
Blood Risk

by

Dean Koontz

BLOOD RISK

Brian Coffey is the pen name for a young American writer whose fiction has sold throughout the world to the tune of over two million copies.
'Blood Risk' should add considerably to those figures.

Brian Coffey

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They had decided that only four men were required to stop the big car on the narrow mountain road, hold the occupants at bay and remove the cash that was stuffed into the suitcases on the floor behind the front seat. At first Merle Bachman—who would be driving away, alone, in the blue Chevrolet with the money locked safely in the trunk—had insisted on a fifth man. Number five would have been stationed at the bottom of the private lane to work an intercept routine in the event that someone turned off from the main highway while the robbery was in progress. The others argued against Bachman, because the private road to the Baglio estate supported very little traffic, especially on the morning of a biweekly cash transfer. Also, no one wanted his share knocked to hell by a fifth crew. Bachman clearly saw the economic sense of using a spare crew, though he insisted there was no other wisdom behind this detail of the plan, and he reluctantly agreed to go ahead with the job as a foursome. Now, the darkly dressed men waited in their prearranged positions as the time for action drew near.

Upslope, the macadam roadway on which the robbery would transpire made an abrupt appearance around a limestone outcropping, ran a hundred yards past a lay-by on the outside where two cars could pass if they should meet coming in opposite directions, went down for another four hundred yards before turning a second limestone corner and continuing out of sight to the main highway. The two sharp twists beyond which nothing was visible, and the still morning air, generated the feeling that a part of the rest of the world had vanished in some unexplained catastrophe.

If you faced upslope, the left side of the roadway was edged by a sheer stone wall slightly higher than a man and, above that, by a thick pine forest and underbrush as green as new money. Though the long grass at the brink of the woods stirred gently in the morning breeze, it made no sound at all, bending down and unfolding back up again in a graceful, mute ballet. Lying at the high corner above the first turn in the road, stretched out in the carbon-paper shadows of the big trees, oblivious of the dew-dampened grass and the quiet way it seemed to be reaching for him, Jimmy Shirillo watched the Baglio mansion through a pair of high-power field glasses. The long blades of grass had brushed Shirillo's face, leaving bright droplets of dew suspended on his fair skin, his only blemishes, giving him a vulnerable look that pointed up his youth. On the other hand, his own professional stillness, his economy of movement and the intensity with which he watched the mansion indicated the experience of a professional beneath the tender exterior.

The binocular lenses were all that might have given Shirillo away to someone looking down from the great house, but they had been tinted to eliminate any telltale glare. Michael Tucker had thought of that, for he thought of everything.

A hundred yards below Shirillo, on the left, sitting in the brush along the top of the stone wall, Pepp Harris cradled an old Thompson submachine gun, a souvenir from World War II. Harris had broken it down, oiled it, packed it in cloth and mailed it from Paris in five packages to his home address in the States. Back then, at the end of the war, that sort of thing was still quite possible. He had never contemplated putting the gun to any illegal use, or indeed to any use at all, for he thought he was finished with war. A civilian again, he had to face his inability to hold a nine-to-five job, and in desperation he launched his own war against the system, against boredom and respectability and enduring poverty. His inability to fit that system did not arise out of any great sensitivity or intelligence. Harris was only averagely perceptive. However, he was also stubborn, very much his own man, with expensive tastes. This would have led him into crime eventually, because he was only fit to be a clerk in any other field. He was the oldest of the four men here. At forty-eight he had ten years of

Bachman, twenty on Mike Tucker, twenty-five on the Shirillo boy, though he didn't use his age and experience to usurp power within the group as others might have done. All he cared about was making the hit and getting the money, and he knew Tucker was a damn fine operator.

Thinking about the money, he grew uncomfortable and shifted in the brush, stretching his long legs and working a cramp out of his thick, muscular thighs. When the vigil first began, he occupied himself by pulling burrs out of his clothes, his heavily callused fingers uninjured by the sharp points. Now, though his calluses remained inviolate, he was too nervous to fool with such minutiae, and he longed to be on the move.

On the right-hand side of the roadway, across from Harris, the gravel berm dropped abruptly into a rock-strewn ravine that bottomed out more than three hundred feet below. The only safe place on that side was the fifty-yard-long lay-by where the Dodge and Chevrolet, both stolen, were now parked, facing slightly downhill. Tucker and Bachman waited there, the older man behind the wheel of the Chevy, Tucker shielded from the lane by the bulk of the Dodge.

Bachman carried a .32-caliber pistol in a chamois shoulder holster, as did Tucker. Unlike Tucker, however, he kept touching it, like a savage with his talisman. With damp fingertips he traced the Crosshatch pattern on the solid butt, lifting the whole weapon slightly out of the holster, testing the way it fit, looking for potential snags- though he had worn this same piece for years and knew that it wouldn't snag, ever.

Though Bachman had only the one gun, Tucker held an additional shotgun with only seven inches of barrel; both chambers were loaded, and six spare cartridges were distributed in his jacket pockets. If Bachman had been carrying the shotgun, he would have been constantly patting his pockets to be sure the cartridges were there. Tucker, however, stood quietly, moving as little as he had to, waiting.

"They should be here by now," Bachman called through the open window of the Chevy. He wiped his slender hand across his face, more than covering his small, compressed features, pulled off something invisible-maybe his own impatience-and shook that off his fingertips. Right now he was jumpy, and he was talking too much, but when the time came for the job he would be all grease and oil, as Tucker had discovered on the other three jobs they'd worked on together.

Tucker said, "Patience, Merle." He was known for his serenity, for maintaining a cool facade that never cracked under pressure. Inside, though, he was all knotted up and bleeding. His stomach twisted this way and that, as if it were an animal trapped inside of him; perspiration gathered over his whole body, a symbolic film of his repressed terror.

He had not been born and raised to make his living this way, had never understood the criminal's social stratum. That he was now a success at what he did was a testament to an almost fanatic determination to achieve what he set out to achieve, and he was usually the undisputed leader of any group simply because others saw and admired his single-mindedness.

At the top of the slope, Jimmy Shirillo dropped the field glasses and rolled onto his back, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Here they come!" His voice cracked on the last word, but everyone understood what he had said.

"Go!" Tucker shouted, slamming a flat palm down on the hood of the stolen Dodge.

Bachman stopped fiddling with the pistol cradled under his armpit and switched on the Chevrolet's engine, revved it a few times and drove forward, blocking the road diagonally. Without wasting a second, smooth and fluid, he put the car in park, pulled on the handbrake, opened his door and jumped out. He took cover at the very end of the rear fender, where, if he saw there was going to be a collision, he could leap to safety easily enough. As an afterthought he grasped the grotesque Halloween mask that dangled from an elastic band around his neck and slipped it over his head.

Halloween in June, he thought. It was the wrong time to wear a rubber mask, in this heat and humidity.

On the hilltop Jimmy had crept to the edge of the limestone outcropping, ready to jump into the lane behind the Cadillac the moment the big car had gone by. He fumbled with his goblin's face mask, felt the dew on it and thought-inexplicably-that the water was blood. Fear. Green fear, pure and simple. Angry with himself, he got the mask in place.

Down at the lay-by, behind the Dodge, Tucker became a scarred old witch with one quick movement of his hand, grimaced at the odor of latex that he now drew with every breath, then looked across the road at the brush above the stone wall. Where was Harris? There. Maintaining good cover for a city boy, blending right in with the weeds. Cradling his Thompson, his face that of a grotesque monster, he seemed twice as big and dangerous as he had ever looked before.

Tucker raised his shotgun and propped the barrel on the fender of the Dodge, cautioning himself to stay loose. His stomach burned; gall stung the back of his throat. Behind the mask he could allow himself a wince, for none of the others would see it.

The roar of the Cadillac's engine was audible now. Tucker wondered if it was moving too fast to stop in time, and he tried to calculate all the possible moves he could make if it slammed into the barricade. Although the shock of the collision would delay Baglio's men's reaction time and ease the strain of getting them firmly under control, there was also the danger of jammed doors. And of firing. Baglio's men could burn-but what about the money, then? The building roar of the car's engine sounded in that moment like flames devouring stacks of crisp dollar bills.

The Cadillac came into sight.

The driver was quick. He hit the brakes, slewed the big chrome machine sideways, then let up so that he could correct a dangerous plunge toward the precipice, brought the car to a jerking halt six feet away from the Chevy's passenger door.

Clouds of blue smoke caught up with the Cadillac and swept past it.

As planned, Pete Harris let go with a burst of machine-gun fire, aimed well above everyone's heads before any of the others could move toward the limousine. The shots glanced around the hillsides like a series of hammer blows on an iron forge bed. The racket was almost certain to be audible the length of the slopes and would draw reinforcements from the mansion. In five minutes the site would be swarming with Baglio's gunmen. Still, this was the quickest, simplest way to let those inside the limousine know that this was serious business, rough business, and that they were hopeless and outgunned.

When the echo died, Tucker was at the driver's window, the stubby shotgun leveled at the old man's neck. A blast from the first barrel alone would shatter the window and fragment the chauffeur's skull before he could complete any dive for the floorboards. The old bastard knew it; he sat where he was motionless.

The other man in the front seat was Vito Chaka, Baglio's trusted "accountant," forty years old, slight and almost feminine, graying at the temples. He cultivated a tiny mustache that covered a third of his upper lip like a smudge of paint. In the 1930s he would have driven the women wild, Tucker thought. And perhaps he still did, with the help of his position and his bankroll. Chaka looked at him, sizing him up, then nodded and slowly placed both hands on the padded dash in front of him, palms turned up, everything in the open, in recognition of their professionalism.

"Get out!" Tucker said. His voice sounded thick and mean through the slit of the rubber mouth.

The chauffeur and Chaka obeyed at once. When the two muscle types in the back seat hesitated, Jimmy Shirillo tapped on the rear window with the barrel of his pistol. He had climbed onto the trunk of the Caddy without making a sound, and his goblin mask seemed to grin at the gunmen when they jumped in surprise.

Shirillo was feeling good, better than he had anticipated he would feel, less afraid than he had been before things got moving. He was sweating, and the full-head mask made his neck itch; but those were

minor troubles.

Thirty seconds later Baglio's men were all lined up along the driver's side of the limousine, the hands flattened on the roof or hood, legs spread wide, leaning forward so they were off balance, heads tucked between shoulderblades, all very neat, very classic. Only Chaka looked sure of himself, dapper even in this humiliating pose.

Bachman quickly opened the rear door on the far side. "Three cases," he said. No trace of his previous anxiety remained in his voice.

Jimmy Shirillo laughed triumphantly.

"Hold the celebrations," Tucker said. "Go help him."

Bachman lifted the heaviest suitcase and walked off toward the Chevy, severely bent by the dragging weight. He wouldn't have been content to pick up one of the smaller cases, of course—for the same reason that he wore high-waisted trousers: he didn't like anyone to think of him as a small man, even though he was a small man.

Jimmy went around and got the last two bags, carried them with little trouble, dropped them in the open trunk of the stolen Chevrolet and slammed the lid while Bachman scurried for the front door.

"Relax," Tucker told the men lined against the car, though none of them had moved.

No one responded.

Bachman started the Chevy, raced the engine once, shifted into reverse, squealed backward, angling the car downhill.

"Easy!" Tucker shouted.

But he didn't need to caution Merle Bachman, for the small man always gauged the situation properly and performed at the optimum safe speed. He was a good driver.

Harris came off the stone wall, grunting, the sound of his heavy breathing magnified by the mass of the car. While Bachman was backing the Chevy, Harris came around to Tucker and said, "Smooth."

Again Tucker said, "Hold the celebrations."

Bachman put the Chevy in gear, touched the gas lightly and started downhill toward the second curve, shimmering curtains of heat rising from the roof and trunk of the car.

"Get the Dodge," Tucker ordered Shirillo.

The boy went after it.

Pete Harris was the only one still watching the Chevy, thinking about all that money in the trunk, thinking about retirement, and he was the first to see that it was going to go sour. "Oh, shit!" he said.

He had not even finished the exclamation when Tucker heard the hot cry of the Chevrolet's brakes and whirled around to see what had gone wrong.

Everything had gone wrong.

Before Bachman had covered little more than half the distance to the bottom curve, a Cadillac had rounded the limestone down there, coming up. It was a match for the Caddy they had just hit, and it was moving too fast, much too fast for these road conditions. The driver pulled the wheel hard to the left and tried to run the bank; that was hopeless, because the shoulder of the road down there turned swiftly into the stone wall that continued unbroken to the top of the rise. A tire blew with the force of a cannon shot. The car jolted, bucked up and down like an enraged animal. Metal whined as a fender was compressed into half the space it had formerly occupied.

Still braking, the Chevrolet wobbled crazily back and forth as Bachman fought to regain control. It veered suddenly and purposefully toward the outside.

"He can't get around a car as big as the Caddy!" Harris said.

Bachman tried it anyway. He was still in the middle of a job, still calm and greased, quick and calculating. He realized that he had only one chance of pulling this off successfully, and no matter

how infinitesimal that chance was, he took it. The Cadillac had come to a complete halt now, prettily ~~badly crumpled on the one side, and the Chevy plowed into its rear door like a pig nosing in the tur~~ reared up and caught its front axle on the top of the ruined door, simultaneously sliding to the left toward the three-hundred-foot chasm. The back wheels jolted off the berm and swung over empty air, spinning up clouds of yellow dust. For a second Tucker was sure the Chevy would break loose and fall, but then he saw it would hold, halfway up the other, larger car like a dog mounting a bitch. Bachman had tried it; he'd lost.

Completely undamaged on the passenger's side, the front door of the Cadillac opened and a tall, dark-haired man got out, dazed. He shook his head to clear it, turned and stared at the demolished Chevy angled crazily over him, bent forward with his hands on both knees to be sick. He seemed to think of something more important than that natural urge, for he straightened abruptly and looked into the front seat, reached inside and helped a young woman climb out. She appeared to be as uninjured as he, and she did not share his sickening intimation of mortality. She wore a white blouse and a very short yellow skirt: a big, lovely blonde. Her long hair flapped like a pennant in the breeze as she looked up the road at Tucker and the others.

"Here!" Jimmy Shirillo shouted. He had turned the Dodge around and was facing uphill.

"Get in the car," Tucker told Harris.

The big man obliged, the Thompson held in both hands tenderly.

"Don't force me to shoot any of you in the back," Tucker said, backing to the open rear door of the Dodge.

Baglio's men remained silent.

He slid into the car, still facing them, raised the shotgun and fired at the sky as Jimmy tore rubber getting out of there, slammed the door after they were moving and dropped onto the seat below window level until he felt the car swinging around the upper curve.

"Are we just leaving Bachman there?" Harris asked.

Tucker peeled off his mask and pushed his sweat-slicked hair out of his face. His stomach was bothering him worse than ever. He said, "We don't have the means to get him out and hold off Baglio's whole army at the same time." He belched and tasted the orange juice that had been his entire breakfast.

"Still" Harris began.

Tucker interrupted him, his voice tense and bitter. "Bachman was right—we did need a fifth man."

"We're boxed," Shirillo said.

From here on out, the private road no longer hugged the edge of the ravine, struck toward the broad interior slopes of the mountain with land opening on both sides. Flanked by pines, it fed ruler-straight into the circular driveway in front of Rossario Baglio's gleaming white many-windowed monstrosity of a house only another mile ahead. Just exiting that drive, a black Mustang arrowed directly for them.

"Not boxed," Tucker said, pointing ahead and to the left. "Is that a turn-off?"

Jimmy stared. "Yeah, looks like it."

"Take it."

The boy wheeled hard left as they came up on the dirt track, braked, barely avoided ripping through several small, sturdy pine trees, slammed brutally across a series of wet-weather ruts, apparently unperturbed by all of it. Tramping down on the accelerator, he grinned into the rear-view mirror and said, "It's not my car."

Despite himself Tucker laughed. "Just keep your eyes on the road."

Jimmy looked ahead, straddled a large stone in the middle of the way and built more speed.

~~The wind hissed at an open wing window, and insects smacked against the glass like soft bullets.~~

"They're right behind us," Harris said. "Just turned in."

Both Tucker and Harris stared through the back window, dizzied by the green blur of trees and underbrush, brambles and grass that whipped by on both sides, waiting for the Mustang to bounce in view. They were startled, then, when Shirillo braked to a full stop three quarters of the way up the long hill. "What the hell" Tucker said.

"There's a log across the road," Shirillo said. "Either we move it or we go on foot from here."

"Everybody out," Tucker said, pushing open his door. "We move it. Pete, bring the Thompson."

The log was the corpse of a once mighty pine tree fully thirty feet long and as many inches in diameter, with a couple of thick branches that had been chopped short with a sharp ax. It looked as if it had been put there to keep anyone from using the road beyond this point, though it was just as likely that it was spillage from a logging truck when the forests had served to feed a paper mill or plank mill factory. Tucker directed all three of them to get on the same end of the log, spaced three feet apart, one foot on each side of the tree. Heaving together, stepping sideways in an awkward little dance, they managed to swing it around about a yard.

"Not enough," Shirillo said.

Harris said, "Where's the Mustang?"

"It can't move as fast on these bad roads as our heavy car can," Tucker said. He sucked in his breath and said, "Again!"

This time they moved the barrier almost far enough to squeeze the Dodge past, but when they stopped to catch their breaths, their backs cracking with a pain like fire, Harris said, "I hear the other car."

Tucker listened, heard it too, wiped his bruised hands against his slacks to make them stop stinging. "Take your Thompson and get ready to meet the gentlemen, Pete."

Harris smiled, picked up the machine gun and trotted to the rear of the Dodge, where he sprawled in the middle of the dusty road. He was a large man, over six feet, more than two hundred and forty pounds; when he went down, the dust rose around him in a cloud. He raised the black barrel and centered it where the Mustang would be when it rounded the bend below. The large circular cannister of ammunition that rose out of the machine gun gave the impression of something insectoid, something that was somehow using instead of being used, an enormous leech draining Harris's body of its blood.

Tucker bent and slipped his hands around the log again, found as good a hold as he was going to get on the surprisingly smooth, round pine trunk. Perspiration ran from his armpits down his sides; his shirt soaked that up. "Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," Shirillo said.

They heaved, gasped as all their stomach muscles tightened painfully. Tucker felt his back pop like a glass bottle full of pressurized soft drink, perspiration fizzing out of him. But he did not let go, no matter what the cost in strained muscles, raised the log a few inches, scraped sideways a frustratingly short distance before they had to drop it. This time Shirillo sat down on the log to regain his breath, panting like a dog that has run a long way in mid-June heat.

"No loafing," Tucker said immediately.

He felt as bad as the boy did, perhaps even worse—he was, after all, five years older than Shirillo, five years softer; and he had twenty-eight years of easy living to put up against the boy's twenty-three years of rough ghetto upbringing—but he knew that he was the one who had to keep the others moving. He had to generate the drive, share some of his fanatical determination to see them through. It was not the getting killed that Tucker feared so much. More than that he feared failure. He said, "Come on, Jimmy, for Christ's sake!"

Shirillo sighed, got to his feet and straddled the pine once more. As he bent to get a grip on it, ~~Harris opened up with his Thompson, filling the woods about them with a manic chatter.~~ Shirillo looked up, could not see anything because of the Dodge and the angle of the trail beyond that, bent again and took hold of the log, put everything he had into one final, frantic heave. Together they muscled the tree farther around than they had the last time before they were forced to let it go. Dropped, the tree landed in the baked roadway with a soft, dusty thump.

"Far enough?" Shirillo asked.

"Yes," Tucker said. "Move ass now!"

They ran back to the car. Shirillo slid behind the wheel and started the engine. That was enough of an alert for Harris, who had not used the Thompson for almost a full minute. The big man jumped up and got into the back of the Dodge again. Tucker was sitting up front with Shirillo and was fumbling with his seat belt. He clicked it together as Jimmy pulled out, turned to Harris and said, "Get any tires?"

"No," Harris said. The admission bothered him, for he respected Tucker and wanted the young man to return his respect. If this job had gone right, it would have been his last; now, because they botched it, he would need to work again, and he preferred to work with Tucker more than with anyone else, even after this fiasco. "The bastards caught on too quick, shifted into reverse before I'd nailed any tires." He cursed softly and wiped at his grimy neck, his voice too soft for Tucker to hear the individual words.

"They coming?" Shirillo asked.

"Like a cop with a broomstick up his ass," Harris said.

Shirillo laughed and said, "Hold on." He tramped the accelerator hard, pinning them back against their seats for a moment, cutting into a long, shadow-dappled section of road.

"Why don't they let us alone?" Harris asked, facing front, the Thompson across his lap. His face matched his body: all hard lines. His forehead was massive, the black eyes sunk deep under it and filled with cold, solid intelligence. His nose, broken more than once, was bulbous but not silly, his mouth a lipless line that creased the top of a big square chin. All those harsh angles crashed together in a look of bitter disappointment. "We didn't get their money."

"We tried, though," Tucker said.

"We even lost Bachman. Isn't that enough?"

"Not for them," Tucker said.

"The Iron Hand," Shirillo said. He took a turn in the road too far on the outside: pine boughs scraped the roof like long, polished fingernails, and the springs sang like a bad alto.

"Iron Hand?" Harris asked.

"That's what my father used to call them," Shirillo said, never taking his eyes off the road ahead.

"Melodramatic, isn't it?" Tucker asked.

Shirillo shrugged. "The Mafia itself isn't a staid and sober organization; it's as melodramatic as a afternoon soap opera. It's all the time playing scenes straight out of cheap movies: bumping off rivals, beating up store owners who don't want to pay for protection, fire-bombing, blackmailing, peddling dope to kids in junior high school. The melodrama doesn't make it any less real."

"Yeah," Harris said, glancing uneasily out the rear window, "but could we go a little faster, do you think?"

The road curved gradually eastward now and narrowed as the huge pines and occasional elms and birches crowded closer-like patrons at a play getting restless for the last act and the climax of the action. Abruptly, the trail slid downward again, and the dust dampened and became a thin film of mud.

"Underground stream somewhere nearby," Tucker said.

At the foot of the hill, the land bottomed for a hundred yards before tipping over another slope.

Here, shrouded by overhanging trees and flanked by thousand-layer shale walls, the Dodge choked, coughed, rattled like Demosthenes talking around his mouthful of pebbles and expired with very little grace.

"What's the matter?" Harris asked.

Shirillo was not at all surprised, for he'd been expecting this for some time now. He was surprised though, by his own serenity. "The gas tank was holed when we turned onto the dirt track," he told them. "I've been watching the indicator drop little by little the last half hour-must be a small hole-but I didn't see any sense in putting everyone on edge until we were actually empty."

They got out and stood in the small glen where a trace of early-morning fog still drifted lazily through the trees, a ghost without a house.

Harris slung his machine gun over his left shoulder, by the black leather strap, and he said, "Well, the road's too damn narrow for them to get around the Dodge. If we have to walk, so do they."

Tucker said, "We're not going to walk so long as they're right behind us with a good car." His tone left no room for debate. "We'll take that Mustang away from them."

"How?" Shirillo asked.

"You'll see in a minute." He ran around the nose of the Dodge, opened the driver's door and threw the shotgun on the seat. He tossed their rubber masks into the road. Unspringing the handbrake, he put the gear shift in neutral. "The two of you get behind and push," he said.

They braced opposite ends of the rear bumper, while Tucker put his shoulder to the doorframe and walked slowly forward, keeping one hand on the wheel to prevent the car from wedging against the shale that loomed close on both sides. At the point where the road began to dip, Tucker picked up the shotgun and leaped out of the way. "Let her go!"

Shirillo and Harris stood back and watched the black car rumble clumsily down the first few yards of the descending trail. As the slope grew steeper, the car gathered speed, veered to the left. It struck the shale wall, sparks flying, screeching, went toward the right like an animal seeking shelter, slammed into the other stone bank, skidded as the trail abruptly angled down, jolted in a rut they couldn't see from the top of the run. It started to turn around as if it had had enough and would come back up the hill, then it gracefully rolled onto its side with a resounding crash that slapped over the top like a wave. It slid another two hundred feet before it stopped, its undercarriage facing them.

"The conservationists would love us," Shirillo said. "We've started our own war on the automobile today- three down in less than an hour."

"You want them to think we wrecked?" Harris asked. When Tucker nodded he said, "What about our footprints here in the mud?"

"We'll have to hope they don't notice them." Half a mile behind them, the steady drone of the Mustang engine became audible. Tucker picked up the masks and distributed them, slipped on his own. "Move ass," he said. "Stay to the side of the road, by the wall, so the prints going down won't be conspicuous. By the bank, there should be enough loose shale to hide our trail." He took off, the other two close behind, the fallen shale shifting under them, damp and slick. Twice Tucker thought he would fall, but he kept his balance by running faster. They made it behind the shelter of the overturned Dodge only a moment before the Mustang appeared at the top of the hill.

"What now?" Harris asked. He had unslung the machine gun.

Tucker looked farther down the hill, behind them, saw that the shale diminished considerably on both sides only a short distance ahead. "Stay down and follow me," he said, moving off in a fast duck-walk.

When they reached a point where they could get atop the banks that had hedged the trail all the way down the slope, Tucker looked back to see how visible they were from above. He couldn't see any of the road beyond the overturned Dodge; good, it was safe to assume they couldn't be seen, either. F

sent Pete Harris to the left, took Shirillo with him on the right, climbed the now diminutive bank slipping once, scraping his knee on loose shale, ignoring the flash of pain. When they were in the woodlands that lay above the road, he looked across and waved at Harris, who signaled with his machine gun in response. Cautiously, they made their way back to the spot where the Dodge had flipped on its side, edged to the brink of the shale walls and looked down.

The Mustang was parked twenty feet above the wreck, doors open. The two men who had been in it moved warily in on the Dodge, pistols drawn.

"Don't move at all," Tucker told them.

They were good, if surprised, and they listened.

"Remove the clips from your pistols-but keep them pointed at the ground. You're covered from both sides of the road."

The two men did as they were told, reluctantly but with the evident resignation of professionals who knew they were cornered. Both were large in the shoulders, dressed in lightweight summer suits that didn't seem to belong on them. Gorillas. Figuratively and almost literally. They would look much more at home in a zoo, railing at visitors through iron bars.

"Now," Tucker said, "look up at me."

They looked up, shielded their eyes from the bright sky, grimaced at the shotgun.

"Now look across the road."

They turned as if connected, stared up at the Thompson in Pete Harris's hands. Tucker couldn't see their faces, but he knew they were properly impressed, for he could see their shoulders draw up in an instinctive urge to crouch and run.

"Now throw your guns up here," he told them. When he had both pistols tucked into his belt, he pointed at the dirt-streaked Mustang and said, "Who was driving?"

"Me," the taller of the gorillas said. He jammed both hands into his pants pockets like a sulking child and looked up at Tucker from under his brow, waiting to see what came next.

"You a good driver?"

"I do okay."

"Which of you is better?"

The man who had not been driving pointed at the man who had and said, "He is. He drives for Mr. Baglio when-

"Enough!" the driver snapped.

The smaller man blanched and shut up. He looked at Tucker, then at his partner. He rubbed at his mouth as if he could scrub out what he had already said.

"Get back in the Mustang," Tucker told the driver, "and bring it right up to the Dodge."

"Why?" the driver asked.

"Because, if you don't, I'll kill you," Tucker said. He smiled. "Good enough for you?"

"Good enough," the driver said, starting for the Mustang.

Tucker said, "Don't try backing out of range. That gentleman over there could blow the car apart before you'd gone ten feet." To the second gorilla Tucker said, "Stand over against the wall. Stay out of the way and be good."

"You won't get away with this," the gorilla said. Clearly, though, he expected that they would. His grainy, broad-nosed face was covered with more than a patina of defeat; the expression was deep-rooted. He was one of those who hadn't any faith in himself unless he could get his hands on his adversary. At this distance he was feeling exceedingly inferior.

"Let's get this moving," Tucker said.

The driver stopped the Mustang when its front bumper was a foot from the underside of the overturned Dodge. His window was rolled down, and he leaned out and said, "Now what?"

"Move it ahead until you feel it make contact."

The driver didn't ask questions. When a solid thunk proved he'd obeyed, he leaned out his window again and waited to hear the next part of it. While the man standing against the wall across the road seemed unable to comprehend what was happening, the driver knew what Tucker wanted. He was going to wait for Tucker to say it just the same.

Tucker hunkered down at the top of the bank, brushed away a swarm of gnats that rose out of the grass at his feet, pointed the shotgun at the driver's face. "I want you to put the gas to it, slowly, build up the pressure until something happens. The Dodge isn't wedged tight. It should slide loose. The moment it's moved enough for you to squeeze your heap past it, do just that."

"And if I keep going?" the driver asked. He smiled as if this were a joke between them, and he had very nice teeth.

"We'll shoot out your tires, blow out the back window, very likely put half a dozen slugs in the back of your head-and possibly blow up your gas tank." He smiled back; his own teeth weren't bad, either.

"I thought so," the driver said. He eased his foot down on the accelerator.

For a moment nothing much happened. As the engine noise built into a scream, a ring-necked pheasant took off from the brush behind Tucker and Shirillo, startling the boy but not the older man. The Mustang's bumper popped a bolt and crunched back onto the grill. Still, the engine noise climbed. The driver was gritting his good teeth, aware that the Dodge might tilt the wrong way, that he might slip off it and careen into the shale wall himself.

Then the Dodge began to creak and give. A section of the shale broke loose from the wall and crashed down over the ruined automobile, rained on the Mustang, clattered at the feet of the gorilla who stood against the far wall, above the wreck. Then the big car twisted sideways, its roof coming around flat against the shale wall across the road. The driver of the Mustang pulled his car through the opening, badly scraping the whole length of his side against the rock. He stopped where he was supposed to, opened his door and got out.

"Come back up here," Tucker said. He hadn't been sure that the Dodge would move, but now he showed no surprise. Tucker was never surprised. It would have damaged his reputation if he had been.

The driver came back, stood beside his companion and looked very disgusted with himself. He had a right. However, unlike the other gorilla, he didn't try to tell them that they wouldn't get away with it. He looked at his dusty shoes, wiped each of them against the back of a trouser leg and did a good job of pretending boredom.

"Where's this road go?" Tucker asked. While he held the shotgun on them, Harris went downslope to the place where he'd climbed the bank, gained the road again and walked back up toward them.

"Nowhere," the driver said.

"It's a dead end?"

"Yeah."

The smaller of Baglio's men, the one who hadn't had enough sense to keep quiet before, looked at the driver quizzically, then smiled and looked up at Tucker. His face might as well be a blackboard with a huge, chalked message on it. "You're never going to get out of here. Mr. Baglio will get you sooner or later, 'cause this is a dead end."

The driver looked scornfully at the other man, spat on the road and sighed, leaned back against the shale wall,

"Is he Baglio's son-in-law, or something?" Tucker asked the driver.

"No," the driver said. "But help's not easy to get these days."

The smaller gorilla blinked stupidly, looked from one to the other. "Son-in-law?" he asked.

When they were all in the Mustang and Jimmy Shirillo had pulled away from the wreck and the two gunmen, Harris said, "Obviously, it's not a dead end at all."

"Go to the front of the class," Tucker said.

Harris's goblin mask hung below his chin like a second face in the middle of his chest, bobbing when he talked. "A dead end would be bad, but this is something worse, so why go on?"

"Because we can't go back," Tucker said. "Obviously Baglio knows we're on this road and has the other end sealed up. But we might come to something else before we run into the roadblock."

"Like what?"

"I couldn't say, but I'll know it when I see it."

At the beginning of May, when the trees were just greening and the summer ahead seemed devoid of any job possibilities, a letter had arrived at Tucker's midtown Manhattan mail drop, sealed in a white envelope with no return address. He had known that it was from Clitus Felton before he opened it, since he was accustomed to receiving letters like it on the average of ten times a year. Half the time often they contained something worthwhile. Clitus Felton, despite his unlikely name, earned his way as a contact point between freelancers on the East Coast, operating out of a small specialty bookstore in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Once he had been in the business himself, expertly planning and executing two or three substantial jobs a year. But age had gotten to him—as had his wife, Dotty, who was afraid that the amazing Felton luck was soon going to be stopped by a cop's bullet or a long stretch behind walls. However, a bookshop wasn't enough to keep Felton interested in life. He was only six months behind the counter when he began to contact old friends and offer his middle-management service. He kept names, aliases and addresses all in his head, and when someone contacted him about a perfect job with a need for the proper partners, Felton considered the possibilities, wrote a few letters and tried to help out. For a percentage. Usually five, if the job worked out as expected. Vicarious crime. He lived for it.

This latest letter had intrigued Tucker. He placed a couple of telephone calls, got the information that couldn't be trusted to the mails and flew to Pittsburgh, from Kennedy International, to meet with Jimmy Shirillo.

When Shirillo welcomed him at the airport, Tucker almost said thanks-but-no-thanks, almost got right the hell out of there before he had heard anything more about the job. Shirillo looked far too young, seventeen at the most, and he didn't look any better to Tucker when he said he was actually six years older than that. Despite the Italian surname, he was fair-complexioned, blue-eyed, with sandy brown hair. He was only about five feet four, perhaps a hundred and thirty pounds. A well-placed bullet wouldn't just kill him; it would knock him a couple of blocks if there was any breeze moving at all.

Tucker wasn't such a big man himself, standing five feet nine and weighing a hundred and forty-odd pounds. He supposed, too, that he didn't look the way a man in his profession should look. He was dark-haired and dark-eyed, with high cheekbones, a thin-boned nose, an air of the aristocrat, and he had been told, at different times, that he was somewhat fey. However, he looked like a bruise compared to the kid; he looked a thousand times more experienced and cautious and capable. The kid inspired no confidence at all, and he made Tucker feel like a father meeting his son.

Shirillo, smiling, reached out and took Tucker's single suitcase with one hand while he offered the other to be shaken. His handshake was surprisingly firm, though unforced, the handshake of a man who was certain of himself. It was enough to make Tucker hold his initial judgment in check.

As Shirillo drove them into and then across the city during the first wave of morning rush-hour traffic, handling his new Corvette with caution but with no restraint whatsoever, making better time than Tucker would have thought possible, he was forced to junk his first evaluation of the boy and

come up with a different one altogether. Beneath that somewhat fragile exterior was a man of competence and—as he proved again and again in that freeway war—not just a little daring.

"Why you?" Shirillo had asked, weaving around a large beer truck, squeaking back into the proper lane with no more than a thickness of paint to spare.

"Excuse me?"

The boy grinned. "You've been sizing me up ever since I took your suitcase in the arrivals lounge and you seem to have decided to trust me."

Tucker said nothing.

"Now," Shirillo said, "I'd like to size you up. Why did Felton think you were especially right for the job?"

Tucker leaned back in the bucket seat, found the roll of lime-flavored Life Savers he usually carried in a pocket, offered one to Shirillo, took one for himself and sucked on it. He said, "I only steal from institutions. I guess that's why Felton thought of me."

"Institutions?"

"Yes. Banks, insurance companies, department stores, diamond brokers, that sort of thing. I've never taken anything from an individual, from anyone who could be hurt by the loss."

Shirillo mulled that over for a moment, then said, "You call the Mafia an institution?"

"One of the oldest," Tucker said.

"But there are differences between the Mafia and—and a bank or an insurance company."

"A few," Tucker admitted. Already he felt at ease with the kid, despite the brief time he'd known him, despite the glittering cars that they sailed past and dueled with, despite the angry honking horns, squeal of brakes. "Though there are fewer differences than you might think."

"One difference," Shirillo said, tramping hard on the accelerator to take advantage of an opening in traffic, "is that a bank, if it catches up with you, will have you tossed in jail—while these boys we're talking about will simply weight you down and drop you off a bridge somewhere."

Tucker smiled, sucked his lime Life Saver, watched the hurtling death machines around him as they were playful animals. "They still do things like that?"

"Worse," Shirillo said. "I don't want anyone in this who doesn't understand the risks."

"Do you?" Tucker asked.

"I was raised in the Hill section of Pittsburgh," Shirillo said. His manner was no longer childlike. It was grim. His face set into tight lines, pinched up by bad memories. "That's mostly a black neighborhood—substandard housing, bad garbage pickup so you get rats running in the streets like dogs, hardly any police patrols, streets that haven't been paved in my lifetime, no family counseling or city services like in the white neighborhoods. It's the kind of place where pressures build up and until, one summer night every couple of years, they just rip out through the top."

"Riots?"

"You been keeping up with the news," Shirillo said. "But I prefer to think of them as nervous system collapses; it's not a physical thing but a psychological one. Everyone clucks about it for a few days; and then the upstanding white citizens rush out and buy a lot of guns they don't know how to use; in a month it's forgotten, and nothing's changed. Nothing at all. If you're not black or Spanish, you've got to be shitting poor to live in the Hill section. And that's why we were there. My father tried to keep ends together with a shoe-repair store, and did, too, until he kicked off at fifty-six from too much damn work. My father has had to pay Rossario Baglio's collectors for the last fifteen years, simply for the privilege of remaining in business. An old Italian custom." He snorted, but wasn't amused by his own joke. "Before Baglio, it was someone else who got the weekly installments. I've seen what they do to people who miss a week or who come flat out and say no to extortion. One of the rebels was a brother of mine, and ever since he said 'No' he limps. Badly. He's lucky that he walks at all."

"So you know the risks," Tucker said.

"Too well."

"I know them too. But I also know that, in a job like this one, you gain advantages along with the risks. For my part, I think the advantages outweigh the additional risks."

"For instance?"

"For instance, you don't have to worry about organized police, the state or federal apparatus, fingerprint experts or any of the rest of it."

"That too," Shirillo admitted.

Out of the city, moving east on the superhighway, the traffic thinned out considerably. Shirillo put the Corvette up around seventy and held it there. Neither of them spoke again until he braked, slowed and drove off into a roadside picnic area fifteen minutes later.

"On foot from here," Shirillo said. He looked at his watch. "And we'll have to make it fast." He picked up two pairs of field glasses from the back seat, handed one to Tucker and got out of the car.

Twenty minutes later, having tramped a considerable distance through a pine woods, moving silently most of the time, they reached the vantage point Shirillo had chosen, in the trees to the side of the private road, halfway down the mile-long straightaway that fed into Baglio's driveway. They stood well back in the shadows under the pines, watching the big white mansion.

"Some house," Tucker said.

"Twenty-nine rooms," Shirillo said.

"Been inside?"

"Once," the boy said. "When I was eighteen, I was a numbers runner for one of Baglio's H.I. operatives, a man named Guita. Guita thought I was a smart kid destined for big things in the organization, and he brought me here with him once to meet Mr. Baglio."

"What happened to your big career in the underworld?" Tucker asked.

"Guita got himself killed."

"Police?"

"No-Baglio."

"What for?"

"I never knew."

Tucker said, "Some action up there at the house. Is this it?"

Shirillo had not been using his binoculars for a few minutes, but he lifted them and peered up the slope. "Yes," he said. "That's Henry Deffer, Baglio's personal driver, that old bastard there. Walking beside Deffer, the dandified one, is Chaka, Baglio's accountant and trouble-shooter. He's the second most powerful man in the local organization."

"The other two?"

"Just hoods."

"That the money, in those suitcases?"

"Yes."

"How much, do you think?"

"I've asked around. No one could say for sure except Baglio and Chaka. But it's likely to be somewhere between two hundred and five hundred thousand, depending on what kind of two weeks it's been."

"Where's it come from?" Tucker asked.

"Baglio's suburban gambling operations, the small stuff - punchboards in a couple of hundred gas stations, small numbers operations out of laundromats and newsstands and beauty parlors, small sports betting from maybe sixty or seventy barrooms. Each one of them's a tiny situation in itself. Multiply a small stake by two thousand situations, and it turns into big money."

"Why only a twice-a-month collection?"

"~~Because it is so little compared to inner-city numbers running, organization hookers, protection~~ money, the dope take from both suburbs and inner city. It isn't enough to warrant all those rounds every week. Besides, these situations with the punchboards and the dollar bets are mostly legitimate businesses copping a little dirty money on the side that they don't have to report on the income-tax returns. They like holding onto Baglio's share, interest free, for a couple of weeks; sometimes, might help a guy make a payment he'd otherwise be a few days late on. Baglio doesn't mind that as long as they turn in an honest percentage and don't get behind."

A black Cadillac limousine had pulled out of the driveway and was on its way toward them down the narrow lane. They stepped even deeper into the shadows and watched it go past.

Shirillo said, "Baglio has about fifty collectors for the suburbs. Every second and fourth Monday every month they hit the road, picking up the small change from these situations. They deliver it here starting midafternoon, until dinner. Monday night it's counted, packaged and put in suitcases for the trip into town Tuesday morning."

"What's done with it then?"

"Baglio owns a good piece of a bank in town, one of the big ones on Forbes. Deffer parks the Cadillac in the garage under the bank, while Chaka and one of the bodyguards use the bank president's private elevator to take the suitcases to the president's sixteenth-floor office. What happens to it then, I don't know. I imagine that it's all very cleverly laundered and made clean again."

"Do you have a spot picked out to stop the car?"

"Yes," Shirillo said. "Let's go look at it."

They spent that afternoon tramping the woods along the private lane, scouting prospective sites for the execution of the robbery. That done, they drove into the city again, where Tucker took a room in the hotel at Chatham Center. In his room, for the rest of the afternoon and evening, they discussed the fine points of the plan, argued alternatives and got it worked out to their mutual satisfaction. It looked good.

Back in Manhattan, Tucker needed only two weeks to locate and interest Bachman and Harris. The four of them had met in Pittsburgh this past Sunday, had gone over the details until they were exhausted. They monitored the delivery of the cash on Monday, went over everything one last time on Monday night in Tucker's hotel room, pulled the job off well. Quite well. Except for that damned woman in the Cadillac. That damn unexpected Cadillac.

Tucker hated failure more than he hated losing the money, more than the possibility of violence and death. He meant to see that the job did not end here.

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"If Baglio's men are in front of us and behind us," Jimmy Shirillo said, "what do we do next?" He slowed the Mustang to a crawl, and he felt like stopping it altogether. If he could freeze them here, stop time, fix this instant for eternity, they'd not have to face Baglio at all; nothing bad could happen to them. For his first major job he'd held up quite well, in the face of almost total failure, but he had his limits. He remembered his brother, the weeks in the hospital, the limp, and he didn't want to go on with this. Tucker traced circles on the shotgun stock with his index finger and wondered how to answer the kid's question. His own reaction to failure was different from Shirillo's; his resourcefulness was increased, his determination magnified. He said, "I've noticed branch roads leading from the main track. We must have passed a dozen of them since we turned off the macadam."

Shirillo nodded quickly. "I saw them too. They were narrower than this, more rutted than this, grown full of weeds, and absolute disaster for anything less formidable than a Land Rover."

"I didn't pretend to mean we'd get all that far on one of them," Tucker said patiently. He didn't like this dawning note of pessimism in the kid, but he didn't comment on it. The best way to bring Shirillo around was to be calm, lead him by example. He said, "At least we ought to make a mile or so before we have to start walking."

"I don't like it," Shirillo said.

"You like facing Baglio's roadblocks any better?"

Shirillo didn't answer.

Tucker said, "By now they know that we have a man with a machine gun, and they won't be overpowered again."

Shirillo thought a moment and said, "Why don't we just abandon the car here and go into the woods away from any trails they might watch?"

"Because we'd never find our way overland; we'd be lost in ten minutes. Unless we can find the macadam road again, we won't know where we are. None of us is a woodsman."

"That's damn straight," Harris said, clutching his Thompson tighter than before, his own pessimism bottled up inside of him, behind a mask of stoic indifference that was not as good as Tucker's own carefully maintained facade. Harris's gloom was not based on inexperience, as was Shirillo's, but on growing certainty that he had been too long in this business and that he was nearer than ever to a big payment of dues. He remembered his short time behind bars, and he knew he wouldn't go that route here-this would be worse, much worse, and painful. Baglio wouldn't send him to a cell but to a grave.

"Okay, then," Shirillo said, resigned to the worst. "But you pick the road, okay?"

A thousand feet farther along, Tucker pointed to a narrow gap in the almost solid wall of thick pine trunks, said, "That one, on the right, ought to lead in the general direction of the mansion."

Shirillo drove into the weed-choked track with all the caution of a man who fully expected it to be generously laced with land mines. The Mustang sighed, sank down in the damp earth with its thick carpet of pine needles, the springs singing unpleasantly. It trembled coltishly, bounced into and out of a muddy hole, making a grinding noise as it pressed brambles, grass and milkweed plants out of the way, moving slowly but deliberately forward.

They rode in silence for more than a mile and a half before the compact car settled abruptly into a pool of black muck and refused to come out of it again, even though Tucker and Harris assisted with a push.

Shirillo finally shut off the engine and got out of the car. He said, "She's wedged in there until someone brings a wrecker after her."

"We'll walk now," Tucker said.

Actually, Shirillo was feeling better than he had fifteen minutes before, because he had never expected a Mustang to get this far over that kind of terrain. That it had lasted as long as this seemed to be some sort of omen that the job wouldn't turn out so bad after all.

Tucker took the lead as they followed the overgrown trail into the woods, Shirillo second and Harris bringing up the rear with his heavy artillery. The older man carried the Thompson snout forward, over the hip, like a wary infantryman going through a suspected enemy position. That was, in fact, pretty much the case.

Although Tucker was aware of the woods around him and was on the lookout for Baglio's gunmen, the greatest part of his attention was on the problem of the botched robbery. In the past three years he had pulled off thirteen perfect operations, a couple of which were already legend in the business. Each job had its hitches, of course, but each had turned out right in the end. At twenty-eight he'd begun to build the kind of reputation among other freelancers that Clitus Felton had retired on. Reliable Miles Tucker. He liked the sound of that, even though the Tucker part of it was not his real name. It had been his alias for three years, and he felt that, given another five years of continued success, he would

give a damn about any name except his assumed one; he would be Tucker then. Already, he was more concerned about upholding Tucker's reputation than about what was said against his real name and family. There was nothing to be proud of in his real name, nothing at all. Tucker, however, was a name to be reckoned with. A botched-up job Remember Tucker's first disaster, the Baglio robbery? After that, it was all downhill for him, right on to that job when he No. Not failure. He wouldn't permit it to remain a failure, because that would be playing right into his father's hands-not Tucker's father, of course; the real father. He refused. He would not provide anyone with a reference point for the beginning of his decline. Before he was finished he would have those damned suitcases, or three others exactly like them, filled with money.

He looked at his watch as he walked along the rutted, unused track, was surprised to see that despite all that had happened this morning it was still only a few minutes past eleven o'clock. A great deal could be done yet today-if they were lucky enough to find their way off the mountain unobserved.

Ten minutes after they abandoned the Mustang, the woods began to thin out around them. The trees were smaller, farther apart, the underbrush thicker. Tucker gave all of his attention to the landscape now; the planning could wait until later. The woods seemed deserted except for them, but Baglio might have men stationed along the perimeter. Whether they had a chance or not was all dependent on how many gunmen he kept in the mansion on the day of a cash transfer.

Spread out side by side now, rather than strung out in one line, they slowly approached the edge of the trees, circumspect, increasingly certain that they were alone. At the edge of the forest, still in the darkness beneath the pines, they stopped and looked down the long manicured slope of a contoured hillside. The mansion rested at the bottom, a white flare in the middle of all that green grass.

Sprawled on the ground at the edge of the woods, the three men watched the activity down at the Baglio mansion. On the long flagstone promenade that fronted the great house, two gunmen had taken up positions, one at either end, leaning against white wooden pillars from which they could survey the circular drive and both the east and west lawns. Tucker imagined that, in the back of the house which he could not see from here, other hoods had also settled in for the duration. Otherwise, the picture was serene, the windows of the house taking the bright sunlight and casting it back in doubled brilliance, willow tree lazily waving whiplike branches, a bird crying somewhere close by.

Tucker put down the binoculars and said, "The white Thunderbird parked in the driveway has Michigan plates."

"A doctor for Bachman?" Shirillo asked.

"Most likely."

Harris said, "Then they got him out of the wreck, you think?"

Tucker nodded. "And they aren't likely to send him to the local hospital, where someone might wonder how and where he got so banged up."

"How bad do you think Bachman is?" Shirillo asked.

"It has got to be more than a bruise or two."

Harris seemed to be remembering the Chevy angled up onto the mangled Cadillac, and he grimaced sourly. "Why didn't they just kill him? Why go to the trouble of bringing a doctor in for him? The Baglio doesn't sound like any humanitarian, from what I've heard."

Tucker brushed away a determined ant that had crept onto his coat sleeve, and he said, "Bachman must either be unconscious or in too much pain to talk coherently. Baglio sent for the doctor to help get Bachman back in shape so he can ask him a few pointed questions."

"About the job," Harris said.

"Yes," Tucker said. "About the job, about us."

"Bachman won't say anything."

"Bullshit," Shirillo said.

Harris looked at the boy, his square face reddening again. He said, "I've worked with Merle Bachman half a dozen times before, and I can vouch for him."

"If the police had him, I wouldn't be the least bit worried," Shirillo said. "I'm sure he's able to withstand any number of late-night question-and-answer sessions in the squad room with those boys, but I also know that no one is going to make it through much of Baglio's questioning. They'll sew him back together from the wreck, ask him a few questions, and break every bone in his body, one at a time, until he spills. They aren't as limited in their choice of techniques as the police are."

Tucker picked up the glasses again, trained them on the front doors which opened on the promenade, followed two men as they came out of the house and walked toward the white Thunderbird. One was in a business suit and carried a black satchel, obviously the physician. The other man was tall, dark and distinguished, with full sideburns and a mane of gray-white hair. Twenty pounds too thick around the middle but otherwise in good condition, he might have been a Congressman or successful oilman. He had to be Baglio, and Shirillo confirmed that he was.

"What's going on, friend?" Harris asked.

Tucker said, "They're arguing, but not heatedly. I'd guess the doctor wants Bachman moved to the hospital, while Baglio disagrees. Right now he's probably telling the doc that he pays these exorbitant medical fees to be able to disregard his advice whenever it's convenient."

A moment later the doctor got into the Thunderbird and drove away, with Baglio waving at him in a friendly fashion. A third person came out of the house then and stood beside Baglio: the rangy blond

who'd been driving the Cadillac which had cut off Bachman's escape route. She wore shorts and halter, and everything about her was zaftig, so ripe she would already have begun to decline by the age of thirty, when many women were reaching the fullest bloom. Right now, though, at twenty-two or twenty-three she was perfect, and she knew it; that was clear in the way she carried herself, the conscious provocative tilt to her hips when she stood beside Baglio. Tucker watched her as, with his arm around the old man, she went back into the mansion.

"You know the girl?" he asked Shirillo. "The one driving the Cadillac?"

"No, but she's probably the latest in Baglio's string of women."

"Lives in?"

"His women usually do."

Tucker watched the house, though no one moved down there and the guards had slumped back in attitudes of boredom. "Is there any way we can find out for certain how many people are in that place at night, besides Baglio and this woman?"

Shirillo considered that for a moment and said, "I guess I could ask around, carefully, but I'm already sure that there's going to be at least four bodyguards. Outside of that, I just don't know."

"Why does it matter?" Harris asked.

Tucker brushed the ant off his sleeve again, flicked it gently away with his fingernail. "We're going to have to go into that house and get Bachman away from them."

"Are you crazy?" Harris's face, for once, was not even pink but the color of a mild yellow cheese. All the lines showed in it now, and he looked as old and tired as he was. He reached out and touched the Thompson lying in the grass beside him, but that did not do any good this time.

"Name me an alternative."

Harris said, "We split and go quiet for a while."

"That's good," Tucker said, a bit sarcastically. "That would be fine if these were the cops or looking for us. Cops have so damn much to do, they can't keep after you for long; no leads for a couple of months, and they put you in the back files and go on to something else. But these people, Pete, have the time and the resources. Baglio looks and sounds like the kind of man who could hold a grudge and nurture it. He's going to pump Bachman for our names, for Felton's name. He'll lean on Felton until he gets a mail-drop address for each of us. Then he just has to wait for us to pick up the mail."

"When do we go in?" Shirillo asked. "Tonight?"

"Tomorrow night, I think."

Harris said, "You're both nuts! Bachman will have spilled it all by then, anyway."

"Maybe not," Tucker said. "From the way the doctor was pushing Baglio, I'd guess Bachman's in a bad way right now. He's probably coked to the hairline and will be until tomorrow morning. Even if he comes out of it then, he won't be a good subject for interrogation. Especially not for Baglio's type of interrogation. What good is it to threaten a man with torture when he's already in too much pain to think straight?"

"And if he isn't as racked up as you think?" Harris asked. "What if we go in there and find out that Bachman's talked, that he's dead and ready for planting in the woods?"

"Then we're no further behind than if we walk away now. Either way, Baglio will be after us then."

"Tucker's right," Jimmy Shirillo said.

Harris shook his burly head, some color back in his face now. "I just don't know. I'm used to operating on common sense. If a man takes a fall, you let him. That's his business; we all take the same risk."

"With the cops, yes," Tucker said. "If Bachman was being held by the cops, I'd walk off." That was not entirely true, for there was still the money they hadn't gotten, the failure he had to erase from the record. "I know he wouldn't name any of us. But these aren't cops, Pete. With these boys, you have

throw out the old rules and adapt to the circumstances."

Harris looked at the house, still dubious. "How can we do it?"

"I'm working out a few angles right now," Tucker said, tapping the side of his head. "But I don't want to lay them out until I've thought everything through." He got up and brushed off his clothes. "Right now, we've got to get off this damn mountain before they shift the search away from the interior and back toward the macadam road."

"Down at the highway, do we just hitchhike back to the city, friend?" Harris asked. "With a shotgun and a Thompson in hand?"

"We can still use Shirillo's Corvette, as planned, though it'll have to seat three of us instead of two. It's parked in the picnic area three quarters of a mile from Baglio's lane. Shirillo can drive east, take the first exit, get on coming west again, take another exit after passing us, get on coming east again and pick us up at a prearranged spot along the berm."

"That'll be fast enough," Shirillo said. "The exits are still pretty close together this near the city."

"Let's hope you're right, friend," Harris said.

Tucker was bothered by a sudden emergence of the "friend" tag on Harris's speech. The big man was not new to this business, and his nervousness was far more dangerous than that of the inexperienced apprentice, since its roots went deeper. Tucker knew that, when he was disturbed, the odd means of address punctuated a lot of Harris's conversation. That he should be this upset already, before much of anything had happened, was not a good sign. "Let's move ass, then," Tucker said. "I've got a hell of a lot of arrangements to make."

The suitcase in which Harris carried the machine gun in its less conspicuous, fragmented form was in Shirillo's Corvette. If the job had gone well, Shirillo and Harris would have left the stolen Dodge for the sportscar and driven back to the city in that, while Tucker would have used the big car and disposed of it on some quiet residential street where it might not be noticed for a couple of days. Now jammed in the tiny, low-slung machine, Shirillo and Harris in the seats, Tucker sitting sideways in the shallow storage compartment behind them, they suffered Harris's elbows as he broke the large weapon down and fitted the pieces into the Styrofoam cups that were firmly glued to the bottom of the suitcase. He took three times longer than usual to complete the chore, but at least he was calmed by it. When he was done he smiled at Tucker, patted the suitcase and said, "It's a beautiful tool, isn't it?"

"Beautiful," Tucker agreed. "I see why you never got married and had children."

Harris didn't catch the sarcasm but took that as a compliment for the gun.

They dropped Harris in front of his hotel after he promised to stay low and keep to his room starting tomorrow morning when Tucker might be expected to phone.

"I still don't see how we can get in there," he said.

"I'll work it out," Tucker said.

Harris closed the door and walked off, carrying the suitcase full of submachine gun as if it were only underwear and shirts.

When Tucker got out of the Corvette in front of his Chatham Center hotel feeling as if he had been folded into someone's pocket, he left the shotgun with Shirillo, told him to wait for a telephone call and sent him home. He went upstairs to his room, showered, dressed, packed his single suitcase and checked out. He called the airport from the lobby, reserved a place on the earliest flight to New York, got a cab and left the city.

At 4:36 that afternoon he landed at Kennedy, not at all happy to be home again, since it was a temporary failure that had driven him back.

In the main airport lounge, which was static-filled by hundreds of chattering travelers, he took his suitcase into a telephone booth and drew the door shut. He dialed the office number of his family banker on the off chance that the man might still be at work. President of the bank, he was still at his desk. Tucker licked dry lips, cleared his throat, wondered if there was any other way to handle this. He decided there was not and identified himself, though not with the Tucker name.

"Michael! What can I do for you?" Mr. Mellio asked. He was warm, sincere, concerned. Bullshit. In truth, he was an icy bastard and completely in the old man's tow. When he hung up in a couple of minutes, he would immediately dial Tucker's father and report, verbatim, what had been said. When you were a depositor of the position of the old man, bankers broke their professional codes and extended you certain extra services.

"How long will you be in your office this afternoon, Mr. Mellio?"

"I was just preparing to leave."

"How early can you be there in the morning?"

"A quarter past eight?"

"Will you see me then?" Tucker asked.

"What did you have in mind, Michael?"

"I'd like to borrow against my inheritance." The statement was simple enough, though it was difficult to make. His father would be pleased to hear Mellio's report; Tucker's financial need, his first in more than three years, would make the old man's whole day.

"Borrow?" Mellio asked, a banker who seemed never to have heard of such a thing. "Michael, need I remind you that by signing one small paper you may pick up your accrued allowances from the trust."

and-"

"You needn't remind me," Tucker said sharply. "May I see you at a quarter past eight in the morning for a loan?"

"Of course," Mellio said. "I'll leave word with the guards to admit you then."

"Thank you, Mr. Mellio," Tucker said. He hung up. His forehead was dotted with perspiration though he felt cold clear through. He wiped his face with a paper tissue, then opened the booth door, stepped out, picked up his suitcase and went outside to catch a taxi.

The doorman at Tucker's building-Park Avenue in the eighties; he had a nine-room apartment complete with his own sauna; his father wondered most about his ability to maintain that-greeted him with a smile and his name, turned him over to the hallman inside, who inquired after the success of his business trip.

"Well enough," Tucker said, though the words tasted bitter.

He knew as soon as he entered his tenth-floor apartment that Elise was home, because the stereo system was carrying Rimski-Korsakov as interpreted by Ormandy's Philadelphia Orchestra, his favorite composer by her favorite orchestra. He controlled an urge to go looking for her and attended to important details first. At the wall safe in the living-room closet he put away the billfold that contained the Tucker papers, took out his own wallet and slipped that into his pocket. He closed the safe again and spun the dial. Then he went looking for Elise.

On his way down the main hall, he stopped before the fragment of an early fifth-century Edo shield which had come into his possession only two months ago but which already seemed an integral part of the apartment. He and Elise had spent hours finding the right place for it and bracing it on the wall, and he had spent even longer examining it in detail, wishing that more than a ragged half of the beaten copper piece had survived. Of course, if the shield had come through the ages intact, it would have been far too valuable for him to afford it. As it was, he had paid close to forty thousand dollars for it and felt that the money was well spent. The oval shield, of well-worked copper trimmed in silver inlaid with small pieces of hand-carved purest ivory, was the product of a nation of African dreamers who had lived on the east bank of the Niger River, constructing elaborate shields but rarely going to war, and it was exquisitely beautiful.

Besides, the acquisition helped substantiate his cover as a freelance dealer in primitive art objects, a front which satisfied Elise and which his father found hard to crack. He really made little money from his dealing, but his records were a private matter between him and the IRS, and his father's investigators could never be sure what he cleared as an art dealer.

He had paused before the shield as much to absorb some of its innate peace as to admire its beauty, now, having shifted out of the higher gear that his Tucker persona demanded, he felt in a better state of mind to meet Elise.

She was sitting in a black leather chair in the den, a drink on the table beside her, a book open on her lap. Even in a comfortable old quilted housecoat a size too large for her, she radiated sensuality. She was a big girl, with a showgirl's body, an inch shorter than Tucker at five feet eight, with high round breasts, a narrow waist, slim but not boyish hips, and legs that went on forever. To date, however, her breaks in show business had been because of her face, not the body under it. She was a natural blonde with green eyes, a complexion as flawless as good china. Oddly enough, she was in demand for two kinds of television commercials: those that required a sexy, come-hither chickee to peer at the home audience and solicit men for cigars, beer and sportscars-and those that needed a stunning but innocent ingenue to push makeups, soda pop, junior fashions and shampoo. With different makeups and a change in hair styles, and with her not unimpressive acting ability, she could be two different ages and temperaments before a camera, in the same session.

Tucker kissed her, felt it turn into something else as she began to kiss him.

"How'd it go?" she asked when he went to make himself a drink.

"It's not finalized. I've got to go back in the morning."

"For how long?"

"A couple of days, no more."

"Was something wrong with the bells?" she asked.

He said, "It's a question of which century they're from-last half of the fifth or early part of the sixth. I think they're more modern than the seller says they are, and I'm having them evaluated by Heinenke in Chicago. He'll even do a carbon dating on them, if he has to."

The lies came so easily, though he hated lying to her. He'd told her he was going to Denver to negotiate the sale of a good set of Javanese temple bells, and then he had gone to Pittsburgh to meet Bachman and Harris and Jimmy Shirillo.

In all other aspects, their relationship was an honest one. They both came and went as they pleased with no phony jealousy between them, no lies or deceptions about whom they might be seeing, where they were going, their plans for the future. She gave him a check every month to pay her portion of the rent and other bills, and when he had not cashed the first two of these she had made him see that unless they shared responsibilities, they could not share anything else. There was a respect and trust between them that Tucker had never found with anyone else-and yet, when it came to the real nature of his business, he had to lie to her. Not because he didn't trust her but because he didn't want her involved in anything where a court might find her an accomplice or contributing party.

Besides, neither had professed a Great Love for the other, merely a sweet affection. When their affair finally came to an end, if it did come to an end, he would feel much better knowing that she was completely ignorant of his criminal reputation.

He sat down at the foot of her chair on the thick shag carpet, kissed her knees and then went to work on the drink that he'd built. He said, "How about you and Madison Avenue?"

"I got a call," she said, grinning. "You're never going to guess what I'm selling this time."

"They're allowing that to be pushed on television now?" he asked.

"Gutter mind," she said.

"I apologize. What are you selling?"

"Pickles."

"Pickles?"

"Peter Piper Pickles," she said, chuckling. He was always delighted with that chuckle, almost a giggle, because it was so out of place in a woman as big as Elise, as sophisticated as Elise, and it gave her another dimension altogether.

"I thought pickles were-what do you call things like that?"

"Family goods," she said.

"That's it. You always say you can't get jobs pushing family goods even in your breathless teenager role."

Elise had once explained, in detail, that housewives were the purchasers of family goods-foodstuffs, kitchen utensils, waxes, soaps and the like. Housewives didn't want to see a stunningly attractive woman or precocious, budding teenager selling them products, because they were reminded of their own spreading behinds and gradually bulging middles. They didn't want to feel as if they were competing with the women in the commercials; therefore, family goods were sold by cutesy women and plain types. Bombshells like Elise were reserved for pitches aimed at men: cigars, automobiles, beer and hair-grooming preparations.

"They've come up with a different approach for this one," she said.

"Who has?"

"Marcus, Marcus, Pliney and Plunket," she said.

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