

CHAPTER 1

AT TEN

MINUTES TO THREE in the morning, the city of Wells lay inert, hot and stagnant. Most of its eleven thousand people tossed restlessly; the few who couldn't sleep at all damned the fact that there was no breeze to lift the stifling effect of the night. The heat of the Carolinas in August hung thick and heavy in the air. The moon was gone. A few unshaded street lamps in the main business area pushed hard shadows against the closed stores, the surviving movie theater, and the

silent gas stations. At the corner where the through highway crossed at right angles, the automatic air-conditioner in the Simon Pharmacy was on, its steady throb purring against the silence of the night. Across the street the one patrol car that the Wells police department kept out all night was pulled up against the curb. Sam Wood, the driver, held his ball-point pen firmly in his solid fingers as he filled out his report sheet. He braced the official clipboard against the wheel and printed neat block letters which he could see by means of the dim light that filtered into the car. Carefully he spelled out that he had completed a thorough check of the main residential section of the city, as was required, and that he had found it in good order. He took pride in setting down his decision. It made him again conscious, as it had for the past three years, that at this time of night he was the most important man awake and on duty in the entire city. He completed his entry, put the clipboard on the seat beside him, and glanced again at his watch. It was almost three, time for a break and a cup of coffee at the drive-in. But the thick

heat of the night made him reject the idea of coffee; something cold would be better. Should he take his break now or take a pass first through shantytown, the poor side of town? That was the only part of his job he actively disliked, but it had to be done. Reminding himself again of the importance of his position, he decided to let the break wait for a bit. He slipped the car into gear and moved it away from the curb with the professional smoothness of an expert driver. He crossed the highway, deserted in both directions, and bumped onto the rough pavement of the sprawling Negro district. He drove very slowly, reminded again of the night, months before, when he had hit a dog. The animal had been sleeping in the street and Sam had not spotted it in time to miss it completely. Sam pictured himself again, squatting in the street, holding the animal's head and looking into its shocked, pained, trusting, beseeching eyes. Then he had seen death come, and although he frequently went hunting, and was generally rated a tough man, Sam had been torn by pity for the dog and chagrin that he had caused

its death. Sam kept his eyes on the road, avoided the worst of the holes, and watched out for dogs. The short loop through the negro district completed, Sam braked the car over the bumpy railroad crossing and began to roll slowly up a street guarded on each side by old, ugly, largely unpainted clapboard houses. This was a poor white neighborhood, a place for those who had no money, no prospect of any, or who just didn't care. Sam wove the car up the street, concentrating on missing the holes in the road. Then he looked up and saw, half a block ahead of him, a yellow distorted rectangle of light framing a window of what would be the Purdy house. A light at this hour could mean a bellyache, or it could mean a lot of other things. Sam despised the kind of man who would peer in windows at night, but to a police officer on duty it was a different matter. He slipped the car over toward the curb so as not to disturb anyone unnecessarily and slowed up enough to check carefully why the light was burning in the Purdy kitchen at three-fifteen in the morning, though he thought he knew. The kitchen

was lighted by a single unshaded hundred-watt bulb hanging by its cord from the center of the ceiling. The thin, weary lace curtains which stretched, dead and motionless, across the open window did nothing to screen the view of the bright interior. There, plainly in view, her back turned, was Delores Purdy. As on the two previous times this had happened during the past few weeks, she wore no nightgown. Exactly as the patrol car reached a point opposite the window, Delores lifted a small pan off the stove, turned around, and poured the pan's contents into a teacup. Sam had a full view of her sixteen-year-old breasts and the agreeable curve of her youthful thighs. Something about Delores, however, repelled him, and not even the sight of her naked body held any great interest. The reason, he guessed, was that she was always unwashed, or seemed to be. When Sam saw her raise the cup to her lips he knew that no one was ill and turned his eyes away. For a moment he contemplated warning her that she was on public view, but he decided against it because a knock at that hour might wake the

whole houseful of kids. And what was more, she couldn't very well answer the door with no clothes on. Sam turned at the next corner and headed back toward the highway. Despite the lack of any visible traffic, Sam made a full stop at the intersection and then turned north. He let the car gain speed until the hot air that was forced in the open windows created the illusion of a breeze. Then for three minutes he held the pace until the city limits were in view. He lifted his foot off the gas, crossed the boundary line, and swung the car easily into the parking area of the all-night drive-in. He climbed out smoothly for a man of his size and pushed his way into the restaurant. It was hotter inside than out. The center of the room was filled by a U-shaped counter covered with worn Formica. Down one side a row of hard plywood booths promised no comfort and little privacy. In one window a totally inadequate air-conditioner pounded out a thin stream of cool air that vanished unfelt inches from the vent where it was born. The wood walls had been painted an off white at one time; the paint had yellowed with age.

Above the grill the black stain of hot grease vapor made a permanent monument to thousands of short orders that had been cooked, eaten, and forgotten. The night counterman was a thin nineteen-year-old whose too long arms thrust below the cuffs of his soiled shirt as though they had been stretched by some infernal machine. His sharp, bony face still showed the signs of acne, his lower lip hung slightly open as though he were either accustomed to thrusting it out at people as a gesture of defiance or didn't know how to make up his mind. At the moment Sam entered, he was jackknifed across the counter, resting his weight on his elbows, and appeared completely occupied by the violent comic book he had open before him. In the presence of the law, he quickly slid his reading matter under the counter, squared his narrow shoulders, and prepared himself for the coming minutes he would spend with the guardian of the sleeping city. He reached for a thick coffee mug as Sam sank onto one of the three remaining counter stools whose upholstered tops were still intact. "No coffee, Ralph, it's too hot," Sam said.

"Give me a king Coke instead." He took off his uniform cap and drew his right arm across his forehead. The night man scooped a scratched glass half full of shaved ice, uncapped a bottle, and filled the glass up with liquid and foam. When the drink had settled down, Sam emptied the glass, chewed a sliver of ice into liquid, and then asked, "Who won the fight tonight?" "Ricci," the counterman answered immediately. "Split decision. But he still gets a shot at the title." Sam refilled his glass and drained it once more before he offered an opinion. "Good thing Ricci won. I don't go much for the Italians, but at least a white man gets a chance at the title." The counterman nodded in quick approval. "We got six black champs now, all the top divisions. I don't see how they can fight that good." He pressed his hands against the counter and spread his bony fingers in a futile attempt to make them look strong and powerful. He looked at the thick hands of the policeman and wondered if he would ever have hands like that. Sam helped himself to an orphan piece of cake that leaned under a clouded plastic cover on the

counter. "They don't feel it when they get hit the way you or I would," he explained. "They haven't got the same nervous system. They're like animals; you've got to hit 'em with a poleax to knock 'em down, that's all. That's how they win fights, why they're not afraid to get in the ring." Ralph bobbed his head; his eyes said that Sam had pronounced the last word on the subject. He straightened the cake cover. "Mantoli was in town tonight. Brought his daughter with him. A real looker, I hear." "I thought he wasn't due until after the first." The counterman leaned forward, rubbing the counter with a grayed and soggy rag. "It cost more than they figured it would to finish up the bowl. Now they figure if they're going to repay the grant in time, they're going to have to charge more for the tickets. I hear Mantoli came to town to help them figure out how much people would be willing to pay." Sam poured the last of the bottle of Coke into his glass. "I don't know," he commented. "This thing may go over all right, or it may turn out the flop of the century. I don't know anything about classical music, but I can't see crowds of people

flocking here just to hear Mantoli lead a band. I know it's a symphony orchestra and all that, but the people who like that sort of thing can hear the same orchestra all winter long without having to come down here and sit on hard seats to do it. And what if it rains." He gulped the glass empty and glanced at his watch. "Yeah. What about that. I don't care about music neither, at least not that long-hair kind," Ralph agreed, "but I say if it can put us on the map like they say it can, and bring in tourists with money to spend, maybe they'll get this joint fixed up and we'll all live a little higher on the hog." Sam got up. "How much?" he asked. "Fifteen cents, the cake's on the house, it was the last piece. Have a nice night, Mr. Wood." Sam laid down a quarter and turned away. Once the counterman had dared to call him Sam. He had given a cold stare of disapproval and it had done the job. It was "Mr. Wood" now, and that was the way Sam wanted it. He climbed back into his car and reported briefly by radio before starting down the highway back into town. He settled in his seat, ready for the monotony that would make up the

last part of the night. The air was thick again as the car gained speed. For the first time since he had come on duty, Sam allowed himself to damn the pressing heat that promised a scorching day to follow. And that meant another hot night tomorrow, and perhaps another one after that. Sam slowed the car as the central area loomed ahead. The night was still deserted, but Sam drove slowly through the small downtown district as a matter of habit. He thought again of Delores Purdy. She would get married pretty young, he decided, and somebody would have plenty of fun rolling in the hay with her. It was then, a full block ahead, that he saw something lying in the road. Sam touched the gas pedal and the car spurted ahead. In the path of the four headlamps the object grew larger until Sam braked the car to a stop in the middle of the street a few feet in front of what he could now see was a man sprawled on the pavement. He snapped the red warning lights on and swung quickly out of the car. Before he bent over the man, he first looked quickly about him, his hand on his holstered .38, ready for

instant action. He saw nothing but the silent buildings and the hard pavement stretching out in both directions. Satisfied momentarily, Sam dropped down on one knee beside the man in the street. He was lying on his stomach, his arms above his head, his legs sprawled apart, and his face turned to the left so that his right cheek was pressed against the heavily worn concrete. He had abnormally long hair, which covered the back of his neck and then curled where it brushed the collar of his coat. Beside him, five or six feet away, a silver-handled walking stick looked strangely helpless on the hard roadway. Sam slipped his left hand under the fallen man and tried to feel for a heartbeat. Despite the sweltering heat, the man was wearing a vest tightly buttoned; through it Sam could detect no evidence that the man was alive. Then he remembered what he had read about apparently dead bodies. Sam had not had any special course of training for his job; he had simply been put on the payroll, had been briefed for a day on his new duties, and then had gone to work. But as instructed, he had studied the civic,

county, and state codes and had read the two or three textbooks made available at the small headquarters building. Sam had a good memory and the information he had absorbed came back to him now in the moment of need. Never assume that a person is dead until he has been so pronounced by a physician. He may have fainted, been stunned, or be unconscious for any of several other reasons. Persons suffering from insulin shock have often been mistaken for dead and in some cases have revived after having been taken to morgues. Unless a body has been so mutilated as to make survival impossible, such as decapitation, always assume that the person is living unless decomposition has taken place to the point where life could not possibly exist. Sam moved quickly back to his car and picked up the radio microphone. At this hour he did not bother to use official language, but spoke quickly and clearly as soon as his call had been acknowledged. "At the corner of Piney and the highway, approximately, man in the road, appears to be dead. No evidence of anyone else nearby, no traffic

for several minutes. Send the doctor and the ambulance right away." As he paused, Sam wondered for an instant if he had used the proper language in reporting in. This was something new to him and he wanted to handle it properly. Then the voice of the night operator snapped him out of it. "Stand by. Any identification of the victim?" Sam thought quickly. "No, not yet," he replied. "I never saw this man before to my knowledge. However, I think I know who he is. He has long hair, wears a vest, carries a cane. A small man, not over five feet five." "That's Mantoli," the operator exclaimed. "The conductor. The man in charge of the festival. If that's him, and if he's dead, this could be one awful mess. Repeat, stand by." Sam pressed the mike onto its clip and walked quickly back to the fallen man. It was only nine blocks to the hospital and the ambulance would be on the scene within five minutes. As Sam bent over the man once more, he remembered the rundown dog, but this was infinitely worse. Sam reached out his hand and laid it very gently on the back of the man's head, as though by his touch he could comfort him

and tell him that help was coming quickly, that he would only have to lie on the harsh pavement for two or three minutes more, and that in the meantime he was not alone. It was while these thoughts were running through his mind that Sam became aware that something thick and sticky was oozing against his fingers. With a quick involuntary motion he jerked his hand away. The pity he had felt evaporated and a growing red anger surged up in its place.