
Nightfall

by David Goodis

1

It was one of those hot sticky nights that makes Manhattan show its age. There was something dreary and stagnant in the way all this syrupy heat refused to budge. It was anything but a night for labor, and Vanning stood up and walked away from the tilted drawing board. He brushed past a large metal box of water colors, heard the crash as the box hit the floor. That seemed to do it. That ended any inclination he might have had for finishing the job tonight.

Heat came into the room and settled itself on Vanning. He lit a cigarette. He told himself it was time for another drink. Walking to the window, he told himself to get away from the idea of liquor. The heat was stronger than liquor.

He stood there at the window, looking out upon Greenwich Village, seeing the lights, hearing noises from the streets. He had a desire to be part of the noise. He wanted to get some of those lights, wanted to get in on that activity out there, whatever it was. He wanted to talk to somebody. He wanted to go out.

He was afraid to go out.

And he realized that. The realization brought on more fright. He rubbed his hands into his eyes and wondered what was making this night such a difficult thing. And suddenly he was telling himself that something was going to happen tonight.

It was more than a premonition. There was considerable reason for making the forecast. It had nothing to do with the night itself. It was a process of going back, and with his eyes closed he could see the progression of scenes that made him shiver without moving, swallow hard without swallowing anything.

There was a pale blue automobile, a convertible. That was a logical color, that pale blue, logical from the start of it, because it had started out in a pale, quiet way, the pale blue convertible cruising along peacefully, the Colorado mountainside so calm and pretty, the sky so contented, all of this scene pale blue in a nice even sort of style. And then red came into it, glaring red, the hood and fenders of the smashed station wagon, the hard gray of the boulder against which the wrecked car was resting, the hard gray turning into black, the black of the revolver, the black remaining as more colors moved in. The green of the hotel room, the orange carpet, or maybe it wasn't orange—it could have been purple. A lot of those colors could have been other colors—but the one color about which there was no mistake was black. Because black was the color of a gun, a dull black, a complete black, and through a whirl of all the colors coming together in a pool gone wild, the black gun came into his hand and he held it there for a time impossible to measure, and then he pointed the black gun and he pulled the trigger and he killed a man.

He took his clenched fists away from his eyes, opened his eyes and brought himself back to this room. Turning, he saw the drawing board, and it threw an invisible rope toward him, the rope pulling him in, urging him to get away from yesterday and stay with now. Because now had him listed as James Vanning, a commercial artist specializing in the more intricate kind of work that art departments of advertising agencies hand out to proven experts. Tonight he was mixed up with one of the usual rush jobs and the deadline was for tomorrow afternoon. But if he went to sleep now he could get up early

tomorrow and finish the assignment in time to satisfy the art director.

If he went to sleep now. That was downright comical. Sleep. As if sleep was something that came automatically. As if all he had to do was put his head against the pillows and close his eyes and go to sleep. He laughed without sound. He laughed at the picture of himself trying to sleep. Every night he had a debate with sleep and it was one rebuttal after another and it kept on like that until it knocked him out just about the time when the sun got started. That was his sleep.

He walked into the bathroom and saw himself in the mirror. Average height but on the husky side. Curly blond hair and quite a lot of it, so that was no worry. The worry came in where suggestions of silver showed here and there through the blondness. Very little silver, hardly noticeable against gold, but even the little that was there was too much silver for a man only thirty-three. And the lines under his eyes and around his lips, those lines weren't age. Those lines were ordeal. And even his complexion. It still retained considerable South Pacific, specifically Saipan and Okinawa, but the darkness of it was more shadow than sun. It seemed that there was shadow all over him, all around him.

More shadow moved in, and he decided to fight it. He took a shower and a shave, he put on a freshly cleaned and pressed palm beach suit. And he was getting his arm through a sleeve when he heard the noise from down the hall.

"A cop," a voice said. "Get a cop."

Another voice from out there. "What's the matter with you?"

"Get a cop."

Vanning's teeth came together, biting at nothing. He couldn't breathe. He stood there, waiting.

"What are you all excited about? What's wrong?"

"Who's excited? All I want is a drink. Bring me a cop of water."

"Why don't you learn to speak English?"

"Shut up and bring me a drink of water."

From there on it became a typical husband-and-wife discussion, the wife yelling for a drink of water and continuing the yelling after she got it. Vanning used up a minute or so trying to decide whether they were Spanish or Italian or Viennese. He wondered when they had moved in. He wondered about all his neighbors. It was a point he made, keeping away from them. Keeping away from everybody.

He told himself to get a move on. He didn't know where he was going, but wherever it was, he was in a big hurry to get there.

2

The heat came in waves, big rollers of heat wallowing in from all parts of Manhattan and down from the sky of melted asphalt. The heat flowed into Washington Square Park and stayed there despite the sporadic breeze. Vanning remained in the park only a few minutes. As he left the park, he aimed toward the corner of Christopher Street and Sheridan Square. There were a lot of lights in that direction, and he figured on a drink or two and maybe a chat with some unimportant person who would talk about unimportant things.

He was crossing a street and turning a corner when a man came up to him and asked for a light. There were no street lamps in this particular area and Vanning couldn't get a good look at the man. He could see, however, a small figure and a mustache and neatly combed black hair. He lit a match and applied it to the man's cigarette. And in the glow he obtained a fairly comprehensive view of the face. But it lasted only a moment. There was no special reason for analyzing the face.

“Hot night,” the man said.

“Terrific.”

“I saw some kids diving off the docks,” the man said. “They got the right idea.”

“If we did it,” Vanning said, “people would call us crazy.”

“The trouble with people is they don't understand people.”

The man had a pleasant voice and a free-and-easy air, and Vanning told himself there was nothing unusual about the matter. The man merely wanted a light and a minute or so of chewing the rag, and he was going to start worrying about all these little things he might as well put himself in a sanitarium.

The man leaned against a building wall. Vanning lit a cigarette for himself. They stood there like a couple of calm animals in a calm forest. The night was all around them and the streets were quiet and the heat was dominant.

“I wonder how they stand it in the tropics,” he said.

“They're born into it.”

“I don't think I could stand it,” the man said. “Ever been near the Equator?”

“A few times.”

“What's it like?”

“Great,” Vanning said. “You go nuts but you don't mind it, because everybody goes nuts.”

“I've never traveled much.”

“Don't go near the Equator,” Vanning said. “This is twenty per cent of what it's like.”

“When were you there?”

“During the war.”

“I didn't get in,” the man said. “A wife and kids.”

“They put me in the Navy,” Vanning said, and listened to himself saying it, and told himself to put the lock on his big mouth. He figured it was about time to start moving.

But the man said, “You see much action?”

“Enough.”

“Where?”

“Around Borneo.” He told himself it was all right. It would last maybe another minute and then he would tell the man he had to meet someone at Jimmy Kelly's or someplace and he would go away and the incident would fade into one of those vague little incidents that never make the front pages or the history books.

“I envy you,” the man said.

“Why?”

“Farthest I've ever been away from New York is Maine. I used to go there summers, before things got tough.”

“Hard going?”

“Lately,” the man said.

“What's your line?”

“Research.”

“Business?”

“More or less.”

“I'm in advertising,” Vanning said.

“Agency?”

“Free-lance artist.”

“How do you fellows make out?”

“It runs in cycles. We don't know what we depend on. Maybe the sun spots.”

“I think we're in for another depression,” the man said.

“It's hard to say.”

The man let his cigarette fall to the sidewalk. He stepped on it. “Well,” he said, “I think I'll be going home. She always waits up for me.”

Vanning was about to let the whole thing pass, but he found himself saying, “Been married long?”

“Eleven years.”

“I wish I was married.”

“You say that as though you meant it.”

“I do.”

“It has its points,” the man said. “In the beginning we were all set to break up. Times I'd be eating breakfast and there she'd be across the table and I'd wonder if it was possible to get rid of her. Then I'd ask myself why and I couldn't think of a good reason.”

“Maybe the freedom angle.”

“You're free.”

“It gets monotonous. I think if you're normal you've got to have someone. You've got to have something special and it's got to be around all the time.”

“Can't that get monotonous?”

“How do you feel about it?”

“Monotony's a relative thing.”

“That isn't a pun, is it?”

“No,” the man said. “I'm saying it in a positive way. You go out and look for a thrill and when you get it there's no thrill. The only thrill is looking for it. When you have someone you can look for a thrill together.”

“Isn't that going a little deep?”

“I met her at a dance,” the man said. “I had a devil of a time really getting to know her. She hadn't been around much, and you know how it is in New York. I bet you'll find more virgins in New York than any other town in the country. I mean in ratio. Even the little towns in the sticks. This is one business where they build a defense mechanism at an early age. You can wear yourself out breaking it down. But don't get the wrong idea. That isn't why I married her.”

“Why did you marry her?”

“I got to like her,” the man said. “We had a lot of fun together. I don't know who you are and I'll never see you again in a hundred years, so it's all right to talk this way. I think it's a good idea to get things

off your chest with strangers now and then.”

“There's something to that.”

“I developed a feeling for her,” the man said. “I wanted to put my hands on her and at the same time didn't want to do that and I got to thinking about it. It reached the point where I was buying things for her and I got a kick out of watching her face light up when she opened the packages. That had never happened before. We went around together for a little more than a year and then I went out and bought a ring.”

“It always works that way.”

“Not always,” the man said. “I think I really fell in love with her about two years after the marriage. She was in the hospital then. We were having our first kid. I remember standing there at the bed, and there she was, and there was a baby, and I got all choked up. That was it, I guess. That was the real beginning.”

“How many you got now?”

“Three.”

“Three is just right.”

“They're great kids,” the man said. He raised a wrist toward his eyes and peered at the dial of a compact little watch. “Well,” he said, “I've got to be running. Keep in trim.”

“I will,” Vanning said as the man started away. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” the man said, and he was crossing the street. He turned a corner and walked up another block and crossed another street. A taxi came down the street in a listless way, the driver indifferent to the wheel, a cigarette miraculously hanging onto the driver's lips. The man raised his arm, waved, and the taxi pulled toward the curb.

The man got in and gave the driver an address on the east side, slightly north of Forty-second Street in the section known as Tudor City. The driver threw his cab into second gear and they were on their way.

In a little more than five minutes the man was home. He had an apartment on the seventh floor of a place once in the high-rent category but now toned down a bit. In the elevator he lit a cigarette and glanced again at his wrist watch as he left the elevator, and saw the hands indicating a quarter past twelve. Walking down the hall, he took a key ring from his trousers pocket, and as he came to the door marked 714 he glanced once more at his wrist watch. Then he inserted the key, opened the door and entered the apartment.

It was a pleasant little place, definitely little for a family of five, but furnished to give an impression of more space. The main element was a large window that showed the East River. And there was a grand piano that had put him in the red for several months. There was a presentable secretary desk with some intelligent-looking books behind glass. The top row was given over to a set of The Book of Knowledge, but underneath that it was all strictly adult stuff. A good deal of Freud and Jung and Homey and Menninger, and some lesser-known works by other psychiatrists and neurologists. The kids were always standing on chairs to get at The Book of Knowledge, and once in a while they'd mess around with the other books and sometimes use crayon on the pages, but the top row was the only place for The Book of Knowledge because the other rows weren't high enough. There'd been a bit of discussion about that, especially when the six-year-old daughter had torn out all the pictures in one of the more involved and pathological works of Man's Nervous System, but there just wasn't enough room for another bookcase and it was rather useless to make a big issue over the matter.

He came into the living room and his wife put down a book and stood up and walked toward him.

“Hello, Mr. Fraser.”

“Hello, Mrs. Fraser.”

He kissed her on the cheek. She wanted to be kissed on the mouth. He kissed her on the mouth. She was an inch or so taller than he was, and she was on the skinny side and had the kind of face they use in fashion magazine ads where they don't want to concentrate too much on the face. It was an interesting face even though there was nothing sensational about it. It was interesting because she showed contentment but no smugness.

She put her hands on the sides of his head. She rubbed his temples. “Tired?”

“Just a little.”

“How about a drink?”

“I could eat something.”

“Sandwich?”

“No meat. Something light. God, but it's hot.”

“I couldn't get the kids to sleep. They must be swimming in there.”

“You look cool.”

“I was in the bathtub an hour,” she said. “Come on in the kitchen. I'll fix you something.”

In the kitchen he sat down at a small white table and she began preparing a salad. It looked good to him and she added things to it and made enough for two. There was a pitcher of lemonade and she put more ice and sugar and water in it and sat down at the table with him.

She watched him as he tackled the salad. He looked up and smiled at her. She smiled back.

She poured some lemonade for him and as he lifted a forkful of lettuce and hard-boiled egg toward his mouth she said, “Didn't you have dinner?”

“Who can eat in this weather?”

“I thought we'd get a breeze from the river.”

“Should have sent you and the kids to the country.”

“We went through that.”

“It isn't too late,” he said.

“Forget about it,” she said. “The hot spell's almost over.”

“I could kick myself.”

“We'll go next year.”

“We said that last summer.”

“Is it my fault?”

“No,” he said, “it's mine. I'm sorry, honey, really I am.”

“You know something?” she said quietly. “You're a very nice guy.”

“I'm not nice at all. I was thinking of the money.”

“They want too much these days,” she said. “The prices they ask, they're out of their minds. Out on Long Island you should see what they're asking.”

“I'm thinking of the country.”

"You're worried about the kids."

"You and the kids."

"Oh, stop it," she said. "You're making enough."

"I'm making a fortune. Next week I'm buying a yacht."

She added some mayonnaise to her salad, mixed it in, ate for a while, and while concentrating on the food she said, "Anything new?"

"Still checking." He sipped some lemonade. "It's a tough one."

"Is he still there?"

"Still there. Tonight I talked to him."

"What happened?"

"I just talked to him. Nothing happened. He came out about eleven. Walked to the park. I followed him. He left the park and I walked up and asked for a match. That's about all."

"Didn't he say anything?"

"Nothing I could use. He's a difficult proposition. If there's anything criminal in that direction, I can see it."

"Now, now—"

"I mean it, honey. He's got me buffaloed. For two cents I'd walk in and tell Headquarters they're on the wrong track."

"Suppose I gave you two cents?"

"I'd back out," he said.

She poured more lemonade into his glass. "I took your brown suit to the cleaner's. And you could use another pair of shoes."

"I'll wait till fall."

She studied his eyes. She said, "You never buy yourself anything."

"I do all right."

"You do fine," she said. She got up and walked toward him. Her fingers moved through his hair.

"Someday you'll be important."

He smiled up at her. "I'll never be important," he said. "But I'll always be happy." He took her hand and kissed it and looked up at her again. "Won't we?"

"Of course."

"Sit on my lap."

"I'm gaining weight."

"You're a feather."

She sat on his lap. He drank some more lemonade and gave her some. She fed him a little more salad and took some herself. They looked at each other and laughed quietly.

"Like my hair?"

He nodded. He put his hand against her head, played with her hair. "You women have it tough in summer. All that hair."

"In winter it comes in handy."

“I wish it was winter already. I wish this case was over with.”

“You'll get it over with.”

“It's a problem.”

She gave him a sideways smile. “And you eat it up.”

“Not this one,” he said. “This one's different. Something about this one gives me the blues. The way he talked. That tone. I don't know—”

She stood up. “I want to see if the kids are asleep.”

Fraser lit a cigarette, leaned back a little to watch her as she crossed the living room. When the waitress cut her off, he leaned forward and dragged deeply at the cigarette and stared at the empty glass in front of him. A frown moved onto his forehead and became more of a frown. The empty glass looked very empty.

3

In this particular Village place there wasn't much doing. Four men at the far end of the bar were having a quiet discussion concerning horses. A young man and a young woman were taking their time with long, cool drinks and smiling at each other. A short, fat man was sullenly gazing into a glass of beer.

Vanning turned back to his gin rickey. A peculiar sense of loneliness came upon him, and he knew it was just that and nothing more. He wanted to talk to somebody. About anything. And again he saw himself in a mirror, this time the mirror behind the bar, and he saw in his own eyes the expression of a man without a friend. He felt just a bit sorry for himself. At thirty-three a man ought to have a wife and two or three children. A man ought to have a home. A man shouldn't be standing here alone in this place without meaning, without purpose. There ought to be some really good reason for waking up in the morning. There ought to be some impetus. There ought to be something.

Again one of those sighs got past his lips, and he recognized it and didn't like it. He was sighing the way too much these days. He finished the drink, downing the last few gulps too fast to get any real taste out of it, and then he ordered another drink and while waiting for it he saw the short, stocky beer drinker looking at him in a hesitant sort of way. It was evident that the fat fellow wanted to strike up conversation, the fat fellow was lonely, too. Just then the drink arrived, another gin rickey.

Vanning offered the fat fellow a kindly smile, and the smile was appreciated and returned. Vanning moved his drink down along the bar, holding onto the smile, and said, “Well, this is one way of beating the heat.”

The fat fellow nodded. “One thing I like about beer,” he said. “It stays cold once it gets in your glass. Whiskey don't work that way.”

“I guess whiskey's a winter drink,” Vanning said, and suddenly he realized this was going to be an extremely dull conversation, and if he didn't push the topic onto another track they would be talking about liquor for the rest of the evening. He wondered what they ought to talk about and he considered baseball for a moment but had to discard it because he certainly wasn't up on his baseball. He didn't even know the league standings. It had been a long time since he had last opened a newspaper to the sports page.

And now, since there was nothing to say and nothing better to do, Vanning went to work on his drink.

The fat fellow said, “She's giving you the eye.”

Vanning gulped and got it down. He looked at the fat fellow. He said, “What?”

“A number just walked in.”

Vanning leaned far over the bar and studied the glass and its contents. Without fully knowing why, he said nastily, “Numbers are always walking in.”

“This isn't bad.”

“None of them are bad,” Vanning said. “They're all wonderful.”

“I just thought I'd mention it.”

“Thanks,” Vanning said. “Thanks for mentioning it.”

The fat fellow shrugged and put some beer down his throat. He was quiet for a little while and then he said, “Too bad you're not interested.”

“Why?”

“She is.”

“That's nice,” Vanning said. “It always builds the ego.”

“I wish she was looking at me.”

“Maybe I'm in the way.”

“Oh, that's all right,” the fat fellow said.

“No, really.” And Vanning gave a brief, quiet laugh. “I'll move on down the bar. Or I'll take a walk outside. Anything you like.”

“Don't do that. It wouldn't help me. I'm not her speed.”

The nastiness cruised away. Vanning turned to the fat fellow and said sympathetically, “Now what do you carry on like that?”

“Oh, cut it out,” the fat fellow said morosely. “I'm just a fat slob and I don't have enough brains to make people overlook it.”

“Glands?”

“No, not glands. Appetite. I've had six meals already today and the night is still young. I'd have a much better chance with that item as Eskimos in the Sahara.”

“Go on,” Vanning said, a little amused. “It isn't that hopeless. Give it a try. Nothing ventured—”

“Yes, I know all about that, and if I thought there was one chance in a thousand of getting a hello, I'd start an operation. But if I ever saw a hopeless state of affairs, this is it. I'm not in that league. Take a look at her and you'll see what I mean.”

“Don't let them scare you,” Vanning said, again lifting the glass. “They're not poison.”

“Maybe you could sell me on that, but the way you say it, you don't mean it. You've been hurt, brother. You can't kid me. You've been hurt plenty.”

Vanning's hand tightened around the glass. He put it down. He tapped ten fingers on the surface of the bar and took a deep breath and gazed straight ahead. “All right,” he said. “What about it?”

“Nothing,” the beer drinker said. “I've been hurt too.”

“That's a shame. Should we start crying on each other's shoulder or do you think maybe it's a good idea to skip the whole thing? Have another beer?”

“She sure is looking at you.”

“All right, then,” Vanning said, “don't have another beer. And do me a favor. Don't give me a play-by-play of what's taking place at the end of the bar.”

"I bet I know what's the matter." And the fat fellow wore a gleeful, shrewd little smile. "You're one of those bashful guys. I bet you're afraid."

"Afraid?"

"That's what I said."

"Afraid," Vanning murmured. He gripped the rounded edge of the bar. "Afraid. I'm afraid."

The beer drinker waited a while, and then he said, "I beg your pardon, friend, but would you mind telling me what the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm afraid," Vanning said.

"I'm going out for a sandwich," the fat fellow said. "Food settles all my problems, and yet my biggest problem is food itself. That's the way it goes, my friend, and I tell you it's a vicious circle, it certainly is."

"I guess so," Vanning said.

The fat fellow was paying his check, turning away from the bar, walking toward the door. Vanning watched him, and then Vanning's eyes hopped away and to the side and toward that part of the bar where she was standing alone in a yellow dress. Her figure was on the buxom side. Voluptuous, but in a quiet, wholesome way.

She was about twenty-six, Vanning estimated while he looked at her and while she looked directly back at him. And then the first coherent thought that entered his head was the idea that she didn't belong in this place, she ought to be home reading a good book, and tomorrow morning she ought to be in the park wheeling a baby carriage. And all that was in his eyes as he stood there looking at her and agreement with all that was in her eyes as she looked at him.

Even at this distance he could see there was no paint on her face except for some lipstick. But all the same there was color in her face, quite a bit of it aside from a beach tan, and it was deep rose all over her cheeks. He didn't think he was causing that. The deep rose was probably a permanent condition of her face. It was definitely a face, and it went along with the rest of her, and he knew why the fat fellow had retreated from the situation. The shining blond hair, loose and wispy and lovely around her shoulders, was some thing else that must have given the fat fellow a bad time.

She kept on looking at Vanning, and he kept on looking at her, and finally he told himself it was curiosity and nothing else that was making him pick up his drink, walk toward her.

Going toward her, it was more as though she were coming toward him, and the effect of her walk was something tremendous. He couldn't understand that, because along with it there was something uncanny, made all the more uncanny by the fact that she looked to be anything but uncanny or hard to figure out. He asked himself to stop trying to understand it.

He said, "Think you know me?"

"No."

"Then why are you looking at me?"

"Can't I look?"

He frowned and glanced at her with his head inclined a little. She stood there and looked at him. He had a feeling that she was a few strides ahead of him and he didn't like that.

"I guess you can look if you want to," he said. "I don't know what you expect to see."

"I'm not sure either."

"If you have a pencil and paper," Vanning said, "I'll be glad to write a short autobiography."

“That won't be necessary. But you can tell me what you do.”

He laughed. It was a way to pass some time, anyway. That was what he told himself. He wasn't able to tell himself the truth. But the truth was there, inside him, and the truth was that a female in a few startling, swift moments, had gotten a hold on him and he had no inclination to free himself.

He said, “I paint.”

“Houses?”

“Houses, horses, fountain pens, anything they want.”

“Oh,” she said, “then you're an artist.”

“With apologies to Rembrandt.”

“I didn't expect you'd be an artist. I thought—”

“Truck driver, longshoreman, heavyweight wrestler.”

“Something along those lines.”

“Disappointed?”

“Oh, no. Aren't artists glamorous?”

“I'm a commercial artist,” Vanning said. “That means I'm a salesman, I'm part of a big selling job, and I actually get paid for painting pretty pictures.”

“It sounds like a nice way to earn a living.”

“It has its advantages,” Vanning said. “But I do it all day long and at night I like to get away from it.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be sorry. Talk to me. That's why I came in here.”

“To see if you could meet a girl?”

“To see if I could find someone interesting to talk to.”

“That's very strange,” she said.

“How come?”

“I had the same idea.”

“I don't think so,” Vanning said. He got his eyes away from her and he watched his fingers rolling back and forth along the smooth roundness of the highball glass. “I think you came in here because you're an unhappy person, desperately unhappy and very disappointed with men, and probably disillusioned but not disillusioned to the extent that you're ready to throw all men aside. Do I hear the sound of a click?”

“Go on. Talk.”

“Well”—Vanning went on playing with the glass—“I think you came in here a little on the frantic side, as if you're giving yourself a few last chances to meet someone worthwhile. Or maybe this was the final try. And you saw me standing there and you told yourself it was a bull's-eye if you could only attract my attention.”

“Do all artists know this much about human nature?”

“I couldn't say. I don't hang around with other artists— Suppose we take one thing at a time. Suppose we talk about me after we get through with you. Is that all right?”

“If it isn't all right we'll do it anyway,” she said. “Because you have your heart set on it. You're getting pleasure out of it.”

“Not exactly what you'd call pleasure. But I think it would do us both some good if we skip the jockeying around. I mean come right out at the beginning and put it all on the table. That saves a lot of time. Sometimes it saves a lot of grief later on.”

“What makes you think there will be a later on?”

“I didn't say there would be. What I'm really trying to do is catch up with you. I'm sure you're mature enough not to take offense at that.”

She smiled. “My name is Martha.”

“Jim.”

“Hello, Jim.”

“Hello. Have another drink?”

“I've had enough, thanks. Too much, I guess, on an empty stomach.”

“We can fix that,” Vanning said. “Come to think of it, all I had tonight was a sandwich and a malted.”

He paid for the drinks and they walked out of the bar. Now it seemed that the heat was letting up a bit and the Hudson was sending over a breeze. Going toward midnight, the streets were quieting down and it was the bars and night clubs that were getting all the play.

Vanning looked at her. He said, “Got any special place in mind?”

“There's a little restaurant off Fourth Street. I don't know if it's still open.”

“We'll try it.”

The place was well off Fourth Street, and the weak yellow light from its window was the only light on the narrow street. Vanning took her in there and they sat at a small table near the window. They were alone in the place. It was very small. Their waiter was the proprietor, and he was a man who looked as if one of his own meals would do him a lot of good. He was trying to be friendly, but weariness prevented him from getting it across. He took their order and went away.

“All right,” Vanning said, and he leaned toward her. “Now tell me.”

“Yes, I've been married. Divorced. No children. I'm a buyer in a department store. Glassware. I live alone in a two-and-a-half here in the Village.”

“I'll want that address. And the telephone number.”

“Now?”

“Here's why. There's a slight possibility I might have to leave you in a hurry. Don't ask me to explain, but just on the chance that things work out that way, I'll want to see you again.”

She opened a handbag, took out a pencil and a small pad. She did some writing and handed him the slip of paper. Without looking at it, he folded it and put it in his wallet.

“Now,” she said, “what about you?”

“Never been married. I come from Detroit and I took engineering at Minnesota. If you like the rah, I was an All-Western Conference guard. Then I was in Central America and we were showing them some new stunts with electricity and water power and so forth. While I was down there I began painting. For relaxation. Someone told me I could paint and I took him up on it. I did a lot of painting down there. Wind-up was engineering played second fiddle and I came back to the States and enrolled at an art school in Chicago. If there'd been a lot of money I would have gone in for the fine arts. But there was very little money and I had to go commercial. Things were breaking very nicely and the luck stayed with me all through those years and all through the war. I wasn't even scratched.”

“Doing what?”

“Navy. I was a damage-control officer on a battleship.”

A dull tone had crept into his voice and he wanted to get rid of it, he wanted to be amusing, diverting. He wanted to show her a nice time. He told himself this was a good thing, this thing happening to him now. She was something clean and refreshing; he felt sure this was the something he had sensed was going to happen tonight. He was glad, and yet there was a certain uneasy feeling along with the gladness, and he couldn't figure it out.

The food came and they ate silently. Every now and then he lifted his eyes and watched her for a moment or so. He liked the way she ate. A quiet sort of gusto. She took her time and yet she didn't waste any time. Her table etiquette was an easy, relaxed thing that made it a pleasure to sit here with her.

After the food, Vanning ordered peach cordials. They sipped the cordials and smiled at each other.

“I should be ashamed of myself,” she said. “I mean, you picking me up like this. Or rather, me picking you up. But you called it right, Jim. I was very lonely, or let's even say desperate. I'll be looking forward to seeing you again.”

“When?”

“Whenever you feel like seeing me.”

“You don't know how good that sounds.”

They finished their cordials and Vanning paid the check and they moved toward the door. They had to go down a few steps, because the door was below street level, with other steps leading up to the pavement, and now Vanning was opening the door, now they were going up the steps, now he knew something was wrong, he saw the shadow cutting in on light issuing from the restaurant, he saw the forms following the shadows and he told himself to twist away and race back into the restaurant and try a rear exit. But already it was too late for that, and the lateness was within him. He was angry, and the anger got the better of discretion, and he was going up the steps, taking her with him but not knowing she was there with him. And suddenly, as the three men came out of darkness and confronted him, he knew he had been expecting it. This was really it. This was the something he had expected would happen tonight.

The three of them stood up there at the top of the steps.

And one of them, his face half black, the other side of his face orange-yellow where the light hit, smiled and took a cigarette from his lips, lowered his eyes toward Vanning and said, “Okay, bud. It's all over.”

Her hand gripped his wrist, and he realized she was there, and along with that realization there was another, and it was a thunder burst; it made him blink, it made him stagger without budging. He took hold of her clutching hand, twisted her hand with violence, threw her away from him. She gasped.

There was a laugh from one of the men up there.

Vanning walked up the steps toward him. They stepped back to give him room, and yet they surrounded him, the three men and the girl beside him.

And then one of the men looked at Martha and said, “Thanks, honey, that was a beautiful piece of work.”

“Yes,” Vanning said. “It was terrific.”

“You,” said the man who had just spoken, and he smiled easily at Vanning, “you don't talk now. You

do your talking later.” Then he looked past Vanning, looked at the girl and said, “You can go home now, honey.” He laughed with pure enjoyment. “We’ll call you when we need you.”

“All right,” she said. “Do that.”

Then she came walking up the steps and, coming abreast of Vanning, she looked at him with nothing in her eyes, and it lasted for an exploding second, and then she turned and walked away.

The three men closed in on Vanning. Two of them had their hands in the pockets of dark tropical worsted suits, but hands alone couldn't make the pockets bulge that much, and Vanning told himself to stop thinking in terms of a break.

One of the men said, “Let's take a little walk across the street.”

The four of them crossed the street, walked down the block to where a large, bright green sedan was the only interference with thick midnight blackness.

The man who was doing most of the talking said, “Now we'll take a little ride.” He climbed into the front seat. In the back, Vanning sat with a man on either side of him. His brain was empty. His mouth was dry and a coldness was getting itself settled within him, and now the car was in gear, going down the street, making a turn and picking up speed. They made a turn. They were going downtown, then they were swinging away from a wide street and going toward Brooklyn Bridge.

“If you tell us now,” said the man behind the wheel, “we'll let you out and you can go home.”

“I can picture that,” Vanning said.

“Why don't you tell us now?” the man said. “You're going to tell us sooner or later.”

“No,” Vanning said. “I can't do that.”

“You can't do that now, you mean. Because you're tough. But it won't last long. When we get to the point where you're not tough any more, you'll say what we want you to say.”

“It isn't that,” Vanning said. “I don't feel like getting myself hurt. If I knew, I'd tell you.”

“Come off that,” the man said. “That's in the heartache department. That's crying the blues. You know where you'll get with that? Nowhere.”

“That's too bad,” Vanning said. “Because then we'll both be nowhere.”

“He's too tough,” the driver said. “He's much too tough, I think. What do you say?”

“I say he's too tough,” said the man who sat on Vanning's left. He was a big man and he wore glasses and now he took them off very slowly, put them in a case and put the case in his pocket.

“What do you say, Sam?”

“Yes, he's too tough,” said the man on the right, a short, wiry man with very little hair on his head. His arms were folded but slowly unfolding.

“I'm not tough at all,” Vanning said. “I'm scared stiff.”

“Now he's being funny,” the driver said. They were on Brooklyn Bridge. The lights were whizzing and passing the car, dropping other lights on sides of other cars, and all the light was bouncing around like captured lightning in a black vault.

“How about it?” Sam said.

“Hold it a second,” the driver said. “Wait till we get off the bridge.”

“I think the bridge is the best place,” said the man who had been wearing glasses.

“We'll hold it awhile,” the driver said. “Just for a little while, Pete, and then you can have your fun.”

“Fun?” Vanning said.

“Sure,” Pete said, and he laughed. “The bigger they are, the more fun they are.”

“You mean with their hands and feet tied, don't you?”

“I can see you're going to be a lot of fun,” Pete said.

The green sedan tore away from Brooklyn Bridge and went slashing into Brooklyn. It went through the city and away from the city and into a section of vacant lots and shallow hills.

“I think now ought to be all right,” Pete said. “What do you say, John?”

“Hold it awhile,” the driver said.

“We're almost there,” Sam said. “How about it, John? Just to get him accustomed to it.”

“Maybe you're right,” John said. “And then get him down on the floor and keep him there. I don't want him to see the layout until after we got him inside. So now, if you want to, you can go to work on him.”

Pete twisted and threw a punch that hit Vanning on the side of the head, and an instant later Sam smashed him on the jaw, using brass knuckles. He lowered his head, testing the pain and the dizziness, feeling another blow and still another and yet another, and then he was going to the floor and the were kicking him. He wondered how long it would be until he lost consciousness. He looked up and saw the brass knuckles coming toward his face, and he threw himself to the side and the brass knuckles went past his head. Then the edge of a shoe caught him in the mouth and he realized there was only one way to stop this sort of thing. They weren't quite ready to kill him, and if he was going to get the slightest satisfaction out of this entire deal, now was the time to get it.

He came up from the floor, fainted at Pete, then swerved and let go with both hands, sending his fists into Sam's face. There was an opportunity for a follow-up, but instead of using it, Vanning swerved again, turned his attention to Pete. He leaned away from Pete's outstretched arm, then got under the arm, got his elbow under Pete's chin and heaved with the elbow, sending Pete's head quite a distance back, and then he hit Pete in the mouth, pistoned the same hand into Pete's mouth, then used both hands on Pete's face. That was about all he could do with Pete, because now Sam was showing a revolver and Sam was cursing and a lot of blood was flowing from Sam's nose.

“Bullets already?” Vanning said.

“Put the gun away,” John said.

“I feel like blasting him.” Sam was holding the gun a few inches away from Vanning's head.

“I told you to put the gun away,” John said. “You're too fidgety with a gun, Sam. That's no good. I've told you that a lot of times. Give the gun to Pete.”

“Sure,” Pete said, the sound staggering through blood. “Let me have that gun.”

“Be careful with it,” John said. “We have a long night ahead of us. Just keep him covered and keep him on the floor.”

Pete's foot thudded into Vanning's chest, forcing him against the floor and the front seat. “Stay there,” Pete said. “Just stay there and regret the whole thing.”

“I thought it was fun,” Vanning said. “Didn't you?”

“The real fun hasn't started yet,” Pete said.

The car made an acute turn, its wheels squealing. Vanning closed his eyes and told himself it was time to accept the thing for what it was. And it was very clear. It was very simple. Tonight he was going to lose his life. It was inevitable that someday this thing should catch up with him, and although he had

sensed that all along, he had tried to stretch it as far as possible. That was a wholly natural way to take it and he couldn't condemn himself for acting in a natural way. All in all, it was one of those extremely unfortunate circumstances, and it had started on a day when it simply hadn't been his turn to draw good cards. He could have died on that day or on the day following or the week following. He could have died on any of those several hundred days in the months between then and now, so what actually amounted to was the fact that all this time he had been living on a rain check and it was only a question of how long it would take until payday arrived.

The car was making turns, going long stretches without turns, making more turns, then sweeping around somewhere in a wide circle, slowing down.

"Put something around his eyes," John said.

"Why bother?" Sam said. "This is the last stop."

"Don't talk like that," Vanning said. "You make me feel blue."

"Bring your hand over here," Pete said. He was handing a large breastpocket handkerchief, folding it over, folding it again, then winding it around Vanning's head, drawing it tightly, knotting it.

"That's too tight," Vanning said.

"That's too bad," Pete said.

The car had stopped. They were getting out. They were taking Vanning across some sort of field. He could feel high grass brushing up against his ankles. Then the high grass gave way to hard-packed soil and it went on that way for a few minutes, and then they were walking up steps that had to be worn because there was considerable creaking. After that the sound of a key in a lock, the sound of a door opening, the feeling of entering a large room, going through the room with big hands pushing him back, holding him back, pushing him again. Now a stairway, a long climb, and now a corridor, and then another door opening, and the sound of a wall switch and light getting through the fabric that covered his eyes. He was working his lips toward a smile. He managed to build the smile. There was some fatalism in it, and a trace of defiance. And underneath the smile he was terribly frightened.

4

Lavender light came down on a purplish river. There was a huge ferry boat crammed with people. The ferry had shut off its power and was floating toward the wharf when suddenly a monster wave came from nowhere and hit the ferry on starboard and knocked it over on its back. And there were no people to be seen. Only the ferry floating on its back. And the river, calm again. And Fraser twisted his face against the pillow and let out a groan. He opened his eyes. He closed them again, opened them again and saw his wife sitting up beside him, looking at him.

"You're all worked up," she said.

"What was I doing?"

"Making noise."

"Did I say anything?"

"I couldn't make it out. Can I get you something?"

"No," Fraser said. "Just put on the light."

She switched on a lamp at the bedside. Fraser blinked and rubbed his eyes. He reached toward a table near his side of the bed, fumbled with a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches. She didn't want a cigarette. She wanted him to go back to sleep. Lighting his cigarette, he got out of bed, walked to the window and looked out. The East River was glimmering black pitch and the lights were points

spears lancing a smoldering night.

He took several short puffs at the cigarette. "I can't get it out of my mind."

"You should be on time and a half for overtime," she said. "You work twenty-four hours a day."

"Not always."

"Want a drink of water?"

"I can get it."

"Let me get it."

She climbed out of bed, and Fraser was alone in the room and he wanted to get dressed and leave the apartment. He was putting on his socks when she came back with the water. She let him finish the water and then she picked up his shoes and took them back to the closet.

"Take off your socks," she said, "and stop the nonsense."

"I feel like doing something."

"On what basis?"

"I don't know," Fraser said.

"I wish you'd get yourself a job in Wall Street. Keep this up and you'll be gray in no time."

She sat down beside him on the edge of the bed. She put a hand on his shoulder. For a while they sat there quietly, then Fraser got up and walked to his dresser. He opened the top drawer of the dresser and took out a brown paper portfolio and began extracting paraphernalia. He stood there at the dresser studying various papers.

This went on for several minutes, and then she came toward him. He looked at her, and she had her arms folded and she was saying, "Now stop it"

"Go back to sleep."

"I can't sleep with the light on."

"Put on your eyeshade."

"You're being inconsiderate."

"I'm sorry," Fraser said. "I can't help this."

"What is it?" she said. "What's all the fuss?"

"So many angles I can't figure."

"Tomorrow. Please, dear. Tomorrow."

"You go back to sleep. I'll go in the other room."

She went back to the bed. Fraser walked out of the room. In the living room he switched on the light and sat down with the paraphernalia. A few minutes later she came into the living room.

"I can't sleep," she said, "when you aren't sleeping."

He picked up the papers and began putting them back in the portfolio. "All right," he said, "I'm done now."

She stopped him. "No, you're not. You won't close your eyes all night. Sit here. Talk to me. Tell me."

Fraser smiled at her. "You've got a very nice nose."

"It's too thin."

"I think it's very nice." He ran his finger along the bridge of her nose. Then he looked away from her

and began punching a fist into a palm, punching lightly, steadily. "They're letting me do it my own way," he said. "If I ruin it, it's my own fault, mine alone. I'm sure I know where I'm going, but I'm not infallible. No man—"

"Don't make excuses to me. I'm a college graduate. I understand things."

Fraser let out a sigh. "It's a very difficult setup. It's like one of those cryptograms where the more steps you solve, the harder the rest becomes."

"You'll work it out."

"I wonder."

"You mean that, really?"

He looked at her. He nodded slowly. "It's a bad one, honey. It's definitely a bad one. With what I've got now, I can turn him in tomorrow. With what they have on him already, they can put him on trial and it's a hundred to one he'd get a death sentence. That's why I find it a little hard to sleep."

"But if that's what he deserves—"

"If."

"Is that your worry?"

"Not under ordinary conditions. But this is a very unusual state of affairs. The record says the man's a bank robber. A murderer. It adds and it checks and it figures. They've got witnesses, they've got fingerprints, they've got a ton of logical deduction that puts him in dead center. And what I've got is a mental block."

"What is this, the old humane element?"

"Just a theory."

"You've got a theory and they've got the facts."

"I know," Fraser said. "I know, I know." He rubbed the back of his head. "If I could only talk to him. I mean really talk. If I wasn't in such a delicate spot. It's one hell of a jam, and every time I walk into Headquarters they look at me with pity."

"You need help on this one."

"I need a miracle on this one."

"You're doing all you can."

"That's what bothers me," Fraser said. "The best shadow job I've ever done. Know every move he makes. Got it down to a point where I can leave him at night and pick him up when he walks out in the morning. I know what he eats for lunch, what kind of shaving cream he uses, how much money he makes with the art work. I know everything, everything except what I need to know."

"He's just clever."

"He's not clever," Fraser said. "That's another thing. I'll be dogmatic about that. He's intelligent, but he's not clever. Talk about a paradox, this one takes the cake."

"You're not a mind reader. You're not an adding machine. You've only got one brain and one set of eyes. Stop trying to knock yourself out."

Fraser stood up. He walked across the living room and came back to the sofa and looked at the wall. "It's a shame," he said. "It's a damn shame."

"What is?"

"They had to go and lose track of those others. That's what they get for putting two-bit operators on

big case. When I think of how they fumbled—”

“That's their fault, not yours.”

“It's my fault if Vanning gets the chair.”

“What makes you so sure he's innocent?”

“I'm not sure.”

“Then what are you worried about?”

“For a college graduate that's a foolish question.”

“Are you quarreling with me?”

“I'm quarreling with myself.”

She pulled him down to the sofa. She put her hands against the sides of his head and made him look at her. “Let me fix you some tea.”

“Black coffee.”

“I said tea.”

“All right, tea.”

She walked into the kitchen. Fraser sat there on the sofa for a while and then went into the kitchen. She was standing at the stove.

He stood behind her and said, “Can I bore you awhile?”

“Please do.”

He took a very deep breath. “Here's one for Aesop,” he said. “Three men rob a bank in Seattle. They run away with three hundred thousand dollars. They get as far as Denver. In Denver they register at a hotel under assumed names. They have a contact man in Denver, a smooth manipulator named Harrison. This man Harrison has the job of taking the money, getting it in a safe place or putting it in various channels or something. You follow me?”

“I've heard this a thousand times.”

“Hear it again. The Harrison party comes to the hotel. He walks out with one of the men, a person registered under the name of Dilks. Now get this, because this part was witnessed. Dilks was carrying a small black satchel. The money. All right, all that's under the heading of fact. Now we go into theory.”

“Yours?”

“No, Headquarters'. Harrison and Dilks take a little stroll. And somewhere long the line this Dilks gets a bright idea. He decides three hundred thousand is a neat little sum and why give it to Harrison? Why not keep it for himself? He waits until he and Harrison are on a dark, quiet street and then he pulls a gun and kills Harrison. He runs away and hides the money. Now we leave theory and come back to fact.”

“Here's your tea.”

“Put it on the table. Listen. Dilks gets out of Denver. But he leaves fingerprints on the gun found near Harrison's body. He leaves a blue convertible with a California license. Police go to work and start checking. And they find out this man Dilks is not Dilks at all, he's a former Navy officer named James Vanning. They start looking for him.”

“Lemon?”

“Just a drop. On a night like this I need hot tea.”

“It's good for you. They say it's the best thing in hot weather.”

“Do you want me to go on?” Fraser said. And she nodded soberly and he said, “They rack their brains trying to figure this Vanning. No former record, nothing except a few minor traffic violations, and that's from way back. Before the war he was a commercial artist in Chicago. Made a fairly nice living at that. Why does this man rob a bank? Why does he commit a murder?”

“A lot of men came back from the war and had the wrong outlook and got themselves in trouble.”

Fraser nodded. “That's what Seattle says. That's what Denver says. That's what Headquarters says. Maybe they're right.”

“And so?”

“Maybe they're wrong. Now look, do you want to hear the rest of this?”

“I'm not interrupting.” She gave him an indignant look. “I'm just discussing it with you.”

Fraser stirred the sugar in his teacup. He blew on the tea and took an experimental sip. “Too hot,” he said. “I'll let it cool for a while.” He took another deep breath and leaned forward. “They look for Vanning. They can't find him. They look for the other two men. No trace. A time interval, and then we see these two other men here in Manhattan. We follow them. We're about to pick them up and then we get very brilliant and we lose them.

“And then we get a call from someone who spots a man answering Vanning's description. We check it. It's Vanning. And Headquarters wants to move in, but Seattle doesn't feel like losing three hundred thousand and there's the factor of making sure. Headquarters disagrees with Seattle, but Seattle claims it would be a very nice thing if the money was picked up along with Vanning. Of course Denver puts up a kick because Denver wants to wrap up a murder case. There's something of a delay and then they give me the assignment and I'm supposed to settle this little discussion between three cities.

“So I focus on Vanning. I wait. I wait some more. I follow him like I've never followed anyone. And I wait. I wait for some indication of a lot of money being spent or hidden or invested. No indication. Nothing. Just Vanning from day to day, and if I don't hurry up and come in with something they'll give me orders to grab him.”

“And they'll be right.”

“No, they won't be right. They'll be making a terrible mistake. Why did those other men come to New York? Because Vanning's here. They trailed him. They know he's somewhere in town and they're looking for him. They want that money. If we take Vanning, we lose the chance of an established contact between him and those other men. Headquarters says forget about those other men, but I've got the feeling we'll never wind up this case if we don't grab all three.”

“But isn't Vanning the killer?”

“Yes.”

“That's definite?”

“Yes.”

“In your own mind?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then?”

Fraser lowered his head. He hit his fists against the table. “I don't know, I can't get rid of the notion. He's a killer and yet he's not a killer.”

She leaned her head sideways and gave her husband a careful look. “Is this man your cousin

something?"

He picked up the teacup and took a few gulps. "I wish you'd try to follow me. If I thought this was hunch or a brain storm I'd laugh at myself. But it's so much deeper than that." He leaned across the table. "I know Vanning. For months now I've been walking behind him, watching every move he makes. I've been in his room when he wasn't there, when I knew it would take him a half-hour to finish a restaurant meal. I've been with Vanning hour after hour, day after day. I've been living his life. Can you see? I know him, I know him. I"—and the rest of it came out in a low tone, rapid and strained—understand him."

She got up from the table and gathered the teacups and took them toward the sink. She turned the faucet handle and the water came out in too much of a rush. She turned it down a little. Quickly and efficiently, the cups were washed and dried and she put them back in the kitchen cabinet. As she closed the door of the cabinet she heard him getting up from the table and she turned to see him walking out of the kitchen. She started to follow him, but just then her eye caught the top of the smooth white table and there was something on the table that caused her to frown. She moved toward the table.

She had seen this sign of extreme agitation once before on a night when their youngest child, stricken with pneumonia, had been approaching the crisis.

She stood there at the table and looked at the scraps of fingernail.

5

"All right," John said. "Let him see where he is."

The blindfold was removed. Vanning blinked a few times and then he looked at John. It was the same John. The same hunched shoulders, rather wide, the same creased leathery face and large, flat nose and thick lips that didn't have very much blood in them. The same stringy necktie. Everything the same even the way John wore his hair, a salt-and-pepper brush that covered his head like a mat of steel wool.

John put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He seated himself on the edge of a studio couch. Sam and Pete were up against the wall, standing there like statues. That left Vanning in the center of the room with light from the ceiling doing a slow fall onto the top of his head. There was some pain in his face from the brass knuckles, and there was a quantity of dizziness, but not so much that he couldn't stand there balancing himself on two feet. He turned his back on the two men who stood against the wall. He looked at John.

"Well?" John said.

"Your move," Vanning said.

They were gazing at each other as if they were alone in the room. John leaned back on an elbow, crossed one leg over the other and took a long, contemplative haul at the cigarette. He blew out the smoke in a single quick exhalation and said, "All I want is the cash."

"I don't know where it is."

"Now say that again," John said. "Just say it to yourself and hear how foolish it sounds."

"I know it sounds foolish, but that's the way it is and I can't help it."

John looked at the black-and-white shoes, the suit and shirt and blue-and-black tie and he said, "Nice clothes you have on."

"I like them."

“They cost money.”

“They're not bad clothes,” Vanning admitted. “But they're not the real high quality. Not the kind of quality I'd be wearing if I had that cash you're talking about.”

“It's a point,” John said. “But not much of a point. What are you doing these days?”

Vanning liked that question. It was more of an answer than a question. It told him something he was hungry to know, and it offered a foundation for some strategy.

He said, “Nothing much.” He tossed a few ideas around in his head, selected one of them and added, “I have a photo studio uptown, West Side, I manage to make a living, and there's a studio couch and a bathroom, and that way I save on rent.”

John looked at the floor and blew some smoke toward a faded violet rug. Vanning studied John's face and told himself it had been a clever play. At least he understood now they didn't know where he was living. He put it together rapidly. They had spotted him in the Village. Followed him. Made a false contact with the girl and told her to work on him, to get him out of the bar and out of that street and into the restaurant on the dark and empty street. It was reasonable. It checked. It was a typical John manipulation. Because John had just so much brains and no more. John wasn't exactly a fool, but he was harder than he was clever, and probably he knew that about himself, because he had a habit of laboring to be clever.

“Look,” John said. “You've got a fair amount of intelligence. You're on one side and I'm on the other. That's clear enough. So we'll take it from there. It's got to be managed along those lines. In order for you to stay alive and have a happy life ahead of you, what you have to do is tell me where you put the cash, then we keep you here until I have the cash, and then we let you go. Does that make sense?”

“It would make wonderful sense,” Vanning said, “except that I don't know where that cash is located and that's why I can't tell you. Now does that make sense?”

“No, it doesn't. I can see a man misplacing a ten-dollar bill. Maybe even a hundred-dollar bill. But he doesn't figure that a man will let three hundred thousand dollars slip out of his fingers just like that. And that brings us to another angle. If you really lost the money, you lost it in Colorado. And that means you wouldn't be here if you didn't have the money. You'd still be in Colorado, looking for it.”

“Colorado is a big place.”

“Three hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money. Most people I know would use a magnifying glass and search every inch of the state.”

“Maybe you and I don't know the same kind of people.”

John threw the cigarette onto the floor, waited until it burned the rug, then stepped on it. He looked at the mashed stub. He said, “We're not getting anywhere.” Then he looked up at Vanning without raising his head. “Are we?”

Vanning sighed. “We can't get any further than this. I don't know where it is. I tell you I don't know where it is.”

“Don't get excited,” John said. “We have plenty of time.”

“I don't look at it that way. If I did, I'd try to stall. I'd try to bargain. I'd ask for some assurance that you'd leave me alone after you had the money, and I'd give you assurance that I'd leave you alone.”

“You wouldn't have to do that,” John said. “We know you'd leave us alone. We know you wouldn't go to the law. How could you go to the law when the law is looking for you?”

Vanning frowned. “What do you mean, looking for me?”

"You're wanted for murder," John said. "Didn't you know that?"

"You're way ahead of me," Vanning said. "I don't remember murdering anybody."

John smiled with understanding and patience and allowed it to coast for a while. Then he beckoned with his fingers and said, "Come on, come on."

Vanning, without moving his head, could see part of the window at his side, and he wondered if he could make it in a leap. He wondered how far it was to the ground. With a big effort he got his mind away from the window and he said, "How much do you know?"

"We know you killed him," John said. "We know the law has you tagged. People saw you with him that night. So the law found out what you looked like. And the car license. That was another thing. Your description tallied with the description of the car owner. And still another thing, the big thing. You bought the car in Los Angeles and you got a license there. That gave them a record of your fingerprints, and the prints checked with prints on the gun."

"How do you know all this?"

"It's the kind of news that gets around," John said. "Newspapers and people talking and so forth. We hung around in Denver for a while, and then we picked up on you from a tip that came from New Orleans. Later we got another tip from Memphis. And then a third tip from New York. We figured you'd stay in New York for quite a time. It's a nice place to hide. What happened was you were spotted in a Village bar. The man who made the contact had to go and lose you in a traffic jam, but we figured we'd tag you again, sooner or later. And that's the way it adds, so now maybe we can come to terms."

"I wish we could," Vanning said. "I wish I had something to offer."

"Put yourself in my place," John said. "I'm very hungry for that cash. I'm so hungry that I'm willing to give you a slice. Say fifty thousand. How does it sound?"

"It sounds great. That's what makes this picture so miserable. I just don't know where that money is."

John stood up. He said, "Final?"

"Final," Vanning said.

"No," John said. "I don't think so." He looked at the two men who stood motionless against the wall.

"Well?" Pete said.

"All right." John was walking toward the door. "You can have him now."

Beyond the pain, beyond the spinning and all the gleaming red, and beyond the falling rocks that crushed and clanged and beyond the black flood shot with more red, with some livid purple in the beyond all that, there was a stillness and it was the stillness of memory, and he groped his way toward it. And he came out in the bright gold of a springtime afternoon in Colorado, and on the pale blue convertible coupe he had bought in Los Angeles after receiving his discharge, he was driving toward Denver with the idea that he would stay in Denver for a while and then take his time going up to Chicago.

The convertible purred its way along the mountain road, and the radio purred along with it, No Morales handing out a suave rhumba. The top was down and the sky was very clear and it was good to know that the war was over and that agency in Chicago was the kind that kept its promises, a big firm with stability and energy, and they had liked his work and in reply to his letter they had told him to come on back and go to work. They asked him if seventy-five hundred a year was all right. He was thinking, before the war they had paid him five thousand a year. That was the kind of outfit it was. He felt good about going back. He felt good about everything. Chicago was an alright place, and someday in the not too far distant future he ought to be meeting a nice girl and getting married and starting

home. It was a fine thing to be thirty-two and alive and healthy. It was a marvelous thing to be starting fresh.

He whistled along with Noro Morales and the convertible floated along the road.

Suddenly, away up there ahead of him, where the road went curving its way up along the mountain, there was a violent noise, and it sounded as if an automobile had crashed into something. Vanning pressed hard on the accelerator and the convertible leaped, and it took a few turns, made a whizzing straightaway run as the road sliced into a tunnel, came out to make another turn, then he saw a branching road, very narrow, almost at right angles to this road, and saw a wreckage.

It was a station wagon and it was turned over on its side against a rock. Two men were stretched out on a patch of bright green near the rock, and a third man in his shirt sleeves was leaning against the rock.

Vanning turned the convertible onto the narrow road and raced it toward the scene of the accident. As he brought the convertible to a stop, the man who was still upright came walking toward him. The man had a leathery face and hair that looked like a mat of steel wool. There was a leather contrivance under the man's left shoulder and it was held there by straps, and now the man reached toward it, took something out of it, came up to Vanning and pointed the revolver in Vanning's face.

"Get out of the car," the man said. "Give me a hand."

"Why the gun?"

"I said get out of the car."

Vanning climbed out of the convertible and the man walked along with him. The two men on the ground were moving about and groaning. One of them, a big man with glasses hanging from one of his ears, was slowly forcing himself to a sitting position, adjusting the glasses and staring around stupidly. The other man, small and wiry and getting bald, was out cold.

The man with the gun was saying, "How is it, Pete?"

"I think I'm all right," the big man said. "Had the wind knocked out of me." He looked at Vanning.

"Where did you pick this up?"

"He just came along."

The big man inclined his head to get a look at Vanning's automobile.

"It's a lucky break," the big man said.

"Yeah, we're overloaded with luck today," said the man with the gun. He looked at the smashed station wagon. "Overloaded. Take the gun and keep it on this guy. I'll have a look at Sam."

"Maybe we ought to hurry," Pete said.

"That's why we smashed up. We were in too much of a hurry. Press the gun-on him. He looks nervous."

"Why should I be nervous?" Vanning said.

"You shut up," Pete said. He prodded the gun against Vanning's spine, held it there. A few moments later he said, "How does it look, John?"

"I think he's done for," said the man with steel-wool hair. "I think he busted his head. But he's still breathing."

"You think he'll last long?"

"I can't say."

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