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"No one writes like Laymon, and you're going to have a good time with anything he writes." —DEAN KOONTZ

# RICHARD LAYMON

Internationally Bestselling Author of *Darkness*, *Tell Us*



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# RAVE REVIEWS FOR RICHARD LAYMON!

“A brilliant writer.”

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“Laymon doesn’t pull any punches. Everything he writes keeps you on the edge of your seat.”

—*Painted Rock Reviews*

“One of the best, and most reliable, writers working today.”

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“Laymon is incapable of writing a disappointing book.”

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—*Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)*

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“Laymon is unique. A phenomenon. A genius of the grisly and the grotesque.”

—*Joe Citro, The Blood Review*

**Other *Leisure* books by Richard Laymon:**

**DARKNESS, TELL US  
NIGHT IN THE LONESOME OCTOBER  
ISLAND  
THE MUSEUM OF HORRORS  
IN THE DARK  
THE TRAVELING VAMPIRE SHOW  
AMONG THE MISSING  
ONE RAINY NIGHT  
BITE**

**RICHARD  
LAYMON**

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## Chapter One

*Saturday May 24*

The sound of breaking glass shocked Rhonda Bain awake. She went rigid on the bed and stared at the dark ceiling.

She told herself it *wasn't* someone breaking into the house; a framed picture or a mirror had fallen off one of the walls.

She didn't believe it.

Someone had smashed a window. She'd heard glass hitting a floor, so it was the kitchen window; the other rooms had carpet.

Rhonda imagined herself bolting from the bedroom, racing for the front door. But as she rushed past the kitchen, a dark shape would lurch out and grab her.

I can't just lie here and wait for him!

She flung the sheet aside, sat up, snapped her head toward the bedroom window. The curtains were open, stirring slightly in the breeze. She shivered and clenched her teeth, but not because of the mild night air on her bare skin.

I've gotta get out of here!

The window was no good. The damn thing was louvered. There wouldn't be time to pull out enough slats, remove the screen and climb through. If she barricaded the bedroom door and smashed an opening with a chair ...

She flinched at the sound of a footstep—a shoe crunching broken glass.

He's still in the kitchen.

If I try smashing the slats, he'll know I'm here, and what if he gets to me before I can—

*He doesn't know I'm here!*

Rhonda swung her legs off the bed. She rose slowly. The boxsprings squeaked a bit, but then she was standing. She turned to the queen-sized bed. With trembling hands, she smoothed her pillow, drew up the top sheet, then the electric blanket, then the quilt. A few tugs and the bed looked as if it hadn't been slept in.

She crouched. She sat on the carpet. She lay back and squirmed sideways, the hanging quilt brushing across her body. It passed over her face. She kept moving. It slid over her left breast, then her shoulder. She scooted in farther. Stopping, she fingered the hem of the quilt. It was five or six inches beyond her left hip and about two inches short of touching the floor.

Good enough.

She lay still, hands pressed to the sides of her thighs. She was trembling badly. She heard her quick thudding heartbeat. She heard herself panting. But she didn't hear footsteps.

He's probably out of the kitchen, walking on carpet. Where?

Turning her head, Rhonda could see out with one eye. She watched the bottom of the doorway.

Calm down, she told herself.

Oh, sure thing.

Want him to hear your damn heart drumming?

She let go of her legs, rested her hands on the carpet, and concentrated on letting her muscles relax. She filled her lungs slowly and let the air out.

Calm, she thought. You're not even here. You're lying on a beach. You're at the lake, stretched out on a towel. You can hear the waves lapping in, kids squealing and laughing. You can feel the sun and the breeze on your skin. You're wearing your white bikini.

You're naked.

Her stomach twisted.

You're naked and hiding under a bed and somebody's in the goddamn house.

She suddenly felt trapped. Though the bed didn't touch her, it seemed to be pressing down, smothering her. She struggled for breath. She wanted out. She ached to squirm free, scurry to her feet and make a dash for safety.

Calm down. He doesn't know you're here.

Maybe he does.

The pale beam of a flashlight danced through the darkness beyond the bedroom door. Rhonda glimpsed it. Then it was gone. She held her breath and stared through the gap, waiting. The beam scrawled a quick curlicue, darted high and vanished again.

He'll come in soon, Rhonda thought. He'll find me. God, why didn't I make a run for it when the window broke?

Why didn't I go with Mom and Dad to Aunt Betty's?

She forced herself to take a breath.

The beam of the flashlight slanted through the doorway, swept toward Rhonda and up.

He's checking the bed, she thought.

See, nobody's here. So get on with it. Rob the place. Take whatever you want, you bastard, just don't look under the bed.

With the snap of a switch, the lights came on.

Rhonda's fingernails dug into her thighs.

Her one eye saw a pair of old jogging shoes in the doorway. The ragged cuffs of blue jeans draped their tops and swayed slightly as the man walked forward.

The shoes stopped, turned, moved toward the closet. Rhonda watched the closet door swing open. She heard some empty hangers clink together. A loop of threads hung from the back of the jeans' frayed left cuff, dangling almost to the floor.

The shoes turned again. They came toward her, veered away, and passed out of sight as the man walked toward the end of the bed. She heard quiet steps crossing the room.

A sudden clatter and skid of metal made Rhonda flinch.

He must've yanked the curtains shut.

What for? The backyard is fenced. Nobody can see in. Maybe he doesn't know that. Or he knows it, but isn't taking any chances. Not with the light on.

The bed shuddered. It kept shaking above Rhonda. The edge of the bedspread trembled. She turned her face up. There was only darkness above her, but she pictured the man crawling over the mattress.

What's he *doing*?

He's right on top of me!

The bed squawked as if he'd suddenly flopped down hard. Something wispy—the

fabric under the boxsprings?—fluttered briefly against Rhonda’s nose.

She heard a click.

What was that?

Rhonda suddenly knew. The stem on the back of the alarm clock. She’d pulled it after getting into bed, wanting to wake up early for *Jurassic Park Marathon* on a cable channel.

He knows I’m here.

Rhonda squeezed her eyes shut. This isn’t happening, she thought. Please.

The bed shook a little. Turning her head, Rhonda watched fingers curl under the edge of the quilt near her shoulder. The quilt lifted. There was more rustling above her. The quilt stayed up. Hands lowered and pressed flat against the carpet. Then an upside-down head filled the space between the bed and the floor.

A man, perhaps twenty-five or thirty years old, stared in at her. His light brown hair was cut short. Even though his face was upside-down, he looked handsome. In other circumstances, Rhonda might have found herself attracted to him. But she felt only revulsion.

She squirmed sideways, moving toward the center of the bed.

“Go away!” she gasped.

The man did a quick somersault off the bed, landed lightly on his back, rolled over and peered in at her. One hand darted out like a paw. The hooked fingers missed her upper arm by inches and raked back along the carpet.

Pushing himself up, he crawled on hands and knees toward the end of the bed.

Heading for the other side?

Rhonda heard nothing. She turned her head to watch the quilt along the right side of the bed. It was lower there, touching the floor.

She shrieked as cold hands grabbed her ankles.

They pulled. Rhonda skidded, the carpet burning her back. She swept her arms away from her sides, reached up and clung to the metal bedframe. The pulling hands stretched her. She kicked, barking a shin on the end of the frame. The hands tugged. Her body jerked, leaving the floor and pressing the underside of the boxsprings for an instant before she lost her hold and dropped.

The carpet seared her buttocks and back. She clawed at the bed, ripped the flimsy cloth, tried to grab springs, curled fingertips over the edge of a wooden cross-slat. But the man was dragging her too hard and fast. Nothing could stop her rough slide.

The quilt **flapped** her face.

Clear of the bed, she squirmed and tried to kick her feet free of the man’s grip. He clamped her ankles against his hips. He smiled as if he enjoyed watching her struggle.

Finally, exhausted, she lay still and panted for breath.

The man kept smiling. He kept her feet pinned to his sides. His head moved as he inspected her with wide, glassy eyes.

Rhonda pressed a hand between her legs. She crossed an arm over her breasts.

The man laughed softly.

He said, “No need of modesty, Rhonda.”

*He knows my name!*

“Who are you?” she gasped.

“I’ve been watching you. You’re very beautiful.”

“Leave me alone.” Her voice sounded whiny, scared. She didn’t care. “Please,” she said.

“Don’t worry. I won’t hurt you. Just don’t cause any trouble and do exactly what I say, and you’ll be fine.”

Rhonda started to cry.

The man kept smiling..

“Okay,” she finally said through her sobs. “I’ll ... just don’t ... hurt me. Promise?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Rhonda’s body was found three days later and far from home.

## Chapter Two

*Saturday June 21*

The jangle of the telephone forced its way into Rick's dream and woke him up. Moaning, he rolled onto his side. The lighted dial of the alarm dock on the nightstand showed five o'clock.

Braced up on an elbow, he reached over the clock and lifted the phone's handset. As he brought it to his face, the uncoiling cord nudged the dock off the stand.

"This is obscene," he muttered.

"How did you guess?" Bert started breathing heavily on the other end of the line.

"It's still night," Rick interrupted. "That's the obscenity. Human beings weren't meant to get up before dawn."

"There are human beings who do it every day."

"Not when they're on vacation."

"Speaking of which..."

"Must we?" Rick asked.

"Don't be so negative. You're going to love it. The fresh mountain air, the grand vistas, not to mention the peace and quiet ..."

"I've been camping before. It's not my idea of—"

"Never with me."

"Right. Bertha Crockett, Queen of the Wild Frontier."

The sound of her husky laugh reminded Rick of just why he had allowed Bert to talk him into a week of backpacking. "Are you still in bed?" he asked.

"I've been up for an hour. I'm all packed and showered."

"Dressed yet?"

That laugh again. "Wouldn't you like to know."

"Matter of fact.. "

"Come on over and find out."

"Bye."

"Hey!"

"Huh?"

"I called for a reason."

"I thought it was just to interrupt my sleep."

"You'll be passing some doughnut shops on the way over. Why not pick up a dozen? We can eat them in the car. I'll fill a Thermos with coffee."

"Okay, fine."

"See you later."

"Half an hour. So long." He hung up, swung the sheet away, and sat on the edge of his bed.

We're actually going to do it, he thought. The realization made him tight and shaky inside. Leaning forward, he propped his elbows on his knees and stared at the floor.

It's today. Christ.

When they'd decided to make the trip, when they'd outfitted him, even last night

while he was packing, the journey seemed somehow distant and vague, as if it were a concept, not an event that would actually occur.

Like having a will drawn up, he thought. You do it, but you don't quite figure on having any real need for it.

Then one fine morning ...

You can still back out.

Hell I can.....

Should've just refused when it first came up.

He had suggested alternatives: the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, the Hyatt on Maui, a tour of Ireland, a cruise on a luxury liner to Acapulco, even a steamboat trip down the Mississippi. But Bert had her heart set on backpacking in the Sierras. Somehow, she'd let two years slip by without roughing it, and she *needed* time in the wilderness. She *had* to go, with or without Rick.

And who would she go with, if not with Rick?

Myself, she'd answered. I find myself excellent company, but you're pretty excellent, too.

That had settled it. The thought of Bert going alone was intolerable.

And what was true three weeks ago was still true. Rick was sure of that. If he backed out, Bert would make the trip alone.

He flinched at the sudden blare of his alarm clock. Reaching down, he picked up the clock and silenced it. He placed it on the nightstand. Hard.

Okay. You're going. So relax and enjoy it.

He put on a robe, walked down the hall to the room he thought of as his "entertainment center," and stepped behind the wet bar. There, he made himself a Bloody Mary with a double shot of vodka, light on the tomato juice, heavy on Worcestershire and tabasco. He twisted a wedge of lemon over the drink, added ground pepper, and stirred.

It tasted tangy and good. He carried the glass into the bathroom. After using the toilet, he took a shower. He wanted to linger under the soothing hot spray. After all, there would be no showers for the next week.

No soft bed.

No safety of walls and locked doors.

No Bloody Marys.

At least you've packed a fifth of bourbon and a revolver, he thought. Those'll help.

Bert'll crap when she finds out.

Tough. Not going into the wilderness without my peace-makers.

Rick turned off the water and climbed out of the tub. He quickly dried himself. He took a long drink of his Bloody Mary, then rolled deodorant under his arms. The shower hadn't lasted long enough to steam up the mirror. He lathered his face and shaved. Though his hand trembled, he managed not to cut himself.

Back in the bedroom, he tossed his robe aside and stood in front of the full-length mirror on his closet door to comb his hair. At least you're in good shape, he consoled himself. You were a wimpy teenager last time around. - .

Last time around ...

His scrotum shriveled tight. In the mirror, he saw his hanging penis shrink.

Turning away from his reflection, he stepped into his underpants and pulled them

up. The hugging fabric took away some of the vulnerable feeling. He took another drink, then finished dressing.

Bert had selected the outfit: a camouflage shirt with epaulets and pocket flaps, and baggy olive green trousers with pockets that reached down almost to his knees. He fastened the web belt, put on his socks and boots, and stepped in front of the mirror again.

All you need is an ascot and a red beret, he thought, and you'll look like a paratrooper.

Appropriate. You sure as hell feel like one—like a paratrooper about to take the big step without benefit of a 'chute.

Rick made his bed. He checked the bedroom windows to be sure they were shut and locked.

He finished his Bloody Mary on the way into the kitchen. There, he rinsed out the glass and put it into the dishwasher.

Then he went into the living room.

His backpack was propped upright against the front of the sofa. On the nearby table were his sunglasses, handkerchief, wallet and keys, Swiss Army knife, matches and a pack of thin cigars. He loaded them into his pockets. Then he mashed a battered old cowboy hat onto his head. He stepped over to his pack.

Forgetting anything? he wondered.

He had double-checked Bert's instructions while packing last night. He knew he was missing nothing on her list.

What else?

Curtains all shut. Lights off. The timer set for the living room lamp so that it would come on at eight each night and go off at eleven. Doors and windows locked. Newspaper delivery stopped. Mail put on vacation hold.

That seemed to be everything.

Rick hoisted the backpack and slipped his arms through its straps. It felt heavy, but had a comfortable fit.

He turned around once.

What are you forgetting?

Rick entered the courtyard of Bert's apartment building. On his way up the outside stairs, he paused and stepped aside while a man in a sport coat and necktie came down.

Lucky guy, Rick thought. *He's* on his way to work. Wish I was.

But that feeling changed when Bert opened her door. Rick stepped inside and into her arms, felt the moist warmth of her mouth, her tight hug, her breasts and pelvis pressing against him. He slipped his hands beneath her loose shirt-tails and caressed her back. It was smooth and bare. He moved his hands all the way up to the sides of her neck and slid them out along her shoulders. He was always amazed by her shoulders; they were slender but wide, giving her body a tapered look and feel. As he stroked them, Bert squirmed against him and moaned.

"How about one for the road?" she whispered.

"You're kidding," Rick said.

"Well, if you're in a big hurry to get going ..."

"I think we can spare a few minutes. Or a few hours. Or a few days."

“However long it takes.”



Straddling Rick on her hands and knees, Bert stared down into his eyes. Her mouth was open. She was still breathing heavily. “Well,” she said.

“Well.”

“Guess we’d better get a move on.”

“Yeah.”

She lowered herself and kissed his mouth. He felt her nipples brush against his chest. Then she pushed herself up. “I guess that’ll hold us till tonight,” she said.

“Isn’t it customary to sleep after all this exertion?”

“If you want me to drive, you can sleep in the car.”

“How about a shower first?”

“Already had one this morning.”

“So did I. But this was a messy job, and—”

“I’ll keep my mess, thank you. Something to remember you by,” she added, smiling down at him. “You may feel free to take a shower, however, if you make it quick.”

“Without you?”

Nodding, Bert climbed off him.

“I’ll pass,” Rick said.

He got out of bed and followed her. The air stirred against his damp body, cooling him. He watched Bert. Her short blond hair looked brown in the dim light, her skin dusky. She walked with easy strides. Rick’s gaze slid down her wide shoulders, her back, her slim waist, and lingered on the smooth moving mounds of her buttocks.

When we’re on the trails, he thought, I’ll let her take the lead.

He tightened inside. He wished he hadn’t thought about being on trails.

We’re not there yet, he told himself.

He stopped in the entryway to the living room and leaned against the cool wood.

Bert continued into the room. Her head lowered as she looked at the discarded clothing. She was in profile when she bent at the waist, and Rick stared at the side of her breast. She picked up her panties. Her breast swayed slightly as she shifted from one foot to the other and stepped into them. The panties were little more than a white elastic waistband. When they were on, she turned toward Rick.

“Am I the only one getting dressed around here?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“Anything to stall.”

“Magnificent view. Mount Bertha.”

“That’s twice.” She raised an eyebrow. “Once more and you’ve had it.”

“Bert’s a boy’s name. You quite obviously are no—”

“Bertha’s a cow’s name. My parents were mad.” After a glance at the floor, she ducked down and picked up a white sock. She bent over, raised a foot, and started to put the sock on.

“What name would you have liked?” Rick asked.

“Maybe Kim, Tracy, Ann. But they didn’t ask. How about you?” She stretched the sock almost to her knee and picked up its mate.

“Ernie,” Rick said.

“Ernie’s a trucker’s name.”

“We’d be Bert and Ernie. We could move to Sesame Street.”

Bert shook her head. She lost her balance and hopped on one foot to steady herself. Rick watched her breasts shake. She finished with the second sock and straightened up. She looked at Rick’s penis, then at his face.

“You missed your calling,” she said. “You should’ve been a peeping Tom.”

“Doesn’t pay as well as ophthalmology.”

“Taking care of other people’s peepers.”

“So they won’t miss out on the glories of observing the human form.”

“You’re a humanitarian.” She picked up her tan shorts and stepped into them. They were loose-fitting, with deep pockets and button-down flaps like the trousers she had picked for Rick. After belting them, she sat on the floor and began to put on her boots.

She was deliberately leaving her shirt for last.

“What I like about you,” Rick said, “you’re so considerate.”

“Maybe I enjoy being looked at as much as you enjoy the looking.”

“Impossible.”

“Then just consider it a perk. I know you’re not thrilled about spending your vacation in the boonies. Anything I can do to make it more bearable ...”

“So far, it’s just great.”

When Bert finished tying her boots, she reached around, picked up Rick’s socks, and tossed them to him.

“I usually start with my shorts,” he said.

She grinned. “Not this time.” She leaned back, braced up on straight arms, and watched. Rick couldn’t take his eyes off her. After his socks were on, she threw the shirt to him. Then his shorts, and finally his trousers. While he fastened the belt, Bert slipped into her faded, blue chambray shirt. Leaving it open, she rolled the sleeves up her forearms. Then she buttoned the front.

Show’s over, Rick thought.

A sudden rush of panic squeezed him.

Bert frowned. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head.

“What is it?”

“Just butterflies.”

“You look like you got kicked in the nuts.”

Feel that way, he thought. “I’m fine,” he said.

Bert got up. She put her arms around him. “What kind of butterflies?”

“Mallards.”

“Mallards are ducks.”

“I’ll be all right.”

“It’s about camping?”

Rick nodded.

“I thought you just didn’t want to go without the comforts. It’s more than that.”

“I had some trouble the last time.”

Bert stroked the hair on the back of his head.

“I was fourteen. I was packing with my father out of Mineral Springs. We were in deep. Nobody else was around. I stumbled going across some rocks and stepped into a crevice. It was so dumb. I should’ve looked where I was going. Anyway, I sustained fractures of my left tibia and fibula. Dad left me alone to go for help. It was three days before I got air-lifted out. Not such a big deal, I guess, but I was fourteen and it was a pretty desolate area like some kind of Dah nightmare landscape, and I felt ... vulnerable. There were coyotes around. I’d see them slinking over the rocks near the camp and I figured I was probably on the menu. Hell, I was scared shitless the whole time. The end.”

Bert held him tightly.

“No major deal in the scheme of things,” Rick said. “But enough to dampen my enthusiasm for roughing it.”

“You must’ve been terrified,” Bert said.

“It was a long time ago.”

“I shouldn’t have pushed you into this. I mean, I knew you weren’t eager to go, but I never suspected ...”

He patted her rump. “We’d better get a move on.”

“Maybe we should change our plans.”

“Call it off?” Rick asked.

“Sure. It’s okay with me.”

Go for it, Rick thought. This is just what you’ve been waiting to hear.

“What about the call of the wild?” he asked.

“I’ll answer it some other time.”

“Without me?”

He felt her shrug.

“I’ll go. You know what they say about falling off a horse. And about lightning striking the same place twice.”

“Are you sure?” Bert asked.

“Absolutely.”

She squeezed him. “I’ll make you a promise. If you break a leg this time out, I’ll stay with you. We’ll stick it out together until somebody comes along, and send *them* for help. I’ll stay and take care of you. If we run out of food, I’ll fish and set traps. And I’ll shoo the coyotes away.”

It was the last thing Rick wanted to hear. “A deal,” he said.

## *Chapter Three*

Gillian O'Neill stared at the ringing telephone. She didn't want to pick it up.

This time, she thought, I won't.

If I don't pick it up, they'll be all right.

But as she watched, the handset rose into the air.

No!

She had a pair of scissors in her hand. She rushed forward, ready to cut the cord, but she wasn't in time. A voice boomed out of the phone as if from a loudspeaker: "Guess what happened to your parents!"

The mouthpiece sprayed blood. The red shower splashed Gillian's face, blinding her. She shrieked, lurched backward, tripped and began a long fall, and jerked awake.

Gaspings, she rolled onto her back.

The bell rang again.

Not the telephone; the front door.

Trembling, Gillian used the top sheet like a towel to wipe her sweaty face. Then she scurried off her bed. At the closet, she grabbed her robe. She put it on as she rushed from the room. It clung to her skin. She got the belt tied on her way down the hall.

"I'm coming," she called when she reached the living room.

"Okey-doke." It was the voice of Odie Taylor.

She slowed down. Just Odie. Good.

She opened the door.

Odie smiled nervously. His head bobbed and swayed, as usual, like the heads of the toy dogs Gillian sometimes saw in the rear windows of cars. As usual, he didn't look her in the eyes. His gaze stayed level with her neck.

"Wake you?" he asked her neck.

"I'm glad of it. I was having a bad dream."

"Gee, I'm sorry." He hitched up his sagging jeans. "You been gone."

"I took a little vacation. Want a Pepsi?"

"Thank you."

He stayed on the balcony outside the door while Gillian hurried into the kitchen and took a can of soda from the refrigerator. She knew better than to ask Odie in. The only time she had invited him into the apartment, he had gone wild-eyed and started stuttering, scared as a trapped animal until he was outside again.

She handed the can to him.

"Thank you very much," he said. He held it and stared at her neck. His head weaved and nodded.

"Is there a problem? My rent late?"

"Heyuh." It was Odie's way of laughing. "You're trying to joke me, Miss O'Neill." Odie seemed as nervous about calling her Gillian as he was about entering her apartment. "You don't pay no rent, you own the place."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot."

"You didn't forget, you're trying to joke me."

"Is there a problem, or ..."

“Gee.” He bit down on his lower lip.

“What is it?”

“I’m gonna have to go on back home. Pa took a spill off the barn roof.”

“God, I’m sorry.”

“Well, he ain’t dead or nothing but he got busted up some. Me and Grace, we’re gonna have to go on back home. I’m sure sorry.”

“Will you be coming back?”

“I jist don’t know. I jist might stay. I been thinking maybe with the baby coming we oughta stay at the farm. City’s not a good place for a kid.”

“Or for anyone else,” Gillian said. “I’m really sorry to have you and Grace leave, you’ve done a great job managing the place.”

“I’m sure sorry. You’ve sure been nice to us. I don’t know what we’d of done ...”

“You’re good people, Odie. I’ll miss you and Grace. But I bet you’ll be glad to get back home.”

“Well ...”

“When will you be leaving?”

“Friday, I guess. The rents’re all paid up for last month and everything’s tip-top around here. Want me to bring the stuff over?”

“No, that’s fine. Just leave it all in your apartment so it’ll be there for the new people.”

“Okey-doke.”

“I might not be around for the next few days, so hang on a second and I’ll get you your pay.”

Odie stayed in the doorway while Gillian returned to her bedroom. Her handbag was on top of the dresser. She took out the checkbook and wrote a check.

Odie was drinking his Pepsi when she reached the door. She handed the check to him.

“Thank you very much,” he said. Then he glanced at it. He raised it close to his face and peered at it. His head stopped moving. He looked at Gillian, looked into her eyes. “You made a mistake here, Miss O’Neill. You got a zero too many.”

“It’s no mistake, Odie.”

“This says five thousand dollars. We get five hundred, nor five thousand.”

“It’s a bonus for you and Grace being such good managers.”

“Holy cow.”

“If I don’t get a chance to see you again before you leave, have a good trip.” She held out her hand. Odie gripped the check in his teeth and pumped her hand. “Drop me a line sometimes, let me know how things are going.”

His head started bobbing again. He took the check out of his teeth. “Sure will, Miss O’Neill. Gillian.” His voice was high-pitched. He grimaced as if he were in pain. He fluttered the check under his face. “Grace, she’s gonna lay a brick when she sees this.” He shrugged.

“Take it easy, Odie.”

“Yeah. Holy cow.” Rubbing the back of his hand under his nose, he turned away and started along the balcony toward the stairs.

Gillian shut her door. She went into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

She would miss Odie and Grace. She had managed the twenty-unit apartment

complex herself for almost a year before they showed up in their lopsided pickup truck. Odie was unemployed, but Grace had already lined up a book-keeping job that would bring in enough money to cover the rent and little else.

Gillian not only liked the two at once, she trusted them. She gave them an apartment rent-free and hired Odie, overjoyed to be released from the burden of running the place.

Now they were leaving.

I'll have to get someone else, she thought as she poured a mug of coffee. No way am I going to start managing again.

Sliding open the kitchen door, she stepped onto the sundeck and sat down on a padded chair. She stretched her legs out, propping her feet on a plastic table. She took a drink of coffee.

Damn.

Her stomach hurt. It wasn't just losing her managers, it was liking them and knowing she would never see them again after they left.

They weren't exactly *friends*. But she had cared about them, and now they'd be out of her life forever.

That's life, she told herself. That's why you shouldn't start caring.

She drank some more coffee. She rested the mug on the arm of the chair, dosed her eyes and tilted her head back to feel the sun on her face.

How's about bugging out? she thought.

I don't know.

She'd only come back yesterday. The need wouldn't start getting strong for a week or two.

Right.

But with Odie and Grace taking off, she might be stuck here after Friday—at least until she could find someone to replace them.

If you wait, you might have to go without for a whole month. Maybe even longer.

You'll be climbing the goddamn walls.

Better go for it while you've got the chance.

Her decision made, Gillian felt a familiar stir of excitement.

Get a move on, she thought. If you don't have any luck today, you'll have to wait for Monday.

She finished her coffee and went inside.

Gillian drove to an area in Studio City where the homes were nice but not elaborate. Rarely did she venture into truly exclusive neighborhoods—except on occasions when she wanted a special treat. Not this time. She had no taste today for the luxuries of a million-dollar home. Nor for dallying with such frills as elaborate alarm systems and private security patrols. A nice home in a middle-income neighborhood was all she desired. This area was just right.

Gillian had spent a terrific week in a house not far from here. The Jenson place. Murray and Ethel, away on vacation to Boston, had been good enough to leave their calendar clearly marked with their departure and return dates. Gillian had simply cleared out the day before they were scheduled to return. That had been back in February. This was June, so plenty of time had passed. She never liked to return to the