

Robert Bloch

Bob's career has spanned six decades. Think about all that has happened in that time and you'll realise how singular his career has been. Of course he wrote Psycho, but he's also written half a dozen novels just as good, and he's shown an equal talent for the short story. 'Water's Edge' is included here because it helps mark the transition from the hardboiled crime story of the fifties and sixties into the quiet revolution of the seventies. This is a beautifully structured and paced story, and should be studied carefully by all readers who also have a hankering to be writers.

Water's Edge

The fly-specked lettering on the window read 'The Bright Spot Restaurant'. The sign overhead urged Eat.

He wasn't hungry, and the place didn't look especially attractive, but he went inside anyway.

It was a counter joint with a single row of hard-backed booths lining one wall. A half dozen customers squatted on stools at the end of the counter, near the door. He walked past them and slid onto a stool at the far end.

There he sat, staring at the three waitresses. None of them looked right to him, but he had to take a chance. He waited until one of the women approached him.

"Yours, mister?"

"Coke."

She brought it to him and set the glass down. He pretended to be studying the menu and talked without looking up at her.

"Say, does a Mrs. Helen Krauss work here?"

"I'm Helen Krauss."

He lifted his eyes. What kind of a switch was this, anyway? He remembered the way Mike used to talk about her, night after night. "She's a tall blonde, but stacked. Looks a lot like that dame who plays the dumb blonde on television-what's-her-name-you know the one I mean. But she's no dope, not Helen. And boy, when it comes to loving..."

After that, his descriptions would become anatomically intricate, but all intricacies had been carefully filed in memory.

He examined those files now, but nothing in them corresponded to what he saw before him.

This woman was tall, but there all resemblance ended. She must have tipped the scales at one-sixty, at least, and her hair was a dull, mousy brown. She wore glasses, too. Behind the thick lenses, her faded blue eyes peered stolidly at him.

She must have realised he was staring, and he knew he had to talk fast. "I'm looking for a Helen Krauss who used to live over in Norton Centre. She was married to a man named Mike."

The stolid eyes blinked. "That's me. So what's this all about?"

"I got a message for you from your husband."

"Mike? He's dead."

"I know. I was with him when he died. Just before, anyway. I'm Rusty Connors. We were cell-mates for two years."

Her expression didn't change, but her voice dropped to a whisper. "What's the message?"

He glanced around. "I can't talk here. What time do you get off?"

"Seven-thirty."

"Good. Meet you outside?"

She hesitated. "Make it down at the corner, across the street. There's a park, you know?"

He nodded, rose and left without looking back.

This wasn't what he had expected-not after the things Mike had told him about his wife. When he bought his ticket for Hainesville, he had had other ideas in mind. It would have been nice to find this hot, good-looking blond widow of Mike's and, maybe, combine business with pleasure. He had even thought about the two of them blowing town together, if she was half as nice as Mike said. But that was out, now. He wanted no part of this big, fat, stupid-looking slob with the dull eyes.

Rusty wondered how Mike could have filled him with such a line of bull for two years straight-and then he knew. Two years straight-that was the answer-two years in a bare cell, without a woman. Maybe it had got so that, after a time, Mike believed his own story, that Helen Krauss became beautiful to him. Maybe Mike had gone a little stir-simple before he died, and made up a lot of stuff.

Rusty only hoped Mike had been telling the truth about one thing. He had better have been, because what Mike had told Connors, there in the cell, was what brought him to town. It was this that was making him cut into this rat-race, that had led him to Mike's wife. He hoped Mike had been telling the truth about hiding away the fifty-six thousand dollars.

She met him in the park, and it was dark. That was good, because nobody would notice them together. Besides, he couldn't see her face, and she couldn't see his, and that would make it easier to say what he had to say.

They sat down on a bench behind the bandstand, and he lit a cigarette. Then he remembered that it was important to be pleasant, so he offered the pack to her.

She shook her head. "No thanks-I don't smoke."

"That's right. Mike told me." He paused. "He told me a lot of things about you, Helen."

"He wrote me about you, too. He said you were the best friend he ever had."

“I’d like to think so. Mike was a great guy in my book. None better. He didn’t belong in a crummy hole like that.”

“He said the same about you.”

“Both of us got a bad break, I guess. Me, I was just a kid who didn’t know the score. When I got out of Service, I lay around for a while until my dough was gone, and then I took this job in a bookie joint. I never pulled any strong-arm stuff in my life until the night the place was raided.

“The boss handed me this suitcase, full of dough, and told me to get out the back way. And there was this copper, coming at me with a gun. So I hit him over the head with the suitcase. It was just one of those things-I didn’t mean to hurt him, even, just wanted to get out. So the copper ends up with a skull-fracture and dies.”

“Mike wrote me about that. You had a tough deal.”

“So did he, Helen.” Rusty used her first name deliberately and let his voice go soft. It was part of the pitch. “Like I said, I just couldn’t figure him out. An honest John like him, up and knocking off his best friend in a payroll stickup. And all alone, too. Then getting rid of the body, so they’d never find it. They never did find Pete Taylor, did they?”

“Please! I don’t want to talk about it any more.”

“I know how you feel.” Rusty took her hand. It was plump and sweaty, and it rested in his like a big warm piece of meat. But she didn’t withdraw it, and he went on talking. “It was just circumstantial evidence that pinned it on him, wasn’t it?”

“Somebody saw Mike pick Pete up that afternoon,” Helen said. “He’d lost his car keys somewhere, and I guess he thought it would be all right if Mike took him over to the factory with the payroll money. That was all the police needed. They got to him before he could get rid of the bloodstains. Of course, he didn’t have an alibi. I swore he was home with me all afternoon. They wouldn’t buy that. So he went up for ten years.”

“And did two, and died,” Rusty said. “But he never told how he got rid of the body. He never told where he put the dough.”

He could see her nodding in the dimness. “That’s right. I guess they beat him up something awful, but he wouldn’t tell them a thing.”

Rusty was silent for a moment. Then he took a drag on his cigarette and said, “Did he ever tell you?”

Helen Krauss made a noise in her throat. “What do you think? I got out of Norton Centre because I couldn’t stand the way people kept talking about it. I came all the way over here to Hainesville. For two years, I’ve been working in that lousy hash-house. Does that sound like he told me anything?”

Rusty dropped the cigarette stub on the sidewalk, and its little red eye winked up at him. He stared at the eye as he spoke.

“What would you do if you found that money, Helen? Would you turn it over to the cops?”

She made the noise in her throat again. “What for? To say, ‘Thank you,’ for putting Mike away and killing him? That’s what they did, they killed him. Pneumonia, they told me-I know about their

pneumonia! They let him rot in that cell, didn't they?"

"The croaker said it was just flu. I put up such a stink over it, they finally took him down to the Infirmary."

"Well, *I* say they killed him. And *I* say he paid for that money with his life. I'm his widow-it's mine."

"Ours," said Rusty.

Her fingers tightened, and her nails dug into his palms. "He told you where he hid it? Is that it?"

"Just a little. Before they took him away. He was dying, and couldn't talk much. But I heard enough to give me a pretty good hunch. I figured, if I came here when I got out and talked to you, we could put things together and find the dough. Fifty-six gees, he said-even if we split it, that's still a lot of money."

"Why are you cutting me in on it, if you know where it is?" There was an edge of sudden suspicion in her voice, and he sensed it, met it head-on.

"Because, like I told you, he didn't say enough. We'd have to figure out what it means, and then do some hunting. I'm a stranger around here, and people might get suspicious if they saw me snooping. But if you helped, maybe there wouldn't be any need to snoop. Maybe we could go right to it."

"Business deal, is that it?"

Rusty stared at the glowing cigarette butt again. Its red eye winked back at him.

"Not all business, Helen. You know how it was with Mike and me. He talked about you all the time. After a while, I got the funniest feeling, like I already knew you-knew you as well as Mike. I wanted to know you better."

He kept his voice down, and he felt her nails against his palm. Suddenly his hand returned the pressure, and his voice broke. "Helen, I don't know, maybe I'm screwy, but I was over two years in that hole. Two years without a woman, you got any idea what that means to a guy?"

"It's been over two years for me, too."

He put his arms around her, forced his lips to hers. It didn't take much forcing. "You got a room?" he whispered.

"Yes, Rusty-I've got a room."

They rose, clinging together. Before moving away, he took a last look at the little winking red eye and crushed it out under his foot.

Another winking red eye burned in the bedroom, and he held the cigarette to one side in his hand so as to keep the light away. He didn't want her to see the disgust in his face.

Maybe she was sleeping now. He hoped so, because it gave him time to think.

So far, everything was working out. Everything had to work out, this time. Because before, there had always been foul-ups, somewhere along the line.

Grabbing the satchel full of dough, when the cops raided the bookie joint, had seemed like a good idea at

the time. He had thought he could lam out the back door before anyone noticed in the confusion. But he had fouled that one up himself, and landed in stir.

Getting buddy-buddy with that little jerk Mike had been another good idea. It hadn't been long before he knew everything about the payroll caper-everything except where Mike had stashed the loot. Mike never would talk about that. It wasn't until he took sick that Rusty could handle him without anybody getting wise. He had made sure Mike was real sick before he put real pressure on.

Even then, the lousy fink hadn't come across-Rusty must have half-killed him, right there in the cell. Maybe he'd overdone it, because all he got out of him was the one sentence before the guards showed up.

For a while there, he had wondered if the little quiz show was going to kick back on him. If Mike had pulled out of it, he'd have talked. But Mike hadn't pulled out of it-he had died in the Infirmary before morning, and they had said it was the pneumonia that did it.

So Rusty was safe-and Rusty could make plans.

Up till now, his plans were going through okay. He had never applied for parole-believing it better to sweat out another six months, so he could go free without anybody hanging onto his tail. When they sprung him, he had taken the first bus to Hainesville. He knew where to go because Mike had told him about Helen working in this restaurant.

He hadn't been conning her as to his need for her in the deal. He needed her all right. He needed help, needed her to front for him, so he wouldn't have to look around on his own and arouse curiosity when he asked questions of strangers. That part was straight enough.

But, all along, he had believed what Mike told him about Helen-that she was a good-looking doll, the kind of dame you read about in the paperback books. He had coked himself up on the idea of finding the dough and going away with her, of having a real ball.

Well, that part was out.

He made a face in the darkness as he remembered the clammy fat of her, the wheezing and the panting and the clutching. No, he couldn't take much more of that. But he had to go through with it, it was part of the plan. He needed her on his side, and that was the best way to keep her in line.

But now he'd have to decide on the next move. If they found the dough, how could he be sure of her, once they made the split? He didn't want to be tied to this kitchen mechanic, and there had to be a way.

"Darling, are you awake?"

Her voice! And calling him 'darling.' He shuddered, then controlled himself.

"Yeah." He doused the cigarette in an ash tray.

"Do you feel like talking now?"

"Sure."

"I thought maybe we'd better make plans."

“That’s what I like, a practical dame.” He forced a smile into his voice. “You’re right, baby. The sooner we get to work the better.” He sat up and turned to her. “Let’s start at the beginning-with what Mike told me, before he died. He said they’d never find the money, they couldn’t-because Pete still had it.”

For a moment Helen Krauss was silent. Then she said, “Is that all?”

“All? What more do you want? It’s plain as the nose on your face, isn’t it? The dough is hidden with Pete Taylor’s body.”

He could feel Helen’s breath on his shoulder. “Never mind the nose on my face,” she said. “I know where that is. But for two years, all the cops in the county haven’t been able to find Pete Taylor’s body.” She sighed. “I thought you really had something, but I guess I was wrong. I should of known.”

Rusty grabbed her by the shoulders. “Don’t talk like that! We’ve got the answer we need. All we got to do now is figure where to look.”

“Sure. Real easy!” Her tone dripped sarcasm.

“Think back, now. Where did the cops look?”

“Well, they searched our place, of course. We were living in a rented house, but that didn’t stop them. They tore up the whole joint, including the cellar. No dice there.”

“Where else?”

“The sheriff’s department had men out for a month, searching the woods around Norton’s Centre. They covered all the old barns and deserted farmhouses too, places like that. They even dragged the lake. Pete Taylor was a bachelor-he had a little shack in town and one out at the lake, too. They ripped them both apart. Nothing doing.”

Rusty was silent. “How much time did Mike have between picking up Pete and coming back home again?”

“About three hours.”

“Hell, then he couldn’t have gone very far, could he? The body must be hid near town.”

“That’s just how the police figured. I tell you, they did a job. They dug up the ditches, drained the quarry. It was no use.”

“Well, there’s got to be an answer somewhere. Let’s try another angle. Pete Taylor and your husband were pals, right?”

“Yes. Ever since we got married, Mike was thick with him. They got along great together.”

“What did they do? I mean, did they drink, play cards or what?”

“Mike wasn’t much on the sauce. Mostly, they just hunted and fished. Like I say, Pete Taylor had this shack out at the lake.”

“Is that near Norton’s Centre?”

“About three miles out.” Helen sounded impatient. “I know what you’re thinking, but it’s no good. I tell

you, they dug things up all around there. They even ripped out the floorboards and stuff like that.”

“What about sheds, boathouses?”

“Pete Taylor didn’t have anything else on his property. When Mike and him went fishing, they borrowed a boat from the neighbours down the line.” She sighed again. “Don’t think I haven’t tried to figure it out. For two years, I’ve figured, and there just isn’t any answer.”

Rusty found another cigarette and lit it. “For fifty-six grand, there’s got to be an answer,” he said. “What happened the day Pete Taylor was killed? Maybe there’s something you forgot about.”

“I don’t know what happened, really. I was at home, and Mike had the day off, so he went downtown to bum around.”

“Did he say anything before he left? Was he nervous? Did he act funny?”

“No-I don’t think he had anything planned, if that’s what you mean. I think it was just one of those things-he found himself in the car with Pete Taylor and all this money, and he just decided to do it.

“Well, they figured it was all planned in advance. They said he knew it was payroll day, and how Pete always went to the bank in his car and got the money in cash. Old Man Huggins at the factory was a queer duck, and he liked to pay that way. Anyway, they say Pete went into the bank, and Mike must have been waiting in the parking lot behind.

“They think he sneaked over and stole Pete’s car keys, so, when he came out with the guard, Pete couldn’t get started. Mike waited until the guard left, then walked over and noticed Pete, as if it was an accident he happened to be there, and asked what the trouble was.

“Something like that must have happened, because the guy in the parking lot said they talked, and then Pete got into Mike’s car and they drove off together. That’s all they know, until Mike came home alone almost three hours later.”

Rusty nodded. “He came home to you, in the car, alone. What did he say?”

“Nothing much. There wasn’t time, I guess. Because the squad car pulled up about two minutes after he got in the house.”

“So fast? Who tipped them off?”

“Well, naturally the factory got worried when Pete never showed with the payroll. So Old Man Muggins called the bank, and the bank checked with the cashier and the guard, and somebody went out and asked around in the parking lot. The attendant told about how Pete had left in Mike’s car. So they came around here, looking for him.”

“Did he put up any struggle?”

“No. He never even said a word. They just took him away. He was in the bathroom, washing up.”

“Much dirt on him?” Rusty asked.

“Just his hands, is all. They never found anything they could check up on in their laboratories, or whatever. His shoes were muddy, I think. There was a big fuss because his gun was missing. That was

the worst part, his taking the gun with him. They never found it, of course, but they knew he'd owned one, and it was gone. He said he'd lost it months beforehand but they didn't believe him."

"Did you?"

"I don't know."

"Anything else?"

"Well, he had a cut on his hand. It was bleeding a little when he came in. I noticed it and asked him about it. He was halfway upstairs, and he said something about rats. Later in court, he told them he'd caught his hand in the window-glass, and that's why there was blood in the car. One of the windows was cracked. They analyzed the blood, it wasn't his type. It checked with Pete Taylor's blood-type record."

Rusty took a deep drag. "But he didn't tell you that when he came home. He said a big rat bit him."

"No-he just said something about rats, I couldn't make out what. In court, the doctor testified he'd gone upstairs and cut his hand open with a razor. They found his razor on the washstand and it was bloody."

"Wait a minute," Rusty said slowly. "He started to tell you something about rats. Then he went upstairs and opened up his hand with a razor. Now its beginning to make sense, don't you see? A rat did bite him, maybe when he was getting rid of the body. But if anyone knew that, they'd look for the body some place where there were rats. So he covered up by opening the wound with his razor."

"Maybe so," Helen Krauss said. "But where does that leave us? Are we going to have to search every place with rats in it around Norton's Centre?"

"I hope not," Rusty answered. "I hate the damned things. They give me the creeps. Used to see them in the Service, big fat things hanging around the docks..." He snapped his fingers. "Just a second. You say, when Pete and Mike went fishing, they borrowed a boat from the neighbours. Where did the neighbours keep their boat?"

"They had a boathouse."

"Did the cops search there?"

"I don't know-I guess so."

"Maybe they didn't search good enough. Were the neighbours on the property that day?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure enough. They were a city couple from Chicago, name of Thomason. Two weeks before the payroll robbery, they got themselves killed in an auto accident on the way home."

"So nobody was around at all, and Mike knew it."

"That's right." Helen's voice was suddenly hoarse, "It was too late in the season anyway, just like now. The lake was deserted. Do you think...?"

"Who's living in the neighbours' place now?" Rusty asked.

“No one, the last I heard. They didn’t have any kids, and the real estate man couldn’t sell it. Pete Taylor’s place is vacant, too. Same reason.”

“It adds up-adds up to fifty-six thousand dollars, if I’m right. When could we go?”

“Tomorrow, if you like. It’s my day off. We can use my car. Oh, darling, I’m so excited!”

She didn’t have to tell him. He could feel it, feel her as she came into his arms. Once more, he had to force himself, had to keep thinking about something else, so that he wouldn’t betray how he felt.

He had to keep thinking about the money, and about what he’d do after they found it. He needed the right answer, fast.

He was still thinking when she lay back, and then she suddenly surprised him by asking, “What are you thinking about, darling?”

He opened his mouth and the truth popped out. “The money,” he said. “All that money. Twenty-eight gees apiece.”

“Does it have to be apiece, darling?”

He hesitated-and then the right answer came. “Of course not-not unless you want it that way.” And it wouldn’t be. It was still fifty-six thousand, and it would be his after they found it.

All he had to do was rub her out.

If Rusty had any doubts about going through with it, they vanished the next day. He spent the morning and afternoon with her in her room, because he had to. There was no sense in letting them be seen together here in town or anywhere around the lake area.

So he forced himself to stall her, and there was only one way to do that. By the time twilight came, he would have killed her anyway, money or no money, just to be rid of her stinking fat body.

How could Mike have ever figured she was good-looking? He’d never know, any more than he’d ever known what had gone on in the little jerk’s head when he suddenly decided to knock off his best friend and steal the dough.

But that wasn’t important now-the important thing was to find that black metal box.

Around four o’clock he slipped downstairs and walked around the block. In ten minutes, she picked him up at the corner in her car.

It was a good hour’s drive to the lake. She took a detour around Norton Centre, and they approached the lake shore by a gravel road. He wanted her to cut the lights, but she said there was no need, because nobody was there anyway. As they scanned the shore Rusty could see she was telling the truth-the lake was dark, deserted, in the early November night.

They parked behind Pete Taylor’s shack. At sight of it, Rusty realised that the body couldn’t possibly be hidden there. The little rickety structure wouldn’t have concealed a dead fly for long. Helen got a flashlight from the car. “I suppose you want to go straight to the boathouse,” she said. “It’s down this way, to the left. Be careful-the path is slippery.”

It was treacherous going in the darkness. Rusty followed her, wondering if now was the time. He could pick up a rock and bash her head in while she had her back to him.

No, he decided, better wait. First see if the dough was there, see if he could find a good place to leave her body. There must be a good place-Mike had found one.

The boathouse stood behind a little pier running out into the lake. Rusty tugged at the door. It was padlocked. "Stand back," he said. He picked up a stone from the bank. The lock was flimsy, rusty with disuse. It broke easily and fell to the ground.

He took the flashlight from her, opened the door and peered in. The beam swept the interior, piercing the darkness. But it wasn't total darkness. Rusty saw the glow of a hundred little red cigarette butts winking up at him, like eyes.

Then, he realised, they were eyes.

"Rats," he said. "Come on, don't be afraid. Looks like our hunch was right."

Helen moved behind him, and she wasn't afraid. But he had really been talking to himself. He didn't like rats. He was glad when the rodents scattered and disappeared before the flashlight's beam. The sound of footsteps sent them scampering off into the corners, into their burrows beneath the boathouse floor.

The floor! Rusty sent the beam downward. It was concrete, of course. And underneath...?

"Damn it!" he said. "They must have been here."

They had-because the once-solid concrete floor was rubble. The pick-axes of the sheriff's men had done a thorough job. "I told you," Helen Krauss sighed. "They looked everywhere."

Rusty swept the room with light. There was no boat, nothing stored in corners. The beam bounced off bare walls.

He raised it to the flat roof of the ceiling and caught only the reflection of mica from tar-paper insulation.

"It's no use," Helen told him. "It couldn't be this easy."

"There's still the house," Rusty said. "Come on."

He turned and walked out of the place, glad to get away from the rank, fetid animal odour. He turned the flashlight toward the roof.

Then he stopped. "Notice anything?" he said.

"What?"

"The roof. It's higher than the ceiling."

"So what?"

"There could be space up there," Rusty said.

"Yes, but..."

“Listen.”

She was silent-both of them were silent. In the silence, they could hear the emerging sound. It sounded at first like the patter of rain on the roof, but it wasn't raining, and it wasn't coming from the roof. It was coming from directly underneath-the sound of tiny, scurrying feet between roof and ceiling. The rats were there. The rats and what else?

“Come on,” he muttered.

“Where are you going?”

“Up to the house-to find a ladder.”

He didn't have to break in, and that was fine. There was a ladder in the shed, and he carried it back. Helen discovered a crowbar. She held

the flashlight while he propped the ladder against the wall and climbed up. The crowbar pried off the tar-paper in strips. It came away easily, ripping out from the few nails. Apparently the stuff had been applied in a hurry. A man with only a few hours to work in has to do a fast job.

Underneath the tar-paper, Rusty found timbers. Now the crowbar really came in handy. The boards groaned in anguish, and there were other squeaking sounds as the rats fled down into the cracks along the side walls. Rusty was glad they fled, otherwise he'd never have had the guts to crawl up there through the opening in the boards and look around. Helen handed him the flashlight, and he used it.

He didn't have to look very far.

The black metal box was sitting there right in front of him. Beyond it lay the thing.

Rusty knew it was Pete Taylor, because it had to be, but there was no way of identification. There wasn't a shred of clothing left, or a shred of flesh, either. The rats had picked him clean, picked him down to the bones. All that was left was a skeleton-a skeleton and a black metal box.

Rusty clawed the box closer, opened it. He saw the bills, bulging in stacks. He smelled the money, smelled it even above the sickening feter. It smelled good, it smelled of perfume and tenderloin steak and the leathery seat-cover aroma of a shiny new car.

“Find anything?” Helen called. Her voice was trembling.

“Yes,” he answered, and his voice was trembling just a little too. “I've got it. Hold the ladder, I'm coming down now.”

He was coming down now, and that meant it was time-time to act. He handed her the crowbar and the flashlight, but kept his fingers on the side of the black metal box. He wanted to carry that himself. Then, when he put it down on the floor, and she bent over to look at it, he could pick up a piece of concrete rubble and let her have it.

It was going to be easy. He had everything figured out in advance-everything except the part about handing her the crowbar.

That's what she used to hit him with when he got to the bottom of the ladder...

He must have been out for ten minutes, at least. Anyway, it was long enough for her to find the rope somewhere. Maybe she had kept it in the car. Wherever she got it, she knew how to use it. His wrists and ankles hurt almost as much as the back of his head, where the blood was starting to congeal.

He opened his mouth and discovered that it did no good. She had gagged him tightly with a handkerchief. All he could do was lie there in the rubble on the boathouse floor and watch her pick up the black metal box.

She opened it and laughed.

The flashlight was lying on the floor. In its beam, he could see her face quite plainly. She had taken off her glasses, and he discovered the lenses lying shattered on the floor.

Helen Krauss saw what he was staring at and laughed again.

“I don’t need those things any more,” she told him. “I never did. It was all part of the act, like letting my hair go black and putting on all this weight. For two years now, I’ve put on this dumb slob routine, just so nobody’d notice me. When I leave town, nobody’s going to pay any attention either. Sometimes it’s smart to play dumb, you know?”

Rusty made noises underneath the gag. She thought that was funny, too.

“I suppose you’re finally beginning to figure it out,” she said. “Mike never meant to pull off any payroll job. Pete Taylor and I had been cheating on him for six months, and he had just begun to suspect. I don’t know who told him, or what they said.

“He never said anything to me about it beforehand-just went downtown with his gun to find Pete and kill him. Maybe he meant to kill me too. He never even thought about the money at the time. All he knew was that it would be easy to pick Pete up on payroll day.

“I guess he knocked Pete out and drove him down here, and Pete came to before he died and kept saying he was innocent. At least, Mike told me that much when he did come back.

“I never got a chance to ask where he’d taken Pete or what he’d done with the money. The first thing I did, when Mike came home and said what he’d done, was to cover up for myself. I swore it was all a pack of lies, that Pete and I hadn’t done anything wrong. I told him we’d take the money and go away together. I was still selling him on that when the cops came.

“I guess he believed me-because he never cracked during the trial. But I didn’t get a chance again to ask where he hid the dough. He couldn’t write me from prison, because they censor all the mail. So my only out was to wait-wait until he came back, or someone else came. And that’s how it worked out.”

Rusty tried to say something, but the gag was too tight.

“Why did I conk you one? For the same reason you were going to conk me. Don’t try to deny it-that’s what you intended to do, wasn’t it? I know the way creeps like you think.” Her voice was soft.

She smiled down at him. “I know how you get to thinking when you’re a prisoner-because I’ve been a prisoner myself, for two years-a prisoner in this big body of mine. I’ve sweated it out for that money, and now I’m leaving. I’m leaving here, leaving the dumb waitress prison I made for myself. I’m going to shed forty pounds and bleach my hair again and go back to being the old Helen Krauss-with fifty-six grand to live it up with.”

Rusty tried just once more. All that came out was a gurgle. "Don't worry," she said, "they won't find me. And they won't find you for a long, long time. I'm putting that lock back on the door when I go. Besides, there's nothing to tie the two of us together. It's clean as a whistle."

She turned, and then Rusty stopped gurgling. He hunched forward and kicked out with his bound feet. They caught her right across the back of the knees, and she went down. Rusty rolled across the rubble and raised his feet from the ground, like a flail. They came down on her stomach, and she let out a gasp.

She fell against the boathouse door, and it slammed shut, her own body tight against it. Randy began to kick at her face. In a moment the flashlight rolled off into the rubble and went out, so he kicked in the direction of the gasps. After a while, the moaning stopped, and it was silent in the boathouse.

He listened for her breathing and heard no sound. He rolled over to her and pressed his face against something warm and wet. He shivered and drew back, then pressed again. The unbattered area of her flesh was cold.

He rolled over to the side and tried to free his hands. He worked the rope-ends against the jagged edges of rubble, hoping to feel the strands fray and part. His wrists bled, but the rope held. Her body was wedged against the door, holding it shut-holding him here in the rank darkness.

Rusty knew he had to move her, had to get the door open fast. He had to get out of here. He began to butt his head against her, trying to move her-but she was too solid, too heavy, to budge. He banged into the money box and tried to gurgle at her from under the gag, tried to tell her that she must get up and let them out, that they were both in prison together now, and the money didn't matter. It was all a mistake, he hadn't meant to hurt her or anyone, he just wanted to get out.

But he didn't get out.

After a little while, the rats came back.