

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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As HE HELPED her down the steps leading from the Florida resort hotel to the beach, he sensed the stares from lounging bathers. She was ravishingly beautiful in the two-piece white swim suit with her wealth of thick black hair. He sensed their sudden pity, their embarrassment at knowing him. He hated it.

"I want to lie in the sun, darling," she said.

She would never know how he felt. Tall, rangy, darkly tanned in khaki shorts, there was something haunted in Guy Dennison's gaunt face.

"Did you bring a book?" she asked. "You could read to me again."

"I brought one down when I set up the umbrella." "Which book, darling?"

"One I've been reading to you—about Alaska."

He watched grimly as she stretched out on the blanket, and stared up at the sun she couldn't see. The bandages across her eyes were the smallest Doctor Allmyre could devise. She wore large dark glasses over the bandages and they only showed around the edges. But anybody could tell.

He sprawled beside her. They were a yard from the cool shade of the big red beach umbrella. He wished to hell they were beneath it, in the canvas chairs.



A Noveltte

by **GIL BREWER**

meet me in the dark

Dennison's wife was blind, so Dennison took care of her. But he wasn't taking such good care of himself . . .

"The Gulf must be beautiful today," she said.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Real calm."

He watched a girl, far down the beach, picking up shells and throwing them into the water. A few feet away a young sunburned couple sipped frosted drinks.

It had been six lousy months since Rome chanced to enter his workroom in the garage up in Quebec. Metal working was his hobby. He'd been grinding brass for a lamp on a wheel. Rome leaned over, laughing, and received an abrupt, deadly shower of white-hot brass filings in both eyes. There followed a series of ticklish operations.

"It'll be months before we can take the bandages off for good," the doctor told them. *"But I must warn you. If they come off before that time, she'll probably see fine for an hour or so. Only it won't last. There will be nothing we can do then—ever. Why don't you two take a vacation . . . ?"*

The doctor had showed Guy how to apply fresh bandages in a dark room. It was hellish to think about.

Nothing was the same any more. She always read a great deal. Now he had to read to her all the time. Morning, afternoon, evening, and bedtime.

"Guy? Couldn't I go in the water?"

"Up to you," he said. "If you like, of course."

"It troubles you. We won't bother."

He held his breath. "Don't talk like that."

"I can't help my imagination," she said. "I'm sorry." Fumbling, she touched his arm. "I'm sorry, Guy."

It shouldn't hit him the way it did. He heard it too much lately. He started to comfort her, then every muscle in his body went taut and the sensation of abrupt panic sent sweat beading at every pore.

A girl in a Bikini bathing suit stood out there by the water, staring at him. She carried a white terry-cloth robe and a small alligator purse with a long strap. It was the same girl he'd noticed down the beach, throwing shells in the water.

It was one girl he never wanted to see again. Not since that night four days ago. But there were too many people around for him to do anything, motion her away. They all knew him and his wife.

The girl moved toward him, her golden hair shimmering in the violent sunlight. Her body was full, lithe, soft, and she smiled at him.

Her name was Janine Bonney. She was maybe nineteen, and beautiful in a way that got a man where it was tender.

He looked at her, shaking his head slightly.

She gave a tiny nod, then began writing in the sand four feet from his side with a crimson-tipped toe.

"BAR—" she wrote. "NOW."

She glanced once at him to see if he got it, then crossed it out with a single flourish of her foot, and

moved lithely off toward the steps.

2.

He looked quickly around to see if anyone had noticed. Don't be stupid, he thought. They noticed.

"Wish I could walk around like that," Rome said.

"Like what?"

"That woman who just went by."

"I didn't see any woman. Only an old man."

"It sounded like a woman. They walk different from men." She sighed. "One thing, I can't watch you ogling all the naked female flesh around here."

He forced a laugh. "Why ogle with you right here?"

"Don't kid me," she said. "Men are all alike."

He checked to see if she were smiling. She was. It was all right. Lately she'd shown touches of an evil jealous streak he'd never before noticed.

It scared him a little.

He could never afford scandal. He had plenty of money, but every cent depended on his leading an unsullied existence; staying married till death. His crazy alcoholic father had seen to that before he died. One slip and he would lose everything.

Every time he got on the subject, he began to scheme. He couldn't help himself. He no longer loved Rome. Rome was a bore. It grew worse daily. It ate into him like a raw, seething acid, and never let him be.

There was even that chance she would never see again—ever. What then!

He would have to make some excuse so he could go up to the bar and see what Janine wanted. He'd have to get rid of the girl for good. She was a lush and cooperative package, but she threatened a luxurious life.

He told himself to relax. Rome didn't know Janine.

"Baby," he said. "I'm going to run up to our rooms—get my sunglasses."

"You could use mine," she said. "It's really very silly, my wearing sunglasses."

"They wouldn't fit." He eyed the bottle of sun-tan lotion on the far edge of the blanket. "I'll get the sun-tan lotion, too. Sun's fierce today."

He stood up, scooped the small bottle of oil into his palm, tossed it on one of the beach chairs, just in case.

"Don't wander around, now," he said softly.

She made a small sound which wasn't quite a laugh.

Janine was waiting at the rustic bar on the outside gallery. A juke box boomed rock 'n' roll.

"Hello, Hungry," the girl said.

She called him "Hungry." He was—for the kind of life he wanted to lead but couldn't.

He had to act sore now, and get rid of her.

"Did I surprise you?" she said, giving him the look; the one with all the hot promise in it.

He slid onto the stool beside her, ordered a bottle of beer he didn't want. Janine poked at a frozen daquiri with a long green straw. The white beach robe was piled on the bar with the alligator purse. She was lushly gorgeous and practically naked in the tight, scant orange kerchiefs bound around her full hips and breasts. Her lips would taste hot and soft and salty. It made him suck his breath with instinctive, primitive emotion.

"Do something for me," he said.

"Depends, honey."

"Go far away someplace."

Her laugh was a throaty, low-down laugh, the same laugh he'd liked so much a few nights ago.

"You flip me, Hungry," she said. "You really do."

There was no breeze. He began to perspire heavily. Janine looked as cool as a head of lettuce. Only she would be hot to the touch.

"Look, baby," he said. "I mean it. Scat."

"My friends call me Bunny," Janine said. "You called me Bunny the other night." She tapped his shoulder. "I'm wearing a new bathing suit." She snickered. "Just for you. Like?"

She showed him the bathing suit, leaning away from him on the stool, which only seemed to thrust everything closer. Her knee touched his. Then she was laughing at him with her eyes, with the bright slash of her red mouth. She crossed her slimly-plump legs.

"You're scared she'll find out about us. Rome, your wife. That wouldn't be so hot, would it, Hungry?"

He heard the hoarse sound of his voice. "What do you know about my wife?"

"Everything," Janine said. "About you, too." Her voice dripped sarcasm. "A real-estate salesman from Tampa, on vacation." Her eyes were hard. "What a line!"

It jarred him. He didn't like it at all.

She patted him on the thigh. "We could go to my place, like the other night. It's not far down the beach."

"I was plastered the other night. You know that."

"Let's say tomorrow night? Tennessean? That'll give your sweet wife time to be in bed and asleep." She smiled, brushed thick blonde hair away from her face. "You were quite the sport before you met her, huh?"

He frowned, sensing trouble. He remembered the man he'd met in the bar the night he'd ended up with Janine. Steve Larkin. Larkin had introduced them.

He wanted to leave. But now he couldn't. He had to find out what she meant.

"Traveled all over the world, didn't you, Hungry? Met your wife in Montreal. She was the daughter of a college professor. Bet she fell like a

ton for big handsome you, with your yacht anchored in the river."

He felt too shaky to speak.

"Guy Dennison," Janine said. "Adventurer-playboy-extraordinary." She laughed softly. "The Dennison millions. Tell me truthfully, Hungry. How much's left of them little ol' millions?"

How did she know these things? His throat was dry, and the muscles around his heart formed a kind of tight cramp that would not relax.

"A million or so, maybe? You're rich—and, honey, I'm going to be rich, too. You're going to help me."

He knew. It was obvious. He felt utterly defeated.

3.

Somebody slapped his shoulder. He reacted anxiously, startled. It was Steve Larkin, half tight. Larkin was a red-haired six-footer who apparently did little but lush it up, tell jokes, and hunt women. He wore a white shirt and gray flannels. Larkin had seen him leave Janine's motel the morning after they'd been drinking.

"Gonna make another night of it, hey?" Larkin said.

"Just leaving," Guy said, thinking I can't leave!

"Guy doesn't feel well, Steve," Janine said.

"Darn shame," Larkin said, trailing whisky fumes.

"Look, Steve," Janine said. "See you later, huh? There's something I want to discuss with Guy."

Larkin frowned. "I'm deeply hurt," he said. "But don't you two run out on me." He whacked them both on the shoulder and left the bar.

Guy rose unsteadily from the stool.

"Better wait," Janine said. "You haven't seen the pictures yet."

The cramp around his heart tightened.

"You know," she said. "Pix. Snaps. Photos. They're real nice of us, too. You and me. I'm sure you'd like to see 'em—maybe you'd want 'em all for yourself, even."

"What are you trying to do?" His voice was hoarse.

"Maybe you'd better come over tonight, 'stead of tomorrow, huh? I'll show you the pictures. Maybe you'd like to come over, anyway. It's okay with me. I like you, Hungry—really, I do."

He turned sharply and walked blindly off. He heard her soft laughter following him.

He found Rome where he had left her. Where else could she go? He stood there a moment, with everything swarming through him, like heavy sludge.

"You've been gone awfully long," Rome said.

He winced. She was sitting up with her hands clasped around her knees. He began to hate her all the more. If he were free, he'd be able to handle this, somehow.

"I was thirsty—stopped for a beer."

"Get your sunglasses?" she asked.

"Yeah. Sure." Now, she'll ask me for them, he thought. Ask to try them on. He should have picked them up. "The oil, too," he said. He snatched the bottle of lotion off the canvas beach chair.

"Guy? I'd really like to go in the water."

"Okay."

"Just wading, of course." She put her head down, took her lower lip between her teeth, then laughed with short bitterness. "Think of it. *Me—wading!*"

She had been an expert swimmer and had taken several trophies, both here and abroad. He knew it troubled her.

He said, "Wouldn't you rather go in after lunch?"

"Let's go in now."

If she made him stay out here all afternoon, he'd go mad. He dropped the bottle of sun-tan lotion, held her arm, pulled her to her feet.

She came against him, put her arms around him. It embarrassed him. What if people saw—people who had just seen him with the blonde?

"Guy," she said, "I'll never let you go—ever!" There was something savage about it. "I love you more than you'll ever realize." She paused. "Kiss me!"

"Not here, Rome."

Her lips were already against his, and there was something savage about the kiss, too, and the hard pressure of her body. Then she turned away.

He walked her to the water. He really wanted to run down the beach to Janine's motel; make her talk—wring the damned truth out of her.

They started into the water, close together. The fact that they had once been extremely happy together seemed outlandish and impossible.

"Is the color like the Mediterranean?"

Would she never cease? Who in hell cared what color the goddamned water was? It was wet, wasn't it?

The water was up to their chests.

"It's delicious," she gasped. "Look, I can float."

"Be careful, Rome."

She was a short distance away. He watched her.

"Guy," she said quietly. "I'm going to swim."

"Cut it out. You know what Allmyre said."

"My eyes are closed. Here, you hold my glasses." Her hair was already soaked. "Don't try to stop me, Guy!"

He dove for her, grabbed her arm just in time.

"What's got into you?" he said curtly. He felt her go limp under his hands. He felt her resignation.

"All right," she said. "We'll go back to the beach. I'll lie in the sun like a good girl."

and they returned to the blanket. He felt the stares of people around them. And right then, it struck him.

She's becoming bitter, he thought. She doesn't seem to care. What will my life be, with a blind woman?

Yes—he could get her out there in the water and urge her to swim. Tell her it was all right, so long as she kept her eyes closed. Tell her he'd been wrong. It wouldn't hurt anything. He would swim beside her. Get her far out in the Gulf and keep her headed out and tell her she was swimming toward shore. Then, once out far enough so people on the shore couldn't see—he'd put her head under water and hold it there until. . . .

The bathers on the beach must have seen them today, heard Rome insist he let her swim. He would say he'd been unable to stop her. She was an expert swimmer; that could be checked. Despondent, she'd gotten away from him.

He would be free—free of the damnable position his father had left him in. Free to fight Janine Bonney, or sleep with her. He'd be able to live again.

The biting inclusion in his father's will held only during his marriage. He was supposed to marry but once. In case of divorce, he would lose the inheritance, and the entire monies would revert to charity. He'd only been left the money because he'd managed to marry before his father's death, and soft-soap him into believing he'd turned over a new leaf. Rome had been full of fun and laughter . . . no more—he hated every moment.

His father had become a heavy boozier toward the end, and didn't want his only son to end up the same.

If Rome died, the money would be his. The old man hadn't figured he would kill her.

But if a breath of scandal touched the Dennison name, he would lose the money, too. The lawyers would fix that.

"Guy?" Rome said. "I'll never try that again. Don't worry. I don't know what came over me."

He couldn't trust his voice.

"I'm sorry, if I frightened you," she said softly.

He stared at her. What if he *couldn't* talk her into it? What if she meant what she said; that she wouldn't try swimming again . . . never go near the water? He couldn't drag her across the beach and throw her in.

He'd have to talk with Janine—make sure.

He thought back to that night; sneaking out when Rome was asleep, meeting Larkin, drinking, then Larkin introducing him to Janine—and waking on the strange bed the next morning, when Janine showed from another room, carrying a coffee pot. He started dressing.

"Fixing some breakfast, honey," she said. "Stick around." She had on a white Spanish mantilla, draped over her shoulders. That was all she wore—

that and a smile and the coffee pot.

"I've got to go. I'll see you."

She came to the door with him, was rubbing him good-by, when Steve Larkin drove past in his car.

Steve ran him back to the hotel.

"You liked Bunny, eh? She's quite a kid."

He sneaked in just as Rome awakened. He told her he'd got up bright and early to see the sunrise.

"I slept like a log," she said. "I sleep an awful lot these days."

You telling me, he thought. "It's the air," he said. "It does that to you."

He had figured he would never see the blonde again.

5.

Now, this afternoon, like all afternoons, he had to read to Rome while she lay in bed. The book about Alaska. He saw no possible way to break from her long enough to see Janine. He felt nervous and ill. He read monotonously, his thoughts a blocked moiling of fear and worry.

He wanted to tell Rome her lipstick was cock-eyed, but didn't. He wasn't sure how she would react. It was sloppy. He supposed she would eventually cease wearing lipstick.

Beneath the light white dressing gown she wore, her shape was as lush and exciting as ever.

"Guy?" Rome said. "Come over here beside me."

He laid the book open on the end table and sat beside her. She took his hands fiercely and pulled him down to her.

All he could think was, What am I going to do?

"This life is boring to me, too, darling. But I can't do anything about it," she said.

"Stop talking like that, Rome."

He ran his hands through her hair, forcing himself to be gentle. She had taken a shower, but her hair was still stiff from the salt water. It irritated him, like everything else about her. Abruptly, he recalled his hands running through Janine's hair—soft, fine, cool. Hot blood rushed and throbbed in his head.

"Bet you'd like to get out," she said. "Have fun."

He sat up perspiring. "Of course not."

"You'd say that, anyway."

The room was quiet for a time and he listened to her breathe. He felt curiously afraid of her just then, and was unable to imagine why.

"Kiss me, Guy."

He kissed her, suddenly conscious of the lipstick.

"You can read a little more, now. Then I think I'll take a nap." She stroked his damp hands. "Guy, my darling—I don't know what I'd ever do without you."

"You'll never have to do without me."

He picked up the book, closing it accidentally,

and returned to the chair. He was so worried he couldn't recall where they had left off. She finally told him.

Fully clothed, he lay on his bed, waiting in the dark. It was after ten. Rome would soon be asleep. The connecting doors between their bedrooms was closed.

"Might read late," he'd told her. "Might wake you."

There was a breeze off the Gulf, but he perspired a great deal. He couldn't turn on the air-conditioning, because he wouldn't be able to hear how she breathed. He had made her the excuse that it wasn't healthful. He lay rigid, eager to get going. But what if Rome woke up, came to him for something—found him gone. . . .

He lit another cigarette, took two drags, mashed it in the overflowing tray. There had been other women, but he'd never fouled up before. Lawyers his father had appointed were satisfied he had settled down with Rome.

Rising, he cautiously opened the connecting door, moved to her bed, and listened. She was asleep. He was momentarily overcome with nostalgia. Maybe he could endure it. Rome might see again and become her old self.

Black laughter threatened to burst past his lips.

They would be broke. All the money would be gone paying blackmail. But maybe there was a way out.

He left by the door from his room, and walked down the sandy path to the beach.

6.

"Well, Hungry—you finally showed."

Janine wore yellow shorts and halter. He had to admit that she looked lovely. Inside she was a devil.

There was a bedroom and modernistically furnished living room and kitchenette. A beige rug covered the floor and soft music filtered through the partially closed bedroom door.

"All right," he said. "Let's get on with it."

"You're terribly brusque, Hungry. Care for a drink?"

He shook his head, watching her.

"I have some excellent scotch," she said.

"No doubt."

She shrugged, opened a cupboard above a small bar separating the kitchenette from the living area. Turning, she held a black automatic in her hand.

"I know how to use this," she said. "Just in case."

He watched her lay the gun on the bar and draw something else from the cupboard. She turned, smiling.

"These photographs," she said, flapping the packet against her thigh. "You try to destroy them,

it won't hurt. I have the negatives. Developed 'em myself."

He reached and snatched them from her, filed quickly through them. They were expert. They were also obvious, like a black burn in the center of a white linen tablecloth. Whoever had taken them stood by the bedroom window, outside. Eight in all, they weren't blurred. Janine and he lay on the bed with a bottle, naked.

"This is good of me, here," she said, leaning close to point with a crimson-tipped finger. "Of course, my hair's sort of messed up—but what could you expect? And both of us are nice and sharp and clear." She paused. "Look—you can even read the label on the bottle."

He wanted to strangle her. She was calm, matter-of-fact. As if they were looking at the family album.

He had the impulse to tear them up, eat them—he hurled them showering across the couch. Everywhere he looked he saw himself and Janine, naked on the bed.

"Don't you like the pictures, Hungry?"

He grabbed her arm, shook her back and forth. He hurled her away as he had the pictures. She tripped and sprawled violently across the couch, her hair shimmering in a vicious snarl under the indirect lighting.

"Steve!" she cried, coming to her knees.

Guy turned swiftly. Steve Larkin entered the room, the bedroom door whipping back against the wall. Larkin's face was red, eyes inflamed. Guy dove at him. Larkin stepped in and swung a savage right that rushed in a blur toward Guy's face.

He felt the sodden impact. The rock-hard shock threw him dizzily back against the couch on top of Janine. She squealed, squirming, and Larkin sprang at him, pulled him up by the shirt front and slammed him again. This time it was the left eye.

"The gun!" Janine gasped.

Guy spun to his feet, ready for Larkin. But the other man had snatched the gun from atop the bar. Guy sank back on the couch. Larkin breathed heavily, then put the gun back on the bar.

"I'll bruise," Janine whispered. "He marked me, damn him!"

"Shut up," Larkin said. "You couldn't do like I asked, could you? Always got to dress it up. You're a fool, Bunny—" Reaching out, he slapped her face hard.

"Steve," she said. "Don't *act* like that."

Larkin breathed heavily. "You'd foul things up fine, all right." He smeared sweat from his face. "Suppose he got the gun—you can't trust a guy like him. Damn you, Bunny—I'd like to. . . ."

"You're drunk, Steve!"

"Not half drunk enough. Sometime, by God, I will be!"

"You two are a great pair," Guy said. His left eye was swelling, the pain ricocheting inside his skull.

"Sure," Larkin said. "We work by flat rate. We want a hundred thousand. That's what buys the pictures—and the negatives."

It awed him. For a moment, he almost laughed.

"You'll pay, Hungry, m'boy."

A hundred thousand dollars for eight photographs. They were mad.

"My face is swelling," Janine said.

Larkin's voice was nasty. "You been ripe for it."

She rose, took two hesitant steps toward the man. "You can't talk to me like that, you big pig!"

"No?" he said brightly. He lunged toward her, slammed his hand against the other side of her face. She smashed against the wall.

Larkin mopped more sweat off his brow. "Now your face'll really have something to swell about."

She sobbed in her throat, turned and rushed into the bedroom. The door slammed.

Larkin stared at the door, then came over to Guy.

"About that hundred grand," he said.

"How could I get hold of that much money?"

"Don't give me any sob stuff. Wire your New York bank. We know all about you, Dennison. You'll pay. You know damned well you've got to—right?"

They watched each other.

"You talk like a long-playing record when you're loaded," Larkin said. "Of course, we helped you along with a dash of chloral in your drink to numb you up—then a needle. You jabbered your head off."

They had him pinned to the mat. He saw no way out. He didn't have a hundred thousand dollars to throw away—there were no more millions; that was gone long ago. His father had left debts, he'd made more. Most of his money was tied up in stocks, which gave him a healthy income. It would mean selling some of them, making the lawyers suspicious.

Guy rose unsteadily from the couch, walked past Larkin to the door.

"Okay," Larkin said. "There's no hurry. Tomorrow night, you'll give us the word. Right here, same time as tonight. Either that, or we give you the business."

Guy looked at the man. Larkin was grinning.

"Newspapers?" Larkin said. "Stuff like that?"

Guy said nothing. He walked outside, and started down toward the beach. He moved like a sleepwalker—or maybe a Zombie, because he felt dead all over.

Back in his room, he donned pajamas, then switched on the light and started for Rome's room, to check. He stopped short. He'd left a long row of sandy footprints from his door, across the maroon carpet. He brushed them patiently away, and it made him feel better.

In the bathroom, he inspected his eye. By morning it would be a technicolor extravaganza. He

bathed it in cold water. It didn't help. He went in and checked on Rome. She was sleeping deeply, as always.

He thought of her swimming far out into the Gulf, directionless, tiring—until she drowned.

He returned to his bed, stretched out. One hundred thousand dollars . . . a one hundred thousand dollar piece.

He lay there straining, smothering the black laughter with his hand over his mouth.

Dawn came and he finally slept. He dreamed—of water, death—and darkness.

8.

They sat on the beach the next day under the umbrella in the canvas chairs. Rome was really in the sun, but he was in the shade. He would have shriveled up and died in the sun like the carcasses of dead fish that floated onto the beach—to be meticulously gathered up by their tails and taken quickly away in a paper towel by one of the colored houseboys.

Dead fish did not exist here.

Everybody had gawped openly at his colorful eye.

"Guy? I asked you something. What's the matter?"

"Just a headache, is all."

"You seem to have a lot of them lately, Guy."

He wanted to yell, get stinking drunk, anything but sit here and listen to her inane chatter. It was killing him by degrees. Next, she'd want him to read to her. About Alaska. Eskimo villages. Sea lions. . . .

"I can listen to the radio, anyway," she said. "I can't see anything. I never used to listen to the radio. I used to laugh at those soap-operas—but, you know something? They hook you. They really do, Guy. It's getting so I can't bear to miss some of them. I suppose it sounds funny. I never realized I'd like them."

He groaned inwardly. He could see them in years to come, sitting around the goddamned radio, commenting critically on the witty dialogue in the soap-operas.

He could feel her own pitiful condition, her self-pity, clawing out with steel fingers, snarling him along with her in their inevitable web of slow mental stagnation and soul destruction.

Or, worse still: "*You watch the TV, darling, and I'll listen and you can tell me what's happening.*"

They sat there. Neither spoke for some time.

He finally said, "Rome? What say we take a dip?"

The meaning behind the words was orgasmic to him, tossing him wildly up on a violent thrill of crazy exaltation. He hung there, cresting.

"Now, Guy?"

He hung there, savagely suspended, his fingers

rigid in the sands beside the chair, a voice screaming monstrosously in his head, *Say yes, say yes, say yes!*

"I must tell you something, Guy—a secret."

He continued to hang there, every muscle taut, his body a bent spring of emotion.

"I'm never going swimming again," she said.

He collapsed. His fists dug into the sand. He hurled it showering before him, listening to her words as she spoke on, through a strange red fog.

She spoke softly. "Yesterday, I tried something very foolish, Guy. I was despondent. I wanted to—well, I was actually thinking about suicide, darling. I'm over it now." She found his arm, gripping it with her fingers, her face strained toward him. "I didn't want to be a burden to you. I was being selfish. I know you love me as I love you. I realized I frightened you. You'll never have to worry again. I swore to myself, I would never go into the water again, Guy—never."

He had a very slim hold on himself now. "Isn't— isn't that rather drastic?"

"Anyway—that's how it is."

He patted her hand. He hoped she didn't feel how tense he was. "I really wouldn't worry, then," he said. "So you could go swimming. We'll go together. I'll be right with you—every minute. And—I promise, I won't worry." The last words nearly choked him.

"No, Guy. I know you're trying to make me feel better. But I'll never go into the water again."

He knew she meant it. He lay back with his eyes tightly closed. He lay that way for some time.

The chance was gone. Time was running out, trickling away, like the sands washed by the Gulf.

Opening his eyes, he saw Janine, wearing the orange Bikini. He closed his eyes, sitting in a dark stupor.

"Hello, there, Hungry!"

It nearly jerked him out of the chair. He snapped his eyes open. She stood before him, flaunting herself.

"Hello," he said weakly.

She winked at him, then moved off. She had a terrific walk, and every eye on the nearby beach followed her.

All except Rome.

"Who was that, Guy?"

He didn't know what to say. "One of the maids," he said. "The one cleaned up our rooms this morning."

"Oh. Did she call you that—Hungry?"

"I guess so. Odd, isn't it?" Every pore in his body dripped perspiration. "Said something this morning, about my looking hungry, or something."

"I see," Rome said. "Is she pretty?"

"Hardly." He forced a laugh. It sounded forced. "Anyway, she's not my type." He rushed madly on without the slightest idea of where he was going, like a car out of control on icy pavement. "Besides—she's a colored maid."

"She didn't sound it."

"That's because everybody down here talks with an accent. You're used to it."

He was out of breath. It was one hell of an experience. He was drenched as if he'd been swimming. He felt he was dying. He had to have a drink—immediately.

He made an excuse and headed for the bar.

9.

Janine met him at the steps. He wanted to shout at her, find out why she had pulled such a crazy stunt as to speak to him down there. But they were in full view of everybody. They walked up the steps toward the hotel bar and her plump hip brushed against him.

"Gee, Hungry—it was like your wife looked at me."

"Well, she didn't." He turned and grasped her arms. "Why did you do that? Everybody saw you—she's not deaf!"

Janine didn't smile. "So you wouldn't forget what can happen. It was my idea—and I don't want a drink."

"I've got to talk with you, Janine!"

"Nuts."

He was desperate. "Bunny!"

She fluffed her hair and smiled. "Tonight, honey—tonight. Maybe tonight I'll be real nice to you." She laughed softly and moved back down the steps, her hips bunching suggestively, her hair golden and glorious in the sun. He went to the bar, then returned to Rome.

"Did you enjoy your beer, Guy?"

"Oh, yeah. Fine."

"Did she have on a bathing suit, Guy?"

"Who?"

"The girl who called you hungry?"

"The maid, you mean? For God's sake, no. She had on some sort of a white uniform."

Diabolically, he would have liked to describe Janine Bonney to her. How luscious and succulent Janine was, with her ripe body bared and bulging around the scant Bikini.

Thinking desperately, he wondered if he could get Janine alone and torture her into giving up the negatives. But then he'd have to kill her to shut her up. He realized he was thinking about killing as if it were the easiest thing in the world. He laughed to himself. He had the nerve to think of killing somebody. But that was as far as it went.

All you have to do is call the police, he thought. Larkin and Janine would be off his neck. Then—the ramifications. The morning papers after they talked. He began to laugh. He couldn't stop. He roared aloud, shaking the canvas chair, his head flung back.

"Let me in on it, will you?" Rome said soberly.

"An old joke I happened to remember," he gasped.

"Tell me, Guy!" She was smiling, excited.

"For God's sake, Rome—lay off me!"

It shocked her. "Yes," she said. "All right."

On the way back to the hotel, he mumbled words of endearment to her. She was strangely quiet.

Well, tonight he would see Janine and Larkin, tell them getting the money would take some time. But he *would* pay them off, burn the prints and negatives. It was the only way. He became elated thinking about it.

He would have a little money left. Properly invested, he would make out. Maybe Rome would be okay, her old self, after she took off the bandages.

He chilled—suppose they retained certain negatives, kept them to bleed him slowly. No—he dismissed the thought.

Pay them. He would even have a drink with them. "Here's hell!" he would say. "Here's to crime, you blackguards!" Toasting the one hundred thousand. Let them have it. It was high time one of the Dennison tribe got to work and made some money, instead of spending.

In the back of his mind he knew it was all hogwash. But he kept saying the words in a kind of deadly rote.

10.

That night, stepping into the darkness of eleven o'clock, he realized he was late. He had taken no chances. Rome was sound asleep, snoring softly.

A shadow detached itself from a tall hedge of Australian pine. It was Janine. She came up to him, wearing a white dress that rustled as she moved.

"Shhhhhhh!" he warned.

"Listen, Hungry," she said, gripping his arm. "I thought I'd come and meet you. Steve's pretty high—rampaging around. I'm a little frightened."

"Tough."

"Anyway," she said. "Let's go to my place. Steve'll be along later. You got the money with you, honey?"

He didn't answer. Make the witch wait.

"Just imagine what people will say when they see those pictures! You and little me, all alone, like that!"

They moved down along the beach.

"Suppose I killed you, Janine—right now. I could, you know? The way I feel? Who would ever know?"

She laughed. "Don't worry. I've got insurance. That's why I can like you and everything, all at the same time."

She excited him. She was a witch, out to ruin him, yet, kind of nice as witches went. He was a typical Dennison; lusting after the very woman who

would toss him to the dogs. He didn't see how he could possibly get a hundred thousand dollars' worth. He put his arm around her, felt the lush movement of her hip.

They reached her apartment, went inside. Soft light suffused the room. She moved to the cupboard, and he saw the automatic lying there. She brought out the pictures.

"We can look at the pictures till Steve gets here. He wants to transact the business. We'll have fun, huh?"

Abruptly, he saw her for what she was. She was really sneering at him—laughing at him.

"How about a drink?" he said.

"Sorry—I'm afraid we're all out. Steve said he'd bring something. Let's sit down and look at the pictures, honey." Her voice was full of insinuation.

A thought occurred to him. He became excited.

"Listen," he said, desperately trying to keep the urgency out of his voice. "I'll go buy a bottle. Then we can have a drink, just you and me—and look at the pictures—and wait for Steve?"

She winked slyly. "I'll change into something more comfortable. There's a liquor store just down the road."

"Maybe we'd better make the most of what we have, eh?"

She banged the packet of pictures against her thigh. All he could think was—Get her plastered and get those negatives and prints from her. Her lips were very red, her eyes a deep, exciting blue.

"I'll hurry," he said, turning toward the door.

11.

The liquor store was farther down the road than he'd figured. He had no car. Getting her plastered would be a pleasure. He wasn't fool enough to think she actually went for him—but she was the type would try to get back at Larkin for how he'd acted toward her. She would probably do anything. Still, *he* was a rich man. It maybe built her ego, just being with him.

He would promise her anything—really feed her a line—maybe even try and get her to cross Larkin. Get her helpless drunk.

It was the big chance. If he could get the negatives, they'd be stopped. He saw the lights ahead: DAD'S LIQUORS.

Moments later, returning along the highway shoulder, he uncapped the fifth of whisky and took two stiff belts.

He stopped on the road in front of the motel. A motorcycle cop was sitting astride his glinting machine, joking with a man by the office.

Guy detoured around the back of the half-circle of buildings, edging among palms and azalea bushes. Pausing, he took another slug of whisky. He felt good.

It didn't last. The instant he opened the door to Janine's apartment, he knew something was wrong.

Clothes were strewn in a running heap, leading from the open bedroom door. The living room was brightly lighted. Tables and chairs were overturned. The cupboard doors flapped open. The rear door in the kitchen stood open, and he could see the Gulf of Mexico shining out there.

"Janine?" he called softly.

No answer.

"Bunny?" he called.

Leaving the front door open, he set the bottle on the floor, moved across the room. He stopped short.

Janine lay sprawled on the beige carpet, clothed in nothing but torn, sheer black panties and bra. Her features were just barely recognizable.

She was dead. Her skull had been shattered. Her beautiful blonde hair soaked now in rich dark blood that still pulsed from fresh wounds. The small black automatic lay on the floor beside her.

It was obvious. Larkin had returned, bitter with drink. He'd caught her getting ready for Guy. She'd probably defied Larkin. Larkin had lost his head, killed her, battered her to death with the blood-stained gun.

The photographs—the negatives. . . .

He sprang to the cupboard. Nothing there. He began a frantic search of the living room, the bedroom. He was lost unless he found those pictures.

Larkin had them—of course.

The apartment was a shambles. He kept searching, inspecting every drawer, every piece of clothing, behind mirrors, in the lavatory water tank, the medicine chest.

They were gone. He was back where he had started, only now there was murder on his hands.

A woman screamed. He ducked past the body of the girl toward the kitchen door. He saw the woman standing at the open front door, pointing at the body, screaming.

He rushed through the door, turned to the right and ran full tilt into Steve Larkin. Larkin was drunk.

"Dennison!" Larkin gasped. "She's dead, you hear?"

Guy swung hard at the man's face. His fist caught a shoulder and he swung again, sinking it to the wrist in Larkin's solar-plexus. He followed it with a bright left cross that splattered against the big man's face.

Larkin reeled backward. Guy leaped past him. He knew he had to get away—back to Rome—the hotel.

"Stop!" Larkin yelled, running after him.

Guy stumbled toward the beach across loose sand. "Halt!" somebody called loudly. "Halt!"

12.

His feet hit the hard-packed sand of the beach. He

heard Larkin curse, then two shots. Then another shot.

Guy sprawled flat, panting, and peered back over the edge of a low bank. The motel was flooded with light.

"Got him," somebody said. "It's him, all right. He's covered with her blood. Look at his hands."

"Oh, Lord!" a woman said. "And I must've been right next door when it happened. I knew there was something wrong about them. I heard him beating up on her. I told Howard, I said. . . ."

"All right, lady—move along, now."

Guy watched, fighting for breath. They hadn't seen him. But what matter? He had to go up there and search Larkin's pockets. The negatives would be on Larkin. He had to act fast, because if Larkin were dead, the first thing they would do was search him.

He sobbed to himself as he returned up past the palms, along the other side of the motel. He walked in the entrance, making it real jaunty. People hurried from doorways, moving toward the far end of the motel.

Nearing Janine's door, he stopped a man.

"What's up?" Guy said.

"Murder," the man said. "But they got the killer. Her husband—he's dead. What a mess!"

He went on. People had formed a circle around the body. It lay in the sand-spurs and dry grass behind the motel. Guy squeezed through the circle until he stood at the inner edge of people.

The patrolman he'd seen out front on the motorcycle knelt beside Larkin's body. He was a young cop, the bill of his cap glinting above a scowl.

"All right," the cop said. "Clear it out, now—he's dead, isn't that enough?"

A woman said, "Well, I like that!"

The cop turned to a man. "Where's a phone?"

So far the patrolman hadn't gone through Larkin's pockets. There was still time.

He had to have those negatives. He shoved over by the cop, knelt beside him, his heart tightening with panic.

"Who was he?" he asked.

He could have bitten his own tongue off. It would send the cop for Larkin's wallet.

"Who the hell are you," the cop said. "What you want?"

Desperation seized him. "Nothing," he said. His voice was strained. "I was just—" He looked at his hands, standing up. "Just wondering who he was, that's all."

The cop stared at him, frowning.

Guy shrugged and backed through the crowd. There was nothing to be done. Larkin had the pictures on him somewhere—or maybe hidden. They would be found. They might even think he, Guy Dennison, had killed Janine.

There was the woman who had looked through the door.

Had she seen him? Could she describe him?

He began to run back toward the hotel, remembering Rome. Suppose the police looked him up? How could he explain it to Rome?

He ran along the beach, now, running fast.

They would go away, leave tonight. He'd make some excuse to her. Something she would believe.

They would have to leave tonight.

Tomorrow the papers would be full of it. They wouldn't print the pictures, but the stories would be there. They would fly to New York tonight, and he'd draw all the money out of the bank tomorrow morning. That way he'd have the money—whatever he could get in cash, anyway.

Then let the story burst—damn them.

He would worry about Rome later. She would have her sight back. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. The money, though. That was what counted. He had only hours to achieve the thing. All he had to do was be in New York when the banks opened tomorrow morning.

He really knew fear now.

13.

"You awake, Rome?"

"Yes."

She had moved when he looked through the connecting doors, rolled over on the bed. The lights were out, but there was enough light from the night outside through the windows to reveal her shape. He had changed into his pajamas, removed the sand he'd carried in onto the rug, washed his face and hands.

"Big rumpus outside," he said. He would have to tell her some of the truth. His legs were shaky. His breathing was still labored. "Heard a racket. Everybody running down the highway—bell-hop said there was a murder."

"No!"

"All kinds of excitement. Can't you sleep?"

"I'm not sleepy, just now."

Somehow he had to broach the subject of leaving, right away; induce her to see things his way.

"Listen, Rome." He stepped toward the bed. "I've an idea—something I want to ask you."

"No, Guy. I know what you want to ask."

He hesitated. "What do you mean?"

"You want us to leave here—tonight. Isn't that so? I think I understand how your mind works."

He stared at her through the darkness. A slow finger of sweat trickled from beneath his left arm. He dragged a hand across his face.

His voice was hoarse. "I don't get you."

"You get me perfectly, Guy. So damned perfectly." Her voice rose slightly, became more shrill. "I know about that girl, Guy—Janine Bonney. I know about Larkin. I know she's lying dead in that motel—murdered."

"Wait!" He cut her off sharply, moved for the light switch, flipped it on. The room flooded with overhead light. He had to see her, watch her expression.

"Well, Guy?"

It struck him like a brick across the face.

Rome was fully clothed, wearing a dark skirt and blouse, and leather sandals.

There were no bandages on her eyes. No dark glasses—nothing. Just her eyes—big and brown, shining in the light. Blinking at him. Clear and normal.

"Do I startle you, darling?"

He stared at her, more awed than shocked.

"Doctor Allmyre was right," she said softly, lying there. "I could see fine, the minute I took off the bandages. Really, it was inspiring. Not at all difficult to follow you and the girl down to her motel. Then, I watched you go for the liquor, Guy."

He heard himself croak, "What are you trying to say?"

She spoke harshly. "I killed her, you fool! I'm strong, you know that. I was a long distance swimmer. My arms are strong! I beat that bitch till she told me where the pictures and negatives were. When I got them, I killed her. I enjoyed every minute of it—every minute!" She ceased, breathing heavily. "I knew all about you. Everything—from the first night you slept with her. I'm not a damned fool, Guy."

His gaze lowered. He saw the sandy footprints leading across the rug from her private outside door. Just like his had been. Her footprints. It was true.

Her voice was soft now, composed. "I told you no one else would ever have you—that you would never leave me. You never will leave me, not now."

He whispered. "What are you going to do?"

"Do? Nothing—what should I do?"

"The negatives?"

"They're my security, Guy—a woman should have security—in case you ever have ideas again. Like wanting me to go swimming, or something like that. Do you think I didn't know what you wanted to happen? You're stupid, and obvious, darling—but, of course, I'll keep you around. It's old hat, Guy, but—if I die, there's a certain person

who will open a certain envelope. Think about that."

He kept watching her and she said nothing. It was then he suddenly realized she wasn't looking straight at him. Her gaze was a shade off to the side. He moved quietly to the right, and she did not move her eyes at all—smiling, now, and staring at a spot of nothing on the wall.

"Rome—"

"Yes, Guy?"

Her eyes were vacant, sightless. The looked normal—they looked like eyes. But Rome wasn't seeing anything. It was a loud scream inside his head; the soap-operas, the TV, the horror of years to come.

He stumbled to the bed, then halted.

She heard the sound of his movement and looked directly at him. Hell tore through him. Those eyes looked so normal—yet. . . .

14.

"I almost have it down pat already," she said. "Yes, Guy—Allmyre was right. My sight started to fade on the way back here. I lost it completely, just as I reached the door. It lasted quite a while. But I'll never see again—I know that now. It's perfectly black out there. But you're here with me—in the dark, Guy. I'm blind—stone blind."

He stood there, rooted to the floor like a strange kind of tree. He stared at her mouth, and for the first time noticed that her lipstick was on cockeyed.

"You'll be my eyes, won't you, darling?"

He could not speak.

"Guy?"

"What?"

"I know it's late, but I'm not at all sleepy. I'd like you to read to me. The book's right there on the nightstand—the one about Alaska. That's so interesting! Page one hundred, darling. An easy number to remember, but you might have forgotten. If you please?"

He continued to stand there for a time.

Then, slowly, he walked over to the nightstand, picked up the book, and opened it.

