

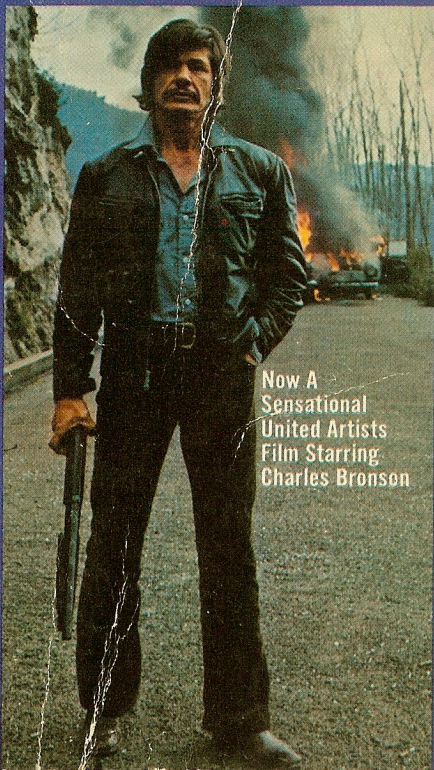
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THE MECHANIC

BY LEWIS JOHN CARLINO

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF **THE BROTHERHOOD**



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Charles Bronson



Testing . . .

Arthur Bishop and the young man called Steve stood watching the beautiful, nude girl sitting in the middle of the floor. She had just opened her veins with a razor blade and was gazing at the blood seeping out. "How long will it take?" she asked.

"Steve'll stop it. I know he will. I know he feels something for me."

Bishop made a quick calculation. "Two and a half . . . three hours. You'll get cold first, then sleepy."

"Hey, baby," said Steve. "I'm kinda hungry. What 'ya got in the frig?"

Inwardly Arthur Bishop smiled. All he needed to complete his life was someone who could follow in his footsteps. Now, perhaps, he had found him . . .

The Mechanic

by

Lewis John Carlino



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I

Arthur Bishop glided slowly just below the surface of the water, carried along by a warm, gentle current. Below him, the same current moved the sea plants in slow-motion ballet. Sargasso, winged kelp, rockweed and sea colander billowed and swayed in silent rhythm.

He controlled his breathing so that he took only small amounts of air through the two-stage regulator, and then at very long intervals. Only the occasional vibration of his flippers, to guide his direction, and a few small bubbles rising to the surface betrayed the presence of this alien to the life below.

The phantasmagoria of seascape unfolded before him in infinite variation of form and color. The mustard-yellow of millepora; stinging coral, gorgonian, sea feathers, the sessile medusa proliferating on the tips of eelgrass, anemones, brain and staghorn coral. Great swirls and blotches of electric hues; patches of phosphorescence gliding by him, slowly, then darting, triggered by his own movements.

The current, the water, its temperature seemed to penetrate his wet suit, his skin. He felt as if the membranes of skin and rubber were dissolving until there was no more separation between his being and the medium in which he found himself. He was at peace, in an almost dreamlike state. In a corner of his brain, very clear and sharp, the Sixth Brandenburg Concerto gave voicing to the pelagic undulations.

He checked his watch and was surprised at the time that had passed. It was the same, always. This place defied dimensions of time and space . . . it just *was* . . . continuing eternally, seemingly infinite.

As he followed the ledge of coral the light changed

slowly; the green to blue, darkening, darkening, then to deep violet where the ledge plummeted to a shadowed canyon that marked the separation between the reef and the open sea.

He paused and looked into the canyon. The music seemed to increase in volume. There was something about the shape of the shadows that reminded him of . . . A slight tensioning of his body, like a small electric shock. He could feel the adrenals open, sensed the amount of flow, knew the path and stages of the effect of the fluid. Into the muscular tissues around the arteries, then the tissues around the heart, then finally, the skeletal muscles. Warm like the clear liquid which suspended him. Familiar, a being, a presence, like an old friend living in his body . . . this thing that emerged in the dark recesses within him.

Evoked by what? Nothing moved in the darkness of the canyon below. Yet there it was, that instinctual prescience that had been with him for longer than he could remember, that he trusted without qualification or condition.

He searched the shadows, studying their shapes. Still, nothing moved except a small school of reef fish feeding in a cluster of staghorn coral. He arched his back slowly, jackknifing, then emptied his lungs and sank effortlessly into the canyon, then hovered in the deep blue shadow, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

Forms emerged slowly as the irises dilated; plants, the head of a moray, teeth bared, mouth opening and closing, as if gasping . . . a ray sliding under the sand to invisibility. His eyes moved slowly, carefully, examining the canyon. He felt the tension in his body mount. Something . . . something was there. He took a small mouthful of air from the regulator and moved forward slightly. Something moved on the periphery of his vision. He turned his head and focused. One of the shadows moved from a recess into light and was defined: a jewfish, about six feet long, weighing about three hundred pounds, glided sluggishly to a patch of gorgonian and began to feed.

Bishop smiled faintly behind his mask. He checked the line winding on his speargun, then slipped the safety. A deep, warm calm moved through his body . . . a feeling of centering, almost joyful. He exhaled, then sank as if in slow motion, closing the distance to his prey.

For some moments the life around him seemed un-mindful of his presence. His movements were in perfect harmony; soft . . . languid . . . undulant. But then something began to change. It was as if the fish were gradually becoming aware of the direction of his movement. Yes, that was it. There were still no danger vibrations from him, but his path was direct, constant, not casual and aimless. That was the difference.

Uncasiness grew to apprehension as the distance between Bishop and the jewfish narrowed. He was almost within range. Around him schools of smaller fish skirted and darted in panic, sensing the impending danger. A few feet more . . . But the great fish was now also aware of some alien presence. It turned slightly on its side in time to see a strange form moving toward it, from above. Everywhere, the water was rippling with confusion and movements of terror.

Bishop pointed the speargun slightly ahead of the jewfish, and fired. With the sound of the CO₂ cartridge exploding, the fish bolted forward, and the spear passed through its body, just behind the gills. It was as if fish and spear had suddenly, magically, been drawn to each other by some powerful magnet; their connection was that perfect.

A mass of silver bubbles cleared, revealing the fish, suddenly arrested in its upward flight. A white nylon line trailed from the spear to Bishop like a strange umbilicus. There were a few desperate jerkings, spasms, but the wound shock was too great. A feeble flutter of tail and gillfins, and the fish began to sink. The reef seemed suddenly devoid of all life. Bishop slowly collected the line. The warm feeling in him, that centering, was gone. Now he felt . . . nothing.

On the beach Bishop removed the spear, then stared

at the fish for several long moments. It was not quite dead. Its body heaved desperately. Its enormous mouth opened and closed, making strange soft creaking noises as it drowned slowly in air. Bishop continued to stare until the movement and noises subsided, and his prey was dead. Then he leaned over, very close, and looked into its eyes; great black orbs of frozen terror, somehow malevolent now. There was something familiar in the glassy stare. His brain made the connection. Bosch's triptych of the Temptation of Saint Anthony. The center panel, at the bottom. A great white fish in profile. Its mouth opened, gasping. Its eye, black, shining, indicting with its stare. In the water, surrounding the fish, and in the sky above, a profusion of demons and witches. Except for its color the fish he had just killed matched the Bosch in almost every detail.

Bishop was startled by the similarities. He moved his head closer to the fish's eye and continued to stare as if searching for something. At first there seemed to be a very clear superimposure of the fish in the triptych and this one; then the external details were obscured and he seemed drawn into the blackness of the dead orb that continued to stare back at him. He felt a faint wave of nausea rise slowly from his stomach and climb upward. His hands and the skin on the outside of his arms began to tingle. He turned suddenly away from the fish, quickly collected his gear and walked down the deserted beach back toward the hotel.

Emerging from the shower, he felt the nausea, so strong on the beach, now gradually subsiding. His breathing was less shallow, more deep and regular. Naked, he walked from the bathroom across the bedroom onto the terrace overlooking the sea. He stood for a long time looking out at the water, listening to the silence broken only by the far-off intermittent cry of gulls. He became aware of his reflection in the mirror on the wall opposite him, turned and stared at himself. Each time that he looked at himself it was with the same feeling of surprise. He had reached forty-seven. He knew the catabolic process had been at work a long

time. And yet the image staring back at him was lean, hard, in top physical shape. It seemed for as long as he could remember it had always been thus. It never seemed to change. He finished drying his hair, then carefully arranged the towel over the back of the chair to dry. Each gesture, each movement, seemed to reflect the pattern of a neatly ordered and disciplined existence; it was as if each movement had been prefaced by careful premeditation.

He put on his robe, walked to the nightstand beside the bed, picked up a book and a ball of wax, and walked out onto the terrace. He sat, opened the book, and began to read. Now, methodically, the fingers of his right hand began to knead the ball of wax. It was an old habit of his to keep his mind and body working simultaneously.

His eyes moved across the page quickly, hungrily devouring the concepts, the symbols, the philosophies, and his whole being seemed to nod in affirmation of what he read. It was Sartre, but the ideas, the seeds of these symbols were basically Adler's and before him Nietzsche. "Freedom . . . the total absolute thing . . . the In-itself . . . man always at the margin of his existence . . . the choice to freedom and beyond that the yawning abyss. Beyond that——" He was interrupted by the short, insistent rings of the telephone. Annoyed, Bishop got up and walked slowly to the phone, then lifted the receiver to his ear. The voice that spoke was as familiar to him as the touch of his own skin, the sound of his own breathing. It was a soft voice, devoid of emotion, almost a whisper, almost an echo of the sea that grated hoarsely beyond the terrace. Each time he'd hear it, like the sea, it seemed to generate great waves of peace, that feeling of centering.

"Mr. Bishop?"

Bishop waited some moments before answering.

"Yes?"

"We have something for you. Can you come?"

The centering deeper now, the waves very strong as

if the vibration of some great bell in him, warm, peaceful, complete.

"When?"

"Now."

"Yes."

There was a pause and the voice said, "Thank you." Another pause, then the metallic click of the disconnect. Bishop replaced the receiver, then he looked at the ball of wax now soft in his hand, and, smiling faintly, moved to the closet for his suitcase.

Movement now. Patches of clouds gliding slowly past the airplane window. Below him the metallic sheen of the sea he had just left. He thought of where he had been a few hours before; the movement, the flow, the silence and colors, the life still continuing, waiting for his return. He leaned back in his seat, opened his book and began to read again. "The abyss could open on such trifling occasions. The doctrine *a priori* was one in which freedom was developed out of the experience of extreme situations. To be resolute in the choice of this kind of freedom had its dangers. Kierkegaard had pointed them out. The isolation could——" Suddenly, he was interrupted by the woman sitting next to him.

"Wonderful."

Bishop turned to look at her. She was in her early thirties, attractive. She sipped her drink and smiled. Her body moved in rhythm to the music coming from the earphones on her head, and still she continued to smile at him. Then her eyes closed in reaction to a crescendo, opened again and focused on Bishop's face. Her body stopped moving. She reached up and pulled the earphones off.

"Really wonderful."

Bishop looked at her puzzled.

"What?"

She touched the earphone now hanging on the back of her neck.

"The music. All that marvelous electric noise, and

the beat. Ah, yes, that. They know something we don't. The young ones. Do you like it?"

Bishop tried not to show his annoyance.

"Some."

She looked at the book on his lap, reached down and closed it so she could read the title.

"*Speculations on Being and Nothingness*. Oh, Sartre." She grinned. "Intellectual. Are you an intellectual?"

Bishop moved the book out from under her hand and opened it once more to where he had been reading.

"Yes."

There was a silence. In it a tension was being born. The woman sipped her drink and continued, for some unknown reason, to grin. She tapped the page with her index finger.

"It should be *Being or Nothingness*. Doesn't make sense the other way. Contradiction." A silence as she mulled over a thought, then looked at his face, examining every line.

"I like intellectuals. I like the way they do it. You don't have to play seduced. Detached. Yes, that's it. They leave you alone with your own fantasies. It's nice that way, being left alone. Don't you think?"

Bishop stirred uncomfortably, trying to focus on the page in front of him. His voice was flat, without emotion.

"Unfortunately it becomes more and more difficult."

The woman laughed loudly. Too loudly. Some of the other passengers turned to look. She sipped her drink, giggled for a while to herself as if holding some delicious secret, then leaned over and brushed his shoulder with her cheek.

"Oh, please don't do that. I warn you for your own sake. I respond quite erotically to insults. Something in my childhood. I think it's connected with my father—rejection and all that. Do you have a cigarette?"

"No."

The woman continued to grin.

"I thank you. My doctor thanks you. The American Cancer Society thanks you."

Bishop grew more uncomfortable, but the woman continued, now sensing the tension as well and determined to make the most of her advantage.

"Why don't you join me in a drink?"

Bishop reached up and rang for the stewardess. The woman smiled in anticipation. The gesture, of course, intimated surrender. She brushed the back of his hand lightly with her fingertips.

"I appear striking but I'm not beautiful at all, really. Not even pretty. What's attractive about me is a certain smugness in the way my eyes express me. Then there's my mouth. The way it's shaped. There's a kind of petulance in the line of the lips. You see . . ."

For Bishop it began to pass the point of annoyance. He tried to control himself, but his reaction began to grow out of proportion to the situation. The words from that page came rolling back. Ah, yes—the abyss could open on such trifling occasions. The pattern of his breathing became rapid, shallow. Small beads of sweat emerged on his forehead. His mouth twisted in a tight grimace as the woman continued.

"I have a good body. I work very hard at that." She paused and leaned over, her face very close to his now.

"Will it be like that between us? Will you leave me alone with my own thoughts and fantasies?"

Bishop was about to answer when the stewardess arrived.

"Can I help you?"

Bishop opened his mouth but the woman spoke first.

"Yes. The gentleman would like . . ." She turned to him, questioning.

Bishop raised himself slightly, looked at the aisle in front of him and spotted an empty seat.

"Is anyone using that seat?"

"Why, no," the stewardess replied, slightly confused.

"Thank you." Bishop took his briefcase from under his seat and got up. "Excuse me," he said.

He stepped into the aisle, walked to the empty seat and sat. The woman and the stewardess exchanged con-

fused expressions. Then the woman shook her head and laughed again, very loud again.

Bishop leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. He didn't know how long it was but gradually his breathing found its normal rhythm, the tension gradually ebbed, and his body relaxed as he completed the final phase of a habitual mental exercise. He opened his eyes. A smile came to his lips. The metamorphosis was startling. He was perfectly composed once more. In control. He opened his book carefully, turned the pages to the place, and resumed reading. ". . . Hence freedom is understood only as the resolute product of the conscious ego."

II

The cab came to a stop in the small cul-de-sac of Sutton Place Square. Bishop emerged from the cab, paid the driver, and turned and walked toward a fashionable brownstone, with its back to the East River. He climbed the stairs to the front door, took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. He paused a moment before entering, filling his lungs with the dank smells coming from the river. The evening was strangely quiet, the square deserted. It was good to be home. He turned and entered the house.

Inside the ground floor consisted of kitchen, dining room, and a small study. On the second floor, he had had all the walls removed so that it formed one huge living room. Above that on the third floor was the master bedroom, bath, darkroom, and a small workshop and laboratory. The entire house was impeccably furnished in luxurious, elegant modern. The walls were painted egg-shell and were covered with prints and paintings; Goya's *Christos de Guerra*, Soutine, Bacon, reproductions of Bosch triptychs. There was some Roman statuary among the pieces of sculpture throughout the house.

Bishop turned on the lights and stood for a long moment in the hallway, as if listening to his house. Then, with some sense of urgency, he climbed the stairs to the bedroom, quickly showered, put on a robe, and came down into the living room. He walked over to a large stereo complex, selected a cassette, placed it in the deck, and adjusted the volume control. The room was immediately filled with the sound of Bach's *First Brandenburg Concerto*. He turned, crossed the room to a wine rack, and selected, with great care, a

bottle of Nuit St. Georges. He opened the bottle and slowly poured the wine into a paper-thin Baccarat crystal wineglass. He moved the glass under his nostrils and inhaled deeply. Satisfied with the bouquet, he placed bottle and glass on the coffee table, then walked to a section of wall that was paneled in burlled walnut wainscoting. His hands moved to a button hidden in the paneling. His index finger pressed and there was a soft electrical whirr and a large bulletin board slowly emerged from the wall. Bishop reached into the pocket of his robe, extracted his ball of wax and began working it in his right hand. Walking back to the coffee table, he picked up his glass of wine; then returned to the board and began studying the assemblage pinned there.

In the center of the board was an eight-by-ten picture of a man of about sixty, balding and with glasses. Around the picture were charts matching various activities to times of day. There were pages of notes detailing the history of personal habits, medical background, and various idiosyncracies. Here and there were detailed drawings of rooms with distances between certain points carefully measured and in scale. Lines were drawn with a marker pen between items to indicate relationships between them. Arrows pointed to various segments of information that were seemingly more important than others. The total effect was as if some careful and meticulous architect had painstakingly assembled the details of a man and his life.

Bishop's hand continued to work the ball of wax as his eyes moved quickly, examining several pictures of an apartment obviously taken with a high-powered lens. Near the pictures was a cut-away diagram of a stove pilot-light assembly. The picture was the focus of his attention for a long moment. He studied it, his face screwed in tight concentration, working something out. Then gradually a faint smile came to his lips as the solution emerged. He took a sip of wine and rolled it under his upper lip, then picked up a marker pen and began writing notes. The smile remained on his face

and now he began to whistle. He began a soft, breathy whistle in accompaniment to the Brandenburg.

"Stove—sulfuric acid (timed).

Pilot light—cellulose expansion.

Book—nitrogen tri-iodide (friction detonation ignition).

Tea—Pantopon, one half gr., each bag.

Book to window—establish level for ignition.

Walk—4 to 5 P.M.

Setup—4:30 P.M. (4 minutes maximum)."

At the bottom of this column of notes he drew a sum line and below that he wrote:

"Paper fire—rapid and total incineration."

He moved back from the board and sat down on the couch, sipping his wine slowly, studying his equation, making sure each detail was carefully, scrupulously analyzed and weighed. By the fourth Brandenburg he was sure his work would stand the test. He was ready. The phone rang almost in answer to his thought.

He let it ring, then picked it up slowly.

"Yes?"

On the other end of the line the familiar, soft, almost caressing voice.

"We would like you to go ahead, please. Are you ready?"

"Yes." Bishop answered quickly, his voice devoid of the surge of excitement now being born within him. He replaced the receiver for a moment, then dialed the airline to make his reservation.

Arthur Bishop, dressed in faded denim jeans and a frayed brown leather jacket, sat on the bed in his shabby hotel room in downtown Los Angeles. He looked at his watch: 4:05 P.M. Then he lifted a pair of field glasses to his eyes and examined the apartment house across the street, focusing his attention on the fifth floor. The two-room apartment was in the same order as when he had previously examined it three months before. Nothing had been moved. The walls of the bedroom-living room were lined with books and papers. Files

and stamp catalogues were everywhere. The occupant was obviously an avid collector.

A movement at periphery vision at street level made him turn the field glasses downward. The man whose picture was pinned to his bulletin board was emerging from the building. He was small, very slight, with a look of nervous apprehension about his eyes. He paused before stepping fully into the street, cased it in both directions, and slowly began walking away from the building with quick, measured strides.

Bishop nodded slightly to himself, opened a frayed cardboard suitcase and took out a small package. Unhurriedly, he left his room, walked to the street below and entered the apartment house from which the man had just emerged.

As Bishop climbed the stairs to the fifth floor he was aware of all the familiar sensations now spreading throughout his being. It was as if he were being immersed in some warm liquid medium, the feeling of centering was so strong. The calm. The peace. The completeness. He felt almost as if he were sleepwalking, as if he were drawn by some strange, powerful magnet.

He reached the fifth floor and moving swiftly now but still without hurry, stopped at a door halfway down the hall. He paused, glanced at the lock briefly, then reached into his pocket and extracted the proper pick. A quick turn and he was inside.

His movements now seemed almost automatic as if he had executed them a thousand times over, like some fine athlete or dancer. He popped a stick of gum into his mouth and began to chew as he moved into the kitchen. He walked to the stove, took a small tool kit from his pocket and disassembled the valve controlling the pilot light. With an eyedropper he withdrew a small amount of liquid from a bottle in his kit, placed it on the valve, and then reassembled the parts. He paused briefly, listening for any sounds in the hall, then continued his work.

He moved the stove out from the wall slightly, took the gum from his mouth, shaped it into a small ring

and fixed the ring onto the gas pipe leading to the stove. From another bottle he withdrew a small amount of a mixture of sulfuric acid and glycerine, then filled the reservoir formed by the gum, and replaced the stove.

He opened the cabinet above the sink, took out a box of teabags, opened the box, counted the bags, and replaced them with an equal number he took from his pocket. A quick check of stove and cabinet, and then he turned and walked into the other room.

From one of the shelves he took a book, opened it, and from a small plastic envelope, slowly and very carefully squeezed a brownish paste onto the inside of the cover. He closed the cover carefully and replaced the book on the shelf, the cover facing the window.

He turned, glanced at the window opposite the book and moved to the center of the room, placing himself halfway between the book and the window. He extended his arms out from the shoulders to align a direct path from the book to the window. With a piece of yellow crayon he marked a small X on the glass. Then he turned and moved his gaze around the room slowly in a final check. He moved to the door and once again listened for any sound in the hall, then he opened the door quickly and left the apartment.

Bishop sat at the window of his hotel room, watching the street below. He looked at his watch. It was five seventeen. There was a slight tightening around his lips. The mark was late. He couldn't . . . The expression on his face relaxed as Bishop saw his man round the corner and enter the apartment building. He lifted the field glasses to his eyes and trained them on the apartment. In a few minutes the man entered.

And so it had begun. All of the preparation, the hours of observation, the thinking, the careful details; the theoretical equation was now being manifested in the simple act of a man entering his home. It had never ceased to amaze Bishop how natural and yet mysterious the events were. It was as if the thin veil of a curtain was being lifted from the stage before his eyes to reveal a drama in which he alone knew the events

and conclusion. And as the events took place this knowledge seemed to create in him a growing sense of peace, so profound and complete that at times he felt as if he were moving into a deep overwhelming sleep. It would all take place only once in a particular way, but it had happened a hundred times over in his mind until it was a reality even before it was played out on this stage.

The man in the apartment across the street took his coat off and walked into the kitchen. He lit the stove and placed a kettle of water on the burner. From the cabinet he took a teabag and placed it in a cup. He then walked back into the bedroom and read, for some moments, the stamp catalogue on the table in the center of the room, until the sound of the tea kettle whistle drew him back into the kitchen. He filled his cup with water, took it into the bedroom, and sat on the bed sipping his tea and continuing to read the catalogue. Bishop checked his watch. In ten minutes the man grew drowsy. He leaned back against the pillows and closed his eyes. Ten minutes more and Bishop lowered his binoculars and sat back in his chair. He looked at his watch once more, then took the ball of wax from his pocket and began squeezing it slowly. The sky was quickly darkening.

At eleven, the clear fluid Bishop had placed on the pilot-light valve solidified into a sticky foam, gradually extinguishing the pilot flame completely.

At twelve twenty-seven the sulfuric acid had worked itself through the gas pipe leading to the stove. There was a sudden hissing sound of gas escaping.

It was three thirty when Bishop looked at his watch again. Now his body tensed slightly. He put the ball of wax into his pocket, went to the closet and took out a thin rectangular case. From the case he withdrew a high-powered air rifle with telescopic sight. He inserted a CO₂ cartridge, then loaded the rifle with a single lead pellet. He took off his jacket and rolled it into a tight bundle, placed it on the window ledge as a support, and rested the rifle on it. He raised the window just

enough to clear the barrel of the gun, then put his eye to the scope and began making adjustments. Inside him, that feeling of sleep, of peace so strong he was barely conscious of his movements, as if someone else was moving his hands, some other being standing behind him working its will through his thoughts and the sinews of his muscles.

He focused the scope on the yellow crayon mark of the window, then continued turning the adjustment, moving the sharp focus from the mark to the book on the shelf. He made a slight adjustment for parallax, then took a deep breath and let it slowly out of his lungs in a long, steady exhalation. His finger curled slowly around the trigger until there was a soft popping sound. The pellet pierced the window opposite directly at the center of the X mark and struck the cover of the book. There was the sudden explosion of the friction detonation of the tri-iodide.

Following that was the second explosion of the accumulated gas within the apartment which suddenly transformed both rooms into a roaring inferno. Although it happened in the space of one or two seconds, Bishop was able to witness the events as if in slow motion. The body of the man was lifted from the bed and torn to pieces by the impact of the first blast. Then the second blast from the kitchen pushed out the walls of the apartment exposing a great gaping hole in the building, alive with the fierce whiteness of moving flame.

III

Bishop had not gone directly home after landing at Kennedy Airport. During the flight back, that feeling he he felt so strongly in Los Angeles began to fade. He struggled to hold onto it, to put the pieces together in his mind's eye, to reenact the events, so that the peace, the centering, would stay. He had not been successful. As the plane had neared New York, the abyss yawned open once more before him, black, fathomless, undeniable, and with it the same shallow breathing, the little spears of nausea tingling upward from his stomach which seemed to coalesce into each other, until they formed surging waves that spread throughout his entire being. He had struggled desperately with himself, concentrating with all his will on the memory of the explosion, the look of the building, the flames, but he couldn't seem to focus. It all slipped away beyond his grasp and he was left with only the taste of bile in his mouth, the sound of his own shallow breathing and sliding viscera. He had found refuge in a Forty-Second Street theater.

As if mesmerized, he watched the film; some non-descript war epic, every moment filled with the chatter of machinegun fire, the crash of mortars and heavy artillery. For the moment, his growing panic seemed somewhat abated. There was a strange, calm, almost benign expression on his face as he lost himself in the violence projected before his eyes. A teen-age couple sat directly in front of him. At first they were very still, then the boy leaned over and whispered something in the girl's ear. She giggled softly and snuggled closer to him in response. He put his arm around her and they began to neck.

The distracting movement in front of him gradually drew Bishop's attention from the screen. He watched for some moments in fascination as the silhouettes of the boy and girl intermittently came together, then parted, revealing the screen beyond. Each time they separated the reality between them was napalm, faces and bodies being burned, blown apart, crushed.

The necking grew more passionate and now the screams and groans being emitted from the celluloid drama mingled with the deep, racing breathing of the couple in front of him as they groped for each other. Finally, they came together and for some long moments did not separate. The boy's hand worked furiously between the girl's legs. She moaned in ecstasy, throwing her head back onto the back of the seat. Beyond her, flickering with similar intensity, a Japanese soldier running from a cave, his body alive with the splendor of the fire from the flamethrower aimed at him by a smiling G.I. The Jap's passion seemed to equal the girl's . . . the agonies identical. The girl moaned louder now and the boy looked around quickly, somewhat embarrassed, and put his hand gently over her mouth.

"Sh . . . shhhhh," he whispered softly.

"Please . . . oh, please," the girl pleaded with urgency.

The boy nodded, then slowly slid down in his seat. The girl threw her head back farther. Bishop could see her face now, her smile, as the boy moved his head slowly along the inside of her thigh toward the thick wet tangle beckoning.

Bishop watched, listened for several minutes, then suddenly got to his feet and bolted from the theater, fighting a sense of suffocation, a sense of that unseen being with its hands at his throat, strangling him.

He walked with long, quick strides, almost breaking into a run, to Broadway, turned and headed north on the east side of the streets. It was Friday night and the sidewalks were thick with people. He tried to continue his pace, but was hampered by the press of bodies surrounding him. He saw, felt, the street as if from one end of a long tunnel; it seemed distant for a time, then

suddenly very close. He could smell the bodies, the sweat, the dried shit they carried in the crotches of their underwear.

As he moved along, he tried to emerge from them, but the net of flesh seemed only to press closer. He began to see it, hear it all in fragments like some grotesque, living collage. Lights flashed, blinded. Lips moved at dizzying speeds, talking, kissing, yelling, laughing, cursing. Hands waved, arms locked, hands clenched into fists, caressed. People spoke to him, but he could not hear them above the din of his growing panic. He found himself, for a moment, pressed against the wall of a building that seemed to be strangely vibrating. He paused, confused for a second. The vibration gradually came together into the maddening sound of acid rock, driving through him with relentless cruelty. He looked up. One floor above the street, floor-to-ceiling windows were filled with the writhing bodies of dancing Go-Go girls. Some of them caught his stare and smiled and beckoned to him, making gestures that drew wild, appreciative laughs and cat-calls from the crowd below. He pushed himself away from the building and dove into the crowd, driving with all his might to get beyond it, to free himself from its entrapment, his legs, his entire body, his brain all screaming, "RUN . . . RUN . . . RUN!"

He didn't know how, or how long it had taken, but he found himself free at last. He searched his thoughts, but somehow a section of memory seemed to have been ripped away. Gradually, he became aware of his surroundings. He was standing in the darkened doorway of a novelty trick store . . . the kind that seemed to be on every corner along Broadway and Seventh up to Fifty-Ninth.

He looked down at the display. The windows were filled with jokes, gag-type lingerie—an assortment of women's underwear, bras with holes cut out over the centers, small enough so that only the nipples could protrude, lace panties with no crotches and snappy gags printed on them. As he studied each item, he was aware

that the panic, the nausea had left him. He felt suddenly tired . . . not physically . . . but with an overwhelming sense of sadness. He moved slowly away from the store to find a cab.

The light came tenuously, hesitantly at first from beyond the river. Then seemed to gather strength, sensing the battle with darkness to come. Arthur Bishop sat on the couch in his white living room, his coat still on, watching the night gradually surrender to dawn; and with the gray metamorphosis, intimating of color and form, as the world gradually was defined, the rod of steel which had run through the center of his spine all night seemed somehow to bend a little. The degree of easing was only slight, but he had learned to be thankful for the smallest relief. If he could only feel physically tired, could only forget the abyss for more than a day or two. He picked up the phone on the coffee table in front of him and dialed his answering service. A cardboard voice answered after two rings.

"Four-six-one-one."

"Number twenty-six, please."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Bishop. A Mr. McKenna has called a number of times. Seems urgent. Nothing else."

"Thank you."

He hung up the phone, then picked it up and dialed again.

"Hello." The voice at the other end was thin, tight, worried.

"Harry, this is Arthur Bishop."

"Art? Thank God. Where the hell you been? I've been trying to get you for four days."

"I was away. I just got in."

"You get my messages?" McKenna said with a trace of anger.

"Yes."

"So you couldn't call?"

"I told you I just got in," Bishop replied flatly. "What is it you want, Harry?"

"I got to talk to you."

"What about?"

"I got trouble, Art."

"Yes . . . ?"

"I can't talk to you on the telephone. Can you come to me?"

"Harry, I just got in."

"Arthur, I neva asked ya before. I gotta see you."

"All right," said Bishop after a slight pause. "What time?"

"Ten. Listen, Arthur, you don't know what——"

"I'll see you at ten." Bishop hung up and stared at the phone for a long moment. He felt nothing.

Harry McKenna's house was in the Highland section of Englewood, New Jersey. It was a large English Tudor affair, the grounds enclosed by an electrified iron fence with four Dobermans patrolling the green sloping lawns day and night.

Arthur Bishop and Harry McKenna sat on the terrace and looked out over the Hudson River far below them. McKenna was a heavy man of about sixty with small eyes that seemed to burn holes into everything they observed. On the table beside him was a large assortment of bottles of medicine and boxes of pills. Wiping his forehead from time to time he spoke with out pause. Bishop sat across from him listening, from time to time nodding attentively, gravely, as Harry unburdened himself.

"Okay, so we all agree. The smart ones is all yellin' franchise, franchise. The dumb ones start yellin' it too because it sounds smart. They don't know what it means but it sounds smart so they all agree. Okay, we're gonna franchise. The smart ones say, 'This time we're clean. Investigation can't touch us. We take our cut. We only franchise. We're clean.' Only the smart ones don't say who we gonna franchise *to*, right?" McKenna paused to take a sip of water.

"Go on," said Bishop, leaning back in his chair.

"Bananas, that's who. Who else is left? No organization protection. No layoff for busted shipments. Noth-

ing. Who's gonna work like that—Indians, independent operators, scabs, that's who. No control. No system and nobody's got a face. Okay, I got a district. I'm responsible. I say the hell with the franchise. I got a source that comes from China through Guatemala and it's all processed when it gets here. Pure. So I'm in business. I'm operating and I'm doing real good. And all of a sudden the council gets mad. So I say let 'em get mad, I'll show them my figures and they'll get happy. So I show them the figures and guess what?"

"What?"

"They're still mad. It ain't the money, they said. It's a rule. It's the rule I broke. A principle. How do you like that?"

Bishop was silent a long time before he answered. "When did you have your last meeting?"

"Two weeks ago. Now they ain't talkin'. I make calls. Nothing. I don't like it. I don't like it a lot."

"What do you expect me to do?"

McKenna searched among the bottles, opened one, extracted a pill, swallowed it, then continued breathlessly. "Look, Arthur. I worked for your father, God rest his soul, for twenty years. He was top man on the council. There was nobody bigger than him. You know that?"

Bishop nodded.

"So his name is still like magic when you talk, and you got it. You got that name, so you make a few calls for me. You say some good things about me. You say I'm willing to call the whole thing off. You personally guarantee it."

"I wouldn't know who to——"

"Right here," McKenna said quickly, taking a small piece of paper from the pocket of his robe and thrusting it into Bishop's hand. Bishop looked at McKenna's anguished face, his beseeching eyes and quivering mouth, before answering.

"Why should they listen to me? I don't know them. I'm not part of it."

"That's what makes it better," said Harry, leaning

toward him excitedly. "You're straight. You're on the outside. A couple of words, what's it gonna hurt? You got the name. They'll all listen."

Bishop turned his gaze from McKenna and looked at the river. He clasped his hands and tapped his lips with both index fingers. His silence seemed interminable to McKenna. Finally he turned back to him.

"Can I guarantee it, Harry?"

"*That* straight you ain't Arthur. What choice I got?"

Bishop unfolded the paper, read the names and numbers written on it, then folded it carefully and placed it in his pocket. McKenna leaned back in his chair, his body sagging with relief.

"Thanks."

"Save it," said Bishop curtly.

"For who?" said McKenna laughing. "How many friends you think I got right now?" His expression was suddenly grim as he looked at the bottles and boxes of medicine.

"Maybe it's all for nuttin'. Look'a that. Maybe I'm scratched because of this." He tapped his heart with his thumb. "I got a beauty here. You don't know."

McKenna took another sip of water and began nodding silently to himself. Both men were silent for a long time until Bishop noticed a grin beginning to spread across McKenna's face.

"What's funny?"

"I was thinkin' of that fishing trip me, you, and your father took to Canada. You were about eight, right?"

Bishop nodded.

"You fell out of the boat. Couldn't swim. Your father said you were gonna learn fast." McKenna laughed. "My God, you looked like a drowning rat splashing around. Not a word though. You wouldn't yell for help or anything. Just kept splashing and swallowing water, and lookin' at your father and he wasn't makin' a move. Remember?"

Bishop nodded again.

McKenna continued, "I finally had to grab you by the hair and pull you in. A drowned rat. Your father

laughed like hell." McKenna laughed for some moments. Then there was silence.

"That was a long time ago, Harry," said Bishop, without any trace of emotion.

"Everything is now," McKenna replied wistfully.

He was about to speak again when they were interrupted by McKenna's son, Steve. He was a boy in his early twenties, long hair, far-out clothes, amulets, peace signs, all the appurtenances, mannerisms, and attitudes of the freak dropout, but there was something else. Something in his face, a look that arrested Bishop's attention immediately. It was as if Bishop was looking at himself in a mirror, not the physical self, but somehow a reflection of his soul. There was that same cold, almost passive regard of all things in the eyes, that same essence of selfness and superiority; and for Steve as well a strange sort of connection with Bishop immediately seemed to take place. It was as yet undefined but very present.

"Arthur, my son Steve," said McKenna, somewhat embarrassed. "Stevie, this is Arthur Bishop."

Steve leaned over and shook hands, a bright, affable grin on his face.

"Hiya."

Bishop nodded. Steve moved behind his father and put his hands on his shoulders.

"I need some bread."

"But I just gave you . . ."

"That was three days ago," Steve said smiling. "I need a thousand." He sat on the arm of the chair in which his father was sitting and put his arm around his shoulders in a kind of buddylike embrace.

"Look, my asking you for money is good for you. It ties us together. Makes you feel I'm dependent on you. It keeps you feeling powerful. You *love* my asking. Oh, you bitch and moan but you really dig it where you live. I get it when you check out anyway." He held out his hand. "A thousand."

"Fast, huh?" said McKenna to Bishop, unable to restrain the smile on his face.

"Chromosomes will tell," said Steve, prodding his father's chest with an empty hand. McKenna reached into his pocket and peeled off ten hundred-dollar bills. Steve's hand quickly closed over the bills and the money disappeared into a leather pouch hanging from his shoulder. He then turned to Bishop, the bright smile never leaving his face for an instant.

"That's really far out. My father gets uptight because I ask him for the money he steals from other people."

"Okay, Steve," said McKenna tensing, but Steve continued.

"See the problem, Mr. Bishop, is that my old man doesn't get a chance to express his real self to people nowadays." He waved his hand indicating the house, the furnishings. "All this gets in the way. Yep, all the great old style, the pizazz is gone."

He reached into the humidor on the table next to his father, took out a cigar, put it into his mouth and screwed up his face for his very famous gangster imitation.

"Whata ya talkin'. I spent a lot of bread fa dis front. Don't ya like the neighborhood? I spent a lot of bread for ya lousy school. Now ya beita get smart or I spread your brains all over the floor."

Bishop repressed a smile. McKenna grew more upset.

"That's enough!"

"Maybe you can help the old man," continued Steve. "See, I've been trying to convince him to get a little of the old Americana back into his life. Oh, he tries. I mean, he watches all the old Bogarts, the Robinsons on the late show . . . but . . . well, all the magic is gone. All he does now is——"

"I mean it, Steve. Cut it out," McKenna interrupted, his patience exhausted. Steve patted him on the back.

"Okay. Okay. Don't get excited, Dad. It's bad for you. Just take your little nitroglycerin pill and put it under your tongue so it will make your veins big and fat and all the blood can go where it's supposed to go."

He turned to Bishop and for the first time since his entrance the smile left his face. "Nice to meet you. Drop in any time." His face screwed up once more for his famous gangster imitation. "Any friend of Big Art's etcetera, etcetera, etcetera." He turned and walked back into the house chewing on the cigar and mumbling to himself. There was a long silence. McKenna sat pale, drained. Bishop looked at his watch.

"I know you have to go," said McKenna. "I'm sorry for all that."

"Forget it," said Bishop standing.

McKenna shook his head. "I just can't understand him. It's as if he . . ." He noticed Bishop's impatience. "Okay, okay. Call me when you know something."

Bishop nodded. "Take care of yourself." There was a short laugh from McKenna.

"Me? What else could happen?"

IV

The next morning Arthur Bishop sat on the couch in his living room and stared at the phone, trying to make a decision. On the table near the phone was the slip of paper McKenna had written. From the stereo came the haunting dissonances of a Honnegger quintet. His thoughts were interrupted by the front door bell. He went to the door and opened it. A postal messenger stood there holding a large brown manila envelope.

"Arthur Bishop?"

"Yes."

"Special Delivery. Certified. Please sign here."

Bishop signed the receipt and the messenger handed him the envelope. Bishop closed the door, walked back upstairs to the living room, and sat once more in front of the phone. He stared at the envelope for a long moment as if trying to see the contents without opening it. Finally he tore it open and extracted a sheaf of papers. He thumbed through the pages and read the headings printed in large letters at the top of each page: DAILY SCHEDULE, MEDICAL HISTORY, RESTAURANTS (this included layouts of rooms), TRANSPORTATION, HABITS, RELATIONSHIPS, HOME DIAGRAM, ACCIDENT HISTORY, and finally a page marked MISCELLANEOUS. Bishop studied each page briefly and then, on lifting the last one, was confronted by an eight-by-ten photo of Harry McKenna. There was a faint tightening of the muscles on Bishop's face, then slowly the traces of an ironic smile at the edges of his lips. He lifted the picture closer and studied McKenna's face, then got up, walked to the paneled wall and pressed the button for the bulletin board. He

pinned the photograph to the board, then the rest of the pages in neat succession.

The ball of wax was already in his hand as he began studying the pages in earnest now. Gradually the lines and arrows he drew between the pages began to indicate certain corresponding factors and relationships. He jotted brief notes as the music continued. He was in his element once again. The muscles of his face spasmed with excitement as his eyes darted quickly across the board. At seven o'clock that evening he had his preliminary directions. He dressed himself and left the house.

The librarian at the reference desk of the Columbia Medical School Library was somewhat irritated that Bishop had not bothered to use the card catalogue before making his inquiry at the desk.

"Yes . . . I'm really very sorry," said Bishop apologetically, "but it's the first time I've been here. Please, anything you might have on exudative endocarditis."

Grudgingly, she came out from behind the desk and led him to a stack in the back of the room. She was very efficient. Only a moment later she located the book.

"Here we are. C-744J." She handed it to him. "I think you'll find this one the most comprehensive."

"Thank you," said Bishop contritely.

The librarian nodded, accepting his tone as a kind of symbolic apology for bothering her, turned and went back to the reference desk. Bishop sat at a table, opened the book, and began reading.

The following morning he was at the bulletin board, writing. "Dilation of the ventricles . . . syncope cardiac spasm then no muscular spasms at all . . . inadequate ventilation (lungs go) . . . prognosis——" He was interrupted by the ringing of the phone. It was Harry McKenna.

"Arthur?"

"Yes, Harry."

"Anything?"

"Not yet."

"It's just that I——"

"Harry, take it easy," Bishop interrupted as he looked up at the board. "I'm working on it."

"Okay, Arthur. Okay."

Bishop forced his voice to be as reassuring as possible. "I'll be in touch with you as soon as I hear. It'll be all right."

"Okay, okay," said McKenna and hung up.

Bishop moved back to the bulletin board and after the word "prognosis" wrote "unfavorable." "Death may occur on slight exertion." He stood back from the board and focused his eyes on these last words.

The next morning Bishop drove to a deserted section of the Pine Barrens on the southern New Jersey shore. He parked his car at the top of a dirt road which led from a steep cliff to the beach below, then walked down to the beach and surveyed the area. Satisfied, he turned once more toward the car, judging the distance from where he stood to the top of the hill. He took a deep breath and then ran up the hill toward the car as fast as he could. He reached the car, chest heaving, his breathing labored. He leaned against it and took his pulse count, then turned once more to look down the road at the beach below, got into his car and drove home.

He had tried to sleep but it was hopeless. Then he tried reading but the words on the page seemed to swim before his eyes. He could not keep his concentration. He looked up at the ceiling, becoming aware of the silence surrounding him, then got up suddenly and walked into the bathroom. From the medicine cabinet he took two tranquilizers and two Gelusil tablets. He swallowed the tranquilizers, chewed the Gelusil, the latter creating a white ring around his lips. He looked at himself in the mirror, wiped his mouth with the back of his arm, then turned and walked downstairs to the living room. He paced slowly in front of the bulletin board, glancing from time to time from the board to the paintings on the wall. The face of Harry McKenna smiled out at him from the photograph. Ex-

cept for the sound of Bishop's rapid and shallow breathing, there was complete silence. The silence was shattered by the ringing of the phone. He picked it up.

"Yes?"

Again the familiar voice, "Mr. Bishop?"

"Yes."

"We would like you to go ahead any time." There was a click on the other end. Bishop hung up, waited a moment, then dialed Harry McKenna.

"Hello."

"Harry, I've made arrangements for a meeting."

"What did they say?"

"They want to talk. If they're willing to do that, I think you're all right. Tomorrow night. Eleven. I'll take you. We'll have to use your car. Mine's in the shop. Transmission trouble."

"Sure. Sure," replied McKenna, trying to contain his excitement. "God bless you, Arthur. It looks like it's your turn to pull me into the boat."

"Eleven."

"I'll be ready."

Bishop hung up. Then he looked at the board for a moment, walked over to it, and drew a connecting line between the word "hill" and the phrase, "Death may occur on slight exertion." His breathing was suddenly normal. The lines of tension in his face disappeared. His body relaxed.

The ride to the spot Bishop had selected had been mostly silent. McKenna had questioned him several times about why the meeting place had been so far away from New York. Bishop had avoided a direct answer by saying neither of them had any prerogatives in the matter. McKenna seemed content for the time, but now as they left the lights of civilization behind and approached the shore wilderness, he began to grow more apprehensive. The questions began once more, now in rapid succession. Bishop continued to parry, giving assurances and encouragement. Finally, they reached the road leading down to the beach.

"I drop you off down there," said Bishop, indicating the beach below. They headed down.

"But didn't they tell you nothing else," asked McKenna, trying to maintain some calm.

"No. Just I was to drop you off on the beach, go back up and wait for you at the top of the hill."

"But couldn't you *tell* anything; I mean by the tone of his voice or anything?"

"Harry, relax," said Bishop, patting him on the leg. McKenna wiped the sweat from his hands on a handkerchief and forced a smile.

"Sure, sure, like you say. If they're willing to talk . . ."

They reached the bottom of the hill. McKenna opened the door and stepped out into the darkness.

"I'll be parked right there," said Bishop, pointing to the crest of the hill from which they'd just descended. Harry looked around, then took a step toward the car, putting his hand on the handle of the door.

"Look, Arthur, don't you think——"

Bishop interrupted him. "I told you, we've got no choice in the matter. We do it their way or not at all. It's going to be all right, now. I'll be back for you as soon as they flash me." McKenna was about to offer a reply, but Bishop pulled away quickly and drove back up the hill. McKenna watched with a growing sense of dread as the taillights grew smaller and smaller and then were extinguished as the car came to a stop at the top of the hill.

In the car, Bishop withdrew a custom-made 22-250 target pistol from the holster under his shoulder. He checked the magazine; then from his jacket pocket took out a silencer and fixed it to the barrel of the gun. He opened the car door, stepped out, and moved slowly down the hill toward where he had left McKenna.

Harry paced on the verge of panic. He had begun to feel the familiar constriction in his throat, the dull pain beginning to radiate down his left arm from the axilla. He knew the symptoms well, and slowed his pacing,

trying to control his fears, trying to regulate the body processes that kept him alive. There was no sound but the quiet whisper of surf. Suddenly, to his left, the sound of a twig snapping. He turned toward the sound, freezing in his tracks, holding his breath so he could hear. The moments seemed eternity. Nothing moved. He squinted, peering into the darkness, trying to perceive some movement, some shape. Nothing.

"Hello?" he ventured. Still just silence. He resumed pacing, glancing from time to time at the silhouette of the car still parked at the top of the hill. Then, another sound. Another twig cracking . . . Then the sound of a body brushing against some undergrowth. McKenna yelled into the dark.

"Hey . . . I'm here . . . cut it out, huh? Let's talk." Silence. "Look, let's cut out the games. I got a lot to tell you."

There was a flash, followed by the faint pop of a silencer. The sand was kicked up a few inches from McKenna's feet. He jumped back, then fell, putting his hand over his face.

"Hey . . . wait! Fa God's sake . . . you said we was gonna talk, fa God's sake. Please."

There was another shot, closer this time, just missing his hand.

"Nooooo," he screamed, backing away into the cover of bushes. "Fa God's sake . . . fa God's sake." He turned and yelled to the car. "Arthur . . . Art . . ." Then, Bishop's voice, behind him, yelling to him, from the darkness with the same urgency as his own.

"The car, Harry. Run! It's a setup! Run!"

McKenna was galvanized with fear. Another shot, just past his cheek. "I can't . . . I can't . . ." he screamed back to Bishop.

"You've got to," urged Bishop. "I'll try to get behind him. RUN! RUN!"

The sweat running down his face, McKenna started to climp up the hill toward the car, toward sanctuary. A bullet kicked up sand at his feet, whizzed around

his face, the steady popping of the silencer goading him up the hill mercilessly.

"I can't . . . I can't . . . Oh, God . . . God . . . God . . ."

"Keep going," Bishop continued to yell from the beach. His calling, urging, seemed to be the thing that kept McKenna moving, despite the sense of suffocation, the stabbing pain wracking his chest. He continued to run, stumbling, getting up again. The car grew closer. Then, as if by some miracle, he was there, his hand on the door, opening it. He heaved himself inside behind the wheel.

The pain in his chest was more than he had ever felt in any of his past attacks. He could not believe there was such pain. His hand clawed at his chest as if to try to tear out the pain. His eyes grew wide with the sudden knowledge he was dying! This was it! For real! No! He could still . . .

He reached for the ignition key. Missing! A shock ran through his body. Why? What . . . ? He was knifed with new pains now, through the back, driving him forward against the wheel. His body seemed to be filling up with liquid. He seemed to be drowning from within. His vision blurred, then cleared. There was a sound just outside the door of the car. He focused.

Arthur Bishop stood looking into the car window, his face totally without expression, in his hand the smoking pistol. Their eyes locked. At first, confusion raged in McKenna's thoughts . . . then it was clear . . . all clear.

"You?" said McKenna through his pain-clenched teeth.

Bishop nodded.

"That's the way it is, huh?"

Bishop nodded again, then opened the car door.

McKenna's face was bathed in sweat and tears. Bishop took out a handkerchief and wiped it, almost caressingly. McKenna reeled under the pain of still another spasm, then struggled to speak, squeezing Bishop's arm.

"Oh . . . oh, God . . . help me . . . Finish it, Arthur. Please. Ya owe me . . . I can't . . . I can't stand the . . ."

Bishop nodded, replaced the pistol in the holster, then leaned into the car. From around his waist he unwound a strip of foam rubber. There was a long moment when their faces were very close, eyes locking, searching. Then Bishop moved quickly, wrapping the foam around McKenna's face. His left arm moved around McKenna's neck while his right pinched his nostrils together and covered his mouth. There were muffled cries under the foam as McKenna struggled in the vise that was Bishop. Bishop's expression was calm. It took only a few moments. McKenna became still . . . there were several convulsions, then he was still again. His eyes glazed. Bishop held him a few moments more, then unwound the foam. His movements were careful, unhurried, almost tender.

He placed his fingers over McKenna's wrist, feeling for a pulse. None. He examined McKenna's face for any telltale marks. None. He smoothed out McKenna's clothes and arranged his body in a more natural position behind the wheel. He wiped off the key and placed it in the ignition and turned it, but did not start the engine. There was a final check. All was in order. Natural.

Bishop got out of the car and closed the door. Then he took some brush and erased the footsteps leading to and from the car. His own car was hidden a short distance away in the cover of some scrub pines, and he walked to it . . . once again in that sleeplike state . . . once again warm . . . centered in the tao of it, yet knowing he would wake soon . . . very soon.

Arthur Bishop stood in front of the door to the apartment, staring at it for a long time. Finally his hand moved slowly to the buzzer. The door opened to reveal a girl in her mid-twenties, quite beautiful. She had a look of openness, the kind of a person constantly generous of emotion. Her jaw dropped slightly from the

shock of seeing him. Her reaction was instantaneous. Her arms came up and encircled him tightly.

"I . . . I had a feeling . . ."

"Can I come in?" said Bishop, somewhat sheepishly. She smiled and pulled him inside.

The apartment was beautifully done, with large deep-cushioned pieces speaking of the same comfort and generosity reflected in the girl's face. It was an extension of her. Everywhere there seemed to be light and color.

As the door closed behind him, the girl took his face in her hands and searched his eyes, finally kissing him. "It's been so long . . . so . . ." She could not finish, the emotion choked off her words. Bishop nodded. She pulled away, turning from him, wiping her eyes.

"I said to myself, I wouldn't do that. Had it all rehearsed. I go to the door. There you are. I smile, very poised . . . as if I'd seen you just yesterday." She turned to him, forcing a smile. "Sorry . . . it's just that . . . it's been so long."

"I know. I'm sorry," Bishop said, sitting stiffly on the couch. "Now we've both said it."

She moved to a side table and poured two brandies.

"Right. Let's not get ourselves into that kind of thing."

"Nothing's changed," said Bishop, looking around the apartment.

"It never does." She joined him on the couch and handed him one of the glasses. To Bishop there seemed a trace of ire in her last words. She raised her glass, still forcing a smile.

"Chin chin."

"Chin chin."

Silence.

"Okay . . . I think I've got it together," she said, turning to him and scrutinizing him. "How about you?"

"All right."

"You lost some weight."

Bishop nodded, then took a sip of his brandy.

"I wrote you a letter," she said, following suit. Her

words seemed strange, staccato-like in the hanging silences.

"Oh?"

"Only I didn't know where to mail it."

"I've been moving," Bishop replied flatly, shifting uncomfortably. There was a long, awkward silence. Tension, thick and tangible, was building in the room. The girl sensed it as well and fought against it with over-cheer.

"It's true, you know. I can tell when you're near."

"ESP?"

"A little more personal than that," she countered, recoiling a little. Bishop stood and began to pace. His face was tight. There was a slight twitching at the corners of his lips. She watched him for some moments, then spoke.

"What's the matter?"

Bishop turned on his heels and faced her. When he spoke his voice was strangely calm.

"I've been here for about three minutes and so far you've managed about one recrimination a minute. I stay away too long. My behavior and our relationship don't change. I keep my life so much a secret to you, you can't even send me a letter. Did you just say all that or was it just my imagination?" For a long time she couldn't answer his question. Tears welled in her eyes as they looked at each other.

"I said it," she answered finally. She shook her head. "I can't help it. It's just that I can't seem to feel anything but a deep hurting when you're not here. And . . . I guess when I see you, I have to hurt back." There was a silence. "Sorry you came?"

"That's a very stupid thing to say."

"Yes . . . it is," she replied as she took his glass to refill it.

Bishop walked around the room examining pictures, objects. He stopped at the painting of a nude, reached up and traced the outline of her body with his fingertip.

"Did you actually write me a letter," he asked, keeping his back to her.

She walked to him, handed him his drink, then went to a desk and took the letter from a drawer and held it out to him. He turned and looked at her, the letter, but made no effort to take it.

"Would you like me to read it to you?"

Silence. There was no answer in his expression. She lifted the letter and began to read in a faltering whisper.

"My darling. You've just left and the silence in this . . ."

Bishop turned his back once more to her and fixed his eyes on the nude.

"I can't hear you," he said. The girl continued.

". . . and the silence in this room presses against my ears until I am deaf with it . . . and all the familiar things here, familiar to you and me, which have witnessed what we've had here, sear against my eyes until I'm blinded as well. Yes, deaf and blind."

Bishop remained turned away from her. Her words moving through his brain painfully so that at times there were little winces at the bridge of his nose and the corners of his lips. But he masked them from her, refusing to show her this face. She continued.

"And this is the way I live until you come to me again. It's so strange. In the times between, I know exactly all the things I'll say to you. And then, you're here and I forget everything. Your presence fills this room, my mind, everything. I lose my identity completely. I can't think of what it was I felt. There is no past; only the moments of the two of us, and I flow into you and become part of you. I know . . . I know these words hurt you because you can't give anything but the moments, but maybe I can write them now because I know I'll never mail this letter and because, somehow, some way, my need for you must find its voice."

"Don't," said Bishop, rubbing his hand over his eyes wearily. But she continued.

"And you? What of the voice of your pain? I've known you so long and never once have you given it

to me. How great it must be. If you could only let me have just one small part of the weight of it . . ."

"Don't . . . please," he pleaded, fighting to keep from turning to her. But she continued.

". . . If I could draw it from you . . . absorb it . . . make it part of me . . . that even would be some comfort in your absences. I love you so much, my darling. I know . . . I . . ." She shook her head, her eyes flooding with tears then held the letter out to him. "I can't."

Bishop moved to her and folded her against him tightly, kissing her tenderly on the face and eyes.

"It's all right. I know . . . I know," he whispered softly. "I'm here now. It's all right. It's going to be all right."

"Oh, I love you," she said, hugging him back with all her might.

Now he was roughly covering her mouth with his own.

"I missed you so much. You . . . you . . ." The girl was now weeping and laughing, covering his face with kisses.

"Baby . . . love . . . love . . . take us to bed."

Bishop picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom and placed her gently on the bed. They touched each other tenderly, speaking soft, short endearments, and then their words became indistinguishable, became the vibrations emanating from deep within their bodies. There was the rustle of clothes being removed and finally the texture of naked skin flashing into light then shadow in the chiaroscuro of the room. Their mouths sought each other hungrily, their hands caressed. The girl began to emit strange animal sounds as their ritual unfolded. It was a ritual of intense tenderness, of tenuous touching, of the connection of eyes, of quick featherlike caresses, of prolongation, anticipation.

Finally he entered her and their touchings changed. They drove against each other as if seeking to emerge beyond each other, to enter into and beyond, to move beyond into where? The thought flashed through Bis-

hop's consciousness, where? Was there a *where* that existed other than the where of the abyss?

He drove into her harder now, desperate, seeking that oblivion, that non-self, that brief millisecond of void. Then slowly he sensed it, the intimations of the brink. It came to him as a road unfolds at night, as if he was straddling the white center line of the dark highway, moving forward into the darkness until suddenly the line and the road ended in space. He groaned now as the brink moved past him, then his body jerked convulsively, as if a great hand was pushing at the base of his spine, pushing him into the void. Now the flashing of very white light, the millisecond. And even in its moment of flashing, he could feel the next moment of his life, and he clenched his teeth to keep from screaming against it.

Again, as so many times before, he was witness to the battle of light. The gray dawn crept slowly into the room. He lay there staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, his expression was dark, grim. He suddenly closed his eyes as if trying to blot out the picture on the screen of his mind. He opened his eyes and looked at the girl at his side. There was a faint smile on her lips as she slept. He reached a hand toward her, then held back, sensing the futility of his gesture. He eased the blankets down and then got up slowly and carefully so as not to disturb her. He dressed, then walked to the dresser opposite the bed. On it was a jewelry box. He opened the box. There was a slight metallic whirr, then soft tinkling music, the Blue Danube. The tune played several times, then slowed, then finally came to a stop in the middle of a passage. Bishop placed some bills in the jewelry box. As he did so he heard the girl move behind him and turned to look at her. She was facing him, wide awake. Her face seemed changed somehow, her voice strange as if coming through a small speaker of a cheap radio.

"It's fifty dollars more this time," she said, continuing to stare at him.

"Oh?"

"The letter. It took a long time to write."

"I see."

"Is that okay?"

"Yes," said Bishop. He turned and put an extra fifty dollars in the music box, closed it, and turned to look at her once more.

"Anything else?" she said, suppressing a yawn.

"No."

"Next time."

"I'll give you a call," said Bishop. He went to the door and was about to exit when he turned to her with an afterthought.

"The idea about the letter was good. Try to think of something like it again for the next time. I'd appreciate it."

"Okay," she said flatly.

"Goodnight," said Bishop, moving out of the room quickly.

"Goodnight," said the girl. But he was already gone.

V

Arthur Bishop stood in the back of the church, watching the final moments of the funeral mass for Harry McKenna. The requiem being played on the huge organ in the loft echoed through the high, vaulted arches of the church which was filled with flowers. In the funeral party were Steve McKenna, Bishop, four pallbearers, and two other men. Except for these, the priest, and two altar boys, the church was entirely empty.

From time to time during the service Bishop and Steve McKenna exchanged glances. There was nothing definitive in what was conveyed through the eyes. It was just that both of them were very much aware of each other's presence.

The service came to a close and as the organ increased its volume the pallbearers stood, lifted the coffin, and walked down the aisle toward the exit.

It was raining slightly at the cemetery. The small party gathered around the open grave, listening to the priest give his eulogy. All eyes were dry. It was obvious everyone was just going through the motions. Steve stood there shifting his weight impatiently from one foot to the other as the priest droned his tribute to Harry McKenna.

"To all who came to him in need he turned to them the face of friendship and solace. He gave his community and church his resources, his faith, and his spirit. His good works live after him and comfort us in his going. We commit his remains to your good earth, O Father, and his soul to Your tender hands and we employ You to let Your goodness and mercy find a place for him in Thy company. We pray You vouch-

safe him to eternal life as a just reward for his good deeds when he walked among us." The priest made the sign of the cross.

"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."

Some of the men in the party joined the priest in the "Amen" and made the sign of the cross. The priest rolled his eyes upward as if seeking some heavenly sign, and continued the service, moving into his Latin incantation. Steve watched for a moment, then shrugged and walked over to Bishop.

"How you doing?"

"All right," replied Bishop.

"Have you got a car?" said Steve. "I mean I would really like to get out of here."

Bishop nodded and they turned and walked toward the cortege parked a short distance away. As they passed the priest, he greeted Steve with a flash of anger, but only for an instant. Then the eyes rolled upward once more and closed in pious concentration, as he continued on with the incantation.

They had been sitting in the bar sipping their drinks silently for about a half hour when Steve finally spoke.

"How'd you like the grave speech?"

"How did you?" said Bishop, signaling the bartender for another round.

"Not bad. Not bad at all. See, I've always been interested in anthropology; primitive rituals, you know, like tucking the dead away. Fascinating really. There's a kind of high comedy in it that's refreshing. Really blows my mind. Yes, I would say that this afternoon my mind was really blown. *We pray you vouchsafe him.* I mean, how often in this workaday, humdrum world do you get to hear a word like 'vouchsafe'?"

"You found it all amusing," replied Bishop, paying the bartender.

"'Refreshing' was the word I used. Sort of restores all your beliefs, doesn't it? I mean it's *really* on occasions like this that we get a chance to be the spectators

of naked hypocrisy. I mean the real nitty-gritty kind we heard this afternoon. *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. Glory be to the Father . . .*" Steve picked up his glass and held it in front of his mouth like a microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, I will not recount for you the stirring saga of the life and times of Harry McKenna; fixer, manipulator extraordinaire, pusher, pimp, thief, arsonist. Oh now, get this. Television camera moves in for a close shot on the next part. You know, documentary-type shot, close, so they can get all the emotion in my face, the nervous twitches, the pathos in the eyes, then there's a long, dramatic silence, forty million people watching coast to coast, tears, nothing too runny, just a few drops here in the corners of the eyes. Get the picture?"

Bishop nodded.

"Okay. Then I let them have it," he continued. "Well, Mr. Susskind, where can I begin? Dad, my dad, was more than just a father. He was an idea. An inspiration. I only wish all of you out there in television land could'a knew him like I did. I'll never forget the first time he didn't . . . blah, blah, blah. And I'll never forget the second time he didn't . . . blah, blah, blah. And blah, blah, blah, etc., etc., etc. . . . until the commercial." He threw himself back in his chair in a fit of laughter. There was a long silence.

"You liked him a lot, didn't you?" said Bishop coldly.

"He was my kind of man," replied Steve, putting his hand over his heart and winking.

"Somehow I didn't think you were the type to make moral judgments."

Steve's expression became suddenly serious. He leaned over toward Bishop, speaking in a half whisper, "You misunderstand, Mr. Bishop. You grossly misunderstand. Morality has nothing to do with it. It's the fraud, the sham of what I'm supposed to feel at his passing that amuses me. Yes, amuses and refreshes me."

"You don't feel any . . . grief?"

"The only thing I feel right now is sure."

"About what?"

Steve took a long time before answering. "About that we are alone, my friend. In our birth, our living, and finally in our dying. Totally and for all time, alone. Dig?"

"Go on," replied Bishop.

Steve seemed to relax. He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the table. "Well, the thing that causes all the big hangups is that everybody tries to sell us the lie that we aren't alone, and we go through life trying to believe the lie, see? Oh, we know it's a lie. Deep down where we live, we really know. But there's all those high school sociology classes, all that team activity in the gym, the United Nations, the United blah, blah, the association of etcetera, the brotherhood of blah, group therapy. Oh, they get at you at a very early age with the pizazz. I mean, there's even Margaret Mead and all and we never can quite get ourselves together because even with all that pushing in around us all the time, deep down, like I said, we really know it like it is. First person syndrome. Solo. O, sole mio."

Bishop's hand shot out automatically, knocking over his glass. Steve looked at him curiously.

"Something the matter?"

"You must have been saving this up a long time," Bishop replied quickly, trying to cover.

Steve smiled. "Got to you, didn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your reaction. Your reaction just now. The glass. Something zinged in there, huh?"

"Maybe," said Bishop, forcing a smile.

"Ah, he plays the game. Please, Mr. Bishop, I really think it's unworthy of you. I expected better things."

"Like what?"

"Well, like a little honesty."

"Why?" said Bishop, sensing the edge of an undefined danger.

"Let's just say, intuition," continued Steve. "It's all in the eyes, the way they look at everything. I believe you're a man of intuition, also, Mr. Bishop. And I be-

lieve you know what I've been talking about. You know because you're there too. Have been for a long time."

"You're very sure of yourself," Bishop replied, smiling.

Steve nodded. "I live in my mind, friend."

Bishop laughed out loud. "I think I read that somewhere. Heidegger? Sartre? One of those existentialists."

"And so do you," Steve cut in angrily. His expression changed almost immediately after the words were out, aware he had been caught off guard, aware he had been vulnerable for the briefest of moments. He sensed himself in a kind of strange chess game with this man. His face now wore a bright boyish grin; his tone was suddenly light and chatty.

"What I don't get is your connection with my father."

"There wasn't any really," said Bishop. "He worked for my father a long time back. He thought I could do him a favor."

"Your father was *in*, then?"

"He was *in*," nodded Bishop.

"Well, how about that," said Steve slapping the table.

Bishop smiled, "You find that significant?"

"Only that you should admit it. There's hope for you yet, Mr. Bishop. And what about you?"

The smile remained on Bishop's face as he shook his head. There was a long silence in which their eyes remained locked. It was Steve who broke the connection.

"Can you give me a ride home?"

"Sure."

Bishop and Steve heard the noises and cries coming from the McKenna estate as they passed through the gate; then gradually, as they wound up the drive, the chaos revealed itself. The grounds had been transformed into a wild circus of freaks and hippies. There were vans, trucks, bikes, parked on the lawn, in the rose gardens, even on the terrace near the pool. The carefully manicured lawn had been torn and criss-crossed by bikers. A group frolicked naked in the pool.

"My people," said Steve, smiling.

They pulled up in front of the house and went inside. What Harry McKenna had spent his lifetime building was now a shambles. The house was jammed with freaks. There were great blotches on the white rugs where gallon jugs of wine had been spilled. There were drawings on the walls, mostly pornographic. The house shook with loud acid rock. There were great quantities of food everywhere; fruit bowls filled to the brim with Beluga caviar, roast turkeys, hams, cases of wine, Kegs of beer, braces of pheasant and other wild game. Someone had dragged a barbecue cart into the middle of the living room and was broiling steaks on it. Some of the freaks sat quietly eating bowls of Jell-O. Some were playing with wind-up toys; cars, walking-talking-and dancing dolls, airplanes, trains; an array of huge stuffed animals; grass was in abundance. A number of very stoned freaks were rolling about and bouncing on some waterbeds that had been dragged in. One of the beds leaked but it didn't seem to bother anybody. There was phrenetic activity going around the four phones which were in constant use. People were placing and receiving calls continually. Steve smiled as he surveyed the scene.

"Don't know if you ever saw the whole house," he said to Bishop. "This is the living room. These freaks are living."

A freak with a long red beard, wearing a burnoose, held the phone and shouted over the din, "Hey, it's Katmandu. Who put in a call to the Dalai Lama?" A girl screamed hysterically and ran to the phone. "Me! I did! Me! Me! Oh, my God, is that him?"

"No, but it's a friend of a friend of his."

"I'll take it. I'll take it. Oh, my God."

Another girl next to her was screaming into the phone angrily, "Yes, John Lennon. It's his mother calling. What do you mean, I don't sound like a mother. What? *What?* Just a minute." She handed the phone to the freak next to her. "Would you tell this sonofabitch I'm a mother."

"She's right, man. She is a *mother*. And I'm a

motherfucker." Then he threw the phone against the wall and both of them fell on the floor, laughing and grappling with each other, then began to make love.

A girl approached, zombie-like, holding two bowls of Jell-O in her hand. She held the bowls out to them.

"Here, Steve. It's . . . so . . ." There were no more words in her high.

"Yeah, thanks," said Steve taking the bowl. "Organic mescaline," he said to Bishop, offering him the other bowl.

"No, thanks," said Bishop with no embarrassment.

"Oh," said the zombie, "but it's so . . . so . . ." Again, there were no words.

Steve winked at the girl. "He's already there, baby."

She nodded, dimly perceiving the meaning of his words, turned and walked off mumbling softly to herself. "Oh, oh, sure, sure. I dig. Far out. Far, far out. Far, far out."

Steve touched Bishop on the arm. "Come on." He led the way through the tangle of bodies and climbed the stairs to the second story to the main bathroom. Steve opened the door to the bathroom and ushered Bishop inside.

The room was huge. There was white marble everywhere, a Roman motif with gold trim, and floor-to-ceiling mirrors on three walls. In a tub carved from a solid block of white carrara sat a boy and girl of Steve's age. The boy was reading *Time* magazine, the girl *Newsweek*. The tub had been filled with peanut butter and they sat in it up to their necks. Hundreds of empty peanut butter jars were littered throughout the room. Steve broke up with laughter at the sight greeting them.

"Hey. Hey. Hey. How about that."

"Three hundred and twenty-four jars," said the girl. "It was Cam's idea."

"Yes. Yes," said Cam in his East Indian guru accent. "Everyone speak of the morass. Very, very, very good to speak. Enlightenment. Social consciousness. But, I say, very, very, very few people know what the morass really is. In this manner you can physically feel

it as you intellectually perceive it. It is the only way to become aware of the principle of life, the individual eternal soul."

"The Atman," said the girl breathlessly.

"That's where it's at, man," said Cam, sniggering.

The girl looked at Bishop. "Wow, look at him. Look at that face. Hey, have you ever faced your face?"

Bishop smiled. He had not been made uncomfortable by all of this, but he felt Steve checking him out to see what his reaction would be.

A freak came through the door. "Hey, Steve. It's Louise. Phone in the study. Bummer, man. Real bummer."

Steve nodded and Bishop followed him out of the bathroom and into the study, down the hall.

Steve continued to eat his Jell-O as he talked. Loud music intermittently drowned out the voice on the other end of the line.

"Yeah, Louise. This is Steve talking."

There was a pause.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, go ahead then. Right. I'm a sonofabitch. Well, go *ahead*. That's right, I don't care. Will you . . ."

The party had hung up. Steve slammed the phone down on the receiver. "Shit." He turned and looked at Bishop. A sudden smile came to his lips. "Hey, I got something. Want to come along?"

"No, thanks," said Bishop, feeling it all was beginning to wear very thin.

"Come on, man," said Steve. "You won't be sorry. This could be the best part of the tour. Very freaky." There was something in his voice that spoke challenge.

Bishop nodded.

"I'll drive," said Steve as they started downstairs. "We gotta move fast not to miss this."

The drive out to Sandy Hook was a demonstration of Steve's prowess in handling the gleaming white Lotus in which they rode. He had dived with several sports-cars on the freeway and had easily demonstrated to all challengers his superiority of reaction and judgment.

Bishop was impressed. And Steve was impressed as well, with the effectiveness of his demonstration.

They approached a small white house situated on a deserted stretch of beach, and stopped.

"This is it," said Steve, getting out of the car quickly. "We gotta hustle, man, or we'll miss this." He took a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door.

Louise was sitting in the middle of the floor of the living room—propped up against some large Turkish pillows. There was a ring of candles burning around her. In front of her was a bottle of wine, a bowl of ice cubes, a package of razor blades, and a bottle of capsules all but empty. She was stoned.

Steve and Bishop moved toward her. As they came into her line of vision she looked squarely at Steve, then at Bishop, then back to Steve.

"Who's he?"

"Friend of the family," said Steve. "Thought you'd already started."

"I wanted you to watch," said Louise, a bitter smile emerging on her lips. She looked down at the articles in front of her. "Let me see if I've got everything. Manischewitz, ice cubes, cigarettes, razor blades." She looked up at Steve. "Chroma-chrome edges. How about *that*? First I thought I'd cut both wrists but I need one hand to drink and smoke, right? How long does it take?"

"I don't know," said Steve. He walked to the television and turned it on to a football game. He pulled up a chair and sat with his chin in his hands, watching the game.

"You do so know," screamed Louise. "You know everything."

Steve turned to her, annoyed, his voice calm and cold. "Louise, you called me either because you don't want to really do it and you want me to save you or you want to lay the guilt of it on me. I'm not buying either. Dig? So get it on."

There was a long silence before Louise answered.

"Okay," said Louise. "Just one thing. Promise to dress me before the ambulance comes."

"Sure," said Steve, engrossed in the game.

Louise slowly picked up a razor blade and held it to her wrist.

"Hold it," said Steve suddenly. "Could I have some of that?" He pointed to the bottle of wine in front of her.

She reeled with the insult. "Sonofabitch."

Steve calmly filled the glass, then held the bottle up to Bishop, offering.

"Mr. Bishop?"

Bishop shook his head. Steve smiled and replaced the bottle in front of Louise.

"Okay. Any time, baby."

She lifted the blade once more and held it against the veins on her left wrist.

"You really don't believe," she said, searching his eyes.

"Oh, baby, baby. I call you that because your innocence touches me. You . . ."

With one quick, short gesture she drew the blade across her veins, opening them, then lifted her wrist close to her face and stared fascinated as the blood rushed down her arm and dripped off her elbow onto the rug.

"Far out," said Steve. "Those are really sharp."

Louise fixed her gaze once more on Steve while picking up a fresh blade. There was no pause this time as she opened the veins on her right wrist. There was a long silence as the three of them watched the life blood begin to flow out of her. Steve shook his head in a gesture of admiration.

"Always said you had balls, Louise."

"How long will it take?" she asked again.

Steve shrugged and turned to Bishop.

"Mr. Bishop?"

"How much do you weigh?" Bishop asked her.

"A hundred and twenty."

Bishop glanced at the rate of flow, then made a

rapid calculation in his mind. "Two and a half . . . three hours. You'll get cold first, then sleepy."

Steve was impressed with Bishop's possession of this knowledge. Louise looked at the clock. It was ten thirty. Then her eyes focused on Bishop.

"You're a sonofabitch, too."

"Louise, baby," said Steve gingerly. "Listen, I didn't have anything to eat before I came. What'ya got in the frig."

She stared through him.

"Yeah, well, thanks," said Steve, making a quick exit to the kitchen.

Louise turned once more to Bishop, her voice starting to shake. "He'll stop it. I know he will. I know he feels something."

After a time Steve returned from the kitchen, munching a spaghetti sandwich. He took a position on the floor in front of Louise and watched her intently.

By eleven thirty she was surrounded by a large dark circle of blood. Steve had seemingly become bored and was now on the couch reading *Rolling Stone*. Tears now streamed down Louise's face as she continued staring at him. Finally she spoke in a whisper.

"I know you, love . . . you'll . . ."

Steve turned to her. "Huh? What? I didn't hear you, babe. What?"

"I said you'll stop it."

Steve smiled and went back to his paper. "If you don't care anything about your life, why should I?"

"You do care," she screamed. "*You do! You do!*"

Steve shrugged, then looked at Bishop. Their eyes locked for a long moment.

By twelve o'clock the dark stain around Louise had almost doubled.

Steve, feeling changes imminent, had moved closer to her and was studying her. She was crying and shivering.

"I'm cold. I'm getting cold."

Steve checked his watch. "Psychosomatic. You've got a whole hour and a half to go."

She held out her bleeding wrists to him, pleading. "Please."

But he just stared at her. It seemed to be all happening in a dream, the three of them sitting there, waiting for the inevitable. Louise began sobbing heavily now as the realization came to her that Steve would not be her salvation. She knew she was dying.

"Help me, Steve. I'm afraid. I'm afraid. I don't want to do it. Steve."

Steve stared at her for a long moment, then got up suddenly and went to the bar. He rummaged around through the bottles and ashtrays, found her car keys, walked back to her, and threw the keys in her lap.

"If you kick it," he said without any trace of emotion, "you can make the State Troopers station in about fifteen minutes."

Now she knew. She felt the world dark before her, knew it was the final coldness, but she chose not to let it engulf her. She tightened her jaw, setting herself for the effort, then slowly, painfully, struggled to her feet and staggered out the door. There was a silence, then the sound of her car starting up and pulling away from the house, tires screeching.

Steve had not looked at her during her exit from the house. His eyes had remained on Bishop and on his face, frozen, there had been that same challenging smile.

Arthur Bishop and Steve McKenna walked along the beach in silence. The surf frothed at their feet, then slid back into the blackness, leaving a gleaming ribbon of sand that seemed alive with phosphorescence. They had been walking for about an hour when Bishop finally spoke.

"These aren't your people. You don't have any people."

Steve let out a short laugh. "What's that? Now who's making the moral judgments?"

"Would you have let her die?" said Bishop, shaking his head.

"Would you?"

Now Bishop smiled as well. "Look, I was just an observer."

They continued walking. The silence stretched long before Bishop continued. "You haven't answered my question."

"What do you think?" said Steve, stopping momentarily.

"Well, we'll never know, will we?"

They continued to walk. It was a clear night, the sky full of stars. Bishop filled his lungs, breathing deeply of the clean salt smells. He felt a strange new sensation being with Steve; a vague connection, confusing, disturbing. They continued walking for another half hour, both deep in their thoughts, both knowing there was something unresolved, until Steve voiced what he was thinking.

"Look, say for instance I just sat there . . . we just sat there and watched her check out. You think that would have been crazy?"

"Irrational, maybe," Bishop replied.

"Okay. Irrational. Anything wrong with that?"

"Depends on where you are in the game," said Bishop. "If you're the victim, I guess you could find something wrong in it."

"Yeah, but what if you're not," Steve pressed.

Bishop thought a moment before answering. "Well . . . it just means you have your own rule book."

"I can dig that," Steve replied quickly.

"Can you?" Bishop countered, pinning him squarely with his gaze. "It takes a very special kind of person to pick up the tab for that kind of living. If your girlfriend hadn't changed her mind, in a way, you would have killed her. That would be *irrational* to most people because it breaks the biggest rule in their book. But that's exactly what makes it special. The only thing is the price tag. In this case your girlfriend's life. You say you can dig it, but you don't know what you're talking about."

"And you do?"

"Do I?" said Bishop with an evasive smile.

"Ah . . . the man is very slippery. When he's cornered he answers my questions with questions."

Bishop laughed.

"What's your action, friend?" Steve continued.

"Action?" Bishop shook his head, laughing louder. "You must have spent a lot of time watching those gangster movies on the late show, too." He looked at his watch. "Thanks for the tour. It's been interesting."

Bishop turned from the beach and started walking back toward the car. Steve watched him for some moments, then said to himself, "Yeah . . . I'd say that." The grin he had been wearing almost the entire evening left his face. Now his expression was grim, masklike, as he watched Bishop's dark form moving away from him. For Steve as well, a strange connection had taken place with this man. He had been trying to define it since their first meeting, but all conclusions had eluded him. He only knew he was drawn to him by some force which, as yet, was unclear.

Suddenly, he shook himself out of his thoughts and yelled to Bishop, "Hey, man . . . wait up." He ran toward him. The smile had returned to his face.

VI

The following morning Arthur Bishop once again threw himself into the daily rigors of a program he had been following for the last six years of his life. It began at five A.M. in a gym in the Nippon Club.

Bishop stood in the middle of the gym floor, barefooted, wearing a silk robe, staring at the small Japanese man standing a short distance away with his back to him. Both men remained motionless for ten minutes, then Bishop reached down and picked up the samurai sword on the floor at his feet. He lifted the sword and advanced toward the man slowly, making no sound. When he arrived within about three feet of him, he made his attack. There was no scream, no holding back. The attack was for real.

Balletlike the man turned slightly as Bishop neared, then caught Bishop under the arm. It was over in a brief moment. Bishop was on the floor, the sword at the opposite end of the gym.

Bishop lifted himself from the floor, smiling. Both men faced each other and bowed courteously, then moved to the perimeter of the gym to witness another match.

As he watched, Bishop could not help but be moved by the beauty of this thing . . . this Akido. These people had learned so artfully how to join with an attacker's energy and use it to unhinge his attack. There was no dragging or pulling, no shouts, or blows; just silent, smooth, simple, circular movements, which invariably had the effect of turning the attacker's attack-energy upon himself. There were no gross acrobatics. It was pure kinetic poetry.

Two matches were fought, then it was Bishop's turn

once more. He stood in the middle of the floor, his back turned to two men who approached him. Both held long, long knives. They made their attack together.

Bishop heard the rustle of their robes, the acceleration of their footsteps, and began his turn, pivoting on the balls of his feet and lowering his body to a semi-crouch so their target would be smaller.

It was as if the men had hurled themselves into the vortex of a whirlpool. They seemed caught for a moment in the grasp of the overwhelming centrifugal force, then the force seemed to release them and they were thrown outward, beyond the circles, spinning, falling. Their knives seemed to have been caught by the same power and were torn from their hands as if by magic.

The men got up from the floor, walked toward Bishop, and once again the reverential bows were exchanged.

At two o'clock in the afternoon he began running in Central Park. After two hours of an unrelenting steady lope, he began to feel the edges of fatigue. He had passed joggers and some of them had broken their gait to keep up with him, but soon realized they could not keep the pace and had dropped back, leaving him to continue on alone. At one time a thin boy in shorts, obviously a long-distance runner, had come from behind and had run alongside him, challenging him to break into a sprint, but Bishop had smiled and shaken his head. The boy had nodded and moved ahead in a burst of speed. Again Bishop was alone.

He ran for another hour, seeking exhaustion, then called a cab and went home, hoping the day's activity would find its conclusion in sleep.

But he did not sleep. At three in the morning, he lay awake, staring at the ceiling of his bedroom. His stomach was tight. There were traces of nausea edging at the back of his tongue. He got out of bed, walked to the bathroom and took two Gelusils, then went downstairs to the living room.

He put a cassette of the Passacaglia and Fugue in D Minor in the deck, turned up the volume, then sat

on the couch and tried making some computations with the day's stock figures.

After an hour, unable to concentrate, he crumpled the papers he had been working on into a ball and threw them across the room in disgust. It was to be another one of those nights without end. He went to a shelf of books and took out a large folio of Bosch paintings. He passed the night without sleep.

The morning found him at the Coney Island Aquarium. He had been there many times before, after many other nights like the one he had just spent. Always the same pattern; the torturous futile search for sleep; then the long hours with the Bosch folio; then here.

He moved through the crowds of people toward a large tank of mixed species and stared, fascinated, as schools and individual fish glided past. His concentration on the life in the tank was total, as if he were the only one present in the gallery. As he continued to stare, his face very close to the glass, the sound of people's voices seemed to gradually fade away into cold silence. He lost any sense of time. He did not know how long he had been staring when a lone grouper, almost the reincarnation of the one he had speared at the reef, moved slowly to the glass near his face. Past it, on the opposite side of the tank, the faces of the crowd seemed to be staring at Bishop and the fish, their faces grotesquely distorted by the magnification of water.

Bishop continued to fix his gaze on the fish. It seemed frozen in its flight, watching him. Now, the sound of people's voices was totally gone, and superimposed over the fish and the distorted faces on the opposite side of the tank were the images of the fish-human demons in the Bosch paintings.

Bishop's hands were now pressed against the glass. He became aware of the pressure he was exerting, took his hands away, and wiped the sweat from them with a handkerchief. His breathing was rapid and shallow. He could not seem to get enough air. The sound of his heartbeat and breathing grew louder, exploding through

his brain. The fish had not moved. It continued to stare at him. Now, it, the images of the demons, the faces beyond, all seemed to be merging, shrinking, until all he could see was the fish's eye, a great, black orb of terror which seemed to be moving in larger and larger circles, spinning, drawing him into its blackness.

Arthur Bishop buttoned his shirt while a young intern completed his report. Throughout the examination, the intern's attitude had been one of perfunctory boredom, and Bishop was now anxious to get out of the emergency room and onto the street, where he might lose, for at least some moments, the vague sense of suffocation he still felt.

"Next of kin?" asked the intern, as he came to the final blanks of the form he was filling out.

"None," Bishop replied. The intern looked up, not bothering to mask his annoyance.

"Well, is there anybody at all we could notify?"

"No."

"How about an acquaintance?"

"You finished?" Bishop said, putting on his coat.

"There's a charge. You can take care of it at the cashier's window. One floor up. I suggest you make an appointment with your doctor for some tests." Then, unable to resist the opportunity, he added, "If you *have* a doctor."

"What do you think's wrong?" said Bishop, ignoring the jibe.

"What'd you feel before you passed out?"

"Just . . . couldn't seem to get my breath . . ."

"Palms sweating?"

"Yes."

"Nausea . . . heart beating fast . . ." the intern continued.

Bishop nodded.

"Sounds like an AR."

Bishop looked at him questioningly.

"Acute anxiety reaction," the intern explained, proud of his newly acquired medical storehouse of informa-

tion. "Classic neurasthenic pattern. See a doctor. Have some tests. If they come out negative, maybe you should see a psychiatrist." His tone was almost becoming friendly. He wrote out a prescription for Valium and handed it to Bishop. "This'll help for a while."

A uniformed policeman entered the room with another form fastened to a clipboard.

"Need a signature, Doc." The intern signed the paper.

"You were really out there, buddy," the policeman said cheerily to Bishop. Bishop nodded. The policeman left the room. There was an awkward moment. Both Bishop and the intern seemed to be waiting for the other to say something or make some move. Finally Bishop spoke.

"Finished?"

"That's all we do here."

"Thanks," Bishop replied and started out.

"Cashier's window . . ." began the intern.

". . . one floor up. Yeah," said Bishop acidly. In the hallway, outside the emergency room, he crumpled the prescription into a tight ball and dropped it on the floor.

He spent the remainder of the day studying German, trying to keep his mind occupied, trying to steer it away from the memory of what had happened at the aquarium. At nine P.M., he began cooking himself an elaborate supper of various exotic curries. By eleven thirty he had completed the project. He placed the last of the nine small plates of curry on a tray, selected a bottle of fumé, and carried the repast to the dining room.

The table had been carefully set before the cooking had begun. Limoge, Val Saint Lambert, gleaming on a background of Belgian lace. He carefully arranged the plates in a semicircle, opened the wine, and poured a small amount into a glass. He was about to taste it when he was interrupted by the insistent ringing of the

door bell. He got up, walked to the intercom on the wall, and turned it on.

"Yes?"

"It's Steve . . . Steve McKenna." There was an awkward silence. "I . . . a . . . was in the neighborhood and thought . . . well . . . I'd stop by. Maybe have a rap." Another silence. "Mr. Bishop?" Bishop turned and looked at the dining table, the single glass of wine.

"I'm sorry, Steve . . . I . . . I've got somebody with me . . ."

"Oh, sure," replied Steve, quickly. "I just took a chance you might be in . . ."

"Maybe another time."

"Yeah . . . well . . . I'll take you up on that. See ya."

"Yes," said Bishop, releasing the talk button. He walked back to the table and sat. He stared at the glass of wine for a long moment, then finally picked it up, tasted it, then began to eat. Gradually, he became aware of the silence surrounding him. The sound of his fork against the plates, the occasional tinkle of the wine bottle touching the glass seemed to accentuate it, even the sound of his own chewing and swallowing. He stopped eating and began to see, in his mind's eye, the picture of himself seated alone at the table, staring at the wall opposite. He got up suddenly and went to the phone.

The girl stood in the doorway of her apartment, wiping the tears from her eyes with the sleeve of her robe.

"I can never get used to this," she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "After all this time . . . then you . . . really you. Welcome home, darling."

Bishop did not move. He stared at her closely. She was very skillful. The transformation from what she had been the week before was remarkable. No glamorous, seductive overtones. Now, a kind of plain, no makeup, scrubbed housewife image. Her hair was in pincurls.

"Come in," she said, without touching him.

He entered the apartment. It too had been transformed to just the right degree of disarray. An ironing board had been set up by the couch. On the floor in a laundry basket were several men's shirts. Bishop moved around the room for some moments trying to get the feeling of what she intended. The girl watched him, waiting for his response to the idea, then decided she had better go ahead.

"I was just doing your shirts," she said, going to the ironing board. She took a shirt from the laundry basket and began ironing.

Bishop watched her for some moments, trying to connect with what she was doing, trying to see it, make himself part of it, but somehow there was something in the way.

He sat on the couch, took his shoes off and put his feet up on the coffee table.

"How are things at work?" the girl said cheerfully.

"Okay," Bishop replied flatly.

"There's a special on TV. The American Wilderness."

"No, thanks," said Bishop, reaching for a magazine.

"You look tired. Aspirin?"

"I'm all right," said Bishop, turning the pages.

There was a long silence broken only by the creak of the ironing board, the occasional hiss of steam from the iron. Finally the girl spoke, once more.

"You know, today I was thinking, wouldn't it be fun to spend Christmas in the snow this year. Get a cabin at Stowe. Just the two of us—snuggled in, fire going, hot mulled wine, ummm, all that beautiful white silence and we'd just make love till the snow melted, like a couple of minks." She laughed and looked at Bishop. He seemed to be growing tense. Her construction did not seem to be working.

"How long has it been since we did that?" she continued, trying to connect with him. "Three years? Four? Remember the fun we had. It was just after——"

"Forget it," said Bishop, interrupting.

"Why? It'd be marvelous," she said with exaggerated

cheerfulness. "Well, think about it anyway. Will you, honey, please?"

"Okay," said Bishop. It was becoming more and more grotesque for him but the girl continued to lead the way, now adding a little spice.

"Oh, listen, I ran into my old girlfriend, Janice, today and she asked about you. How's that lovely, lovely man of yours, honey. Bitch! She always did have the hots for you."

"Okay, cut it out," said Bishop coldly as he dropped the magazine on the floor.

"Well, it's true. Yeah, you kinda went for her, too."

"Shut up," Bishop exploded. "I'm telling you to shut up. This is all stupid, ridiculous." He got up, walked to the ironing board and kicked it over.

"Well, damn it," shouted the girl, suddenly out of character. "It wouldn't be if you helped it along a little." They stared at each other in silence, both frozen in the reality of this bizarre game. The girl sensed that she must change her attack and moved close to him. She began running her hands sensually over his body. Her voice was soft . . . seductive.

"I'm sorry, darling. Hold me. Please. I've waited so."

"Let go," said Bishop, pulling her arms away.

"Please. No," she said dropping to her knees. She pressed her face against his stomach, moving downward. Bishop recoiled, put his hands against her face and pushed her away violently.

"Get away from me!"

She saw the panic leaping in his eyes, the twitching in his face as he stared at her. The moment stretched long, then he reached into his pocket, took out some bills and threw them at her. "I'll call you," he said, and rushed out of the apartment.

There was a brief expression of bewilderment on the girl's face, then she shrugged, picked up the bills, counted them and put them in the pocket of her robe. She got up, walked to the mirror and looked at herself, checking for bruises. There were none. She smiled at

the face looking back, then leaned close to the mirror, studying the face, moved by its beauty.

He had walked for several hours before going home, trying to sort his thoughts. Nothing seemed to be working any more for him. All the elaborate games, the carefully planned illusions, the neatly structured excursions were like so many cardboard facades. He could not suspend himself into the fantasies any more. They had become more and more complex in his effort to give them the smallest details of reality, but now he knew they were fast becoming impossible.

It was two A.M. when he turned into Sutton Place Square. Parked in front of his house was Steve McKenna's white Lotus. Bishop walked to the car and looked in. Steve was behind the wheel, asleep. He looked at the boy for a long moment, studying his face, then tapped on the window. Steve opened his eyes and saw Bishop, smiled and rolled down the window.

"Waiting for me?" said Bishop.

"Yep," Steve replied, yawning.

"How long have you been here?"

"Since last night about twelve."

"Must be important."

"You said another time."

"I said, *maybe* another time," Bishop parried.

"Yeah, that's right," Steve replied, the grin suddenly vanishing.

There was a silence in which it seemed neither of them was willing to take the responsibility for the next moment. Then realizing the decision was essentially his, Bishop finally spoke.

"Okay, come on in."

"You know what freaked me out?" said Steve, getting out of the car. "You're in the phone book."

"What's so . . ."

"Well, I just didn't think you were the type." They exchanged a smile and entered the house.

Steve carried his cup of coffee as he moved around the living room viewing its contents with admiration.

Bishop sat on the couch watching him. Finally, Steve turned and looked at him.

"So this is what it looks like inside your head."

"How's Louise?" said Bishop, smiling faintly.

"Among the living. She's a professional survivor, that one." Steve continued his examination of the room.

"This stuff must have cost a lot of bread."

"Still trying to figure my action?"

Steve shrugged. "No, I was just . . ."

"My father left me a nice chunk."

"Yeah, well, it's nice to be comfortable, isn't it?" Steve said, concluding his tour. He turned, walked to the chair opposite Bishop and sat.

"Something specific you wanted to rap about?" tested Bishop, refilling Steve's cup.

"No, I just . . ." His expression suddenly changed. "Yeah, damn it, there is. What happened the other night was pretty far out. Okay, you started to say some wild things about it. You were cooking pretty good. Then I ask you some questions and you short-circuit on me."

"So?" Bishop smiled.

"So, how about some answers."

"To what?" Bishop replied innocently.

"Well, for openers suppose I say I think I'm the kind of person who can pick up the tab for what happened. What's the rest of it? I mean the *real* price for your own rule book."

"What makes you think I can answer that?" Bishop countered, a faint trace of amusement in his expression.

"Because you said . . ."

". . . you didn't know anything about it. That doesn't mean I do."

Steve put his cup on the table and shook his head. "Now you see him. Now you don't." Bishop looked at his watch.

"My time up?" Steve inquired.

"No, it's just that I have something to do."

"Can I come?"

Bishop looked at the boy, caught by his pugnacious

grin. He shook his head and smiled. "What do you want from me?"

"What have you got?" asked Steve, half laughing.

"Now *you're* answering questions with questions."

"See the influence you have on me," Steve countered, already sure of his victory.

"I've got to change. Be with you in a minute," said Bishop, getting up.

As Bishop left the room, Steve's attention turned once more to its contents. His eyes moved slowly over the paintings, the statuary, the books, carefully seeking to define the man who had just left him, through these extensions of his mind.

VII

The small two-passenger stunt plane skirted the beach, flying low over Long Island Sound. At land's end it veered sharply into vertical flight and climbed to 10,000 feet. There, it continued on a level flight for several moments, then rolled over into a power dive for 4,000 feet that was transformed into a quick succession of brilliantly executed loops and rolls that seemed to have no end. Finally the plane righted itself and climbed once more for altitude.

Inside at the controls Bishop was smiling. Steve, next to him, shook his head in admiration.

"That's incredible."

"Keeps me sharp," replied Bishop. "Balance, problems of orientation. Sometimes you have to think in reverse." He turned and looked at Steve, a challenge in his smile. "Want to take her?"

Without hesitation Steve nodded, took the controls and immediately put the plane into an erratic dive-roll. Things seemed to go haywire for some dangerous moments as they bordered on the edge of losing control, but Steve finally managed to right the plane to level flight. His expression was deadpan as Bishop said, "Not bad. How long you been flying?"

"About twenty seconds," said Steve. There were grins on both faces.

In the afternoon, Bishop took Steve to an outdoor rifle range in the Kitatinny Mountains just outside of Hope, New Jersey. The targets were set electronically, and as the range attendant put his eye to a spotting scope, Steve watched as Bishop leaned over the custom-made 308 magnum target rifle. Bishop put his eye to the scope, slowly made his adjustments, then pulled

the rifle tight against his shoulder, becoming part of it. Bishop's finger curled around the trigger and began to squeeze. A slight breeze came up. The finger relaxed, waited for it to abate, then resumed pressure. The silence was shattered by four explosions in rapid succession.

Steve could not believe what had just taken place. "Four in a row at a thousand yards? That just can't happen."

There was a tense silence as the attendant focused the spotting scope on the target.

"Let's have it," said Bishop.

"The last one cut the nine ring," replied the attendant.

"Where?"

"Six o'clock."

"Set up a clean target," Bishop said to the attendant, a trace of anger in his voice over the last shot not being clear of the ring. He reloaded quickly.

That evening they had supper together at a restaurant on Third Avenue. The food, the wine, the service had been perfect, and Bishop, surprised with himself at a newfound feeling of relaxation, told Steve something of his past.

"My father was what they used to call a *judge*. He settled arguments on the council. Whatever he decided, that was it. Nobody questioned his word. Well, almost nobody. Some hothead in Chicago didn't like one of his decisions and put out a contract on him." There was a silence in which Bishop debated whether to continue but the expectancy in Steve's face, the way he hung on Bishop's every word seemed to prod him to continue. The boy seemed to absorb everything he said like a sponge, seemed to look at him in a manner that was almost reverential. "The man that got him was a shooter from Topeka, and that was it."

"How old were you then?" said Steve.

"About your age. No, younger. I was still in school."

"What happened to the dude from Chicago?"

"He was dead three weeks later," said Bishop, feeling

a slight tension through his body. "The guy that did the job got it a month after that." Bishop shaped his finger into a gun and pointed it at his temple.

"Got it like bang, bang?"

Bishop nodded. "You find this interesting?"

"You kidding?" said Steve. "My father used to do his front number even for me. You know, like if he did that nothing would rub off. Wouldn't talk about any of this stuff. Oh, he was beautiful. The thing is, I really wanted to dig it but he . . ." He shook his head laughing. "He wanted me to be part of his front, too. Just a neat, Englewood type kid. When I got my people together, he really freaked. The image just didn't fit him. Yeah, he was really beautiful. What'd you do after they burned your old man?"

Bishop shrugged. "I finished school and . . ." He felt the tension in his body grow stronger, his eyes narrowed faintly. He could not explain to himself these new feelings, could not understand how the nausea had left him, could not believe that somehow this boy sitting across from him could . . . A strong flash of apprehension moved through him. "That's enough about that," he said flatly.

"No, go on," said Steve, deeply caught by what Bishop had been saying. "I really . . ."

"Another time," said Bishop firmly.

Steve grinned. "Well, at least you didn't say *maybe*. When?"

Bishop shook his head evading. "I don't . . ."

But Steve was not to be denied. His face seemed to glow with an inner light, his eyes seemed to dance with laughter and the unbridled enthusiasm of his youth. "How about tomorrow? I'm not doing anything tomorrow. I've got the whole day. Yeah, tomorrow would be very good for me. What's your schedule . . . ?" Bishop watched Steve's face as he continued talking—found himself gradually surrendering before the withering barrage of irrepressible smiles and comic banter. The apprehension he had felt just a moment before had somehow been lost. He felt connection! Yes, the

realization that he was actually connecting exploded into his consciousness with such force he could hardly lift the glass of wine to his lips without trembling.

The following morning Steve joined Bishop and together they began his daily routine. First on the schedule was a Kendo match at the Nippon Club. Bishop gave Steve brief instructions on technique, then both of them donned their wire masks and took wooden swords from the rack on the wall. In a moment or two Bishop was working Steve over unmercifully. In three passes Steve was on the floor. He tried to get to one knee but Bishop stepped in quickly, slicing at the boy's kneecap, tapping it just enough for the momentary paralysis. Steve went down in a heap shouting surrender.

"Okay. Okay, I've had enough." He took off his mask and smiled weakly at Bishop. "I think I need a little more work on theory."

Bishop took off his mask, stepped to him and offered him a hand up. The expression on his face was dead serious.

In the afternoon they swam at the Y. They had been at it for several hours when Steve began to show exhaustion. Bishop swam easily without effort alongside him. As they neared the edge of the pool completing the lap, Steve said, "Okay, that's it. Right?"

"Uh uh," said Bishop, kicking off once again in the opposite direction.

"You're crazy. That's three hundred laps," Steve shouted at him.

Bishop looked back at him laughing, "Just my warm-up. Now I'd like to do some swimming."

Steve looked at Bishop and shook his head; an expression of determination crept onto his face slowly. He braced himself for the ordeal ahead and kicked off as well.

That evening before supper they played handball. After about an hour it became obvious that in this activity at least Steve seemed to have a slight edge. He seemed just a hair quicker at the returns. They played fiercely, giving each other no quarter until after about

an hour and a half Bishop was well aware he had begun to fade. He missed a return and threw the ball to Steve.

"Your serve."

Both men were covered with sweat. Their chests heaved violently with labored breathing. Steve drove a sizzling serve against the wall. Bishop returned it with equal force. There was an exchange of incredibly skillful shots on both their parts. Bishop drove himself to his limit in an effort to press Steve. There was a moment when he felt he had him nailed, but Steve returned the ball with a spectacular cross backhand that rebounded into the court about six inches from the floor. Bishop dove for the ball but missed. He looked up at Steve from the floor, a faint but undeniable trace of admiration in his smile. "Game. Very good."

"I know," said Steve with feigned modesty.

"You really play to win."

"You know another way?"

Bishop shook his head. Steve stepped up to him and gave him a hand up.

"How about two out of three?" Bishop challenged.

"Okay, man, but you haven't got a chance," Steve countered. "I told you I'm a genius at this game." He turned and served the ball. Both returned to the game with the same expression of grim determination.

The following morning found them once again at the Nippon Club gym. A crowd of about sixty people, mostly Japanese, had assembled and were waiting for a karate match to begin. The spoke to each other in hushed, apprehensive whispers. Steve leaned closer to Bishop's ear, picking up their tone.

"What's going on? Everybody's acting weird."

Bishop was about to answer when two Japanese men entered the gym and walked to opposite sides of the mats that were lying on the floor. One of the men was about forty, powerfully built. His body was thick, muscular. There was a fierce look about his eyes. The older man, slight of build, almost birdlike, stood quite relaxed, his face radiating a warm, gracious smile wherever he looked. His expression was almost wistful.

Bishop leaned close to Steve explaining, "The older man is Yamoto. Just here from Japan. He's the undisputed master there. The other guy is Kori. Very dangerous, very fast. He's got some new tricks which are sort of an insult to the classic old style. Yamoto says the tricks are useless against a classic fighter. He's here to prove his point. Should be very interesting."

The crowd became silent as the two men bowed to each other in signal for the match to begin. Immediately, Kori took the initiative, moving around Yamoto like a cat, making lightning attacks which strangely seemed to keep missing their mark. Yamoto, his tactics all defensive, seemed not to move at all.

Twenty minutes into the match Kori, for all his speed, could not seem to penetrate the master's defense. From time to time during the match Steve had turned and glanced at Bishop, who seemed to be going into some kind of sublime trance as he watched.

Kori pressed his attack harder, frustrated by being unable to connect with the old man. Suddenly, in a rage, he lashed out with a deadly chop to the old man's forearm, but upon touch, the blow was not withheld. It was delivered in its full power; a cardinal sin in matches of this type. There was a loud crack and Yamoto's forearm went limp, broken by the blow. There was a gasp from the crowd. Kori stood still, staring at the old man. There was no apology in his expression. He had proven his point.

Yamoto nodded slightly to his adversary, then, still smiling, lifted the broken arm and placed it in the belt of his robe. There was a look of confusion on Kori's face, then sensing danger he tensed but it was too late. Yamoto made his attack. To those watching it seemed as if the old man had swept over Kori's body, caressing it with his one good hand and his feet, like a strange white butterfly, hovering over some inanimate object. The movements were so quick they were only seen in blur. When it was over the results of the caress were revealed to all.

Kori's face seemed to have assumed another shape.

There was bleeding from all the openings of his body. His twisted, broken form collapsed to the mat, an expression of unbearable pain in his eyes. There was dead silence in the gym.

The old man bowed to his victim, then to the crowd. On his face was a strange, beatific smile. He moved out of the room and the crowd began to slowly move out after him.

Steve turned to Bishop and was about to speak but checked himself, seeing the look on his face as he stared at the crumpled form on the mat. It seemed as if Bishop had turned to stone; his body, his eyes transfixed by the recent events; his face revealing the exact expression Steve had seen on Yamoto's as he made his exit.

VIII

They had gone to Bishop's house after the match and had begun to play Go. Bishop had opened a bottle of Margaux and they sat in the living room, listening to Bartók, studying the stones on the board. Bishop had spoken only a few words since the match. He seemed to be still caught in the trance that had overtaken him at the gym.

Steve moved a stone, then looked up at Bishop whose gaze seemed fixed at a point in space between himself and the board.

"Hey!"

"Huh?" Bishop, suddenly focusing, shaken out of his reverie.

"You haven't said three words since the match."

"Hmmm," Bishop shrugged.

"He practically murdered that guy."

Bishop moved a stone, then looked up at Steve, smiling.

"Murder is only a classification of killing. It means killing without a license. Everybody kills. The difference is only the license. Governments, the military, police all have it because our institutions give it to them."

"You think Yamoto is a killer?" asked Steve, somewhat confused by Bishop's answer.

"He's a killer who doesn't kill," replied Bishop, studying the board once more. "It's funny. No . . . for him, the rules are very important. He's not free of them."

"How can anyone be totally free? I mean, isn't that conceit just a hypothetical abstraction?"

"I don't think so," said Bishop. "It has to do with making conscious choices, decisions; acts which have

nothing to do with the rules . . . are beyond them . . . and everything to do with the expression of self."

"Oh, come on, man," countered Steve. "A society of people who are free to live any way they want?" Bishop smiled faintly.

"I didn't say *society* . . . individuals. The true test of that freedom is the singular personal act of the individual, whatever it may be and regardless of the consequences."

"Like what happened with Louise," Steve replied after a thoughtful silence.

"Yes . . . in a way . . . except that act had no real meaning."

"Why does it have to have meaning?"

Bishop filled a glass, drank, then thought a moment before answering.

"The act must reflect a pure philosophy of life. Absolutely pure. With Louise the act was not pure. She had coerced you with a situation that demanded a particular response from you. Either you save her, or let her die . . . but your response was exactly that; a *response* to a situation she had constructed. You were reacting . . . not really acting, and out of the motive of showing her she could not emotionally blackmail you. The thing I'm talking about is the individual's ability to act. Freedom can only come without motive or passion. Only then can it express pure personal volition. Only then can it begin to emerge as a life-art form."

"Art?" Steve said quickly.

"Yes. Of course! The act must be an end-in-itself, just as man is an end-in-himself." Bishop pointed to the paintings on the walls. "The true artist . . . the genius doesn't create as a means or for some kind of reward. His concern is the expression of self. Even . . ." he hesitated, ". . . even an act of killing can emerge as an art form if it is performed purely . . . without motive, since it stands beyond society's highest rule . . . beyond it . . . totally free. Performed without motive it's the highest art form man can know, because he uses himself as the medium of its expression."

Steve could not take his eyes from Bishop's face. Bishop seemed suddenly transformed. His expressions were highly animated, bursting with excitement. His eyes were wide with an almost evangelical fire, as he continued.

"You see, man is really nothing more and nothing else than his plan . . . his blueprint for life. To be free the blueprint must reflect pure logic. A logic that gives no quarter and asks none. He is, after all, nothing more than the sum total of his acts; it doesn't matter if those acts appear irrational to the rest of the world as long as they express the logic of the free choice." He thought a moment. "Yes . . . even if the choice is to kill."

There was a long silence.

Finally Steve spoke.

"Is that your professional opinion?" There was a dangerous edge of insinuation in his tone.

Bishop recoiled, gathered quickly and closed like a suddenly disturbed sea anemone. "That's my opinion," he replied flatly.

"Okay, man, don't get uptight," Steve countered, unable to mask his impatience and anger over Bishop's evasive maneuver.

"I'm not."

"Bullshit. Look, man, we know what the talk is behind the talk, but every time we get close to pulling its clothes off the same thing happens. As long as you're rapping it out on your terms, hypothetical, *suppose for instance*, like that . . . everything's okay. But the minute I get close, the minute my question is specific, you either shine me on or go out for coffee. Now what the hell is going on? I'd like to get to it."

"What makes you so sure . . . ?"

But Steve would have no more dodging. "There he goes again. Okay, let's forget it."

There was a long silence before Bishop responded. "Okay," he said coldly.

Steve jumped to his feet. "No . . . I mean really forget it. You can't lay it out in front? All right. All right. I guess I'm really dumb. All along you've been

defining your terms, but I guess I just ain't been listening right. Yeah . . . let's just forget it."

He walked out of the room and down the stairs to the front door. Bishop followed and called to him from the top of the stairs.

"Steve. Your leaving. It's your choice . . . not mine, remember that."

Steve turned and looked up at him, the anger working in his face.

"Yeah . . . well, somehow I don't see it that way." He turned and slammed the door on his way out.

Bishop stared at the door. It was only a moment or two before the thick oppressive silence of the house began to press in on him once more.

In the week that followed, Bishop threw himself desperately into the rigors of his routines, trying to keep his thoughts from returning to that feeling of connection he had had with Steve in the restaurant. At first, the activities, the intense physical concentration, seemed to work, but gradually as the week wore on he found himself unable to think of anything else. He felt as if he had lived his entire life with the feeling that he was about to die by suffocation, and for the briefest of moments, being with Steve, talking with him, the pressure from his chest was gone so that for the first time he knew what it was to really breathe.

Friday night found him once more alone in his living room surrounded by open folios of Soutine and Goya and Doré's illustrations from the *Inferno*. He had sought for several hours to lose himself in the purity of sublime form and color, but his efforts had been without success. The sanctuaries, the refuges, all seemed to be slipping away from him, and, in their place, he saw the grotesque face of his own panic, leering back at him from the perpetual and inevitable silence that would not let him rest. He knew he had to make a choice if he was to continue to live, knew that he had arrived at his limit. He lifted the phone from the receiver and called Steve.

At eight o'clock the next morning they were once

more sitting opposite each other in Bishop's living room, sipping coffee. When Steve had arrived, Bishop had chattered pleasantly, making small talk, trying to delay what he knew must come. Steve had remained silent and emotionally noncommittal. Finally the small talk trailed into a silence which stretched uncomfortably.

"Can we get to it?" said Steve, locking his eyes with Bishop's.

Bishop stood and began to pace. "You said you thought you were the kind of person who could pick up the tab for what happened at Louise's that night. Do you still feel that way?"

"I think so," said Steve.

Bishop turned suddenly and stared at him. "Look, you've been pressing pretty hard. Now you better be sure."

"I'm sure," said Steve after a moment. His face was expressionless.

"Would you say I'm that kind of person?" continued Bishop, turning away from him.

"I . . . I really don't know. You confuse me sometimes."

"Would you believe me if I said I was?"

Steve thought a minute. "You'd have to prove it."

"And if I did," Bishop said quickly, "would you accept the responsibility of that proof . . . of that knowledge?"

"Sure. Why not."

Again Bishop stopped his pacing and turned to face him. "Even if it could mean your life?"

"Yes, I would," said Steve without pause.

"Think carefully now," said Bishop. "We're moving very quickly out of conjecture and abstraction. This isn't freshman philosophy anymore, my friend. *Could you?*"

Steve thought for several moments. Then nodded. "Go on."

Bishop walked to the chair opposite Steve and sat, staring at him. His face was masklike. His eyes seemed to be trying to penetrate Steve's skull as if to see his

thoughts. The silence continued for a long time. Finally Bishop nodded to himself and spoke. "Ever hear the term 'mechanic' used outside of its normal meaning?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"My father used it. It's a dealer, a guy who works game tables."

"Anything else?" Bishop pressed.

"Sure. A shooter. A hit man. So?"

Bishop leaned back in his chair, his body seemed to relax. "So there we are," he said softly.

"And that's your action?" Steve asked, taking a deep breath.

Bishop nodded.

Steve forced a smile. "Oh, come on now. You're putting me on."

"I have a very poor sense of humor," said Bishop. "It's a failing, I know. But I can't help it."

"Why tell me?" Steve said.

There was a flash of anger on Bishop's face. "Let's stop fooling around. You're known all along and you've been pushing pretty hard to hear it. Isn't that the truth?"

Steve nodded.

"I'm telling you because I need a colleague. You seem to share my beliefs and I think you possess the aptitude. I could use a backup man, sometimes—I wouldn't have to spread myself so thin. You see, unlike you, I can't live in my mind alone. I find recently that the isolation is more than I can tolerate. I'm sure you can understand how close personal relationships are impossible because of what I do. Eventually people expect you to account for time, for things. Impossible. Except of course if that relationship . . . shall we say friendship . . . were with someone who knew. That's my flaw, you see; the loneliness. It's what gives you this opportunity."

"Are you paid for it?"

Bishop nodded.

"Well, doesn't that knock out the purity of your

theory? I mean about motive. After all, if you do it for money——”

“Money is paid to me,” Bishop interrupted, “but that’s not the motive. I live rather well on independent means. I expect you will too now, with what your father left you. No, the people I work for merely provide the opportunity. I really don’t need them, but the arrangement works in a rather symbiotic way. See any inconsistency?”

“No,” said Steve, after thinking a moment.

“What I’m suggesting is that you apprentice yourself to me,” Bishop continued matter-of-factly. “I’ll teach you all I can. When you’re ready, I’ll give you your first hit. After that, you’ll have the choice of remaining with me or moving out on your own. What do you say?”

Steve smiled. “Do I have an alternative?”

Bishop took his ball of wax from the table beside the couch and began squeezing it. When he spoke, his voice had the quality of ice. “There are alternatives to all choices, but as I said, we have to bear the responsibility of them.”

Steve looked at Bishop’s hand, caught for the moment by the steady movement of the fingers, then smiled. “You’ve got a partner, Mr. Bishop.”

“Associate,” Bishop countered. He dropped the ball of wax on the table, then moved close to Steve, studying him. “First thing, the costume goes. All of it. Hair, too. From now on you look like everyone else. Straight. Normal. Anonymous.”

“That’s the deal, huh?”

“That’s what you just bought,” Bishop replied, deadly serious.

IX

The training of Steve McKenna began the next day at a skeet range on Long Island. He stood there holding a beautifully balanced Baretta while Bishop gave him some final instructions.

"No. Point the gun as if it were the extension of your arm. Keep both eyes open." He turned to the throw house down-range and yelled, "Pull." A clay bird left the house and was halfway across the range when Steve fired. The bird disintegrated into fine powder.

"Good. Now you're getting it," Bishop said, patting Steve on the back.

Steve smiled and yelled, "Pull."

Now as Steve continued to shoot, Bishop began to grill him on the ballistic figures he had given him earlier in the morning. "Winchester: 300 magnum, 180 grains. Muzzle velocity?"

"3,070," said Steve quickly, then fired, shattering a clay bird.

"Drop at two hundred yards."

"2.1 inches. Pull." He fired. A miss.

"Three hundred yards?"

"5.3 inches. Pull." He fired. A hit.

"150 grains at three hundred yards?"

"4.8. Pull." A hit.

"It's 4.2," Bishop corrected.

"You sure?"

Bishop smiled. "Want to lay a little money?"

"Uh uh."

"I appreciate the confidence," said Bishop, selecting a gun and stepping up to the firing line. He loaded the gun with four shells, then yelled to the throw house on his right, then on his left, "Doubles." He turned to

Steve, "It's just like pointing your finger. Pull. Pull." Two clay birds were thrown from each house. Bishop slowly lifted the gun to his shoulder and fired in rapid succession. The four clay birds turned to powder before Steve's eyes. "Like that," said Bishop, nonchalantly.

Steve grinned.

That evening Bishop continued the ballistic work. They worked in Bishop's living room for the most part. The bulletin board was out and on it were diagrams showing the parabola fall of bullets of various weights and powder measurements. Along with the diagrams were schematics of various trigger mechanisms. They spent several hours at this. Then Bishop went on to some of the nontechnical phases.

"When a mark is being considered for a hit, the council, the top echelon people have a workup, a preliminary résumé done on him that includes some of his background, patterns of behavior, stuff like that. They have some people who are very adept at this sort of thing. The résumé on the mark is sent to me and I study it and determine the best method."

"Which is?" said Steve.

"It varies. It's usually the thing that can best appear to be accidental. The National Safety Council puts out a good book on accident statistics; I also use the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. I try to never use a conventional weapon. There's always a question of motive. The mark should terminate by accident, natural causes, or disappearance. The actual method of the hit should be the result of careful cross-checking in the résumé."

"What if there's nothing there to help you?"

"Impossible," Bishop smiled. "In the pattern of his life, each man is vulnerable one way or another. The trick is to study him very closely and find that natural vulnerability. *Natural*. The more unnatural it is, the more opportunities there are for it to fail and also the more opportunities for tracing the plan of it."

"Once the council makes its decision, I'm on my own. After it's done I destroy the résumé. Payment is made

to a numbered account. I work on a yearly retainer plus so much for each job. The extra amount is commensurate with the importance of the mark and the difficulty of the hit. Anywhere between ten and a hundred thousand."

"Do you know the reason for the hit?"

"No. I make that an absolute requirement."

"How about goofs? Haven't you ever made a mistake?"

Bishop smiled. "The coefficient of my survival is one hundred percent efficiency. Nothing less."

Steve did not smile. The point was made.

The training continued without respite through Saturday. On Sunday Bishop suggested they visit the Bronx Zoo. Steve had imagined it would be a day of rest but as they walked through crowds of children playing, the sounds of the carousel, Bishop continued the instruction.

"Now, the optic nerves starting with the ocular motoris."

Steve began without hesitation. "Chiasma. Foramen opticum . . . Musculus . . . levator palpebrae superioris."

"Okay, now the bones of the sacrum."

Again, Steve responded quickly. "Right. From the top down: superior articular process . . . body of the first sacral vertebrae . . . then the first . . ."

Bishop laughed out loud, impressed. "Ah, the lad is quick. Very quick."

That evening they had supper in a small restaurant on Bleecker Street. They talked mostly of their past, of their relationships with their fathers, and of the remarkable similarity of their lives. Finally toward the end of the evening, Steve asked a question which had been on his mind for several days. "Why are you always squeezing that ball of wax?"

Bishop thought a moment, then smiled. "Just habit, I guess. But it seems to have a practical value." There was an empty pony glass on the table before them which had been filled with Galiano. Bishop inserted his little finger and third finger into the glass, then

slowly spread the fingers against the sides until the glass shattered. He had made another point.

Monday's training began with various attack methods. In his workshop Bishop had set up a block of wood roughly the shape of a human head. On both sides of the block were circles of foam rubber representing the ears. Bishop watched as Steve advanced slowly to the head, then suddenly and with great force cupped his hands and clapped them over the foam pads.

"Good," said Bishop. "Hard as you can without bruising."

"But how does it work?"

"The shock vibration breaks the eardrums and causes internal bleeding in the brain," Bishop replied. His tone was dry, academic, totally unemotional.

In the evening they began the first of many chemistry lessons to come. Steve watched as Bishop poured a clear liquid over a brown-red paste-like substance which had been placed over a beaker on some filter paper.

"First wash with alcohol . . ." He took another beaker of clear liquid and poured this over the paste as well. "Then ether." He took the precipitate and carefully put it into a small vial. Then filled the remainder of the vial with ether.

"And that's how you make nitrogen tri-iodide. As long as it's wet, it's safe. Once it's dry . . . well, a fly landing on it will detonate it." He tossed the vial to Steve. Steve held the vial up to the light and looked at it in fascination.

"Far out."

The chemistry lessons for explosives continued for the next week and a half and Bishop managed to keep them going during their visits to various museums and galleries in the city. On a Wednesday they attended a showing of kinetic sculptures at the Jewish Museum. As they walked through the galleries of moving constructions and infinite prisms, Bishop continued the training. "Gelatin?"

Steve had not lost the beat in the quickness of his

responses. "Nitro: 0.5; gun cotton: 5; ammonium nitrate: 59.5; woodmeal: 6; ammonium oxalate: 5; sodium chloride: 19.5."

They stopped in front of a construction of steel rods, gears, motors, all wrapped in a covering of twisted steel wires. Bishop pressed a button at the base of the construction and the entire junkpile came alive with flashing lights, chattering gears, and the whirr of electric motors. They watched the contraption for some moments, then Bishop shook his head and pointed to a door marked EXIT. As they left, Bishop continued the lesson.

"Ammonium nitrate compound."

"Okay," said Steve, "Ammonium nitrate: 63.5; sulfur flower: 2; charcoal flower: 18.5; ammonium sulfate: 7.5; water: 1; and, ah . . . copper sulfate: 7.5."

They emerged from the building onto Fifth Avenue just opposite the park. Steve walked ahead for several moments before he realized that Bishop was not at his side. He turned and saw Bishop standing near the entrance to the museum, his gaze riveted on a comic domestic drama taking place at the curb, a short distance away.

A middle-aged couple with two children were arguing loudly over the cries of the children, whose clothing was covered with chocolate stains from the melting ice cream cones in their hands. The smaller of the children, strapped in a stroller, was having a tantrum.

Steve walked back to Bishop and watched the show with him for several moments in mild amusement, before speaking.

"What's the matter?"

"Him," said Bishop, indicating the harassed father with a thrust of his chin.

"What about him?"

"Let's say he's a mark. I want you to put together a résumé, based on your own observations. Take as long as you need, starting right now. See what you can come up with." He thought a moment. "Yes, I think

it's time for you to go to this phase. You're on your own in this. Come to me when you're ready. Okay?" Steve nodded assent. They turned and looked at the family for a moment or two. Then Bishop smiled and walked away from Steve without a word.

Two weeks later Steve returned to Bishop with the results of his observations. Both men stood in front of the bulletin board in Bishop's living room studying the information assembled there. Bishop was impressed. The work had been done with painstaking care. A picture of the mark, obviously taken with a telephoto lens, was among the charts and diagrams. The time schedules had been noted to the fraction of the minute. The medical history went back seven years and was detailed elaborately. Diagrams of the furniture factory in Long Island City where he worked as a maintenance man, and the routes of his routine through it, had been carefully charted.

They had been studying the board for about three hours when Steve ventured, "The elevator at the factory."

"Explain," said Bishop without commitment.

"He's the first one to use it in the morning. He gets to the factory at four. He's the only one there at that time except for the watchman who's in the front of the building far enough away. Okay, the first thing he does when he gets there is take the elevator to the roof to check and service the air conditioning and ventilating machinery. The elevator is old, an antique. A cable breaks. Accident. Company negligence."

Bishop shook his head.

"What's the matter with it?"

"Sloppy," Bishop replied. "There's no way to fake stress damage without a lot of time and sophisticated equipment. Any professional with half a brain could spot a tool or acid cut on the cable."

"So what? They couldn't tell who did it," Steve countered carelessly.

Bishop tensed suddenly, turned and stared angrily at Steve, his words coming from between his clenched

teeth. "Don't you ever say 'So what' to me when we're doing this. Don't you ever say that to me again!"

"Okay, man," Steve replied, backing off.

"We're talking about life and death here. And I don't mean the mark's. My life and death. Yours! The odds on cable breakage are against you. There can be no investigations. No questions in that direction. *You understand?*"

"I understand," Steve answered contritely.

Bishop turned once more to the board, studied it for several moments, then picked up a marker pen and drew a line between the diagrams of the elevator, the roof, and the hallway section of the upper floor of the factory, just opposite the elevator. He stepped back away from the board, continuing to study the relationships of the diagrams, then nodded to himself.

"You were close," he said, turning to Steve. "See how this sounds to you. He goes up in the elevator, then out onto the roof. The elevator has a double gate, yes?" Steve nodded. "Okay, there's a utility closet right here next to the door leading to the roof. A man is in the closet when he comes up, waiting for him. The mark goes out onto the roof. He's out there . . . How long . . . ?"

"On an average of twelve minutes," Steve replied after checking his figures.

"Plenty of time," Bishop continued. "The man comes out of the utility closet, closes the outer gate and sends the elevator down, then reopens the gate by jumping the electric safety circuit. The light, at that time of day, in that part of the hall, is not too good. The mark won't be able to see the elevator isn't there. It will appear to be just as he left it. Gate open, elevator waiting for him. The man goes back into the utility closet and waits. The mark comes in from the roof and walks to the elevator. The man comes out of the closet, steps behind him and . . . pushes. He then goes out onto the roof and crosses over to the adjoining building and is home free. No complicated maneuvers. It's a fairly frequent type of accident. Any holes?"

Steve thought a moment, then smiled, shaking his head. "No . . ." Bishop nodded gravely, then picked up the National Safety Council booklet and read.

"In the ages between forty-five and sixty-four, of the total deaths by accident, 10,431 were from falls." He put the book down. "Falls from high places are very neat."

"That would be your choice?" Steve said. Bishop smiled at him, then turned to the board once more.

"One of them. There are other possibilities. For instance——" He was interrupted by the door bell.

"Special delivery for Mr. Arthur Bishop," said the postal messenger, reading the name off the address label.

"Yes, that's me," Bishop replied and signed the receipt for the large brown manila envelope. "Thanks." The postal messenger nodded and walked back down the steps to the street. Bishop watched him for a moment, then scanned the square to see if anyone had watched the delivery. It was empty. He closed the door and walked up the stairs to the living room.

Steve was at the board, making some calculations on a note pad which he held in his hand. As Bishop entered the room he turned to him.

"Hey . . . I got another idea . . ." He was momentarily confused by the strange smile on Bishop's face. Bishop extended his arm, offering the envelope to Steve. There was a long silence. Finally Steve stepped forward and took the envelope.

"Open it," Bishop said, continuing to smile. Steve quickly opened the envelope and took out a sheaf of papers. He read the headings on the pages, then came to an eight-by-ten picture of a man. He studied the picture for a moment, then looked up at Bishop.

"This is for real," he said, trying to contain his excitement.

"For real," Bishop replied and walked to the board. Steve watched him for a moment, then joined him and began to help him remove the lesson material.

X

Two nights later Steve and Bishop lay in the tall grass of a hill overlooking the mark's estate. It was a large ten-acre affair just outside of Riverdale, surrounded by a tall, electrified fence. The house rested on a knoll at the end of a long drive that wound upward from the main gate, which was electronically controlled. The entire setup had a fortresslike feeling to it.

Bishop made his observations of the estate through a pair of high-powered infrared field glasses, while Steve made notes. After about ten minutes, Bishop noticed a shiny object . . . a disk supported by a steel rod which extended about eight inches above the ground. He moved the field glasses slowly to the right and found another . . . then still another. The disks had been arranged in a large circle around the house. They were obviously transponders of some sort.

"There's an electronic blanket all around the house. You couldn't get within a hundred yards without tripping it." Steve made some notes. Bishop continued his scan.

The glasses moved to the front gate. A closed-circuit TV camera was trained on the area in front of the gate. "Camera at main gate." Steve wrote. The glasses moved back to the house.

At the front door there were two cameras trained on the area in front of the house, pointed in opposite directions to give a wide field of view.

"Two cameras at the front door," said Bishop, then turned the glasses to the door. "Double locks on the front door."

"Right," Steve replied, continuing with his notes.

Bishop moved the glasses to the large window of the

living room. A burly, dangerous-looking man was sitting in front of a television set. He was using an ear set, obviously not to disturb the other occupants of the house. A .38 Colt automatic was on the lamp table beside him, in easy reach. On the wall opposite the man were a TV camera, intercom switches, and controls for the alarm system. Bishop reported his observations to Steve who continued to write them down, then turned the field glasses once more to the man at the TV set. He was slapping the arm of his chair, laughing at what was taking place on the screen.

"Okay, number two's shift is now." Steve looked at his watch and wrote down the time.

"Three thirty."

"Right," Bishop replied. "And number one is in the lower bedroom, in the rear." Steve wrote. Bishop continued looking at number two for several moments, then handed the glasses to Steve. "Here, take a look." Steve put the glasses to his eyes and trained them on the man at the TV set.

"He looks rough." He lowered the glasses and looked at Bishop. Bishop nodded slightly, his expression blank.

In the morning they were at the board, sorting the information they had accumulated the night before. There was now a diagram of the house, with hallways and rooms carefully delineated. There were also the time schedules for the bodyguards, and additional sketches of the positions of the cameras, the transponders and the position of the main gate.

They had been studying the board silently for about a half hour when Bishop finally spoke.

"Whoever was on duty would check the TV screens in the living room before opening the front door. He would have to open both locks after that. That might give me time to get into position . . ." He shook his head. It still wasn't clear enough. He moved to the time schedules of the bodyguards and studied them for a moment. "Let's see what we've got here," he continued. "Okay . . . there's two of them watching him all the time, except at night, when they sleep in shifts."

He turned, walked away from the board, and began to pace. "When's number two's time?"

"Midnight to four," Steve answered, reading from the schedule.

"Right . . . right . . . Okay. The housekeeper is off from six P.M. Friday to Saturday noon . . ." He stopped pacing, suddenly, then turned to the board once more. The silence seemed to stretch interminably. Finally something clicked for Bishop. He turned to Steve.

"I want you to rent three different kinds of cars, from three different companies."

"Why three?"

Bishop shook his head and pointed to the directory. Steve shrugged, went to it and began turning pages. Bishop moved closer to the board, his eyes moving quickly over the pieces of information.

The following week was spent following the mark and his bodyguards. As the days passed, a routine of activity began to emerge that seemed to hold to a fairly predictable pattern. It began on Monday, at six A.M. in the heart of the wholesale flower market, just off Sixth Avenue.

Twenty-eighth Street teemed with activity. Trucks moved continually through the narrow street, unloading their fragile cargos. The air was heavy with sickly sweet fragrances. In several spots curbside bartering reached the shouting stage.

Steve and Bishop had been sitting for about an hour in a Plymouth at the end of the street near Seventh Avenue, when the mark and his bodyguards emerged from a warehouse halfway up the block. The guards checked the street, then nodded to the mark who had hesitated inside the doorway of the building for a second. The mark walked out onto the street. He carried a briefcase. The three men walked to a Lincoln, got in, and moved slowly away from the curb, toward Fifth Avenue.

"Okay," said Bishop. Steve started the Plymouth and followed. As they threaded their way through the carts

and trucks, Bishop's attention was arrested by a sign on a building just at the end of the block. It read: ALLIED PLATING. He took a small notebook from his pocket and noted the address, then, as they passed the building, made a quick sketch of the entrance, the alley alongside the building, and the loading dock at the end of the alley.

"What's that for?" Steve queried, glancing at the sketch.

"Don't really know yet," replied Bishop, pocketing the notebook. "Just an idea. Tell you later."

Midweek Steve and Bishop sat in a Ford coupé and observed the mark and his bodyguards emerge from the basement of a tenement on One Hundred and Twenty-Sixth Street, just off Lexington Avenue.

"What do you figure?" Steve asked, noting the bulging briefcase.

"Numbers. That's the big action up here. Maybe a smack payoff. Hard to tell."

Again the same hesitation by the mark as his boys checked the street. The nod, then the slow, careful walk to the Lincoln.

"Man, those cats stick to that dude like skin," Steve ventured.

"Professionals," Bishop nodded grimly. "They know what it's all about." The Lincoln moved away from the curb slowly. "From the way they move I'd say they've been doing this kind of work for a long time." He nodded. Steve started the engine and they moved forward, following. Bishop jotted some notes in his book, then looked up at the Lincoln a good block ahead of them. His voice had an odd, sad tone to it when he spoke.

"Yeah . . . a long time . . ."

At four A.M., Saturday morning, they were parked a short distance from Sloppy Louie's, across from the main building of the Fulton Street Wholesale Fish Market. During the twenty-minute wait before the mark emerged from the building, Bishop had glanced from time to time at the carts of fish being wheeled

by. At first, they had not bothered him, but gradually as the light began to change, as the forms and colors emerged with the dawn, his attention had been drawn to the eyes of the dead fish. He could not seem to release his mind from the thought that all the eyes were fixed on him with malevolent concentration. He struggled to think of other things . . . on the feeling of being with Steve . . . but the eyes seemed to penetrate all his defenses. He felt his breathing begin to quicken, to go shallow . . . felt the first metallic taste of nausea begin to rise . . .

"There they are," Steve whispered, breaking through Bishop's thoughts. Bishop sat up in the seat, a wave of relief moving over him like a cool hand.

The mark joked with some of the men wearing aprons who were pushing the carts into the building. Then he walked to his car.

"Man, this guy has really got a lot going for him," Steve said, watching the Lincoln pull away. He turned, looked at Bishop, and was surprised and somewhat confused at the expression he saw on his face. Bishop's lower jaw was pulled down, the muscles were tight on the sides of his neck. It was the expression of someone about to vomit.

"What's the matter?" Steve ventured.

"Move, goddammit," Bishop snapped, turning his face to the window. "Get going and stop asking so many fucking questions."

They spent the rest of the day, for the most part, in silence as they continued their observation of the mark. Steve could feel the turmoil going on in Bishop, the desperate tension. He didn't know what had caused it, but knew better than to try to question him in any way about it. In their weeks of being together it was as if they had become extensions of each other. Each could sense the other's mood, even at times his thoughts. The dimension of closeness had brought with it a set of unspoken rules, the first of which, for Steve at least,

was to back off fast when Bishop looked as he had that morning.

By three in the afternoon, however, as they moved through some quiet, shaded streets in Forest Hills, Bishop's mood seemed to have lifted. He and Steve chatted easily, sometimes even joking. The Lincoln continued on slowly in front of them through the dappled sunlight of the thickly shaded streets.

After about twenty minutes of cruising like this, the Lincoln pulled up in front of a small park, surrounded by a well-manicured perimeter of rose gardens. In the center of the park were several croquet courts. The people playing on the courts were all old; none appeared to be under sixty.

"This looks like it might be something. Stop here," Bishop said quickly. Steve pulled up to the curb and turned off the engine.

The mark and number one got out of the Lincoln and walked slowly toward the courts. The scene was strange, almost surreal. Old people moved in a kind of slow-motion ballet, tapping the balls through the hoops. Those not playing sat on benches around the edge of the courts, lifting their faces to the sun as if to draw new life from its warm rays. Bishop took a pair of field glasses from the glove compartment and put them to his eyes.

The mark and number one approached an old man of about eighty who was in the process of making a shot. The old man spotted the mark, smiled and waved, then signaled him to wait for the shot. The mark nodded. The old man made his shot, then spoke to the old woman with whom he had been playing. The old woman smiled and nodded graciously. The old man then turned and walked to the mark and number one and the three of them sat on one of the benches which was unoccupied and somewhat isolated from the ones surrounding the court.

In the car, Bishop quickly opened the briefcase on the seat beside him, took from it a small pocket tape recorder and turned it on. He put the glasses to his eyes

once more and focused them on the faces of the three people sitting on the bench. There was silence for several moments, then Bishop began to dictate to the recorder, as he read their lips.

In the park, the old man said, "It comes in tomorrow at one A.M. on El Al. I can have it to you by three."

"Bullshit," the mark replied. "I need my sleep. I'm not——"

"Okay, day after then," the old man interrupted.

"No. Tomorrow at three's okay," the mark replied after a moment's thought. "How's it come?"

"In a Chicken Lickin' truck, right to your place."

The mark turned to number one. "You check the goods when it comes. I want a real careful test. If there's any doubt . . . wake me. Understand?" Number one nodded assent. The mark turned once more to the old man. "Betta not be crap," he warned. The old man smiled.

"You always know where you can find me."

"Yeah . . . yeah, I do," the mark smiled back. He and number one got up to leave. As they were about to walk back to the car, the old woman came over to them. The mark smiled at her.

"How are you, miss. Nice day . . . nice day." His tone was overly polite. The woman nodded and smiled. The mark, in a fit of sudden generosity, decided to give the woman a rose from the patch nearby.

"Say, miss . . . I'd like you to have one of these." He struggled with the stem, bending it back and forth until it broke suddenly, driving a thorn into his finger. He handed the rose to the woman, then turned and walked to the car, sucking his finger.

Bishop dictated his final words into the recorder. "Sonofabitch flower!"

The mark and number one got into the car. Number two started the engine and the car moved away from the park.

"Shall I follow?" Steve inquired.

"No," Bishop replied, replacing the recorder in the

briefcase. "I think we just might have enough to put it together now. There's still a couple of little things . . . but . . ."

"Hey . . . where'd you learn to do that?"

"What?" replied Bishop.

"Read lips. That's really far out." Bishop smiled.

"Tools of the trade, my friend. Just tools of the trade. Get me to a phone booth."

They stopped at a diner in Long Island City, just under the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge. Bishop got out of the car, went to the outdoor phone booth in the corner of the parking lot, and paged through the classified directory, then dialed his call. Steve had parked the car and now stood just outside the booth, curious over what Bishop was up to. Bishop smiled at him, then held the receiver away from his ear slightly so Steve could hear.

"Allied Plating," a girl answered.

"I'd like to talk to somebody about a plating job," Bishop said quickly, disguising his voice slightly.

"One moment, I'll let you talk to Frank." There was a pause, then the click of an extension being picked up.

"This is Frank."

"Er . . . look. I got a bumper needs rechroming," Bishop said. "How long would it take?"

"Two days."

"That's good," Bishop said. "Let's see. Today's Thursday. If I bring it in tomorrow, I could have it Saturday, right?"

"We don't work on Saturday," Frank replied impatiently. "Monday afternoon would be the soonest."

"Okay . . . that's fine . . . that's all right," Bishop replied. "I'll bring it in." There was the click of a disconnect. Bishop hung up the receiver and smiled at Steve's expression of confusion.

XI

They drove back into Manhattan, then crosstown to Twenty-Eighth Street to Allied Plating. They circled the block slowly twice. The first time around, Bishop made notes as to the positions of doors, the type of locks on them, windows, the width of the alley alongside the building, and the relationship of the loading ramp to the alley and the street beyond.

There was a van in the street in front of the building, just at the head of the alley. On each side of the van was a sign reading, ALLIED PLATING AND METAL FINISHING. Bishop made note of the approximate size of the sign.

On their second sweep of the block Bishop took a motorized Nikon from the briefcase, checked the light and set the aperture and speed. As they approached the van he motioned for Steve to slow down.

"Easy now . . . just cruise by nice and easy. Keep us parallel to the van."

They came alongside the van. Bishop fired the camera four times in rapid succession.

That evening they both stood in the darkroom, looking down into a tray of stop bath at two sixteen-by-twenty enlargements of the sign Bishop had photographed that afternoon. During the processing of the photographs Steve had not asked any questions and Bishop hadn't offered any information as to what he was up to. It had bothered Steve at first, but gradually he had gotten to like being taught in this manner. It was now a series of wonderful surprises, each one fitting, he knew, into some kind of master plan hatching in Bishop's brain. Bishop had continued to explain some of the theoretical aspects of the project, but

there were things like this which he chose to reveal through performance.

After Bishop put the pictures into a drying drum, he turned them over to receive backing of pressure-sensitive adhesive. Next he rolled the pictures carefully and secured them with rubber bands. Then he and Steve washed and went down to supper.

They ate, for the most part, in silence. Several times Bishop began a conversation about something totally irrelevant to what they were doing; a concert he wanted to go to, a film, the new exhibit at the Modern Museum, but the talk soon trailed off into silence. Steve did not pursue the conversation. He could see the preoccupation in Bishop's face, knew his mind was elsewhere; formulating, cross-checking, weighing alternatives. They finished their meal with a dessert of *frais de bois*, flown in that morning from Paris, and little cordials of Mandocrema. Then they went to work once more at the board in the living room.

For about an hour Steve had been watching Bishop draw lines and make notes at the board. He worked with total concentration, his eyes moving quickly over the information, checking, cross-checking, back-checking. He would pursue one plan to its conclusion, which seemed to Steve to be perfect, airtight, only to begin once more with an alternative. Finally Bishop broke the silence, mumbling to himself. He was ill at ease, for some reason.

"There's no watchman at Allied on the weekend, so we wouldn't have anything to worry about there."

"Then how come you look worried," Steve said softly, without pressure.

Bishop turned to him, a faint smile of irony on his lips. He was about to speak when the phone rang. He let it ring three times before picking it up, then lifted the receiver to his ear slowly, as if knowing what was to come. Even after only the first couple of words spoken by the soft voice, he could feel that sense of peace . . . the centering . . . the warm invisible cocoon

moving to cover his body . . . as if he were settling slowly into a warm bath.

"Mr. Bishop?"

"Yes?"

"We would like you to go ahead on this one, please. Do you have any problems?"

"No problems," Bishop replied after a moment.

"You hesitate," the voice continued. "Are you sure?"

"Yes . . . there are no problems."

"Good. If you're ready we would appreciate completion this weekend. Is that possible?"

"Yes, I think so," Bishop said, looking at the board.

"Fine." There was a click on the other end. Bishop held the receiver to his ear until he heard the dial tone, then replaced it on the rest.

"The man?" Steve quiered, covering his excitement. Bishop nodded. "We get a go?"

"Yes," said Bishop, traces of worry about his eyes and mouth.

"Then what's wrong?"

With his back to Steve, Bishop stood looking at the board for some moments before answering. When he finally turned his expression was clouded, grim.

"This could get very messy . . . yes . . . it really could. We must be exact in everything. The mark is cautious. He's been at this a long time and he has instincts about this kind of thing. That makes him dangerous. Number one and two are pros, as I told you. From what we've observed I would rate them as among the best there are. Our work has got to be careful, quiet, and clean. The key, I think, is number one. Once he's down, the rest should go all right. But there's a lot to do before we get to that point." He forced a smile. Steve shrugged. There was a silence. Bishop shook his head and continued. "You've got a big three your first time out. This is going to be a heavy graduation. You going to be all right?"

"Like you told the man, no problems." Steve smiled confidently.

Bishop studied him for a moment, then nodded and

turned to the board. "Okay, pay attention. This is the way we work it . . ."

They waited in the thick cover of growth bordering the road leading to the mark's estate. Steve checked his watch. The luminous dial read twelve forty-seven. He lowered his wrist and his arm came close to his side, feeling the holster under his armpit. There was a dryness in his mouth.

Bishop had chosen this section of road because it narrowed to a point where a car would have to stop if any obstruction should be in its path. They had found a boulder and rolled it into the center of the road. Now it was only a question of time.

Both men searched the darkness ahead for a sign of headlights. They listened, but there was no sound except a faint rustle of wind and the soft drowsy hum of insects. Steve decided to use the time to go over the instructions Bishop had given him before leaving the house. He wiped his sweating hands on his trousers and began to tick them off in his mind.

Bishop, slightly in front of Steve, parted some branches in an effort to get a better view of the road. Darkness . . . silence. It was strange, this feeling he had now. For the first time since doing this work, he felt as if he carried a heavy stone in his stomach. Before, there was always that ease . . . that sureness and calm. He knew what he felt now was due to Steve. So much could go wrong if the boy faltered. It could mean . . . His thoughts were interrupted by flickering headlights. Both men tensed as the headlights disappeared, then appeared once more, the van rounding a turn. Bishop checked his watch. Twelve fifty. Everything on schedule.

The driver in the Chicken Lickin' van smiled and patted the large family-size cardboard bucket on the seat beside him. Six pounds of pure smack—he would be flush for a long time to come.

The road narrowed. He saw the boulder and slammed the brakes hard. "Sonofabitch," he said through his

teeth. He got out of the van and looked at the boulder, then at the sheer walls lining both sides of the canyon. It had obviously been loosened by the recent rain, he thought.

"Sonofabitch," he repeated, trying to move the boulder out of the way.

Steve and Bishop watched for a few moments, letting the driver clear the road of the boulder. Then as the driver was about to get back into the van, Bishop stepped out from the bushes behind him and tapped him lightly, with the edge of his hand, on the shoulder, near the neck. The driver sank to the ground unconscious. Steve moved quickly to Bishop's side, took off the driver's white jacket and hat and donned them. Bishop tied and gagged the driver with long strips of adhesive.

They lifted the unconscious form and carried it deep into the undergrowth, then returned to the van, got in and continued on toward the main gate of the estate.

"Here we go," said Steve, swallowing hard. His mouth felt as if it were full of cardboard. Bishop was on the floor of the van, at his feet.

"It's going to be all right. Just keep loose. If you tighten up, they'll sense it. It's that tricky. They'll just know," said Bishop, sensing Steve's apprehension.

"Okay, okay," Steve replied testily. They continued on in silence to the gate.

When they arrived, Steve took a moment to adjust his hat. He checked in the mirror, then pressed the button on a steel pillar. In the house, a buzzer rang and a light went on over the panel of television screens and switches.

Number one took the earphone out of his ear, turned from the program he had been watching, went to the console and flipped on the gate camera. Steve smiled into the lens. Number one studied the face for a moment, then pressed a talk button. "Yeah?"

"Chicken Lickin'," Steve replied cheerily.

Number one studied the face and the van for several more moments, then pressed the gate release.

Steve put the van into gear and moved forward slowly. The gate closed with an ominous metallic clang behind them as they moved toward the house.

"Remember what I told you," Bishop cautioned from the floor of the van. "Don't say a word once we're inside. Move only on my signal." Steve nodded. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

They pulled up in front of the house. Steve picked up the bucket and got out of the van without hesitation and walked to the front door with a kind of cocky, self-assured swagger. He knew the cameras would miss nothing. He pressed the Speak button on the intercom.

"Chicken Lickin', here," Steve chirped, smiling into the camera. "Chicken Lickin' is *lickin'* chicken," he added in an exaggerated southern drawl.

In the van, Bishop could not repress a smile. The weight in his stomach lifted a little. The kid had balls, the kind of coolness that was very rare. He had not been mistaken.

In the house, number one stared at the two screens, giving reverse angle views of Steve. "Wise guy," he muttered and went to the front door and began to open the locks.

Bishop heard the first lock snap open. He moved from the van silently as if catapulted by some powerful force, and took a position alongside the door. The timing was perfect. Just as he flattened himself against the wall, the second lock snapped open and the door opened inward.

Steve held the bucket out. Number one stepped forward slightly, reaching for it. "Okay, let's have——" His words were cut off suddenly as Bishop swung inside with incredible speed, his right hand flexed slightly above his head. Number one stepped back, his hand moving for the gun in his belt, but Bishop's hand shot out, the edge of it connecting with number one's temple. There was a faint crack. The look of surprise was

frozen on number one's face as the thought entered his brain—he was dead!

He started to fall. Bishop caught him, eased him to the floor and checked his pulse. Satisfied, he turned and looked at Steve to see his reaction. The boy seemed at ease, alert, waiting for his instructions. Bishop smiled faintly. He took number one's gun and placed it in the drawer of one of the lamp tables, then listened for any sounds. The house was silent except for the faint, tinny voices coming from the ear phone on the coffee table.

Bishop nodded to Steve and together they moved silently out into the hall and to the rear bedroom. They paused a moment, at the door, continuing to listen, then Bishop eased it open slowly and they slid into the room.

Number two lay asleep, fully clothed, his .38 automatic next to him on the bed. Bishop and Steve moved to opposite sides of the bed, alongside him near his head. Steve held a foam rubber pad in his hands. Bishop carefully withdrew a long hatpin from the collar of his jacket, then reached into his pocket for a small ball of cotton. Their eyes locked for a brief moment, then Bishop nodded.

Their actions were simultaneous, sure, precise. Steve leaned over number two and pressed the foam pad over his mouth while Bishop pushed the hatpin into the bodyguard's ear. Number two opened his eyes, his body flexed, but he was already dead in his moment of waking. There was no struggle.

Bishop withdrew the hatpin, wiping it carefully on the cotton ball, then returned them both to pocket and collar. He indicated the man's gun to Steve with a nod of his head. Steve picked up the gun and placed it in the drawer of the nightstand. Once more they both stood very still listening for any sounds. Their eyes locked, while Bishop studied the boy's face for any telltale signs of faltering. There seemed to be none. He jerked his chin toward the ceiling, indicating the floor above. Steve nodded. Before they left the room,

they straightened out the bed. Except for the absence of life in the form that lay so peacefully sleeplike on the bed, the room was as they had found it.

They climbed the stairs noiselessly to the master bedroom and entered. The mark, in expensive silk pajamas, lay soundly asleep. Once more they took their positions on opposite sides of the bed. Once more the foam rubber pad, the hatpin . . . the cotton ball. They looked at each other—Steve waiting for the signal from Bishop. The mark stirred, for some reason, his eyes coming open slowly. Bishop saw they would lose the moment. He nodded to Steve. But Steve, suddenly confronted with the mark's panicked stare, hesitated. It was only for an instant, but it was enough time for the mark's survival reflex. His fist lashed out, connecting with Steve's mouth, driving Steve backward against the wall. At the same time, the mark's left hand darted under the pillow. Sensing what was to come, Bishop dove for the floor as the gun came out from under the pillow.

The mark leaped from the bed and ran for the door, the automatic jumped in his hand as he pumped shots in all directions. Steve hugged the floor, dazed, galvanized with shock.

The mark cleared the door and headed down the hall for the stairs, Bishop sprang to his feet and followed, pressing his arm against the spring holster high on his right side. As he reached the head of the stairs, a .25 Colt automatic leaped into his hand. The mark was close to the front door, reaching for it, when he heard Bishop behind him. He turned and squeezed off a shot at the figure at the top of the stairs, but the gesture had been too hasty and the bullet missed its target by a wide margin.

Bishop lifted his gun and, in an almost leisurely manner, took aim and fired three times. The mark fell back against the door, on his forehead, between his eyes, three holes which gradually formed a perfect triangle, connected by the blood that oozed from them.

Steve had remained silent as Bishop washed the

blood from his mouth. They avoided each other's eyes. Steve knew the blunder was unforgivable, knew he was solely responsible. He clenched his teeth with the shame of it.

They collected the bodies and loaded them into the van. Before leaving, Steve pressed the photographs of the Allied Plating sign over the Chicken Lickin' signs on the van. Bishop drove, while Steve undressed the corpses. The only communication between them for the entire trip to Allied Plating was an instruction from Bishop for Steve to remove any labels he might find in the clothes.

The flower market was just coming awake as they scanned the street, making a mental note of the positions of trucks and the number of stores that were already open. There would not be as much activity today because of the weekend.

The van made its way up the street slowly, then backed into the alley to the loading ramp of Allied Plating. Bishop got out of the van and went to the freight door. His fingers moved quickly, searching for the alarm cable he knew must be somewhere in the jam. He found the cable, jumped the alarm with a pair of alligator clips, and turned his attention to the lock on the door. In a moment or two the locks snapped open under his knowing hands.

On the loading dock near the door were several large bins on wheels that were used to carry metal parts from the trucks into the building. Bishop turned and nodded to Steve who opened the rear doors of the van. Bishop pushed one of the bins to the van, steering it so that it partially entered the rear section. They loaded the bodies into the bin. Then they pushed the bin into the building after they had checked the alley carefully for any observers.

Inside the building near the freight door was a row of hooks upon which hung a number of rubber aprons. Each man took an apron, put it on, and returned to the bin, wheeling it into the soak room through a set

of swinging doors marked DANGER: VOLATILE CHEMICALS.

Once inside the room Bishop's eyes moved quickly over the huge stained vats of chemicals. His eyes stopped on one of the vats marked NITRIC. He nodded to Steve and together they pushed the bin to the vat, which was sealed with a steel cover. Bishop held the lock of the cover in his hands, studying it, then reached into his pocket, withdrew a pick and inserted it in the lock. It snapped open immediately. He then pushed back the cover, turned and nodded to Steve once more. The naked bodies were taken from the bin and carefully and slowly lowered into the solution. The cover on the vat was then replaced and locked. Bishop looked around the room, making a final check. All seemed in order. He then led the way out and they retraced their steps toward the van. The freight door was once again locked and the jumpers removed from the alarm cable. There was a quick check of the alley and the street beyond, then Steve and Bishop got into the van, eased out of the alley and up the street toward Eighth Avenue.

"How long will it take?" said Steve, without looking at Bishop.

Bishop looked at his watch. "I calculate in forty-eight hours everything will be into solution."

Bishop was driving. Steve sat next to him, the cardboard bucket in his lap. Steve removed the cover from the bucket and looked down at the clear plastic bags of white powder. "What do we do with the smack?" he asked.

"I don't know exactly," Bishop replied, "but I'm sure we'll be getting a call about it."

Driving toward the estate they passed a supermarket and deposited the clothes into a large Goodwill collection box in the center of the parking lot in front of the market. When they reached the road leading to the estate, they left the van and walked down the road about a quarter of a mile to where their rental car was hidden.

Thirty-seven minutes later they sat in Bishop's dining room having a breakfast of champagne and scrambled eggs, while the mark's résumé and their blueprint for his death burned upstairs in the living room fireplace.

XII

They had both for the most part remained silent upon arriving at Bishop's house. Neither seemed to be able to find the words to break the silence. Looks were exchanged briefly, then the glances averted. Bishop watched as Steve chewed his food, painfully, his lip quite swollen now from the blow he had received from the mark.

"How's it feel?"

"It's okay," replied Steve flatly. There was a long, awkward silence, then Bishop reached into the champagne cooler, took out an ice cube and handed it to Steve.

"Here, press this against it. It'll check the swelling."

"No. It's okay. I . . ."

"Take it." Bishop insisted. Steve took the ice cube and pressed it against his lip. There was another embarrassed silence, broken finally by Steve.

"Okay. You want to talk to me about it?" he said, stung with humiliation.

Bishop leaned back in his chair. Steve searched his face, looking for some kind of reaction but there seemed to be none. "I really don't see how there's much to talk about."

"I don't agree," said Steve quickly.

"Go ahead then," Bishop replied.

Steve took a moment, organizing his thoughts, then began. "Okay. I froze for a minute. Isn't that why we can't talk to each other?"

There was no reaction from Bishop.

"Yeah, I froze," continued Steve. "For just that little second, and that could have cost us the whole ball game. Right?"

Still no reaction from Bishop.

Steve continued. "What I want to know now is where do we go from here. I mean, what do you feel about that?"

"I don't really know," said Bishop after a moment.

"I don't believe you. I think you do. I think you have some very strong feelings about it. It could have been all so . . . so simple." Steve shook his head. "And the way you handled it after I . . . I mean you were so together, so on top of it all, holding it, not letting it get away even with my goof."

"It was your first time," Bishop said noncommittally.

"Look," Steve replied impatiently, "I'm not sparing myself and I don't expect you to. I want you to put it out front. How can you be sure——"

He was interrupted by the phone. Bishop picked up the receiver on the first ring, knowing immediately what the words to come would be. The voice spoke quietly, somewhat overly polite.

"Could you spare a few minutes, Mr. Bishop?"

"Yes. When?" Bishop replied without hesitation.

"Now. I'm at home."

"All right."

"Oh," the voice continued, "and would you be so kind as to bring the goods with you."

"Yes. I will." Bishop replaced the receiver on the rest, pushed himself away from the table and got up. The expression on his face had changed. There were tight lines of worry at the edges of his eyes and in the corners of his mouth. "I . . . ah . . . I've got something to take care of. I'll see you here later. Okay? We can finish our conversation then."

"Okay," Steve shrugged, returning to his food.

Bishop watched him eat for a moment, then climbed the stairs to his bedroom to get dressed. Before leaving the house he packed the bags of heroin into his briefcase, then made a telephone call and took a cab to La Guardia field.

It was just dawn when Bishop arrived at the airport.

He was met by a pilot who yawned and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes as he escorted Bishop to the Cessna warming up near the runway.

The flight took two hours. They headed north toward Martha's Vineyard, just off Wood's Hole, then the plane banked sharply and began its descent toward a small island to the east. In the center of the island was a large, medieval castle surrounded by a moat. A short distance from the castle was the white ribbon of a private airstrip, there were no other structures on the island.

The landing was smooth, effortless. They turned at the end of the runway and taxied back toward the hangar. As they approached the building a Rolls Royce appeared on the road that led from the castle. It moved quickly toward the airstrip, arriving as the plane came to a stop and its engines were cut. Bishop got out of the plane quickly and walked to the Rolls Royce. A uniformed chauffeur saluted and opened the door for him. Bishop got in and the car moved slowly back toward the castle.

They were met in the courtyard by another uniformed servant who escorted Bishop into the castle and down a long marble corridor to an elevator.

"This way," said the servant, indicating the elevator.

They both got in. The doors closed and the elevator began its descent. It seemed to Bishop that they had gone the equivalent of ten or twelve stories downward before the elevator finally came to a stop and the doors opened once more.

"Please," said the servant, indicating that Bishop should follow him. They walked down a long corridor to a heavy steel door and paused a moment. From the other side of the door Bishop heard a strange electrical humming sound interrupted intermittently by what he thought sounded like the crackle and sputter of sparks. The servant knocked softly. A familiar voice said, "Come in." The servant opened the door and nodded Bishop inside.

The room turned out to be a large workshop. In

the center of the floor, seated on a high stool in front of a turntable, was a man dressed in a jumpsuit, welding apron, and welding goggles. On the turntable there was a large piece of iron sculpture which was gradually changing shape as the man worked on it with torch and rod.

As Bishop approached the table, the man handed him a pair of welding goggles. Bishop put them on and watched as the work continued for some moments. Finally the man turned off the welding torch, lifted the goggles from his eyes, and turned to Bishop, a strange, enigmatic smile on his face.

"How are you, Mr. Bishop?"

"Fine," Bishop replied quickly. "I have something for you." He held out the briefcase.

"Ah, yes," the man replied casually. "Put it there, would you." He pointed to the worktable. The man stared at the briefcase for a long moment. The smile left his face. He turned once more to Bishop. "We would like to know how Harry McKenna's son figures."

"He's going to be working with me from now on," Bishop replied without hesitation.

"Do you think this is wise?" the man said after a moment.

"You saying I need your permission?"

The man blinked, then smiled. "Information is all we want, Mr. Bishop. We like to know things. An organization can only survive if its members are willing to sacrifice certain personal choices for the good of all. That's a very sound, democratic principle, Mr. Bishop. We have survived because we have this rule. What you or I want is unimportant. Only the rule."

There was a silence, then Bishop replied.

"Someone trained by me should be worth a lot to you."

The man nodded and smiled. "No one lives forever." He turned and tapped at the sculpture with a small welding hammer, then spun the turntable slowly, appraising his work. "There seems to be too much weight for the mass, don't you think?" He turned to Bishop

once more. "You take full responsibility for him then?"

"Yes," said Bishop quickly.

"Even after what happened last night?" Bishop was about to say something but the man continued. "It was not the kind of work we have come to expect from you. It's a strong word and I hesitate to use it but your performance was somewhat shoddy. I am sure it was because of the boy."

"Well, it was his first time out. I'm sure he won't—"

"Yes, yes," the man interrupted. "I'm sure you know what you're doing. I just thought the question of responsibility should be clarified between us."

"I understand," said Bishop.

"Fine," said the man, opening a drawer in the work table and taking out a manila envelope. He handed the envelope to Bishop. "I thought as long as you were coming here, you should have this now. Save us some time. The preliminary work has been done carefully. I've checked it over myself. Sorry it comes so soon after . . . I mean, you've hardly had a chance to rest, but this one has to be done fast. Very fast."

"I'll handle it the way I always have," Bishop replied, tensing slightly.

The man smiled. "Ah, but there might not be enough time for that. You see, our friend is on the run. The word is he's getting ready to talk to some people. The problem is considerable, Mr. Bishop."

Bishop's tension increased. "Look, I'm not some Cleveland shooter. I don't cowboy." There was a long silence. The man clasped his hands together prayerlike.

Finally he spoke. "Mr. Bishop, unless this is taken care of quickly, things could get complicated, sloppy. That would disturb a lot of people. We want you to be aware of our time problem. It's really not open to discussion, Mr. Bishop. This business about McKenna's son has disturbed a few of our associates. I understand it, of course, but these people see it only from the outside. A quick, clean job now would go a long way in putting everything back in proper balance."

The silence hung heavy, ominous between them.

"I understand," Bishop replied finally.

"I knew you would," said the man, turning away from him back toward the sculpture. "Your man is in Naples. We've given you a name in Rome for any equipment you might need." He lowered his goggles, lit the welding torch, and returned to his work. The conversation was obviously over. Bishop took off his welding glasses and quickly left the room.

On the trip back to New York he thought about Steve and the events of the past several months. He knew he could not possibly go back to what it had been like before Steve. There might be some difficulty ahead but he knew intuitively that Steve would make it. He had all the proper instincts and now his task would be to hone these instincts so that Steve could eventually function almost automatically in the work that was to come. Yes, it would be all right. It would take some time but the raw material was there, and more than that he knew that Steve could keep him from the abyss.

He arrived home to find Steve's car missing. He paid the cabbie and moved into the house quickly. There was a strange new emotion stabbing at him; irritating, undefined. He walked into the living room and in the next twenty minutes he dialed Steve's house seven times. Each time his call was answered by a busy signal. He opened the envelope and began to examine the résumé. He tried to concentrate but found his thoughts quickly drifting. He called Steve once more. Again, the same busy signal. He sat very still for some moments, his thoughts racing, then replaced the pages of the résumé in the envelope, locked the envelope in a drawer, and left the house.

The troubled expression on Arthur Bishop's face was gradually replaced by a faint smile as he approached Steve's house and saw Steve's white Lotus parked at the front door. He pulled up behind it, got out of his car quickly, went to the door and rang. He waited impatiently for some long moments but there

was no answer. He rang several times more but no sound came from within the house. He tried the door, found it unlocked, and entered the house.

Most of the lights were on. A radio played softly from the living room. "Steve," Bishop called. There was no answer. He walked to the living room. On the coffee table was a bottle of champagne newly opened with two half-filled glasses next to it. Bishop picked up one of the glasses and rubbed his finger lightly over the lipstick stain. He turned suddenly and climbed the stairs to the second floor. As he reached the top of the stairs he called once more. "Hey, Steve." Still no answer. He checked the master bedroom, the bath, then entered the study. The house was entirely empty.

He was about to leave the study when the thought crossed his mind. He walked to the desk, sat, and turned on the desk lamp. The phone was off the hook. He replaced the receiver, then took a pen from his pocket and looked for a piece of paper on which to write a note. There was none on the top of the desk. He tried to open the center drawer of the desk and found it locked. He smiled, took a pick tool from his pocket, and quickly opened the drawer.

Inside there were several sheets of writing paper on top of a file folder. He took a sheet of paper and lifted it out of the drawer. In the process the edge of his hand moved the folder slightly so that a snapshot slid out, partially exposing the top half of the face of a man. Bishop closed the door and began to write his note. He stopped suddenly in the middle of a word. Something! It was as if someone had placed an icy hand on the back of his neck. Something!

He opened the drawer once more, stared at the snapshot for some moments, then slid it slowly out of the folder. It was a picture of himself, obviously grabbed with a long lens. He lifted the picture close to his face, studying it, then took the folder out of the drawer and opened it. On the first page were typed the words *Arthur Bishop. Age 47. 12 Sutton Place Square, New York City.* He flipped the pages in the folder, reading

the headings. Medical History, Habits, Schedules, Idiosyncracies . . . He closed the folder and stared at it for a long while, frozen, unable to move.

He did not know how long he had been sitting there when he finally moved again. He seemed to have lost any sense of time, seemed to have been caught in a strange limbo of no thought, but he was moving again, was gradually aware of the thoughts racing through his mind. With great care he replaced the picture in the file and put the file back into the drawer, being careful to return it to the exact position in which he had found it. He then relocked the door, crumpled the note he had begun, put it into his pocket, turned off the desk lamp and left the house.

At one thirty the following morning Arthur Bishop sat in his robe on the living room couch, staring transfixedly at the expanse of white wall opposite him. On the coffee table in front of him were several white tablets and a glass of water. The room was darkened. On the hi-fi the cloudlike voicings of the *Stabat Mater*. Bishop's breathing was shallow, rapid, his face a chalk-white mask. He took his eyes from the wall and looked down at his hands, his palms were covered with sweat. He took a handkerchief from his robe pocket and wiped them. He reached over and was about to take a sip of water when he was interrupted by the ringing of the front door bell. He got up and walked slowly downstairs.

Steve stood on the threshold, grinning.

"Hey, you're still up. Good."

Bishop let him in without a word and they walked upstairs to the living room. The air was thick with tension. Bishop turned on a couple of lamps, then walked to the coffee table, picked up the two pills, and washed them down with water.

"You okay?" said Steve, shocked at Bishop's appearance.

"Fine. Don't I look fine," said Bishop, avoiding his eyes. "I called you about nine but . . ."

Steve grinned sheepishly. "Louise. She picked me up

and we did the thing. Very good for the nerves, you know. She has this sensational thing she does."

"Spare me the details," Bishop interrupted acidly.

"I'm sorry. I just got hung up."

"Look, let's not get into this, huh," Bishop snapped. "It's ridiculous enough as it is."

"Well, if I'd known you wanted to . . ."

"You're a free agent, my friend! The only thing you have to do here is fulfill the requirements of this association. That means your occasional presence, some intelligent responses and some skill in your work. Nothing more."

"You got that," Steve replied. "So what's bugging you?"

Bishop suddenly knew he was revealing too much. He checked himself, trying to relax, then shook his head and forced a smile. "Nothing. Forget it." There was another long silence. Bishop poured himself another glass of water and sipped it slowly. Steve could see he was having some difficulty. Bishop leaned back on the couch and began to speak with a strange, quiet objectivity.

"Interesting. The pattern is always the same. I can almost time the minutes it takes to hyperventilate. It would be wonderful if you could keep it all straight in your head. I mean the details of it. The body does such strange things psychosomatically. Interesting."

"Shouldn't you call a doctor?" Steve said.

"It's passing," Bishop replied, shaking his head.

"I'm really sorry, Arthur."

"You mustn't feel responsible. It was happening long before I knew you. As I said, part of the price. You live alone, incommunicado so to speak, for so long, then the sudden connection with a person and then a situation like this and the isolation suddenly comes crashing down on you."

Steve did not know what to say. There was a long, awkward silence. Bishop's breathing finally found its normal rhythm, gradually his body came under control.

He smiled, got up, went to the door and took out the manila envelope and held it up for Steve to see.

"You got one so soon?" Steve said.

Bishop nodded and dropped the envelope in Steve's lap.

"They want us to cowboy him."

"Explain," Steve replied, opening the envelope and studying the picture of the mark.

"It seems he's about to do some talking to some people which could be very embarrassing to everybody. He's in Naples. They want me to get him now. Fast. Any way I can."

"That doesn't sound very cool. What are you gonna do?"

Bishop smiled. "I'm getting too old to change my habits. I'll do what I always do. Carefully, slowly, in my own time, in Italy."

Another silence. The unanswered question hung heavily between them. Bishop prolonged it for some moments, then smiled and took Steve off the hook.

"I could use your help," he said softly, the tone of his words almost a plea.

"Anything," Steve said quickly.

"Okay," said Bishop, suddenly very friendly and cheerful. "First thing, I want you to get the hell out of here so I can get some sleep. The passport office in Rockefeller Center opens at eight thirty in the morning. Be there. There's a twenty four-hour service if you tell them it's an emergency. We ought to be able to leave Wednesday morning. Goodnight."

Steve dropped the envelope on the coffee-table and jumped to his feet. "Okay. Okay. Yeah, goodnight." He started for the door.

"You can let yourself out. Okay?" Bishop said from the couch.

"Sure, man," Steve replied. There was a silence. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Right," Bishop replied flatly. Steve left the room. Bishop sat unmoving, listening to his footsteps as he descended the stairs, opened the front door, and left

the house. Bishop lifted the glass of water to his lips and sipped slowly. His eyes closed, then pressed tightly, an expression of unbearable pain. The empty house seemed to throb around him.

XIII

The BEA plane banked sharply, making its approach to Naples. Bishop pointed to the view below. Steve moved closer to the window and looked down. Below them, the glistening Bay of Naples held in the embrace of deep purple landforms. Vesuvius towered above it all, dark, solemn, menacing. From the shore inland, the city was submerged in a dirty brown cloud of smog. Beneath the cloud, thousands of Fiats and Alphas raced noisily through the streets, continually feeding and sustaining it. But from land's end outward to sea, from the edges of the city into the mountains, the air was clear, the forms and colors emerged in wonderful profusion. Steve could see Capri, Ischia . . . then to the south the jewels of Amalfi, Positano, Ravello.

"Far out," he smiled, then turned to Bishop. "Just like in the postcards." Bishop nodded, then tightened his seat belt as they approached the field.

They deplaned through a crowd of shouting and wailing Neapolitans caught in the sacred and somewhat circuslike act of Italian reunion, and made their way to customs.

It took only a moment to move past the inspectors. They made brief verbal declarations and their baggage was marked with chalk and was passed to a waiting porter, untouched. Search would have made no difference. They were absolutely clean. There was the name of the man in Rome when the time came.

The taxi careened through the narrow streets as if protected from collision with other vehicles, pedestrians, and buildings by some invisible force field. Their ride to the hotel was done to the accompaniment of an unrelentingly steady stream of curses and protestations

from their driver, who, upon leaving the airport grounds, had been suddenly and miraculously transformed into a reincarnation of the Marquis di Portago at his Ferrari.

The driver's hand remained glued to the horn as they made their way through the city, moving toward the coast. The streets became narrower. They passed red-stuccoed villas from the eighteenth century, crumbling under the perpetual onslaught of the combination of dampness and sun which softened then dried the structures, eventually into a fine powder. They passed tiny wharves where fishermen mended their nets and made jokes. Women called to children from balconies, mixing their voices with the shrill cries of vendors pushing carts of fish and fruit. On a narrow breakwater, an old man fished with smiling patience, knowing the sea rewarded those with faith.

They arrived at their hotel, the Excelsior, and were escorted to a suite overlooking the bay; two bedrooms, separated by a sitting room. The furniture was all blond mahogany, in the style of what had been called "modern" in the late forties. They unpacked, had supper brought up, ate ravenously, then sat on the terrace overlooking the sea, watching the shadows creeping slowly down the slopes of Vesuvius, reaching for the city with fingers of night that gradually closed and coalesced the darkness.

They had been sitting in silence for about an hour when Steve finally spoke.

"We . . . ah, start tomorrow?" Bishop nodded, without turning his attention from the dancing reflection of light in the water below. Steve got to his feet. "Anything you want to go over tonight?" Bishop shook his head. He seemed to be caught in some light trance. "Well . . . I'm gonna crash. This time-change thing's got me all fucked up. Okay?" Bishop nodded slightly and Steve went into his bedroom and closed the door.

Bishop continued to stare at the lights in the water, mesmerized by the patterns of lines and jewel-like explosions of color. He felt cold inside. A coldness he

had never felt before. Ice. Totally ice! He had a sensation that if he should move, no matter how slightly, if he should come into contact with any solid object, then he would surely shatter into a thousand pieces. He struggled with the idea for over an hour, then gradually forced it from the screen of his brain. He knew he would not be able to sleep. He stirred slightly, then leaned back in his chair in preparation for the night's vigil. Yes . . . he would wait for the light as he had for so many of the days of his life. Wait. Tomorrow it would begin again. Maybe there would be some relief. Perhaps the peace would come again. No matter how brief it would be, he would be grateful. He would be able to go on.

The following afternoon Bishop and Steve sat in a rented car on a side street leading to the Piazza of the Plebiscite. On one side of the square was a Romanesque basilica fronted by white columns which were capped with triangular capitals bearing friezes. On the opposite side was an eighteenth-century palazzo with a long, vaulted porticoed arcade, facing to the center of the square. The mark and his bodyguard had entered this building and had been inside for over an hour.

Steve fidgeted with some of the switches and controls on the dashboard. Bishop took his eyes from the building he had been watching and turned them to the boy.

"You nervous about something," he said softly.

"No," Steve replied quickly. "Just like to get into it. I've got some things to make up for. I guess I'm kinda anxious."

Bishop smiled faintly and looked back toward the building he had been watching.

They had found the mark's villa early that morning; a luxurious, castellated rococco affair, surrounded by beautiful gardens that sloped gently to the water's edge. He had emerged from a twenty-eight-foot cabin cruiser, moored at a private dock outside the villa, gotten into his car with his bodyguard and had made several stops

at various official buildings in the city before coming to the piazza.

The first time-schedule notations had gone into Bishop's notebook. It had begun.

Steve was engrossed in watching the movements of two pigeons involved in the ritual of mating foreplay when he felt Bishop tense. He looked up to see the mark and his bodyguard emerge from the building and head for their Maserati. Bishop lifted a small binocular camera to his eyes, trained it on his target, and snapped two pictures.

"What's the time?" he asked quickly. Steve looked at his watch.

"One thirty-six."

"Note it." Steve made the entry.

They followed the mark for the rest of the afternoon, and when, at around seven, he and his bodyguard entered a restaurant for supper, Bishop had suggested that they dine there also. After all, he appeared to be a man of good taste. Even after only these few hours of preliminary observation he had demonstrated superb choices in cars, houses, boats, surely the choice of eating place must follow.

The restaurant was built on a small promontory overlooking the bay. The dining area was a large, overhanging terrace, with a clear view of Vesuvius and the mountains to the south. It specialized in seafood. Scattered among the tables where people ate were elaborate and grotesque arrangements of dead fish, wired into fantastic shapes of boats, flowers, human faces.

The mark sat alone at a table, near the seaward edge of the terrace, sucking clams which he took from a huge pile on the cart next to him. His bodyguard, a short distance away, near the door, also sat alone, eating. Steve and Bishop had taken a table at the far end of the terrace, a row of pillars providing the comfortable screen to partially obscure them from their subject.

Bishop had ordered for them both: the specialty of the house *sopa de pesce*, followed by spaghetti carbonara, scallopini, and *funghi trifolati*. The meal pro-

gressed in silence until Bishop asked the waiter about a certain wine. The waiter became suddenly animated and excited, left for some moments, and then returned with a dusty bottle which he kissed reverently, opened, and placed on the table.

Bishop opened the wine and filled Steve's glass, then his own. Before drinking, he studied the label.

"Casa dei Fiori." A smile came to his lips. He seemed suddenly, and for the first time since their arrival, cheerful and friendly.

"Is this so special?" Steve asked, lifting his glass and holding it against the light. Bishop lifted his glass as well.

"Last time I had this was ten years ago. They make it right here. Not enough to export. Even so . . . it doesn't travel."

Steve lifted his glass to his lips and drained it.

"Not bad."

Bishop smiled tolerantly.

"There's something you're going to have to learn. Time is very important in the enjoyment of things. Slowing down to savor . . . even in what we're doing now. There's a wonderful peace that comes with figuring things carefully, without rush. It's the same with tastes, emotions, the feel of things. Savoring. Extracting the essence of things . . . wringing them dry . . . then moving on to the next sensation. Feeling . . . knowing every move . . . turning it over and over . . . in your mind . . . your hand . . . on your tongue . . . like this wine. Yes . . . there is one difference, though, between what we do and sensual pursuits. With this, the process must be more precise, because of the heavy penalty involved. Yes. If you drink wine quickly only the taste is lost . . . but with the other thing . . . well, you have to be dead sure—or dead. The price is more than a taste . . . the smell of a subtle bouquet. And there is almost never a second chance."

He put his glass to his lips and sipped slowly, rolling the wine under his upper lip.

"I'll try to remember that," Steve said. He filled his

glass once more, then drank as Bishop had just demonstrated.

"Remember! Don't *try*. Dead sure . . . or dead," Bishop whispered, then smiled. The words hung in the silence between them for the remainder of the meal.

In the morning they followed the mark into the Bassi Napolitani, the Casbah-like quarter of Naples. Tall, balconied buildings towered over the tangle of narrow, shaded streets which seemed to turn on themselves like a labyrinth. Washing hung from lines connecting the buildings in a great patchwork of color. In the narrow passageways, a cacophony of street vendors and honking horns.

Steve and Bishop watched from a doorway as the mark, a beautiful girl, and another couple stood at a produce stall. The mark's girlfriend playfully grabbed a cluster of grapes and began feeding them to him in Caesar-like fashion. The group broke into laughter, then entered a building nearby. Bishop opened his notebook.

"Time?"

"Ten twenty-five."

They followed the mark for the next two days, continuing to accumulate the information which would lead to the final blueprint of the plan.

At the end of the second day they sat in their hotel suite studying pictures of the mark's villa, his cabin cruiser, and the various locations he had visited since their arrival. They both agreed that the information was still incomplete; they needed more time.

Steve finally got up and began to pace the room. A silent tension built up.

"The room isn't going to get any bigger," said Bishop after some moments of watching him.

"Yeah. Well, I think I'll take a walk. Okay with you?"

Bishop shrugged. Steve left the room quickly.

In the street outside he paused a moment taking a deep breath, filling his lungs with the cool sea air, then began to walk, angry at his own impatience.

At 3 o'clock in the morning Arthur Bishop lay on his

bed on the verge of sleep. Even as he drifted into it he was surprised at his own feeling of exhaustion; surprised and grateful. His breathing was deep, steady, his body relaxing. Suddenly the eyes were wide open, the body tense, coiling. He had heard a slight noise at the door. In one silent movement he was out of bed and against the wall alongside the door. A moment passed, then the door opened slowly against him. Bishop's arm raised upward as if being pulled by some invisible wire. The arm flexed at the elbow, the fingers of the hand folded at the first knuckle and then the arm was slowly cocked back.

The figure stepped into the room. Bishop leaped forward, grabbed the intruder with his left hand; the right hand started its forward motion toward the bridge of the nose.

"Hey!" The voice was Steve's. Bishop's hand stopped a fraction of an inch from the kill spot, then he reached over and turned on the light. Steve grinned sheepishly.

"Dumb, huh?"

Bishop stepped back away from him. "Very dumb."

"Sorry," said Steve, weakly. "I didn't want to wake you. I got hungry and remembered I left some candy bars in your . . ." He pointed to Bishop's nightstand.

Bishop did not respond.

Steve shrugged, crossed to the nightstand, opened the drawer and took out several candy bars.

"Can't help it. I go crazy when I get hungry at night. I didn't mean to ——" His words were cut off by the look on Bishop's face. He forced a smile. "Yeah, well, goodnight." Bishop nodded slightly and Steve left the room, closing the door behind him. It was some moments before the fingers of Bishop's right hand finally opened.

In the morning they were back at work observing the villa from a steep hill which rose sharply behind it. Through his binoculars Bishop saw the mark, his girlfriend, and his bodyguard boarding the cabin cruiser. Several moments passed, then the cruiser started up and headed out to sea.

"What now?" said Steve.

Bishop shook his head and continued to watch the cruiser for about ten minutes before answering. "He's going south. Let's see how far we can get on the coast road."

Steve drove quickly through town and onto the Autostrada. In thirty minutes they were passing through Atrani on the narrow coast road. Once past the town they pulled off into a viewing area, parked, and waited.

It was only twenty minutes before the mark's cruiser appeared from around a narrow headland. Bishop nodded to himself; he had guessed correctly. The cruiser continued south, hugging the coast.

At 5 o'clock that evening Steve and Bishop continued their observation of the mark's cabin cruiser, which was now moored in the Golfo Persico, a small, beachless bay walled by sheer cliffs. On the afterdeck of the cruiser the bodyguard served drinks to the mark and his girlfriend. A small dinghy had been lowered over the side and was tied astern. Bishop scanned the boat through his field glasses, paying particular attention to the cabin layout, the bridge access, and the deck space fore and aft. Steve wrote in the notebook as Bishop dictated his findings.

By the end of the second week a considerable amount of information had been accumulated, but to Steve it seemed that it still didn't go together. After a particularly frustrating day he and Bishop sat in the living room of their suite studying the pictures and notes spread out on the coffee table. Among the materials was also a marine chart showing the waters of the cove and coastline where the mark's boat had been moored.

Bishop sipped a glass of wine as Steve tapped a pencil nervously on the coffee table. They had been at it for several hours and Steve's frustration had continued to grow.

"Seems he doesn't do anything the same way, the same time, twice." Bishop nodded, then walked to the

terrace and looked out to sea. It was some moments before he spoke.

"Except to spend the night on board that boat Friday and Saturday." He thought a moment, then walked to the coffee table and studied the photos of the cabin cruiser and the marine chart. A smile came to his face. "Boat accident. Say a diesel leak explosion. Yeah, that would be very nice."

"But how do we get close enough?" said Steve. "There's no beach. They would spot a boat coming in plenty of time."

Bishop sat on the couch and picked up the marine chart. He studied it for some moments, then looked up at Steve. His smile seemed to have gotten larger. "You scuba?"

"Yeah," said Steve, somewhat confused. He was about to continue when the idea suddenly jumped out at him clear and sharp. "Yes. Yes, I can," he said excitedly. "That is far out. Okay, how does it go together?"

Bishop marked an X on the marine chart in the spot where the cruiser had moored, then handed the chart to Steve and walked into his bedroom to get his coat and briefcase. He came back into the room putting on his coat.

"I've got to pick up some equipment in Rome. I can just make the ten o'clock. Be back tomorrow night. I want you to study the chart. Memorize this area." He pointed to where he had marked the X. "The beach, these offshore formations, the water depths, everything that's on there. Got it?"

"Check," said Steve quickly.

"There are some details I still have to work out but I'll fill you in when I get back." He turned and left the room quickly.

Steve went to the couch, sat down and spread the chart in front of him on the coffee table. He studied it for a moment or two, then noticed Bishop's unfinished glass of wine. He smiled, reached out and picked up the glass, then smelled the wine, held it to the light, and sipped it slowly.

XIV

On the Friday night of the week following Bishop's trip to Rome both men found themselves in a small flat-bottomed speedboat. The boat, equipped with a powerful outboard motor, had been hidden in a small inlet separated from the Gulf of Persico by a jagged point of land stretching into the sea. Both men were dressed in wetsuits and masks. Neither spoke as they checked the equipment in the bottom of the boat. The equipment included lines and floats and mini air tanks; enough for a twenty-five-minute dive. Two sealed waterproof bags contained sawed-off Browning automatic shotguns. There were a number of small, square, waterproof bags containing gelatin explosives, timing devices, and suction pads. They strapped leg holsters, containing pistols fitted with silencers, to their calves. Then Bishop opened the bags with the shotguns and began loading them.

"You really expecting that kind of action?" Steve whispered.

Bishop smiled at him, finished loading the shotguns, and replaced them in the waterproof bags, tying them securely. He then picked up two of the bags containing explosives and tied them to his weight belt. It was some moments before he answered Steve's question. "You start losing odds when you're out in the open like this." He handed Steve a waterproof bag of shotgun shells. Steve fastened the bag to his weight belt, then both men put on their air tanks, and tested their regulators. They checked each other's equipment carefully, in silence, for some moments. Then Bishop spoke once more.

"You straight on everything?"

"Yep."

"Where's our man sleep?"

"Forward bunk, starboard."

"His friend?"

"Aft starboard, near the door."

"Engine hatch?"

"Aft of the bridge, about four feet."

"Okay, let's go," said Bishop, satisfied. "It'll be light soon." They lowered their masks and slid over the side of the boat into the water.

It took them eight minutes to round the point of land and arrive at the cruiser. Before surfacing they slipped their tanks and tied them to the anchor chain, then made their way noiselessly to the surface. On board all seemed quiet. The cruiser was dark except for mooring lights fore and aft. Steve and Bishop treaded water for some moments, listening for any sign of life. Finally Bishop nodded and they boarded. On deck they took the shotguns out of the waterproof bags and made their way to the main cabin.

Bishop put his ear to the cabin door, listening. The silence continued. He slowly opened the door, and they entered, shotguns at the ready, and approached the berths. There was a sudden look of worry on Bishop's face. Something was wrong about the shapes under the blankets. Bishop moved quickly and pulled one of the blankets down revealing a large, stuffed duffle.

"They've got to be here," said Steve. "Nobody got off."

Bishop's mind was racing trying to calculate all the possibilities. "The dinghy!" He had just spoken the words when there was a slight sound outside the cabin door. Bishop turned instinctively and fired four bursts directly into the door. A moment passed and then the door swung open and the mark, his chest and stomach torn open, gaping, tumbled into the cabin. Bishop stepped forward. As he moved Steve caught a movement on deck outside the cabin window. The mark's bodyguard was in the process of leveling a Universal

Enforcer carbine at Bishop. Steve yelled, "Watch it!" and as Bishop dropped to the floor Steve swung his shotgun toward the window. A blast of carbine fire ripped the paneling just above Bishop's head. The blast was followed by three explosions from Steve's shotgun. The bodyguard staggered backward clutching at his face, which had been torn in half, then fell dead.

Steve and Bishop stood frozen, listening. The only sound was the gentle lap of waves against the ship's hull. Finally Bishop nodded and they made their way slowly back out on deck.

"But how could they know?" said Steve.

"We've been set up," replied Bishop. The words had barely left his lips when they heard the sounds of boat engines approaching. "Let's move." They replaced the shotguns in the waterproof bags and dove overboard, heading for the cover of rocks where their boat was hidden. Above them, two powerful speedboats, each holding two men with machine guns, approached the cabin cruiser slowly.

Steve and Bishop surfaced in time to see the speedboats pull up alongside the cruiser and the men board.

"Friends of yours?" asked Steve, breathing heavily. Bishop kept his eyes fixed on the cruiser. "Come on, man. What the hell's going on?" Bishop turned to him, speaking softly.

"These are the people I work for."

"Explain."

"I didn't check with them before bringing you in with me. It seems I've broken a rule. They get very upset when you do that."

On the deck of the cabin cruiser the four men from the speedboats looked down at the two torn bodies. One of the men, obviously the leader of the group, short, powerfully built, slowly scanned the shoreline, the cliffs, the water around the boat, then spoke in Italian.

"They're not going any place. All we need is the light. They're still here, close. If they go under, we'll see the bubbles. Look for that. I'll take my boat to the

mouth of the cove to keep them from coming out." The leader and his partner got into their speedboat and headed for the narrow opening of the cove. The remaining two men took positions fore and aft, on the cruiser.

Steve watched as Bishop opened one of the small bags tied to his weight belt and withdrew a gelatin charge. He attached it to a suction device, then connected the wires leading to a small time-delay mechanism.

"You were very fast back there," Bishop said as he worked.

"Just tools of the trade. What's that all about?" Steve said, indicating the explosive. Bishop smiled.

"I think I'll just cut the odds down a little. They've pretty much got us bottled in here. We'll have to make a run for it eventually. You get to the boat and wait there." He slipped his mask down over his face, submerged, and swam toward the cruiser once more.

The leader's boat continued to cruise slowly back and forth in the opening to the cove. On the deck of the cruiser, the two men on guard peered into the dark water. It was fast becoming light. The silence stretched for some moments, then the men heard a soft thud under the boat. They slipped the safeties off their machine guns and began firing into the water, in a circle around the boat.

The leader heard the firing. He turned on his walkie talkie and put it to his lips. "What's going on?" The voice that responded from the cruiser was breathless with excitement.

"We heard something under the boat."

"Anything?"

"No . . . not yet."

"All right," replied the leader. "Take it easy. We've got time. Don't start shooting until you're sure of a target."

Bishop made his way back toward the spot where Steve was waiting with the boat. He had gone about two thirds of the way when suddenly he ran out of air.

He slipped his tank, surfaced briefly for air, then continued on to the boat.

Steve gave him a hand in. "You okay?"

"Yeah . . . fine," Bishop replied, pulling off his mask and flippers.

"Hey, that sounded like a small war."

"That's exactly what we've got here, my friend."

"How long will it take?" Bishop looked at his watch.

"Just about . . ." His last word was lost in the sound of the explosion.

The cruiser and the speedboat alongside it were hurled skyward, lifted on the petals of a huge white and crimson flower of flame. There were some feeble moans, somewhere in the dark water . . . then all returned to silence.

"Okay! Now!" Bishop snapped, grabbing the wheel of the boat. "Hold on!" He pressed the start button and the engine came alive, going immediately to full throttle. The small boat seemed to leap from the cover of rocks, out to sea.

The leader had been watching the burning remains of the cabin cruiser when he heard the sound of Bishop and Steve's boat. He turned and saw it heading toward the mouth of the cove. He pointed. "There!" His companion pushed the throttle full forward and they gave chase, seeking to cut Bishop's boat off before it could reach the open sea.

It took only a few moments for Bishop to realize they had no chance at this game. The boat pursuing them had three times their power. It would only be a question of time before they would be overtaken and come under the submachine guns. "Where's that reef?" he shouted to Steve over the roar of engine. Steve looked toward the shore, then to the mouth of the cove, getting his bearings.

"There!" He pointed to an opening between two rock formations, just wide enough for a small boat to get through. Beyond the opening lay the open sea and escape.

"How much clearance?" Steve looked at his watch.

"This tide . . . about a foot and a half."

"That's all we need." Bishop turned the boat sharply and headed for the opening. The boat behind them was closing quickly. Machine-gun fire kicked up the water around them. "You know what to do?" he shouted, pointing to the dark shadow of reef just in front of the opening. Steve nodded. "I hope you're right about the depth," Bishop continued. "There's room enough for him to get through too, if you're not."

"Trust me," Steve shouted back. Their eyes locked for a moment; then Bishop turned to see the opening coming up on them fast. As they approached the reef, Bishop yelled, "Now!"

Steve pulled the release pin on the outboard and tilted the engine into the boat. There was a scraping, but they were over the reef.

The men in the boat behind saw the reef, knew they didn't have the clearance to go over, but could do nothing because of their speed. The boat's hull connected with the jagged formation and was torn away in an instant. The boat sank immediately. The two men began to swim toward shore.

Bishop turned and looked back at them for a moment, his face tight, angry. "Take the wheel," he shouted to Steve. Steve moved forward. Bishop pointed to the men swimming. "Go back." Steve nodded, and turned the wheel sharply, heading back into the cove, as Bishop removed one of the shotguns from its bag.

In a few moments they were close to the men. As Bishop and Steve approached, one of the men raised his right arm to them, slapping the inside of his elbow in the classic insult. Bishop fired five times, emptying the shotgun, then turned to Steve, a strange, peaceful smile on his face. "Let's go," he said softly.

They made their way back to Naples along the coast road. Steve drove. After about twenty minutes of silence, Steve finally spoke.

"That got just a little hairy, back there."

"I don't think it's over. These people are very thorough. Once you understand them, you have some

idea—" His words were cut off by what was suddenly revealed in the road ahead, as they rounded a sharp turn.

Two cars blocked the road. Behind them three men with automatic weapons. A third car was parked some hundred feet beyond the block. Bishop quickly took the shotguns and pistols from the rear seat. "Okay . . . we've got to go through. When you get about a hundred feet away from them, slow down as if you're going to stop, then put her in first and keep her rolling as fast as you can and jump out when I tell you. Point her right through the center."

The men at the road block watched the car approach. They raised their weapons and were about to open fire, when the car slowed down as if to stop. There were confused expressions on their faces for an instant, then the car suddenly picked up speed and headed toward them. They began shooting.

Steve ducked as a spray of bullets crashed through the windshield. His hand was pressed hard against the accelerator, the engine screamed, full throttle. "Go!" yelled Bishop. They jumped from the car just before it crashed.

The two men behind the cars had been unable to move quickly enough to save themselves. Their bodies jerked convulsively in the flames of the gasoline explosion that followed the impact. The third man had run and taken cover behind some trees. He continued firing.

Bishop and Steve returned the fire, but their weapons did not have the range to be effective. The exchange of fire continued for some moments, then Bishop pointed to the remaining car. Steve nodded and they made a desperate run toward it, dodging the fire from the trees.

Bishop reached the car first. He jumped in, started the engine, put it in gear, and started forward. Steve reached for the door handle, but missed it, and fell to the road as the car raced away.

Bishop turned and looked back. Steve got to his feet and was running toward him, but the man in the trees

now moved out to the road and was firing at Steve. Bishop slammed the car into reverse and jammed his foot against the accelerator. The car raced backward toward Steve, then passed him moving toward the man with the submachine gun. The man now began firing at the car in an effort to stop it, but the car did not stop. He turned to run, but the car was already upon him, crushing him into the road.

The lights of Naples were just coming into view when Steve finally spoke.

"Thanks. Now we're even, I guess."

"I guess," Bishop replied. There was a long silence.

"What do you think they'll do next?"

Bishop shook his head.

"I doubt if they'll try anything more here. They need time to regroup, so to speak."

"Got a plan?"

Bishop nodded. "London, then on to Spitzbergen. I've got a boat waiting there."

"Just like that, huh?" Steve replied.

"There was always the possibility this could happen."

"And after Spitzbergen?"

"I'll tell you as we go along," Bishop answered flatly. Another silence.

"So we run, huh?"

"That's all that's left, my friend."

XV

Arthur Bishop snapped his suitcase closed, then carried it into the living room of the suite. "Come on, let's move it," he called to Steve.

"Right . . . just a minute," Steve replied. A moment passed and he appeared, suitcase in hand.

"Got everything?" said Bishop. Steve looked around the room.

"I think so."

"Let's go."

They moved to the door and were about to exit when Steve pointed to a bottle of Casa dei Fiori on the sideboard.

"Hey, we might not get back here for a long time. Whata ya say?" Bishop thought a moment, then smiled.

"Make it quick."

"Hey, that's really out of character coming from you. Well . . . maybe due to the circumstances beyond our control . . . the gods of wine will forgive us." He broke the seal on the bottle, pulled the cork, and poured. They drank quickly, then left.

Fifteen minutes later, Steve turned onto the Autostrada leading to the airport. They had rented a car for the trip. A cab, at this point, might prove risky. Since leaving the hotel, they had both been silent. Steve looked over at Bishop whose eyes were fixed on Vesuvius. "Arriverderci, Napoli," he said, smiling.

"Yeah," Bishop replied. He was about to say something else when suddenly he felt a strange tightness in his stomach; the sensation was followed by a stabbing pain. He rolled his tongue trying to rid it of the sudden odd taste. The tips of his fingers had begun to tingle.

"Yes, it's really a beautiful city," Steve continued cheerfully. "I would have really liked to see all the dirty paintings at Pompei. Well . . . maybe next time . . ."

Bishop blinked his eyes. Something was happening to his vision. His body was beginning to feel like lead. The stabbing pain in his stomach came more frequently now. He tried to move his hand to his face and found he could not. He was about to speak, when Steve turned south, away from the airport, toward Atrani. Bishop could only speak with difficulty now.

"What . . . the hell you doing? We . . . we've got to go to the airport. This is the wrong way. We've got to . . ." Steve smiled. His voice was soft, calm, caressing when he spoke.

"You can't go anywhere, Mr. Bishop. You'll be dead in about fifteen minutes." Bishop turned his head painfully, and looked at Steve. "Brucine," Steve said in answer to the question in Bishop's eyes.

"How . . . how much?"

"Half a gram."

Bishop forced his hand up. He loosened his tie, then leaned back on the seat. He was losing control now, his body jerking, convulsing. Steve continued talking.

"Listen . . . you'll really appreciate this. See, the stuff is absolutely clear when it's in a solution. I just coated the inside of the glass and let it dry. When the wine hit it, it went right back into solution again." Bishop's breath began to come in tight, desperate gasps. "You know the stuff?" Steve asked matter-of-factly. Bishop nodded. "Then you know what to expect."

They drove on in silence for some moments before Bishop could finally speak.

"They'll . . . they'll get you . . ."

Steve smiled and shook his head. "Maybe this'll buy me out with them."

Bishop grimaced with pain.

Steve continued talking. "You said each man had his vulnerability. Yours is . . . was . . . you just couldn't cut it alone. You told me that."

"There . . . there's something you don't have in your file on me. The medical history. I . . . I've got a slow thyroid," Bishop said, fighting back a scream of protest against the unbearable pain that tore through him.

"You knew about my file?" Bishop nodded. "And you came back for me anyway . . . I mean back at the road block? Why?"

"I figured like you . . . on the boat . . . the game had to be just between the two of us." There was another silence. Bishop closed his eyes. No . . . no . . . he would not scream. "Was . . . it . . . because . . . because of your father?"

"That you?" Bishop nodded. Steve smiled. "Far out. No. I thought he just . . . died." Bishop's body was suddenly racked by a violent spasm. His face twisted grotesquely. Steve continued talking, calmly. "Look, I don't want you to be confused by all this. See . . . it never really went together for me. *They* tell you who to hit. It keeps the whole thing from being what we talked about. You still need a license . . . *their* license. You're really their man. Then . . . well . . . there was our friendship and what it was becoming. It . . . well . . . there was a certain amount of emotional dependence creeping into it. Oh, on *my* part as well. It seemed . . . well . . . to contaminate the whole idea of our being together; the whole theory of personal freedom. You see . . . the idea . . . the theory . . . is really all I can believe in, Mr. Bishop."

Steve slowed the car and pulled off the road onto a rest area, overlooking the sea. He got out, went around to Bishop's side of the car, opened the door and pulled him out. The paralysis was fully upon Bishop now. He could not move. Steve lifted him, cradling him in his arms, like a child, and carried him to the cliff edge. The sky was magical with the first colors of dawn.

Steve lowered Bishop to the edge of the low safety wall. Below them, the cliff dropped sharply, two hundred feet to the sea. Steve pulled him against him,

fading. The glaze had already begun in the clear membrane covering his eyes. Steve took Bishop's face in his hands. There was a great sadness in his voice when he spoke.

"You're a heavy dude, my friend. The best I've ever known. I have to do this to make it pure for me. You once said there were heavy prices to be paid for this kind of thing. I guess this is what you meant. I . . . I'm really sorry. But I'm free now . . . like you said. Really free."

There was a silence. Steve could see Bishop's jaw tightening. He was struggling to say something . . . some final thing. Steve leaned close . . . his ear against Bishop's lips. The words came in a faint, grating whisper.

"Me . . . too . . . now, kid."

Steve looked into Bishop's eyes, then leaned over and kissed him fully, deeply, on the lips, then stood up and pushed slightly. Bishop fell backward and down into the sea. Steve watched the bubbles for some moments, then said softly, to himself, "Yeah . . . see Naples and die." He wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his sleeve, and walked to the car.

With the last flickering traces of consciousness, Bishop had the sensation he had somehow been reincarnated as a great chunk of stone which had just detached itself from the mother cliff and was now sinking into the sea. He stopped sinking. His eyes moved upward toward the surface. The water was a delicate rosy color. It was all so beautiful; the hue of the water, the colors and shapes of the coral, the gliding poetry of fishes and plants.

Something approached on the periphery of his vision. The eyes turned. What he saw was the last observation of his life . . . frozen on the screen of his brain forever.

A large grouper emerged from the coral and moved toward him. It seemed, strangely, to have only one eye. Within the eye, he could see the reflection of his own smile. He was free.

then moved his face very close to Bishop's. He was

Epilogue

Steve McKenna stood in the middle of Arthur Bishop's living room. His eyes moved over the contents of the room slowly, finally coming to rest on the ball of wax Bishop had left on the coffee table. Steve smiled, walked to the table, and picked up the ball and put it in his pocket. He was about to exit the room, when a thought crossed his mind. He turned, went to the hi-fi console, selected a cassette of the Magnificat in Eight Parts. It had been one of Bishop's favorites. He placed the cassette in the deck, turned the volume up full, and left the room.

As he emerged from the house, he noticed that the square and the street beyond seemed strangely devoid of life. He shrugged, walked to the garage alongside the house, and opened the door. Bishop had suggested he leave his Lotus there so he could drive home on their return.

Steve unlocked the car, got in, and inserted his key into the ignition. He was about to start the engine when he noticed a folded note, resting on the steering wheel. He took the note, unfolded it, and read:

Steve, if you read this it means I didn't make it back. It also means you've just broken a thin filament controlling a thirteen-second delay trigger. End of game, friend. Bang. You're dead.

Steve's right hand shot out for the handle of the door, but in the split second before the gesture, he already knew it was futile.

The car exploded, tearing out the front wall of the

house above. The darkness was suddenly bright and alive with flame, the air filled with the celestial voicings of the Magnificat which resounded from the hi-fi in Bishop's living room.



HIS name IS ARTHUR BISHOP

He lives in an elegant apartment in the most exclusive neighborhood in Manhattan. He enjoys the finest food and wine, the most sublime art and music, the most talented and expensive women. His body and brain represent absolute perfection of harmony between thought and action.

And when the leaders of the Syndicate want a man eliminated, they call on—

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