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THE PRICE



OF LUST

A Novelette

BY JOE GORES

The notebook must have been valuable . . . it cost five lives.

HE WAS a nervous little guy with quick hands and sad eyes and a bald pate fringed with grey. The billowing steam muted his high-pitched voice but his hands conveyed a perpetual excitement, like the paws of a squirrel eating a nut.

"You got the build, oughtta be with the 49ers," he yapped, gesturing at my towel-wrapped body through the clouds. He wiped sweat from his face with a quick hand. "Me an' my partner take nightclub photos, I'm up all night; this turkish bath saves my life."

As I was knotting my tie after my shower he popped up again, a manic gadfly before analysis.

"Cuppa coffee?"

"Why not?" I had been steaming out the kinks of an all-night drive

from Eureka, and my reports would take me the whole morning anyway.

We went up carpeted stairs and through aluminum and glass doors. San Francisco looked deserted. Down on Market an early streetcar rumbled by; across Golden Gate Avenue a black Fleetwood lisped carbon monoxide into the dawn-fresh air. Yellow light spilled from a coffee shop half a block away.

"They're open."

"Okay."

We turned left, toward the corner. The Caddy came alive. I yelled: its lone occupant had a black handkerchief knotted across his face just below his eyes and his hairless head shone under the

dome light like a peeled egg at an Easter social.

Something black and deadly and silenced puffed at us from the open window; a slug splattered on the imitation marble steps of the apartment house next to the turkish bath and a second jerked urgently at my topcoat sleeve. My companion grunted, grabbed my lapels; we hit the gutter. My mouth was cottony with fear: I reeked of it. The Cadet slid into Taylor Street before I got the license number.

He clung to me like a rejected paramour, his lips drawn back and his shocked eyes pleading for understanding.

"I . . . I didn't . . . the book . . ." His hands relaxed and his head hit the curb. Fluid drooled from his slack mouth. Two men came out of the all-night billiards parlor across the street and turned uphill, toward Jones, without noticing us. I was all alone with the little guy, and he was dead. The turkish bath hadn't saved his life after all.

2.

Violent death, like a night with a virgin, leaves too many regrets. Climbing the stairs to my office Wednesday morning—after spending enough of Tuesday with the police to convince them the gunman hadn't been after me—I was an old man with spiders in his eyes and a cigarette made from a wrestler's sweat sock. I'd gone to bed

with a bottle and the dead man's face.

The door with *Bartholemew Drew, Investigations* in one corner of the frosted glass stood open enough for me to see a woman reading a newspaper in the outer office. Her rolled umbrella was slim enough for duelling and her purse could have garaged a Renault.

"Hello, Bart. It's been a long time."

"How are you, Edie?" I unlocked the private office and opened a window to stir up the musty smell that came with the lease. There was a dead fly on the window sill. Belatedly I added: "Too long."

She'd cried on my shoulder after her husband's death in an accident, until she'd become engaged to a man named Frank LaMonea. I hadn't seen her in four years but I'd heard that the marriage hadn't worked out. She'd changed enough so she swiped a glove across the chair and showed too much leg sitting down. The leg was still good. Her spike heels could have skewered *shish kabab*.

"You're older, Bart."

"I saw a man die yesterday."

She nodded. Her newspaper was headed GUNS ON GOLDEN GATE AVENUE over a picture of the blanket-covered dead man, with another of Otard from Homicide sleuthing the gutter for clues. I'd managed to keep my own mug out of it.

"It must have been terrible, Bart. But when I saw your name it suddenly seemed you might be able to help *me* with my . . . problem. Were you working?"

"I'd just met him in a turkish bath. Name was Hymie Bergen, developed pictures for a photo girl, Gloria Gann, at some roadhouse down the coast. Two shots from a silenced .38—and from a moving car that's shooting. The car was stolen." I sat down behind my desk. "You mentioned trouble."

She brought up one of those hesitant women's smiles that no man can ever duplicate. Her wide-set grey eyes were ageless and her well-boned face would retain its beauty for another ten years.

"You probably heard that Frank and I . . ." I nodded. "A year ago I went to a Reno dude ranch to establish residence. You know the sort of place: lonely women sharpening their claws on one another and hating the man they couldn't hold. A man named Vernon Segale was staying there and—"

"And six weeks is too long to be alone. What dude ranch?"

"The *Bucking Horse*. Not that it matters. Segale said he could get me a night-club job when I came back to San Francisco. I believed him. His last night there we had a party in his room and I got terribly drunk. I . . . I remember dancing for him by moonlight."

She shuddered and ground out her cigarette savagely.

"So after my divorce I looked him up. He was the lousy *parking attendant* at a crummy roadhouse in Pacifica—and since then he's been fired! Some job *he* could have gotten *me*! I haven't seen him since then, and haven't talked to him when he's called, but . . . this morning . . ."

It was a plain white envelope with her name and address—a new apartment house on Nob Hill—in executive type, the kind that looks like printing. It had been mailed from Sausalito, a small town across the Golden Gate from the city, the night before.

Inside were four photos, wallet-size. In two of them Edie was doing a wild interpretive dance, her face very serious. Part of a blonde-wood side table was visible, with a whiskey bottle, two glasses, and an ash tray full of butts. By the third one she had gotten nude and was sitting on the bed, head back, laughing, beside a young blond guy with a 'build like Steve Reeves'. The bottle was empty in the fourth, and the bottom half of a print by some modern artist showed on the wall. Edie and the blond guy were still on the bed. They weren't sleeping. The pictures had a nightmarish quality, like illustrations for *Tropic of Cancer* without Miller's vitriolic humor to save them from pornography.

"Don't leer so, you damned goat!" Edie was blushing furiously. "Taken with infra-red flash; we

use a lot of it in our business." I said it just to be saying something. My palms felt clammy. "Any note?"

Her eyes had become tight and furious. "Did there have to be?"

"No note. No way to prove Segale sent them. You don't need me, Edie; go to the police."

She squeezed her eyes shut as if scanning the lids for guidance. Wan sunlight struck rich fluid highlights from her dark hair. Disturbing shadows when she leaned toward me, lips slightly parted, contradicted her defenselessness. Her perfume was *l'Or* at sixty bucks an ounce.

"If any stranger ever saw these I'd . . . well, I'll never go to the police. And I don't have any money to pay Segale. I . . . I thought if you'd . . . I mean, we were good friends once; when all this is over . . ."

"Okay, Edie," I growled, "You don't have to offer me your fair white body. I'll talk to him and see what I can do."

I refused a retainer, wrote down Segale's Sausalito address, and watched the door close behind her tight revealing skirt with a sigh like lost innocence. Her perfume, like her Nob Hill address, was a good trick for a girl without any money. The years had made her one of those women who depend on a glimpse of her stocking tops to get her out of trouble, but that's the way it usually is with my cli-

ents. They're seldom innocent, or moral, or nice, or even honest. Just in trouble.

Most investigations are routine: park your fanny on a chair and run up a phone bill. I learned from the Hall of Justice that Segale's car-park permit had been rescinded when he'd left the Pacifica road-house, the *Rumrunner*, but they had the same address Edie had given me; Sausalito information confirmed it. There was no felony want on him, the rackets detail had never heard of him, and none of the house men at the big downtown hotels made him. I cremated a cigarette and got interested.

A toll-call to the *Rumrunner* got me a secretary who confirmed that Segale had been terminated, reason unspecified, and an appointment with the owner, Dwight Benjamin, for ten-thirty the next morning. The secretary had never heard of Edith LaMonea.

I leaned back and put another Pall Mall to the torch. The *Rumrunner* nagged me. Segale nagged me. He was too pure to be a professional, but damned few amateurs work with infra-red flash. Then I got it. I rooted around in the story on Hymie Bergen in the newspaper Edie had left. There it was. Bergen had worked at the *Rumrunner* developing night club photos; Segale had worked at the *Rumrunner* as a parking boy; Edie had come to see me about one of

them the day after I'd shared a gutter with the other. Coincidences really occur, but not that kind.

I got an operative busy in Reno, then found out from a rental agency what apartments cost in Edie's building. Finally I tried some head-waiters whose business was remembering people. They remembered her: always with the high-rollers from out-of-state. Always with the singles. The tricks women have. A pattern was emerging and I didn't like it. I called the answering service and told them I'd be out.

3.

A few years ago Sausalito was a sleepy little bayside village with retired oldsters dangling lines off the piers. Then the weekend beats and the limp wrists and the yachting set discovered it: now Ferraris chase you down the sidewalks and supermarkets shoulder aside the olde shoppes, and rentals read like executives' salaries.

Segale lived on Columbine Drive, a narrow tortuous lane high in the hills flanked by expensive houses buried in oaks and eucalyptus trees, in a modern pile of stone, redwood, and glass designed to look as if someone had dumped it beside the road with a truck. In the carport was a blue and cream 1956 Olds registered to a Doreen Britten in the 2400 block of Washington in San Francisco, and a black Mercedes sedan registered to Segale.

The bell beside the front door was a small brass figurine of a nude woman with the button in her navel. When I tickled her, Segale opened the door; his personality matched the bell. His face, clothes, and manners were Hollywood, his ego a yard wide. He was in his mid-twenties, almost as big as I was and built like a charter member of Vic Tanny's Gyms. Sunglasses peeped from the pocket of his one-button roll—the button was a copper knob the size of my thumb—and the creases in his grey slacks would have sliced steak.

"Something?"

I didn't like him any better than taxes. I flashed my buzzer and dropped my dime.

"My client is being threatened with some scatological photos of herself and a man. She thinks you're doing it, which is a felony in this state."

"Indeed?" His nicely-modulated voice went with his nicely-modulated hair and his eyes held lazy amusement. His tone said that I bothered him as much as a very small hangnail. "The lady has a name?"

"Not yet; but maybe you can recognize her." I shoved one of the photos under his nose. One that he was in.

His hair didn't turn grey but he didn't like it. Then he remembered his pose and started a nasty gurgling sound like blood coming from the throat of a slaughtered

hog. It was supposed to be a chuckle.

"Nice work. Artistic. I suppose you're selling prints, cheapie, but—"

I remembered the Olds in the carport. "Maybe Doreen would like to see them. She could come out and—"

It almost pulled his plug. He came through the door and jerked it shut behind him, his face opened up as if I'd kicked him in the stomach. He was breathing like a man trying to be quiet in a dark room.

"How did you . . . listen, cheapie, drag Doreen into this and you . . . you'll wake up kissing the gutter."

"George Raft, 1936. Any time, son; any game you want to play."

Late sun had turned the water below the Golden Gate into a vast crinkled vat of golden champagne. I fought rush-hour traffic to Washington Street and found the rundown apartment house a few doors off Fillmore. The landlady had a face like a hatchet wound and a nose that twitched to the scent of scandal like a rabbit smelling lettuce. Doreen, she said, lived with her father, Homer Britten, and probaby spent her whole paycheck —she was a nightclub singer—to keep the old man in booze. Segale was a frequent visitor. The name of the nightclub where Doreen sang was no surprise.

From a pay phone on the corner I had my answering service read me the wire that had come in from

Reno. Segale had never been at the *Bucking Horse*; Edie had. I headed for the sea like the last lemming trying to overtake the others; I should have known I'd be too late. It's only on television that you're always in time.

4.

Dwight's Rumrunner, in red, came up out of the fog under a white neon arrow like the pointing hand of a luminous skeleton in a house of horrors. I braked, turned right on a narrow dirt road. San Francisco was twenty miles and two hundred years behind. After a fresh-faced punk in a white coat—Segale's successor—had talked me out of my car, I went to the edge of the low bluff to smell sea, fog, kelp, feel moisture and the vibration of the unchanging thud of the surf. Below was the broad pale beach of low tide and lines of grey breakers rolling out of darkness. I turned away with a shudder; it was a long way to Hawaii.

The bar ran the length of the building with windows overlooking the ocean. Through a net-draped archway a diminutive flame-haired girl with surprising curves under a plain white sheath dress was singing of love and sorrow and faithlessness in a voice that made you believe her. She belonged there like Leontyne Price in a high school chorus.

I found a place at the bar be-

tween a short sad white-haired man and a pair of college types who argued shrilly and waved their arms at one another like drowning men. When the bartender came over I drifted a dollar down on top of my change. His apron string creased his round belly and he had a face like the tailgate of a truck.

"They ought to give that singer half the gross. She earns it."

"Yeah. Dorry Britten, three shows a night, nine, eleven, and one. Tell your friends. That's a big tip for a sixty-cent beer."

"Information. Not much. Is Gloria Gann around tonight?"

After a moment's cogitation he nodded slowly.

"Fine. I'll be at a table."

He nodded again and the dollar disappeared. The white-haired man raised his face from his drink to frown at me as if people didn't do that in the *Rumrunner*. Maybe they didn't. I patted his shoulder as I went by.

Doreen Britten was gone from the dining room dais, replaced by a lean horsy-faced man who tickled *Stardust* from the piano with just enough energy to keep his card in the musician's union. At the cashier's desk by the stairs to the second floor was a frozen-faced peroxide dish who looked like she'd handled more passes than R. C. Owens.

I spotted Gloria Gann by her camera, an underfed blonde wear-

ing a white blouse over thrusting latexed breasts and a black skirt tight enough to give a girdle complexes. Her face was closed as a fist, her eyes full of dollar signs. I laid a five on the table as she came over.

"I'd like some answers about Edith LaMonea."

She shrugged, set her camera on the table. "Never heard of her."

"How about Vern Segale? I need answers on him, too."

She stared at the bill, poised between greed and caution; the money won, as it always does with her sort of girl.

"I could tell you some things. Why should I want to?"

I mated the five with a ten and leaned forward casually.

"I was with Hymie last night. He talked before he went. To me."

Her knees almost buckled and she fell into the chair I pushed out. She mouthed words as carefully as if they were glass splinters.

"Did . . . didja say anything to the bartender about Hymie? How do I know you ain't just stringing me?"

"Tell me about the book."

"The *book*?" Her shocked eyes probed the room for danger; her swift chipmunk movements were those of her late partner's, as if she had inherited them. My question had put so much real fear in her eyes that I knew she was through talking. I wrote my home phone number on one of my business

cards and dropped it on top of the money.

"When it gets too heavy to carry around, Gloria, call me."

She stared at me, bright-eyed, then shot out a quick tiny hand and speared the bills and card and was gone. There was one more cookie in the jar. Segale's name on the back of another card worked.

Glaring down at me ten minutes later, Doreen Britten looked cool as a monk's desires in a navy-blue suit that matched her eyes. Segale had good taste. Her hair was the color of burnished copper, cut short and rising in soft waves from the nape of her neck, and her voice was too soft for her strident tough-girl act.

"Why should a name I don't know written across the back of your card buy you any of my time, shamus?"

"You should have said 'the name of a man who used to work here'; even girls with great lost eyes don't have memories that are that poor. And if you're ashamed of him, don't park your car in his driveway."

"I know your kind!" she shrilled in sudden little-girl fury. "You manufacture evidence in divorces and commit perjury and frame innocent—"

"Very old and very tired. There are unethical PI's just as there are society doctors who push the hard stuff to rich neurotic women, and hundred-grand lawyers who sub-

orn juries to get racketeers acquitted; but they wear better clothes than I do and drive Continentals instead of Falcons. I'm hired to ask questions and trained to get answers. Don't think I can't bother you, Miss Britten, because a private eye with a client can bother anyone."

She wrinkled her button nose and sat down, suddenly meek.

"All right, I was at Vern's house this afternoon. I often am. He's my fiancé, there's nothing wrong with that."

I wondered what she would say to the pictures in my pocket.

"Why was he fired from his job here?"

"He wasn't. He quit, because he was asked to do things he . . . he felt were immoral."

"You're not a good liar, Miss Britten. A man who would quit a job for that reason wouldn't have let you stay on. Not when you could do . . ."

"Is there some trouble here, Dorry?"

It was the short frayed man who had frowned at me in the bar. He had a marvelous head of fine white hair, black eyebrows, diffident blue eyes, and the sad gentle voice of a preacher who's just caught the organist with a hand in the collection box. Next to Dorry he was easy.

"I'm a private investigator trying to get information about Vernon Segale from your daughter, Mr. Britten."

Doreen was suddenly sore at me again; her temperament was as volatile as organic peroxide.

"Why don't you bribe him with a drink, peeper?"

I remembered her landlady. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Britten?"

Doreen tossed a trio of words at me like she was skidding a plate of stew over a skid-row counter to a drunk, and stalked away with swishing hips. Homer Britten's eyes were full of pain.

"Have you ever been married, sir?"

"Once. It didn't take."

He nodded as if he'd made his point. "Her mother left me when Dorry was a child and I've had to raise her alone. It hasn't been easy."

"Do you approve of Segale's relationship with her?"

"Would it matter if I didn't?" His mouth twitched. "She supports me, sir. Totally. This drink is on her tab; she even pays our rent."

I let it go by. One person feeling sorry for him was enough.

"Do you know a woman named Edith LaMonea? She'd be coming in here with a series of different men and would be close to the photo girl."

"To Gloria?" He looked vague. "I—I'm sorry, Mr. Drew. I don't recall . . ."

I bought him a drink and got away from there; probing him for meaning was like trying to get a policy statement from a dish of

jello. On the way out I swerved over to the hostess' desk by the stairs and let her see a twenty and a jaded leer.

"How much for a room for the night?" She looked at me like a floater fished from the bay, but I plowed on: "She's out in the car. She's of age but my wife—"

"Cops," she spat disgustedly. "Don't you creeps ever quit trying?"

There were other ways. I slid a pair of aces into the car park boy's ready palm and tried it on him. He tipped me a wink.

"Not here, man; not this week. This place is from hotsville. There been more fuzz around today than at the police academy. Our photogger got wasted last night and . . ." He stopped abruptly and his face closed up like a safe door. "Like who sounded about balling out here?"

"Edith LaMonea. I knew her before she got on the Mary Magdalene lay."

"I'm hip, dad; there's a *chick*. Like she'll trip you and beat you to the floor. The floor upstairs."

I left him laughing at his own wit and headed north, my thoughts as murky as an hour of stag movies. A little after one a.m. I parked on Lake and went through the landlord's house to let myself into my cottage.

Fists exploded out of darkness. I snapped a left with the power of an old lady with a coronary and my

knuckles crumpled against an abdomen cast from pig iron. A knee found my groin. Varnished oak flooring came up to kiss my jaw; reality slipped away like a roll of dimes in Reno.

A bell was tolling the news of my stupidity. I crawled through the connecting door to the bedroom, fumbled at the phone, mumbled "Minute," into it, and got to the bathroom in time to vomit into the toilet. I splashed my mouth with cold water. Back at the phone a low harried female voice tumbled words at me.

"You said to call when it got too heavy. It's too heavy. I can tell you everything but I'll need money, tonight, to get away from here."

My hand whitened around the phone as my mind began functioning.

"Where are you, Gloria? I'll come right—"

"Oh! I've been—I'd hoped . . ." Her voice was tight and panicked. "I've got to trust you now. Wait for me."

The line was dead. I hung up slowly, as if I had a glass arm. Her voice had held terror but I had nothing to give the cops. If she had a phone it wasn't listed; the *Rumrunner's* bartender said she'd left two hours before, alone, and convinced me he didn't know her home address. I put on *Music 'til Dawn* and a pot of tea strong enough to melt the spoon. It was a rough four hours. I ached all over

and the pictures Edie had given me were missing. It wasn't tough to guess who had them.

A six a.m. newscast carried the bulletin. Police had found her by a phone booth on the other side of the Park wearing two .38-calibre slugs in her skull. Her purse had been found two blocks away. Apparently the mail box on the corner had been the only witness and Gloria had been too dead to give descriptions.

I put myself to sleep with bourbon again, but my dreams made me wish I hadn't wasted the whiskey.

5.

Cold late-morning light made the *Rumrunner* look like a building at a nuclear test site just before the blast. In the bar was a harsh-faced man whose hands smelled as if he'd been setting osyter pots.

"Ain't open 'til noon, mister."

"Dwight Benjamin. I'm expected."

He jerked a broad scarred fisherman's thumb at the curtained doorway behind the performer's dais. The dingy hall was rank with memories of small-timers on the downhill trek to oblivion, but Benjamin's office had planters, soft lights, and good modern prints. A busty blonde who thought she was Jayne Mansfield was pecking an I.B.M. typewriter as if it were yesterday's cat food. Her voice was

like a scream from a chasm but matched her violent purple eye shadow. She concentrated over my card like a chimp with an Einstein equation, buzzed the intercom, and dropped me from what she called her mind like a stone going over a cliff. She would be incapable of more than three letters a day but was probably adequate for night work.

In the private office the carpet was as deep as a buffalo wallow and the boomerang-shaped desk covered enough area to trot a pony. The walls were soundproofed. So was Benjamin. He was a tall hard lean cookie with swarthy skin, dark hair brushed straight back, and the hooded eyes they all have, little windows of the soul opening on a blank wall. His moustache was neat and nasty as the death penalty. I had caught up with the description that had come in from Reno the day before, which made it easier. We shook hands, I sat down in the pale gold chair across from his, fished for a cigarette, and got chatty.

"I'm investigating an ex-employee of yours, named Vernon Segale. Also a woman named Edith LaMonea."

"Never heard of the woman." He said it much too promptly. "You know how it is in this business. Segale, let me think." He frowned to show the complexities of his thought processes.

"Funny you'd forget LaMonea.

She's a hooker who's been steering marks out here for the past year."

"Out *here*?" He started glaring at me as if he had just remembered he was supposed to be tough. "Listen, peeper, I eat up your kind raw. Try that old shake on me and I'll—"

"What? Call the cops and chat with them about extortion?"

Time went by on tiptoe like a teen-ager sneaking in after a late date. I stretched out my legs and blew smoke through my nose. Benjamin's voice came from far away, as if he were recovering from a tracheotomy.

"I . . . don't know what you're talking about, peeper. If you—"

"Or maybe you'd rather talk about the book." It was a random shot but his face got old and his eyes were those of a kicked hound. I stood up. "Well, I'll be around, Dwight. Maybe we can do business."

Benjamin was still sitting on his hands: no applause. But there didn't have to be. I would have wowed 'em in Cincinnati. In the outer office the secretary was doing her face; she probably spent more time with it than Kennedy does with the budget. In the dining room I ducked between chair-laden tables to go up the stairs to the second floor.

I was in luck. An old lady with streaked peroxide hair and varicose veins was just backing a maid's cart from the room at the

head of the stairs; I told her I'd left a pair of cufflinks in there the night before and went in.

The wall heater probably got a workout that close to the ocean, the double bed had a stained spread, the scuffed tan rug was thinner than the ham in a drug-store sandwich, and the shower stall was just about large enough to wash a cat. It was a room in which only a drunk or a conventioneer could feel erotic. The ornately-framed mirror set in the wall opposite the bed was the jarring note I'd been seeking. I snooped the frame and found what I'd expected.

"Is the room next door the darkroom where the nightclub photos are developed?"

"Yes. And that'll be five bucks." Her voice was scared but firm.

"Let's see your aces, mother; I think you're bluffing."

Behind her, over the bed, one of Modigliani's models leered reproachfully at me from a framed print, one eye slightly smaller than the other as if she had a bad hangover. The model's hands and the cigarette-scarred blondewood side-table looked familiar.

"You didn't leave no cufflinks in here, mister; none of these rooms was used at all last night. I just checked 'em."

"Well I'll be damned." I started to grin. "Is the room on the far side also arranged so the mirror is on the wall adjoining the darkroom?"

She had to think that one over, which made me like her. When she finally nodded I gave her the fin. She'd earned it. Going back to town I knew that her thanks were the only ones I'd get.

6.

Edie came to the door wearing a red silk lounging outfit that made all her lush curves obvious, but they moved me like the curves of a store window dummy. I crossed the broad living room to the built-in bar by the picture windows. The view was exclusive and apparently corrupting. Edie had returned to the couch to languidly show too much leg again like a summer re-run of an old television show.

"Too early for bourbon, Bart?"

"Too late."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Her voice and eyebrows had climbed half an octave. I gestured around at the plush tasteless layout.

"California modern. Ersatz materials arranged in the latest sub-phallic mode by this month's pansy decorator. It has a nice appearance but it isn't real. Like Disneyland. Like you, Edie: made up to look like a woman but running on stainless steel guts. You use an old friend and don't even realize there's anything wrong with it; you see a man in a run-down office wearing last year's suit and decide because he's honest he must necessarily be dumb."

"You sound dumb; or foolish. When I hired you I didn't think I—"

"You didn't think at all. You remembered me from the days when I was opening my own office after Army CID and Pinkerton's. You actually assumed that I wouldn't check out Reno or Segale's background and come up with the *Rumrunner* and Dwight Benjamin."

"Why should I listen to this trash?" she demanded petulantly. But her hand shook as she stubbed out her cigarette.

"Because Benjamin, not Segale, was the man you met in Reno. He had been using one of the old bedrooms on the second floor of the *Rumrunner* for a darkroom, and the others to accommodate steady customers who occasionally ended up with girls who didn't care if they went home or not. Then he got an idea. He could knock a hole in the walls of the adjoining rooms, install one-way glass that would look like a common mirror unless you were in the darkroom, and conceal an aperture in the fancy frame through which he could take undetected infra-red photos."

"You'd better leave now." Her tone was icy.

"Not quite yet, Edie. Benjamin was afraid to try blackmailing any local people because they might squawk to the local law: he needed a girl with real class who would pick up well-heeled tourists in the

big hotels, take them to the *Rumrunner* to catch the show—his vocalist is a hell of a lot better than she should be—and while there succumb to their manly charms and go upstairs with them. But a week or a month later they'd find out they'd have to buy some pictures to keep the little woman from seeing them. Benjamin went shopping in Reno for the woman he needed. He found you."

"I suppose I made up those pictures I gave you yesterday."

"Oh no. But they were taken at the *Rumrunner* by Gloria Gann. You mailed them to yourself from Sausalito, after typing your own name and address on the envelope with the I.B.M. Executive in Benjamin's outer office, and you guessed—correctly—that when Segale saw them he wouldn't spill anything to me for fear his fiancé, Dorry Britten, would see them. He even mugged me last night to get them away from me."

She still wasn't softened up. She sneered: "How do you think you're going to prove any of this?"

"I don't have to. First, I'm only concerned with the extortion racket in relation to the murders. Your racket's dead anyway, now."

"What do you mean, murders? Hymie's the only one who—"

"Guess again. They found Gloria Gann out near Golden Gate Park at dawn, but she wasn't watching the sun rise. Two in the head from the same .38 that killed

Bergen. She's wearing a sheet and a DOA tag and—"

"Bart! *Don't!*" She was off the couch, backing away as if I had carried bubonic plague into the apartment. Fear of death was pulling her face apart, aging her as I watched. "First Hymie and then Gloria and now I . . . I may be next. You're—Bart, you have to protect me!"

"Quick and fast, Edie, or I walk out of here."

"I knew I wasn't going to get much of a settlement from Frank so when Benjamin offered me clothes and money and this apartment I . . . I took it. I always picked marks who were married, and from out-of-state; upstairs at the *Rumrunner*, while Gloria was getting her pics, I'd micky his drink with a light sedative so I could get his name and address from his wallet. I'd give them to Dwight."

"How did he make contact?"

"A person-to-person phone call a month later. He'd tell the mark that something was coming in the mail that the little woman shouldn't see, and hang up. After the prints went out, he'd mail a regular statement of payments to make over a six-month period, requesting cashier's checks made out to cash; mailed to a drop. From there they were automatically remailed. No written threats, nothing that would stand up in court as evidence of extortion. No one's squawked yet."

Talking had steadied her; her

grey eyes were calculating again and her fingers had started toying with the buttons of her kimona.

"Hymie mentioned a book before he died. What is it?"

"Dwight keeps the photo negatives, numbered, in his safe. He also has a little notebook with a complete list of the marks, the numbers identifying their photos, their addresses, how much they're paying, and to what drop they send the payments. Without the book the photographs are worthless. The day before Hymie was killed, Dwight told me that it had been stolen. He had fired Segale over some argument a few weeks ago and thought he might be responsible. He'd had me take Segale upstairs months ago so Gloria could get some pictures, and he gave me the prints you know about and told me to use them to force Segale to return the book."

"So you decided to use me for your dirty work since you'd seen in the papers that I'd been with Hymie Bergen when he died. I suppose you thought there was a chance I had been hired to investigate the *Rumrunner* by a—former client—and that you could seduce me into telling you anything I might know."

"I'm so ashamed, Bart. I shouldn't have tried to use you."

She spoke with her face averted, but there was no flush on her cheeks and as if by accident the top buttons of her kimona were open.

All she was to me now was something from the script of a bad B movie; I had to get her back on the defensive before she could start lying.

"Why do you think that you might be next?"

Remembered fear made her eyes limpid, momentarily honest.

"Hymie wasn't in the set-up. A few days ago Gloria told me that he had found out about it somehow and was threatening to go to the police. I told her to go to Benjamin. Then Hymie was killed; Benjamin must have had it done. Then Gloria. Can't you see, everyone who knows about the notebook."

"Maybe Gloria took the notebook, not Segale, and she was killed by someone who wanted it."

"That would still mean Benjamin." Her face lit up with a new thought. "You aren't afraid of him, Bart. Instead of just protecting me, you could get the book away from him. We'd be on easy street then. You could have anything you wanted from me . . . darling."

"You're a real sweetheart, Edie."

I started for the door. She tried to catch my arm, her eyes shocked and outraged.

"Where are you going? Bart! I need your help! You can't just—"

"Try Mexico, Edie. The police probably wouldn't bother to extradite you and Benjamin will be too busy ducking the law to come after you."

I went out the door with her

curses striking my back like small diseased fists; she would be on her way to the airport in half an hour. When the trouble comes the hookers always are.

7.

Light was fading from the dirty faces of the buildings across Powell Street and the memory of Edith lay in mind like dirty linen. According to her I knew the murderer: Dwight Benjamin. So why wasn't I on my way to the police? He was an extortionist, perfect for a quick railroading. Why shouldn't I be smart, go to the cops?

I put out the lights and turned things over to the mice. I had to have proof before I pointed the finger. My face, reflected palely in the door as I went out, looked broad and harsh and angular, but more human than it had an hour before.

Doreen Britten's apartment was on the second floor rear. The stairs creaked and the dim halls were of a more gracious age, high-ceilinged and broad enough for a drag race. She answered the door wearing red pedal pushers and a lime blouse; her face, freshly-scrubbed and glowing, was the face of a twelve-year-old, but her smoky eyes weren't a child's. She had a lot of hidden fire.

"I'm glad you've come, Mr. Drew. It gives me a chance to apologize for last night."

"Your father probably needs it

more than I do."

The apartment had the ill-assorted furniture of a woman who is paying her own rent. Across the living room from the ancient couch was a new tv set; the bunny ears on top were flanked by a photo of Vern Segale, all teeth and tan and blond waves, flashing his life-guard's grin, and another of Homer Britten, his face younger and his upright shock of receding hair still black, peering timidly at life.

"I got the set for Dad; I'm not always as cruel as I was last night. It's just that he's so . . . so pliable. When he got here six months ago he didn't even have a suitcase, just the clothes on his back. He'd been with a carnival in the midwest and had hitch-hiked out."

"I thought he raised you after your mother left him."

"That's his favorite . . . fiction." Her voice was sharp and rising. "The nuns raised me, here in the city; I hadn't seen Dad for years. I pretend to believe he sent the sisters money because it gives him a chance to feel he's . . . that he had a right to be respected."

I sat down in the stuffed chair beside the tv and turned my hat over in my hands. I needed a new one. I said:

"Last night I told you that a private eye with a client can bother anyone. Tonight I don't have a client. I'm holding out on the cops in two murders. I'm asking your help because your fiancé is mixed

up in the extortion setup that's been instrumental in these murders. I still need an answer: why was he fired from the *Rumrunner*?"

Her troubled blue-violet eyes had stolen to Segale's grinning image on the tv set. Her fingers, locked in her lap, writhed like a snake run over on the highway.

"I act like I've been around, Mr. Drew, but the *Rumrunner* is my first professional engagement. I . . . you probably won't believe this, but I've never . . . I mean, Vern and I don't . . ."

"I believe you, Doreen."

Some of the invisible but somehow tangible tension left her.

"Thank you. You make it easier. Before Dad was here to drive me to and from work on bad nights, I used to stay over at the *Rumrunner*—there are a couple of bedrooms upstairs—when the fog was too thick. A few weeks ago I got a really wonderful offer from a big supper club here in the city; I gave Dwight notice. Then he . . . he showed me some photos." Her voice had faded and her cheeks had gotten scarlet. "They were horrible, pictures of me undressing and coming out of the shower nude. I . . . first I asked Hymie Bergen why he had done that to me, but he said he didn't know anything about them. Then I—I told Vern about them, because by then we were in love. He said he was going to beat the negatives out of Dwight."

"Did he?"

She shook her head. "All that happened was that Dwight fired him. Vern—Vern told me there was nothing we could do just then."

"Hymie *didn't* know anything about the pictures of you, Doreen," I said gently. Apparently she still didn't know about the pictures of Segale and Edith. "Gloria took them. Hymie was killed because he was a threat to the extortion setup."

"You must be wrong. Gloria . . . Gloria was my friend. She wouldn't—"

"Gloria would do almost anything for money." I told her most of the story Edith had told me, and finished up: "Now you can understand why I've come to you. I have to know if Vern took the notebook or knows who did. I have to know the motive behind Gloria's murder."

"Vern would never steal anything, Mr. Drew." She had drawn herself up proudly. "And he would certainly never want to blackmail anyone. Besides, doesn't everything point to Benjamin as the killer?"

"Too much so. Problems." I held up a hand to mark them off. "A blackmailer seldom kills. Extortion is Benjamin's business and the two murderers have ruined that business. He could have just let the notebook go and built up a new list of marks; he could have bought Hymie off or had him given a professional beating, the sort that will break almost any man. I can't see

him being either desperate enough or dumb enough to hire a killer and leave *himself* open for a future shakedown."

She nodded. "Then why don't you see Vern and ask—"

"Vern wouldn't let me get near him. After . . . you see, we had a misunderstanding yesterday. I need you to run interference."

She saw cheap vicious shallow Vernon Segale as a knight in shining armor; if I told her about the mugging she wouldn't believe me anyway. Segale would disillusion her quick enough by himself. I didn't know that my decision to not tell her about the photos would save my life.

"If . . . If I help, can you keep Vern from being involved publicly in anything—anything unsavory?"

"It may be too late for that, Doreen. But if I had a client—say you hired me to get the pictures with which Dwight Benjamin is blackmailing you—I'd have a legal reason for withholding anything not bearing directly on the murders unless they hauled me up to the grand jury."

She bought it. Ten minutes later I had a one-dollar retainer and her promise to arrange a meeting with Segale. When I got back to the office the phone was ringing; it was her old man.

"Doreen has told me that she hired you, Mr. Drew and I—for what it's worth, I approve. She's already left for work, but she said

that Vernon will be expecting you at his house at ten o'clock." His voice became wistful. "I don't know what it's all about but I'll be home watching television all evening. If you need any help, anything at all, I . . . I mean, I'd welcome a chance . . ."

His daughter's feelings must have been contagious; I found myself telling him I was glad to know he'd be standing by. Going down to Moar's Cafeteria for an early dinner I had no idea how glad I would be.

8.

I parked ten yards beyond Segale's house and walked back; across the road the eucalyptus trees sighed and gave off their wet mongrel smell. Arched below were the lights of Sausalito; beyond a black arm of bay the faint penumbra of San Francisco was being blotted out by mist.

Segale's Mercedes was in the carport, engine cold, but the house was dark. The front door was ajar; my Lüger was in my hand before I even knew I'd moved. I stepped inside breathing shallowly. Nothing. Just the reek of whiskey. I worked my pencil flash.

Liquor from the overturned bar puddled the floor. Upholstery was ripped, mattresses gutted, gobs of excelsior thrown about like cotton candy. Feathers had snow-stormed the house. The toilet top was in

pieces, writhing snakes of toothpaste decorated the bathroom sink, the suits in the closets had been slit. Slices of bread littered the kitchen like grotesque confetti. Sugar, coffee, and flour had been dumped in the sink and the electric wall clock eviscerated of its mechanical intestines. There were no bodies.

I walked back to Falcon trying to figure out what had happened, and slid in behind the wheel. An automatic was jammed against my neck. My hands jumped on the wheel like a spastic's; my mouth was dry as a Scotsman's wit. A gaudily-clad arm came across my chest to remove the Lüger and point out that I should have checked the back seat.

"You're going to drive back to the city now, cheapie. If you try anything I'll kill you, I really will."

I believed him: as he came over the back of the seat, Segale was shaking with excitement like a wet cat. We climbed momentarily above the mist; the engine caught its breath while the wipers clapped with measured metronome applause. I tried to hide the tremor in my voice.

"What do you think you're doing, Segale? Doreen told me—"

He jerked the .45 so the sight numbed my cheek. I felt a warm trickle down my jaw.

"Did you really think you'd conned her, cheapie? She knew that you're still working for Edith, and I know you were here earlier

trying to find the pictures I took away from you last night."

"Sure. That's why I came back now with my hands in my pockets. Pardon me while I have a good laugh. Edith left town this afternoon—you can check on that."

My jaw muscles still ached with the tension of controlling my rage, but my fingers were slowly unclenching themselves from the wheel. Beyond the tunnel on U.S. 101 a break in the fog showed us the illuminated orange cables of Golden Gate Bridge, rising from the scudding mist in strangely delicate festoons like something in a Japanese print. As we started out across it, Segale waved his automatic.

"Get in the right lane. We're going to your house and we'll use the Lincoln Boulevard to get there."

At the toll plaza he slipped the Colt under his thigh and looked scared while I tossed a quarter into the automatic hopper and took the underpass to the Presidio; he had Mr. America muscles and a cleft chin but he was pure mush inside. In the view area below the bridge a lone sedan was pointed out into the fog. Bad weather never bothers neckers.

"When were those pictures of you and Edith taken?"

"Last year—before I even met Doreen." My question had put him automatically on the defensive and made him querulous. "Edie all but asked me to go upstairs with her

and what the hell . . . I mean, I made it with lots of chicks before I met Doreen."

"Really? I thought you were a virgin. Ever make it with Gloria?"

"Yes. No. Listen you, shut up. I'm not taking any more riding."

But sweat beaded his forehead and upper lip as if he had a fever; it was probably the first time in his life he had ever held a gun on anyone.

We had passed Fort Scott; the tall eucalyptus trees were thinning and we were at the crest. Fog flowed up across the highway from the blackness like smoke from dry ice. The wipers swished monotonously. Except for a pair of headlights in the rearview mirror, our world was bounded by low bent scrubby cypresses to the left and the white wooden guard rail to the right. Returning to my house was senseless, unless . . .

Unless I'd been forgetting something: that headpieces have more uses than just to disguise baldness. A man's overcoat, bulked around a slim slight figure . . .

"Who are we meeting at my house?"

He jerked up the .45, startled by my sudden barking tone.

"Dor . . . What makes you think we're meeting anyone?"

"Yesterday I showed you some photos. Your reaction was immediate and physical: beat me up and take them away from me. You didn't even search my house for the

negatives. A few weeks ago Do-reen told you that Benjamin was using photos to blackmail her into staying on at the *Rumrunner*. Your first thought was of senseless violence. But tonight you patiently waited in the back of your Mercedes, and then hid in the Falcon so you could bring me back to my own house at gunpoint. It's too devious for you, Segale. Someone had to spell it all out for you."

"Go to hell, cheapie."

"Sure. Only have you thought of this? I didn't search your house: *someone* did. Someone who's already killed twice and wanted us both together at my house—it'll be easy to arrange it as if we fought over the pictures of you and Edie and killed one another—is waiting to kill again. I'll bet you were told to have those prints with you and have them in your pocket right now."

"You're crazy, cheapie!" But I knew from the sick look on his face that I was right. "Do—"

Too late: the killer had been smart enough to wait in case we did take the shortcut. The car that had been behind us was beside us now, the dome light reflecting grotesquely from the bald head of the dumpy driver. A black handkerchief obscured the lower part of the face. Jolt: metal scream: skid: the wheel was alive under my hands, the car bucked against the rail like a maddened stallion. Segale's shriek was lost in the splintering

of wood, my door was open, black-top was coming at me. I tucked, tried to roll, the weight of the universe slammed my skull.

9.

My head outweighed Friendship Seven and was already in orbit. Salty blood filled my mouth; I spit out a tooth. My left arm was broken. A red glow in the fog showed where Segale had found the answer to the big question on the rocks below. The cutter moored off China Beach coughed coldly and poked a long white finger of light at the burning car.

When my shambling foot kicked the mail under the slot and scattered it across the living-room floor thirty minutes later, I yelped: shock was wearing off and my left arm had touched the door frame. I found a bottle, took what was in it, and sat down on the bed to tear a shirt into strips with my teeth while the liquor moved around in my belly. Getting my arm into the sling brought sweat to my face.

I should have recognized the car sooner, back at the view area under the bridge. That should have clinched it, but the time element was screwy. How long had I been out when Gloria had called? Five minutes? That made it impossible, unless . . .

Gloria Gann.

I was staring stupidly at the mail I had kicked across the floor. On

one envelope my name had been hurriedly pencilled in over her typed name and address. Flap stuck with scotch tape; local post mark; four cents due because it was too bulky for its single stamp; Gloria had been found a few feet from a mail box.

The car crawling by, circling the block. Just time to scrawl my name over her's, slap on her single stamp, drop it in the box. A poor scared little girl all alone, with death rounding the corner. *I've got to trust you now.* Her trust had been too late. The time element fell into place.

The room wavered and receded as if I were under water. Doc Soto in Daly City would set my arm without asking questions, he had gone through high school with my father in Modesto. But no time for him now. If Benjamin heard about Segale before I got to him, it would be too late. Dialing the phone my hand shook: pain was bursting inside me like mortar fire. Benjamin's voice was a weird pleasure. I said:

"It's the size of a pocket address book, blue imitation leather cover, number notations in pen and ink that look like a simple book code. An expert could identify the handwriting. You've got an hour."

My voice hung in the miles of fragile wire connecting us. I was holding my breath. When he spoke my sigh was like dead leaves blowing down an autumn street. He

hadn't heard about Segale. I hoped I was right: I had to be right: but pain was making my thinking fuzzy.

"What are your terms?"

Cash was his only currency, greed the only motive he would credit.

"Ten grand tonight—cash—and the negatives and prints of the photos you've been using to blackmail Doreen Britten. In the future, twenty-five percent of the take."

"Why the pictures?" His voice was thin, sharp, suspicious.

"A man can never get too much money, can he, Benjamin?"

I hung up, shook my head like a fighter who's just been tagged with a hard right. I hadn't even had to have him check the parking lot to see if her car was there, or ask him if he'd found a replacement.

Her father finally answered the phone, his voice thick and surprised when I spoke my name, as if he had just run up a flight of steps or been wakened from a sound sleep. The surprise sharpened when I asked for Doreen.

"She's not here." He tried to shake grogginess from his voice. "What time is it? I fell asleep watching tv." He made the sounds a man makes looking at his watch with a phone in his hand. "After one. Isn't she still at the *Rumrunner*?"

Reality wavered, blurred, darkened, I aged a year bringing it back into focus again.

"No. Did she take the car tonight?"

"Yes. I usually drive her, Mr. Drew, but tonight she said she wanted the car. If she isn't at work, where—"

"An hour ago I was run off the road. Segale was with me, which may or may not have been planned. Segale is dead."

"Vern? Dead?" My call had brought realities a weak man should never have to face. "You can't believe that Doreen would . . . would . . ."

"I said it may not have been planned. This afternoon you offered help: now I need it. If Doreen gets there before I do, tell her Gloria mailed the book last night, to me, and I'm bringing it over. Tell her anything, but *keep her there*. Can you do it?"

"Yes, but . . . but Vern! This is monstrous. How can I tell her that Vern . . ."

"You're her father," I said. "I'll get her pictures from Benjamin and be right over."

I rested a moment, tasting my pain as a spear-struck fish will rest on the bottom adjusting to the strange metal thing in its body. I felt no compunction about what I was asking Britten to do; I could only hope that he could carry out instructions. I straightened up, slid the deadly notebook into my inside jacket pocket and stuck my spare Policeman's Special into my waistband. I'd talked too much but it

was too late to change anything now. One more call to make.

Al Persico, a sharp tough operative I sometimes used, was home and agreed to lend me his car and back my story. Doc Soto could wait: the killer couldn't.

10.

The tide was coming in. Each wave passed a clammy hand of spray over my face like the caress of death. Ten minutes earlier I had called Benjamin from the pay phone outside the *Rumrunner* and had told him to come down the path to the beach, alone, and keep walking until he was stopped.

His cautious shape loomed up darkly in the mist. I thumbed the button of the four-cell hand lantern I'd set on top of a granite out-cropping, and leaped clumsily aside, yanking out my Policeman's Special. The stark light pinned Benjamin to the sand as an entomologist pins a beetle to the board, and his right hand jerked up a .32 belly gun.

"Throw it away!" I yelled.

He did. It struck at the edge of the circle of light. His bold features, cast in sharp relief like the face of a carved gargoil on a French cathedral, were emptied of defiance. I stepped into the light with the .38 on his middle. Fog swirled around us in a slow smoky dance.

"Don't be hasty, Drew!" Like a lot of the hard boys he wasn't really

hard, just mean and lucky; when the luck went so did they. His voice was almost lost in the thunder of the waves on the short steep beach below us. "I was afraid of a trap. The money is at the *Rumrunner*, like you told me to have it, and the pictures are in my suitcoat pocket. Tomorrow—"

"No tomorrows, Benjamin. Vern Segale is dead; this time the cops will really land on you. You're too well-covered to fall on an extortion rap, but your operation is dead now and Doreen—"

A slight diffident cough behind me made a black hole, like a speck of flung mud, appear in the center of his forehead. He went down without a sound, a corpse before his knees hit the sand.

"Do not move at all, Mr. Drew. You know I am an excellent shot and could easily kill you with the second shot this silencer allows."

The confrontation: but not as I had planned it. I would throw myself sideways, roll, come up firing at the sound of his voice. But my knees buckled and I sat down in the sand like a toddler learning to walk. The book was burning in my pocket. I threw away the useless gun.

He stepped into the light, the .38, grotesquely lengthened by its silencer, too big for his fine-boned almost delicate hand. His bulky overcoat made him seem a heavier, bigger man, but his voice was low, and sad and unchanged. By the

harsh light his silver wig finally was unreal.

Homer Britten. Murderer.

"I might have believed you were deluded into thinking Doreen was the killer if you had not told me you were coming down here to get her photos from Benjamin. I'll take the book now."

I stared up at him, cursing tiredly. The agony in my arm had seduced my judgement while I had been talking on the phone, and I had said too much. I took out the notebook, held it carefully as a foaming wave tugged at my trousers. Defiance was my last poor dignity.

"Even if you shoot me it goes into the water, Britten. The ink will run and even if you can find it, it will be useless."

"In a moment you will gladly hand me the book, Mr. Drew."

"In exchange for a quick death? Think again. I'm tougher than that."

"We've had ample proof of that. No, because driving in carnival dare-devil shows and managing shooting galleries at county fairs has given me more than proficiency with autos and side arms. It has made me an amateur psychologist. It has given me the insight to know that you are a romantic. That you walk mean streets but are not yourself mean."

"Has it given you the insight to know that you're a sick gutless nothing whose hatred of his own

weakness has made him a mental defective?"

For a moment the mask slipped. His face turned to wax and I tensed myself to throw the book into the sea. But then the glassy look left his eyes and his skin became skin once more as his lips came back down over his teeth.

"I hope you do not provoke me into rashness, Mr. Drew. If I fire and you throw away the book, then to amuse myself I will use the nude photos of Doreen which are in Benjamin's pocket to drive her either to madness or to suicide. Her ridiculous moral rectitude, inbred by the good sisters who raised her, would make it quite simple."

The wind sighed in the misted dark as if sharing my revulsion. He would do it; and he was right. He knew I would meekly hand over the book if it would keep him from destroying his daughter.

Except for two things.

Except that I didn't think the sob we'd heard had been the wind. Except that the rim of light behind him no longer showed me Benjamin's .32 in the sand. The return of hope stung like blood in frost-bitten fingers. If I could last, if I could keep him talking. If.

"Why is the book so important to you, Britten?"

"You can ask?" His footlight was a dimming hand torch but he loved the stage, he was supremely self-centered. "All my life I've had nothing, been nobody, been cheated

by life. The book will give me cars and clothes and women and . . . and *respect*." His eyes were bright and inturned. He stepped closer as a wave splashed me again. "After I learned of the extortion ring through mere observation, I knew that if I could tempt Gloria, poor venal Gloria, into stealing the book —by promising her half the take—I would be able to be *someone*."

"Did you have to kill to be *someone*?"

"What else could I do?" The egomaniac peeped from his eyes. "Doreen made Bergen aware of the extortion photos and he was threatening exposure for Gloria. She would have talked before I could have gotten away with the notebook."

"So you killed him, wearing an oversize coat, a mask to hide your face, and with your wig removed so the police would search for a baldheaded killer. Your hair is *receding* in the photo Doreen has of you, but it didn't register with me in time."

He smiled proudly.

"She had no idea I was actually bald." His face darkened as if a cat's paw of wind had passed over a placid lake. "I made a grave error in allowing Gloria to keep the book; Hymie's death upset her too deeply. Even before you asked for her at the *Rumrunner* I knew she had to die. I missed her at her apartment, but saw her in the phone booth down the street, circled the block and did . . . what I did."

For a second he looked almost sorrowful. "Until you told me tonight, I didn't know that she had already mailed the book to you in the few moments I lost sight of her. I had spent the day searching everywhere for it."

"Even Segale's place. You told Doreen you needed the car so Segale would take her to work—that's why she was already gone when you called me at six o'clock—and once he was out of the way you searched his house. And then you convinced him I had done it, and arranged for me to take the shortcut through the Presidio so I could have an 'accident'."

Pain was snapping at me like a shark at a drowning man. He bent over Benjamin's corpse and pulled the envelope with Doreen's photos in it from the jacket pocket. He glanced at them briefly, then looked at me.

"We are out of time, Mr. Drew. I do not enjoy killing and you are the last. Toss the notebook at my feet and I will let you destroy these photos before . . . while you are still able."

He was grotesque, his soul was twisted and stunted and blackened like a lightning-riven tree. Fog swirled around us, muffling the Pacific's shouts. I struggled to my feet; acquiescence had made me also grotesque; if I were wrong I wanted to take death standing up. I tossed the book.

"I have a final question, Britten.

Were you jealous of poor egotistical stupid Vernon Segale? Couldn't you stand having only Doreen's pity and affection while he had her love? He knew nothing of any of this; why did you murder *him*, Britten?"

We both heard her gasp: then she was in the light with Benjamin's .32 steady in her gloved right hand. Her eyes were the hardest I've ever seen, and filled with the deepest horror.

"You killed *Vernon*?"

"He's lying, daughter. Of course, I didn't—"

"Look at his face, Doreen. You heard him admit running me off the road with your Olds. He arranged it so Vern was with me, and was killed."

She didn't say anything. She just shot him four times in the stomach. In the fog the reports were like hand-claps. His body jerked and his wig fell off and landed at his feet like a small dead albino animal. He fell sideways, writhed briefly, and was still, staring up at us with sandy eyeballs. She dropped the gun beside him as if she were discarding a candy wrapper.

"My own father," she said dreamily. "I was waiting after the bar closed for him to pick me up, and saw you call Dwight from the outside pay phone. When Dad got there I told him you were both down here on the beach, and he said you were the murderer and he was going after you. He said he

would be a man for once and wouldn't let me call the police. I wasn't supposed to follow but I did—I was afraid for *him*. I . . . I heard everything and I picked up Dwight's gun and then he . . . he said he had killed . . . I . . . Vern . . ."

Her forehead pressed my chest, agony nearly swept me away. She smelled of *Emeraude*. Her small even teeth began worrying my lapel and she made raw sounds in her throat like a knife scraping bone. I stepped back and brought up my open right hand, hard. When I slapped her again the madness faded from her clouded violet eyes. She went right on as if she hadn't even stopped.

" . . . and so I killed him. I'm not even sorry. Does . . . does that make me some sort of unnatural person?"

A wave flopped Benjamin's arm. In a few minutes the tide would be at full flood, and it was still a long way to Hawaii.

"I made you shoot him. I'm not proud of it but I wanted to live and there was no other way. He deserved to die."

But her eyes were becoming a little girl's. I seized her shoulder and shook her roughly, barking harshly to hold her attention.

"At first I thought *you* were the killer, Doreen; but when Gloria was killed you were doing your one a.m. show. But your father was short and slim, like you, and a

bulky overcoat would make him look dumpy as well as you, and the bald head, instead of being a bald wig covering your hair, could be him removing a wig that he always secretly wore. There were other things. In the bar last night he got interested in me only when I asked for Gloria, not when I mentioned you; and later he slipped and called me by name when he didn't know me and no pictures of me had been in the papers."

It worked; her eyes meeting mine were rational again.

"Why . . . why did you tell him you were coming to see Benjamin?"

"I wasn't thinking straight, and it slipped out. And I really did have to get the pictures of you from Benjamin. I knew as soon as he heard that Segale had also been killed he would clear out, and in a few years he would have used them to blackmail you."

"Now they'll execute me." Her voice held a first hint of bitterness.

"Only if you want them to. I'm like a doctor, Doreen, except crime is the disease I treat." I picked up the envelope with her pictures in it, and handed it to her. "Let me handle this. Go home. In time you'll forget, even Vern."

"I'll never forget."

There was an infinite sadness in her voice; seeing her ravaged face in the dim light I could almost believe her: almost but not quite.

"You're dramatizing, Doreen.

You'll forget. The young always do."

She stared at me, unmoving; then something that might have been hope flickered far down in her eyes. She put out a hand and touched my cheek, wonderingly, like a child touching a kitten. Then she turned away and walked out of the light without looking back, her high heels sinking into the sand and the water foaming around her ankles. The fog and the night took her.

Pain was a cudgel. Benjamin's eyes glittered with momentary false life as the tide hissed around him.

Homer Britten was a bundle of discarded clothes, waiting for the cleansing Pacific with the patience only the dead can attain. Icy water sucked at my calves and dragged both men closer to the sea. I had to wade to my flashlight. Doc Soto. I had to get to him. He would tell the police I had been under his care since Al Persico had brought me in, dazed and injured after a car accident. If I could just get to him. Only I couldn't. It was much too far. I'd never make it.

But as I started up the path to the *Rumrunner's* parking lot, I knew that somehow I would.

