

# DIRTY WORK

BY LEWIS SHINER

THE OFFICE SMELLED like money. Brand new carpet, somebody's expensive perfume still hanging in the air. The chairs in the waiting room are leather and the copy machine has a million attachments and there's pictures on the wall that I don't know what they're supposed to be. Made me ashamed of the shirt I was wearing, the cuffs all frayed and some of the buttons don't match.

The secretary is a knockout and I figure Dennis has got to be getting in her pants. Red hair and freckles and shiny skin that looks like she just got out of a hot shower. A smile like she really means it. My name was in the book and she showed me right on in.

Dennis shook my hand and put me in a chair that was slings and tube steel. The calendar next to his desk had a ski scene on it. Behind him was solid books, law books all in the same binding, also some biographies and political stuff.

"Too bad you couldn't make the reunion," Dennis said. "It was a hoot."

"I just felt weird about it," I said. I still did. It looked like he wanted me to go on, so I said, "I knew there'd be a bunch of y'all there that had really made good, and I guess I...I don't know. Didn't want to have to make excuses."

"Hard to believe it's been twenty years. You look good. I still wouldn't want to run into you in a dark alley, but you look fit. In shape."

"I got weights in the garage, I try to work out. When you're my size you can go to hell pretty quick. You look like you're doing pretty good yourself." Charlene is always pointing to people on TV and talking about the way they dress. With Dennis I could see for the first time what she's talking about. The gray suit he had on looked like part of him, like it was alive. When I think about him in grungy sweats back at Thomas Jefferson High School, bent double from trying to run laps, it doesn't seem like the same guy.

"Can't complain," Dennis said.

"Is that your Mercedes downstairs? What do they call those, SLs?"

"My pride and joy. Can't afford it, of course, but that's what bankers are for, right? You were what, doing something in oil?"

"Rig foreman. You know what that means. 'I'm not saying business is bad, but they're telling jokes about it in Ethiopia.'"

Dennis showed me this smile that's all teeth and no eyes. "Like I told you on the phone. I can't offer you much. The technical name for what you'll be is a paralegal. Usually that means research and that kind of thing, but in your case it'll be legwork."

Beggars can't be choosers. What Dennis pays for his haircut would feed Charlene and the kids for close to a week. I must look ten years older than

him. All those years in the sun put the lines in your face and the ache in your bones. He was eighteen when we graduated, I was only seventeen, now I'm the one that's middle aged. He was tennis, I was football. Even in high school he was putting it to girls that looked like that secretary of his. Whereas me and Charlene went steady from sophomore year, got married two weeks after graduation. I guess I've been to a couple of topless bars, but I've never been with anybody else, not that way.

It was hard for me to call Dennis up. What it was, I got the invitation for the class reunion, and they had addresses for other people in the class. Seemed like fate or something, him being right here in Austin and doing so good. I knew he'd remember me. Junior year a couple of guys on the team were waiting for him in the parking lot to hand him his ass, and I talked them out of it. That was over a girl too, now that I think about it.

Dennis said, "I got a case right now I could use some help with." He slid a file over from the corner of the desk and opened it up. "It's a rape case. You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

Dennis sat back, kind of studying me, playing with the gold band on his watch. "I mean my client is the defendant. The thing is—and I'm not saying it's this way all the time or anything—but a lot of these cases aren't what you'd think. You got an underage girl, or married maybe, gets caught with the wrong jockey in her saddle, she hollers 'rape' and some guy goes to the slammer for nothing. Nothing you and I haven't ever done, anyway."

"So is this one of those cases?"

"It's a little fishy. The girl is at UT, blonde, good family, the guy is the wrong color for Mom and Dad. Maybe she wanted a little rough fun and then got cold feet. The point is, the guy gets a fair trial, no matter what he did." He took a form out of the file. "I'll get you a xerox of this. All I want is for you to follow this broad around for a couple of days, just kind of check her out."

"How do you mean?"

"Just get an idea of what kind of person she is. Is she some little ice princess, like she wants the DA to believe? Or is she showing her panties to anybody with a wallet and a dick?"

"Geez, Dennis, I really don't know..."

"There's nothing to it. This is absolutely standard procedure in a case like this. She knows she's going to have people watching her, it's just part of the legal bullshit game." When I didn't say anything he said, "It's ten bucks an hour, time-and-a-half if you go over forty hours a week, which I don't see this doing. We pay you cash, you're responsible for your own taxes and like that, and if you forget to declare it, that's your lookout. Hint hint. If this works out we can probably find some other things for you."

Here's the carrot, was what he was saying, and here's the stick. Good money, tax free, if you do it. Turn this case down because it sounds a little hinky and you're back on the street.

"What's this woman's name?"

"Some horrible yuppie name..." He looked at the file. "Lane, that's it."

Lane Rochelle. Isn't that a hoot?"

I didn't like the way her name made me feel. Like I was standing outside the window of one of those big Highland Park mansions back in Dallas, wearing last week's clothes, watching guys in tuxedos and women in strapless dresses eat little sandwiches with the crusts cut off. I blamed her for it. "I don't know anything about this kind of work," I said. "I mean, if she sees me I'm liable to scare her off. I don't exactly blend into a crowd."

"Let her see you. It's not a problem."

I still wasn't sure. "When would you want me to start?"

He slapped me on the shoulder as he came around the desk. "There you go," he said. He walked out of the office and I heard the hum of his big new copy machine.

SO I DROVE over to campus in my good corduroy jacket and my frayed cuffs and my black knit tie. I parked my pickup in the Dobie garage and walked down 21st Street to the Perry Casteñeda Library, where Lane Rochelle works. The piece of paper Dennis gave me shows her address and her job history and her criminal record (NONE). Also a xerox of a photo of her from the society page of the *Statesman*.

She's older than Dennis let on, twenty-eight, she's working on her master's degree in History. She's paying her own way with her job at the library, not living off her rich parents back in Virginia, which makes me like her more too. The photo doesn't tell me much. Blonde hair, nice smile, wears her clothes the way Dennis wears his.

I went past the security guard and the turnstiles and looked around. I mean, I don't spend a lot of time in libraries. The place is big and there's this smell of old paper that makes me a little sick to my stomach. The Circulation desk is off to my left and across from it there are some shelves with new books and a yellow naugahyde couch. I found a book that looked interesting, a true-crime thing about this guy that kept a woman in a box. I sat down and every so often looked up and finally I caught sight of Lane moving around behind the counter.

She's not an ice princess, and she's not some kind of sexpot either. She's just a real person, maybe a little prettier than most. Right then she looked like somebody that didn't get a lot of sleep the night before and is having a tough day. The second time she caught me looking at her I saw it hit home—some big guy lurking around her job. I hated to see the look on her face, which was mostly fear.

A little before eleven o'clock she came out a door to one side of the counter with her purse and a bookbag. I let her get out the front door and then followed. It was nice out, warmer than you could ask February to be. The trees had their first buds, which would all die if it froze again. There were even birds and everything. She headed up 21st Street and turned at the Littlefield fountain, the one with the horses, and climbed the steps toward the two rows of buildings on top of the hill. Once she looked back and I turned away, crouched down to pretend to tie my shoe, not fooling anybody.

I watched her go in the first building on the left, the one with the word

MUSIC over the door. I followed her inside. The halls were full of students and I watched her push through them and go in one of the classrooms. Just before she went in she turned and gave me this look of pure hatred.

Made me feel pretty low. I stood there for ten minutes just the same, after the hall cleared and the bell rang, to make sure she stayed put. Then I went outside and walked around the side of the building. The classrooms all had full-length windows. The top halves were opened out to let in the warm air. I found Lane's room and sat in the grass, watching a woman teacher write on the board. She had heavy legs and glasses and dark hair in a pony tail. Charlene always talks about going back to college, but I can't see it, not for me. I had a semester of junior college, working construction all day and sleeping through class at night. They didn't have football scholarships and I wasn't good enough for the four-year colleges that did. So I went with what I knew and took a job on my daddy's drilling crew.

By eleven thirty I was starving to death. There was a Vietnamese woman with a pushcart down by the fountain selling eggrolls. I walked down there and got me a couple and a Coke and took them back up the hill to eat. It would have been okay, really, eating eggrolls outside on a pretty spring day and getting paid for it. Only Lane knew I was there watching and I could see what it was doing to her.

At noon we went back to the library. Lane sat off to herself in the shelves behind the counter. She had brought her lunch in her bookbag, a carton of yogurt and a Diet Coke. She didn't seem to be able to eat much. After a couple of bites she threw it away and went to the rest room.

She got off work at two in the afternoon. I watched her climb on a shuttlebus and then I drove out to her apartment and waited for her. She has a one-bedroom on 53rd street near Airport, what they call a mixed neighborhood—black, white, brown, all low-income. This is where the rape happened. There's a swimming pool that doesn't look too clean and a couple of 70s muscle cars up on blocks. A lot like my neighborhood, over on the far side of Manor Road.

She walked right past me on her way to her apartment. I was sitting in my truck, watching the shuttlebus pull away. She went right past me. I could tell by the set of her shoulders that she knew I was there. She went in her apartment, toward the near end of the second floor, and I could hear the locks click shut from where I sat. She pulled the blinds and that was it.

I did what Dennis told me. I got out and made a log of all the cars parked along the street there, make and model and license number, and then I went on home.

I WAS IN TIME to give the kids a ride back from the bus stop. Ricky is fifteen and going through this phase where he doesn't talk except to say yes or no to direct questions. Mostly he shrugs and shakes his head in amazement at how stupid adults are. So naturally he didn't say anything about me wearing a tie. Judy, who is seventeen, wouldn't let it alone. "What's it for, Dad? You look way cool. You messing around? Got a girlfriend?" She doesn't mean anything by it, she's just kidding.

I had TV dinners in the oven by the time Charlene got home. Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, and that apple cobbler dessert she loves. Her new issue of *Vogue* was there and she took it into the bathroom with her for a while. When she came out she was showered and in her blue-gray bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, with her hair in a towel. She loves *Vogue* magazine. I guess it takes her to some other world, where she isn't pushing forty and she still weighs what she did in high school and she doesn't spend all her days answering phones for a heating and air conditioning company.

"How'd it go?" she said. We had *Wheel of Fortune* on, the kids on the floor with their dinners between us and the TV.

"I got four hours in today, ten bucks an hour. I should make at least that tomorrow."

"That wasn't what I asked."

One reason I never ran around on Charlene is I don't think I could fool her for a second. "I don't like it," I said. "I think he's using me to scare somebody, because I'm big and ugly."

Charlene grabbed the back of my neck and shook me like a cat. "You're big all right. But I always thought you was handsome." Then she leaned back and picked up her magazine again and she was gone.

EVERYBODY WAS ASLEEP by eleven. I went out real quiet and drove over to Lane's apartment. There were a lot more cars out front this time and I wrote down all the new ones on my log sheet. The light was still on in her apartment. I was about to head home when the blinds moved and she looked out and saw my truck.

I wanted out of there bad enough that I made the tires on that pickup squeal.

I SLEPT AWHILE and then laid awake awhile and then it was morning. I had a lot of coffee and not too much to eat which made my stomach hurt.

I was already at the library when Lane came in. She saw me and went straight through the STAFF door and stayed out of sight. A few minutes later a campus cop knocked on the door and she stood in the doorway with him and pointed me out.

I felt like high school again, like I'd been caught with a *Playboy* in the toilet. The campus cop walked over and asked me if I had any ID. I showed him my driver's license.

"What you up to here?"

I gave him one of Dennis's cards, like Dennis said I should. "I'm doing research for a law office. Call this number, they'll back me up."

"Don't look like you're doing research to me. Maybe you should move along."

"Fine," I said. I put my book back on the shelf, which was too bad because it had gotten interesting. Only I couldn't check it out because I wasn't a student. I went outside and sat on a wall.

It was a nice day for something. Warm again, a few clouds, the birds getting ready for spring. College girls all around. I never saw so many good-

looking girls in one place. Young and healthy, in tight jeans and running shoes, clean soft hair blowing around, sweet smells trailing along behind them. It hurts to see so much that you want, that you can never have, to be so close you could reach out and touch it.

About a half hour later Lane came out of the library and headed down Speedway, right through the middle of campus. I didn't think she saw me. I found myself noticing the way she walked, the way her young, firm ass strained against her jeans. Don't even think about it. I waited until she had a good lead on me before I started after her.

She turned left on 24th Street, by the Experimental Science building, and I lost sight of her. When I turned the corner she was gone. I hesitated for a second, kids shouldering by me on both sides and then I went up to the first door I came to and looked inside. Not there.

When I turned around she was right in front of me. "What do you want?" she said. She was shaking and her voice was too loud.

"I'm working for a lawyer—"

"That defense lawyer? That fuck? Did he hire you to follow me around? What the fuck does he want from me? Is this Gestapo bullshit supposed to make me drop the case?"

"I don't think he—"

"What kind of slimebag are you, anyhow? Haven't I had enough shit already? How can you stand to go around and humiliate people this way?" Crying now, people stopping to stare at us. "Do you know what happened this morning? My boss called me in and wanted to know why I was being followed. Like it was my fault! I had to tell him everything. Everything! Can you imagine how humiliating that was? No. Of course you can't. If you could imagine it you would go shoot yourself."

A boy walked up and put his hand on her arm. She shook it off and shouted at him, too. "Leave me the fuck *alone!*" She turned back to me, her mascara running all over her face, and spit on my left shoe. Then she shoved her way through the crowd and started running back down Speedway, back the way she came.

**I** STARTED SHAKING too, as soon as I got in the truck. I shook all the way to Dennis's office.

He was with "one of his people" when I came in. After a few minutes his door opened and this good-looking Chicano came out. He was in his twenties, with longish hair and a mustache and an expensive black leather coat that hung down to his knees. He smiled at the red haired receptionist and pointed at her and said, "You be good, now."

"You too, Javier."

"No chance," he said, and rubbed his mustache and sniffed. The receptionist laughed. I couldn't help but think that Dennis was paying him more than ten bucks an hour for whatever it was he did.

Dennis was standing in the doorway of his office. "Come on in," he said.

I sat on the edge of the armchair. It wasn't really built for that and it made me feel off-balance. There was a dusty-looking mirror and a soda straw on his

desk.

“You want a little toot?”

I shook my head. “It’s about this case. This is really nasty. I don’t know if I can go on with it.”

“Okay,” he said. He put the mirror and the straw in the top center drawer and then got a bank bag out of another one. It was one of those rubberized deals with the zipper and the little lock, except it wasn’t zipped or locked.

“How many hours did you have?”

I guess I expected him to argue with me at least, maybe even offer me something else. “Call it seven,” I said. “And two parking receipts.” I put my log sheet with the license numbers on it and the receipts on the corner of his desk. I felt small sitting there, just waiting for him to pay me.

“So what happened?” he said.

“She turned on me, started screaming. Said I was trying to scare her off.”

“Gave you the old not-a-moment’s-peace bit, right?” He counted out four twenties and put them in front of me. “Haven’t got any singles, you can keep the change.”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Well, I understand. If you can’t hack it...”

“It’s not that I can’t hack it, I just don’t see why I should want to.”

Dennis sat back in his chair. Today he was wearing his casual outfit. I’d never seen a silk jacket before, but Charlene had showed me pictures and I was pretty sure that’s what it was. The pants were khaki, the shirt was pale blue, the shoes had little tassels on them. “Let me explain something to you. This business isn’t about who makes the most noise or who sheds the most tears. At least it’s not supposed to be. It’s about the *truth*. And the truth is not always what it seems. Ever have some asshole nearly run you off the road, and then he gives *you* the finger? A guilty conscience can make for a lot of righteous-sounding anger. This Rochelle bimbo has been going to one of those dyke counselling centers, and who knows what kind of crap they’ve been feeding her.”

“But what if she’s telling the truth?”

“If she is, my client goes to jail, probably does ten years of hard time. If she’s lying, she could go up herself for perjury. These are not matchsticks we’re playing for, here.” He leaned forward again. Every time he moved he did something different with his voice and I felt my emotions getting yanked around in another direction. “Look, I understand where you’re coming from. It takes a while to build up your callouses. Just like working on an oil rig, right? You get a lot of blisters at first and it hurts like hell. Then you toughen up and you can really get the job done.” He put the bank bag in the drawer. “Take the afternoon off, think it over. If you still want out, call me tonight, I’ll put somebody else on the case. I’ll be here in the office, I’m working late all week. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said. I took the small stack of bills and folded it and put it in my front pants pocket. I wondered when was the last time Dennis got a blister on his hands.

As I got up he said, “Just one thing you want to keep in mind. Everybody’s

got something to hide.”

I CAN'T REMEMBER the last time I had that much cash in my pocket. It made me a little drunk. I drove to the Victoria's Secret store at Highland Mall and spent \$58 on a crepe de chine sarong-wrap chemise in mango, size L. I took it home and hid it in the bedroom, and all through supper I was goofy as a little kid, just thinking about it.

I gave it to Charlene after we went to bed. She started crying. She said, "I'll get back on my diet tomorrow. It's so beautiful. I can't wear it the way I look now." She put it in the back of her drawer. She didn't even try it on.

She kissed me on the cheek and lay down with her back to me. I sat there, my hands all knotted up into fists. After a while she went to sleep.

I just sat there. I hadn't called Dennis. I was supposed to call him if I wasn't going back on the job. If I didn't do it he would just get somebody else. Somebody with all those callouses I don't have. Finally I got up and put my clothes back on and went out driving.

I guess I was supposed to be thinking things over, but what I did was drive to Lane Rochelle's apartment. It was a quarter to twelve. I wrote the time down on a new log sheet and walked around and wrote down all the cars and license numbers. Lane's window was dark. I got back in the truck and tried to find a comfortable way to sit. I wondered what she wore to bed. Maybe it was a crepe de chine sarong-wrap chemise in mango, size S. Maybe it was nothing at all.

A car door slammed and woke me up. The digital clock on my dash said one A.M. I saw a guy walking away from a black Trans Am, two slots down on the right. It was the guy I saw in Dennis's office that afternoon. I slid a little lower in the seat.

I wondered what was he doing there? Did Dennis give him my job? He went through the gate by the pool, headed for the far set of stairs.

The apartments are kind of L-shaped, with the long part parallel to the street and the short part coming toward where I was. There was another set of stairs on the end of the building closest to me. I got out of the truck as quiet as I could and went up the stairs. I got to the corner just as the guy knocked on Lane's door.

I could hear my heart. It sounded like it was in my neck. The guy knocked again, louder this time. I heard the door open and catch on its chain.

"Javier," Lane said. She sounded only a little surprised.

"I got your message," the guy, Javier, said.

"It's late. What time is it?"

"Not that late. You gonna let me in or what?"

"Not tonight. Come back tomorrow, okay?"

"Listen, I went to a lot of trouble to drive over here. How about a beer or something, anyway?"

"Fuck off." I wondered where she learned to talk like that. "Come back tomorrow night."

The door slammed and two or three locks turned. I didn't hear any footsteps. Javier was still standing there. Then he said, "*Chingase, puta!*" and

walked away.

I moved away from the corner and pushed my back flat against the wall. I was in the shadows, I didn't think he could see me. He took one last look at Lane's apartment and then spit in the swimming pool and got in his Trans Am and drove away.

**I** WAS COVERED in sweat when I got home. I had to sponge myself off with a wet washcloth before I could get back into bed. Charlene was still asleep, snoring away.

I wondered if I should call Dennis. What if he already knew Javier was hanging around? What if it was his idea? I thought about the smooth way he handled me that afternoon in his office and decided it wasn't any of my business. If Dennis wanted to ask me a question I would answer it. Otherwise I was on my own.

Being on my own is okay. I've been that way most of my life. It makes some things a lot easier. Like taking Dennis's money.

**I** GOT TO THE LIBRARY about ten o'clock and went right up to the circulation desk. Lane was there and when she saw me she turned and walked away. This older woman came over and asked if she could help me.

"I need to talk to Lane for a second."

"What is this in reference to?"

"It's in reference to I would like to apologize to her."

The old lady went to talk to Lane. They went back and forth a little and at one point the old lady put her arms around Lane and gave her a hug. It made me feel lonely to look at them like that. Then Lane came up to the counter. She took hold of the edge with both hands and waited for me to talk.

"Look," I said. "I'm sorry I scared you. I've been out of work for two years. This is just a job to me." She stared, no expression. "I thought about the things you said, and maybe I don't trust this lawyer very much either. What I'm trying to say is, you don't have anything to be afraid of from me. If you're...I mean, if things are the way you say they are, I would maybe like to help a little if I could."

She stared a while longer, and then she said, very quiet, "If you want to help, just go away. Just get the fuck away from me and stay out of my life."

"I can't do that right now," I said. "I have this job to do and it's the only thing I've got. All I want is to try to make the best of it."

Her eyes teared up. "Make the best of it. Oh God. What do you know about anything?"

She walked away and there was no use calling her back. I got my true crime book again and took it over by the card catalog, where I could see her if she left the building but she wouldn't have to watch me hang around all day. At eleven I followed her to her class at the Music building and back again after. I had an eggroll lunch while I waited and if she noticed me she didn't let on.

It was another nice day. I sat outside until she left at two, watching the clouds move around in the sky. She got on her shuttlebus and I sat there a little longer, wishing things were different but not knowing what exactly I

would change. Just a mood, I guess. Then I started the long uphill walk back to the Dobie Garage.

Dobie is the only place a non-student can park anywhere near the library. It's across from Dobie Mall, which is this combination shopping center and dormitory. Kids can eat, shop, sleep, go to movies, have sex, live and die there without ever going outside. The garage is always full so I had to park on the fourth level, one down from the roof. Homeless guys, what we used to call winos, what the kids call Drag worms, sleep in the stairwells, which smell of them peeing and throwing up there. I can't stand to see those guys, I want to knock them down to get away from them. If it wasn't for Charlene that could be me. No work, no future.

I got up to level four and even from the end of the row I could tell something was wrong. The truck was not sitting right. I felt sick. It goes back to my days on the rigs. Your wheels are your livelihood. If you can't get around, you can't work, if you can't work you can't feed yourself, if you can't do that you're not a man anymore.

I wanted to run over and see what was wrong and at the same time I wanted it not to be happening and the two things were pulling me in opposite directions. By the time I got to the truck my heart was pounding and my eyes were blurry.

It was all four tires flat. They weren't cut, not that I could see. The valve stem covers were off and they'd let the air out with a Bic pen or something. In addition they had taken their car keys or something and put long, ugly scratches down both sides of the body. I walked all the way around and then I started kicking one of the tires, which was stupid. It wasn't the tire that had done it.

It wasn't Lane that had done it either. She wasn't out of my sight all morning.

There was a note under the windshield wiper. It was in block capitals on lined yellow legal paper. It said GO AWAY.

**I** CALLED THE TRIPLE A and they sent a truck. The driver said something about those fucking college kids and I nodded along. While he was doing the tires I looked under the frame and inside the hood to make sure there wasn't a bomb or anything. Then I had the guy wait to make sure it started, which it did.

I stopped off at Airport Auto Supply and got some white primer and sprayed it on the scratches and it didn't look quite so bad. Then I went home. I wasn't shaking this time, not outside. It was all inside. It's like the constant vibration from the rotary table out on the drilling platform. It goes right through you. The kids were already there so I went out in the back yard and looked at the dead yellow grass. There were patches of green coming through and every one was a weed.

Call Dennis. He can get the note fingerprinted.

Sure. Students use legal pads, but so do lawyers. Maybe it was his cocaine buddy Javier did my tires. I can handle him one on one, but I know he's the kind of guy carries a gun.

The house needs a paint job, the lawn needs a gardener. The kids are nearly old enough for college and I got no money to send them. I wish I had a Mercedes SL instead of a Pinto wagon and a Ford pickup truck. I need a drink but I don't dare start. When was the last time I thought about who I am, instead of what I have? When did it start being the same thing?

In the bedroom, on the bottom of my undershirt drawer, was my daddy's gun. A Colt Woodsman .22 target pistol, loaded, because my daddy taught me an unloaded gun is worse than no gun at all. I went in the bedroom and locked the door and got it out. It smelled of oil and a little bit like cedar from the drawer. It felt great in my hand. I made sure the safety was on and stuck it in my pants. No, that was stupid. It would fall out or I would shoot myself in the foot. I folded it up in an old Dallas Cowboys nylon jacket.

Charlene was home. I heard her try the bedroom door, then knock quietly. I opened it. "I need to use the wagon," I said.

We never ask each other a lot of questions. It's like we don't really know how to go about it. I could see her try to make up her mind if she wanted to ask now. She must have decided not because she gave me the keys and got out of my way.

Judy said, "I need the wagon tonight, Dad, I got choir."

"Take the truck."

"I hate the truck. I don't like that stick shift."

"Just take the truck, all right?"

Now Judy was ready to start crying. I put the truck keys on the little table by the door and went out.

I was starving to death. I hadn't eaten anything since those two eggrolls before noon. I bought a hamburger and fries and a chocolate shake at Gaylord's there on Airport and ate them in the car. Then I got worried about Lane recognizing me, even in a different car. I looked around and found a bandanna in the back seat. I took off my tie and rolled up my shirt sleeves and put on my sunglasses. Then I tied the bandanna over my head, pirate style, the way I'd seen some biker guys do. Looked stupid as hell in the rear view mirror, but at least it didn't look much like me.

I made a pass all the way around the apartments and then parked out of sight of Lane's window. No sign of the Trans Am. The lights had been on behind her mini-blinds when I drove by. It was seven-thirty and full dark. A little after eight my bladder started to kill me. I got out and peed against the back of the apartments, which didn't have any windows. From the smell there I wasn't the first.

A little after nine it started to rain.

By ten I thought maybe I'd made a mistake. That old Pinto wagon is too small for me and the springs in the seats are shot. I hurt like hell after ten minutes, let alone two and a half hours. I could have been in bed asleep. Worse yet, Javier could have showed up without me seeing him, or in another car.

I got out and walked up and down the parking lot. No Trans Ams. Lights still on in Lane's apartment. The rain soaked my bandanna and got in my shoes. Half an hour, I thought. Then I either go home or I go upstairs for a

look. I was about to get back in the wagon when a black Trans Am pulled into the lot.

I ducked down and listened. The engine revved, then stopped. I could hear the hot metal tick and the rain make a softer tick against the hood. The door opened, the springs groaned, feet scraped against the asphalt. The door shut again. Silence. What if he can see me? My gun was still inside the Pinto.

I heard his footsteps move away. I could see his black leather coat as he went in the gate, Javier for sure, headed for the stairs. I waited until he was blocked by the corner of the apartment and then I crawled in the wagon head first. I stuck the little Colt in the back of my pants and jogged over to the other set of stairs, putting the jacket on as I ran.

By the time I got to the corner of the building, Lane had her door open. I heard her say, "There you are."

"You look nervous." Javier's voice. "Something wrong?"

"What do you think, you fucking prick? I'm going to welcome you with open arms?" I couldn't get used to the language she used. It just didn't fit with the way she looked.

"It's like raining out here, okay? Are you going to let me in, or what?"

"Yeah, I'm going to let you in."

A second later I heard the door close. The locks went again and then there was a crash and a muffled shout and then silence.

I COULDN'T JUST stand there. Even if it was none of my business, even if I was carrying a gun I had no permit for, even if somebody in that apartment had trashed my truck and left me threatening notes.

I turned the corner and tried to see through the blinds. Nothing. I heard voices but I couldn't tell male or female, let alone what they were saying.

Christ Jesus. It's happening right now, and I can't let it go on.

I knocked on the door. It went so quiet in there I could hear the raindrops ping on the railing behind me. I stepped back and kept my hands away from my sides, away from the gun stuck down the back of my pants. I don't know how long I waited but it felt like at least a minute.

Something moved behind the peephole and the door opened on the chain. It was Lane, fully dressed, not a mark on her. I suddenly realized I was still wearing the bandanna and sunglasses. She laughed and it sounded more nervous than anything. I wadded up the glasses and bandanna in my left hand.

"Just go away," she said. "Don't pull any knight-in-shining-armor numbers, don't give me any shit, just go away. Tell your lawyer friend it's over. I'm dropping the charges. The law sucks, you can tell him that too. Happy now? Go fuck yourself and stay away."

She started to close the door. I stuck my foot in, I don't know why. I couldn't let it end that way.

"Look," I said, "I just want to say—"

"I don't want to hear it." She leaned on the door, and it hurt.

To hell with it. "Let me get my foot out and I'm gone," I said.

She eased off on the door and right then something crashed in the back of the apartment and I heard Javier's voice, muffled, yelling.

“Oh shit,” Lane said. She took a step back.

A woman’s voice from off to the side said, “Bring him in.”

All of a sudden Lane’s apartment didn’t seem like such a good idea. The door slammed and I heard the chain come off and I turned around and ran for the stairs. Something hit me in the back of the knees and I skidded into the railing at the edge of the walkway. Then something metal poked me in the ear and a woman’s voice said, “Get up and go inside.”

My knees hurt where I’d slid. I got up real slow and the woman got behind me where I still couldn’t see her. I walked back to the apartment. I was so scared that everything looked tilted and the light hurt my eyes. Then I was inside and she pushed me and I went down on my knees again, next to the far wall of the living room.

“Put your hands on your head,” the woman said, “and turn around and sit against the wall.” I did what she said. There was the gun still stuck down the back of my pants. All I wanted was out of there. If I could get the gun out without getting shot in the process, maybe I could walk away.

Lane was there, and two women I didn’t know. The one with the gun was close to six feet tall, heavy, with crewcut blonde hair. She wore jeans and a plain white sweatshirt and a green flannel shirt over that. The sleeves of the flannel shirt were rolled up to show the sweatshirt underneath. The gun was some kind of little automatic and there was a silencer screwed on to the end of the barrel. That was when I realized for the first time that I was probably going to die.

The other woman was closer to my age. She had on jeans and a bulky orange sweater. Most of her hair had gone white. She had a pair of pliers which she was taking apart a plain wire coat hanger with. I could see a wad of paper on the breakfast bar that she’d torn off the hanger.

Against the wall across from me, behind the door, was Javier. They’d done something to his hair, cut a lot of it off the front, and it gave him a startled look. His hands were behind his back. One of his shoes was off and the sock was gone. His mouth was taped shut with silver duct tape. It looked like there was something in his mouth behind the tape. They’d run the tape all the way around his head a couple of times. I figured out where the missing sock was and decided I would be quiet.

“You know him?” the one with the gun said to Lane.

“He works for Asshole’s lawyer. He’s the one with the truck you fixed this afternoon. He’s nobody, just hired meat.”

“Scum,” she said sadly. “What would make somebody take a job like that?”

“Money,” the woman with the coat hanger said. “It’s all about money. Even Asshole there, women are just property to him. Right, Asshole? Like cattle or something. You can do anything you want to them.”

That was when I finally got it. “He’s the one,” I said.

The woman with the gun gave me a funny look. “I think Dr. Watson over here just figured something out.”

“Javier,” I said. “He’s the one that...”

“Raped me,” Lane said. “That’s right. He raped me. Do you mean to sit

there and tell me you didn't know?"

"I didn't know. But...I saw him here the other night. You called him by name..."

"Jesus," said the woman with the coat hanger. She sounded disgusted.

"Yeah, I know his name," Lane said. "I knew him before he raped me. So what? Because I know who he is, does that give him the right? I bought some coke from him, okay? And now my lawyer says he'll probably get off because of it. Even though he raped me. You want to hear about it? He pulled a knife, and he cut my clothes off, and he made me lie on my stomach, and he fucked me up the ass." She took two steps and kicked Javier in the face. She was wearing boots and she caught him on the cheekbone.

The woman with the coat hanger said, "Careful. Break his nose and he'll suffocate."

The woman with the gun said, "That'd be a real pity."

"Kind of misses the point, doesn't it? If we just *kill* him?" She had the hanger straightened out now and she was twisting one end into loops. It looked like a letter at the end of the straight piece of wire. It was a letter. It was the letter R.

"What are you going to do?" I said. Nobody paid any attention to me.

The woman with the coat hanger took it into the kitchen. I could see her through the breakfast bar. She took an ice bucket out of the freezer and set it on the counter. Then she bent the long end of the hanger double to make a handle. Then she got down a potholder, it was a red potholder, quilted in little diamond shapes, it fit over her hand like a mitten. Then she turned on a gas burner, turned it up to high. The flames were blue and the potholder was red.

Suddenly Javier started to spasm and make choking noises. There was a sour smell and he snorted a fine spray of vomit onto his clothes.

The woman with the coat hanger put it down on the stove and hurried over to take his gag off. The woman with the gun knelt on his legs and shoved the silencer into his crotch. "Don't make a sound," she told him. "Or you'll never fuck anybody again."

They were all looking at Javier. I got the Colt out. I was shaking again. It seemed like it was a million degrees below zero in that apartment. Javier spit puke on the floor and Lane ran into the kitchen for paper towels. She ran right past me and didn't even see the gun in my hand.

I stood up and the woman with the gun turned around. "What do you think you're—" She saw the Colt. Her face didn't change hardly at all. "So you want to play cowboy."

"I just want out of here. Let me walk out the door and you'll never see me again."

"I'd rather kill you," she said. I could tell she meant it. "I don't do anything with a gun pointed at me. So you can either use it or you can put it away."

We stayed like that, just looking at each other, pointing our guns at each other, Javier on his side, gasping, Lane with a handful of wet paper towels, the woman in the orange sweater standing to one side with a look on her face like

she was only mildly interested. I tried to imagine myself pulling the trigger and knew I couldn't do it. It was the first rule my daddy taught me, that you don't pull a gun unless you're willing to use it, and here I'd gotten it wrong. I wondered how much noise her gun would make, with the silencer and all. I wondered if it would hurt.

"That's better," the woman with the gun said. I looked at my hand, saw my daddy's Colt now pointed down at the floor. My legs had gone weak and I eased down onto my knees and put the Colt on the cheap brown carpet between us.

I said, "Now what?"

The woman with the gun said, "Good question."

The woman in the sweater taped Javier's mouth shut again and went back in the kitchen. Lane went over to Javier and wiped up the mess on the floor. Then she got up and opened the front door.

The woman with the gun said, "Are you crazy?"

Lane looked at me, crooked her finger toward the door. "Get out of here."

The woman with the gun said, "Lane—"

"Let him go," Lane said. "Maybe he learned something."

I stood up. It didn't look like the woman with the gun was going to stop me. I took one careful step toward the door, and looked back. The woman with the coat hanger was holding it over the burner. A bright yellow flame was coming off it and the metal was turning red hot. I took another step and then I was walking, fast, and then I was outside and the door slammed shut behind me. I ran for the stairs and I was just to the corner of the building when I heard Javier, right through the tape, let out one long, muffled scream.

**I** JUST WANTED to finish it. I stopped at the Diamond Shamrock on Airport and called Dennis's house. The rain was still falling, slower now, and I turned up the collar of my jacket while I listened to the phone ring. His wife answered and told me he was at the office. I remembered he'd told me that.

I parked next to his Mercedes in the lot. I had to knock on the glass door of his office for him to come unlock it. He was working at the copier and there was a big stack of what looked like tax forms on the table next to it.

"What's up?" he said. He fed another form into the machine.

"Lane Rochelle's dropping the case," I said.

"You're kidding."

"That's what you wanted, isn't it? I mean, that's why you'd hire a big, stupid guy like me in the first place, right?"

"Maybe you're not so dumb as you look."

"Maybe not."

"I think this calls for a bonus. I expect my client could afford a couple hundred on top of your hourlies."

I expected it was worth a lot more than that to Dennis, not to have to put Javier on the stand, not to have him talk about his cocaine customers. But all I said was, "Why don't I get that bank bag for you?"

"Sure. It's in the desk there."

I went into Dennis's office and got the bank bag out of the side drawer. I guess I was just looking for something. I didn't know what it was going to be until I found it. I looked back into the waiting room and Dennis still had his back to me, feeding papers into the machine. I eased open the top drawer and there it was, a fat plastic bag full of cocaine. I figured it must have been about a quarter of a pound. I flattened it out and put it down the front of my pants and tucked my shirt back in around it.

I took the bank bag in to Dennis and he counted out three brand new hundred dollar bills. "Not bad for a day's work, eh?" he said. I couldn't do anything but nod. "You did good," he said. "There's plenty more where this came from. Just let me know, okay?"

I even shook his hand.

I went downstairs and jimmed the lock on the gas tank of his Mercedes. Then I took off the gas cap and poured the entire baggie of cocaine inside. When I closed it all back up I could hardly tell the difference. Then I threw the baggie in the dumpster. I don't really know what cocaine does to an engine, but I figure there's at least a lot of sugar in whatever it's cut with. Any way you look at it, it's just bound to be expensive.

I was still kind of pumped up when I got in the Pinto, but it wasn't like I thought it would be. I didn't feel any better. In fact I felt worse, I felt like hell. Lane said maybe I learned something, but if I did then maybe I learned the wrong thing. I got turned around and headed north on the I-35 access road, and I must not have been paying attention, because when I went to get on the freeway there was suddenly this car behind me that I never saw, his tires screaming on the wet road. I kept waiting for the thump as he hit me and it didn't happen, there was just his horn as he whipped around, leaning over in his seat to shake his fist at me. And there was nothing I could do except sit there and hold onto the wheel. Because there are all these millions of gestures for being pissed off and not one to say I'm sorry.