumed. “Emily knew how upset I was. She didn’t want me to come in, but the Sheriff meant to see me and I thought it would be easier on her if I spoke to him alone.”

Gibbs leaned forward. “But won’t Engstrom be seeing her too, just to confirm your alibi?”

“I suppose so. But he won’t lean on Emily the way he leaned on me. At least that’s what I’m hoping, but with the kind of pressure he’s under right

now, anything is possible.”

“There’s just one other thing I’d like to know,” Amy said. “Do you have any idea who might be responsible for what happened last night?”

“None. And as I told you, the Sheriff didn’t volunteer to fill me in.”

“I can do that much,” Gibbs said. “During the time before Miss Haines met me at the hotel I heard at least six versions of various rumors already floating around. What most of them boil down to is the usual mysterious stranger who was seen by somebody—no one quite knows who—coming into town or leaving town during the storm. There’s no explanation why he was wandering around on foot with an umbrella, but everyone is absolutely convinced that he is definitely an escaped lunatic, a gay with terminal AIDS—or a child molester who killed Terry Dowson and has now graduated to bigger things.”

Pitkin spoke slowly. “That’s nothing to joke about.”

“I’m serious. And so are they, which is what really bothers me. If this case isn’t solved quickly, we’re due for a witch-hunt.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, but there doesn’t seem much that we can do about it.” Pitkin glanced at Amy. “I only hope that when you write your book it won’t be necessary to compare Fairvale with Salem, Massachusetts in 1692.”

“That’s not my intention,” Amy said. She turned, nodding at Gibbs. “I think we should go now.” As she rose, the phone’s flashings flared across her face. “It was kind of you to see us, Mr. Pitkin. You’ve been very patient.”

The attorney gestured, rising. “No need for that. Let’s just hope we meet again soon under more pleasant circumstances.” He nodded at Gibbs. “Let me show you out.”

“I expect to be in and out of the office all day, after Homer finishes up on the route,” Gibbs said. “If you want me, get in touch.”

“Thanks.”

Amy didn’t speak until they reached the car. “What do you think?” she said.

“I’m not sure. Want some coffee?”

“Somebody’s bound to spot me.”

“There’s a hot plate and some instant coffee at the office,” Hank Gibbs said.

“I’ll settle for that.” As Gibbs started the car she spoke again. “Will you do me a favor?”

“Name it.”

“I noticed there’s a drugstore across the street from the courthouse. Would you get me a package of cigarettes?”

“Sure. What brand?”

“Anything mentholated.”

“That’s funny. I didn’t know you smoked.”

Amy shrugged. “I haven’t, not since I finished my book. But now that I’m starting another—”

“Sounds to me as if you’re getting uptight,” Gibbs murmured.

“What about you?”

“A little.” He shrugged. “Guess it comes from writing too many obituaries.”

They parked in the alley, motor running, while Gibbs ran his errand at the pharmacy. A gap between the building and the structure on its left gave Amy a view of the courthouse and annex across the street. In the parking lot a TV remote crew was doing a shoot with a couple of deputies. Because of the distance and the clustering crowd Amy could not identify them. No matter; the important thing was that she had escaped the risk of sound-bites. It would be bad enough when the time came to get in front of the cameras and plug her book. But right now it made no sense going on television just to plug somebody else’s murder.

Now where had *that* come from? She was beginning to sound like Hank Gibbs. But she was thankful for his presence and grateful for his return with a package of Salem Ultralights 100s.

*Salem*, as in Salem, Massachusetts, 1692. *Salem*, as in witch-hunts. No wonder she was uptight. And where was Eric Dunstable?

Reaching into her purse she pulled out the lighter. Flame rose with a flick; the fluid hadn’t evaporated. And neither had her need to smoke, in

spite of the resolution made so many months ago. The fact that she'd continued to carry the lighter with her almost hinted at precognition. And *where was Eric Dunstable?*

Gibbs was frowning at her. "Trouble?"

"No." Amy dropped the cigarettes into her purse. "Just resisting temptation." Which was a lie, of course; she'd decided not to risk breaking a fingernail opening the package while the car was in motion. Besides, the first cigarette would taste better with a cup of coffee, no cream, regular sugar please.

But the cubicle at the rear of the print shop was not a restaurant, and while the coffee was instant as promised, it took a good ten minutes for the water to boil on the hot plate. They sat talking as they waited.

"Sorry this place is such a mess." Gibbs' gesture encircled the small room's clutter. "Seems as if we're spending most of our time sneaking in and out of back rooms by the back way."

"I'm not complaining," Amy said. "But now that we're here let's get back to the question. What do you think?"

"About Charlie Pitkin? Frankly, I don't know. He could be hiding something."

"Like law books, perhaps?" Amy nodded. "I noticed he didn't have any in his office."

"Tell you a secret. A good lawyer doesn't need them."

"Not even for trials?"

"Especially not for trials." Gibbs leaned back his hands steepling. "Take homicide, for instance. Chances are an average suspect is male, aged somewhere between eighteen and thirty-five. When arrested he's in dirty jeans, a tank top, bare feet, has a scraggly beard, maybe a couple of porno tattoos on his arms above needle marks.

"Then he gets himself an attorney. And when the trial begins he'll be wearing a white shirt, a plain tie with a small knot, conservative three-pieced suit, black oxfords, and a close shave. I don't even have to mention blow-dry." The sides of the steeple fell away to form a funnel.

"A good trial lawyer today is just a combination hairstylist, fashion advisor, and drama coach." Gibbs paused, smiling. "Besides, Pitkin does

have a law library in his other office, up at the state capitol.”

Amy listened, trying to conceal her impatience, thinking *Everyone had a weakness and his is self-appreciation. My weakness is the patience I have for listening.*

As if sensing her thought, Hank Gibbs halted abruptly. “Sorry, I got carried away.” He glanced at the pot on the burner of the hot plate, confirming that its contents had not yet begun to bubble. “Anything else strike you about Pitkin or the office?”

“Pictures.” Now it was Amy’s turn to glance at the water, but a watched pot never boils. “Two photographs on his desk, both in silver frames. And maybe you didn’t notice because it was so dark, but there’s a big one hanging in the corner on the wall opposite the window.”

“The little girl?”

“His little girl. I saw his daughter the other night and her features haven’t changed all that much. The photos on the desk are more recent.”

“He’s very fond of her.”

“Obviously.” Amy paused. “I didn’t notice any pictures of his late wife. What was she like?”

“I wouldn’t know. She died when Emily was still in grammar school. Cancer. It was Charlie who did most of the parenting.”

“How old is Emily?”

“I’d say twenty-three or four. She graduated from college three years ago.”

“Let me guess the rest. No boyfriends, no live-ins. She came straight back home to take care of Daddy.”

Gibbs leaned forward. “Slow down, I think you’re driving too fast. And on the wrong road.”

“I’m not suggesting any actual physical relationship. But there does seem to be a strong bonding between them.”

“Drive a little further. I’m not sure where you’re heading.”

“To an obvious conclusion. A daughter who really loves her daddy might be willing to provide him with an alibi.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Let’s try a detour for a moment. What makes you assume that Charlie Pitkin would risk his professional and political career by committing murders that would point to him as the principal suspect? It’s not just that he was Remsbach’s friend and attorney; the two of them had some kind of joint setup in this Bates Motel deal. Now, with his partner dead, Pitkin may end up with everything. But he wouldn’t pull such a dumb trick and hope to get away with it. Charlie’s too sharp for that.”

“Is he?” Amy’s sidelong glance shifted to the pot; the water was beginning to simmer. “Remsbach kept telling me about all the clever promotion ideas Pitkin had come up with for the tourist trade. But the man we saw—”

“—had just been cross-examined by the Sheriff as a principal homicide suspect,” Gibbs interjected. “He’d probably gone through a sleepless night and faced the prospect of hiding out in his office all day. If he’s innocent, you can imagine what a shock it was, losing the two of them at once—his partner and his girlfriend.”

Amy frowned. “Did his daughter know about his relationship with Doris Huntley?”

“I’m not sure. What difference would it make?”

“So far there’s no evidence to show that these murders couldn’t have been committed by a woman.”

“Spoken like a true feminist.” Gibbs looked up. “I think our water’s boiling.”

Amy rose. “Let me do the honors.”

“Here’s my mug. You can use Homer’s, over there on the shelf—it’s clean. Sugar’s in that little bowl behind the coffee jar. Got the ashtray over the top to keep the flies out. You need a spoon, there’s a couple in the drawer. And I don’t think Pitkin’s daughter is the guilty party.”

“But you don’t know.” Amy played instant housewife with the instant coffee.

“I can find out.” Gibbs took a sip, grimaced, then set the mug down. “Watch out, it’s hot.” He stood up and started toward the doorway leading to the print shop and the front office beyond. “Only be a minute,” he said. “Might as well get this thing settled while the coffee cools.”

Following his previous direction, Amy located the sugar and a spoon. As she stirred the contents of her cup she could hear the echo of Hank Gibbs' voice from the room beyond, but the sounds were too faint for precise word identification.

Explanation, and his cooling coffee, had to wait until Gibbs returned.

"Just talked to Leona Hubbard. She and her husband are Pitkin's neighbors out at the lake. Told me she called Emily last night to ask about some church social this coming weekend. Neither Emily nor her father answered the phone."

Amy stopped stirring her coffee and met Gibbs' gaze. "And—?"

"Mrs. Hubbard tried again about half an hour later, but by then the phone was out of order; I guess the storm was really heavy there. She wanted her husband to take a hike over to the house and see if anyone was home, but he said forget it. Old Lloyd's arthritis acts up on him in bad weather and he wasn't about to go any farther than the kitchen window. Even with the rain coming down he was able to point out that the yard light was on over at Pitkin's place and both cars were in the carport."

"So?"

"Mrs. Hubbard saw Emily around eight this morning, right after her father left to come into town. She knew what had happened, of course, because the phone was working again and Engstrom had just called.

"Emily told Mrs. Hubbard that she and her father had been home together since six-thirty last night."

"Are you buying that?"

"Apparently Sheriff Engstrom is. According to Lenoa Hubbard he called to ask her the same questions over an hour ago." Gibbs picked up his coffee cup and took a tentative swallow. "Cooler." Now, a gulp. "Unless somebody's lying, it doesn't look as though Doris Huntley was killed by a jealous daughter."

"I still think jealousy could be the motive." Amy murmured. "But perhaps we ought to forget Doris and concentrate on Remsbach. You happen to know if he's been involved with any other women?"

Gibbs slammed his coffee mug down onto the table. "Holy Christ—why didn't I think of that?"

“Who is she?”

“Sandy Oliver.”

“That’s a new name to me.”

“An old one to her. Took it back after the divorce.” Gibbs nodded. “She was married to Dick Reno.”

This time Amy went into the print shop with Gibbs, perching on a stool beside the counter as he made his call. After dialing there was a lengthy period of silence, but Gibbs continued to grip the receiver.

“Same old story.” He sounded annoyed. “Nobody wants to answer the phone. It’s a wonder they ever make any appointments.”

“They?” Amy said. “I thought you were calling Sandy Oliver.”

“I am,” Gibbs told her. “She’s got a job doing nails over at the beauty parlor.” His annoyance dissolved into a grin. “You can imagine what it must be like over there this morning. Maybe they can’t even hear the phone with all that cackling going on.”

But somebody did, because Gibbs turned away from Amy and directed his next remarks into the mouthpiece. “Hi, Ada. Hank Gibbs here. Can I have a fast word with Sandy? Only take a minute—”

He broke off, his grin giving way to an annoyed expression once again. “Okay. It wasn’t all that important.” Gibbs paused. “No, they haven’t found the murderer yet.” Another pause. “I haven’t got the faintest idea. Unless you did it.”

After a final farewell he replaced the receiver and turned. “Sandy’s not there today. Called in sick.”

“What does it mean?”

“She’s the only one who can answer that.” Gibbs glanced at his watch. “There’s still time to drive out to her place if you like.”

“Hadn’t you better call her first?”

“I don’t think so. Way I figure it, staying home from the beauty shop, particularly on a day like this, she doesn’t want to talk.”

“If she won’t talk with people she knows she certainly isn’t anxious to see a newspaper editor and a total stranger.”

“Which is why I don’t intend to give her any warning.”

“You sound as though you really think she could be a suspect.”

Gibbs’ gesture was equivocal. “So far we can’t accuse her of the actual murders. But if there’s anything to the jealousy angle you brought up, she might still be involved.”

Amy frowned. “There’s always a chance she really could be ill. And even if she isn’t, she probably won’t talk to me.”

“Want to bet? Anyone working at that beauty parlor knows more about what’s going on in town than I do. You’ve probably been a chief topic of conversation right up until what happened last night. Don’t worry, she’ll see you, if only out of curiosity.”

Gibbs lost no time leading her back to the rear exit, and it was Amy who remembered to disconnect the hot plate before she left. As they walked out to the car she shook her head. “If you ask me, you’re the one with the curiosity.”

“Maybe so. But there sure as hell wouldn’t be much use trying to run a newspaper without it.”

“I understand.” Amy’s voice rose above the sound of the motor as Gibbs turned the key in the ignition. “You’re the fisherman, and I’m the bait.”

“Makes a good combination. Let’s see what we can catch.”

As they drove Amy glanced through the windshield and noted the thinning ranks of houses on both sides of the street ahead. “Have we far to go?” she said.

“She lives about ten miles outside of city limits. Closer to the Bates place than she is to town.”

“And Dick Reno—?”

“He’s got the old Murray property, about three miles farther on. Just this side of the swamp.” Gibbs gave her a sidelong glance. “You know about the swamp, don’t you? Norman’s disposal.”

Amy’s nod both acknowledged and dismissed the thought. Once again she diverted her attention to the view beyond the windshield. They were traveling through an area of rolling hillsides topped by pines rising against the vivid blue of a cloudless sky.

“I love the scenery around here,” she said.

Gibbs shrugged. “I guess it’s all right if you like beauty.”

Amy smiled, then sobered. “Mind if I ask you something?” she said.

“Go ahead.”

“Are you really that cynical? Or is it some kind of an act?”

“Both.” As he spoke he avoided her gaze, peering at the roadway ahead. “I guess it’s what our friend Steiner would call a defense mechanism. Leoncavallo would have cast me as Pagliacci.”

“If it’s all a front, what’s behind it?”

“Envy, I guess.” He kept his eyes on the road as he spoke. “Envy of people like you.”

“Why me?” Amy paused. “I wrote a book, is that it?”

“Partly. The big thing is that you wrote something you wanted to write, something you believed in. Now you’re going to write another, probably lots of others. And when I’m an old man with a long gray beard and a short fuzzy memory I’ll still be writing up Sunday school picnics and high school basketball games for the local paper.”

“Any law says you have to stay here?”

Gibbs nodded. “Law of economics says there aren’t too many people around looking to buy a small-town weekly with poor circulation. Law of nature tells me my own circulation isn’t all that great—I don’t have the energy to start all over again. And even if I could beat out all those kids with degrees in journalism and land a job with some metropolitan daily what difference would it make? I’d still be writing nonnews about nonpersons.” Gibbs shook his head. “These being the laws, it looks like I’ll serve a life sentence.”

He spun the wheel and the car veered left onto a narrow dirt road tunneling beneath towering trees. “Sorry to bend your ear, but you asked for it. One of these days I’ll get around to writing my unauthorized autobiography.”

*Self-pity*, Amy told herself. *Whoever would have guessed it?* Or was it something which required guesswork? A montage of images flashed through her mind—Dad, her sister Fran, Bonnie Walton, ex-lover Gary,

Dick Reno. And last but not least, that not-so-celebrated authoress and researcher, Miss Amelia Haines. Admit it, self-pity is one trait most of us share in common. But we seldom share it openly with others. Why had Hank Gibbs momentarily removed the mask? Was that his way of coming on to her?

*Vanity.* That's another common trait commonly concealed, if Gibbs itched for her he'd have made his move by now, and they would have been parked back there behind the trees instead of emerging into the sunlight.

Its rays were reflecting from the windowpanes of the two-story structure at the end of the road directly ahead. The barn behind it indicated that the white frame house had once functioned as a farmhouse, but the open field area beyond showed no present signs of cultivation.

As they parked in the rutted side yard, chickens clucked a greeting from somewhere inside the barn. Emerging from the car Amy confronted a tan-and-white collie bounding from behind the house with mixed signals—a menacing growl and a wagging tail. She chose to believe the tail, but still felt more secure when Gibbs came around the front of the car and stooped to pat the dog before moving toward the back door.

She followed him as the growl, tail, and dog itself vanished as quickly as they'd come. Now her attention was directed to the woman who opened the door in response to Gibbs' knock.

Sandy Oliver was neither as tall or as heavy and her nose had never been broken, but her complexion and facial features bore a marked resemblance to Dick Reno's; she could easily have passed as his sister rather than his ex-wife. Short-cropped curls and the ambiguity of boots and jeans accentuated a sense of unisexuality, betrayed only by the bulge of heavy breasts beneath the khaki shirt.

Gibbs smiled at her. "Afternoon, Sandy," he said.

His smile was not returned. "What the hell do you want?"

"Like you to meet a friend of mine." He indicated Amy with a nod.

"Cut the crap." Her eyes were still fixed on Gibbs. "You gonna answer my question or not?"

"Maybe it would be better if we talked inside. I wouldn't want the chickens to hear."

Sandy Oliver's reaction indicated she would never make a meaningful contribution to a sitcom laugh track. For a long moment she stood motionless, then stepped back abruptly. "Okay, but make it short."

Gibbs gestured and Amy was the first to cross the threshold and enter the kitchen beyond. She did her best to ignore the scowl on Sandy's face but there was no escape from the acrid reek of her breath. No escape, and no mistaking: the lady had been recently smoking a joint.

Or several. When Gibbs moved up beside Amy in the kitchen their reluctant hostess glared at them with pinpointed pupils.

"Start talking," she said.

Gibbs nodded. "First of all, I'd like to introduce—"

"Never mind, I already know who she is. That's all they've been talking about the last couple of days. Every customer in the shop keeps telling me what she's been up to and where she went, like it was the second coming of Christ." Now the eyes were pinpointing Amy directly. "Ever since you hit town and stuck your snotty nose into what's none of your business, we're in trouble. On top of it, now you got the nerve to show up here. Well, honey, just let me tell you where you can stick that snotty nose of yours—"

"Cool it!" Gibbs gestured quickly. "The only reason Miss Haines is here is because I invited her to ride along."

"And I'm inviting her to get the hell out of my house." Sandy Oliver's gesture was neither as quick nor as firm as Gibbs', but her voice was strong and strident. Now she focused her glazed glare on Amy's companion. "That goes for you too, Hank Gibbs. I wouldn't use that goddamn newspaper of yours to line the litter box for David's dog!"

Somewhat to Amy's surprise, and not altogether to her approval, Gibbs grinned. "I'm not trying to drum up circulation," he said. His grin softened to a smile. "Look, Sandy, I know you're not feeling well and we didn't come here to upset you. All I need is two minutes, just long enough to ask you a couple of simple questions."

"Like where I was last night?" There was a rasp in Sandy Oliver's laugh that betrayed more anger than amusement. "I'll tell you where. I was over at Otto Remsbach's place, sticking a knife in him and cutting Doris Huntley's throat."

There was no trace of a smile or grin on Gibbs' face now. "Sandy, for God's sake—"

"That's what you want to hear, isn't it?" Ignoring his shocked stare she moved across the kitchen to the cupboard area beneath the sink. "Damn good thing I left that butcher knife stuck in Otto's gut. Maybe if I had it here now I'd use it on both of you."

Still speaking she stooped. "Lucky for me I got this."

Rising, she faced them with the leveled revolver.

"Sandy, no—"

"Now it's my turn. Where were you last night?"

"Baldwin Memorial Hospital. You can check—"

"Shut up. I'm asking her."

The muzzle of the revolver moved ever so slightly, ever so emphatically. But before Amy could answer, Sandy shook her head.

"Never mind, I already know." Her voice shook too, but not her hand. "Wasn't more 'n nine o'clock before I get this call from Ruth Potter. Said she just got home from that lousy Chinese restaurant out on the county trunk and she saw Dick having dinner with that female reporter from Chicago. How do you think I felt, with David sitting right there finishing up his homework and having to listen? His own father, messing around with another woman in public—"

Amy broke in quickly. "I thought you and Dick were divorced."

"That's none of your goddamn business! You got no right to shame me and my son in front of everybody, do you hear me? Answer me, you little bitch, do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear."

It was Dick Reno's voice, and he moved quickly into Amy's field of vision. Reno had entered so quietly that none of them were aware of his presence until now. By the time Sandy glanced up he was already wresting the weapon from her hand. "This is what I came looking for," he said. "Where've you been hiding it?"

"None of your business where!" The rasp in Sandy's voice was edging upward to a screech. "Gimme that! Damn you, I gotta keep something

around to protect myself!”

She clawed at him but Reno shoved her back. “So do I,” he said.

“What the hell for? You already carry a gun at work.”

“Not anymore.” Reno shook his head. “I’ve just been fired.”

Somewhere along the way, either from the late Otto Remsbach or her customers at the beauty salon, Sandy had acquired a wealth of raunchy invective. Her vocabulary seemed far from exhausted when Amy and Hank Gibbs made their abrupt departure.

A moment later Dick Reno joined them, still carrying the gun as he slammed the door behind him to stem Sandy's scatological flow. His car was not visible; it had been parked on the far side of the house. Apparently the tan-and-white collie was checking it out, but the chickens acknowledged Reno's presence as he walked Amy and Gibbs to their vehicle.

Gibbs eyed him warily. "Want to tell us what happened?"

"No, I don't." His scowl merged with a crooked grin. "But I might as well. You'll find out anyway, I'd better give it to you straight before you put a write-up in next week's paper."

Reno glanced at Amy. "After I dropped you off last night I got on the squawk box to Irene at the office. Usually I draw city patrol first, then one of the county trunk routes, but this time Engstrom left orders assigning me in reverse.

"Point is, he'd detailed me to cover this area. Things looked pretty quiet the way they do on a weeknight when the kids aren't out playing cowboy. Thinking about kids reminded me of what we'd been discussing at dinner, how Sandy had custody of David, and that started to steam me up."

Reno's lopsided grin had disappeared but the scowl remained. Now he took a deep breath. "Next part's off the record. Okay with you, Hank?"

"Shoot."

"That's what I damn well felt like doing, the more I thought about Sandy and how she'd screwed-up—not just her life, but David's and mine." He hesitated. "Like I say, no traffic around. Everything was under control out

there on the trunk; everything but me. I went from steam to boil. Next thing you know I headed for the house here.”

Hank Gibbs’ eyes narrowed. “What did you have in mind?”

“Murder.” Again Dick Reno hesitated, then shook his head. “But that’s where it stayed—in my mind. What I felt like doing and what I actually did are two different things. By the time I drove up here last night I’d simmered down a bit, enough to talk to Sandy without blowing my stack.”

“What time did you arrive?” Gibbs said.

“Around ten, maybe a little earlier.” Reno shrugged. “What I should have done was check things out with the office. Last time I called in was about nine forty-five, just before heading here.”

“You didn’t say where you were going?”

“I told Irene I was making a second run, just to double-check on a couple of truckers who’d parked their rigs outside the Pig-Out Inn. Wouldn’t want to see them back on the highway carrying two loads instead of one.”

Hank Gibbs nodded. “So Irene didn’t log where you were actually going?”

Dick Reno sighed. “If she knew about me pulling a stunt like that on duty she wouldn’t be able to wait to blow the whistle. I know I goofed, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Hank Gibbs nodded again. “Right.”

“Wrong.” Reno’s gaze flickered to Amy. “Look, there’s no point my boring you with this stuff.”

“I’m not bored,” Amy said. Then, quickly, “In case you’re wondering, it’s off-the-record with me too.” She smiled. “I don’t even have a whistle.”

Hank Gibbs cleared his throat, then glanced expectantly at Reno. “You were saying?”

“We talked about David. At least that’s what I tried to talk about, but the minute I brought up the idea of custody it was the same old story, forget it, no way. I told her I damn well wasn’t going to forget it, and there was a way, even if it meant going to court and telling what I knew was going on between her and Otto Remsbach.” Somewhere in the background the chickens clucked their disapproval before he continued.

“Surprised I heard about that?” His grin was rueful and fleeting. “So was she. I could see, even though she didn’t let on, just told me to get the hell out!”

“Did you?” Gibbs asked.

“Had to, before I lost my temper. Got all the way back to the county trunk by the time I cooled down enough to remember I was overdue calling in. By ten they knew what had happened up at Remsbach’s place and when Irene asked me where I’d been I figured the best thing to do was tell the truth.”

Amy glanced up at him. “Did they believe you?”

“Sometime after midnight Engstrom contacted Sandy. I don’t know whether she’d heard the news from somebody over the phone, but she sure as hell put me on the spot. Said she hadn’t seen me last night at all, let alone the time those murders were supposed to have taken place.”

“I’m surprised Engstrom isn’t holding you,” Gibbs said.

“He probably would, if he had anything positive to go on. As it is he fired me.”

“For suspicion of murder?”

Reno shook his head. “Two charges. The first is failure to report in on schedule. The second is revealing classified information.”

Amy frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means I told you they found that wax dummy of Norman Bates’ mother in Otto Remsbach’s bed.”

“Hell you say!” Hank Gibbs’ eyebrows rose. He turned to confront Amy. “You didn’t tell me that!”

“Sorry, I promised to keep my mouth shut.”

“Well, you didn’t hear it from me, either,” Reno said. “This is off-the-record, remember?” He expelled a long breath. “Engstrom was right. I should have had more sense. With all those newspeople in town, God knows what’d happen if this hits the fan.”

“It will, sooner or later,” Gibbs said. “You know it and I know it. And Engstrom, bless his little pointy boots, he knows it too.”

Dick Reno shrugged. "If it happens, it happens. But don't forget your promise."

"Still loyal to the old uniform, eh?"

"To hell with the uniform! It's the town I'm thinking about. Last night was bad enough, but if the media people tie those murders in with this Bates business—"

Gibbs gestured quickly. "You don't have to draw a picture, believe me, I'm thinking the same thing. They're taping me for network news this afternoon, probably end up just running a couple of sound-bites, but I've got to figure away to duck some of the questions. They're bound to bring up Bates, probably Claiborne too, and I'm willing to bet some smart-ass is going to try and tie little Terry Dowson's death in with the mess."

"Who knows?" Reno said. "Maybe there is a connection." He stared down at the weapon in his right hand. "I'm going back in and have another talk with Sandy."

"Think she did it?"

"I'll ask her."

As Dick Reno turned and moved away, Gibbs opened the car door for Amy. "Good thing that gun isn't loaded," he murmured.

Amy didn't reply. It wasn't until they were back on the dirt road that either of them spoke again. As they drove past the bordering trees to the right, Gibbs' profile was alternately sunlit and shadowed, but his expression remained unchanged.

"What's bothering you?" Amy said. "Is it the interview?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Interviews don't worry me. It's just that everything Dick Reno said is true. Salem had the witch-hunts, London had Jack the Ripper, and from now on Fairvale is stuck with Norman Bates." His grin was grim. "Strange, isn't it? All the time and effort Otto Remsbach spent trying to publicize that damn motel. He never realized the best way to promote it was his own death."

Amy frowned. "Maybe his partner had that idea."

"Possibly." Gibbs turned onto the county trunk. "But we both know his partner also has an alibi."

“They all have alibis,” Amy said. “Including you and me.”

Gibbs’ grin returned. “You still claim you didn’t do it?”

Amy nodded, but her reply didn’t match his mood. “Stop clowning. If we eliminate Dick Reno and Sandy, who’s left?”

“Just about everybody else in town,” Gibbs said. “They all hate what’s been happening here and I have a pretty strong hunch that if Remsbach had lived to go through with his plans there might have been some organized opposition. Of course, that wouldn’t help anymore. It’s no use trying to keep a low profile after last night. From now on the smartest thing to do is open a dozen new hotels and restaurants for the tourist trade.”

“You just mentioned something about the possibility of organized opposition.”

“I also said the possibility was past.”

“You’re being evasive. Aren’t you going to give me any names?”

“You’re being persistent. But let’s just start with a few you already know. Irene Grovesmith, Reverend Archer, Bob Peterson, Dr. Rawson. And I’ve got a pretty fair hunch that you can throw in Sheriff Engstrom himself, just for good measure. Come to think of it, so far the only one we know in that bunch with a solid alibi is Grovesmith. You can scratch Irene, if you like. Personally, I wouldn’t touch her with a ten-foot pole.”

“Be serious.”

“I am. Very.” Gibbs took a deep breath. “We can’t change the past, we can’t anticipate the future. So why waste the present worrying about either one?”

“Hedonist.”

“Pragmatist.” Gibbs’ grin returned. “Which reminds me, what are your present plans?”

Amy glanced at her watch. “It’s one o’clock. How long will it take me to get from the hotel to the State Hospital?”

“Twenty-five minutes. Half an hour at most. What time’s your appointment with Dr. Steiner?”

“Three-thirty.” Amy glanced ahead, noting that Gibbs was entering town now by the same route they’d left, and undoubtedly for the same reason; if

he dropped her off at the rear of the hotel she could return to her room via the service elevator without detection. Pragmatism had its practical advantages, no doubt about that.

And she had a good two hours of free time. The thought that occurred to her was promptly voiced. "I wonder if they locked up the Bates place again?"

"You'd have to ask Pitkin about that. He and Remsbach would be the only ones who had keys."

"What about the people who'd been working out there? Didn't those two girls get in with somebody's duplicate?"

"After Terry Dowson was killed, Engstrom checked out alibis on all the workers and members of their families. While he was at it he picked up the extra keys. Far as I know they're still somewhere in the Sheriff's office, probably stashed away under the Kleenex box in Irene's right-hand desk drawer." He sobered. "Why did you ask? I hope you're not thinking of going out there?"

"Never mind the rhetorical question. You know damned well I've got to see the place for myself. I want to get there before those news-hounds find out about what was in Remsbach's bed and start sniffing around the Bates property again." Amy reached for her bag on the seat beside her as they pulled up to the curb at the rear of the hotel. "Right now I have two hours to spare and according to the map book I'd be only a mile or so off the route to the State Hospital. Besides, it's broad daylight—"

Gibbs nodded. "The sun is bright, yes. But standing in the sunshine out there and trying to pick locks with your nail file isn't bright."

"What makes you so sure? Maybe the place hasn't been locked again."

"And if it is, maybe Pitkin will loan you a key. But if I were you I wouldn't count on it."

"I'm not. All I want is a chance to look around before there's a mob scene. One way or another, I've got to see it before I leave town."

"That figures." Gibbs nodded again. "I'd drive you over myself if it wasn't for that interview session coming up."

"Thanks, I know you would." Amy opened the door and swung her feet down to rest on the pavement. "And thanks for the breakfast and limo

service.” Emerging, she straightened and turned to close the door behind her.

“Amy?”

“Yes?”

“Promise me something. Don’t risk going out there by yourself. I’ll be free again tomorrow morning, but if you can’t wait, at least get somebody else to come with you. Don’t go there alone.”

For a moment she hesitated, then nodded. “You’re right, of course.”

“That’s better.” The slam of the passenger-side door punctuated Gibbs’ words. “By the way, what time do you expect to be back from seeing Steiner?”

“I don’t know but my guess would be somewhere around six. Six-thirty at the latest.”

“If you feel like it, give me a call at the office. Maybe we can have dinner together.”

“Where?”

“They say Irene Grovesmith makes a terrific pizza.”

The car moved forward and Amy turned away as it departed. As she made her way through the back entrance to the waiting service elevator she couldn’t avoid a rueful reflection. What did she do to make herself attractive to older men?

Maybe just being younger was enough. But rightly or wrongly, she was beginning to feel that Hank Gibbs’ intentions involved sharing more than a pizza. And why was it that he seemed incapable of being serious whenever he became serious? It would probably take someone like Dr. Steiner to answer that question; she ought to remember to ask him when they talked.

But there was so much to talk about, so much to think about, far more than she had anticipated. A good thing she’d promised not to go out to the Bates place this afternoon; what she really should do during the next two hours was to organize her thoughts, recopy some of her random notes in chronological order, and set down a list of things she meant to ask Steiner about. There already was such a list, of course, but in view of last night’s events and today’s revelations, it would have to be both revised and expanded.

The upcoming meeting with Dr. Steiner would be crucial, particularly so because the other meeting she had counted on—the one with Adam Claiborne—would never take place. Nor would she meet again with Otto Remsbach.

Stepping out of the service elevator she fished the key from her purse and moved to the door of her room. Once again she hesitated before metal met metal; a ghostly Adam Claiborne peered over her shoulder and on the other side of the door Otto Remsbach lay bedded and waiting, ready to receive her in bloody embrace.

Amy forced herself to turn the thought aside before she turned the key. There was nothing behind her but a shadow, nothing more substantial awaiting on the bed in her room.

Closing and locking the door behind her, she put her purse down on the bureau and opened the top drawer. Now where had she left the big notebook?

And who was tapping, ever so softly, but ever so persistently, on the door?

“Miss Haines—”

The muffled voice that spoke her name answered her question.

Eric Dunstable. How could she have forgotten about him?

“I’ll get the key.”

Finding anything in that overloaded bag of hers was always a problem and this instance proved no exception. After her first and fruitless scrabblings she bowed to the inevitable and dumped the contents of her purse on the bedspread. The rest was easy.

Amy unlocked the door. “Here we go.”

And here he came. It might have been a televised rerun of the other evening; the taller version of Toulouse-Lautrec hadn’t grown an inch. He was still wearing the same clothing and, as far as Amy could determine, had slept in it as well. If he’d slept at all. And the right lens of his glasses was cracked at the base of its outer rim. Spectacle frames could not conceal the crescents of darkness under his eyes. Nor the twitch in the left one.

All this was apparent at a glance, and Amy did her best not to stare. “I’ve been trying to get in touch with you,” she said.

Dunstable nodded. "Would you mind if I sat down?"

"Please do."

While he settled back in the armchair, Amy seated herself on the edge of the bed and began to restore the contents of her bag in their proper disarray. "Where have you been?" she said.

"Montrose. Rock Center. Selroy." Another twitch. "That's where I ended up last night; the Selroy Motor Lodge, because there was no way of getting back here again by bus until this morning. At first I'd planned to try hitching a ride, but then the storm came up and I decided against it, even though it meant spending extra money when I already had accommodations over here." Now the inevitable twitch was accompanied by a movement of beard-bordered lips suggesting a smile. "This was probably one of the most fortunate investments I've ever made."

Amy closed her bag. "How so?"

"It provided me with the necessary alibi for my whereabouts at the time of the murders."

"Then you've seen Engstrom."

"A couple of his deputies came by this morning just about ten minutes after I stepped off the bus." The smile disappeared and the twitch returned. "They probably phoned ahead to the Sheriff's Department here the moment I bought a ticket in Selroy. I gather my description has been rather widely circulated?"

"But Engstrom accepted your explanation?"

"Not until he checked it out with the Selroy Motor Lodge." Sunlight from the window glittered against the cracked lens as Dunstable glanced up. "I understand you had some problems last night."

"That's a very polite way of phrasing it." Amy paused. "I was on the scene after Doris Huntley was murdered. But I didn't kill her, and at the time I wasn't even aware Otto Remsbach was dead."

"I believe you." Dunstable's left eyelid blinked in affirmation. "You don't have the aura."

"Aura?"

“Of evil.” He leaned forward beyond the reach of the sunbeam’s ray and his shadowed face was somber. “So many have that aura here. I could feel it at the church—”

*Bedbug, Amy told herself. He’s as crazy as a bedbug.* But she didn’t tell him that; you’re supposed to humor the crazies.

She did her best. “The other night you said that if you attended the memorial services you’d be able to identify Terry Dowson’s murderer.”

“I was wrong.” Again the affirmative twitch. “Because they were wrong. The auras, too many of them, too confusing; impossible to separate vessel from contents.”

“I’m not following that.” Amy frowned.

“The body is a vessel, its contents good or evil, most generally an admixture of both. During possession the aural emanation is pure evil. A contradiction in terms, of course, but it’s difficult to explain.”

“I know.” At least she’d better pretend that she did. “But you still haven’t told me what you were doing in all those places.”

“Yesterday morning I hitched a ride to Montrose. In the afternoon I got over to Rock Center and then on to Selroy just after dinnertime. That’s where I finally found it.”

“What were you looking for?”

“Apparently something of a rarity in these parts. A Catholic church.”

Amy nodded. “You wanted to talk to a priest.”

“Not so. I wanted to steal some holy water.” Dunstable leaned back, but the sun had shifted slightly, just enough so his face was still in shadow. “And I did, from the font they have near the exit.” In the dimmer light the twitch was almost invisible. “A good thing I had a few minutes before they picked me up after I got back here. I more or less assumed that would happen so the first thing I did was empty the little cough syrup bottle of holy water into the glass in the bathroom. As I expected, they searched the place when they came and one of them named Al was still at it when his partner took me over to the Sheriff’s office.” Shadow and beard hid the smile but satisfaction sounded in his voice. “Naturally he didn’t find anything, and he never noticed the water in the glass.”

“I assume it has something to do with exorcism?”

Dunstable nodded. "You might call it the vital ingredient."

"Exactly how will you use it?"

"That all depends upon who or what I use it on."

"Which means you still feel that some form of possession is involved."

"More than ever, after what I've learned about last night." Once more the winking from the shadows accompanied the words. "Do you know that Dr. Claiborne died over at Baldwin Memorial Hospital just before those murders took place here in town?"

"I did hear something to that effect," Amy said. "But of course nobody has established the exact time when Remsbach and Doris Huntley were killed. Even an autopsy report will only be an educated guess."

"This isn't guesswork." Eric Dunstable's hoarse voice rose in reply. "And it isn't the first time this demonic entity has deserted the dead to possess the living."

Now he leaned into the light. "There's no way of telling just when and where the possession originated, but we do know that all those who came in contact with the entity were themselves possessed and died in turn. The phenomenon may have begun with Mrs. Bates herself rather than Norman."

Amy frowned. "You have nothing to support such a theory."

"Not entirely, but you can't dismiss the necrology. First Mrs. Bates, then her lover, Ed Considine. Next were Mary Crane and Arbogast, the insurance investigator. Then the two nuns, Sister Barbara and Sister Cupertine." His fingers rose and fell in accompanying enumeration. "After which came Norman himself. But it didn't stop there. There was that producer, Driscoll, out in Hollywood, and Vicinzi, the director. Now we've had Terry Dowson, Doris Huntley, and Otto Remsbach here. An even dozen."

As the list mounted Amy felt her own apprehension mounting with it. She knew the names, but somehow, up until this moment, she had never consciously realized the chain had so many links. And while possession might be a preposterous explanation, the linkage remained. The thought disturbed her and she strove for a light dismissal.

"Let's hope there's no more. Thirteen is an unlucky number."

“I don’t believe in superstitions.” Dunstable was actually serious, Amy realized. And, she mustn’t forget, crazy as a bedbug. Except there was something about what he said, or the way he said it, that continued to trouble her.

Eric Dunstable seemed aware of that, because now he attempted to relieve her mind. “Don’t worry about the number,” he said. “The entity has already passed to take over another.”

“If that’s the case, you’re right back to square one,” Amy said. “You still have to identify whoever is being possessed.”

“Now the circumstances are different. This time I think it will be comparatively easy.”

Amy’s fingers pressed hard against the bedspread and the mattress beneath. “Aren’t you going to tell me whom you suspect?”

“I’m not quite ready to do so yet.”

“But when you are—”

“Exorcism.”

“How?”

“By whatever method proves necessary.” Dunstable stared at her. “Words banish. Water purifies. Fire cleanses.”

His eye blinked.

Sheriff Milt Engstrom parked his car a little way up and off the road.

And it was his own car, not the Department's. Anyone passing by wouldn't be apt to give it a second look and nobody would be trying to reach him on the squawk. In fact no one knew where he was and that's the way he wanted it.

His pointed boots moved soundlessly along the elbow at the right-hand side of the road, still silent as he crossed to the door.

It was only after he unlocked it and entered the office that his heels clicked against the floorboards.

"Hello, Norman," he said.

The figure on the pivot pedestal did not turn, nor did it reply.

"What's the matter?" Engstrom said. "You got wax in your ears?"

Just a little joke. A very little one, but right now he'd settle for whatever might lighten things up, even for a moment. Just too damn bad the power hadn't been turned on here; even in the shadows and with his back turned Engstrom didn't particularly care for Norman's looks.

Looks. Better case the room and bath, just to make sure. Floorboards creaked as he crossed to the door of number one. New lumber and old lumber; both creak the same. Engstrom wondered if the floorboards were silent when someone walked on them in the old motel. Had to be, of course. That's how Norman managed to sneak into the room and the bath beyond, just the way he was sneaking now.

Only he didn't have to sneak. There was no need, because for the first time since last night he was alone. No phones, no messages, nobody yapping questions. Which meant he didn't have to give any answers. That was one of the reasons why he was here, to get away from giving answers.

There were none to be found in the bedroom when Engstrom opened the door and switched on the flashlight he'd lifted from his waistband. Its beam

traveled with him into the bathroom; no answers here, from the wax figure of the victim standing under the shower.

He wondered what Fatso Otto might have done about it if he'd lived. How long would it've taken him to pipe water out here and set his prices? Five bucks to use the john, ten bucks for a shower. Just the thing for the tourist trade. Nice conversation piece for the ladies when they got back home. Tell all your friends you used the bathroom in the Bates Motel. Give 'em a gift certificate. Get your picture taken with the dummy.

Engstrom shook his head. Come to think of it, Fatso Otto would never think of it. This was the kind of stuff Charlie Pitkin would try to pull; he was the brains and Otto was just the blubber.

Right now the coroner would be carving away at the blubber over at Baldwin Memorial. But where was the brains? Nobody at the office since noon, and at the house his daughter said he'd left right after lunch, she didn't know for where.

Lot of things she didn't know about dear old Daddy, or did she? How much was she onto some of those deals he had going for him up at the legislature, or even here at the Fairvale office? How much and how often did she cover for him?

Troubling questions, but there was another one which bothered him even more. How much did he really know about that girl? When you got right down to it, damned little except with the kind of gossip Irene Grovesmith brought back from the beauty parlor, which didn't count because Irene hated that girl almost as much as she hated this place. All the women seemed to hate it; Sandy Oliver, Marge Gifford in Doc Rawson's office, the waitresses, store clerks, even the girls in the steamy back room over at Qwik Dry Cleaners. Emma hated it too, and it was a good thing she was off visiting her sister Frances in Springfield this week. She'd missed all of the excitement and he'd missed all the static he would have gotten about how it served Otto Remsbach right, why didn't somebody stop him from building out there in the first place, why doesn't somebody just burn it down?

In his own mind Engstrom could almost hear her saying just that, but he couldn't picture her burning anything down. Some of those other women, yes, and some of the men too.

He retraced his steps to the office, flashlight fanning the silver bell on the counter and the figure facing the wall behind it. Certainly was some piece of work, that one. And so was the pivot mechanism in the pedestal. He'd already checked the battery setup that operated it when you pressed the bell on the counter and turned on the little strip of voice-tape. No clear print on the bell, and of course Banning's people couldn't get anything off the connecting wire that ran down behind the desk and into the base of the pedestal. Pretty cute the way they'd figured that one out, but then the outfit Charlie had hired did a lot more complicated things for some of those special effects in the movies.

Engstrom's lips tightened as he left the office. Don't look now, but your age is showing. They don't make movies anymore; it's all films. Got to keep up with the times.

And got to keep up with the present situation too. Switching off the flash, he started for the house. Where were all of those potential arsonists right now?

Irene was at the office handling calls and reporters, God help her; she wouldn't even have time to light a match. Sandy Oliver'd phoned in sick, so she was probably at home, but Doc Rawson's office hadn't heard from her. That's where Marge Gifford worked and she was on the job today. He'd talked to Pitkin's daughter less than an hour ago, out at the lake cottage. But where the hell was Amelia Haines?

Not in her room this morning, that's for sure, and nobody downstairs saw her leave. The lobby was like a snake pit; if somebody talked to her on the house phone the desk had been too busy to notice. She could even have used the service elevator and sneaked out the back way but her car hadn't been moved. He should have checked again before coming out here, but you can't think of everything.

Or everyone. The weirdo, Dunstable, there was no excuse to hold him after checking out his alibi this morning; he said he was going back to the hotel, but Christ only knew where he was now. And He wasn't talking to anyone, not even Reverend Archer, who'd been asking for divine intervention to help destroy this place. Maybe Archer would lose patience and act on his own. Meanwhile, as of his wife's response to a noontime call,

the Reverend was not at home, she didn't know when to expect him and couldn't say where he'd gone.

Homer was holding the fort at the *Fairvale Weekly Herald* office but his boss was out. According to Homer, Hank Gibbs was slated to tape an interview over at the hotel sometime around four o'clock; TV and radio people had rented—and were taking turns using—the banquet room, which was a fancy name for the place where the Kiwanis Club held breakfast meetings every Friday morning. Today the meeting had been called off, which meant there were that many more prospective firebugs on the loose. They hadn't been happy about Fatso Otto's project from its beginning and now they'd be anxious to see it end. Then there was Dick Reno to consider. Tall man, short fuse. He didn't take kindly to being fired, but you can't depend on someone who doesn't know enough to keep his mouth shut. He'd sneaked off while he was on duty last night; where could he have sneaked off to now?

Again Engstrom's hand dipped to his waistband, this time not to locate the flashlight but to reassure himself his revolver was ready before he opened the front door of the Bates house. After considering all those likely to have incendiary intentions it was possible that he might not be the first visitor here.

Sunlight hazy, clouds coming in from the west. More rain coming?

If so it didn't concern him; not at the moment, anyway. Truth to tell, a little rain this evening might be just the thing. Nothing like a good storm to put out fires. Unless, of course, the fire started before the rain did.

Once inside the house he closed the door quietly behind him. It was time to use the flashlight again. Here in the hall nothing seemed changed; a big sheet of plastic still covered the area where Terry Dowson's body had lain and the stained flooring beneath. Didn't look as though anyone had disturbed it since blood samples had been collected. Whole mess would have to be cleaned up sooner or later, but not right now. Maid's day off.

The flashbeam aided vision but it didn't help his hearing or other senses. As far as these were concerned, he'd have to depend on himself. Up until now all he heard was the sound of his own footsteps and all he smelled was a lingering trace of semi-glossy paint. He didn't expect to be touching or tasting anything; then again, one never knows.

One never knows, but one had damn well better find out. Move slowly, softly, carefully. Upstairs first; switch the flash to your left hand and keep the right hand close to the holster. Dick Reno turned in his revolver this morning, but he had one of his own. How many more of those jokers on his list might have revolvers, target pistols, deer rifles, shotguns, or other weapons? For that matter, an ordinary butcher knife would do; it had done before, several times, and most efficiently.

Darkness hid his grim smile as he mounted the stairs, keeping the flash low so that its light wouldn't advertise his approach. Once on the upper landing he pointed his boots down the hall and made a slow-motion survey door by door, room by room, closet by closet. All clear.

Satisfied, he retraced his route down the hall and the stairs, then duplicated his efforts on the first floor. Nobody had been hiding under the bed up above, nobody lurked behind the furniture down here. The drapes in the parlor were less than floor-length and stirred only in response to his passage.

Funny thing, though; no pictures on the walls, upstairs or here below. Maybe they'd been ordered but hadn't arrived. Perhaps they'd come in at the last moment, too late for hanging. Only it was never too late for hanging, not in this state. Or framing, either.

Again the grim smile. Wonder what kind of pictures were supposed to go on the walls here—regular old-fashioned paintings or maybe blowup photos of Norman and his mother? Have to ask Charlie Pitkin the next time he saw him. *If* he saw him.

Hopefully that wouldn't be in the basement. Or the fruit cellar.

Boot tips teetered on the steps. Down and dirty. That's what they used to say in stud poker games when he was a kid. But this wasn't a game and he wasn't a kid anymore; just a grey-mustached man who had plans for living to a ripe old age. Should have sent somebody else out here in the first place, but with Reno gone he was left shorthanded. Besides, it would be too risky.

Either it was darker in the basement or his flashlight was starting to give out. That had happened here before, or was it just his imagination? In any case he'd come too far to turn back now. Now that he knew the basement was empty. Now that he had to look into the fruit cellar.

The door was slightly ajar.

Had it been that way before? He couldn't remember.

Point the flashlight forward. Pull out the revolver and point it too. Ease the door open very gently, very slowly, using the tip of the left boot. Now fan the beam in on—

Emptiness.

It was a relief, of course. A relief, but strange; strange not to see Mother there, where she belonged. Should have had a pivot installed for her. Here, or in Otto Remsbach's bed.

This time the smile was not quite as grim. The tension was easing now that he could be sure—reasonably sure—the house hadn't been invaded. And wouldn't be, if he could prevent it. Eventually those news-media turkeys would be coming out here but all they were going to get was what they'd gotten the first time around; exterior shots of the house and the motel setup. If Captain Banning pitched in they wouldn't even get that much, but Banning's nose was out of joint because the Highway Patrol didn't get any exposure on the Remsbach case. He wasn't about to detail any round-the-clock surveillance here, not even on a drive-by basis.

Banning wasn't worrying about the media or about possible arson either. And when you came right down to it, why should he?

Coming right down to it was something to think about when coming right up the stairs again. Better check out the situation just to be on the safe side. In arson, matches are less important than motives.

Once more he reviewed the reasons that might motivate potential pyromaniacs. Only the people on his list weren't maniacs, he reminded himself, except perhaps for Eric Dunstable. Do demonologists start fires? It didn't matter; this character was weird enough or wired enough to do anything. Too bad the laws on substance abuse didn't allow for a test when they'd pulled Dunstable in: both times Engstrom could have sworn the guy was on something.

The girl who worked for Doc Rawson, that Marge, was into his sample supply; he knew because Doc had told him. Said he was going to dump her as soon as he could find himself another. But so far nothing serious had

happened and just because she popped a few pills didn't necessarily tie in with a burning desire to get rid of this place.

It was the others who really wanted it destroyed, and for good reason.

Now, leaving the house, Engstrom regretted he couldn't share their feeling. As an officer of the law he was responsible for the protection of life and property. The way things had been going, there were bound to be noises about how well he'd performed the first part of his duties. But if on top of that he let somebody burn down this place after it had been featured on the nightly news—

Engstrom shook his head.

It was up to him to keep everyone from playing with fire.

If not, he'd end up on the nightly news himself.

**D**r. Steiner was waiting for Amy in the lobby, and at first glance she thought he was one of the patients.

But patients in institutions of this sort were not likely to be wearing business suits nor moving freely about in wheelchairs without anyone in attendance. If anything more was necessary, his greeting offered confirmation.

“Miss Haines? I’m Nicholas Steiner.”

His outstretched hand was cold but his smile was warm. His grip was weak, his voice strong. Contrasts or contradictions? Another question among many for which she’d be needing answers. Better try an easier one first.

“How did you recognize me, Dr. Steiner?”

“There’ve been descriptions.” The smile brightened. “Besides we don’t expect many visitors this late in the afternoon, particularly the kind who arrive carrying oversized notebooks under their arms.” Again the frail hand extended. “Suppose we make a deal? I’ll carry your purse and notebook on my lap and you wheel me back to my office.”

“Fair enough.” Amy stepped behind the chair and, following Steiner’s directions, turned and propelled it past the reception desk. The white-capped, dark-faced woman behind it looked up and smiled at Dr. Steiner as they passed. “See you got yourself a new nurse,” she said.

“That’s right,” Steiner said. “Don’t report me to the union.”

Amy steered the chair into the corridor beyond—the administrative area, she concluded, since most of the doors lining the route were open to reveal glimpses of office furniture or filing facilities.

“Hang a left here,” Steiner told her.

*Here* was a modestly furnished but comfortably old-fashioned office; drapes instead of blinds, light incandescent rather than fluorescent, desk

solid wood, not flimsy metal.

Amy wheeled Steiner up beside rather than behind it, across from the armchair in which she seated herself after retrieving purse and notebook. Extracting a pen from the former, she held it poised, flipping open the latter to an empty page.

“I was just thinking,” she said. “This must be quite a switch for you. Usually you’re the one who takes the notes.”

Steiner’s right hand loosened the folds of the scarf around his neck. “Usually I ask patients if they need some water before they start talking,” he said. “There’s a cooler over in the corner behind you, and a cup dispenser. If you don’t mind—”

“Of course.” Amy rose and obliged his request. As she settled back in the chair again he drank slowly, then placed the empty cup on the edge of the desk beside him.

“That’s better,” he murmured. “Throat’s still a little uncomfortable.”

Amy nodded. “I’ll try not to ask too many questions.”

“Ask as many questions as you wish. I’ll try not to give too many answers.”

“Suppose I start with an easy one.” Amy gripped her pen. “What was Dr. Claiborne like?”

“You call that an easy question?” The accompanying chuckle held a hint of hoarseness; then the voice sobered. “Depends on which Dr. Claiborne we’re talking about.

“The Adam Claiborne I knew—or thought I knew, as my associate here—was a caring and competent co-worker, a decent and highly intelligent man who was almost like a son to me.

“But he was also the son of Norman Bates.” Steiner expelled his breath in a silent sigh. “I failed him. All those years after he came back, all those attempts to help. And I failed him.”

“I’m sorry,” Amy said. “It must be painful for you to talk about this.”

“After what Adam did to me the other night, it’s painful to talk period.” Steiner gestured hastily. “Don’t take that as a hint. I want to talk. I *need* to. If this hadn’t happened, if I could do what you’ve been doing—”

Amy leaned forward. "You think you'd be able to identify the murderer?"

"Somebody must. And soon."

"How would you go about it?"

Dr. Steiner shrugged. "Not the way Engstrom has, or Captain Banning. I've talked to them both and all they're interested in is clues, alibis, and motives. The problem is they have no clues, alibis can be faked, and motives can be concealed."

"Then where do you start?"

"The same place you did when you wrote your book about Bonnie Walton. You begin by constructing a profile of your subject."

"But I knew in advance that Bonnie Walton was the guilty party. She'd already been convicted of murder. And the profile of her I constructed in advance turned out to be wrong."

Steiner took another sip of water. "So you changed it, correcting errors on the basis of what you learned as you went along. And in the end it's my opinion you came pretty close to the truth."

"Thank you."

"Thank yourself for doing an honest and thorough piece of work." Steiner dropped his emptied paper cup into the waiting wastebasket beside the desk. "The point is, you probably never would have started the project if you hadn't already formed a profile of the subject in your own mind. Right or wrong, you needed to visualize an image as a point of departure. Then interviews helped you correct that image as you went along."

"Let's talk about the image of a possible suspect in this case. Do you have enough to create such a profile now?"

Steiner frowned. "Only in generalities, on the basis of what little I've learned."

As he spoke, Amy's pen raced to keep pace with his words.

"No need to repeat what we both know. Actually there are just a few points of special interest that I think haven't been given enough consideration.

"First off, in the murder of Terry Dowson. According to Captain Banning, Highway Patrol people couldn't locate tire tread marks anywhere

nearby. They say the storm must have washed them away, but I don't think our suspect would have left it to chance. Because nothing else was left to chance; nothing turned up in the house that was of any use to the forensic lab. So far the same thing holds true for the murders of Doris Huntley and her lover.

"This doesn't establish whether the homicides were premeditated or the result of circumstance but it does indicate the culprit is someone capable of careful and logical action to conceal these crimes. And, subsequently, to conceal identity. Which leaves us with only one remaining clue."

Steiner paused for a moment and it was Amy's impatience that broke the silence. "Aren't you going to tell me what it is?"

Dr. Steiner nodded. "Let me put it in the form of a question. Why would anyone steal the wax figure of Norman's mother?"

Now it was Amy who paused. "Some kind of a psycho? Someone who thought he was Norman?"

"If by 'psycho' you mean 'psychopath' then such a possibility exists. This type of personality disorder does not involve irrationality or psychotic patterns of behavior."

"Then the murderer wouldn't necessarily believe himself to be Norman."

"But it could be someone who wanted us to *think* he had such a belief. If that's true, there's no reason the murderer couldn't be female."

"Or a fanatic." Amy turned a page in her notebook. "Of either sex." She raised the pen and strove to make her question seem casual. "Mind telling me the name of the patient who visited you from Fairvale today?"

"I've had several visitors." Steiner's reply was casual too. "Frankly, if any of them were patients it's my obligation not to reveal their identities."

Amy smiled. "That won't be necessary. I think I saw the last one going to his car as I drove in. Reverend Archer, wasn't it?"

"Archer was here, yes." The casual note was missing from Steiner's answer now. "Fact is he comes out on a regular basis to pay ministerial calls on some of our cases. That doesn't make him a patient."

"But fanaticism does."

Amy too was far from casual; both voice and stare were direct.

Steiner sighed. “You understand this is privileged information?”

Amy lowered her pen. “I promise you I won’t write anything down.”

“Not for the moment, anyway. But my hunch is that the press will dig up all this material and a lot more, long before your book sees publication.” He hesitated. “I still don’t know—”

“Neither do I,” Amy said softly. “But I want to find out. Not just for the sake of the book, but because of my own involvement. In some ways I feel personally responsible for what happened last night.”

“Your only responsibility was being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Steiner moved the wheelchair a few inches forward, his voice lowering. “Now about Archer. He and Norman Bates were friends. In high school, and after. Archer actually knew Norman’s mother; he used to go out to the house frequently before she first began seeing Joe Considine.”

“Her lover.” Amy nodded.

“And Norman’s enemy. Or so he thought.” Steiner settled back in his chair. “That’s when the trouble began. You and I both know what happened to Mrs. Bates and Considine, but at the time nobody suspected Norman. Apparently nobody had any reason to suspect him, except for Archer.”

“He knew?”

“From what he’s told me, Norman found out about his mother’s affair with Considine. In his eyes she had betrayed him; his rage grew to a point where he was openly voicing threats against them both. That’s when Archer stopped seeing Norman and by the time Mrs. Bates and Considine died Archer was already off to the university. But ever since then he’s carried guilt feelings about not speaking up.

“According to him, he never saw Norman again, which is not all that unusual when you consider Archer was away for eight years between the time he started university and his eventual return as an ordained minister of the gospel. By then Norman was already a recluse, except during the performance of his duties in running the motel.

“When they finally discovered what Norman had done over and above the call of duty, it was too late for Archer to do anything except condemn himself for not ever coming forward with his suspicions. I needn’t tell you what the man has gone through in the years that followed.”

“He hated Norman?”

Steiner shook his head. “He hated what Norman did to Fairvale and its reputation. He hated the notoriety he felt would follow Otto Remsbach’s plans to rebuild the house and the Bates Motel as a tourist attraction.”

“Enough for him to kill Remsbach?”

“Enough for him to make every effort that might prevent Remsbach’s plans from going through.” Dr. Steiner’s brow furrowed to betoken the thought behind it. “I’d say he was highly motivated, determined, perhaps obsessed to the point of fanaticism—but I’d draw the line at describing him as murderous. What I saw this afternoon was a sorrowing and deeply disturbed man.”

“Where was he last night?” Amy asked.

“He doesn’t know.” Steiner shrugged. “Amnesic fugue. Could be triggered by emotional distress. It happens.”

“It happened to Norman.” Amy paused. “Could Archer—”

Steiner gestured before she could continue. “We’re talking about an elderly diabetic.”

“I know this may sound foolish, but isn’t there such a thing as maniacal strength?”

“Rubbish.” Steiner’s smile softened his reply. “You might as well suggest I got up out of this wheelchair and sneaked off to commit those murders myself.”

“Anything is possible.” Amy could smile too. “Adam Claiborne almost did you in with just one hand.”

“True,” Steiner said. “I should have been more cautious. I was supposed to have a male nurse standing by but he went to the washroom. You might call it a security leak.”

He chuckled, then sobered. “Wasn’t so funny at the time.”

“What reason did Dr. Claiborne have for attacking you?”

Steiner’s voice was very sober now. “Because of my own stupidity. I ought never to have gotten into a discussion about the Grand Opening plans for the Bates place.”

Amy nodded. “You’re saying he took all this personally?”

“Very.” Steiner paused reflectively. “I should’ve remembered something he told me in one of our early sessions. ‘Norman Bates will never die.’ And in a way, of course, he didn’t. Because there was part of Claiborne therapy never reached; a part that still believed he was Norman.”

“Maybe he was.”

Dr. Steiner glanced up quickly. “You’re not serious—”

“Eric Dunstable is.”

“The self-styled demonologist?”

“I take it you know about him.”

“Bits and pieces. Not enough.” Steiner leaned forward. “I’d appreciate hearing more.”

He listened intently as Amy recited her contacts with Dunstable from the first momentary meeting in Chicago up until their most recent encounter a few hours ago. “So according to his theory Norman did live on through Dr. Claiborne and has taken possession of someone else after his death.”

“His theory?” Steiner’s right hand rose in a gesture of dismissal. “Demonic possession is one of the oldest and most widespread concepts in human history.”

“Does that mean you believe in it?”

“Quite the contrary. No amount of age or faith transforms fantasy into reality. Stop and think. There was a time, up until a few centuries ago, when it was generally accepted that the mentally ill were possessed by demons. Today we’re starting to believe there may be a physiological basis for certain types of schizophrenia—evil organisms instead of evil spirits. For all we know demons may turn out to be just molecules in a DNA chain.”

“That’s not what Dunstable believes,” Amy said. “He’s convinced that Norman lives on.”

“And must be exorcised.” Steiner frowned. “Did he mention any details about the ritual he had in mind?”

“Not directly.” Amy tapped the point of her pen against the page beneath it. “I remember something he did say, though. ‘Words banish. Water purifies. Fire cleanses.’ ”

“Mean anything to you?”

“He told me about stealing holy water from the church. My guess would be he needed it as part of the ceremony.”

“That sounds logical.” Steiner nodded. “And I assume that the words he refers to would be in the form of invocation and prayer. Fire probably involves the lighting of candles.”

“He wasn’t specific about that.”

Dr. Steiner frowned. “Where is Eric Dunstable?”

“I don’t know,” Amy said.

But now, of course, she did.

Steiner had a sandwich and coffee in his room.

The sandwich was hard to chew, the coffee difficult to swallow. The same applied to much of what he'd been thinking and hearing about this Bates business. Hard to chew over some of the facts, difficult to swallow some of the fantasies.

Or even to separate one from the other. He certainly didn't believe everything he'd heard. Some people aren't on speaking terms with the truth.

On the other hand, who was he to expect anything better? Most of us want more than we deserve. "Help—I'm drowning! Throw me a yacht!"

Perhaps he was being presumptuous. There was no reason to assume that those he'd spoken with could differentiate between the real and the false. The parade is endless, the crowds cheer, and the Emperor strides naked through the streets.

So much for rock-lyric philosophy.

If he really wanted to come to grips with this problem it might be necessary to invent a philosophy of his own. Or at least make use of what he'd developed over a lifetime of professional practice. Not that practice makes perfect; but the best course for him now was to be professional. In which case his philosophy was simple enough.

People wear masks to hide behind from others. Sometimes they wear masks to hide from themselves. And his job was to remove those masks.

Steiner pushed himself back, away from the food tray on the table-top, away from the lamplight and into the shadows. Closing his eyes he evoked images behind the lowered lids.

*Masks.* Two masks—Comedy and Tragedy. Who wore them, and why? And which other disguises did they don, the people involved in this affair?

Hank Gibbs wore Comedy, Dick Reno's wife affected Tragedy. What did they conceal? He knew what was under Reverend Archer's mask of piety,

but wasn't certain he could recognize the real Engstrom behind the false face of authority.

Dick Reno? He wore a half mask that only half concealed the bitterness beneath. And that ex-wife of his, Sandy Oliver; she too wore a domino, though it didn't prevent the violence in her eyes from blazing through.

Masks. Sometimes they slipped in moments of stress, sometimes they were ripped off in rage. Wearing them permanently was an art that few could master. But of course there were physical aids; cosmetics and cosmetic surgery, beards and mustaches for men, eyeglasses for both sexes.

He remembered Amy's description of Eric Dunstable. Beard, mustache, glasses—he had them all. Plus the twitch. Symbolic, of course. Demonologists wear death masks.

Now he wondered what lay under that particular mask. Was it too good to be true, or just too bad to be true?

And why was it being worn?

He slipped the forefinger of his right hand beneath the scarf to trace a gentle semicircle around his bruised and tender neck. *Nicholas Steiner*, M.D. Was the degree a mask in itself? Was he hiding something just like the others, Archer, Gibbs, Reno, Pitkin—

Charlie Pitkin. He'd forgotten about prim and proper Pitkin, with the corners of his mouth turned down even when he smiled. The mask of Tragedy. But in Pitkin's case, it wasn't a mask.

Then he knew.

Amy left the hospital as darkness deepened in the parking lot and clouds converged overhead. The night air was chill and still; the calm before the storm.

But Amy wasn't calm, hadn't been since she'd realized what Eric Dunstable must have in mind. Or *had*. Perhaps by now she was already too late.

That's why she'd terminated her visit with Dr. Steiner so abruptly. She tried to appear calm then because there was no sense alarming him; all he could do was sit in his wheelchair and stew. But she made no effort to conceal her concern when she called Hank Gibbs from the hospital lobby.

"Has anything happened?" she said.

"I just finished my interview session. How did yours go?"

"That's not important now. Did any news come in? Anything about the Bates place?"

"Not to my knowledge. Why should there be?"

"Have you seen Eric Dunstable this afternoon?"

"No." Gibbs' voice conveyed concern. "Slow down, Amy. Tell me what this is all about."

She told him, but not slowly. Not slowly and not calmly because there wasn't time. "When Dunstable mentioned using fire in exorcism, I thought he was talking about lighting candles. But now it hit me—maybe he believes the demons came from the Bates place. And he's just flaky enough to exorcise them by burning it down. Or am I crazy too?"

"I don't think so," Gibbs said. "Did you call Engstrom?"

"Not yet. I was thinking about the fire department too."

"Let me ask Engstrom; maybe he can lean on them to take a run-by, just in case. I'll wait for you here at the office."

“No,” Amy said. “I’m going out there now. Dunstable doesn’t trust anyone but I think he’ll listen to me.”

“Stay away! Suppose something happens—”

“What kind of a question is that for a newspaperman to ask?”

“All right. I’ll meet you there. Half an hour?”

“Okay.” She prepared to hang up but the voice from the receiver forestalled her.

“One more thing,” Gibbs said. “If by any chance you arrive ahead of me or Engstrom, for God’s sake don’t go looking for him alone.”

“Right.”

And that was it, or almost so. One of the reasons Amy used a notebook was because she couldn’t recall conversations verbatim. Even her own past thoughts were paraphrased unless taken down at the moment of inception. Since she’d promised Dr. Steiner she wouldn’t write during their meeting there were things he’d told her, things she’d told herself, that were already forgotten. What exactly had Steiner said about the psychological equivalents of demonic possession? And why had he said nothing at all when she described Eric Dunstable and the way he impressed her?

Never mind. Concentrate on trying to remember the route back to the freeway, getting dark now so better switch on the lights, make sure you’re not on brights, should have had that damned air conditioner checked the other day, open the window and get a little air, here’s the turnoff sign for the on-ramp, didn’t realize rush-hour traffic was this heavy around here.

It’s almost as bad as the expressway to O’Hare back home, bumper-to-bumper, just crawling. What’s the matter with these people, where did they call come from, where are they going? Don’t tell me there’s some kind of accident up ahead.

Yes, that’s got to be it, all those lights. And everyone trying to inch into the left lane. There it is, flares on the pavement, man in uniform swinging a flashlight. Brown uniform, different hat, not like one of Engstrom’s people, must be Highway Patrol.

What happened here? Two cars piled on shoulder, white van behind, probably paramedics. That awful smell. Don’t look, don’t try to look, he’s waving you on with the flashlight, keeping going, keep your eyes on the

road. Moving faster now, clearing up ahead. Get out of this mess, get away from that smell. Gasoline. Maybe one of the cars caught fire.

*Was I right about Dunstable? I hope not.*

Quit lying to yourself, part of you hopes not but part of you doesn't, that's why you want out from this damned crawl-along traffic because if anything did happen, if anything *is* happening, you don't want to miss it. This could be the big chance, the big break, hello Geraldo, good-bye to crummy apartments forever.

Really dark now. Turnoff ahead, not far, right fork or left? Why did you leave the county map at the hotel, dummy? Try to visualize it. Got to be left, right leads to the swamp, swamp leads to discovery of car, car leads to discovery of Mary Crane's corpse inside, corpse leads to shower, shower leads to motel room, motel room leads to Norman Bates waiting, waiting for someone to come down the side road in the storm then just as she was coming down that road now.

Then and now.

One and the same. Or almost the same. Then it was raining, now it was going to rain. Both times rain, the corpse was Crane's and she was Haines. Also an idiot for allowing herself to pollute her stream of consciousness this way.

No stream outside yet, not even a drizzle, just mist. Better clear the windshield. Blades squeak. Blades, swooping back and forth, up and down. Stop them, stop thinking like that, the windshield's clear and you've got to clear your mind of all that.

It wasn't easy, but Amy managed. Moving through the mist, feeling the tremor as she peered ahead. Was it fear, excitement, or just anticipation? Perhaps all three, plus a surge of anxiety when a curve in the road brought her destination into view.

The low outline of the motel loomed beyond and to the right. Behind it on the slope, the house raised a rooftop against a clouded sky. No lights shone from the windows of either structure, and there was no hint of flame.

Amy's sigh of relief was augmented as she caught side of Hank Gibbs' car parked near the motel entrance. Then vision blurred as her windshield misted over again. It would be raining soon now.

As she turned into the driveway that circled past the entrance Amy signaled her arrival with the horn. Unnecessarily, of course, because he could see the headlights.

Or could he? The beam swept forward, moving across the car ahead and revealing no occupant.

Nobody behind the wheel. And no sign of anyone from the Sheriff's Department. Which meant Gibbs had come alone. Had he gone inside too?

Judging from the phone conversation, he'd expected she would arrive first, but neither of them could foresee her delay on the freeway. Still it was only logical he'd wait for her to get there before going in. Unless something had happened.

Amy braked, horn blasting as she halted.

Then she waited, motor running, windshield wipers working, apprehension mounting.

The wipers screeched. She leaned on the horn again, staring out into the mist that shrouded the empty windows and dark door of the motel. Nothing stirred except for a swirl of rising fog.

Now she glanced ahead, switching on the brights to bring the outline of the house into better focus against the foggy slope and solemn sky. Still no sign of light in the windows, no sign of life anywhere.

Once more Amy used the horn. If Gibbs had gone into the house for any reason he should still be able to hear the racket she was making; the sound of this horn was loud enough to wake the dead.

*To wake the dead—*

Abruptly Amy lifted her hand. Then she switched off the lights and wipers, cut the motor, dropped the car keys into her purse, opened the door, and stepped out into the mist-chilled night.

As she moved forward her voice rose. "Hank! Where are you?" Her cry brought no echo from the fog; no echo and no response.

Amy came up along the right-hand side of Gibbs's car, gazing through its windows, dreading what she might see.

Nothing.

Nothing except for the key still lodged in the ignition. What did that indicate—absentmindedness or sudden need for haste? And if the latter, where had he gone?

No answer. Nothing but silence. Dead silence.

Turning, she glanced again at the motel; its office windows dark, its door closed, or nearly so.

Nearly? Amy blinked, then stared again.

The office door was ajar.

Suppose that was the answer? Suppose Hank Gibbs had gone inside because *he* was there?

Amy started across the driveway, calling softly as she neared the door. “Hank—?”

No response came.

But the door was ajar, her purse open, the cigarette lighter was in her right hand. The left zipped the purse shut, then pulled the door outward.

Beyond the threshold was the darkness, darkness that the glow of her lighter could pierce but not dispel. And if there was anything within that darkness, the lighter was scarcely an adequate weapon.

*Fire cleanses.*

Taking a deep breath, Amy thumbed the lighter, then hastily extinguished the flame. Because now she could smell the odor, just as she had on the freeway. But this time the reek of gasoline rose from within the room before her.

“Eric!”

Her shout rose; no sense in silence, no hope in hiding. The odor told her who it was and what he was doing; what he must have done when Hank surprised him.

“Eric—stop!”

But there was no stopping now for her as she moved into the silence and the shadows. Shadow of the reception desk, shadow of the wax figure on the pedestal, shadow on the floor.

Amy swerved just in time to avoid colliding with what lay there, sprawled facedown.

Her scream broke the silence. As she backed away against the countertop, her elbow struck the bell. Then everything seemed to happen at once.

The bell sounded.

She turned to face the counter.

From somewhere behind her a glimmer of light flashed across the open doorway.

The pivot revolved, revealing the figure atop the pedestal.

“Welcome to the Bates Motel,” the taped voice said, and Norman faced Amy with a waxen grin of greeting.

But the knife came from behind her.

The knife that hurtled past Amy's head buried itself in the wall, but the revolver of the uniformed man in the doorway behind her found its target.

The uniformed man was the red-haired, skinny sheriff's deputy named Al.

Amy was properly grateful. Though, given a choice, she would have preferred that her rescuer had been Dick Reno.

But Reno had already made a choice of his own; he and Sandy Oliver were going to make another try of getting together, now that Engstrom was giving him back his badge. Amy didn't see him again. In retrospect it was probably just as well.

She did see Engstrom. But here retrospection failed her; he was just another figure in the nightmare following the events at the motel, the nightmare that included so many figures and seemed to linger for so many days. During that time everybody did their best to protect Amy from the media, though there was no way of keeping them from her entirely. And until the furor began to die down, leaving town was not the answer.

That was the real problem, of course; not enough answers.

Nothing from Charlie Pitkin, who split a whole bottle of sleeping pills between himself and his daughter the night after what took place at the motel.

None from Eric Dunstable, whose body Amy had almost literally stumbled over in the motel office.

None from Hank Gibbs.

Nor would there be.

He'd died from his bullet wound while still *en route* to Baldwin Memorial Hospital.

Gibbs had covered his tracks well. And bringing them to light again wasn't all that easy. Despite the spectacular advances of criminology, forensic medicine, and computer science, in the end it came down to a matter of just plain hard digging.

The partnership between Otto Remsbach and Charlie Pitkin on the Bates project was fully confirmed by data in their respective files. But it took digging to establish the shadowy connection between Charlie Pitkin and Hank Gibbs.

At least that's what Sheriff Engstrom confided to Amy on the day before her departure.

"Gibbs didn't have anything down in writing," Engstrom said. "But he probably would have after Pitkin did a job on Remsbach's estate. That was no big deal; the will named Charlie as executor, and he'd made enough private loans to justify a takeover for repayment. The house, the business, the Bates property—Pitkin would have ended up with it all. Plus Hank Gibbs as a partner."

Amy's pen moved over her notebook page quickly. "But if there was nothing in writing—"

Engstrom shook his head. "Nothing about a partnership deal, no. But we found other things on paper. Memos in Gibbs' handwriting, locked away in Charlie Pitkin's files. Very detailed memos on how to set up the Bates project from the beginning. The two were thick as thieves."

"Stealing's one thing, murder is another," Amy said. "Do you really believe both of them were in on this?"

"That's something we'll probably never know for sure." Engstrom sat with crossed legs, the pointed tip of his right boot jabbing empty air. "But in view of the circumstances, it's likely they did plan the murder of Otto

Remsbach together.” Now the legs uncrossed. “Thing is, plans don’t always work out. And that’s when the trouble starts.

“We don’t think anyone planned Terry Dowson’s death. The way we see it, Gibbs went out there for only one reason—to get hold of that wax figure of Norman’s mother.”

Amy frowned. “Then you’re assuming he already knew what he intended to do with it.”

The sheriff shrugged. “There doesn’t seem to be any other logical motive.”

“Nothing he did seems logical to me,” Amy said. “Killing that child—”

“Remember what I said about plans getting fouled up. Gibbs did his best; got himself an alibi, parked his car God knows where. And he was willing to lug that wax dummy a long way, most likely through the wooded acreage, just to make certain nobody would see him. What he didn’t count on was those two kids showing up.

“Nearest we can figure, they were already somewhere upstairs when Gibbs arrived; still don’t know if he got a dupe key or found the door open. Maybe he heard the girls talking upstairs and took a chance on getting the dummy out before they came back down. My hunch is he was worried about having to handle the figure, and he had to hurry because his alibi would only cover him for so long.

“Anyhow he got the dummy. From what the other girl, Mick Sontag, told us about their movements, he could have taken the figure just before they came down the basement stairs. When Gibbs heard them he hid somewhere until they went into the fruit cellar.

“That gave him enough time to sneak back up, but not enough to get out before Mick came running upstairs. What he must have done was hide behind the front door. When she ran outside he waited to give her a chance of getting far enough away so as not to see him when he slipped out. That’s probably what he was starting to do when Terry Dowson got upstairs. My guess is what happened then was panic, not plan.”

Amy nodded. “The plan was only to kill Remsbach.”

“Frankly, we have no way of knowing. We do know Doris Huntley slipped Pitkin a lot of information about Remsbach’s deals, so she might

have been killed intentionally to prevent any chance of her talking. On the other hand it's quite possible she died for the same reason Terry Dowson did; she just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Either way, Gibbs knew where he was going to be on the night of Remsbach's murder. He did go to Baldwin Memorial Hospital to provide himself with an alibi, but he counted on no one knowing the exact time of his arrival or departure. And no one did.”

Amy added a line at the bottom of one page and finished her sentence on another. As she did so she glanced up toward the open doorway and outer office beyond. From behind the reception desk Irene Grovesmith nodded and smiled.

It was difficult for Amy to account for such a drastic change in attitude until she hit upon the reason. Irene must have seen her on the nightly news. Anybody who appears on prime-time television automatically becomes a celebrity, someone you smile at in hopes that they'll smile back.

Amy did so, but when she faced Engstrom again her expression changed. “We spent a lot of time together,” she murmured. “I can see now what he was doing—trying to find out just how much I knew. Pretending to help by taking me around, while his real reason was to keep me from learning too much more on my own.” The pen twisted between nervous fingers. “And all the while I thought it was because maybe he had a thing about me.” Amy shook her head. “How could I have been such a fool?”

“One thing's for sure,” Engstrom said. “You never should have gone out to the Bates property in the first place, even if you expected to meet Gibbs there. And when you saw his car parked and empty it should've been enough to signal that he'd set you up.

“Which, of course he did—with the office door left ajar to get you inside.”

“I just didn't stop to think,” Amy said. “I was concerned about him.”

“And he was concerned about you. When you reported seeing Dunstable and feeling he might torch the Bates place, Gibbs had no choice. If you'd guessed right he had to move fast, hoping he'd be in time to stop Dunstable from lighting a match.

“The problem was he had no way of preventing you from coming when you insisted. Even if he could, if something happened out there, Gibbs would have to explain why he lied to you when he promised he’d call us. Either way, he had to do two things—stop Dunstable and get rid of you.”

Amy was adding to her notes. “I still can’t believe it,” she murmured. “Two cold-blooded murders—”

The Sheriff shrugged. “Remember Terry Dowson, Otto Remsbach, Doris Huntley. They say killing’s pretty much like anything else people do. It gets easier as you go along.”

*No big deal.* Amy heard the echo of Bonnie Walton’s words when she’d interviewed her for the book. If true, there really should be a warning from the Surgeon General. *Warning: murder is habit-forming and can be injurious to your health.*

Gallows humor, that’s what they used to call it. But there’s been nothing even remotely amusing about the deaths of those others, or her own close call. She met Engstrom’s gaze. “You actually think Hank Gibbs went out there prepared to kill us both?”

“He didn’t have any options. Looks like he arrived just in time to surprise Dunstable sprinkling that gasoline. Maybe he put up a struggle, maybe not, but we know how it ended. Then Gibbs had to deal with you. Again there’s no telling, but our theory is he’d have burned the motel himself to get rid of the evidence.”

“Meaning our bodies.” Amy’s shudder was involuntary. “Since no one knew I called him, he’d probably say something about just happening to be driving by and seeing the flames.”

“Something like that,” Engstrom said. “Burning the motel would get him off the hook. Rebuilding it could be expensive but at least he’d save the house.” The Sheriff leaned forward. “Tell you something else. If things had worked out, I bet that wax dummy of Norman would have ended up in the fruit cellar instead of melting in the motel fire. There’d be plenty of time for Gibbs to risk moving it before leaving to call the fire department, since he didn’t figure on any of us being around.”

Amy looked up from her notepad. “Why did you send someone?”

“You can thank your friend Steiner for that. If he hadn’t figured things out and called us, Al wouldn’t have been coming by to check on the place and give you a hand.”

Amy frowned. “Dr. Steiner didn’t know I was going there.”

“True. But from what you told him, he had a pretty good idea about Gibbs showing up sooner or later.”

“What made Steiner so sure?”

“Who knows?” Engstrom shrugged. “Maybe you’d better ask him about that.”

And on the day before leaving town, she did.

This time Dr. Steiner greeted her in his office. And there he answered her question.

“Masks,” he said. “After we talked the other day I got to thinking about how we hide behind them, and what they symbolize in our society. The most commonplace extremes, of course, represent Comedy and Tragedy, and I found them on the faces of various people you and I discussed. All but Charlie Pitkin. Tragedy, for him, was not a mask.”

Amy’s notebook was open, her pen at the ready. “What do you mean?”

Dr. Steiner shook his head. “I’d rather you didn’t write it down. And please, if you use this information, no attribution.”

“I promise.” Amy flipped the notebook shut with the tip of her pen. “Was he one of your outpatients too?”

“That’s right.”

“Then perhaps you don’t have to say anything. From what Sheriff Engstrom told me about the double suicide, I think I can guess the rest. The burden of such a relationship must have been unbearable for them both.”

“He was doing his best to fight it,” Steiner said. “But after what happened the other night, it was too much. He undoubtedly realized that once his involvement became known he couldn’t hope to shield himself or his daughter from the investigation that was bound to follow.”

Amy nodded. “Then he knew about Hank Gibbs.”

“I don’t think so. That’s why he went into trauma. Granted, Pitkin was far from a model of rectitude, but he’d never knowingly act as an accessory to

homicide.” Steiner sighed. “I just wish he had come to me before—”

His visitor frowned. “It doesn’t add up,” she said. “This sad man with his sad secret, giving Otto Remsbach all those way-out funny ideas.”

“That’s how I knew,” Dr. Steiner said. “I can’t recall seeing him smile or say anything indicating he might have the slightest sense of humor. But Hank Gibbs always wore the mask of Comedy.”

“Were you aware Hank and Pitkin were secret partners?” Amy said.

“I knew they were close and I assumed it was some kind of business deal. But until this notion about the masks came to me I didn’t guess it must have to do with Remsbach’s plans to turn the Bates property into a tourist attraction. Then everything seemed to fall into place—the relationship between the two, Gibbs feeding Pitkin ideas to pass on to Remsbach, the motivation behind the murders—”

“The Sheriff thinks the little girl’s murder wasn’t premeditated, and they’re not certain about Doris Huntley. But he’s sure about Hank Gibbs planning to kill Remsbach.”

“That’s why he needed the wax figure of Norman’s mother, because he wanted it to be found with Remsbach’s body in the bed.”

Amy’s frown returned. “You think he did this as some sort of a sick joke?”

“Quite the reverse. Putting that dummy beside Remsbach’s corpse was serious business. You couldn’t buy that kind of publicity.”

“But that’s insane!”

“Technically speaking, no. By both clinical and legal definitions, Hank Gibbs was in full possession of his faculties, aware of what he was doing, and realized the consequences. His *rationale* was psychopathic, not psychotic. Within the context of later events, getting rid of Eric Dunstable and attempting to get rid of you was logical procedure.”

Amy shook her head. “As I remember it, a psychopath is someone without empathy, someone who can’t identify with others. But Hank was always so helpful, so friendly—”

“Friendly with everyone, but no friends of his own. A loner in a job that demands interaction with just about everyone.”

“Then why didn’t he get out?”

“Perhaps he liked being a big frog in a little pond. Or maybe he hoped he could find a way to jump and make a splash in a bigger pond.” Steiner smiled. “Just like you.”

“I didn’t realize it was that obvious.” Amy paused. “All right, it’s true—I think most writers want the reward of fame and fortune, and I’m no exception. But I wouldn’t kill for it.”

“You’re not a psychopath.” Steiner smiled again. “I know it’s all guesswork on my part now, pretty much like coming up with an autopsy report without ever having had a chance to dissect the actual corpse. But I think I knew Hank Gibbs as well as he allowed anyone to know him. And to coin a phrase, actions speak louder than words.

“If you stop and consider, everything Gibbs did fueled media attention, in a society where such attention is essential for material success. That’s what he wanted out of life, and nothing else mattered, even if it meant taking the lives of others.”

“It’s hard for me to accept it,” Amy said. “He seemed like such a caring person.”

“And so he was.” Dr. Steiner nodded. “But only for himself. If you’re looking for the bitterness and the cruelty, it’s there, in his humor. He used it both as a shield and a weapon. His self-deprecation served as both.” Steiner’s chuckle rasped faintly. “I ought to know. I’ve had the same tendencies at times.”

“You mustn’t let me overtire you,” Amy said.

“That’s no problem. If there is anything else I can do to help—”

“You’ve already done more than your share,” Amy said. “I only wish I knew of some way to repay you for all your kindness.”

“Don’t worry about that. Just go write the book. And when you do, remember to tell about the demons.”

“Eric Dunstable’s demons?”

“No.” Steiner shook his head. “The demons that possessed Hank Gibbs and continue to possess so many others. Greed. Avarice. The real demons that are taking over this world.”

“I won’t forget.” Amy rose, smiling.

“Let me make a suggestion,” Steiner said. “When you’re finished, maybe you can write another book, about life in the asylum.”

“Here?”

“No.” Steiner gestured toward the window. “Out there.”

## — ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

ROBERT BLOCH has won the Hugo Award and the World Fantasy Award Grand Master Award.

Robert Bloch first gained notoriety as the author of *Psycho*, the inspiration for the classic Alfred Hitchcock film. His other books include *Psycho II*, *Lori*, *The Night of the Ripper*, *American Gothic*, and many other novels of suspense and terror. His hundreds of short stories have appeared in virtually every major magazine and anthology and include such seminal works as “Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper,” and “A Toy for Juliette.” “The Chaney Legacy,” like many of Bloch’s works, was adapted for television. He recently published *The Jekyll Legacy*, a collaboration with Andre Norton.

His newest book is *Once Around the Bloch: An Unauthorized Autobiography*. Robert Bloch and his wife live in California.