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

THE ROOM was comfortably and quietly decorated in expensive colors, restful as a warm melodious symphony. The only incongruous note was the gas-log fireplace. It was too modern for the conservative taste that marked everything else there.

Everything but the Colt .45 in my hand.

The sound in the room was the

looks, same name, but not the same woman. I never thought I'd see her begging.

I raised the unloaded .45 and drew a cold bead on the face of the heavy bronze clock over the fireplace.

The woman slumped to her knees on the rug beside me and stared up at my face. "Paul," she said, "you don't know the man.

WAIT FOR DEATH

*I had to kill Johnny Hunter . . . even
though I'd never seen him before.*

BY

KARL KRAMER

woman's voice saying, "Don't do it, Paul! You know it's wrong. Please don't do it."

The only answer she got was the little metallic clicks I made with the .45 as I inspected it. From the couch I glanced up at her with an annoyed frown. Something had happened to her during these past two weeks. The lips were the same; full and pulpy soft and pink. The eyes under the raven hair were still the rich color of black olives. The breasts still round and hefty. Same

you've never seen him. I've never begged in my life, not for anything, but I'm begging you now. Stay away from Johnny Hunter. Please!"

I took my eyes off the gun and looked down at her, feeling something close to pity. This was the only bad part of the deal, hurting her. I went back to the gun. I checked the clip for a full load and slammed it into the butt. I didn't want to talk about it. Not to her. I knew what I had to do and talk wasn't going to help. Not all the

talk in the world.

My eyes searched through the windows across the room. Dusk had thickened to darkness over the city. I glanced at the clock over the gas-lugs. Quarter-to-seven and time to leave. I shoved the nose of the .45 deep under my belt at the front and started to get up.

She clutched my coat sleeve, held me there. "Listen to me, Paul. You like me, I can tell. We could get along all right together if we left right now, this minute. Just the two of us."

Desperate fingers tightened about my wrist.

"Hunter means that much to you, Judith?" Those were my first words to her since she had entered the room and found me there with the gun. Her eyelids fell and she lowered her head in a silent confession. I didn't need any other answer.

"I've heard about things like that," I said. "A woman giving up the man she wants in order to save him. Never believed in it. It won't work. I'm sorry you're so stuck on him, but I owe this to Vance."

"You owe Vance nothing!" she snapped. "He's using you to get to Johnny Hunter. From the first he only wanted to use you for this."

"I know. I made the bargain and I intend to go through with it. Why can't you understand, Judith? A deal is a deal."

Her eyes narrowed shrewdly. "I'll call the police. So help me, I'll do it."

"You haven't yet. What good would it do you? They couldn't get here in time to stop me, and if they did there would be somebody to take my place later." I stared her down. "Go to sleep. Get drunk or something."

I had her there. I pushed myself off the couch and she rose with me, still clinging to my sleeve. I glanced at her from the corner of my eye as I reached for my hat on the coffee table. Her face grew tight and lined with grief. She seemed to sense that this small act of hat-lifting was my final refusal.

Then she released my sleeve and her eyes went wide. She lurched toward me suddenly. One of her hands clawed for my face while the other reached for the .45 in my belt. "You won't!" she screeched. "I won't let you!"

The gun was jammed too tightly under my belt for her to reach the trigger. That saved me. Her hand was on the gun butt. She was fumbling to yank it loose when I closed my left hand around her fingers and held them powerless. My head was thrown back to avoid her clawing red nails. I grabbed that hand too.

For a second I stared into her outraged eyes; eyes that had been lovely and warm before this. I muttered "Sorry" and drew my right hand away and swung at her frightened face. She went limp. I caught her as she fell against me and carried her to the couch.

I hovered over her inert form, my eyes drinking up the pale soft beauty of her face, the curves of her lush full-fleshed body. Vance's wife. It wasn't easy to refuse a body like that when it was offered. My chest went tight and I wanted to kiss her. My fingers dug into my sweaty palms. I chewed my underlip.

Suddenly I turned away from her and jammed my hat on over my short brush-cut. I felt as steady as a leaf in a gale. I crossed to the door, took a last look around the silent apartment—Vance's apartment—and hit the light switch. Then I lifted Judith over my shoulder. Downstairs I slid behind the wheel of the grey Buick. Vance's Buick. Judith was still stretched out on the back seat.

Thunder rumbled in the north as I eased the Buick into the west-bound traffic. I turned toward the thunder when I reached the Henry Hudson Parkway and ahead of me lightning cut jagged streaks through the black sky. The rain fell as I crossed the city limits. I left the window down. Cool drops of rain slashed in and stung my cheek and I realized I was pushing the Buick too fast. I eased it down to fifty. I wanted to be careful until I reached the cabin, until I paid my debt to Vance.

The last time I tried to kill a man I failed. Only it hadn't been *another* man that time. I got a cigarette to my mouth, fired it with the dash lighter. Lulled by the smoke and

the steady hum of the Buick's tires on wet pavement, I tried to grope back, to recapture that black mood, to remember the frame of mind I had been in when all this started . . .

2.

The first day back from the Korean front I had put on my old civvies and looked up the hometown girl. The one who wrote to me, the one who said she would wait.

The one who married the son of a super market owner while I was on the boat coming back.

My wallet was bulging. There came a succession of hotel rooms, each dirtier than the last. And girls, each cheaper than the last. And bottles, until they lost their effect and the wallet was empty. Then the fight with a bartender who wouldn't stake me to one on the house, then running, the shrill scream of a police whistle behind me in the night.

And finally the bridge.

There was a pale moon over the bridge. When I looked up at it, it seemed to laugh, to mock me over the miles of dark empty space. All of a sudden it got to be too much, it was heaped too high.

There was a rapid succession of changing sensations. As I left the bridge I thought I heard a car motor and the angry squeal of brakes. There was a rush of air past my face. Then the water, cold and sudden at first, then a warm, soothing, enveloping blackness. I was through

fighting—until I felt something slink around my chin down there, take a firm hold and start to pull me up.

I thrashed, frightened and choking, my lungs hot. But the man in the water with me soon put an end to it. His fist exploded against my chin and I got a fleeting glimpse of that great black void.

My first realization that I was still alive came when my eyes batted open. Through a wet blur I saw the moon again. It seemed to have that same mocking expression. A spasm shook me then. I rolled over the retched violently and spat and cursed. When my viscera settled down I discovered I was on the lake shore, cold and wet. I looked around and found a face close to mine, a face with heavy cheeks and wet blond hair plastered on its forehead.

He was kneeling beside me, dripping. Between labored breaths he said, "What'd you want to do that for? Young guy like you?"

"None of your damn business!" I gasped. "Who asked you to put your nose in?"

He ran a hand across his mouth. "Maybe . . . maybe it is my business."

I rolled to a sitting position and he walked over to pick up his coat. Half-dazed, drenched, and again defeated I sat there catching my breath and watching him. He was a big man, with broad shoulders and gorilla-size hands. He came

back muttering to the night, "Why did I drive down this way tonight instead of taking the highway? Why did I get here just as you tried to knock yourself off?" He looked out over the shimmering lake. "I don't know. But maybe it was what they call fate—doing us both a favor."

I scowled and grunted to let him know what I thought of his cheap philosophy.

He leaned down and helped me to my feet. "C'mon, let's get some dry clothes."

"Sure," I said. "They grow on trees around here."

"At the cabin, punk. It's only a coupla miles back."

"Name is Paul. Paul Miller."

"Yeah, sure, punk. Mine's Vance Jensen. Real fancy, huh?" His mouth opened into a raucous deep laugh and there in the night it sounded like a laughing tuba. I didn't see anything funny.

He led the way to a car pulled over to the side of the dirt road. I got in feeling sulky and tight-lipped. This big buy had just made things tough for me again. Why do you get help when you're beyond it?

He guided the car over the snaky road until a clearing showed itself on the left. The headlights of the car found the log cabin as he wrenched the wheel around and stepped on the brake pedal.

Inside he lit a hurricane lamp and played the good host. He found

large towels and we rubbed ourselves dry in that barely furnished cell in the woods. He threw me some corduroy pants and a shirt and I knew then he was being generous with someone else's equipment. The clothes were almost a perfect fit on me and about nine sizes too small for him. He barely squeezed into the duds he picked for himself. I didn't wonder too much about it. I was just along for the ride.

He offered me a cigarette and his heavy-cheeked face was passive around his small inquiring eyes. I took the cigarette. I said, "I suppose for this you want the whole sad tale of my life?"

"Unh-uh," he grunted, slowly shaking his expressionless face.

It didn't help me, didn't hurt me. I still felt empty. There were safety matches on the wooden chest. I lit my cigarette and waited for him to say something.

He did. "A guy just doesn't do a thing like that, punk. If someone else does it to you, that's different, but you don't do it to yourself." He looked thoughtful now as he scratched his thick neck and paced beside the rough pine bunk. "Why did you?"

Was I to tell him my girl gave me the fast shuffle? He'd laugh. Tell him the booze had worn off and I couldn't buy myself another drink? He'd laugh louder. I shrugged and kept my mouth closed.

"Okay," he snapped. "I don't give a damn about that anyway. I'll give you a reason not to try it again."

"Like what?"

"Like four hundred a week and a place to flop. Clothes, good food, drink. All the good times you can handle. Good-looking women." He smiled at me openly.

"Women!" I gritted, stepping on the cigarette.

"So that's it. A dame!" His tuba laugh blasted again.

There he was laughing at me and I didn't feel like taking a poke at him. I didn't feel like doing anything. It was all the same. Up or down. Left or right. Laugh or cry. All the same. But the offer he made sounded like it might turn into a good deal. It sounded impossible, without sense. A wild whoopee fling at his expense. With that I might forget. I might get to feel better. I might get to feel.

"What's in it for you, Jensen? You don't throw your good money away on a guy like me for nothing. What's the scoop?"

He put his hands on his hips and thrust a big face out at me. It held a stony look. "It's not for nothing, punk. It's a brainstorm that hit me when I saw you going over. You're just the kind of a guy I need. Probably no relatives, nobody who gives much of a damn about you one way or the other, a stranger, a guy nobody will know. There's a job I need done. You live good on my dough until I tell you to do it." He

clamped his teeth hard for a second, then bit off the words. "When I say do it, you do it. No questions asked."

"And when I've done it?"

He shrugged. "You'll get a bonus if it comes off okay and you're on your own again."

"How much?"

He didn't hesitate. "Two thousand."

I searched the rough wall behind him. What did I have to lose? Nothing. The job he'd have lined up for me would be something dirty. It would be the end of the easy life he was offering now. It was both means and end. There was this and there was the lake. I couldn't think any further than that.

"Okay," I said.

He stuck out a big hand. "First time I ever made a deal with a dead man."

That shook me for an instant. But he was right. I took his hand.

3.

Vance drove me into New York, the east eighties. It was quite a place, his apartment, and as soon as I looked around and saw the colors and the delicate little pieces I knew there was a woman's hand in this. He ushered me through the door saying, "This is where you live from now on. That Buick downstairs is yours while you're around, but no long trips, understand. This is one investment I want to pay off."

"I've nowhere to go." I wandered aimlessly around the enormous living room and snorted at the gas-log fireplace. Ersatz homeyness.

Vance picked up the phone near the foyer and dialed. I listened. "Hello, Gus . . . I'm sending a guy down today . . . yeah, name of Paul Miller . . . send me the bill."

He replaced the phone in the cradle and turned to see me watching. "That was my tailor," he said. "You hop down there and get a couple suits for yourself. I don't want nobody around here in rags like you have on."

I guess the four hundred a week and the car and the new suits made him think he could talk to me any damn way he pleased. I noticed it but it didn't bother me. "Where do I sleep?" I asked.

"In here." I followed him out of the room and into another, a bedroom. "Guest room," he explained. "Yours now." He began pointing. "Down there's the kitchen, over there the latrine, next door down there is where I bunk, and we use that one for poker games."

There was another room he hadn't mentioned, at the end of a small passageway, the most distant room from his. I jerked my thumb toward it. "That's the woman's room?"

"Who said there was a woman?" he snapped.

"Nobody. The decorations. The magazines on the table. Women's magazines."

He stared at me until I thought he was trying to bore a hole through my face with his eyes. "You got good vision. I like that," he said. "The room back there is Judy's. That's the one thing you got no part of, the one place you never got a reason to be. Judy's my wife. Great little girl, but she gets funny ideas now and then. You be careful there, punk."

So, I thought, that's the way it is between them.

"Or else what?" I grinned. "You'll kill me?"

He knew that threat was weak. He scowled. He looked menacing. He joined his hands and cracked his knuckles. "No, punk, but I'll make you wish that's what I would do." All expression left his face and he gave me the blankest, most emotionless look I ever saw. Then he was dangerous. But I was here to spend his money, drink his liquor, have myself a hell of a time for a while, and he could use his energy being dangerous to somebody else.

"Suits me," I said. "Great little girls I can do without."

"Yeah." He plucked a wallet from his pants and counted out some bills. The first week's pay. Then he found pencil and paper in a drawer in a small end table and wrote out an address. "That's the tailor. When you get back here some of the other punks will be up for a card game. You can buy in if you want."

"Okay." I shoved the money in

my pocket. I went for the door, going out to get the first really expensive suits I'd ever had.

"Remember," he said, "there's no backing out of this deal."

I closed the door and went downstairs.

Weaving and jerking through traffic, jumping the lights, I got the Buick over to the west side and turned downtown. Near the tailor's address I slowed the car and did something I'd always wanted to do. I parked beside a sign that read "No Parking." I got out and walked up to the second floor of a grimy building to see Gus the tailor. I spent a couple of hours up there getting fitted and when I came down there was a ticket on the windshield of the Buick. I smiled. So they were going to fine me. So what? I was in the chips. I scuttled under the wheel and roared away.

Back at Vance's I thought I'd walked into the wrong apartment. It stunk of whiskey and smoke. It seemed more like the back room of a pool parlor. A voice grumbled and cursed and somebody else laughed. A tuba laugh. Vance's laugh. I could hear him say from the other room, "My pot. Lady Luck's no lady for you, Billy."

Somebody said, "Damn!"

I closed the door quietly and walked into the game room.

Around a circular table there were four others besides Vance. They all had glasses at their elbows, their loud ties were pulled away

from unbuttoned collars. Two of them wore hats. Vance looked up as he shuffled the deck. "Back, huh? Like to buy a stack?"

I thought about it, told myself I didn't have to play games with him. "No thanks. Maybe next time."

"Suit yourself," he said. Then to the others, "This is Paul Miller." That was all the explanation necessary. They grunted their hellos at me through the smoke and I grunted back. I stayed long enough to watch Vance's diamond flush get snowed under by Kings-full, then went back into the living room and sat on the couch, thumbing idly through a magazine.

The game broke up after a few more hands. I could spot the losers by the way they grumbled as they came out of the room. Vance wasn't grumbling. He was sliding the knot of his tie up to the collar and saying, "How about a drink at the Parrot Club? On me. I'm on my way over there anyway."

Two of them liked the idea and waited while Vance got into his coat. The others said goodbye and walked out. When Vance was ready he turned to me. "Keep yourself handy," he said.

He herded them out without inviting me along and I knew then how it was going to be as far as the boys were concerned. It was none of their business. And whatever else they did besides play poker wasn't any of my business. I liked the arrangement. I picked up an-

other magazine. Before I could crack it I heard feet scraping somewhere in the apartment. I wasn't alone.

4.

A door slammed and the feet scraped closer, right into the same room with me. I didn't move my head up. I just looked up at her from under my eyebrows. She came in with short, lurching steps and made it to the cabinet bar near the window without falling. She had an empty glass in her hand. A tall glass. She tilted a booze bottle over it until it was half full, held it under the seltzer bottle and squirted in a thimbleful as mixer.

Turning and raising the glass to her lips in one motion, she noticed me for the first time. She brought the glass down quickly and covered it with her other hand, as though she thought I might try to take it away from her.

"Thought everybody was gone," she mumbled through loose red lips between which she presently sloshed some booze. Her eyes focused on me. Large dark eyes. She pushed with red-tipped fingers at her loose, uncombed raven black hair. That face of hers would look good sober. The rest of her—bust ill-concealed under the loose robe, full rounded hips, the soft white patch of leg that showed—wasn't harmed any by drink. It was terrific. Dream-girl stuff. "What are you, mister? Something left over from the poker game?"

"I didn't play."

"Smart." She took a couple of steps toward me. "Don't ever. Vance cheats."

I filed that away in my mind and kept quiet. She came closer and looked down at me with an ugly twist to her mouth. "What's your recommendation?" she asked. "Pocket picking or tea peddling?"

I looked up at her hovering, drunken face. "Neither."

"Why didn't you go out with the rest of them?"

"I'm not one of them," I said evenly, then, "Why don't you get back in your room?"

She flushed clear up to the temples, waited, then said seriously, "Because I hate it. Because I hate this whole place! Now why don't you get out of here before I call the manager and have you thrown out!"

"I like it here," I said, "and in case Vance forgot to mention it to you, I live here now."

"You—!" She gulped again from her glass. "So you're the boarder he brought home. Boarder, my eye!"

I nodded. We remained frozen there for a minute, silently appraising each other. A thought fluttered through my mind, like a curtain in a light breeze. This woman and I weren't such strangers after all. She was doing slowly—with the booze—what I had tried to do in one swift stroke back at the lake. Her eyes told me she was hurt, helpless, trapped.

She broke the silence by draining her glass with one deft tilt, holding it out to me and saying, "How about a drink?"

For a second I wanted to tell her she'd had enough. I shrugged that off and crossed to the bar with her glass. I mixed her one and one for myself. When I carried it back to her I found her draped on the couch with a lot of thigh showing. "Your robe is slipping," I told her.

She gave me a quizzical glance and covered her legs. She said, "How long are you staying—Boarder?"

"I don't know." I sat at the other end of the couch. "Until the job is done."

"What job? What are you here for?" she asked. Her eyes in that instant seemed afraid and sober.

"Don't know that, either," I said, taking my eyes off her and sipping my highball.

She got up when I reached for the magazine and moved away from the couch slowly, carefully, as though it was *me* she was afraid of. At the little bar she snatched a bottle by the neck and tripped toward her room. Before she left me, she said, "Better leave yourself while you're still able—Boarder."

I didn't bother answering. It could have been just a piece of advice or it could have been a warning. Before she disappeared into the hall that led to her room she tilted her head and flashed her eyes at me with a look that seemed to say:

you'll be seeing me again and again. I found myself wishing she hadn't given me that look and it bothered me because I wasn't supposed to care. I was Paul Miller, the man who had been burned once, the man who didn't give a damn, the man without a future. I put my glass to my lips and forgot it.

At that moment I heard a key scrape in the lock and the door to the apartment flew open. I looked around to find Vance standing there. He closed the door and walked in. He halted momentarily, glanced at me, looked in the direction of *her* room, then back at me. He scratched his chin. "Forgot my car keys," he said.

I watched him go into the game room and come out again. There was a look of bafflement and wonder on his face.

"Surprised?" I said.

He glared at me. "Walk easy, punk. Easy. There's no guarantee goes with this deal."

He went out again. Besides being dangerous he fancied himself a really clever guy. I smiled at the closing door.

The next two weeks were a slice of life a lot of guys secretly ache for. What you might call riotous weeks. I didn't get drunk but I always had enough booze in me to keep me from remembering too many things, enough to keep a haze between myself and reality. I slept during the day and lived at night. I spent Vance Jensen's money on good

food, good drink, and women who would give nothing but sell anything and who left me wanting to spit on them.

I saw Judith almost every day and we talked casual talk for a few minutes at a time. I learned she was singing at the Parrot Club, Vance's joint, as well as pretending she was an ever-loving wife. Her drinking tapered off and some color crept back into her cheeks and I came to know—without any demonstration—that she wouldn't leave me feeling the way I felt after a crazy bout with one of the others.

Then it set in. Monotony. Boredom. A nervous, twitching impatience.

I dropped around to the Parrot Club one night, about eleven, to see Vance. As I pushed into the place a wave of applause was rippling through the dive. I looked across the floor and saw Judith bowing and backing away from the tables, smiling into the baby spot. I strolled beyond the crowded, smoky bar and rapped on the Manager sign.

Vance let me in. "Oh, it's you." He went back to an open ledger on his desk, made a scrawl, then said, "What is it you want? Run out of dough?"

I flung my fedora into a chair, planted my palms on his desk and looked down at him. I said, "When does it come off?"

He leaned back with a grin, showing neat large teeth. "When does what come off?"

"The job, whatever it is. Let's get it done!"

"Got a burr in your pants, punk?" His smile disappeared. "Take it easy. You're having a hell of a time. Enjoy it."

"Enjoy it he says! I'm getting tired of booze and cheap women! I want to get this over with before I get sick!"

He rubbed his hands together. "Good, good. You're getting to hate people, you're ready to damn the world! That'll make your job easier to do. I like that."

I collapsed myself into a chair facing him. "Yeah, but when?"

"Soon, I think. Very soon. Just sit tight till I tell you to move." His face settled into that utterly blank, emotionless expression again. "You're not thinking of taking a walk-out, are you?"

"I'm not walking," I insisted. "We made a bargain. I've never walked out on a bargain in my life, and I won't start now. Getting restless, that's all."

"Simmer down. It won't be long."

"Yeah." I got up and started for the door. It swung open before I reached it and Judith came in rubbing her forehead. She glanced at me and slowly approached the desk. She told Vance, "I can't do the late show tonight. This headache is killing me."

He scowled up at her, ran a hand over his blond head in exasperation. "That's just great. What am I supposed to do, sing to them myself!"

"I can't help it, Vance. If I go out there again I think I'll faint."

"All right, all right. I'll put Myra on in your spot. She'll love it."

"I know she will," Judith said. "I'll tell her while I'm changing."

Vance scratched his chin and turned to me. "Take Judy home. See she gets an aspirin." His eyes swung between us, from her face to mine and back again. "And no stops on the way. Go to sleep."

And right then, all of a sudden, I wanted to smash his nose in. What did he think he was? Her jailer? I held the door for her. "I'll wait for you. Car's out front."

5.

It didn't take her long to change. Within ten minutes we were rolling through the uptown traffic. I looked at her when she lit a cigarette. That little headache-born frown she wore in Vance's office was gone. She inhaled smoke and let it squirt out her nostrils.

"How's the headache?" I asked.

"Gone," she smiled. "Why is it, Paul, that you never say much more than hello to me? Do I have leprosy?"

"So that's it."

"Yes, that's it."

I stopped for a red light and stared at her. "What's so special about you?"

If the jibe hurt, she didn't show it. She talked on. "Nothing, I guess. Why do you talk like that. I can see you're not really as tough as you

like me to think—" She paused. "—just as you know I'm not the lush I seemed to be when we first met."

"Do I know it?"

She turned on the car seat, put her legs under her. "Be a friend, Paul. Is that too much to ask?"

"Cut it out!" I rapped.

The light changed. I put the Buick in gear and rolled. I felt my palms sweat on the wheel and it wasn't the weather. There was a big gulf between us and I wanted it to stay there.

She blew a spear of smoke out the car window. "Sorry, Paul. It's just—I need someone once in a while when it gets rough."

"What do I look like? A boy scout?"

She ignored that. "Help me, Paul, and I'll get you enough money to last you the rest of your life."

The rest of my life! My mirthless laugh spilled harshly between us. The first laugh I'd had in months.

"Are you that hopeless!" she said.

She flicked her cigarette into the slipstream and came back at me again. "I'm serious about this. The Parrot Club and a couple of other places are in my name, actually are mine. Vance gave them to me for a wedding present. I could get a lot of money for them, even selling cheap."

I was about to snap at her again but let it go. This was our block. I slid the Buick to a stop beside another car and backed into a space

in front of the apartment house. I went around to the sidewalk side and opened her door for her. Damned if I know why. Maybe a hold-over from early training. We went up in silence.

A tear rolled down her cheek. It might have been an act. I didn't know. "Look, Judith, I'm sorry you have these troubles. We all have troubles. I can't do anything for you. I stopped asking for help some time ago—and stopped giving it!"

I got up. I didn't want to watch her face fall apart. As I left the room her racked sobs pecked at the back of my neck. In my room I pulled off my clothes and went in to shower. There was a cool spray over my head and back as I thought about Judith. The way it was, she'd be better off making the best of her bum deal with Vance Jensen. She was beaten from the start. The trouble was, she had me upset. And I'd thought I was beyond upsetting.

6.

The next evening came. I was pacing the living room with a cigarette, feeling fidgety and Vance was at the coffee table cheating himself at solitaire. Every now and then he glanced toward Judith's room and I looked out at the darkening sky.

The door chimes rang and Vance got up. At the door he stood without admitting his caller, but I heard the message. "Hunter's back."

Vance shut the door and stomped into his room. When he came out

he had a Colt .45 in one hand and a box of ammunition in the other. He slapped the ammo box on the table and tossed the .45 at me. I grabbed it.

I took a quick look at the clip. Two slugs. I shoved it back. Vance put on his hat and said, "This is it. I'll be out with my alibi and you'll be doing your job."

He watched me carefully to see if I was going to chicken out. "Any questions, punk?"

One long step brought me up close to him, close enough to jam the nose of the .45 into his belly and watch his skin blanch. I gritted my teeth. "The name is Paul. I'm sick of this 'punk' business. Say it once—Paul."

His eyes rolled toward the gun in his belly. "Yeah, sure—Paul."

"That's all," I said.

He gave me his blank look, then he sprang his surprise.

"You're only going to pretend it's Hunter you're after," he said.

"I don't get it."

"Easy. Hunter was the bait. I knew he'd be back and last night did it, that fake headache."

My mind whirled. I'd fought off my desire for Judith and cooled myself off with the shower. It must have been while I was in my room Judith had slipped off to see Hunter; what if I'd gone into her room, after all . . . she'd have been gone. The laugh would have been on me.

"You don't think it's just Hunter,

do you?" Vance scowled. "It's anything in pants that looks good to her! I was glad to see you didn't fall for her." He started to poke his finger into my gut then thought better of it. "You're to get her."

My mouth must have fallen open. Vance nodded. "It's the only way I can get rid of her. I thought maybe if I kept a watch on her she'd come out of it, but when Hunter came back that was it. Tell her you're going after him. She'll try to talk you out of it. Pretend you're taking her to him, then . . . you know what to do."

He went out and I stared at the door. I'd thought it was Johnny Hunter, and he'd let me think so. He'd wanted to see if I'd play around with her myself.

Thunder was still stumbling across the sky when I turned the Buick off the wet highway and onto the narrow, rutted road that led to the entrance of the Motel.

Easing out of the seat, I turned up my coat collar and hunched my shoulders against the cold rain. My legs were stiff from the uninterrupted ride. I sloshed through the mud toward the cabin marked "Office." I hoped there was an empty cabin at this late hour. I had to walk with my head down to keep the slashing rain out of my eyes.

I didn't think twice what Vance would do if he knew I had finally doublecrossed him. I hadn't gone to the cabin, but had kept on driving

beyond the place where Hunter was waiting for Judith, and now she and I were irrevocably bound together. There was one empty cabin, "for me and my wife."

I went back to the Buick, eased it up to the entrance of #6, set in a semi-circle of trees. The attendant in a dark green slicker dashed away from my headlights as he came from some last-minute straightening of the cabin. I waited for the yellow light of the Office to shut off, and then I carried Judith into the cabin and tossed her on the bed. She moaned and lay still.

On the way up here I suppose I could have killed her and dumped the body, but killing a woman was something new. I needed time to get used to the idea.

I removed my wet clothes and was climbing into my side of the double bed when Judith stirred again, suddenly lifted herself up and said: "Where's Johnny?"

"This isn't Vance's cabin," I told her. "We're at a motel."

"Oh." She slid her black olive eyes toward me and fell back again motionless.

I reached over and switched off the table lamp, and closed my eyes hoping that I wouldn't have to think. I'd gone into a semi-conscious state just before falling asleep when I gradually became aware of an arm encircling me and Judith's face was pressed against my chest. She snuggled up to me and I felt her warm flesh against my own.

In the morning the air was clear. I could feel a coolness on my face as I lay quietly on my back. I knew I had been right to rescue Judith from Vance. It didn't matter now; we could keep on driving away from the city, perhaps to Canada. He'd wanted me to kill her; well, so far as he was concerned she'd be dead.

I turned toward her, but her side of the bed was empty. The cover was rumpled and the pillow had a hollow dent where her head had been. The mountain air must have awakened her and she had had plenty of sleep during the drive up here. I closed my eyes for a moment and then decided it was time for me to get up, too. I felt hungry.

Washing and dressing quickly, I stepped out into the air. The Buick gleamed with the rainwash. Beyond was a building next to the Office marked "Diner." Judith must be having breakfast as she was nowhere else in sight. The other occupants of the cabins must have had an even earlier start because there were no other cars outside the cabins now.

I walked across the pine-needled path to the Diner and looked in through the large window. Judith was at the far end of the long counter. The fellow behind the counter was taking away some dishes and as he turned his back I saw Judith open her purse and take out a flask, pour what looked

like whiskey into her coffee cup. She drank it quickly.

Worried, I went to the entrance and opened the screen door but didn't go in. I heard her say to the young man: "So I can't help you do the dishes? Well, can I help you with anything else?" There was a fierce undermeaning in her tone. He laughed nervously.

I could see his face from where I stood but I couldn't see Judith. There was a red stain creeping up his handsome features. Anything in pants, Vance had said.

"Since you're all alone," Judith said, "nobody would know if I lent a hand."

I opened the screen and stamped in.

"Oh, you're up at last," Judith said brightly without any sign of dismay at my presence. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry," I said abruptly.

"You should be," she said too softly.

There was something stuck in my throat and I couldn't eat even if I'd wanted to.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go."

She clamped her purse together and then opened it again.

"Oh, wait. First I want to tip this young man." She brought a coin out of her bag and stretched her arm across the counter so that she could put it directly into his hand. I pretended to look away but I saw her give his palm a tweak before she withdrew her arm.

"Where are we going?" she

asked, joining me. She lurched slightly and I knew she had had more than one shot from her purse flash.

"I'm taking you to Johnny Hunter. That's where you want to go, isn't it?"

"What's the matter? Don't you like me?"

Without answering I climbed into the car and let her help herself into the seat from the other side.

I kept my lips locked together, paying no attention to her chatter. Vance was right. She needed killing. She was a lush.

"You're going too fast!" she complained. I was hitting close to eighty.

"If you don't like it. . . ." I reached over suddenly to her door handle. "Get out!" I pushed with all my might, the car swerved, and I righted it with one hand, grabbed at the open door with the other, and in my turned position I could see her body bounce off the road against a boulder, shattering. Quickly I dragged the door to, and grabbed the wheel with both hands. With my foot off the gas, the Buick had slowed down some, but now I put on speed again. I'd paid my debt to Vance. My debt, I thought, with a bitter swallow. Hal I was a bigger bum than I'd been when Vance rescued me from the river. I hadn't paid my debt, I'd compounded it last night. . . .

All I could do was keep driving . . . to Canada maybe.