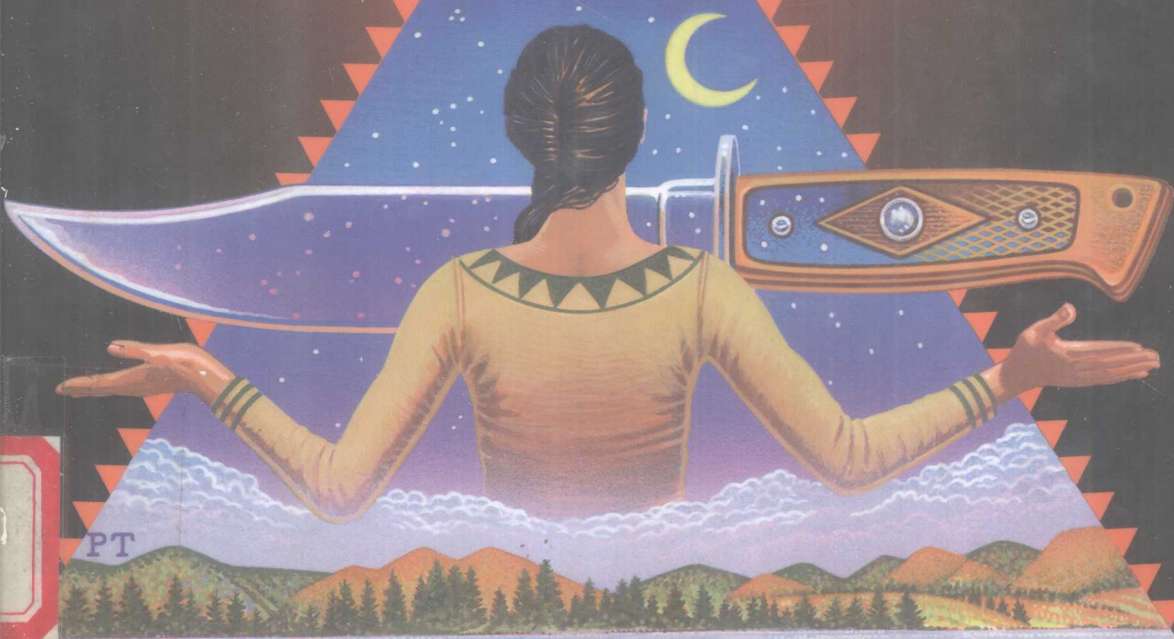


AUTHOR OF DANCE FOR THE DEAD

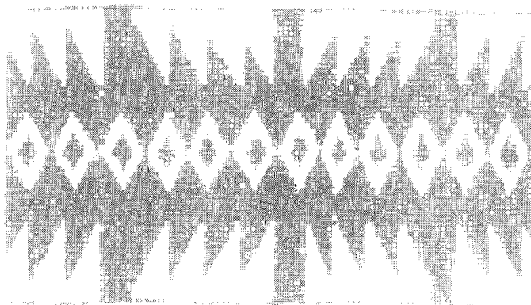
# THOMAS PERRY

A JANE WHITEFIELD NOVEL

# SHADOW WOMAN



# *Shadow Woman*



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THOMAS PERRY



RANDOM HOUSE NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Published in the United States by Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously  
in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

ISBN 0-679-45302-4

Random House website address: <http://www.randomhouse.com/>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

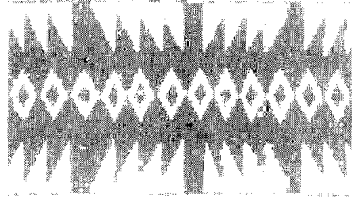
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First Edition

*Book design by Bernard Klein*

# *Shadow Woman*





**P**ete Hatcher pushed through the warm, dry night air that was trapped between the tall hotels and casinos, feeling the stored heat from the sun still rising from the concrete to his ankles. He had tightened his back muscles to keep his spine straight and his shoulders back, but it felt like a pose, so he tried to lose his self-consciousness and slouch a little. It was hard to do anything for so many days without ruminating on the way it must look, what they must think about it. He had tried to look formidable and alert, as though he would be hard to kill. The idea was worse than childish. It was the reaction of an animal trying to convince a predator that he wasn't weak enough to take down just yet.

The part of Las Vegas that he loved was the Strip, with the exaggerated shapes of its giant buildings lit up in candy colors that burned against the blue-black desert sky, but being downtown like this was different. The carnival neons and incandescents glared from all sides and bounced off asphalt and concrete, then washed across the faces of the people walking with him as a dead yellow-gray that cast deep shadows in their wrinkles and sunken eyes.

He followed a couple who seemed to sense it. Each eyed the other and the woman became uncomfortably aware that the ghastly light that had skinned the life from her beloved's cheek must have done the same to her own. She bravely forced a smile that only gave her face deeper hollows and the bared teeth of a skull. The pair reached the roofed-over mall, retreated to the nearest glass door, and escaped into the soft blue of a bar lit with the twinkle of tiny star-white bulbs. When they had taken a few steps into the cool, machine-made air, Pete saw them both give a little shrug-and-shudder to be sure none of the leftover street magic was clinging to them.

Hatcher followed them through the bar into the big casino, then skirted the margin of the gaming floor, ignoring the din of the bells on the slots and the rattle of coins in the collection pans that bounced off the walls above his head to excite the customers. He moved deeper, staying far from the blackjack tables and crap tables, where bright overhead lights shone on the green felt and turned the dealers' starched white shirts into semaphores. He stepped to the little window in the wall a few feet apart from the cashiers' cages.

He said to the middle-aged woman behind the glass, "There was supposed to be a ticket for the midnight show left for me."

"Your name, sir?" He had somehow assumed she would know his face, but her expression was only attentive.

"Pete Hatcher."

Hatcher took the ticket and read the seat number while he was still in the light, then handed it to the girl in the fishnet tights and frock coat at the door and let her lead him into the show. Hatcher never looked back to see whether the two men were still following. They were.

The round walls of the room were lined with big plush booths in three tiers, and the space in front of the stage crowded with rows of long, narrow tables arranged like the spokes of a wheel so nobody in the cheap stackable chairs along them could see better than anybody else.

The woman he had been told to call Jane was already seated in the dark booth when he got there. She was thin, with gleaming black hair braided behind her head, a long, graceful neck, and bare shoulders that showed no trace of a line in the tan and made him want to believe that she was in the habit of sunbathing naked. He felt an unexpected, tearing pain when he looked at her, so he glanced at the stage. This was what he was about to lose—not the money or the fancy office or the clean, hot desert air. It was the women, ones like her. They weren't ever from here, but this was where Pete had always

found them. It was as though they were the winners of some quiet beauty contest, judged not by a bunch of potbellied Chamber of Commerce types but by the women themselves, before they were even women. They seemed to take one look in the mirror and know that the creature looking back at them didn't belong in Biloxi or Minneapolis.

The woman said, "Pete?"

"Yes?"

"Kiss me." He turned in surprise and she was offering him her cheek in that strange way the best of them did, so he could press his lips against that incredibly smooth place just in front of her ear and smell the fragrance of her hair. He lingered there for a moment to whisper, "I thought we were blending in. You mean beautiful is the worst you can do?"

She ignored the question, drew back to end the kiss, and said, "Good enough. Dates want you to kiss them; hookers don't. If the management thinks I'm in business, they'll have their own people watching me. Did you know you're not alone?"

"I haven't been alone in two weeks," he said. "My phones are bugged, my apartment, even my car. When I'm asleep they switch on a camera with an infrared lens that's above the smoke detector in my ceiling."

"That's a very good sign," said the woman. "If the bugs and cameras had disappeared, that would be a very bad sign. It would mean they expected that pretty soon the police would be taking a close look at everything you used to own."

"It's not the sort of sign that makes me want to rush out and buy next year's calendar."

"Don't worry about what didn't happen," said the woman. "Worry about what you have to make happen."

"What?"

"The instant that the box opens—"

"What box?"

"Just listen. When the box opens, you get out and walk—do not run—to the exit door that's facing you. Go outside, get into the black Ford that's parked in the reserved space at the end of the lot. Drive north on Route 15. It will take you to St. George, Utah. That's about all the time I can buy you. You'll still be an hour from Cedar City. Don't stop to pee or something, just keep driving. There's a small airport in Cedar City, and your ticket is reserved at the Southwest Airlines desk under the name David Keller. From now on, that's you. The papers I promised you are in the wallet under the seat of the car.



There's a suitcase in the trunk. You'll just make your flight, and you'll be in Denver before daylight."

"What about the other stuff?"

"Everything you'll need at first is in the suitcase. The diplomas, honorable discharge, bank books, and so on are in your new apartment."

"And?"

"And what?"

"That gets me out, but what about you? They've seen you with me. They'll have nobody to take it out on but you."

Her eyes settled on him in puzzled curiosity, studied his face for a moment as though they had found something rare and unfamiliar there, then drifted toward the stage. "I'm good at this, and you couldn't help me anyway. Don't think about me. Think about what you have to do."

"Anything else you haven't told me?"

"Volumes," she said. "I like to spend more time with my runners before I set them free, but you don't have it to spare. All you really need to know is that if you never make a mistake you'll live forever. Right now, just concentrate on tonight. If you live through this, you'll catch on."

"What if they've got somebody waiting at the back door for me?"

She placed her long, thin fingers on his hand, and her voice went soft and low, like a mother talking to her child. "Then hit him fast, and hurt him as badly as you can. He won't have the stomach for a one-on-one fight for keeps. It takes much more courage to spend two weeks pretending you don't know you're in trouble than it does to join a pack stalking a lone man. I've been watching you, and I've been watching them. You can do this."

He sighed, but his lungs had taken in so little air it came out in a shallow puff. "I sure hope you're right. I assume you took your fee out of the money when you took it to Denver?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't work that way. A year from now, maybe two, you'll think about the way your life is. And you'll remember how you felt tonight. And then you'll send me a present."

He raised his eyebrows. "How do you know that?"

"I don't. But over the years I've gotten a lot of presents."

As the house lights dimmed, Pete raised his eyes to see where tonight's shadows were. He found them in the tier above, seated in a booth where they could catch a glimpse of him in profile whenever they wished. He leaned back, hiding his face from them, but the woman gently leaned on his back and pushed him forward as she

whispered in his ear, "Let them see you. Keep your face where they can see it."

A small projectile spitting sparks like a comet streaked over their heads. It exploded at center stage in a loud bang and a billow of lighter-fluid flame six feet high, followed by a fog of dry-ice smoke that quickly spread from curtain to curtain and drifted over the footlights into the audience.

A bright spotlight beam appeared and frantically swept across the wall of smoke, trying to penetrate it and find some solid object. In a moment a few wisps seemed to congeal and resolve themselves into the shape of an old, bent, wizened woman in bulky rags, leaning on a cane. She hobbled forward out of the fog haltingly, then seemed to notice the audience for the first time. Pete looked at the people around him. They were hushed with surprise, as though they had forgotten that they had bought tickets and sat here sipping watered drinks waiting for this.

The old woman glared at them, then gave a low unearthly cackle and lifted the cane into the air. As it reached the height of her shoulder it shortened and narrowed, and as it went over her head it was clearly a wand.

She tapped herself on the top of the head and the rags instantly incinerated in a flash of sparks and smoke. The spotlight fought its way through the smoke and found in her place a young, shapely woman who stood erect and wore a sparkling gold spandex skin that seemed little brighter than her mane of honey-blond hair. The deep, resonant voice of the announcer shouted, "Ladies and gentlemen . . . Miranda!" and then was drowned in music and applause.

Pete leaned to the side and said, "She's got my attention. I hope she's got theirs."

The woman beside him watched his eyes. "If she doesn't yet, she will. She used to strip."

Miranda paced the empty, dim stage like a cat, doing the impossible for the willfully gullible, receptive crowd. First she reached into the air and began plucking things out of it: white doves that couldn't have been hidden in her brief costume and flew out over the audience, then returned to a perch at the back of the stage; a single rose that she tossed over her shoulder onto the floor; then, one after another, four rabbits. It was as though she were completing the compulsory round of a conjurers' competition, executing a sampling of the standard tricks.

Only slowly did it occur to the audience that something strange and unplanned was happening. The rose she had thrown behind her

was changing. It grew longer and longer, then arched upward a little. Then it began to writhe and slither. Miranda produced a magician's top hat, put it on her head, then took it off and held it before her stomach. The rabbits, one by one, ran toward her, leapt into the hat, and disappeared inside it. She collapsed the hat and flicked it offstage like a Frisbee.

The audience was distracted. The rabbit trick was a bit out of the ordinary, but the audience was captured by that rose. It was now seven or eight feet long. The petals had fallen off, and now it arched its back, slowly raising its head behind Miranda, and spread its hood. It was a king cobra, its green-black skin looking oily in the lights. As she took her bow, it coiled to strike. Miranda seemed to sense something was bothering her audience. She frowned at them, then reached up into the dark air again, produced a pearl-handled revolver, pivoted gracefully, and shot the serpent through the eye. It jerked spasmodically, then fell. A wind passed across the stage, swirling the smoke in little eddies. The snake crumbled into dry flakes that blew away, leaving only a new, fresh rose in its place. Miranda squeezed the pistol in her hands until it became a ball the color of mercury, threw it into the air, and watched it explode.

While Miranda took another bow, Jane studied the audience, trying to detect anyone watching the two shadows for a signal. After a moment she was satisfied that they had come alone. A company like *Pleasure, Inc.*, could afford as many as they wanted, but they wouldn't put more than two on Pete Hatcher. Pete wasn't crazy enough to attack even that many. She leaned close to him and whispered, "Your time is here. Take one last look at it, and then never come back. This part of your life is already over."

He turned to look at her face, but it was veiled in darkness again. The music grew loud and frantic, and the audience murmured and then drew in its breath as Miranda took a little run and jumped off the eight-foot stage onto the floor. She danced up the aisle, glanced at a man sitting at one of the tables, reached into his ear, and extracted a pair of satin and lace panties. The man grinned appreciatively, but the woman beside him looked, then bared her teeth in something that wasn't a smile. Her left hand moved furtively along her haunch.

The audience gasped its religious conviction that the hand was quicker than the eye, and as Miranda danced along the tables, their approval drowned out all but the beat of Miranda's music.

As she drew near Pete Hatcher, he turned his eyes away from her toward Jane. She said, "Good luck, Pete," and Miranda's surprisingly strong, sinuous fingers wrapped themselves around his forearm. Pete

looked up into Miranda's face as he rose to his feet, but when she was this close he saw nothing soft or reassuring there. Her unnaturally perfect teeth were set in the performer's clench, so she could be nervous or winded without showing it, and between the black eyeliner and the blue-gold eyeshadow, the eyes themselves had that mad, manic stare that they all had, not seeing him at all because she was living in her mind a minute or two ahead of everyone else. Her mask of makeup was not the color of a human being, and it reflected light in tiny metallic sparkles that were not what mortals were made of.

Pete let her lead him by the hand down the aisle to the stage, and he let the polite applause that acknowledged he was a good sport carry him to the steps until it was overwhelmed by the audience's celebration that Miranda had returned to the stage. While the spotlight had followed Miranda to Pete's booth, unseen hands had been busy up here. There was a couch placed at center stage. Miranda led him like a woman leading her lover. She spoke to him only in a hard, professional tone as they went. "I'll walk you through this. For now, just lie there. Don't move, don't touch. Got it?"

"Yes," he said. He lay on the couch and discovered that it was hard, a board with a layer of cloth over it. The audience roared again, and he could tell it was because Miranda, facing away from them, had snaked a hand up behind her back and unsnapped the top of her outfit. Her hands went to the waist of her tights and made a first, tantalizing tug. She stepped closer to Hatcher, placed a knee on the couch, and everything happened at once. At the front of the stage there was a flash and a big puff of smoke. For a second Hatcher could see streams of smoke piped upward at the footlights, and then he saw nothing. He felt an abrupt jerk as the silky material under him separated, yanked toward both sides of the stage by unseen wires. He felt the dislocation of air as Miranda flailed around in the dark a few feet from him, but he saw nothing.

The light came on, and the first sight was Miranda, this time wearing a Victorian-looking black corset with garters and black stockings and holding a long silver stiletto. She said, "Mug for them," so he looked her over uneasily. When Miranda had timed the laugh, she stepped closer. "Good. Now stand up and look at the couch."

He got up and stared down at it. The couch was now an ornate lacquer-and-silver box about four feet long. She opened the top and said, "Climb in. When it's closed, bring your knees up to your chest."

He wasn't surprised to see the box. Jane had mentioned the box. Pete took one look out at the audience. He could see Jane sitting alone in the booth, now illuminated by the bright houselights, and fifty feet

behind her and to her right, the two shadows. One was the guy he had seen outside his window after dark on Tuesday. He had the melancholy, tired look of a cop who had been on his feet too much. The other was short, stocky, and bullnecked like an Irish middleweight, with a round, reddish squint-eyed face.

As he stepped into the box he gazed past them at the ridiculous baroque lounge, its oversized booths with scrollwork molded from sawdust and glue and painted purple, then fitted with cushions of foam rubber upholstered with shiny fabric. He loved all of it, being part of it. He loved to see the women looking at it: the ones from the Midwest who wore crisp pastel dresses you could never quite see through and took the long way out of Caesar's to look in the windows of the shops at yellow diamond necklaces and solid silver samovars and sable coats, not because they wanted them but because they were placed there to be seen, just like celebrities. He loved the dealers in their little pressed man-outfits and bow ties and shiny shoes, and the tall dancers in costumes that made them hard and gleaming like human jewels, and the women from the dry plains who tiptoed out to the pool with hotel towels wrapped around their hips because they were having second thoughts about their new bathing suits—maybe not even how much skin they showed, so much as what owning a suit like that might mean about them. Hatcher lay down in the box, let her slam the lid on him, and waited.

Jane watched Miranda work through her variation of the ancient conjurer's tricks. Miranda whirled the box around on its casters, watched the mechanical feet at the end of the box kick and wiggle while she sliced the box in half, then wiggle again when she separated the two boxes. Finally, she flung open the lids of the two boxes, and there was nobody inside at all. She closed the boxes, whirled them around a bit, then had two burly assistants in turbans lift one on top of the other. She opened the single door, and out stepped Pete Hatcher. He bowed, shyly received a kiss from Miranda, and walked toward the steps.

As he reached the floor of the lounge, the lights swept back to Miranda. She was climbing into the box herself. The two assistants turned the box around a few times, tapped it with Miranda's discarded wand, and a big flame shot upward. All the while, the silhouette of the good sport she had drafted from the audience could be seen making his way in the darkened room to Jane's booth.

He sat down and said in Miranda's voice, "He's on his way, Jane."

"Thanks, Miranda," said Jane. "It's a great show."

On stage, the two befuddled assistants opened the box. Out stepped a man who looked very much like Pete Hatcher. The spotlights quickly searched the room. When they found Pete Hatcher's booth, the figure of Pete Hatcher leapt to its feet, threw off the coat and wig, stepped out of the pants, and became Miranda. She milked the applause, curtsying and throwing kisses, then ran back to the stage. She tore a curtain from the back of the stage to reveal what looked like Pete Hatcher lying stiff and seemingly asleep, floating three feet off the ground. She covered him with the curtain, levitated him a few feet higher, where he would be out of her way, and went on with her act. Jane looked at her watch.

Miranda proceeded to keep the audience confused and agitated with her smoke and mirrors and costume changes. From time to time she would bring up other members of the audience to shill for her, and when they had done their parts, she would cover them with cloths and levitate them too, until after two hours there were six men and women floating above the stage. As Miranda was taking her final bow, she suddenly seemed to remember something. She turned, looked up at the six bodies floating in the air, and hurried toward them. She stepped to the first, snatched the cloth away, and revealed that there was nothing at all under it. She pointed to a table at her feet, and the woman who was supposed to be floating smiled at the audience and waved happily. One by one, Miranda snatched the cloths out of the air and revealed each of her volunteers, sitting in their seats watching the show. When she pointed at Jane's booth, the man sitting beside Jane gave a graceful little bow that ended in an outstretched arm lifted toward Miranda in a gesture that began in appreciation and ended in surprise.

The audience's eyes shot to the stage in time to see another flash and puff of smoke, and Miranda was gone. Only the pile of cloths lay where she had stood a moment before. The smoke grew in volume and thickness, and slowly, the pile of rags stirred and began to rise. The hydraulic platform under the stage pushed Miranda upward, and as she rose through the cloths, they hung from her like thick draped clothing. She was, once again, the old, bent crone who had begun the show. She limped to the edge of the stage where she had left her wand, tapped it once on her palm, and it grew into the walking stick. She winked slyly at the audience and slowly walked through the smoke and disappeared.

The doors opened at the rear of the lounge and the audience filed out with the lights still low, Miranda's eerie music still in their ears and wisps of theatrical smoke still in the air. Jane and her companion made their way toward the door with the others, deep in the gratified,

chattering crowd. Before they stepped into the light of the casino, Jane said, "Thanks," and the man, one of Miranda's assistants, stepped to the side and was gone.

Jane walked purposefully across the casino alone, under the enormous crystal chandeliers, where she could be certain the two shadows would see her. She went into the lobby and stopped at the front desk to pick up her room key.

She made her way back across the casino and up into the bar that overlooked the long rows of green felt tables. She sat down at a table for two and waited. In the mirror above the bar she could see Pete's two shadows. The tall one was wandering around looking over the heads of the gamblers to see where Pete Hatcher could have gone. The second man was behind Jane and to her left, just at the perimeter of the bar, where he could slip away if he needed to.

She waited a few minutes for the barmaid to show up, then ordered a martini and a scotch and water, and watched the barmaid throw down two napkins, one in front of the empty chair, then head for the bar to get the drinks. The sight of two drinks on the tray coming back to the table seemed to make all the difference to Pete Hatcher's shadows. They were reassured, almost as though they were watching Pete. They might not know where Hatcher was right at this moment—the men's room, somewhere in the labyrinth of slot machines, where they had not looked for him—but they knew where he was going to be in a few minutes. The few minutes accumulated into a half hour, then forty-five minutes. The small shadow left to see if Pete Hatcher's car was still in the lot and came back to report to his friend that it was, but they weren't feeling confident anymore. Something was wrong, and they weren't yet sure what it was.

She glanced at her watch. Katie . . . she corrected herself: Miranda . . . had promised to transport Pete Hatcher out the stage door near the start of her act, so the show had given him a full two hours to make the Utah border. Jane's little pantomime of being stood up had bought him the third hour to get to Cedar City. His plane would be loading passengers just about now. It was time for Jane to start making herself disappear.

She left a twenty-dollar chip on the table and stepped out of the bar. The two men hesitated for a second, then followed. They had to give her plenty of room and try not to look interested. Jane walked toward the elevators, and she knew they had no choice but to follow. If they lost her, they had nothing. She took the elevator to the fifteenth floor, went into her room, kicked off her shoes, and called the garage. "This is Miss Seymour in Room 1592. I'd like my car right away,

please.” As she listened to the parking attendant’s answer she was already stepping out of her gown.

She heard the doorknob rattle a little. She looked at the door, but it didn’t budge. She could see the shadows of feet under the door. Jane kicked the dress under the bed, slipped on her slacks, pulled the sweater over her head, then heard a sudden thud. She looked at the door. The double-edged blade of a knife had pierced through the thin oak veneer of the hollow door beside the lock. She froze. An unseen hand worked the blade around a little and withdrew it. There was another dull thud, and the blade punched through again.

She snatched her purse, quickly slipped out through the curtains to the balcony, and quietly slid the door shut. She had misjudged them. They should not have been willing to take a chance like this yet. Maybe she had been too eager to get Pete out of sight and she had missed some sign, forgotten to ask some question. There was no way to fix it now, no time to think. She had to get out.

She had nothing with her. This was not the hotel where she had been sleeping. It was just the room she had rented to disappear from. In a few seconds those two would have the door open. She looked around her at the balconies of the other rooms. They were narrow and far apart, and even if she somehow managed to reach one of them without falling, she would only be in the next room. She leaned out as far as she could and looked down. On the floor below her there was a balcony just like hers, but it had to be twelve feet down.

Jane saw a thin wedge of light fan into her room as they opened the door as far as the chain would allow. She unclasped the leather strap of her purse, clasped it around the bottom of the vertical railing support closest to the wall of the building, tossed her purse to the balcony below, stepped over the railing, and lowered herself into the empty air. She was trembling with fear and awe at what she had done as she dangled there, six feet above the railing of the fourteenth-floor balcony. She wanted to drop but found her hands would not obey the command to open. It looked as though she would fall, scrape the outside of the balcony, and plummet two hundred feet to the pavement.

She bent at the hip and began a gentle swing. The first sweep brought her out away from the balcony and tipped her down a little so she had to look directly through all that empty night air at the tiny figures on the lighted concrete below. After a sickening pause at the end of the arc, she began to swing forward. When she judged that the balcony was under her, she let go.

She dropped and hit the concrete balcony hard, slid a little, and bumped the railing so it gave a low vibrating sound like a tuning fork.



She turned and saw that the sliding door into this room was closed. As she stood and reached for the handle, she knew that, whatever else happened, she was not going to put herself outside the railing again. She tugged on the door and it wouldn't budge. She lay on her back, covered her face with her purse, and kicked out at the glass with both feet.

The glass gave a loud crack, but it didn't break inward. She went to her knees, lifted a long jagged shard out, set it beside her, then used her purse to push a bigger one inward. She crawled inside, hurried across the empty room, burst out into the hallway, ran to the elevator, and punched the button. But as she glanced upward she saw that the number lit up was fifteen. The elevator was coming down from above.

She turned and ran for the sign that said EXIT, slipped inside the door to the stairwell, and waited. The bell rang, the elevator doors parted, and she saw that nobody was inside. She ran for the elevator and got past the doors just as the big man emerged from the stairwell and dashed toward her.

She rode the elevator down to the garage level. When the bell rang she took a step toward the opening doors, but then the space was filled with a blur of moving flesh and gray fabric as the shorter man with the pink swine face charged inside the elevator. He slapped the button and used his body to block the opening while the doors slid together again, trapping her inside with him.

Jane predicted his half-formed strategy, because the small space made it inevitable. He had enclosed her in a tiny compartment, so he would sweep her into a corner before she could do much flailing and use the strength of his upper body to keep her there and stifle the screams. She put up both hands in a weak defense, half cringing before the blow, half supplication that it wouldn't come. The man lunged toward her.

Jane's right hand jabbed out, more to stagger him than to do harm, but he was moving faster than she had expected. Her knuckles glanced off the bridge of his nose and into his left eye. His hands went up, too late, and Jane rocked back against the wall to deliver the kick to his knee that she had planned from the beginning. She felt the knee break; he dropped to the floor, gasping in pain.

She sidestepped past him and hit the OPEN DOOR button. As the doors slid open his hand shot out to grasp her ankle. His grip was so strong it hurt, tightening like the jaws of an animal as he pulled her toward him. She said quietly, "Think. If you drag me back in there alone with you and your broken leg, are things going to get better for you, or worse?"