

K **MANHUNT**

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

DECEMBER, 1958

35 CENTS



DESERT CHASE

a full-length novel by

THURBER JENSEN

Also:

RICHARD DEMING

LAWRENCE BLOCK

C. B. GILFORD

EVERY STORY NEW!

CONTENTS

FULL LENGTH NOVEL

- DESERT CHASE *by Thurber Jensen* 58

SHORT STORIES

- A LITTLE VARIETY *by Richard Hardwick* 1
- THE STRANGLER *by Richard Deming* 8
- FLOWERS FOR BARNEY *by Ovid Demaris* 24
- GIGOLO *by C. B. Gilford* 35
- RIDE A WHITE HORSE *by Lawrence Block* 48
- WAIT FOR DEATH *by Karl Kramer* 113

MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Publisher*

GERALD ADAMS, *Art Director*

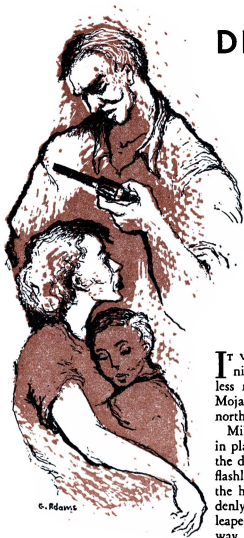
JOE SHORE, *Advertising Rep.*

JOHN UNDERWOOD, *Editor*

J. PROSKE, *Associate Editor*

MANHUNT VOLUME 6, NUMBER 7, December, 1958. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for 12 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. Funds) for 12 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Additional entry at Concord, N. H. The entire contents of this issue are copyright 1958 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

The shot tore into his hip, ripping flesh, splintering bone, sending searing waves of pain through his entire body, paralyzing him. He lay crumpled on the ground, dying, while the other watched, and laughed.



DESERT CHASE

A

Full-Length

Novel

BY

THURBER

JENSEN

IT WAS the first flat tire and the night of the second day, a starless night of August heat on the Mojave, south of Las Vegas and north of Searchlight.

Mike Bruce clapped the hubcap in place, fishing his tools up out of the dust. His wife, Helen, held the flashlight, her skirts whipping in the hot summer desert wind. Suddenly, their seven-year old son, leaped into the velvet black highway, his arms wildly flailing, and

G. Adams

shouting, "Look! A car, and it's slowing down!"

"Jake, get out of the road!" Mike shouted in exasperation. "How many times have I told you those cars come around the bend up there ninety miles an hour? Now get off the highway and stay off!"

Helen, forgetting Mike's need of the flashlight in her concern, rushed over and grabbed Jake. The oncoming car, with the brilliant headlights of the new models, was already slowing. It turned off the highway onto the shoulder, and drew to a stop, facing Mike's station wagon. The headlights glared out at Mike and the entire scene ruthlessly.

Mike Bruce stood up, brushing pebbles and sand from his knees. He was a tall man with heavy shoulders. He raised one arm to motion the newly arrived car on. "No trouble!" he called. "Thanks just the same."

The headlights suddenly dimmed and the ignition was turned off. Someone opened a door and stepped out.

Mike repeated, "Just a flat tire! All fixed now. Thanks anyway!"

The stranger approached. He was a medium-built man and his hat was pulled down over his brow. His right hand was in his coat pocket, though it was far too hot for a coat.

Helen said, "We won't need any help. We're about ready to move on."

Another door slammed and a

second man came over. He was hatless and wore an open white shirt, but like his friend he held his right hand in the pocket of his jacket.

The first man said to the second. "Just him and her and a kid!"

The gun came out and Mike stared at it. Helen, small and dark and quick, stifled a scream.

"Be careful, Mike," she whispered. "They look like they mean business."

The first man said harshly, "Shut up, lady!"

Jake suddenly rose from his sitting position and ran to his father, hugging his leg and whimpering. "Daddy! Are they going to shoot us?"

Mike squeezed his arm gently. "Ssh, Jake," he warned. Then to the strangers, "What do you want?"

"We're taking your car," the man with the gun said, easily enough.

The other man opened the door to the driver's seat and turned on the ignition key. "Nearly full!" he said. "Look's okay."

"Good!" the gunman said cheerfully. "Now, Mac," he turned to Mike, "this is the deal. You take our car—we take yours!"

Mike walked toward the other car and the gun followed him like a compass needle. He looked inside. It was a recent model and looked all right except for the dark, jelling substance on the seat. It was splashed on the vinyl upholstery and along the floor, and smeared the door on the opposite side.

Helen said, "May we take out our overnight bag and my purse?"

The gunman said, "No! Leave it! You and the kid get in the station wagon back here!"

"Here? You mean in our car?" her voice was small and scared. Mike heard it and wanted to bash the fellow's brains in.

"Yes, in your car!" his tones were brittle and cracked like a dry stick.

Helen hurried over toward Mike who turned to face her quickly, barring her from the sight inside the car. Her eyes looked into his-frightened eyes in a small, pale face.

He said, "Do as the man says, Helen!"

"Oh, no!" she huddled in fear, her arms tightly about her, staring at him, beseechingly.

"Helen, please!" he urged. "Take Jake and get in the back of our car!"

But still she stood frozen in fear. The first man strode over to her and roughly grabbed her arm. "Get in back!" he ordered, and almost threw her ahead of him, stumbling against the rear door of the station wagon. Then, with one swoop, he gathered up Jake and tossed him in the front seat.

The one with the gun walked over to Mike who still stood at the door of the other car. In a calm, even voice, he said, "Get this, Mac! Just so long as nobody stops us or asks questions your wife and kid are safe! Just that long and no longer! You understand?"

Mike nodded. "Yes! And for how long?"

"Can't say!" He reached inside his pants pocket with his free hand and pulled out a billfold, handing it to Mike. This is for you," he said. "Now hand over yours!"

Mike hesitated a moment, and then slowly withdrew his pocket book.

The gunman didn't even glance at it, but pushed it into his own pocket.

"How will I know if my wife and boy are all right?" Mike asked.

The gunman shrugged. "Watch the papers! No reports on us being picked up by cops—you know your wife and kid are all right!"

The terms were set, and without wasting any more time the two men climbed into the front of Mike's car and sped out into the night.

Long after the tail lights from his blue Mercury station wagon had disappeared, and the roar of the motor gave way to silence, Mike still strained his eyes down the long velvet stretch of highway.

Finally, he came back to himself and looked down at the new billfold in his hand. He opened it and, with the help of his lighter, scanned the contents. There was an oil company credit card and a Nevada driver's license made out in the name of Charles Gannett. Gannett was described as sixty years old, dark skinned, six feet tall and weighing two hundred pounds.

Obviously Charles Gannett was neither of the two men who had accosted him just now. Mike looked inside the car at the big jellied mess on the seat and wondered if it had come from Charles Gannett and where he—or his remains—were now.

Then he saw the gun. It was a .22 pistol and it was half under the seat, the gleam of its metal dulled by drying blood.

Great! Mike thought. I'm left with enough evidence to put those two behind bars, and what can I do about it? Nothing! Except keep my half of the bargain and pray those bastards keep their's. But the cruel truth was Mike had no guarantee that Helen and Jake's safety depended on him. More likely they would serve as most hostages: as a means for the gunmen's escape. And then—Mike shuddered at the thought—then it would be easier, more convenient to dispose of them. Well, he would first have to play along for the time being. There was no alternative. He would have to act alone and on blind faith.

Only how long would he be able to mislead the police? Were they even now forming road blocks at Searchlight to the south and Davis Dam to the north? If the police stopped Mike not only could he not report his situation, but they would hold him for questioning, thus stopping him in his efforts to follow his wife and son.

He pulled out his handkerchief

and opened the car door on the opposite side. He reached down and retrieved the gun, wiping off the blood. Examining the chambers he found only one shot had been fired. He put the gun in his trousers.

In the far distance, he saw the bobbing of approaching lights. He estimated the time it would take the oncoming car to reach him. Then he got in his new car and drove it further off the side of the road, leaving the headlights on. He opened the glove compartment and found a flashlight.

The oncoming lights were approaching fast. Mike stood in the middle of the road and waved the flashlight. It was a pickup truck and there were two in the front seat. The driver was a heavy man, wearing a widebrimmed hat and worn boots. Beside him sat a young girl—plump and round-faced with a tendency to cross-eyes. Her mouth was open and her eyes rolled grotesquely when Mike pulled the gun. "Get out!" Mike ordered.

The man swore. "What's this country coming to? You damned tourists!"

Mike said, "Shut up! Give me your pocket book and whatever else you have in identification."

The man spit and glared at Mike. Mike knew he would have to be tough. He approached the fellow holding the gun in front. With his left hand he slapped him quickly across the face. The girl in the car screamed.

Indecision and fear crossed the face of the driver. He pulled out his pocket book and Mike pulled out his—the one he had recently acquired.

"We'll just trade!" said Mike.

"What's the idea?" demanded the man—his tone not so belligerent as before.

Mike said, "You'll take my car—I'll take yours! Simple! But the girl stays with me!"

"Oh no you don't!" The fellow gave a lunge toward Mike and Mike came up swiftly with his left hand into the pit of the man's stomach.

The fellow buckled and drew back. Mike waved the gun and walked toward the pickup.

"What are you going to do with her?" the fellow called. "That's my daughter and I'll kill you if anything happens to her! I'll hunt you down and kill you!"

Mike said, "She'll be safe just so long as nobody stops me or asks any questions." He turned on his heel and came closer to the fellow. "Do you understand? The first cop who stops me or asks questions—your girl gets it! I have nothing to lose as you'll see when you get in my car."

At last the fellow understood and Mike got in the pickup beside the scared teenage girl.

The girl shrieked, "Daddy! Stop him! Don't let him take me!"

Mike saw the agonized look on the fellow's face as he backed away

toward the car and the new shock that awaited him when he looked inside and saw blood on the seat—when he began to realize that he, too, must somehow sidestep the police.

Mike turned the pickup around and headed south. He bore down hard on the road, the pickup rumbling and complaining at the unaccustomed speed.

After about five miles of it he glanced at the plump girl beside him. He was staring straight ahead but the eye on his side made it appear that she was watching him. "Look!" he said in short, clipped tones. "You won't be hurt if you behave yourself! But the first move you make you'll get slugged and then I'll have to gag you and tie you up and throw you on the floor of this truck. You can bounce along with those two water cans and those chains and ropes back there."

Her full lips trembled slightly and Mike drew a deep breath. I hope that holds her, he thought.

"If we come across anything—like a patrol or a road block or anything at all, you keep quiet," he ordered.

"The sheriff at Searchlight knows us!" she blurted.

Oh God! What a break! "Is that so?" Mike mumbled. "Well, in that case you'll be able to get us right through. You just tell the sheriff that I'm a friend of the family."

"I won't do it!" she announced.

He heaved a big breath and pulled the pickup off to the shoul-

der. He slowed and braked and turned off the ignition.

He held the gun in his right hand and grabbed her right wrist with his left, holding tight until he saw her wince with the power in his fingers. Then, cruelly, he raised her arm twisting just a little. He saw her face grow pale with fear and her eyes drift apart wildly.

"Where do you live?" he asked conversationally, suddenly dropping her arm. There was a sickness in the pit of his stomach but he controlled his words carefully.

"Needles!" she gasped. "Needles, California."

"Where in Needles?" he pursued.

"Up the river—this side. We have a ranch there."

She was breathing hard and her hands were clutched in her lap over her jeans.

"What's your name?" he asked now.

"Joy. Joy Ridel," she answered quickly.

"Tell me, Joy . . . would your mother be glad to see you tonight?"

"I guess she would be surprised. We were going to Las Vegas, Daddy and I. She doesn't expect us until tomorrow night."

"Then no one will be looking for you for awhile, will they?"

She turned and stared at him stupidly. "I guess not. . ."

"What I mean is this, Joy! You and I can drive off into one of these little desert trails and spend the night. In the morning those road

blocks will be gone and we can go on—But tonight. . ." He stopped and leered at her meaningfully.

God, what a face, he thought as the horror of his words struck her.

"You wouldn't!" she gasped.

He nodded vigorously. "Why not? He stepped on the gas and started ahead again. "There'll be a good place just around that hill, I imagine. . ."

"No!" she almost screamed. "Oh no! Don't stop—please!"

"I've got to have some proof that you won't say anything to the police at the road block. . ." He paused menacingly. "Otherwise. . ."

"I won't say anything!" she promised quickly. "Cross my heart!"

"That isn't good enough!"

She started to cry. "Please, please! Honest I won't say anything."

Mike was thinking. "Tell you what! When we get to the road block you lay your head on my lap. I'll put my left hand under your neck. You make out that your asleep, see? If you so much as open your eyes or mouth I'll squeeze on your carotid artery. . ." he paused. "Do you know what the carotid artery is?"

She shook her head, vehemently.

He pressed on. "Pressure on the carotid artery causes immediate unconsciousness—then death! You understand?"

"Oh, yes!" she shriiled.

He drove on in silence for about twenty minutes. The lights loomed ahead in the road.

"All right!" he ordered through his teeth. "Get your head down and close those eyes!"

Worldlessly, her face expressing utter horror, she complied. Mike slowed and drew to a stop. He glanced down at her. Her lips trembled and then she forced them still. With here eyes closed she looked very young—scarcely older than Jake. The sickness in the pit of Mike's stomach had become a dull, nameless ache.

The patrolman approached, sweeping the interior of the pickup swiftly and efficiently. Then the back of the truck. He asked to see the driver's license and Mike knew a bad moment.

"You look more than one hundred sixty-five pounds," the patrolman said to Mike, eyeing him. Mike hadn't even seen that driver's license himself yet.

"I've put on some weight lately," answered Mike and wondered where the words came from.

The patrolman was staring down at Joy Ridel on Mike's lap. "What's the matter with her?" he asked.

"Sleeping," answered Mike.

"Okay, go ahead!" the patrolman stepped back and Mike threw the pickup in gear.

"You can raise up now!" he told Joy.

She sat up. "I did just as you wanted!" she reminded him.

"Yes!" "You catch on fast!"

Then she began to talk. She told him about her friends at school,

about her parents, her relatives. She chattered like a magpie.

"I don't think gangsters are so bad!" she informed him. "I think they're just like anyone else. Only thing, maybe they've had some bad breaks and turned to a life of crime. Down inside, they're not so different."

He grunted. I wish she'd shut up... I've got to think.

They were coming to another road block. "All right! Get your head in my lap again," Mike ordered.

"But..."

"Hurry up!" he growled. She obeyed.

The patrolman went over the car. He looked at the driver's license. "You'd better get this renewed," he told Mike and waved him ahead.

Mike said, "Officer, do you recall a blue station wagon with two men, a woman and a little boy within the last two hours?"

"Perhaps," answered the patrolman.

"I'm with them on this trip," Mike explained. "I lost them and don't know which road they would be taking..."

"They went on south," answered the patrolman. "Toward Needles. About thirty minutes ago."

"Thanks, Officer!"

On the way again Joy raised up her head. "What did you ask him that for?"

"None of your business!" he told her curtly.

But she wasn't afraid anymore. "You're confederates!" she said. "They're in it with you!"

"In what with me?" he demanded.

"In whatever you've done!" "Did you get a big haul?"

"No!" he said. "Shut up, will you!"

But she went on. And on and on!

The lights of Needles sprang up from the abyss of darkness, appearing and disappearing with the turns and dips. Mike looked at the gas gauge and made some mental computations. Not enough to get to Vidal but he didn't want to stop at Needles. Not with this girl who might be recognized. He thought about the junction south where Highway 66 cut off from 95. They could probably make it there.

"We turn off left at the next crossing!" Joy said.

"What for?" Mike was growing very tired of her chatter—of her bright inanities.

"My home. About three miles now."

"What makes you think we're going to your home?"

"But you said..."

"I said nothing!"

"But I thought..."

"You *didn't* think!"

She was quiet for a time.

Mike said, "Look, Joy! I can't let you go home. I can't be sure you won't notify the cops! I've got to keep you with me!"

"Geel!" she said. "I'm a hostage!"

"Yes!"

"Are we going to shack up?"

"Shack up?"

"Yes! You and I together in some shack until the heat's off?"

"No!"

"Well, then, what?"

"God! I don't know! Will you shut up?"

Quiet for a few minutes.

"See that service station—the one with the Shell sign?"

"Yes!"

"My uncle runs it!"

"We aren't stopping there!"

"You'll run out of gas. About 10 miles to the gallon is all you get in this old pickup. The new Ford does a lot better, but Daddy wanted to bring back a load so we went in this old one."

Mike suddenly realized that all his money had been in his pocket-book that the thugs took. There had been none in the one he had given to Joy's father. He didn't know if there was any in the one he now had.

"Joy, how much money have we?" he demanded.

"I have seven dollars and Daddy had fifteen and a check from Morrison Construction company for eighty-five dollars. It was his pay check," she contributed.

They were easing out of the town and he pressed more speed into the lumbering pickup. At the junction there was another road block.

"Do you want me to lie on your lap again?"

"Yes!"

She flopped down with such a willingness that Mike flinched. He had the gun tucked back behind him and he gritted his teeth and put his left hand under her neck again. She nestled down, horrifying him.

The patrolman was perfunctory. He asked if Mike had noticed anything along the highway to the north. Mike said no. Then he asked about the blue Mercury station wagon.

"Went south," the Patrolman said. "I remember distinctly because the little boy said that was the way to Mexico and his mamma told him to shut up!" The patrolman sighed. "Folks get mighty touchy after a long day riding in the desert..."

Mike thanked the patrolman and drove on. At Vidal Junction there was no road block. Mike felt a chill of apprehension. But the checking station on the left required a stop anyway.

The man inside with the uniform came out and peered inside. "No fruits or vegetables—no plants?"

"None!" Mike said crossly.

"Where you headed?"

"That depends. I'm following a blue Mercury station wagon. Four people. Do you remember it?"

The man nodded. "About twenty minutes ago. They turned east for Parker, Arizona..."

He turned east. Joy popped up from his lap. "What are you going to do when we catch them?"

"I don't know!"

"You ought to have a plan. You're afraid of them, aren't you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"I can figure it out!"

"How?"

"Well, you haven't any money of your own. That means they ran off with the haul, see?"

"I wish you'd keep still."

"Why?"

"I have to think!"

Every year Mike and Helen and Jake had gone east on highway 60-70 to Blythe, California from their home in Los Angeles. They would spend one day of their precious vacation with Helen's mother who lived in a little town on the southern Colorado river. Then they'd move on to Las Vegas for a day, then to the Grand Canyon, Bryce and Zion, up to Salt Lake City—then west again via Reno, San Francisco, down the coast and home. It required their full two weeks and amply exhausted their funds and energies.

This event—the thugs and the car switch and all—came on the night of their second day, about one hundred and fifty miles up Highway 95. Mike knew the highway fairly well but he had never gone east from Vidal Junction, crossing the Colorado into Parker, Arizona. This part of the country was unfamiliar to him, but Joy knew it well.

"There are almost no cops in Arizonal" she said.

"Oh?"

"They just have big signs warning you about their unmarked patrol cars directed by radar."

When he didn't answer she went on, "No one will chase you when you hit out from Parker. If you go down to Quartzsite you won't meet any cops at all."

"I don't plan on going that way."

"That's where your gang will head. You'll see!"

"How do you know?"

"It figures. That kid was telling them the way to Mexico—south. Well, there's a better way straight south from Quartzsite. You go through a big government place—a million acres of government testing ground. They don't bother anybody on that highway."

Mike knew about Yuma Test Station along the southwest edge of the Colorado just north of Yuma, Arizona.

"You know so much," he said.

"Suppose they want to rest up awhile . . . where will they do that?"

"Oh," she said grandly, "anywhere off the road. A few miles back in the hills there are old mine shacks . . . places to shack up for days!"

He glanced at her and, seeing the look of self-pleasure on her round face, thought, God, what a screwball I picked for a hostage.

They took the road down to the Colorado and across the bridge into Parker. A small checking station was on the right and in front of it

there was an unmarked patrol car.

The officer approached, peered in and asked a few questions. Then he waved them on.

Mike drove on to the first gas station, filled up the car and asked his questions again. No one recalled the blue station wagon.

They were heading east in the desert blackness again. Joy was sound asleep, her head rolling back and forth across his thighs.

Like Jake, he thought, and was stabbed by pain of apprehension because now he had lost the scent. He no longer could be sure he was following the blue station wagon. He drew the pickup over to the roadside and stopped. He looked down at the plump teenage girl who slept on his lap. He realized he'd brought her across two state lines and for the first time since he'd made his decision to chase the thugs on his own, he wondered if he was doing the right thing.

Shouldn't he have gone to the first roadblock in that blood-stained car, told all, requested help? After all, maybe that gunman was only bluffing about what he'd do to Helen and Jake in case of a cop or questions.

Then Mike knew that, rightly or wrongly, he had to continue his course. He couldn't take a chance on Helen and Jake. He had to see to it personally that they were safe, whatever the cost. But he didn't need Joy anymore. Why not let her go?

In his pocket were the seven dollars he had taken from her father. Joy said she had seven more. There was a payroll check which, conceivably, Mike could cash in the morning on his stolen credentials. It was worth a try.

He turned around and drove back into Parker to the first motel. He registered himself as Warren Ridel and daughter, leaving Joy asleep draped over the seat of the pickup. Then he went out and carried her into his cabin. She barely stirred enough to stand, letting him lug her most of the way. Inside, he left her sleeping on one of the beds and then went out, locking the door behind him.

He went down to the motel office and called his boss in Los Angeles.

"Look, Fred, I hate to wake you but I'm in a bad spot. I've got to have money. Will you wire me a hundred as an advance on my salary?"

"A jam? Mike, did you gamble in Vegas?"

"No! I'm in Parker, Arizona. Look, telegraph the money to me in care of the Texaco Service Station. Please, Fred! I'll tell you about it later."

When he came out of the office, he drove the pickup down the street to a big drugstore, went in and bought a roll of adhesive plaster. Then he went out and drove the pickup back to the motel and around to the rear, parking it behind an old garage. He took out the

adhesive plaster and tore off a strip. The license plate had white numbers on blue and the middle number was a 3. He used the adhesive tape to make the 3 into an 8.

Then he hiked down to the Texaco station and told them he had asked for some money to be wired there and would they hold it for him. He gave them his right name—Michael Bruce.

Finally he went back to the motel. He hardly glanced at Joy, but tumbled on to the other bed. He could not sleep, though. He kept thinking about Helen and Jake. He was thinking of Helen's small, firm body, her warm mouth. He was thinking of those old mine shacks along the hills. Of the two thugs and Helen small and scared.

Sheriff Jack Gregory, of Clark County, Nevada, had a policy that quiet efficiency worked better than front-page so he concentrated on keeping local vice strictly a matter for the county officials.

Within minutes from the time the holdup car—identified only as a light green Buick, model 1956, license plate unknown—passed through Las Vegas and turned South on Highway 95, the Clark County Sheriff's office spotted the body South of Railroad Pass. It had been dragged twenty yards off into the rocks and all identification papers removed. But Nevada highways are smooth, so the body and car marks were easily identified by

the first patrol car going to Searchlight.

The body was that of a large man, about six feet, around sixty or so and dark-skinned. It was tentatively established as that of Charles Gannett, owner of the store which had been robbed at Barstow, California. The two thugs had forced Gannett into their car to stave off the police when they made their getaway. Apparently he had become troublesome.

The road blocks had been set up all the way to Needles, California and the getaway car description was out by 9 P.M. But it is a long road and even at high speed it takes time to patrol it. It was ten-thirty before the car was spotted on the roadside, its dim lights burning.

It was quite empty but the big patch of blood showed that Charles Gannett had been shot and bled badly before being removed.

On the seat was a billfold containing the identification and other papers of Charles Gannett. Outside the car there were numerous tracks in the sand and evidence of another car having been near. It didn't take long to figure out that this other car probably had stopped with a flat tire and that the two thugs had commandeered it. By 11 P.M. the word was out to check all southbound cars and hold any suspicious characters, warning that hostages might be involved.

By now, too, it had been established that Charles Gannett owned

a .22 caliber pistol which could have caused his death.

By eleven thirty it was reported that a rancher had been picked up by a cosmetic salesman, roughly one mile south of the getaway car, and the rancher rode as far as Needles, California.

The rancher had told the salesman that his car had broken down and he was hitch-hiking toward Searchlight for help, but when he found that the salesman was going on through to Needles he decided to leave the car until morning and then go after it himself. He had said he had another car and it would be simpler that way. He had said his name was Ridel—Warren Ridel.

Yes, the salesman had noted a car off the roadside but had thought nothing of it, since people sometimes park off in the desert that way.

By midnight a patrolman called at the small ranch house of Warren Ridel. His wife said, yes, Warren had come home and had taken the new Ford sedan to go after his car . . . she said the car was an old Chevrolet pickup and had broken down.

The patrolman took a snapshot of her husband when he left, and the salesman identified it as the rancher he'd picked up. The police put that lead aside as a bum steer.

By 1:00 A.M. it was conceded by the Clark County Sheriff's office that the thugs had either gone into hiding or driven completely out of the territory.

In the blackness ahead, only the pugnacious beam of strong headlights cut the sense of complete engulfment in despair for Helen Bruce. The light ahead was cutting through—through to another road block and the possibility that somehow the patrolman might catch on this time. That he might get an inkling and act quickly and efficiently!

She sat crumpled in the corner feeling the gun against her like an ache. It was not the gun she feared though—it was the towel around Jake's throat. She had brought that towel along on the trip, an old trick of hers. She would wet it and wring it out at the service stations, then spread it over her bare knees. It made her marvelously cool. But now that towel was very dry, and looped around Jake's throat.

The tall, stooped man, with brownish fine hair had one hand on the loose end of the towel and he had already demonstrated his technique. He simply twisted and Jake fell onto the seat, crumpled. Helen realized that an extra twist and Jake would not rise again; the officer would never know, looking down on the unconscious child. Then all Helen's screams would be in vain and much, much too late.

She had been afraid that would happen when Jake—against very careful directions to the contrary—had piped up about going south to Mexico. But they had let it go—until long past the road block. Then

the man beside Helen leaned forward very casually, grabbed Jake by the tuft of black hair—so short and thick and glossy and raised him off the seat a foot.

"Keep your mouth shut like we told ya!" he said calmly to Jake and dropped him.

Jake began to whimper and Helen commanded "Hush!" in such tones that Jake hushed, crumpling down in the seat. There were no more sounds, no more questions.

Just before they arrived in Parker, however, the tall, stooped man, who was driving, shook Jake and told him to sit up. Then he had put the towel around Jake's throat with his free hand.

"We just leave the towel in place around your neck, kid!" he said. "I keep my hand on it right behind your neck, see?" He glanced back to Helen and then at the road ahead. "Now, we'll show your mother what will happen if either of you try anything."

Then he gave the quick little twist and Helen saw Jake crumple down again. She heard him gasping and coughing but he neither cried nor spoke.

She tried to think about her husband—what he'd be likely to do. But what could he do in her behalf? The answer pounded against her ears—nothing!

Helen knew then, she would have to act for herself and her son. But how?

There are two things a woman

may do. She may try to overpower her captors or she may outwit them. But, being slight of build and unarmed, she had to try the latter.

When a woman outwits a man she uses her sex. Quite simple! Play one thug against the other. But which? Which was the safer—or perhaps the more gullible?

The one called Nick on the right of her, holding the gun, had leaned back in the seat. His eyes were closed. He had a longish face and beardless, clear skin. His brows were thick and black and covered over his nose. The nose was thin, with wide nostrils. The brow was sloping and the ears small. The mouth was a thin line and wide—neither sensual nor tender. She looked at his hands, the one on the gun. They were long, agile fingers—competent.

There was neither weakness nor tenderness about him. He would kill as part of the job. She doubted if he would slip because of a woman.

She could see only the back of the driver's, Al's head—the fine hair, sort of lifeless, but not thin. She looked at the bony structure over the ears, which flared outwards and showed signs of beatings. The hunch of big shoulders, making an ape-like appearance. She leaned forward and looked at the hands on the steering wheel—short, stubby fingers, the knuckles covered with reddish hairs. The thumb was squat and blunted on the ends. Within

herself she cringed. But she knew this one must be the one she played with her sex.

They were going east from Parker. It was a little after eleven. The slight haziness in the sky which obscured the stars and added a weight of humidity to the hot air, made the envelope of blackness terror-filled for Helen. Jake slept—or at least she hoped he slept.

Al said, "Say, I'm getting hungry. Anything to eat in this wagon?"

Helen prodded herself—her first try at pleasing Al. "There's a can of tomato juice and soda crackers—a wedge of cheese. I hope you like your cheese sharp."

She knew Nick had opened his eyes and that she was getting a questioning look from him. She laughed just a little—trying to make it sound casual and friendly.

"Sounds okay!" Al answered. "Where is it? I'm starved."

Helen turned and began to rummage behind her seat under the blankets they always took on their trips. She knew Nick was on the alert though he said nothing. She got the cheese and crackers and opened the tomato juice.

After that she couldn't resist calling to Jake. "Come on, dear! Here's some for you!"... But she had managed to serve Al well and first.

Nick helped himself, casually.

When Jake did not rise she called to him again. Al put a hand on the child, shaking him. "Hey! Wake up!"

Jake sat up. "I don't want any, thank you!" The tears were behind the words but Helen did not dare speak kindly to him lest it break him down.

"Eat it!" Al ordered harshly.

Helen gave the small sandwich of cheese and crackers to her son. He took it from her and stuffed it into his mouth. He drank from the paper cup she offered. Then he slumped down onto the seat again and was still.

At the sign pointing south, a graveled road forked down into the limitless desert. The station wagon drew to a halt and the two men deliberated.

"Think we can get to the border this way, Nick?"

"Yep," agreed Nick.

"The sign said 'Quartzsite 24 miles.' Guess we can gas up there, huh?"

Nick stirred himself and shoved the gun tighter against Helen. How much we got left?"

About a fourth of a tank. I wonder how far to Yuma?"

Nick yawned and looked out into the darkness. "I wouldn't know. Say, you got a road map?" he turned to Helen.

"In the car pocket," she answered.

"Well, hell! Why didn't you say so before?" Al demanded.

"I'm sorry!" answered Helen meekly. "I guess I just supposed you knew the country—the way you drive and all, as if you were really familiar with the road..."

"What do you mean 'the way I drive'?"

She gave a little laugh (charming laugh she hoped). "Why, nothing, only that you drive so well—confident and sure—as if you were used to driving long distances at high speeds!"

Nick looked at her, raising the brim of his hat slightly.

Al said, "Well, I guess I can drive a car all right!"

Nick studied the map. "We'd better get gas at Quartzsite. It's over a hundred miles to Yuma from here."

The car hit the graveled road and bounced over the rough ground. There was a cloud of dust behind them which, Helen thought, would pretty nearly obliterate the tail lights. She wondered if anyone could follow down this road—any policemen or Michael! It seemed the jumping off place—the end of the world.

Then, shortly after midnight—she saw the tread of lights on the left and right. Soon the neons of a small town loomed ahead.

"Cripes! a highway!" cursed Nick. "We're going to have to cross sixty and seventy here and look at that traffic!"

"We gotta get gas!" reminded Al.

They approached the intersection slowly. Al stopped behind some run-down tourist cabins.

"Can you see if there are any cops from here?"

"You'd better get out and walk up there," Nick told him.

Al switched off the ignition and lights, looking down on the seat at Jake. Then he got out and walked up to the highway from among the old cabins.

After a time he returned. "There's a road block all right," he told Nick. "Two cops are up at that service station across the road on the left. They've got a line of cars a block long."

Nick thought for a time. "Well, Madam here will do the driving!" he decided. "You and I and the kid will walk."

He prodded Helen gently with the gun. "We'll meet you about a block down on the road. It crosses the main highway right here and goes on down. We'll take your kid!" He paused and thought some more.

"Just in case you want to tell those cops something and think you can get by with it, I'll be standing right there in back of that service station. They aren't looking for any guys on foot. But I'll be where I can see and hear. I'll know, see? And if I wave my arm up and down like so . . ." he lifted his right arm and swung it in a circle, "then Al will choke the kid with the towel—right then and there! See?"

Helen looked squarely into his eyes, under the half-closed lids. "Don't worry! Please don't worry about me!" she said.

Nick grunted. Al got Jake and jerked him out. "Come on, Kid!"

Helen got out stiffly and got be-

hind the wheel. She waited for the three others to disappear among the cabins.

After a time she started the motor and drove across the intersection. A cop waved her down and she stopped. She saw a dark figure dart behind the buildings and then she saw him fasten tightly against the off wall of the station. It was Nick all right and he was well within seeing and hearing distance. The lights of the station glared mercilessly down.

The patrolman approached her. "Just by yourself, Ma'am!"

"Yes!" she said loud and clear.

He looked the car over carefully. "Well, go ahead."

She stepped so suddenly on the gas that the car lurched a little. She crossed into the right lane of the south road and drove down about a block. She stopped. She opened her purse quickly and withdrew a yellow silk scarf.

Al jumped in the back seat, jerking Jake along. He slammed the door. Nick was alongside of her and Helen moved over at once, the scarf balled tightly in her hand.

He pushed in beside her. "Cripes! Why didn't you get gas?"

"Oh, I forgot!" Helen said. It was the truth. She had forgotten. Her hand was out the window.

Al uttered a long line of curses. Nick bore down on the road ahead. "Pretty good little trick, Sister. But it won't help you! I heard a guy say there's a little station about

thirty miles down. We'll fill up there!" Nick stated. "You'd better not try any more tricks!"

"But it wasn't on purpose!" Helen insisted. "You've got me as afraid of those cops as you are. I just forgot!" She let go the balled scarf in her hand.

"Skip it!" growled Nick.

The scarf floated down and the wind swept it back up the highway.

In a short time the headlights defined a sign which designated the area: U. S. Government Military Reservation. Then nothing more; just miles and miles of desert. However, from point to point, a side road, took off to the right or left of the highway. The night was velvet black and only the occasional clump of paloverde or ironwood, broke the endlessness of the highway. The dips, almost cruel at a speed above fifty miles, jolted them and Al cursed. "Take it easy," he snarled at Nick. "Better let me drive if you don't know how!"

And Helen knew that he had taken her flattery about his driving, so she resolved to give him some more bait at the earliest opportunity.

It was a little after one A.M. by the clock on the dash, and Helen saw the gas gage indicator was hovering close to empty. Lights to the right kept bobbing into view and the service station Nick had expected developed. Except for the two outside lights however, it was dark.

"Closed!" Nick said in disgust.

"We could get them up." Al said.

"No. We'll drive down the road a ways and go off onto the next side road for the night. Can't risk any extra attention like waking a guy up."

There was a curve around a clump of sharp hills. The car coasted on a dugway, down and around. The desert became more lush and rocky. There was a bare marking of jeep tracks off to the left. Nick swung onto these and the car growled through sand and rocks and stopped under a small cliff. Nick turned off the motor and got out.

"A good spot. We can't be seen from the highway."

"What are we going to do now?" Al demanded.

"Get some sleep!" Nick replied, curtly.

Helen said, "We can put this back seat down and make a bed in the back with the blankets."

There was a dead silence. "Yeah?" Al said experimentally.

"Okay!" Nick said. "Let's get with it!"

Helen got out and then Nick and Al. Jake was asleep on the back seat. Helen quickly lifted him out. He stood beside her, clutching her legs.

They got the seat down and Helen began to spread out the bed—the air mattress was on the bottom. "We need to blow this up," she said.

Al said, "We can't all sleep on that space."

"We'll take turns," Nick said. "One of us has to stay on guard."

"Whose going to be on guard first?"

"You will."

"And you and her will lay down there?"

"Yep! And the kid on the front seat! I get two hours then you get until time to go back to that gas station. Six o'clock will be alright to go down to that station without drawing attention."

"I don't see why anybody has to stay on guard. We could hear a car if it comes and you can fix it so she won't go wandering around. Tie her feet together."

Nick thought this over. "Okay, I guess. Only it's too crowded in here for three. You'll have to take a blanket and lay out there." He pointed to a flat spot behind the car.

"Why me? Why not you? I figure she likes me as well as you and I got it coming. You're always first in everything."

"I got my reasons!" Nick said crossly.

"Yeah! I'll bet!"

Nick was exasperated. He walked over to Al and put his hand before Al's face. "Can't trust you, that's why. She'll play you for a sucker, see?"

"Listen, Nick! I'll give you a share of my cut for it. How's that?" Al was wheedling now.

"You're a damned fool!"

"You don't kid me none!"

"I said, you're a fool." Nick was walking toward the car. He turned to Helen where she stood clutching Jake.

"Get the kid on the front seat and pile in here in back. I'm about out of patience."

Helen lifted Jake onto the seat and kissed him quickly. "Go to sleep, dear! Everything will be alright in the morning." She wished she could believe it.

She climbed in back and lay down, close to the side of the car. Her heart was beating furiously and she was sick with fear. Al leaped in beside her.

Nick stood looking in menacingly.

"Let her decide, Nick!" Al said. "Which one of us do you want, baby? Come on, you pick which one!"

For the life of her—for all her reasons and her resolutions—Helen could not answer him. She buried her head against her knees and the revulsion swept over her in waves.

Nick said, "Get it over with then," and moved away.

Al's hand touched Helen's shoulder and then moved downward.

She screamed, "Stop it!" and rose up, tearing at him like a wildcat, raking his face, kicking and sobbing.

He struggled with her shortly. Then Nick was in it, pulling Al back and out of the car.

"It isn't the time, Al!" he said tiredly. "We're only a hundred yards from the highway!"

"The little bitch!" Al cursed. "I'll fix her. She bit me—the little bitch!"

Nick climbed in back. He said to Helen. "Just keep over to that side. I want a little sleep, see?"

Helen lay quietly hearing Nick's snore and Al's grunting as he rolled over outside on the rough ground. All was still—very still. She stirred, experimentally. She raised up. Instantly Nick had her neck in an iron vise.

"Do I have to tie you?" he demanded in a hoarse tone.

"No!" she whispered back. "No, no!"

Then she knew it was no use—she could never go leaving Jake with them and she couldn't get away with Jake. She lay back and felt the utter exhaustion of defeat.

It was very early in the morning of August 22. It was not yet light, though the cloudiness had gone and the stars shone brilliantly. Mike Bruce looked at the radium dial on his watch and stretched his aching muscles. Perhaps he had slept but it didn't seem like it. There had been a million sounds in the night—cars passing, stopping, voices. It was 4:30 A.M.

The teen age girl in the next bed, however, slept soundly, her face cherubic.

Mike arose from the bed and put on his shoes—he had never removed his clothing. He very quietly opened

the door and locked it with the key from the outside.

On his way to the motel office he noticed the new Ford sedan parked in the unit next to his. It was two tone white and red and bore a California license plate.

The office was closed though the vacancy sign still was in place.

Mike wondered if the money he had asked Fred, his boss, to send had arrived. He walked down to the Texaco station, gratified to see it bore an open-all-night sign. The attendant inside, a school boy who had been dozing, looked uncertainly at Mike.

"Oh, yeah! You're the guy who was waiting for a telegram. Well, it just came. Mr. Michael Bruce, huh?"

Mike nodded and tore open the telegram.

IT READ, SORRY MIKE CAN'T GO ALONG WITH YOUR GAMBLING YOU WILL HAVE USE FOR THAT HUNDRED WHEN YOU GET HOME (signed) FRED.

Mike stood very still looking at the telegram. Fred would be like that, of course. Lacking an explanation of why Mike needed the money he had assumed that—since Mike was due to be in Las Vegas, if he needed money it was because he was gambling.

Mike walked back around the block to the back alley where he had parked the black pickup. He noted, with satisfaction, that it was unnoticeable in its spot behind the old sheds.

Mike stood under the neon of the motel and pulled out his acquired bill fold. He studied the driver's license and noted that it had expired, as the policeman had warned at the road block. He looked at the payroll check from Morrison Construction company of Needles, California. Then he memorized the Warren Ridel's signature on the driver's license. He walked back up into the town and entered the bar and cafe which was open.

He bought coffee. The woman who waited on him looked tired and in need of sleep. He began to talk to her.

"What happened to that road block they had here about midnight?" he asked.

"They broke it up," she told him. "Decided it was too late or that the holdup men had gone another way."

"You didn't hear anything on the radio—no news?"

"No, nothing!"

"Let's hear if there's anything now," he suggested casually.

"There won't be anything on until five," she told him. "I don't think they caught them yet. Bill Price — he's the patrolman here — was just in and he said they hadn't yet."

Mike asked for another cup of coffee and a doughnut. The coffee was thick and syrupy and barely warm but he forced himself to drink it.

"Where can I get a payroll check cashed?" he asked.

She eyed him. "Where from?"

"Needles... bank at Needles from Morrison Construction company."

"You from Needles?"

He nodded. "Yes. Ridel is my name, Warren Ridel." He waited not knowing what to expect. It was very possible that a rancher at Needles might be known in Parker.

She said, "They cash payroll checks at the Lodge bar. You might try there. You'd better have some identification, though..."

He thanked her and left. He thought he'd better be in the pickup when he went to try the Lodge. The pickup looked like it belonged to a local rancher—all that loose stuff in back. He walked back to the motel to check on Joy.

The light in the east was strengthening. He woke Joy and told her they'd be pulling out soon. She grunted, covered her head, and went to sleep again. He shook her. Finally she sat up, blinking, holding the sheet under her chin.

"We're still on the lam, aren't we?" she said, as though she were asking, "It's Christmas, isn't it?"

He hustled her out and she stood a moment in hesitation outside the motel. "Come on!" he ordered. "If you want to eat before we hit the road."

She followed him around the block and into the pickup. He backed out and drove around to the

Lodge. He parked in front and turned to Joy. "I've got to cash your Dad's check. Are you going to behave yourself so I can buy you some breakfast?"

She sighed and yawned. "I don't think you'd better stop for breakfast."

"Why not?"

"Because Daddy is back at that motel. He might get up and see the pickup and you'd be caught."

He stared at her.

"That was our red and white Ford parked there. I'd know it anywhere," she told him.

"Oh Lord!" he moaned.

She was chattering on. "He's come to get me but he didn't tell any cops or they'd have stopped us. He was afraid to squeal to the cops because of what you said you'd do to me. But he's after me and if he catches up he'll kill you because he had the rifle in back and he's a very good shot!"

Mike knew he'd have to get some money for gas somehow. Inside the Lodge he saw a man in uniform dimly and recognized the patrolman of the night before.

The patrolman was talking to the clerk at the desk. "So the way I figure is these two mugs dumped off the body of that Gannett fellow and then heisted another car. That way they got through the road blocks. You can't check everybody with vacation traffic like it is..."

Mike studied the patrolman, he said, "what did you say, officer?"

The patrolman, eager for a new audience launched into his account at once. He told Mike everything about the robberies, the murder, the chase. He described the hold-up men. Expounded on his personal theories!

Mike decided that he was clearly not one to be trusted with the knowledge that Mike held. He would surely bungle things when the showdown came. No—Helen and Jake's life depended on there being no bungling. Mike had broken the law to such an extent now that he dare not turn himself in.

So he pulled out the payroll check and asked the clerk to cash it.

The clerk stared at it for some time. He stared at the driver's license. He said to the patrolman, "Bill, you know any Ridel in Needles?"

The officer nodded. "Cash Ridel runs the Shell station there. I know him."

"You know Warren Ridel?"

The patrolman shook his head.

At that moment Joy came in. She walked up to Mike confidently—a sly grin on her face, her off-eye wandering, giving her an ultra-canny look. She said, "Can't you get it cashed, Warren?"

Mike stared at her.

She turned to the clerk and then to the patrolman, a suggestive little smile on her half-open mouth. "Shouldn't be any trouble," she told them. "Warren is my cousin and

we live in Needles and Cash Ridel, is my uncle and he runs a service station. He has light hair and one finger shot off in the war. I go to the high school and the principal's name is Mr. Goodman and his wife was married before to Dueno Castro and he has the Castro grocery store . . ." she paused for breath. Then, "Our school licked Parker on the last game of basketball of the season and the score of the last one was twenty-to-two. The basketball coach in Parker is named William Foster and his wife used to live in Needles and her name was Ruth Wallset . . ."

"That will do," said the Clerk. "I'll cash the check, Mr. Ridel."

Mike scrawled the name Warren Ridel, as nearly as he could, to resemble the same signature on the driver's license.

He walked out with the cash, gassed up at the Union Oil station and started east again. Joy was sitting up proudly beside him, the one near eye wandering cunningly.

"I guess I better say thanks," Mike said gruffly.

"Oh, you'll have to pay for it!" she said enigmatically.

"Pay? How?" he asked.

"I'll just take a fourth of the haul for it! One fourth . . ."

"How do you figure that? I told you there is no haul."

"I heard about that mess of hold-ups," she told him. "It was on the radio before Daddy and I left last night. You and your buddies got

about twenty-seven hundred altogether." She paused. "But I want a fourth for mine. I figure there are the three of you men and me. The woman doesn't need any nor that kid."

She pursed her lips and popped them open again, as if she were popping bubble gum. "Hey, what did you get a little kid into it for? That's dumb!"

"It wasn't my idea," he told her wearily.

She nodded. "I guess not! You must have got outsmarted on it—letting the others get away with the haul like that."

"I guess so!" he agreed. They rode in silence for a time.

The day was now full upon the desert and the first rays of sun cut through blindingly into the pickup. Mike had been doing some tall thinking.

He said, "Joy, I think I'd better tell you the truth."

"Okay!" she responded, expecting something juicy.

"I'm not one of the hold-up men," he began. "I'm just a poor tourist who was fixing a flat tire. Myself and my wife, Helen, and my little boy, Jake—aged seven . . ."

"So?"

"So these two thugs came along in that car you saw and they pulled out a gun, forced my wife and boy to go with them. They took my wallet and left me theirs and that car. They said they'd kill my wife and son the first time a cop stopped

them or asked too many questions..."

"Well," Joy said in disgust. "Well, I never! Just the same trick you pulled on us!"

"The same one," Mike agreed. "I figured if it worked so well for them I could pull it myself. Only now I've brought you against your will across two state lines. I stole your father's car and forged a check. I failed to report the robbery of my car or to inform the police about those thugs! You can see I'm in kind of a mess!"

"You sure are! And here I thought I'd really have something to tell my friends about being held hostage by those killers!"

Mike sighed. "I wish I knew if my wife and son were safe. I wish they were as safe as you have been!"

Joy looked at him thoughtfully. "Where do you think they are now?"

"I have no idea. We're going this way because you suggested it," he said and grinned a little at her.

This perked her up visibly. "Well, now I think we ought to make that south turn toward Quartzsite. There are so many places they could hide out that way and it's on the road to Mexico. I'll bet we can track them down."

"Thanks, Joy!" Mike said, and gratitude was in his voice.

"Only we'll have to watch out for Daddy! He'll shoot first and ask questions later. If he sees this

pickup on the road he'll blow out the tires with his rifle and we'll have a devil of a time with him!"

"The first town we hit I'm putting you on a bus and sending you home!" Mike said. "I think I can trust you to keep still about things until I have a chance to save my wife and son—can't I?"

She thought this over. "I'd rather stick with you!"

"You're very brave!" he said. "But it will be better the other way. I don't know if I'll even find them. Tell you what— if you don't hear from me by tomorrow night then you can go to the police and tell them everything."

"But what about your wife and little boy? If I tell them those men will kill your wife and boy... they said they would..."

"I know. But if I haven't found them by then it will be too late. I know those mugs won't hold onto them that long. They'd have no reason and Jake would be such a nuisance. I'll be very lucky if they're still alive when I catch up to them!"

Then he recalled what the man at the checking stand at Vidal junction had said about the little boy mentioning Mexico and his mother scolding him for it. At least they were alive until then!

He fanned the small glimmer of hope and took the road South toward Quartzsite as Joy had advised.

The crossing of Arizona 95 and U.S. 60-70 loomed ahead. There

was no road block, no patrolmen in sight. Mike awakened Joy.

"Here's where you get off, kid!" he said. "Sorry! But you can catch a bus and go home from here."

"I want to go with you—to help!"

He shook his head. "No!"

He gave her twenty of the original eighty dollars. "That will take care of you. I will pay your dad back for everything when I can."

She was pouting, turning her head away and pouting. He ignored it. She got out of the pickup and, without a backward look, went into the nearest cafe and service station.

He crossed the highway. He entered the other side and proceeded south. The sign said YUMA 85 miles, and another said YUMA TEST STATION 65 miles. A million acres of wild desert belonged to the government testing site, Mike remembered.

Then he saw something along the road. It was a small yellow piece of material and the wind had lodged it in a greasewood clump. He stopped and went over and picked it up. Helen had had that scarf in her purse to keep her hair from blowing. He hurried back into the pickup and pressed on the accelerator, new determination burning within him.

It was six thirty in the morning, Pacific Daylight Saving time. A tan Pontiac two-door hardtop pulled into the Shell station at Needles, California. A dapper young man ordered a complete servicing. He

got out of his car and walked about the station. The radio was on blaring the news.

"The two hold-up men are still at large but it has been determined that they passed this way, in all likelihood trying to make it south to the border. Their abandoned hold-up car was found on Highway 95 above Searchlight. The body of the murdered store owner, Mr. Charles Gannett was recovered late last evening..."

The dapper young man approached the Service station man and said, "Quite something about those hold-up fellows making it through all the road blocks, wasn't it?"

"Guess they must have switched cars," the Service station man said. His name was Cash Ridel.

The dapper young man said, "I picked up a fellow last night. Said he'd broke down just about that section where they found that abandoned car." He paused. Then, "I brought him all the way to Needles but he got out and hiked off somewhere." He paused again for emphasis. "Said he had a ranch hereabouts. Said his pickup had broken down and he had to get his other car and go after it this morning."

"That so? What was his name, did he say?"

"Ridel—Warren Ridell"

Cash Ridel straightened up from pouring in the quart of Quaker State oil. "That would be my brother," he said.

"Well what do you know? Say, isn't that a coincidence, though?"

Cash Ridel wore a puzzled frown. "Funny about Warren breaking down," he muttered. "You'd think he'd have called me. He could take the wrecker. Did he say anything about Joy—that's his fourteen year old daughter? Where did he leave her?"

The salesman shook his head. "Didn't mention having a daughter. I assumed it was just himself."

"Hmmm! Well, they stopped in here before leaving to gas up. Joy was already to stay with her aunt for a week. She goes to Vegas quite often and stays with her aunt. Wonder what made her change her mind?"

The salesman tried a few more leading ideas but Cash had ceased to communicate. Another car had driven up. The salesman left.

It was seven o'clock and Cash Ridel called up the ranch. "Flo? This is Cash! Say what happened last night?"

"What do you mean, Cash?" Her voice sounded high and funny.

"I mean about Warren breaking down. How come he never called for the wrecker or something..."

There was a long silence then, "Well—well, he just went back by himself. He took the Ford."

"Oh! Well, he might have called me. I'd have been glad to help. By the way, how come Joy decided not to go?"

"Well she just didn't want to."

"Well, that'll please Liz. She wanted to get Joy to help her can some peaches. Do you mind if she comes out first thing to get Joy."

"No, No! Don't come out. I mean Joy isn't feeling well. I'm keeping her in bed."

In about thirty minutes Cash called his wife and told her the story. "I think you'd better take a run out and see what's the matter with Joy!" he finished. "You know what a flutter-budget Flo is. She wouldn't know whether Joy needed the doctor or not. You're level headed and could tell right away."

At nine-thirty Liz drove into the service station. "Guess what!" she told Cash soberly. "Warren was held up by a thug last night and his pick-up stolen. Joy was taken as a hostage. The thug told Warren he'd kill Joy at the first show of a cop. Warren was forced to exchange billfolds and identification with the fellow. He left that hold-up car for Warren but Warren started to hitch-hike. He thumbed a ride and got home. He took the Ford and went south chasing that hold-up fellow and Joy all by himself."

"For God's sake! Why didn't Flo call the police?"

"Afraid to. That fellow meant business Warren said! He'd kill Joy if the police showed! Warren figured he wouldn't know the Ford and he could sneak up on him some way. He could overtake the old pick-up easy. He took the rifle," she finished.

"It's still better to tell the police! He forgot you can call in the FBI if someone crosses the stateline with a kidnapped person. The FBI are real smart about these things . . ."

"I guess Warren didn't think of that. Flo made me promise not to tell the police either. She's worried sick."

Cash went to the telephone and called the sheriff and asked him to send someone to hear his story firsthand.

It took awhile to make the proper connections. Cash thought it advisable to talk personally to the FBI and so it was after eleven before the thing was set-up right. The young agent who came chided him severely for his brother not having gone to the local authorities.

"Don't you see the girl is no safer even if no one ever accosts that criminal? Don't you see that he will probably kill her the minute it becomes convenient?"

"So he goofed!" admitted Cash. "I guess we all goofed!"

Then he called for his assistant, phoned Liz and took off south in the new pink Olds.

Helen was looking out of the station wagon at the desert sky. She saw the sky clear and, one by one, the stars come out. Then she saw the faint lifting of darkness in the east and knew both hope and panic. The hope came for the end of the night only, the panic from what daylight must bring.

It was growing into her consciousness the certainty that each passing hour brought her closer to the inevitable moment when the two thugs would have done with her and her small son. There would be the moment of decision when they would weigh the advantages against the disadvantages and the disadvantages would loom greater.

Bringing the car through that road block at Quartzsite around one A.M. had saved the two of them this long. It had been evidence to the two gunmen that, as yet, Mike had not reported the affair and the blue Mercury was not yet marked by the police.

Helen reasoned that they would keep them alive until they had gassed up again at the little station they had passed but a mile or so back on the highway. But it was not likely that she would live to accompany them as far south as Yuma and for the attempted run into Mexico at San Luis. Here, in this part of the desert, they would decide to kill her and her child. It would be easy to dispose of the evidence.

So she knew if she were going to act at all it must be soon.

Mike Bruce always kept a water bag on the car and now Helen sat up and reached for it outside the rear window where it hung suspended from a hook Mike had arranged. She took the towel that Jake had had around his throat for a restraint and dampened it with

water. Then she took out her comb and ran it through her hair. Nick was watching her.

"You're wasting your time!" Nick told her dryly.

She rubbed her face vigorously with the damp towel. Then she put on lipstick, looking in the small mirror from her purse.

"Do you think so?" she answered and was surprised at herself—those sarcastic tones! Or did she just feel it was hopeless?

No, she must never give up hope! Not for Jake's sake.

Al groaned and got up. He looked in at Helen. Then he looked at Nick.

"Did you have a nice time?" he demanded sourly.

"Wouldn't you like to know!" Nick said.

Al grabbed Nick's arm. "Come on, tell me! How was she?"

Nick wheeled on Al and there was a snarl in his voice. "Can't you think of anything but your guts? We've got things to do—we got to get gas and get across the border. Maybe the place is lousy with cops! That's what you've got to think of—not that dame!"

Helen woke Jake. He sat up and began to whimper. She held him to her. "Hush, dear! You must not cry!" He quieted immediately.

"Mama!" he whispered, his arms clinging around her neck. "When can Daddy find us?"

"I hope soon, dear," she answered, her heart like a rock.

She led Jake around where Nick stood. "I need to take him for a walk," she flushed and looked downward.

Nick eyed her studiously. "Go off over there," he pointed to the east where there were rocks and clumps of ironwood. "We'll be watching," he added.

Then he removed his gun from his pocket and began to check it.

Al's eyes, small and brownish, followed after Helen and Jake as they walked.

Amongst the rocks—only partially screened by the ironwood—Helen leaned down and talked in Jake's ears. "Listen, dear It's very, very important that you do exactly as I say. Do you understand Mama?"

He nodded.

"Unless we do something, those men will kill us!"

He shrank back, the stark fear in his eyes boring into her.

"Now, I have a plan—just like in a television show! I'll leave you here and walk back to the car. When you hear me call HELP real loud then you sneak quickly up to the highway. You must go that way (she pointed north through a wash) and stay out of sight. Sneak through the rocks and run like a fox."

"What will you do, Mama?" he whispered.

"I will run back the other way toward the highway. I will yell HELP, HELP and run that way.

The men will go after me and not see you. That will give you a chance to get away, see?"

"But suppose they shoot you . . ."

"They won't," she hoped! "They need me for awhile yet. They need to keep me until they get gas for the car. They will probably make me go get the gas for them."

"But what if that Al forgets and shoots anyway?"

"Nick won't let him hurt me yet!" Helen insisted. "Now don't forget, dear! No matter what happens—no matter what you hear and even if they shoot and everything, *you must not stop!* You must keep going. It's our only chance."

"Mama, I'm afraid!" his small hand was clutching her skirt.

"You must not be afraid!" she said so sternly that he believed her. "You will be brave—like Roy Rogers! You will be brave and keep running. When you are a long way up there you will go to the highway and if there aren't any cars coming you will keep running until you come to that service station. When you get there tell the man to help us—to call the police. If there is a car coming, you must flag it down. Stand in the road and wave your arms."

She kissed him quickly and turned around to go back to the car. Walking back she wondered at herself. Fear had gone out of her and time stretched out endlessly—as endless as the desert. She walked slowly to give Jake plenty of time

to be ready—to plot his course.

When she got within a few feet of the car she suddenly bolted off to the right, running, leaping, stumbling toward the highway above. She yelled at the top of her voice—beaming her call in the direction of the highway, "HELP! HELP!" She kept going forward, stumbling. Perhaps there would be a car passing—perhaps someone would hear.

Al wheeled on Nick. "Don't shoot her, Nick—not yet!" he almost begged it.

"Get her then!" growled Nick.

He stood and watched while Al scrambled after Helen—watched until Helen fell gasping, Al lunging at her.

Watched while Al, prone upon Helen, tore off her blouse exposing the white of her brassiere. Heard the loudness of their breathing, the funny gasping groans made by Al!

Then he turned and looked back from where Helen and Jake had been. Looked and then walked down that way, searching the landscape his hand shading his eyes. Then cursing in dismay!

Helen lay breathing heavily, looking at Al, at the silly passion on his face, hearing the foolish talk he uttered. She did not move.

Then she saw Nick above them, Nick shaking Al by the collar and Nick yelling, "Get up, you damned idiot! The kid got away!"

Al was slow. He backed away, still looking down at Helen. Nick had his gun out, the barrel close to Helen, pointing down at her. "I ought to kill you now!" he said. "But I need you for awhile yet. But your moment will come little smart girl—your moment will come!"

Al said, "where the hell did the kid go?"

"How should I know? You let her fool you completely. The kid got away and no telling how long he's been gone. Probably up on the highway by now. Get up there and keep out of sight. But get that kid!"

"Why can't you go after the kid and let me watch her?"

Nick's lips curled in disgust. "Because she'd get your gun and kill you while you were drooling over her—that's why!"

Al turned and began to walk down where Helen and Jake had been. He looked in all directions.

Don't look north! Look south! Helen willed.

Al stumbled along aimlessly through the rocks. Nick watched awhile. Then he walked in the eastern direction where Helen had taken Jake earlier, and where Al was scrambling through the rocks and dry brush, cursing.

"All" Nick shouted. "Come on back and watch her and the car. I'll find the kid!" Then he turned back toward Helen. He said in measured, exact tones, "If I don't

get the kid right away I'll let Al at you . . ." he paused, eyeing her. "It might make a difference, too. You see Al spent time in the pen for criminal attack on a woman. He left her for dead!"

Helen just stood staring. She was thinking, what difference could it possibly make in the end!

Al shouted, "Hey, I found his shirt!" He was waving something red—Jake's T-shirt. Helen looked and her blood curdled. Could Jake have run south instead of north?

She was sick with foreboding, watching as Nick went south. She could run to the highway herself now—it was her chance. But fear for Jake stopped her. He must have gone down into the gully.

Jake was down low behind the pale verde clump watching his mother walk back toward the car and the two men. He could see them standing and waiting.

His mother walked slowly. He held his breath while he waited. He knew which way he was going to run. There was a sort of rock ledge just north and sandstone layers underneath. Even then he would have to go almost on all fours, like a donkey, to keep out of sight. He had on a red shirt and this was bad, the men with the guns would see him. So, quickly he peeled off his red T-shirt.

Now his mother was nearly at the car. She was going to yell real loud but he held his breath listening anyway. He shook the red

shirt and held it ready to throw it in the other direction. That way they would think he had run down into the gully where all the big bushes were.

Then he saw his mother start to run. She ran ahead of the car and up the tracks the car had made around the rock pile. She stumbled and almost fell, then she ran again. Then he saw her lift her arms and heard her yell, "HELP! HELP!" He heard it very plain.

His hand balled up the T-shirt and he threw it to the south with all his strength. He saw that both the men were looking at his mother now and that the big one was running after her.

Swift as a fox he ran, on all fours, over and through the rocks northward. When he got beyond the ledge and amongst the piles of sandstone he stood up. No one was coming after him. He ran and ran, leaping from rock to rock.

From time to time he looked back. He could see no one and then, panting, he stopped and listened. There was not a sound except his breathing. He saw he had not even made tracks—stepping on the rocks along the way. Then he kept running and resting and listening. He did not know how far he was from the road but he kept going north. He knew the road was to his left but he feared going on it yet. Maybe the men would get the car and race up the road looking. So he stayed in the gullies,

walking and stopping and listening.

Then he turned left and west, and walked. Up through rocks and bushes. And there it was—the winding length of black highway. He could see it for miles. There were no cars. Then, ahead of him, to the left he saw the service station.

He ran toward it.

There seemed to be no one around and Jake knocked hard upon the door. Then he ran around to the back and knocked on the door of the back room. After awhile he heard someone coming and the door opened.

"I ain't open yet," the old man said, pulling up his trousers and peering crossly down at Jake.

He was a wizened little old man with white hair and very dry, wrinkled skin. He did not look like a happy man to Jake. But Jake, gasping, told his story.

"You say you and your ma was kidnapped and the car is just down the dugway?"

"And they have guns, and the police are after us but we can't tell the police because then the man—the one named Al, will choke me with a towel," Jake finished.

"Hmmm." The old fellow studied Jake's face in half disbelief. "Why don't your daddy come and get you?"

"Because the men said they'd shoot both me and Mama if any policemen asked questions. So Daddy can't tell the policemen. Besides, all Daddy had was that other

car and maybe it doesn't run. He doesn't have any money because the men took his money away."

"Hmnm!"

"Mama wants me to ask you to call the police and send someone after her because maybe they'll shoot her because I ran away . . ."

The old man stepped out the door and stood looking up and down the highway. Then, muttering, he tramped around to the front of the station.

His eyes swept the highway, north and south. "Don't seem to be a car in sight . . ."

"It's way down. They drove it off past a little hill so you can't see it even from the road."

"Hmnmph!"

"Can't you go down in your car and get my Mommy?"

"Hmnmph!"

"They are awful mean to my Mommy! Haven't you got a car?"

"Yes, but it won't run—I'm all alone here—can't be leavin' my business to run off on no fool chase, sonny!"

"Well then, can't you call up the policemen?"

"No phones out here, sonny!"

And now Jake broke. His underlip shot out and tears ran down his face. His weariness and his fears broke through. "Maybe they will shoot my mommy!" he sobbed.

"Now sonny, you stop that baby stuff! Guess we can do something about it." He was thinking—muttering to himself. "Tell you what,

very next car comes through here we'll flag 'em down. We'll tell them to get the police at Quartzsite—or if they're headed south, we'll have 'em phone from the Army post about thirty miles south. Somebody will be coming through pretty quick. You sit right here and I'll go out to the highway and stop somebody."

Jake sat down on a five-gallon oil can and held his face in his hands. This old man didn't really believe him about the trouble but he had promised to send for help—to stop a car. Jake could do no more.

Suddenly, the old man shouted to Jake. "Look son, a car's coming now!"

Jake looked to the south where the old man pointed. He looked and looked, a horror clutching at his stomach and stopping his breath like the towel had done the night before in Al's hands.

The car coming was the blue Mercury station wagon. Nick was driving, his mother and Al were in the back. The old man waved his arms wildly and the car slowed, turning in.

Jake sat like a lump of rock watching. He saw Nick's arm shoot out the window and heard the rack of the automatic—one shot—then two more.

He saw the old man fold and fall to the roadside, the blood shooting from his neck.

While Jake watched Nick leaped out of the car and grabbed the old

man by the collar of his shirt and began to drag him toward the station. Nick barely glanced at Jake who sat cowered like a ball of yarn against the side of the service station. He kept dragging the body, fast, around to the back of the building.

Then he came running around to the front again. He still did not look at Jake. He ran to the place where the old man had stood and kicked dust over the blood spot and along the way where the body had made marks.

Then he jumped back into the station wagon and drove it around to the back. Soon Jake heard him tell Al to get busy and change license plates on those cars.

At last Nick came around to the front and looked down at Jake. His mother was with Nick and Nick had the gun in her side again.

Nick didn't look mad. He was sort of smiling. He said to Jake, "Your ma was worried about you, kid. Why did you run off?"

Jake looked at his mother's face. Her lips quivered and she did not smile.

Jake said, "I got tired of *him!*" He pointed down to the place where Al was.

"You mean Al—you got tired of Al?"

Jake nodded, his lips pressed tightly. In this situation he felt he would do better not to speak any more than absolutely necessary.

"Well, we'll watch Al after this.

No need for you to have trouble because of him!"

Nick sat down on the ledge of stone and motioned Helen to sit. He said, conversationally, "Now let's all get things straight. We don't want any more trouble. Just as soon as we get that license plate changed and the other things tended to—such as some breakfast and gas in the car—we'll go on to Mexico. But until then, Jake will just sit in the back of the station and we'll tie his feet and his hands so he can't be running off again."

Nick took out a dirty white handkerchief and tied Jake's hands. Then he led the two of them around to the back and found a piece of rope and tied Jake's feet.

He said to Helen, "Go inside and make us some coffee."

Helen obeyed him, wordlessly. Jake sat miserably in the shade against the building. Al was pounding around behind the sheds in back.

In a few minutes he came over. He stooped down to Jake, slapped him hard across the face. "You little brat! I ought to clobber you across this cement here!"

Nick said, "All right, Al! Leave him be! He's just a little kid and you don't need to scare him any more than he already is!"

Al turned to Nick. "You gettin' soft on me?"

Nick sighed and pulled out a cigarette. "Not on you, I ain't! And you'd better remember that."

Al pulled out his gun from his pocket, levelling it at Nick. "I guess I don't need you around anymore! I'm sick of your bossin' anyway."

Nick yawned. "Put it back, Al. We'll eat and feel better. No need you gettin' huffy!"

"Yeah! You talk! You had the woman all night and won't let me get even a touch! You're hoggin' the whole show and I'm sick of it!"

Nick walked over to the door and looked in. "Hurry up with that coffee!" he shouted to Helen. Then to Al, "Look, Al! You can have her—all you want. Only take the right time for it, will you?"

Al dropped the gun into his pocket. "When's the right time accordin' to you?"

"First, we better look around here and see if we're alone. Then we'd better make plans in case somebody comes—Get rid of the old man's body. You'll get your moment after that if the coast is clear."

"You mean that? Can I have all I want with her?"

Nick nodded, turning his head away in distaste. Then he picked up Jake and carried him around behind the sheds. He dropped him down and he and Al began to dig with a couple of old shovels they found. After they had put the old man's body under the dirt they rolled two empty and rusted oil drums over the spot.

Helen had cooked coffee and eggs in the old man's back room.

"You watch the road while I eat, then I'll spell you!" Nick told Al.

Al glowered but obeyed.

Helen spooned some food into Jake's mouth. He could barely swallow, but he forced himself. Helen did not eat though she sipped her coffee.

Al came hurrying. "Hey, Nick! There's a car coming. What'll I do if they stop?"

Nick rose. "Stay here and watch these two. If either of them makes a sound let them have it. Take that big wrench there and drop it on their heads hard!"

Al grinned and picked up the wrench and stood with it over Jake's head, leering at Helen. She knew that it would be Jake—and not herself—who would take Al's blow if there was to be one!

In a little while Nick returned. "You go out again, Al. That car didn't get here. Turned off the highway up there always and drove off into the toolies! Just some local guy in an old beat-up pick-up. But he may wander down here—may know the old man. If he comes we'll say the old man went to Quartzsite for something. That we're relatives of his just keeping watch for him until he gets back. If anybody acts suspicious let 'em have it quick!"

Joy Ridel sat sulkily in the small lunch room toying with a cup of cocoa. She was miserable with defeat and frustration. For once in

her life she thought she had found her big moment—something to make her hit the headlines—and it had fallen flat. First the gunman turned out to be not the kidnaper she'd hoped, but a victim himself, and then he'd gone soft on her; given her money to board a bus back to Needles, with neither danger nor glory at her heels.

Joy vowed not to return to Needles. Instead she would go on—and on and on! Let them chase her. Let the police look for her! Her name would be in the papers.

She looked around at the customers for a moment and chose a truck driver. He was a short, balding fellow, tired looking. Joy sidled over to him and said, "Which way are you going?"

He stared at her. "Does it matter?"

"I need to get home," she lied. "I ran out of money and just wondered which way you were going—if I could ride with you."

"I'm going to Yuma," he answered. "Where do you live?"

She smiled at him in simulated astonishment. "Yuma? That's where I live. Gee, could I ride with you?"

He studied her. "Well, I don't know. I wouldn't want to get in any trouble."

"Please," Joy begged. "There wouldn't be any trouble. I'd surely appreciate it . . ."

He sighed. "Okay, I guess. My truck is a two-ton hay truck and

it's pretty uncomfortable when it's empty. But you can come along, I guess."

Joy looked out and saw a red and white Ford sedan coming across the intersection. The car crossed the road and wheeled in to the station. Joy turned to the truck driver and said, "I'll just run into the rest room. You won't go for a minute will you?"

"I'll wait," he told her and ordered another cup of coffee.

The red and white Ford gassed up and left, heading south. Joy finally came out from the rest room. She smiled at the truck driver and said she was ready. She had put a big blob of brilliant lipstick on her sulky mouth.

Mike saw the service station in the desert early sunshine, looming far off to the south and left, the outcropping of Kofa mountains rising beyond. Through here the road dips were murderous in the old pickup and he had to slow considerably.

The sun glinting on something—the rear bumper of a new blue station wagon, the main part of which was behind a shed—caught Mike's eyes. He couldn't be certain about the car. Neither could he afford to be wrong!

There was an old trail of a road which led off to the left into the hills from one of the dips. Mike turned on this road and drove the pickup far enough back to be out

of sight. Then he got out and started walking, the .22 pistol tucked into his shirt.

He walked a long distance, keeping far east of the highway and out of sight as best he could. He went down through the broken country and cut back onto the highway. He crossed the highway far to the west and approached the service station from behind.

It took about an hour. During that time an occasional car passed on the highway, none of them stopping at the small station.

There was almost no place to hide. Yet Mike made it to the inside of the back shed. He crouched down behind an old ice box. He knew for sure that the blue Mercury station wagon was his own, although the license plates had been changed. He saw the old car closer to the station and saw that it was without plates now. The Arizona plate on his own car must have come from this one.

Inside the back of the station, where Helen sat beside Jake, who was still tight in his bonds, there was a small radio. Al and Nick had turned it on and were listening for the news.

Two gunmen who robbed five stores last evening are still reported on the loose. The body of the murdered man, Mr. Charles Gannett, was retrieved earlier and also the getaway car. Police assume that the two bandits commandeered another car and may have hostages.

Because of the possibility of harm to the hostages the police are proceeding with great caution. . . .

Nick switched off the radio and began pacing the floor. "They got that body already!" he complained.

"You said it wouldn't be till the bones were dry . . . You said they'd never find it!" Al jeered.

Nick sat down and began to think. "Why do you suppose nobody stopped us last night?" he pondered. "They found that other car and didn't tumble when we run the road block."

"Because her husband didn't tell, that's why! Like you told him, he'd better not!" Al put in.

Nick nodded. "Just the same I wouldn't try no road block now—not in that blue Merc we've got."

"We need another car!" Al said.

"How about the old man's car? The one you took the plate from?"

"We could try."

"It won't run!" Jake piped up suddenly.

Nick turned to him. "How do you know, sonny?"

Jake looked at his mother, as if he regretted having spoken. Nick prompted him. "Huh? How do you know that?"

Jake sighed. "'Cause he told me it wouldn't," he admitted.

It was nine A.M. Al said, "It's starting to heat up. We'd better hit the road in something."

"No," Nick said. "Unless we can get another car we're better off here for now. That Army station is only

about thirty miles south of here. We got to figure some way of getting through the road blocks. They'll be after that Mercury anytime. You can bet her husband will have reported it by now . . ." He paused. "You know, wonder why he never took that car we left him?"

Al shook his head. "Wanted to hitch a ride, I guess. "It sure is going to be hot around here."

"Well, this place has a cooler," Nick told him. "Turn it on."

"Where?"

"Over there by that window. Try that!" Al went over and turned a switch and hot air filled the room with a steady whir.

"Cooler? That's hot!" complained Al.

"You have to turn the water on some place. Water drips down through all that stuff outside and the wind blows through the wet stuff. That's what makes it cool."

Al started outside walking around, looking for the water inlet to the cooler.

Mike held his breath listening. He could see through a crack in the shed. He saw the stooped figure of Al walking around. His heart gave a lurch and pounded. Sweat formed in droplets on his forehead.

Mike took out the gun and held it in his hand. *That's one of them, all right!*

He wished he could shoot the fellow now. But something in him

held back. Some voice talked into his fevered brain. You don't know how many there are inside. You don't know where Jake and Helen are. One shot might be the finish for Jake and Helen if they are, please God, still alive. So he held the gun and his breath.

Al found the water spigot with the copper tubing inlet to the cooler. He turned on the water then went back into the garage.

A red and white Ford was coming from the North. Mike saw it slow and turn in. He saw the man inside and the rifle on the seat when the man got out and approached the station. He recognized Warren Ridel.

In a moment Nick came out from the small back door and walked around in front. Mike had seen that it was Nick and now he must only discover whether Helen and Jake were alive before he made his plans. He strained to listen and watch.

Warren Ridel was talking to Nick.

"Say, can you tell me what happened to the guy in that black pickup back there off the highway?"

Nick looked where Ridel pointed. "I don't see no pickup."

"Well, it's just around a piece of that hill. You can see it from back on the road a ways. I think that's my pickup but I can't drive this car over that road. Thought I'd park it here and hike over."

There was a dead silence. Then Nick, smoothly, "Why sure thing! We'll watch it for you."

Ridel went over and removed the rifle from the front seat. "Don't mind telling you that I'd better not meet the fellow who stole my car and run off with my girl . . ."

"Run off with your girl? Nick wasn't curious but he wished to be very casual and normal in this circumstance.

Ridel looked at Nick steadily. "Never mind no questions. But if anybody shows up here—a man and a young girl fourteen years old, you just keep him here. But watch him! He's a bad one!" He started off. "May not be my pickup but I found out they was headed this way. Tracked 'em all the way. By the way I left the keys in case you need to move my car!"

Nick waited while Ridel walked back up the highway, and then cut off through the desert to the east, to intercept the old road that way. Then Nick went around to the back and slammed the door after himself.

Almost at once the door reopened and Helen came out followed by Al carrying Jake. Mike could see them clearly. He saw the torn blouse Helen wore and the way Jake's hands and feet were bound. The last man had an armload of groceries, cans, packages, coffee. Helen carried a water can.

They are all right! They are alive and all right! Thank God!

Then he heard the new Ford start and take off. Heading south.

He ran around to the blue Mercury station wagon. No time to change that license plate, now. The keys were missing. Mike searched around among a pile of tools. He found a screwdriver and pliers. He got busy over the ignition switch, removed the plate. He quickly rigged a jumper on the switch and got in.

The car backed out smoothly and swiftly. He was on the road, following the red and white Ford.

Mustn't get too close! They mustn't recognize the car or the driver. But they were going like the mill tails out of Hell!

The red and white Ford appeared, and disappeared, out of the dips and around the curves. Mike kept it just ahead of him, pacing it at 70 miles an hour. A great sense of relief was in him now and he felt free and strong at last.

Helen and Jake were all right!

He had been right not to report it to the police. At least this way they were still safe.

But for how long?

Surely Warren Ridel would report the theft of his new car. Then a thought struck Mike. Ridel would assume that it was he—Mike—who had stolen that car, wouldn't he? He already suspected the pickup as his own. When he found the pickup and returned to the station and found his new Ford gone—what would Ridel do?

He would suppose that Mike had taken the car.

Ridel would surely follow in the pickup! That would be his logical move.

But how long before the police got in it? And how safe were Helen and Jake even if the police didn't stop that red and white car?

Once more Mike began to wish he had notified the police, asked for help. There were arguments both ways. Still, somehow he had gone this far and his family was still safe! So far so good! But he resolved to stop the next patrol car he met and get help. It was not going to be easy any way you looked at it.

Mike, keeping the car ahead in view but as far ahead as possible, saw the car slow and turn right. There was a dust cloud forming after it as it sped westward, disappearing through a gully formation.

Mike drove on to the place the Ford had turned. There was a small sign indicating west to the Colorado river . . . the road was a poor one but negotiable. Mike looked behind. He could not see any other car. The pickup would possibly never catch up.

Yet he might need Ridell

He stopped the station wagon and got out. He opened the hood of the engine and shoved his hand down inside, getting a blob of black grease. Under the road sign indicating Colorado river he scrawled in big letters . . . J. RIDEL and

made an arrow pointing.

Ridel would assume that Joy had made the sign and follow.

Mike hoped.

It was ten A.M. The red and white Ford, followed at a distance, by the blue station wagon, had hit river country. Nick got out followed by Helen. Al got out, leaving Jake trussed in back.

"Now what?" demanded Al.

"We sit tight!"

"But I thought the whole idea in taking this car was to get through to the border."

Nick shook his head. "You forget that this car will be hot before we could get through . . . I should have killed that guy and then we'd be all right."

"And you're supposed to be the brain!" Al spoke disgustedly.

Nick shook his head. "They won't be looking for us in the red and white Ford. They'll be looking for us in that blue station wagon. We'll make like fishermen until night anyway. Then we can try getting through. Maybe we can switch license plates somewhere."

Al was looking at Helen. "This is as good a time as any for me," he declared, leering at her.

Nick said, "You better wait until we scout around a little. Be sure we are private here!"

"All right but hurry up about it!" Al said, sitting down in the shade, dipping his fingers into the dark water of the river.

Helen lifted Jake out of the car

and sat him down. She unlaced his shoes below the rope bindings.

"Hey, what are you trying?" Al demanded.

"Just let him have his feet in the water," she explained, forcing a sort of smile.

The welts where the rope had cut were cruel and red. Helen rubbed Jake's ankles tenderly.

"Leave it be!" commanded Al.

Nick returned. "Aw, take the ropes off the kid!" he said, seeing the welts. "He won't run no place while we're watching him. You won't try nothing, will you, sonny?"

Jake shook his head and Helen removed the rope bindings.

Jake, free again, smiled at Helen. He pulled up his pant legs and waded into the cool water.

"Everything okay?" Al asked of Nick.

Nick nodded. "Nobody around. There's a sort of shack back there a ways. Nobody there. No boats, no tracks. You can't see the car from any direction. We can go up to that shack and stay until night."

They trudged up through the thick sand and growth, coming upon the shack. It was barely standing, the boards rotting. It had evidently been a boat shelter at one time but long deserted. Still it was shade and protection from prying eyes.

Helen thought, this will be our grave. Here out of sight, and we'll be sunk down in that blackish water with weights on us!

Until they had taken the road leading to the river area she had had hope. Now all hope had gone from her. They must be thirty or more miles from help of any kind. It was still too hot for hunters and too many mosquitos for fishermen or any others.

The sound of mosquito slapping was the only sound for some time. Yet she knew that Al was looking at her—she could feel his eyes boring in from behind her.

How long now before Nick gave the word for which Al had been waiting? Then, after that, Helen knew they would kill her and Jake—they would have no further use for either of them as hostages.

Joy was rambling on, and the truck driver who had obligingly agreed to take her to Yuma was regretting his bargain. Joy told him many things and perhaps they had gone twenty miles before he started at the last of her remarks.

"Did you say you knew where those hold-up men were?" he asked.

She had been bragging, he realized, but this last remark was really something.

Joy gave him one of her cunning looks, the left eye wandering, the pouty lips parted. She was nodding slowly and with emphasis.

"Well, if you know that why don't you tell the cops? They'd sure like to know!" he told her.

"Because!"

"Oh, just because, huh? Now don't give me that bull."

"All right!" she almost sang it. "Then how do you like this—I know the gun was taken from the getaway car. I know who's got that gun. I know who has it and that he's after those hold-up men and the reason he didn't call the cops is because those hold-up men have his wife and little boy and they'll shoot them the very instant a cop asks questions. That's why he don't call the cops and they're ahead of us just a little ways on this very road."

"Wow!" commented the truck driver, shaking his head at Jay. Still, it did sound kind of peculiar.

"I was with that man until you came and picked me up!" Joy announced, unable now to keep any of her story back.

"You were with him?" The incredulous statement—with the undertone of half belief broke Joy down completely. She told the whole story from beginning to end.

"What's more," she finished. "I saw my very own daddy go down this road in our new Ford. He's after the pickup. He doesn't know I'm not still in it."

The driver of the truck began to moan. "Oh why did I ever fall for that story of yours! I feel like putting you out right here and now!"

They rode in silence for some time, Joy with a smug little smile on her lips. She knew she had his respect. He would not put her out and he would be very careful how he treated her from now on.

It was nearly noon. Joy, watch-

ing the road saw the sign indicating the way to the river. She saw the smudge of grease and her mouth fell open.

"Well, I like that!" she exclaimed.

"Now what?"

"Didn't you see that sign?"

"Just a sign pointing down to the river for fisherman?"

"No it isn't! Underneath it has my name written and an arrow pointing plain as day!"

"Now don't give me that!"

"It does! It says J. RIDEL and points with an arrow!"

He shook his head. "You're nuts. Absolutely!"

Mike saw the way the red and white Ford went. It had turned southward, plowing through the loose dirt. He turned his own car up the other fork and drove for some distance. There was an opening ahead and signs of a recent trailer encampment. He could drive no further, the new car was low and heavy and before he knew it he was in a sand trap. He could go neither forward nor backward.

He got out and started to walk southward, down river, leaving the blue station wagon. In his trousers the .22 pistol bulged. He held one hand to steady it.

They had all sat down in the shack. Helen on the floor near Jake, Al holding a gun on his lap and leaning against the back of the shed, his head resting so that he could watch Helen without having to move.

Nick stood by the door, looking out over the water, listening, swatting mosquitoes.

"Well, Nick—?" Al began.

Nick did not answer. Al sat upright. "How about it, Nick? When is the time for me with *her!*?" his head jerked in Helen's direction, his eyes not leaving her for an instant.

Al heaved a big sigh and spat outside. "You dirty hog!" he muttered under his breath.

"What? What did you say?" Nick demanded. He wheeled on Al, his mouth curled in distaste. He said, "All right! Now, then! I'll take the kid and we'll go for a walk . . ."

Helen swallowed and looked at Nick. He avoided her gaze. She felt sick and afraid, but no desire to fight was left.

She saw Nick lead Jake away and knew he was going to finish the child off this time. Perhaps from behind, painlessly. At least she could trust Nick for that. He would not hurt the child if he could help it. Just a quick movement, probably on the back of the head. A sudden blow and the deep water.

Nick paused with Jake a step or two from the shack and looked back at Al, who was standing now, putting his gun up on a jutting rafter of the shack.

"Don't use that gun!" he ordered. "This is government property . . . Somebody might hear."

"I'd better choke her then?"

Nick did not answer. He had turned his back and was walking down the river with Jake.

Helen fought like a tiger. She lifted her knee and let him have it in the groin with all her strength. He had completely ripped off her blouse. Her lips bled, but she hit him hard.

He drew back for a moment cursing. It gave her another breath and she stood up and screamed.

Nick came running back.

"For God's sake! Can't you shut her up?" he panted to Al.

He raised his hand and struck Helen a sharp blow, knocking her to her knees.

Al was cursing and rocked back and forth on his heels, double over, in pain and fury.

"Get up!" Nick commanded him.

Al stood, still half-buckled with pain.

"Leave her alone!" Nick commanded. "Don't touch her! You're too goddam dumb to handle her!"

Al stood dumbly staring at Nick, but the pain was leaving him and anger was taking its place.

"What did you say?" He demanded.

Jake now stood in the doorway, horror on his face at seeing his mother, blood running from her mouth, her hair dishevelled, her clothes half torn off.

Helen looked at him unbelievably. She had thought Nick would have done with Jake by now—so quickly, as was Nick's way.

Nick was looking at Jake. "I said, leave them both alone! We're not going to hurt them. You hear! Not either one! You don't touch the woman again!" He turned away, putting one hand gently on Jake's head.

Al stood dumbly for a moment.

Helen screamed, "Look out, Nick!"

But he wheeled too late! The gun in Al's hands spat out.

Nick crumpled to the floor. A small trickle of blood ran from the hole in his chest.

Helen reached for Nick, raising his head, holding her hand over the wound in his chest.

The sweat glistened on Nick's pale brow and the near transparency of his skin was deathly. He gasped in short labored gasps. Al stood holding the smoking gun, his lips curled, his small eyes crafty.

Helen said, "Oh Nick! I'm sorry, really I am." She began to cry a bit, strangled, little sobs not real and only momentary.

Jake stared in complete terror.

Nick looked at Jake. "Run, sonny!" he commanded. "Run like hell!"

Then he gasped a few more times and was still. He was dead.

Al said, "See what you done?"

Helen stood up and reached for her blouse.

"No you don't!" said Al. "I'm going to fix it this time."

Helen saw Jake backing toward the door. She saw the gun.

But Jake was running!

It was not hopeless for Jake. It must not be hopeless for Helen. But she could not stand off his gun. So she stood quietly while he advanced.

He took her torn blouse and made a rope with it, tearing it in long strips. He tied Helen's hands behind her. The boards in the rear of the shack were rotted between. He pushed the ends of the blouse through and fastened them securely around a solid board.

Then, grinning at her lewdly, he ripped off her nylons, throwing her sandals out into the water, over Nick's dead body.

Then he tied her ankles, securing them to the board shack also. She drooped, half hung as on a cross, before him. But her child had run and was still running. Jake would get away. He would not die! He would not see what happened here to his mother.

Jake scrambled through the bushes, running. He ran up river, away and away. Nick was dead—he had seen Nick die. Nick had wanted Jake to run! That was funny because he had been the one to tie Jake up for running away before. Nick had made Jake promise not to run that time and Jake had promised so that he would not have to wear the ropes any longer.

He and Nick had been walking and Nick had told Jake that when he was a boy he always wanted to

go by a river—a real river—and see fish. He pointed out the fish, jumping for bugs now to Jake.

Then they had sat down, he and Nick, and Nick had patted Jake on the head. He had told Jake that he was a real brave kid!

Then they had heard his mother screaming and Jake had insisted on going back. But—Al had killed Nick, and now his mother was alone with Al.

Surely there must be somebody Jake could find for help.

Then—like a dream or something—he saw his father coming.

Mike picked up his son, lifting him to him. "Where's Mommy, Jake?" he demanded at once.

Jake tried to tell him everything. Jake was panting and there was so much to tell. "She's back in that little house by the river. Hurry, Daddy! Al has her and he killed Nick and he's very angry with Mommy! He might shoot her if you don't hurry!"

Mike put Jake down. "The car is back there quite away. Keep going up the river and you'll see it. Get inside and lay down and stay there!" Mike ordered. "If you see anybody send them for help!"

Then he hurried down the river while Jake went back the way his father had pointed, looking for the blue station wagon.

Now Daddy had come and it would be all right!

He found the station wagon, crawled in the back and lay down.

He went instantly to sleep, the perspiration from the heat forming small beads on his naked arms and chest.

After walking through the desert to the place where the old black pickup was parked Warren Ridel was pretty tired. However, his anger sustained him upon seeing—as he well knew he would—that the pickup was his own. Also, the keys were in place and the tank nearly full. Simple to get in and drive it back to that station.

Warren felt certain that the man who had taken the pickup and Joy were somewhere around that station. They had to be! There was no place else to hide. That fellow who had been at the station looked kind of funny, come to think of it. Maybe he was hiding something. Maybe Joy and the roughneck who kidnapped her had been around.

Warren drove back to the station. His red and white Ford was not in sight. He jumped out of the pickup, his rifle in his hand and went up to the front of the station. The closed sign was still in place and the door locked. Warren walked around to the back—no sign of the red and white Ford. He recalled having seen a blue station wagon at the back. It was gone, too.

Warren went to the back door and pounded. He waited, then he opened the door and went in.

He saw the dirty dishes and signs of recent occupancy . . . cigarette butts. The air-cooler was going full

blast. The cupboards were open and all signs of a recent ransacking existed.

Then he went out and noted from the tracks the direction his red and white Ford had been driven. Then he got back into the pickup and followed, heading south.

It was nearly noon when the hay truck bearing Joy Ridel and its driver reached the intersection just outside Yuma. There was a road block and Joy was astonished to see the black pickup containing her father waiting off to the side.

He had been obliged to wait as he had no driver's license. The night before he had run through two road blocks without having to show the license, but merely satisfy the patrolmen as to his identity and the fact that he was alone in his vehicle. However, now the officers were getting fussy and when they found he was without his license they had required him to wait off to the side.

Joy said to the driver as soon as she spotted her father, "Hey, there's my daddy! What's he doing in the pickup?"

Then she threw open the door on her side and got out, running over to her father.

The driver of the hay truck said to the patrolman, "You'd better talk with that girl. There's something mighty funny about her. She told me a story back at Quartzsite about living in Yuma and then she

told me another story. You'd better have her tell it to you."

The officer nodded and let the hay truck through.

Warren Ridel, pleased of course to see Joy unharmed, was nonetheless adamant on going after the outlaws, as he termed them. He had barely begun to listen to Joy's story when the patrolman came over.

In a few moments, the patrolman stepped back and called Wade Bingham, the county sheriff.

"Hey Wade! Come over and hear this!" he called.

The sheriff, a tired looking man with a big mustache and sad brown eyes, came over. Joy's father prodded her. "Go on, Joy! We'd better tell them everything."

"Well," began Joy, popping her lips and letting her eyes wander over their faces—noting the look of intent interest there, feeling the marvelous sense of importance she'd been longing to feel. "Well, it's like this. Mike Bruce—that's the name of the fellow who kidnaped me last night . . ."

"Wait a minute," the sheriff cut in. "You were kidnaped? When and where exactly?" The patrolman had taken out a pad and pencil.

Joy relished this. She popped her lips again. "Just above Searchlight. Daddy and I were on our way to Vegas and this Mike Bruce was in the road. He flagged us down."

Warren Ridel cut in. "He had

a flashlight and a gun. He was standing by a car with its dimmers on off the road. He made me get out of the pickup—traded billfolds with me, got in my car and drove south with Joy."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"Well," began Joy again, popping her lips. "He said he'd kill me the very minute a cop stopped to ask questions. Daddy knew he meant it, too."

"I felt I couldn't take a chance on that fellow killing my little girl if a policeman stopped him for questions. So I hitchhiked back to my place and started after him in my new Ford."

"Wait a minute. You came south in another car?"

"That's right. A new red and white Ford."

"License number LA7-0762, California," Joy said.

The patrolman made a note of it. The sheriff called to the third officer who was taking care of traffic off to the side. "Bill, did any red and white new Ford go through here?"

The officer shook his head. "Not in the last hour anyway."

"Go on!" the sheriff said to Joy.

"Well, it turned out that Mike Bruce wasn't an outlaw at all—" she said, drawing it out, looking at their faces.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it turned out that the reason he had held up daddy and kidnaped me was to get our pickup

and run after the real outlaws!"

She stopped to savor the effect of this. Finding it satisfactory she went on. "The real outlaws are those two bandits who did all those robberies yesterday and who murdered that store owner."

"Go on!" prompted the sheriff. His tired brown eyes had gained a light, his shoulders straightened.

"Well, the very same thing had happened to him as happened to Daddy and me," Joy said. "He'd been fixing a flat tire and along came this getaway car and the two outlaws. They held a gun on Mike and forced his wife and little boy to go off with them in their car."

She stopped and looked from face to face.

"Yes, yes!" prompted the patrolman. "Go on!"

"Well, the reason Mike had to holdup Daddy and kidnap me was so he could chase the outlaws and catch them himself. Because *they* were using *his* wife and little boy for *their* hostages. They told Mike they'd kill his wife and little boy if Mike reported it to the police. It was such a good trick that Mike decided to use it himself."

She paused. Warren Ridgel looked very irked. He said, "Too bad I didn't catch up to him! Taking my car and running over two state lines with my daughter."

"That isn't all, Daddy," said Joy, virtuously. "He used your money, too. He cashed your pay check!"

"What? How did he do it?"

Now Joy looked very cunning indeed. "I helped him!" she stated. "He needed the money so he could catch those outlaws before they had a chance to hurt his wife and little boy!"

"Now let's go over this," the sheriff interrupted. "A man named Mike Bruce was held up by the two bandits who robbed those stores and murdered that Gannett fellow. He came south chasing those bandits who were in his car with his wife and child. Can you tell us what kind of a car that is?"

Joy nodded. "Sure! He asked at every place if that car had gone through. Otherwise we wouldn't have known which road to take." She sighed. "We lost the trail at Parker, though. They had changed shifts at the checking station. So we stayed in Parker all night. Well, a few hours of the night, that is. Then we cashed Daddy's pay check . . ."

"Oh good!" cut in Ridel sarcastically.

"Well, it was my ideal Joy said, pausing for effect again.

"What was your idea?"

"Cashing that check and taking the road down through Quartzsite. I figured that if these outlaws were going to Mexico that's the road they would take."

"Wait," the sheriff said. "You haven't told us what kind of a car they were in yet."

"It was a blue Mercury station wagon," she answered.

The sheriff looked at the patrolman and then called to Bill again. "Any blue Mercury station wagons go through?"

Bill checked his notes, thought a minute. "A two-tone blue came through, I believe. It was a Yuma Test Station car, though . . ."

"Well, go on!" the sheriff prompted Joy again.

She simpered a bit and then turned her face away. "He put me off at Quartzsite," she said. "Gave me twenty dollars to go home on the bus."

"Well, why didn't you?" demanded the sheriff and her father together.

She sighed. "Because I wanted to come down and see if those outlaws had really come this way. I wanted to help catch them."

She turned to her father. "Where was the truck when you found it? Wasn't Mike anywhere around?"

Ridel turned to the sheriff. "This pickup was way out in the desert off to the east of the highway. Just north of that service station way back there . . ."

"Oh, yes!" nodded the sheriff. "Old Slats' place!"

"I drove to that service station and the fellow said he hadn't seen anybody. But he lied, damn his hide!"

"Lied?"

"Yes! Because when I came back there wasn't a soul there. They'd run off in my new Ford. Came this way, too. I tracked the car here."

"Old Slats had run off in your car?"

"Don't know who he was. Didn't look very old to me."

"Can you describe him?"

"Well, not too big of a fellow. Dark-skinned. Said nobody had been around."

The sheriff turned to the patrolman. "That doesn't sound like old Slats, does it."

"Sure don't! You say no one else was around, yet he drove off in your new car, coming south?"

Ridel nodded. "Say—just thought of something!"

"What?"

"That car in back that was missing when I got back. It was a blue station wagon!"

The sheriff stepped back and conferred a moment with the patrolman. "Send that message out on the short wavel" he finished.

To Ridel and Joy. "Looks like they're the men were after—at least one of them answers the description. Nick Frehner, ex-con, wanted for robbery and murder. The other fellow was probably around there and maybe this Bruce's wife and kid were still with them. At least now we have something to go on."

The radio in the police car was blaring. The sheriff went over and listened in. Then he came back to Joy and Warren. He said, "The police were called in by your brother, Cash Ridel at Needles. A patrol car is in Quartzsite now. I told them to come south and

we'd go north. We'll set up a road block both ways and one on the California side of the dam out at Yuma Test station. They might have made it through that way already, though. We'd better call Winterhaven and send out patrols along Highway 80."

"They could be in Mexico by now if they took that road across the dam," said the patrolman.

"They could!" the sheriff admitted. "Better call the Border patrol and give a description of those two cars. If that fellow Bruce is on their tail, though, we can at least count on finding them soon."

"What should I do now?" Joy asked the sheriff.

"You're going home!" her father answered gruffly.

The sheriff nodded. "You've been very helpful," he told her. And to Warren. "When we catch that fellow Bruce we'll hold him to answer to your complaint. I get tired of these guys taking the law into their own hands."

"I just want to meet up with that guy! That's all! I'd like to lay one right on his jaw!"

"Now, Daddy!" Joy chided. "He can't be blamed too much, you know."

The sheriff said, "You'd better tell us how you get to your ranch out of Needles." He smiled at Joy. "There'll be newspaper men wanting to talk to Joy—take her picture for the papers and all."

Joy put her head down and

raised it again. Her eyes were not in the least crossed. She smiled very prettily at the sheriff.

The sheriff then scribbled something on a note paper and gave it to Ridel. "This will get you through the next road block going north. It explains that I will be responsible for your driver's license . . ."

"Thanks," said Ridel and started up the pickup, turning it back toward Quartzsite.

They had progressed north about twenty miles when Joy suddenly exclaimed, "Daddy! I forgot to tell them something very important."

"What?"

"That sign up here aways. It's a sign pointing an old road to the Colorado River."

"So what of it?"

"Didn't you see when you came down? It had 'J. Ridel' on it at the bottom in big plain writing, and an arrow pointing."

"Why would it have that on it?"

"Don't you see, Daddy? Mike must have written it there. He must have known I'd be following and made that arrow to say which way he'd gone!"

Ridel shook his head. "Beats me!" he muttered. But he turned the pickup around and started back.

"We'll hail the first patrol car coming this way," he said.

"Daddy," Joy said. "Mike said he'd pay you back—all the money and for the use of the pickup and all."

Warren Ridel nodded. "Well, who am I to complain at him? I had my rifle along ready to shoot and I didn't notify the police either. Guess we're in the same boat, him and me!"

It seemed that now if she could die, it would be the perfect thing at the perfect time. The strain on Helen's arms, the pain in her face from the blows she had suffered, the pain in her legs from straining, the backache, all these things were as nothing compared to the fact that Jake had gotten away.

Now that he had her trussed lightly, Al stood back looking at her, letting his eyes savor her weakness, her bruises, her near nakedness. He was breathing fast. He reached out a hand, a blunt thumb and pressed it into Helen's stomach slowly and with increasing pressure. Pressed and pressed until he could almost feel her backbone—until he saw her wince with the pain of it!

When he released the pressure Helen drew an involuntary breath and raised her head, her face white.

He laughed shortly. Helen's lips moved and she dropped her head again, not wanting to look at the pure sadism on his face—being more sickened from that than the pain.

He rubbed a hand across his mouth and looked at her again. Her body was covered with mosquitos, plump with blood.

Then they both heard the sound, the rock splashing into the water from up river. Al pressed his nose against the big crack in the hut at that side. He looked long and carefully.

Then he swore and turned to Helen. He strode behind her and undid the part of her bindings that fastened her to the wall of the shack. He had his gun in his right hand and held Helen in front of him with his left—held her by the bindings on her wrists from behind.

With no wall to steady her, her knees buckled, the bindings on her ankles cutting in tightly. But he held her up in front of his own crouching figure.

Helen felt the gun cruelly in her back at the same time she saw the figure in the doorway.

"Mike!" she whispered. "Mike!" and fainted, her head dropping on her bare chest, her knees completely buckled.

Al's arm swept around her waist holding her unconscious form tightly against him, ducking down so she was a protection to his body, the gun still in her back.

"Drop your gun!" Al commanded of Mike. "Or I'll let her have it."

Mike let the .22 pistol fall to the floor.

"Kick it over this way!"

Mike kicked it.

Al let himself down slowly to a sitting position, still holding the limp form of Helen against him.

He worked forward inching toward the gun Mike had dropped.

When he had it he kicked it behind him. Then he dropped Helen onto the old rotting floor and held his gun toward Mike in the doorway. Too late—Mike had slipped around the door out of sight.

"I know you're out there!" Al growled. "I can kill both of you any time I want."

Mike leaned against the building, raising his arms up and bracing them on the side.

Between Mike and Helen was Nick's dead body. The blood from his wound had dried and a million flies were on it.

"Too bad you had to come!" said Al. "Now you'll have the pleasure of watching it . . ."

Mike stared at the river, his dark eyes enigmatic and deep as wells.

"'Cause I don't aim to be cheated out of her!" Al said.

"You're going to get to watch it! That might make it even better . . ." he paused. "I've never had an audience to appreciate it before!" He was looking down at Helen. Looking at her and unbuckling his belt with his left hand, still holding the gun on the door with his right.

"You're not that good!" Mike told him. "You can't do it and watch me, too!" He stood tightly against the building, taunting.

A flicker of doubt passed Al's face, his lips working. He tugged at the belt.

Mike sensed the doubt though.

He went on, "It'd take a lot bigger man than you—bigger and better, to do the job! Besides you're too dumb! I'll catch you in a dumb act and then we'll see!"

It was the way everybody had always got the best of Al—the way Nick had controlled him. Telling Al how dumb he was! Threatening him with his dumbness! Calling him names!

"I can kill you any time," Al bragged. He shot one shot through the wood. Mike ducked, fastening himself behind the upright which bore the weight of the shack. Al got up and started after Mike. He stooped and picked up the .22 pistol, shoving it into his belt front, fastening the belt. Then he stepped outside the shack, listening and looking. Mike had disappeared. But he had to be close—among the clumps of tamarick, behind the high bank.

Al leaned against the door of the shack, his gun ready. He waited. Sooner or later he knew Mike would come—come to rescue his wife.

Mike would be listening and watching, too. Al could wait. He had been very patient so far on this deal. He'd have his moment and it would be all the better for the waiting!

The sun had passed the meridian long enough to put the shack entirely in shade. Al stood in the shade waiting. He felt sure that Mike Bruce was watching him.

Al could not guess what Mike would do but he felt certain the man would try to rescue his wife. He felt certain that Mike would not go for help, leaving his wife alone with Al.

Al felt a great exultation—a cleverness, a knowingness. He listened and waited.

Helen could see Al's back. Her hands and feet hurt in the bindings and her bare skin was a mass of welts from the mosquitos. She wondered where Mike had gone. She could not guess what Al planned. She wondered when Al would grow tired waiting and return to her—to hurting her and killing her!

The patrol car arrived at the desert service station from Quartzsite. The two officers investigated the premises. They found no trace of Old Slat.

They were waiting for the sheriff of Yuma County to come from the south. At two P.M. they made contact and went over the findings. They speculated that either old Slat had been taken as hostage or that he had been murdered. After awhile they discovered the two shovels and the loose dirt. Then they found the recently-placed rusted oil drums. Under the oil drums they found the body.

While they were noting all these things they received another radio call. This one had to do with the sign further south which indicated an access road to the Colorado river.

It made note of the fact that the name J. Ridel and an arrow had been added to the sign.

Mike lay, belted tightly in the sand, amongst the clump of tamarick. He listened, knowing that the killer in the shack lacked the litheness to walk quietly. He would hear him if he came.

He would hear him if he moved on Helen in the shack.

The boards were loose in the shack and sound traveled in the soft air. So, hearing nothing, Mike knew the killer was waiting—waiting for him to show. He decided he was more patient than the killer. He had seen the man and the man's passion. The killer would not wait long. He wanted Helen—that much Mike had seen. So he resolved to wait until he heard sounds—sounds indicating that the killer had moved. Then he would have his chance!

Al knew Mike would outguess him if he waited. It always happened that way. So bring the man out first! Get him on the run and shoot him. Shoot him in the legs, breaking them. Let him lie within sight. Let him watch the rape and death of the woman! Then kill him!

But he would have to flush the man out. Al began to shuffle and kick the boards in the floor, noisily.

Mike came running—quietly, stealthily. But in plain sight. Al let him get almost to the door.

Then he shot. He was a good marksman and his shot went true. Mike buckled and fell, his right thigh splintered. He tried to crawl along, the pain shooting up into his brain and blinding him. He gasped and felt the wet, warm blood flowing down his leg. It was as if he were in a vise. Nothing could make those muscles move him now. His body screamed and clamored with the pain and refused to let him move!

He heard Al laugh—looked up at the man and saw him laughing, the gun hanging loosely. Al was licking his lips and laughing.

Mike grabbed his leg with both hands, fiercely holding above the warm, bubbling wound. The blood slowed and Mike still grasped. Gritting his teeth and holding his breath he stopped the blood a little.

Why doesn't he finish me off? Mike wondered with a part of his mind that remained somehow untouched by the pain or the emotion. *Because he wants me to suffer, answered the mind. He wants to see me suffer. He loves to see suffering and that is a fact and that is his weakness!*

Mike had stopped the blood with his two hands. He raised himself slowly and painfully on his right elbow. It was the left thigh bone that was shattered, the splinters sticking through the gaping wound. The fabric of his gray sports slacks was torn and bloodied.

Slowly, he raised himself and

without looking into the shack at all, merely knowing that Al still watched, savoring his pain, he took his left hand and cleaned away the dirt. He tore open his trouser, panting and gritting his teeth, until the wound was exposed.

All of this, he knew, entranced the man in the shack. He was down below the shack on an incline. Helen, on the floor to the rear, could not see. Not yet! It was well that she could not!

Perhaps it consumed a hundred years of time (more likely ten minutes) for Mike to make a bandage over his wound. He pulled out his handkerchief from his left rear pocket and folded it tightly over the wound, pushing the bone splinters down into the flesh again.

Then, tired beyond all human experience, he fell to the ground in a faint of exhaustion.

He knew the killer stood watching him—knew the killer would not permit him to lie comfortably.

He sensed that Al was moving toward him. He had nothing . . . nothing but his two hands. He breathed and held his breath, willing a great power into those hands.

He lay very quietly, holding his breath, waiting.

Al moved slowly, watching. Mike's face appeared immobile. His eyes were closed. Al came closer.

He stood directly over Mike, looking down. Then he put a foot forward gently, experimentally. He kicked the shattered leg.

Mike did not stir.

Al kicked the leg again, harder. Still Mike gave no sign!

Then Al, impatient with the possum show, leaned over, grasping Mike by the shoulders to flip him over, face upward.

Mike's two hands, strong with the flow of blood and oxygen and will with which he had been nourishing them, moved.

He had the gun arm. He twisted it with all his strength. The gun dropped and Mike retrieved it.

Mike shot but the shot went wild in the struggle. Still, he held the gun and looked wildly for his target. Al had jumped back and was in the shack again.

Now each man had a gun. Al could not shoot from the rear of the shack. If he came forward he would be the target. He stayed huddled behind Helen, who had now pulled herself erect.

"Stay there!" shouted Al hoarsely. "I've got my gun in her back!"

Helen dropped to the floor and began rolling. Before Al could reach her she was in the doorway. Nick's body was there and it stopped her.

But someone else was there now. Helen saw legs—legs, and above them a black holster.

"Drop your gun and put your hands high!" commanded the new voice, the voice of the patrolman.

So it was all over! Help had finally come.

Only one thing was left as Helen

sat, holding Mike's head in her lap, comforting him. "Put my shirt around you!" he ordered, though the patrolmen were decently looking the other way now.

The one thing that was left was the scream. It was a man's scream

and it was not one of pain but of frustration. Complete, anguished frustration!

Al Bertoli had never had, and now would never, never have his moment with the woman! They took him away screaming.

