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the outfit

*The Outfit was after Parker. But Parker was an old pro.
He knew how to hit the syndicate where it hurt the most.*

A Novelette

BY RICHARD STARK

WHEN the woman screamed, Parker awoke and rolled off the bed. He heard the *plop* of a silencer behind him as he rolled, and the bullet punched the pillow where his head had been.

He landed face down on the floor. A stubby pregnant .32 was clipped to the springs under the bed, like a huge black fly standing upside down, and Parker's hand was reaching out for it before he hit the floor. He spun away a half-turn from the bed, raising the .32 so the other one would know he had it, but he didn't fire. This was a hotel room, and the .32 wasn't silenced.

A half-turn, and he reversed his spin and rolled under the bed, hearing the second bullet thud into the floor just behind him. His arms were tucked in close to his body and he rolled all the way across and came up on the other side, seeing the other one just stooping to fire under the bed. Sitting there, Parker threw the .32. The grip hit the other's forehead, just above the nose. He grunted, and dropped out of sight. Parker bent and looked through under the bed. He was lying over there on his face.

After the first scream, the woman had been silent. Now she stared

slack-faced as Parker got to his feet and went around the bed. He was tall and lean, with corded veins and hard tanned flesh. His torso was creased by old scars, and his legs had a bony angularity to them, the muscles etched against the bone. His hands were big, thick, knotted with veins; they were made for gripping an axe, or a rock. When he picked up the .32 again, his hand made it look like a toy.

The killer lay on his face, arms and legs splayed out, as though he'd been dropped from a height. His gun was still in his right hand. Parker stepped on the wrist, then bent and got the gun. It was a .25 calibre target pistol, useless for almost any serious work. Except to come up close and kill a sleeping man. The silencer had been made for a gun with a larger barrel, and a jury-rigged clamp arrangement had been fashioned to fit it to the small barrel of the .25.

Parker stuck his foot under the killer's chest, pushed, and rolled him over. He flopped over like a fish, his right arm swinging over and thumping the floor like a sack. He had a narrow pale face, skimpy eyebrows, small nose and thin lips, prominent cheekbones and temples. He wore a short-sleeved white shirt with button-down collar, red and green striped tie, sharply-creased tan trousers with no cuffs, and highly-polished brown shoes with zippers instead of laces and floppy leather fringes to hide the zippers.

There was a purpling bruise on the point of his right temple, and a small cut in the middle of it gleamed carmine. Parker had never seen him before in his life.

The woman found voice again at last, and half-whispered, "Shouldn't we call the police?"

"Shut up a minute. Let me think."

It was a mess. She knew him as Charles Willis, absentee businessman with an income from a few parking lots and rental properties and gas stations here and there around the country. How could he square Charles Willis with a silent killer in the middle of the night? He had to give her a story, and she had to be convinced by it, and it had to give her a reason to keep her mouth shut. The law, too, would want to know why a professional killer had been aimed at Charles Willis.

The truth might do it, but he didn't know her very well, or how far he could trust her.

Her name was Elizabeth Ruth Harrow Conway. She was a good-looking woman, twenty-nine years old, with honey hair and golden flesh and the tall lush well-proportioned body of a voluptuous athlete. She lived on a combination of alimony from her ex-husband and atonement gifts from her parents. She'd always been rich, had always lived in places where only the servants worked, and she'd never had a problem that wasn't fashionable.

That much Parker knew about her. Also that she was fine in bed, and that she sometimes had a panther craving for brutality. He knew little more than that, and thought there was probably little more to know.

The killer made a small sound in his throat, and his head thrashed lightly on the floor. His blond hair was dry and limp. Sweat had broken out on his face, though the room was air-conditioned. He'd be waking up soon, and Parker had to have the woman squared away by then.

He saw her watching him, and was surprised at her expression. He'd expected fear and astonishment, but she looked—breathless. Pleased and excited, and curious. The way she always looked when they bedded together. Expectant. So; the truth. As little of it as possible.

There was a wooden chair with padded seat and back over by the blind window, the one with the air-conditioner in it. He went over and got it and brought it back and sat down on it. "Charles Willis isn't my name," he said. "I have another name. I use it in my work. You don't want to know about my work."

"What?" She frowned at him, and glanced down at the killer lying on the floor between them. "I don't understand— You aren't Chuck Willis?"

"I am now, and here. When I'm not working, I'm Charles Willis. Here in Miami, or is Nevada."

"And when you are working?" She'd absorbed it faster than he'd expected.

He shook his head. "You don't want to know about that."

"But he—" she pointed at the killer—"he's from that other part of your life."

"That's right."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. I never saw him before."

"Oh. You mean he was just hired."

"That's right."

"And you don't want to turn him over to the police."

"Right again."

"I see." She reached out for the cigarettes on the night-table. She was nude, and when she leaned to reach for the cigarettes her breasts hung heavy for a hand. Sitting back again, they were firm again. She was a good animal.

She lit her cigarette and said, "I don't see. You aren't what you seem to be, but you don't want me to know what you really are. Whatever you really are, someone somewhere hired this man to kill you. Whatever you really are, it keeps you from wanting to be involved with the police. You want me to help you by being quiet, but you don't want to tell me what's going on."

He was silent. She studied him, frowning, but he had nothing to say. He sat and waited. While he waited, he watched the killer,

whose head had moved again but whose eyes hadn't opened yet. The bruise had stopped swelling, and was an unhealthy color. The carmine outline of the small cut had started to dull toward maroon as the blood clotted.

After a minute, he got to his feet. He had the .32 in his right hand, the silenced .25 in his left. He went over and put the .32 on the dresser, then went back and sat down and watched the killer again.

"All right," she said. "For now." "Good."

She put her cigarette out, and nodded at the killer. "What about him?"

"We'll talk to him." He kicked the killer in the ribs. "You're awake," he said.

The killer opened his eyes. They were pale gray, gleaming faintly in the light from the table lamp on the nightstand. His face was blank, as though he had no attitude about what had happened to him. He said, his voice as blank as his face, "You can't turn me over to the law. You can't kill me, because you can't get rid of the body and you can't trust the dame. And you can't kill her because that would bring the law on you. You got to let me go."

"You can trust me, Chuck," she said. Her voice was low. She was half-smiling, and looking down at the pallid face of the killer.

Parker ignored her. He said to the killer, "Name of your contact. The guy who fingered me."

The killer shook his head, rolling it back and forth on the floor, doing it carefully, as though he were part of a balancing act. His face was still blank. "No," he said.

"And the name of your contact in New York. You work out of New York, don't you?"

"Forget it," said the killer.

"You can't go to the law either," Parker told him. He looked past the killer, over at the woman. "I've got to force the names out of him," he told her. "I don't like that kind of job. You want to try it? I'll tie him. And gag his mouth so he can't holler."

She smiled again, and leaned far over the edge of the bed, and looked down at the killer. "Yes," she said. "I've never done anything like that. I'd like to try." Her tongue peeked out past her lips. She moistened her lips, and looked down at the killer, and smiled.

Parker was pleased. He'd figured her right, every step of the way. He hadn't figured the unloading yet, but that would come when it was needed. When it was time to get rid of her, split with her, he'd find the way. Not kill her, just unload her.

He looked down to see if he'd figured the killer right, too. He had. The killer was staring up at the smiling face of the woman, balloon-like in the air over him. His pale eyes seemed larger, and the sweat had started on his face again. His fingers were clenching and unclenching out at the ends of his

arms, and his cheeks seemed hollow, thinner.

Parker said, "What's your name?"

"Go to hell," said the killer. But his voice was higher and thinner, and not completely under control.

Parker got to his feet. "We'll use two of my ties," he said. "You. Get into the chair."

The killer didn't move.

Parker stepped on his ankle. The killer gasped, and Parker stepped off the ankle again and said, "Get in the chair."

The woman said, "Tell him to take his pants off."

The killer closed his eyes. His whole face seemed sunken now, and more pallid. He said, "Clint Stern. That's my name, Clint Stern."

Parker saw the woman pouting. She moved back against the pillow again and lit a new cigarette. She wouldn't meet Parker's eye.

Parker said, "Who fingered me?"

"Joe Menner."

"Who is he?"

"A collector. He collects from the books around the hotels."

"All right. Who gives you the assignments?"

"Jim St. Clair."

"In New York?"

"Yes."

"Where do I get in touch with him?"

Stern's eyes flickered, and his brow creased with worry lines. "You're making me dead, man," he said.

Parker said to the woman, "Maybe you'll get a chance at him after all."

Stern said, "I'll be dead anyway. What's the difference?" He sounded bitter, as though an injustice had been done him.

"I'm not talking about dead," Parker told him. "She won't let you die. Will you, Bett?"

She shrugged. She no longer seemed very interested. She knew Stern was going to give in without her doing anything. So did Parker. So did Stern. He said, "He runs a club in Brooklyn. On Kings Highway, near Utica Avenue."

"What's it called?"

"The Three Kings." Stern closed his eyes again. Every time he closed them, he looked like a corpse. He said, "You're killing me, man." He sounded tired, that was all.

"This guy Menner," said Parker. "You were supposed to call him when the job was done. Right?"

"Yes," said Stern.

Parker pointed. "There's the phone. Call him."

Stern sat up. Then he winced and put his hand to his bruised temple. He winced again, away from the hand, and looked bleakly at the spot of blood that had come off on his palm. "Maybe I got a concussion," he said.

"Move faster," said Parker.

Stern got to his feet, climbing up the chair. He moved as though he were dizzy. He stumbled when he moved away from the chair, and

almost fell down. He made it to the writing desk where the phone was, and leaned against the wall. He picked up the receiver as though it was heavy, and started to dial. Then he looked over at Parker and said, "What do I say?"

"Parker's dead."

Stern finished dialing, and lifted the receiver to his ear. He waited, looking dull-eyed, and from the middle of the room Parker heard the click and the metallic chatter when the phone was answered at the other end. Stern said, "This is Stern. Let me talk to Menner." There was brief metallic chatter again, and then silence. Stern leaned against the wall. Perspiration was streaming down his face, and his eyes looked heavier and heavier.

Finally, the phone chattered again, rousing him. He said, "Menner?" His eyes got brighter, feverish looking. He licked his lips. A kind of sick nervousness seemed to be pumping through him.

Parker watched him, and knew he was getting ready to tell Menner the truth. He whispered, "Remember the woman, Stern."

Stern slumped. He said, "It's done. He's dead." Questioning sounds. "No. No trouble." His voice was as flat and lifeless as his eyes. "Yes. All right, goodbye."

But he remained leaning against the wall, head bowed, phone to his ear. Parker went over and took the phone away from him and hung it

up. He said, "Where was that you just called?"

"Floral Court. Rampon Boulevard."

"What number?"

"Twelve. Twelve Floral Court."

"How many others there?"

"Five or six. It's a poker game."

"All right. You got any money? Stern! You got any money?"

"Not on me."

"Where you can get it?"

"Yes." He was acting now as though he'd been doped.

"You better get it and take off. South, out of the country."

"Yes."

"It won't do any good to try again. It won't work. And it wouldn't mean anything to the Outfit anyway. They're going to know you missed the first time, so they'll know they can't count on you."

"Yes."

"Take off," Parker told him.

Stern stepped away from the wall, and stopped. His eyes swiveled up in their sockets and he fell over on his face, falling loose and limp.

Parker shook his head, irritated. He said to Bett, "Wait here." He pulled a pair of pants on, grabbed Stern under the shoulders, and dragged him to the door. He pulled the door open and looked outside. It was quarter to four in the morning, and the hall was empty. Parker dragged Stern down to the end of the hall and opened the door to the interior fire stairs. He pulled Stern through and shut the door again.

A dim bulb faintly illuminated each metal landing up and down the stairwell.

Parker propped Stern up in the corner and checked his pulse. He was still alive, but not by much. When he'd fallen, he'd hit the same place on his head. It was bleeding a little bit again.

"Die someplace else," Parker told him. He pinched him and jabbed him in the ribs and snapped his finger against the underpart of Stern's nose. Stern came groggily out of it. His eyes were unfocused, and if Parker had asked him his name he wouldn't have known the answer. Or what the date was, or where he lived, or where he'd been born. But he could understand simple orders, and he could make his body move.

Keeping his voice low, Parker said, "Get on your feet."

Stern tried, but he couldn't do it alone. Parker helped him get upright. When he was up, he could stay up, one hand pressed against the wall. His head was down, chin sunk in his chest, but his eyes were still half-open. He could still hear.

Parker said, "When I go out this door, go down those steps there. Do you hear me? When I go out this door, go down those steps there."

Stern nodded minutely.

Satisfied, Parker stepped back and opened the door. He stood in the doorway and watched Stern take the first step toward the des-

cending metal stairs. He turned away, closed the door behind him, and walked back down the hall. Behind him, he could hear the muffled thumping as Stern fell.

He went back to the room and told her, "I'll be back later. I've got to go get this straightened out."

"Let it wait a few minutes," she said. She was sitting nude on the bed, her feet curled under her. She was smiling at him.

He didn't really have the time. He looked at her, and knew it would be a while before he had another chance; he'd be busy for the next week or two. "It can wait," he said, and went over to the bed.

Half an hour later he was ready to leave. "I'll be back in a couple weeks," he told her.

"I'll be waiting," she said.

2

In the center of the U was a dry concrete fountain, littered with papers. The three sides of the U were Floral Court, with latticework supporting tired vines across the open end, separating the court from Rampon Boulevard. By day, Floral Court was pink stucco, with green morning it was black, with one square of yellow light spilling out from one window, framing the dry fountain.

No air conditioners here. The windows were open, and breathing sounds of sleepers mingled in the middle of the U, punctuated

by the flat clatter of chips from the yellow window at the back.

Parker came silently through the opening in the latticework and stopped to take the awkward .25 from under his coat. The .32 would have been better, but he wanted to return the .25. He moved again, close to the stucco wall, passing the open windows and the sounds of breathing.

The door marked 12 was just to the left of the lit window. Parker passed it and crouched to peer over the windowsill. Inside was a tiny box of a living room, with a wide archway to an equally tiny box of a dining room. The dining room was dominated by a long table, around which sat six men, playing seven card stud. A chandelier over the table threw glaring light on the players and the cards.

Any one of the six could have been Menner. All were stocky, fortyish, sour-looking, with the pale complexions of permanent Florida residents. They spoke only to announce their bets, not calling one another by name.

Parker considered. He had to get inside. The window was no good; too much light spilled to it, and two of the players sat facing it. He straightened, moved to the side, and cautiously tried the door. As he'd expected, it was locked. So he'd have to take a chance on the back. He moved away, retracing his steps around the U to the latticework, and on out to the sidewalk.

Rampon Boulevard was deserted. This part of it was lined on both sides with stucco U's, all of them like *Floral Court*. Parker turned left and walked down to the corner, counting courts. *Floral Court* was fourth from the corner. Parker went down the sidestreet and turned at the driveway that ran behind the courts, separated from the courts by rows of garages. The darkness back there was almost complete, with only a sliver of moon in the sky.

He went between two garages and came to the rear of *Floral Court*. Here, by day, the pink stucco was crumbling and faded, the rear doors were grimed with age, the little patch of ground between court and garage was weed-pocked dirt. By night, it was a black emptiness.

No light from number twelve leaked out to the back. Parker had to go by sound, hearing the faint noise of the chips. He found the rear door and the rear window, and both were locked. But the wood of the doorframe was rotten; Parker leaned his weight against the door and felt it give. If he didn't have to worry about noise, he could go through this door in two seconds.

He had a pocket knife. He took it out, opened it, and forced the blade between door and frame till he found the lock. Then he pulled on the knob, pulling the door back away from the frame, gouging the

knife into the soft wood around the lock bolt. The wood made small cracking sounds, but it gave, and then the bolt was free, the blade under it. Parker pushed gently, and the door opened. He stepped through and pushed the door to behind him.

He was in the miniature kitchen. An open door on the right led to a bedroom, which he could barely see. Ahead, a yellow crack outlined the swing door that led to a short hallway. The hallway was flanked by the bathroom on one side, the second bedroom on the other. The dining room was straight ahead.

Parker pushed the swing door open slowly, till he could peer through at the dining room. Only one of the players was in sight, at the head of the table. He was concentrating his full attention on the cards. Parker slipped through the doorway, getting the .25 into his hand again, and strode quickly to the dining room. He stood in the entrance and said, "Freeze."

Six faces spun to gape at him. He let them see the gun, and said, "Face front. Look at your cards. Quick!"

They did as they were told. One of them, looking down at his cards, said, "You're making a mistake, fella. You don't want to knock over this game."

Parker said, "Menner, collect the wallets."

One of the six looked up. So that one was Menner. He stared at Par-

ker, and suddenly recognition struck him and left him ashen-faced. He sat gaping.

"Fast, Menner," Parker told him.

One of the others muttered, "How come he knows you, Jake?"

"Shut up. I'm waiting, Menner."

Menner held his hands out in front of his face and shook them, as though clearing away cobwebs. "Stern," he said. "Stern."

"You'll see him in a few minutes. Collect the wallets. The rest of you, keep your hands on the table, your eyes on the cards. Menner, you reach into the pockets for the wallets. You don't want to bring out anything but wallets."

The one who'd spoken before now said, "Do like he says, Jake. We'll take care of him later. We don't want any trouble here."

Menner obediently got to his feet. He went around the table, reaching into the other players' pockets, bringing out the wallets. Parker told him, "Put them in your coat pockets. Your own wallet, too. And the bills from the table."

"Listen," said Menner. His voice was shaky. "Listen, you don't under—"

"Shut up."

Menner had all the wallets in his coat pockets. He looked baggier than before, and forlorn, like a half-deflated balloon. He stood waiting for Parker to tell him what to do next.

Parker said, "Tell them why I'm here."

"Listen, honest to Christ, it ain't the way—"

3

"Tell them why I'm here."

The player that did all the talking said, "Do what he says, Jake. I'd like to hear it myself."

"They—they sent down this gun from New York, for this guy here, this Parker. They said I was to—I was to finger the job. That's all it was, I swear to Christ."

"The rest of it," said Parker.

"That's all! What else, for Christ's sake?"

"You fingered me in the first place. That's why the gun came down."

The player said, "That's between you and Jake, buddy. Don't take it out on us."

"It's all the same Outfit. Give me your coat, Menner."

"For Christ's sake, Parker, I—"

"Give me your coat."

Stuttering, Menner took the coat off. Parker reached out for it, waiting for Menner to try flipping it in his face, but Menner was cowed. He handed it over with no trouble, and stepped back to take his medicine.

Because it was such a light untrustworthy gun, Parker pulled the trigger three times. He turned and went out the back way, clearing the back door before Menner hit the carpet or the other five got out of their chairs.

It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the blackness, then he was gone. No one followed.

Parker sat at the writing desk with pen and paper, frowning. He wasn't used to writing letters:

"Frank,

The Outfit thinks it has a grievance on me. It doesn't. But it keeps sending its punks around to make trouble. I told their head man I'd give them money trouble if they didn't quit, and they didn't quit. You told me one time about a lay you worked out for that gambling place outside Boston, and you'd do me a favor if you knocked it off in the next couple weeks. I'm writing some of the other boys, too, so you can be sure they'll be too busy to go looking for you special. I don't want a cut and I can't come in on the job because I'll be busy making trouble myself. You can always get in touch with me care of Joe Sheer out in Omaha. Maybe we'll work together again some day.

Parker"

It took three drafts to get the finished letter. He read the final version through, decided it was all right, and nodded to himself. Then he went on to the other letters. They were easier, because he just copied the first one word for word, except for the particular job he wanted each man to do.

He did six letters, and then looked out the window and saw it was daytime, the dry fountain

looking like a remnant from a lost civilization. It was not quite seven o'clock, and he was back in number 12 Floral Court again. If those other poker players were anxious to get their money and wallets back, they might be able to check back through Menner's friends or other people in the Outfit and find out where Parker was supposed to be staying, so it would be a good idea to stay away from the hotel for a while. But nobody would be in any hurry to come back to Floral Court. There was a body in the bedroom closet.

Parker had run as far as the back yard, and then down to the left a distance of three courts. Behind him, he'd heard the poker players emerge. One of them had a flashlight, and all of them booted on out past the garage. He waited, between two courts, and after a while they came back and went into the apartment. He kept waiting, until he heard three cars start up out front on Rampon Boulevard. Then he went back in. The lights were off, the place was empty, and Menner was in the bedroom closet. The poker players would be running around establishing alibis.

In the sideboard in the dining room he found the stationery and envelopes. He pulled the shade down in the living room, sat at the dining room table, and started writing letters.

This had all started a year ago. Parker had been in on a robbery

with four other guys, including one named Mal Resnick. Resnick was due for a fifth of the pot, but he needed it all, to pay off a debt he owed the syndicate, so he killed all his partners and took off. But Parker wasn't as dead as Resnick had thought; he followed Resnick to New York and evened the score. Resnick had already turned the money over to the syndicate, the Outfit, and Parker went to the Outfit to get it back. They didn't want to give it to him, so he used pressure, disrupting the New York organization, which was run by two men, Carter and Fairfax. Parker killed Carter, but still the Outfit wouldn't pay off. So he went to Fairfax and told him:

"I've worked my particular line for eighteen years. In that time, I've worked with about a hundred different men. There's you people with your organization, and there's us. We don't have any organization, but we're professionals. We know each other. We stick together. And we don't hit the syndicate. You're sitting there wide open, you can't squeal to the law, but we don't hit you. If you don't give me my money, I write to those hundred men. I tell them, the syndicate hit me for forty-five G. Do me a favor and hit them back once, when you've got the chance. Maybe half of them will say the hell with it, but the other half will do me any favor they can make a profit out of."

They weren't sure whether it was bluff or not, but they agreed to pay. With Parker standing over him, Fairfax telephoned Bronson, head of the national organization, and Bronson came to terms. He put the forty-five thousand in a trap, and Parker walked through the trap and came out on the other side with the money. Knowing the Outfit would now try to hunt him down and kill him, he went to a plastic surgeon who worked outside the law, and came out with a new face.

But now the Outfit knew about the new face. And knew also about the cover name, Willis. And had sent Stern. So Parker was writing his letters.

He did six of them now, then went over to the window, pulled the shade away, looked out at the decaying fountain, and decided he'd waited long enough. He tucked the letters into his coat pocket, got the .25, stripped the silencer off it, and went to the bedroom closet. He pulled Menner out onto the bedroom floor, wiped his own prints from the gun, and closed Menner's hand around it. It might not hold up as suicide—the angle was probably wrong, and Menner had two too many bullets in him—but it should help to slow the law down. And the gun, if it could be traced at all, couldn't be traced past Stern to Parker.

Out back, he threw the silencer into a garbage can. Then he

walked around to Rampon Boulevard and caught a cab. "Hotel Maharajah."

There was no one he recognized in the lobby. He went on up to his room, and it was empty. As far as he could tell, no one had been in it. He packed his suitcase, stuffing the six wallets into it, and went downstairs to check out. This time he was going to settle things with the Outfit once and for all. This time he was going straight to Bronson.

4

The woman with orange hair sat on the porch and watched Parker come walking down the rutted road toward the house. A barn stood back of the house to one side, and a long garage was on the other side. Rusting automobile parts were scattered on the baked clay between house and garage. A lone dead tree stood gray and naked in front of the house, with a rusty pulley arrangement fixed to a thick lower branch. Except for the woman with orange hair, the place looked deserted.

It was November, but the land was dry and the air was hot. After three miles, the suitcase was heavy. The rutted road made walking difficult. It would have been easier if he'd left the suitcase in Cordele, but he didn't want to go through there again.

As he walked past the dead tree

with the pulley on it, a lean mongrel hound rose up on the porch next to the chair the woman was sitting in. He stretched and yawned, then looked up at the woman and looked out at Parker. He watched Parker and waited, not barking or moving or doing anything.

Parker stopped where he was, and dropped the suitcase onto the ground. He said, "Chemey around?"

The woman said, "Who wants him?"

"Parker."

"Parker, you say?"

"Parker."

She lifted her head and called, "Elly!"

A boy of about fourteen, as lean and silent as the dog, came out of the house and stood there. The woman said to him, "Go on over to the garage, see if Chemey ain't there. Fella name of Parker lookin' for him."

Parker said, "Tell him I got a new face."

The boy turned his head and gazed at him, the same way the dog gazed. The woman frowned and said, "What the hell kind of talk is that?" She was very fat, forty or forty-five, with a fat white face under the orange hair. She was wearing a dark blue dress with a pink flower print.

"Plastic surgery," Parker told her. "He'll have to recognize me by voice and build and what I know."

The woman shook her head. "Go on, Elly," she said. To Parker she said, "You can wait right there."

The boy came down off the porch and walked around the garage. He was wearing dungarees and nothing else. He was tanned as dark as an Indian, and his sun-faded blonde hair was shaggy and long. He opened a door in the side of the garage and went inside, closing the door after him. The door squealed loudly in the silence, and seemed to affect light oddly. Instead of a shaft of sunlight angling through the opening and lighting the interior, it was as though a shaft of darkness pooled on the ground outside the door when it was opened.

Parker said, "You want a cigarette?"

"Thank you, no," said the woman.

"I think I'll have one," he said. He wanted her to know what he was reaching for. She nodded, and he slowly took cigarettes and matches from his pocket. Then he stood smoking in the hot dry air. The dog watched him, unwinking.

The squealing door opened again, and the boy stood in the pool of darkness, gazing at him. Then he turned and said something to somebody inside. Parker waited.

The boy came out to the sunlight again, and a short skinny man in overalls came out after him. The man had dry black hair and a narrow face. His bare shoulders were

pale and covered with freckles. He came walking over and stood studying Parker for a minute, and then he said, "Well I'll be darned. Got yourself a new face, eh?"

"It's your brother I wanted," Parker told him.

The skinny man frowned. "What's that you say?"

"I asked for your brother."

"The hell," said the skinny man.

"You asked for Chemey."

"And you're Kent."

"What makes you think so?"

"Go tell your brother I want to buy a car. Like the Ford with the bullet holes in the trunk."

The skinny man scratched his head. "You sound like Parker," he said. "You sure as hell act like Parker. And you know the right stuff to be Parker. But you don't look like Parker."

"Plastic surgery. I told your wife."

"Lemme see if Chemey's here."

"I'll come along. It's hot out in the sun."

The skinny man frowned and said, "You got all Parker's brass, I'll give you that much. What would you do if that dog there took to leap at you?"

Parker glanced at the dog. "Break its neck," he said.

"Yuh. And what if I was to whip out a pistol and start shooting down on you?"

"I'd take it away like Handy McKay did that time."

The skinny man flushed, and on

the porch the woman started to laugh. She had a high Betty Boop sort of giggle, completely different from her speaking voice. The skinny man turned to her and said, "Shut your face!" and she stopped immediately. He spun back to Parker. "I think you're a phony, Mister," he said. "I think you better get off this property."

Parker shook his head. Over the skinny man's head, he called to the woman, "You want to keep that dog right there next to you." Then he started walking toward the garage. The skinny man hollered and made as if to come after him, but then he stopped. The woman rested her hand on the dog's head, and watched Parker cross the yard.

The side door of the garage opened again, and a man came out with a shotgun cradled on his arm. He was short and skinny, like the other one, with the same kind of narrow face and dead hair, and was similarly dressed in faded blue bibbed overalls. They were obviously brothers, but what was petulance in Kent's face was strength in Chemey's. He came out and closed the door after himself, and said, "Stop right there, friend."

Parker stopped. "Hello, Chemey," he said.

Chemey looked past him at Kent. "Well? Is he Parker or ain't he Parker?"

Kent didn't answer at first. Parker half-turned and looked back at him. "Am I, Kent?"

"Yuh," said Kent. He said it reluctantly, and glared at the woman, as though daring her to laugh again. But she was silent, her face carefully blank as she watched them, her fingers scratching the top of the dog's head, between its ears.

To his brother, Chemy said, "Get us a drink. Come on in, Parker." He led the way back into the garage, and set the shotgun against the wall beside the door.

The garage was big enough to hold four cars. At the moment, there was a fifteen year old red Ford pickup truck parked down by the far wall, and an orange Volkswagen next to it on this side. The Volkswagen rear lid was open and the engine had been removed and was lying on two-by-fours behind the car. The back seat had been taken out, too, and leaned against the side of the pickup truck. All along the back wall was a workbench, littered with tools and small parts and lengths of wire and pieces of metal. Automobile body parts were stacked here and there in much of the clear space, and two engines hung by pulley and chain from the roof beams. A small plastic radio on the workbench was blaring country and western music; a girl singer with a twang as bad as a harelip was singing about unrequited love.

"Well, now," said Chemy. "You sure changed your face around. But you're still mean as ever."

"That brother of yours needs a talking to."

Chemy shrugged, and grinned faintly. "If you were Parker, you'd do what you done. If you weren't, you'd let him chase you off the place."

Parker shrugged. It didn't matter one way or the other. He was just hot from the walk.

Chemy said, "Take a look down here at this VW. What do you think of this? A 57 Ford straight six engine in there in back, and redid Chevy brakes. Think she'll move?"

Parker frowned at the Volkswagen. "No," he said.

"No? Why in hell not?"

"Where's your cooling system?"

"Right where the back seat used to be, with scoops down through the floor. 51 Plymouth radiator assembly, that fits real nice."

Parker knew he was supposed to think of every objection he could, so Chemy could show him how smart he was. He said, "Not enough weight for the power. She'll go like a motorboat, with her nose up in the air. You'd have to take corners at ten miles an hour."

"No, sir. I've weighted down that front end, so your center of gravity is right *here*." He touched a spot low on the side, just behind the door.

"That's pretty far back."

"Oh, she'll jounce, I know she will. But the weight is just far enough up so you can take corners

just about any damn speed you like."

Parker shook his head. "She'll jounce apart," he said. "She won't last a year."

"I know damn well she won't. But she'll last a month, and that's all she's wanted for. A car that looks slow but it goes like a bat out of hell. That's what this girl is. A special order."

"So everything's worked out, then."

"No, it isn't." Chemey frowned at the car. "One damn thing," he said. "You know what that is?"

"What?"

"I can't make her *sound* like a VW. I've tried all sorts of mufflers, I've run pipe back and forth underneath there till she looked like a plate of spaghetti, but she never does sound like a VW. You know that little cough-cough sound the VW's got? Your VW fires slow, is what it is, and I be damned if I can get the effect." He glared at the car again, shaking his head. "I'll get it," he said.

"Sure." Parker knew he would. Chemey made cars do whatever he wanted them to do.

"Sure," agreed Chemey. He turned away from the Volkswagen. "So what do you want? A car? anything special?"

"Just a car. With clean papers."

"How clean? To sell?"

"No. To show if I'm stopped for speeding."

"Takin' her out of the state?"

"Up north."

"All right, then."

The garage door opened and Kent came in, carrying three glasses and a bottle of liquid as colorless as water. He glanced sullenly at his brother and Parker, then went over to the workbench, set the glasses down, and poured three drinks.

Chemey and Parker went over and they all drank. It was good liquor, with a harsh woodsmoke taste on the tongue and a bright burning in the back of the throat.

Chemey set his glass down and cleared his throat. "How new?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter. But I'll be going maybe a couple thousand miles in it, so I don't want one ready to fall apart."

Chemey nodded. "When?"

"Now."

"Always in a hurry." Chemey grinned at his brother. "This Parker," he said. "Always in a hurry, huh?"

"Huh," said Kent. He was being surly, staring into his empty glass.

Chemey winked at Parker, finished his own drink, and said, "I got two in the barn right now, but not what you got to have. Both hot, both no good. I got to take a ride. How much you want to pay?"

"I'll go a thousand if I have to."

"Well, maybe not. You go set on the porch a while. Come on, Kent."

They went outside and Parker strolled over to the house while the two brothers went around behind

the garage. Parker went up on the porch and sat on the other chair. The woman grinned at him, showing spaces where she'd lost teeth, and said, "I guess I must of heard about you."

"Maybe," said Parker.

A six year old Pontiac station wagon with Chemy at the wheel and his brother beside him came around from behind the garage and drove off down the rutted road. Parker sat and smoked, waiting. The woman tried to start a conversation with him once or twice, but he didn't encourage her and she quit. The dog got up again after a while and went down off the porch and loped away around the house. A while later Parker got to his feet and went into the house and walked through rooms of sagging furniture to the kitchen, where he got himself a drink of water. He didn't see the boy. The woman followed him in, and stood in the kitchen doorway, smiling hesitantly at him, but not saying anything. When he started out of the kitchen, she murmured, "We got time."

He shook his head, and went back out on the porch. She stayed inside the house.

He waited three hours, and the sun was turning red way off near the western horizon when Chemy and Kent came back. Kent was driving the Pontiac this time, and Chemy was following him in a four year old blue Oldsmobile with

Alabama plates. Kent took the Pontiac around behind the garage, and Chemy stopped the Oldsmobile in front of the house. He got out and patted the hood and said, "Well? What do you think?"

"What do you think?"

Chemy grinned, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't know yet. I figure maybe. The car's hot in Florida and the plates are hot in Alabama, but the plates are off a LaSalle, so you got nothing to worry about."

"LaSalle? There's still some of them around?"

"Give me three days around here, Parker, I'll find you a Harmon."

"I don't want a Harmon."

"Sure not. I'll check this out for you. She run good coming in."

Kent had come around from behind the garage, and was now opening one set of doors in front. Chemy got back into the Oldsmobile and drove it into the garage, next to the Volkswagen. Parker walked over after him, went inside, and Kent followed, closing the doors.

The two brothers spent half an hour checking the car, mostly in silence. Every once in a while, Kent would say, "Look at this," and Chemy would bend close and peer, and then say, "It's okay." A few times, it wasn't okay, and the two would work to make it okay.

Finally Chemy said, "She's better than I thought. A southern car all the way, Parker, got none of your northern corrosion."

"I thought it was from Florida. What about salt corrosion?"

"*Stolen* from Florida. She used to have Tennessee plates on her."

"What about papers?"

"Right here. Just fill in whatever name you like."

Parker had a driver's license in his wallet, from the state of New Jersey, with the name Joe Flynn on it, from his last job, and so he wrote the same name on the registration. Then he said, "Wait a minute," and went out to the suitcase, still lying on the ground out in front of the house. He picked it up and carried it back to the garage. The woman with orange hair was on the porch again, standing there, watching Parker with no expression on her face.

Parker went into the garage and opened the suitcase on the work-bench. There was an envelope in the side pocket of the suitcase, and he took it out and slid seven hundred dollar bills from it and put them on the bench. Then he put the envelope back in the pocket and closed the suitcase.

Chemey watched the whole operation, and nodded. "Good enough," he said. "Kent, open them doors."

Kent opened the doors, and the woman with orange hair was standing there. Her face was flushed now, and she looked upset. She said, "Kent, that bastard raped me."

Kent just stared at her. Chemey said, "Don't be foolish."

"God damn it, I say he raped me!"

Kent turned, looking shaken. "Parker? What the hell is this?"

Parker shrugged.

Chemey said to the woman, "Come off it, will you?"

Kent shook his head, looking goggle-eyed at his brother. "Why would she say it, Chemey? If he didn't do nothing, why would she say it?"

"Ask Parker if you want. Don't ask me."

Parker said, "She made the offer and I turned her down."

Kent looked ashen. "You're a lying son of a bitch," he said. He reached out and a wrench came into his hand, and he started across the garage toward Parker.

The woman turned her head and shouted, "Judge! Here, you, Judge!" And whistled shrilly through the gaps between her teeth.

"Leave that dog out of this!" shouted Chemey.

"Don't do anything stupid, Kent," said Parker.

"I'll break your head open, you son of a bitch." Kent was as white as the inside of a potato, and he shuffled slowly forward, the wrench held out from his body in his right hand.

Parker turned his head, saying, "Chemey, you want me to kill your brother?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Then call him off."

"I couldn't do that, Parker. I'm sorry, but I couldn't do that."

Parker frowned. "Chemmy, do you believe that bag?"

"That isn't for me to say, Parker, I ain't the husband. I'm just the brother-in-law."

"Then you'll keep out, won't you?"

"Unless my brother gets hurt."

Kent said, "I won't be the one gets hurt." He dashed in suddenly, face contorted, arm looping up and over with the wrench.

Parker ran inside the descending curve, butting Kent in the face with the top of his head, kneeing him, chopping upward with the rigid side of his hand against the soft underpart of Kent's upper arm. Kent cried out and his arm went dead, and the wrench fell to the floor. Parker stepped back and hit him twice, and Kent went down after the wrench and didn't move.

The woman was screaming for the dog again. Chemmy wasn't saying anything at all now, but was leaning against the side of the Oldsmobile and looking on with an expression of regret on his face.

Parker turned and strode swiftly to the side door. He grabbed up the shotgun and turned with it as the dog, lean and fast and silent, came loping on a long curve from outside into the garage. The woman was screaming at him to sic 'im, and Chemmy was shouting for the dog to come back. But the woman's voice was louder and the dog

kept coming and leaped. Parker had the shotgun by the barrels and he swung it like a baseball bat. The dog leaped into the swing, and the wooden stock cracked against the side of his head and sent him tumbling away to the side, to crash into a pile of junk and lay still.

Parker turned the shotgun around and said, "My best move is finish the three of you."

"I'm neutral, Parker," said Chemmy.

"No, you're not. That bag wants to see your brother get killed, Chemmy. She sent him after me hoping I'd do it."

The woman shouted, "Chemmy, I swear to God—"

"Shut up," said Chemmy. "Parker never touched you."

The woman stared at him, open-mouthed.

Parker said, "Can you convince your brother?"

"Sure I can. Why should I?"

"I don't leave loose ends behind me."

Chemmy thought it over, gazing down at his brother, unconscious on the floor. Finally, he said, "I guess I see what you mean. All right, I'll convince him."

"How?"

Chemmy grinned bleakly. "She offered it to me, too, once or twice."

"Lies!"

They both ignored her. Parker said, "I'll wake him up."

"No. You take off. It'd be better if we was alone when I told him."

He'd be able to take it better."

"You are going to tell him."

"I swear it, Parker."

"All right." Parker put the shotgun back where it had come from.

Chemey said, "You want to give this bitch a ride into town? I figure she ought to be outa here before Kent gets the word."

"She can walk."

"I guess she can at that." He turned and looked at the woman. "Get started," he said. "If Kent wants to kill you, I won't do nothing to stop him."

"You *took* the offer, you bastard!" she screamed at him.

Chemey turned his back on her, saying to Parker, "You might's well take off now. Sorry we had all this fuss."

"I'll be seeing you."

Parker stowed his suitcase on the back seat of the car. The woman, after hesitating a minute, had gone away from the garage, headed for the house. Parker backed the Oldsmobile out into the late sunlight, turned it around, saw the flash of orange hair in the living room window, and drove away down the rutted road, driving slowly and carefully across the bumps and potholes. When he got to the blacktop road, he headed north. The Olds responded well. The upholstery was in rotten shape, the floor mats were chewed to pieces, and the paint job was all scratched up, but the engine purred nicely and the Olds leaped forward when he

pressed the accelerator. He lit a cigarette, shifted position till he was comfortable, and headed north out of Georgia.

5

There was a large poster frame beside the entrance. In it, a faggot with black wavy hair smiled over his bow tie. His eyes were made up like Theda Bara. Under the bow tie, it said, *RONNIE RANDALL & his PIANO—Every NITE!* Over the entrance, small spots shone on huge silver letters against a black background: *THE THREE KINGS*. Pasted to the glass of the entrance doors were posters saying, *No cover, no minimum, except weekends*, and *SALLY & the SWINGERS, Every Fri Sat Sun.* The building behind all this information was low and squat, concrete block painted a pale blue. Parker drove by twice, slowly, and then parked half a block away, in the darkness of a side street.

This part of Brooklyn was a tight gridwork of two-story row houses, with Kings Highway gouging a broad blacktop diagonal down through it, flanking itself with diners and bars and small warehouses and used car lots. At the corner holding The Three Kings, two right-angled grid streets intersected, with Kings Highway cutting through the intersection at a forty-five degree angle, leaving a big open space of blacktop in the cen-

ter, fed from six directions and capped by a swaying traffic light. The streetlights were all too far away to light the middle, which was open, bare, and black.

Eleven o'clock, Tuesday night. Darkness surrounded the intersection everywhere but at the pool of light in front of The Three Kings. Up and down Kings Highway were far glimpses of other cases of neon, but the grid streets were all shut up and dark, lined by trees.

Parker left the Olds in a slot with plenty of room in front, so he could take off without backing and filling, and walked to the intersection. November was ending, and it was cold, the wet bronchial cold of a harbor city. Parker's breath misted around him as he walked. He had a topcoat on, but no hat, and he walked with his hands jammed deep in his pockets. In his suitcoat pocket was the gun he'd picked up the day before in Wilmington, a short-barreled S&W .38 Special.

He was now ten days from Florida. Forty-seven letters had been written, twelve men had been talked to personally. Four of the twelve had said they'd been looking for an excuse like this for years. Five more had said they'd think it over, and three had copped out for one reason or another. Say a third would move, out of fifty-nine, twenty jobs. All within a month or less the Outfit would be hit twenty times, maybe more, all over the country.

Starting tonight.

Light washed down on Parker as he pushed open the door and went into the club. Inside, amber light feebly silhouetted the furnishings and customers. Two bartenders were blobs of white shirt behind the dark wood bar, but tonight one of them was unnecessary. Four women and three men were spaced along the bar, and the booths on the other side were all empty. In back, twenty or so tables were arranged in a semi-circle around a small platform, and on the platform Ronnie Randall, twenty years older than his picture and very tired, noodled at the piano. Three of the tables back there were occupied, served by one sour waitress in black dress and white apron.

Two of the women at the bar turned to look at Parker, but he ignored them and walked farther down to where a batch of stools were empty. He didn't sit down, but stood leaning against the bar. One of the bartenders came down and asked him what he'd have and he said, "Menner of Miami Beach sent me up to see Jim."

"Who?"

"Jim St. Clair."

"No, no, the other one."

"Menner."

The bartender shook his head. He was a burly man gone to fat. He said, "I don't know the name."

Parker shrugged.

The bartender studied him a minute and then said, "I'll see.

What'll you have?"

"Budweiser."

"Check." He turned and called to the other one, "Bud here. I'll be right back." He walked away, down to the end of the bar, raised the flap, went through, and turned right, through the door next to the door marked *Pointers*. Farther back, there was a door marked *Setters*.

The other bartender brought the beer and took Parker's money. After a while the first bartender came back and said, "Okay. Right through there where I went."

"Good."

Parker walked back, pushed open the door, and found himself in a short bright hallway with plaster walls painted green. At the end, where the hall made an L to the left, there was a door marked *Office*. He walked over there, looked to the left, and saw a gleaming kitchen, with an undershirted Negro sweating at the clipper. Parker pushed open the office door and went in.

It was a small cramped room with gray walls. A desk was shoved against one wall, a filing cabinet against the other, and there was a water cooler in the corner, all leaving a small circle of black linoleum floor space in the middle of the room. A short fat redfaced man looked up from the desk, where he had ledgers open, and said, "Well? Hah?" He waved his hands, both of them ink stained.

"Menner sent me to see you," Parker told him. He started to close the door, but the bartender had come along behind him and was standing there.

The redfaced man was saying, "Menner? Hah? Menner? Menner's dead."

Parker nodded. "I know. But Cresetti said you didn't know him, so I should use Menner's name." Cresetti was another of the poker players.

"Cresetti? Hah? Who?"

"He took over from Menner."

"And he sent you up here? Why? What the hell do I do with this Cresetti? What's this Cresetti to me?"

"You sent Menner that guy Stern," Parker reminded him. The bartender was just standing there behind him, leaning against the doorframe.

"Sure, Stern," said the redfaced man. "Sure I sent him. He screwed up, huh? That bastard killed him, how do you like that?"

Parker shrugged. "He killed Menner, too." He wasn't really paying attention, he was trying to decide what to do about the bartender.

"Sure he killed Menner. They tell me maybe he'll come here." The redfaced man squinted at him. "You think so? Nah, I don't think so. What's he got against me? Menner fingered him, yeah, Stern tried to knock him off, yeah, but what did I do to the bastard? Nothing.

I'm told, send a gun to this Menner in Florida, I do it. I don't know what this gun is supposed to do, I don't have nothing to do with nothing. So I figured this bastard won't bother me. He'll ignore me, right?"

"Maybe," said Parker.

"Maybe you're him," said the red-faced man. "Hah! That's a hot one, huh? Maybe you're him! Maybe I oughta have Johnny he oughta frisk you."

"I've got a gun on me."

The redfaced man grinned and ducked his head, multiplying his chins. He was full of fun. "Heeled?"

"Stern's gun," Parker told him. "I'm bringing it back. .25. with a silencer. Johnny can reach in my righthand coat pocket and he'll find it there." Parker waited for Johnny to come up behind him, close enough.

But the redfaced man waved his hands. "Nah, why? We enemies? We animals in a jungle? Just take off the coat, that's all. It's hot in here, who needs a coat? Gimme, I'll hang it up."

Parker shrugged. He took off the coat, handed it toward St. Clair, and dropped it on the floor just before St. Clair got it. Grunting, St. Clair automatically stooped for it, Parker kicked him in the face. His hand went inside his suitcoat as he turned, and when it came out it had the stubby .38 in it. Johnny was one step into the room, but he stopped when he saw the gun.

"Back to the door, Johnny," Parker told him. "Lean against the wall like before. Fold your arms. That's a good boy, Johnny."

Johnny stood there the way he was told. His face was expressionless. St. Clair was lying on the floor. Parker tugged on a drawer of the filing cabinet and found it locked. He'd been a little worried when he'd seen no safe in the room, but now he felt better. St. Clair kept his cash in a locked filing cabinet. He felt real sure of himself, St. Clair.

Parker went down on one knee, watching Johnny, and went through St. Clair's pockets till he found a key ring. Then, lefthanded, he unlocked the filing cabinet and went through the drawers. In the bottom drawer was a green metal box. It was heavy. Parker lifted it out, put it on the desk, and found the key that opened it. It was full of bills in stacks, with rolls of coins lined in the top tray. Parker removed the tray and put it on the desk; he had no use for coins. Then he removed St. Clair's wallet from his jacket pocket and dropped it in the box. He looked at Johnny again. "Yours, too."

Johnny moved very slowly, reaching around under the apron to his hip pocket and coming up with a worn brown leather wallet. Parker said, "Toss it on the desk."

"I got a lot of papers in there," Johnny told him. "Driver's license and stuff."

"Good," said Parker. It would go with the papers from the poker players in Miami. Legitimate papers were always useful. He dropped the wallet in the box and closed the top. Then he switched the gun to his left hand, picked up the box in his right, and swung it against St. Clair's head. It made a dull echoing sound. When St. Clair woke up, he'd be in a hospital.

Parker put the box down, got into his topcoat, and picked the box up again. "Now," he said, "we're going outside. We'll go through the kitchen and out the back way, and you won't say anything to that boy working back there, not even hello. You got me?"

"Not yet, but I will."

"Don't be brave, Johnny, you just work here. Let's go."

Johnny led the way and Parker followed, cradling the metal box. They went through the kitchen with no trouble and on outside. Parker closed the door and then it was pitchblack. It took Parker a few seconds to adjust his eyes, and then he saw and heard Johnny making a run for it to the left. He smiled thinly and followed. They both went around the building, Johnny crashing and blundering ahead, Parker moving silent in his wake, and then Johnny burst out to the brightly-lit sidewalk and ducked to the left around the corner of the building, toward the entrance. Parker made it to the side-

walk and walked the other way. In three steps he was in darkness, and then he was around the corner. He got into the Olds, put the metal box on the seat beside him, and drove away from there.

6

In spidery Gothic script, the nameplate on the ivory door read: *Justin Fairfax*. Parker touched his finger to the bell-button beside the door, then looked at the name. He hadn't moved. That was stupid, it really was. He should have moved.

Parker had been here once before, while trying to get his money back from the syndicate. Fairfax was the man in control of the New York area of the Outfit's operations, and it was in this apartment that Parker had spoken on the phone to Bronson, the man in charge of the national organization, the one who was now trying to have Parker killed. Parker wanted to get his hands on Bronson, which meant he would have to go through Fairfax.

The door opened. A heavyset distrustful man stood there, his right hand near his suitcoat lapel. He said. "What is it?"

Beyond him, Parker could see two twin brothers of the heavyset man lounging in the elegant living room, looking like burglars resting in the middle of a job. He said, "I've got a message for Mr. Fairfax. From Jim St. Clair."

"What's the message?"

"I'm supposed to deliver it to him personally."

"Tough. What's the message?"

Parker shrugged. "I'll go tell Mr. St. Clair you wouldn't let me in," he said. He turned away and headed for the elevator.

"Hold on."

Parker looked back.

"All right. You wait there, I'll see what Mr. Fairfax has to say."

"I'll wait inside. I don't want to hang around the hallway."

The heavyset man made an angry face. "All right," he said, "get in here."

Parker went in, and the heavyset man closed the door after him. They stepped down into the living room, and the heavyset man said to his twin brothers, "Watch this bird." Then he went on through the room and deeper into the apartment.

The twin brothers watched him. Parker stood with his hands in his pockets, his right hand holding the .38. His topcoat was unbuttoned, so he could aim the gun anywhere from within the pocket.

The heavyset man came back, followed by Fairfax. Fairfax was a tall and stately man, graying at the temples, with a clipped pepper-and-salt moustache. He was about fifty-five, and spent a lot of time in gymnasiums. He was wearing a silk robe from Japan and wicker sandals. He looked at Parker and frowned. "Do I know you?"

The new face came in handy sometimes. Parker said, "I work for Mr. St. Clair. You might of seen me around with him."

"Mmm." Fairfax reached up and touched his moustache with the tips of his fingers. It was a habit he had, meaningless but a little irritating. "Well, what's the message?"

Parker glanced meaningfully at the bodyguards. "Mr. St. Clair said I should keep it private," he said.

"You can speak in front of these men."

"Well—It has to do with Parker."

Fairfax smiled thinly. "Parker is the reason these men are here," he said. "What about him?"

"He knocked over The Three Kings tonight."

"He what?"

"He beat up Mr. St. Clair and walked off with thirty-four hundred dollars."

"So he's in New York." Fairfax mused, stroking his moustache with the tips of his fingers.

"He told Mr. St. Clair he was coming to see you next."

"He did, eh?" Fairfax glanced around at his three bodyguards. He smiled again, with scornful amusement. "I think we're ready for him if he does come," he said. "Don't you?"

"No."

Parker fired through his pocket, and the heavyset man staggered back one step and fell over a table, knocking magazines to the floor.

The twin brothers jumped to their feet, but Parker pulled the gun from his pocket and they stopped, frozen in mid-gesture. Fairfax backed up till his shoulders brushed the far wall; his face was pale and thin-looking, and his fingers now completely covered his moustache.

Parker said to the brothers, "Pick him up. Fairfax, lead the way. Same bedroom as last time." The last time he was here there'd been bodyguards, too. They'd been locked in a bedroom while Parker said what he had to say.

The twin brothers went over to the man on the floor. One of them looked up, saying, "He isn't dead."

"I know. I caught him in the shoulder. You can call a doctor after I leave here."

Fairfax, looking stunned, led the way. The brothers followed, carrying the wounded man, and Parker came last. They went into the bedroom and the brothers put the wounded man down on the bed. Fairfax pursed his lips at that, but didn't say anything.

Parker said, "Guns on the floor. Move very slow and easy, and one at a time. You first."

They did as they were told. Then Parker had them stand leaning against the wall, hands stretched out to the wall, bodies off-balance, and frisked them, finding nothing more on them. He relieved the wounded man of his gun, picked up the three guns in

his left hand by their trigger guards, and motioned for Fairfax to precede him out of the bedroom. Parker locked the bedroom door, and he and Fairfax went back to the living room.

Fairfax had regained some of his composure. "I don't know what you hope to gain," he said. "You'll keep annoying us, and we'll keep hunting you. The end is inevitable."

"Wrong. You aren't hunting me, I'm hunting you. Right now, I'm hunting Bronson."

"You won't get at him as readily as you got at me."

"Let me worry about that. This is the second time I've met up with you, Fairfax, and you can live through it this time too, if you co-operate."

"Whatever you want, it's beyond my power to give it to you."

"No, it isn't. I want two things. I want to know where Bronson is now and where he'll be for the next week or two. And I want to know who in the Outfit is slated to take over if anything happens to Bronson."

Fairfax's smile was shaky. "It would be worth my life to tell you either of those things," he said.

"You don't have any life left if you don't. I got your bodyguards out of the way so you could tell me without anybody knowing. I'm making it easy on you."

"I'm sorry. This time you'll just have to kill me." His voice had a

quaver in it, but he met Parker's eyes and he kept his hand down from his moustache.

Parker considered. Then he said, "All right, we'll make it easier than that. You know who's next in line after Bronson. I want to get in touch with him."

"Why?"

"You listen, and you'll find out. What's his name?"

Fairfax thought it over. His hand came stealthily up and lingered at his moustache. He said finally, as though to himself, "You want to make a deal. All right, there's no harm in that. It's Walter Karns, from California."

"Can you call him now?"

"I imagine he's at his place in Los Angeles."

"Phone him."

Fairfax got on the phone. Karns wasn't at the first two places he tried. Fairfax finally got in touch with him in Seattle, and said, "Hold on a second." He hadn't identified himself.

Parker took the phone. "Karns?"

"Yes?" It was a rich voice, a brandy and cigars voice. "Who is it?"

"I'm Parker. Ever hear of me?"

"Parker? The Parker who's been causing all that trouble in the east?"

"That's the one."

"Well, well, well. To what do I owe the honor?"

"If anything happens to Bronson, you're in, right?"

"What? Well, now, you're going a little fast there, aren't you?"

"I'm going after Bronson. Maybe I can make a deal with him, so we'll both be satisfied."

"I really doubt that, you know."

"Maybe I can, maybe I can't. If I don't, you're next in line. What I want to know, should I spend any time talking to Bronson?"

"Well, well! So that's it!"

"Do I try to make a deal with Bronson?"

"He'll never do it, you know."

"You got any other reasons why I shouldn't try?"

"Hold on. Let me think about this."

Parker held on. After a minute, Karns said, "I think we could probably work something out, Parker."

"You people go your way, I go mine. You don't annoy me, I don't annoy you."

"That certainly sounds reasonable."

"There's more. I'll get Bronson. I got Carter one time, you remember him?"

"From New York? Yes, I remember that clearly."

"And I had my hands on Fairfax once. And now I'll get Bronson. That means, if I have to, I can find you too."

"You seem to have found me already. Who was that on the phone before you?"

"That's not part of the deal. I just want you to know the situation."

"I think I understand, Parker. Believe me, if you succeed in ending the career of Arthur Bronson, you will have my undying respect and admiration. I would no more cross you thereafter than I would shake hands with a scorpion."

Parker motioned for Fairfax to come close. Into the phone he said, "Say it plain and simple. If I get Bronson, what?"

He held the phone out toward Fairfax. They both heard the tiny voice say, "If you get Arthur Bronson, Mr. Parker, the organization will never bother you again."

Parker brought the phone back and said, "That's good. Goodbye, Mr. Karns."

"Goodbye, Mr. Parker, and good hunting."

Parker hung up. He turned to Fairfax. "Well?"

Fairfax stroked his moustache. "I've always admired Karns," he said. "And I never have liked Bronson. You'll find him in Buffalo. He's staying at his wife's house till you're found. Seven ninety-eight Delaware, facing the park."

"All right. Fairfax, listen. What happens if you warn Bronson?"

"I won't, you can rely on that."

"But what happens if you do? You have to let him know you told me where to find him. He wouldn't take any excuse at all for that."

"I'm not going to warn him."

"What about those bodyguards of yours? Can you keep them quiet about tonight?"

"They work for me, not for Bronson."

"All right." Parker went to the hall door and opened it. "Goodbye, Fairfax."

"Goodbye."

Parker boarded the elevator and rode down to Fifth Avenue. The park was in front of him, the Olds was illegally parked around the corner. He plucked the green ticket from under the windshield wiper, ripped it in half, and dropped the halves in the gutter. Then he got behind the wheel and drove around the park to the west side, where there were phone booths. He got into one and made a long-distance call.

The phone was answered on the fourth ring by a male voice. Parker said, "I'm looking for Arnie La-Pointe."

"Speaking."

"This is Parker. I want you to give Handy McKay a message from me."

"I'm not sure I'll see him."

"If you do."

"Sure, if I do."

"If he's got nothing on, I'd like to meet him at Madge's in Scranton next Thursday."

"Who should he ask for?"

"Mr. Parker."

"What time Thursday?"

"Nine o'clock."

"If I see him, I'll tell him."

"Thanks."

He hung up and went back out to the Olds. He had two days to

get to Scranton and meet Handy, if Handy felt like sitting in, and then on to Buffalo, and Bronson.

7

Parker sat in his darkened room in the Green Glen Motel just north of Scranton, and looked out the window at route 6. It was 8:30 Thursday night; Handy was due soon.

He heard footsteps coming along the cement walk, and then a rapping at his door, and a voice called, "Parker, it's me. Madge." He shook his head and got to his feet. He'd have to talk to her.

Madge ran the Green Glen Motel. She was in her sixties now, one of the rare hookers who'd retired with money in the bank. Running this motel earned her a living and gave her something to do and indirectly kept her connected with her original profession; most of the units here were rented by the hour.

Parker opened the door and she came in carrying a bottle and two glasses. "Turn the light on, Parker. What the hell are you, a mole?"

Parker shut the door and switched on the ceiling light. "Sit down," he said, because he knew she would anyway.

Madge was bone-thin, with coarse white hair cut very short in Italian style. She wore black wool slacks with shadow-sharp creases, and a white blouse with large black buttons down the front. She put the

glasses down on the bureau and held up the bottle for Parker to see. Haig & Haig. "Just off the boat," she said, and laughed. She had gleaming white false teeth. Inside the young clothes was an old body, but inside the old body was a young woman. Madge wouldn't let herself be old. It was 1920, she was as young as the century, the Great War was over, Prohibition was on, money was everywhere; it was a grand thing at the very beginning of the Jazz Age to be alive and young and a high-priced whore. It would be 1920 around Madge till the day she died.

"You want ice?" she asked him. "I can go get some ice if you want."

"Never mind," said Parker. She couldn't stay long. Handy was due soon.

She splashed liquor into both glasses, handed him one, and said, "Happy times."

He grunted. The liquor, when he tasted it, was warm and sour-sharp. He should have had her go for the ice.

She went over and sat on the bed. "What a sourpuss," she said. "I just can't get used to that new face, Parker. You know, I think it's even worse than the old one."

"Thanks." He went over and looked out the window again. When Handy got here, he'd have an excuse to throw Madge out.

"Did I tell you Marty Kabell was here last summer? He had some blonde with him, Christy or some-

thing. He had a moustache, too . . .”

She talked away, talking at his back as he stood looking out the window. She told him who she'd seen in the last year, who she'd heard about, where this one was now, what happened to that one. She was full of information. Some of the names she mentioned were people Parker didn't know; Madge thought all the people she knew also knew one another. One big happy family. It was part of her still being twenty years old.

A car turned in from the highway and he interrupted her, saying, “You got a customer.”

“Ethel's minding the store.” Ethel was a cow of a girl, about twenty-five, somewhat retarded. She lived at the motel and worked for Madge, cleaning the units when they were vacated, sometimes taking over in the office. Where she'd come from and what connection she had with Madge Parker neither knew nor cared. Some people thought she was Madge's daughter.

Madge kept talking. Every once in a while she'd pause or ask a question, and Parker would have to rouse himself and say something. Madge liked to talk too much, but she was valuable and it was worth while to put up with her talking. Hers was the safest place in eastern Pennsylvania.

Ethel passed by the window, carrying a key, followed by a teenage

couple with their arms around each other's waist. The girl looked frightened, the boy looked intense. After a minute, Ethel came back alone, headed for the office. Behind Parker, Madge still talked. She was asking questions now, trying to store up more information on comings and goings to pass on to the next friend who stopped by. Parker answered in monosyllables: “In jail.” “Out in California somewhere.” “Dead.”

At last another car pulled in from the highway. Parker finished the warm liquor and said no to a second drink. He listened half to Madge, and for the other half listened for footsteps coming down the walk. He heard them coming, and waited, and then there was a knock at the door.

Handy. But just in case, he said to Madge, “Answer it for me, will you?”

“Sure. You in trouble, Parker?”

“No.”

Madge shrugged, still in good humor, and went over and opened the door. “Hello, Handy! Come on in.”

“What say, Madge?” Handy was tall and lean as a one by twelve, with knobby wrists and a bony face and stiff dark hair graying over the ears. He had a cigarette dangling from his mouth, and when he took it out it was badly lipped, brown tobacco showing through wet gray paper for half an inch.

“It's real good to see you,

Handy," said Madge. "Hold on, I'll get another glass."

Parker said, "Later on, Madge."

"Business," Madge told him. "It's always business with you, Parker." She put a hand on Handy's arm. "Come on over the office later, we'll get drunk."

"Sure thing, Madge." Handy grinned at her, and held the door open for her. She went through and he closed the door and turned to Parker. "She's a good old girl."

"She talks too much. How've you been?"

"So-so. Never any static on that armored car job. You read the papers on it?"

Parker shook his head. That was three months ago, he and Handy and two others had taken an armored car in New Jersey. If it wasn't for this Outfit thing, he'd still be in Florida, living on the take from that job. He and Handy had split it down the middle, because the other two had tried a cross and it hadn't worked.

"They never even got a beginning," Handy said. He went over to the bureau and crushed his cigarette in the ashtray. It sizzled. Then he pulled a box of small-size wooden matches from his pocket, got one match, and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. Between cigarettes, he always sucked on a wooden match. He turned back to Parker and said, "You remember what I told you after that job, I told you it was my last one. I'm retiring."

Parker nodded. Handy quit after every job, he'd been doing it for ten years or more.

"I mean it this time," Handy told him, as though he knew what Parker was thinking. "I been up in Presque Isle, Maine. They got them an Air Force base up there, and I'm buying in on a diner, right across the road from the main gate. Open all night. I short order a good egg when I put my mind to it, so I'll work the nights myself."

"Good luck."

"Damn right." Handy moved over and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I been in this business too long," he said. "I'm a lucky man, Parker. You, too. Both of us, too damn lucky. But there's no string goes on forever, and I figure mine's down in Presque Isle, Maine and short order a few eggs and let the rest of the world go by." He grinned. "In the meantime, what's the job you called me in for?"

"It isn't a job. Not the regular kind, anyway."

"What kind?"

Parker filled him in on what had happened in the last week, the killer who'd missed, and the letters to the other men in the business, and taking care of Menner, and knocking over The Three Kings. When he was done, Handy said, "I been thinking. Out of the people I know, there's at least eight'll be real happy to get that letter of yours. They'll go right out and do that job they've been thinking

about all these years." He grinned and nodded. "This Bronson and his friends, I bet they're hurting right now."

"They'll hurt more." Parker lit a cigarette. "Anyway, I know where Bronson is. I'm going there."

"What else?"

"I could use a man beside me. I'm not in this one for the dough, so I'll give you the take from the poker game and The Three Kings. Forty-two hundred. Plus whatever we pick up in Bronson's house."

"I wasn't in on those other two. Why give me the dough from them?"

"Make it worth your while. Bronson may not have much on him."

Handy shrugged. "Keep the dough, Parker. We known each other for years. We'll split the take from Bronson, and call the rest for old time's sake."

Parker frowned. He didn't like it that way. He said, "A split all the way, then. Twenty-one hundred for each of us, plus Bronson."

"Why? Why you want to give money away all of a sudden?"

"I'm not giving it away. I'm making it worth your while. You don't want to do a job for nothing."

Handy watched himself light a new cigarette. He leaned over to drop the match into an ashtray and then shrugged. "All right," he said, not looking at Parker. "A split all the way." He lipped the cigarette,

then grinned and looked over at Parker. "I could use the money, anyway."

"For the diner."

"Sure, for the diner." Handy settled back on the bed, relaxing. "When you want to go after this Bronson?"

"Early next week. By then, the Outfit'll have been hit a few times. I want to be sure this guy Karns won't be in any hurry to cause trouble when he takes over."

"When do you want to go to Buffalo?"

"Tomorrow. We can use the time getting set up. How's your car? Hot?"

"Not a bit. Paid cash for it in Bangor. Absolutely legitimate."

"Same name as with the diner?"

"Sure. My own."

"We'll use mine then. To be on the safe side. It can't be traced back to me."

"It's a mace?"

"Yeah. I got it off Chemey, in Georgia. You know, the little guy with the brother?"

"Sure. It should be okay, then."

"It is."

"All right." Handy got to his feet. "I'm gonna stop in with Madge for a while. Come along?"

"Not tonight."

"See you in the morning, then."

Handy went out, and Parker switched off the light again. He sat by the window, smoking and looking out at the highway. Handy was troubling him. Buying a car,

buying it legitimate. Buying into a diner, and planning to work in it. And being willing to come into a job for nothing, out of sentimentality.

It was a bad sign when a man like Handy started owning things, and started thinking he could afford friendships. Possessions tie a man down, and friendships blind him. Parker owned nothing, the men he knew—who were just that, the men he knew, not his friends—owned nothing. Sure, under the Charles Willis name he had pieces of a few businesses here and there, but that was for tax reasons. He stayed away from those places, had nothing to do with them, didn't try to get a nickel out of them. What Handy was doing was something else again; buying things to have them. And working with a man not for a profit but because he *liked* him.

When a man like Handy started craving possessions and friendships, it meant he was losing the leanness. It was a bad sign.

8

Handy pointed. "That one," he said. "Next to the gray house."

Parker looked at the house where Bronson lived, and nodded. He pulled the Olds over to the curb and stopped, then gazed across at the mass of stone where he'd find Bronson.

It was Saturday night. They'd

taken their time coming up from Scranton to Buffalo, stopping off in Syracuse Friday night while Handy got himself a gun. He now had under his coat an Iver Johnson snub .38 revolver.

Parker shut off the engine. "Let's go for a walk."

"Right."

The park was beside them. They walked along next to it, not crossing till they came opposite the next cross-street. They went down that street and turned right, toward the rear of Bronson's house, walking casually, two big men in hunting jackets and caps, their hands in their pockets.

Handy murmured, "There's his garage."

"Driveway there."

They strolled along, looking in all the parked cars they passed, studying the driveway as they went by, and then continued on down to the corner and turned back toward the park again.

Handy said, "It's open. Does that figure?"

"They'll be watching inside the house. Maybe Bronson's got a front around here. So it would look funny for him to have guards at the driveways."

"I guess so."

"He'll have them in there with him, though."

Parker thought about it as they walked along. This was Bronson's front, Bronson's cover. He probably had his life here completely depart-

ed from his life in the Outfit—like Handy with his diner in Presque Isle, Maine, or Parker when he was being Charles Willis—and maybe he was here now because of Parker. Maybe he figured this Buffalo cover would hide him, the way Parker always used the Charles Willis cover.

So this should tie the score. Bronson breaks into Charles Willis, Parker breaks into Buffalo.

They turned right, and walked past the front of Bronson's place, and on down to the end of the block. Then they crossed over by the park again, walked back to the car, climbed in, and Parker drove away.

So that was Bronson's hideout. A big pile of stones, set back from the street, the grounds surrounded by high hedges. Neighbors far away on both sides. On the left a school for the blind, on the right some sort of clubhouse or something with neon; both sides empty at night, anyway. And the park across the street. And nothing but his own garage in back. He was isolated in there, a sitting duck. You could set off dynamite, and no one would hear a thing.

Handy said, "You want days or nights?"

"I'll take nights. I slept this afternoon on the way in."

"Okay."

They headed north, through Kenmore and Tonawanda, and found a motel near the Thruway.

The woman in the office talked all the time, reminding Parker of Madge, except she was fat. She finally showed them their unit and gave them the key and went away. Parker and Handy carried their luggage inside and then Handy looked at his watch and said, "Ten o'clock. I'll see you at ten in the morning."

"Right."

Parker went back to the car and drove south again into Buffalo and over to Bronson's house. He parked across the street again and down the block a ways, so he was facing the house. His watch told him it was ten-twenty. He got pencil and notebook out of the glove compartment and made a rough sketch of the front of the house, numbering the windows from one to eleven. Five of them showed light. He wrote: 10:20—1-2-3-6-7. He had passed the rear of the house coming in, and there had been no lights on back there at all.

The notes finished, he put the pencil and notebook down on the seat beside him, lit a cigarette, and settled down to wait.

At eleven-forty a prowler car went by, headed east. Parker jotted it down in the notebook.

At eleven-fifty-five, window 3 went out. At eleven-fifty-seven, window 9 came on. He wrote it down. At twelve-ten, window 9 went out. He wrote that down.

At twelve-twenty, windows 6 and 7 went off. Parker waited, but

no other lights went on in their place. He started the car and drove around the block, but there still weren't any lights on in back. He returned to his parking space and wrote it down.

At one-fifteen, the prowler car went by again, once more headed east. So it was a belt, and not a back-and-forth deal. And the belt took about an hour and a half. Parker wrote it down.

After the prowler car disappeared from his rearview mirror, he got out of the car and crossed the street. The streetlights were widely spaced here, and all on the park side. He was only a shadow when he slipped through the opening in the hedge and moved at an angle across the lawn toward the lighted windows. He peered over the edge at the room inside.

An oval oak table, and a chandelier above, and poker again. Five men this time. Parker looked at them and picked out Bronson right away. He had the rich, irritated, overfed look. The other four had the stolid truculence of club fighters, strike breakers and bodyguards. In this case, bodyguards.

Parker moved around the house, keeping close to the wall. There was an apartment over the garage, which he hadn't noticed before. There was a light on there, and record player music—MJQ—came softly from the open window. As Parker watched, a Negro in an un-

dershirt passed the window. The chauffeur, then. Parker continued on around the house.

There were no other lights on. Someone had gone to bed in the room behind window 9. The chauffeur was in his apartment over the garage. Bronson and four bodyguards were playing poker downstairs. The one who had gone to bed—Bronson's wife? Probably. So there were six in the house, plus the chauffeur. Parker went back to the car and wrote it all down in the notebook.

Two-fifty, the prowler car again. Three-ten, window 3 went on. A minute later it went off again, and then an upstairs pair of windows, 6 and 7, went on. They stayed on.

Who would have left the game? Bronson. Window 3 would have shown the light he'd turned on to go upstairs. Windows 6 and 7 were probably his bedroom. Windows 1 and 2, where the game was, stayed on.

Three forty-five, windows 6 and 7 went off. Then window 8 came on, stayed on for five minutes, and went off. So was 8 Bronson's bedroom? Maybe he had a den or something upstairs, and he'd spent some time there before going to bed. Parker wrote it down with a question mark, then drove around the block again. The chauffeur's light was out, and there were still no lights on in the back of the house.

The bodyguards didn't even cover the back of the house! They were still in front, playing poker!

Parker didn't believe it. He parked around front again, left the car, and went over to the house to check. And they were there, all four of them, still playing poker at the oval oak table.

Parker went back to the car. He wrote it down, and put an exclamation point after it.

When window 3 went on at four fifty, and then windows 1 and 2 went off, he knew they were all going to bed. None of them would stay up all night, to be sure. They would all go to bed. Window 3 went off, and Parker started the Olds and drove around back and saw the row of lights on up on the third floor. He waited and saw them go off, one by one, and now the entire house was in darkness. Now there was no one awake to give the alarm. Parker went back to his parking space in front and settled down to wait for morning. He noted the prowler's infrequent passage, and also noted the fact that the two cops in the prowler never gave him a second glance. He'd been sitting here all night, but they hadn't bothered about him.

At seven-thirty, he put pencil and notebook in his pocket, left the Olds, and walked into the park. There was a blacktop path a little way off, and some benches along it. He sat on one, bundled up in the

hunting jacket, and chain-smoked while he watched the house and waited for ten o'clock.

At five past nine, a black Cadillac came out through the opening in the hedge, and turned right. Squinting, Parker could see the Negro chauffeur at the wheel, and one man in back. That would be Bronson. Another black Cadillac came down from the cross-street to the left, turned, and fell in behind the first one. There were four men in this one. The two Cadillacs drove away. So now there would be no one in the house but Bronson's wife.

At nine-thirty a cab stopped in front of the house, and a Negro woman got out, carrying a brown paper bag. She went on into the house. Cook or maid or some such thing, carrying her work clothes in the bag.

At five minutes to ten, another cab came along and stopped, this one pulling to the curb behind the Olds. Handy got out and paid the driver. Parker got to his feet and strolled along the path, looking over at Handy. Handy checked in the Olds first, then looked around and spied Parker and came walking across the grass. Parker sat down on the nearest bench and Handy came over and sat down next to him, saying, "How'd it go?"

Parker got out the notebook and read off what had happened in the last twelve hours, with his own commentary and explanations.

Handy listened to it, nodding, and then said, "He's making it easy for us."

"It doesn't figure."

"Sure it does. He thinks he's safe here. The bodyguards are for just in case, but he doesn't really think he'll need them."

"We'll go in Thursday. That'll give us five days to double-check."

"Okay."

Parker got to his feet. "See you tonight."

"Right."

Parker looked over at the Olds. "Maybe we ought to move the car for a while."

"I won't need it till after dark."

"I'll be right back."

Parker went over and got into the car and drove it away from there. He took it halfway around the park, locked it, and walked back through the park to Handy. "It's over there. You follow the path straight through."

"Okay."

Parker gave him the keys, then walked out of the park, found a cab, and took it back to the motel.

9

Thursday night:

They came in through the back way, keeping out of sight of the chauffeur's windows. It was quarter to eleven. By the lights, they knew Bronson was up in his office or den, his wife was in bed, the bodyguards were at the poker

game again. They played poker all the time. Every once in a while Bronson sat in with them, but not as though he enjoyed it. It was as though he was dying of boredom in there, and had to do something to occupy his mind. He was here because he was sure Parker would be looking for him at the resorts where he usually hung out, there wasn't any question of that any more.

They came at the rear door. Handy had three small slender tools wrapped in flannel and tucked inside his topcoat. He took them out now and unwrapped them. It was pitch black against the rear of the house, but Handy could see with his hands. His tools made muted metallic sounds against the lock on the back door, and then the door came open as though the lock had been made of butter. Handy wrapped his tools up again, tucked them back inside his coat, and took his .38 back out of his pocket.

Parker went in first. He had his gun in his right hand, a pencil flash in his left. There was electric tape over the flash, leaving only a small opening for the light to peep through.

They had entered a stairwell. Concrete stairs led down to the basement, wooden stairs led to the upper floors. Straight ahead was another door, unlocked. Parker opened it cautiously, to find more darkness. He aimed the light into

the darkness and saw a big square kitchen. He crossed it, Handy behind him, and on the other side there were three doors. One led to a small dining room on the right, one to a deep pantry, and one to a hallway. At the far end of the hallway there was light. Parker started down the hallway, and all over the house clocks began striking eleven.

They waited through it, unmoving, and when it ended Handy whispered, "Jesus!"

Parker started forward again, and another chime sounded. He thought at first it was another clock, running slow, but then he realized it must be the front doorbell. "Hold it," he whispered.

Ahead, at the far end of the hallway, one of the bodyguards went by, carrying his cards with him. They waited, heard the front door open, heard conversation, and then the bodyguard went back. A door closed.

Parker moved again. The two of them hurried silently down the hallway to where it opened onto the main front hall. Someone was going upstairs. They heard, "Hello, Mr. Bronson. A real mess, that Cockatoo situation."

Another voice muttered something unintelligible.

The first voice said, "Very nice house, Mr. Bronson. Really very nice."

The second voice said, "You said that last time." That would be Bronson. He sounded bitter.

"I must mean it, then."

"Yeah. Come on into the office."

There was silence, and then a door closed upstairs.

Parker whispered, "Watch the stairs."

Handy nodded.

Parker moved away to the right, at an angle, and came to the doorway where the bodyguards were playing poker. He glanced in and saw them sitting there, concentrating on the game. They would be there another three or four hours. They could be ignored.

Parker hadn't expected this visitor. Bronson had had only one visitor in the five days they'd been watching his house, and that had been a youngish man with a briefcase who'd showed up in a chauffeur-driven limousine Sunday night. He'd looked like an insurance adjustor, except for the limousine. He'd stayed half an hour, and then had gone away again. Following the lights behind the windows, Parker'd been able to tell the visitor had spent all his time in Bronson's office on the second floor.

He wondered if this was the same one, back again. Whether it was or not, he'd delay them.

Parker went back to Handy and whispered, "They're at the cards again. We can forget them."

"Right."

Mrs. Bronson was already in bed. They'd seen the light go on and off in her bedroom an hour ago. So, except for the visitor, ev-

erything was set up the way they'd planned.

Parker led the way up the stairs. They were thickly carpeted, as was the hall on the second floor, so they moved without sound.

The third door on the right should be Bronson's office. Bronson's bedroom was beyond that, and his wife's bedroom further down, at the end. The hall was lit dimly by wall fixtures in the shape of candelabra. Light gleamed under the door of Bronson's office.

Parker moved up silently to the door and pressed his ear against it. He heard the stranger's voice, talking in a monotone. After a minute, he figured out what the stranger was talking about. There'd been a robbery at a place called Club Cockatoo, and he was describing the robbery to Bronson.

Parker smiled to himself. He'd been right. He wondered which of his letters had set off the robbery of the Club Cockatoo. He moved away from the door, back down the hall to where Handy was waiting at the head of the stairs. Handy was keeping an eye on the staircase, just in case anyone decided to come up.

Parker whispered, "They're talking about a robbery."

Handy grinned. "Just one?"

"I don't know."

Parker went back and listened some more. The stranger's name was Quill, and Bronson didn't like him very much. Quill was explain-

ing how come the people who worked at the Club Cockatoo had let the robbers get away with it. Parker listened, as impatient as Bronson, and at last heard Quill say, "Well, I think we may have learned from this."

Bronson's voice said, bitterly, "And the others."

"I'd heard there'd been some more."

"Eleven more."

Parker moved away, back to Handy, smiling again. "Twelve," he whispered. "They been knocked over twelve times."

"That's a lot of money," said Handy.

"Karns'll go along. Twelve times! Karns'll pay us to stop."

Handy looked over the rail at the stairs and the hallway down below. Dimly, the poker players could still be heard. Handy said, "What do you want to do? Tackle him with that guy there?"

"No. He's maybe due someplace else after he leaves here. We don't want to keep him."

"What, then?"

"We'll wait. In Bronson's bedroom."

"Right."

They went down the hall together, past the office door, through which they could faintly hear the murmuring sounds of Quill and Bronson, and opened the next door along. Parker went in first, shining the pencil flash around, reassuring himself the room was emp-

ty. Handy came in after him, Parker shut the flashlight off, and they settled down to wait. They could hear Bronson and Quill talking next door, but couldn't quite make out the words. They left the hall door partway open, just in case one of the bodyguards should come up, or another guest should arrive, or Mrs. Bronson should decide to get out of bed. Handy sat on the edge of the bed and Parker stood by the door. They'd taken their hats off and tossed them on the bed, but kept the coats on. They both had their guns in their hands.

They waited about fifteen minutes, and then they heard the office door open and Quill say, "Good night, Mr. Bronson." Bronson muttered something from inside the office, and then Quill shut the office door and walked away toward the stairs.

Parker whispered, "Take the stairs. I'm going in after Bronson now."

"Right."

As soon as Quill started down the stairs and out of sight, Handy moved out of the bedroom. He went silently down the hall and stood against the wall by the head of the stairs, watching.

Parker waited a minute, then went down the hall and opened the door to Bronson's office. Bronson was standing at the window looking out, his back to the door. Parker studied his back, wondering if there was any reason to spend time

talking to Bronson first, and had just about decided there wasn't any reason when Bronson turned around.

Bronson saw him, and gave a start, but recovered quickly. A bitter smile creased his lips and he said, "So you're Parker."

"That's right." Parker raised the .38.

But there was sudden motion to his right. He turned his head and saw Handy coming on the run. He stepped into the office and Handy barreled in after him, saying hoarsely, "They're coming back up!"

Parker turned to Bronson. "Why?"

"What? Quill's staying the night."

"All right. Keep your mouth shut."

Bronson shook his head. "No. I've been wondering if those bodyguards were any damn good. Now I'll find out." He raised his head and shouted, "Help!"

Parker fired in irritation and ducked back out to the hall. Behind him, Bronson sagged onto the desk.

Quill and one of the bodyguards were at the head of the stairs. They gaped at Parker and Handy, and then turned to run back down again. Parker and Handy both fired, but they'd both aimed at the bodyguard, so Quill got away safe, stumbling over the bodyguard as he dropped and fell down the stairs.

"The wife!" said Parker. "Shut her up."

"Right."

Handy hurried away down the hall and Parker went back into Bronson's office. Bronson was lying on his face behind the desk. Parker checked him, but he wouldn't need a booster. He straightened and took the phone off the hook, hoping there was only one phone line in the house. If all the extensions were on the same line, there wouldn't be any calls made while this phone was off the hook.

Parker hurried back to the hall. Handy hadn't come back yet. Parker ran down to the end of the hall, by the stairs, in time to see the three bodyguards starting up. He fired, not hitting anybody, and they ducked back into the room where they'd been playing poker. Parker knelt behind the railing and waited for Handy.

This was a good spot, for right now. Looking over the railing he could see straight down to the foot of the stairs, and out across the main hall to the front door and off to the right to the room where the bodyguards and Quill were holed up. He could keep them in there, unless they tried going out the window.

Somebody took a shot at him from the doorway down there. He ducked back, waited a beat, and leaned forward in time to see one of them making a dash across the hall for the room on the opposite

side, hoping to get back there so they could have Parker and Handy in a crossfire. Parker slid the .38 over the top of the railing, dropped the running man, and ducked back out of sight again. They were firing from the room on the right again, the bullets gouging the wall over Parker's head.

Handy showed up, running forward at a crouch, ducking down to kneel beside Parker. "Tied and gagged," he said. "What now?"

"Three left. Two bodyguards and Quill."

"What about the back stairs?"

"I don't want a chase. We finish them off in here. It's private in here. No neighbors, no questions."

"Okay."

Parker said, "Besides, we want time to go through the place. You don't want to do this for nothing."

"Yeah, that's right."

"You stay here. Take a shot at them every once in a while. I'll go down and go around outside to the window."

"Right."

Parker slid away, in a crouch, and straightened when he was a ways down the hall. He hurried down to the far end, where he found the stairs that led to the back door. He started down them, and a sound made him stop. Somebody was coming in through the back door.

Parker waited. Whoever it was, he was being slow and cautious. Small occasional sounds told Par-

ker where he was and what he was doing. He came in the back door, shut it carefully behind himself, and then started up the stairs. Parker had shut the second-floor door behind himself, so it was inky black in the stairwell. He sat on the top step, the .38 in his right hand and the pencil flash in his left hand, waiting. Both were aimed down at the landing.

The other one came slowly up the stairs, and finally got to the landing. He made the turn and started up the other half flight toward Parker. Parker switched on the pencil flash. It was one of the bodyguards, staring up at him, blinded by the light. Parker fired, and the face fell away from him. He switched off the light and heard the bodyguard go crashing back down the stairs.

Parker followed him, hurrying. He'd been delayed too long. Handy would be wondering where the hell he was.

He went out the back door and around the outside of the house to the front. He saw the open window where the bodyguard had crawled through, trying Parker's tactic in reverse. He moved up to the window, peered over the edge, and saw the two of them in there. The bodyguard was crouched by the doorway, peering out around the corner, an automatic in his hand. Quill was at the far end of the room, sitting in a leather chair, the briefcase on his lap, with the blank

expression of somebody in a waiting room.

Parker called to the bodyguard, "Drop the gun. Don't turn around."

But the bodyguard wouldn't quit. He spun around, firing wildly, and Parker dropped him with one shot. Then he turned and showed the gun to Quill, resting it on the windowsill. "Don't move," he said. "Don't make any move at all."

"I'm just sitting here," Quill told him. He didn't act particularly worried.

Parker called, "Handy! Come on down."

They waited, and after a minute Handy came in, grinning. He looked around and said, "One more. There's one missing."

"I met him on the way around. Watch Quill."

"Right."

Parker left the window and went around to the back of the house again. He let himself in and walked through the house to where Handy and Quill were waiting. He went over to Quill and said, "You know Karns?"

"Not personally. I've heard of him."

"I hear he'll be taking over."

"Bronson's dead?"

"I want you to give Karns a message from me."

"I take it you're Parker."

"That's right."

"And since you want me to de-

liver a message, that means you'll let me live."

"Why not?"

Quill smiled. "Exactly. Why not?"

"You heeled, Quill?"

"A gun? I never carry one."

"I didn't think so. All right, the message. Tell Karns I'll start getting in touch with my friends, telling them to forget the Outfit again. But it'll take a while. There'll probably be a few more robberies before I get in touch with everybody. This thing'll be tougher to stop than it was to start. But that was Bronson's doing, getting it started in the first place. I'll stop it as soon as I can. You tell Karns that."

"There may be some more robberies, but you'll stop them as soon as you can."

"That's it."

"I'll tell him."

"Good." Parker turned to Handy. "I'll keep an eye on this bird while you go through the house."

"Right." Handy pocketed his gun and left the room.

Quill said, "Have you been masterminding these robberies?"

"No. My friends have been doing it on their own."

"They've been very professional."

"My friends are very professional."

"Yes, of course."

They were silent then.

About ten minutes later, Handy

was back. "I found a safe," he said. He turned to Quill. "You know anything about it? What he might have in there?"

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't know Mr. Bronson that well."

Handy shrugged. "I'd hate to take the trouble to go in there and not find anything but a lot of papers. I'll take the chance." He went out again.

This time he was gone longer. Parker sat at the table where the bodyguards had played poker, and Quill remained in the leather chair, his hands on the briefcase resting on his lap.

Handy was back in half an hour, grinning. "Jackpot," he said. "Bronson must of been holding out on the income tax people. Twenty-four grand in the safe. Plus about three hundred I picked up here and there, and some jewelry. We'll maybe get five or six on the jewelry."

Parker got to his feet. It was over. He could relax. Karns would be more sensible than Bronson. He said, "So long, Quill. Be sure to give Karns the message."

"Yes, I will. Goodbye, Mr. Parker."

10

Parker sat at the writing desk in the motel room, writing letters. It was the Green Glen Motel, outside Scranton, and Handy was off having a drink and some reminis-

cence with Madge. Parker was copying from the first letter he'd done this afternoon, and had so far done eight of them:

"Frank,

If you haven't done anything about that first letter I sent you, never mind. I got everything straightened out now, so we can leave the Outfit alone again. I got in touch with the guy who ran the Outfit, and the one who's taking over now has more sense. I talked with him, and we got everything squared away. If you already got the job set up go ahead and do it, but you don't have to on my account any more. You can always get in touch with me through Joe Sheer in Omaha. Maybe we'll work together again some time.

Parker"

He was just starting on the ninth when the door opened. He looked up, expecting Handy or Madge or both, but it was Ethel, Madge's girl, carrying sheets over her arm. She said, "I'm supposed to change the linen now."

"Go ahead."

She went over to the bed, and he got back to work on the letters. He did two more and then she said, "Okay, it's all changed now."

"That's good."

"Looks nice," she said.

He turned to look at her. She was a hefty girl, with big mounds of breasts and hips, and rumpled blonde hair framing a face that

would have been good-looking if it wasn't so vapid. He said, "Yeah, very nice. That's good." He wondered if she was waiting around for a tip.

She said, "You want anything else before I go?"

"No," he said. "That's okay."

She licked her lips and smiled, looking almost animated. "You sure?"

Then he caught on. And seriously considered it for a second or two, because the job was over, and he was due for a celebration, and it would be a nice break from the letter-writing to toss this one once, a soft quickie on the clean sheets. But the blank cow-face stopped him, because he knew there was a blank cow mind behind it.

He could wait till tomorrow night. He'd be back in Miami tomorrow night, and he'd look up Bett Harrow again. He could save it till then. The first one after a job ought to be a good one, on a clean piece like Bett, not on a cow from Scranton. He said, "I'm sure. Forget it."

"If you say so," she said. The smile faded, and she looked vague and sullen. She went out and closed the door after her.

Parker wrote letters a while longer, and then Handy came in. "Madge'll take care of fencing the jewels for us," he said. "She'll hold onto the dough till the next time we come through."

"Good."

"Where you headed next, Parker?"

"Miami."

Handy sat down on the bed. "It's colder than hell in Presque Isle this time of year," he said.

"Warm in Miami."

"Maybe I'll come along."

"What about your diner in Presque Isle, Maine?"

Handy shrugged, grinning sheepishly. "The hell with my diner in Presque Isle, Maine," he said.

"Come on along, then," Parker told him.

