

THE LEDGE by Stephen King

'Go on,' Cressner said again. 'Look in the bag.'

We were in his penthouse apartment, forty-three stories up. The carpet was deep-cut pile, burnt orange. In the middle, between the Basque sling chair where Cressner sat and the genuine leather couch where no one at all sat, there was a brown shopping bag.

'If it's a payoff, forget it,' I said. 'I love her.'

'It's money, but it's not a payoff. Go on. Look.' Re was smoking a Turkish cigarette in an onyx holder. The air-circulation system allowed me just a dry whiff of the tobacco and then whipped it away. He was wearing a silk dressing gown on which a dragon was embroidered. His eyes were calm and intelligent behind his glasses. He looked just like what he was: an A-number-one, 500 carat, dyed-in-the-wool son of a bitch. I loved his wife, and she loved me. I had expected him to make trouble, and I knew this was it, but I just wasn't sure what brand it was.

I went to the shopping bag and tipped it over. Banded bundles of currency tumbled out on the rug. All twenties. I picked one of the bundles up and counted. Ten bills to a bundle. There were a lot of bundles.

'Twenty thousand dollars,' he said, and puffed on his cigarette.

I stood up. 'Okay.'

'It's for you.'

'I don't want it.'

'My wife comes with it.'

I didn't say anything. Marcia had warned me how, it would be. He's like a cat, she had said. An old tom full of meanness. He'll try to make you a mouse.

'So you're a tennis pro,' he said. 'I don't believe I've ever actually seen one before.'

'You mean your detectives didn't get any pictures?'

'Oh, yes.' He waved the cigarette holder negligently. 'Even a motion picture of the two of you in that Bayside Motel. A camera was behind the mirror. But pictures are hardly the same, are they?'

'If you say so.'

He'll keep changing tacks, Marcia had said. It's the way he puts people on the defensive. Pretty soon he'll have you hitting out at where you think he's going to be, and he'll get you someplace else. Say as little as possible, Stan. And remember that I love you.

'I invited you up because I thought we should have a little man-to-man chat, Mr Norris. Just a pleasant conversation between two civilized human beings, one of whom has made off with the other's wife.'

I started to answer but decided not to.

'Did you enjoy San Quentin?' Cressner said, puffing lazily.

'Not particularly.'

'I believe you passed three years there. A charge of breaking and entering, if I'm correct.'

'Marcia knows about it,' I said, and immediately wished I hadn't. I was playing his game, just what Marcia had warned against. Hitting soft lobs for him to smash back.

'I've taken the liberty of having your car moved,' he said, glancing out the window at the far end of the room. It really wasn't a window at all: the whole wall was glass. In the middle was a sliding-glass door. Beyond it, a balcony the size of a postage stamp. Beyond that, a very long drop. There was something strange about the door. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

'This is a very pleasant building,' Cressner said. 'Good security. Closed-circuit TV and all that. When I knew you were in the lobby, I made a telephone call. An employee then hot-wired the ignition of your car and moved it from the parking area here to a public lot several blocks away.' He glanced up at the modernistic sunburst clock above the couch. It was 8.05. 'At 8.20 the same employee will call the police from a public phone booth concerning your car. By 8.30, at the latest, the minions of the law will have discovered over six ounces of heroin hidden in the spare tyre of your trunk. You will be eagerly sought after, Mr Norris.'

He had set me up. I had tried to cover myself as well as I could, but in the end I had been child's play for him.

'These things will happen unless I call my employee and tell him to forget the phone call.'

'And all I have to do is tell you where Marcia is,' I said. 'No deal, Cressner, I don't know. We set it up this way just for you.'

'My men had her followed.'

'I don't think so I think we lost them at the airport.'

Cressner sighed, removed the smouldering cigarette holder, and dropped it into a chromium ashtray with a sliding lid. No fuss, no muss. The used cigarette and Stan Norris had been taken care of with equal ease.

'Actually,' he said, 'you're right. The old ladies-room vanishing act. My operatives were extremely vexed to have been taken in by such an ancient ruse. I think it was so old they never expected it.'

I said nothing. After Marcia had ditched Cressner's operatives at the airport, she had taken the bus shuttle back to the city and then to the bus station; that had been the plan. She had two hundred dollars, all the money that had been in ~ny savings account. Two hundred dollars and a Greyhound bus could take you anyplace in the country.

'Are you always to uncommunicative?' Cressner asked, and he sounded genuinely interested.

'Marcia advised it.'

A little more sharply, he said: 'Then I imagine you'll stand on your rights when the police take you in. And the next time you see my wife could be when she's a little old grandmother in a rocker. Have you gotten that through your head? I understand that possession of six ounces of heroin could get you forty years.'

'That won't get you Marcia back.'

He smiled thinly. 'And that's the nub of it, isn't it? Shall I review where we are? You and my wife have fallen in love. You have had an affair... if you want to call a series of one-nighters in cheap motels an affair. My wife has left me. However, I have you. And you are in what is called a bind. Does that summarize it adequately?'

'I can understand why she got tired of you,' I said.

To my surprise, he threw back his head and laughed. 'You know, I rather like you, Mr Norris. You're vulgar and you're a piker, but you seem to have heart. Marcia said you did. I rather doubted it. Her judgement of character is lax. But you do have a certain... verve. Which is why I've set things up the way I have. No doubt Marcia has told you that lam fond of wagering.'

'Yes.' Now I knew what was wrong with the door in the middle of the glass wall. It was the middle of winter, and no one was going to want to take tea on a balcony forty-three stories up. The balcony had been cleared of furniture. And the screen had been taken off the door. Now why would Cressner have done that?

'I don't like my wife very much,' Cressner said, fixing another cigarette carefully in the holder. 'That's no secret. I'm sure she's told you as much. And I'm sure a man of your experience knows that contented wives

do not jump into the hay with the local tennis-club pro at the drop of a racket. In my opinion, Marcia is a prissy, whey-faced little prude, a whiner, a weeper, a bearer of tales, a -'That's about enough,' I said.

He smiled coldly. 'I beg your pardon. I keep forgetting we are discussing our beloved. It's 8.16. Are you nervous?'

I shrugged.

'Tough to the end,' he said, and lit his cigarette. 'At any rate, you may wonder why, if I dislike Marcia so much, I do not simply give her her freedom -'

'No, I don't wonder at all.'

He frowned at me.

'You're a selfish, grasping, egocentric son of a bitch. That's why. No one takes what's yours. Not even if you don't want it any more.'

He went red and then laughed. 'One for you, Mr Norris. Very good.'

I shrugged again.

'I'm going to offer you a wager. If you win, you leave here with the money, the woman, and your freedom. On the other hand, if you lose, you lose your life.'

I looked at the clock. I couldn't help it. It was 8.19.

'All right,' I said. What else? It would buy time, at least. Time for me to think of some way to beat it out of here, with or without the money.

Cressner picked up the telephone beside him and dialled a number.

'Tony? Plan two. Yes.' He hung up.

'What's plan two?' I asked.

'I'll call Tony back in fifteen minutes, and he will remove the... offending substance from the trunk of your car and drive it back here. If I don't call, he will get in touch with the police.'

'Not very trusting, are you?'

'Be sensible, Mr Norris. There is twenty thousand dollars on the carpet between us. In this city murder has been committed for twenty cents.'

'What's the bet?'

He looked genuinely pained. 'Wager, Mr Norris, wager. Gentlemen make wagers. Vulgarians place bets.'

'Whatever you say.'

'Excellent. I've seen you looking at my balcony.'

'The screen's off the door.'

'Yes. I had it taken off this afternoon. What I propose is this: that you walk around my building on the ledge that juts out just below the penthouse level. If you circumnavigate the building successfully, the jackpot is yours.'

'You're crazy.'

'On the contrary. I have proposed this wager six times to six different people during my dozen years in this apartment. Three of the six were professional athletes, like you-one of them a notorious quarterback more famous for his TV Commercials than his passing game, one a baseball player, one a rather famous jockey who made an extraordinary yearly salary and who was also afflicted with extraordinary alimony problems. The other three were more ordinary citizens who had differing professions but two things in common: a need

for money and a certain degree of body grace.' He puffed his cigarette thoughtfully and then continued. 'The wager was declined five times out of hand. On the other occasion, it was accepted. The terms were twenty thousand dollars against six months' service to me. I collected. The fellow took one look over the edge of the balcony and nearly fainted.' Cressner looked amused and contemptuous. 'He said everything down there looked so small. That was what killed his nerve.'

'What makes you think -'

He cut me off with an annoyed wave of his hand. 'Don't bore me, Mr Norris. I think you will do it because you have no choice. It's my wager on the one hand or forty years in San Quentin on the other. The money and my wife are only added fillips, indicative of my good nature.'

'What guarantee do I have that you won't double-cross me? Maybe I'd do it and find out you'd called Tony and told him to go ahead anyway.'

He sighed. 'You are a walking case of paranoia, Mr Norris. I don't love my wife. It is doing my storied ego no good at all to have her around. Twenty thousand dollars is a pittance to me. I pay four times that every week to be given to police bagmen. As for the wager, however...' His

I thought about it, and he left me. I suppose he knew that the real mark always convinces himself. I was a thirty-six-year-old tennis bum, and the club had been thinking of letting me go when Marcia applied a little gentle pressure. Tennis was the only profession I knew, and without it, even getting a job as a janitor would be tough - especially with a record. It was kid stuff, but employers don't care.

And the funny thing was that I really loved Maria Cressner. I had fallen for her after two nine-o'clock tennis lessons, and she had fallen for me just as hard. It was a case of Stan Norris luck, all right. After thirty-six years of happy bachelorhood, I had fallen like a sack of mail for the wife of an Organization overlord.

The old tom sitting there and puffing his imported Turkish cigarette knew all that, of course. And something else, as well. I had no guarantee that he wouldn't turn me in if I accepted his wager and won, but I knew damn well that I'd be in the cooler by ten o'clock if I didn't. And the next time I'd be free would be at the turn of the century.

'I want to know one thing,' I said.

'What might that be, Mr Norris?'

'Look me right in the face and tell me if you're a welsher or not.'

He looked at me directly. 'Mr Norris,' he said quietly, 'I never welsh.'

'All right,' I said. What other choice was there?

He stood up, beaming. 'Excellent! Really excellent! Approach the door to the balcony with me, Mr Norris.'

We walked over together. His face was that of a man who had dreamed this scene hundreds of times and was enjoying its actuality to the fullest.

'The ledge is five inches wide,' he said dreamily. 'I've measured it myself. In fact, I've stood on it, holding on to the balcony, of course. All you have to do is lower yourself over the wrought-iron railing. You'll be chest-high. But, of course, beyond the railing there are no handgrips. You'll have to inch your way along, being very careful not to overbalance.'

My eye had fastened on something else outside the window... something that made my blood temperature sink several degrees. It was a wind gauge. Cressner's apartment was quite close to the lake, and it was high enough so there were no higher buildings to act as a windbreak. That wind would be cold, and it would cut like a knife. The needle was standing at ten pretty steadily, but a gust would send the needle almost up to twenty-five for a few seconds before dropping off.

'Ah, I see you've noticed my wind gauge,' Cressner said jovially. 'Actually, it's the other side which gets the prevailing wind; so the breeze may be a little stronger on that side. But actually this is a fairly still night. I've seen evenings when the wind has gusted up to eighty-five... you can actually feel the building rock a little. A bit like being on a ship, in the crow's nest. And it's quite mild for this time of year.'

He pointed, and I saw the lighted numerals atop a bank skyscraper to the left. They said it was forty-four degrees. But with the wind, that would have made the chill factor somewhere in the mid-twenties.

'Have you got a coat?' I asked. I was wearing a light jacket.

'Alas, no.' The lighted figures on the bank switched to show the time. It was 8.32. 'And I think you had better get started, Mr Norris, so I can call Tony and put plan three into effect. A good boy but apt to be impulsive. You understand.'

I understood all right. Too damn well.

But the thought of being with Marcia, free from Cressner's tentacles and with enough money to get started at something made me push open the sliding-glass door and step out on to the balcony. It was cold and damp; the wind ruffled my hair into my eyes.

'Bon soir,' Cressner said behind me, but I didn't bother to look back. I approached the railing, but I didn't look down. Not yet. I began to do deep-breathing.

It's not really an exercise at all but a form of self-hypnosis. With every inhale-exhale, you ~row a distraction out of your mind, until there's nothing left but the match ahead of you. I got rid of the money with one breath and Cressner himself with two. Marcia took longer - her face kept rising in my mind, telling me not to be stupid, not to play his game, that maybe Cressner never welshed, but he always hedged his bets. I didn't listen. I couldn't afford to. If I lost this match, I wouldn't have to buy the beers and take the ribbing; I'd be so much scarlet sludge splattered for a block of Deakman Street in both directions.

When I thought I had it, I looked down.

The building sloped away like a smooth chalk cliff to the street far below. The cars parked there looked like those matchbox models you can buy in the five-and-dime. The ones driving by the building were just tiny pinpoints of light. If you fell that far, you would have plenty of time to realize just what was happening, to see the wind blowing your clothes as the earth pulled you back faster and faster. You'd have time to scream a long, long scream. And the sound you made when you hit the pavement would be like the sound of an overripe watermelon.

I could understand why that other guy had chickened out. But he'd only had six months to worry about. I was staring forty long, grey, Marcialess years in the eye.

I looked at the ledge. It looked small, I had never, seen five inches that looked so much like two. At least the building was fairly new; it wouldn't crumble under me.

I hoped.

I swung over the railing and carefully lowered myself until I was standing on the ledge. My heels were out over the drop. The floor on the balcony was about chest-high, and I was looking into Cressner's penthouse through the wrought-iron ornamental bars. He was standing inside the door, smoking, watching me the way a scientist watches a guinea pig to see what the latest injection will do.

'Call,' I said, holding on to the railing.

'What?'

'Call Tony. I don't move until you do.'

He went back into the living room - it looked amazingly warm and safe and cosy - and picked up the phone. It was a worthless gesture, really. With the wind, I couldn't hear what he was saying. He put the phone down and returned. 'Taken care of, Mr Norris.'

'It better be.'

'Goodbye, Mr Norris. I'll see you in a bit... perhaps.'

It was time to do it. Talking was done. I let myself think of Marcia one last time, her light-brown hair, her wide grey eyes, her lovely body, and then put her out of my mind for good. No more looking down, either. It would have been too easy to get paralysed, looking down through that space. Too easy to just freeze up until you lost your balance or just fainted from fear. It was time for tunnel vision. Time to concentrate on nothing but left foot, right foot.

I began to move to the right, holding on to the balcony's railing as long as I could. It didn't take long to see I was going to need all the tennis muscle my ankles had. With my heels beyond the edge, those tendons would be taking all my weight.

I got to the end of the balcony, and for a moment I didn't think I was going to be able to let go of that safety. I forced myself to do it. Five inches, hell, that was plenty of room. If the ledge were only a foot off the ground instead of 400 feet, you could breeze around this building in four minutes flat, I told myself. So just pretend it is.

Yeah, and if you fall 'from a ledge a foot off the ground, you just say rats, and try again. Up here you get only one chance.

I slid my right foot further and then brought my left foot next to it. I let go of the railing. I put my open hands up, allowing the palms to rest against the rough stone of the apartment building. I caressed the stone. I could have kissed it.

A gust of wind hit me, snapping the collar of my jacket against my face, making my body sway on the ledge. My heart jumped into my throat and stayed there until the wind had died down. A strong enough gust would have peeled me right off my perch and sent me flying down into the night. And the wind would be stronger on the other side.

I turned my head to the left, pressing my cheek against the stone. Cressner was leaning over the balcony, watching me.

'Enjoying yourself?' he asked affably.

He was wearing a brown camel's-hair overcoat.

'I thought you didn't have a coat,' I said.

'I lied,' he answered equably. 'I lie about a lot of things.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing... nothing at all. Or perhaps it does mean something. A little psychological warfare, eh, Mr Norris? I should tell you not to linger overlong. The ankles grow tired, and if they should give way...!' He took an apple out of his pocket, bit into it, and then tossed it over the edge. There was no sound for a long time. Then, a faint and sickening plop. Cressner chuckled.

He had broken my concentration, and I could feel panic nibbling at the edges of my mind with steel teeth. A torrent of terror wanted to rush in and drown me. I turned my head away from him and did deep-breathing, flushing the panic away. I was looking at the lighted bank sign, which now said: 8.46, Time to Save at Mutual!

By the time the lighted numbers read 8.49, I felt that I had myself under control again. I think Cressner must have decided I'd frozen, and I heard a sardonic patter of applause when I began to shuffle towards the corner of the building again.

I began to feel the cold. The lake had whetted the edge of the wind; its clammy dampness bit at my skin like an auger. My thin jacket billowed out behind me as I shuffled along. I moved slowly, cold or not. If I was going to do this, I would have to do it slowly and deliberately. If I rushed, I would fall.

The bank clock read 8.52 when I reached the corner. It didn't appear to be a problem - the ledge went right around, making a square corner - but my right hand told me that there was a crosswind. If I got caught leaning the wrong way, I would take a long ride very quickly.

I waited for the wind to drop, but for a long time it refused to, almost as though it were Cressner's willing ally. It slapped against me with vicious, invisible fingers, praying and poking and tickling. At last, after a particularly strong gust had made me rock on my toes, I knew that I could wait for ever and the wind would never drop all the way off.

So the next time it sank a little, I slipped my right foot around and, clutching both walls with my hands, made the turn. The crosswind pushed me two ways at once, and I tottered. For a second I was sickeningly sure that Cressner had won his wager. Then I slid a step further along and pressed myself tightly against the wall, a held breath slipping out of my dry throat.

That was when the raspberry went off, almost in my ear.

Startled, I jerked back to the very edge of balance. My hands lost the wall and pinwheeled crazily for balance. I think that if one of them had hit the stone face of the building, I would have been gone. But after what seemed an eternity, gravity decided to let me return to the wall instead of sending down to the pavement forty-three stories below.

My breath sobbed out of my lungs in a pained whistle. My legs were rubbery. The tendons in my ankles were humming like high-voltage wires. I had never felt so mortal. The man with the sickle was close enough to read over my shoulder.

I twisted my neck, looked up, and there was Cressner, leaning out of his bedroom window four feet above me. He was smiling, in his right hand he held a New Year's Eve noisemaker.

'Just keeping you on your toes,' he said.

I didn't waste my breath. I couldn't have spoken above a croak anyway. My heart was thudding crazily in my chest. I sidled five or six feet along, just in case he was thinking about leaning out and giving me a good shove. Then I stopped and closed my eyes and deep-breathed until I had my act back together again.

I was on the short side of the building now. On my right only the highest towers of the city bulked above me. On the left, only the dark circle of the lake, with a few pinpricks of light which floated on it. The wind whooped and moaned.

The crosswind at the second corner was not so tricky, and I made it around with no trouble. And then something bit me.

I gasped and jerked. The shift of balance scared me, and I pressed tightly against the building. I was bitten again. No not bitten but pecked. I looked down.

There was a pigeon standing on the ledge, looking up with bright, hateful eyes.

You get used to pigeons in the city; they're as common as cab drivers who can't change a ten. They don't like to fly, and they give ground grudgingly, as if the sidewalks were theirs by squatters' rights. Oh, yes, and you're apt to find their calling cards on the hood of your car. But you never take much notice. They may be occasionally irritating, but they're interlopers in our world.

But I was in his, and I was nearly helpless, and he seemed to know it. He pecked my tired right ankle again, sending a bright dart of pain up my leg.

'Get,' I snarled at it. 'Get out.'

The pigeon only pecked me again. I was obviously in what he regarded as his home; this section of the ledge was covered with droppings, old and new.

A muted cheeping from above.

I cricked my neck as far back as it would go and looked up. A beak darted at my face, and I almost recoiled. If I had, I might have become the city's first pigeon-induced casualty. It was Mama Pigeon, protecting a bunch of baby pigeons just under the slight overhang of the roof. Too far up to peck my head, thank God.

Her husband pecked me again, and now blood was flowing. I could feel it. I began to inch my way along again, hoping to scare the pigeon off the ledge. No way. Pigeons don't scare, not city pigeons, anyway. If a moving van only makes them amble a little faster, a man pinned on a high ledge isn't going to upset them at all.

The pigeon backpedalled as I shuffled forward, his bright eyes never leaving my face except when the sharp beak dipped to peck my ankle. And the pain was getting more intense now; the bird was pecking at raw flesh... and eating it, for all I knew.

I kicked at it with my right foot. It was a weak kick, the only kind I could afford. The pigeon only fluttered its wings a bit and then returned to the attack. I, on the other hand, almost went off the side.

The pigeon pecked me again, again, again. A cold blast of wind struck me, rocking me to the limit of balance; pads of my fingers scraped at the bland stone, and I came to rest with my left cheek pressed against the wall, breathing heavily.

Cressner couldn't have conceived of worse torture if he had planned it for ten years. One peck was not so bad. Two or three were little more. But that damned bird must have pecked me sixty times before I reached the wrought-iron railing of the penthouse opposite Cressner's.

Reaching that railing was like reaching the gates of heaven. My hands curled sweetly around the cold uprights and held on as if they would never let go.

Peck.

The pigeon was staring up at me almost smugly with its bright eyes, confident of my impotence and its own invulnerability. I was reminded of Cressner's expression when he had ushered me out on to the balcony on the other side of the building.

Gripping the iron bars more tightly, I lashed out with a hard, strong kick and caught the pigeon squarely. It emitted a wholly satisfying squawk and rose into the air, wings flapping. A few feathers, dove grey, settled back to the ledge or disappeared slowly down into the darkness, swan-boating back and forth in the air.

Gasping, I crawled up on to the balcony and collapsed there. Despite the cold, my body was dripping with sweat. I don't know how long I lay there, recuperating. The building hid the bank clock, and I don't wear a watch.

I sat up before my muscles could stiffen up on me and gingerly rolled down my sock. The right ankle was lacerated and bleeding, but the wound looked superficial. Still, I would have to have it taken care of, if I ever got out of this. God know what germs pigeons carry around. I thought of bandaging the raw skin but decided not to. I might stumble on a tied bandage. Time enough later. Then I could buy twenty thousand dollars' worth of bandages.

I got up and looked longingly into the darkened pent-house opposite Cressner's. Barren, empty, un-lived in. The heavy storm screen was over this door. I might have been able to break in, but that would have been forfeiting the bet. And I had more to lose than money.

When I could put it off no longer, I slipped over the railing and back on to the ledge. The pigeon, a few feathers worse for wear, was standing below his mate's nest, where the guano was thickest, eyeing me balefully. But I didn't think he'd bother me, not when he saw I was moving away.

It was very hard to move away - much harder than it had been to leave Cressner's balcony. My mind knew I had to, but my body, particularly my ankles, was screaming that it would be folly to leave such a safe harbour. But I did leave, with Marcia's face in the darkness urging me on.

I got to the second short side, made it around the corner, and shuffled slowly across the width of the building. Now that I was getting close, there was an almost ungovernable urge to hurry, to get it over with. But if I hurried, I would die. So I forced myself to go slowly.

The crosswind almost got me again on the fourth corner, and I slipped around it thanks to luck rather than skill. I rested against the building, getting my breath back. But for the first time I knew that I was going to make it, that I was going to win. My hands felt like half frozen steaks, my ankles hurt like fire (especially the pigeon-pecked right ankle), sweat kept trickling in my eyes, but I knew I was going to make it. Halfway down the length of the building, warm yellow light spilled out on Cressner's balcony. Far beyond I could see the bank sign glowing like a welcome-home banner. It was 10.48, but it seemed that I had spent my whole life on those five inches of ledge.

And God help Cressner if he tried to welsh. The urge to hurry was gone. I almost lingered. It was 11.09 when I put first my right hand on the wrought-iron balcony railing and then my left. I hauled myself up, wriggled over the top, collapsed thankfully on the floor... and felt the cold steel muzzle of a .45 against my temple.

I looked up and saw a goon ugly enough to stop Big Ben dead in its clockwork. He was grinning.

'Excellent!' Cressner's voice said from within. 'I applaud you, Mr Norris!' He proceeded to do just that. 'Bring him in, Tony.'

Tony hauled me up and set me on my feet so abruptly that my weak ankles almost buckled. Going in, I staggered against the balcony door.

Cressner was standing by the living-room fireplace, sipping brandy from a goblet the size of a fish-bowl. The money had been replaced in the shopping bag. It still stood in the middle of the burnt-orange rug.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a small mirror on the other side of the room. The hair was dishevelled, the face pallid except for two bright spots of colour on the cheeks. The eyes looked insane.

I got only a glimpse, because the next moment I was flying across the room. I hit the Basque chair and fell over it, pulling it down on top of me and losing my wind.

When I got some of it back, I sat up and managed: 'You lousy welsher. You had this planned.'

'Indeed I did,' Cressner said, carefully setting his brandy on the mantel. 'But I'm not a welsher, Mr Norris. Indeed no. Just an extremely poor loser. Tony is here only to make sure you don't do anything... ill-advised.' He put his fingers under his chin and tittered a little. He didn't look like a poor loser. He looked more like a cat with canary feathers on its muzzle. I got up, suddenly feeling more frightened than I had on the ledge.

'You fixed it,' I said slowly. 'Somehow, you fixed it.'

'Not at all. The heroin has been removed from your car. The car itself is back in the parking lot. The money is over there. You may take it and go.'

'Fine,' I said.

Tony stood by the glass door to the balcony, still looking like a leftover from Halloween. The .45 was in his hand. I walked over to the shopping bag, picked it up, and walked towards the door on my jittery ankles, fully expecting to be shot down in my tracks. But when I got the door open, I began to have the same feeling that I'd had on the ledge when I rounded the fourth corner: I was going to make it.

Cressner's voice, lazy and amused, stopped me.

'You don't really think that old lady's-room dodge fooled anyone, do you?'

I turned back slowly, the shopping bag in my arms. 'What do you mean?'

'I told you I never welsh, and I never do. You won three things, Mr Norris. The money, your freedom, my wife. You have the first two. You can pick up the third at the country morgue.'

I stared at him, unable to move, frozen in a soundless thunderclap of shock.

'You didn't really think I'd let you have her?' he asked me pityingly. 'Oh, no. The money, yes. Your freedom, yes. But not Marcia. Still, I don't welsh. And after you've had her buried -'

I didn't go near him. Not then. He was for later. I walked towards Tony, who looked slightly surprised until Cressner said in a bored voice: 'Shoot him, please.'

I threw the bag of money. It hit him squarely in the gun hand, and it struck him hard. I hadn't been using my arms and wrists out there, and they're the best part of any tennis player. His bullet went into the burnt-orange rug, and then I had him.

His face was the toughest part of him. I yanked the gun out of his hand and hit him across the bridge of the nose with the barrel. He went down with a single very weary grunt, looking like Rondo Hatton.

Cressner was almost out the door when I snapped a shot over his shoulder and said, 'Stop right there, or you're dead.'

He thought about it and stopped. When he turned around, his cosmopolitan world-weary act had curdled a little around the edges. It curdled a little more when he saw Tony lying on the floor and choking on his own blood.

'She's not dead,' he said quickly. 'I had to salvage something, didn't I?' He gave me a sick, cheese-eating grin.

'I'm a sucker, but I'm not that big a sucker,' I said. My voice sounded lifeless, dead. Why not? Marcia had been my life, and this man had put her on a slab.

With a finger that trembled slightly, Cressner pointed at the money tumbled around Tony's feet. 'That,' he said, 'that's chickenfeed. I can get you a hundred thousand. Or five. Or how about a million, all of it in a Swiss bank account? How about that? How about -'

'I'll make you a bet,' I said slowly.

He looked from the barrel of the gun to my face. 'A -'

'A bet,' I repeated. 'Not a wager. Just a plain old bet. I'll bet you can't walk around this building on the ledge out there.'

His face went dead pale. For a moment I thought he was going to faint. 'You...' he whispered.

'These are the stakes,' I said in my dead voice. 'If you make it, I'll let you go. How's that?'

'No,' he whispered. His eyes were huge, staring.

'Okay,' I said, and cocked the pistol.

'No!' he said, holding his hands out. 'No! Don't! I.. all right.' He licked his lips.

I motioned with the gun, and he preceded me out on to the balcony. 'You're shaking,' I told him. 'That's going to make it harder.'

'Two million,' he said, and he couldn't get his voice above a husky whine. 'Two million in unmarked bills.'

'No,' I said. 'Not for ten million. But if you make it, you go free. I'm serious.'

A minute later he was standing on the ledge. He was shorter than I; you could just see his eyes over the edge, wide and beseeching, and his white-knuckled hands gripping the iron rail like prison bars.

'Please,' he whispered. 'Anything.'

'You're wasting time,' I said. 'It takes it out of the ankles.'

But he wouldn't move until I had put the muzzle of the gun against his forehead. Then he began to shuffle to the right, moaning. I glanced up at the bank clock. It was 11.29.

I didn't think he was going to make it to the first corner. He didn't want to budge at all, and when he did, he moved jerkily, taking risks with his centre of gravity, his dressing gown billowing into the night.

He disappeared around the corner and out of sight at 12.01, almost forty minutes ago. I listened closely for the diminishing scream as the crosswind got him, but it didn't come. Maybe the wind had dropped. I do remember thinking the wind was on his side, when I was out there. Or maybe he was just lucky. Maybe he's out on the other balcony now, quivering in a heap, afraid to go any further.

But he probably knows that if I catch him there when I break into the other penthouse, I'll shoot him down like a dog. And speaking of the other side of the building, I wonder how he likes that pigeon.

Was that a scream? I don't know. It might have been the wind. It doesn't matter. The bank clock says 12.44. Pretty soon I'll break into the other apartment and check the balcony, but right now I'm just sitting here on Cressner's balcony with Tony's.45 in my hand. Just on the off-chance that he might come around that last corner with his dressing gown billowing out behind him.

Cressner said he's never welshed on a bet.

But I've been known to.