

MANHUNT

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CONTENTS

FEATURE STORY

- THE PORTRAITS OF EVE *by Bruno Fischer*..... 50

NOVELETTES

- MEET ME IN THE DARK *by Gil Brewer*..... 13
 HOOKED *by Robert Turner*..... 33

SHORT STORIES

- BLACK CAT IN THE SNOW *by John D. MacDonald*..... 47
 BE A MAN! *by Talmage Powell*..... 29
 PRESSURE *by Arnold English*..... 9
 THE HELPING HAND *by Avram Davidson*..... 24
 THE BABE AND THE BUM *by Mike Brett*..... 62
 THE PAINTER *by Michael Zuroy*..... 1
 A REAL QUIET GUY *by Tom Phillips*..... 4
 YOU CAN'T LOSE *by Laurence Block*..... 43

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Marchand's life was practically perfect. All he had to do to improve it was kill. . . .

HOOKED

A Novelette

by
ROBERT TURNER



THE fishing camp was down a rutted dirt road, about five hundred yards off the highway. Marchand had never been there before. It wasn't quite the way he had visualized it; not rundown and dirty, at all. It was really quite a place, well kept and prosperous looking, and Marchand could see how, living here, having a business like that, a man who wasn't too ambitious, didn't want too much out of life, the outdoor type who liked boats and water and people who went in for fishing, could be quite happy with it.

First there was a small, store-like building, with a sign over it that said you could buy all kinds of bait and rent tackle there and that they served food, beer and soft drinks. Behind that, closer to the water, was the house. It was a fairly new, modern looking house, in the \$15,000 class. At the lake's edge there was a small pier and a half dozen trim, freshly painted small boats suitable for rowing or attaching an outboard.

Marchand parked the shiny new Cad Eldorado convertible near the store and settled back comfortably in the seat to wait. He'd gotten out here a little early, about fifteen minutes before Gladys had told him to be there.

In a few minutes a girl came out of the store, walked toward the car. She was barefoot and she wore jeans and a blue work shirt, the tails of it out and tied in a knot in front, baring her midriff and accentuating the most beautiful development Marchand had ever seen on a woman. He could hardly believe his eyes as he watched her walk toward the car. The jeans fitted her long, finely carved legs as though she'd been born in them.

For a moment, Marchand was almost afraid to look at her face. She had to be a hag in the face department, he told himself; there had to be *some* catch to a girl with a body like that being stuck way out here in the sticks.

But there wasn't. Under a smartly coiffed cap of sun-glistening, mahogany red, softly waved hair, was the most strikingly beautiful face Marchand had ever seen. The eyes were widely set and unbelievably dark and liquid looking under their long, thick, spiked lashes. The brows were delicately winged. Under a small, saucily tilted nose, her mouth was full and moistly pouting, made for kissing.

Just before she reached the car, she smiled and her teeth were tiny and so even and white the smile almost blinded Marchand. He had had his share of lovely women in his twenty-seven years, showgirls and models some of them, but he'd never had one hit him like this at first sight. He thought it had something to do with the clean, wholesome, unspoiled look about her. Whatever it was, she had him flipping. He felt himself flushing and getting nervous and full in the throat like some silly school boy.

"Hi," she said. "Mrs. Marchand is still out on the lake but I imagine they'll be in pretty soon. You can wait out here or come on inside, if you like and have some coffee or a beer or something." Her voice was low and throaty, yet completely feminine.

Somehow, Marchand got words out without stammering, without his voice breaking with emotion; he never knew how.

"So you're a mind reader, as well as being beautiful," he said.

She laughed. "Not exactly. I recognized the car." She was close to it now and she trailed her fingers, lightly, lovingly along the glittering chrome trim. "How could I miss?"

"You like this buggy, huh?"

She shook her head, wonderingly. "It's almost too much to believe that people own things like this." Then she looked up at him. "I didn't know Mrs. Marchand had a son."

"She doesn't." He grinned crookedly at her. "I happen to be her husband."

"Oh!" She looked quickly away, flustered. "I—

I'm sorry."

"Forget it. It happens all the time. It's what I get for marrying a woman almost twice my age."

"Mrs. Marchand's very nice," she said. "She's sweet."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I think she is. She's very nice to us."

"You old man Foster's daughter or do you just work here?"

"I'm his daughter. I'm Nila. I'm just home during the summer. I go to State."

"Oh."

"Oh, college is all right."

"Sure, except with a girl like you, it's a waste of time."

"What do you mean a girl like me?" her eyes flashed. "Just because my father runs a fishing camp here in Florida doesn't mean I intend to spend *my* life here, either, just because *he* goes for it."

"I didn't mean that," he said. "What I meant was, a girl with your looks doesn't need a fancy education to make out. You should be in New York or Chicago or L. A., right now, knocking down fifty an hour as a model, maybe working in TV, even the movies."

"Uh-huh," she said. "Listen, Mr. Marchand, girls with good features and a nice shape are a dime a dozen in those places. I know what the score is. Maybe if I had a lot of money to pay for a big time photographer for glamor shots, for a press agent, for the works in a high priced beauty salon once a week, for the kind of clothes it takes, for a top voice and drama coach. Without those things it'd be a rat race just like anything else."

"You shouldn't have any trouble getting somebody to finance you."

"That's a nice, polite word for it," she said. She saw him staring at the bulging front of her blouse. Her voice froze a little. "You mean somebody like you, Mr. Marchand?"

He looked up at her eyes again. They stared right back at him, steadily, almost defiantly. "Ray," he said.

"What?"

"My first name. Ray. Never mind the Mr. Marchand bit. I feel old enough, being married to a woman like Gladys, without that."

"Well, Ray, then," she said. "I'm sorry, Ray, but sometimes I get a little tired of guys coming in here and giving me the dumb little country girl treatment."

"Include me out of that group. I wasn't speaking for myself. Hell, Nila, I haven't got a cent of my own. My wife's the one with the rocks."

She started to say something but then, from the lake, there came faintly the sound of an outboard motor. They both looked out toward the lake and saw a boat, about a quarter mile out, heading in.

"Here comes your wife, now. I'll see you. I'd better get back inside. My father likes to have hot

coffee waiting for him when he gets back."

He watched her walk away from the car. The view was even better from the back. Because the swing of her full-rounded, tight-jeaned hips was natural and not overdone, it was twice as provocative. Watching her, Marchand felt his pulse begin to pound and his head felt hot and swollen with the blood beating through it.

"Nila!" he called out.

She stopped and half turned around, the partway twist of her body accentuating its ripely curved beauty.

"I'll be out here again," he told her. "I think I could get to like this fishing routine. I'd need a guide to take me out in a boat, though; I'm a real square landlubber. You ever available?"

"Sometimes," she said and went on into the store.

2.

Through the windshield of the car he watched his wife, Gladys, and old man Foster, who owned the camp, tie-up the boat. Then Gladys, carrying a string of several bass, all of them over three pounds, and a couple of plump crappies, walked up from the dock. Behind her, carrying the outboard motor, was Pops Foster.

They made a good pair, those two, Marchand decided, his wife, a little plumpish but generally well preserved for a woman in her fifties and Foster, about the same age but not looking it with his big, lean, rawboned body; except for the iron gray hair at the temples and a ruggedly lined face. He watched Gladys look back at Foster and jabber something so that both of them laughed.

"What the hell have they got to be so damned happy about?" he asked. "Two thirds of their dull lives already shot and they gambol about, yakking and yokking it up like school kids. Just because they've been out in a dinky boat for a few hours, throwing out a silly plug and reeling it in; out and in and if they're lucky, a couple of stupid, slimy, smelly fish get suckered into snapping at the thing? Is that it? I don't get it. . . . Now, maybe a fishing party, out on the Gulf, in a fifty foot cabin cruiser, with lots of good booze and a couple of dollies along. . . ."

Gladys came up to the car and said, "Hi, Sweetie," and took the fish around to put in the trunk compartment. Then she came back and got into the car next to him.

"Been waiting long?" she said.

"Hours," he lied.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize we were late, but Floyd—Mr. Foster—he got to telling me about going for muskies up in Michigan and the time just went by."

She leaned toward him, one hand on his shoul-

der, her lips puckered. "You were sweet to get the car fixed and run out here for me. Give Momma a kiss."

He was looking past her bent-forward head toward the Fishing Camp store and he saw Nila standing there talking to her father, only Nila was looking toward the car, at him and Gladys and she could see inside, he knew.

"Oh, come on," he told Gladys. "Act your age, will you?"

She looked up and saw the direction of his gaze and turned and looked the same way. "Oh, I see," she said. "You've met Nila. Cute-looking child, isn't she?"

"Yes," he said. "She's a walking, breathing doll. She's got me nuts, just looking at her."

Gladys laughed, heartily. "You!" she said. "I should have known you'd really go for that. I meant to tell you about her and watch you come out here, sniffing around, just for kicks."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, Buster, Nila Foster isn't one of those Tampa B-girls or peelers you're so fond of. You not only wouldn't get to first base; you wouldn't even get a turn at bat, with her. That's strictly hands off, honey, if I've ever seen it and it's going to stay that way until some court clerk hands her the piece of paper that gives her the right to some guy's name."

"Is that so? You know what I think, Gladys?" he said. She was getting under his skin so that he had to control his voice. "I think you're just trying to discourage me because you're afraid I might really go for something like that. Then you'd lose me."

Gladys stretched her plumpish, dungareed legs out under the dash and lit a cigarette. She blew smoke. "Ray," she said, "I thought we understood each other better than that. I couldn't lose you for a million babes like Nila; not for more than an hour at a time. You know why, don't you?"

"No, I don't. I know that *you* think you know why. How do you know I'm not sick and tired of being a rich old woman's husband? How do you know I don't want out?"

"Now, Ray, dear," she said, as though reproving a child. "You know not many things make me sore, but you're starting to get close. How would you like your allowance cut off for a week again?"

He told her what she could do with her allowance and smashed down on the gas pedal. The big Cad leaped forward like a live thing. In no time the speedometer was registering over ninety.

Sitting a little rigidly, now, Gladys said: "Wouldn't it be nice and convenient for you if we had an accident at this speed? That is, if I were the only one killed."

Gradually he slowed the car and neither of them said anything for a while. Then Gladys said: "Okay, honey, you win. I feel too good to fight, any more. Maybe you're right and you'll bowl Nila

right over with your beautiful looks and flashy line. Okay?"

He didn't say anything.

"Only I still doubt it," she went on, "because if the old man even catches you sniffing around her, he'll kill you. He's already thrown a drunk fisherman who asked Nila for a date, into the lake. Anyhow, she's the serious type, honey, not interested in just a fast hassle. It would take too much of your time."

He still didn't answer.

"But give a whirl, doll, if it'll make you happy," she said. "You know me, not a jealous bone in my big old body and, anyhow, we had it understood that you could have your little outside parties, so long as you're discreet and don't get too serious about anyone. Okay?"

There was no answer. Marchand didn't speak again all the way home. When they got to the house, he left the car in the drive and got out, without waiting for Gladys and went on inside by himself. He went straight to the room that had been turned over to him as a studio. He set up a clean canvas. For a number of hours he painted furiously, without stopping. When he finished, exhausted, he stepped back and examined what he had done. It was a rough but effective full length portrait of Nila Foster, as he had last seen her, half turned around to look back at him.

He saw immediately that he'd captured some alive quality that he'd never been able to put on canvas before. At the same time that it awed him a little, it brought out all the fury and frustration in him.

"Christ, what's the matter with me?" he said. "Blowing my stack over some dumb kid in a hick fishing camp!"

He slapped a brush into the oils and started splashing paint haphazardly over the portrait until it was obliterated. Then he went over and flung himself face down on the studio couch, breathing as though he'd just run a long, long way.

He lay there, thinking about Nila and the things Gladys had told him about her and the way it was with him and Gladys.

When he'd married her three years before, Gladys had been considered a hopeless alcoholic. He figured he had it made. In a few years she'd either drink herself to death or fall, have some kind of an accident and he'd be set for life. Even if it took ten years, he figured he could stand it. Then a crazy thing happened, as it sometimes does with alcoholics. She just quit drinking. Nothing spectacular happened to make her do it; she just suddenly seemed to wake up to what she was doing to herself and decided it was ridiculous. She had a little trouble sticking with it the first year but after that it didn't seem to bother her at all. It only bothered Marchand.

Then, a year ago, they'd come to Florida for a

vacation and Gladys had fallen in love with the place and they'd settled here permanently and she'd gone off on this outdoor life, fresh water fishing kick. It didn't bother her that Marchand didn't share her enthusiasm. He had his painting, she said.

That was another thing. Marchand had thought that with financial security, not having to worry about working for a living, being able to devote full time to it that he'd develop the real talent he was certain he had. But that hadn't happened. If anything, his work deteriorated, became even less imaginative.

He lay there thinking about that and how different it would be, with a woman like Nila Foster. When he awoke, it was morning. . . .

3.

At three o'clock that next afternoon, he could no longer stand it. Gladys was going into town to shop and Marchand got out his Corvette and headed out for Foster's Fishing Camp. Before he could get out of the car, Nila saw him and came out of the store. He watched her walk toward him. Today, she was wearing a dress, a summer cotton frock that was even more maddening than the outfit she'd worn the day before, though it only hinted at, instead of displaying, the lushness of her figure.

"I told you I'd be back," he said.

She acted flustered, almost scared. "What is it?" she said. "Why are you here?"

He raised his brows in surprise. "Why, to see you of course. Why else?"

She glanced behind her, out over the lake. "Listen, my father knows you're a married man and your wife's one of his best customers. You'd better get out of here."

"Where is he?"

"Out on the lake, around the bend, netting minnows. But he's liable to come back any minute."

He grinned. "What are you so upset about? I just tell him I want to go fishing and I want you as a guide and I've come to make an appointment."

"Are you crazy?" she said. "He wouldn't let me go out on that lake with a strange man."

"Oh, come on, honey. You're over twenty-one, aren't you? How eighteenth century can you get?"

"You don't know my father."

"From what you're telling me I don't even want to."

She glanced apprehensively over her shoulder again. She stamped her foot petulantly. "Will you please go away. Please. Right now, before you get me into trouble." She sounded close to crying.

He reached out of the car and caught her wrist. She tried to yank it away once and then let it stay in his grasp. Her flesh felt very smooth and warm and through his fingertips he could feel her pulse racing.

"There's got to be some time I can see you. When he isn't here, maybe? He can't be here all the time."

She shook her head, frantically and tried to pull free from his grip again. Then, her voice desperate, she said: "If I tell you, will you go, now?"

"Sure."

"Well, Mondays. Mondays there isn't much business anyway, after the weekend and we close down. He has a man come in to clean the boats and the dock, work on the motors and he usually goes into town to buy new equipment. Come back Monday."

He let her wrist slip from his hand, then and without another word, without looking at him again, she turned and ran back to the store, disappeared inside.

Trembling, his heart pumping as though after some great exertion, Marchand somehow managed to start up the car and swing around and drive back to the highway. All the way home he sang into the wind rushing past the windshield of the sports car, at the top of his lungs. He hadn't done anything like that since he was a kid of sixteen.

That night for the first time in months he was really, genuinely pleasant with Gladys. He took her out to dinner and then to a movie in town. He didn't see much of the movie, though. He kept thinking about Nila, what it was going to be like with her; he kept going over every wonderful, delightful detail of what it was going to be like, again and again. . . .

4.

The coming Monday, it wasn't anything like he had dreamed it would be. It was the worst day he'd ever spent in his life, for a while.

She was there, all right, and her father wasn't. The only other person at the Camp was a Negro, working on the boats and Nila told Marchand not to worry about him, that he couldn't get her in trouble with her father because the Negro was deaf and dumb.

She was wearing white sharkskin shorts, the kind, buckled at the sides so tightly that the edge of the material bites into the flesh and so snug all around that a man wonders how the girl ever got into them and why they don't split with her slightest movement. And for the first time Marchand really saw her legs. They were tanned not too darkly, so that they looked burnt but were the color of a Malayan woman's. The thighs and calves were in perfect proportion. No muscles or tendons showed and yet there was not the slightest flabbiness either; just taut-skinned fullness, roundness. Her waist was so tiny it cut in sharply from the arch of her hips.

The first moment he looked at her that day, Marchand just stood there shaking his head, an awed expression on his face. She gave a short, slightly

self-conscious laugh but he knew that his obvious admiration pleased her.

For a few moments they talked the meaningless, fencing, preliminary small-talk of strangers and then Nila said: "We can go out in a boat, if you'd like. I've figured out a way so that we won't be caught even if my father should come back a little early."

"Swell," Marchand said. "What's the bit?"

She told him that at the far end of the lake there was a small strip of beach to land a boat and a path leading from it to a side road. She had already towed a boat up there and left it. Now, if they drove up to that path in Marchand's car, when he was ready to leave, she'd drop him off at the strip of beach again and come back alone in the boat. She said that she often went out on the lake alone, when her father was away and he wouldn't think anything about it.

On the dirt road, near the almost unnoticeable-from-a-distance path that led to the lake, they got out of his Corvette and started through a dense stand of jackpine and punk trees and live oak, dripping with moss. Fallen needles were a soft carpet under their feet and the Florida summer heat was softened to an almost-coolness. Walking behind Nila, Marchand felt as though the two of them, here, were all alone in the world and always had been and would be and the excitement of that was almost unbearable to him.

Several times he stopped her and moved close but it didn't do him any good. She didn't make a big routine out of it. She just looked at him, softly and whispered: "No, Ray! Please, no. Please?" And so he let her alone. If anybody had ever told him anything like that could happen, he would have gone into convulsions of laughter.

They went out onto the lake in the boat and just drifted. They were in a large cove cut off from sight from the main part of the lake and the houses and fishing camps around it. There was nothing but the thick, high breeze-waved reeds around the shore and here and there a tangle of dead tree branches reaching gnarled and twisted, out of the water and herons and cranes standing in the shallows, patiently, waiting for minnows. The sun was hot on them but the over-the-water breeze kept them from perspiring. And they sat, she at one end of the boat, he at the other and talked.

He told her about the way it was and had been with himself and Gladys. She told him how it had been very rough for her and her father and it had been only in recent years that they'd had any kind of comforts. Pops Foster had started his camp with a couple of broken down old boats and a crude shanty, with only one room.

"That's why I'm sticking through college," she said. "I don't know how, but I'm going to get a lot of money, somehow, for my father and me. Maybe I'll marry somebody with money; maybe

I'll figure some way to make it. I might even try it the way you said, Ray, going to New York or California. I've been thinking about it since you mentioned it."

They talked a lot and then came the time when there seemed nothing else to talk about and suddenly he got up and moved to her end of the boat and sat beside her. "Nila," he said, very quietly, "Why won't you let me kiss you? You know how bad I want to, don't you? You know how it is with me, don't you, how it's been since the first second I saw you? Girls always do."

She turned her head away. She didn't answer.

"It's the same with you, too, isn't it?" he said. "Guys know, too. . . . And you *want* me to kiss you, so why won't you let me? I've never asked before, Nila, but I knew I had to with you. You'll let me, won't you?"

"No, Ray," she said.

"Why not? There isn't any reason, really, not any good enough reason."

"Yes, there is. Once I kiss you, Ray, I'll be finished; you could do anything you wanted to me or with me. I can't have that. You're married, Ray. I've always done everything all at once and big and for keeps. When I love a man, it's going to be that way, too. And it can't be that way with us, Ray, don't you see?"

"No," he said. "All I see is that we've got to have each other or we'll both go crazy."

It became something he couldn't control then; the hot beautiful nearness of her was too much for him.

She fought him and the strength of her surprised him. It also made him that much more desperate and determined to have her. When both of them fell to the floor of the boat, she stopped struggling quite so hard. Then, a moment later, so suddenly it surprised him, her furious writhing and twisting was no longer against what he was trying to do but with it, helping him.

5.

His head was in her lap and she was finger-combing his thick, touseled black hair. He said: "I don't know, Nila. I just don't know. Don't think I haven't thought about it, before I met you, even. I've wanted out for a long time, now but there just isn't any way. Sure, I could probably get some kind of a divorce but I wouldn't get any real loot out of it. I'd be lucky if I even got her to pay the costs. She's a stubborn old gal and if she got really riled-up, which she would, she'd fight me all the way."

Nila didn't say anything.

After a while Marchand said: "I don't expect you to understand. Anybody who hasn't really *had* a lot of money, couldn't possibly. You don't know how wonderful it is, honey. Christ, I could never go

back to being poor again. Not ever."

She sighed. "I don't blame you. I guess I do understand and I wouldn't want you to, even. If we did it that way, you'd be miserable in a few weeks and then I would, too. Remember I told you I want money, too."

"Aw, hell," he said. "We'll think of something. We'll work something out." He reached up to pull her head down to kiss him.

She pulled away. "Will we, Ray? I don't think so. I think it's pretty hopeless. I'm not sorry for what happened this afternoon. I'm glad. But it's not going to happen again. I'm not going to see you any more, Ray. This was crazy and it was wonderful while it was happening, but it's over now. I mean that."

He protested, argued, but it did no good. She remained adamant and finally she had to leave and he walked back through the pine-scented, cool, silent woods alone to his car.

The next week was hell for Marchand. He fought it every way he could; he got drunk; he went over to Tampa and blew his whole week's \$400 allowance from Gladys on a whole roomful of B-girls; he fought with Gladys constantly, but none of it did any good. He thought of Nila all the time, when he ate, when he drank, even when he slept. And as Monday came closer, he knew that no matter what, he had to see her again.

Monday afternoon, he drove out to the camp and he almost went insane when he found that Nila wasn't there. He finally learned, through the gesticulations of the deaf and dumb Negro, working on the boats, that Nila had taken one of them and gone out on the lake. Then, after much futile motioning and trying to convey his idea, unsuccessfully, he finally got through to the Negro that he'd pay him to fix a motor on one of the boats and let him go out. The Negro said no, until he saw the twenty dollar bill Marchand held out.

Marchand found her, lying on the small strip of sandy beach, in the cove, where they'd rendezvoused the week before. She must have heard the sound of the motor coming toward shore, but she never looked up. Even when Marchand beached the boat and walked over to her and kneeled beside her, she didn't look up. She lay with her eyes closed. She was wearing a strapless black bathing suit, zipped down one side.

Marchand said: "Why weren't you there, Nila? Why did you do that to me? I almost went crazy when you weren't there."

She didn't answer for a moment and he watched the deep rise and fall of the slopes of her breasts, overflowing the top of the swimsuit, showing an edge of whiteness against the tan. Then she said:

"I was afraid to be there. I guess I knew you'd come and I knew I wouldn't be able to refuse you, yet I *couldn't* see you again."

"You *are* seeing me, though. Right now."

"Yes," she said. "Even with my eyes closed. The way I've been seeing you all week."

He lowered his face against her throat and fastened on a small pulse beating there. His hand fumbled for and found the zipper of the suit. "Nila, Nila, Nila," he whispered. . . .

6.

The idea came to him, afterward, when Nila wanted them to go swimming off the little beach and he had to admit to her that he'd never learned to swim. She stared at him, amazed, as though she'd never heard of such a thing. He was a little embarrassed about it. Almost defensively, he said:

"Hell, lots of people can't, Nila."

"I suppose," she said. "I guess I've just never met any of them before."

"You've met one other," he said. "My wife. Gladys can't swim a stroke, either."

"She can't?" Nila said. Then a strange, dreamy look came into her eyes and suddenly she turned her face away. "Oh," she said. "That was terrible, awful! I—don't know what's come over me."

"What?" he said. "What are you talking about?"

"What I was thinking." She still couldn't look at him.

"What was it?"

"About your wife. It—was a terrible thing to think of, Ray, but I—well, I just couldn't seem to help it. Forget about it, please, will you? I don't even want to talk about it."

"Maybe we should talk about it." He took hold of her shoulders, his fingers digging in. "What were you thinking about Gladys, Nila? Something about the fact that she can't swim? You were thinking about her going out on the lake, all the time, weren't you? You were thinking how convenient it would be if something would happen; if a storm would come up and the boat would turn over and sink or something, weren't you?"

"No, Ray!" she said. "No, no, I wasn't."

"Yes, you were." He was talking almost breathlessly now and his mind seemed to be going wild. He was suddenly full of a weird excitement.

"All right." She turned back to face him and her lower lip protruded a little, defiantly. "It was wrong, of course, but maybe I was. Maybe I was even wishing it *would* happen, but it won't, of course."

"You mean because your father is always out there in the boat with her. Is that what you mean?"

"Of course. He's a very powerful swimmer."

"Yeah," Marchand said. He turned away from her and began pacing up and down the beach. Then he came back and stood in front of her. "But your father doesn't *have* to be out there in the boat with her from now on. Why couldn't I

suddenly decide to take up fishing? Why couldn't I start going out there in the boat with her?"

She pulled back away from him, her eyes very large and frightened looking, her mouth O'd. "Ray!" she gasped. "What are we talking about? Are we out of our minds or something? We've got to stop talking like this."

"Do we? She could fall out of the boat, couldn't she? If I happened to rock it at the wrong time or something? The lake is pretty deep, isn't it, in places?"

She nodded. "Out in the middle, it's very deep. But this is silly, Ray. It's just crazy talk. Even if it wasn't, it would be stupid. It would be so obvious. They'd get you for it, Ray. After all, the circumstances *would* be suspicious, you so much younger than Gladys and she's so wealthy. It would look awfully bad, Ray."

"Why, for Christ's sake?" he said. "It would be an accident."

"They'd wonder why you couldn't save her. You could reach out an oar to her. Then there are those two seat cushions, you know, the ones the law says have to be there, one to a person. They're life preservers, you know, filled with cork or kapok or something. All you'd have to do would be to throw her one of those."

"Yeah," he said. "You're right, I'm afraid."

She moved into his arms and she was trembling all over, now. "Ray, Ray, we've got to stop this. We can't do anything like that and you know it. You *know* it!"

"Wait a minute," he said. "The life preservers, those cushions. You've given me the answer."

She looked up at him, her eyes still frightened.

"Don't you see, honey," he said. "It's a natural. I don't push her, at all. The boat tips over. I tip it. But before I do, I get hold of her cushion, as well as my own, on some pretext. When we're both in the water, I'll shove the boat away so she can't hold onto it. I'll have both cushions. . . . Later, I'll tell them that one of the cushions just floated out of reach when the boat tipped over. I'll tell them I tried to get to her but she went down before I could reach her. With me not being able to swim, either, it's a natural. That day, before we go out, I'll make some kidding remark to your father about neither one of us being able to swim."

She pressed her whole body against him, now, her fingernails digging into his shoulder blades. "Oh, no, Ray, no!" she whispered. "Please, no, Ray. Stop it! Stop it!"

"Stop it?" He felt filled with a vicious, terrible exhilaration, the way he imagined it would feel to be soaring on some narcotic. "You can't stop something like this, Nila. It was *meant* to be—the whole thing. Don't you see?"

"No," she said again but there was less spirit in the protest, this time.

"Nila, you know how much she's worth?"

She shook her head.

"Over three quarters of a million dollars. Do you have any *idea* what it's like to have that kind of money?"

"But—would you get it, Ray, if—"

"Of course. She has no living relatives, not even distant ones. And she's never made a will. Her lawyer's got after her about it a number of times but she just treats it as a joke. She says she's nowhere near ready to die. You don't know her. She won't even admit to herself that she's beginning to get old. Not seriously."

"You'd never get away with it, Ray."

"You're crazy; it can't miss. Now I'm on the right track, all the little pieces are beginning to fall into place. You'll be on shore, watching that day. You'll see the whole thing. She stood up, we'll tell them and leaned over too far, to pull in a fish and, when she lost her balance, started to fall, she grabbed the edge of the boat and capsized it."

"It'll still look funny, Ray. I mean, you're suddenly going out with her like that, when you've never cared anything about fishing."

"I've thought of that, too, Nila. That's easy. It won't happen the first time I go out with her. Sure, I'll suddenly decide to take up fishing, to be more companionable to my wife, but what's wrong with that? Especially if the accident doesn't happen until we've already been out on the lake together three or four times. We'll make it the fourth trip, definitely."

"But suppose, even though you do go out with her, fishing, she still insists on taking my father along as a guide?"

"All right. If she wants him to go along the first time or two, okay. I let him. But then I just tell her I don't want him along any more; I just want the two of us to be alone for a change."

She rubbed her mouth softly against his shoulder. "I don't know, Ray. It's such a horrible thing to do, to even think about."

"Look," he told her. "Dreaming about getting rich, getting that kind of money by working hard for it, through a lucky break or something, is kid stuff. It's pipe-dream stuff. It never happens. You've got to have the guts and cold nerve to pull something big, to go *after* the money, to let nothing stop you. You think we'll ever get it any other way—either of us?"

She stepped back away from him and closed her eyes and put the back of her hand against her forehead.

"All right, Ray. All right. But don't let's talk about it any more. I feel a little sick and my head's starting to hurt. We can't rush right into it, anyhow. Let's think it over for a week."

"All right, honey," he said. He smiled, faintly. He was pretty sure he'd sold her. Any thinking she did about it from now on, would be the right way.

7.

That night he started right in, priming Gladys, so that she wouldn't be suspicious, later. He bought a paperback book about fresh water angling, at a drug store. He asked Gladys a lot of questions about the sport.

She looked at him curiously, said: "What's the pitch, lover? This is out of character for you."

"Maybe I'm just getting smart," he said. "I've been thinking a lot about it. I figure there must be something to this fishing gimmick, so many millions of people seem to get a charge out of it. I don't want to miss anything, but how'll I know, if I don't look into it a little."

She shook her head, wonderingly. "For the first time since I met you, you really surprise me; you've caught me off guard. Well, you won't last long at it, that's one sure thing. You just aren't the type, Handsome—even though there isn't supposed to *be* any type."

"Well, I figure a little sunshine and fresh air and mild exercise might be good for me, too. I feel pretty edgy and kind of rundown, these days. No interest in anything, even my painting, you know. Maybe it would be like a kind of therapy."

"Maybe," she said. "You'll try it once, probably, and that'll be it."

Two days later, Marchand went fishing with his wife. Gladys bought a spinning outfit and some plugs for him from Nila, in the little store. Nila scarcely looked at him, all the time and he knew for sure, then, that she was going along with him.

Pops Foster went out with them, that first time. Marchand was surprised to find that he was a likeable old guy, who knew how to handle a boat and seemed to have an uncanny instinct about where they'd find fish. He had a laconic, dry sense of humor, too, Marchand learned and seemed to be surprisingly intelligent in a shrewd, native sort of way. Following Foster's advice, carefully, Marchand landed his first fish, a three and a half pound bass, on his fourth cast. In a little less than three hours they had taken their limit and in spite of himself, Marchand was excited and happy about the expedition. He didn't have to fake it.

On the way back, Foster watched Marchand examining the catch and said: "Reckon the bug's bitten your mister pretty hard, Miz Marchand. You probably won't be able to keep him away from the lake, from now on."

Gladys chuckled. "If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it. But the real test'll be when we spend a few hours out here some day, one of those bad days, and don't even get a strike. That separates the men from the ribbon clerks in this sport."

Marchand just grinned at them.

That night, in bed, he thought about all that had happened. But by then he'd forgotten the excitement of the sport, itself. Another, greater excitement

seized him. The first big step had been taken. And both Gladys and old man Foster had been sold on his enthusiasm. There would be no cause for suspicion on that score. He wished he could see Nila alone for five minutes, just to tell her how well it was going. But he knew that wouldn't be wise. It would be best to stay completely away from her from now until it was all over and probably even for some time after that. It might even be best if they waited until the end of the summer and she started back to College, before he saw her again. It would probably look bad for him to go back to the lake where his wife had drowned. Just thinking about waiting that long before he could hold Nila's hot young writhing body close to his own again almost made him sick; made him feel empty and depressed. But he would have to be patient.

Two days later, Gladys was ready to go fishing again. She didn't seem surprised that Marchand volunteered to go with her.

She just shrugged and said: "After today, you'll probably have had it. We probably won't have much luck. There's quite a wind and the lake will be plenty choppy. But we'll see."

They got out to Foster's camp about three o'clock in the afternoon. There was no sun; the sky was completely overcast and a stiff wind was blowing off the lake. On the way out, Marchand had suggested that this time they go out alone. He said that he wanted to see what he could do by himself, without a guide supervising his every move. Gladys didn't seem too surprised and offered almost no protest.

Both old man Foster and his daughter, Nila, were on the dock, when Marchand and his wife shoved off, with Gladys sitting in the stern, operating the outboard. Just before they did so, Gladys shouted over the roar of the motor: "Floyd, keep your fingers crossed that we don't run into a snag and bust a hole in this scow. Neither one of us can swim, you know."

Floyd Foster showed his big strong teeth in a grin and shouted back: "You won't be in any danger. A lot of the lake is shallow. Anyhow, you've got those cushion life preservers."

Then the motor roared louder and they eased away from the dock. Gladys increased throttle as they cleared the narrow canal leading into the dock and got out onto the lake proper. Out on the water the wind was stiffer than ever and as the 15 horse motor revved up to full speed, the lake's choppy whitecaps slapped viciously against the raised prow, as though determined to pound the little craft to pieces.

When Marchand saw that instead of following the shore line toward one of the coves where they'd fished the last time, Gladys was heading straight out toward the deep center of the lake, his heart began to wallop crazily against his ribs.

Cupping his hands about his mouth to be heard

over the shriek of the wind and the roar of the motor, he shouted: "Where are we going?"

"Out in the middle," Gladys shouted back. "When it's windy and choppy like this, the fish often stay out in deep water. We'll give it a try out there for half an hour, anyhow, using deep-running plugs. Okay?"

He shook his head. The excitement in him was beginning to get unbearable. Everything was setting it up for *today*. If he had the nerve to take advantage of it, he wouldn't have to wait for two more trips. *It could be today*. He remembered Gladys' remark to Foster about them not being able to swim. She was steering. Foster would remember that, tell the police that, so they'd know it was Gladys' idea to go out into the deep middle of the water. It was made to order for him, today. All he had to do now was find the final courage to go through with it.

In another few minutes, they were in dead center of the lake and Gladys cut the motor. When they drifted to a stop, heading into the wind, Gladys threw out the stern anchor.

"Hurry up and get that bow anchor in, too, honey-bunch," she told Marchand. "So we won't keep swinging around."

He watched her, standing up there in the stern, leaning way over, easing the heavy anchor down into the water. Something inside of him, shouted: "*Now! Now! You've got a perfect opportunity and the longer you wait the more likely you are to lose your nerve. A thing like this, you do fast, at the first big chance and the less thinking about it, the better.*"

Then he glanced back toward the shore and his heart felt as though it had dropped into his stomach. Two figures were still standing on the dock, watching them out here. Nila *and* her father. They would *both* see what he did if he did it now. He couldn't do it, now.

"Goddamn that old goat," he thought. "Why can't he stop gawping and go back about his business?"

Angrily, he reached down and picked up the chained cinder-block that was used as the bow anchor, squatting a little, to put the strain of the weight on his legs instead of his back. He didn't ease the anchor into the water the way Gladys had. In his temper, he heaved it in with a great splash that sloughed water over him and into the boat. At the same time, the effort to heave the heavy block and the sudden release of its weight, made him lurch, almost lose his balance. He had just recovered it and was about to turn around when he felt something digging into the small of his back. He twisted his head, yelling in protest.

Unbelievably, he saw Gladys holding an oar, the blade of which she'd set against the middle of his spine and now her face was twisted partly in an evil grin and partly from the strain of her effort as she shoved against the oar with all her might.

Marchand felt himself being thrust ludicrously off balance, his arms, flailing. He felt the sound of his own screaming being whipped away from his mouth by the strong wind as he went headlong over the side of the boat.

Just before he hit the water, he twisted and saw Gladys still standing in the boat, clutching one of the cushion life preservers against her chest and hurling the other one out of the boat on the opposite side from him.

He hit the water and had a momentary surprised awareness that it wasn't cold; it was actually luke warm, near the surface. He went under and a quantity of the brackish tasting water rushed into his mouth before he could close it, choking him, making his eyes feel as though they would pop. He thrashed violently and finally surfaced. When his head broke into the air, he coughed out water and tried to gulp in air. He was looking squarely at the boat, swung around so that it was almost ten yards away from him, now and saw Gladys, holding the cushion-preserver against her chest with one hand

and clutching the gunwale of the small boat with the other, while she stood, furiously rocking the boat, trying to capsize it. Marchand was starting to go down again, when he saw the boat go over, saw Gladys pitch into the water, still clutching the life preserver, a good twenty feet away from him.

As Marchand started to sink again, he flailed frantically, trying to force himself toward her. But the effort only made him seem to sink faster.

The last thing Marchand thought was what a prize fish he had been. Just like a stupid, greedy, unsuspecting bass, he'd gone for the lure they'd thrown in front of him—Nila. And now that it was too late, Marchand could see how a woman like Gladys could get tired of him and fall for a man like Floyd Foster, her own age, her own type.

The fact that he knew now, for sure, that Nila had been in on it from the first moment, had suckered him so beautifully from beginning to end, was a blow so sickening that he almost welcomed the big, swelling, swelling blackness that was filling his head to bursting.

